



Highlander's
Virgin
Bride

LYDIA KENDALL

HIGHLANDER'S VIRGIN BRIDE

A SCOTTISH HISTORICAL ROMANCE NOVEL

LYDIA KENDALL



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



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SCOTTISH BROGUE GLOSSARY

Here is a very useful glossary my good friend and editor *Gail Kiogima* sent to me, that will help you better understand **the Scottish Brogue** used:

about - about

ach - oh

afore - before

an' - and

anythin - anything

a'side - beside

askin' - asking

a'tween - between

auld - old

aye - yes

bampot - a jerk

bare bannock- a type of biscuit

bearin' - bearing

beddin' - bedding or sleeping with

bellend - a vulgar slang word

blethering - blabbing

blootered - drunk

bonnie - beautiful or pretty

bonniest - prettiest
cannae - cannot
chargin' - charging
cheesin' - happy
clocked - noticed
c'mon- come on
couldn'ae - couldn't
coupla - couple of
crivens - hell
cuddie - idiot
dae - do
dinin' - dining
dinnae - didn't or don't
disnae - doesn't
dobber - idiot
doesn'ae - doesn't
dolton - idiot
doon - down
dram - a measure of whiskey
efter - after
eh' - right
'ere - here
fer - for
frein - friend
fey - from
gae - get or give
git - a contemptible person
gonnae - going to

greetin' - dying

hae - have

hald - hold

haven'ae - haven't

heed - head

heedstart - head start

hid - had

hoovered - gobbled

intoxicated - drunk

kip - rest

lass - young girl

leavin - leaving

legless - drunk

me - my

nae - not

no' - not

noo - now

nothin' - nothing,

oan - on

o' - of

Och - an Olympian spirit who rules the sun

oot- out

packin- packing

pished - drunk

scooby - clue

scrans - food

shite - shit

sittin' - sitting

so's - so as
somethin' - something
soonds ' sounds
stonking - stinking
tae - to
teasin' - teasing
thrawn - perverse, ill-tempered
tryin' - trying
wallops - idiot
wee -small
wheest - talking
whit's - what's
wi' - with
wid - would
wisnae - was not
withoot - without
wouldnae - wouldn't
ya - you
ye - you
yea - yes
ye'll - you'll
yer - your
yerself - yourself
ye're - you're
ye've - you've

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ABOUT THE BOOK

“If allowing myself to love her brought me danger, then so be it...”

After her father’s money runs out, Meredith Quinn has to do what a dutiful daughter should: marry a man she doesn’t want. Her marriage of convenience helps her parents, but that’s not the only silver lining: her husband is the most handsome Highlander she has ever met. Even though he looks ready to murder her.

Laird Ryder Higgins’ reputation as cruel does not come lightly. After he lost his entire family by murder, he realizes he knows only one thing: trust no one. But his sweet new wife doesn’t stop talking, and he wants to shut her up in more ways than one...

He intimidates anyone but her. Ryder cannot understand how this kind creature came to be his, but he starts believing in miracles. Yet, he can’t protect her from everything. Her father’s castle burns to the ground, and Meredith is devastated to lose her family home. With no roof over their head, her family comes to live with them. But the problems don’t stop...

Was the fire truly a mistake? Or is there someone behind it all?

CHAPTER 1

THE DUSTY MIRROR hanging from the wall of Meredith's chamber needed a good cleaning.

It was a strange thing to be focusing on when she was just about to meet the man she would most likely marry, she thought, but, nevertheless, she raised one hand and swiped it across the cloudy glass, revealing her own pale face and green eyes staring anxiously back at her.

Meredith turned quickly away. She was nervous enough at the thought of meeting the Laird of Millar – or her betrothed, as she supposed she should try to start thinking of him — she did not need to be reminded of the fact that soon he, too, would be looking upon her face, and deciding whether she was fit to be his betrothed.

Betrothed. The word felt strange on Meredith's tongue as she whispered it to herself, daring herself to speak aloud the truth she had been hiding from these past few days when she'd gone about her life as usual, almost as if that life were not about to change.

“Are ye ready, Meredith? He's here!”

The door burst open to admit her younger sister Melissa, her face alight with excitement as she almost danced across the room to where Meredith was standing, willing herself to move.

“Wait ‘til ye see him, Meredith!” Melissa gabbled as she looked critically at her sister, reaching out to straighten the collar of her blouse. “Felix and I hid in the gallery to watch him arrive, and he’s exactly as we imagined him! Exactly!”

Meredith couldn’t help smiling at her sister’s enthusiasm.

“Exactly?” she teased. “So, the Laird of Millar is, indeed, as tall as a bear and with the teeth to match, then? But a bit less hairy, I would hope?”

Melissa grinned back at her, unperturbed.

“He is *quite* hairy,” she said, thoughtfully. “At least, the hair on his head looked very thick and quite long. I couldnae see the rest for his clothes, more’s the pity!”

Meredith gasped in mock horror and pushed her sister away.

“Ye better nae let Ma and Pa hear ye talking like that,” she said sternly, “Ye’ll have them in an early grave!”

All the same, as she turned back towards the mirror, in a bid to put an end to this inappropriate turn the conversation had taken, she had to admit, her curiosity was piqued.

Her parents were good, decent people. She knew they would never give her hand to a man they knew to be cruel, and yet... and yet everything she'd ever heard about the Laird of Millar spoke to the contrary. He was a warrior. A good one, true — or so rumor had it — but also a hard and unforgiving one, who had killed his own father in a murderous rage.

The most dangerous Laird in Scotland was not a man you would want to find yourself on the wrong side of, in other words, and Meredith, who had been fortunate to only have known kindness in the course of her short life, felt her stomach clench with nerves at the prospect of meeting this man. And meeting him with the intention of marrying him, at that.

“If ye dinnae believe me, ye can always come and see for yerself,” Melissa suggested, her hand on the door of the chamber. “Maybe if ye have a quick look at him before ye go down, it’ll help settle yer nerves?”

Meredith considered this proposition thoughtfully. Of course, she would marry the Laird regardless of his appearance or character. Her mind was already made up on that. It was, after all, the only thing her parents had ever asked of her. The only thing she could do to help them out of their present difficulty. So she would marry for love after all, but the love of her family, rather than of her betrothed.

Her parents did not want to sell their lands any more than she wanted to marry this stranger, with his fearsome reputation. But what choice did any of them have?

The Great Hall of the castle that was the only home Meredith had ever known sat at the center of the building, surrounded by a wide gallery, from which it was possible to look down upon the occupants of the hall. Having grown up here,

Meredith knew all its secrets, including the one spot in the gallery that was completely hidden from the view of those below.

The gallery was lit only by candles, set at intervals along its length, and it took Meredith's eyes a few seconds to adjust to the relative gloom. When they did, she risked a glance down at the room below, almost gasping aloud at what she saw.

The man seated before her parents was certainly fearsome — that much was true. The storytellers who'd passed through the castle had not lied when they'd spoken of his tall stature and muscular form, of the dangerous glint in one black eye, or even of the patch he wore over the other, a lasting reminder of the battle in which he'd lost it.

They had not, however, mentioned how, when you put all of these parts together, the result was, quite simply, the most handsome man Meredith had ever seen. A man who, even in the simple act of raising his whisky to his lips, displayed the kind of muscles that put the sleeves of his jacket under considerable strain.

Meredith's mind whirled. She had not expected to like this man at all, let alone to like him in the way she already feared she did. But would he like her in return? Her face flushed, and her heart hammering, she stood up, leaving her hiding place in the gallery, and holding her back straight and her head high as she walked quickly towards the stairs that led down to the Great Hall, with a confidence she did not feel.

There was only one way to find out.



“Did ye have a long way to travel, Me Laird?” Meredith’s mother was saying as Meredith crept silently down the wide staircase, not wanting them to see her too soon. “I believe ye said Millar Castle is a fair way from here?”

“Aye.” His voice was low and rather rough, almost as if he wasn’t used to using it too often, and Meredith could tell by its tone that the speaker would have preferred to have just stopped right there, with no further explanation necessary. Apparently realizing that a one-word answer might not be deemed quite polite, however, the Laird valiantly had another go.

“It is a full day’s ride from here,” he said, “depending on how fast ye travel. I daenae mind the journey, though. It gives me time to think.”

Quite what it was that he needed so much time to think *about*, however, must forever remain a mystery, for he stopped abruptly, as if he’d reached the limit of the polite conversation available to him.

“And ye made the journey all by yerself?” Meredith’s father asked now, taking up the burden of the conversation as his wife shot him a grateful glance, clearly at a loss as to how to proceed with a man who seemed to prefer to sit in uncomfortable silence. “I notice ye daenae have a manservant with ye, or anyone at all to help ye on yer way?”

“Nay,” the Laird responded, with a quick shake of the head. “Nae servants. I prefer the solitude. I enjoy the silence of the

forest without mindless chatter from servants to fill it.”

Still on the stairs, Meredith stifled the giggle that had risen up in her throat. The silence the Laird professed to love so much had now settled on the room, and no one seemed quite aware how to break it until her father gave it one last go.

“And nae guards, either?” he asked cautiously. “I’d have thought a man yerself would be ever wary of attack?”

“I’m aware that me reputation precedes me,” the Laird replied curtly. “But I can assure ye, sir, I can look after meself - and anyone else who travels with me. Yer daughter will be quite safe with me. Assuming she wishes to return wi’ me, that is.”

“Aye, aye, of course, I dinnae mean...” Meredith’s father started to say, but Meredith chose this moment to clear her throat loudly, thus drawing everyone’s attention to her and saving her poor father from the embarrassment she felt sure he must be feeling.

She paused at the bottom of the stairs, suddenly afraid to walk any further. The Laird had risen automatically to his feet as she approached, but as she risked a quick look at his brooding face, she noticed with dismay that he looked anything but pleased to see her.

The scowl on his face was enough to scare the dead, and it only deepened as she took a few faltering steps towards him, barely hearing her father’s voice as he made the introductions. The Laird was not, it appeared, pleased with his future wife, a fact that was written all over his rough-hewn face and glinted dangerously from his one remaining eye.

Meredith's heart sank. She had already made her mind up to accept him, but now it seemed only too clear the choice would not be hers to make. Still, there was nothing to be done, so, straightening her shoulders once more, she flashed him her widest smile and held out her hand obediently, feeling a start of surprise when he bent over it and pressed it to his lips. *His reputation might be that of a rogue and a warrior, but at least he has the manners of a gentleman*, she thought, taking a seat opposite him and looking up at him curiously. The man was a conundrum, and it was a puzzle she already knew she would very much like to solve.



This is a mistake, thought Ryder Higgins, as he sat squeezed into an uncomfortably small chair in the drafty Great Hall of the castle, the seat of the Quinn clan — the eldest daughter of which he had somehow allowed himself to be persuaded to marry.

A huge mistake.

How had he allowed it to happen, though? It was true he wanted the land they offered. Their clan, too, might not be the strongest in Scotland, but it was amongst the oldest. An alliance with the Quinns would do much to repair his reputation, damaged as it was by his father's cruelty and recklessness, as well as by the unfortunate business with the old Laird of Moore.

As he sat sipping politely — or, at least as politely as he was able — on the whisky his hosts offered him, though, Ryder could not shake the notion that this arrangement was all wrong. Wrong for him, and, no doubt, wrong for the

unfortunate lass who was destined to be his bride. For who, after all, could love a man such as him when his heart was hardened to the point that he could offer no such affection in return?

No, he would not do it, he decided. It felt too much like taking advantage of these people, their kindness, and desperation. *And their daughter*, a voice in his head reminded him. Yes, that too.

By the time a quiet footfall on the stairs behind him alerted him to his future bride's arrival, Ryder's mind was entirely made up. He would greet the lass politely, and then he would make his excuses and leave. They would be disappointed, he knew, or, at least, the parents would be. The lass herself would most likely be relieved to be freed of her obligation to him, especially once she'd managed to get a good look at him.

Most women found him intimidating — frightening, even. It was the eye patch, he supposed. Or the scars, perhaps. Or even just the reputation that preceded him everywhere he went. The warrior. The father-killer. The man who was never far from a fight. It was who he was, and he would not change. The woman he married would have to accept this, and that, he suspected, was something very few would.

No, he would not go through with this, he decided, even though it would presumably leave the family whose hospitality he was currently availing himself of in dire straits. So, placing his whisky on the table before him, he rose to his feet — and turned to face a woman unlike any he had seen before.

On the face of it, there was nothing particularly unusual about Meredith Quinn's appearance. Black hair, green eyes, pale skin... all very pleasant, of course, but it was her smile that

made him stop in his tracks, with a sharp intake of breath. Women very rarely smiled at Ryder Higgins.

No one did, in fact. But this Meredith was not only smiling at him, almost as if she did not notice the many flaws in his features, but it was also the kind of smile that could stop the world from spinning on its axis, a smile he could scarce believe was actually being directed at him.

“Me Laird, me daughter, Meredith,” Edward Quinn was saying, but Ryder barely heard him as he stepped forward to kiss the small white hand she offered, noticing as he did how perfectly formed she was. Her voluptuous figure was modestly draped in a dark green skirt, with a matching bodice laced over a white blouse.

It was the kind of outfit worn by any lady of her class, but, in Meredith’s case, the green was such a perfect match for the color of her eyes, and her curves so barely contained by the tight bodice that, for a moment he felt almost as if she must be some kind of witch, sent to tempt him. She was not slim, but she was so perfectly made, with womanly curves lurking dangerously underneath the folds of her dress, that he found it hard to look away. She might be curvier than most women, but that made Ryder even more interested, as she was exactly to his taste and everything he admired in a woman.

“I’m pleased to make yer acquaintance, Me Laird,” she said, sweeping her skirts to one side as she took her seat and fixed those dark green eyes upon him, not even flinching or dropping her gaze when he simply scowled in response.

This is dangerous, Ryder thought, sitting back down and throwing the rest of his whisky back in one gulp, nodding

curtly when his host offered him another. *Very, very dangerous.* The fact was, Ryder did not want a wife.

Yes, he had been willing to accept one, even just a few hours ago, as he rode towards Castle Millar, utterly unprepared for what he'd find inside. He had been willing to take on a marriage of convenience, to take a wife in exchange for money, land, and the respectability that had never been his, no matter how great his prowess on the battlefield.

But could he really go through with it, he wondered now, as Melissa and Felix, Meredith's younger siblings, joined them in the Great Hall, the girl staring with open curiosity at the patch on his eye, while her brother resolutely refused to look at him at all. Ryder resisted the sudden impulse to wink at Melissa with his one remaining eye just to see her reaction.

"How did ye do that, Me Laird?" Melissa asked as soon as the introductions were made, and she was free to speak. "It must have been very terrible, I expect."

"Melissa!" her mother exclaimed, horrified, but Ryder raised a hand to silence her.

"It's nay bother, I daenae mind," he assured her, before turning to the daughter, who was still watching him, totally unabashed. "It was a wild bear," he said solemnly. "I fought it off and killed it, but not before it managed to take out my eye."

"A bear! Really?" Melissa's own eyes widened in delighted shock. Ryder could have sworn he heard a low chuckle from Meredith's direction, but before he could turn to acknowledge her, the boy — Felix — had jumped in.

“Daenae be so stupid,” he told his sister roughly. “There are nae bears in Scotland, ye should ken that. He’s naught but a liar!”

There was a single moment’s silence before Meredith’s father got to his feet, his face stern.

“That’s enough from ye, Felix,” he said firmly. “I willnae tolerate that kind of language to either yer sister or our guest. Ye will go to yer chamber for the rest of the evening.”

He turned to Ryder as Felix stomped off out of the room, barely managing to resist the impulse to slam the door behind him.

“I hope ye’ll accept me apologies, Me Laird,” he said, his face serious. “He can be a difficult lad, Felix. He disnae ken what he says.”

“All young lads can be difficult,” Ryder replied, brushing aside the apology. “I would ken! Please, daenae trouble yerself about his behavior. I assure ye, there’s nae offense taken.”

Meredith’s father nodded, but as he re-filled Ryder’s glass, the Laird could tell the older couple were still embarrassed by their son’s behavior. And not just in case it reflected poorly on them, he realized, but because their concern for him appeared genuine. They did not want him to be hurt by Felix’s words, and Ryder felt himself smiling at this despite of himself, for there had been so many things — serious things — in his life that had damaged him that it was hard to imagine how a young lad’s words could possibly make an impact.

As Meredith's parents continued to fuss around him, though, he smiled again. He was unused to having people show a real interest in him, much less care for his comfort or well-being, and, with their quiet warmth, the Quinns were slowly starting to win him over.

"Something funny?" Meredith asked, from the seat beside him, seeing his smile. Ryder froze at the sound of her voice. Other than their introduction, she had not yet addressed him directly. He had resolutely refused to look in her direction, scared of having the same reaction he'd had the first time he'd looked into those green eyes of hers — a reaction he just could not allow himself.

"Nay," he said curtly, seeing her face fall as his tone. "Just enjoying me whisky."

He turned quickly back to her father, asking some banal question about the farms on his property to extract himself from the expectation that he speak to the daughter any longer. She'd said just two words to him, and yet it had made the blood rush to his head like a lovesick lad. It would not do. He must find some way to extricate himself from this arrangement before it went any further.

Of course, there was still time, he reminded himself, taking another deep sip of his whisky and feeling its warmth spread through his body, almost — but not quite — reaching the coldness of his heart. This was still the betrothal phase, a time when, according to Highland custom, he would take Meredith to his home, to Millar Castle and... he knew not what would happen next, only that, were one of them to decide to break it off, they could, with no harm done.

But the harm has already been done, he thought, watching silently as Meredith chattered easily away, giving every appearance of being completely comfortable in his company. The harm was done as soon as she walked down the stone stairs and into his life; he just wasn't sure whether or not she realized it yet.

CHAPTER 2

THE MORNING WAS cold but clear, the kind of weather that made the mountains to the east of the castle stand out in sharp relief against the cobalt blue sky. It was Meredith's favorite kind of morning, the kind that carried the promise of frost but also of adventure — a new start waiting somewhere beyond that far-off horizon.

Neither the morning nor the weather appeared to please the Laird. Indeed, Meredith was starting to wonder if anything ever did. So far he'd simply grunted in response to her cheerful "Good morning!", and although he'd recovered his manners enough to bid farewell to her family as they assembled at the castle gate to see her on her way, and had even had sensibility enough to avert his eye as she sobbed in her mother's arms, he had yet to utter another word as they turned their horses north, and started towards Castle Millar.

A man of few words, thought Meredith, enjoying the feeling of the autumn breeze in her hair. Well, no matter; she had words enough for both of them, and she would not allow Ryder's black mood — which seemed to be the only mood he had — to ruin her excitement as she embarked upon this, the longest journey she had ever taken.

“It’s a fine morning for a ride,” she called, raising her voice so he could hear her from his position a few feet in front of her. “Such beautiful weather, daenae ye think?”

Nothing. His back stiffened slightly, telling her that he had, at least, heard her, but there was no response to her question. Determined not to be beaten, she sat a little straighter in her saddle and tried again.

“Daenae ye just love this crisp, clear weather?” she asked, her voice trembling slightly in spite of herself. “It’s me favorite kind! Winter is too cold, and summer brings the midges, of course, but this! This is just perfect, isnae it?”

Still nothing. Meredith clicked her tongue in irritation. Was he really going to refuse to even converse with her all the way to his castle? That would not just be rude; it would be intolerable. This was not, after all, merely a pleasure excursion, after which she would return home to her family. Sighing deeply, she raised her face to the sky, feeling the weak sunlight on her skin and smiling at the sensation, allowing herself to forget, for a moment at least, the uncomfortable silence that had fallen between them.



Ryder spent half of his life on horseback; in fact, it sometimes seemed to him that riding came more naturally to him than walking. Today, though, he shifted uncomfortably in the saddle, every nerve in his body reminding him of the woman riding behind him. The woman who seemed sure she would one day be his wife. His jaw clenched in irritation. Ryder had never feared anyone in his life — with the notable exception of his father, of course. That, however, had been when he was but a lad; as soon as he was old enough, he had put paid to the old man’s abuse, and, since then, he had feared nothing and no

one. They, however, had feared him, which made Meredith Quinn all the more of an enigma.

Meredith did not fear him. That much was clear from the easy way in which she chattered on and from the way she looked him in the eye, refusing to drop her gaze, even when he simply deepened his frown in return. He could not understand her. By rights, she should be afraid of him — perhaps more than anyone, given the power a husband could wield over a wife. Yet, she did not.

He, however, was both surprised and confused to find himself very much afraid of *her*, not in a physical sense, of course — there was no woman alive who could beat Ryder Higgins in a battle of strength — but rather in the effect she had on him. He didn't like it. Or rather, he *did* like it — too much, in fact. Which was why, when the lass had the temerity to draw her horse level with his, turning those damned green eyes, fringed with their jet-black lashes, upon him, Ryder simply stared resolutely ahead, refusing to return her gaze.

“What a long way we seem to have come already,” she said, not appearing to notice his silence.

Ryder grunted in response. He was being childish, he knew, but he refused to give her the satisfaction of drawing a single word out of him.

“Is it far? To Castle Millar, I mean? Oh, I wish ye would tell me something about it! Is it large? Comfortable? Are there mountains, or is it near the sea? I've never been to the sea, and I would so like to! Have ye ever been sailing?”

Despite himself, Ryder turned his head to glance in her direction, astonished at this barrage of questions.

“Aye,” he said, at last, choosing to answer the first and the easiest. “It’s a day’s ride at least. Ye’d do well to save some of yer energy for the journey.”

Be silent was what he meant by that. *Stop talking, and let me think about something other than the sound of your voice and the way you look at me when you’re waiting for an answer.*

But Meredith, unable to read his mind — and, he suspected, probably unwilling to comply, even if she could — continued talking, apparently untroubled by his monosyllabic answers and curt nods of the head. The lady would apparently do exactly as she pleased, it seemed. Ryder was not at all sure quite what to make of that.

As they crunched on through the trees, their horses’ hooves muffled by the deep layer of autumn leaves underfoot, Ryder suddenly became aware of a lull in the one-sided conversation. Meredith’s horse had fallen back in line with his some minutes earlier, and, as he turned in the saddle, curious to know the reason for her sudden silence, he saw that it had stopped altogether — and not only that, but Meredith appeared to be entirely absent from the saddle.

Cursing softly under his breath, he pulled his own steed to halt, seeing as he did so that she had dismounted and was crouched by the side of the road, deep in conversation with a child so small that Ryder hadn’t even noticed him standing there as he’d ridden by. Ryder glanced warily around, instinctively distrusting the situation.

He had not brought any guards with him on his journey to collect his betrothed, not thinking it necessary — he knew these lands well enough. And those who inhabited them knew *him* well enough, if only by reputation, to know to stay well away from him, and cause no trouble, for it would not end well for them.

“How d’ye do, sweetheart?” Meredith was saying, kneeling down in the fallen leaves so she was at eye level with the boy. “What brings ye to be out here on yer own? Is there nobody with ye?”

“Nay, miss.” The child shook his head shyly. Meredith glanced around, looking for some clue where he had come from. “I’m lost.”

“Lost? Well, that willnae do,” she exclaimed, reaching out to take him by the hand. “D’ye know where ye live? Daena ye worry, we’ll make sure ye get home safely, willnae we, Ryder? Ryder?”

Ignoring Meredith’s words, Ryder gazed into the depths of the forest behind her. He was starting to wonder if his confidence in traveling like this, without guards, had been misplaced. Something was amiss here. He could feel it. And, whatever it was, he needed to get Meredith as far away from it as possible.

“Meredith!” he barked out, his harsh voice causing the birds to fly suddenly from the trees above his head, their flapping wings momentarily the only sound. “Meredith, get back on yer horse; ye cannae be stoppin’ to talk to everyone ye see!”

“Och, it’s just a wee lad,” she replied, turning wide, tear-filled eyes upon him. The child — presumably lost, although Ryder personally had his doubts about that — had clearly touched her soft heart with his plight. This was going to be harder to manage than he had thought.

Ryder had just swung one leg over the horse’s head, preparing to dismount, when he saw them. Two men had appeared from the forest behind where Meredith stood, their eyes so intent upon her that they seemed not to have noticed her companion, a mistake they would surely regret, he thought grimly, as he slid silently from the saddle. This was the oldest trick in the book. The bait and switch, whereby a crying child persuaded a kind — typically female — passerby to stop and help, only to be set upon by the men, whose swords he could see glinting in the shade of the trees.

Ryder was fast, but the men were faster, and, before he knew quite what had happened, one of them had grabbed Meredith around the waist, one hand holding her hard against his body as his other snaked up beneath her skirt.

“Hush, woman,” he growled, as she screamed in fright, her eyes wide with terror. “Ye better shut up, or I’ll make ye!”

Meredith fell silent, her breath coming in loud gasps.

“Aye,” the man called to his companion, who was still keeping watch at the edge of the tree line. “She’ll make a fine wench, so she will. Nice and plump, just the way we like ‘em!”

They were to be the last words he ever spoke. Barely had they left his mouth than Ryder was upon him, a roar of fury

escaping his throat. This was not as he had planned. As soon as he had realized what was happening, the level-headed part of him that usually dominated had formed the intention to creep quietly up behind the pair and kill them before they even knew what had happened. But the anger that tore through him when he saw their eyes upon Meredith was so pure and so strong that it surprised even him. They would not take her from him; he would make sure of that.

The fight that ensued was short but brutal. Ryder spared the miscreants no mercy as he slashed furiously at their bodies, allowing rage to dictate his actions, as he swung the sword again and again. The first man was dead within seconds, his mouth frozen in a round 'O' of horror. The second fought on for a few minutes longer, but it was clear that he was more used to taking on unsuspecting women than men such as Ryder Higgins, and, before too many seconds had passed, he too lay amongst the now bloodstained leaves.

The child, however, was still out there. Glancing swiftly around him and catching a glimpse of one pale limb disappearing into the darkness of the forest, Ryder raised his sword to give chase, only to be brought up short by Meredith, her voice shaking as she grabbed him by the sleeve, clinging on his arm.

“Nay, Ryder, please,” she pleaded. “He’s just a bairn. It’s nae his fault. Let me help him, please!”

She made to turn and run after the boy, but Ryder gave a roar of fury and, before she could even try to stop him, had turned and scooped her up, carrying her firmly back to the horses, which had, mercifully, waited obediently where he’d left them. He would let her have her wish regarding the child. He would not harm him. But he’d be damned if he was actually going to

allow her to help the wee shite who had almost lured her to her death. If he hadn't been there...

Not wanting to continue the thought, Ryder threw Meredith back into her saddle, trying his best to ignore the way her soft body felt as he held it against his.

"Ye'll sit there, and ye'll do as I say," he told her. Then, noticing the glint in her eye as she turned around to look in the direction the boy had fled, he turned and strode quickly over to his own horse, returning with a length of rope, which he coiled tightly around her wrists, ignoring her yelp of protest as he got back onto his horse, one end of the rope wrapped firmly around his hand.

"Just to be sure," he said, urging the horse forward. "If I cannae trust ye nae to leave that saddle, or talk to any strange bairn ye happen upon, then this is the way it'll have to be."

He spoke angrily, his heart still hammering wildly from the fury that had filled his body when he'd seen the two men creeping up on her. He had not intended to care about her, but he did not seem to have a choice in the matter, and his scowl deepened as he looked back to see a small smile playing around the corners of her pink lips.

"What are ye laughing at?" he demanded, over his shoulder. He did not particularly want to engage her in conversation, but the woman was infuriating. To have taken such a foolhardy risk was one thing, but to be actually amused by his anger... Ryder had never known anything like it.

"Well?" he said, turning again in the saddle. "I'm waiting?"

“I’m sorry,” Meredith gasped, a small laugh escaping her lips. “I know it’s nae funny. It’s just, ye look so amusing when yer angry, I can’t help myself. Do ye ever laugh at things you’re nae supposed to? Because I do, all the time. In fact...”

She launched into a story about how her brother, Felix, had once fallen from a tree and knocked himself unconscious. Rather than wailing in horror, like her sister Melissa had when they’d finally been ushered in to his chamber to see him, Meredith had found herself unable to stifle her laughter at the sight of his shocked face upon the pillow.

“It’s nae that I didnae care, or thought it was funny,” she finished, thoughtfully. “I was as scared as Melissa was, in truth; I just seem to react to it differently. Do ye ken what I mean?”

Ryder stared resolutely ahead, refusing to answer her. He couldn’t believe the temerity of the lass. She was going to be a handful, to be sure, and it was better that he nipped her behavior in the bud right now before they went even one step further.

“Ye need to be careful,” he said, pulling his horse to a stop and turning to face her. “Yer behavior has consequences. Consequences ye willnae like.”

His single eye glinted dangerously, but she simply smiled back at him, as if challenging him in some way — to what, he did not know.

“Back there —” he nodded in the direction they had come. “Ye could’ve been killed. Ye could’ve got us both killed, for that matter.”

Meredith nodded solemnly.

“I know,” she said, her eyes downcast. “And I will nae do it again, I promise.”

Ryder clicked to his horse to walk on, placated. That had been easier than he’d thought.

“I daenae think ye’re quite right about possibly getting us *both* killed, though,” her voice said from behind him. “Me, maybe. But ye? The great warrior, Ryder Higgins, famed throughout Scotland? Oh nay, I daenae think anyone would *dare* try to kill ye.”

Her tone was arch. She was toying with him, Ryder realized in astonishment. Making fun of him, even. She had just watched him kill two men, without even pausing for thought, and yet here she was, playfully sparring with him. He frowned, hardly able to believe the sauce of the lass.

“Quiet,” he said curtly, not wanting her to know how discomfited he felt. “Ye need to learn to be quiet.”

But Meredith simply shrugged, her black curls tumbling over her shoulders and lifting slightly in the breeze as she urged her horse level with his once more.

“Is that right?” she asked calmly, looking him in the eye.
“Well, I’m sorry to say it, sir, but if ye wanted a quiet bride,
ye’ve picked the wrong woman.”

Ryder looked at her incredulously, resisting the sudden impulse to return her smile. He had a feeling she was right — and that perhaps he did not want a quiet wife after all.

CHAPTER 3

THE LAIRD of Millar may have lived up to Meredith's expectations – in terms of his appearance, at least — but his castle, unfortunately, did not.

“Is... is this it?” she asked in dismay as their horses carried them under the arched doorway, leading into a central courtyard, buzzing with people. Even from the outside, the castle looked as if it had been leeches of all color, with nothing left but grey tones. Everywhere she looked, grey stone gave way to grey cobbles, which led to grey stone stairs, leading up to a wooden door, which looked in need of a good clean. Even the late afternoon sky was grey, leaden with rainclouds and darkening by the second in the quickly fading daylight.

“Is it nae to yer ladyship's liking?” Ryder snorted, jumping down from his horse and coming, at last, to untie her hands as a small boy ran towards them to take the horses. Meredith shifted uneasily in the saddle, uncomfortably aware of the many eyes upon her — eyes which, she knew, would also have mouths attached. Mouths which would, no doubt, take great delight in spreading the news that the Laird of Millar had returned from his travels with his betrothed tied up like a captive — or a savage.

Meredith felt her face flush in embarrassment. This was not exactly how she had hoped to start her life as mistress of this castle, she thought, ignoring the hand Ryder offered her as she jumped down herself.

“Nay matter,” she chirped, looking him in the eye. “It looks a bit... unloved, I suppose, but it just needs a woman’s touch, that’s all. So, it’s a good thing I’m here.”

The castle wasn’t the only thing in need of a woman’s touch, she thought, as she followed Ryder through the door she’d noticed earlier and into a dimly lit entrance hall. By the look of him, he could be doing with that himself; maybe it would help soften him up a little. Meredith flushed again, surprising herself with the unusually brazen thought, and thanking her stars that the narrow spiral staircase he now led her up was too dark for him to notice — not that he was looking at her, anyway.

“I’ll take ye straight to yer chamber, so ye can rest,” he said curtly over his shoulder. “I’ve matters I must attend to before bed.”

“And leave me there alone?”

For the first time, Meredith felt a shiver of fear run through her. The corridors they passed through were dark and dank, with an unpleasant, moldy smell that made her want to press her handkerchief to her nose. She knew the Laird to be a man of considerable means, but you would not know it to look at the place he called home. “Home,” however, would be a poor choice of words for this... this place. It was as cold and unwelcoming as a villain’s lair, and, as the shadows around them deepened, Meredith found herself shrinking closer to Ryder, shivering involuntarily.

“Of course, on yer own; ye can hardly expect me to stay with ye,” he said, appearing not to notice her fear. “Do ye want me to sit and braid your hair like a lass?”

“Indeed nae, I’ve already learned to keep me expectations low,” Meredith shot back before she could stop herself. “I realize that whatever business ye have must be far more pressing than making your future wife welcome, but it would’ve been nice to have been introduced to some of the staff, at the very least. If I’m to be mistress here, they should at least know who I am!”

“Och, they’ll know who ye are,” Ryder replied grimly, stopping in front of a chamber door, which he pushed open as he spoke. “It would be hard for them to have missed ye.”

His eye swept quickly over her, and then he was inside the room, taking the lamp he carried with them. Meredith took a deep breath, then quickly followed him before the shadows in the corridor swallowed her up.

The bedchamber was every bit as austere as what little she’d seen of the rest of the castle, with no furniture but for the bed itself, a small wooden table and chair pushed into the corner and an ancient wardrobe which Meredith already knew she’d hesitate to open, for fear of what lay inside. Thick curtains covered the only window, and Meredith hurried to pull them back to admit what was left of the light, regretting her decision as a cloud of dust rose up from the worn fabric, threatening to choke her.

“It’s lovely, thank ye,” she said blandly, determined not to give the Laird any further reason to smirk at her. “When will dinner

be served?”

Ryder looked at her in amusement. “I’ll have a tray brought up along with yer things,” he told her, taking his lamp over to the table to light hers. “I willnae have time to dine with ye tonight, I’m afraid.”

“Nay, I daena suppose ye will,” Meredith sighed, perching on the end of the bed and trying not to think about how hard it felt. “What is this business of yers that’s so important, anyway?”

Ryder’s face darkened.

“Man’s business,” he told her abruptly. “All of the business that comes with running an estate and being a Laird...”

“...and fighting?” Meredith added, looking at him directly. “I know ye do a lot of that. Or so I’ve heard, anyway.”

“Aye, maybe I do,” he replied. “Fightin’ to keep people safe. There’s a lot of people depend on me to do that, not just those who dwell here in the castle, but many beyond its walls, too — the rest o’ the clan, the people who live off the land attached to Millar Castle, and who need to be protected.”

“And me?” she asked softly, allowing the words to hang in the air as he considered how to reply. “Even me?”

“I do me duty to everyone under me protection,” he said at last. “Even ye.”

Turning quickly, as if regretting the softness of his final words, he opened the chamber door and stepped into the darkness beyond it. "I'll have yer things sent up," he said. "Ye'll have plenty of time to unpack."

And then he was gone.



Ryder closed the chamber door firmly behind him, then stood outside it for a few seconds, needing time to think before he descended back into the main part of the castle. She was rattled, he could tell. Oh, she had tried to act brave, as if nothing troubled her, but it was clear from the way she'd crept closer to him on her walk through the castle and the question she'd asked about whether he'd protect her that Millar Castle had not felt any more homely to Meredith than it ever had to Ryder himself.

He had not deliberately allowed the castle to fall into disrepair or to feel as cold and joyless as it no doubt did to a woman used to a comfortable family home. It was simply that he had never loved it, which meant he had never cared enough to make it any more than the empty shell it was. A strong roof and a set of sturdy stone walls, that was all he needed.

But, as he paced the empty stone corridors now, he couldn't help but notice that it was perhaps not the most welcoming place to bring a new bride, whether he was legally married to her or not. Maybe Meredith was right about the castle needing a woman's touch.

A frown crossed his face at the thought of Meredith and her touch. This would not do. He had been pleased to realize the castle scared her, he reminded himself. He did not, after all, want a wife, and bringing her to so inhospitable a place was an excellent way to make sure he didn't end up with one in spite of himself. But as he stepped back out into the courtyard, scanning the area for someone he could charge with the duty of taking Meredith's belongings to her, he realized he was lying to himself.

He had liked the way she shrank closer to him. He liked being the person she turned to for protection. He did not, however, like these feelings she was inspiring in him, so, giving his head a quick shake, as if to free it from her, he marched quickly over to Matthew, his estate steward, who he'd just spotted on the other side of the courtyard. He would busy himself with matters of importance and put Meredith out of his mind for now, he decided; if, indeed, it was even possible.



Once Meredith's small number of belongings had been delivered to her chamber and carefully unpacked, the room looked ever so slightly better. Meredith had taken her time over the task, draping some of her more colorful shawls around the room in an attempt to bring a little color to the drab greyness that seemed to prevail everywhere in this place. But, now that she was done, there was little else to occupy her.

“Where is the tray of food Ryder had promised me?” she wondered, drumming her heels impatiently against the end of the bed she sat on. Must she go and fetch it herself, as well as unpacking her own clothes? It seemed she must, so, without allowing herself time to reconsider the bold move, Meredith quickly took the candle from the table and stepped out into the gloom of the corridor.

This had been a bad decision, she realized, almost as soon as she left the safety of her chamber. The corridors Ryder had strode down so confidently were a veritable maze to one as unaccustomed to them as Meredith, and it took only a few short minutes for her to become hopelessly lost.

“Nay matter,” she muttered to herself, turning down yet another corridor that seemed to have appeared from nowhere. “I just have to find the staircase, then I’ll at least be able to get down to the ground floor, where there will surely be someone who can help me find me way back to me chamber. The stairs have to be here somewhere, after all...”

With that, the candle she was carrying abruptly spluttered out, the flame extinguished by a rogue draft that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Her heart hammering, Meredith broke into a run, rounding another corner in the darkness and screaming in fright as she ran straight into a small but solid form, coming in the opposite direction.

“Ow! Get off, demon!” the figure squealed angrily. “Leave me be!”

Meredith gasped in fear — then felt her whole body relax as the shadowy shape in front of her raised a lamp to its face, revealing a small girl, not much younger than Meredith herself.

“I beg yer pardon,” she said, smiling. “I seem to be lost. I’m Meredith. What’s yer name?”

“Ellen.” The girl before her scowled, still annoyed at having been almost knocked off her feet, but her expression changed to shock and then embarrassment as she realized who she was speaking to.

“Meredith? Ye... ye mean the woman his Lairdship is bringing to be his bride?”

Ellen gulped in horror, then dropped into a quick curtsy. “Beg pardon, m’lady,” she said. “I thought ye were a ghost!”

“I thought the same about ye,” Meredith laughed, liking the girl immediately, despite their poor start. “I was just about to scream for help when I realized ye were but a girl!”

“I’m sixteen!” Ellen retorted. “Well, fifteen and three-quarters.”

“Very mature, I’m sure,” Meredith said gravely. “Well, Ellen, now that we’ve met, I daenae suppose ye can help me find me way back to me chamber, do ye? I *was* looking for some food, but I’ve become so lost I fear if I daenae go back soon, I’ll probably be out here all night.”

“Oh, I can do better than that,” Ellen replied, giving a smile that lit up her freckled face. “I can take ye back to your chamber *and* bring ye something good to eat. I know where cook keeps all the best stuff!”

“Well, then, I’m fortunate indeed to have bumped into ye, then,” Meredith said warmly, linking arms with the girl. “Now, lead the way!”



The castle's kitchen was easily the most welcoming room in the building, with a cheerful fire burning in the grate and delicious smells wafting through the warm air. Everywhere Meredith looked, scullery maids rushed to and fro, all under the watchful eye of the cook, Mrs. MacDonald. A short woman with a headful of white hair, and the kind of figure that suggested she was in the habit of sampling her own food just a little too often.

“Ye, lass!” she barked as Ellen led Meredith into the room. “Give me that pot over there — and hurry up wi’ it, I daenae have all day!”

Surprised and more than a little bit scared by the woman's harsh order, Meredith turned obediently to fetch the pot the woman indicated, only to be stopped in her tracks by a low, rumbling chuckle from the cook.

“Och, I wasnae talking to ye,” she said, reaching up to mop at her brow. “I ken better than to start giving out orders to the new mistress o’ the castle. Or so I assume, at least? I was talking to this one.”

She pointed at a small scullery maid, who appeared from behind Meredith, struggling under the weight of the heavy pot.

“Here, let me help ye with that,” she said, starting forward, but the cook got there first.

“Indeed she will not,” she said firmly, pulling out a chair at the long wooden table that occupied the center of the room. “I’ll not have the lady o’ the house working in me kitchen! Ye sit yerself here, and I’ll get ye a bowl of broth; I daenae expect his Lairdship has troubled himself to make sure ye have something to eat?”

Meredith shook her head as she sank gratefully into the seat offered.

“He did say he’d arrange for something to be sent up,” she said, not wishing to appear disloyal to Ryder in front of his staff. “But... well, I suppose he must have forgotten. Lucky for me that I met Ellen here.”

“Och, aye, that one’s always turning up like a bad penny,” Cook said, rolling her eyes in the direction of the maid, who simply grinned back at her as she went to help pour the thick broth into a bowl for her mistress. “Ye can take some for herself too,” she said, her voice softer. “I daenae expect ye’ll have had much to eat, have ye?”

Meredith sat at the table and watched the exchange with interest. For all the cook’s sharp words and rough manners, it was clear that there was a good heart lurking somewhere underneath, and Meredith liked her for it already.

“As for his Lairdship,” the woman was saying now, as she energetically kneaded a lump of dough for tomorrow’s bread, “I’m sure he did forget; only his Lairdship could forget to feed the new bride he’s brought to his castle. But daenae ye fret, me lovely, we’ll look after ye here!”

Ellen underlined these words by placing a full bowl of broth in front of her, and Meredith tucked in enthusiastically. “This is so good,” she mumbled through a mouthful of food. “So, so good!”

“I like a lass who enjoys her grub,” Cook said, nodding approvingly. “And his Lairdship does too, I happen to know.”

“Why, has he brought other brides here before, then?” Meredith asked, her eyes wide. She spoke in jest, of course, but she nevertheless felt relieved as the Cook chuckled loudly in response, amused at the very idea.

“Nay,” she answered at last. “Ye’re the first. And the last, I’ll be bound, for if there’s one thing I ken about his Lairdship, it’s that he’s loyal as the day is long. Once he’s made up his mind about something, there’s nae changing it.”

Meredith would’ve described that as stubbornness rather than loyalty, but she let it go, curious to know more.

“I’m not actually sure he has made his mind up — about me, I mean,” she said ruefully, taking another spoonful of broth. “He daenae really speak much, does he?”

The older woman chuckled again.

“Ye’ll get used to that,” she said, handing Meredith some bread to mop up her broth with. “And he’ll get used to ye, too, for that matter.”

“Have ye kent him for a long time, then?” Meredith asked, eager to speak to someone who knew him better than she did — not that it would be hard, mind you.

“Only since he became the Laird,” Mrs. MacDonald told her. “I came here after the old Laird — his faither — was gone, so I’ve only kent him as a man, not as a boy, more’s the pity. Maybe if I’d got me hands on him earlier, he’d have manners enough to look after his bride a bit better.”

“Och, I’m fine,” Meredith protested, getting up from the table. She was disappointed not to have learned more about Ryder, but pleased to at least have found some friendly faces in this strange place; it would certainly make her life that little bit easier. “At least I ken where the food is now,” she smiled. “So I’ll be able to come and help meself next time I’m hungry.”

“That ye willnae,” Mrs. MacDonald tutted, turning to Ellen, who stood behind her, awaiting her next orders. “Never let it be said that a single soul in Millar Castle ever has to go lookin’ for their supper. I’ll get Ellen to carry some more back upstairs wi’ ye, so ye can eat it in yer chamber.”



A few minutes later, Meredith was safely ensconced in her chamber once more, only this time with a roaring fire in the grate, courtesy of Ellen, and another tray of broth and fresh bread in front of her. The inhabitants of this castle may be woefully unprepared to receive visitors, but at least she wasn’t going to starve.

“Ma and Da dinnae want me to come to work here,” Ellen was telling her now, as she gave the fire another vigorous poke. “They’d heard too many tales of the auld Laird and his ways

with the maids, and they dinnae want me to end up the same way. He was a bit too free with his hands as well as his affections, if ye know what I mean.”

Meredith nodded slowly, her eyes on the girl.

“And the current Laird?” she prompted softly. “Is he the same way?”

“Och, nay!” Ellen grinned up at her, showing a row of crooked yellow teeth. “That yin’s bark’s worse than his bite. That’s nae to say his bite isnae bad enough, mind ye, but he’s nae a cruel man, or an unfair one like his Da was. I still wouldnae want to marry him, though — rather ye than me — but he isnae so bad. There are far worse masters, and far worse husbands too, I’ll be bound.”

Meredith continued to eat her broth as the girl chattered on. She was relieved to know Ryder was considered a decent master by his servants. “Remember,” her father had told her more than once, “ye can tell a lot about a man by how he treats those who he considers beneath him.”

It was something she had always taken to heart, but while she was pleased to hear that the Laird would at least meet her expectations in that regard, she still found it hard to think of him as a husband. He may not be cruel to her, true, but it was hard to imagine him ever being tender, either, and, for a moment, she found herself almost envying Ellen, who would never have to make the decision Meredith had, and marry a man she barely knew.

“That was delicious, Ellen, thank ye,” she said, putting down her spoon and looking imploringly at the maid. “In fact, I don’t suppose ye’d be kind enough to go back down to the kitchen and fetch me some more, would you?”

No sooner had the words left her lips, however, there was a commotion outside the chamber door, which suddenly banged open to reveal Ryder himself, his face filled with fury.

“What’s this I’m told about ye wandering the castle on yer own?” he demanded, storming into the room and making Meredith shrink back in her seat in alarm. “Ye’re the talk of the castle, woman! Meredith Quinn, wandering the castle like a ghost and giving the maidservants palpitations! What did ye think ye were doing?”

Meredith threw a swift glance at Ellen, who had leaped to her feet at her master’s entrance, and was now staring determinedly at the floor, the strings of her aprons twisted in her hands.

“I... I’m sorry, m’lady,” Ellen said, at last, still refusing to meet Meredith’s glance. “I mentioned how ye almost knocked me off me feet when I was speakin’ with the scullery maid, and I suppose she must have passed on the story once we’d left the kitchen.”

“News travels fast, I see,” said Meredith drily. Then, her voice softer, “It’s all right, Ellen, you’re nae in trouble. But I’d be very much obliged if ye could go and fetch me that broth now.”

Grateful to be excused, Ellen swiftly left the room, giving Ryder a wide berth as she did so.

“Well,” he growled impatiently as the door closed behind the maid. “Do I have to ask ye twice? What were ye thinking, creeping around the place without so much as a by-your-leave?”

“I do beg yer pardon, sir,” Meredith said stiffly, drawing herself up to her full height, inconsiderable though it was, “But I had nay idea that I was to be a prisoner in me room. Am I to understand that I may nae leave without yer lairdship’s express permission, then?”

“Aye,” said Ryder after a moment’s hesitation. Then, apparently reconsidering, “I mean... nay. I don’t mean for ye to be a prisoner, that is. But ye cannae just wander where ye will. These corridors are dark and uneven. Ye could hurt yerself, or someone else, as ye apparently discovered with yer carelessness!”

“But no one was harmed,” Meredith countered calmly, refusing to allow the spark of anger that his words had kindled in her to take light. “Indeed, quite the opposite, for I made myself a fine new friend. Two, in fact.”

“A friend, is it?” Ryder was incredulous. “The maidservant isnae yer ‘friend,’ lass. And the servants aren’t here to sit nattering by the fire for yer entertainment. That’s nae what I pay them for. I’ll be having words with that girl when I find her!”

“Indeed ye willnae,” Meredith replied, her green eyes flashing in anger. “Ellen was merely doing as I bid her, and if I’m to be the mistress of this castle — ” she raised an eyebrow to silence the objection she could sense on the tip of his tongue, “then I should be free to ask her to do as I wish. Perhaps if ye’d provided me with some food and warmth, as ye promised, I wouldnae have had to take matters into me own hands. So, nay, sir, ye will nae take Ellen to task, I willnae stand for it.”

She glared at him, doing her best to look imposing in spite of her small stature.

“In fact,” she continued, as inspiration struck, “I think I’ll take Ellen as me personal maid from now on, if it pleases ye. I’ve rather taken a liking to her.”



Ryder stared at her for a second, dumbstruck. Had she been a man, he would have struck her for her impertinence. But here she stood before him, a woman — and one who was very much at his mercy, despite all of her attempts to seem brave. It was almost intolerable.

“Dammit, woman,” he spat out at last. “Do ye really think ye can come into me castle — me home — and tell me what to do in it and how to run it?”

Meredith smiled suddenly — a broad, sunny smile that Ryder almost found himself returning in spite of himself.

“Aye,” she said simply, her voice low. “Aye, I do think that. What did ye think a wife would do, yer Lairdship?”

Again, she turned those wide, innocent eyes upon him, and again he hesitated, not knowing how to respond. There were several roles he had expected his wife might perform for him, he had to admit. It was just that none of them were ones he felt able to explain to her then and there, and none of them had involved him being so thoroughly scolded by her, within mere hours of her arrival.

As no response seemed appropriate to her last question, Ryder took the only option remaining to him, turning quickly on his heel and leaving the room, slamming the door behind him in an impotent gesture of outrage.



A few minutes later, however, the door opened once more, and Ellen's head poked around it, her smile wide on her freckled face.

“Ye’ll never guess who I just bumped into in the hallway,” she said cheerfully, carrying another bowl of broth into the room and setting it carefully on the table. “It was his Lairdship! And he tells me I’m to be yer new maid, m’lady! What d’ye think o’ that?”

Meredith smiled as she took up the broth and warmed her hands on the bowl. *Perhaps Ellen was right*, she thought, bringing it to her lips and blowing softly to cool it. *Maybe his bark was worse than his bite after all.*

CHAPTER 4

RYDER STORMED down the corridor that led from Meredith's chamber, barely even noticing which direction his legs took him. His mind was in turmoil. Never before had he known a woman to have such power over him. She infuriated him — but, as his legs took him in the direction of the kitchen, his senses barely registering the delicious smells wafting from it in his direction, he realized she excited him, too, more than was safe for him.

How confusing she is, he thought, brushing brusquely past a servant, who jumped out of his path just in time. *And how ill-equipped I am to deal with her and the conflicting emotions she arouses in me.* His mother had raised him never to hit a woman — it was one of the few things she had taught him, in fact, and he suspected it was something she'd learned the hard way, at the hands of his father.

He would not be like that man. He was determined not to repeat the sins of the past if he could possibly help it. But he didn't know any other way to be. He would never hit her, but his fists were not the only way in which he could hurt her, he knew, and as his pace slowed, he was suddenly struck by the uncomfortable knowledge that everything Meredith had said to him had been right.

He had left her alone in her chamber, without so much as a fire to keep her warm. He had promised to send up food, a promise he had abruptly forgotten as soon as his estate manager was there in front of him, with what seemed like far more pressing business for him to attend to. *But what could be more important than his future wife?* He had promised himself he would not think of her thus, but he couldn't help himself — something about the woman had seemingly bewitched him, and, angry though he still was at her impertinence, he knew he wouldn't be able to settle until he had at least made things right.

He had arrived at the door of the kitchen now, and he paused outside it for a second. Ellen, the maid Meredith had so skillfully claimed as her own, had seen to it that her mistress was fed, when he'd forgotten all about it. Perhaps, however, there might be some cake or other sweetmeat fresh from the oven, which he could take her as...

He didn't like the word "apology." Ryder had never apologized to anyone in his life. But it might at least go some way towards calming the friction that had sprung up between them and which would not let him rest, so, making up his mind, he pushed open the wooden door and walked inside.

"Well, if it isnae the Laird himself!" Mrs. MacDonald was seated at the table, putting her feet up for a few minutes while two of the maids buzzed around, clearing up the remnants of the dinner she'd just made. "Daenae tell me ye've finally remembered the young bride ye brought home wi' ye and dinnae even bother to feed!"

Ryder attempted a scowl, but it didn't quite work. Infuriating though his cook could be at times, he found it impossible to be annoyed with the woman. In fact, if he were to think about it seriously — and he tried his best not to — he might find

himself coming to the conclusion that Mrs. MacDonald was the closest thing he had to a family. Not just because his own family were long gone, but because, even when alive, he'd never really felt like he belonged with them.

Mrs. MacDonald, by contrast, was as much a part of Millar Castle as the stones which formed its thick walls, and between her and the Murrays — his man-at-arms, Robert, his wife, and their two almost grown-up children — Ryder felt he had everyone around him he would ever need.

But now, there was Meredith. Meredith, who, if the expression on his cook's face was anything to go by, had good reason to feel aggrieved at the treatment she'd recently received from her betrothed.

“Ye've met her then, I take it?” he said now, crossing his arms defensively in front of his chest as he leaned back against the kitchen wall.

“Och, aye, I've met her,” Mrs. MacDonald replied. “And fed her too, ye'll be pleased to know. Poor thing was about to expire wi' hunger when she showed up in me kitchen. It was good I was here to help her.”

“Aye,” Ryder agreed drily. “And ye have something else to say about the matter too, I can tell. Well, let me have it. There's nae point putting it off.”

Mrs. MacDonald paused for a second, then gave a quick shrug.

“Well, seein’ as ye asked,” she said, drawing herself up to her full height, short though it was, “what were ye thinkin’ of, bringing that young lassie here and then leaving her all by herself in her chamber, like a prisoner!”

“She wasnae a prisoner,” Ryder explained patiently. “And I left her in a perfectly comfortable chamber...”

“Comfortable?” Cook’s expression was incredulous. “D’ye call that comfortable? That dusty, musty old room that hasnae been cleaned in years? Why, the poor lassie must have wondered what on earth she’d let hersel’ in for when ye left her in there, twiddling her thumbs.”

“I’m sure she wasnae...” Ryder started, then stopped in the middle of his sentence, seeing there was no point continuing. “Alright, Mrs. MacDonald,” he said, raising his hands in mock surrender. “I give in. I shouldnae have left her alone, and I should have made sure she at least had something to eat. Better?”

“And ye’ll tell her yer sorry for being a bampot?” the cook added helpfully.

“And I’ll tell her I’m... look, can ye just give me some cake to take to her?” Ryder pleaded. “I think I get the message.”

“Ye better have,” Mrs. MacDonald said, her voice fierce. But nevertheless, she got up from the table and cut not one but two large slices from the cake she’d finished baking earlier.

“Here,” she said, handing it over to him, wrapped in a cloth. “And daenae forget to tell her the bit about ye bein’ a bampot, will ye?”



“A peace offering.”

The bedchamber Ryder had given Meredith was not much different from when she’d arrived earlier that day, but somehow she seemed to have filled every corner of it, bringing a light and warmth that even he could see had been sorely lacking.

“Ye want to make peace with me?”

Meredith looked at him warily from where she sat at the little wooden table. She did not appear to be frightened, but something in her demeanor forbade him from approaching her, so he simply stood at a distance and showed her the bundle of food in his hands, which cook had wrapped in a warm cloth.

“Cake,” he said, holding it up so she could see it. “I thought we might eat it together, and perhaps it might go some way towards making up for our... misunderstanding... earlier.”

“Oh, I think I understood ye perfectly well, sir,” Meredith replied, her green eyes challenging him. “Ye wish for me to remain in me room at all times, a prisoner in all but name. I, on the other hand, prefer to decline yer suggestion.”

Her words were sharp, but her voice was soft, and, as he watched, he saw a smile curl the edges of her lips upwards,

giving him the courage to draw a little closer.

“I will, however, accept yer offer of cake,” she said now, smiling fully this time. “I must admit, I *do* love sweet things!”

As do I, thought Ryder, noticing the swell of her pale breasts below the open neck of her blouse and then chastising himself quickly for the thought. *This was not part of his plan*, he reminded himself. Then again, as he stepped closer to the table she sat at, realizing as he did so that hers was the only chair in the room, a new plan started to form — one which would surely have the desired effect of scaring him off her, and allowing him to escape his promise to her father without any blame on his part.

Meredith, however, appeared to have had the same thought he had regarding the insufficient seating arrangements and sprang up from the table as he approached.

“Here,” she offered, pushing the chair towards him. “There is but one chair, so it’s only fitting that the Laird of the castle should be the one to sit in it. I’ll warm meself by the fire.”

She made to move off, but Ryder was too quick for her, and, springing quickly forward with a deftness that belied his stature, he hooked one strong arm around her waist, pulling her back and onto his lap before she had a chance to object.

Object, however, she did. He might have guessed.

“Sir!” Meredith gasped her voice unusually high. “Let me go, I beg ye!”

“Why?” asked Ryder mischievously, his single eye wide in mock innocence. “There’s more than enough room for two, and it would please me if ye’d keep me company, rather than standing over there, on the other side of the room. If it pleases ye too, that is.”

Her eyes were wary, but she submitted to his request, settling herself on his lap in such a way that he was immediately aware of how perfectly her body fit his, her soft curves complimenting his taut muscles. As she shifted slightly on his knee, he felt himself start to grow hard and instantly adjusted her position to lessen the friction between them. His reputation may be fierce, but he would not touch her unless she made it clear that she wanted him to, just as he had not forced her to sit with him.

The thought of her actually *wanting* him to touch her, however, simply excited him more, making it hard for him to concentrate on the slice of cake which she now offered him — twisting around in his lap, her face mere inches from his, as she held the plate out invitingly.

“This is good,” she said, her voice muffled from the large mouthful she had just taken, the wariness of earlier apparently forgotten. “Here, try some.”

Ryder opened his mouth obediently as she fed him a mouthful of warm cake before taking another bite for herself.

“One for ye, one for me!” she laughed, repeating the process. “Or maybe two for me, rather!”

He smiled in spite of himself. Meredith was a woman who unapologetically enjoyed her food. That much was apparent. He liked that about her. It was a welcome contrast to some of the simpering ladies of his acquaintance, who'd make a big show of their apparently tiny appetites, modestly refusing anything other than a few bites of food.

But why deny yourself something that would bring you so much pleasure? Ryder never had and, if the way in which Meredith tucked into another slice of cake was anything to go by, she was entirely in agreement with him on that score.

He shook his head as if to dislodge the thought. *This will not do*, he thought, removing his hands from her waist, where he'd been keeping her balanced on his lap, and placing them firmly by his sides instead. He wanted to scare her off, he reminded himself, and, that being the case, he must not think of her thus — not even for a second. *This was a bad idea*, he thought, moving her a little further away from him. *I should not have allowed me conscience to force me to make amends with her. I have a feeling I'm going to regret it.*

Or would he?

“I must say, yer housekeeping might nae be up to much, but yer cook is truly wonderful,” Meredith was saying now, licking the last of the crumbs from her fingers and twisting around until they were face-to-face once more, her body still nestled comfortably — for her, at least — against his. “One of the best, in fact!”

“Is that right?” he replied, trying not to smile. “Well, I'm pleased to hear ye're happy with something, at least. I was starting to think I'd have to take ye right back home at first light tomorrow; ye were that displeased with everything.”

“Och, nay,” said Meredith, her green eyes laughing at him. “It takes more than a bit of dust — or an inhospitable host — to bother me! I’ll have this castle of yers sorted out before ye know it.”

She probably would, too, Ryder thought — if I let her.

“I can well believe it,” he replied earnestly. “It’s why ye would want to bother yerself with it — or with me — that I struggle to understand. I know yer family have many troubles, of course, troubles that an alliance with me could help solve.”

“That’s nae why,” she cut in quickly, her eyes downcast. “Well, I mean, maybe it was to start with. It’s why I agreed to meet with ye, at least, and to give some thought to the idea of a union between us.”

He nodded, understanding. He did not blame her for her pragmatism in agreeing to enter into a marriage — or at least consider one — purely to help her clan. He’d have done the same in her position. He did, however, admire her frankness. Many lesser women would have tried to flatter him, to convince him that they’d only been interested in his affections and not in his power or protection. Meredith, on the other hand, appeared to be unwilling to tell a lie — not about his home, and not about anything else, either. Her honesty might be uncomfortable for him at times, but there was no denying it was part of her attraction.

“And now?” he said softly, pulling her closer against his better judgment.

“Now?”

“Ye said ‘to start with’ it was just about yer family and yer clan. Which makes me wonder if ye’ve changed yer mind since then. I know it’s not me castle yer interested in, after all...”

He knew she had changed her mind. He could feel it in the way she moved closer to him, leaning into his chest as if for warmth, even though the fire in the hearth was still blazing away merrily. But — for reasons he didn’t understand or want to admit to himself — he needed to hear her say it.

“Aye,” she said bluntly, looking him in the eye. “Aye, me mind changed as soon as I laid eyes on ye, and nothing ye’ve done since has managed to change it back. Not even yer dusty old castle and yer habit of ignoring almost every word I say to ye. And I’ve a notion ye might feel the same yerself.”

Her eyes flashed, challenging him. *It’s almost as if she can read my mind*, he thought. *As if she knows I want to scare her away — but also knows how completely incapable I find myself of actually doing it.*

Ryder hesitated, feeling his resolve to scare her off melting away in the face of such boldness and hating himself for his weakness.

“A man such as meself cannae afford to feel such things,” he said, at last, his voice harder than he intended. “Which leaves me with a problem.”

She flinched slightly at the roughness of his words, the movement making him harden again under her legs.

“Me, ye mean? I daenae intend to cause ye any problems, Me Laird,” she said, making to stand up and giving a small gasp when he pulled her back roughly towards him. “I’m sorry indeed to hear that’s how ye think of me.”

Ignoring the statement, Ryder simply pulled her closer still, his hands clasped tightly around her waist.

“Leave me be, why daenae ye?” she hissed, frustrated when he failed to let her go. “I daenae understand ye, one minute yer as nice as can be, the next yer warning me off ye, and then right after that, ye want me to sit in yer lap?”

She trailed off, her voice shaking. Ryder looked at her thoughtfully. She was right. There was no denying it. It wasn’t the lass’s fault that he found himself so conflicted in his emotions towards her, after all, and he wasn’t being fair to her by blowing so hot and cold. And he didn’t know why, but, in the short time he’d known her, her opinion had already become important to him. He wanted her to think well of him — even while he tried to push her away.

“I beg yer pardon,” he said gruffly, unused to issuing an apology. “Maybe ye can tell me how I can make this easier on ye? What would ye like me to bring ye to make ye more comfortable? Something for yer chamber, maybe? Or some more of that cake ye liked so much?”



Meredith simply stared at him, exasperated.

“This isnae about cake!” she said at last. “How can ye even think that?” She squirmed uncomfortably on his lap. She badly wanted to stand up — to put some distance between them and be rid of the tingling sensation that had lit up her body as soon as he’d pulled her towards him.

Being close to him made her aware of every part of her body. Every brush of his hand on her waist and every slight movement that made his strong arms curl even more tightly around her. The longer their conversation went on, the stronger the sensation became, until it reached the point where she almost felt like she couldn’t quite think straight.

He was saying something else — something about that damned cake, she was sure — but she barely heard him, so aware had she become of the hardness of him, pressing firmly against her legs, as she sat on his lap. She wasn’t quite sure now whether what she really wanted was to move away or to sink closer to him, but she decided to choose the first — and undoubtedly safer — option.

The moment she stood up, however, quickly crossing the room to where the fire now burned lower in the grate, under the pretense of warming herself before it, he was on his feet and coming after her, his tall, broad-shouldered figure suddenly making the room seem small.

“Ryder —”

He paused for just a second, but whatever she had intended to say next — assuming she even knew — was forgotten as his lips silenced hers, his hands in her hair as he pulled her roughly towards him, kissing her passionately, until her mind

was full of nothing but him. His lips, his tongue, his body, as it pressed insistently against hers. She murmured incoherently, but his response was simply to deepen the kiss, the softness of his lips contrasting sharply with the strength of the body that pressed against hers.

The room is much too hot, Meredith thought, abandoning herself to the kiss and enjoying the sensation of his hands in her hair, the thumbs softly stroking her face. Either that, or I am.

The thought brought her sharply to her senses, and she pulled quickly away, her heart pounding in her chest as she looked at him, her eyes wild.

“We... we mustnae,” she said at last. “We are but betrothed, it... it wouldnae be right.”

A moment’s frustration flashed across Ryder’s face, and he made as if to reach for her again, stopping himself just in time.

“As ye wish,” he said curtly, moving away from her, his tone carefully neutral.

“It’s nae that I daenae want to, ye understand,” she called after him, realizing that the look of frustration on his face was merely hurt in disguise. She had offended him — which was the last thing she had intended. She took a step towards him, reaching one hand out imploring, but it was too late; her fingers brushed the sleeve of his shirt at the same moment that he opened the door and stepped quickly through it, not bothering to look back.

The door banged shut behind him, the sound loud in the small chamber.

He was gone.

CHAPTER 5

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Meredith sat waiting for Ryder in the little room just off the Great Hall, which Ellen had described — somewhat euphemistically, Meredith couldn't help but feel - as "The Morning Room."

"Och, Me Lairdship doesnae call it that, of course," the maid admitted, blushing slightly. "He doesnae come in here at all, really, he always takes his breakfast either in his chamber or nay at all."

Meredith nodded, pulling her shawl a little closer around her to ward off the chill in the air.

"His mother always used to sit here in the mornings, though," Ellen continued, making a move to start a fire in the hearth, having noticed her mistress shivering. "Or so some of the older servants say, anyway. So, I thought ye might like to sit here, too, like a lady."

Meredith smiled encouragingly at the girl. Ellen had always had aspirations to be a lady's maid, rather than simply a scullery maid, she'd admitted, and Meredith enjoyed seeing how carried away the girl was with her new role. "Morning room" indeed! The small stone chamber was as grey and

cheerless as all of the other rooms she'd seen so far, although, she had to admit, it had a fine view down to the loch which sat below the castle, and the way the morning sun was streaming in through the window made it almost pleasant. Almost.

“This will do very nicely, Ellen,” she said. “Thank ye. Although, I had been hoping the Laird would join me. I daena suppose ye know where he is, do ye?”

Ellen straightened up, the fire now burning merrily.

“Either the stable or the estate office,” she said immediately. “If it's nay one, it'll be the other. Me Lairdship either rides out in the mornings, or he locks himself up in that room with Matthew, his estate steward. He lives on the estate with his family. Ye'll probably meet them today, for they often come to the castle for breakfast. Mrs. MacDonald lays on quite a feast!”

“I'm sure she does,” Meredith smiled, her stomach rumbling at the thought. Sure enough, though, no sooner had she started to tuck into the plate of eggs that was the first thing Ellen set in front of her than the door to the little room opened to admit an older gentleman with iron-grey hair and an upright stature, followed by what Meredith assumed to be his wife and two children.

“Ye must be Matthew,” she said, getting to her feet. “Ellen was just telling me all about ye.”

“Indeed, aye. I'm pleased to make yer acquaintance, Me Lady,” Matthew replied, bending to kiss the hand she offered

him. “May I introduce my wife, Margaret, and our two children, Angus and Marion.”

Meredith smiled warmly as the family stepped forward to greet her, the woman giving her a quick hug, which Meredith returned gratefully, while the two younger members of the family hung back a little stiffly. They looked to be around Felix’s age, Meredith thought, glancing at them out of the corner of her eye. That explained the slight sulkiness she detected, then! *Lord, I hope they don’t ever get to know Felix,* she thought, horrified. *Imagine how they’d all rub off on each other!*

She needn’t have worried, though, because, within a few minutes of them all sitting down at the table, it was obvious that the Murray siblings’ slightly standoffish nature was merely the product of shyness rather than something ingrained in their personalities. Before long, Meredith had them chattering away happily and clamoring to hear more about herself and where she’d come from.

“Enough, enough,” their mother cried at last. “Me Lady will be tired of answering all these questions!”

“Och, please call me Meredith,” she replied, smiling at the woman. “And daenae worry, I can give as good as I get when it comes to talk.”

Margaret beamed back at her, relieved. She reminded Meredith a little of her mother. The same kind face and selfless nature. Her husband, meanwhile, was a quiet man with impeccable manners, who seemed content to let his wife and children take over the conversation while he sat back and watched them, only joining in when necessary.

“Yer like a proper, old-fashioned knight,” Meredith commented, unable to help herself. “I’d imagine ye must be a lot of help to Ryder on the battlefield.”

“Aye, I like to think so,” Matthew replied, his eyes twinkling to offset his serious tone. “Although he’s a big help to me, too, it has to be said.”

“Really? What’s he like?” Meredith asked, propping her chin on her hands as she leaned forward, eager to hear his answer.

“Well, the exploits of the battlefield are probably not best suited to the breakfast table — or indeed, a lady’s ears,” he said diplomatically, catching his wife’s eye and ignoring the protests from his son. “But what I can tell ye is that he’s a brave man, and a true one, is Ryder, a good man to have on yer side. I would trust him wi’ my life. In fact, I’ve done exactly that, more than once. He’s a good man, Me Lady, as loyal and trustworthy as they come. It’s been an honor to fight alongside him.”

Meredith nodded thoughtfully. Ryder’s reputation may be fierce, and his manner somewhat unpolished, but he was clearly well-liked by those who knew him best, right down to his cook and maids. Again, her father’s words came back to her, about judging a man by how he treated those beneath him. Matthew, of course, did not fall into that category, but, so far, all those who did had spoken well of their master. She had yet to hear a word against him. It was only she who seemed to be at odds with him. A situation that she was determined to change as soon as she possibly could.



After she'd finished breakfast and bid goodbye to the Murray's, having secured a promise from Margaret to visit her again soon, Meredith wandered over to the chamber Ellen had described at the estate office, in search of Ryder, and, finding it empty, marched out to the stables, before she could stop herself.

The more time that passed without any sign of her betrothed, the angrier she became. *His behavior is intolerable*, she decided, stomping angrily over the rough ground which surrounded the castle's stable block, cursing softly under her breath as she saw how filthy the hem of her dress had already become.

Curse this place, she thought, snatching it up and holding it high above her knees as she navigated the mud-covered cobbles, which threatened to turn her ankle at any moment.

And curse the man who owned it, for that matter. How could he bring her here, mistreat her, and then abandon her to her own devices? How could he kiss her so passionately, then walk away as if nothing had happened? Had it meant nothing to him? Had she been wrong in imagining a connection between them? Because she had been certain she was not and yet, had it not been for that kiss — and the long minutes that had preceded it as she sat on his lap, only too aware of his excitement — she might now be forgiven for thinking she had completely imagined it.

“Ouch!” Meredith let out a sharp cry as the inevitable happened, and she tripped over a cobblestone that was partially hidden in the mud. “Och, for goodness sake, what’s wrong with this place!” she shouted in exasperation — noticing just as the words left her mouth that she was not alone. From over the top of a stable door, Ryder was watching her, a smirk on his face as she stumbled her way over to him,

still attempting to keep her skirts from trailing on the dirty ground.

“What are ye laughing at?” she demanded as she arrived at the other side of the stable door. “D’ye enjoy seein’ a woman in distress, then?”

“Distress?” Ryder raised one eyebrow in mock surprise. “Aye, I suppose a walk across a stable yard must be distressin’ indeed to a fine lady such as yerself. Maybe ye’d be better off indoors, where it’s nice and safe for ye?”

“Och!” Meredith spluttered in anger. “Daenae ye ‘fine lady’ me,” she hissed, her eyes blazing. “I might be a lady, but I’m nae soft. I’m well used to stable yards and being outdoors — I’m just nay used to places that clearly haven’t seen the right side of a broom in years!”

Ryder smirked again. “Me apologies for nay keeping me stable up to yer standards,” he said, shrugging slightly to indicate that he was not troubled in the least by this.

“Or yer castle,” Meredith shot back. “Or yer manners, for that matter. Where were ye this morning? I had expected to at least see ye at breakfast.”

“Breakfast?” Ryder looked at her, surprised. “I had me breakfast long before ye were awake,” he said. “I daenae have the time to be sittin’ around taking breakfast like a lass.”

“Nay even when it’s yer betrothed’s first morning under yer roof?” Meredith replied, incredulous. “Nay even after...

after... well, after last night? D'ye nay think we should talk about it, at least?"

A shadow crossed Ryder's face, and he turned away, taking the horse behind him by the head and stroking its soft nose.

"Nay," he said shortly. "There's nothing to talk about."

He led the horse out of the stable, forcing Meredith to step back to allow him to pass.

"But..." Meredith started to speak but found she had nothing to say. What could she say, after all, to a man who appeared to want no part in the conversation? A man who was happy to mock her but unwilling to take her in the least bit seriously? She stood watching, her anger fading to sadness as he swung himself up onto his horse and turned its head to the hills.

"If ye'll excuse me," he said curtly, "I have business to attend to."

Without another word, he turned and rode off, leaving Meredith standing alone in the stable yard, watching his departing figure grow smaller as she struggled to hold back the tears that had welled up behind her eyes when he'd turned away from her so abruptly.

Nothing to talk about, she thought, as she turned and made her way back to the castle, this time simply allowing her muddy skirts to trail along the ground behind her. *Well, we'll see about that.*



Having found out from the servants what time the Laird usually dined in the evening, Meredith made sure to be waiting in the Great Hall for him, precisely on time. She was wearing her favorite dress — a dark red velvet, which showed off her rounded figure to its best advantage, and enhanced the rosiness of her cheeks. Melissa always said she looked her best in red, and, somehow, it was important that the Laird think so too.

I don't know why I want to impress him, though, she thought ruefully, as she took the seat a servant boy held out for her. It's nay like me to want to chase after a man who dinnae care for me. It's just... it's just I was so sure he did...

A polite cough from the doorway interrupted her thoughts.

“Beg pardon, Me Lady,” the manservant said, as he approached the table apologetically. “Me Lairdship will nay be able to dine with ye tonight. Would ye like me to bring out the first course?”

Meredith nodded, not wanting to turn around and let the man see the tears that had sprung up in her eyes. *Abandoned again*, she thought, taking up her spoon as a bowl of cook's delicious broth was placed in front of her. *First at breakfast, and now at dinner, too.*

Well, it would be the last time this would happen, she decided. No matter how strong her feelings for him, she would not beg for his attention or sit lonely in his castle, like an unwelcome guest — even though she did appear to be exactly that.

“Could ye send someone over to the Murray household,” she asked the servant, placing her spoon back down on the table. “Ask them if they’d like to join me for dinner. And please take this back to the kitchen to keep it warm until they arrive. Tell Mrs. MacDonald I expect some visitors while yer there.”

The boy nodded and sped off, taking the food with him. Twenty minutes later, as Meredith warmed herself by the fire, she heard the door at the end of the room creak open, and Margaret Murray, accompanied by Angus and Marion, stepped through it.

“Why, Meredith, I wasnae expecting to see ye tonight,” Margaret said, apologizing for their lateness. “Matthew is out with Ryder at the moment, inspecting the estate, so I hope we three will do?”

“Of course, ye will,” Meredith told her, gesturing for her guests to take a seat at the dinner table and ringing the bell above the fireplace to let the kitchen know they were ready. “And I thank ye for the information on the whereabouts of me betrothed. He dinnae think to tell me where he was going, or when he planned to return.”

She had intended the words to be light, but as an awkward silence descended, she realized he was in danger of embarrassing her guests. “But no matter,” she said gaily, lifting her wine glass to her lips. “I’m sure we’ll all have a fine time without the menfolk. Apologies, Angus!”

Margaret smiled back at her as she took the glass Meredith offered her, but later, as they gathered by the fire after dinner,

the older woman took the opportunity to draw close to her and place a kind hand on her arm.

“Are ye sure everything’s alright with ye and Ryder, Meredith?” she asked gently. “It’s just, it must be hard for ye, being so far away from home. Ye must miss yer family dreadfully.”

“Aye,” Meredith admitted, trying her best to suppress the tears that had sprung into her eyes at the woman’s kindness. “Aye, me mother especially. I hope very much to be able to see them all soon.”

“Well, ye’ll see them at the wedding, surely?” said Marion cheerfully, coming to join them by the fire. “When is it, by the way?”

“Oh.” Meredith paused, unsure quite how to continue. “I’m not... I mean, we havenae...” She trailed off as Margaret shot a warning glance at her daughter, silently urging her to drop the matter.

“There’s plenty o’ time for that,” Margaret said briskly. “Tell us more about yer family, Meredith. I’m looking forward to meeting them all, whenever that may be.”

Meredith smiled gratefully at her, and the conversation moved on. As she bid her guests farewell later that evening, however, Margaret took her quickly aside.

“Daenae stay angry with Ryder, Meredith,” she said softly. “That’s one of the best pieces of advice I was given when I

was a lass, about to be wed. I'm sure he'll come to see ye soon, and ye can work everything out."

Meredith nodded dutifully and thanked the woman for her advice. It was hard not to feel aggrieved at his absence, though, and she wasn't sure how easy it would be for her to forget it, either.

If he wants to see me, he can come and find me, she thought, as she made her way back up the winding stairs to her chamber. And, when he does, I may or may not be willing to see him in return. We'll just have to see.

With that, she closed the chamber door behind her, sank onto the bed, and immediately burst into tears. They were brave words — fighting talk, even — but the truth was, she didn't *want* to fight with him. She wanted anything but that.

With a heavy sigh, Meredith leaned over and blew out her candle, leaving the room lit only by the fire in the grate and the moonlight coming in through the windows. She had never felt more alone.



The next morning, Meredith woke feeling a little brighter.

"It's amazing what a good night's sleep can do," she told Ellen when the girl brought in her tray. "A good night's sleep, and a beautiful morning to wake up to!"

It was true that the morning had dawned bright and clear, as autumn mornings often do before the season gives way to

winter. From her bedchamber window, Meredith could see the tops of the trees on the nearby hillside, their leaves a riot of rich browns and reds.

“I think I might go for a ride this morning,” she mused as Ellen busied herself about the room, preparing her mistress’s clothes for the day. “First, though, I want to clean this room up a little, get it looking a bit more welcoming. If I’m to spend as much of me time here as Me Lairdship obviously expects, I may as well try to enjoy it. Will ye help me, Ellen?”

“Of course, Me Lady,” Ellen replied briskly. “There’s nothing a bit of hard work can’t fix. Me Mam always used to tell me that when I was a lass.”

“Yer Mam is a wise woman,” Meredith said, smiling at the girl’s enthusiasm. *If only a bit of hard work would be able to fix whatever’s wrong with Ryder*, she thought ruefully.

An hour later, she was standing in front of a dusty old trunk which Ellen had dragged from some forgotten part of the castle, opening it to reveal a heap of jewel-colored rugs and tapestries, their colors still bright as the two women pulled them out, exclaiming in delight as they draped them around the room.

“I wonder where these came from, and how they came to be forgotten in this trunk?” Meredith said thoughtfully as they stood back to admire their handiwork. “They’re too beautiful to be hidden away.”

“I think the chamber I found them in belonged to the Laird’s mother,” Ellen told her. “They must have been hers. She’s

been gone many years now, though, so I suppose he just had them packed away.”

Meredith frowned thoughtfully. *I know so little about him*, she thought. *His mother, his father... why, I don't even know if he has any brothers or sisters, or —*

“Ellen, what do ye know about the Laird?” she asked, turning to the maid, who was energetically beating the dust out of a tapestry she'd just pulled from the trunk. “Does he have any family in this part of the world?”

“Nay, Me Lady,” Ellen replied, panting slightly from her exertions. “The family are all long gone — and nae missed, either. Especially nae the old Laird, Me Lairdship's faither.”

“Aye?” Meredith watched with interest as Ellen straightened her back and turned to her.

“There's nae much I can tell ye, Me Lady,” she said to Meredith's disappointment. “It was before me time. According to me Mam, though, he was a wicked man, the old Laird. Truly wicked. He'll be burnin' for all eternity, that man, if what folks say is true.”

“But what *do* they say?” It was not in Meredith's nature to gossip, but she had to know more about the man she was to marry — if, indeed, she was actually going to marry him. She wanted to understand him or to at least try to, but if she hoped Ellen would be able to help her do that, she was to be disappointed.

“Like I say, Me Lady, it was before me time,” the maid said shrugging. “I know his daughter — so, the current Laird’s sister — ended up dead, and some say the father was responsible. But more than that, I couldnae tell ye. We didnae speak o’ such things in me family if we could help it.”

Meredith sat down on the bed, lost in thought. She had been angry with Ryder all day — furious, even — but the little Ellen had been able to tell her about his upbringing made her feel sad, instead. She did not know the whole story — she wasn’t even sure she *wanted* to know — but one thing was certain; he was a man who had known little kindness in his life, even, it seemed, as a young lad.

Perhaps it was unsurprising, then, that his actions were so confusing, one minute kissing her passionately, the next treating her as if she did not exist. If he had never been shown love, he would not know how to show it in return — that much was clear.

Well, maybe she was the right person to teach him, she decided, squaring her shoulders in determination. Because there was one more thing that was absolutely certain in Meredith’s mind, and that was that she would not give up on him — or, at least, not without a fight.

CHAPTER 6

THE YOUNG SOLDIER standing in front of Ryder in the castle courtyard had clearly had enough.

They had been sparring for what felt like hours now, and, young and fit though the man was, he had proven to be no match for Ryder, who had beaten him time and time again, but who still showed no sign of stopping,

“Again,” Ryder barked now, picking up his sword and squaring up to his unwilling opponent, his face inscrutable as always. He didn’t care whether the soldier wanted to fight with him or not; he needed to find some way to drive the thoughts of Meredith out of his mind, and physical exertion seemed like the best way to do it, which was why he had spent most of his time since their kiss out here training. For the last few days, he’d been forcing various members of his staff to spar with him, in what he told himself was an effort to improve his swordsmanship, but what he knew was simply a desperate attempt to take out his frustration at her on some other poor soul instead.

As he brought his sword down, seeing his opponent jump out of the way just in time, however, his frustration only increased.

“Enough!” he roared, sending the small crowd of staff members who had gathered to watch them reeling backward in fear. “If ye cannae be bothered to put up a decent fight, I’ll find someone who will!”

Throwing down the sword, he stormed out of the courtyard. As he went, though, he couldn’t resist a quick glance at the upstairs windows, hoping he might see Meredith there, watching him. But, alas, all were empty.



The next morning, Meredith yawned lazily in bed as Ellen set her breakfast tray in front of her.

“What news from below, Ellen?” she asked, licking her lips in appreciation at the spread Mrs. MacDonald had provided for her. “Come, entertain me for a bit while I eat me breakfast!”

What news of Ryder was what she really meant, of course. Luckily for her, Ellen already knew her well enough to know just what her mistress was asking her.

“Me Lairdship rode out early this morn with Matthew, Me Lady,” the maid told her, drawing back the curtains and allowing weak sunlight to flood the room. “But no before he and Mrs. MacDonald had a big to-do in the kitchen. It seems Me Lairdship wasnae best pleased not to find his breakfast waiting for him when he went down, and, well, ye can imagine what cook had to say about that!”

“I can indeed,” Meredith laughed. “I daena expect she was best pleased herself!”

“What d’ye mean, I should’ve had yer breakfast ready at this ungodly hour!” Ellen said, in a passable imitation of the cook. “Dae ye think I’ve nothing better to dae wi’ me time?”

Ellen laughed merrily, apparently unperturbed by the Laird’s bad temper and the cook’s equally sharp reaction to it. Meredith smiled in return, but she couldn’t help but feel troubled by Ryder’s behavior. His incessant training over the last few days had not escaped her notice, and nor had the way he’d been storming around the castle, apparently picking fights with anyone who dared to cross his path.

Her train of thought was interrupted as a loud knock came on the chamber door.

“Ryder?” she asked eagerly as Ellen stepped forward to open it, but her face fell as she saw only one of the maids instead.

“Beg pardon, Me Lady,” the girl said apologetically, “But the Laird of Moore is waiting below. He came to see the master, but naebody can find him, so maybe yer Ladyship could go down and make him welcome instead?”

“The Laird of Moore?” Meredith turned blankly to Ellen, looking for help.

“The Laird’s friend,” Ellen clarified. “Or he tries to be, at least.”

There was clearly much left unsaid behind her words, but Meredith had no time to ask as she hurried quickly from the

chamber, following the servant girl downstairs to meet this Laird of Moore, whoever he may be. *Am I doing the right thing?*, she wondered, as she wound her way down the spiral stairs to the entrance hall.

She had no idea whether Ryder would be pleased or annoyed to find that she had taken it upon herself to play mistress of the castle in his absence. Still, it was that very absence of his that had given her no other choice. So, she took a deep breath as she reached the bottom of the stairs and turned to see a masculine figure waiting for her in the pool of light that spilled in from the open door. Meredith put her very best smile on her face and stepped forward to greet him.

The gentleman waiting in the castle's entrance hall was tall and muscular — though not so tall, nor so muscular as Ryder, Meredith couldn't help but note — and as fair as Ryder was dark.

“A good day to ye, Me Laird,” Meredith said, offering a hand, which he held just a little too long, pressing his lips to it while smiling at her with soft brown eyes. “I'm afraid the Laird is out hunting, so I hope I'll do instead. Oh, I'm Meredith, by the way, Meredith Quinn.”

She did not know whether it was true that Ryder was simply hunting that morning, but something — she knew not what — told her that, despite the friendly demeanor with which this stranger greeted her, it would not be wise for her to admit to him that she had no idea where her betrothed was at that moment. Besides, Ryder would not like it, and heaven forbid she upset him more than she had already.

“Meredith Quinn, soon to be Lady Millar, I believe?” the man said now, dropping her hand at last. “And aye, ye'll do very

well indeed. Allow me to introduce meself. Colby Green, Laird of Moore, at yer service.”

At this, he offered a small bow, which Meredith smiled at, not quite sure whether he was mocking her or simply being polite. Either way, she would not forget her manners. Her husband-to-be may not be here to see it, but if she were to become Lady of this castle, she supposed she may as well get in some practice.

“I’m pleased to make yer acquaintance, Me Laird,” she said. “Ryder hasnae mentioned ye, I daena think.”

A shadow briefly crossed Colby’s face at this, but his expression did not change.

“Ach, it’s so like Ryder not to tell ye about one of his oldest friends,” he said smoothly, his smile never dropping. “We’ve known each other since we were lads, would ye believe? Me lands adjoin his, so our clans have always been somewhat...” He paused, searching for the right word. “Intertwined, I suppose. And now I hear Ryder is to be married!”

“Indeed, aye.” Meredith did not want to admit her doubts about Ryder’s intentions on this matter to this stranger, pleasant though he seemed. “And ye, Me Laird? Are ye married?” she asked, throwing the question back to him.

Colby shook his head.

“Nay,” he said regretfully. “Nae yet. Although, now that ye ask, I have hopes that that may change in the future.”

Meredith smiled uneasily. She had merely wanted to know if she might find an ally in his wife if he had one. Another woman in a similar situation to her own — far from home, and expected to play Lady of the castle — but, was it her imagination, or had his eyes swept suggestively over her body as he answered her? Before she could give it any more thought, however, Colby was offering her his arm and gesturing to the open door.

“I had hoped to find Ryder at home so I could persuade him to accompany me on a hunt,” he explained, “But as he appears to have beaten me to it, perhaps ye’d like to join me for a walk, instead? The weather is uncommonly warm for the time of year, and it would give us a chance to become better acquainted.”

Meredith hesitated for just a second. She wasn’t at all sure whether Ryder would approve of her walking with a man she’d only just met — or, indeed, if it was even proper — but, then again, Ryder wasn’t here. In fact, given how little she’d seen of him since the incident in her room, which she still blushed to remember, she might as well have stayed at home.

Her temper flaring, she took the arm Colby offered, returning his easy smile. Why should she sit around in this dusty old castle, waiting for Ryder to grace her with his presence? She’d told him before that if he’d wanted a quiet wife, he’d picked the wrong woman, and she’d meant it. Besides, the Laird of Moore was one of Ryder’s oldest friends, he’d told her so himself. What objection could Ryder possibly have to her taking a short stroll with him on such a glorious autumn day?

“Thank ye, Me Laird,” she said as they stepped out of the gloomy castle and into the golden sunlight. “That would be very nice, indeed.”



Ryder pulled his horse to a stop at the top of the hill opposite the castle, allowing it to take deep gulps of air after its exertions. *I must have ridden for miles today*, he thought, reaching up to wipe the sweat from his brow, *and yet it hasn't been far enough, for everywhere I go, I still think of her. Her and her infernal green eyes, looking at me as if into my soul.*

Meredith. Since that night in her chamber, he had done everything he could think of to drive her from his mind, and yet none of it had worked. She was still there, inhabiting his mind the way she had so cheerfully set up home in his castle, quickly befriending his staff with her easy manner and genuine smile. She had a way with people, he had to admit, and while he had always relied on fear to make others do his bidding, he couldn't help but admire the way Meredith was somehow able to wield an equal amount of power without so much as raising her voice.

Meredith. He wished he could stop thinking of her, but he couldn't help it, he saw her everywhere — even now, in fact, seeming to walk down to the loch that lay in front of the castle, accompanied by a tall man, who was supporting her by the elbow as she carefully navigated the muddy ground.

Ryder shook his head, disconcerted. It could not be Meredith. The thought was preposterous, for why would his betrothed be out walking and laughing — as he saw the figure on the lochside appeared to be — with another man, as if she hadn't kissed him, Ryder, so passionately just a few days before?

His single eye narrowed as he squinted at the couple by the water, urging his horse to take a few steps further to afford him

a better view. It could not be Meredith, and yet... and yet, he had only known her for a short time, but already he would recognize that soft figure and tumbling black hair anywhere.

It was her. And, what's more, as the horse carried Ryder closer towards them, he saw with a surge of rage that the man who held her by the arm, pretending to help her across the uneven ground as a pretext for getting closer to her, was not simply a servant she'd asked to accompany her. It was Colby Green — the Laird of Moore himself — walking with Ryder's betrothed, in front of Ryder's castle, on Ryder's land.

No.

This could not be tolerated.

With a bellow of rage which echoed through the valley, making the couple by the water look up, startled, Ryder kicked his horse into a gallop, pointing its head towards the loch. It would be the last time Colby Green would dare lay a hand on Ryder's woman. He would make sure of it.



“Look! Did ye see that wee fish jump from the water?”

Down by the lochside, Meredith was thoroughly enjoying her walk with Colby, mercifully oblivious to the fact that she was being watched from the hillside by an increasingly furious Ryder. Other than Ellen, who she'd become firm friends with during her short time in the castle, Colby was the first person she'd really talked to since she arrived, not counting the brief conversations she'd had with the various servants she encountered.

She did not, of course, know him well enough to confide in him about how she was really feeling, but the Laird of Moore, it turned out, was good company. Unlike Ryder, from whom she had to draw out each word reluctantly, Colby talked smoothly and knowledgeably about the area she found herself inhabiting and which he'd lived in his entire life.

It had been his idea to walk down to the loch.

“Ryder and I used to fish here as wee lads,” he told her, taking her arm to help her across the pebbled shore which bordered the water. “We’d spend hours down here, just waiting for a fish to take the hook and passing the time o’ day.”

Meredith could not imagine what they could possibly have talked about during all of those hours. Indeed, it was hard to imagine Ryder engaged in friendly conversation with anyone — not even her, in fact. But then, she supposed, Colby was much more like her, always ready to fill in a gap in the conversation with some joke or other observation that made her throw her head back in laughter.

“I’m glad ye brought me here,” she said as they stood, watching the waves lap the shore. “It’s good to get out of the castle, and this place is so beautiful, I just cannae stop looking at it.”

“Aye, a thing o’ such beauty is hard to look away from,” Colby agreed, his eyes fixed on her. “I count meself a lucky man to get to see it.”

Meredith simply nodded, her face shining as she watched the low autumn sun begin its descent, turning the rippling waters red in its dying light.

All of a sudden, however, the tranquility of the scene was abruptly shattered as a loud cry split the air, the sound of a horse's thundering hooves accompanying it. Turning in shock, she looked to the horizon and saw a familiar figure riding towards them, his face a mask of fury.

"Ryder!" she cried, as his horse stopped just short of the pebbled shore, Ryder flinging himself immediately from the saddle and setting towards them on foot. "Whatever's the matter? Has something happened?"

"Aye," he growled, arriving in front of them. He spoke as if to answer her question, but he looked only at Colby, who simply grinned back at him, unperturbed.

"Aye, something's wrong," he spat furiously. "This is what's wrong. Me wife and the Laird of Moore together is what's wrong!"

"I'm nae yer wife..." Meredith began, but Ryder cut her off, gesturing angrily at Colby and completely ignoring her.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded. "Why do I come home to find ye here, Moore? And what's yer business with me betrothed?"

"Why I have no business with the good lady," Colby replied easily. "I merely stopped in passing to ask if ye'd like to

accompany me on a hunt, and, finding ye gone, asked Meredith if she'd take a stroll with me instead. We were just passing the time until ye came back; ye must see there's no more to it than that."

He shrugged as if already bored with the conversation, and Meredith took the opportunity to jump in eagerly.

"He's right," she said pleadingly, attempting to take Ryder by the hand, and flinching when he shrugged her off angrily. "Ryder, please, we've done nothing wrong. And yer being very impolite to yer friend!"

"Friend?" Ryder's eye narrowed in suspicion. "Friends daenae flirt with each other's wives, do they?" he spat, and then, receiving no response from Colby, whose face remained impassive, "Och, away with ye, man. I've no patience for ye!"

Shrugging again, Colby made no attempt to dissuade him, simply raising his cap in Meredith's direction as he turned to walk back towards the castle, where he'd left his horse.

"Ryder, I cannae believe ye did that," Meredith began, her voice shaking. "He was just being a friend to me and keeping me company while ye were gone. And I'm glad someone thought to offer me kindness," she added, her eyes flashing. "I've already learned to expect no such thing from ye."

"Is that right?" Ryder responded, his voice ominously low as he stepped towards her. "Well, we'll have to see about that."

And, without another word, he swept her up into his arms and carried her back towards the castle, ignoring her cries of protest.

“We’ll see about that,” he said again, as the large door banged closed behind them.

CHAPTER 7

“RYDER PUT ME DOWN!”

Meredith had kicked and screamed her way through the castle in Ryder’s arms, not caring who could hear her. Nor, however, had Ryder, who had simply continued up the stairs, holding her firmly against his body as she writhed in fury, trying to escape his grip.

At the top of the staircase, he turned and marched on towards his own chamber, kicking the door open with one foot and then allowing it to slam closed behind them as he threw the still kicking Meredith onto the bed before him.

“Ryder, what on earth...?” she started to say, but his lips closed upon hers, ending the sentence — and all thought — in a passionate kiss that left her gasping for breath and barely able to remember why she had been shouting at him just moments before. Adrenaline still coursed through her veins as he pushed her roughly back against the pillows. This time she didn’t protest as he brought his lips towards her, softly kissing her neck, then moving downwards, trailing feather-light kisses across her collar bones, and the swell of her breasts, just visible beneath the open collar of her blouse.

“Take it off.” His voice was low and firm as he sat back on his heels, his eye never leaving her body.

Meredith blushed furiously but obediently did as he said, kneeling on the bed as she unlaced the bodice she wore, allowing it to drop to the floor, hesitating as she reached for the blouse underneath it.

“Take it off,” he said again. “All of it.” And then, seeing the fear in her eyes, he reached for her, cupping her face in his large hands as he dropped soft kisses on her closed eyelids.

“I’m nae going to hurt ye, lass,” he said softly. “I just need ye to understand that yer mine; mine, and no one else’s.”

Ryder had not known he would say it, but the second the words left his lips, he knew they were true. There was no use in pretending—in telling himself he was trying to scare her away. The truth was, he wanted her—more, in fact, than he had ever wanted anything in his life.

Seeing her with Colby had simply confirmed what he had already known. The truth he’d been trying to hide from himself with his endless sparring sessions and long horseback rides. He’d been trying to escape her, but now, as she opened her eyes and he gazed into their depths, he knew that no matter where he tried to run to, he would always want to come back to her, no matter what.



“I do know that,” she whispered, as he helped her unlace the blouse and pull it gently over her head.

“Aye, but I need to prove it to ye,” he replied softly, as her skirt joined the small pile of clothes on the floor, leaving her before him in a simple white shift. “And I need to make sure ye want no one else but me in return.”

“I do,” she said, gasping as he kissed her again, his tongue parting her lips. He kissed her over and over again, her lips, her face, her neck, his hands gently moving down her body as he did so, unhurriedly exploring her pale skin and the curves of flesh that lay beneath her shift.

Meredith gasped again as his lips moved lower, closing her eyes to concentrate on the sensation as they brushed lightly against her swollen breasts before traveling down her body, his hands insistent as they moved under the hem of her shift and up her thighs. It was unknown territory for her — she was but a maid, after all — but Meredith closed her eyes and sank bank against the pillows, abandoning herself to the pleasure that surged through her veins as his tongue found its way to the secret place beneath her shift, kissing her gently there, and then gradually increasing in pressure until she could hardly stand it.

Her hands reached down for him, her fingers entwined in his thick, dark hair, as the almost unbearable pressure increased again. She moaned in frustration as she felt his lips withdraw. “Nay,” she cried, hardly knowing what she said. “Danae stop, please!”

As she writhed beneath him, she reached down to pull him closer to her, her fingers entwined in his black hair as his tongue was placed on her again, making her gasp at the sensation. She felt as if every nerve ending in her body was alight, her skin suddenly exquisitely tender to each gentle

touch of his tongue, as it teased at her, making her fingers tighten against his scalp and her hips rock up towards him.

She murmured incoherently, barely aware of what she was saying as she felt the pressure slowly build within her, the sensation becoming more and more intense until it suddenly reached a peak. She felt herself explode in a wave of pure pleasure, which broke over her, making her scream out loud, her hands still buried in his hair. The sensation was so pure that it erased all other thought, leaving just her and him, together in a moment that seemed to stretch on indefinitely, her hands still entwined in his hair as he moved to rest his head against her body.



After a few minutes, Ryder started to pull away from her, ready to leave, as was his way, but she pulled him back down towards her until his head was resting on her shoulders.

“Stay,” she whispered sleepily, reaching for him again. Ryder hesitated before reluctantly submitting to her embrace. He was unused to such affection, having never known it until now. Indeed, as he lay there, feeling his eye grow heavy as her soft fingers continued to stroke his hair, Ryder realized he could not recall the last time someone had touched him other than in anger. The thought made his heart feel suddenly full, and, as he lay there, he felt the unfamiliar sensation of tears prickling behind his eye and reached up to angrily dash them away before she could see them.

This willnae do, he thought, shifting position slightly, and feeling her arms tighten around him. But then again, the damage — if there was to be any — was already done. The woman lying beside him, her dark eyelashes fluttering as she started to drift towards sleep, was already his, in all but name,

their lives already entangled. He could not have walked away from her now even if he wanted to — at least, not in good conscience — and there was no point in trying to convince himself otherwise.

She was right, he thought, as he propped himself up on one elbow to watch her sleeping face. *Our fates were sealed from the moment we met. There was never any other option.*

“Meredith,” he whispered now, not wanting to startle her. “Meredith, wake up; I’ve something I must ask ye, and I need to do it now. It cannae wait until morning.”

“Ryder?” Her eyelids fluttered open, her green eyes confused as they tried to focus on him in the dim light of the single candle. “Did ye say something?”

“Aye.” He sat up, suddenly awkward. *How stupid to think that we were so intimate just moments ago, and now I’m afraid to ask her a simple question*, he thought, grinning ruefully as she looked up at him from the pillow, her dark hair spread around her face and making her look like a creature from a dream.

“Meredith,” he began, her smile giving him courage. “Ye must forgive me, for I’m nae a man of many words.”

“No, yer nae,” she agreed solemnly, the twinkle in her eye adding levity to her words. “It’s lucky for ye that that’s nae why I like ye.”

He grinned back at her. Just a few days ago, he’d thought he’d never get used to her playful manner, and yet already she was

so familiar to him that his awkwardness evaporated as he leaned forward and took both of her hands in his, pulling her up to face him on the bed.

“Well, I’m glad to hear ye like me,” he said softly, “Because I daenae think anyone would blame ye if ye didnae.”

Meredith simply shrugged, her black hair spilling over her shoulders as she waited for him to speak.

“D’ye think ye might like me enough to agree to be me wife?” he asked, at last, watching for her reaction. “Because I know we’re already betrothed, but I’d like to make it official — and I daenae see the point in waiting any longer when I know me mind is already made up, and willnae be changed. So... will ye?”

If he had been worried she might keep him guessing, he needn’t have. No sooner had the words left his mouth than she was throwing herself into his arms, her soft lips meeting his in a passionate kiss.

“Of course, I will, Ryder,” she said, pulling away just enough to speak. “Did ye ever doubt me?”

His answer, however, was lost as she kissed him again, and he kissed her in return, his heart light for what felt like the first time in his life. If allowing himself to love her brought him danger, then so be it, he decided, as he drifted off to sleep, still in her arms, a short while later. It was not, after all, as if he was unused to danger, but now it was time to allow himself to become used to love.



Meredith lost no time in writing to her family to tell them about the upcoming nuptials.

“Nae sense in waiting, lass,” Ryder had shrugged when she’d asked him when he thought they might hold the ceremony. “Just tell me when ye need me, and I’ll be there.”

Meredith did not need to be told twice. As soon as the messenger had been dispatched, bearing the happy news, she summoned Ellen to her chamber and asked for the girl’s help in restoring Castle Millar to its former glory — or what she assumed it must have been at some point in the dim and distant past.

Ryder had simply shrugged once more when she’d asked him if the place had ever been “homely,” and while her intuition told her there was much he was not telling her, she already knew him well enough to understand that there was no point in trying to wheedle the information out of him. He would tell her when he was ready. Until then, she busied herself with preparing the castle for guests while consulting with cook on every detail of the wedding feast.

Within days, the once quiet and gloomy castle had become a hive of activity. Everywhere Ryder looked, teams of servants pulled open curtains, disturbing decades’ worth of dust as they allowed the cold autumn air to drift inside, airing out the rooms and breathing new life into the castle.

Meredith had also raided the storage boxes, he saw, feeling a lump rise in his throat as he recognized some of the tapestries

that had once hung in his mother's chamber, now decorating the walls of the Great Hall, where the wedding ceremony and feast would take place. *Ma would've liked her*, he thought, taking in the dramatic change Meredith had brought to the place. *It's just a shame she dinnae live long enough to meet her and to see the difference she's made to the place — and to me, for that matter.*

“Ye've worked wonders, lass,” he said gruffly, as Meredith took him by the hand and dragged him down to the Great Hall, the night before her family were due to arrive, to allow him to inspect her handiwork. “I barely recognize the place. And that's a good thing, trust me. A very good thing.”

It was true. The rooms and walls may be the same as ever, but Meredith's presence had had a restorative effect, not just on him but on the ancient castle, too. Ryder could not yet call it a “home” — the memories he carried still cut too deep for that — but as he raised his glass to his lips in a toast to his future wife's hard work, he felt more content than he had in his life.

Now all that remained was for the guests to arrive — the one part of the whole arrangement that Ryder would gladly have skipped over.

“I just wish I could wake up tomorrow and be married to ye already,” he told Meredith that night, as they sat by the fire in her chamber, sharing a dram before bed.

“I wish I could think ye romantic for saying that,” Meredith sighed, resting her head on his shoulder. “But I know only too well that yer saying it, not because ye just cannae wait to be me husband, but because ye'd rather not have any extra folk in yer castle.”

“It’s not that I resent yer family being here,” he assured her quickly. She was sitting on his lap, in what had quickly become their usual position, her arm around his shoulder and his around her waist. “It’s just that I’m not used to families. Or not ones like yers, anyway. Yers are close. Mine were... different.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” she said, her face curious but her voice steady. She did not want to pry, so she simply dropped a quick kiss on his forehead. “Ye’ve already met me family,” she said reassuringly, “And I’ve already come to see the Murrays as me friends. That’s all we need. Just the people we love and trust the most to witness our marriage and help us celebrate it.”

Ryder glanced up at her. He was not at all as sure as she was that her family would take to him, and he did not want to point out that, aside from Meredith herself — and possibly the cook though she would never admit to it — there was no one in the wide world that Ryder could actually claim to love or to love him. Meredith was not the first to do so — he supposed his mother must have loved him, too, although she had been too timid and too afraid of his father to ever show much in the way of affection — but Meredith was now the only person in the world to do so, and that was more than enough for him.

Only a handful of his closest allies would attend the wedding. As for the rest, it was just too far to expect them to be able to travel at short notice — a fact that Ryder was secretly grateful for, as it meant a small wedding, and then they could go back to it just being the two of them, the way he liked it.

The villagers, he knew, would doubtless line the streets to cheer them on their way as they made the short walk from the

church back to the castle. The wedding of the Laird was, after all, the most important event to take place in this part of the world for many years now, and they'd be curious to see the new Lady of Millar. But they would not all come back to the castle with them, so the number of guests he'd be forced to entertain would be kept to an absolute minimum.

"And the Laird of Moore?" Meredith asked cautiously, her lips still brushing his forehead. "Will ye be inviting him to the wedding? He is yer oldest friend, after all."

"Aye," Ryder said after a short pause. "Aye, I'll invite Colby. He lives close enough to be able to attend, and it'll maybe go some way to making up for the jealous way I spoke to him the last time we met."

Meredith nodded, surprised that he brought the matter up, unprompted. They had not talked about Colby since the day of his visit. At the time, she had told herself that Ryder had simply been jealous to see her with another man, but she hadn't expected him to admit to it quite so readily. *How little I know of the man I'm going to marry*, she thought again. *Still, I suppose there will be plenty of time to find out, now that we're about to be man and wife.*

Sensing her confusion, Ryder pulled her towards him, kissing her softly on the lips.

"Now ye get yerself to bed, lass," he said, stroking her face gently. "Yer family will be here tomorrow, so it'll be a long day for ye."

And for me, he thought, closing the door behind him and heading for his own chamber. One long day in a week of a long days. But then, once it's over, they'll be on their way back home, and Meredith and I will be alone at last.

Smiling at the thought, he entered his chamber and poured another dram of whisky from the bottle on the table.

Alone at last. He'd drink to that.

CHAPTER 8

“MEREDITH!”

Melissa had flung herself from her horse and into Meredith’s arms in a whirlwind of hair and clothes.

“Meredith, I’ve missed ye! I can’t wait to see inside the castle! It looks very grand from here, is it? What’s me room like? Mam has brought some dresses for ye to try, so ye can decide which ye want to wear for the wedding! Wait until ye see what mine’s like!”

Laughing as she staggered under the weight of her younger sister, Meredith somehow managed to untangle herself from her grasp and held her at arm’s length to get a good look at her.

“Melissa, I swear ye’ve grown since I last saw ye,” she said. “Ye definitely haven’t got any quieter, though. So many questions!”

“Oh, ye cannae talk about that,” Melissa grinned. “Ye talk twice as much as me, and ye know it! It’s been so dull without ye at home! Felix barely speaks at all, and as for Ma and Pa, well...”

She stopped to roll her eyes in the direction of their parents, who were speaking politely to Ryder while casting an eye in the direction of their daughter. Felix, Meredith's younger brother, meanwhile, hung back, holding his horse's head and scowling fiercely. Meredith would have to worry about that later, though, for as Ryder moved towards her younger sister, she saw Melissa drop into a curtsy, raising her eyebrows sarcastically at him.

"How d'ye do, Laird Grumpy," she said archly. "I hope ye've been being nice to me sister these past weeks!"

"Melissa!" Meredith elbowed her sister sharply, horrified by her behavior, but although Ryder's face betrayed his shock, he simply smiled politely and kissed the hand Melissa now offered him.

"Welcome to Millar Castle," he said simply. "Any family of Meredith's are always welcome here."

Meredith sighed in relief at the easy way he had managed to diffuse the potentially awkward situation. All the same, as her mother came towards her and embraced her warmly, she couldn't help but glance over her shoulder to where Felix was still standing alone with the horses, determinedly ignoring everyone — including Ryder.

He could be a difficult young man; he always had been. From the moment he'd been old enough to walk, Felix had been jealous of his two older sisters, doing anything he could to wrest their parents' attention back to himself, even if it meant getting in trouble.

Meredith still remembered the time her little brother had stolen her favorite doll and thrown it from the highest tower in the castle, watching as it broke into pieces on the flagstones below. Felix hadn't wanted the toy for himself. He just hadn't wanted Meredith to have it, and as she watched him scowl again in Ryder's direction, Meredith was afraid that the intervening years had done little to change her brother's personality. She just prayed he wouldn't make things difficult on her wedding day.



“I love it!”

Meredith let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding as Melissa turned to face her, her beaming face confirming that she was, indeed, more than happy with the bedchamber Meredith had allocated her.

“Are ye sure?” Meredith asked anxiously, searching her sister's face for the trace of an untruth. “D'ye think ye'll be comfortable here?”

“Och, aye,” Melissa replied, grinning broadly. “In fact, ye'll have trouble gettin' rid o' me! Now, what's for dinner? I'm starving!”

Meredith smiled back at her as the two sisters linked arms and headed downstairs. It hadn't been easy bringing Ryder's musty old castle up to the standards she knew her family were used to, but, with Ellen's help — and that of the rest of the servants — she had somehow pulled it off just in time.

Her mother, she knew, wouldn't have said anything had Meredith's new home not lived up to her expectations. She would have worried, though, and that was the last thing Meredith wanted, especially given that the reason she was here in the first place was to lessen her family's worries, not to add to them.

While her mother would have worried in silence, however, she knew all too well that Melissa would have complained in public, which meant the approval her sister had just bestowed on her was worth more than she'd ever have admitted.

"Tomorrow, we'll go out riding," she told Melissa now, as they arrived at the Great Hall, where the servants had been instructed to serve dinner. "I'll show ye the loch and the forest trails... it's so beautiful at this time of year Melissa. Like home, only the colors are so much more vivid, somehow!"

"I'm sure I'll love it, too," Melissa said happily, taking a seat at the long table, while Meredith took her own place, at the head of the table, opposite Ryder, who was pretending to listen to Meredith's mother's polite conversation, while his eye roamed the room as if looking for a chance to escape.

He looks so uncomfortable, Meredith thought, her good mood evaporating as she pulled in her set. Like he's only here under duress or something. And just when things were going so well, too!

She had desperately hoped Ryder wouldn't mind the presence of her family in his home. In fact, a small part of her had even dared to hope he might actually enjoy it. Until now, she'd been planning to ask him if Melissa might stay on for a while after

the wedding — she would enjoy it so much, and there was no denying that Meredith herself would appreciate the company. Now, though, as she watched him quietly from the other end of the table, her biggest hope was simply that they all make it through dinner without some kind of argument erupting.

“Ooh, this smells delicious!” Melissa was saying now as the servant boy placed a bowl of cook’s famous broth in front of her. “Broth like this has always been Meredith’s favorite! Well, that and cake, of course! Ye cannae ever get enough cake, Meredith, can ye?”

Meredith blushed furiously as she remembered the last time she and Ryder had shared a slice of cake together. Glancing up, she caught his eye and smiled as he winked solemnly in her direction. *Maybe it will be OK after all*, she thought, allowing herself to relax slightly. Yes, it was all very new — for both of them — and their new situation would take a little bit of getting used to, but wasn’t that the case for every newly betrothed couple, after all?

Surely she and Ryder were no different in that respect from anyone else? It would not all be easy. She knew that — and, if she hadn’t, one look at Felix’s sulky face would’ve quickly confirmed it. But, all the same, here she was, with all of the people she loved most — yes, even Felix — in the same room, and a whole new life about to begin.

What could there possibly be to worry about?



“Meredith, are ye absolutely sure ye want to do this? Because ye know ye can still change yer mind, daenae ye? I know ye agreed to marry the Laird for the sake o’ the clan, but yer

happiness will always be the most important thing to us. Ye dae know that?”

Meredith’s mother’s words were firm, but her face was strained with anxiety as she stood behind Meredith, carefully brushing out her long dark hair on the morning of the wedding. The past few days had not been easy for her — for any of them, in fact. Although meticulously polite, it had been evident that Ryder was unused to having so many guests in his home, and he’d frequently disappeared, making the transparent excuse that he was going for a ride to escape his obligations as a host.

“I dae know that,” Meredith assured her mother, turning briefly to place a hand on her cheek. “But yer wrong if ye think that’s the only reason I’m marrying Ryder. I know that’s why I agreed to meet with him and to come here, but things have changed.” She turned back to the mirror, watching as her mother continued with her attempt to brush the tangles from her unruly curls. “I’m marrying him for love,” she continued simply. “Love of him, as much as love of you and Pa. So ye daenae have to worry about me.”

She smiled again, reassuringly, but her mother simply continued silently with her task, unconvinced.

“Is he kind to ye, though, lass?” she asked, finally, meeting her daughter’s eye in the mirror. “It’s just, we’ve heard so many stories about him, and we would never ask ye to do anything that ye didnae want to, or that would put ye in danger.”

“Stories are just stories, Ma,” Meredith reminded her. “I know the real Ryder, and I know him to be a good man. One of the best, in fact. I wouldnae be marrying him if I dinnae think so.”

“True,” her mother acknowledged. “I daenae think the man’s been born yet that could persuade me Meredith to do something she daenae want to. It’s just... he wouldnae take Felix out riding with him when Pa asked him to. And we’ve barely seen him since we’ve been here, so we haven’t had the opportunity to get to know him the way ye have. It’s a mother’s job to worry, lass. Ye’ll maybe find that out for yerself one of these days.”

“He dinnae take Felix with him because Felix has been every bit as cold as Ryder,” Meredith sighed, exasperated. “I could shake the pair of them. They’re as bad as each other.”

It was true. Although neither would have liked the comparison. Meredith’s betrothed and brother were more alike than they realized, and, having got off to a bad start when Felix had sulked during the introductions, the two had continued in the same vein, with Felix choosing to interpret Ryder’s detached manner as a personal snub, while Ryder, for his part, saw no point in trying to win over a boy who obviously didn’t like him.

“True.” Her mother’s expression lightened somewhat. “As long as yer happy, lass,” she said, placing her hands on her daughter’s shoulders and bending to kiss her cheek. “That’s all we want. And Felix will come around, I’m sure of it.”

“Well, if he doesnae, he’ll have me to answer to!” Melissa spoke up from the corner of the room, where Ellen had been helping her dress. “I like Ryder. He’s a right grump when he wants to be, but then, so is Felix, so I wouldnae worry what he has to say about it. Did ye ask him if I can stay on after the wedding, Meredith? Ye did promise ye would, remember?”

Meredith laughed at her sister's fierce expression.

"I'm nae worried," she said, standing up and preparing to step into the dress her mother held out for her. "I know Ryder, and I know he's a good man, despite being a 'grump' as Melissa would have it. He's even agreed to let ye stay, Melissa — that's how good he is! And besides, even if he and Felix never become friends, at least they only have a few more days to tolerate each other. Now, let's finish getting ready. I daenae want to keep me groom waiting, after all!"



The wedding day dawned bright and clear, and as Meredith rode on horseback to the small church which stood just outside the castle grounds, at the edge of the little village there, she already knew she would remember it for the rest of her life.

"Ye'll probably talk about it for the rest o' yer life too," said Melissa, sticking her tongue out at her sister when she dared to share this thought with her. "Knowing ye!"

Meredith simply smiled. Nothing could possibly spoil this day for her – not even the glowering expression on Felix's face as she walked past him on her way down the church aisle, holding tightly on to her father's arm.

She had seated Felix and Melissa next to the Murrays, hoping that Angus and Marion, who she'd introduced to her family the evening before, at dinner, would help shake her brother out of his black mood. She could already tell that her mother and Margaret were going to be firm friends. It had gladdened her heart to see how easily the two groups of people had seemed

to mesh together. Her family, and Ryder's close friends, all getting along as if they'd known each other forever.

In the church pew directly behind them all, Colby Greene turned to smile warmly at her while she saw the Lairds of Munro and Galloway, with their wives beside him. Meredith did not know either man well, and their wives not at all, but they all turned to smile graciously as she passed, and she felt another prickle of excitement as she thought of the new life that was waiting for her at the altar.

These people would soon be her friends, as well as Ryder's. By the time she walked past them for a second time, she would be the Lady of Millar, and everything would be different.

At the top of the aisle, she paused as Ryder turned to face her, his usually serious expression giving way to a bright smile as he caught sight of her.

"Ye look beautiful," he whispered, just loud enough for her to hear him. Meredith simply smiled in return, then turned and kissed her father on the cheek, as he handed her over to her husband-to-be, then went to take his place beside her mother - who was already struggling to hold back her tears; Meredith was amused to notice.

The ceremony started with the hand-fasting. Meredith and Ryder's hands were bound together with strips of cloth, one bearing Ryder's clan tartan and one bearing Meredith's to signify their union.

"May this knot remain tied for as long as love shall last," intoned the priest, as the couple slipped their hands out of the

circle that had been formed from the fabric, the knot still intact. *Forever*, Meredith thought, as Ryder leaned forward to kiss her, his eye filled with pride. *It will remain tied forever; I'll make sure of it.*

Afterward, the new couple led their guests from the church for the walk back to the castle, where there would be music and dancing, food, of course, and plenty of whisky and ale, as the two families celebrated the union with their small number of guests. *Will Ryder dance with me?* Meredith wondered as they walked behind the piper who had been hired to pipe them home, a small laugh escaping her at the thought of her tall, fierce-looking husband dancing a reel.

“What are ye laughing at, wife?” he asked, smiling down at her. “I hope it’s nae me?”

“Och, it is,” she assured him playfully. “It’s always ye, Ryder. I was just thinking how much fun it will be to dance with ye!”

He raised his eyebrows in horror, but once they arrived back at the castle, and he’d carried her over the threshold, before paying the piper with the traditional dram, he surprised her by joining her in the first reel of the night, whirling her around the room energetically, before giving her a small bow, as he opted out of the rest of the dancing.

“Forgive me, lass,” he said as he gestured back towards the table, which was laden with food and drink. “But I’d rather save me energy for later.”

He gave a quick wink, then turned to sit down next to her father, leaving Meredith blushing furiously as she realized

what he meant. He was a surprisingly good dancer, though, she reflected, as she took Melissa's hand and joined her in another reel. Good swordsmen often were, she had heard. The thought made her wonder what else Ryder might be good at, and she was suddenly glad that the energetic reel made it impossible to tell whether the redness that flooded her face was from embarrassment at the audacity of her own thoughts or simply the result of her exertions in the dance.

So lost in her thoughts was she that when her father stood up and tinged a fork against his glass to get everyone's attention, it took her a few seconds to realize what was happening.

"Time for some speeches," Melissa giggled, nudging her sharply with her elbow. "This will be the most we've ever heard Laird Grumpy say if he gets up! D'ye think he'll make a speech, Meredith?"

Before Meredith could answer her, her father was beckoning for her and Ryder to join him at the front of the room, where he invited them both to drink from a silver quaich filled with whisky, and which Meredith recognized as a Quinn family heirloom, which he must have brought with him from home.

The dish was shaped so that it had to be held with both hands - not just because of its size but to signify peace between the clans. A man could not reach for his sword while both hands were occupied, after all. And, as she took a sip, and, as she finished drinking, and stood back to listen to the speech her father had started to make, Meredith couldn't help but hope that seeing Ryder's willingness to make himself vulnerable before their family would go some way towards mending Felix's stubborn hostility to his new brother-in-law. They could but hope.

“A daughter is a precious thing,” Edward Quinn finished, raising his glass in Meredith’s direction, “And I know that the Laird of Millar will do everything in his power to look after Meredith for us. I’m proud to be able to call him my son-in-law and to welcome him to our family.”

“Meredith’s nae precious,” a rough voice suddenly called out from the back of the room. “If she was, she wouldnae have run off with the Lairdship here as soon as she had the opportunity. Well, he’s welcome to her, though I daenae know why he wants her.”

At first, Meredith assumed Felix was making a poor attempt at a joke. Then she noticed the tumbler of whisky in his hand and realized the boy had probably been sneaking a drink at every possible opportunity — the result being that, as he staggered forward, one finger pointing at her accusingly, he could barely stand up, let alone walk in a straight line.

“Felix!” Meredith’s father made a move towards his son, but Ryder was faster, and, before anyone had a chance to intervene, he had Felix by the throat, holding him against the wall of the Great Hall with one strong hand while the other brought the knife he always carried — even at his own wedding, it would seem — to the boy’s throat.

Meredith gave a sharp cry and darted forward, grabbing Ryder by the arm as her mother and Melissa sobbed behind her. The room fell silent, the fiddle players Ryder had hired to provide some entertainment pausing in the middle of a reel when they realized no one was dancing.

“Ryder!” Meredith cried desperately, trying to pull her husband away from Felix, only to be brushed off as easily as if

she were a fly buzzing around his head. “Ryder, let him go! He’s drunk and stupid, I know, but he’s still me brother!”

“Aye, and it’s time he started behaving like it,” Ryder growled, his eye never leaving Felix’s pale face. “No one talks to me wife like that, brother or no. So this fool better apologize if he doesnae want to feel the full force of me anger. And he better promise me he’ll never speak so disrespectfully to any woman again in me hearing.”

“I apologize!” Felix spluttered, struggling for breath as Ryder continued to hold him against the wall. “And I promise! I dinnae mean anythin’ by it, Meredith, ye know that! I was just speakin’ in jest!”

“Aye, and a fine joke it was,” Ryder hissed sarcastically. “But one that I wouldnae risk repeating if ye know what’s good for ye, lad.”

With that, he released his hold on Felix’s neck, allowing the younger man to drop to the floor, where he crouched, clutching his bruised throat, while his mother and Melissa ran towards him, both still in tears.

Meredith stood there for a second, her heart hammering wildly in her chest. She had not expected to find herself torn between her family and her husband — especially not so soon in the marriage — and yet here she was, quite literally standing between the groups of people she loved most, not knowing who to turn to first.

As she turned to look imploringly at Ryder, however, she saw Colby Green step quickly up beside his friend, his usual smile

firmly in place.

“Well, young Felix,” he said, offering a hand to the younger man, who still cowered on the floor, his hands massaging his neck where Ryder had gripped him, “This is a fine state to get yerself into, but then again, I suppose we’ve all been there where whisky is concerned and it was very fine whisky, after all! Now, why don’t ye come with me for a breath o’ air; it’ll do ye the world o’ good.”

Meredith shot a grateful look in his direction as he pulled Felix to his feet and guided him towards the door, one hand under the younger man’s elbow, to support him. “Thank ye,” she mouthed silently as they passed, then, turning back to Ryder, she slipped her hand in his.

“I think that’s enough entertainment for one night,” Ryder said softly, looking down at her. “Let’s go to bed, wife.”



In Ryder’s chamber, Meredith perched on her husband’s knee, her head nestled against his shoulder as he stroked her hair.

“I just wish the day had ended as well as it began,” she said wistfully, gazing into the fire which blazed in the hearth. “We were so happy — and then Felix had to go and ruin it all!”

“We can still be happy,” Ryder replied gruffly, still unused to voicing such thoughts. “We *are* still happy, I mean. But Meredith, ye must see that I couldnae just let him talk to ye like that, brother or no? Felix has been argumentative and hostile ever since he arrived here. I’ve done me best to ignore

it, but when a man starts to talk to me wife like that, well, that's nae something I'm willin' to overlook."

"Felix isnae a man, though," Meredith replied, a small smile creeping over her face. "He's still just a lad, really, and a lad who had a few too many drams o'whisky, too. Och, I daenae know," she continued, thoughtfully. "But maybe it's for the best that it happened. At least now he knows that ye willnae tolerate his behavior. Maybe he'll settle down and be his normal self again. And then we can all live happily ever after!"

"As long as it's nae all together," Ryder said, returning her smile. "And now, wife, I think it's time for bed, daenae ye agree?"

Meredith lowered her eyes bashfully. She had been thinking about this moment all night, but now that it was here, she found herself suddenly shy under Ryder's gaze.

Ryder, however, had no such qualms.

"Come," he said, taking her by the hand and leading her over to the bed, which had been turned back by the maid while they were downstairs at the feast. Ellen had already helped Meredith undress, replacing the dark green dress she'd been married in — green to match her eyes — with a simple white nightshift which, Meredith was suddenly aware, clung to her body, outlining every curve.

She did not know why she felt shy; it wasn't like he hadn't seen her in her shift before after all - or out of it, for that matter. Meredith blushed at the memory, even though it

excited her. Seeing her discomfort, Ryder took a step towards her, leaning down to kiss her on the lips - the softest of touches, which gradually became harder and more insistent as she responded to his kiss, moaning softly as he pushed her gently back until she was lying beneath him on the bed, looking up at him, her eyes trusting.

“Relax, lass,” he said softly, as he kissed her again, starting at her mouth and then trailing soft kisses down her neck. “Yer safe with me. Ye can trust me.”

Meredith merely nodded, almost imperceptibly. She could feel his hardness against her body and the sensation, combined with that of his lips on her skin, was almost too much to bear. Her lips parted as Ryder’s kisses moved lower down her body before he carefully lifted the white nightgown over her head, pausing to quickly remove his own breeches and shirt before returning to the bed.

The room was warm, and the firelight flickered on her pale skin as he bent once more over her body, and she reached up, pulling him towards her, no longer feeling shy or afraid, but simply longing for the moment when she would finally be truly his.

“I trust ye,” she said, simply, her eyes meeting his.

He kissed her again, his tongue parting her lips as his hands roved over her body, firm but gentle at the same time. Reaching up, Meredith softly trailed her fingers over his arms, feeling the tightly packed muscle underneath skin laced with silvery scars. He worked his way down her body as he had a few nights earlier, his kisses making the skin on her thighs tingle in anticipation as his lips reached them, and his hands gently pulled them apart.

She gasped aloud as she felt his tongue between her legs, swirling in slow, lazy circles that made her raise her hips to meet him, desperate to feel his tongue on her skin. After a few moments, however, he pulled back to look her in the eye.

“I love ye so much,” she whispered, reaching out to stroke the hair back from his face.

“And I love ye,” he replied softly, bending to kiss her once more. No longer nervous, she kissed him back passionately, her fingernails digging into the skin on his arms as he finally entered her, making her cry out as the brief moment of pain turned into pleasure. She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms tightly around him, feeling almost as if she was part of him now — or he was part of her, she wasn’t sure which. All she knew, as their bodies moved together in the flickering light of the small room, was that they fit together as if they had been made for each other — and that as her body shuddered in pleasure, her mind thinking of nothing other than the sensation of him moving inside her, she wanted this moment to last forever.



This must be what it feels like to be happy, Ryder reflected as they lay together afterward, their bodies still tangled together in the heat of the room. Until now, the word had been largely meaningless to him — much like the word love. But now he understood both well enough for a chill to run down his spine at the thought of ever losing this feeling.

Meredith had been his wife for less than a day, but, already, being with her felt so natural that his life before this, his wedding day, felt cold and empty in comparison. A life filled

with duty and conflict, and not much more than that. Now, however, he had a wife. One who understood him and treated him with a kindness he had not known existed in the world. He even had a new sister-in-law, who, he remembered with a groan, he had rashly promised Meredith he'd allow to stay behind to keep her sister company once the rest of her family headed back home.

Not even the thought of being forced to listen to Melissa's near-endless chatter over the dinner table every day, however, could dampen his mood. It had, quite simply, been the best day — and night — of his life. Of Meredith's too, he knew — she'd told him often enough, right before she fell asleep in his arms.

In the space of just a few short weeks, everything had changed. And as he finally joined Meredith in sleep, Ryder knew that he had changed, too —and that the woman lying next to him was the reason.

CHAPTER 9

THE FOLLOWING DAY, Meredith woke up early and lay there for a few minutes, watching Ryder's sleeping profile before finally becoming too impatient to wait another moment for him to wake.

"Ouch!" Ryder sat up suddenly, rubbing his arm where Meredith had prodded him sharply, before rolling over and pretending to still be asleep. Her new husband, however, wasn't fooled.

"Ye wouldnae be trying to wake me up, by any chance, would ye?" he asked, wrapping his arms around her from behind and drawing her body towards his.

"Nay! Whatever makes ye think that?" Meredith asked, her eyes widening in faux innocence - and then widening again as she felt the hardness of him against her back, through the thin nightgown.

"That's good," Ryder said softly, his voice muffled by her mass of dark hair as he nuzzled at her neck. "We wouldnae want our marriage to get off to a bad start, after all, would we?"

“Och, I think it’s already got off to a very good start, daenae ye?” Meredith giggled, enjoying the feel of his muscular arms around her. “It’s nice to wake up like this, isn’t it?” she said, rolling over to face him and looping her arms around his neck. “I was half expecting ye to be up and out like ye normally are. It’s not like ye to stay abed so long!”

“Nay, it isnae,” Ryder agreed, realizing with surprise that she was right. For the first time in as long as he could remember, he’d fallen into a deep, dreamless sleep, not waking until Meredith had prodded him. “Ye’re teaching me bad habits, wife!”

“Och, I daenae think they’re so bad,” Meredith replied, punctuating her words by kissing him softly on the lips. Ryder enthusiastically returned the kiss, and before long, her shift was once more on the floor by the bed as they explored each other with their hands and lips, discovering all of the best places to touch. Unlike the previous night, when there had been an urgency to their lovemaking, this morning they took their time, knowing that there was plenty of it and that there would be many more mornings like these, as well as nights like the one that had preceded it.

“We’re so lucky,” Meredith sighed contentedly as they lay together afterward, trying to find the will to get out of bed. “So very lucky.”

“Aye,” Ryder agreed, stroking her back. “We are indeed.”



Mrs. MacDonald had arranged for breakfast to be served in the Great Hall for the next few mornings, the morning room being too small to comfortably accommodate so many guests.

By the time Meredith and Ryder made their appearance, Meredith blushing slightly at the good-natured jests relating to their lateness and what might have caused it, Felix and Angus were giggling together over something at one end of the table while her father and Matthew spoke earnestly together at the other.

“Where’s Mam?” Meredith asked, seeing Melissa sitting beside Margaret and Marion Murray, but no sign of her mother.

“Och, she’s in the kitchen, swapping recipes with Mrs. MacDonald,” said Margaret, looking up from her bowl of porridge. “We couldnae drag her away!”

“And it’s as well ye couldnae,” said Erin Quinn, appearing through the open door, with the cook close behind her, carrying yet another tray of food. “For I’ve acquired a long list of instructions which I’ll be taking back to our own cook, seeing as I’ve been unable to steal Mrs. MacDonald away from Ryder and Meredith!”

Mrs. MacDonald smiled at her new friend as she bustled around the table, placing plates and bowls at intervals along it. It was rare to see the cook out of her kitchen, as she usually left such tasks to the serving boys, but this morning she had apparently made a rare exception - keen, no doubt, to see how everyone was getting along in the aftermath of the wedding.

“Nay, Lady Quinn,” she said, shaking her head solemnly as she stood back to admire her handiwork, “I’ll not be stolen by anyone. I know Me Lairdship has his moments, but he’s no’ a

bad master to work for, so I'm afraid to say he's stuck with me."

Ryder raised his eyebrows at the rare compliment. "And very pleased to be so," he said gallantly, as the cook left the room once more, satisfied that everything was in order. Around the table, everyone was chatting happily, and helping themselves to more breakfast - all except Felix, of course, who had been noticeably silent since Ryder's entrance, his conversation with Angus forgotten. *Nursing a mighty hangover, no doubt,* thought Ryder, glancing down the table at the boy, who was resolutely avoiding his gaze. *Maybe I should try to spend some time with the lad, see if we can call a truce?*

"Felix," he called down the table, forcing the boy to look up at him, "I'd like ye to come for a ride with me this morning, as soon as we're done here. Angus, yer welcome to join us if ye like."



Felix and Angus exchanged a glance, then Felix shrugged, trying his best to look unconcerned by the prospect of a morning in the company of his terrifying new brother-in-law. Once they were out on the moor, high above the castle, however, the young man appeared to have a change of heart.

"Ye daenae have to do this, ye ken," he said stiffly as they drew their horses to a halt and waited for Angus to catch up with them. "I know we dinnae get off to the best start. I wouldnae blame ye if ye wanted nothing to do wi' me."

"I dinnae," Ryder had said bluntly, looking the boy in the eye. "But that was before ye apologized for yer behavior at the wedding — and before yer sister told me a bit more about why

ye might be feeling a wee bit put out that yer faither handed over his lands to me, rather than leaving them all to ye.”

Felix shifted uncomfortably in his saddle, feeling as if Ryder had somehow managed to see right through him. The loss of his home had affected him more deeply than he would ever have admitted, and, strange though it was to admit it, with Meredith and Melissa so preoccupied with the wedding and the new life they were both embarking in, Ryder appeared to be the only person who had truly noticed that Felix was struggling with his own, less happy, change in circumstance.

Then again, there wasn't much Ryder *didn't* notice — as Felix had already found out to his cost. He supposed all that moody silence of his at least gave him plenty of time to sit back and observe what was going on around him.

“Besides,” Ryder continued, as Angus's horse finally appeared on the horizon, “Yer me wife's brother. That makes ye family, and family stick together — whether they like each other or no'.”

Felix grinned despite himself. He was still less happy with the situation than he knew his parents and sisters would like him to be, but as they turned their horses for home, and set off at a gallop he had to admit, he had a newfound respect for his brother-in-law. They were not yet friends. It was far too soon for that. But if anyone were to ask him at that moment who he most wanted to be like when he was older, the name Ryder Higgins would have been the first one on his tongue.



All too quickly, the week passed, and it was time for Meredith's family - with the exception of Melissa, who would

be staying behind, for a few weeks, at least - to return home.

“Ye’ll write as soon as ye’re safely back home, willnae ye?” Meredith asked her mother anxiously, as she kissed her goodbye. “Ye’ll send a messenger as soon as ye arrive, so I ken ye’re all well?”

“Aye, lass,” Erin reassured her for what felt like the hundredth time that morning. It was not like Meredith to be so anxious, but, for some reason she couldn’t place, she’d woken up that morning with a feeling of foreboding that she just couldn’t shake.

“It’s just because yer family are leaving, and ye daenae ken when ye’ll see them next,” Ryder had said when she’d confided in him earlier that morning. Meredith nodded, but it felt like something more than that, and as she threw her arms around her mother, hugging her tightly as the tears began to fall from both of them, she found herself wishing they had made a firmer plan for their next visit, rather than the vague promises that they wouldn’t leave it too long.

“Be good for Mother and Faither, now,” she warned Felix sternly as he submitted grudgingly to her embrace. “Nae nonsense from ye, Felix, I’m warning ye! And nae whisky either, or ye’ll have Ryder and me to deal with!”

Felix grinned and Meredith smiled back, relieved that they’d managed to get through the visit without any further hostility from her brother. Maybe Angus had been good for him, or maybe he was just growing up at last.

Her father was the last person she bade farewell to, and, as she hugged him tightly, she was suddenly struck by how thin he felt in her arms. *It's not just Felix who's getting older*, she thought, tears streaming down her face as she watched them ride away. *They all are.*

The thought was not a welcome one, and as the three familiar figures rounded a corner in the road and disappeared from sight, she shook her head briskly as if to dislodge it.

“Right,” she said, a little too brightly, turning to Melissa, who stood dabbing her eyes at her side. “What shall we do today, then?”

CHAPTER 10

THE BANGING on the door had started off softly, but it soon escalated to a loud thump, making Ryder groan and pull the pillow over his head. It was far too early for such a racket — and he had a good idea who was making it, too.

“Go away, Melissa!” Meredith called, her tousled black hair emerging from underneath the bedclothes. “Yer banging that door fit to wake the dead!”

“It’s nae fit to wake ye, though, is it?” Melissa called petulantly through the door as she started banging again. “Come on, Meredith, come and keep me company!”

“Sorry.” Meredith raised the corner of Ryder’s pillow and planted a soft kiss on his lips. “I better get up, or she’ll never stop!”

By way of response, Ryder simply hooked an arm around her waist, pulling her close as he kissed her back sleepily.

“Go then, wife,” he said, letting her go at last. “Before I start to regret ever agreeing to let yer sister stay on after the rest of yer family left!”

Meredith kissed him again before climbing reluctantly out of the warm bed. He was pretending to be grumpy, but she knew him well enough by now to know it was just an act. Ryder made a big show of only just tolerating Melissa's presence in his home, but she knew he was secretly enjoying being part of a close-knit family — for what was clearly the first time in his life.

Well, maybe not the part where Melissa woke him up at the crack of dawn, wanting to go out for a ride, of course. Meredith wasn't sure anyone would enjoy that. But as she hurriedly dressed, before joining her sister on the other side of the chamber door, laughing as the younger woman immediately grabbed her by the hand and hauled her off down the hallway in search of breakfast, she felt a wave of happiness flood her body.

This is perfect, she thought, smiling to herself as she followed Melissa down the stairs. I have a husband who loves me, a sister excited to be away from home for the first time in her life, and a family finally free of the financial worries that have plagued them so. What could possibly be better?



A few hours later, Meredith pulled her horse to a stop on the crest of the hill and waited for Melissa to catch up with her.

“Hurry up, slowpoke,” she called back in the direction she'd come, enjoying the feel of the wind whipping through her long hair, which had come loose as she'd galloped along the shores of the loch and then up into the nearby hills.

It was exhilarating being out here, seeing the seasons change, and not having a care in the world. But, as she turned to call again for Melissa, she suddenly realized that the sound of approaching hooves was too loud to come from only one horse. Who on earth could Melissa have bumped into, all the way out here in the wilds?

Suddenly uneasy, Meredith turned her horse in the direction she'd just come from but had only traveled a few paces when two riders suddenly appeared from the tree line. Melissa, plus another, smaller figure, who, after a second's hesitation, Meredith recognized as John, one of the young servant boys from her parents' castle.

Her heart beating faster, Meredith pulled her horse to a stop and waited as they approached. She wasn't sure why John was here — her parents and Felix could only have reached home a day ago, if that — but, if the look on the boy's face was anything to go by, she feared it could not be anything good.

“Meredith! Oh, Meredith, I cannae believe it!”

Sobbing loudly, Melissa threw herself from her horse and came running towards her sister, who quickly dismounted, just in time for Melissa to throw herself into her arms.

“What is it? What's happened? Melissa, tell me!” Meredith demanded. Melissa, however, was so overcome with emotion that it was left to John, arriving just behind her, and with a face every bit as pale and solemn as Melissa's, to break the news.

“A fire, Me Lady,” he said, in response to Meredith’s questioning look. “A fire at yer parents’ castle. A bad one.”

“Are they... Are they alright?” Meredith stared at the boy in horror, her arms still wrapped around her sobbing sister.

“Aye, Me Lady,” John reassured her quickly. “Aye, everyone is fine. It happened while they were here, at the wedding. By the time they returned home, it was over — everything was gone.”

“Everything? What do ye mean, John?” Meredith could hardly believe what she was hearing. Surely the castle she’d grown up in could not have been totally destroyed. She thought of the thick stone walls that were so familiar to her. Walls that had stood firm, not just throughout her own life but for many generations before. Walls that could not possibly no longer be there. It was just unthinkable, and she would not even entertain the idea.

“Nay,” she said firmly before John could answer her question. “Nay, I daena believe it. I *willnae* believe it. What d’ye mean, John, coming here and scaring us wi’ such nonsense?”

Her eyes blazed, but even as she spoke, she knew what he’d told her was the truth. She could see it in his downcast eyes and the defeated slump of his thin shoulders.

“I’m sorry, Me Lady,” he said, at last, raising his eyes to her. “I’m sorry, but it’s true. The fire must have blazed all night. It would’ve been impossible to bring under control, especially wi’ everyone from home, and naebody there to raise the alarm.”

He paused for a second to allow the news to sink in.

“Some o’ the walls still stand,” he offered, trying in vain to find some good news. “But the rest... the rest is gone. Burnt to the ground. I cannae tell ye any more than that. Yer father, he sent me back here as soon as he saw it - to tell ye, and to ask ye what they should do.”

For a second, Meredith thought her legs might give way, allowing her to fall to the grass in shock. Then, taking a deep breath, she straightened her shoulders, determinedly choking back the tears that threatened to come at any second. There would be time for tears later. For now, she had to take charge. Her parents were no longer young, and now they were homeless. It was up to her, as their eldest daughter and the Lady of Millar, to help them — and help them she would.

“Why they must come here,” she said firmly, pushing Melissa away as she prepared to get back on her horse. “They must come here and stay wi’ Ryder and me. It’s the only thing to do. John, ye must follow me back to the castle. We’ll give ye a hot meal and a fresh horse, and then ye must be on yer way back to them, to bring them here, to us. D’ye understand?”

John nodded, happy to be relieved of the burden of breaking the news to the daughters of the house, and given a practical task instead.

“Come on, Melissa,” Meredith said briskly, giving her distraught sister a quick shake, followed by a kiss on the cheek, to soften her words. “This is nae time for tears. We must be strong if we’re to help Ma and Pa. Now, come, let’s

get back to the castle as quickly as we can, so I can find Ryder, and tell him what's happened. Ryder will know what to do.



Ryder stood by the fire in the Great Hall, clutching a tumbler of whisky, which he'd already refilled more times than was perhaps wise.

It had been several hours since Meredith and Melissa had returned from their ride, Meredith's face grim and Melissa's stained with tears. Of course, Ryder had immediately assured them he would be happy to welcome their family to his home and had provided a fresh horse for John, who had bolted his food down gratefully, before setting back off to meet the Quinns, who would, they assumed, already be on their way here.

Ryder's voice had been strong, and his manner calm as he'd issued his instructions, but underneath, he was worried. As far as he could tell, Meredith and Melissa, too upset to think straight, seemed convinced the fire had been an accident, and he had said nothing to disabuse them of that idea. Ryder, however, thought differently.

He had visited Quinn's castle just a few weeks before, and while he could not claim to know it well, he had seen enough of it to know the place was well-built and sturdy. Constructed to endure far more than a fire caused by a carelessly handled candle, or a spark from the fire. No, whatever had caused the centuries-old building to burn so completely had been no accident. Ryder was sure of it.

He shifted uneasily from one foot to the other as he watched Meredith and Melissa talk quietly in the corner of the room.

He'd instructed Cook to serve dinner as usual, but no one had much of an appetite, and, instead, he'd found himself pouring another whisky as he stood by the fire, waiting for the knock on the door that would tell them the Quinns had finally arrived.

It was almost a full day's ride from their castle to his, and the fire had grown low by the time a servant appeared to announce their arrival.

"Ma! Pa!" With a loud sob, Meredith, who had refused to go to bed, no matter how many times Ryder had told her to, was running across the room to hug them both, Melissa hot on her heels. Even Felix, standing behind his parents, his face wan in the dim light of the fire, submitted to a hug without protest — a miracle in itself.

"A bad business, Ryder," Meredith's father said, untangling himself from his two daughters and joining Ryder by the fire. "A bad business, indeed."

Silently, Ryder poured another glass of whisky and handed it to the older man, who gulped it down in one, his face drawn with exhaustion and strain.

"Sláinte," Ryder said, simply raising his own glass before pouring another for his father-in-law. "And welcome. Me home is yer home, ye know that, ye must treat it as such. I was saddened indeed to hear o' yer troubles."

Meredith's father raised his glass in return.

“I’m grateful to ye, lad,” he said, his voice low. “I daenae know what we’d have done had ye not been here for us. For we have nothing. Nothing. Every last thing, gone.”

His voice broke, and he drained his glass for the second time while Ryder stood awkwardly waiting for him to continue.

“I wondered,” he said tentatively when the older man simply stared down into his glass, lost in thought. “I wonder if ye had any thoughts as to what might have happened?”

He spoke quietly, not wanting to alert Meredith, who now sat huddled together with her mother and siblings at the other end of the room, her arm around her weeping mother. His father-in-law, however, was quick to understand what he was asking.

“Me thoughts are the same as yers, I’d imagine,” he said, looking Ryder squarely in the eye. “Mainly that it couldnae have been an accident. That someone must be behind it. The question is who?”

“A question I’ve been turning over in me mind ever since I heard the news,” Ryder answered, reaching for the whisky bottle and handing it to the older man. “A question I’ve yet to find any answers to.”

Meredith’s father nodded, his face etched with sorrow.

“We have no enemies,” he said simply. “Or none that have made themselves known to us, at any rate. We had, as ye know, fallen upon hard times until recently...”

Ryder nodded, encouraging him to go on.

“...but we had no debtors, no one to wish us ill. We’re not fighters, or politicians, Ryder. We live quietly and try to bother no one. Which is why I cannae understand who would want to do such a thing — to take everything from us, and leave us with nothing? Who, I ask ye?”

“I daenae know,” he said grimly, his eye flicking quickly over to where Felix sat with his sisters and mother, his face still pale with shock. But no. Felix might be somewhat misguided in his ways at times, but he loved his family — Meredith had said as much, and he had no reason to disbelieve her. Besides, Felix had nothing to gain — and much to lose — by being complicit in burning down the castle he would one day have inherited. Even had he not been with his parents at the wedding when the fire had started, Ryder would not have believed the lad to be involved.

It had not been Felix. But who *had* it been?

“I daenae know,” he said again as he reached to refill their glasses one last time. “But I intend to find out.”

CHAPTER 11

It's strange how quickly things can change, Meredith thought as she gazed around the dinner table at her assembled family, plus the Murrays, who had rushed to the castle as soon as they'd heard the news.

Just a few weeks ago, she'd been a single lass, living with her parents and siblings. Now she was married, and they lived with *her* — a turn of events so strange and unexpected that she still had difficulty believing it was true.

“Ryder, stop talking,” Melissa said, abruptly cutting into her thoughts. “I can barely hear meself think for yer ceaseless chatter!”

She was teasing, of course. Although Ryder had been surprisingly accepting of his new circumstances, welcoming Meredith's family to his home with a warmth that had surprised even her, being thrown into the middle of the Quinn clan had not made him any more talkative, much to Melissa's chagrin.

Now, he simply glowered menacingly at his sister-in-law, daring her with his eye to tease him again. Knowing Melissa was more than likely to rise to that particular challenge,

though, Meredith quickly intervened, asking Melissa to please pass the salt and then engaging her in a long conversation about which of Meredith's clothes she would most like to borrow.

She had become used to playing peacemaker between the two of them, and although she knew their bickering was not serious — in fact, she'd told Ryder more than once that he should take Melissa's relentless teasing as a compliment, for it meant she truly saw him as one of the family.

"It's just her way," she explained, as the three of them walked to the stables later that morning, Melissa running ahead to take a carrot to her favorite horse. "If she dinnae like ye, she'd just ignore ye, but she already sees ye as a big brother, which means ye have to put up with yer share of teasing, like the rest o' us!"

Ryder was silent for a moment, his face serious.

"It's been a long time since anyone saw me as a big brother," he said, at last, thinking of the sister who he had failed to protect from their father's cruelty. A fact that he knew would haunt him for the rest of his life. "I fear I dinnae do a very good job of it the last time, either."

Meredith looked up at him curiously. It was rare for him to mention his family, and she wasn't sure whether she should press him on the issue or simply let the subject drop rather than forcing him to re-visit a memory that was clearly painful to him.

“Yer sister?” she prompted gently, choosing to tread carefully. “I daenae ken very much about her.”

“Aye. Elspeth was her name. She wasnae much older than Melissa when she died. When she was killed, I mean,” he replied, his voice steady but his expression far away. “And I might have avenged her death, but I still wish I’d been able to prevent it instead. I’ll always wish that.”

Meredith squeezed his arm tightly, sensing he’d said as much as he was willing to - for now.

“I daenae ken what happened to Elspeth,” she said tenderly, “But I ken ye would have done yer best for her, whatever it was. And I ken ye’ll do yer best for Melissa, too, and me, and Felix, and me parents, and...”

“Enough!” Ryder laughed, his solemn mood lifting. “Ye’ll have me looking after everyone in Scotland at this rate!”

“And ye’d be good at it, too,” she replied, as Melissa came bounding back towards them, putting an abrupt end to the conversation.

“Come on, slowpokes!” she called as she approached. “Am I to wait all day for ye two to join me for our ride? Ryder, can I ride the chestnut mare this time? Remember ye promised me I could as long as ye were there to watch me? And will ye race me to the stream and back? Only Meredith is always too slow, and it’s nae fun beating her every time!”

Meredith stuck out her tongue at her sister as she finally paused for breath, Ryder chuckling beside her at the younger girl's enthusiasm.

“Aye,” he said, as Melissa took the opposite arm to the one Meredith was holding and started to drag them both towards the stables. “Aye, ye can ride the mare. Ye’ll not be able to get far enough ahead o’ me to come to any harm on her, anyway!”

Melissa gasped in mock offense.

“Well, we’ll just have to see about *that!*” she said, pouting.

At that, they turned and walked through the archway that led to the stable courtyard, Ryder with a sister on each arm and a small smile on his face. So far, it had been the perfect morning.



After lunch, Meredith and Melissa walked over to the Murray household to take the family some sweetmeats Cook had prepared, and Ryder took the opportunity to spend some time with the Quinns.

At first, he’d worried that his interactions with his new parents-in-law would be awkward or uncomfortable. He had never known what it was to be part of a family, after all, and they were proud people, once the heads of a large clan, who had already felt beholden to their son-in-law when his betrothal to Meredith had helped them out of their financial woes. To now be forced to throw themselves entirely upon his charity must be difficult indeed, he knew, but if Meredith’s

parents felt any sense of discomfort in his presence, they had never once shown it.

Meredith's mother was kind and warm. The sort of mother his own might have been, had she not been so beaten down by his father and his cruelty. Her father, meanwhile, had a shrewd mind and a quick wit. Ryder found himself looking forward to the conversations they'd have in the evenings, over a dram, and had come to value the older man's opinion when it came to the running of the estate.

"I'm pleased yer here," he said gruffly that afternoon, as he sat with Meredith's father in the estate office, where he'd been helping him go over his plans for the management of the estate over the coming months. "I am a fighter, not a businessman. I would far rather be out on the hills than sitting in front of piles of musty paper, so I'm grateful indeed for yer help. It's taken a big burden off my shoulders."

"Nay, lad, it's I who should thank ye," Edward Quinn answered, the lines at the corners of his eyes deepening as he smiled. "I've never been comfortable with the idea of accepting charity, so if I can make meself useful to ye in some way, ye have but to ask."

"It's nay charity when it's between family," Ryder replied firmly, shuffling the papers on the desk before him. "So while I willnae object to yer help, I will object to any thanks ye feel obliged to offer me, for none are necessary."

He turned away, pretending to be busy with the papers he was holding to give the older man the opportunity to blink away the tears he'd seen welling up in his eyes. As he did so, the door of the little room opened to admit Meredith's mother,

Erin, carrying a tray of the same scones and other fancies he's seen Meredith and Melissa carry off to the Murrays.

"Nay, they're not for ye," she said, shooting a quick look at her husband as she set the tray carefully down on the table. "These are for Ryder. He needs feeding up."

Ryder did not believe anyone who knew him would agree with this assessment of his physique – indeed, his belt had been feeling a little tighter since Meredith had arrived at the castle, such had been Cook's increase in productivity – but he took a cake anyway, purely to please his mother-in-law, who beamed in satisfaction as she saw him devour it and reach for another.

"Plenty more where these came from," she said happily, drawing up a chair beside them. "And cook and I can always rustle up more when they're done, so daenae be shy!"

Ryder grinned, his mouth full of cake. He was unused to being looked after like this – his own mother had been too busy hiding herself away from his father and his cruel hands to take much notice of what he ate, and, by the time Mrs. MacDonald had started cooking for him, he had been a grown man, who could more than look after himself.

Still, there was no harm in letting someone else do it every now and again, so Ryder leaned forward and took another cake from the plate. If he wasn't careful, he could get very used to having this family around him.



At dinner that night, Ryder smiled over the top of his glass as Meredith caught his eye across the table, rolling her eyes

comically at whatever it was that Melissa was talking her ear off about now. She smiled back at him, her lovely face lighting up. *She's so beautiful*, Ryder thought, watching as she turned back to Melissa, her face animated as she joined in the conversation. *How lucky I am to have her — and how much I would do to keep her and her family safe.*

The thought made him pause, for this was not simply an idle thought, but one borne of the fear he had felt when Meredith had arrived back at the castle; her face panicked as she told him of the fire that had destroyed her family's home.

Someone wanted to hurt them, he knew it as surely as he knew he'd do anything — anything at all — to stop it happening. And yet, therein lay the problem. It had been two weeks since the fire, and he was no closer to working out who was responsible.

“Let's take a stroll before bed,” he whispered, taking her by the hand as their guests filed out of the Great Hall after another feast laid on by Mrs. MacDonald. “I need to walk off some of that food, I think!”

Meredith looked a little bemused - it was a cold evening for a walk, after all - but happily followed him towards the castle door, calling for Ellen to run and bring her a shawl as she went.

“Look, a full moon!” she said, pointing up to where the moon was just visible, peeking up above the castle parapets. “It's so beautiful!”

“As are ye,” Ryder said, a little bashfully. Soft words did not come easily to him, and yet, what had happened to her parent’s home had provided a timely reminder that nothing lasted forever. As they walked on through the night, the moonlight illuminating their path up the small hillside that faced the castle, he wanted her to be left with no doubt about his feelings for her.

“It looks even more lovely from up here,” Meredith said as they stopped at the top of the hill, leaning against the trunk of the tree that grew there as they gazed back at the castle, thrown into stark relief against the moon. “Ye must love it so much.”

Ryder wrapped his arms around her.

“It’s just a place,” he said carefully, aware that the subject must be a difficult one for her, given the loss of her own childhood home. Meredith had loved the place she had grown up in and yet had lost it; he had hated his, but here it still stood. He tightened his arms around her, feeling her settle back into them.

“Places daenae really matter,” he continued. “People are the only thing that matter to me. And one person in particular, actually.”

“Is that right?” She turned to face him, smiling up at him in the moonlight, her lips inches from his. This close up, he could almost taste her, and, feeling a sudden and uncontrollable urge to do just that, he pressed his lips to hers, pushing her back against the rough trunk of the tree as he kissed her deeply, feeling her warm body respond instantly to his touch. As they kissed, his body pressed against hers, he felt himself grow hard. He had to have her, and it had to be now.

Feeling his excitement grow, Meredith reached around his body, pulling him closer. Her breath came in short, ragged gasps as he pulled at her clothes, desperate to feel her skin against his. Finding only resistance from the layers of skirts she wore, however, Ryder growled in frustration, then, tearing his lips from hers, he hoisted her up in his arms until her legs were hooked around his waist, his hands fumbling with her skirts to pull her undergarments roughly aside as she ran her soft fingers through his hair, moaning softly as she felt his fingers brush her skin.

He couldn't wait any longer. His lips were against her neck, the musky scent of her making her impossible to resist, as, in one swift movement, he thrust his way inside her, making her cry out in pleasure. He silenced her with another kiss, his arms tightening around her as she finally pulled away, burying her face against his neck as he continued thrusting, enjoying the feel of her hot breath against the skin of his neck.

“Sorry,” he gasped, at last, his face flushed as he exploded inside her, unable to hold back any longer, “I dinnae mean that to be over so quickly.”

“It's nae matter,” she whispered as he lowered her back to the ground. “There will be many other chances for us.”

Without realizing it, she had echoed his own thoughts on their wedding night. But as they walked back towards the castle, her hand tucked safely in his, Ryder found himself once again feeling uneasy. On their wedding day, he had felt as if they had all the time in the world, but the subsequent events involving her parents and their castle had changed that, leaving an ever-present threat hanging over them.

He still did not know who was behind the burning of Quinn Castle. All he knew was that whatever it took, he would find out. And then he would make them pay.

CHAPTER 12

AUTUMN HAD GIVEN way to winter, and there was a thick frost on the ground as Meredith and Melissa walked down to the lochside the next morning, their arms linked and their bodies wrapped in thick woolen shawls.

“How I wish me clothes hadnae been lost in the fire,” Melissa lamented, looking down at her attire with distaste. “It’s good o’ ye to lend me some of yers, Meredith, but ye’ve always been bigger than me. I look like a child playing dress-up!”

Meredith couldn’t resist a small smile as she turned to look at her younger sister. It was true that Meredith’s clothes hung off her sister’s much smaller frame, but until the women she’d commissioned in the village to make up some new clothes for the family were done with the task, there wasn’t much to be done about it.

“Clothes should be the least of yer worries,” Meredith reminded her sister gently. “Clothes can be replaced, after all — and least ye’ve still got the things ye brought for the wedding. Ma and Pa have lost their home and their livelihood. Ye should be grateful that clothes were all ye had to lose.”

Melissa shrugged, unwilling to concede the point.

“It’s all worked out though, hasn’t it?” she insisted, taking a seat on a rock by the waterside and waiting for Meredith to join her. “We all like living here. Ye like us being here. Even Laird Grumpy seems to have settled into it. He seems almost human these days!”

Meredith elbowed her sharply in the side.

“Och, shush,” she said, taking a seat next to her and rummaging in the small basket she carried to pull out the bread she’d brought for the swans who lived on the loch. “Ryder’s a good man. He’s happy to have ye all.”

“Aye. And I suppose we were lucky to have been here for the wedding when the fire started,” Melissa acknowledged, her face suddenly serious. “Had we been at home, it could’ve been much worse.”

“Aye. Lucky indeed,” Meredith answered. Her eyes remained fixed on the two swans, who had started clamoring for food as soon as the two women had approached, and she was glad of the excuse not to look her sister in the eye.

Melissa said they’d been lucky, and just a few days ago, Meredith would’ve agreed with her. Last night, though, as they’d lain together in bed, their legs intertwined and her head resting on his chest, Ryder had confided some of his fears about what might have happened to the Quinn’s castle.

“It could well have been just an accident,” he’d said carefully, his fingers stroking her hair. “I’m not saying it wasnae. But, all the same...”

He'd trailed off, not wanting to continue, and she'd looked up at him in surprise.

"What?" she'd said, propping herself up on one elbow, so she could look him in the eye. "Tell me what yer thinkin', Ryder? Ye ken ye can tell me anything."

He'd sighed but had done as she'd asked.

"I just think it's something o' a coincidence that the castle happened to go on fire when yer family were all away from it," he said as if the words were being pulled from him reluctantly. "Most o' the servants traveled with them, after all. There weren't many left behind, and those that were, were the ones yer faither trusted to look after the place in his absence. It just seems unlikely they'd have started a fire accidentally and then failed to realize until it was too late."

Meredith lowered her head back onto his chest thoughtfully. It was true what he said. She did not want to believe the fire could've been started deliberately — or begin to imagine who would've done such a thing — but she knew her father had questioned the servants who'd remained behind carefully. All had sworn they'd done nothing that could have started a fire. Her father had believed them, and so had she. It had been a mystery. But now, it was a mystery that Ryder suggested might have a more sinister explanation than she had so far considered.

It had taken her a long time to fall asleep that night — and, judging by the way Ryder had shifted restlessly in the bed next to her, she wasn't the only one with an unquiet mind.

She would not share her concerns with Melissa, though, she thought now, watching her sister throw bread to the two swans, laughing when their giant beaks came a little too close for comfort. In some ways, she was glad that the younger woman's biggest worry was what she would wear each morning. She knew her parents, although relieved to have been made so welcome in Castle Millar, were still reeling from the shock of what had happened. She just wished there was something she could do to help.

“Who’s that, up by the castle?” Melissa’s voice broke into her thoughts, and Meredith stood up, shading her eyes against the low winter sun as she peered up towards the large wooden door, which was, she saw, surrounded by horses.

“It looks like the Laird of Moore,” she said after a few seconds. “At least, I think so. It’s hard to tell from this distance.”

She turned back to the swans, Colby Green immediately forgotten, as her mind returned to the more pressing issue of her parents and their changed circumstances.

“Have ye noticed that Faither doesnae seem quite himself lately?” Melissa was asking her now, her face unusually serious.

Meredith paused, not knowing what to say. She had not realized Melissa had noticed their father’s increased frailty and had not wanted to bring the subject up with her mother, almost as if speaking the words aloud would somehow make them real. But there was no denying that Edward Quinn did not

seem as well as he had just a few weeks earlier. Unsurprising, she supposed, given everything he'd been through.

“Faither’s fine,” she reassured Melissa, making up her mind not to share her concerns with her sister. “He’s just tired, is all. Ye would be too if ye had to put up with yer nonsense every day.”

Melissa grinned, her fears allayed. But as her sister turned back to the swans, Meredith felt a shiver run down her spine. She hoped that what she'd told Melissa was true. She just wasn't altogether convinced that it was.



Ryder was pacing the floor in the Great Hall when Colby was shown in, talking to Meredith's father, who sat in a seat by the fire, looking far older than he had on the occasion of his daughter's recent wedding.

“I'm sorry to intrude,” Colby said smoothly as he approached the two men. “But I wanted to offer me congratulations again on yer recent nuptials, Ryder. Me congratulations, and maybe a small toast to both yer health?”

He pulled a bottle of whisky from the deep pocket of his overcoat and offered it to Ryder, who accepted it reluctantly, and turned to open it before introducing Meredith's father. The older man tried to raise a smile as Colby offered him his hand, but it was obvious that his mind was on other things.

“I won't stay,” Colby told them both, ignoring the fact that he had not been asked to. “But I couldnae allow the occasion of

me oldest friend's marriage to go unremarked. To yer health, Ryder, and to yer wife's, too!"

The three men raised their glasses to their lips. There was a moment's silence as they each savored the taste of the amber liquid on their lips. Then the silence was suddenly broken by a loud and terrified scream. A scream which sent Ryder running immediately from the room, his glass dropping to the hearth, where it shattered on impact, sending sharp shards of glass scattering over the flagstone floor.

CHAPTER 13

DOWN BY THE LOCHSIDE, Meredith's growing sense of unease had become impossible to ignore. *I wish I knew what was happening up at the castle*, she thought, resisting the impulse to turn around and look up at it. *I wish I knew whether Ryder was being civil to his visitor — or treating him with the same disdain he had for him the last time we met.*

The hair on the back of her neck prickled uncomfortably. *It's just the winter chill*, she told herself firmly, wrapping her shawl around herself. That's all it is. And yet, as she sat there by the water, huddled on a rock, it was hard to shake the feeling that she was being watched.

“Meredith, did ye hear me?” Melissa said, appearing in front of her, her face annoyed. “I was telling ye about the feast I think ye and Ryder should have, but I daenae think ye heard a single word I said, did ye? Ye were miles away!”

“Sorry.” Meredith shook her head sharply as if to dislodge the unwelcome thoughts that had set up home in it and turned her attention to a sister. “Now, what's this about a feast?” she said, smiling. “What possible reason could ye have for expecting us to throw a feast?”

“There’s always a reason for a feast,” Melissa said confidently. “What reason could ye have not to have one?”

She never did find out Meredith’s answer, however, because, just as her sister opened her mouth to speak, a hand appeared from behind her, clamping it firmly shut. Melissa had just a second to take in her sister’s shocked expression, her eyes round with horror, before she was rushing forward, her hands grabbing at her sister’s clothes, as she tried to pull her away from the hooded figure who held her firmly in his grasp, one arm around her waist, almost lifting him from the ground, the other still held over Meredith’s mouth.

“Help!” Melissa shouted, turning towards the castle as Meredith struggled in the man’s grip, her heels beating frantically against the ground as she tried to free herself. “Help!” she shouted again, realizing even as she did so that the castle was too far away for any of its inhabitants to possibly hear her. “Help us, someone!”

Melissa paused for a second, torn between the impulse to attack the figure who held her sister and that to run back to the castle for help. She could not see the man’s face — as the hood fell back slightly in his struggle, she saw another covering underneath, pulled up over his mouth and nose so that only his eyes were visible, glinting dangerously in the shadow of the hood.

Whoever he was, though, he had obviously never encountered Meredith Quinn before because, as Melissa spun round in a panic, not knowing which way to run, the man suddenly cried out in pain, snatching his hand away from Meredith’s mouth to reveal a deep bite mark where she’d sunk her teeth hard into his flesh.

Seeing her opportunity, Melissa swiftly bent down and plucked a large pebble from the mass of stones which lined the lochside, hurling it at the attacker and somehow managing to hit him square in the forehead, right between the eyes. As he raised his other hand to his head, in shock, Meredith ran forward, realizing the instinctive reaction had forced him to release his grip on her before suddenly changing her mind and turning back to knee him sharply in the groin, just as Ryder had shown her, a few days earlier.

Thank goodness he was so insistent on teaching Melissa and me how to defend ourselves, she thought, as another pebble flew past her head, thrown by Melissa, who had, by now, gathered a small armful of the missiles and was throwing them at the figure one after the other, cheering enthusiastically as she did so.

“Come, Melissa! Quick!”

Tempted though she was to join in the fun her sister was having, Meredith knew it would take but a few seconds for the man who had grabbed her to recover his senses and return fire — and she knew, too, that, in spite of all of Ryder’s instructions, she and Melissa would be no match for an angry man.

“Come on, Melissa,” she said again, grabbing her sister by the arm as she turned and ran towards the castle. “Run!”

Disappointed, Melissa dropped the armful of stones she was still holding and ran after her sister, neither of them daring to look back until they were safely within the shadow of the castle walls.

“Ryder! Ryder! Help us, Ryder!”

Meredith had not even realized she was shouting for her husband until she heard her own voice echo off the walls of the castle’s cavernous entrance hall. “Quick, Ryder, before he gets away!”

Before she could shout again, the door of the Great Hall banged open, and Ryder appeared, Colby Green close on his heels.

“What is it?” Ryder said urgently, taking her by the arm. “What’s happened, Meredith? Tell me!”

She was dimly aware of her mother’s terrified face in her peripheral vision as she stumbled out an explanation of what had happened by the loch, her voice shaking now that the adrenaline had started to leave her body. The hall seemed full of people—curious servants, she supposed, drawn there by the sounds of her screams as she arrived—but she ignored them all and concentrated on Ryder’s face, watching the panic that had been etched there as he’d ran towards her turn quickly to fury.

“Simon! James!” he roared, summoning two of his best men, who had joined the small crowd in the hall. “Come with me! Meredith, stay here with yer mother and yer sister, ye hear me? Guards, look after me wife. Daenae let her out of yer sight, whatever ye do!”

And then, unsheathing his sword, he was gone, followed by Colby and the two men he’d called upon to help him. Meredith stood there for a moment, watching them run from the castle

— then, with a small sob, she felt her legs give way beneath her as she fell to the stone floor.



“Ryder, it’s almost dark,” Colby called out, his eyes straining to catch a glimpse of Ryder’s figure in the failing light. “Even if he is still out here, we’ll never find him in these conditions. Better to return to the castle, surely? We can start the search again as soon as it’s light.”

Hours had passed since Meredith and Melissa’s dramatic appearance in the castle’s entrance hall. Yet the only trace they had found of the man who had tried to take them was the disturbed ground on the banks of the loch, where Meredith had struggled with her assailant, and Melissa had thrown stones with an accuracy that Ryder had to grudgingly admire.

I’m glad I spent some time showing them how to defend themselves, he thought, as he turned in the direction of Colby’s voice. Melissa may have scoffed and said there was no need of it, but if they hadn’t been able to fight him off...

He shook his head, not wanting to dwell on the thought that had been circling his mind for hours now. It had been no random attack, that much he knew for certain. Someone had tried to kidnap his wife, and, had she been alone, without Melissa and her rocks to come to her assistance, they may well have been successful. Someone had wanted to hurt her — or to hurt him, rather, for what other reason could there have been for the attempt?

None. There was no other explanation for it, other than that someone had wanted to rattle him. To get at him, by taking her. And that someone was still out there somewhere — which

meant that Ryder would not be able to rest until he had found him, and killed him.

“Ryder, listen to me. We must head for home, or we’ll be putting everyone at risk, out here in the cold and the dark.”

Colby had ridden up beside him, but although Ryder knew his words made sense, he was not prepared to listen to them.

“Nay,” he said shortly, not bothering to look at the man. “Nay, I’ll not be stoppin’ the search until I’ve found him, whoever he is. Not while there’s breath in me body. Ye should go home, though,” he added, almost as an afterthought. “I’m grateful for yer help, Moore, but this is something I need to do meself.”

The words did not come easy to him, for he wished it had been anyone other than Colby Green who’d been visiting him at the time of the attempt on Meredith. All the same, there was no denying that he’d appreciated the man’s help in his search.

Colby had followed Ryder unquestioningly, assuring him that he would do everything in his power to help him find the man who’d tried to take Meredith from him. Ryder was a proud man, but when it came to his wife, he was not too proud to accept help in bringing anyone who hurt her to justice — and he didn’t particularly care where that help came from, either.

“Nae need to thank me,” Colby assured him now as they rode side by side through the darkening night. “I’m at yer service, Ryder. Me and as many o’ me men as ye need. Ye only have to ask.”

“I’m grateful for it,” Ryder said again, the words barely registering with him, so consumed was he with thoughts of Meredith and the need for vengeance upon whoever had tried to take her from him.

Meredith was his priority now. And, despite his rude treatment of him the first time he and Meredith had met - treatment that Ryder now deeply regretted - Colby was here now offering Ryder his assistance in the one matter that was of the utmost importance to him — assistance which Ryder could not afford to turn down.

“I thank ye,” he said now, turning to him. “I will track him down, no matter how long it takes me. I can promise ye that.”

“Indeed, I daenae doubt it.” Colby’s voice was smooth in the darkness, his manner completely at ease. “But may I suggest ye track him down in the daylight rather than the pitch dark? Ye’ll have a much better chance o’ actually finding him then.”

Ryder did not want to give up now. It was not in his nature. But as he struggled even to see his horse’s ears in front of him, let alone Colby, who rode alongside him, he was forced to concede that the other man had a point.

“We will return home for now,” he said grudgingly. “But I will be out here again at first light — before it, even.”

“And I’ll be right here, beside ye,” Colby assured him. “We’ll find him, Ryder. I’m sure o’ it. But will have a better chance of doing it with full stomachs and a good night’s sleep. Trust me on that.”

And, with that, the two men turned their horses around and headed for home.



Back at Millar Castle, all was calm. In fact, as Ryder rode into the courtyard and handed his horse's reins to the stable boy who came running out to meet him, it was hard to imagine anything had been amiss.

Despite the lateness of the hour, everyone was still awake. Meredith and Melissa huddled by the fire with their mother, who appeared reluctant to leave their sides.

"I wouldnae be surprised if she tries to follow me to me bedchamber," said Melissa, who had apparently recovered from her ordeal of earlier, and was now thoroughly enjoying the attention she'd been receiving as she recounted her story to anyone who'd listen, her own bravery becoming more exaggerated with each re-telling.

"She even insisted on telling the maid who brought in our dinner," Felix said, grinning shyly at Ryder. "The poor lass dinnae ken what to say! I wish ye'd let me come with ye, Ryder," the boy continued eagerly. "By the time I heard the commotion, ye'd already left."

"There was nothing ye could've done," Ryder said, dropping exhausted into his usual seat by the fire. "We searched for hours, but we dinnae see hide nor hair o' him. Ye may join us tomorrow, though. We'll be startin' the search at first light, and we'll need as many men as we can muster."

“Is that really necessary?” Meredith said, crossing the room to sit next to him, the shadows under her eyes making them look even larger than usual against the paleness of her skin. “Whoever it was must be long gone by now. I’d rather ye stayed close by, Ryder, rather than riding out in search of him. I daenae want ye putting yerself in danger.”

“The only danger is to ye,” Ryder told her, his voice sounding harsher than he’d intended. “There now,” he reached for her, attempting to soothe her. “I daenae mean to scare ye, lass. I’m just worried that he’ll come back, whoever he was. And I mean to be prepared if he does, so I danenae want ye to leave the castle until we’ve found him. There’ll be a guard with ye at all times. And yer sister and parents, too.”

Meredith stared up at him, her eyes wide.

“Not leave the castle?” she said, astonished. “But, Ryder, I cannae stay here all the time, I’ll go mad! Surely if ye stay beside me, I can go about me business as usual. Nobody would dare come near me then.”

“I cannae be with ye all the time, lass,” Ryder said softly. “I wish I could. But I must resume the search. We have to get to the bottom of this to find out if the person who tried to take ye is the same one who burnt down yer family’s castle.”

There was a loud gasp from Melissa, who sat upright in her seat, shocked.

Ryder cursed silently under his breath. He had not intended to blurt out his thoughts in front of them all, but it was too late.

The damage was done, and perhaps it was just as well that they all knew what they were dealing with.

“I’m sorry, Meredith,” he said, turning to his wife. “But it’s better she ken. It’s better ye all ken,” he added, looking around the room. A row of white, terrified faces stared back at him.

“I think we’re all in real danger,” he said bluntly, seeing no point in softening his words. “I daenae ken where it’s come from or who’s behind it, but I promise ye, I mean to find out. And until then, I think it’s for the best if ye all stay safe in the castle. Meredith in particular. Please, Meredith,” he said, his voice breaking as he turned to look at her. “Do it for me. Because if I lose ye now, I think I’ll lose me mind along with ye.”

There was a moment’s silence, then he felt Meredith’s small hand slip into his, squeezing it reassuringly.

“Well,” she said briskly, with a confidence she did not feel. “I think me and Melissa have proved that we’re more than able to look after ourselves.” She paused as Melissa grinned in her direction. “But, of course, Ryder, we’ll do as ye ask. I wouldnae ever want ye to have to worry about me or to make yer life difficult in any way.”

“I’ll always worry about ye,” he answered, squeezing her hand in return. “Always. And ye’ve been making me life difficult from the moment I met ye. But I will keep ye safe, Meredith. I promise ye that.”

She nodded, her eyes filled with tears. “I ken ye will,” she said simply. “I trust ye.”

It was true. But as she carried her candle up to bed that night, Ryder following close behind, as if scared that someone was about to jump from the shadows and snatch her away from him, Meredith realized that while she felt safe with him, he was perhaps not so safe with her. A thought that made her huddle into his naked back when she woke in the night, looping her arms around his body and pulling him tightly towards her.

She had thought he was already asleep, but as she pressed her face into the soft space between his neck and shoulder, inhaling the husky, masculine scent of him, she felt him respond to her touch, rolling over onto his back and pulling her firmly on top of him until she was sitting astride his body, her hands on his chest.

“Did I wake ye?” she whispered, dipping her head to drop a soft kiss on his lips. “I dinnae mean to.”

“Aye,” he grinned, reaching up to brush the hair back from her face, “But it dinnae matter. It was a nice way to wake up.”

“Och, d’ye think so?” Meredith answered coyly. “Well, in that case, maybe I should wake ye up like this every day.”

Ryder smiled as he took her face in his hands, pulling her towards him for another kiss, this time allowing his hands to roam over her body as he kissed her deeply.

“Ye’ll get nae complaints from me if ye do,” he said softly.

By way of response, Meredith sat up straight, pulling her nightgown over her head and allowing him to feast his eye upon her pale skin as she cast the garment aside.

“Or maybe like this?” she suggested, taking his hands and returning them to her waist. “Maybe this would be a better way to wake up?”

“Aye, maybe so,” he agreed, his breathing becoming louder as she adjusted her position, sliding him inside her and beginning to move slowly back and forth, her eyes never dropping his gaze.

“Yer so beautiful,” Ryder whispered, his eye locked with hers. “Like a goddess, with that pale skin and black hair.”

His hands were on her hips now, as he allowed her to take charge — a novel experience for a man used to always being in control. But Meredith was a force of nature. The kind of woman he had never even known to dream of — and here she was, all his.

Her pace quickened, her eyes becoming unfocused as she moved faster and faster on top of him, enjoying the sensation of him deep inside her, his hips beginning to thrust in time with hers as they rocked together, their movements perfectly timed. Meredith bent to kiss him again, the slight change of angle increasing the friction and making her breath come faster as her excitement reached its peak.

“I love ye, I love ye, I love ye,” she cried, collapsing on his chest, her body shuddering with pleasure.

“I’m not done with ye yet,” Ryder whispered, deftly flipping her over until he was on top of her, their skin slick with sweat as he held her by the wrists, thrusting into her until he could stand it no longer, and he moaned as he released himself inside her.

“Yer mine,” he whispered as they lay together, their skin cooling. “Yer all mine.”

CHAPTER 14

IT WAS on the third day of Ryder's relentless search for Meredith's attacker that her father's health started to fail.

In retrospect, it should have been obvious that something was amiss, Meredith reflected, as she sat by his bedside, his frail hand clasped in her. Never in the best of health, the elderly man had faced so many trials over the past few weeks that it was a miracle he'd remained standing. The worries about money, followed by the loss of his home, and then the attack on his two daughters... it was no wonder he had taken to his bed.

"Here, drink some of this, Pa," Meredith begged, raising a bowl of cook's broth to her father's pale lips. "It'll make ye feel better."

The old man did as she asked, but, after just a few sips, he fell back against his pillows, clearly exhausted by the effort to remain upright for long enough to eat. Meredith replaced the bowl on the table by the bed, her eyes never leaving his pale face.

Please, Lord, not him, she prayed silently. Please don't take him now. I can't lose him, too.

A small sob escaped her throat, despite her best efforts to suppress it, and she was grateful when the door of the bedchamber opened a moment later, admitting Melissa, who had come to take her place.

“Ye should get some rest,” her sister said, placing a hand on Meredith’s shoulder. “We’ve a long night ahead.”

Melissa appeared to have grown older in the days that followed the kidnap attempt. It was as if all of the events of the last few weeks had caught up with her at once, and, annoying though her sister could be, Meredith had found herself wishing more than once that she could have the old Melissa back, inane chatter and all.

It’s not fair, she thought, as she closed the chamber door softly and went in search of Ryder, who was due back soon. She should not have to deal with this at such a young age. Not after the loss of her home, too, and all she’s ever known. *None of us should be facing this, in fact. I was so happy that day after the wedding — but a few days happiness was all I got before everything came crumbling down, castle walls and all.*

She walked quickly down the stairs, trying not to feel annoyed by the constant presence of the guard on her heels. True to his word, Ryder had instructed the man not to leave Meredith’s side, and the servant had obeyed his master’s words to the letter, no doubt fearing the consequences if he did not. She just wished his presence actually made her feel safer — or that Ryder would give up his so-far fruitless search for her assailant and accept that she was safer with him by her side rather than out on the moors day after day. They all were.

“Ryder!”

She arrived at the foot of the stairs just in time to meet Ryder on the way up, his shoulders slumped in defeat. Another’s day’s search had ended without a trace of the man he was looking for, Meredith assumed.

“I wasnae expecting ye for another hour or more!” she said, noticing the dark shadows that ringed his eyes and the hollows that had started to appear under his cheekbones. “Come, we’ll go straight to the kitchen, and I’ll ask cook to make ye something hearty to eat. Ye look like ye could be doing with it!”

“Maybe later, lass,” Ryder answered, his voice firm. “I want to go and see yer faither first. How is he? Did he manage to eat something?”

Meredith simply shook her head, not wanting to meet him in the eye. When Ryder hadn’t been out on his search, he’d been spending much of his time by her father’s bedside, much to her surprise, talking to the old man in a low voice that Meredith couldn’t quite decipher.

It’s strange how quickly things can change, she found herself thinking yet again. For good as well as for bad. She would never have believed that the stiff, distrusting man who had arrived at her parents’ castle to escort her to his home was the same man who now spent every spare moment comforting her elderly father in what she felt sure must be his final days. Then again, she would not have believed that those final days would come around so soon, either. Life was filled with surprises, it was true, and not all of them welcome ones.

“He dinnae want anything, Ryder,” she said now, finally meeting his eye. “He hasn’t eaten for two days now. The physician says... he says...”

But it was no use. The words on the tip of her tongue wouldn’t come, she just could not bring herself to speak them aloud and make them real, so she was grateful when Ryder reached for her, pulling her into a warm embrace that told her there was no need for words between them. He understood only too well.

“It’s alright, lass,” he murmured into her hair. “It’s alright. I’m here for ye.”

“Are ye, though?” Meredith countered, pulling back just enough to look him in the eye. “Will ye really be here for me, Ryder, or will ye be out with Colby, searching endlessly for someone that willnae be found?”

Her eyes blazed. She had not intended to speak so harshly, but now that the words were out, she found herself unwilling to take them back and deny the truth of them. She was no longer afraid of the shadowy figure who had terrified her by the loch that day, not because the threat had disappeared, but simply because her father’s condition had given her far more important things to worry about. She couldn’t face those worries alone, she knew, as she looked into her husband’s eye.

“I ken ye mean well, Ryder,” she said, her voice softer, as she reached up to stroke the hair back from his forehead. “I ken ye just want to protect me — to protect us all, and I love ye for it. But I need ye here now. D’ye hear me? I cannae do this on my own, Ryder. Please tell me ye’ll give up this search — for now, at least? Even if the man does come back now, what harm can I possibly come to with ye by my side to protect me?”

Ryder nodded, his arms still wrapped firmly around her. He had done the best he could — he knew that as well as she did. Not only had he brought in the very best physicians to tend to her father as soon as the man’s health had started to fail, but he had also done everything in his power to try to track down the man who had attacked her and bring him to justice, riding out for long hours every day with Colby and his men, until they’d covered every square inch of the land surrounding the castle, and as far beyond it as had been possible.

All he wanted was for her to be safe. But as he held her in his arms, feeling her shoulders shake as she sobbed into his shoulder, he knew that what she needed to feel safe was not a husband out trying to vanquish an unseen enemy, but one who would stay with her, right here in their home, as she watched her beloved father attempt to fight an enemy that came from within.

That was the husband she needed — and so that was the husband she would have.

“Come,” he said now, gently wiping the tears from her cheeks. “We’ll have nay more tears. I’m here now, and I willnae be going anywhere. I promise ye, lass.”

Then he looped one arm around her waist and gently led her back upstairs to her father’s chamber.



The room was stuffy in spite of the cold December air, but the physicians grouped around Meredith’s father’s bed would not allow them to open the curtains to allow the air to circulate —

it would not do to allow the patient to become too cold, they had said.

Ryder watched from the corner of the room, a small frown on his face. These men were supposed to be some of the finest physicians he'd been able to call to him at such short notice, but so far they'd made very little difference — if any at all — to the old man in the bed, who seemed to grow frailer by the hour.

Ryder clenched his fists, trying not to let his anger show. He was not used to the type of problems that could not be solved. In his world, there was always a solution, whether it be the fist, the sword, or the purse. In this case, he had opted for the latter, paying over the odds to get his father-in-law the best treatment money could buy, but he was starting to think it had all been for nothing, and his anger at this fact surprised even him.

It was not that he was unused to death, far from it, in fact. If anything, Ryder had seen so much death in his life that he had thought himself inured to it. He had not cried at the death of his mother or even of his sister. He'd simply set out to get vengeance for it — and vengeance he had had, even though it had been at the price of killing his own father.

Needless to say, he had not cried at the death of his father, either. He had felt no guilt, no remorse. The old man had deserved what he'd got. He'd killed Ryder's sister, and he'd have killed Ryder too, had he but had the chance. It was as simple as that. Ryder had done what he had to do, and he'd do it all over again if he had to, making the necessary choices and not flinching at the consequences.

This, however, was different. Not only because this was a death he knew would hurt the person he loved most in the world, but because, as he now realized, it would hurt him, too. A few weeks ago, he had thought Meredith was the only person who had ever loved him and the only person he loved in return. Since he'd found himself so deeply embedded in her family, however, he'd come to feel differently.

What Meredith's parents had shown him, he now knew was not simply gratitude or even duty. No, their warmth was unfeigned, their loyalty sincere. They had treated him, in other words, as a son, and the injustice of finding this kind of family, only for it to be so quickly torn away from him, was just too much to bear.

Casting a quick look across the room to where Meredith sat between her mother and sister, with Felix hovering awkwardly behind them, Ryder quickly rose and left the room. "Some air," he told the guard at the door of the chamber. "Tell my wife I needed to get some air if she asks."



Back inside the room, Meredith was so preoccupied with her own thoughts that she didn't even notice him leave. Over the last hour or so, her father's breathing had become shallower and harder to detect — in fact, several times, she had started forward in a panic, thinking it had stopped altogether and that the time she had been dreading had come, as it surely must.

Now, however, it came in a loud rattle, which seemed to fill the room with its ominous sound, and, seeing the two physicians by the bed exchange a worried glance, she moved to the bedside, where her mother was already crouched, holding her father's hand. Taking the other hand in hers, Meredith was shocked anew by how frail and insubstantial it

felt. How could the man who had swung her above his head when she was a child and raced through the long stone corridors of the castle, chasing her and her siblings, have come to this?

A loud sob from Melissa, standing behind her, interrupted her thoughts, and she glanced quickly around the room, noticing Ryder's absence for the first time.

"My husband," she said, turning quickly to the nurse who stood at the end of the bed. "Fetch my husband, and don't delay!"



Ryder arrived back in the bedchamber just in time to see — or, rather, to hear — Meredith's father draw his last breath.

After a second's disbelief, the silence of the room was shattered by a loud wail from Melissa, who crumpled into her brother's arms, sobbing broken-heartedly. By the bedside, her mother rocked back and forth in her seat, sobbing quietly to herself, while Ellen, who had become as fond of the rest of the family as she was of Meredith herself, placed a hand on her shoulder, in an attempt to comfort her.

Only Meredith remained composed, standing up and, still clutching her father's hand, bending to drop a kiss on his paper-thin cheek.

"Goodbye, Pa," she said simply, kissing him again. "And thank ye for everything ye ever did for me. I'll never forget it."

As Ryder hovered uncertainly in the doorway, reluctant to interrupt such a private scene and yet longing to run forward and comfort her, Meredith's eyes swept the room, the relief in them apparent when they finally latched on to him, standing by the door.

“Ryder!” she said in a sob, her voice breaking with emotion. “Oh, Ryder, yer here! Thank goodness yer here!”

She did not allow herself to cry until she was in his arms, her head pressed into his shoulders as the tears finally flowed. And as he held her tightly, murmuring words of comfort into her dark hair, Ryder was surprised to find himself weeping along with her. For her father, for her — and, of course, for himself. The old man in the bed had been the closest thing to a father figure he'd ever had, and although he'd only known him for a few short weeks, the lessons he'd learned from him were carved into his heart.

From Edward, he had learned that it was not simply physical strength which made a man, but what lay within. By the time Ryder had met him, Edward's own strength had already been failing, but his heart, and his love for his family, had still been strong. It was the kind of strength, Ryder realized, that would never die and could never be beaten out of a man. Indeed, it was a strength he had passed on to his children — and to Ryder himself.

“I wish I had kent him for longer,” he said, so softly that only Meredith could hear. “I wish ye could have had him for longer. If there was anything in the world I could do to bring him back for ye — nay, for all of us — ye ken I would do it. I wouldn't hesitate.”

“I ken. And I love ye for it.” Meredith’s eyes, as she looked up at him, were filled with tears, which spilled down her pale cheeks as if they would never stop. And as he wrapped his arms tightly around her once more, Ryder realized that the other lesson he had learned from Edward was that, when you truly loved someone, their pain was yours and could hurt as much — or even more — than your own.

Now that he was gone, it was up to Ryder to look after his daughter and the rest of the family — his family. And, at last, he finally felt equal to the task.

CHAPTER 15

IT WAS a few days after the funeral, but although life in Millar Castle was gradually starting to return to normal, with servants rushing here and there and the low murmur of voices constantly filling the air, the weather at least continued to match Meredith's mood.

It's almost as if all of the light has gone out of the world, she thought, as she sat at her favorite window seat, pretending to embroider a handkerchief with Ryder's initials, but with her eyes fixed on the steel grey sky and the angry storm clouds that filled it. A Highland winter was always hard, but this year seemed particularly so. And although she'd gained a husband she loved — and who loved her in return — since this time last year, the loss of her beloved father, as well as her family home, was proving an onerous burden to bear.

If it wasn't for Ryder, she thought, attempting to concentrate again on the task in hand, *I'm not sure how I'd have coped. Not at all, probably.*

True to his word, Ryder had barely left her side since the day of her father's death, and while he liked to pretend it was for her safety and protection — and she, in turn, pretended to believe him — she knew only too well that he was worried about her.

“I daenae like to see ye so sad, lass,” he’d said, more than once. “I just wish there was something I could do to make ye feel better.”

The sadness she felt, however, was not only hers. She could feel it in him, too, as well as in her mother and siblings, and in the very air that surrounded them, or so it seemed.

“There is,” she’d said simply, “And yer already doing it, just by being here and sharing in it. That’s all ye can do, and I’m grateful for it.”

“I’ll be here as long as ye need me,” he’d replied, and sure enough, there he was now, appearing in the courtyard below her window, having spent the briefest time possible in the office with Matthew this morning. He’d be on his way up to her any moment now, and Meredith smiled in anticipation, then felt her smile turn into a frown as she recognized the man beside him. Not Matthew, as she’d at first assumed, but Colby Green. Again.

Colby Green. The man had been nothing but pleasant to her — to all of them — in the days that had passed since her father’s death, and even Ryder had grudgingly praised him for continuing to comb the area for Meredith’s attacker, even after Ryder himself had abandoned the search. He’d been solicitous towards Meredith’s mother and sister and friendly to Felix. There was nothing at all to criticize him for — so why did Meredith feel her stomach fall with disappointment when she saw him in the castle once more?

She did not know but when the chamber door opened a few minutes later, to admit Ryder, she heaved a small sigh of relief

to find him alone.

“How are ye, lass?” Ryder asked, taking a seat beside her and kissing her softly on the lips, by way of greeting. “If yer well enough, I thought we might take a walk down to yer faither’s grave? We’ve nae flowers to put on it at this time o’ year, but I’ve noticed it seems to help ye to spend some time with him?”

“It does,” she said, smiling at him gratefully. “Thank ye for suggesting it. Wait there, while I get me shawl...”



Meredith’s father had been buried in a sheltered spot close to the loch, which he’d spent much of his time by in the few short weeks he’d been a guest at Millar Castle.

“It’s so peaceful here,” Meredith said, kneeling on the grass by the grave and reaching out to brush some dirt off the stone they’d placed at its head. “I ken he’d approve of our choice. I just wish we could have buried him closer to home...”

Her voice trailed off as she realized the “home” her father had loved so much and had expected to live out the last of his days in, no longer existed. Burying him there had not been an option, and while she was glad his grave was close enough for her to be able to visit it every day, it also served as a constant reminder of everything she’d lost.

“Sometimes I almost forget,” she admitted to Ryder, looking up at him through her dark lashes. “Like in the mornings, when I wake up and think everything’s normal, before reality comes crashing in, and I remember it’s not. Nothing will ever be the same again, will it?”

“Not *exactly* the same, maybe,” Ryder replied, choosing his words carefully. “Things can never go back to how they were before yer faither...” he trailed off, not wanting to speak the words aloud.

“That doesnae mean it will always feel like this,” he continued, taking her by the hand, and pulling her to her feet. “It doesnae mean that ye can never be happy again in time.”

“Time,” Meredith sighed, looping her arm through his as they started to walk their usual route around the loch. “I daenae want to wish it away, but why does there have to be so much of it to get through before we can have the things we want? Like a family of our own, for instance. And a home for Felix, so he doesn’t have to always feel so ... so *beholden* to us.”

She looked up at him shyly, wondering what he would say to her comment about having a family of their own. It was her deepest wish, after all — but was it also his?

“Patience, me love, patience,” Ryder chuckled, squeezing the hand that held his arm. “Ye always want everything at once. Och, daenae get me wrong,” he added quickly, seeing her eyes flash dangerously, “It’s one of the things I love about ye. Yer so impulsive it keeps me on me feet.”

“As it should.” She smiled wanly, and although it was but a mere shadow of her usual, radiant smile, it was the first time he’d seen it in days, and it made his heart glad.

“But we already have a family we love,” he reminded her. “Aye, it would be nice to add to it, and I’ve nae doubt we will

— probably sooner rather than later. But for now, I quite like having ye to meself, at least for now.”

She smiled again, encouraging him to continue.

“As for Felix,” he said, “I’ve been giving some thought to that, and, from what I’ve been told about the state of yer parents’ castle, I think we can rebuild it in time.”

“Time! There’s that word again!” Meredith shot back impatiently, but her eyes looked brighter, and he could tell he was gradually starting to win her around. “So much time!”

“Well, time, aye. But we need money, too,” he continued, “And luckily for us, that’s not something we lack. I’ll rebuild yer parent’s castle, Meredith,” he said, stopping in his tracks, and turning to face her. “I promise ye that. However long it takes me, I’ll do it for ye, and for Felix. I cannae bring yer faither back, nae matter how much I wish I could, but that I can do, and I promise ye I will.”

Meredith reached up and wiped a tear from her eye before replying. The tears were never very far away these days, she reflected, but if there was one person she could rely on to banish them, even for a while, it was her husband.

“How lucky I am to have ye,” she said softly, taking him by the hand as they resumed their walk. “And yer right, we have time. We have nothing but time, in fact. And if ye can learn how to live with me and me impatient ways, I suppose I can learn to be a bit more patient.”

“That’s my lass,” Ryder replied, wrapping an arm around her to protect her from the chill. “Now, let’s get ye back to the warmth of the castle. I’m sure Cook will have something delicious waiting for us.”



Back in the Great Hall of the castle, the mood was somber. Melissa and her mother sat in their usual seats by the fire, needles in their hands, and a basket of sewing at their feet. At first glance, they looked busy, but as Meredith drew closer, she realized the pile of sewing hadn’t gotten any smaller since it had first appeared yesterday evening — not that it mattered, mind you, given that none of it actually needed to be repaired anyway.

“Keeping busy, I see,” she said brightly as she took a seat next to them and picked up a shirt of Ryders that did not appear to need darning. For her family’s sake, she needed to be strong, she knew, but the prospect of another evening watching the two women beside her weep quietly into their sewing was enough to make her want to weep herself.

Fortunately for Meredith, however, no sooner had she sat down than the door of the Great Hall swung open once again to admit Felix, along with Angus Murray, just back from a ride. The two boys had been spending a lot of time together over the past few days, and Meredith was glad her brother had someone to help him take his mind off all that had happened. As the two approached, she noticed Melissa sit up a little straighter and reach up to smooth her hair into place. If Meredith wasn’t very much mistaken, Felix wasn’t the only one who was enjoying the company of young Angus Murray. Well, well!

“Come and join us,” she said, patting the seat next to her and glancing at Melissa, whose face flushed slightly as she caught her sister’s eye. “Tell us about yer ride.”

“We went almost as far as Colby’s castle,” Felix said, dropping gratefully into his seat. “We saw him off in the distance with some of his men, in fact.”

“Aye, he’s been out searching for the varmint who attacked yer sisters,” said Ryder, who had just joined the group, a glass of whisky in his hand. “He told me he wouldnae rest until he was found.”

“Really?” Meredith looked up, surprised. With everything that had happened, she had almost forgotten the attack. Ryder, however, had obviously not, and neither had Colby, it seemed.

“Aye,” said Ryder again. “We want to make sure yer safe,” he added. “Not just ye and Melissa, but all of us. And ye willnae be safe until that villain is found.”

Meredith made no response to this, but a shiver ran down her spine at his words. She had been just starting to feel a little better, but now the darkness had settled over her again, and she wondered if she would ever be able to shake it off.

“Maybe ye could come out with us tomorrow?” Angus suggested now. He was careful to include everyone in his invitation, but Meredith did not miss the way his eyes lingered on Melissa as he spoke.

“Och, nay,” she said before Ryder could answer. “Ryder and I are planning to visit the grave again first thing tomorrow morning. Ye should go, though, Melissa,” she added innocently. “Some fresh air would do ye good.”

“Indeed it would,” her mother agreed, getting up from her seat. “It would do ye all good, in fact. Now, if ye’ll excuse me, I think I’ll have an early night.”

Meredith squeezed her mother’s hand gently as she passed her seat. There had been a lot of early nights for Erin Quinn lately, and Meredith wasn’t entirely sure whether this was a good thing or a bad one.

“Time,” Ryder mouthed across the room to her, as if reading her mind. “Give it time.”

Time. That word again. But her husband was right, she knew. She just had to be patient and allow time to do its work, as it always did. She just hoped it wouldn’t take too long.



The next morning, Meredith and Ryder set out on their walk as soon as breakfast was over, stopping once again at Edward Quinn’s grave, where Meredith spent a few minutes sitting quietly, lost in her thoughts.

“I can’t wait for spring when I can at least find some flowers to bring for him,” she said, straightening up at last. “The winter can be so bleak, without bright colors to cheer it up.”

Ryder opened his mouth to reply, but, before he could speak, he was suddenly writhing in agony, bent double as he reached down to massage his leg — a leg which, Meredith realized with horror, was suddenly running with blood.

“Ryder,” she screamed, leaping up from her position on the ground and rushing over to him. “Ryder, what happened? How...?”

In her muddled state, she thought for a brief second that Ryder’s injury must have been some kind of accident — then she saw him wrench the arrow from his leg, his black eye blazing with fury as they scanned the horizon for a sight of the perpetrator who must surely be nearby.

“Meredith, get behind me,” he ordered, but before she could obey, two men had appeared from the trees behind them, one making directly for Meredith, while the other drew his sword, swinging it in Ryder’s direction.

Ryder had only moments to react, and his brief moment of hesitation, as he decided whether to fend off his attacker or protect his wife, gave the man who now approached him just enough time to catch him off guard. Despite his best efforts, the man forced Ryder backward, away from the screaming Meredith, who was now separated from him by the body of his assailant.

In vain, Ryder tried to move away from the man to get to her, cursing himself under his breath as he realized how much that moment of hesitation may have cost him. At any other time, he would have been more than happy to stand and fight, but something about the way this attack had happened made him instantly suspect it had been carefully orchestrated to make him do just that. Meredith was his weak spot. He knew it, and

presumably whoever was behind this attack — for he was not stupid enough to think it was the two hired swordsmen who now faced them — presumably knew it too, taking advantage of his distraction in the face of his grief to catch him a rare moment of vulnerability.

The man in front of him did not want to kill him, he knew — apparently the instructions he'd been given forbade him from that — but merely to toy with him. To keep him occupied for long enough for his associate to make off with Meredith. Casting his eye frantically around, he saw two horses standing a short distance away, one with a coil of rope looped across its saddle. If they could just get her away from him, they would carry her off on horseback. For what purpose he didn't dare even imagine.

Swinging back around to face his opponent again, Ryder raised his sword in his direction while trying his best to keep Meredith within his line of sight. Try as he might, however, he could not seem to get the swordsman out of the way and watch her at the same time — even for a fighter as skilled as Ryder, it was an impossible task to be in two places at once, so, with a roar that threatened to split the heavens, Ryder turned all of his attention to his assailant. The quicker he dispatched the man, after all, the sooner he'd be able to come to Meredith's aid — which was the only thing that mattered.

From the corner of his eye, he could see her struggling fiercely against the scoundrel who held her, who let out a growl of anger as she landed a well-placed knee squarely in his groin, just as Ryder had taught her. Under different circumstances, he might have allowed himself a moment of pride — she may be small in stature, but she was not a woman to meekly submit to any man's attempt to overpower her — but as his own assailant continued to draw his attention, coming close enough to keep him away from Meredith, but not quite close enough to land any blows, Ryder saw red.

Raising his sword high above his head, he charged forward, dimly aware of the guttural roar that came from his throat — a roar of fury and determination. He had not known what he was about to do until he'd done it, which gave his opponent no time at all. Like a man possessed, Ryder let out another roar of anger before bringing his weapon down hard upon the other man's head in one quick swoop. He was dead before he even hit the ground. His eyes never losing the look of shock that had filled them in the split second before Ryder was upon him.

As for Ryder, however, there was to be no opportunity to congratulate himself for his victory. In fact, he just had time to register the bright red blood staining the ground below him and to realize the man was dead before a sharp blow to the back of the head sent him falling forward into blackness.



It was impossible to know how much time had passed since the attack that had knocked him unconscious, but as Ryder opened his eye to the grey sky above him, he instantly knew something was very wrong.

His head throbbed as he tried to raise it from the ground, noticing as he did so the pool of blood that surrounded him — whether his or that of the man he had killed, he did not know.

“I must have someone clean that up before Meredith sees it,” he thought vaguely, through a fog of pain that made him want to rest his head back on the cold, hard ground and close his eyes against the weak sunlight, which was nevertheless too bright for them. “She would hate to see her father's graveside desecrated by such violence.”

Meredith! The thought of his wife brought him sharply to his senses, and, as the memory of what had happened suddenly flooded his mind, he tried to leap to his feet — realizing too late that the head injury he'd sustained would not readily permit movement.

“At least I managed to kill one o’them,” he just had time to think, catching sight of the body on the ground nearby as his legs buckled under him, and he fell to his knees. Suddenly, though, he felt a strong pair of hands reach under his arms, supporting his body, as a gabble of voices broke through the fog.

“Ryder! Ryder, what happened? Where’s Meredith? Ryder, quickly, tell us what happened? Ellen saw ye lying on the ground out here while she was passing the window. But... but how? Ryder, what’s going on?”

His vision cleared just enough for him to focus on Melissa, who stood in front of him, her face pale with fright.

“Yer alright, Ryder, I’ve got ye,” said a familiar voice from just behind his head. “Just try and sit still for a moment, so ye daenae collapse again.”

Matthew! The man who had come to his aid was Matthew, and he was accompanied, he now saw, not just by Melissa, but also by Ellen and Felix; the latter curiously approaching the body on the ground nearby.

“I dinnae recognize him, Ryder,” the boy said, pulling back the hood the man wore to reveal a white face, frozen in death. “Do ye?”

Ryder shook his head wordlessly, holding up one hand in an attempt to silence Melissa, who he could tell was about to unleash another one of her torrents of questions in his direction. But there was no time for that now.

“Nay,” he croaked, wincing in pain at the effort it took to get the words out. “Nay, but it dinnae matter who he is, he’s just a pawn, used by whoever is behind this.”

Turning to Matthew, Ryder spoke in a low voice, trying and failing to keep his words from Melissa, who stood wringing her hands as she waited to find out what had become of her sister.

“Matthew,” he said urgently. “Matthew, they’ve taken Meredith.”

Ignoring Melissa’s gasp of horror, he took a deep breath and continued, his voice rising as he struggled to contain his anger.

“They’ve taken me wife!” he roared. “And when I find them, God help them, because I will find them, whoever they are, and I will make them suffer!”

Melissa flinched in shock at the fury in his voice, but Ryder no longer seemed to see her, so focused was he on Meredith and the person – or people – who had taken her.

“Matthew!” he barked, turning to his man-of-arms, “I need ye to take as many men as ye can and begin a search for her. Take Felix with ye. And have someone bring me horse around right

away so I can set out to find Colby and ask for his assistance once more. We need as many men as he can lend us. Hurry up man, we daenae have time to waste! Meredith needs us! God only kens what might be happening to her while we stand around here!”

The thought made him even angrier, and as he made to stand up the adrenaline created by his fury helping propel him off the ground before the pain in his leg forced him reluctantly back down again.

“Daenae just stand there looking at me,” he roared. “Someone bring me horse round so I can go after her!”

“I daenae think so,” Ellen said firmly, stepping forward as Matthew looked at her uncertainly. “The only place yer going is up to yer bedchamber, Me Laird. Yer barely fit to walk, let alone ride! Matthew can go and find the Laird of Moore for ye.”

“Nay!” Ryder growled, his voice stronger than he felt. “Nay, I willnae lie abed while Meredith’s out there, taken captive by God knows who! I willnae rest until I find her. I’ll burn every castle within 100 miles to the ground if that’s what it takes!”

He would do it, too. That much was absolutely guaranteed. But as he attempted to stagger to his feet and found himself once again staring directly at the ground — which he’d have been making close acquaintance with, had Matthew not been there to grab him just in time — even Ryder was forced to admit that he was in no fit state to join the search for Meredith. Not that day, at least.

“I’ll go back to the castle,” he grudgingly conceded. “But not to me bedchamber. And only for as long as it takes for me head to clear, so I can decide what needs to be done to find her.”

“Of course, Me Laird, of course,” Ellen said soothingly, as Felix stepped forward to support Ryder on one side while Matthew held the other. “Just come with me, and ye’ll be right as rain before ye ken it. And we’ll find her ladyship safe and well — I just ken it.”

Her face was far less confident than her words, but Ryder clung onto them nonetheless as the small party made it’s way back to the castle, Melissa running on ahead to find her mother and break the terrible news to her. They would find her. They had to. There was no other option.

CHAPTER 16

“IT’S ME OWN FAULT. I’m to blame.”

It was the third time Ryder had made the statement in the past hour, and Melissa was already weary of trying to correct him. As he sat by the fire in the Great Hall, though, his face tense with both pain and guilt, it was obvious that he wouldn’t listen, even if she did speak up.

“I should never have left the castle without a guard,” he continued, twisting in his seat in agitation. “I thought I’d be able to look after her, but I should have guessed that whoever’s behind this would send more than one man to overpower me. They kent I wouldnae be able to fight them all.”

He shook his head, staring into the fire, before twisting round to stare at the door, waiting for it to open with news from Colby and the search.

He’s like a caged animal, Melissa thought, as she sat quietly beside her mother, her mind whirling. God help whoever did this when he finally catches up wi’ them.

“But who is behind it, Ryder?” Melissa’s mother leaned forward, searching Ryder’s face for some clue. Melissa had never seen her look so scared. Not even at her father’s deathbed or funeral. Not even when they’d returned to Millar Castle, having discovered that their own home was gone. But losing a child, she supposed, would be worse than any of those things. Not that Meredith was lost, of course — or not in that sense, at least. She corrected her own thought before it could take root in her mind. Yes, her sister was missing. But she would be found. Surely she would be found.

“Ryder?” Her mother prompted gently, shaking Meredith’s husband from his thoughts. He looked up at her as if seeing her for the first time.

“Who’s behind it?” he asked. “I wish I kent.” He shook his head, then dropped it to his hands, his entire posture filled with regret.

“I have my fair share o’ enemies,” he said, at last, looking up at them. “More than my fair share. I suppose ye know that. I’ve spent me whole life fighting, and I’ve told meself I was doing it for the best — to protect me and mine. But now I find it’s probably put them at risk instead, for any one o’ those enemies could’ve done this. Any one of them could’ve realized this was their chance to get back at me. Now, when I’m at my weakest.”

“Yer not weak,” Meredith’s mother said kindly, placing a comforting hand on her son-in-law’s arm. “Nobody could ever call ye weak.”

“Aye, I daenae suppose they would,” Ryder acknowledged. “But that was before I married Meredith. She’s me biggest

weakness — she makes me vulnerable, and someone kent that and used it against me. I just daenae ken who yet.”

He paused, his expression thoughtful. This was the very thing he'd been worried about. The reason he'd tried to drive Meredith away during her first few days in the castle. He'd been afraid that she would make him weak and that he, in turn, would make her vulnerable. This much was true, beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Was it really true, though, to say that all of those who classed themselves as his enemies would have known that? The more Ryder thought about it, the more he started to doubt that fact. The wedding had been a small one, after all — deliberately so. Most of those who'd known about it were here in this room or out searching for Meredith on his behalf. The villagers who'd lined the streets as they followed the piper home after the ceremony could be ruled out, for none of them would class Ryder as an enemy, having lived on his land, and enjoyed his generosity ever since he became laird.

Who, then, had known enough about his feelings for Meredith to have known to use her against him?

With a bang that echoed the length of the Great Hall, the door opened, revealing an agitated-looking Matthew, with Ellen hovering anxiously behind him.

“Matthew, at last!” Ryder said, leaping to his feet and growling in pain when the arrow wound in his leg reminded him sharply of its existence. Ellen had cleaned and dressed the wound as best she could when they'd got him back to the castle, but Ryder knew it would be a long time before an injury that deep was fully healed.

“What news?” he asked eagerly, ignoring the pain in his leg and head as Matthew hurried towards him, his feet loud on the flagstone floor. “Did ye find Colby? Has he sent his men out to join the search?”

“I dinnae find him, Me Laird.” Matthew’s face was ashen in the dim light of the large room, and Ryder felt a sudden trickle of foreboding run down his spine as he waited for him to continue.

“I dinnae find him,” Matthew said again, “But I did find one o’ his servants, on his way here. He gave me this to give to you.”

His hand trembling slightly, he held out a rolled-up piece of parchment, tied with a ribbon, which Ryder fumbled with for a second before the paper finally fell open.

The room fell silent. All eyes were on Ryder as he scanned the document in his hands and then read it again, as if to be sure he’d understood it.

“Get me horse ready!” he suddenly shouted, casting the parchment angrily to the ground before him. “I will find Colby Green, and I will make him pay for this!”



In the silence that followed Ryder’s outburst, Melissa darted forward and picked the sheet of paper up off the floor, where it had fallen, her face blanching in horror as she read what it said.

“Well, miss?” Ellen said, her fear making her bold. “What does it say? What’s going on?”

“It’s... it’s just a few lines,” Melissa said, at last, holding the message up so everyone could see it.

I have Meredith. Return my clan’s lands, or I will kill her. You know where to find me.

The paper fluttered from Melissa’s hands as she stood there, speechless. Then, with a small sob, her mother fell to the floor in a faint, and all thoughts were forgotten as she rushed forward to catch her.

By the time Melissa’s mother was lying propped up in front of the fire, a glass of whisky in her hand, Ryder had finally stopped shouting and was pacing back and forth across the room, his injuries apparently forgotten. He had been incensed when he’d realized his wounds would not permit him to ride out that night, but as his initial burst of anger settled to a low but furious simmer, his pacing had become thoughtful.

“Perhaps it’s for the best that I don’t act tonight,” he said, as if to himself. “It’s what he’ll be expecting, after all. For me to storm round there to free her — and walk straight into some unknown trap, I’ll be bound.”

“Ryder?” Melissa’s voice broke into his thoughts. She was sitting by her mother’s side, clasping her hand in hers, but her eyes followed Ryder, looking for an answer. “Ryder, are ye going to tell us what’s going on, or do we have to guess?”

“Colby Green,” Ryder said bluntly, continuing to pace. “That’s what’s going on. And I should hae kent. I should hae kent he would be behind this. It was right there in front of me, the whole time.”

“I daenae understand,” Melissa said slowly. “I ken the message came from the Laird of Moore, but I thought ye were his friend? His oldest friend. That’s what he told Meredith, at least?”

Ryder paused in front of the fire, wondering how much to tell her.

It was true that he and Colby had known each other since they were but young lads, as Colby had told Meredith. It was not true, however, to say that they had been friends. Actually, their clans had been sworn enemies for as long as Ryder could recall. It was only when his own father died that he’d tried to reach out and call a truce. But the alliance Colby’s father had promised him had turned out to be false — just a ruse to try to get closer to him and take his lands.

He’d had no option but to kill the man. He would not have stopped in his bid to become Laird of Millar, as well as Laird of Moore. Ryder’s father may not have been right about many things, but he had at least been right about that, so there was no mystery as to why the man had turned against him, rejecting his offer of kinship, and preferring instead to double-cross him. No, the only mystery to be solved was why, after his father’s death at Ryder’s hands, Colby had tried to befriend him.

“A false friend,” he said, finally turning to Melissa and her mother. “One who always meant to double-cross me; to find some way to avenge the loss of his family’s lands and soldiers that came about because o’ his faither constantly going against mine. Well, it looks like he’s finally found it. And now I need to find him and put an end to this once and for all.”

It was a very brief summation of all that had happened between his father and Colby’s. And between Colby’s father and Ryder, for that matter, but he did not want to distress the ladies with the gruesome details of a feud that had divided their clans for generations. A feud which he had finally been willing to consider closed — only to realize too late that Colby had been lying to him all along.

He was not his friend; he never had been. Ryder had known it once, but the events of the last few days had somehow pushed it from his mind and allowed him to accept Colby’s overtures of friendship, too distracted by the attack on Meredith, and her father’s subsequent death, to examine the man’s motives as rigorously as he usually would.

It was his fault, and he would never forgive himself for this catastrophic — not to mention uncharacteristic — lapse of judgment. Meredith was in danger because her husband — the very person who had sworn to protect her — had let his guard down and put her at risk. But now was not the time for blame and recriminations. Not when his wife was still in the hands of Colby. Ryder shuddered at the very thought, pressing a hand to his eyes as if to blot it out. He could not afford to think of that now.

Think, he told himself, as the fire crackled before him. *Ye have to think how yer going to get her back — and then ye have to think about how, exactly, to deal with the man who took her.*

Melissa was still watching him, her mother's head now drooping onto her shoulder as she surrendered to sleep.

“Melissa,” Ryder said, stopping abruptly before her, as a thought started to form in his aching head, “I think I have a plan. But I’m going to need yer help.”



No one in the castle got much sleep that night, least of all Ryder, who knew he needed rest if he were to be well enough to put his plan into action the next day, but who could not bring himself to lie down in the bed he shared with Meredith, without her by his side.

He could barely stand the thought of leaving her with Colby for even a minute, let alone overnight, but if there was one thing he had learned from his father, it was that old adage about revenge being a dish best served cold. It was a lesson that Ryder had taken a long time to learn. As a young man, his instinct had always been to act first and think later — an instinct that had led him into trouble on more than one occasion.

With time and maturity, however, had come a new, deeper understanding of the world and how it worked. Taking time to understand the enemy was now key to his strategy. It did not do to underestimate someone, as he had clearly done with Colby. For years now, Ryder had viewed Colby with a pity that verged on disdain. The man had tried pathetically hard to befriend him after Ryder had killed his father, claiming that all he wanted was peace between the clans and that he'd been on Ryder's side all along.

Ryder had not believed him, and nor had he respected him for appearing so willing to turn on his own family and befriend the man who should have been his sworn enemy — indeed, he had viewed Colby's craven need for friendship as a weakness. Until the day he'd found him by the loch with Meredith, however, it had not occurred to him to view Colby as a threat. An irritant, yes, and, latterly, an unlikely ally in the search for Meredith's attacker.

But, of course, Colby had been behind that attack all along, hadn't he? He had visited Ryder that day, claiming to want to toast his good health on the occasion of his wedding. An excuse which Ryder now saw for exactly what it was — a ruse designed to distract him while the men he'd paid to take Meredith did his bidding.

He had presumably been the person behind the fire at Quinn Castle, too, Ryder now realized. He hadn't wanted to say as much to Melissa and her mother, but it was the only explanation that made sense. Had he done it out of simple malice, he wondered, or in a bid to drive Ryder out of his mind from the presumed pressure of having to take in Meredith's entire family along with her?

If it was the latter, of course, he'd made a grave error in judgment because, instead of driving Meredith and Ryder apart, having her family there had only brought them closer together. What's more, it had also given him some powerful allies, in the shape of Melissa and Felix. Two people who loved Meredith almost as much as he did and whose loyalty to her had quickly turned into loyalty to her husband, too.

With a bit of luck — and a lot of planning — that loyalty would now be the thing that helped bring her back to him. His only hope was that it wouldn't be at the expense of Melissa's safety. Because not only would Meredith herself never forgive

him if something were to happen to her beloved sister, he knew that he'd never forgive himself, either.

But it was the only way. His best chance at distracting Colby, and keeping him occupied for long enough to put his plan into action, and bring both Meredith and Melissa safely home. Now all he could do was pray that it worked.

CHAPTER 17

IF RYDER HAD SEEMED like a caged animal as he paced the Great Hall of Millar Castle, he was nothing compared to Meredith now, trapped as she was in the dungeons of an unknown castle. One she'd only managed to catch the briefest glimpse of as she'd been carried on horseback into the courtyard, and then whisked quickly underground, surrounded by guards.

The journey from the lochside where she'd seen Ryder fall to this cold, dark room had been a short one, but Meredith had screamed the whole way, frantically twisting and turning in a bid to throw herself from the galloping horse, with no thought for what might happen to her when she fell.

It was no use, though. In the muddled moments that had seemed to take a lifetime to pass as Ryder bravely fought the second man by the loch, her captor had taken advantage of her distracted state to bind her tightly to the saddle, from which vantage point she had witnessed his final blow to the back of Ryder's head.

Her stomach lurched in fear as she relived that terrible moment of impact. Hearing the sickening thud as the base of the sword made contact with her husband's skull and seeing the bright red blood flow from the wound. She did not know

whether he was alive or dead. All she knew was that the kind of man who would approach an opponent from behind while he was engaged in fighting another was not the kind of enemy she ever wished to encounter.

And yet here she was. *But where, exactly, was “here”?* she wondered.

The walls of the small room gave her no clue. It was small and cramped — the ceiling so low that even Meredith’s head almost touched it, and the darkness so complete that she’d been unable to stop herself calling out for a candle just so she could get at least some idea of her surroundings.

No one, however, had answered her call. Just as the man who’d brought her here had resolutely ignored her screams as she sat before him on the horse, it seemed the rest of the household — wherever they were — seemed equally deaf to her cries for help. She could feel, rather than see, that there were iron bars on the door of her room, but the darkness beyond them remained a mystery.

Somewhere off to her left, she heard a low moan — presumably from some other poor soul locked up here — while, every so often, the faint scuttle of feet made her pull her skirts tightly around her, protecting herself from the rats which must surely be nearby.

“Is there anyone there?” she called quietly, one last time, hoping her fellow prisoner at least might answer her. “Is there someone else down here?” The moans stopped immediately, but there was no response from the direction they’d come in. Whoever was down here with her clearly didn’t want to talk.

After a while, she had stopped calling and simply allowed her body to sink to the stone floor, trying to ignore the feeling of dampness that seeped through her skirts, making her shiver with cold and discomfort. No one was coming to help her — or not from within this castle, at least. Ryder, she knew, would, even now, be mustering as many men as he could find, ready to search for her. That was assuming he was still alive, though.

Meredith shook her head, suppressing the sob that rose up in her throat at the thought. He was alive. He *had* to be. She would simply not allow herself to believe otherwise. And so she sat, and she waited. For what, she wasn't sure.

She hadn't expected to sleep, but as the adrenaline from the fight and from her capture slowly started to leave her body, she found her eyelids drooping despite her discomfort. Suddenly, though, the soft thud of approaching footsteps made them snap open and sent her stumbling to the door of the cell, the pins and needles in her legs almost bringing her to her knees once more.

Resisting the impulse to call out once more, Meredith simply stood there, breathlessly holding on to the iron bars, her heart beating so loudly in her chest she felt sure whoever was approaching must surely be able to hear it.

After a second or two, the flickering light of a candle illuminated the small cells, sending shadows leaping into the corners of the room. Meredith swallowed quickly, her mouth dry with nerves as she waited.

“Lady Millar,” a low voice said at last, as a dark figure came to a stop a short distance from the bars of her cell. “How nice to see you again.”

Meredith gasped aloud, her mind whirring as she tried to take in this new piece of information. She may not have known him for long, but she recognized his voice instantly.

Colby Green.

She had been captured by the Laird of Moore.



“Ye! But... but... ye!”

There were so many things Meredith had imagined saying to her captor in the time she'd spent sitting there alone in the darkness, with nothing else to do but think. Now that the moment was here, however, she found herself totally lost for words.

Colby, on the other hand, had no such difficulty.

“Why, aye, it is,” he said smoothly, raising his candle to shoulder height so his face was illuminated. “I’m flattered that ye remember me. Please allow me to apologize for the standard of yer accommodation. I’m sure it’s not at all what yer used to. Still, no matter, assuming yer husband does as I’ve asked him, ye’ll be out of here in nae time. And I’m sure ye’ll be comfortable enough in yer parents’ castle. Once ye’ve rebuilt it, that is.”

Meredith’s heart leaped at his mention of Ryder. So he was alive! He had to be, for Colby to be so confident that he would

do as he asked — whatever that may be. For a moment, she felt a surge of elation before the second part of his statement sunk in. Her parents' castle. So he had been behind that too, presumably, as well as that first attack on her and Melissa that day that now seemed like such a long time ago.

“Ye burnt me family's home,” she said bluntly, trying her best not to allow the emotion she felt to show in her voice. “Why?”

Colby shrugged, unconcerned.

“Because I could,” he said simply. “Because I knew I could get to him — to Ryder — by gettin' to you. And because he took everything from me.” His voice had suddenly become bitter, all pretense at civility gone. “He killed me faither and took me land. All that was left was this castle — or what was left o' it once his men had finished with it. Why should he get to be happy? Why should he have two fine castles at his disposals when I'm left with the remains of one? Why should he get to have a wife like ye?”

He pressed his face angrily against the bars of the cell, and Meredith shrank back, suddenly scared. When she'd first realized it was the Laird of Moore who held her, she'd felt vaguely relieved because while he might have been clever enough to have captured her, she instinctively felt he was weak. The kind of man who paid others to do his killing for him, rather than get his own hands dirty. The kind of man who would be no match for Ryder, in other words.

Now, however, she wasn't so sure. Colby may be weak, but he had also revealed himself to be cunning — and vengeful. Meredith's life may have been sheltered, but she was not so naive that she didn't know danger when she saw it. And here it was, standing right in front of her now, she was sure of it.

Ryder was right all along, she thought, her heart sinking as the realization hit her. He didn't trust him, and I didn't bother to ask why. Why didn't I believe him? Why did I allow myself to be taken in by this man?

“Ye’ll never have a wife like me,” she said, her blood rising as he smirked at her from the other side of the cell door. “He’s twice the man ye are, and ye ken it. And once Ryder gets his hands on ye, ye’ll ken it even more.”

“Careful, Me Lady.” Colby’s eyes flashed dangerously in the candlelight, and Meredith took a quick step back before he could reach through the bars and make a grab for her. “Ye wouldnae want to upset me now, would ye? Not when we’ve been gettin’ on so well. I wouldnae want to have to do anything to harm ye, would I? Although, if Ryder doesnae hurry up and do what I’ve asked...”

He trailed off, the smirk back on his face.

“I wonder what’s keepin’ him?” he said softly. “I would have thought he’d have been here right away, desperate to save his bride. Maybe he daena care as much as I thought.”

He shrugged carelessly, and Meredith saw red.

“He isnae here because yer hired thug knocked him out,” she shouted, throwing herself against the bars. “And if he’s harmed him, then so help me, I’ll...”

“Ye’ll do what?” Colby laughed cruelly, leaning forward to meet her gaze. “Forgive me, Me Lady, but I daenae think yer in a position to do much, are ye?”

“Och, do ye think so?”

Meredith stared at him for a long moment, their faces almost touching through the bars of the cell. Then, with one swift movement, she took a quick step back and spat viciously in Colby’s face, watching in satisfaction as her spittle met its mark, hitting him right in the middle of his grinning face.

That’ll wipe the smile off yer face, she thought grimly, as Colby staggered back in shock, raising a hand to swipe at his face and then staring at it in disbelief as he realized what she had done.

Meredith had just a second to regret her rash behavior before Colby was reaching into his pocket and pulling out a thick bunch of keys, cursing loudly as he did so.

“On second thought,” he said, rummaging for the right key, “Maybe I willnae bother waiting for Ryder to show up. I’ve waited long enough for that fool. Maybe I’ll just...”

“Me Laird, there’s someone here to see ye!”

The voice that interrupted him came from a small servant boy, who had appeared from the darkness of the dungeon behind him without warning.

“What’s that? Cannae ye see I’m busy?” Colby blustered, his smooth manner long since forgotten in his anger at the interruption.

“Beg pardon, sir, it’s just, she says it’s urgent. She must see ye right away; she cannae wait.”

“She?” Colby turned around to glare at the boy, his face puzzled. “It’s a woman?”

“Aye sir, a young one. She asked to see ye right away. Said she wouldnae leave until she’d spoken wi’ ye.”

Colby thought for a second, then looked back at Meredith, his eyes cold as he slid the keys back into his pocket, moving deliberately slowly as if to taunt her.

“It appears ye have a reprieve,” he said curtly as he turned to follow the boy from the dungeon. “For now. But fear not, fair lady, I’ll be back to deal with ye later. And I’ll be looking forward to it, too.”

Meredith stood by the cell door, watching until the light from his candle faded into the darkness at the end of the long corridor, and she was absolutely sure he’d gone. Then, finally, she allowed her shaking legs to fold underneath her as she collapsed gratefully to the floor.



In the courtyard of Moore Castle, Melissa’s legs were also shaking as she stood waiting for the young servant boy to go and fetch the Laird.

There had been no question of her refusing Ryder's request, none at all. Meredith would have done the same for her, she knew. They were family — it was what they did. All the same, as she shivered underneath her thick cloak, not sure whether the sudden chill came from the night air or from her own barely suppressed terror, she couldn't help but wonder what she'd gotten herself into.

On the ride here, she'd told herself to be brave, like Meredith was. It had been frustrating to sit around doing nothing for the past few hours, after all, and finally being on horseback, doing something — *anything* — to try to help her sister was at least better than that. Then again, she was not Meredith. A fact she was only too aware of when they arrived outside the walls of the castle, and Ryder turned in his saddle, his face white from the effort of remaining there despite his wounds, to ask if she was ready to go inside.

“Aye,” she'd said stoutly, hoping her nerves did not betray themselves. “Aye, I'm ready.”

Ryder had nodded reassuringly as she'd slipped from her horse, handing the reins to one of the other men, who stepped forward to take them. It had been easy to feel brave when Ryder was right there beside her, but now she was all alone, Ryder and his men hidden on the other side of the castle walls, while she stood here, a small, solitary figure in the middle of the unfamiliar courtyard, feeling her heart flutter inside her chest, like a bird beating its wings.

“Can I help ye?”

The Laird of Moore had snuck up on her so softly that Melissa hadn't even heard him approach until he was right there beside her, close enough to touch. She felt the anger rise inside her at the sight of the man who had taken her sister, but she simply smiled sweetly, hoping the light from the torches placed at intervals around the courtyard would be enough for him to see her — and to realize she was just a girl, who could not possibly be a threat to him.

“Ye just need to distract him for long enough for him to lower his guard,” Ryder had told her. “Just talk to him. That should be easy enough for ye. In fact, wi’ a bit of luck he’ll be so desperate for ye to stop that he’ll do whatever ye say.”

Melissa had stuck her tongue out in response, grateful that the moment of teasing had revealed something of the old Ryder again. *He must be feeling better to be teasing me for my talking*, she'd thought, smiling to herself. *Let's just hope I can live up to his expectations.*

“Aye, Me Laird,” she said now, still smiling coquettishly up at him. “I think ye can. I'm Melissa Quinn, Ryder's sister-in-law.”

Colby frowned at this, instantly suspicious, as she'd known he would be. Glancing down, she saw his hand reach for the sword he carried by side and she spoke up quickly before he could draw it.

“It's alright,” she said, hoping she sounded sincere. “I'm not here to cause trouble for ye, I promise.”

“Why are ye here, then? Speak up, girl, I daena have all night.”

The suspicion had not left Colby’s face, but the hand that rested on the hilt of his sword made no further move; she was glad to see.

“I’m hoping for yer help,” Melissa blurted out, seeing that he was growing impatient. “And yer protection. From Ryder, I mean. Please, Me Laird, ye will help me, will ye not? I daena ken where else to go!”

“Ye need protection from Ryder? Why?”

Colby was curious despite of himself. Melissa glanced down at her feet, pretending to be shy, before looking back up at him through lowered lashes.

“Ryder is a cruel man, Me Laird, as ye well ken,” she said, crossing her fingers at the lie. “I’ve always been afraid o’ him. Any woman would be.”

Colby nodded grimly, pleased to hear his enemy spoken of in such terms.

“Meredith was the only reason I agreed to stay in the castle with him,” Melissa continued, her voice low, so he had to lean closer to hear her. “She protected me from Ryder. He didna dare lay a finger on me while she was there if ye ken what I mean?”

Colby nodded again, giving her the courage to continue.

“The thing is, though,” she said, her face the picture of innocence, “Meredith has... well, she’s gone, Me Laird. Nobody kens where she is. I think Ryder must have taken her somewhere. I just... I just hope he hasnae harmed her...”

At this, she broke into sobs so heartfelt that she surprised even herself with the force of her emotion. *If he doesnae believe me, she thought, her stomach churning in fear, I’m done for. Please, Lord, let him believe me...*

Her prayers were answered.

“So, ye daenae ken where Meredith is?” Colby asked, his tone inscrutable. “And Ryder hasnae spoken to ye about this? He hasnae told ye where she might be?”

“I havenae dared to go near him to ask,” Melissa lied. “I’m too scared o’ his temper and his fists. I just waited in me room until I was sure she wasnae coming back, then I stole a horse from the stable and came here. Like I said, I dinnae ken where else to turn. Ye will help me, Me Laird, willnae ye? Meredith told me what a gentleman ye were the time ye went walking with her. She never forgot that kindness, and I remembered it tonight as I left the castle. I thought if anyone would help me, it would be a man such as yerself.”

For a moment, she thought she had gone too far, but then, with a lecherous smile, which made her shudder to her boots, Colby was putting an arm around her shoulder and turning her in the direction of the nearest doorway.

“Ye did the right thing coming to me,” he said soothingly, guiding her towards the door. “Now, let’s get ye inside.”

As they walked across the courtyard, Colby’s arm still held uncomfortably tight around her shoulders, Melissa risked a quick glance up at the castle battlements. If all had gone to plan, at least some of Ryder’s men should be up there by now, waiting for their opportunity to strike. Sure enough, as her eyes strained in the darkness, she was just able to make out the dark figure of a man, shadowy against the night sky. Seeing her look up, the figure raised one arm in a quick wave. Reassured, Melissa turned back towards Colby, who opened the door with one hand, while the other still looped around her shoulder.

Seeing her opportunity, Melissa quickly slipped her hand into the pocket nearest her, resisting the impulse to shout out in triumph as her fingers closed around the object she had been hoping for.

The keys.

She had managed to get the keys.

CHAPTER 18

FROM HIS POSITION atop the castle battlements, Ryder was the only person who saw Melissa's shawl apparently slip from her shoulder as she stepped inside the castle with Colby, the garment fluttering slightly in the breeze as it landed on the flagstone floor of the courtyard.

His shoulders finally relaxing from the rigid position they'd adopted almost as soon as his sister-in-law had come into view, he allowed a small smile of satisfaction.

"Good lass," he said under his breath. "Now, if ye can just keep yerself safe for a wee while longer..."

As he turned around to face the small group of men who stood waiting for his command, however, he felt a trickle of fear run through his blood. The fact was, Ryder was not at all sure Melissa *would* be safe with Colby. He was not sure of that at all, and as he led his men silently back down the narrow stone staircase that led from the battlements to the courtyard below, Ryder knew he would never forgive himself if anything were to happen to her. Just as he had never forgiven himself for what had happened to his sister, all those years before.

Melissa is different, though, he reminded himself as he walked. She's strong, and she's cunning. She did not hesitate for a second when I told her my plan, and I will not fail her – or Meredith.

By now, they had reached the bottom of the staircase.

“Wait here,” Ryder whispered, turning quickly to the men behind him, who shrank instantly back into the shadows. Pausing for a second to listen carefully to the sounds outside, Ryder carefully pushed the door before him open, one painfully slow inch at a time.

The courtyard was empty or, at least, it appeared to be. He paused for just a few seconds longer, allowing his eye to become accustomed to the light from the few torches, which, although dim, still contrasted sharply with the pitch darkness he'd just come from.

If everything had gone to plan, Melissa should be reappearing any time...

“It must have slipped off as I came inside,” her voice suddenly said from across the courtyard, interrupting his chain of thoughts. “Let me just... oh, yes, look, here it is!”

From his position by the tower door, Ryder watched as Melissa took a few steps into the courtyard, to where her shawl still lay on the ground, before returning to Colby, who stood waiting for her at the door. He did not see her drop the key he hoped she had managed to steal from him, but he knew she would have done so. He trusted her. He just hoped he'd be able to trust himself to do what had to be done to rescue

Meredith without letting the burning anger he now felt towards Colby get in the way.

As he moved silently towards the spot he'd seen Melissa pick up the shawl, being careful to stay in the shadows of the castle walls to remain undetected by anyone who happened to be watching, Ryder's hand itched to grab at the sword that remained sheathed at his side. He wanted nothing more than to raise the weapon against Colby – to run screaming through the door he'd disappeared through and wreak his revenge for what he'd done to Meredith.

But no. Meredith was the priority now. He had to get her first... and then he'd be free to do whatever he pleased to Colby. *A quick kill would be too good for the man*, he thought grimly. *I want him to suffer.*

With this thought to spur him on, he reached the spot he'd last seen Melissa stand in, and, dropping to all fours and keeping a close eye on the door she'd disappeared through, he started feeling around in the darkness for the keys he knew she would have left for him.

Nothing.

Ryder paused, his heart hammering so loudly in his chest he was almost afraid it would give him away.

The key had to be here somewhere. It *had* to be. There was just no other option – and no other way to get Meredith out of the dungeon Ryder was sure Colby would have locked her into. He was strong, yes, and his anger made him even stronger. Even that, however, would be no match for the stone

walls and iron bars of a cell, which was why he'd needed Melissa's help to get the keys. The keys that were now apparently missing.

Taking a deep breath to steady himself, Ryder paused for a second, then two, before recommending his search, this time spreading his hands wide as he smoothed them over the rough stone of the courtyard, waiting for them to make contact with...

...metal. As the cold metal of the keys brushed against the tip of his fingers, Ryder had to stop himself from shouting out in triumph and relief. Instead, he simply closed his hand silently around them. Not just one key, he realized now, but an entire bunch of them. *Why, I must be holding the key to every single room in this castle*, he thought, gripping them harder until the iron dug into the flesh of his hand. The realization, however, was quickly followed by another, much more sobering thought. That if Colby had, indeed, lost something so incredibly important to him, then it surely wouldn't be long before he noticed its absence. That would put Melissa in terrible danger, and him and Meredith, too, of course.

Sure enough, no sooner had the thought entered his head than the door opposite him started to creak open, and Ryder sprang back into the shadows, his feet scrambling for purchase on the stone ground.

"Guards! Search the castle! I believe we have an unwelcome guest!"

Colby had appeared at the door, his anger apparent, even in the dark of the courtyard. Melissa was nowhere to be seen. Had Colby realized her role in the disappearance of his precious keys, or did he believe Ryder alone was behind the theft?

Either way, it was clear that he must act now to free Meredith because as soon as Colby had finished blustering to his guards, he was certain to head down to the dungeon, which was, after all, the place he knew Ryder would go.

There was no choice, though. He had to save her, and he would risk far more than the wrath of Colby Green to do it if he had to, even death. What he would not do, however, was risk Meredith, so, with a last glance at the tower where he knew some of his men were still hidden, he turned and ran silently in the direction of the dungeon. He had left Matthew in command of the men he'd placed outside the castle, with explicit instructions on how to proceed – whether or not he returned to them. He had to trust that they would do as he'd asked and that they would make it out alive. For now, though, he had but one thought on his mind:

Meredith.

He repeated her name softly under his breath as he ran, like a prayer or an incantation. *Meredith, Meredith, Meredith. Please be safe. Please be alive. And please, for the love of God, let me not be too late to get ye out of this place.*

Ryder had visited Colby's home often enough to know its layout almost as well as he knew that of his own castle. He and Colby had sometimes played in these very dungeons as boys, creeping down there under cover of darkness, with just a single candle to light their way, telling each other ghost stories in the darkest corners of the cells, and waiting to see who would go running for safety first.

It had always been Colby, of course. Even as a young lad, Ryder had already seen too much cruelty and death to be frightened by a mere ghost. Ghosts, he knew, were not real and

could not harm him. His father was real. His father could – and frequently did – do him the kind of harm that leaves lasting scars – ones that weren't visible to the naked eye but which were there all the same, just under the surface.

And so, Ryder had simply sat there, smiling in the darkness as Colby ran screaming from some childish ghost story, taking the candle with him. *He always was a coward*, Ryder reflected now, feeling his way through the dark passages which wound their way deep under the castle. But, in being a coward, Colby had inadvertently done him a favor. Because all of those times Ryder had had to find his way out of the dungeons alone and in total darkness had taught him how to navigate them effortlessly, learning each twist and turn, and the location of each and every cell built into their walls.

She was in the very last cell. He had known she would be, of course.

“Meredith!” he yelled as he approached. “Meredith, it’s me! Can ye hear me!”

“Ryder!” her voice came back almost instantly, the echo picking it up and sending it ricocheting against the walls. “Ryder, I’m here! Over here!”

Within seconds, he was at the door of her cell, his fingers fumbling with the keys as Meredith sobbed behind the bars her hands reaching for him frantically.

“Ryder! Oh, Ryder, I knew ye’d come!” she said, her voice breaking with emotion. “I told him as much! And... and I spat in his face, too! Ryder, ye should have seen it!”

“I’m sure ye did,” he said, smiling as he finally managed to insert the correct key in the lock and pull open the heavy door. “I’d have expected nae less o’ ye!”

With that, she ran from the cell and flung herself into his arms, covering his face with kisses, as he hugged her tightly.

“We have to go, lass,” Ryder said reluctantly untangling himself from her embrace. “Colby will ken I’d come down here to find ye. He’ll surely be after us by now!”

Sure enough, as he took her hand and started to guide her back the way he’d just come, they heard a commotion somewhere in the network of passages nearby. Raised voices, footsteps, plus the unmistakable sound of the Laird of Moore’s voice, commanding his guards to follow him to Meredith.

“This way!” Colby shouted, the echo immediately repeating his words. “Follow me. I know exactly where they’ll be! If we hurry, we can trap them there, and Ryder can join his pretty little wife in her cell, if I decide to spare him.”

Gripping Meredith’s hand tightly in his and raising the fingers of his other hand to lips in a shushing motion, Ryder led her on, walking more slowly now in a bid to remain silent enough to avoid detection by Colby and his men. At a point where the passage they walked down forked in two, they paused, Ryder listening hard. The voices were louder now. Colby and his men were making no attempt to stay quiet – which was fortunate for Meredith and Ryder, who could tell exactly how close they were.

And they were close. Too close for comfort in fact, and, as Ryder looked frantically around for somewhere to hide, he realized they were out of options. With nowhere left to go, he turned around, shielding Meredith with his body as he pressed her up against the wall of the passage, hoping against hope that the space was wide enough and dark enough that the men would pass them by, without realizing they were there.

“Quiet, now, lass,” he whispered softly, feeling her trembling against him in fear. “Just a few seconds, and we’ll be safe. I promise I’ll keep ye safe.”

Ryder wished he felt as confident as he sounded. As the group of men reached the same fork in the way they’d come to themselves just a few seconds earlier, however, fortune finally shone on the couple hidden in the shadows. The voices grew louder and louder... then gradually started to recede. They’d taken the wrong turning! Ryder stifled a chuckle of amazement as he realized that Colby, for all his bravado, had led his men in completely the wrong direction! *Pride goes before a fall, indeed*, he thought, as he cautiously peered around the corner of the passage and, finding it empty, took Meredith by the hand once more, almost pulling her off her feet in his haste to get them both safely above ground.

“We’ll have just a few minutes before he realizes his mistake,” he said, his voice low as they finally saw the glimmer of moonlight that signaled the end of the long corridor. “I need to make sure yer well away from here before that happens.”

“And ye?” Meredith asked, tugging at his hand. “Where will ye be when I’m well away from here?”

Frowning slightly, Ryder didn’t answer. The fact was, Colby was not the only reason he desperately wanted to get Meredith

out into the open air. If all had gone according to plan, the castle should be ablaze by now, his men having snuck quickly through the rooms, lighting fires at every stop. The aim was to create a blaze so large and so widespread that it would be impossible to stop – a technique Ryder was sure Colby must have used when he set fire to the Quinn castle just a few weeks earlier. If the plan worked, it would destroy everything Colby held dear. But it also risked destroying both Meredith and Melissa, as well as the many men Ryder had mustered to help him that night, hence his urgent need to get them all to safety.



They emerged from the dungeon into an inferno. The sky, previously pitch dark but for the light from the moon, was now a fiery orange, the loud crackle of flames filling the air and almost drowning out the screams which seemed to come from every direction, as the castle's staff and guards frantically tried to get to safety. As Ryder and Meredith paused at the dungeon entrance, they saw three guards run past, one of them briefly making eye contact with them and then looking instantly away. These men had long since abandoned their posts, Ryder saw; unlike his own men, who he trusted to be loyal to their last breaths, any loyalty they'd once had to Colby was gone. Their only thought now was for survival and escape, as his must be too.

“Quickly!” he said, pulling Meredith away from the blaze in the courtyard and through the nearest door. It was clear that they would not make it through the flames before them, and he would not risk it. The room they now entered, however, was still untouched by the flames, although smoke had started to permeate the air, making them cough as they fought their way through it.

“Pull yer shawl up over yer mouth,” Ryder yelled to Meredith, casting his eye around the room in search of some way to

escape their predicament. *This cannae be happening*, he thought, as his gaze landed on the room's single window, which opened out onto the wide expanse of grass below. *We cannae escape Colby, only to burn to death in a fire started by me own men. There must be a way out!*

The window was narrow, but as he strode towards it with Meredith cowering behind him, Ryder thought it looked just wide enough for her to climb through. He would not make it after her, but that didn't matter. For now, all that mattered was Meredith and getting her to safety. Which might be easier said than done if he knew anything about his wife and her determination.

"Here," he shouted, stooping down and making a stirrup with his hands. "Climb onto me hands, then out through the window. Quickly, lass, we daenae have much time!"

"But... but what will ye do? How will ye get out? I'll be lucky if I can get through that space, let alone ye!"

Meredith's eyes were wide with fear, but they grew wider still as she realized he had no intention of following her, even if he could.

"Yer not coming with me, are ye?" she asked bluntly, her lower lip trembling. "Ye want to go back into the castle and track down Colby, I suppose. Well, that's a shame because I'm not going without ye, Ryder. Ye cannae make me. If we burn, at least we burn together."

She meant it, too. He could see it in the firm set of her jaw as she stared at him, almost daring him to contradict her.

Stubborn to the last, he thought. Then, before she knew what was happening, he had picked her up by the waist, swung her over her shoulder, and was forcing her out through the window, ignoring her screams of protest as he gently prised her fingers from the side of the window, and gave one last push which sent her tumbling the short distance to the ground below.

Ryder stopped for just long enough to reassure himself she was safe, then, as he saw her struggle to her feet, then whirl round to face the window she'd just come out of, he resolutely turned away, his eye stinging from the smoke as he ran back the way he'd come, and out into the flame-filled courtyard. If he'd waited and given her a chance to speak he knew she'd have been able to change his mind, and persuade him to leave with her, and he couldn't risk that happening before he'd tracked down the man who had taken her and exacted his revenge on him. She'd be angry with him, he knew, but she would at least be safe, and that was the only thing that mattered.

For now, though, he had to find Colby.

CHAPTER 19

LANDING on the damp ground outside the window Ryder had just propelled her through at force, Meredith didn't know whether to feel relieved to be free of the dungeon – and the rapidly spreading fire – or furious with Ryder for having pushed her out here on her own, while he ran right back towards the danger she'd only just escaped.

She opted for fury.

“Ryder!” she yelled, springing angrily to her feet and ignoring the sharp pain that ripped through her right shoulder as she did so. She must have sprained it somehow when she landed, but it didn't matter. All she cared about was that she was out here alone while her husband was in danger, and what was the point of that, after all? What use was her freedom if it came at the price of Ryder's life?

“Ryder!” she screamed again into the darkness. “Ryder, ye better get yerself back out here, or so help me, I'll... I'll...”

But she never did get to tell him what she would do because, before she could finish her sentence, a small figure came barreling out of the darkness, almost knocking her off her feet,

“Meredith! Oh, Meredith, thank goodness! I was so worried!”

Melissa threw her arms around her sister’s neck, sobbing incoherently into her hair.

“Melissa? But how? What are ye doing here?” Meredith glanced at her sister’s tear-swollen face and then back at the castle window, which remained dishearteningly blank. It was no use. He wasn’t there, and even if he had been, there was very little chance that he’d have been able to squeeze himself out of the same tiny window she’d used. Which meant he must be elsewhere in the castle, hunting down Colby, no doubt, with little thought for his own safety.

“Melissa, listen,” she said impatiently, untangling herself from his sister’s arms, her eyes still sweeping the castle walls, searching in vain for a glimpse of Ryder. “Ryder’s still inside the castle, and he’s in danger. And if he willnae come to me, I suppose I’ll just have to go to him! Wait here, Melissa, ye hear me?”

Before she could move, however, another figure loomed out of the darkness from behind Melissa, his sword raised above his head.

“Melissa! And Meredith!” The figure lowered his weapon, relief etched on his face – which Meredith now realized was that of her friend, Matthew Murray.

“Ryder left instructions for me to go into the castle for Melissa and to make sure she was safe,” he said, taking in the situation before him. “The first part of the task was easy enough, but

she's been making the second very difficult for me by giving me the slip to find ye!"

"I had to," Melissa said, her voice still shaking with emotion. "I couldnae just stand by and do nothing when I didnae ken where ye were or what was happening to ye, Meredith! "

"I'm confused," Meredith answered, looking from one to the other. "I've nae idea why yer here, Melissa, but I daenae have time to find out now. I need to find Ryder. Matthew, will ye help me?"

"I'll do better than that," the man-at-arms said, nodding quickly. "I'll find him for ye. He'll never forgive me if I let ye go back into the castle after him."

"Well, ye'll just have to never be forgiven, then," Meredith said fiercely. "For I willnae rest until I've found him, and I will find him, Matthew. I have to find him! He dinnae leave me, and I won't leave him, either. That's the way it is with us."

Matthew sighed, looking at her standing there, her fists clenched and her jaw set in determination. He was starting to think that being left in charge of these two women was possibly the most challenging task Ryder could have given him. But his friend had trusted him to look after them, and look after them he would.

"Nay," he said firmly. "Nay, lass, I cannae let ye come with me, ye ken that. It's too dangerous. But tell me quickly, where did ye last see him, and which way did he go?"

Seeing that there was no changing his mind, Meredith quickly recounted as much of what had happened as she had time for, Matthew listening intently as she spoke.

“Right,” he said as soon as she finished. “Daenae ye worry, Meredith. I’ll find him, I promise. I willnae stop until I’ve brought him safely back to ye.” He looked over his shoulder, and, as he did so, Meredith suddenly realized they were not alone out here. The crackle of the flames that now leaped up the castle walls had deadened all sound but for Matthew’s voice, but as she looked around, other figures started to stand out against the night sky – Ryder’s men, she assumed, and...

“Felix! Over here!”

At Matthew’s command, one of the figures detached itself from the small group of men he had been standing with and made his way towards them. Felix’s face, as he drew near, was pale and frightened, but his eyes lit up as they alighted on his sister, standing beside Matthew.

“Meredith!” he said, grasping her hands in his. “Yer safe! But what about Ryder? Where is he?”

“That’s what I’m about to find out,” said Matthew, raising his sword once more. “Felix, I need ye to look after yer sisters, ye hear me?”

Felix nodded, suddenly seeming older than his years as he straightened his back and awaited Matthew’s instruction.

“Ye have the sword Ryder gave ye?” Matthew asked. Then, when Felix nodded again in confirmation, “Good. Keep it unsheathed, and yer wits about ye. Take yer sisters as far from this castle as ye can manage – get them all the way home if ye can manage it – and daenae be tempted to turn back, whatever happens.”

He touched his hand to his head in a brief salute, and then he was gone, his figure melting into the smoky blackness as quickly as it had appeared.

“Right,” Felix said importantly, clearly enjoying the status Matthew’s request had just conferred on him, “Follow me. We have horses tied up over yonder...”

He started walking in the direction he had pointed, stopping when he realized that only Melissa was following him.

“Meredith?” he called back over his shoulder. “Hurry up, Meredith, ye heard what Matthew said! We need to get away from this place as quickly as we can!”

“Ye daenae think I’m going to run away home, like a scared wee lassie?” Meredith said, wrinkling her nose in scorn. “Me husband’s somewhere in that castle, and I willnae be leaving her without him, just ye wait and see!”

The last words were thrown over her shoulder as she set off towards the castle gate at a run, ignoring Melissa’s scream of protest. Felix paused for a second, his mind in turmoil. He’d felt so proud to have been trusted with the task of keeping her safe, but here she was, already doing her level best to make him look bad.

“Meredith!” he shouted his voice lost almost instantly amid the crackle of flames from the building in front of him. “Meredith, come back here!”

But Meredith did not turn around or even slow her step, so, with a heavy sigh, Felix unsheathed his sword for the first time in his life and ran after her.



The castle’s courtyard, as Ryder emerged into it from the room whose window Meredith had made her reluctant escape, was all but empty, most of those who had once occupied the castle having either made their escape or fled in a desperate bid to escape the flames.

There would be no escape, though. As Ryder looked around, desperately searching for some hint of where Colby might be, he saw flames licking at almost all of the windows. Matthew and his men had done their job well. Now it was time for him to do his.

Think, Ryder, think, he muttered to himself, feeling a bead of sweat start to trickle down his forehead. The heat from the inferno the castle had become was almost too much to bear, but he raised a hand to his head and dashed the sweat away impatiently. *Think. Where could he be? Where would he go?*

He knew that Colby could not possibly have made it out of the castle itself. Matthew had too many men positioned at the gates for anyone to get through them undetected. He had to be here somewhere, but where?

He whirled around, his eye desperately scanning the walls of the building for some clue, and, as he did, the moon suddenly emerged from behind a cloud, throwing the central tower of the castle into stark relief against it.

Yes.

The north tower. It was the tallest of all of the four towers which stood at each corner of the courtyard, and, unlike the others, the small room at the top opened directly out onto the castle's battlements. From there, it was possible to climb another small flight of stairs, which led to a viewing platform. It had been designed for long-ago sentries to keep a careful watch over the land around the castle, but, when Ryder and Colby were lads, it was normally empty of soldiers, leaving the two young boys to climb to the top, daring one another to step closer and closer to the edge.

Colby would be there. He had to be. As the highest point of the castle, it would be the last place to be affected by the flames, and, as it was open to the elements, it would offer the best chance of survival. It was much too high to be able to jump from there to the ground, of course, but Colby might hope to be able to wait it out until the flames died down and he could make his escape.

The more Ryder thought about it, the less certain he felt that this was where he would find Colby. The man had never been keen on heights, after all – Ryder was always the only one of the two who dared to get close to the edge – and the chance of safety it offered was but small.

As he looked again at the tower, though, he saw that the windows were filled with smoke, but not with fire. The chances of him finding Colby at the top were slim, but they were all he had. So, without giving himself time to think further on the matter, he raised his sword once more and charged towards the tower, darting here and there to avoid the flames that filled the courtyard, and stopping only when he reached the door of the North Tower.

Here, Ryder stopped for a moment to draw in a lungful of smoke-filled air. The acrid smoke burned his throat as he gulped at it, and he wished he had something to cover his face. It was too late to think of such things, though, so, taking a final breath, he shouldered open the door of the tower and climbed the stair inside at a run, fighting his way through the thick black smoke that made it impossible to see more than a short distance in front of him.

At the top of the staircase, he found the little room, just as he remembered it, and fought his way through the smoke and out onto the battlements. The air here was clearer, and he took a moment to stop and rub at his stinging eye, looking cautiously around for any sign of Colby.

At first, the battlements appeared to be empty, any guards who had been stationed up here having long since fled. The viewing platform was just around a corner, though, and as he peered carefully around the wall, being sure to keep the rest of his body hidden, his heart leaped as he saw a solitary figure standing in front of it, staying well back from the edge as he looked out at the castle grounds, filled now with the roar of flames, and screams from those below.

Colby.

I could just creep up behind him now and put an end to this, Ryder thought, as he watched his enemy inch closer to the edge of the platform, apparently looking to see if there was any way down from it. *Just one push and he would be gone. Meredith would be safe. This whole sorry mess would finally be over.*

Just one push. It was all it would take.

But then he thought of the Quinns and how they had looked when they'd returned to Millar Castle the night they found out their home had been burned to the ground. He thought of Edward, dying so soon afterward, and buried far from the place he'd loved. Finally, he thought of Meredith and the way she had screamed his name as the soldier had carried her off on his horse. The panic that had risen in his breast when he realized he had lost her.

No.

A quick death would be too good for Colby, and, besides, it was not Ryder's way. He would not attack a man from behind, enemy or not. He would not take the coward's way out, the way Colby himself had done, sneaking around, pretending to be his friend, but all the while plotting against him. Lighting fires instead of facing his former friend head-on, like a man.

But Colby Green was no man. He was a coward and a monster. And he would die at Ryder's hand – this very night, in fact – but only once he'd told him that to his face.



Stepping out from the shadows he hid in, Ryder allowed the hand holding his sword to fall to his side, the blade of the weapon hitting the stone floor of the castle battlements with a metallic sound which made Colby still standing by the little platform, turn quickly around.

“I kent ye’d find me,” he said blandly, sounding entirely unsurprised to find Ryder standing before him. “Ye were always good at finding things, Ryder. Good at killing them, too, weren’t ye?”

“If yer talking about yer faither,” Ryder said cautiously, his hand tightening on the handle of his sword, “Yer right. It’s nae secret that I killed him, and it’s nae secret why I did it, either. He plotted against me from the moment I became Laird, just as he plotted against me faither before me. I killed him before he could kill me, and ye ken that’s what he wanted.”

“Yer faither deserved it,” Colby spat, his eyes flashing with anger. “He deserved every bad thing that came to him. Ye said as much yerself.”

“Aye, he did,” Ryder said calmly, never taking his eye off the man in front of him. “He did deserve it. But I dinnae. I tried to make peace with yer faither after mine was gone. I wanted only peace. For me to live me life without always wondering who was coming for me next. But he wouldnae have it. He wouldnae stop until he took what was mine – and what he believed was his.”

“And why should he not?” Colby’s voice shook with anger as he took a step towards his foe. “Why should ye have land, and men, and ready money? Why should ye have so much when we had nothing?”

“Nothing?” Ryder laughed mirthlessly. “Ye call this nothing?” He gestured around him, his arm taking in the castle and its ground. “Ye had more than most men ever dream o’, Colby! Ye and yer faither! Ye even had a family who loved ye, which was far more than I ever had. Nay, yer problem wasn’t that ye had nothing. It was that nothing was ever good enough for ye. Yer greedy, Colby, like yer faither before ye. Ye cannae stand to see another man succeed, can ye? Ye cannae stand for me to have anything ye lack. Even Meredith.”

“Meredith?” Colby’s lips turned upward in a smile that was more of a snarl. “I wasn’t interested in yer wife, Ryder, I just let ye think I was because I kent she was yer weak spot. I might not have been interested in her, though, but I think it was obvious she was interested in me, wasnae it? She was certainly always pleased to see me, if ye get me drift.”

Ryder knew the man was goading him, doubtless to try to buy himself some time to make his escape, but all the same, it was almost impossible not to rise to the bait Colby dangled so dangerously before him.

“Daenae ye talk about me wife,” he spat, his hand twitching to raise the sword in his hand. “Ye aren’t fit to speak her name.”

Colby shrugged impassively.

“Is that right?” he said softly. “Same old Ryder, I see. Always thinking ye can tell folk what to say and do. Always wanting to be in charge. But then, look how easy it was for me to take yer precious Meredith away from ye? Ye dinnae look quite so bold then, did ye?”

This time Ryder didn't even flinch.

“Words,” he spat, taking a single step closer to his enemy. “Just words. That’s all ye have, Colby, isnae it? Yer too much o’ a coward to fight like a man, so ye take the easy way out, every time. Paying someone else to frighten two lassies while ye distracted me with whisky. Ordering yer soldiers to come and take Meredith, while ye sat here in the safety of yer castle, like a spider in its lair. Only it’s not looking quite so safe now, is it, Colby?”

As if on cue, a spark from the flames that licked up the sides of the castle fizzed through the cold night air to land on the flagstones at their feet. Colby’s eyes swiveled to follow it, and Ryder took advantage of his momentary distraction to take another step forward.

“Nothing to say?” he asked, menacingly, his hand still gripping the handle of his sword. “Or have ye just realized that yer attempt to hurt me has only hurt yerself? This castle ye were so desperate to protect will be razed to the ground. Yer men have all deserted ye. Ye cannae buy loyalty, Colby, ye can only earn it. And ye never have. Ye did this to get more land and more money – or so ye say, anyway. But now ye have nothing.”

As he spoke, Ryder continued moving forward. Now he was well within striking distance. He could finish this now if he wanted to. Colby, however, had yet to raise his sword, and Ryder would not strike until he did. He hated him – oh, how he hated him! And he would kill him, too. But he would do it with honor. If they were to fight, it would be a fair fight, and so his sword remained by his side as he looked his rival in the eye.

“Aye, I have nothing,” Colby said, bitterly not seeming to realize the danger he was in. “Just as I always have. But no more do ye, Ryder, without Meredith. And ye nearly lost her, too, didn’t ye? It was so easy for me to take her from ye. I just wish I’d killed her while I had the chance.”

It was too much. With a roar of fury, Ryder sprang forward, his sword raised at last, as he prepared to silence the man in front of him for good. He moved fast, but either he had underestimated Colby’s skill as a swordsman, or the man had uncommonly good luck because, just as Ryder’s arm came down, Colby’s flew up, slicing through the thick leather of Ryder’s overcoat and biting into the flesh below it.

Ryder howled in agony as the force of the blow sent him reeling backward, only just managing to stay on his feet. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see blood spattered on the flagstones, but there was no time to worry about the extent of his injury, for Colby was upon him, his face a white mask of anger as he bore down upon him.

This time, however, Ryder was too quick for him, dodging quickly out of the way of the sword that came flashing down upon him and ignoring the pain in his arm as he used both hands to raise his own weapon, expertly blocking Colby’s attempts to strike.

I didnae ken he had it in him to fight like this, Ryder thought, as the two men danced around each other, the sharp sounds of steel against steel joining the crackling of the flames behind him. From somewhere far off in the distance, he thought he heard Meredith’s voice calling his name; it could not be her, for, wherever she was right now, her voice surely couldn’t reach him on top of the tower, but the thought that she was out

there somewhere, waiting for him to come back to her, spurred him on.

Already Colby was starting to tire – he could see it in the paleness of his face and the way his breath came in loud gasps, but he was fighting, not for fun this time, or for practice, but for his life, and he was determined to fight to the last.

“It’s nay good, Colby,” Ryder shouted above the noise of the flames, which crept ever nearer. “There’s nowhere for ye to go. Even if ye manage to kill me, ye’ll never make it back down through these flames.”

“And the same could be said for ye,” Colby panted, fending off another blow. “The only way out is down, and neither of us would survive that fall.”

He was right, of course. It was the glaring flaw in Ryder’s hastily made plan, and he had known it as soon as he had emerged onto the roof. But he would not think of that now. His only thoughts were of Colby and Meredith and how he would never allow the one to harm the other, ever again. If he died up here, so be it. He would die protecting the woman he loved more than life itself, and, with that thought, he threw himself forward, forcing Colby back to the edge of the platform they stood on.

“Stop!” Colby cried, realizing how close he was to a fall that would certainly kill him, even if Ryder did not. “Stop, Ryder! We can talk! We can come to some understanding, surely?”

His face was rigid with terror as he begged for his life, but Ryder simply laughed mirthlessly as they continued to fight.

“Surely ye ken me better than that, Colby?” he snarled, moving ever closer to the edge of the tower, to where darkness awaited. “Surely ye ken that as soon as ye took Meredith, ye were as good as dead, man?”

“Ryder,” Coby pleaded, his earlier bravado completely gone. “Please, Ryder. Please...”

Pathetic, was Ryder’s last thought before he flung himself forward, his sword slicing through the cold, smoke-filled air until it found its target on the white flesh of Colby’s throat. *To beg for his life after trying to destroy mine. Well, no more.*

Colby’s eyes widened in shock and then froze as a long, guttural choking sound came from his mouth. For a seemingly endless moment, he stood there on the castle battlement, his figure outlined by the light from the moon, before he fell backward, disappearing into the inky blankness below. On the castle wall above him, Ryder lowered his sword, at last, his heart hammering loudly in his chest. He did not need to look down to know that he had seen the last of Colby Green, but there was no time to feel jubilant because there was still one more problem to solve.

He somehow had to escape the burning tower.

EPILOGUE

MEREDITH HAD MADE it almost as far as the castle gates before Felix caught up with her and dragged her roughly back, almost falling over in the process. Meredith struggled for a few seconds before suddenly becoming limp in his arms as the adrenaline from her escape faded, leaving her suddenly exhausted.

“I didnae ken me wee brother was so strong, all of a sudden,” she said, scowling at Felix to let him know that she may have given up on her plan to run back into the burning castle, but she wasn’t exactly happy about it.

“Ryder’s been teaching me to fight,” Felix grinned, accepting the compliment and ignoring the tone with which it was delivered. “I daena think he expected me to be using me new skills on ye, though!”

“He probably did,” said Melissa, joining them. “Ryder isnae stupid; he’d have guessed Meredith would be trouble.”

Meredith opened her mouth to retort, but before she could speak, a commotion from the group of soldiers stationed to the right of where they were standing caught her attention.

“It’s Colby Green!” one of them shouted as the three Quinn siblings started towards them. “Over here! He fell from the tower yonder!”

Meredith had stopped in her tracks as soon as she heard Colby’s name, but, upon hearing the second part of the man’s statement, she started back towards him.

“He fell?” she asked as soon as she drew close enough for him to hear her. “Is he...?”

As much as she hated the man, she couldn’t quite bring herself to finish her question, letting Felix do it for her.

“Is he dead?” her brother asked bluntly. “Is Colby dead?”

“Aye,” the soldier replied, drawing gasps of relief from both Melissa and Meredith. “And not from the fall, either, by the looks o’ him. His throat was cut. He was dead before he even hit the ground.”

Meredith and Felix looked at each other, the same idea occurring to both at the same time.

“It must have been Ryder,” Meredith said excitedly. “Which means he’s still alive!”

“Aye, and probably still atop the tower Colby fell from,” Felix added, his face grim.

Silently, the three siblings turned and looked up at the tower, black against the night sky, but with orange flames flickering from its ramparts and illuminating some of the windows.

“Then we need to go there and find him,” Meredith said firmly. “It’s the only way. We cannae leave him there, Felix!”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Felix answered immediately. “D’ye think I’d ever be able to face Ryder again if he thought I’d let ye run into a burning tower? Nay, I’ll go,” he added, seeing her open her mouth to argue. “Matthew will still be inside. I’ll find him, and I’ll tell him where Ryder is. Daenae worry, Meredith. We’ll bring him back to ye.”

Meredith nodded, her eyes huge with fright. She had no idea when her brother had grown up, but it was as if the Felix who had first arrived at Ryder’s castle for their wedding day had been a different person from the young man who stood before her now.

“Please take care o’ yerself, Felix,” she said, reaching out to grab his hand. “I need ye to come back safely as well as Ryder, ye hear me?”

“I hear ye,” he answered, but his eyes were looking behind her, roaming the darkness for a familiar face. “Angus!” he shouted, finally seeing who he was looking for. “Angus, over here! I need ye!”

Angus Murray approached them at a run, his sword in his hand.

“Felix,” he gasped, “There ye are! I’ve been looking for ye! Did ye hear about Colby?”

“Aye,” Felix replied, “We did. But it’s Ryder we need to think about now. We think he’s still in the tower Colby fell from. Will ye come with me to find yer faither?”

Angus didn’t hesitate. With a quick nod to Meredith and Melissa, he and Felix were gone, disappearing into the smoke that surrounded the building.

“What now?” asked Melissa, her voice shaking. “What do we do now?”

Meredith wrapped her arms around her and pulled her sister close.

“Now we wait,” she said simply. “We just wait.”



The blaze in the castle courtyard was gradually starting to burn itself out as Felix and Angus entered it; their overcoats pulled up over their noses in a bid to protect them from the smoke that still swirled in the cold air. *There must have been nothing else left to burn*, Felix thought, as he spun around, frantically searching for Matthew.

He’d felt brave as he’d run towards the building with Angus, but now that he was actually here, he could feel the panic start to rise in his chest. This castle was large and unfamiliar, which meant that finding Matthew – or, indeed, Ryder himself – felt like an impossible task.

For once, however, luck was on his side, for no sooner had the thought entered his head than a shout from Angus made him spin around, just in time to see two figures making their way towards them through the haze.

“Angus! Felix!” Matthew shouted as he reached them. “What are ye doing here? I thought I told ye to look after Meredith and Melissa!”

“I did,” Felix assured him. “They’re safely outside, Matthew, and they willnae try to follow us, I promise ye! But we need to find Ryder! We think he might be in the North Tower – Colby’s body fell from there not long since!”

“The tower?” A shadow crossed Matthew’s face as he turned to look in the direction Felix pointed, but he rubbed his eyes quickly, as if to erase the thought, and turned to the soldier behind him.

“If Ryder’s in that tower, then that’s where we’ll go,” he said. “Come, follow me!”

The two men set off at a run, with Felix and Angus following closely behind them. Felix was relieved to pass responsibility for his mission on to Matthew. At the door of the tower, the men paused for a second to look up at the dark, smoke-filled staircase while Matthew listened intently for any sound that might indicate Ryder’s presence.

“Ryder! Ryder, are ye up there?” he shouted at last. “Give me some sign if ye are!”

The silence that followed seemed interminable, but then, just as Matthew was about to make his way up the stair anyway, they heard it.

“Matthew?” came Ryder’s voice – faint but discernable. “I’m here! On the stairs!”

Without looking back, Matthew leaped towards the stairs, taking them two at a time. “Hold on Ryder,” he shouted as he ran. “We’re on our way!”



Ryder had made it halfway down the narrow stone staircase before the smoke that filled it threatened to overwhelm him, and he sank back against the wall, gasping for breath. His arm was soaked with blood where Colby had slashed at it, and the blood loss had started to make him feel dizzy and lightheaded.

“Come on, man,” he muttered to himself as he reached for the rope that served as a handrail, shouting out in pain as his hand made contact with the red hot metal hook that held it to the wall instead. “Come on. Ye cannae get this far and then faint like a lassie. Ye have to get yerself out of here.”

It was sheer willpower rather than physical strength that got him back on his feet, just as Matthew appeared around the bend of the stairs.

“Hold on, Ryder, I’ve got ye,” Matthew said, springing quickly to his friend’s side and pulling his arm over his

shoulder, ignoring the blood that still flowed freely from it. Ryder looked at him gratefully.

“Ye’ve come to save me yet again, Matthew,” he croaked, his throat stinging from the smoke he inhaled with every word. “Thank ye.”

“I wouldnae thank me just yet,” Matthew said grimly, as he gestured to the soldier who had accompanied him up the stairs to come and support Ryder on his other side. “We still have to get ye out of here.”

He would do it, though, Ryder knew. Matthew had never let him down yet, and he would not do so now. He already felt he could breathe easier as the three men made their way slowly down the stairs to where Felix and Angus were waiting for them. Felix quickly shrugged his way out of his overcoat, wrapping it tightly around Ryder’s injured arm to try to stem the bleeding until they could get him to safety.

“Meredith?” Ryder gasped, still struggling for breath. “Where is she?”

“Outside the castle walls,” Felix assured him. “She’s safe, Ryder. Ye saved her.”

The knowledge that Meredith was out there waiting for him gave Ryder all the impetus he needed to stagger his way across the courtyard, still supported by the men on each side of him and out through the castle gate.

“Meredith!” he shouted as he stumbled onto the muddy grass beyond the castle walls. “Meredith, where are ye!”

Then, his strength finally depleted, he dropped to the ground, unconscious.



Ryder woke to find Meredith’s face hovering over his, her expression anxious.

“Ryder!” she cried as he opened his eye. “Oh, thank God, yer alive! I was starting to think ye’d never wake up...”

“He’s only been out for a few minutes, Meredith, daenae carry on!” said Melissa’s voice from somewhere off to the left, and Ryder found himself smiling despite the seriousness of the situation.

“I see all’s well out here, then,” he said, his voice husky from the smoke. “Bickering as usual!”

He heard Melissa chuckle quietly before Meredith’s mouth was on his, her arms around his neck as she kissed his lips, then his face.

“I daenae ken whether I want to kiss ye or hit ye for making me worry like that,” she scolded, her voice light. “Ye big bampot!”

Ryder laughed aloud at that, then immediately started to cough as he realized his lungs weren’t quite up to the effort.

“I think I’d prefer the kiss if it’s all the same to ye,” he said once his coughing fit had subsided. “Maybe even two, if ye daenae mind.”

“Och, I think that can be arranged.” Meredith smiled back at him, then bent to kiss him again. “That can definitely be arranged.”



Ryder remembered very little of the ride home that night or the chaotic hours that followed when they arrived back at Millar Castle, where Erin Quinn was anxiously waiting for them, but fortunately for him, he had Meredith and Melissa to fill him in on everything that had happened in the days that followed.

“Even Mrs. MacDonald was waiting up for us in the Great Hall when we got back,” Meredith told him, as they walked together to her father’s grave, which they were visiting for the first time since Meredith had been taken from it by Colby’s men. “And Margaret, and Marion, and Ellen, and... oh, just everyone, really! They were all so worried, although none as much as me, of course!”

“Of course,” Ryder agreed, smiling at her fondly. Luckily for him, his mother-in-law had had the foresight to send for a physician, who had been waiting at the castle when they’d arrive back. Ryder being pulled on a cart they’d found in Colby’s stables, most of which had survived the blaze. His arm still stung every time he moved it, and the scar he’d been left with would never fade, but he didn’t care because each time he looked at it, he’d be reminded, not of Colby and his treachery, but of Meredith, and how his love for her had kept him alive that night.

“Can ye believe how much has happened since the last time we stood on this spot?” Meredith asked as they reached the grave. “Faither would never have believed it!”

They stood together silently for a moment, their hands tightly clasped as they thought, not just about Edward Quinn, but of the other lives that had been lost due to Colby and his attempt to double-cross them.

“Nay,” Ryder agreed softly. “Nay, he would never have believed it. I wish he were here so we could tell him all about it.”

“There’s something else I wish we could tell him,” Meredith said shyly, turning to face him. “It’s why I brought ye here, actually. So that he might hear it at the same time as ye.”

“Go on?” Ryder looked at her curiously, but instead of speaking, she simply took his hand and placed it on her belly.

“I ken ye cannae feel anything just now,” she said, smiling up at him, “But soon ye might feel a little kick or a wriggle of some kind. And soon after that, ye’ll get to meet yer first child.”

For only the second time in his life, Ryder’s eye filled with tears as he took her in his arms, unable at first to speak.

“Those better be happy tears,” Meredith teased, raising her hand to wipe them away and then resting it lovingly on his cheek. “Are they?”

“They are,” Ryder confirmed as he bent to kiss her. “They’re very happy tears indeed.”

The End?

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

Eager to learn how **Meredith and Ryder's** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple.

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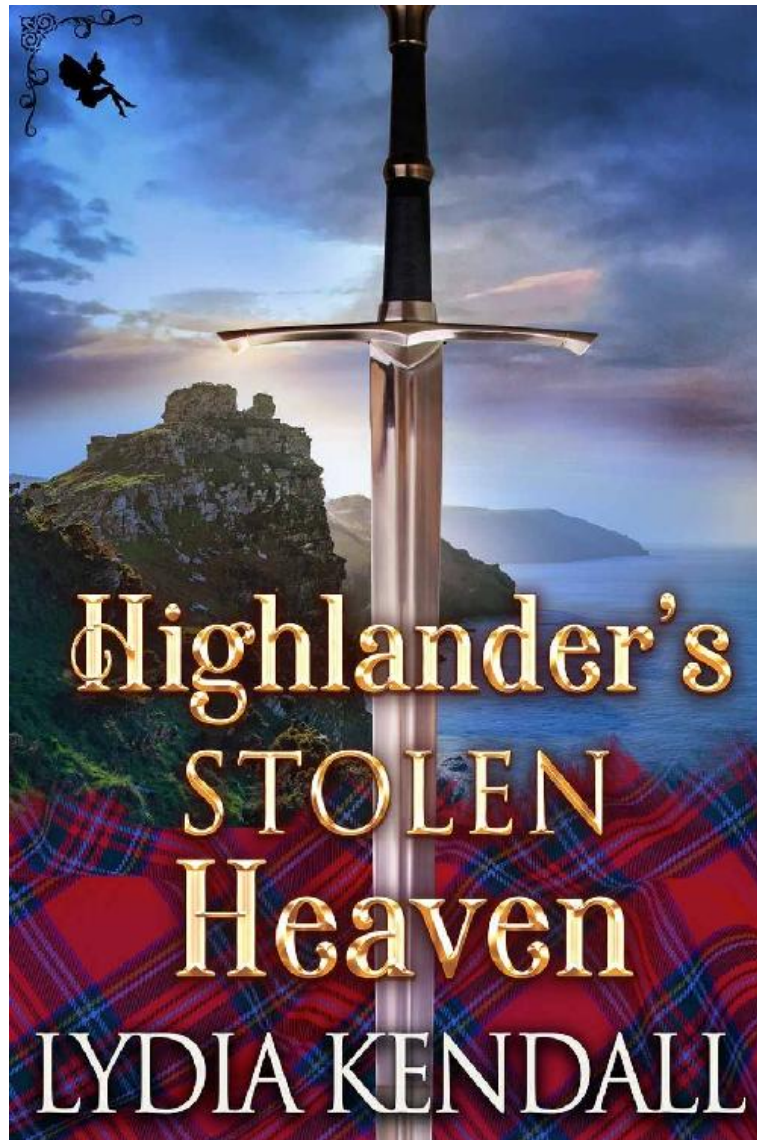
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PREVIEW: HIGHLANDER'S
STOLEN HEAVEN

CHAPTER 1

SHE NO LONGER HAD ANY scars.

It had been five years since, and the memories of the past had faded into nothing. Her scars had healed, leaving smooth skin behind, and Eve Johnstone touched her upper left arm, remembering the pain that had taken hold of her that fated night. The ghoulish past could no longer cling to her.

The smile on her lips widened a bit as she continued with her daily task of folding her son's clothes and tying her hair into a tight chignon at the nape of her neck. Blonde strands tumbled through her fingers, not willing to cooperate at all with the simple hairstyle she had done every day since she first moved out of her husband's Castle.

After a few more seconds of trying, she stopped. Her hair fell around her shoulders. Her nerves tickled with a renewed surge of energy, and life.

For the first time in a long while, Eve felt truly free.

“Mam!”

The cry seemed to echo throughout the entire cottage, bringing a brighter smile to Eve's face. She didn't bother to turn around, knowing she need not bear witness to the young lad barreling into her chamber. Knowing very well that he wouldn't stop himself in time, she took one step back and reached a hand down, preventing him from colliding into the opposite wall.

“Do ye wish to get hurt, Reggie?” Eve asked, finally looking down at the young lad currently blinking up at her in a semi-

dazed state.

“Of course, nay!” he blurted out then slowly pulled himself out of her hold. “I couldnae stop myself.”

“Aye, aye, I believe ye.”

Reggie’s bottom lip popped out and he crossed his arms. The sight made Eve laugh. She turned her back to the mirror, watching as the young six-year-old lad trotted over to her bed to climb on top.

“Arenae ye ready, Mam?” Reggie asked, his arms still crossed. “We’re goin’ to be late for the fair.”

“The fair lasts the entire night, my dear. We willnae miss a thin’.”

“Have yet been to the village fair before?”

Eve shook her head. “It’s been a very long time since I’ve been to one.” She rubbed a hand over her chin as she spoke, and the frown on Reggie’s face brought a smile to her lips.

“Then you might be wrong, Mam.” His pout grew more pronounced as he looked her up and down. “Arenae ye ready yet?”

“I’m just about.” The impatience in Reggie’s brown eyes had laughter bubbling up her throat. He was a lot like her in that regard. But he was less willing to disguise it. “What do ye think? Should I tie me hair back, or should I let it down?”

“Down.”

“Oh?” Eve blinked in surprise. “Ye answered awfully fast.”

“Because ye look bonnie with yer hair down, Mam.” He scooted to the end of the bed, letting his skinny legs dangle over the edge. “Ye look bonnie with yer hair tied back too, but I like how ye look now. Is it because of the fair?”

“Aye.” Eve turned back to the mirror. “Among other things.”

A ghoulish past indeed. But through all the hurt and pain, she was given the greatest gift of all—who was currently sitting behind her trying to contain his excitement. Oftentimes, she would wonder what would have happened if she hadn’t been

forced to leave her father's cottage if her life would have turned out any better. But when she thought of the fact that she might not have had Reggie, the light of her life since the moment she gave birth to him, it made all that had happened feel less burdensome.

A small hand tugged on the skirt of her dress. "Mam."

Eve looked down to see that Reggie had made his way next to her without her noticing. He stared up at her with those large, round, brown eyes, his curly blond hair falling past his ears.

That smile, that never seemed to be far away on days like this, appeared once more. "Yes, me love?"

"Are ye sad?"

No, but now I feel like crying. Eve shook her head, biting the inside of her cheek to keep the tears from falling. She was overjoyed, relieved, grateful. She was anything but sad right now. But, as intelligent as he was at his age, Reggie wouldn't understand that.

So, she shook her head, then lowered to a crouch to meet him eye to eye. "I'm just excited," she said to him, hoping he didn't hear the crack in her voice. "It's going to be me first fair in a long time and I get to enjoy it with ye."

Reggie's grin was quick, the worry on his face disappearing. "Does that mean we can go now? I can hear the flutes already."

"All right, all right, let's go." Eve rose, taking his hand as she did. He was already dressed, looking rather adorable in his plain white leine and his tan-colored kilt. She had wanted him to wear his tam, but he hated having things on his head and the last thing she wanted was for him to be uncomfortable on a night like this.

And what a night it would be. The first fair she would attend in Hillwood Village in years. She couldn't deny to him nor herself that she was excited. *When was the last time I enjoyed any celebration since I returned?*

She was always so busy worrying about Reggie, and trying to battle the awful flashes of her past she carried with her.

Hand in hand, Eve led Reggie out of her chamber and through the small living space they shared in within the cottage. The moment they stepped outside, the airy sound of the flutes coming from the village square grew louder and Reggie squirmed in anticipation. She used to be so much like Reggie—young and full of life, but experiences had changed her.

He could hardly keep himself still enough for her to pull the front door closed behind her before he went running down the front pathway, through the gate, and toward the festivities.

A gentle wind wafted past her face, brushing back the tears that had threatened to fall just a few seconds prior. Reggie made sure not to run too far, always taking the time to stop and ensure that he hadn't gone too far ahead. Since they lived near the outskirts of the village, they would have to walk for a few minutes before they arrived in the square. Though, at the rate Reggie was moving, Eve didn't doubt they'd cut that time in half tonight.

It wasn't long before they came upon the first stall. By then, the music was loud, joined in by a hum of chatter, drums, and singing. Those who had visited from other villages and town made Hillwood Village far more crowded than she'd ever seen it and so Eve made sure to grab hold of Reggie's hand again, fearing he might get lost.

"Eve! Goodness, I dinnae think I would see yer face around here!"

A sigh filled Eve's lungs at the familiar voice. Dreading every second of it, she turned around to see Mrs. Henderson rushing forward, her ample bosom bobbing atop her tartan dress. As usual, her rosy face was filled with deceptive innocent and slight judgment.

When Eve first returned to the village, Mrs. Henderson was the first person to lend her a helping hand after her husband's death.

It didn't take Eve very long to realize that Mrs. Henderson was only trying to get firsthand information for the gossip about who she really was that would spread around the village just a

few days later. It has been years since then and Eve still hadn't learned to trust her.

"Mrs. Henderson," Eve greeted, forcing herself to smile. "I'm nae sure why ye thought I wouldnae attend but here I am."

"Aye, here ye are." She bobbed her head in a nod. Then, she turned her smile to Reggie, who only peered up at her with impassive eyes. "And here is this little sweetheart too. Would ye like a treat, youn' one?"

"Nay, thank ye," he replied in a soft voice.

"Oh, come now. Eve, ye shouldnae make him too wary of his neighbors, ye ken. How else will he make friends if he's always this shy?"

"He does just fine, thank ye," Eve responded. "Now, if ye'll excuse—"

"How are ye, me dear?" Mrs. Henderson asked suddenly, her tone becoming concerned.

Eve paused, tightened her hold on Reggie's hand. She knew that tone and she didn't trust it. "What do ye mean?"

"Well, today is that day, isnae it?" Mrs. Henderson leaned closer, dropping her voice to a whisper. "Will ye finally tell Reggie—"

"I ken what today is. It is the day of the fair."

"Oh, aye, but surely ye son is old enough to—"

"Mrs. Henderson. I'm nae sure what ye're tryin' to refer to."

"Ah, right, right," she sang. "I understand ye completely, Eve. I wouldnae want the young' one to hear about such somber things either. Especially nae about his faither. Ye two should just enjoy this night and try nae to think about anythin' too terrible."

What a miserable woman. Eve gritted her teeth, not bothering to force her own smile knowing very well it would only turn into a sneer. "We will. Now, please excuse us."

Eve tried to step away, not wanting to give her the chance to say anything else. As if he sensed his mother's annoyance,

Reggie fell in step with ease. But before they got too far, Mrs. Henderson called out to them again, her shrill voice ringing out within the noise around them.

“Perhaps if ye’re lucky, ye will find a nice man tonight. Heaven kens ye and the youn’ one need someone to take care of ye. I ken how hard it can be just being on yer own.” She paused, cocking her head to the side—and not at all perturbed by the ice in Eve’s eyes. “Well, considerin’ who ye were married to before, I suppose ye dinnae have anythin’ to worry about in that regard, do ye?”

And with that said, she took her leave, a crafty smile playing around her lips.

Eve sighed and returned her attention to Reggie tugging her skirts. “What are they sellin’, Mam?”

“Come let’s go find out.”

They reached the front line in seconds, and Eve scooped Reggie into her arms.

The lady gave her a slight look of impatience. “How many do ye want?” she asked tersely.

“Oh, uh, one please,” Eve responded with a blink.

“A doyt.” The lady on the other end of the counter, scribbled something on top, and then handed it to Eve. “Here ye are. I wish ye all the luck.”

“Thank ye very much.” Eve looked at the piece of paper. It said ‘456’. “May I just ask what exactly this ticket is for?”

“Ye dinnae ken?” she asked, her brows twitching, and Eve shook her head. “It’s a competition, and the winner gets the prize.”

“My son and I barely come around these festivities,” Eve explained with a nervous smile.

“Well ye’re in luck, lass. The prize is an entire day with the Laird, now scoot along, let me attend to others,” she replied, shooin’ Eve away with a wave of her hand.

“Wait, what Laird?”

“Up in the big Castle?” Both Eve and Reggie asked at the same time.

“Aye, in the big Castle, all right. A day with Laird Devlin.”

CHAPTER 2

“STOP SULKIN’.”

“I am a grown man. I dinnae sulk.”

Connall MacMillan, Laird Devlin, felt his sister’s eyes boring into the side of his face as she studied him intently. He tried to school his expression, to hide the fact that he was downright miserable thinking about what he would soon have to subject himself to, but he also knew it was impossible trying to keep anything from her.

“Ye ken this is what is best for the Clan right now.” Nieve’s voice was gentle, if not a bit weak. She waited a moment before she continued. “And I think you could find it fun if you would simply give it a chance.”

“I fail to see how paradin’ meself around for all to see could be deemed fun.”

“Perhaps if ye were to take off yer leine and put on a funny hat, ye could see the charm in it.”

Connall paused in the process of adjusting the pin at his breast to look at his sister. As usual, she appeared as fragile and as delicate as ever lying in bed, but there was good-natured mirth in her eyes and a smile playing around her lips.

“I think ye find me discomfort more entertainin’,” Connall grumbled.

“Aye, ye do have a way of makin’ the most mundane of tasks seem like ye are movin’ mountains. It is quite a marvel I must say.”

“Ye are pokin’ fun at me.”

“That I am. Willnae ye smile, at least?”

Instead, Connall sighed. Fed up with the task of pinning the Clan’s crest to his chest, he went over to the side of his sister’s bed and sat in the chair next to her. Nieve had been lying in bed all week, burdened by a terrible cough and exhaustion. Even now he could see the fatigue lingering behind her eyes as she looked up at him.

“Willnae ye take me place?”

“I dinnae think I will put on as good a show as ye could, dear brother. As I said, all ye need to do is take yer leine off and the entire fair would have been a success.”

“And what of ye? Men have been longin’ to have yer hand in marriage ever since ye came of age. I have nae doubt ye would be just as popular.”

“Neither do I,” Nieve said with a tired smile. “Ye ken I would be at that fair if I had the strength.”

Connall nodded. He made sure not to show his concern, knowing it would only upset her. But he wasn’t entirely confident that some of his worry didn’t slip into his voice when he said, “How do ye feel?”

“A little better,” she said softly. “I havenae coughed a single time since ye entered the room.”

“That’s good. Ye should have yer medicine before ye go to bed. And sleep early tonight.”

“Aye, aye. It’s been so long since I’ve been like this that it’s impossible nae to remember.”

She said it in jest, but Connall couldn’t bring himself to laugh. He rested his hand atop her dark hair, grimacing at the heat radiating from her skin. If he hadn’t touched her, she wouldn’t have let him know that she had a high fever. As if she knew what he was about to say, Nieve took his hand from atop her head and put it aside.

“Dinnae worry about me,” she said gently. “I will be fine. Just like I always have. For now, yer only concern should be the

Clan and the Lairdship. Ye ken why ye have to do this. Otherwise, ye wouldn't be subjectin' yerself to it in the first place."

"It is one of the banes of being a Laird, I fear."

"And yet ye wouldnae have it any other way." Nieve's brows knitted together for a brief moment and Connall instantly knew that she was trying to hold back a cough. "Ye should go or else ye will be late."

"I'm sure I can spare a few more minutes," Connall sighed.

"Surely, ye dinnae want to be at the receivin' end of Gregor's anger, now do ye?"

He was trained in the art of battle, a skilled hunter, and a great negotiator. He'd learned all that he needed to know from his father. But dealing with his advisor Gregor's anger was a feat he had yet to master.

"Very well," he said, running his hand through his hair. "I shall take me leave then. If I linger here any longer, Gregor shall surely have my head."

"And it would be a sad sight to see ye go," Nieve responded with a small giggle.

"Yet ye dinnae sound as sad as ye should." Connall shook his head in mock disappointment. "Me own sister has betrayed me."

"It is the way of the world."

At that, he laughed, then finally made his way toward the door. He met Gregor outside the Castle and forced on a smile.

"Connall, why are still lurkin' around here? Dinnae tell me ye intend to not show up for the fair?" Gregor's lips formed a thin line, and his eyes drifted over Connall's. Connall found that as much as he dreaded Gregor's company and the scolding he received from the man each time he tried to evade his duties, he was still grateful he had him around to make certain he did the right thing.

"I wouldnae do that... I ken how much effort ye put into this," he replied and started down the path leading to the gate.

“I shall be there in time for the announcement, ye shouldnae worry about anythin’.”

Gregor’s smile showed his excitement, but Connall didn’t share in it.

I do this for you, Nieve, and no one else, he thought grimly as he mounted his horse and rode to the village square.

By the time he was entering the village, a crowd of screaming villagers had already swarmed him. He smiled at them, all the while making sure no one was foolish enough to throw themselves in the path of his horse. The good mood he had been forcing slowly began to dwindle as well. He loved his people, but Connall was not good at dealing with attention.

Even so, he kept up appearances. The fair was rather lively and became even more so as he neared the village square. Atop a large wooden stage was a ragtag group of people playing different instruments, creating a lovely tune that greatly complemented the singing woman standing in the center. The moment she saw him approach, she began to sing louder, the band playing harder. People began to cheer, rushing in to meet him. Connall simply didn’t know what to do with himself at that point.

Luckily, Gregor knew exactly what he was thinking and led the charge. Upon reaching the stage, he dismounted first and created a path toward the small steps to the left, making it easier for Connall to make his way to the top. The singing woman was grinning from ear to ear when he approached, her cheeks flushed red. She cut her song short and made a sloppy curtsy.

“’Tis a pleasure to meet ye, Me Laird,” she said hurriedly, her words slurring. That made Connall smile. Clearly, she has been enjoying herself throughout the night. “Me name is Barbara Henderson.”

“And I am Hector Henderson.” A man approached them, lowering the fiddle in his hand. “I am the village head. This is my wife.”

“I am pleased to meet ye both,” Connall responded, slipping into his diplomatic voice. “I take it ye two will be conducting the event for tonight.”

“Of course, My Laird—” Mrs. Henderson hiccupped, then quickly covered her lips in shame. Connall resisted the urge to laugh. “I mean, aye. Me husband shall be the one to call tonight’s winner.”

“Well then, Mr. Henderson,” Connall said in response, facing the village head. “I shan’t make ye wait any longer.”

“Ye havenae made me wait at all, Me Laird.” Mr. Henderson seemed far calmer than his wife, who couldn’t stop herself from hiccupping and filling the air around them with the smell of wine. “But aye, I believe it is time that we begin.”

And here comes the very thin’ I’ve been dreading’.

Connall didn’t show his discomfort. He stood back, accepting the chair that was brought out for him, noticing that Gregor was given one as well. He watched as Mr. Henderson stepped out to the front of the stage to loudly address all who had gathered, which seemed to be almost everyone in the village and the rest of the Clan. A hush went over the crowd as they listened to him speak, explaining the rules and the ticketing system.

It was simple—one number, one ticket, one winner.

And a day with the Laird. Oh joy.

“I shall now do the honors,” Mr. Henderson bellowed. His wife came up to him, swaying her hips from side to side as she held out a small bag. Connall watched with disguised displeasure as the village head dipped his hand into the bag and pulled out a piece of paper.

“And the lucky winner of today’s prize... Laird Devlin... is number 456!”

Connall’s eyes instantly went to the crowd of people, waiting for the winner to step forward. His gaze suddenly landed on a woman, familiar face, and brown eyes he had never forgotten for one day.

Oh, my God, it's her.

CHAPTER 3

“NUMBER 456? WHERE ARE YE?”

Eve put her finger to her chin, cocked her head to the side, and let out a heavy sigh. She couldn't decide between the seasoned sausages or the buttered biscuits. So different, but both so good.

“Number 456?”

She crossed her arms. She'd never been very good at decision making, especially when it came on to one of her true loves—food.

“Number 456! This is the last call!”

“Mam!”

“Aye, Reggie?” She didn't look at him, too preoccupied by the weight of her decision to be bothered by him pulling on her skirt. “Which would ye prefer to have? The sausages or the biscuits?”

“Mam, they're callin' for ye?”

“The sausages, arenae they? Aye, they do look quite delectable.”

“No, Mam, the man on the stage.” Reggie stopped pulling on her skirt and tugged on her purse instead. Since it was strapped to her waist, that finally got her attention.

“Reggie? What has gotten into ye?”

The young lad didn't answer. He stuck his tongue out as he pushed his hand into the purse, digging around for something.

After a second of searching, he withdrew a small piece of paper, held it up, and bellowed at the top of his lungs, “Number 456 is right here!”

“Reggie, what are ye doin’?” Eve gasped, shocked at the outburst.

He turned his round eyes to her. “Daenae ye remember buyin’ the ticket, Mam? And look, ye’re number 456. Ye won!”

“Won?” *Won... no, but then that would mean—*

Suddenly, she felt the eyes. Everyone was staring at her. Reggie had successfully captured the attention of nearly everyone in the village square and she was now the subject of envy from nearly every woman in attendance. Eve wished she could hide, wished she could go back in time and refuse to buy the ticket in the first place.

This wasnae supposed to happen. I wasnae supposed to win.

Reggie tugged on her skirt again, trying to get her attention, but Eve felt herself going into a daze. Out of pure instinct, she reached out to take his hand, pulling him closer to her side. She wanted to run. She didn’t want to be seen by so many people. She didn’t want to be seen by him.

But it was already too late. Mr. Henderson’s strong voice was already calling out to her. “Number 456, please come up to the stage.”

I cannae.

As soon as the thought crossed her mind, Reggie started running ahead, pulling her along with him. Eve couldn’t bring herself not to follow. She felt a hum in her ears, a chill over her skin. And she didn’t dare to look up at the stage.

The Laird of Devlin. The Laird of Devlin... goodness, why me?

She didn’t want to see him. When she thought to come back to the village, she didn’t think she ever would. Hillwood Village was small, an hour away from the Castle, and the Laird was always too busy. Eve thought she could live her life without the memory of her past.

She didn’t think it would follow her here.

Reggie kept pulling her forward, far too excited to notice her reluctance. A path parted through the crowd, envious eyes watching her go by. Complete silence had fallen over the lot of them, much to Eve's surprise. She'd been the subject of so much gossip since she'd returned to the village that she'd expected them to have much to say about what was unfolding before their eyes. Or perhaps she was simply in too much shock to hear any of it. God knows she could hardly feel her feet.

Somehow, Reggie managed to drag her to the side of the stage and up the steps. The silence was so deep that she could hear their footsteps on the wood.

"Eve Johnstone," Mr. Henderson greeted. He'd always been kind to her, and his tone tonight was no different than usual. "It appears ye have great luck tonight."

"I suppose ye would see it that way," she mumbled. She focused her attention on his lined face. She didn't dare to look at anyone else on the stage.

Mr. Henderson chuckled, then faced the crowd. "Why daenae we give a round of applause for tonight's grand winner?"

The applause that ensued was slow to begin, gaining traction after a few seconds. Eve hardly heard it, her heart pounding so loudly in her ears.

When it was over, Mr. Henderson faced her again and gestured a hand to the side. Then, she heard footsteps. Reggie began to squirm by her side, though he remained hidden behind her skirt. Eve forgot how to breathe.

How do I face him after all these years? And why do we have to meet in front of all these people?

She felt her cheeks burn from the heat rising inside her, and she pretended to cough, hoping it would ease the sudden tightness in her throat.

"Mrs. Eve Johnstone."

His voice was just the same, as smooth as silk and as commanding as ever. Her first instinct was to ignore it, to turn and walk away. But her body did not listen to her mind and

she looked into the eyes of the man she'd told herself she would hate forever—Connall MacMillan.

His voice was the same, but he had changed in so many other ways. Somehow, he'd gotten more attractive, his dark-brown hair tied to the nape of his neck and his green eyes framed with thick lashes. His face was that of a man, built with stone and fortitude, with a small scar lining his jaw. He wore a leine, his kilt the color of the Clan, and despite the layers Eve could see the press of muscles that laid underneath. Then there was those lips!

But the way he looked at her... she'd never seen that look in his eyes before. With complete aloofness.

It should have dispelled the feeling simmering in the pit of her stomach—something she hadn't felt in years. A part of her womanhood she'd thought had long since disappeared.

It forced her to face him, raising her chin. "Laird Devlin."

"I must congratulate ye on winnin' tonight's prize. I assure ye that I fully intend on bein' an hospitable host and wonderful date for our day at the Castle."

The chill in his voice could have frozen them both to the spot. But she wouldn't be outdone. After all, she was the only one who had reason to be this way. "I daenae doubt it, Me Laird."

He said nothing in response and so neither did she. For a few seconds, they just stood there staring at each other. Eve almost forgot the fact that they were being watched.

"Shall we step away, then?" he said finally. "So that the festivities may continue."

Eve blinked. She noticed then that Mrs. Henderson was glaring holes into her, and everyone else seemed rather intrigued by the unusual contention between them. So, she nodded. "Very well."

Connall stepped to the side and gestured that she take the lead. She didn't know where she was going, but anywhere would be better than in front of the entire village.

She hurried off the stage, keeping Reggie close to her side and very much aware of the man who trailed behind her. She kept walking, heading toward a secluded spot within the square where she knew they wouldn't easily be overheard. Thankfully, there was a group of young lads she recognized playing with sticks. Eve lowered to a crouch in front of her son. "Why daenae ye go and play with yer friends over there? Just until I'm finished speakin' with the Laird. Then we can get back to the fair."

Reggie peered up at Connall, a silent statue behind her, and then looked back at his Mam with a nod. He knew better than to question her at that moment, even though Eve could tell he'd rather stick close to the god-like figure that was the Laird of Devlin.

She watched as he ran off, easily joining in the play fight with the other lads. She continued to stare after him, refusing to face Connall.

"Will I have to speak to yer back the entire time?" he said finally, his voice brusque.

"Forgive me. I shall be with ye in a moment." She needed a moment to compose herself, to gather her approach. She hadn't prepared herself for this, after all.

Eve heard him shift before he said, "I see that yer mouth is as smart as ever."

She slowly turned to face him, then instantly regretted it. Here, alone, she was no match for his cold demeanor, no match for the smoldering eyes that seemed to see into her very soul. But she wouldn't let him see that.

Eve drew in even breath then met his eyes "Forgive me if I may sound impolite, Me Laird, but I have nae intention of goin' to the Castle or spendin' the day with ye."

"Then why would ye join the competition if this isnae what ye wanted?"

"I dinnae ken what I was buyin' at the time. Reggie got so excited that—" She broke off, annoyed by the fact that she was explaining herself to him. "It matters nae the reason why. I

hope ye understand that I simply do nae wish to subject meself to this.”

Connall shook his head, crossing his arms. He turned away from her, wandering over to a nearby tree before leaning against it. Eve tried ignore the way his forearms bulged—and the way her insides tightened at the sight. “I’m afraid it willnae be that easy.”

She nearly mimicked him by crossing her arms, but she clasped her hands in front of her instead and pretended to be the picture of calmness. His jaw ticked at that. “And why is that?” Eve questioned.

“Because people are expectin’ it to happen.”

“Ye’re the Laird, arenae ye? Cannae ye simply say that I did not wish to participate?”

“Come now, Eve. I ken ye’re smarter than that.”

The condescending tone had her gritting her teeth. “Let’s pretend that I’m nae,” she pushed out.

Connall’s heavy gaze didn’t lift for a second. “Why else would I agree to this if nae because it will benefit me image? And what do ye think people will say if the person who bought a ticket and won decided that she dinnae want to do it anymore?”

“I dinnae care what people say.”

“I do. Me advisors do. And so should ye.”

She raised her chin. This felt familiar and she hated it. She hated how easy it was for him to pull her in like this. “I’m afraid it doesnae matter to me. Now, if ye will excuse me—”

Connall shifted his eyes to a spot over her shoulder. “And what of yer son? Would he think the same?”

Eve stepped to the side, blocking his line of vision. “My son and I are none of yer concern, Me Laird.”

“Ye’re perfectly right about that.” He raised his hands in submission, but the coolness in his eyes did not abate. “I

willnae try to convince ye any longer. Just ken that rejectin' this opportunity will be as bad for ye as it will be for me."

"As I said, I am none—"

"Aye, aye, I understood the first time." Suddenly, he pushed himself away from the tree and slowly began to approach her. Eve refused to move. Every nerve in her body began to scream in protest, begging her to put distance between them. But the closer he came, the more difficult it was to think. "I dinnae think I would see ye again. Least of all in a place like this."

Eve feigned confusion at that. "I dinnae ken what ye mean. Have we met before?"

Something flashed in his eyes, which gave Eve far more satisfaction than she wanted to admit. She hadn't planned on pretending not to know him, but now that she had, she would simply continue. Perhaps getting away from him would be easier that way. After all, it had been ten years. And even though she could have spotted him a mile away, they had both changed in ten years.

She held her breath as he leaned closer, standing hardly an inch away from her. "Do nae pretend, Eve," he murmured. The low timbre of his voice, and the heat it brought shook her to the core.

What is this reaction? she thought, stifling it down. But he was too near and all she could smell was the familiar scent of mint that clung to his breath. *Just like when they first met.*

For her own sanity, she took a step back. "Ye must have me mistaken for someone else. Now, I would like to take my leave."

He reached out to touch her, and she evaded him quickly, not wanting to remember what his hands felt like on her cheeks.

Connall straightened, studying her for a few seconds longer. Then he nodded, as if confirming something to himself. "I'm glad to see that ye've been happy and well, Eve," he said in a low voice. "I would have expected no different."

She chose not to respond to that, and pretended that she could have found something to say if she truly wanted to.

Connell paused like he was waiting for an answer. “Enjoy the rest of the fair, Eve,” he finally said and strode away. His shoulders flexed as he walked, and her teeth sank into her lower lip.

Eve watched him go, her body shaking. She didn’t know if it was the anger he’d built in her, the slight chill in the air, or the shock of seeing him after so many years.

But the moment she was alone, Eve knew one thing for certain—he still affected her, in the same way no other man had.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lydia Kendall has always been passionate about medieval romance. Having traveled to the Scottish Highlands several times as a young girl, she has always been drawn to their unparalleled beauty and history. A history that inspired stories of love and passion, mixed with tradition in the most appealing way for every hopeless romantic - much like herself.

Born in Denver, Colorado, Lydia Kendall has a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing, and over the last decade she has been writing non-stop for several clients - that is until she decided to start publishing her own work. When she isn't writing, Lydia loves spending her time on the beautiful outdoors with her loving husband and baby daughter.

Follow Lydia on this sensational journey of hot highlanders, bonny lassies and fierce passion...and find sheer pleasure in the magnificent world of the Scottish countryside - one that will sweep you off your feet and keep you begging for more!

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