

# *Passion* OF A HIGHLANDER

ARCH THROUGH TIME



KATY BAKER

# Passion of a Highlander

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Katy Baker

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PASSION OF A HIGHLANDER

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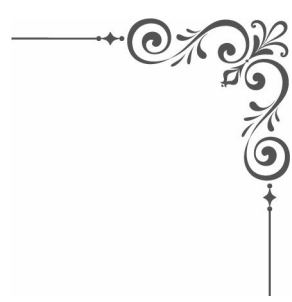
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# Chapter 1

Caitlin Summers reached up, tugged on the rope to check her anchor, then wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her gloved hand. Satisfied she'd found a decent ledge, she allowed herself a moment's respite, tucking her feet into the ledge and leaning forward against the sun-warmed rock face.

Her legs and arms were screaming with fatigue and her lungs burned as she sucked in deep, invigorating breaths. Yet she felt better than she had in a long time. The exertion, the danger, the risk—it all helped her to forget.

This high up the wind could sometimes be fierce, but she'd chosen a perfect day for climbing: bright sunshine, warm but not hot, and a gentle breeze to cool a sweating brow.

Her eyes swiveled downwards. The rockface spread out below in a series of dark, craggy slabs overgrown in places with vegetation that had somehow managed to get a foothold in the cracks and crevices that dotted the cliff. There were often other climbers up here, but today she had it all to herself.

Caitlin sucked in a breath and looked up. Above towered a sheer wall of rock, stretching up into the blue sky as far as she could see. A thrill of excitement ran through her. She loved the feeling of risk and danger that came with climbing, the adrenaline rush that made her feel alive in a way nothing else could.

Out here, nothing mattered but the moment. There was no past, no future. Just herself and the rock and the challenge of beating it. There were no memories that dogged her thoughts, no anxieties about the future, no doubts that refused to let her go. Just herself and the wide-open expanse of the Highlands around her.

She took another deep breath and pushed off from the ledge, grabbing the next handhold and pulling herself up. As she climbed, her muscles burned with the intensity of the effort but she pushed through the pain and focused only on the next move, the next grip, the next step.

Finally, after what seemed like hours of climbing, Caitlin reached the summit. She collapsed onto the rocky outcropping, gasping for breath and feeling the warmth of the sun on her skin. She closed her eyes and let herself sink into the moment, savoring the feeling of accomplishment and the rush of satisfaction. It reminded her that she was *not* a victim. She was strong, resilient. If only she could remember that more often.

She sat up and rubbed her aching legs. Through the weatherproof material of her skin-tight leggings, her fingers traced the contours of the bumps and ridges of the damaged skin underneath. She told herself she was trying to work the pain out of her exhausted muscles, but it was more than that.

Her scars were like a scab she couldn't help picking, an ever-present reminder that she couldn't outrun. Panic began to rise up from deep inside. It beat at the edges of her consciousness like the wings of some great black bird.

*No. Not this time. Leave me alone.*

She pushed the panic away and took deep breaths, refusing to let it in. Tugging down the arms of her long-sleeved climbing top, checking her fingerless gloves, and her leggings to ensure every inch of her skin was covered, she climbed to her feet, unhooked her harness, and looked around.

The view from the summit was breathtaking. Caitlin could see for miles, the rolling hills and valleys of the Scottish Highlands stretching out before her in a patchwork of greens and browns. It

was a peaceful scene, a momentary respite from the turmoil of her thoughts.

Behind her, the crag gave out onto an upland plateau of purple heather and long grass, but nearer to where she stood, sheltered from the wind by a rocky hill, grew a copse of oak trees.

Caitlin made her way towards the copse, feeling the crunch of dried grass beneath her boots. The trees were old, their bark thick and gnarled, and the leaves rustled gently in the breeze. She found a spot beneath the largest oak and sat down, her back against the trunk. For a moment, she just sat there, feeling the roughness of the bark against her back and listening to the sound of the wind whispering through the leaves. But then memories, like a boulder rolling down the mountainside, came rushing back: the crackle and roar. The stink of smoke. The helpless terror of being trapped with nowhere to run.

Caitlin closed her eyes and breathed deeply. No. She was *not* going there.

A sudden sound cut through the trees, loud enough to make her jump. Her eyes flew open and she scrambled to her feet, looking around. Was that a...*meow*?

The sound was coming from somewhere further into the trees. Caitlin walked closer, craning her neck. And then she saw it—a large tabby cat perched high up in one of the branches, mewing for help. Beneath the tree stood a portly old woman with gray hair pulled back into a bun. She waved her arms as though trying to coax the cat down from its treetop perch.

“Come on now, ye daft beast!” she called. “Stop mucking around!”

Caitlin blinked in surprise. What on earth were an old woman and her cat doing up here?

The cat inched along the branch towards its owner but then seemed to think better of it and froze, all four legs wrapped around the branch, yowling loud enough to wake the dead. Caitlin felt an odd pang of sympathy for the feline.

She coughed politely. “Erm, can I help?”

Surprised, the old woman turned around and smiled when she saw Caitlin. “Och, dearie. Ye startled me. If ye could help, I would be mighty grateful. I’m afraid Baxter here has gotten himself into a bit of a pickle.” She gestured towards the cat, still mewling piteously up in the branches.

Caitlin moved up to the tree, tilting her head back to peer up at the cat. He looked like a run-of-the-mill tabby cat, except he was bigger, had stripes down his back and a very fluffy tail. He looked like... “Is that... a Scottish Wildcat?”

“Wild?” the old woman replied. “I should say so. Does *what* he likes *when* he likes. Doesnae listen to a word I say! Except when he gets himself into trouble and needs my help! Then he isnae so wild!”

Caitlin looked back up at the cat. “Okay, little guy. Let’s get you down from there.”

She took a step back then launched herself upwards, grabbing hold of the lowest branch and pulling herself up. Her fingerless gloves protected her palms from the scrape of the bark as she climbed higher, eyes fixed on the cat. When she reached the branch where Baxter was perched, she stretched out a hand and stroked his fur, murmuring soft words of comfort. Baxter watched her with large green eyes before meowing again, his paws still gripping the branch tightly.

Caitlin reached into her pocket and pulled out a piece of jerky she’d brought for the climb, holding it out towards the cat. “Hey, little guy, want a snack?”

The cat’s ears perked up at the smell of the jerky and he tentatively sniffed at her hand before taking a tiny bite. Caitlin grinned. “There you go. See, not so bad up here, is it?”

She grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, pleased when he didn’t try to bite or scratch, and pressed him against her chest. With one hand holding the cat and the other steadying herself on the



branch, Caitlin began to make her way back down the tree. It was a tricky maneuver, but she made it down to the last branch then jumped the rest of the way, bending her knees as she landed.

The old woman was waiting for her with open arms. "Oh, thank ye, my dear! I've been up here for hours trying to coax him down."

She took the cat from Caitlin and held him close, stroking his shiny fur. Baxter purred loudly, a deep rumble like a tractor engine. Caitlin smiled. It was a small act of kindness, but it made her feel good to have helped someone—or in this case, *something*—in need.

"Dinna ye do that again, Baxter," the old woman scolded the cat. "Next time I willnae come running, do ye hear?"

Baxter squirmed out of his owner's arms, jumped to the ground, and began rubbing himself against Caitlin's legs. Then he sat down, curled his tail around his paws and gazed up at her with an unblinking stare.

"Ha! He likes ye! Which is more than can be said for most folks."

Caitlin smiled. "I think he probably likes the jerky in my pocket."

The old woman nodded. "Aye, most likely. He's a greedy little devil that's for sure." She cocked her head, regarding Caitlin with a curious expression. "What brings ye up here, my dear? Not many folk venture up this way. Are ye a climber?"

"That's right. I come up here whenever I can. It helps me clear my head."

The old woman nodded slowly. "Aye, I ken what ye mean. There's something about the quiet of the wilderness that can help us find our way again."

Caitlin looked around. The little copse was backed by the hill in one direction and the cliff in the other. She couldn't see any path or road. "How did you get up here?" she asked the old woman.

She shrugged. "Ask Baxter. He will insist on running off like that. And all because I threatened him with a bath! Next time I'll leave him up that tree, that'll teach him a lesson!"

This didn't answer Caitlin's question at all. Did the old woman live around here? Caitlin could see no settlements, no houses, no roads, no footpaths.

The old woman suddenly stuck out a hand. "I'm Irene MacAskill, my dear. It's a pleasure to meet ye."

Caitlin reached out, took the old woman's wrinkled hand, and shook it. "I'm Caitlin Summers."

Irene pumped her hand with a surprisingly strong grip. "Aye. I know who ye are."

"Oh. You do?"

Irene gazed up at her, dark eyes seemingly depthless. "Ye know, I ken a thing or two about the troubles ye carry with ye. Sometimes, it takes a wee bit of help from someone else to take that first step towards healing."

Caitlin blinked, taken aback. "How did you...?"

Irene smiled enigmatically, deepening the wrinkles around her mouth. "I've lived a long life, lassie. Seen many a troubled soul come through these woods. And I like to think that I've helped some of them along their way. Just as I'm here to help ye."

Caitlin frowned at this odd comment. She didn't need Irene's help. She didn't need anyone's help. She was fine just the way she was, thank you very much.

"I doubt that," she replied. "You don't even know me."

"Perhaps not," Irene agreed. "But I understand the burden ye carry."

"Right." She didn't want to have this conversation. "I'm glad you've got your cat back." She hefted her pack. "It was nice to meet you, but I had better be going. It's a long climb down."

She began to turn away, but Baxter trotted in front of her and sat right by Caitlin's feet, so close she almost stood on him. She stepped the other way, but Baxter shifted again, blocking her path. He gazed up at Caitlin with a knowing stare.

"What's he doing?"

"How should I know?" Irene replied with a shrug. "He's a law unto himself."

Caitlin studied the eccentric old woman. Her eyes were possibly the darkest she had ever seen, seeming almost entirely pupil with no iris at all. There was something unsettling about that gaze, as though she wasn't looking at Caitlin at all but looking *through* her. Caitlin didn't like the sensation at all. She didn't want anyone looking too deep.

Irene gave her a sad little smile. "Ye seem lost, my dear. Like ye are searching for something and canna quite find it."

Those words were way too close to the mark for Caitlin's liking. She gave a little laugh. "I'm not lost. Look, I have a GPS and everything. I know exactly where I am."

"Aye," Irene agreed. "But do ye know where ye are *going*?"

"Back to the pub," Caitlin replied with forced joviality. "Just as soon as I get down this rockface. I reckon I've earned a nice, cool drink."

Her attempt at lightheartedness had no effect on Irene. The old woman didn't smile as she said, "I suggest ye stay a while longer. There is something ye need to find up here and it isnae just a cat stuck up a tree."

Caitlin felt a flash of irritation. Who was this old woman to tell her what to do? She didn't know anything about her, her life, her struggles. She was just a crazy old cat lady who lived in the woods.

"Thank you for the suggestion, but I don't need your advice," she said, her voice harsher than she intended. "I don't need anyone's help. I'm fine on my own."

Irene just watched her with those inscrutable eyes. "Is that so?"

Caitlin opened her mouth to argue, to tell Irene to mind her own business, but then she stopped.

The memory of that night flooded her mind, the night that had shattered her world into a million pieces and left her struggling to pick them all up again. It was an effort to push it back down.

Irene sighed. "I understand that ye want to be strong, lassie. But there's a difference between being strong and being stubborn. Sometimes, to truly be strong, ye have to be willing to ask for help. And I'm here to offer ye mine."

Caitlin said nothing, but she was feeling more unsettled by the moment. Why was this old woman—and her cat—out here at the top of a cliff that only a climber could get to? And why was she saying all these strange things? There was something...something Caitlin couldn't quite put her finger on.

"How?" she found herself asking in a small voice. "How can you help me?"

Irene gave her a small smile. "I'm offering ye a chance to find what ye are looking for, my dear: the other half of yerself. A chance to heal and to move forward. But ye have to be willing to take it."

"And how do I do that?"

Irene gestured to the surrounding landscape. "Ye start by listening to what the wilderness has to say."

"It doesn't say anything."

"Are ye sure about that? If it doesnae speak to ye, then why do ye come up here? Why do ye seek its solace when there are so many other ways ye could drown yer sorrows?"

"I..." Caitlin had no answer to that.

"Some people call it fate, some call it destiny. I prefer to think of it as choice. Ye can choose to stay on this path or ye can choose another." Irene's voice was gentle but firm. "No choice is ever easy

and yers will be no different. It is coming soon, my dear. If ye choose the harder, darker path, it will be fraught with hardship. But the destination will make the journey worth it. It will lead ye to the person ye are meant to be and the one who will help ye become that person.”

Despite herself, Caitlin felt something stirring inside her. It was faint, like a whisper in the wind, but it was there. She turned and looked behind her at the Highlands stretching out. Maybe Irene was right. Maybe she should stay a little while longer, just to catch her breath.

Irene MacAskill patted her shoulder. She was so short that she had to reach up to do it. “Think on my words, my dear, but dinna take too long. Yer choice will soon be upon ye. Come on, Baxter.”

With that, she turned around and walked off into the trees, Baxter trotting at her side with his bushy tail stuck straight up in the air.

Caitlin watched them go. She almost went after them to demand answers to her questions. But she didn’t know how to frame those questions. And besides, she wasn’t sure she would like the answers. In only moments, the old woman and her cat had disappeared into the trees.

Caitlin shook herself. That was weird. Still, it was a story to tell when she got back to the pub this afternoon.

Her stomach growled loudly. It was well past midday and she’d been climbing all morning, working up an appetite. She looked around for a decent lunch spot and set off deeper into the trees.

She finally settled on a shady spot by a small stream. She took out her rucksack and began rummaging through it for the bland cheese and tomato sandwiches she’d made for herself this morning. As she ate, she watched the water flow over rocks and pebbles, the sunlight glinting off its surface. It was peaceful here, the only sounds the rustling of leaves in the breeze and the gentle babble of the water.

But then something caught her eye. There was a reflection in the water: a face. She leaned down and saw it was the face of a man with messy blond hair. What the hell? She jumped up, startled, and spun around, searching. But there was nobody there.

Glancing back at the water, she saw that the reflection was still there. There was something...familiar...about the figure, even though she couldn’t see the face clearly. For some unaccountable reason, Caitlin felt like she ought to know him.

A sudden gust of wind swept through the clearing, sending leaves swirling around her feet. Caitlin shivered and pulled her jacket tighter around her. Slowly, she reached out a hand and touched the surface of the water. The ripples distorted the reflection, making it impossible to see the man’s face. Caitlin felt a sudden urge to dive into the water and find out who he was, to uncover the mystery that seemed to be lurking just below the surface.

But then the wind died and the water stilled. The reflection vanished without a trace. *Yep. You really are going crazy*, she told herself. *Perhaps you need to go back to see Dr Clifford.*

Finishing her sandwiches, she screwed the brown paper bag into a ball, tucked it back into her pack with a sigh, and stood up. The sun was starting to fall from its zenith and the afternoon was wearing on. It was time to start her climb down if she wanted to get back to the hotel before dark.

Her stomach tightened with apprehension. She didn’t *want* to go back down. She didn’t want to go back to her life where everything was so difficult, every day a struggle to stay afloat.

Irene had been right about one thing: she *did* come up here to forget, to find peace, if only for a short time. Perhaps the old woman had been right about the choice she had to make too, but she *had* been wrong about one thing: Caitlin didn’t need help. She didn’t need someone else to lead her to her destiny or to tell her what to do. She’d find her own way, and make her own choices, just as she’d always done.

*Stubborn*, a voice whispered in her head.

She ignored it and turned back towards the cliff edge. But she'd only gone three paces when she stopped abruptly.

Ahead of her lay a tangle of branches and trunks where one of the oaks had fallen against its brethren after a lightning strike. The fallen tree was blackened and scorched, its skeletal branches like fingers gripping its neighbor. Where the trunks touched, a kind of archway had formed and through this Caitlin could see the cliff and the lowlands beyond stretching out.

Or, at least, that's what she *should* be able to see.

But right now, her vision was obscured by something that was swirling in the gap beneath that archway. The air moved and rippled like the waters of a pond stirred by unseen hands.

Caitlin goggled. What the hell was that? She walked carefully nearer, straining to make it out.

As she approached, the swirling substance began to take shape. It looked like a thick mist, but it was unlike any mist she had ever seen before. Caitlin stopped short, unsure. Was it some sort of weather phenomena? She took a step forward, then another, until she was standing before the strange mist.

It was like staring into the heart of a storm, although she felt no wind, no rain, only a strange pull as if some unseen force had a hold on her.

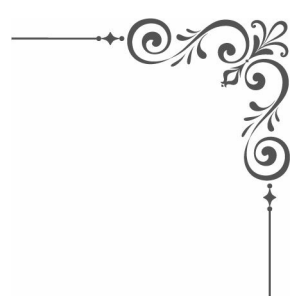
*Ye can choose to stay on this path or ye can choose another. If ye choose the harder, darker path, it will be fraught with hardship. But the destination will make the journey worth it.*

For some unaccountable reason, Irene's words echoed in her head. And, for an even more unaccountable reason, she felt herself stepping forward and reaching out to brush her fingers against the shimmering mist. A tingle like electricity hummed all the way up her arm, raising the skin on the back of her neck.

*Idiot*, she thought. *Turn around and leave.* But she didn't. She stepped closer.

*It will lead ye to where ye are meant to be and the person ye are meant to be.*

Caitlin stepped through the arch.



## Chapter 2

Kai Stewart crept noiselessly through the undergrowth, moving between bushes, ducking under branches, making no more sound than a ghost. His eyes were fixed ahead, his ears straining for the slightest noise.

There was only the whisper of the wind through the trees and the chirp of birds high up in the branches. He glanced to his left and spotted Magnus slipping through the foliage. For such a huge man, he was surprisingly quiet, and Kai wouldn't have known he was there if he didn't know to look for him. Kai glanced right, and after a moment saw the rustle of a bush that indicated Oskar was in position. Finally, he peered up at the tall branches of an oak across the way and spotted Emeric's lithe form high up amongst the leaves. The archer had an arrow nocked already, pointing down at the path ahead.

Kai nodded in satisfaction. So far, so good. He raised his hand to the others with his fist clenched—the signal to stop—then hunkered down behind the thick tangle of a gorse bush to wait.

If Conall's intelligence was correct—and he had no reason to doubt it—their target should be appearing at any moment.

The day was warm and despite the breeze that shivered through the trees, Kai felt sweat beading on his brow and trickling down his face. He resisted the urge to wipe it away, focusing intently on the wide path that snaked through the woods below.

It had taken weeks to reach this point. Weeks of meticulous planning, of reconnaissance, watching, waiting, of chasing every rumor and scrap of information and now, finally, they were about to strike.

It couldn't come soon enough. Matters in the Highlands were worsening by the day: alliances fracturing, unrest in the villages, rumors that seemed to take on a life of their own. If Kai and his men weren't successful soon, the unrest would likely spill over into bloodshed before the month was up.

He adjusted the grip on his sword, tightening the leather wrapping around the hilt. His fingers itched to draw the blade, but he knew better than to rush things. Patience was key.

Minutes passed, then an hour. Kai's muscles tensed with anticipation, but he didn't move. The others were equally still, waiting for his signal.

And then he heard it—the unmistakable sound of footsteps on the path. But they were coming from the wrong direction—from behind him rather than the path below. Damn! Had Conall's intelligence been incorrect, after all?

Kai glanced to his left, saw Magnus looking back at him. The big man's gaze was full of questions, and Kai knew what he was thinking. Did they go ahead with the plan, or retreat? Kai made his decision. He nodded once, indicating he was going to take a look. Then he rose from his hiding place and darted back along their trail towards the source of the footsteps.

He moved swiftly but cautiously; keeping low and using every bit of cover at his disposal.

As he drew nearer, the footsteps grew louder. Whoever was coming, they were making no effort to hide their approach. Kai darted behind a tree trunk, pressing his back against the rough bark, and listened. Then, with a quick lunge, he darted out and grabbed the figure who suddenly stepped around the bend in the path. It was a short, round old woman with gray hair and a startled expression on her face.

Kai started in surprise and released her, backing quickly away. He took in the gray bun, the dark eyes, the wrinkled face and rosy cheeks and his mouth dropped open in shock. He recognized this

woman.

“Irene?” he said incredulously. “Irene MacAskill?”

“Good day to ye, my boy,” she replied cheerfully. “Fancy running into ye on this fine day.”

“But...but...” Kai stammered, trying and failing to string a sentence together.

He’d seen this woman many times when he was a boy, but not since he’d grown into a man. And yet, despite the years that had passed, she looked exactly the same: a face so wrinkled it looked like a dried-up apple and a bright smile that made her look like a kindly grandmother.

“Ye should shut yer mouth, dear,” Irene said with a grin. “Ye might catch a fly.”

Kai snapped his mouth closed. He glanced around, but they appeared to be alone. “What are ye doing here, Irene?”

Irene had never shown any interest in him before. She’d only ever been interested in his older brother, Rory.

“Rory isnae here,” Kai said to her. “He’s at Callingford with Leah and the twins.”

Irene MacAskill cocked her head. “Aye, so I gather. But I’m not here for yer brother. I’m here to speak to ye.”

Kai blinked in surprise. “Me?”

He couldn’t imagine what business the old woman could have with him. Did she know about his mission? It was possible since he’d been given it by the Order of the Osprey and they served the Seelie Fae. Was she here to help? The services of a Fae could come in very handy indeed.

“Did Lord Brochan send ye?” Kai asked. “If so, perhaps ye can help us out with something. Someone is going to come along that path any minute. If ye could just—”

Irene held up a hand to stop him. “I’m not here for that, my boy. I canna interfere with events, as ye well know.”

If she wasn’t here to aid him, then why was she here? He crossed his arms, annoyed. “If ye aren’t going to help, then kindly allow me to get back to my men. I’ve delayed too long already.”

He turned to go but she grabbed his arm. For an old lady, she had a grip like a tavern-brawler.

“I said I canna interfere,” Irene said. “But I *can* give choices. After that, the path ye choose is yer own.” She cocked her head and studied him. That gaze seemed to pin him to the spot like a well-aimed spear. “Ye are a great man, Kai Stewart,” she said softly. “Or at least, ye could be. But that depends on the choices ye make now. It depends if ye choose to allow someone to see behind the mask ye paint for yerself. Perhaps then ye will find the path that will lead ye to the man ye are meant to be.”

Kai rolled his eyes. “Oh, really? Well, thank ye for the advice.” Had she gotten him confused with his older brother, who might have listened to this rubbish? “I’m more than happy with the ‘path’ I’m on, thank ye for asking.”

He had his mission, his men, willing women dotted up and down the land, and enough gold to buy whatever he needed. What more could any man want? It was a grand life he led and he didn’t need some interfering old woman telling him differently.

He tried to tug his arm from Irene’s grip but she did not let him go. Her fingers tightened around his wrist.

“Ye are right about one thing, Kai Stewart,” she said. “Someone *is* going to come along that path behind ye any minute, but it might not be who ye expect it to be. That person will bring a choice about which man ye want to be and which road ye wish to take.” She released her grip, grinned widely, then reached up to pat him on the cheek. “Choose carefully, my boy.”

Without another word, she turned and walked into the trees. But before she rounded the bend, she stopped and looked over her shoulder at him. “They are almost here, by the way. Ye had better be going.”

And then Kai heard it: the unmistakable clop of horses’ hooves.

“Damn!” he swore under his breath, spun on his heel, and went sprinting back the way he’d come, careful to keep out of sight and make no noise.

Irene MacAskill’s words rang in his head. Why had she come to speak to him? He did not have Fae blood like his half-brother, Rory. He was not a time-traveler like his mother, Madeleine. He had never had anything to do with the Fae. So why him? And why now?

*It doesn’t matter*, he told himself as he resumed his position in the undergrowth overlooking the path. *Only the mission matters.*

To his right, Magnus gave him an enquiring look. Kai shook his head to indicate there was no danger. He pushed his thoughts aside and waited. The clop of hooves drew steadily louder. He peeked through the foliage and spotted a wagon approaching. It was laden with supplies: sacks of grain, barrels of ale, bolts of cloth. A fat man in expensive clothes rode on the bench, holding the reins loosely in one hand.

Behind the wagon rode a lone rider, a man with a broad-brimmed hat pulled low over his face. His horse was a sturdy bay, well taken care of, and the rider was armed with a sword and a brace of daggers.

Kai glanced at his men. Magnus nodded grimly, and Oskar was a silent shadow in the undergrowth. Kai couldn’t see Emeric up in the trees, but knew he would be ready.

He raised his hand, ready to give the signal. But before he could move, the bushes lining the road below began to thrash. A second later, a figure stumbled out into the path of the wagon.

The wagon driver yelled and yanked heavily on the reins, pulling the wagon to a screeching halt mere inches from where the figure stood shakily, swaying slightly as if injured or drunk.

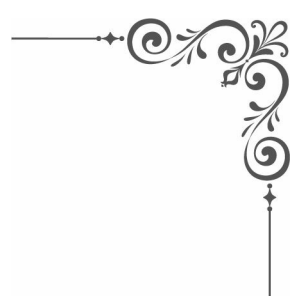
It was a woman.

Kai stared in shock. She was wearing the most bizarre clothes he had ever seen: black skin-tight trews and boots that were bright pink. She had a bag slung on her back and some kind of harness around her waist from which dangled some odd bits of metal and a coil of rope. The woman stumbled as if dizzy and then collapsed onto her knees.

Kai quickly changed his signal, uncurling his fingers and holding his palm up, telling his men to hold their positions.

This was unexpected. What was going on? And who the hell was that woman?





# Chapter 3

Caitlin's skull felt like it was splitting. A headache had erupted behind her eyes the second she'd stepped through the arch. For an instant, the ground had gone out from under her and she thought she was falling, but then her feet had hit solid ground and she'd staggered, enveloped by the smell of leaf-litter and soil.

Then she'd heard the sound of horses and gone stumbling towards it, hopeful that perhaps the riders might have some aspirin they could give her, or at least some water.

Now, as she staggered to her knees, unable to keep her feet any longer, she looked up and saw a farm cart bearing down on her pulled by a *very* large pair of horses.

Terror shot through her and she tried to throw herself out of the way but her body didn't seem to want to work properly. She was only able to crawl a few paces before she collapsed again.

The wagon driver shouted something and the horses whinnied as they skidded to a halt just a few paces away. Her heart was pounding in her chest, her skull was slowly splitting in half, but she still had the presence of mind to think, *what is a cart doing up here on the plateau?*

"Have ye lost yer wits?" the wagon driver bellowed. "I could have trampled ye!"

The driver—a large, fat man with wobbling jowls—climbed down from the cart and advanced on her. He was dressed in a blue tunic and matching pants and with some kind of tartan wrap around his torso.

"Sorry," Caitlin muttered. "I...um...came over all funny."

"Funny?" the man shouted. "Is that what ye call it? I'd call it downright bloody stupid!"

The headache was starting to recede, dissipating as quickly as it had arrived. Maybe she was coming down with something. That would explain the headache and the disorientation. If that was the case, she needed to get back to the hotel as soon as possible. The thought of a hot meal, warm bath, then curling up in bed had never been so appealing.

Bracing her palms on the damp ground, she climbed carefully up to standing. A wave of dizziness shot through her and for a second, she thought she might fall again, but she gritted her teeth, took deep breaths until it slowly passed, and she was able to look around.

She was still in the copse of oaks, but the trees looked different. They were smaller for a start, with much more undergrowth beneath them. They went on for as far as she could see and there was no sign of the cliff and the lowlands beyond.

She frowned, confused. There were other strange things too. The wagon was wooden and seemed to have no engine. It had large, spoked wheels and was pulled by two massive horses that looked like Clydesdales. What kind of farmers used wagon and horses these days? Most used tractors, surely?

The fat man was still yelling at her. He was gesticulating wildly, his face red with anger. She caught snatches of what he was saying: "... bloody fool woman ... be at home with the bairns not wandering the countryside ..."

"I'm sorry," she said again, hoping to placate him. "I didn't mean to cause any trouble. I just got a little disoriented, that's all."

The man snorted. "Disoriented? Ye're a daftie, that's what ye are. What are ye even wearing, lass?"

Caitlin glanced down at herself. She was wearing her climbing gear; leggings and top, harness, carabiners, and hands in their fingerless gloves. The gear reminded her that she needed to get back

down the cliff before it got too dark.

“I’m a rock climber,” she explained. “I came up to the plateau and—” she trailed off, scratching her head. And what? None of this looked familiar. Had she fallen down and hit her head? Was that why this all looked so strange? “I...um...I seem to have gotten a bit lost.”

“Rock-climbing?” the fat man said incredulously. “What kind of madwoman are ye?”

He was beginning to get on her nerves. Okay, so she’d nearly caused an accident but that wasn’t an excuse to be such an asshole about it, was it? And besides, he was a fine one to talk about what she was wearing. Had he looked in a mirror lately? His blue tunic ensemble and tartan wrap looked like he’d hired it from a fancy-dress shop.

“I just need to figure out where I am and then I’ll be on my way, okay?” she snapped. She slung her pack from her shoulder, rooted around inside and took out her GPS tracker. It would tell her exactly where she’d wandered to and how to get back to the cliff.

The man’s eyes widened when he saw the device in her hands. “What is that?”

“It’s just my GPS,” she said, holding it up so he could see the screen.

A look of terror stretched his features. He quickly made the sign of the cross. “This thing be demon-sent!” He lunged and knocked the GPS out of her hand, sending it falling to the ground a few paces away.

“Witchcraft!” he bellowed, staggering back. “Witchcraft!” He turned and Caitlin saw there was a second man, sat on a horse and wearing a low-brimmed hat, watching the encounter in silence. “Conall! Do something! She’s a witch!”

“I beg your pardon?” Caitlin said incredulously. “Is that some kind of joke? And what the hell do you think you’re doing, knocking my GPS away like that? You could have broken it, you idiot!” She took a step towards him but he backed away, face pale and sweaty.

“Conall! Do what I pay ye to do and save me!”

But the man in the wide-brimmed hat didn’t move and it was pulled so low that Caitlin couldn’t see his face. The fat man stared at him for a second, gave a loud ‘harrumph’, turned to climb back onto his wagon—then stopped abruptly.

A third man—one Caitlin hadn’t seen approach—was sitting on the wagon seat, a giant of a man with midnight hair and a short black beard. He grinned at the fat man and gave him a jaunty wave.

“Going somewhere?”

The fat man’s eyes grew wide. “Where did ye come from? Conall!” he yelled. “Bandits!”

Now the hat-wearing man looked up and Caitlin got a glimpse of gray eyes in a tanned face.

“Actually,” the man said in a smooth voice. “These are my friends.”

The fat man gaped and spun around in a circle. Caitlin looked around too and saw that two other men had emerged from the trees. One was a flame-haired man with twin swords—*swords?*—strapped across his back, and the other was a tall man with a mop of messy blond hair and stubble on his chin. All of them were dressed as strangely as the fat man. What the hell?

It was the blond man who stepped towards the wagon driver, ignoring Caitlin completely. “Good day, Alfred,” he said with a jovial grin and a twinkle in his eye. “Sorry to drop in on ye unannounced like this but Conall tells me ye’ve been a very naughty boy.”

Alfred spun towards the rider and pointed a pudgy finger. “Traitor!”

The mounted man—Conall?—shrugged. “Traitor? Seems a wee bit hypocritical dinna ye think, coming from ye?”

Alfred looked around wildly, searching for escape, but the blond man shook his head. “Dinna do aught stupid, Alfred. Ye wouldnae get three paces before Emeric got ye.” He nodded at one of the

trees and Caitlin looked up to see a fifth man up in the branches holding a bow with an arrow trained on Alfred.

Alfred swallowed thickly. “Who are ye?” he asked. “What do ye want?”

Caitlin would dearly love to know the same thing. Who were all these men? And where had they come from? She began backing away, hoping they were too caught up in their conversation to notice her. But she’d not gone three paces before she bumped into something hard and whirled to find the red-headed man standing behind her.

“Where do ye think ye are going, lass?” he asked smoothly, his hand moving to rest on the hilt of one of his swords. Swords? Why was he carrying swords?

Caitlin swallowed, her heart racing. “I... I just need to get back to my hotel. I got lost and I didn’t mean to intrude on anything.”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “Lost? In these woods? That’s a dangerous game to play, lass.”

Caitlin took a step back. What was happening? This was crazy!

The blond man, who seemed to be the leader, spoke to the red-head. “Easy, Oskar.” He walked to stand in front of Caitlin and looked her over with his hands planted on his hips.

Caitlin couldn’t help but notice how handsome he was, with his rugged, stubbled jaw and sparkling blue eyes. This, coupled with his tanned skin and messy blond hair, gave him a careless, cocky sort of attractiveness. But there was something about the way he moved that told her this man was dangerous, despite his easy-going appearance.

“Who are you?” she demanded, pleased when her voice didn’t tremble.

The man smiled, a flash of white teeth, and gave her a flourishing bow. “Kai Stewart at yer service. And I’m afraid ye have stumbled right into the middle of my business.”



KAI GRINNED AT THE lass, adopting his usual affable charm, but his mind was whirling, playing over a hundred different scenarios.

Who was this woman and where had she come from? At first, he’d thought she was part of Alfred’s crew but one look at Conall’s bafflement and Alfred’s subsequent behavior towards her, had quelled that notion. Her large blue eyes were wide with fright and darted between each of his men as if worried about what they might do.

His eyes strayed to the ground by the lass’s feet. That odd device that Alfred had knocked out of her hand lay there, staring up from the grass. It was a little black oblong, made of a strange material with a piece of glass over the front. On that glass, a green dot was slowly pulsing and there were buttons on one side.

A shiver of unease went through him at the sight of it. He’d only ever seen that kind of material—plastic?—and that kind of glowing power—electricity?—on a handful of occasions and they were always on things that his brother and mother owned.

Things from the future.

*That person will bring ye yer choice about which man ye want to be and which road ye wish to take.*

He glanced up at the lass. No. She couldn’t be. Could she?

She had appeared right after Irene MacAskill had, she carried objects that did not belong in this time, and she was dressed like no Highland woman he had ever seen.

Damn it all. This was a complication he could *really* do without.

*What are you playing at, Irene?* he thought. *What are you up to?*

But he didn't have time to think about it now. He scooped up the device and tucked it away before anyone else could see it.

"What is yer name, lass?"

"Caitlin," she replied, looking around warily. "Caitlin Summers. Who are you people?"

"We mean ye no harm," he assured her. "But we need ye to stay just where ye are until we get this sorted out." To Oskar he said, "Make sure she doesnae move." Then he returned to the wagon.

Alfred looked even more panicked as Kai approached. "Please, I beg of ye, let me go. I'll do anything ye want!"

Kai raised an eyebrow. "Anything? Well, that's quite the offer. Anyone would think ye have something to hide."

He gestured towards Conall and the man finally removed his wide-brimmed hat, then jumped down from the horse and approached the wagon. He shoved aside the sacks of grain to reveal the floor beneath. Taking a knife from the holder at his hip, he stuck it in the gap between the floor and the side of the wagon, and prised up the boards to reveal small, neatly stacked barrels beneath the false floor.

Magnus turned from where he sat on the wagon seat and whistled at the sight. "Well, would ye look at that? Seems yer were right, Conall. As usual."

Conall gave a lop-sided smile and a small shrug. "I do my best."

Kai shook his head at Alfred. "My, my, ye really have been a naughty boy, havenae ye?" He walked over to the barrels and ran his hand over the surface. They were smaller than any ale barrels he'd ever seen and bore no markings. "What's in them?"

"I dinna know!" Alfred cried. "Honest, I dinna! I was paid to transport them, that's all!"

"Paid to transport them where? To whom?"

Alfred snapped his mouth shut.

"He picked them up from a ship docked at Wick," Conall said. "I'd never seen the style of ship before. It looked eastern. Perhaps from beyond Carthage."

Kai held out his hand to Conall who placed his dagger in Kai's palm. Kai shoved the blade under the lid of one of the barrels and prised it off. Inside, the barrel was full of a fine black powder.

In the dim light under the trees, he couldn't make out what it might be. Pepper? Some kind of dye? "Oskar," he said. "Pass me a torch."

Oskar grabbed a dry branch, wrapped an oil-soaked piece of cloth around the end, and lit it. He passed it to Kai who held it aloft as he peered at the stuff in the barrel.

"Stop!"

Out of nowhere, Caitlin suddenly slammed into him hard enough to take them both crashing to the ground. Kai grunted as he felt the impact of the lass's body against his own, knocking the air out of his lungs.

"Are you out of your mind?" she yelled.

The torch went flying from his hand and landed in the grass where it guttered and went out.

Kai managed to flip them over so that he was on top, pinning her to the ground. He could feel her heart pounding like a trapped bird beneath him.

"What the hell do ye think ye are doing?" he hissed.

"What the hell do you think *you're* doing?" she replied, struggling against him. "Are you insane? You'll blow us all to kingdom come!"

He could hear his men rustling behind him, weapons at the ready, but he held up a hand to stop them.

“Woman,” he said, grabbing her by the arm and pulling her up. “Ye had better explain yerself. What are ye talking about?”

“Exactly what I said!” she cried, pulling against his grip. “You take that flame anywhere near those barrels and you’ll kill us all! That’s gunpowder!”

Gunpowder? He’d heard of it. Rumors that the eastern lands had developed some kind of explosive powder that could level castles and destroy armies had circulated for years. But he’d never seen it before. And he’d certainly never heard of anyone transporting it through the Highlands.

He looked between the barrels and the lass. Finally, he released her.

“Gunpowder,” he said the word softly. It sounded strange on his tongue. “And how would ye know this, lass?”

She opened her mouth and closed it again. “I’ve...come across it before. In my line of work.”

There was a story there, he was sure of it, but he didn’t have time to question her now. Instead, he looked at Alfred. “Is that true? Is that what ye are transporting?”

“I dinna know!” Alfred squealed. But from his pale, terrified expression, Kai knew he was lying.

Kai scrubbed his hand through his hair. Lord take him, that had been close. “I think I owe ye my thanks,” he said softly to Caitlin. “Ye may have just saved our lives.”

She rubbed her arm where he’d held her. She seemed surprised by his gratitude. “I...um...you’re welcome.”

Kai studied her. She had sparkling blue eyes, chestnut hair, a sprinkling of freckles across her nose, and the kind of buxom figure that Kai appreciated in a woman.

She caught him looking and frowned. “And you can show your thanks by telling me who you are and exactly what’s going on here.”

“I would have thought that was obvious,” Kai replied with a smirk. “We’re good men trying to stop some bad men.”

“Very funny. Is this some sort of war game?”

“It’s no game. As ye can see, we caught this man transporting dangerous materials. We need to find out who he’s working for and what they plan to do with this stuff.”

Caitlin pinched the bridge of her nose. She looked almost as pale and frightened as Alfred. “This is nothing to do with me. I just want to go home.”

“Home?” Kai said. “Where is home?” *Had* Irene sent her? If so, he suspected the lass’s home was a very, very long way off.

“None of your business! Just let me go!”

He shook his head. “I’m afraid I canna do that. Not until I know ye are not involved in Alfred’s business.”

“I’m not involved in anything!” Caitlin exclaimed, throwing up her hands. “I was climbing and I...got...lost. I stumbled on this clearing and ran into you. That’s it. Now let me go!”

Kai narrowed his eyes. “Maybe,” he said. “Maybe not. It’s a little suspicious ye knew he was carrying gunpowder isnae it?”

“I knew no such thing! I only realized that when you opened the barrel!”

He suspected she was telling the truth. If Irene had brought her here...but he could not take that risk. Not until he was sure.

He strode over to Alfred and clapped him on the shoulder. “Well, my friend,” he said in a jovial voice. “Looks like ye’ve gotten yerself into a bit of a bind. But I dinna want ye to worry—we will take good care of ye. Just as soon as ye tell us where ye were taking this wagon and who paid ye to do it.”

Alfred's jowls wobbled as he shook his head. "I canna do that."

"Oh? It isnae that hard. Just open yer mouth and form words. Come on, let's try it together, 'I was taking the wagon to...'"

"They'll kill me if I tell ye!"

Quick as a flash, Kai drew his dagger and pressed it against the man's throat. "And *I* will kill ye if ye dinna."

Alfred's eyes swiveled down to the glittering metal pressed against his neck and he swallowed thickly, making his Adam's Apple bob.

"In my satchel," he croaked.

Without removing the dagger or taking his eyes off Alfred, Kai called, "Conn, is there a satchel in that wagon?"

Conall climbed onto the back of the wagon, rooted around for a minute then came up with a leather bag. He opened the neck and pulled out a parchment. "Got it."

Hopping down, he unrolled the parchment and handed it over. Kai looked down at it, scanning the words that filled the page.

The parchment was a contract. It stated that Alfred was to transport the gunpowder from the docks to a small village on the edge of the Highlands. The contract was signed simply, *Leif*.

A jolt went through Kai. Leif.

He waved the contract in Alfred's face. "Does this refer to Leif Snarlsson? Is he yer employer?"

Alfred swallowed again, his eyes darting from side to side. "I dinna know his last name. He's just known as Leif."

"Dinna give me that!" Kai growled, grabbing Alfred by the tunic and shaking him. "Ye are working for that Norwegian bastard, aren't ye? Answer me!"

"I dinna know who he is! I swear!"

Kai glared at him for a second then made an effort to master his temper. He stepped back and sheathed his dagger then read the parchment again. According to the contract, the gunpowder was to arrive at its destination by noon several days from now where another courier would take charge of it. Kai's mind raced, trying to piece everything together.

Leif.

It *had* to be Leif Snarlsson. How many people in the Highlands had the name Leif? And how many of those people were involved in illicit dealings?

Kai and his men had been following rumors of this man for months. He was thought to be behind a series of strange goings on in the Highlands: people going missing, attacks on travelers, cattle slaughtered in the fields, ships spotted off the coast. But the man himself remained as elusive as a ghost.

Kai's commanders in the Order of the Osprey believed it was all part of a bigger plan to destabilize the Highlands ready for some sort of attack and Kai couldn't shake the feeling that the arrival of the gunpowder was just the beginning of something much larger.

He chewed his lip as he considered his options.

"Does the man ye are going to meet—this 'courier'—know what ye look like?" he asked at last, turning back to Alfred.

The fat man blinked. "Nay, we never met, only corresponded through intermediaries."

"Then he willnae realize it isnae ye that's delivering this cargo, will he?"

"What are ye thinking?" Conall asked, leaning back against the cart and picking his teeth with the tip of his dagger. The man's wolf-gray eyes sparkled with anticipation as if he'd already guessed

Kai's plan.

"I'm thinking we keep Alfred's rendezvous," he replied. "Only it willnae be Alfred making the delivery, it will be us. We need to know what Snarlsson is planning. This is our best chance. We'll stop at Aberfeldy tonight. It lies close to our route."

"What about the woman?" Oskar asked nodding at Caitlin. "She knows too much."

Kai turned. Caitlin was watching them warily. One arm was wrapped around her stomach as if she was about to be sick and the other hand was pressed to her mouth as if to hold down a scream.

Who was she? And what was her part in this? *Damn it, Irene*, he thought. *Why have ye thrown this woman into my path?*

Who Caitlin was or what she was doing here would have to remain a mystery for the present. His mission was his first and only priority. And Oskar was right: she'd seen too much.

"We'll take her with us."

Caitlin's eyes went wide. "No, you bloody-well won't! You can't just take me prisoner!"

"Prisoner? Ye aren't our prisoner. Think of yerself as our honored guest."

Caitlin's gaze darted between the men and she looked as terrified as a startled rabbit. He stepped closer, forcing her to look up at him.

"Caitlin," he said softly. "Ye willnae be harmed. On this I give ye my word. But I canna let ye go. My mission is too important to risk word reaching the wrong ears. As soon as we make that rendezvous, ye will be released."

She opened her mouth and shut it again. He could tell she didn't believe him and he couldn't blame her. Who would when they'd just seen him threaten to slit a man's throat?

"Ye can trust us," Magnus rumbled from his seat on the wagon. The big man was easy-going and his ferocity in battle belied his gentle nature. "Ye can trust Kai. He may be a little rough around the edges, but he's a good lad at heart."

"Rough around the edges?" Kai asked, raising an eyebrow. "I'll take that as a compliment."

Magnus chuckled but Caitlin didn't join in. He took her hand and she flinched as if she expected him to chop it off.

"I willnae let any harm come to ye," he said softly. "On my honor."

His charm normally worked on the lasses and he concentrated all of it on Caitlin right now. But to his surprise, *he* was the one who suddenly felt warmth prickle up his skin and his heart do a strange little flutter.

She swallowed thickly. "How far is this place you're traveling to?"

He waved a hand vaguely. "Not far."

"And when we get there, you'll let me go and I can call a cab and go home?"

He nodded. "Ye have my word. Now I need yer word too. Our mission is of utmost importance. I need yer word that ye willnae try to run off or speak of what ye've heard here today to anyone. Can ye do that?"

She glanced around at the men who were all watching her. "Do I have a choice? Fine. I promise. Now can we get going? The sooner we get there the sooner I can get home and out of this crazy mess."

Kai turned to his men. "Conn, Oskar, ye can ride in the back of the wagon. And Emeric, get down from that bloody tree!"

Magnus scowled at Alfred. "What should we do with him?"

"The Order will want to question him," Kai replied. "Ye will take him to Dun Saith."



Magnus raised an eyebrow then glanced at the bay that Conall had been riding. “That poor beast will never be able to carry me.”

“Nay, it willnae. Take one of the cart horses instead.”

In short order Oskar and Magnus had unhitched one of the cart horses, replacing it in the traces with Conall’s bay. They tied Alfred’s wrists and ankles, and slung him over the horse’s back.

Kai put a hand on Magnus’s broad shoulder. “Ride hard. Tell Laird Callum and Lord Brochan everything we’ve learned. And be careful. If Snarlsson discovers we’ve captured Alfred, he might send someone after ye.”

Magnus nodded, his shaggy hair bouncing around his head. “Dinna worry. I’ll get our little informant to Dun Saith safely.”

“Good man,” Kai said, clapping him on the back. “Now let’s get moving. We’ve tarried too long already.”

Oskar, Conall and Emeric jumped up into the back of the wagon but Caitlin just stood there, as if considering trying to run. Kai held out a hand to her.

“If my lady would like to board?”

She glanced at his hand, at the cart, at the glade around them. Without a word, she took his hand and climbed up onto the wagon seat. Kai climbed up beside her.

He flicked the reins and the cart lurched forward, leaving Magnus and Alfred behind. They headed out onto the rocky path, the cart bouncing over the uneven terrain. Caitlin clung to the bench with white knuckles, looking tense and anxious.

“Relax,” Kai said, casting a reassuring smile in her direction. “We’re just going for a wee ride on the moors.”

She glanced at him, her cheeks flushing, but didn’t reply. Kai let the smile spread across his face.

Ah, but this was what he lived for. They were on the hunt, adventure awaited, and he had a beautiful woman by his side. What more could he want?



# Chapter 4

The wind whipped Caitlin's hair around her face, making her blink back tears as she clung to the seat of the bouncing wagon. They had climbed out of the copse and onto the moors. There was a road—of sorts—but it was little more than a rutted track and she saw no other signs of life.

She was uncomfortably aware of Kai's proximity. The wagon seat was barely big enough to hold the both of them and as a result Kai was squashed right up against her, the warmth of his thigh pressed against hers. She did not want to be this close to him. Hell, she didn't want to be this close to any of them! What she wanted was to get out of this nightmare and go home.

What made things worse was that she was pretty sure Kai was aware of all of this, and was enjoying her unease. Bastard. Yet she couldn't say anything about it without making it obvious she was discomfited, and she would *not* give him the satisfaction.

Oh, heck. She should never have bothered getting out of bed this morning. What idiotic notion had made her decide to go climbing today? She had no idea who these men were or what they were doing but it was clear they were all as crazy as Irene MacAskill. Why else would they dress the way they did—like they were some sort of medieval warrior—or be out here playing this ridiculous war game or reenactment or whatever it was?

As they crossed the moors, Caitlin tried to concentrate on her surroundings and the direction in which they were traveling. Kai might have stolen her GPS but that didn't mean she couldn't use her eyes. That way, the moment she had a chance to escape, she would at least know in which direction they'd headed and how to retrace her way back to the cliff.

Sure, Kai had promised to let her go when they reached this 'rendezvous' but she didn't trust his word one little bit. Why would she? They were all clearly lunatics. Nope. The second she could manage it, she was off.

As they traveled, the landscape changed from rocky crags to rolling hills covered in heather. It was wild but beautiful.

Kai caught her eye and grinned, as if to say "see, it's not so bad." Caitlin made no response and instead glanced over her shoulder at the men riding in the wagon. The taller one—Conall?—looked relaxed. He was lying back with his feet up on the edge of the wagon, reading a book. The other two—Emeric and Oskar?—were not so relaxed.

"Get yer bloody elbow out of my face!" the red-headed one, Oskar, growled.

"I wouldnae have my elbow in yer face if ye'd just shove over and give me some room. Yer fat arse is taking up all the space!" Emeric, who had light brown hair held back by a headband, shot back.

"My fat arse? Ye are a fine one to talk! God give me strength! I canna travel all the way to Aberfeldy with ye in my ear 'ole. I'll end up braining ye!"

Kai swiveled in his seat. "I'll brain the pair of ye if ye dinna belt up! Would ye rather get out and walk?"

That shut them up. The two men lapsed into sullen silence, shooting each other dark looks.

Kai winked at Caitlin. "Isnae this fun? It's like being on a family trip. Ma and Pa, with three squalling brats in the back!"

"Hey!" Conall said, looking up from his book. "What do ye mean *three* squalling brats? I havenae been doing any squalling!"

Caitlin surprised herself by smiling at their banter.

Kai chuckled at her reaction, the sound low and rough. “See, even the lass thinks we’re a bunch of squalling brats.”

“I never said that.”

“But ye were thinking it,” Kai said, the corners of his eyes crinkling with amusement. “I can tell.” He leaned back and pulled a spare blanket from a pile next to where she’d stowed her climbing harness, and handed it to her. “Here ye go, lass. It will get cold up here. No sense in freezing yer arse off.”

“Thanks,” she muttered, wrapping the blanket around her shoulders.

Caitlin watched Kai out of the corner of her eye. She couldn’t figure him out. He smiled a lot and was all friendliness and charm but she couldn’t help remembering how he’d drawn his blade in a flash and threatened to slit Alfred’s throat with it. Would he really have done that? Surely not. Surely that was just an empty threat? Surely it was all just part of the act? Right?

She shivered and returned her attention to the landscape, searching for anything familiar with which she could orient herself. The rolling hills were dotted with patches of yellow gorse and flocks of grouse, the only signs of life in this desolate place. Where were the tourists and the hikers? Where were the cars and the roads and the little cottages?

The further they went, the more uneasy Caitlin felt. Nothing seemed right, nothing seemed normal. She glanced over at Kai again and he gave her another reassuring nod.

“Can I have my GPS back?” she blurted suddenly.

He frowned at her. “Yer what?”

“My GPS—the thing Alfred knocked out of my hand. I saw you pick it up.”

“Ah, that. What did ye call it? A GPS?” He reached into a pouch tied at his waist, took out the little device, and examined it. “What does it do?”

Did he seriously not know what a GPS was? “It tells me where I am. Handy when you’re somewhere like this.” *In the middle of nowhere with a bunch of crazy men.*

He nodded. “Aye, I can imagine it would be. A word of advice, lass. If I give ye this back, keep it somewhere out of sight. If anyone sees it ye might find yerself facing a worse reaction than Alfred’s.”

She remembered Alfred’s reaction. *Witchcraft! This thing be demon-touched!* Alfred was clearly as insane as the rest of them.

She clenched her jaw and took the GPS from him. She glanced down at the device and pressed the power button. The screen flickered to life and showed her current location. The little green dot on the screen was surrounded by nothing but empty space.

“This can’t be right. There’s nothing here.”

“Are ye sure ye are using it right?”

Caitlin scowled at him. “Yes, I’m sure. The GPS doesn’t lie.”

Kai shrugged. “Aye, but it doesnae tell the whole truth either. Perhaps the wizardry it uses to find yer location isnae available here. Or perhaps there are things around us that it canna recognize.”

“Like what?”

“It doesnae matter,” he replied, his expression turning serious. “Put it away before one of the lads sees it.”

She didn’t understand why he didn’t want anyone to see it but she tucked it away anyway and huddled deeper into the blanket, feeling alone and trapped. She closed her eyes and prayed for some kind of miracle, for someone to come and rescue her from this nightmare.

Then, out of the blue, Kai started to sing. His voice was low and raspy at first, and it took Caitlin by surprise. She opened her eyes and watched in amazement as he belted out a lively tune in a language she didn't understand. Gaelic? He had a half-decent singing voice. After a moment, as if they'd done this many times before, the others joined in, their voices creating a surprising harmony.

What the heck?

As the song came to an end, Kai turned to her with a sly grin. "So, lass, what do ye think? Are we a talented bunch or what?"

"You're passable, I suppose. What was the song about?"

Kai's grin widened. "Ah, that's a secret. Ye'll have to learn Gaelic if ye want to find out."

Caitlin rolled her eyes. "Thanks for the tip."

Conall cleared his throat. "Ahem. Would ye like to hear my latest poem?"

"Nay, we wouldnae!" Oskar shouted. "Save it for later when we all need to get to sleep!"

Conall scowled at him. "Well, ye are gonna hear it anyway, ye bunch of savages."

He cleared his throat again and began reciting a poem. It was about love and war and the beauty of the Highlands. Oskar groaned. Emeric threw an apple core at Conall. Kai shook his head, an expression of long-suffering patience on his face.

"What do ye think?" Conall asked when he'd finished.

"What?" Emeric said, blinking rapidly. "Sorry, what did ye say? I fell asleep for a moment there."

"Ye are hilarious, ye know that? Very well, ye paragons of artistic appreciation, let's see if ye can do any better."

Emeric shrugged. "We canna all have the education ye have, my friend. Not all of us grew up in a noble house."

"But I was the best story-teller in my village," Oskar added, pushing himself up straight.

"Really?" Conall replied, his voice dripping sarcasm. "How come ye've never mentioned it before?"

Oskar ignored the man's jibe and launched into a story about a Fae princess who fell in love with the local lord. It was full of forbidden trysts and heart-break and had Conall and Emeric groaning again.

"Are they like this all the time?" Caitlin asked Kai.

"Oh, ye have no idea," he replied. "Ye've caught us on a good day. Just wait until they are all in a temper. That's fun."

Caitlin surprised herself by snorting a laugh. She shook her head in bemusement. She couldn't figure these people out. They were strange and dangerous—and clearly crazy—and yet...and yet...she found that she was no longer afraid of them.

Her gaze settled on Kai. He caught her looking and grinned. Flushing, Caitlin looked away, studiously studying the road ahead.

What had brought these men together? They were so different from each other—in looks, in personality, and in background if what Oskar had said was true. Were they some sort of reenactment group? Some kind of historical research society? She had no idea.

And yet, there was a bond between them that was hard to miss.

They lapsed into silence as they continued their journey but Caitlin felt more comfortable than she had before. Perhaps everything would be all right. Perhaps Kai really was taking her to a place where she could call a cab and get home. She glanced at him. He held the reins loosely and to outward appearance looked relaxed—just a man out for a ride on his cart—but there was a watchfulness about

him that reminded Caitlin of a stalking cat. He seemed to miss nothing: not the cry of a hawk overhead, nor the sudden movements of a hare racing across the hillside.

And she couldn't forget that he'd threatened to slit a man's throat.

The afternoon wore on. The track didn't get any smoother and the cart bumped and rattled its way through the empty landscape. Her stomach rumbled loudly. It had been hours since she'd eaten her lunch and her insides felt hollow.

Kai raised an eyebrow. "Hungry?"

"No," she lied, pulling the blanket tighter around her shoulders. "I'm fine."

"Oh, ye willnae want this then?" From somewhere in the folds of his plaid he produced a shiny red apple and held it out on his palm. He took a bite with a crunch loud enough to make the horses flinch and munched on it happily. "Ah, delicious!"

Caitlin kept her expression carefully neutral, refusing to be baited. But her traitorous stomach rumbled again and Kai chuckled. There was no guile in his laugh, no forced jollity, or sarcasm. It was an infectious sound full of genuine joy.

Despite herself, Caitlin found herself grinning. "It seems my stomach doesn't agree with me. It definitely thinks I'm hungry."

"Ah well, we canna have that, can we?" He produced another apple from somewhere. "Here. Tell yer stomach that help is on the way."

Caitlin took the apple from him with a wry smile. "Thanks. I'm sure it will be relieved."

Kai's gaze locked with hers. His eyes were the pale blue of a summer sky. Under his scrutiny heat suddenly flushed up her neck and her heart did a strange little wobble.

"Ye are welcome," Kai said softly.

Caitlin tore her gaze away and bit into the apple, concentrating on that to distract her from the man beside her. Why did he have to sit so close? His thigh was still pressing against hers and she couldn't move away without tipping off the end of the bench. The sooner they got where they were going, the better. Oh. Which reminded her—

"Where are we going exactly?"

Kai glanced at her then back at the road. "A place called Aberfeldy. We should be there in a few hours."

A few hours. That was all she had to endure. She'd never heard of this Aberfeldy place but it might have a bus service or at least a phone she could use to call a cab. If she was really lucky, there might even be a police station. A few hours. She could do that, couldn't she?

She was lost in her thoughts several hours later, when Kai nudged her shoulder. "We're here," he said, nodding into the distance.

Shading her hand against the lowering sun, Caitlin peered out and spotted a cluster of buildings at the base of a wood-covered hillside. Civilization at last! A wave of giddy relief washed over her.

But as they drew near, Caitlin's relief began to turn to unease. This was not what she'd expected. The buildings were made of rough-hewn stone and had thatched roofs. Smoke rose from chimneys and she could hear the distant sound of voices. Far from being a town, this place looked like some peasant village right out of a medieval saga.

Kai brought the cart to a stop and jumped to the ground, holding out a hand to help Caitlin down.

"What?" she stammered. "Where are we?"

"Aberfeldy, as promised."

In a daze, Caitlin took his hand and climbed down. Her legs were stiff from sitting all day and her backside ached from the hard wooden bench but she hardly noticed her discomfort as she stared at

this strange place.

The buildings were arranged in a rough circle with a large open space in the center. People were busy going about their business, and they were all dressed as strangely as Kai and the others. Chickens and geese waddled through the mud streets and Caitlin caught sight of a goat in the far corner, tethered to a post.

Her insides tightened. She could feel that all too familiar sensation of panic gathering in the pit of her stomach. She had managed to keep it at bay during the journey, comforting herself with the thought that this would be over soon, but now?

Kai gave her a concerned glance. "Are ye all right, lass?"

"No," she replied in a choked whisper. "No, I'm not all right. This is all wrong! All wrong!"

Kai put his big hand on her shoulder. "All will be well, Caitlin. Trust me."

"Trust you?" she cried. "When you bring me to this...to this...Oh God! What the hell is going on?"

Kai studied her intently. "Are ye seriously telling me ye dinna know?"

"Know what?"

"Where or when ye are?"

Caitlin threw up her hands. "I've been telling you all day I haven't got a clue!" Her voice was shrill, on the edge of hysteria.

"Damn it," he muttered under his breath. "I thought—" He looked up at her. "All right. I'll explain everything, but not here."

He walked away, gesturing for her to follow. Caitlin trailed him to one of the larger buildings. It was a pub of some sort, with a sign hanging over the door that read *The Drunken Piper*. It didn't look like any pub she had ever seen. The walls were made of rough-hewn timber and the windows were small and set high up in the wall.

Kai pushed open the door and gestured for Caitlin to go inside but she hesitated.

"Dinna worry," Kai said. "It's safe. Come on."

Reluctantly, she followed him through the door. The interior of the pub was dimly lit, with flickering candles casting shadows on the rough wooden walls. Caitlin could see a few men sitting at a table in the corner. They looked up as Kai and Caitlin entered, their eyes flickering with curiosity and suspicion. Caitlin shifted her feet, uncomfortable under their scrutiny. Why was this place lit by candles? Had they had a power cut?

Kai walked over to the bar and spoke briefly with the woman behind it. The woman nodded and disappeared into a back room, reappearing a moment later with a set of keys. She handed them to Kai and spoke in a voice too low for Caitlin to hear.

After a moment, Kai returned and led her up a narrow staircase at the back of the pub, the rough wood creaking beneath their feet. They reached the top of the stairs and Kai unlocked a door, pushing it open to reveal a small room. It was sparsely furnished, with a bed, a table, and a chair. The only source of light was a small window.

"Ye can rest here for a while. I'll bring ye something to eat and drink," Kai said.

He headed to the door but Caitlin darted in front of him, blocking his path. "Don't you dare! You said you would explain!"

Kai sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "Fine. But ye have to promise me that ye'll stay calm and listen to what I have to say."

"I'll try." Although she couldn't promise anything on that score. Already she could feel panic bubbling again.

Kai took a deep breath. “I thought ye realized what had happened to ye but it seems that ye dinna. I asked ye earlier if ye knew where and when ye are. Ye said ye didnae know *where* ye are but ye didnae answer my second question. Do ye know *when* ye are, lass?”

Caitlin blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“What century do ye think this is?”

“What sort of a ridiculous question is that?”

“One I need ye to answer.”

“It’s the twenty-first, of course!”

His eyebrows rose in surprise. “The twenty-fist? Lord above, ye’ve come a long way, lass. This isnae the twenty-first century. It’s the fifteenth. The year 1495, to be exact.”

Caitlin stared at him, her mouth dropping open. “Is that supposed to be funny? You promise to tell me what’s going on and come up with a ridiculous story like that? How stupid do you think I am?”

Kai’s expression hardened. “I’m not joking, Caitlin. Ye’ve been transported back in time. Back to the 15th century.”

She heard the words. She understood them. And yet they still made no sense. Transported back in time? What utter rubbish! It was impossible. And yet...and yet... everything she’d seen tallied with what Kai said: the strange clothes, the old-fashioned buildings, the lack of technology.

It didn’t matter. She was not going to fall for such a ridiculous lie.

She tried to laugh but it came out as a shaky shriek. “Yeah, pull the other one why don’t you? It’s got bells on it.”

“This is no joke,” he said softly. “I assure ye.”

There was no humor in his eyes now. All the amusement was gone. Hell. Did he believe what he was telling her? She swallowed thickly. “That’s not possible. Time-travel isn’t real.”

“Of course it is—although there are only a few who are capable of it. I met one right before I met ye. I suspect ye did too. Her name is Irene.”

“You mean Irene MacAskill? That little old lady whose cat I rescued from a tree? What has she got to do with any of this?”

“So ye *did* meet her—” He stopped and shook his head. His expression suggested a deep unease. “I think ye better start at the beginning, lass.”

Yes. Start at the beginning. That was a good idea. Maybe then she could figure out what the hell had happened to her. She began pacing up and down in front of the window, thinking.

“I was climbing,” she began. “Up the Scarrowdale. I got to the top and Irene was there with her cat. He was stuck up a tree so I climbed up and rescued him. At the time I thought it was odd that an old woman and her cat would be up on that plateau.”

“So ye’d never met her before?”

“No.”

“And ye didnae agree to let her send ye back in time?”

Caitlin laughed shrilly. “Oh yes, of course I did! I’m in the habit of letting dotty old ladies send me to other eras!” She groaned and pressed a hand to her forehead. “I cannot believe I even just said that. How can an old woman send me through time?”

Kai watched her steadily. He didn’t answer her question. “What exactly did Irene MacAskill say to ye?”

“Not much. Not much that made sense, anyway. Something about paths and destiny and things like that. I took no notice. I thought she was a bit batty.”



“That’s the impression she likes to give,” Kai replied. “But she is far from that. Ye can be sure of one thing: if she sent ye here, then she has a plan for ye.”

“What? What kind of plan? And why would she be interested in me, anyway?”

*It will lead ye to the person ye are meant to be and the one who will help ye become that person.*

Her eyes flickered to Kai and away again, unwilling to follow where that thought might lead.

Kai shrugged. “I dinna have the first clue. The plans of the Fae are a mystery.”

Caitlin looked at him sharply. “Come again? The plans of the what?”

“The Fae, lass,” he replied, his voice as calm as if he was discussing the weather. “Ye asked how an old woman could send ye back in time—well that is yer answer. It’s because Irene isnae an old woman at all but one of the Fae and they have magic beyond our understanding.”

This was too much. Fae? Magic?

Caitlin felt the panic rise in her chest again. Her heart raced. Her breathing turned quick and shallow. She staggered, pressing a hand to her forehead. A whimper escaped through her clenched teeth. She could feel darkness closing in on her as though she was falling, falling, falling into the abyss—

And then suddenly strong arms went around her, pulling her against a warm body. The grip anchored her, gave her something to cling to as she fought the darkness.

Through the blackness she heard Kai’s voice murmuring softly in Gaelic, his breath warm on her ear. Gradually the panic began to recede and when Caitlin opened her eyes again, she was met with a pair of bright blue ones.

“Ye’re safe, Caitlin,” Kai said, his voice gentle. “Ye’re with me.”

Caitlin took a deep breath, trying to will the panic away. “I don’t understand,” she said shakily. “Fae? Magic? What does it all mean?”

“It means that ye are not here by chance. The Fae have a way of manipulating things, of weaving paths together that might seem impossible. And they have a plan for ye.”

He paused and looked into the distance, as if recalling something from his own past, before turning back to Caitlin with an encouraging smile.

His arms were still tight around her, his broad chest was pressed against hers. He was warm and strong and comforting and his presence helped to chase away the terror. Fae? Magic? Time-travel? It was impossible. It was crazy. She rested her forehead against that hard chest. Right now all she wanted to do was sink into Kai’s embrace and forget.



KAI HELD CAITLIN IN his arms, surprised at how much he was enjoying it. He hadn’t planned on it but the moment he’d seen her distressed, he had acted instinctively, folding her into an embrace and pulling her close before he could even think about it.

For a reason he couldn’t quite understand, he felt a swell of protectiveness towards this strange lass, and an overwhelming desire to keep her safe.

Why didn’t she know about time-travel and Irene MacAskill? Why had no one told her? What kind of plan did the Fae have in store for her? And, for that matter, what plan did Irene have in store for *him*?

All these thoughts ran through Kai’s mind as he held Caitlin and he pushed them away with an effort. They could wait. Right now, the woman in his arms demanded his attention.

This close she smelled of wildflowers and something else, something exotic that he couldn't quite place. Kai found himself inhaling deeply. He was aware of the swell of her breasts against his chest and the way her hips pressed against his. He tried to ignore the stirring of desire in his loins, but Lord, it was difficult. He knew he shouldn't be thinking this way, not when she was in such a vulnerable state, but he couldn't help it.

Caitlin looked up at him, her eyes wide and full of questions. He could see the confusion in them and knew that she was struggling to make sense of everything that had happened.

"It's all right," he said softly, running a hand along her hair. "Ye dinna have to understand it all right now. Just know that ye're safe with me and I'll do whatever it takes to keep ye that way."

His thoughts began to wander to places that they shouldn't. Desire stirred again. She was beautiful and brave and—

She pulled away abruptly, wiping at her eyes. "It's fine. I'm fine. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have panicked like that."

He didn't want to let her go. "Dinna be sorry. If I was in yer shoes, I'd likely be bawling like a bairn."

Her brows rose. "I find that hard to believe. You don't seem afraid of anything."

"Oh, I am, lass, believe me. I'm frightened of many things."

"Like what?"

Unbidden, an image flashed into his head, a woman's face wreathed in silky black hair, and with it came the usual twist to his gut, the punch of pain and fear and anguish. He pushed it away ruthlessly and pulled his cocky smile onto his face like a mask.

"Conall's poetry for one."

Caitlin laughed softly and the sound of it lifted Kai's heart. He wanted to reach out and pull her close again, but that moment had passed. Instead, he tilted her chin so she was looking up at him.

"Ye asked about Irene MacAskill and the Fae. I have a brother, Rory, who is familiar with them both. As soon as my mission is complete, I shall take ye to him and he can answer all yer questions and find a way to get ye home." He paused and smiled down at her. "Do ye think ye can stick with us for a few more days?"

Kai saw the look of relief wash over Caitlin's face and her eyes sparkled with hope. "Your brother?"

"Aye. And his wife. She's from yer time as well. Ye aren't the only time-traveler I've ever met, Caitlin. So ye see, ye aren't alone."

Caitlin studied him and he couldn't quite read the look in her eye. Relief, certainly. But something else as well.

"Thank you, Kai," she said at last. "I don't understand any of this. All I want is to go home."

Kai gave her a gentle smile. "Then ye shall, lass. We'll make sure of it."

For a moment, they stood there in silence, looking at each other. Kai felt his desire for Caitlin growing stronger, heat clenching his stomach and flashing into his groin—

He cleared his throat and stepped back. "That's settled then. We need to start by making sure nobody else discovers yer origins. Ye saw what Alfred's reaction was. If anyone discovers ye are a time-traveler ye can expect more of the same." He ran a critical eye over her figure-hugging and *very* un-highlander-like attire. It might accentuate her curves in all the right places but it was also highly inappropriate if she wanted to blend in. "We'll start by finding ye some suitable clothing."

It was the excuse he needed to leave. If he stayed here there was no telling what he might do. He strode to the door.

“I willnae be long,” he called over his shoulder. “Try to get some rest.”

Without waiting for her reply, he hurried out, wondering exactly what Irene MacAskill had gotten him into.



# Chapter 5

Caitlin picked her way tentatively down the stairs. They were narrow and rickety and she was wary about putting her hand against the wall to steady herself as it might go straight through it. The lathe and plaster did not look particularly durable although the beams that held the place together were thick and black with age.

*I'm in a medieval inn,* she thought incredulously as she trod carefully onto each step. *A real medieval inn!*

Just thinking about it made her head spin. She still wasn't sure if she believed it. The logical, rational part of her said it was impossible. Utterly impossible. But the same rational, logical part of her couldn't quite reject the evidence of her own eyes either. What other explanation could there be? That she'd somehow fallen in with a bunch of madmen who insisted on living like medieval warriors? That this was all some sort of elaborate hoax?

No. It didn't fit. It was all too real for that and the illogical, irrational part of her whispered that it was all true, every word Kai had told her. And the way he had held her earlier...

Aargh. She pushed the memory away. She would most definitely *not* go down that road.

"Caitlin? Everything all right?"

She looked up. A man was standing on the stairs a few steps below her. At first Caitlin thought it was Kai and her heart did a funny little wobble but then she realized it was the sandy-haired archer. What was his name? Emeric?

"Um. Hi. Yes, fine. Just trying not to break my neck in this stupid dress. Where did Kai get it from, anyway?"

True to his word, Kai had provided her with some medieval style clothes. He hadn't brought them up himself but instead had sent a young lad. She hadn't seen Kai since their discussion in her room.

Emeric shrugged. "I havenae a clue. Come, I'll escort ye to a table. Dinner has just been served."

With a nod of thanks, Caitlin took Emeric's offered arm and allowed him to help her down the rest of the stairs. She'd donned the ridiculously heavy dress but kept her own boots and also her gloves. She was grateful for that decision now as she stepped onto the dirt floor of the inn's common room. The place was dimly lit with flickering candles and smelled of smoke and sweat, but she could see that it was full of people. Men and women sat at rough-hewn tables, talking and laughing, while others leaned against the bar, drinking ale from wooden cups. Caitlin felt a stab of nervousness as eyes flicked in her direction.

It was a bizarre feeling, walking around in medieval clothing, in a medieval inn, surrounded by people whose lives were so utterly different to her own. It was like she'd stepped into a different world entirely, a world that she didn't belong in.

Emeric led her to a small table in the corner, nodding at a woman who bustled over to them with a plate of food.

"Rosa, this is Caitlin," Emeric said in a low voice.

The woman, who was tall, with a full figure and twinkling eyes, smiled at Caitlin. "Welcome, lass." Her words were heavily accented and from her dark hair and olive skin, Caitlin guessed she wasn't Scottish. Spanish, perhaps?

"You know Kai and the others?" Caitlin asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

Rosa nodded. "I do. Let's just say we've helped each other out of scrapes in the past." She gave Caitlin a knowing smile. "Kai has told me all about you and your...predicament. You can trust these lads," she said firmly, patting Caitlin's hand reassuringly. "They will keep you safe."

Caitlin smiled tentatively back at her. What did Rosa mean by 'your predicament'? Surely Kai hadn't told her about her being a time-traveler?

Rosa set down the plate of food then bustled away before Caitlin could thank her for it. It was a simple meal—a stew made of root vegetables and chunks of meat—but Caitlin's stomach was growling so loudly she could hardly hear herself think. She dug in, the flavors bland but the food filling, all the while looking around for Kai.

There was no sign of him, or of Conall or Oskar either. Emeric sat opposite her, tucking into his own meal. The archer was silent and there was something about his dour demeanor that precluded conversation.

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, Caitlin decided to break the ice. "So," she said, nervously pushing a strand of hair out of her face. "You're an archer, right?"

Emeric looked up, his expression unreadable but his lips set in a grim line. He was younger than Caitlin had first assumed, with startling green eyes and full lips.

"Aye," he said, his tone clipped. "Kai asked me to keep an eye on ye."

She flushed with irritation. That was annoying. She narrowed her eyes at him, challenging him to explain what he meant but he remained stoically silent.

"Thanks," she said, trying not to sound too sarcastic. "I appreciate the help."

Emeric nodded noncommittally, then looked away again as if his willingness to talk had been spent. Caitlin sighed inwardly and went back to eating her meal in silence.

Just then, the door opened and Kai sauntered in with his arm around a woman. He spotted Caitlin and Emeric and waved but instead of coming over to their table, Kai took the woman towards another table, pulling her onto his lap as they sat down.

Caitlin was caught off guard by this sudden development—who was this woman? She was beautiful—far more beautiful than Caitlin was—with dark hair cascading over her shoulders and almond-shaped eyes that sparkled in the firelight. Caitlin's stomach twisted at the sight of them together, though she tried her best to hide it. What did it matter to her who Kai spent his time with?

The woman wrapped her arms around Kai's neck as he laughed at something she said, their eyes meeting in what seemed to be a moment of familiarity. It was obvious that they had some kind of relationship. Caitlin tore her eyes away and concentrated on her meal. She took another few bites of stew before pushing it away abruptly—suddenly she wasn't hungry anymore.

Emeric noticed the sudden shift in Caitlin's mood and his piercing green eyes landed on her. "Is all well?"

Caitlin shrugged. "Yeah, I'm fine. Everything is fine. Why wouldn't it be?"

Emeric's eyes narrowed as he studied her, clearly not convinced. "If something is bothering ye, lass, it's best to speak up. Keeping yer worries to yerself willnae change anything, except to make things worse for ye." He clasped his hands together on the table and leaned forward. "I know it isnae easy being in a strange place, with people ye dinna know and a situation ye dinna understand."

Caitlin looked up at him, surprised by the insight. "How did you...?"

Emeric waved his hand dismissively. "Let's just say I have experience with such things. I know what it's like to feel lost and alone in a foreign place."

Caitlin felt a pang of gratitude towards Emeric. Maybe she had misjudged him. "Thank you... for understanding."

Emeric simply nodded, and the two of them lapsed into silence once more.

Unwilling to sit and watch Kai with the woman any longer, Caitlin gathered up the bowls and carried them over to the bar where Rosa was standing.

“Thanks for dinner,” she said to the older woman, feeling an unexpected wave of relief at getting away from Emeric’s watchful gaze.

Rosa smiled. “You’re welcome, sweetheart.”

Caitlin couldn’t quite pin down the woman’s age. Older than Caitlin, in her late thirties perhaps, she had the air of somebody who’d seen and done a lot in her life.

“Do you mind if I ask you something?”

Rosa raised an eyebrow. “You can ask anything you want, little dove. Whether you get an answer though, depends on the question.”

“Where are you from? Originally, I mean. You don’t speak like everyone else around here.”

“Oh, that’s an easy one,” Rosa replied, cleaning a pottery tankard with a cloth. “I’m from Madrid.”

Caitlin nodded, thinking about this. She was no history expert but she guessed that in the fifteenth century migration wasn’t as common as it was in the twenty-first. She wondered what had brought Rosa all the way from Madrid to this tiny hamlet in the middle of the Scottish Highlands.

Rosa gave a low, throaty laugh. “I can see the questions in your eyes, little dove, although you are too polite to ask them. You’re wondering how I ended up here aren’t you?”

Caitlin gave a sheepish smile. “Am I that obvious? Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

Rosa waved a hand. “You aren’t. It’s no secret. Everyone around here knows my story.” She put down the tankard and her dark eyes found Caitlin’s. “I was brought here from my homeland by a wealthy lord, one who showered me with riches beyond my dreams. For a poor girl from Madrid, it was like I had stepped into a fairy tale.”

“So, you married a Scotsman?”

Rosa gave another throaty laugh. “Married? Hardly. He didn’t bring me here as his wife but as his mistress.”

“Oh!” Caitlin said, embarrassed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“Don’t be,” Rosa replied. “It was a good life. There was no love involved, of course, but he treated me well and all I had to do was let him share my bed whenever he felt like it. A fair trade for a decent life, don’t you think?”

Caitlin didn’t know what to say to that. It seemed foreign and strange to her, but who was she to judge?

But Rosa wasn’t finished with her story. “It all ended rather abruptly. My lover died in a hunting accident and after that his wife threw me out. By then I had made a life for myself here. A life that I preferred to the one I had left behind so I opened this tavern with the little money I had managed to save. I have a good business, good customers, and good friends. What more could a woman ask for?”

Caitlin smiled, feeling a sense of admiration for the woman in front of her. “I don’t think I could ever be as strong as you.”

Rosa chuckled. “Oh, little dove, you don’t know what you’re capable of until you’re put to the test.”

“Perhaps,” she murmured although she didn’t believe it. She’d already been put to the test and had failed it miserably.

She looked around. Kai was still talking to the dark-haired woman, Emeric was staring into his tankard, and the rest of the patrons were engaged in business of their own. “I’m a spare part here,”

she said to Rosa. "Is there anything I can do help you?"

Rosa blinked, taken aback by the offer. "Why, that would be very kind of you, my dove. You can help me clear up dinner if you would like?"

Caitlin nodded eagerly, glad for something to occupy her mind. She began wiping down the tables and collecting dishes while Rosa chatted with some of the patrons. As she worked, Caitlin glanced at Kai. To her surprise, she found him watching her. Then his dark-haired companion said something and he looked away again. Caitlin found heat flooding through her cheeks and an uncomfortable feeling filling her stomach like acid.

What was wrong with her? Was she feeling *jealous* of all things? That was ridiculous. She and Kai were just strangers thrown together by the oddest of circumstances. She barely knew him. She shook her head, scolding herself for being so foolish. She finished clearing the last of the tables and walked over to Rosa, who was counting her earnings for the night.

"Thank you," Caitlin said, hoping her gratitude was clear. "I really enjoyed helping out."

Rosa smiled, pocketing the coins. "You're a good lass. If you ever need anything, you know where to find me."

The door suddenly opened and Conall walked in. His gray eyes swept the room, taking in Kai and his companion, flicking to Emeric sat alone and brooding at his table, and then finally to Caitlin standing with Rosa. He gave Caitlin a friendly smile then crossed to Emeric's table and sat down. The two men spoke in low tones then Emeric got up and disappeared up the stairs whilst Conall gave Caitlin another quick look before taking out a book and starting to read.

Caitlin frowned to herself. Had she just seen a shift-change? Was it Conall's turn to be her minder now? Annoyance flashed through her. Did they all think she was so useless she needed watching every minute of every day?

She marched over to Conall and stood looking down at him with her arms crossed. He glanced up from his book.

"Good evening, my lady," he said with a nod. "I trust ye find yer accommodations to yer liking?"

His accent was lighter than the others' and she remembered Oskar saying that Conall was nobly born. Caitlin wasn't entirely sure what that meant. Was he a baron or something? But if that was true, why was he running around with Kai and his band?

"My accommodations are just fine," she said. "Did Kai tell you to come down here? Are you my new minder?"

"Yer what?" Conall said with a puzzled expression. "I dinna know the term."

Caitlin rolled her eyes. "Never mind. I just don't need someone watching over me all the time."

"I'm not watching over ye," Conall said, his voice low and serious. "I'm merely here to make sure ye're safe."

Caitlin bristled at the implication. "I'm not a child. I don't need anyone to look after me."

"Of course not," Conall said smoothly. "But it never hurts to have an extra pair of eyes and ears, does it?"

He had a point. She was in a strange place, and she couldn't afford to let her guard down. Still, it rankled her that she was being watched like a prisoner.

She swallowed hard and mumbled an excuse before turning away from Conall and walking to the stairs. She paused at the bottom and glanced over her shoulder.

Kai was watching her again, ignoring the dark-haired woman who was whispering something in his ear. Instead, his gaze was pinned on Caitlin and the intensity of it made heat flash up her neck.



She quickly turned away and climbed the stairs, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of seeing her flustered. When she reached her room, she closed the door behind her and leaned against it, letting out a shaky sigh. She breathed deeply, trying to calm herself.

It had been a wild, crazy day and exhaustion washed through her. All she wanted to do was sleep.

*Things will seem better in the morning,* she told herself. Locking her door, she crossed to the bed and lay down fully clothed. Her eyes drifted closed and sleep took her.

*There is something pinning her down. A heavy weight lies across the lower half of her body. She cannot feel her legs and when she tries to move, nothing happens. There is a strange smell in the air and a sound that's coming closer. It takes a moment for her to place it.*

*Smoke. Fire.*

*She glances to her right and in the dim light sees a woman lying next to her. She strains against the weight pinning her down, calling out the woman's name. But there is no response.*

*The heat is becoming unbearable. She has to get out. There is a beam lying across them both and Caitlin reaches out to try and move it, but although it isn't yet on fire, she can feel its heat radiating through it as if it's already been engulfed by the inferno. She screams, pulling back her hands as agony rockets through her.*

*There is no escape—Caitlin can feel it in her bones—but still, she cries out for help. Her throat is raw from screaming and all that comes out of her mouth is a desperate croak, barely audible even to herself.*

*She is trapped. Trapped.*

Caitlin lurched awake with a cry. Her heart was pounding, her body trembling. She scrambled to her feet and looked around wildly. Everything was blurry, hazy, as if she was looking through a fog. She tried to take deep breaths but they sounded ragged and unsteady even to herself. Her therapist's voice echoed in her head telling her to try grounding techniques or relaxation exercises but none of them worked.

The memories of Kai's words echoed through her mind: 'Ye aren't alone'. But this did not bring any relief—Caitlin knew she would always be alone in moments like these.

The room was closing in. She was trapped. Trapped again like a rat in a cage. She had to get out. She had to get home. She had to...

She had to get out *now*. This instant.

She ran to her door, unlocked it, hurried down the corridor and then the stairs. The common room was dark, with only the faintest light filtering through the windows. Caitlin sped to the door, lifted the bar, and pushed it open.

The night air was cold and crisp, and the stars shone brightly overhead. Caitlin paused only long enough to get her bearings from the stars before she began to run. She'd been mapping their route in her head all day and knew which direction she needed to head in.

She ran down the road, her eyes flicking back and forth as she tried to remember the landmarks she had noted earlier that day. The road was deserted, the only sound the crunching of the gravel under her feet.

She had enough presence of mind to keep out an eye for danger as she slowed her pace to a brisk walk. She glanced over her shoulder at Rosa's inn. In the darkness it was just a lump of shadow. Where was Kai right now? Asleep in one of those rooms? Was that woman with him? She felt an unexpected twinge deep in her gut.

She continued on, the night growing darker and colder as she left the light of the village behind. Despite the cold, sweat prickled on her forehead. She was on edge, barely able to keep the panic at

bay, and kept expecting someone to jump out of the shadows. But nothing happened. The road remained deserted.

The sound of rushing water caught her attention. She followed the sound to a nearby river, which was rushing along at a fast clip. It was wider than she had expected, and she hesitated for a moment before stepping onto the rocky bank.

She made her way carefully along the edge of the river, her eyes scanning the water. She was so focused on the river that she almost didn't notice the sound of hoofbeats approaching from behind.

She turned just in time to see a group of horsemen thundering towards her, their faces obscured by the darkness. Caitlin froze, her heart racing as the riders approached—and went thundering past without noticing her in the gloom.

She counted at least twelve of them and in the moonlight she caught the glint of weapons at their sides. She scrambled up the river bank and onto the road in time to see them disappear around a bend. Caitlin pressed her hand to her chest to try and still the thundering of her heart. Some instinct deep within warned her that those men were dangerous.

Who were they? And where were they going in such a hurry in the middle of the night? There was nothing out here except—

Except Aberfeldy where Kai and Conall and Rosa and the others were holed up, blissfully unaware of the danger riding towards them.

Caitlin never made the conscious decision. She suddenly just found herself sprinting back the way she'd come, a new urgency like panic filling her veins.

*Kai*, she thought. She ran faster, her lungs burning with the effort, her feet pounding the dirt road beneath her as she raced back towards Aberfeldy.

She rounded the bend in the road and skidded to a sudden halt. Firelight flickered through the trees ahead. Cautiously, Caitlin crept closer, her heart beating faster with every step. She could hear the murmur of voices now, but she couldn't make out what they were saying. She dropped to the ground and crawled, her heart in her throat, until she could see the people gathered around the fire.

The horses were tethered to the trees and the men were hunched around the flames, eating. One of them, the leader perhaps, was standing by the fire, addressing the rest.

“Everyone clear on the plan? This is to be a quick strike. In and out, no loitering. Angus and Devlin, ye will head to the animal pens and open them. Drive the animals out but dinna even think about trying to steal any. We dinna have time for any cattle-rustling tonight. Seamus, David, John, Patrick, ye will torch the inn. The rest of ye, torch the houses nearest the perimeter. Dinna go too far into Aberfeldy. We dinna want to risk getting trapped or any of the villagers seeing us. Understood?”

“This is a stupid plan,” one of the men grumbled. “What’s in it for us? What kind of a plan has us torching a place before we have a chance to loot it?”

Quick as a snake, the leader slammed his fist into the speaker’s face. The man went flying over backwards, roaring with pain.

“Because, ye ignorant piece of slime,” the leader growled. “This isnae about plunder. It’s about fear. The master wants those people scared, not dead. And if ye’re not willing to follow orders, then ye can leave now and find yerself a new gang to run with. But before ye do that, just remember how the master treats disloyalty.”

The man clambered up, wiping blood from his nose. “No need to go telling the master,” he said. “I didnae mean aught. I’m loyal. I’ve always been loyal.”

“Glad to hear it,” the leader said. “Get some food down yer gullets while ye can. We’ll rest the horses for half an hour then set out.”

Caitlin's mind raced. They were going to set fire to Aberfeldy! To Rosa's inn, where Kai was staying!

She crawled back the way she'd come, careful to make no sound, then climbed to her feet and began to run. She had half an hour before the riders set out again, half an hour to make it back to Aberfeldy and warn them. Would it be enough? What if the riders caught her on the road? What if they caught Kai and the others unaware? What if—?

She clenched her fists to beat back the panic rising up her throat. It was going to happen again. She wouldn't be able to save them. It would be just like last time.

Terror. Smoke. Crushing weight. Can't get out. Trapped. Trapped. Trapped!

Then suddenly she slammed into something so hard that it sent her staggering back. She almost lost her footing but before she could fall, strong hands caught her, pulled her back to her feet.

She opened her mouth to scream just as a hand clamped over her mouth. She looked up and found herself staring into Kai's face.

He looked very annoyed. "What in all the Hells?" he growled. "Caitlin! What are ye doing out here?"

He took his hand from her mouth, resting them instead on her shoulders. Before she knew what she was doing, Caitlin cannoned into him, wrapping her arms around him and burying her head in his shoulder.

He grunted at the impact, but then his arms went around her, just as they had back at the inn, strong and solid and reassuring. He stroked her hair with one hand.

"Hush, lass," he whispered. "It's all right. I've got ye. I've got ye."

Slowly, the terror eased. Within the solid cage of Kai's arms, her heartbeat began to slow.

She stepped back. "What are you doing here?"

"Isnae that the question I've just asked ye? What do ye *think* I'm doing here? Looking for ye! What did ye think ye were doing, woman?"

*Running away*, Caitlin thought. *I was running away.*

She shook her head. "There's no time. Kai, listen to me. There are men on the road behind me. Riders. I overheard them talking and they're coming to Aberfeldy. They're going to burn it!"

Kai's eyes flashed dangerously. "Where?"

She waved vaguely at the road behind them. "Not far. They're camped at the moment but they won't be for long."

"Stay here," Kai commanded, his voice like iron. "Hide in the trees. Dinna come out until I return." All trace of the charming scoundrel was gone. Instead, a cold, hard warrior stood before her, his face set with determination.

Caitlin caught his arm. "What are you doing? We have to get to the village and warn them!"

He spun back to face her. "Do ye really think we have time for that? If those men are mounted, they would run us down on the road long before we reached the village! I need to stop them now."

"Then I'm not letting you go alone."

"Aye, ye are," he growled. "Do as ye are told, woman."

"And how are you going to make me?" she challenged. "Tie me up? I'd like to see you try! I know where they are. I'll show you. It's better than you going blundering right into them, isn't it?"

He studied her a moment, his eyes like dark pools in the moonlight. "All right," he said at last. "But stay close and if I tell ye to run, then run."

They set off again, not taking the road but instead weaving through the trees alongside, keeping to the shadows. Kai moved without making a sound, stepping dextrously around bushes, ducking beneath

branches, a ghost in the night.

Caitlin hurried along in his wake, doing her best to emulate his quiet. Her heart raced with fear and adrenaline, and she tried her best to keep her breathing steady. She kept her eyes fixed on the road as they walked, scanning for any sign of the men.

She halted suddenly and grabbed Kai's arm. He looked back at her and she pointed to where the road bent around a stand of tall, thin pines.

"Just beyond the bend," she whispered. "They made camp in the trees to the left."

Kai nodded and together they darted across the road and into the cover of the pines. The thick coating of needles deadened the sound of their footfalls as they approached the camp.

They slowed their pace, crept up to the edge of the trees, and peered out at the riders. The men were clustered around the fire, eating and laughing, unaware of Caitlin and Kai crouched in the shadows.

Kai glanced at Caitlin and held up a hand, signaling for her to wait. Then he moved off into the trees, disappearing into the shadows as though he was a shadow himself.

Minutes ticked by like hours. Sweat gathered on Caitlin's forehead. The ever-present panic bubbled in her chest but she refused to let it take her. Finally, she heard the sound of a horse whinnying, followed by shouting and chaos. A second later, the thunder of hooves echoed through the woods and horses came stampeding towards her.

With a cry, Caitlin threw herself behind a tree as the horses—all riderless—came thundering past, eyes rolling and manes tossing. They clattered onto the road and galloped away south, disappearing into the distance.

Caitlin peeked out from behind the tree, trying to make out the riders' camp through the shadowy trunks. Where was Kai?

The sound of another set of hooves froze her in place. A rider burst out of the trees. Caitlin's eyes widened, her heart leaping into her mouth as the horse and rider bore down on her.

But it was Kai. He pulled up the horse in front of her, his expression unreadable but his eyes conveying something deep and fierce.

"We need to get out of here."

He held out his arm. With a gulp, Caitlin grabbed it and Kai hauled her into the saddle in front of him.

He held the reins in one hand, the other circling Caitlin's waist to steady her as he kicked his heels into the horse's sides, spurring the beast into a gallop. They passed out of the trees and down the road, vanishing into the night like wraiths in the wind.

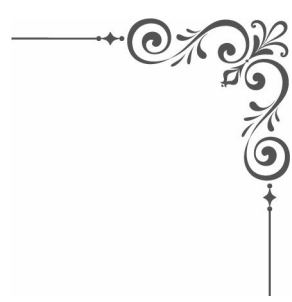
Finally, Kai slowed their pace to a canter and eventually brought them to a stop in a small clearing surrounded by trees. He jumped down, leaving Caitlin perched awkwardly on the horse's back, and jogged back to the road where he stood listening. If Caitlin hadn't known he was there she would never have noticed him. He was as still as stone, just a darker shadow in the night as he studied the road with an intense gaze.

Finally satisfied, he returned to Caitlin. "I dinna think they are following. I gave their horses a good enough scare to send them running halfway to Aberdeen. It will be a long time before those raiders recapture them, if at all."

Without another word, Kai climbed back into the saddle and clucked to the horse, guiding the beast back onto the road. They traveled more slowly this time, at little more than a brisk trot, but even so, Kai kept his arm tightly clamped around Caitlin's waist. To keep her safe? Or to make sure she didn't try to run off again?

They rode on in silence for a while, the only sound the steady rhythm of the horse's hooves on the road. Then he pulled the horse to a halt and swung down. Taking the reins, he walked the horse while Caitlin rode. He seemed lost in thought.

Finally, he asked the question she knew was coming. "Why did ye do it, lass? Why did ye run away?"



# Chapter 6

Kai watched Caitlin intently. In the darkness, she was little more than a shadow among shadows, her dark hair blending with the background so that he could barely see her. But he could *feel* her. Damn it all, the lass's nearness brushed against his senses like a lightning storm. If he closed his eyes and spun around a few times, he would still be able to pinpoint where she was.

She shifted uncomfortably. "I...I panicked. I was trying to get home," she said at last.

"Alone? In the dark? In a hostile place like this?" Dear God, she was either insanely brave or just plain insane. "Do ye have any idea of what could have happened to ye?"

The question came out rougher than he intended, and he realized he'd curled his hands into fists, keeping them by his side with an effort. He wanted to reach out and grab her, to shake her for being so damned stupid. Didn't she realize what she could have done?

She frowned. "Yes, I've got a very good idea of what could have happened to me. I could have run into a bunch of strange men who would have taken me captive, forced me to go with them into the wilds, and refused to let me go." Her eyes widened in mock-surprise. "Oh, wait. That's already happened, hasn't it?"

Kai growled deep in his throat. "That's unfair, lass. It wasnae me that brought ye back in time. I promised I would help ye didnae I? I thought we were beginning to trust each other."

Caitlin bit her lip, looking away. For a long time, she stared off into the trees. Finally, she turned back to him. "Trust each other?" she said, as though trying out the notion. "I...I would like that."

Kai paused. There was something in her eyes, something that hadn't been there before. She looked almost...hopeful.

He found himself wanting to reach out and touch her, but he forced himself back from the edge of recklessness and instead asked carefully, "Then why did ye run?"

Caitlin looked away again, her cheeks flushing. "It...it's difficult to explain." She sighed and looked back at him with a sad expression. "It's too easy for me to panic and run when I'm scared. It's an automatic response, something my subconscious does without my control."

He studied her in the darkness. He'd seen enough men damaged by battle to recognize it when he saw it in another. She'd been hurt, badly hurt, and he could tell she was used to keeping it well hidden. "What happened to ye, lass?" he asked softly.

She opened her mouth to speak and, for a moment, he thought she might tell him. But then she shook her head. "Nothing. It doesn't matter."

Kai watched as Caitlin seemed to retreat into herself. Whatever secrets were locked behind the wall she'd built would not be revealed by a few warm words or friendly gestures. Not yet anyway. Inexplicably, Kai found himself wanting to break down that wall, to see the real Caitlin hidden beneath the armor she wore to protect herself.

For a few seconds, they simply stared at each other, caught in a moment that felt like it could last forever.

Then she cleared her throat and ran a hand through her hair. "How did you know I'd gone, anyway?" she asked, clumsily changing the subject. "I didn't think you'd notice me. You seemed a little...busy."

"Busy?"

"With your...um...friend."

Friend? Did she mean Mae? Was that a hint of jealousy he heard in Caitlin's tone? He laughed softly.

"Something funny?" she asked.

He held up his hands. "Nay, lass, nothing at all." *If only you knew*, he thought. *You thought I didn't notice you? You thought I was too busy with Mae? Dear God, lass, dinna ye know an act when ye see it?*

The truth was that he'd done nothing *but* notice Caitlin all evening. His eyes had followed her wherever she went and he'd been unable to stop the surge of jealousy that ran through him when she'd sat with Emeric and then Conall—even though he'd been the one to instruct them to guard her. He'd longed to go over and join them, to join *her*, but had stopped himself, busying himself with Mae's attentions instead. Normally such flirting would soothe him, but tonight it had only made him feel out of sorts, like the mask he always wore for the outside world no longer quite fit.

"You still haven't answered my question," Caitlin prompted.

He sighed. "I knew ye were gone because I went to yer room. To check on ye, ye understand?" *Because I couldn't stay away*, he thought. *Because I lay in my bed—alone!—thinking about you all night. Dear God, lass, do you have any idea how frightened I was when I found you gone?*

But he couldn't say any of this to her. He couldn't expose himself like that.

It was his turn to clumsily change the subject. We had best be getting back. We need to warn Rosa and the villagers."

He climbed into the saddle and settled himself behind Caitlin, her back pressed against his chest. He could feel the heat of her body through his clothes, and it was both a comfort and a distraction.

As he nudged the horse from a walk to a canter, he forced his thoughts to more urgent matters. Those raiders had been coming to Aberfeldy. Why? Were they searching for Kai and his men? Were they working for Leif Snarlsson? Or were they just opportunists out for plunder?

"Caitlin," he said softly. "What can ye tell me about the men ye saw? Did ye hear them say anything?"

"I heard them arguing. Some of them wanted to plunder the village but the leader said not to. They were going to torch the place then run. The leader said the 'master' wanted the people scared, not dead. I don't know who this 'master' is."

Kai suspected he might. Caitlin shifted on the horse, her back rubbing against his chest. He tried to push down the flare of desire that shot through him at the sensation.

Finally, Aberfeldy came into sight in the distance, just a cluster of shadows in the darkness lit only by a few candles burning in windows. Kai heard a sudden 'twang' and an arrow thudded into the dirt right in front of the horse's hooves. The beast whinnied, shying to one side so Kai had to saw hard on the reins.

"Damn it, Emeric!" he yelled. "Are ye trying to get Caitlin and me killed?"

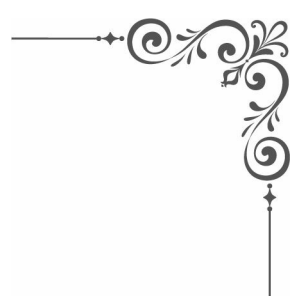
Branches above rustled and Emeric suddenly dropped to the ground. He shrugged. "Sorry, Kai. I didnae realize it was ye."

"Evidently. What are ye doing out here?"

"Looking for ye," Oskar said, stepping out of the trees. "Mae said ye weren't in yer room when she went to...um...keep ye company. When we couldnae find ye or Caitlin, we thought we'd best come looking. Where have ye been?"

Kai didn't answer Oskar's question. "Gather everyone," he snapped. "I need to talk to the whole village. It seems Caitlin may just have saved all our arses for the second time."





# Chapter 7

Caitlin stood at the back of the inn, trying not to be noticed as the occupants argued. Kai had climbed onto a table at the front, commanding attention as he spoke in a low, serious voice. She couldn't hear everything he was saying, but she could make out phrases like "band of brigands," "intent on causing chaos," and "threat to this village."

The villagers murmured and shifted, some clearly frightened, some angry and itching for a fight. Kai's eyes swept over the crowd, his gaze coming to rest on her briefly before moving on. She wondered what he was thinking.

"What are we gonna do?" a thin, blonde woman asked, panic in her voice.

"Isnae it obvious?" another woman replied. "We run. Go west to MacAuley lands. They'll take us in."

"We will do no such thing!" Rosa said angrily. "You would let these people drive you out of your homes? We will stand and fight!"

The room erupted into a chorus of agreement and Caitlin felt a swell of admiration for the village leader. Rosa was a force to be reckoned with.

"And we'll fight with ye!" This was from Oskar. The man looked angry enough to take on the entire band of brigands by himself. At Caitlin's side, Emeric shifted uncomfortably and Conall rolled his eyes.

"He needs to shut his mouth," the gray-eyed man murmured. "And not make promises he canna keep."

Kai raised his hand for silence, and the room quieted. "As Rosa says, ye are *not* going to run," he said firmly. "Ye aren't in any immediate danger. The bandits were relying on surprise, a lightning raid that would have ye running scared. These kinds of men are not brave. They will only go for weak targets. They have lost their horses and, therefore, their method of escape, so I doubt they will try their luck again." He held up his hand as the villagers began muttering. "Nevertheless, I suggest ye post guards. I will put together a rotation schedule which ye can implement."

"But aren't ye gonna stay and help us?" someone shouted. "Oskar told us ye would!"

Kai's expression darkened and his gaze flicked to Oskar. "Nay. I'm afraid we have other business to attend to."

He jumped down from the table, grabbed Oskar's shoulder, and propelled him ahead of him. "Outside. Now."

Caitlin followed them into the yard. The sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon, its rays turning the sky to a soft pink hue. Dew clung to the grass and fog still lingered in patches. Somewhere in the distance, birds began chirping their morning songs and a gentle breeze ruffled Caitlin's hair.

"Ye canna be serious!" Oskar growled, swinging around to face Kai. "Ye know who those men work for! Ye canna leave these people at their mercy!"

"What would ye have me do?" Kai snapped. "Stay to defend this village and blow our mission? How many would suffer then?"

"We canna just walk away," Oskar replied stubbornly. "It isnae right."

"This isnae our fight, man. We have a mission to complete and we canna afford to be sidetracked."

“Like hell we canna!” Oskar hissed. “I’ve never known ye to back away from a fight! I’ve never known ye to be a coward!”

Kai shifted forward, his face inches away from Oskar’s. “A coward, am I?” he growled, his words as sharp as daggers. “Call me that again and so help me I’ll teach ye a lesson ye willnae forget.”

Oskar bared his teeth and his hand balled into a fist. “Ye can try.”

The red-haired swordsman swung his fist in a fierce blow, but Kai merely swayed out of the way, grabbed Oskar’s shoulder, and rammed him against the inn wall.

“Enough!” he snarled. “I know what was done to ye. I know what ye lost. Did I not promise ye revenge? But not like this. Not here. Not yet. We have to do this right, damn it!”

Oskar glared at Kai, his eyes blazing. But slowly, the fire faded and his body relaxed beneath Kai’s grip. Caitlin saw something pass between them—an understanding that held unspoken emotion. Then, finally, Kai let go of Oskar and stepped away.

The swordsman wiped a hand across his brow. “Aye,” he said softly. “My apologies. Ye are right.”

Kai grinned. “Aren’t I always?”

And just like that, the tension evaporated.

The door opened and Rosa stepped out of the inn, pulling a shawl around herself against the chill air. She cast a measuring glance over the scene and sighed.

“I know you have to leave,” she said, her voice filled with resignation.

Oskar opened his mouth to speak, but snapped it shut again when Kai shot him a look.

Kai stepped forward and took Rosa’s hands. “With ye in charge, Rosa, these people have nothing to worry about.”

Rosa snorted. “Flattery will get you nowhere, you realize that? I know you too well, Kai Stewart.” She jerked her head to indicate the yard behind her. “Some of the men have volunteered for guard duty. They’re waiting for your orders.”

Things happened quickly after that. Kai walked off to speak to the village men, Conall and Oskar went to retrieve the cart, whilst Emeric disappeared into the inn to fetch their gear.

Caitlin found herself left alone with Rosa.

“He’s a fine man, isn’t he?”

Caitlin looked at her. “I’m sorry?”

Rosa gave a low laugh. “It’s alright, little dove. You don’t need to hide it from me. I’ve seen the way you look at him. Like I said, he’s a fine man, isn’t he?”

Caitlin didn’t know what to say to that. “I suppose so. But he’s also very complicated.”

“Aren’t we all?” Rosa said with a chuckle. “But Kai, perhaps more than most. I’ve known him for years and I still wonder if I know the real man at all.” She gave Caitlin a quizzical look. “Perhaps you can be the one to peek beneath the mask, eh?” She patted Caitlin on the cheek. “Come now. Let’s get you provisioned for this trip. I very much doubt any of your companions have given a thought to a lady’s comfort.”

Caitlin followed Rosa back into the inn. Most of the villagers had dispersed and the common room was quiet. Rosa led Caitlin behind the bar and through a curtain into a single long room that she guessed was Rosa’s living quarters. It was rustic but homely with a large fireplace, flagstone floors, and a well-scrubbed table. A single rickety bed stood in one corner with a chest next to it.

Rosa knelt on the floor in front of the chest, threw the catches, and opened the lid. Inside, Caitlin saw piles of neatly folded clothes. Rosa reached out and ran her fingers gently over the material, a

wistful expression on her face.

“My lover gave me these,” she said softly. “Many years ago now. It’s a long time since I’ve worn any of them.”

She pulled out a garment and climbed to her feet, turning to face Caitlin. She was holding a beautiful satin dress in a pale lilac. “This will look perfect on you.”

“You want *me* to have it?” Caitlin asked in surprise. “Thank you, Rosa, it’s very kind of you to offer, but I couldn’t possibly—”

“You can, and you will. I will never wear these again. It would make an old woman happy to see them go to a good home.”

Old woman? Rosa couldn’t be more than forty! And yet, Caitlin could see the sadness in Rosa’s eyes and the lines etched deep into her face, the marks of a hard life.

Caitlin allowed herself to be led to a stool where Rosa began to fuss over her, brushing out her hair then tying it into a long plait.

“Now, let’s get you into this dress. I don’t know where Kai scrounged that old thing from, but it’s barely good for rags. Here, I’ll help you out of it.”

She reached for the ties on the front of Caitlin’s dress. A jolt of panic went through Caitlin and she lurched up, stumbling over her own feet in her haste to get away.

“No,” she stammered. “It’s fine. I can do it myself.”

Rosa nodded. “All right, my dove,” she said soothingly. “There’s a curtain over there if you would rather change behind it.”

Caitlin grabbed the dress and dived behind the curtain. She could feel her cheeks burning as she quickly stripped off her clothes and slipped into the satin dress. To her relief, it had long sleeves and a deep hem which covered her arms and legs. She kept her gloves on, even though they didn’t match the dress.

When she stepped out from behind the curtain, Rosa smiled. “Ha! I knew it! If there is one thing I have an eye for, it is beauty. You look like a princess.”

Caitlin snorted. “Really? I feel ridiculous.”

Rosa eyed Caitlin’s fingerless gloves but didn’t comment. The older woman began throwing out more clothes, which she packed into a leather satchel along with some soap and a hairbrush.

Finally satisfied, she straightened and held out the satchel. “There. That should keep you going until you get to...wherever you are going.”

Caitlin took the satchel, slung it over one shoulder, then curled her fingers around Rosa’s.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” she said. “I’m grateful for everything.”

Rosa smiled, her dark eyes twinkling. “I never had a daughter, never had anyone to spoil or pass my things onto. You’ve given me that—if only for a short time.” She pulled Caitlin into an embrace and hugged her tightly.

There was a knock on the door and Emeric stuck his head in. “Time to go, Caitlin.”

Caitlin released Rosa with a sigh and followed Emeric outside. The horses were already hitched to the wagon, steam rising from their nostrils as they stamped their feet. Inside the wagon she could make out blankets and camping gear, along with food for their journey.

Kai stood at the front of the wagon, his broad shoulders silhouetted against the pink sky. He gave Caitlin a crooked smile.

“Ready?”

She swallowed thickly. Ready? She would never be ready. But she merely nodded and climbed up onto the wagon seat.

Kai turned to Rosa. "I've drilled the men as best I can, but they'll soon get lazy and complacent if someone doesn't keep them in line."

"Oh, don't you worry about that. If there is one thing I'm good at, it's keeping men in line."

Kai laughed. "Aye, dinna I know it?"

Rosa smiled and her dark eyes found Caitlin's. "Goodbye, my dove. And good luck. I hope you find what you're looking for." She flicked a significant look at Kai, which thankfully he didn't notice.

Kai climbed onto the driver's seat beside Caitlin while Conall, Emeric and Oskar scrambled into the back of the wagon. Kai took up the reins, clucked to the horses, and the wagon lurched into motion, trundling away down the road. Caitlin twisted in her seat and waved back at Rosa until the woman was lost in the distance.

For just a short while, she had felt safe in *The Drunken Piper*. It had only been for a few hours, but at least it was something. Now they were riding into God-alone knew what.

"Where are we headed?" she asked as the cart rolled along the track.

Kai's blue eyes flicked to hers. "North."

"North? North where?"

"Now that would be telling."

Caitlin glared at him. "Oh, so we're back to that are we?"

"Back to what?"

"Cryptic answers that tell me absolutely nothing. Do you know how annoying that is?"

Kai's eyebrows rose. "Do ye mean to tell me that ye dinna appreciate the thrill of the unknown?"

Caitlin rolled her eyes. "That's exactly what I'm telling you."

Kai's expression turned serious. "Alfred gave us the name of the rendezvous and where it is. Finn's Cross. That's all I know. I canna tell ye more until we get there."

Caitlin supposed she would have to be satisfied with that. She had assumed that after Aberfeldy her ordeal would be over, that she would be home by now. Instead, she was stuck with these people. With Kai.

She glanced at him, but his blue eyes were fixed on the road ahead.

*He's a complicated man*, Rosa had told her. What had she meant by that?

"See anything ye like?" Kai asked, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

Caitlin looked away, flushing with embarrassment. "Nothing," she said, feeling foolish at being caught staring.

Kai chuckled. "Ye are a terrible liar, Caitlin. Come on, out with it."

She shrugged. "You seem distracted. I was just wondering what you're thinking about."

"Isn't that obvious? I'm sitting here wondering why my beautiful companion is staring at me."

Caitlin huffed. "You're impossible, you know that?"

Kai's grin only widened.

Caitlin looked around. Behind them, Emeric was asleep in the back, his head bobbing gently with the swaying of the wagon. Conall had gotten out and was walking alongside it while Oskar glared fiercely out at the landscape.

"He doesn't look very happy," Caitlin said to Kai, indicating the swordsman.

Kai nodded. "He'll be all right. He never likes to walk away from a fight."

"So I gathered. He seemed to take it pretty personally when those bandits were going to attack Aberfeldy."

Kai sighed heavily. "Aye," he replied in a low voice that wouldn't carry. "Oskar has been fighting his whole life. It's all he's ever known. He lets his anger get the best of him sometimes, but he's a

good man. I'd trust him with my life. I'd trust *all* of them with my life."

Caitlin said nothing. There was so much she didn't know about her unexpected traveling companions.

Kai yanked suddenly on the reins, pulling the cart to an abrupt halt. In the back, Emeric came awake with a snort, and Oskar cursed as he was jostled against the cargo.

Kai jumped lightly down from the wagon seat, crouching in the dirt and scanning the ground. The rest of his men joined him.

"Hoofprints," Kai said grimly. "Lots of them. A large group of riders came through here recently." He stood and looked around. "I dinna like the look of those trees," he announced, nodding at a ridge of conifers that stood directly in their path. "The perfect place for an ambush. I'm going to scout ahead. Conall, Emeric, take point to either side of the wagon. Whistle if ye so much as smell anything out of the ordinary. Oskar, ye will stay with the wagon."

"With the wagon?" Oskar snapped. "I'm not a bloody wagon-driver!"

"Nay," Kai agreed lightly. "Ye are Lady Caitlin's guard, and I wouldnae trust anyone else with such a task."

This took the wind out of Oskar's anger. He nodded grudgingly, then climbed up onto the wagon seat beside Caitlin and took the reins.

The sudden change in mood fell over the group like a blanket, and Caitlin's stomach clenched with apprehension. She could only watch mutely as Kai and the others disappeared into the trees.

Silence descended. Oskar noticed her unease and gave her a reassuring smile. "Dinna worry, Lady Caitlin. We'll be through this forest in no time, and then we'll be back on the open road again."

Caitlin forced a smile, although her disquiet did not abate. Oskar clucked to the horses and the wagon lurched into motion.

They were soon swallowed by the trees. What had been a cold, clear day became instantly gloomy as they passed beneath the thick cover of the forest canopy. The trees grew close together and there was no undergrowth between the trunks, only shadow.

Oskar remained silent, his eyes sweeping the trees that crowded close on either side, the squeak of the axles and the thud of the horses' hooves the only sound in the still, thick air.

She hadn't realized that she was leaning forward on the wagon seat, or that she was clinging tightly to its edges until Oskar said, "Relax, lass. Ye are making the horses nervous."

"Easy for you to say," she muttered, but she forced her fingers to unclench and leaned back in her seat. She cast a quick glance over her shoulder at their cargo. The casks of gunpowder weren't visible, buried beneath the false bed and the other supplies piled on top. Was that what this was all about? About who could get their hands on such a destructive weapon?

The wagon trundled on through the trees for what seemed like hours until finally, blessedly, they emerged into a clearing and Caitlin breathed a sigh of relief as sunlight warmed her skin again. The others were already there waiting for them, standing in a circle around something at the side of the road. Oskar directed the horses towards them with a gentle tug on the reins.

Kai came to meet them, his face unreadable, but his eyes alight with something that Caitlin couldn't quite identify. "They're gone," he announced. "At least a day ago if the remains of the campfire are anything to go by."

Now Caitlin could see that the others were gathered around a scorched circle in the grass. The inside of the circle was filled with ash and bits of burned wood. Someone had camped here.

"And we found something," Conall said. "In the remains of the campfire. Looks like they tried to burn it. What do ye make of this?"

He held something up to Oskar. Oskar took it, and Caitlin saw that it was a scrap of tartan cloth with some kind of sigil sewn into it. She couldn't make it out very well, but the design looked like a representation of an orca.

Oskar ran his hands over the cloth and looked at Kai in surprise. "Do ye think this means—?"

"I dinna know," Kai replied, unease in his voice. "But I dinna like it." He took the scrap of cloth from Oskar and tucked it away.

"What is it?" Caitlin asked. "Why do you all look like you've swallowed a wasp?"

"Naught," Kai replied. He rubbed his chin. "At least, I hope it's naught. Come. I've found us a place to camp for the night."

He led them through the clearing and into the trees, winding his way around thick trunks and across moss-covered glades. The sun had begun to dip in the sky when at last they came to a large, flat area at the top of a small hill that had been cleared of all but a few scattered trees.

As Oskar brought the wagon to a halt, Caitlin climbed down, stretching her stiff muscles with a relieved sigh. She was glad she hadn't had to walk all day, but sitting on a hard wooden bench made her backside ache with a vengeance.

The others went to work setting up camp with the easy efficiency of those who had done it many times before. Oskar saw to the horses, Kai set about building a fire, whilst Emeric and Conall unpacked their supplies.

Caitlin watched, feeling useless. "Er...is there anything I can do to help?" she asked.

The men glanced up at her as though surprised she would ask.

Kai shrugged and nodded at the supplies. "Ye can help us prepare dinner."

Caitlin nodded, relieved at having something to do. She took a knife, sat on a nearby log, and began to peel parsnips. The men worked around her, their movements fluid and practiced.

As night fell, they gathered around the fire, their meal of roasted rabbit and vegetables sizzling on skewers above the flames. The men talked quietly amongst themselves and laughed now and then, and Caitlin was content to sit and listen.

Oskar passed around a flask of what smelled like whisky, and she took a sip when it was offered to her. The warmth of the alcohol spread through her body, and she felt herself relax a little.

Kai caught her eye from across the fire. The directness of his gaze sent a heat flushing through her that had nothing to do with the whisky. She turned her head, forcing herself to concentrate on what Oskar was saying.

He was telling a story about their last mission, which involved hunting down some bandits that had been harrying travelers, complete with dramatic hand gestures and exaggerated facial expressions. The others laughed and chimed in with their own embellishments.

With a dramatic flourish, Oskar finished his story then tossed the flask across the fire towards Emeric. The archer made a grab for it, missed it entirely, and the whisky sprayed into the flames with a loud whoosh. Sparks flew up into the night sky and Caitlin let out a gasp as the night breeze took them and blew the little sparks right at her.

The flames seemed to flicker around her and, for a moment, she was paralyzed with fear. Memory flared. Smoke. Heat. Choking agony.

She jumped to her feet and stumbled backwards, her heart pounding. She couldn't seem to catch her breath.

Kai was at her side in an instant, his arm around her shoulders as he guided her a few steps away from the firepit. "It's alright," he said softly. "It's just a spark."

Caitlin nodded quickly. “Of course it is. It just made me jump, that’s all. I...er...I think I’ll go to bed.”

Before anyone could speak, she hurried into the tent that Emeric had set up for her. It was the only tent they had, and the others would sleep on bedrolls by the fire. The interior of the tent was dark, small, and smelled unpleasantly of mildew but Caitlin barely noticed as she knelt on the hard ground, squeezed her eyes tight shut and balled her hands into fists as she felt the panic rise up inside her.

*No, she told herself. You’re not having me this time.*

She practiced the techniques her therapist had taught her: breathing deeply whilst visualizing the panic passing through her and dissipating like water draining away.

Slowly, the tension in her body began to ease. She closed her eyes and let the sound of the campfire and the men’s voices fade into the background. She focused instead on the sound of crickets and the rustling of leaves in the gentle breeze, conjuring up a mental image of a peaceful meadow bathed in sun.

*You’re okay, she told herself. You’re safe.*

She wasn’t, of course. She was neither okay nor safe. She rolled up the hem of her dress and stared at her calves, at the rough, ridged skin and all it signified. Tears welled in her eyes.

The crunch of footsteps sounded outside and Kai’s deep voice rumbled, “Are ye all right, lass?”

Caitlin jumped, quickly pulled down her dress, and wiped the back of her hand across her eyes. “I’m fine,” she called.

Those were not the words she wanted to say. What she wanted to say was, *no actually, and I could really do with you coming in here and holding me right now. I could really do with you putting your arms around me like you did at the inn. I could really do with you making me feel safe and warm and...and...*

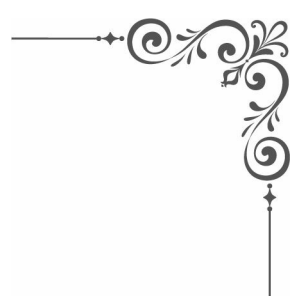
But she couldn’t say any of that. Not without revealing her flaws and then Kai would know the truth about how broken she was. She couldn’t risk that. Not now. Not ever.

After a moment she heard Kai move away.

With a huff, she lay back, put her hands behind her head, and stared at the moth-eaten interior of the tent. She could still hear the crackle of the campfire and the low voices of the others outside. She listened out for Kai but he was silent.

She closed her eyes and fell into fitful dreams full of flames and screaming.





## Chapter 8

Kai pulled his cloak tighter around him and stared into the darkness. The campfire had burned down to embers and as a result, it was biting cold. Not for the first time that night he wished he was inside the tent being kept warm by a soft body—Caitlin’s soft body to be exact.

He huffed and shifted his weight, tearing his gaze away from the dark shadow of the tent and scanning the clearing instead. He was supposed to be keeping watch but he was distracted, his thoughts flipping back to Caitlin no matter his efforts to control them.

When those sparks from the fire had drifted towards her earlier, she’d reacted as if she was being attacked by an army of demons. He’d seen the fear in her eyes, the way she’d jumped up and stumbled back from the fire. His heart had twisted at the sight of her terror.

He’d known then that she was not all right, despite her protestations to the contrary. She guarded her past fiercely—didn’t they all?—but he wanted to know what was wrong, what caused the terror he sometimes saw in her eyes, the terror she so desperately tried to hide. But he knew she would not tell him if he asked.

He sighed and rubbed his hands together, trying to warm them. The night was quiet save for the occasional hoot of an owl or rustling of leaves. He detected no threats nearby and nor did any of his men if their snoring was any indication.

He hoped that his band had come far enough that anyone following would have lost their trail. Only Alfred had known they’d stolen Leif Snarlsson’s cargo so nobody should be tracking them. But still it made him uneasy.

All of this seemed too coincidental—Alfred and his cargo, Irene and then Caitlin, the planned attack on Aberfeldy, the scrap of cloth he’d found in the ash earlier—all of it was connected, he was sure of it. He just didn’t know how.

Conall turned over in his sleep, grunted, and sat up, looking around. Spotting Kai, he said, “It’s past my turn at watch. Why didnae ye wake me?”

“I couldnae sleep,” Kai replied. “No point in us both being awake. Go back to sleep.”

Conall watched him for a moment then sighed, climbed to his feet, and came over to sit next to Kai. He picked a stalk of grass and began shredding it. For a long time, neither man spoke.

“Ye did the right thing, ye know,” Conall said at last, his voice soft.

“Right thing?”

“By leaving Aberfeldy. If we had stayed, we would only have brought down more trouble on the village. Best for everyone if Leif Snarlsson doesnae know who we are.”

Kai snorted softly. “Tell that to Oskar.”

“Oskar lets his arse do the talking most of the time. If he engages his brain once in a while, he’d realize ye had no choice.”

Kai knew he’d made the right decision but still it rankled. He’d never been one to back down from a fight or leave innocent people unprotected. But he wasn’t the head-strong young warrior he’d once been, free to make his own choices and to hell with the consequences. He was a leader now. A member of the Order of the Osprey. He had the lives of his men and the needs of the Order to think about.

And then there was Caitlin. He would not risk putting her in further danger.

His eyes strayed to the tent. He couldn't hear anything from within. Was she awake? Was she thinking about him the way he seemed to always be thinking about her?

He growled softly under his breath. No. No more of this. As a rule, he never got emotionally entangled. If other men wanted to bare their hearts, that was their business. Not him. He'd learned the hard way not to expose himself like that. It led only to ruin and despair.

Following the line of his gaze, Conall said softly. "She's a bonny lass, all right."

Kai pulled his gaze away from the tent and glared at his friend. "Aye, she is. What of it?"

Conall held up his hands and laughed softly. "Naught, my friend. Naught at all if that's the way ye want to play it."

Kai looked away, staring out into the darkness, but he could feel Conall watching him.

"Not all women are like Lorna, ye know," Conall said softly.

Kai's head whipped around and he opened his mouth for an angry retort but a sound suddenly came out of the darkness. Both men froze. It came again, so soft Kai could almost imagine he'd dreamt it: the soft tread of footsteps.

He jumped to his feet, Conall only a heartbeat behind. He gave a long, low whistle, the signal for danger, and both Oskar and Emeric came awake in an instant. They scrambled out of their blankets quickly.

"Guard Caitlin," Kai commanded in a low voice.

Wordlessly they spread out, circling Caitlin's tent and drawing weapons. None of them said a word, just dropped into the practiced routine they'd done countless times before. They formed a rough circle, the tent in the center, staring out into the night. Kai and Oskar held swords, Emeric had his bow drawn and nocked an arrow, and Conall held twin throwing daggers. Whoever was out there, they'd have a rude awakening if they thought to catch his band unprepared.

Kai felt a wave of gratitude. He'd trust each and every one of these men with his life. They were more than just companions. They were his brothers. Maybe not by blood as Rory was, but brothers nonetheless.

The sound came again, nearer this time, and Kai caught sight of a large shape lumbering towards them through the gloom. His fingers tightened on the hilt of his sword, muscles tensing for a fight.

Then a voice called, "I'm not coming out until ye put yer damned tooth-picks away, boys. I dinna fancy being skewered tonight!"

Kai let out his breath in a whoosh and his shoulders relaxed. "If ye dinna fancy being skewered mayhap ye shouldnae sneak up on people in the middle of the damned night!" he called back.

The undergrowth rustled and Magnus stepped out into the starlight, grinning from ear to ear. "How else am I supposed to keep ye sorry lot on yer toes?"

"One of these days, Magnus, ye are gonna push yer luck too far," Kai growled.

Magnus laughed and clapped him on the back. "But not today, eh?"

Kai couldn't help the grin that tugged at the corners of his lips. He sheathed his sword and they all clustered around Magnus, shaking his hand and clapping him on the back.

Kai gestured for them to sit and they settled around the fire. He handed Magnus the whisky flask and the big man drank deeply, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Ah, but that hits the spot. It feels like I've been traveling an age."

"How did ye find us?" Kai asked.

"With difficulty," Magnus replied with a scowl. "Why did ye leave the road?"

"We suspected an ambush," Kai answered. "We ran into some...trouble...at Aberfeldy."

Magnus's eyebrows rose at that but before he could ask questions, Kai said, "Did ye get Alfred back to the Order all right?"

"I did, but it wasnae easy. The bastard fought me every step of the way. I had to knock him out a few times to get him to keep quiet." Magnus chuckled wickedly at the memory. "Seems he's even more scared of the Order of the Osprey than he is of Leif Snarlsson."

Kai leaned forward, his hands on his knees. "Did the Order get any information out of him?"

Magnus shook his head. "No more than we already knew. Seems he's a low-ranking member of Snarlsson's organization and doesnae know much. Laird Callum was able to discover some interesting information about Snarlsson himself though."

He reached into a leather scrip that hung at his side, pulled out a rolled parchment, and handed it over. Kai unrolled it, scanned the contents, then whistled under his breath.

"Seems our friend has enemies in high places. Snarlsson is wanted by the king of Denmark and Norway."

"Wanted for what?" Emeric asked, unstringing his bow and tucking it back into its case.

"It doesnae say."

"Doesnae need to," Oskar said. "If he's wanted by royalty, he must have done something pretty bad. Ever get the feeling we're walking into a bear pit?"

Kai grunted in agreement then folded the parchment and tucked it into his tunic. Unease settled in his stomach and he glanced over at the tent where Caitlin was sleeping.

He sighed and leaned back against a log. Snarlsson was no small-time criminal. He was a powerful man with connections and resources enough that he could import gunpowder all the way from the orient. But why? What was he planning? And who was helping him? He had to have allies in the Highlands to be able to pull this off.

Magnus noticed the look on Kai's face and nudged him with his elbow. "Ye look like ye just found out yer wife's been unfaithful. What's troubling ye?"

Kai shook his head. "Nothing. Everything."

"Want to talk about it?"

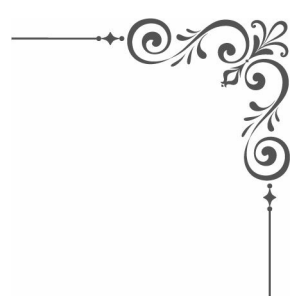
"Not really."

Magnus snorted. "Aye, well, I'll leave ye to yer brooding then. I'm going to bed."

He lay on his back by the fire and closed his eyes. The others followed his example and they were all soon snoring again.

Kai stared into the smoldering embers of the fire. He couldn't shake the feeling that something big was coming, something that would change everything.

And he wasn't sure he was ready for it.



# Chapter 9

Caitlin climbed out of bed the next morning, staggered groggily to her feet, tottered out into early morning sunshine—and stopped dead. A horse was standing outside her tent, idly cropping grass. It lifted its head and snorted at her.

“Um. Hi. Where did you come from?” she asked. It was not one of the horses that had been pulling the wagon.

She held out her hand. The horse sniffed her palm with the velvety end of its nose then went back to cropping grass, swishing its tail to keep away flies.

Caitlin scratched the back of her head. Other than herself and the horse, the clearing was empty. The fire pit was black and cold and four piled bedrolls sat next to it but there was no sign of their owners.

She took a few steps out of the tent—edging carefully around the horse—and spun around as a voice boomed suddenly, “Ah! Good morning, lass!”

A huge man stepped out of the trees, smiling broadly. He was carrying a curry brush in one hand. Caitlin blinked in surprise. “Magnus?”

She’d only met the man briefly before he’d been charged with escorting Alfred to prison, but she would be hard pressed to forget him. He was muscled like a footballer, tall enough to be a basketball player, and had a chiseled, handsome face, with green eyes and jet-black hair.

He gave her a small bow. “The very same.”

“But...but...when did you get here?”

“Around midnight I reckon. Maybe a bit later. I had to stop to rest the horse for a while or I’d have been here sooner.”

Caitlin had not even heard him arrive. She must have been so exhausted she’d all but passed out.

“Where’s everyone else?”

“On errands. Emeric and Oskar have gone to fetch breakfast, Conall to scout back along our trail.”

“And...Kai?”

He laughed softly, a low rumble like an avalanche. “Dinna worry, lass. He’ll be back soon. He’s scouting ahead.”

Caitlin pointed at the horse. “Is she yours?”

“Technically she’s Alfred’s but seeing as he’s currently sitting in an Order jail cell, I figured he wouldnae be needing her for a while. I was just about to hitch her up to the cart. That prancing beast of Conall’s isnae cut out for pulling a wagon.”

“Oh. Can I help?”

Magnus handed her the curry brush. “Thank ye, lass. Ye can brush her down while I get the cart ready.”

Caitlin nodded and started brushing the horse’s coat. The beast was enormous, with the strong shoulders and hairy fetlocks of a dray horse but she was also friendly and seemed to enjoy the attention, although at one point she leaned against Caitlin contentedly and nearly knocked her onto her backside.

When Caitlin had finished, she handed the brush back to Magnus and together they began hitching the horse to the cart. As they worked, the sound of footsteps reached Caitlin’s ears and she turned to

see Emeric, Conall and Oskar striding over with several loaves of bread and strips of what looked like bacon.

“We’ve got breakfast!” Emeric called.

Caitlin’s stomach growled at the smell of freshly baked bread. Magnus wasted no time in starting a fire and settling down to cook breakfast. The men settled around the fire but Caitlin hesitated to join them. She couldn’t help glancing to the north, where Kai had gone.

A branch snapped behind her and she whirled just as the man himself stepped into the clearing. Her heart fluttered but she forced herself to remain where she was and keep a passive expression on her face.

Kai caught sight of her and stopped. An expression flashed across his face so quickly she could almost believe she’d imagined it. It had looked like...longing? Or was that just wishful thinking?

A moment later, he broke into a cocky grin and raised an eyebrow at her. “Well, I must admit, I didnae expect a welcoming party. Missing me already, lass?”

She scowled. “Get over yourself. I was just seeing to the horses.”

He barked a laugh, took her elbow, and steered her over to where the others were sitting by the fire. The smell of cooking bacon and fresh bread was enough to make her mouth water.

She seated herself on a log and Kai sat next to her—uncomfortably close if truth be told—although he didn’t seem to notice. Or maybe he did notice and enjoyed her discomfort. Ah, damn it, the man was insufferable.

“Did ye find anything?” Kai asked Conall as Magnus dished out fried bacon and bread.

The tracker shook his head. “Naught out of the ordinary. Just the usual travelers on the road. Ye?”

“Naught, either. The road seems clear. Mayhap we’ve been lucky and escaped notice.”

Oskar snorted. “Lucky? That would be a first.”

“Aye, it would,” Kai agreed. “But I’m not one to scorn a gift when it’s offered me. If the weather stays fine, we should reach Finn’s Cross by midday.”

Caitlin took the small wooden plate that Magnus offered her and nodded her thanks. Several strips of bacon and two large chunks of bread slathered with butter filled the plate. She made herself a bacon sandwich and tucked in, throwing manners to the wind and eating ravenously. It was delicious and only a helping of spicy sauce and a nice coffee to wash it down with would have made it any better.

She swallowed and said, “This Finn’s Cross place. What is it? A village?”

“I’m not sure,” Kai answered. “I’ve never visited but if it’s a place Leif Snarlsson uses, I would imagine it’s an out-of-the-way place that makes it easy to keep beneath the notice of the local lord and sheriff.” He looked around at them all. “We’ll go cautiously and decide on our best method of approach when we know more about what we’re dealing with.”

The men nodded in agreement. They finished their breakfast, cleaned up, and began packing their gear, ready to move on. Caitlin found herself working alongside Kai as they stowed their supplies in the cart.

“Something on yer mind, lass?” Kai asked, glancing over at her.

Caitlin looked up. “What? Oh. I was just...thinking.”

“Thinking? Didnae anyone ever tell ye how dangerous that is? Ye might start having ideas and who knows where that could lead.”

“I was actually thinking about what we’ll find in Finn’s Cross.”

Kai shrugged. “We have to be ready for anything.”

They got moving soon after that. Conall mounted his horse again now that it had been swapped out of the wagon traces. Oskar and Magnus rode in the back of the cart whilst Emeric took his turn at walking.

It was a cool, overcast morning as they made their way back onto the forest road. Overhead, the breeze rustled through the treetops, making them sigh and wave. Not for the first time, Caitlin was glad of the thick blanket that Kai had given her as she huddled down on the wagon seat, pulling it tight about her.

Anticipation and trepidation warred in her gut. They would reach their destination today. Kai and the others would fulfill their mission and then Kai would take her to his brother as promised, and she would find a way home.

By tonight she could be back in her little terraced house, sitting in front of the TV eating chocolate! It sounded like heaven and she closed her eyes, overwhelmed for a second by the thought of it.

But hot on the heels of the relief came another feeling, one she struggled to place, one that made her stomach feel like a boulder sat in it. Regret?

She glanced at Kai and the feeling intensified.

Finally, the trees pulled back and the road came out into open country. It was climbing steadily towards the uplands and the trees became scrub until eventually even this receded and was replaced by the thick heather and tough grasses of the uplands.

Caitlin looked around. She could see for miles in all directions. The Highlands spread out in a vast carpet, punctuated every now and then by the sparkling silver of a loch or river. It was beautiful. Beautiful and wild and desolate and reminded her why she'd started climbing out in these wilds in the first place. Out here, she had started to find a sense of peace. Out here, only the moment mattered.

Out here, she could forget the past.

She blinked. Irene MacAskill's words suddenly echoed in her memory. *If ye choose the harder, darker path, it will be fraught with hardship. But the destination will make the journey worth it.*

The group continued on, the cart creaking and swaying on the uneven ground, and the horses snorting and nickering. As the sun rose higher, it burned away the clouds and the morning turned hot. Caitlin took off her blanket and wiped sweat from her forehead.

She was beginning to drowse in the seat, the constant sway of the cart lulling her into sleep, when Kai suddenly yanked on the reins and pulled the cart to a lurching stop. Caitlin sat up and peered around, realizing they'd reached a crossroads.

The road they'd been traveling met a much wider one, and at each corner stood a tall stone marker. Kai stepped down from the cart and walked up to one of the markers, inspecting it closely.

"Are we going the right way?" Caitlin asked, sliding off the seat and following him.

"I dinna know," Kai admitted, running his hand over the weathered stone. "I dinna recognize this place at all and I thought I'd traveled most of the roads up here."

Magnus whistled suddenly in warning and Caitlin turned to see another wagon crest the brow of the hill and come rolling down towards them. The group fell into tense silence, hands close to weapons.

As the cart neared, Caitlin saw that it was being driven by an older man and two youths—his sons, perhaps. They were deep in conversation and Caitlin heard a sudden peal of laughter. They certainly didn't look like bandits or any other kind of threat.

Kai plastered a wide smile onto his face and waved in a friendly manner. "Good day!"



The older man pulled the cart to a halt a few paces away. “Good day to ye, friend,” he called. “How may we be of service?”

The two youths eyed them warily, but made no move to get down from the wagon.

“We are heading to Finn’s Cross,” Kai said, strolling over with his usual swagger. “But I find I’m not sure of the way. Do we follow this road or take the wider one?”

“So ye are heading to the fair then?”

“Fair?”

“Aye, the biggest fair in these parts! We’re heading there too. Best place to sell our wares.”

“Ah! I thought ye must be merchants by the quality of yer clothing.”

“That we are,” the man replied. “And I must say, I thought ye might be bandits when I first caught sight of ye. But I can tell from yer manners and the fact that ye’ve got yer wife with ye that ye must be merchants just like myself.”

Caitlin felt her cheeks flame at the man’s suggestion but Kai merely nodded. “That’s right and these good fellows are our guards. Ye can never be too careful can ye?”

“Aye. Well, if ye turn west onto the coast road ye’ll be at the fair in no time,” he nodded at the wider road. “Ye are welcome to travel with us if ye like.”

Kai bowed his head in thanks. “Much obliged to ye but we need to rest the horses for a bit. We’ll follow along later. I owe ye a flagon of ale when next I see ye.”

“Ha!” the man cried, flicking the reins. “If I see ye at the fair, I’ll hold ye to that!”

With that, he gave them a wave and his cart lurched off down the wider path. Kai watched them go, hands on hips and a frown on his face.

“I dinna much like the sound of that,” Conall said, guiding his horse alongside.

“Nor me,” Emeric agreed. “I thought this Leif character liked to act in the shadows. A busy fair isnae the kind of place I’d expect him to use. It’s too public.”

“On the contrary,” Kai said, turning to look at his men. “It’s the perfect place. He can hide his activities in plain sight, bury his illegal trade under the honest activities going on around it.” His eyes narrowed as he turned to watch the merchant’s cart disappearing into the distance. “But it makes our job a whole lot more dangerous. If this goes wrong, a lot of people could get hurt.”

“So, what do we do?” Oskar asked. “We canna back out now. We’ve come too far to lose the bastard’s trail.”

Kai said nothing. He had a faraway look on his face as he stared into the distance.

“No,” he said finally. “We willnae back out. But we have to be careful. Conall, I want ye to ride ahead and scope out the place. Pose as a merchant and find this merchant we’re looking for—what did Alfred say his name was? MacGuinness?—and then ride straight back. The rest of us will follow behind. When we reach the fair, I will go in alone. Emeric, Oskar, ye two will follow me in and watch my back. Magnus, ye will take Caitlin to a safe spot away from the fair and wait until we return.”

The men all nodded and they set off again. Conall galloped off ahead and soon disappeared over the horizon. The rest of them followed at a slower pace, wending their way along the wider road which soon became busier with other traffic: people with carts, people with belongings slung across their backs, all making their way towards the fair.

As the afternoon wore on, Caitlin heard the faint sound of music on the wind, growing louder and more distinct until finally they topped a shallow rise and found themselves looking out on the fair below.

It was a riot of color and noise, with people thronging the booths and stalls, their voices raised in bargaining and laughter. The air was thick with the scent of roasting meat, warm beer, and spices. Caitlin had never seen anything like this, and for a second she forgot all about Leif Snarlsson, their mission, time-travel, and being so far from home, and just stared at it all.

But then she saw Kai stiffen at her side, his face turning grim and resolute, and the reality of their situation came crashing back in. They were here to do a job, and they couldn't afford to let their guard down for even a moment.

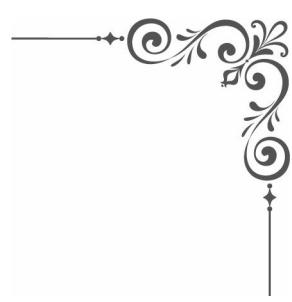
Kai turned to his men, his voice low. "Remember, we stick together. Keep an eye out for anything suspicious. And if things go south, we get the hell out of here as fast as we can. Understood?"

They nodded and Magnus craned his neck. "Conall is coming back."

Caitlin turned to watch as Conall rode up to them, his horse lathered with sweat and his expression grim.

"Well?" Kai asked, his voice sharp with tension. "What did ye find?"

"We have a problem," Conall said, his eyes flickering from Kai to the others. "I found MacGuinness all right and managed to overhear some of his conversation. He *is* expecting a delivery today, and it *is* being delivered by a man called Alfred. But it seems our erstwhile friend was a little more devious than we gave him credit for and didnae tell us everything. Alfred was to make the delivery but he wasnae coming alone, nor was he the holder of the contract. He was to be accompanied by the person whose name the contract is in: Alice Brewer. His wife."



# Chapter 10

“What?” Kai said incredulously, sure he must have heard wrong. “His wife?”  
Conall shrugged. “That’s what the merchant said. Alice and Alfred Brewer are making a delivery today.” He rubbed his chin. “This is gonna cause some problems. If we dinna turn up with Alice, they’ll be suspicious—”

“Damn right they will!” Kai growled. He spun on Magnus. “Why didnae ye tell me about this?”

“Because Alfred never mentioned Alice,” the big man replied, spreading his hands. “Despite the Order’s questioning. Sneaky bastard put on a good show. Even had me believing he was just a sniveling little toad willing to sell his grandmother for the highest price.”

“Perhaps he was just protecting his wife,” Emeric suggested. “Perhaps he kept his mouth shut for her sake.”

Kai snorted. He doubted that very much. He’d come across countless men like Alfred Brewer before. More often than not they were weak-willed and spineless, and like Magnus said, willing to sell their grandmothers if it saved their own skin. But still.

“So why wasnae Alice with Alfred when we caught him on the road?” he asked.

Magnus shrugged. “He lives up West Heath way. The road to Aberfeldy passes not a mile south. Perhaps he was going to pick her up on the way.”

Aye, that would make sense. Ah, damn it all! Kai cursed under his breath. They couldn’t afford to lose their chance to catch up with Snarlsson.

“So, what’s the problem?” Oskar asked. “We just pretend Alice is ill or something which is why she’s not here. Who will know?”

“Oh, they’ll know,” Kai replied. “If Alice Brewer is the contact, MacGuinness willnae make the deal with anyone else. He’ll be on his guard and any hint that something’s not right will send him running.”

“Then what do we do?”

“I dinna know yet! Be quiet and let me think!”

“I’ll do it,” Caitlin said suddenly.

Kai spun towards her. “I’m sorry?”

She had her arms folded and a determined look on her face. “You need this Alice Brewer, right? There’s a good chance that the man you’re going to see doesn’t know what Alice looks like seeing as Alfred said he never met his contact. Right?”

“Aye,” Kai said slowly, not liking where she was going with this.

“Then I’ll pretend to be Alice Brewer.”

“No,” he said immediately, shaking his head. “It’s too dangerous. I canna vouch for yer safety.”

Her eyes flashed dangerously. “I don’t remember ever asking you to! If you can pretend to be Alfred, why can’t I pretend to be Alice?”

Kai opened his mouth to argue, but there was a resolute set to Caitlin’s jaw that told him she wouldn’t be dissuaded. Yet the thought of putting her in danger made his stomach twist with dread.

“Caitlin, listen to me,” he said, his voice low and urgent. “This isnae a game. There are dangerous men in there who willnae hesitate to hurt ye if they think ye are a threat. I canna let ye put yerself in that kind of danger.”

She stood her ground, her eyes locked on his. “Then what’s the alternative?”

The problem was, he didn't have one. This was the only lead they'd been able to dig up in weeks of searching for Snarlsson. If he let this opportunity slip through his fingers, Lord alone knew when he would get another one.

"All right," he said reluctantly. "But ye do exactly as I say. No improvising. No talking. I'll do the bargaining. Stick to the plan and if the Lord is smiling on us, we'll get in and out without anyone being the wiser."

Caitlin nodded, her eyes gleaming with determination. "I understand."

Kai turned to his men. "Here's the plan. Caitlin and I will pretend to be Alice and Alfred Brewer and make the delivery. After that, we will keep a close watch on the courier. Hopefully, he will lead us to Snarlsson himself. Magnus, Oskar, ye will pose as buyers and loiter nearby as back up in case anything goes wrong. Conall, Emeric, keep watch on the perimeter and make sure we're not being followed. Remember, our priority is to find out what Snarlsson plans to do with that gunpowder and where he's hiding so the Order can arrest him and foil his plan."

They all nodded, their expressions grim.

Kai turned to Caitlin. "Remember, ye are Alice Brewer now, a fifteenth century woman. Dinna do anything to draw attention to yerself. Just play along with whatever I say and we'll get out as soon as we can."

Caitlin nodded again, and swallowed thickly. Kai placed a gentle hand on her shoulder and squeezed it reassuringly. "It'll be all right," he said softly. "I willnae let anything happen to ye."

She gave him a small smile. "I know you won't."

He felt his heart swell at the words. She trusted him. He only hoped he was worthy of that trust.

"All right," he said, clapping his hands together. "Let's get moving."

They took their places. Conall rode off ahead whilst Kai took the wagon's reins once more. He gave a quick flick of his wrist, urging the horses forward, the wagon creaking as it rolled down the dusty road. They rode in silence. That stillness had fallen over his men, that focus that came before a battle. Caitlin sat beside Kai, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes fixed on the horizon.

For one fleeting, crazy, instant he wondered what it would be like if this was real. If he really was just a brewer and Caitlin was his wife. What would his life have been like with such a woman at his side? What would it have been like to come home to her and their bairns each evening after a hard day's work?

He pushed that thought aside. This was not the time or place for such fantasies.

Far enough out from the fair that nobody would spot them, Emeric, Magnus and Oskar jumped down from the wagon and made their way on foot, melting into the flow of people. In moments they were lost in the crowd but Kai knew they wouldn't be far away if he should need them. He gave them a few minutes head start then got the wagon moving again, soon passing into the hotch-potch of milling crowds and stalls.

It was so busy that their progress slowed to a crawl. People pressed close on every side and Kai didn't like it at all. All these people... If anything should go wrong...

He set his jaw. Nothing would go wrong. He wouldn't let it.

He knew from Conall's earlier reconnaissance where the merchant they were looking for had set up his stall and as they approached the delivery site, Kai's pulse ratcheted up a notch. He could see several men gathered around a large wooden crate outside the stall, their faces hidden beneath dark hoods. They looked up as the wagon approached, but made no move to stop it. Kai pulled the horses to a halt.

One of the men stepped forward, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. "Who are ye?" he demanded, his voice low and menacing.

Kai climbed down, his hand held out in greeting. "I'm Alfred Brewer," he said, his voice friendly. "And this is my wife, Alice. We are here to make a delivery."

The man narrowed his eyes, taking in Kai, Caitlin, and the wagon. Kai smiled affably but all the while he was assessing the danger. He couldn't help but notice how the other men had spread out around the cart and even though they appeared relaxed, nonchalant even, he knew the look of trained warriors when he saw them. These men were more than the usual merchant's guards, hired to protect from bandits on the road.

At last, the man seemed satisfied. "Gaffer!" he yelled over his shoulder. "Someone to see ye!" A short, stocky man emerged from the tent behind the stall, his face was rugged and scarred, his eyes a sharp, piercing blue.

"Alfred and Alice Brewer for ye," the guard said.

The merchant glanced around nervously then hurried over. "Welcome," he said. "I'm Henry MacGuinness. I trust yer journey was... uneventful?"

Kai nodded, keeping his face neutral. "Aye, it was—" he began to answer but trailed off when he realized that MacGuinness wasn't talking to him. Instead, the man bobbed his head deferentially to Caitlin.

Caitlin glanced at Kai and back to MacGuinness. "Aye, it was," she replied, doing a passable job of a Highland accent.

MacGuinness smiled. "I'm glad to hear it, my lady." He flicked his gaze to Kai and nodded in acknowledgement before carrying on the conversation with Caitlin as if Kai—or rather 'Alfred'—wasn't important at all.

"We've been waiting for ye," MacGuinness said. "I must admit, I expected ye a little earlier. The message said ye would be here by midday. The lads were getting a bit fidgety."

"We, er, broke a wheel on the cart," Caitlin said quickly. "And had to stop to replace it otherwise we would have been here on time. Our delay hasnae caused any problems, I hope?"

"Oh, nay, my lady, ye are here now and that's what matters." He swallowed and glanced around again. His voice dropped low. "Ye have the delivery?"

Caitlin nodded. "It's in the back."

The man moved over to the wagon, his eyes flickering over the piled goods in the bed. "Excellent. Please, bring it inside." He nodded to his men and they pushed aside a cart that had been pulled up at the side of the stall. It made a small gap, just wide enough to fit their wagon through.

Kai smoothed his face into an impassive mask and clucked to the horses, driving the cart through the gap and into the space beyond. They emerged into a sort of enclosed compound behind the merchant's stall. Several wagons had been drawn up in a circle and cloth hung between them to create a wide area away from the prying eyes of other stall holders. Crates filled most of the carts and a large pavilion had been set up at the back. This was the real area of operations, Kai realized, with the stall at the front merely being a decoy to make it seem that MacGuinness was a small-time trader like everyone else.

MacGuinness followed them in and his men pulled the cart back into place at the entrance, effectively trapping Kai and Caitlin inside. The skin on the back of Kai's neck prickled. This felt like a trap although he couldn't see any signs of danger. Most of MacGuinness's men returned to their positions at the front of the stall, leaving only two behind to start unpacking the cargo.

“Wait,” Kai said as the men climbed into the back of the cart and began unloading the goods that lay atop the false floor. “Ye dinna touch any of that until we’ve been paid.”

The men hesitated, looking at MacGuinness. The merchant in his turn, looked at Caitlin.

“Ye heard the man,” Caitlin snapped. “We had a contract, remember?”

MacGuinness bobbed his head deferentially. “Of course, of course. If ye’ll just step this way.”

He held up a hand to help Caitlin down from the wagon. She took it, stepped down, and allowed him to take her arm and escort her towards the tent at the back of the compound. She glanced over her shoulder and shot Kai an enquiring look. He nodded slightly, telling her to keep up the ruse, even though his stomach was churning with unease.

Kai followed the two of them towards the tent. MacGuinness didn’t spare him so much as a glance, all of his simpering attention fixed on Caitlin. Kai didn’t like it. He’d assumed that Alice Brewer had been dragged into this by her husband and was just an unwilling participant who’d been roped in to add a little credibility to her husband’s activities. Now he wondered if he’d assumed wrong. If Alfred Brewer was the important one, then why was MacGuinness paying such attention to ‘Alice’?

As they entered the tent, Kai’s eyes adjusted to the dim light. Inside, the air was heavy with the scent of musk and incense. A low table held a variety of implements—inkpots, parchment, weighing scales, weights and the usual paraphernalia of a successful merchant.

“Please, take a seat,” MacGuinness said, gesturing towards a makeshift bench in the center of the tent. Caitlin sat down on the bench, smoothing her skirts. Kai took up position behind her, keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings.

MacGuinness sat down opposite Caitlin and opened a small chest at his feet. He pulled out a pouch, opened the drawstrings, and tipped a mixture of copper and silver coins onto the table.

“I think ye’ll find it’s all there. Our mutual friend is most fastidious about these things.”

Kai scooped the coins into his palm and made a show of counting them, but his thoughts were racing. Mutual friend? Was he referring to Leif Snarlsson?

He dumped the coins back onto the table and stepped back again, nodding to show it was all there although, of course, he had no idea what price had been agreed.

Information. He needed information. And that meant he had to take a risk.

“The cargo we’ve brought ye is very valuable,” he said. “And our mutual friend wouldnae be happy if he discovered some of it had disappeared onto the black market instead of being used for its intended purpose.”

MacGuinness’s eyes widened and he glanced at Caitlin, a flash of fear crossing his face. “I wouldnae!” he protested. “I’m loyal to our mutual friend and his cause! I would never betray him! We have stuck to the plan, I swear!”

The plan? So, this man *did* know what Snarlsson intended for the gunpowder.

Kai had to tread carefully. “I didnae mean to imply that ye were untrustworthy,” he said, keeping his tone neutral. “But given the value of the cargo, I just wanted to make sure that everything is in order before we leave.”

Kai could see the wariness in the man’s eyes. “Everything *is* in order, I assure ye. Our mutual friend’s agent arrived to set the fuses early this morning. He’s spent the day setting things up. Everything is laid. We’ve just been waiting for yer delivery so we can begin.” He grinned suddenly, the affable smile gone, and a hungry gleam in his eyes instead. “This place is going to go up with a bang and the Order will have quite the surprise!”

Kai felt his hand moving towards the hilt of his dagger and forced himself to remain still. How did this man know about the Order of the Osprey? And what did he mean about this place going up with a bang?

Something was wrong here. He had assumed this man was an intermediary and that he would take the gunpowder to Leif Snarlsson, leading Kai and his men to their quarry. But what if he wasn't taking the gunpowder anywhere? What if—

He opened his mouth to speak, but a sudden commotion spun him around to face the tent flap. He had a second to register raised voices and the tramp of feet, a second to pull Caitlin to her feet, push her behind him and draw his sword, before armed men came spilling into the tent.

They were clearly professionals, their movements coordinated and precise. They were armed with swords but didn't attack, merely spread out in a ring around the interior of the large tent, eyes fixed on Kai and Caitlin.

MacGuinness scrambled to his feet. "Who are ye?" he cried. "What is going on?"

The tent flap was pulled back and a woman strode in. She was tall and lean with a mop of wild, curly hair that framed her striking features. Her eyes were a deep shade of brown, and they scanned the room with a cool detachment. She wore a leather tunic and treads, both of which hugged her slender frame.

"Who am I?" she barked. "I believe ye've been expecting me. My name is Alice Brewer."

MacGuinness's face crumpled with confusion and he looked between the woman and Caitlin. "But...but...this is Alice Brewer."

The woman smiled icily. "No. This is the woman who's been pretending to be me."

Kai felt the blood drain from his face. He glanced at Caitlin out of the corner of his eye. Her face was pale but she didn't flinch away from Alice's gaze.

Kai considered his options in a heartbeat. Could they fight their way out? Doubtful. So he did the only thing he could think to do: he pulled on another mask and began to act.

"Ye've got a damned nerve," he growled at Alice Brewer. "Where have ye and that no-good husband of yers been? Ye were paid well to deliver this cargo and our master willnae be happy that ye failed him!"

Alice blinked, thrown momentarily off balance by Kai's swagger. "What are ye talking about? The cargo is outside."

"Aye," he snapped. "The cargo is outside all right but ye didnae deliver it. My men found the cargo for sale at a market not five miles from here! The merchant said he bought it from a man and his wife. Not trying to double-cross us were ye? Not trying to make yerself a quick profit by betraying our master?" His voice was low and deadly and he schooled his face into the passive mask of a killer.

"Who are ye? I dinna have to answer to ye," she said, but there was a hint of uncertainty in her voice.

He stepped forward and used every bit of skill he had to make his performance convincing, willing her to believe he was one of Leif Snarlsson's agents. "Oh, aye? Would ye bet yer life on that?"

"If ye work for our master then ye will know where I've been!" she retorted. "Directing my men to attack Aberfeldy!"

Shock rippled through Kai at this revelation but he let none of it show on his face. "Aye, and what a disaster that was!" he snapped. "From what I hear yer men were discovered and their horses stolen before ye even set foot in the place!"



Alice's expression turned wary. He knew what she was thinking. How could he know about that unless he *was* an agent of Leif Snarlsson's?

"Look," she said, her voice more placating now. "It wasnae my fault that the attack on Aberfeldy went wrong. Nor was it my fault that the cargo was lost. When my husband didnae meet me at the rendezvous, I assumed he'd been captured by the Order or the laird's men. I came here as fast as I could. I am loyal. I would never betray our cause!" She seemed to reach a decision. "I have nothing to hide. I have done what our master demanded. Here." She reached into a pouch at her waist and took out a parchment which she brandished defiantly at Kai. "I think ye'll find everything is in order."

Kai took the parchment. He was just about to unroll it when a noise reached him from outside: people shouting and the sound of many horses. With Caitlin following, Kai ducked through the tent flap and crossed the compound into the fair. There, he stopped in shock.

The fair was in chaos.

A group of mounted men were chasing people everywhere, causing havoc. The riders were poorly dressed and their weapons battered, but there were enough of them to cause panic. The leader sat his mount, shouting orders to the others.

Kai's eyes narrowed. Where had he seen that man before?

Alice took a few steps towards the man and bellowed, "Wolfric! Make sure ye check the east side! We dinna want them escaping across the river!"

The man, Wolfric, pulled his horse around to face Alice and opened his mouth to bellow a reply. But then he caught sight of Kai and started.

Beside Kai, Caitlin gasped. "It's them! It's the bandits from Aberfeldy!"

That's where he'd seen the man before!

"Ye!" Wolfric bellowed at Kai. "I'll take yer damned head for what ye did to me and my lads!"

He nudged his horse towards them but Alice held up her hand "What are ye doing man! These are agents of our master!"

"Ye bloody fool!" Wolfric roared. "They are naught of the kind! This is the bastard that drove off our horses at Aberfeldy! Did ye think ye went unnoticed?" he shouted at Kai. "Well, ye didnae! I saw ye stealing my own bloody horse, damn ye! And now I'll make ye pay!"

Alice spun on Kai, her eyes flashing with fury. "I knew it! Liar!"

Kai backed away, pushing Caitlin behind him, and drew his sword as Alice's men formed a circle around them.

"We dinna have time for this!" Alice hissed. "Wolfric! Go tell MacGuinness to get started."

The bandit leader glowered. "Not until I've taken my vengeance on this bastard—"

"Do as I say! I will deal with our two spies."

With a frustrated snarl, Wolfric pulled his horse around and trotted towards MacGuinness' compound.

Kai glanced around, desperately searching for a way to escape, but he and Caitlin were surrounded. Alice's men were closing in from all directions, forming a tight circle. There was no sign of Magnus, Conall and the others.

Suddenly, Alice's men charged. Kai was ready for them. He parried and kicked and struck, blocking each blow with his sword. He would not let them get near Caitlin.

He pushed her back with one arm, keeping her behind him. He fought off the first wave of attackers and was gratified when they pulled back, surprised by the ferocity of his defense. But he was badly outnumbered and knew he could not hold out for long.

A wave of resignation washed over him. He had known this day would come—that he would die in a fight one day—but his heart twisted with pain at the thought of what would happen to Caitlin.

“Come on then,” he growled, raising his sword in front of him in a determined gesture. “Let’s finish this.”

As Kai watched, two of Alice’s men suddenly staggered as arrows sprouted from their necks. They collapsed into the dirt right at Kai’s feet. A second later, there was a thunder of hooves and an enormous horse came galloping through, slamming Alice’s men aside as if they were sticks. On the enormous horse’s back sat an even more enormous man, waving his sword over his head and bellowing a war cry.

Kai didn’t think he’d been so glad to see Magnus in his life.

The big man grinned. “Thought ye could do with a little help.”

He heard the drum of running feet and Oskar, Conall and Emeric ran through the gap that Magnus had created and formed a ring around Caitlin.

“Ye took yer bloody time,” Kai growled.

“Aye, sorry about that,” Emeric said. “We were...otherwise engaged.”

All of them, Kai noticed, looked like they’d been in a fight, with cuts and scrapes and bruises.

Around them, Alice’s men were regrouping after Magnus’s charge. Alice herself was watching them with a cold fury.

“Ye canna win,” she snarled. “No matter what ye do, our plan will still succeed.”

“What plan is that?” Kai demanded. “What do ye mean to do with that powder?”

Alice just smiled, a cold, mocking smirk. “Ye’ll find out soon enough.” She gave a command to her men and they charged.

Kai braced himself, sword raised. Magnus spurred the horse forward, knocking men flying, but many more made it past the big man. And then they were on them. The clash of metal against metal filled the air as swords flashed in the sunlight.

Emeric dispatched one man with an acrobatic kick while Oskar disarmed another with a neat sweep of his sword. Conall took out one who came too close to Caitlin with swift stabs of his daggers.

Alice’s men fought with shocking ferocity, with little care for their own safety, confirming Kai’s suspicion that these were more than just hired thugs.

*I would never betray our cause, Alice had said. What cause was she talking about? What was their real plan here?*

He had no more time to think about it as two men came at him, one armed with a spear, the other with twin blades. Kai shifted his weight, allowing the spear-wielding man to lunge past him while simultaneously slicing the sword-wielding man’s arm. He followed up with a swift kick to the man’s jaw and he went down in a heap. He dispatched the other with a single stroke of his sword.

But still the attackers came. There seemed to be no end to them. His men were holding steady, keeping Caitlin safe within their circle, but all of them were sporting cuts and Magnus had been knocked from his seat and the horse had bolted.

Only a few of Alice’s men had fallen. The others, he noticed, kept rotating, darting in to attack one of Kai’s men then disengaging, making no real effort to break through the circle.

They were trying to delay them, Kai realized. Trying to keep him and his men pinned here. But why?

“Fall back!” came a sudden bellowed order.

Alice's men disengaged in an expertly coordinated maneuver, turned, and ran. It happened so quickly that Kai was left staring after them as they disappeared into the distance.

"Ha!" Oskar bellowed, brandishing his sword. "What's the matter, ye bloody cowards? Had enough already?"

In the aftermath of the fight, Kai looked around. The fair-goers were milling around in confusion, and the fair itself was in disarray. Stalls were broken or overturned, food and goods scattered across the ground.

He sheathed his sword and turned to Caitlin. "Are ye all right, lass?"

She was pale and shaking, but she wasn't looking at him. Instead, she was staring at MacGuinness's compound.

"She sent Wolfric in there," she muttered. "And then she and her men just left without the gunpowder. Why would they do that? It's almost as if..."

Her eyes suddenly went wide. "Run!" she yelled. "Everyone! Run!"

The fear in her voice made Kai go cold. And with it came understanding. No. Oh no.

"Run!" he yelled at his men. "Now!"

They took off, sprinting for all they were worth in the same direction Alice and her men had taken. They bellowed at the fair-goers to get out as well.

But they had not gone more than fifty paces when there was an almighty boom from behind them and the world turned white. Something picked Kai up and tossed him through the air as though he was a piece of flotsam. He struck the ground hard, felt a sharp stab of pain, and knew no more.



# Chapter 11

Caitlin found herself lying face down in the dirt. Her ears were ringing and her skull felt like it had been stuffed with cotton wool. With a groan, she lifted her head. The world was a blur of dull tones and muffled sounds.

She blinked a few times, trying to clear the fog from her mind, but nothing changed. The air smelled of smoke and there was a strange silence.

She stumbled to her feet and looked around for Kai. He was lying on the ground a few feet away, his face streaked with dirt and blood.

A jolt of fear went through her, and she raced over to him as quickly as her shaky limbs would allow.

Kneeling beside him, she urgently shook his shoulder. “Kai? Kai, wake up!”

She watched anxiously as his eyelids flickered open. “What happened?” he muttered groggily as he tried to sit up.

“An explosion,” Caitlin replied. “The gunpowder went up.”

She couldn’t believe how calm she sounded. Inside, she was screaming. *No, no, no! This cannot be happening again!* Her heart was beating so rapidly against her ribs that she felt faint. But she sealed the fear away. She could not afford to let it affect her now.

Placing her fingers on Kai’s wrist, she felt his pulse. It felt strong and steady.

“Any pain anywhere?” she asked, running her hands quickly over his torso and arms.

“Only my head,” he muttered. “Feels like I’ve been on a drinking binge for a week.”

“Track my finger,” she said, holding it up in front of his eyes and moving it from side to side. He followed it perfectly. “What year is this? What’s your name?”

He frowned at her. “Have ye gone daft, lass?”

“Just answer the questions!”

“It’s 1495 and I’m Kai Stewart. Why?”

She breathed out a sigh of relief. He didn’t seem to have a concussion. She looked around at the carnage, at the flattened stalls and debris. At the people scattered around like blown sticks. It was...incomprehensible.

Taking a deep breath, she climbed to her feet and allowed her training to take control.

“Stay here,” she said to Kai. “Don’t move.”

She staggered into the devastation and reached a cluster of people, most of them injured and wailing in pain. Caitlin knelt beside them and began to assess their injuries. Most seemed only to have cuts and bruises from flying debris. They would have to wait. The walking wounded would come last, after the most serious were treated.

A heavy hand settled on her shoulder. “Lass,” Kai said. “What are ye doing?”

His color was returning, although he still looked a little unsteady on his feet. “I need you to organize these people,” she told him. “Anyone who isn’t injured needs to start looking for those who are. Anyone who’s bleeding out or unresponsive, you call me straight away.”

Kai shook his head. “I need to find my men. Then we need to leave. We have to go before—”

“I’m not going anywhere!” she snapped. “You go if you must, but I have to help these people.” She pointed at a tent that was miraculously still standing. “There. We’ll use that as a triage station.”

“A what?”

“A place where I can assess injuries,” she said. “Start taking people in.”

He frowned, looking like he was going to argue, but then gave her a curt nod and set off to follow her instructions.

When she reached the tent, Caitlin was pleased to find it stocked with rolled up rugs. Finally, a bit of luck. She quickly laid them out on the ground to use as beds for those in need of help.

Kai returned shortly after, along with Conall and Magnus, who seemed unharmed, bringing several people with them. One of them was a woman called Bella who introduced herself as a healer. Caitlin was relieved; having a healer would make this so much quicker. She set Bella to work assessing the injuries and sent Kai out to look for wood to use as splints and clean cloth for bandages.

Caitlin moved around the tent, checking on each patient in turn, offering words of comfort where needed, staunching blood and splinting broken limbs where she could.

“Caitlin!” Kai’s cry brought her running from the tent.

He was crouched over a woman lying in the dirt. Caitlin went running over to them.

The woman’s chest was heaving and blood gushed from a wound on her thigh.

Caitlin ripped off the hem of her dress and wrapped it tightly around the woman’s leg to stem the bleeding.

“Stay with me,” Caitlin murmured. “You’re going to be okay.”

The woman’s eyes fluttered open and she gasped for air. “My husband,” she said weakly. “Is he...?”

Caitlin looked around. She saw a man lying not too far away, his chest still, his eyes staring at nothing.

“He’s fine,” Caitlin lied. “We need to get you fixed up and everything will be okay.”

But as she spoke, the woman’s eyes rolled back in her head. Caitlin felt a sudden panic as she checked the woman’s pulse. Nothing.

“No!” she hissed. “You’re not doing this to me, do you hear?”

She started CPR, pumping on the woman’s chest and breathing into her mouth.

And she was suddenly back there.

*It is so dark she can barely see and so hot she can barely breathe. Above her is just a mound of broken beams and debris, keeping the rest of it from collapsing. There is a sound in the background that she can’t quite place. A low roar and crackle coming closer.*

*A mist darker than the gloom around her is snaking across the ground and she realizes it’s smoke.*

*Terror rips through her.*

*She struggles but can’t move. With an effort, she lifts her head and realizes that a ceiling beam has fallen across her legs. It’s made of timber but feels as heavy as concrete. She can’t move it, despite how hard she heaves and strains.*

*The crackling sound is getting louder and she looks down to see flames slowly licking at the end of the beam, getting closer and closer to where she’s lying.*

*“Help!” she screams, but her voice is barely a whisper. “Help!”*

*“Caitlin?” an equally hoarse voice gasps from nearby.*

*Caitlin turns her head and sees a woman lying next to her. She looks in a worse state than Caitlin. Her skin has lost all its color and her breaths are coming in short, shallow gasps.*

*Now Caitlin remembers. This is the woman she was working on before this happened. What had she said her name was? Amy?*

*She reaches out her left arm, fingers groping along the debris-littered floor, until she finds Amy's hand. She squeezes it tight.*

*"We're going to be all right," she says. "They're going to get us out of here. You just need to stay with me."*

*"Sure," Amy whispers. "It doesn't hurt anymore anyway."*

*Her eyes flutter closed.*

*"Amy!" Caitlin cries. "Don't fall asleep! You have to stay with me!"*

*But it's too late. Amy is gone and the flames are coming closer...*

*"Caitlin!"*

Kai's voice snapped her back into the present. In front of her, the woman's eyes had rolled back in her head and she was no longer breathing.

*No! Not again!*

Caitlin hammered on the woman's chest, one, two, three times, then pressed her ear against her breast, listening for a heartbeat.

Nothing.

She went back to CPR, count the compressions, breathe. Count the compressions, breathe. She would not lose another one! She wouldn't!

"Caitlin!" Kai grabbed her shoulder, forcing her to look at him. His face was streaked with sweat and dirt. "She's gone!"

"No!" Caitlin cried. "I have to save her! I have to!"

She turned back to the woman, but Kai's fingers tightened on her shoulder just as two arrows thudded into the dirt not two paces from where Caitlin knelt.

Kai swore under his breath and jumped to his feet. "Damn it! Time's up. We have to go. Now!"

He grabbed Caitlin under the armpits, heaved her to her feet, and began dragging her away.

"Let me go!" Caitlin cried, fighting him. "I have to help these people!"

"Ye've done all ye can," he growled, his grip tightening. "Bella will do the rest. See there? Alice's men are coming. Who do ye suppose they are looking for? If we stay here, we'll be captured! Ye canna help anyone if ye are dead!"

Caitlin blinked and saw a group of mounted men cantering cautiously into the carnage, looking around as if searching for something.

"Kai!" a voice cried, and Caitlin saw Conall and the rest of Kai's band some distance away, helping injured people to the healer's tent.

Kai glanced at the riders who were drawing steadily nearer, and Caitlin could see the indecision on his face. The riders were between Kai and his men.

"Get out of here!" he bellowed at them. "Diving Osprey! Diving Osprey! Dun Cator!"

Caitlin had no idea what he was talking about, but the words seemed to mean something to the others. Conall nodded, then they turned and limped off in the other direction, losing themselves amidst the wreckage before Alice's men could see them.

Kai took Caitlin's arm, and marched her in the other direction, weaving between the debris and away from the riders. Suddenly, he halted.

"Thank ye, Lord," he muttered.

Magnus's horse was up ahead. Miraculously, the beast seemed unharmed, but she had gotten the reins tangled around a post, which is probably the only reason she hadn't bolted as far away as she could get.

As it was, the horse's flanks were lathered with sweat and her eyes rolled in terror. Kai released his grip on Caitlin and approached the beast slowly, talking soothingly. At first, the horse stamped and tried to back away, but as Kai reached her and began slowly stroking her nose, she began to calm.

Carefully, Kai untangled the reins. "Good girl. Naught to worry about now."

He glanced anxiously back the way they'd come. Caitlin couldn't see Alice's men anymore, but she knew they would be coming.

With a quick movement, Kai secured the reins then turned back to Caitlin. "Up ye go," he said urgently, holding his hands out to give her a boost. Caitlin put her foot in his hands and let him help her up into the saddle.

Kai grabbed the horse's mane and swung himself up onto her back, settling into the saddle behind Caitlin. He wrapped one arm around her, holding her tight against his chest as he kicked the horse lightly and the beast broke into a trot, eager to get away.

Kai guided them carefully through the wreckage and away from Alice's men, moving as quickly as possible.

Caitlin didn't want to look, but couldn't help herself. Her eyes darted through the wreckage, seeing the dead and the injured, hearing the cries as people called out for loved ones. She felt as if she was abandoning them.

*I'm sorry*, she thought. She hoped that Bella could do what was needed.

As they made their way further away from the site of the explosion, the wreckage began to recede and they passed through areas untouched by the devastation. Here they encountered frightened people looking around in bewilderment, calling to each other to find out what had happened.

"Send word to the local sheriff," Kai told them. "And the laird. If any of ye are skilled with healing, go help the injured. Ask for a woman named Bella. She could use yer aid."

Finally, they reached the edge of the fair and Kai nudged the horse to a faster pace. Soon they were galloping through the trees, faster than Caitlin had ever ridden before. She clung tightly to the saddle horn as they raced through a stretch of thick forest until finally, they burst out onto a wide open plain.

Here Kai pulled up the horse and turned around to face back the way they'd come. They'd traveled so far that the fair—or what remained of it—was barely visible in the distance. Kai's gaze swept the landscape below, his expression full of fury and determination.

"I dinna think we've been followed," he said at last. "But we canna linger. They still might be able to pick up our trail."

For a long time, they rode in silence, Kai's arm still around Caitlin.

"I've never seen anything like that," he said suddenly.

She looked over her shoulder at him. "Like what?"

"Like what ye did for that woman. Like the way ye organized everyone, treated those people's injuries. Ye didnae tell me ye were a healer."

Caitlin said nothing for a long time. "I was a paramedic," she admitted at last.

"A paramedic?" The word sounded strange on his lips. "Is that a healer?"

"In a way. I attended accidents or when people were taken ill suddenly. It's what I trained to do before...before I ended up here. That's how I knew it was gunpowder in Alfred's barrels. I'd seen it before because we were trained to recognize explosives in case of terrorist attack."

As they rode further north, the landscape began to change. The trees thinned out, giving way to wide open fields dotted with sheep and cows. The sun began to set, casting the sky in shades of red and orange.



“We need to find a place to stay,” he said, scanning the landscape. “But all the supplies were on the wagon. It’s going to be a rough night.”

Caitlin spotted something in the distance. A large barn standing at the edge of a field in the fading light of dusk. She pointed it out to Kai and he urged the horse toward it. As they drew near, Caitlin could make out more details—an old wooden door on rusty hinges, weeds growing up around its base, and a rusted-out weather vane perched on top.

Kai pulled up outside and dismounted before helping Caitlin down. As soon as her feet touched the ground she stumbled, overcome with exhaustion. She had been running on adrenaline for hours now, but finally events seemed to have caught up with her.

Kai caught her just in time and held her for a moment until her legs were steady enough for her to stand.

“We’ll rest here,” he said, pushing through the creaky door. “It’s not much, but it’ll have to do.”

Caitlin followed him inside, her eyes adjusting slowly to the gloom. The barn was empty, save for a few scattered bales of hay and some old tools hanging on the walls. It was dusty and smelled of animal dung, but it was shelter and it would have to suffice. They climbed up into the loft and Kai went to work, gathering dry hay to make a bed for them. Caitlin helped where she could, her hands shaking with exhaustion.

When it was ready, Kai shrugged apologetically. “That’s the best I can do.”

Caitlin didn’t care. She sank into the straw and sat staring into space, the events of the day playing through her mind.

Kai lowered himself down next to her. “Are ye all right, lass?”

All right? Was he seriously asking that question? She turned to him, a fierce retort on her lips, but it died when she saw the look on his face. His expression was haggard, his eyes haunted.

“What happened?” she said at last. “I don’t understand. Why would they do that? All those people —”

“To sow fear,” Kai answered softly. “To show that they can strike whoever they like and nobody is safe.”

“But those people were innocent!”

“Ye think that matters to them?” he retorted angrily.

Caitlin squeezed her eyes tight shut. Kai shuffled closer and she felt his arms go around her. She leaned into him, into his warmth and strength. She let out a shuddering breath and tried to focus on the sensation of him holding her. It was the only thing that seemed real right now.

“Listen to me, lass,” he said firmly. “We are safe now. They canna find us.”

“What about the others? Will they be all right?”

Fear for his men flashed across Kai’s face, but he nodded. “Aye. They’re a tough bunch. I’ve sent them to rouse the Order and then meet us as soon as they can.”

“Meet us where? How will they know where we are?”

“Because we know what Snarlsson’s next target is going to be and we are going to get there first. The others will meet us there.”

“How?” Caitlin asked. “We didn’t even know they were going to attack the fair. How can we know where they’ll attack next?”

Kai reached inside his shirt, pulled something out, and held it up so Caitlin could see it. It was the scrap of tartan material with the orca sigil sown into it that had put Kai and his men so on edge when they’d found it in the woods.

“What is it?”

“It’s an insignia from a guardsman’s uniform,” he replied. “And it shouldnae be this far south. The orca and tartan are the symbol of the Douglas clan from far up on the north coast. The fact that we found this in what I now believe was Alice’s camp bodes ill. It looks to me like this was given to Alice and her men so that they would recognize the Douglas warriors. So that they would recognize their next target.” He closed his fist around the scrap of material.

“You can tell all that from a bit of cloth?”

“Not just from this. I suspected, but Alice confirmed it.” He took out the parchment that Alice had handed to him right before all hell had broken loose at the fair. “This is a list of locations,” he said, unrolling it and holding it out for her to see. “It’s coded in case it should fall into the wrong hands, but the Order of the Osprey managed to break the enemy’s code weeks ago. That means I can read it.” He pointed to one of the names on the list that had been scratched out. “This is the fair.” Then he pointed to the next name on the list. “This is their next target. It only confirms what the dropped sigil told us.” He met her eyes. “Tomorrow, we ride for Dun Cator.”

“And that’s where the others will meet us?”

“Aye, with the Order behind them, hopefully. Dun Cator is strategically important as it has the only deep-water harbor for miles. It would make sense that Leif Snarlsson would want to take it, particularly if he’s trying to import more of his gunpowder from the east.” He smiled grimly. “The attack on the fair was a distraction designed to keep our eyes fixed here, on the southern Highlands, so we didnae notice his activities in the north. But Alice made a mistake when she dropped that sigil. Now the Order will be waiting for them and we’ll make them pay for what they’ve done.”

Caitlin nodded. “What do you need me to do?”

Kai’s eyes softened. “Just stick by my side and keep an eye out for anything suspicious. Ye’ve got a good eye for detail, lass. It could make all the difference.”

Exhaustion washed over her again. She needed to sleep, but feared the nightmares it would bring.

Kai studied her for a long moment, a thoughtful look on his face. “Earlier, when ye said ye were a paramedic in yer time? Ye said ye ‘used to be’. What did ye mean by that?”

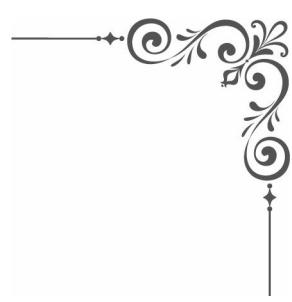
The dying woman’s face flashed into Caitlin’s mind and she looked away, focusing on the rough planks of the barn wall while she tried to gather her thoughts. She didn’t want to think about her past. What she wanted was to move on, to forget, to piece herself back together.

But she was beginning to realize that she couldn’t forget. Her past would always follow her, even into the fifteenth century.

“‘Used to be’ is correct. Past tense. I’m not a paramedic anymore,” she replied. “I’m…” She trailed off, unable to finish the sentence. I’m what? Broken. Damaged goods.

She glanced down at her hands, at the black gloves that covered them and what that signified. All of a sudden, it was too much. She felt tears gathering in her eyes and despite her efforts, she couldn’t hold them back.

Kai said not a word. He just enfolded her in his arms and pulled her into a tight embrace. The dam inside her broke and she sobbed into his shoulder as she clung to him fiercely, sobbed out her grief and her guilt until finally she sank down into dreamless sleep.



## Chapter 12

Caitlin was finally asleep, her eyes closed and the lines smoothed from her face. Kai stared down at her, seemingly unable to look away. Her breathing was even, her breath making a wisp of hair that had fallen across her face rise and fall gently. He reached down and brushed it away, then laid her down in the straw, careful not to wake her.

When he was certain she was still sleeping, he shimmied over to the ladder and descended to where he'd tethered the horse. The huge beast was dozing, head hanging down and one hoof cocked, but she came awake as Kai approached, nuzzling hopefully at his clothes.

"I know, girl," he murmured. "We're both hungry." He'd given the horse some hay but it was half-rotten and unappetizing. Unfortunately, all of their supplies were left behind on the wagon. They had no food, no bedding, no fodder for the horse.

Kai checked her hooves and did his best to brush the animal down. He had no curry brush, so used a handful of straw—it was the best he could do in a pinch.

As he worked, the emotions he'd been holding back all day broke over him in a wave. Anger. Frustration. But mostly, guilt.

In his mind's eye, he again saw the devastation of the fair, the dead and injured fair-goers. And it was all his fault.

If he hadn't delivered that gunpowder, if he'd destroyed it or taken it to the Order, none of this would have happened. But he hadn't. In his arrogance, he'd believed he could outsmart Leif Snarlsson. After all, he was Kai Stewart, wasn't he? Master of his own destiny, liver of a charmed life, warrior and strategist extraordinaire!

And those people were dead because of his arrogance.

Ah, damn it! He stopped, his hands resting on the horse's flanks, as a wave of despair washed through him. All those people. All those lives. All ruined because—

*I will put it right, he told himself. I will warn the Douglas. I will bring Leif Snarlsson to justice. I will pay for my mistakes. On this, I swear.*

He began brushing down the horse again, the repetitive movements helping to calm his anger and focus his thoughts.

Tomorrow they would ride to Dun Cator. He shook his head. He had never expected to see the place again. Not after...

An image flashed into his mind. *Her* image. Dark hair. Full lips. Her voice that had once called to him like that of a songbird.

His stomach twisted with a pain he'd thought long buried. Dun Cator. Why there? Why, of all places, would his fate lead him there? To the one place in all the Highlands he did not want to go?

He felt like a beast being led by a tether, with no choice over its fate. Irene MacAskill's words suddenly floated into his head.

*Learn to open yer heart and allow yer wounds to heal, allow someone to see behind the mask ye paint for yerself.*

*How?* he thought. *How does any of this make sense?*

Opening his fingers, he let the straw drop from his grasp and watched as the wisps drifted slowly to the ground. With a sigh, he climbed back up the ladder and settled down in the hay beside Caitlin.

For a few heartbeats, he just watched her as she slept, then he put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, hoping that his warmth would be enough to keep away the night's chill.

Caitlin snuggled against him and the despair that filled him lifted slightly. He closed his eyes and rested against the softness of her body. To the soft sound of the horse munching hay below, Kai drifted into exhausted slumber.

He woke with a start. He was dreaming of the past and Irene's voice lingered in his mind although he couldn't remember what she'd been saying. He jerked his head up and looked around wildly, scanning the shadows for signs of movement. He could hear his breath coming in short gasps as he listened intently to any sound that may indicate danger.

But all that greeted him was the shuffling of the horse below, her hooves scraping against the wooden floorboards as she shifted her weight.

Sunlight was filtering through the gaps between the boards, that hazy, gray sort of light that indicated it wasn't long past dawn, and outside the birds were beginning their chorus. Despite all that had happened yesterday, he'd slept soundly, the deep, formless sleep of utter exhaustion.

His shoulders relaxed and he looked down at Caitlin—and found that she was awake and watching him intently.

“My apologies,” he said softly. “I didnae mean to wake ye.”

“You didn't,” she said sleepily. “The sparrows are making enough noise to wake the dead.”

She hadn't moved from her spot and was still nestled in the crook of his arm, her head on his shoulder. He could feel her body heat radiating through the fabric of his shirt. Her face was only inches from his, her body touching him in a way that made his groin ache. Lord help him, he was a man, wasn't he? What, by all that's holy, was he supposed to do when a beautiful woman was staring at him like that?

So, he did what he'd been aching to do for days: he bent his head and kissed her.

At first, the kiss was chaste—a gentle brush of lips that promised more than it revealed. But then Kai felt himself being swept away in the moment, and before he knew what he was doing, his arms were around her waist and he was deepening the kiss. Caitlin's body arched into him as if responding to an unspoken need.

He felt all the tension he'd been carrying slipping away as his heart beat faster with desire. He ran his hands along her sides and pulled her closer, drinking in the sweet taste of her lips.

His heart pounded in his chest. Nothing else mattered now—not the danger of the mission or the uncertainty of their future—all that mattered was being here in this moment with Caitlin.

He wanted to make love to her—to feel her naked body underneath him, and hear her soft moans as he moved inside her. He wanted to make her scream his name with pleasure as he drove them both higher and higher until they reached the peak of ecstasy together.

He kissed her hungrily before pulling away just enough to whisper in her ear, “I want ye so badly, Caitlin.”

The heat of his words seemed to send a wave of electricity through them both, and Kai watched as Caitlin's eyes widened with desire. He ran his hands down her arms and across to her hips, then hiked up her dress and trailed a finger up the inside of her thigh.

Suddenly, Caitlin gasped—but not from pleasure. She put her hands on his chest and pushed away from him, quickly pulling down her dress. Her face was flushed and her breath was coming in rapid bursts.

“What... what are we doing?” she said shakily.

Kai felt as though he'd been doused with cold water. His blood was singing with desire, but the look on her face sobered him abruptly.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. "I'm sorry if I mis-stepped, lass," he said at last, his voice hoarse. "But I thought ye wanted it." He looked up and met her gaze. "I thought ye wanted it as much as I do."

Yes, it was still there in her eyes: a stark, naked desire almost the match of his own. Her cheeks were flushed, her chest rising and falling rapidly, her pupils dilated.

Oh aye, she wanted him, and the realization was enough to send his blood roaring again, despite his efforts to stop it.

And yet, there was something stopping her, something making her pull back, something stronger than desire.

"I...I..." She swallowed thickly and smoothed her dress, making sure it was covering every inch of her skin. "I shouldn't have let things get that far. I'm sorry, Kai. This isn't what I want."

She was lying. It was obvious in the flush of her cheeks, the rapidness of her breathing. But she would come to him when she was ready and not before, and when she did—good God, when she did!—he would be waiting. He didn't think he'd ever wanted a woman the way he wanted Caitlin.

He ran a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldnae have done that. I just get carried away when I'm with ye."

"Why?" she asked. "You could have any woman you wanted."

"But I dinna want any woman," he said, unsure where the words were coming from. "The woman I want is ye, lass."

She shook her head. "You wouldn't say that if you knew."

"If I knew what?"

"Nothing. It doesn't matter." She scooted away from him and climbed to her feet.

The moment was gone, and Kai felt strangely hollow inside. He was used to being rebuffed. After all, many of the women he chased turned him down—at least at first. Getting them to change their minds was half the fun. But Caitlin's rejection hurt much more than he'd expected.

"Let's put it down to the stress of yesterday, eh?" he said, offering her an easy excuse. "After what happened at the fair, it's no wonder we both needed a bit of release."

She nodded, latching onto this. "Yes. You're right. That's all it was."

Kai climbed to his feet. "Well, I'm glad we got that sorted. Now, we had better be going."

There was nothing for breakfast, so they mounted up and started riding north towards the coast. The drizzle started soon after they'd begun their journey and Caitlin shivered in her damp dress. Kai pulled his own cloak close, wrapping it around the both of them. Her body tensed for a second then she sighed softly as she leaned into him and he felt some of his tension dissipate. His mind was filled with her. He still didn't know why she had pulled away from him, but he was determined to find out.

As they rode, Kai kept his eyes peeled. He glanced around at the surrounding hills and mountains, the gnarled trees and scraggly bushes. The ground was wet with mud and the going slow. The sky was gray with thick clouds that blocked out any trace of sun or warmth.

It was nearing midmorning when they finally passed the first major landmark—an old stone bridge that spanned a narrow stream. He remembered this bridge from his childhood—it marked the boundary of Douglas land.

The road wound its way through rolling hills and thick forests, with occasional patches of open fields. They saw not another soul: only birds and rabbits and the occasional deer that bounded away

as soon as they came close.

Kai spotted a trout stream snaking its way through a clearing in the trees. His stomach rumbled. He didn't like starting out without breakfast but this spot might just help him remedy that. He pulled the horse to a halt on the banks of the stream and swung down.

"Let's try for some breakfast," he said with a grin. He waded carefully into the shallows and scanned the clear, cold water.

Caitlin dismounted and watched him with a bemused look on her face. "What are you doing?"

"Fishing."

"Fishing? But you haven't got a line or anything."

He raised an eyebrow. "Have ye never heard of trout tickling? I was a master at this as a lad. Let's see if I've still got my old skills, eh?"

He moved slowly and carefully through the water, just as his father, Deryn, had taught him, until he spotted a tail jutting out from beneath a rock, showing where a trout was resting. Slowly, he put his hand into the water and moved it until it was beneath the fish. Then he slowly began running the tips of his fingers along the fish's belly, lightly enough that it wouldn't startle, but strong enough that it would send the creature into the trance-like state he needed.

He was in luck. The trout didn't dart away from him and he was able to get his hands underneath its body and heave upwards as quickly as he could, propelling the fish out of the water, towards the bank. It flashed silver as it hurtled through the air—and straight at Caitlin.

"Catch it, lass!"

With a yelp, Caitlin ducked and the fish went sailing past her to land on the bank where it flopped and danced, trying to get back to the water.

"Quick!" Kai cried. "Dinna let it get away!"

Caitlin pounced, grabbing the wriggling creature with both hands. But then her feet slipped in the mud and she fell flat onto her back. To her credit though, she didn't lose her grip on the fish, even though it was a big specimen that was struggling wildly.

"Agh!" she cried, doing her best to hold the wriggling beast. "What am I supposed to do with it now?"

Kai couldn't help himself. He burst out laughing. "Lass, I reckon I could sell tickets to this. I'm not sure who's going to win this wrestling contest but if I was a betting man, I'd put my money on the fish."

"It's not funny!" Caitlin cried, but he could hear laughter in her voice. "Come and help instead of just laughing!"

With a snort, Kai climbed up the bank to where Caitlin lay, dispatched the fish and took it out of Caitlin's hands. She sat up, wiping the back of one gloved hand over her brow.

"Well," she said. "I think we can safely say we've earned our breakfast. Sorry, Mr. Fish."

Kai quickly went to work, gutting and cleaning the fish before building a small fire with some brush. He skewered the fish on a long stick and roasted it over the flames until the skin was crispy and the flesh tender and flaky.

Caitlin watched him work, her stomach grumbling audibly. When the fish was cooked, he used his knife to carefully remove it from the stick, then handed half of it to her.

"Here ye go, lass," he said with a grin. "Yer wrestling partner."

They ate in silence for a while.

"You know," Caitlin said suddenly, breaking the comfortable silence between them. "I don't think I've ever had trout quite this good before."

“Aye, well, it’s the tickling method,” Kai replied. “Brings out the best in them.”

She raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Oh, does it now?”

“Aye,” he said, nodding. “Makes them all relaxed like, so the flesh tastes better.”

She gave a soft laugh. “Well, whatever the reason, it was delicious. Thank you.”

Kai smiled and was about to reply when Caitlin suddenly stood up.

“I’m going to go down to the stream and wash up a bit,” she said. “I stink of fish and horse.”

He watched as she walked to the stream, her pale skirts swaying gently in the morning breeze. He couldn’t help but admire her grace and beauty, even from this distance. She stopped at the edge of the water and turned her back on him, taking off her gloves before lowering her hands into the stream. It was then that he caught sight of the skin beneath—her hands were ridged and scarred, like she had been burned or scalded.

He quickly looked away, not wanting to pry into something that was obviously personal to Caitlin. But he couldn’t stop himself from wondering what had caused such damage...and why she was so determined to hide it.

Kai rose to his feet and brushed off his plaid. Caitlin returned shortly afterwards, her hands once again hidden beneath the black gloves. Kai boosted her onto the broad back of the carthorse then vaulted up behind her. He took hold of the reins and they set off at a brisk pace.

His thoughts turned to what awaited them. Dun Cator. He’d walked out of there four years ago, turning his back not only on it, but on the future that it offered.

Strange how life seemed determined to lead him full circle.

An image flashed into his mind again. *Her* image. Dark hair. Dark eyes. A smile to die for. But then the image changed, the hair shifting from dark to chestnut, the eyes from brown to blue and it was Caitlin’s face he saw instead, Caitlin’s smile that set his heart racing.

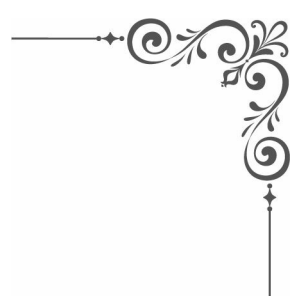
Ah, damn it all! He shifted his weight, making the horse stamp and swing her head back to give him a horsey-glare. He deliberately sat a little more upright so there was more of a gap between him and Caitlin. The last thing he needed was to have her touch him and send his thoughts spiraling again.

He was a commander in the Order of the Osprey, damn it! People were relying on him. His men were relying on him. He needed to concentrate.

He growled under his breath, gave himself a shake, and pushed all thoughts from his mind except the moment, except focusing on the path and staying alert for danger.

He wondered how his men were faring. Better than him, he hoped.





# Chapter 13

Caitlin heard Kai growl under his breath. He seemed irritated and out of sorts. He kept shifting around, making the horse shy and snort, and she really wished he'd keep still. She was finding it hard enough to keep her seat as it was.

Poor horse. She felt for the animal having to carry the both of them although she had to admit that the horse was so big that it probably barely felt their weight at all.

Horse? She shouldn't just be calling her 'horse'. The poor beast had saved their lives back at the fair and was working hard to carry them. She deserved a proper name. She was black and white, with great splotches all over her coat but her mane was a smoky gray.

*Smokey?* she thought. *Does that suit her?*

Caitlin was all too aware that she was trying to distract herself. Thinking of horse names was a far safer subject than thinking about the man sat behind her.

Dear God, how had she let it go so far this morning? She'd kissed him for pity's sake! And she'd almost done a whole lot more! If she hadn't stopped herself—

Her cheeks flushed, heat rushing through her at the thought. How could she have been so reckless?

*It was just the moment,* she told herself. *Just being close to Kai like that. And like he said, we were stressed out from yesterday. It doesn't mean anything.*

But her reasoning sounded hollow, even to herself. She could tell herself that Kai Stewart didn't mean anything to her but she knew that wasn't true.

And yet, he wasn't some guy she'd bumped into at the coffee shop or met at a work's party. He was a medieval warrior whose life was so far removed from her own that they may as well have been from different planets. She would soon be going home and leaving all this madness—and him—behind.

Madness. That was a good word for it. It summed up exactly what her feelings for Kai Stewart were.

She bit her lip and gripped the horse's mane tightly enough that she could sit upright—away from him. He'd made it perfectly plain that he wanted her. All she had to do was give the word and she could feel his hot skin sliding across hers, the pressure of his lips, the weight of his body atop her...

*Stop it!* she told herself savagely. *What are you thinking? This is crazy! Do you want to end up like Mae? Just another notch on his bedpost? Because that's all he's offering. Don't kid yourself that it's anything more.*

That thought sobered her a little. She may be broken but she had a little more self-respect left than that.

The horse plodded on. They rode through forests and valleys, keeping to dark, quiet paths, all of them blurring together in a kaleidoscope of sights and smells. Kai was silent for most of the journey, his hands resting lightly on the reins. She kept her own hands firmly in the horse's mane to stop herself from reaching back to touch him. She knew if she did that then she'd be lost forever.

Kai's mood, she noticed, changed as they neared the coast. He became warier. He'd told her very little about Dun Cator but from his expression she guessed he was expecting trouble when they got there.

Great. Couldn't they just have things easy for once?

For a while all she heard was the thud of hooves against the ground, birdsong, and Kai's breathing. But gradually she became aware of something else—a salty smell that filled her nostrils with every breath. The sea! Finally, they crested a hill and saw its vast blue expanse spread out below them.

Kai pulled the horse to a halt and they looked out over the glittering waves. The sea breeze tugged at Caitlin's hair sending it streaming out behind her, bringing with it the scent of salt, and freedom. She breathed deeply, feeling invigorated.

Kai's expression had softened as well. "Ah! There's something about the sea, isn't there?" he said. "It's so full of possibility and freedom."

Caitlin blinked, surprised that he'd described her own thoughts so accurately.

"I lived by the sea for a few years," she said. "I had an apartment over a chippy that looked right out onto the seafront."

"A chippy?" he asked. "What's a chippy?"

She laughed lightly. "Oh my! You people don't know what you're missing! You don't have chips? Or fries, as most people call them? Do you even have potatoes yet? Actually, don't answer that, I don't want to know. Tell you what, if you ever come to my time, I'll treat you to the greasiest, loveliest bag of chips that money can buy. You won't know what hit you."

Kai laughed too, his eyes sparkling with mirth. "Is that an invitation, lass?"

She snapped her mouth shut. She really had to stop saying such stupid things.

Kai's smile faded as he scanned the horizon. "Dun Cator is just beyond those cliffs." He urged the horse forward.

The rocks they rode toward were jagged and rough, and the waves crashed violently against them. When they reached the cliff edge they dismounted and Kai led them down a hidden path until they emerged in a small cove that was sheltered from the wind.

A group of men were gathered around a small fire at the back of the cove. They wore rough clothing and had weapons at their sides. One of them spotted Kai and stood up, gesturing for the others to do the same.

Kai approached the group, his hand resting on his sword.

They were big, burly men, with rough unkempt beards and hard, watchful eyes. They surrounded Kai, their hands twitching at their weapons.

Caitlin tensed as Kai spoke to the men in a language she didn't understand. They seemed to be arguing, their voices growing louder and more aggressive. Caitlin could feel the tension in the air, like a storm brewing. She glanced around nervously, looking for a way out if things turned violent.

But then, unexpectedly, the men nodded and stepped back. The leader made a strange gesture with one hand, hooking his middle two fingers and leaving the rest splayed, and Kai made a similar gesture in response, as though it was some sort of prearranged signal.

Caitlin breathed out slowly as the tension dissipated. She didn't understand what had just happened, but at least they weren't going to come to blows. Kai returned and gathered the horse's reins. They walked past the group of men, who watched them warily, and headed towards the cliff face. As they got closer, Caitlin could see that there was a narrow path cut between the rocks.

"Stay close," Kai warned her. "The path is treacherous."

Caitlin glanced back at the men. "What was that all about?" she asked, her voice low and tense.

Kai didn't answer right away. "Lord Alasdair Douglas rules Dun Cator and the surrounding lands," he said finally. "He is very...particular...about who he lets approach his keep. Those men were guards. If I hadnae given the right passwords, we wouldnae have been allowed any further."

Caitlin didn't comment as they walked in single file with Kai leading the horse through the narrow, rocky path between the cliffs. It was slow going, and more than once Caitlin slipped and nearly fell, but Kai caught her elbow before she could hurt herself. For his part, he moved with an easy grace that suggested he'd been this way many times before and he picked out a route that was wide enough for the horse to pass unhindered.

The path wound and twisted, hugging the cliffs as it followed the shoreline. To Caitlin's left she could see the sea stretching out into a hazy horizon, while on her right the cliffs rose up like a wall. It seemed like they had been walking for hours when suddenly, around a bend in the path, the view suddenly opened out.

Caitlin gasped as she laid eyes upon Dun Cator. The keep was built directly into the side of the cliff, with tiers of stone walls and towers that soared high above them. Nestled below it was a small fishing village, with tightly packed cottages and boats bobbing on the waves.

Kai smiled at her stunned expression. "Quite the sight isnae it?"

Caitlin nodded and they walked down the winding path into the village. The streets were narrow and bustling, the air thick with the smell of fish and salt. People were going about their daily business: bartering for goods, getting in the day's catch, gossiping with neighbors, and children were playing in the streets. It looked like a homely little place but Caitlin knew better than to let her guard down. After what had happened at the fair...

She kept her eyes peeled for anything out of the ordinary.

The locals paid them no mind as they wove through the streets and Caitlin did her best to blend in and not to stare like some wide-eyed tourist. They made their way around another bend in the cliff and for the second time in less than an hour, Caitlin stopped and stared in wonder.

A huge harbor lay below them. It was crescent-shaped with wooden jetties poking out into the sea like countless fingers. Piled up at those jetties were ships of all kinds: from tiny fishing vessels to broad-bottomed cargo vessels to sleek galleons with tall sails. Crates of cargo were being unloaded from many of them with some kind of wood-and-rope crane before being transported up to the castle or to large structures like warehouses along the seafront.

"Impressive isnae it?" Kai said, seeing the line of Caitlin's gaze. "Ye can see why Leif Snarlsson wants it. Not only is this the only deep-water harbor on the northern coast, but Dun Cator is unapproachable by land should the cliff path be blocked. He could hole up here with his fleet and slowly tighten his grip on the northern Highlands and there wouldnae be a damned thing anyone could do about it."

Caitlin peered out over Dun Cator and its harbor. Memories of the fair played through her head. Smoke. Screaming. Moans of pain. Leif Snarlsson and his people had already shown they were ruthless and would do terrible things to get what they wanted. How far would they be willing to go to capture this strategically important spot? If she and Kai didn't stop him, would it soon be those gossiping women lying in the street moaning in pain? Would it be those children staring lifeless at the sky?

The thought twisted her stomach with dread. No. She and Kai had gotten here ahead of Snarlsson. They would not let him destroy this place.

"Ah ha! Finally!" shouted a voice behind them. "Ye took yer bloody time getting here!"

Caitlin and Kai turned to see two familiar figures approaching along the street: the enormous form of Magnus and the lithe figure of Conall.

Kai broke into a beaming smile. "Well, I'll be damned!" He bounded over to them. "Ye are alive after all! I thought I'd finally gotten rid of ye!"

He placed his hands on Conall's shoulders just as Magnus swept Caitlin into a hug that nearly cracked her ribs. She was a little breathless when the big man put her down again.

"But...but...how?" she said. "How have you got here ahead of us?"

Magnus winked at her. "Because traveling by river is a damned sight quicker than traveling by horse."

"We got free of the fair and Alice's men," Conall explained. "But were forced south until we reached the river. Once there, we 'borrowed' a boat and rode the river all the way here. We arrived a couple of hours ago."

Kai nodded, grinning. "It's good to see ye, my friends." He looked over their shoulders and a worried expression flashed across his face. "Emeric? Oskar?"

"Dinna worry," Magnus said. "They made it out too. Oskar has gone to Laird MacDonald to get help for those injured at the fair whilst Emeric is sailing to Dun Saith to rouse the Order as ye commanded. He will bring them here."

Conall looked around, his wolf-gray eyes glancing up at the keep towering above them. A wary expression crossed his face. "Do ye think this is a good idea, Kai? There is no need for ye to go up there. Magnus and I can carry the warning. After everything that happened here..."

He trailed off and Caitlin was surprised by the spasm of anguish that twisted Kai's features. He shook his head.

"None of that matters. What matters is that Lord Alasdair is warned and that Leif Snarlsson is stopped."

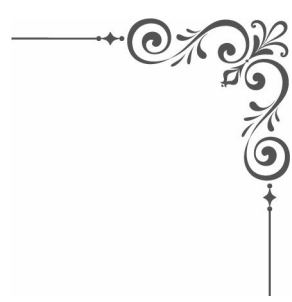
Conall shared a look with Magnus. "Aye, that may be so, but from the gossip we've heard since we arrived, things are not as they once were in Dun Cator. Lord Alasdair is old and it's Lady Lorna and her husband who run Dun Cator now."

Kai stilled. His expression went as blank as stone but Caitlin didn't miss the flash of anger in his eyes or the way his mouth twitched as though suppressing a snarl.

"Then it is to Lady Lorna and her husband that we must deliver our warning," he said, his voice cold. "Let's go."

Without waiting for the others, he marched off. Conall gave Caitlin an apologetic shrug and Magnus took Smokey's reins, gently stroking the giant horse's nose.

Having no other option, Caitlin set off after Kai and Conall, leaving Magnus to bring up the rear. She had no idea what was going to happen when they reached the keep but she couldn't shake the suspicion that whatever it was, she wasn't going to like it.



# Chapter 14

*Lady Lorna and her husband run Dun Cator now.*

They were not the words Kai had been hoping to hear. He had hoped to speak directly with Lord Alasdair and not see the lord's daughter at all. If he had been really lucky, Lorna and her husband would not even be at Dun Cator. After all, Lord Alasdair's holdings stretched up and down the coast with many more settlements under his stewardship.

*Lucky?* he thought to himself. *Did you really expect to be lucky? Then you are a damned fool.*

One thing he'd learned was that if fate had a chance to piss on him, it generally did. Why should he have expected anything different this time?

He led the way through the winding streets and up towards the gates of the keep. It had been many years since he'd walked this path but it felt like only a heartbeat had passed. His feet remembered the way with no prompting.

As they climbed, he did his best to remain in the calm, detached bubble that he entered before a battle, a bubble in which no emotions could reach him. He almost succeeded.

Yet that calm shattered when they finally climbed up to the gates of Dun Cator and a familiar voice called, "Kai? Kai Stewart? Is that really ye?"

A tawny-haired man with a scar down his face came hurrying towards him. The man wore the Douglas plaid with the orca sigil sewn onto his breast.

"Rannoch?"

He had known Rannoch since his days as a young warrior. They'd spent many an hour drinking together, playing chess and discussing philosophy. Rannoch had been a simple guardsman back then. If the sigil on his breast was anything to go by, he was a captain now.

Rannoch reached out to clasp Kai's arm in a familiar gesture before embracing him tightly. "Kai! It's so good to see ye again, my old friend." He grinned widely as he stepped back to get a better look at him. "What brings ye here?"

"Naught good, my friend. I have grave tidings for the lord of the keep."

Rannoch took this in stride. He was a warrior to his core. "Lord Alasdair is unwell," he said. Then he glanced at Kai's companions, his expression wavering slightly. "But I...um...can take ye to Lady Lorna and Lord Tobias. They serve in the lord's stead now."

Rannoch's discomfort was clear. Kai beat back a surge of annoyance. First Magnus and Conall, now Rannoch. Did none of them think he could handle this? Did they all think him so weak?

He deliberately didn't look at Caitlin. He knew he would see questions in her eyes, questions he did not want to answer.

"Lead the way then, Rannoch," Kai said, his voice steady.

Rannoch gave a stiff nod before turning and leading the way into the keep.

As they walked, Kai couldn't help but feel the weight of the past bearing down on him. He had been happy here once. Happier, perhaps than he ever had been in his life. But then—

He gritted his teeth and pushed such thoughts aside, focusing on the task at hand.

Finally, they reached the great hall, a chamber so familiar to Kai that entering it was like stepping back in time. The tapestries were the same, the well-used benches and tables looked exactly as he remembered them.

And the woman seated at the head table looked the same, if a little older. Same dark hair, same piercing eyes that seemed to spear him to the core, same full lips and shrewd expression. But she was different in all the ways that mattered.

Now, she was flanked by her husband.

She rose as he entered the room. Forgetting all protocol, she gasped in a shocked voice, “Kai?”

He refused to respond to the welcome in her voice or give in to the tingle it sent through him.

Instead, he bowed stiffly, formally, before Lady Lorna and Lord Tobias.

“My lord, my lady,” he said, his voice low and measured. “I bring grave news from the south. Leif Snarlsson, the Norwegian mercenary and pirate, is on the move. He has already attacked a fair south of here. We believe ye to be his next target.”

Lorna said nothing, only stared at him, her eyes shining as if she’d not heard his words at all. Kai couldn’t bear to meet her gaze so instead, he focused on her husband.

Tobias Kenworthy, an English baron, had filled out in the years since Kai had last seen him. The young, pompous lordling had become a thick-set, bearded man with sharp features and an even sharper expression. That expression was fixed on Kai right now and he could almost see the man’s thoughts churning behind his eyes, trying to decide if Kai was a threat and what he should do about it.

Maybe this had been a bad idea after all. Perhaps he *should* have let Magnus and Conall handle this as they’d suggested. The last thing he needed was his presence to cause more trouble than it solved.

But then Tobias inclined his head. “Leif Snarlsson? That is a dark name indeed. I doubt me there’s a lord along the whole northern coast who hasn’t heard it. And you think he’s coming here? Why?”

“That is what I hope to explain if ye will hear me, my lord?”

Tobias glanced at his wife. Lorna blinked, gathered herself, tore her gaze away from Kai, and met her husband’s eyes. Something passed between them, something intimate that made Kai’s stomach twist with unexpected fury.

“Very well,” Lord Tobias said. “Speak then. Tell us everything.”



CAITLIN STOOD WITH Magnus and Conall as Kai told his tale. She’d been introduced briefly and whilst Lady Lorna and Lord Tobias had given her welcoming smiles, all of their attention had been fixed on Kai. Especially Lorna’s. From the first moment Kai had walked into the room she had all but bounced on her feet, trying and failing to keep her pleasure from showing. Caitlin scowled. She didn’t know what was going on here but she didn’t like it.

Kai, for his part, looked tense. As he relayed everything that had happened at the fair and why they thought Dun Cator was Snarlsson’s real target, his shoulders were hunched and a vein throbbed in his temple. He kept his gaze very firmly fixed on Tobias, and didn’t look at Lorna.

Magnus and Conall shifted and Caitlin glanced in their direction. If she hadn’t known better, she would have said they were as tense as Kai, but perhaps for a different reason. Their attention was fixed on Kai rather than on the lord and lady who’d they come to warn, and both of them looked uneasy. Conall’s jaw clenched and Magnus kept shifting his weight from foot to foot.

Caitlin’s frown deepened. What was going on here? Why had Magnus and Conall offered to come here in Kai’s stead? What were they so worried about?

Kai finished his tale and Lady Lorna’s hands went to her mouth. “But...but... that’s horrible! Oh, those poor, poor, people!” Tears gathered in her eyes. “Rannoch!” she called and the guard captain



stepped forward. “Take as many men as ye deem fit and ride south to the fair immediately. Take the healers with ye and whatever supplies ye need—we have to help those people.”

“No. Dinna do that,” Kai said quickly. When Lorna gave him an enquiring look, he continued. “That is exactly what Snarlsson intended with attacking the fair. He wants to draw everyone’s attention there: Laird MacDonald, whose lands the fair is on, the Order of the Osprey, even the king. And while we are all busy looking south, he will come north and attack ye from behind. So no, my lady, as much as it pains me, ye mustnae send any men south. Dun Cator needs to be at full strength if ye hope to fend off this attack.”

“But...but—” Lady Lorna stammered.

“He’s right,” Lord Tobias cut in. “As much as it galls me, we have to remain here. If what we are told about Snarlsson is true and he attacks us here—”

“How can he attack us?” Lorna cried. “How would he dare? We have a royal charter! We are beholden to no lord save the king! How would he dare violate that and bring down the king’s wrath on his head?”

“If what we hear about this man is true, he willnae give two shits about any royal charter,” Tobias replied, stroking his beard. “I heard that when Northolt wouldn’t surrender, he burned the place to the ground and that had a royal charter too.”

Lorna paled. “Then what are we going to do? We’re merchants, traders, not warriors! We dinna have enough ships or men to keep out a fleet!” Her voice rose at the end as though she was on the verge of hysteria.

Kai stepped forward and laid a hand on her arm. “It’s all right,” he said in a gentle voice. “Ye aren’t alone. As we speak, the Order of the Osprey rides to Dun Cator.”

Lorna’s eyes widened. “The Order of the Osprey? Coming here?”

“Aye. They will protect ye. *I will protect ye.*”

Lorna stared at Kai and Caitlin felt something ugly unfold inside her. Jealousy.

Lady Lorna gave a grateful smile. “Thank ye, Kai. And thank the Order. Their protection means the world to us. But I worry for my people.”

“I know it,” Kai replied. “And I know how much yer people mean to ye. But the Order will come. They will stand with ye.”

Lorna shared a quick look with her husband. She smiled at Kai, but it was a weak sort of smile, all thin and stretched. After a moment, she squared her shoulders and stepped back. Taking a deep breath, she looked beyond Kai to where Caitlin and the others were standing.

“I’ve forgotten my manners and kept guests waiting. Be welcome at Dun Cator, all of ye. I will have someone show ye to our guestrooms where ye can wash and rest before dinner.”

She waved a hand and three young women who Caitlin guessed must be servants stepped forward. One of them approached Caitlin.

“If ye will follow me, mistress?”

Caitlin glanced at Kai but he was watching Lorna and it was Conall who nodded and gave her an encouraging smile. Caitlin followed her from the room.

Built into the side of the cliff as it was, Caitlin soon discovered that Dun Cator was a place of stairs. Many stairs. All steep enough to make Caitlin’s legs ache and her breath to come in gasps. By the time the servant halted outside a door Caitlin was puffing like a bellows. The young woman gave a curtsy and opened the door, indicating for Caitlin to go inside.

“If ye need aught, just ring the bell,” she said. “I’ll bring ye some wash water.”

With that she gave another curtsey and left, leaving Caitlin to look around the room she had been given. It was not large but like every room she'd seen in Dun Cator so far, it had a spectacular view of the sea.

Caitlin strode over to the window and looked out. The sun had broken through the clouds and was dipping towards the horizon, turning the waves into a sheet of beaten gold. It looked tranquil, peaceful. Who would believe that soon the sea would be dark with ships?

And here she was, trapped right in their path.

So be it. She would do whatever she could to stop the same fate befalling the people of Dun Cator as those at the fair.

The maid returned a short while later with a steaming bowl of water, a cloth, and a bar of lavender-scented soap. Caitlin thanked her profusely then set to with a vengeance, washing herself as thoroughly as she could. It felt amazing to wash away the grime and dust of their long ride and the only thing that could have topped it would have been a steaming hot shower followed by a hair dryer and straighteners. Still, she couldn't have everything.

When she'd washed, she set the bowl on the dressing table and strode over to the window again. She knew she ought to take this opportunity to rest but she was restless. Nervous energy zinged through her veins. Where was Kai right now? What was he doing? Was he thinking about her?

Or Lorna?

That ugly feeling unfolded inside her again. She squashed it mercilessly.

She strode to the door and yanked it open, determined to get some fresh air on her face. It would help to clear her mind and settle her thoughts. At the end of the corridor, she found a set of steps which she climbed and wandered through a series of passages that held doors just like her own—other guest rooms at a guess. Which one was Kai's? Where was he staying?

No! Stop it!

She climbed another staircase, this one longer than the first, and came out into a long, narrow gallery. Tapestries covered the back wall but the other housed a large wooden door that stood open, flooding the gallery with light. Through the open door Caitlin could hear the sounds of seagulls.

Ah ha! Caitlin stepped through the door and found herself on a wide stone balcony. A waist-high balustrade cordoned it off but even so the sudden height was enough to make Caitlin gulp. She was high up in one of Dun Cator's towers and the land fell away below her so that all she could see were the roofs of the keep, the village beyond that, and gulls that circled, searching for food.

She inhaled deeply, leaned on the balustrade and closed her eyes, sucking in the invigorating sea air and letting it calm her chafed nerves.

"Aye, gets ye like that doesnae it?"

Caitlin opened her eyes with a start and turned to see that she was not alone on the balcony. An old man sat in a chair nearby, a blanket over his legs. He had thin white hair over a liver-spotted scalp and enough wrinkles that he could give Irene MacAskill a run for her money.

"Oh! Sorry!" Caitlin said. "I didn't mean to intrude."

The old man waved a hand. "Ye didnae. My daughter thinks the sea air is good for me but I've been staring at this view for seventy years. After all that time it gets a wee bit boring." The old man regarded her with shrewd blue eyes. "I dinna recognize ye, lass. Ye aren't one of the serving staff, are ye?"

"Um, no," Caitlin replied. "I'm a visitor, I arrived with Kai and the others."

The old man's eyes lit up. "Kai? Kai Stewart? He's here?"

Caitlin nodded. "Yes. We arrived about an hour ago."

The old man breathed out slowly. Almost under his breath he said, "I didnae think he'd ever come here again. Not after—" He shook himself and gave Caitlin a smile. "And who might ye be?"

"Caitlin," she said. "Caitlin Summers. Pleased to meet you."

"Not half as glad as I am to meet ye," the old man said. "I'm glad young Kai has found himself a bonny lass. He deserves happiness. Ye are most welcome, my dear."

"Oh no," Caitlin blurted at the old man's assumption. "It's not like that. Kai and me are just—"

"Father!" came a voice from the corridor. "Have ye been sending the servants away again?"

There was the sound of footsteps and Lady Lorna herself stepped out onto the balcony. She was carrying a tray laden with crockery and she looked annoyed. She stopped dead when she spotted Caitlin.

"Oh. My apologies, I didnae realize ye were up here. Caitlin, isnae it?"

"It is. I just wanted to get some air. I didn't mean to intrude where I shouldn't."

Lorna glanced at the old man. "Ye havenae. I hope ye've found my father in a pleasant mood?"

Father? So, this was Alasdair Douglas, the lord of this castle?

Lorna put the tray down on a small table at the side of her father's chair and placed her hands on her hips, scowling at him. "Andrew tells me ye sent him away again and refused to eat yer soup."

"Of course I refused to eat my bloody soup!" the old man growled. "It tastes like horse piss! I'm sure ye are trying to bloody poison me!"

"We are *not* trying to poison ye," Lorna said in a tone like steel. "We are trying to do our best by ye, which ye dinna make easy!"

The old man wagged a finger at her. "Yer best by me? Then bring me meat, girl! Juicy beef fresh off the bone."

"The physician said—"

"I dinna give a pig's fart what the physician said! I'm still the bloody lord of this castle, girl, and I'll get my bloody way!"

From the way they spoke, Caitlin guessed this was an argument they'd had many times before. Her cheeks flamed with embarrassment to see this exchange between father and daughter. She began carefully edging towards the door.

"Father," Lorna said. "Eat yer soup or I willnae tell ye my news."

"Ha!" Alasdair replied. "I already know! Kai's come, hasnae he? Caitlin already told me." Lorna glanced at Caitlin, annoyance flashing across her features. "And I'll bet ye are glad of it aren't ye?" Alasdair continued. "Tobias, not so much I would imagine."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Ye know full well what that's supposed to mean." He looked up at his daughter, his expression stern. "Just dinna go causing any trouble, ye hear me?"

Caitlin edged through the door and their voices were cut off as she hurried away. But she'd not gone more than ten paces when Lorna called from behind her, "Caitlin! Wait!"

She turned and Lorna came hurrying over to her. "My apologies that ye had to hear that," she said. "My father can be a little...difficult at times."

"No need to apologize. He was perfectly charming."

"Charming?" Lorna snorted. "I dinna think I've heard that word used to describe my father in... well, ever, actually. He does naught but gripe and complain these days. The old bastard ought to hurry up and die. He's in the way of everything!"

Caitlin was shocked by the vehemence in her tone.

Lorna seemed to realize she'd said too much and gave Caitlin an awkward smile.

“Oh dear, did I really say that out loud? My apologies. I didnae mean it, of course.” She gave a long, loud sigh. “It’s just that sometimes it all seems to pile on top of me: looking after my father, running the castle, keeping my husband happy.” She fixed Caitlin with her piercing stare. “And now this news that Kai has brought with him. I’m afraid it’s frayed my temper a little.”

Caitlin gave her what she hoped was an encouraging smile. “I understand. I’m just grateful we got to you in time. Kai’s news must have come as quite the shock.”

Lorna nodded. “It did.” Her expression turned thoughtful as she studied Caitlin. “I must admit, I was surprised to see that Kai had taken a woman into his band. Ye dinna often see female warriors.”

“Oh, I’m not in his band,” Caitlin blurted before she could think better of it. “And I’m certainly no warrior!”

“Oh?” Lorna replied, her eyebrows climbing. “Then how do ye know Kai? How do ye come to be traveling with him?”

She asked in an off-hand manner but Caitlin got the impression there was more to her question. Lady Lorna was suddenly focused and intent, waiting keenly on Caitlin’s answer. She sensed she was suddenly in dangerous waters although she couldn’t exactly pinpoint why.

Caitlin chose her words carefully. “I met him and his band on the road. I was lost. They helped me. They were escorting me to his brother when we got caught up in the incident at the fair.”

She had assumed that this information would mollify Lorna but the words had the opposite effect. She reached out and gripped Caitlin’s arm. “Kai’s brother? Ye mean Rory Stewart? Why would he be taking ye to him?”

“Er...um...he thought Rory might be able to help me find a way home,” she said quickly, surprised by Lorna’s sudden interest. “Like I said, I got lost.”

Caitlin tugged her arm free of Lorna’s grip and took a step back, feeling suddenly uncomfortable. How did Lorna know Kai’s brother? How did she know Kai himself for that matter? And why did she look so intense at the mention of Rory?

Lorna stared at her for a moment, unblinking. But then she shrugged and waved a nonchalant hand. “I’m sure that’s true. I’ve heard that Rory Stewart is one of the best trackers in the Highlands. I’m sure he’ll be able to help ye. When do ye think the Order of the Osprey will arrive?”

“I...er...” Caitlin stammered, caught off guard by Lorna’s sudden change in subject. “I’ve no idea.”

“But they’re riding from Dun Saith, aye?”

“I think so,” Caitlin replied, remembering Kai mention the name.

“That’s a three-day ride,” Lorna said under her breath. “Depending on how many men they bring.” She looked at Caitlin again. “Are they sending their full strength to aid us, do ye think? Will the commanders be with them? I’ve heard Laird Callum is now too old to travel but his grandson should be coming in his stead, aye?”

Caitlin threw up her hands. “I really don’t know. You’re talking to the wrong person. Kai or Conall or Magnus will be able to tell you more than I can.”

“But if ye’ve been riding with Kai and his men ye must have picked up something! Did they talk about their plans? Or how many men the Order can put into the field?”

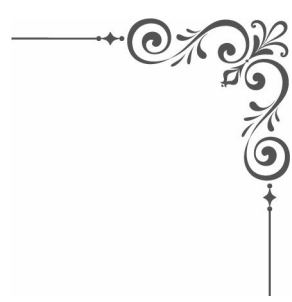
“Look, I’m sorry, but I think you’ve got the wrong end of the stick. I can’t tell you anything like that.”

Lorna stared at her a moment. Then she smiled and waved a hand. “Listen to me, grilling ye like some military strategist. Forgive me. I’m just worried for my people is all. Think no more of it. In fact, whilst ye are here, I want ye to treat this as yer home. Ye are a friend of Kai’s which means ye are a friend of mine. Ye are our honored guest.”

“That’s very kind. Thank you.”

She turned and began to walk away but Lorna suddenly caught her wrist. “But dinna come up here again,” the lady of the keep said, her voice hard and cold. “My father is not to be disturbed. Strangers upset him.”

Caitlin inclined her head in acquiescence. Then she hurried off, feeling Lorna’s eyes boring into her back as she went.



# Chapter 15

Kai picked up his tankard, took a long, deep gulp then slammed it back on the table, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Several empty tankards already covered the stained table top. What time had he come in here? He couldn't remember. Squinting, he peered through the windows—unglazed holes in the wall that were covered with shutters at night—but the inn was packed so close to its neighbors that he could barely see the sky, let alone the sun.

It was somewhere near sunset at a guess.

He took another swig of ale, annoyed to find the tankard empty, and waved at the innkeeper to bring him more. The part of himself that still had a clear head told him sternly that this was a bad idea. But that part of himself was already drowning under the weight of alcohol and regret that was slowly seeping through his veins.

Kai breathed deeply, trying to calm the storm of emotions whirling inside him. It had been foolish of him to think he could come here and not stir up the past. It had been foolish to think he could so easily make up for his mistakes at the fair. It had been foolish to think that Caitlin wanted him—

Ah, curse it all!

And so now here he was, sitting by himself in this dingy inn, drinking himself into oblivion so that he could forget. Yet the alcohol didn't seem to be dulling his memories, but only making the recollections of them sharper, more painful.

The innkeeper brought him another tankard of ale and Kai thanked him gruffly, not wanting to make conversation.

Kai had just taken a sip when he noticed one of the serving girls smiling at him suggestively. She was pretty, with a saucy grin and sparkling eyes that shone in the dim light of the inn. His mouth curved into a half smile but his heart wasn't in it. He couldn't bring himself to flirt—which was a sure sign that he was feeling sorry for himself.

Sighing heavily, Kai picked up his tankard and took another drink, hoping that this time—perhaps—the alcohol would do its job and dull his senses.

The door suddenly opened and the lithe form of Conall appeared in the doorway. His wolf-gray eyes swept the room. Spotting Kai, he took a tankard from one of the serving wenches, then crossed to Kai's table and sat down opposite without saying a word. Conall offered a faint smile before picking up his tankard and taking a sip. They drank in silence for a while, Conall's gaze never leaving Kai's face.

Finally, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "What are ye doing here, Kai? I didnae think ye were one for wallowing in self-pity."

The words stung Kai into anger. "What would ye know about it? When I want yer opinion, I will ask ye!"

Conall's eyes narrowed at the outburst, but his tone remained even. "Ye didnae answer my question, Kai. What are ye doing here? What's going on?"

Kai slammed his tankard down on the table, sloshing ale over the worn surface. "What's going on? Leif Snarlsson is what's going on. Me being an utter bloody idiot is what's going on!"

*Caitlin is what's going on, he thought. Lorna is what's going on. All those people hurt at the fair because of me is what's going on.*

Conall's expression softened, and he reached out to place a hand on Kai's shoulder. "What happened at the fair wasnae yer fault."

"Wasnae it?" he growled. "Would any of those people have been hurt if I hadnae decided to take that gunpowder there?"

Conall had no answer to that.

Kai scowled, determined to change the subject. "How are the preparations coming?" he asked. "Give me some good news, will ye?"

"Well at least I can please ye on that score. Lord Tobias has sent scouts along the coast in both directions and to the higher ground inland. He's set up teams of messengers in relays so we'll know in plenty of time if Snarlsson's fleet is spotted."

"Any word from the Order?"

"Not yet." Conall leaned forward with a frown on his face. "How come ye dinna know all this already? Surely Lord Tobias has told ye—"

Kai snorted, cutting his friend off. "Lord Tobias has told me precisely nothing. I asked to be part of his war councils but I was politely rebuffed. Preening, arrogant, cock-sure, little—"

"Well, ye canna really blame him, can ye?" Conall interrupted.

Kai felt a flash of anger but before he could retort, the door burst open and a group of rowdy men stumbled in, laughing and shouting. Kai tensed, his hand instinctively going to the hilt of his sword.

But then he relaxed, recognizing some of them as local fishermen. They were drunk and in high spirits, but not dangerous. Kai's eyes flickered back to Conall. "What do ye mean by that?" he asked, his tone low and dangerous.

Conall didn't flinch, meeting Kai's gaze steadily. "Ye know exactly what I mean. After what happened with ye and Lorna—"

"Quiet!" Kai growled. "Dinna say it!"

Conall held up his hands placatingly. "Alright, alright." He leaned back in his chair, taking another sip of his ale. "But what happened between ye and Lorna—"

"I said not another word!" Kai snapped, his chest tight with anger and pain. "I dinna wish to talk about it!"

Conall sighed heavily and lapsed into silence. The rowdy group of men stumbled over to a nearby table, their laughter and shouts growing louder. Kai took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. He didn't want to talk about Lorna. Hell, he didn't even want to *think* about Lorna. But being here ripped that wound open as though it was still fresh and bleeding rather than scabbed over.

Kai shook his head, trying to push aside the memories. "I suppose ye are right," he said at last. "About Tobias, I mean. In his position perhaps I would see me as a threat as well. But he shouldnae. He won. I lost. And nothing changes the fact that we need to work together if we're going to stop Snarlsson."

Conall nodded in agreement, and his expression turned serious. "There's something else ye need to know, Kai. I've been hearing rumors—whispers—that Snarlsson might have some kind of inside information. Information that could give him an advantage over us."

"Rumors? From whom?"

"Some of the guards. Most didnae want to talk to me but those that did said there have been whispers of clandestine meetings taking place in the town but the town guard havenae been able to ferret them out."

Kai scowled. Perfect. Just bloody perfect. "Then we need to find out who this mole might be and what information they've passed to Snarlsson."



“Aye,” Conall said. “But we need to be careful. If Snarlsson knows we’re onto him, this could go south very quickly.”

Kai considered this. It was not unusual for there to be spies and informants living in a lord’s castle. Anyone could be bought and it was unsurprising how the promise of coin could turn a man’s loyalty. But what was unusual was for those spies and informants to have access to the kind of information that Leif Snarlsson would want. Only someone close to the lord and lady of the keep would have that, and in Kai’s experience, spies were normally lowly servants or stable hands trying to make a few extra coppers.

Still, he wasn’t about to take any risks. Their only advantage was that Snarlsson didn’t know they’d worked out he was targeting Dun Cator. They could not afford to lose that advantage.

“I’ll speak to Lord Tobias again,” he said. “See if he can be persuaded to stop merchants and the like leaving the castle.”

Conall nodded his agreement.

“In the meantime,” Kai continued. “Go see if Magnus is back from scouting. We need to know what he’s discovered.”

Conall nodded again. He finished his ale and stood. “Aye, I’ll go check on him now.”

Kai watched as Conall strode out of the tavern and into the street, his broad shoulders set with determination. He sighed heavily and leaned back in his chair.

As he did, he noticed the serving lass watching him again. Kai couldn’t help but smile automatically at her, some of his old swagger returning. He considered going over and talking to her, trying his hand at some light flirting. Aye, maybe that’s exactly what he needed.

Then the image of another woman flashed through his mind and he felt a pang in his chest. He couldn’t figure out whether the woman was Lorna or Caitlin. He closed his eyes for a moment, pushing the feeling aside.

Damn it!

He finished his drink then rose and left the tavern, determined to clear his head. He’d climb up to the castle and speak with Lord Tobias, even though he’d rather stick his head in a wasp’s nest. But if there *was* a mole in Dun Cator, the lord of the castle needed to know about it.

Kai stepped out into the evening, striding through the gathering darkness towards the castle gate. The stars were beginning to shine overhead like a thousand tiny fireflies and his boots clacked against cobblestones as he walked, echoing off buildings like a distant drum beat warning of an impending storm.

It matched his mood perfectly.



## Chapter 16

The next morning, Caitlin was already up when a soft knock came on her door. In truth, she'd barely slept and just kept tossing and turning most of the night, unable to stop the whirring of her thoughts.

She answered the door and the same maid who'd shown her to her room yesterday came in and gave her a curtsy.

"Good morning, my lady," she said. "I trust ye slept well?"

"Yes, thank you," Caitlin lied.

"Then if ye wish, I will help ye get ready for breakfast."

"Er...sure. Great." The young woman crossed to the mantelpiece and took up a hairbrush then moved to stand behind Caitlin's chair.

"What's your name?" Caitlin asked as she began brushing out her hair.

"Emma, my lady."

"I'm Caitlin."

The girl smiled but said nothing. It seemed she wasn't one for conversation. Caitlin allowed her to brush her hair, but when Emma offered to help her dress, she froze. Emma blinked at her, a bemused expression on her face as Caitlin insisted the young woman turned her back while she dressed herself.

Emma was too well-trained to comment, but Caitlin suspected the maid thought her behavior a little odd. Well, tough. She was doing her best to fit in here, but there *were* limits. Once she was dressed and washed, Caitlin followed Emma down to the great hall for breakfast. The hall was already bustling with activity. The servants went about their chores whilst the warriors and lords sat at their tables, eating and talking.

Caitlin hesitated on the threshold, a twinge of apprehension twisting her stomach. She scanned the tables for Kai, but there was no sign of him, Conall, or Magnus. Caitlin smoothed her dress, feeling self-conscious as she followed Emma to a seat at one of the long tables. Emma hurried off, leaving Caitlin sitting stiffly by herself.

Where were Kai and the others? She should have arranged to meet them before coming down to breakfast alone. She felt *very* out of place and *very* uncomfortable.

Emma brought her some porridge and pieces of flatbread, asked if she needed anything else, then bustled off when Caitlin answered in the negative. Damn. She should have asked the maid to stay. Then at least she might not have looked so conspicuous sitting here alone. She busied herself with her breakfast, trying to appear at ease when really all she wanted to do was get out of here.

But she needn't have worried. It wasn't long before other women came to join her at the table—the wives of the castle's guards and functionaries. They chatted amicably amongst themselves, asking polite questions of Caitlin, which she answered just as politely without revealing anything about herself. Their easy small-talk helped her relax a little although she still found herself scanning the hall for Kai.

By the time she'd finished her breakfast, he still hadn't appeared. She pushed the bench back, rose to her feet, and bid good day to her breakfast companions. Trying to walk demurely like a medieval lady was supposed to, she crossed the great hall and made her way outside into the bailey.

A cold wind was blowing in off the sea and Caitlin couldn't help scanning the horizon anxiously, dreading the sight of sails coming this way. But the sea was empty except for the small fishing vessels of the locals.

*For how long?* she thought. *How long until the fleet arrives?*

The thought made her stomach clench. She remembered the explosion at the fair, the ringing in her ears and the sound of screaming. Would the same thing happen to Dun Cator?

*No*, she thought fiercely. *It won't.*

She looked around the bailey and spotted Kai standing by the stables talking quietly with Conall and Magnus, who was brushing down Smokey.

Caitlin tried to ignore the flutter in her chest at the sight of Kai as she picked her way carefully through the mud of the bailey towards the three men. Kai had changed into a green tunic that accentuated the pale gold of his hair. He looked up when he heard her footsteps.

"Caitlin," he said, inclining his head.

"Kai," she replied, matching his somber tone. "Magnus. Conall." She stroked the velvety end of Smokey's nose and the horse nuzzled her, looking for a treat. "What are you doing? It doesn't take three of you to groom one horse."

The men shared a glance. Magnus shifted his feet uncomfortably. Conall scrubbed a hand through his hair.

Caitlin crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. Whatever they'd been discussing, it was clear they didn't want to reveal it to her. Well, to hell with that.

She tapped her foot, waiting.

"We were...um...just discussing what we've discovered since we arrived here," Magnus said at last.

"Oh? And what is that?"

Kai scowled. "Naught that ye need to worry about, lass. The less ye know, the better."

Caitlin's cheeks flushed with indignation and she took a step forward. "I'm risking as much here as you are. Don't you think I deserve to know what's going on?" She glared at him, daring him to refuse her.

Kai held her gaze for a long moment before heaving a heavy sigh. "Fine. We think there may be a mole within Dun Cator. Someone who's working for Leif Snarlsson."

Caitlin blinked in surprise. "Do you have any idea who it could be?"

Kai shook his head. "Not yet." He glanced at Conall and Magnus. "We were just discussing some possible suspects."

"Such as?"

"It would have to be someone who can come and go from the castle without causing suspicion," Magnus said. "My guess is a servant."

Kai shook his head. "I dinna think so. How would a servant have access to secrets that Leif Snarlsson would be interested in? It has to be someone higher ranked than that. A merchant? A castle functionary? One of the lord and lady's personal guards?"

Conall shrugged. "Maybe. I've checked the guild register. There hasnae been anyone new arrive in the last six months. All the merchants are well known in Dun Cator and have been plying their trade here for years."

"Could it be Lorna?"

Caitlin hadn't realized she'd asked the question out loud until all three men turned to stare at her.

"Lorna?" Conall asked. "What would make ye suspect her?"

Caitlin shook her head. "I... I don't know. It's just a feeling. She was a little strange with me when I bumped into her yesterday. She asked lots of questions. Odd questions. She was very interested in when the Order of the Osprey will arrive and how strong their forces might be."

"So what?" Kai snapped. "Of course she would be interested in those things. Of course she would ask questions. Her home is under threat!"

"But you didn't see her expression," Caitlin said, remembering the avid look in Lorna's eyes. "And you didn't hear the way she spoke about her father. It was...not nice. Then, as I was about to leave, I...I...think she threatened me." Caitlin rubbed her wrist as she remembered Lorna's grip on her arm. "I don't think she wanted me talking to her dad."

"Ye've seen Lord Alasdair?" Kai asked.

Caitlin nodded. "Briefly. On one of the balconies."

"Ye should go speak to him, Kai," rumbled Magnus. "He would be pleased to see ye."

Kai shifted uncomfortably. "Lorna says he's too ill to receive visitors."

"No, he's not!" Caitlin retorted. "He seemed fine to me. Don't you think it's a little strange that Lorna is lying about that? And did you miss the bit where I told you she threatened me?"

Kai crossed his arms over his broad chest and glared at Caitlin. "Lorna isnae passing secrets to the enemy. Ye must have misunderstood what she said to ye. She's been naught but kind, and ye repay that kindness by insulting her?"

That stung.

Stubbornly, Caitlin shook her head. "I'm not trying to insult anyone. I'm just telling you what I saw. Maybe we should—"

"Enough! Ye will leave Lady Lorna out of this."

Caitlin blinked, taken aback by the ferocity of his words. She had never seen him so defensive. But perhaps he was right. Perhaps she *was* reading way too much into Lorna's strange behavior and the way she'd spoken so harshly about her father.

And yet... something nagged at her. There had been no sign of Leif Snarlsson and his fleet. If Dun Cator really was the next target, then surely, they would be some sign of them by now?

Unless they weren't coming after all. Unless they'd been warned.

An uncomfortable silence had fallen.

"Er...I'd better take the horse for some exercise," Magnus muttered.

"Aye, and I'll help," said Conall.

Looking eager to escape, the two men hurried away. Kai watched them go with a tense expression on his face.

"Kai?" Caitlin said, her voice soft and uncertain. "Perhaps if we just ask Lorna—"

"Did ye not hear me the first time?" Kai snapped, turning to her. "Lorna isnae the mole."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I just can, all right!"

"Why are you so defensive about her?"

"And why are ye so jealous that ye would try to malign a woman who has been naught but kind to ye?"

The words hit Caitlin like a slap. Jealous? Is that what he thought? How the hell dare he? Cold fury boiled in her stomach.

"I apologize," she hissed through clenched teeth. "I didn't mean to offend your delicate sensibilities."

Without another word, she spun on her heel and stalked away.

“Caitlin, wait!” Kai called after her. “I didnae mean—”  
But she kept walking and did not look back.



KAI WATCHED CAITLIN walk away, feeling like he had a lead ball sitting in his stomach.

Why had he just said that? He hadn't meant to, but the words had popped out before he could think about it.

Even after all this time he was still protective of Lorna. It was ridiculous.

He should go after Caitlin, apologize. But the stiff set of her shoulders as she stalked off warned him against that.

He blew out a breath. “Kai, ye are a bloody idiot,” he breathed to himself.

He thought over Caitlin's words. He admired her courage in speaking to him about Lord Alasdair and Lorna, even if he hadn't liked what she said.

And she was right, of course. His feelings for Lorna *were* clouding his judgment and that was dangerous. He needed to stay focused on the mission at hand, not sifting through memories of a relationship long gone.

Kai ran a hand through his hair, feeling a headache coming on. He needed to clear his head. Conall's words about Lord Alasdair nagged at him. *Ye should go speak to him, Kai. He would be pleased to see ye.*

Trouble was, Kai wasn't at all sure about how *he* would feel on seeing the old man. After all, he was the one who had taken Lorna from him and given her to Tobias. If he hadn't interfered, what would Kai's life be like? Would he be happy? He certainly wouldn't be the person he was now. He wouldn't be a member of the Order of the Osprey, wouldn't be leading a band of warriors and fighting missions all over the country.

And he would never have met Caitlin.

Aargh! It was all so damned confusing!

Gritting his teeth, Kai went in search of a servant who could tell him where Lord Alasdair might be found and was then directed to the lord's study. Kai wound his way through the castle, up to a broad wooden door in one of the towers, and halted outside. He inhaled deeply, then knocked.

“I'm busy!” came a shout from inside. “Piss off!”

“It's Kai Stewart, my lord,” Kai called through the wood.

There was silence. Then the voice snapped, “Ye'd better come in then.”

Kai pushed the door open, walked into the room, and glanced around at the familiar surroundings of Lord Alasdair's study. Nothing had changed, not even the smell of sandalwood that filled the air. It was like stepping back into his past, a past he had fought so hard to leave behind.

Alasdair Douglas, however, had changed a great deal. The lord of the castle sat in a chair by the fire. He looked old and tired, far different from the imposing figure that Kai remembered from his youth. His eyes seemed to have lost their spark, and he sat with a blanket thrown over his knobby knees. A servant was busy cleaning up Alasdair's plates and dishes. The blond man piled it all onto a tray, glanced at Kai, and then bowed to Lord Alasdair.

“I will be back later, my lord,” he said. “Ring the bell if ye need anything in the meantime.”

Lord Alasdair waved the man away irritably and fixed his gaze on Kai. “Ah, Kai Stewart,” he wheezed. “I was wondering when ye would show me the courtesy of paying me a visit.”

“My apologies, my lord,” Kai replied, giving him a stiff bow. “I only arrived yesterday and Lorna said ye were too ill for visitors.”

“Did she? That doesnae surprise me. My daughter thinks I’m too ill for anything other than being coddled like some drooling bairn.”

Kai smiled at the familiar spirit of defiance in Lord Alasdair’s voice. “Ye look well, my lord,” he said diplomatically.

The old man snorted. “That’s a lie, but I thank ye for telling it.” He sighed wearily and gestured for Kai to take a seat. “So what brings ye to Dun Cator? Ye didnae come all this way just to pay an old man some courtesy.”

Kai sat down and shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “I learned that Leif Snarlsson is planning an attack on Dun Cator and I came to warn ye.”

Lord Alasdair frowned. “Who did ye say?”

Kai blinked, taken aback. “Leif Snarlsson, my lord. Surely yer daughter and son-in-law have told ye about this?”

Lord Alasdair scowled. “My daughter and son-in-law tell me precisely nothing these days. They think I’m too old and infirm to be bothered with such trifling matters.”

Kai raised an eyebrow, surprised by the lack of communication between Lord Alasdair and his own family. Nor would he refer to an attacking fleet as a ‘trifling matter’. “Well, regardless, Snarlsson is a threat.”

“And what are ye and my son-in-law planning to do about this attack?”

Kai hesitated. “We’re still in the process of planning our response, my lord. But I assure ye, we willnae let Dun Cator fall.”

Kai quickly filled him in on what he knew, and Lord Alasdair listened intently, his eyes growing brighter. When Kai finished speaking, the old man leaned back in his chair and stroked his chin thoughtfully.

“Interesting,” he murmured. “Very interesting indeed.”

Kai frowned. “What is, my lord?”

Lord Alasdair looked up, his eyes twinkling. “Why, the fact that ye’ve come all this way to warn me, of course. It means ye still have some loyalty to me after all these years.”

Kai stiffened. “I have loyalty to the Order of the Osprey, my lord. Nothing more.”

Lord Alasdair chuckled. “Of course, of course. But tell me, Kai, how do ye feel about Lorna these days?”

Kai paused, caught off balance by the sudden change in topic. “I beg yer pardon?”

The old man leaned forward, his eyes flickering with a mischievous light. “Dinna play coy with me, boy. I may be old, but I’m not an idiot. After what happened between ye, I didnae expect ye to ever return to Dun Cator. Yet here ye are.”

Kai shook his head, his expression hardening. “My feelings for Lorna are irrelevant to the matter at hand, my lord. I came here to warn ye of an impending attack, not to reminisce about the past.”

Lord Alasdair waved a hand dismissively. “Very well, very well. But tell me, Kai, have ye loved anyone since her? From what I hear of yer reputation, ye’ve had no shortage of opportunity.”

Kai scowled at him. “I dinna wish to discuss this.”

Lord Alasdair leaned back in his chair, grinning. “Ah, so there *is* someone! Is it that lass who came with ye? I met her yesterday. Caitlin, is it? She struck me as a rare kind of woman.”

“Aye, she’s... different all right,” Kai said slowly. “She challenges me, makes me face things I’d rather ignore. But she also makes me feel things I havenae felt in a long time.”

Kai blinked, surprised to be saying these things. Where had that come from?

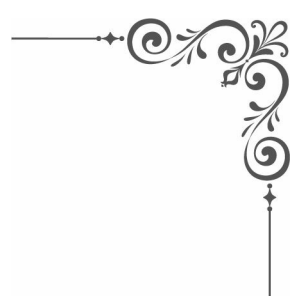
This meeting had been a mistake. He should never have come here; the old man always had a way of getting under his skin. He mumbled something about having other errands to run and quickly made for the door, not wanting Lord Alasdair to see the flush in his cheeks.

As he reached for the door handle, Lord Alasdair's voice stopped him. "Ye are running away, boy. Running away from what ye feel for that girl. That is a mistake. If ye have a chance at happiness ye should seize it or spend yer life regretting it. Take it from someone who knows."

Kai turned back to the old man, his eyes narrowed. "Ye dinna know anything about my life. I would thank ye to keep yer opinions to yerself."

With that, he walked out, letting the door slam behind him.





# Chapter 17

Caitlin sat staring out of the window. The view from her room was mesmerizing. The sea stretched away to the horizon in a great gray-green blanket. On a day like today, when the sun shone and made the waves sparkle like jade, it seemed full of endless possibilities.

The scene was much brighter than her mood. Anger and hurt warred in her gut. Anger was winning the battle. How dare Kai bloody Stewart speak to her like that? How dare he accuse her of being jealous? Jealous! As *if!*

But a traitorous little voice in the back of her head whispered, *was he right?*

*No!* she told herself fiercely. Of course he wasn't right. *I am not jealous!*

But the voice persisted, taunting her with all the reasons why she might be jealous of Lorna—and why she might have accused her of being the mole. After all, Lorna was beautiful, clever, and sophisticated. She was everything that Caitlin was not—and there was clearly a history between her and Kai that he didn't want to talk about.

She got up and began pacing the length of her room. This was ridiculous. They were here to stop Leif Snarlsson, and Kai was a distraction. The sooner they sorted this all out, the sooner she could find a way home. She had to focus and play her part in finding out who might be colluding with the enemy.

As she paced, she played events through her mind: everything that had happened since they'd arrived in the cliff-side keep. Had anyone seemed uneasy since their arrival? Had anyone been asking questions about them?

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. She hurried to answer it and stopped dead when she saw Kai standing there. Her traitorous heart did a little dance at the sight of him, but she kept her expression neutral, her gaze cool.

"Kai," she said, her voice guarded. "What brings ye here?"

"Caitlin," Kai said. "We need to talk."

"About what?" she asked, folding her arms across her chest.

"About earlier," Kai said, his gaze locking onto hers. "I didnae mean to upset ye. We're on the same side here."

Caitlin felt a sudden surge of anger. "On the same side?" she repeated. "Is that really what you think? Because it didn't feel like it when you accused me of being jealous of Lorna."

Kai sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, Caitlin. I shouldnae have said that. It's just that...look, can I come in?"

Caitlin considered slamming the door in his face. She considered putting her arms around him and kissing him.

Instead, she shrugged. "If you want."

He walked past her into the room and strode to the window, gazing out to sea as she'd been doing only moments ago. Caitlin shut the door and leaned on it, watching him. He seemed agitated, but she would be damned if she would do anything to make this easier on him.

Kai turned to face her but hesitated before speaking. "I wanted to apologize. I know ye wish to stop Leif Snarlsson as much as I do. I spoke out of turn. It was just a shock hearing ye accuse Lorna. I dinna wish things to be awkward between us."

Caitlin narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

Kai took a step toward her. “Ye know why. Because I care about ye, Caitlin,” he said softly. “Ye are important to me.”

There was a vulnerability in his eyes that she hadn’t seen before. She took a deep breath, trying to control the feelings that were bubbling up inside her. She had to keep control.

“Then tell me the truth. What is between you and Lorna? Why are you so protective of her?”

Kai winced. He looked away, gathering his thoughts before continuing. “Lorna and I were close once,” he said, his voice tinged with regret. “It was a long time ago.”

Caitlin felt a twinge of... something. Jealousy? Disappointment? She couldn’t be sure. “And...and you still love her?” The words hurt to say them, but she had to know.

“No!” Kai cried. “Is that what ye think? No, Caitlin. I dinna love her. Not anymore.”

Caitlin felt a wave of relief wash over her, but she didn’t let it show. “Then why won’t you talk about the two of you? Why is it such a secret?”

Kai sighed. “It’s complicated, Caitlin. There are things about my past that are...difficult to talk about.”

Something inside her softened. That was something she could understand all too well. Didn’t they all have things in their pasts they didn’t want to talk about? Her more than most.

She reached out and touched his arm gently. “It’s alright,” she said. “You don’t have to explain if you don’t want to.”

Kai looked down at her hand on his arm then back up into her eyes. He smiled, a genuine smile that warmed her heart, and Caitlin felt herself relax for the first time since their argument.

“Are we good?” he said softly.

“We’re good,” she agreed with a nod.

“Excellent!” Kai said, some of his usual good cheer returning. “That gladdens my heart. And it reminds me that in all the busyness since our arrival I havenae had the chance to ask how ye’ve been settling into Dun Cator. I’m guessing ye find it more to yer liking than that tent?”

“Oh, you think?” Caitlin replied, raising an eyebrow, glad that the awkwardness between them had vanished. “This place is incredible. Who built it and when? And how did they do it? Even in the twenty-first century, it would be a tricky job to build into the cliff like this.”

Kai laughed and held up his hands. “Whoa, lass! I’ll try to answer yer questions. Dun Cator is old. Very old. Nobody really knows who built it and when. Some say it was made by the tribe that ruled this place thousands of years ago.” His blue eyes found hers. “Others say it was built by the Fae.” He cocked his head at her. “Would ye like to see more of the place? A tour perhaps?”

Caitlin grinned. “Would I ever! Show me all the secrets of this place.”

Kai’s smile widened and he stepped back, gesturing for her to follow. “Come on then, lass.”

Caitlin followed him out and they walked together through the well-lit halls and corridors. Kai pointed out interesting features and shared stories of the keep’s history. He obviously knew the keep well, and this made Caitlin wonder again about his history with the place—and with Lorna. She pushed the thoughts aside. No. She would not dwell on that. She was here with Kai, and things were good between them again. She would be content with that.

As they reached a large, ornate door at the end of the hall, Kai turned to her, his eyes sparkling. “Now, here’s a secret that not many people know about.”

He pushed open the door to reveal a huge library filled with shelves upon shelves of books. The walls were lined with ancient tomes, their spines worn and cracked with age. The air smelled of parchment and leather, and Caitlin could feel the weight of history in every corner.

“Wow,” she breathed, stepping inside to run her fingers over the spines of the books. “This place is incredible.”

Kai’s grin was smug as he leaned against one of the bookshelves. “The books here hold knowledge that has been hidden away for centuries.”

Caitlin walked over to one of the shelves, running her fingers over the spines. “What kind of knowledge?”

Kai shrugged. “All kinds. History. Theology. Philosophy.”

Caitlin turned in a circle, taking it all in. “I could spend days in here.”

Kai laughed lightly. “Then I had best get ye out before ye take root. Come, ye can explore this at yer leisure later. There is plenty more to see.”

They left the library and made their way back through the keep and out the main doors. They crossed the bailey and joined the throng of people heading down into the village.

Its white-washed stone houses were built in tiers that fell away gradually down to the sea, and the narrow streets followed the contours of the cliff like a well-crafted maze. The air was thick with smoke from smoldering hearths and filled with the sounds of industry—hammers ringing against anvils, goats bleating as they were herded through cobblestone streets, children running wild amidst adults who admonished them angrily as they burst past.

Nobody paid her and Kai any heed at all. Dun Cator was a busy port and she guessed that the people here were used to folk of all kinds coming and going. Two more strangers would hardly make a difference.

They made their way through the winding streets until they reached the docks. The air here was thick with salt and the sea breeze rippled across Caitlin’s skin, sending shivers up her spine. She could hear seagulls swooping through the air and feel the waves lapping against the dock.

Kai pointed out the various ships and vessels that were moored there, each one with a story of its own. But as they reached the end of the dock, Caitlin noticed something else—lookouts perched atop some of the warehouses. Kai explained that they were on watch for Snarlsson’s fleet and her mood darkened. She mustn’t forget why they were really here, what danger these people were in.

Kai must have noticed the change in her expression, because he reached out and touched her arm gently. “Come,” he said, pointing down to the beach. “Let’s explore.”

Caitlin followed him down a set of steps that were chiseled into the cliff-face, winding their way down until they reached the golden sand below. A few fishermen were already out, casting their nets into the sea or dragging their boats onto the shore with heavy ropes.

Kai led Caitlin along the shore, the sound of the waves crashing against the sand filling the air. She could feel the warmth of the sun on her face, and for a moment, she forgot about the danger that lurked just beyond the horizon.

As they walked, Kai began to pick up shells that were scattered along the shoreline, holding them up to the light to examine their intricate designs. Caitlin watched him, intrigued.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m collecting shells,” Kai replied, a mischievous glint in his eye. “I thought I’d make something for ye.”

Caitlin couldn’t help but smile at his enthusiasm. “For me? What are you going to make?”

Kai shrugged. “I’m not sure yet. Maybe a necklace or a bracelet. Something to remember our time here.”

Caitlin felt her heart skip a beat at his words, but she tried to ignore the fluttering in her stomach. She didn’t want to read too much into his actions.

Kai led them further along the shore until they came to a small, isolated cove. The sun glittered off the turquoise water, and the only sound was the lap of waves against rocks. Nobody else seemed to be around as they sat down on the sand, watching as seagulls soared in and out of view.

“It’s beautiful here,” Caitlin said softly, taking in the scene before her.

“Aye. It’s peaceful,” Kai murmured, turning to look at her. “Nobody can see us here.”

Caitlin didn’t dare let herself ponder what he meant by that.

Kai rose to his feet and started gathering bits of seaweed from the beach. He set to work weaving the shells together using the strips of seaweed, creating intricate patterns as he went. He worked quickly but carefully, barely glancing at what he was doing as though his hands knew what to do without him having to think about it.

When he finished, Kai held up a beautiful necklace made of brightly colored shells and sea glass—each one glinting in the sunshine like tiny gems. He presented it to Caitlin with a grin and a flourishing bow.

“For my lady.”

Caitlin tried to match Kai’s nonchalant grin. “It’s beautiful but how many of those have you made for your ladies before?”

“None,” Kai replied, his expression turning serious. “I wanted you to have something to remember our time here,” Kai said softly. “Something pleasant. Something other than the danger and violence.”

All trace of cockiness had gone from his demeanor and now he looked serious and earnest.

Caitlin marveled at how quickly this man had become important to her, even though they’d known each other for such a short time. Wordlessly, she looped the necklace around her neck, feeling the warmth radiating off it into her skin.

Kai’s eyes glittered as he watched her, taking in every detail of her reaction. He leaned in close, his breath hot against her face.

“I’m sorry if I seem forward,” he said, his voice low and husky. “I just canna help myself around ye.”

Caitlin’s heart pounded in her chest as she met his gaze. She didn’t know what to say, didn’t know how to respond to the intensity of his words.

But before she could speak, Kai kissed her. His lips on hers were gentle at first, then more urgent as their passion built. Caitlin moaned into his mouth as his hands roamed over her body, pulling her to him.

She forgot about the necklace, forgot about the shoreline, forgot about everything else in the heat of wanting him. His kisses were sweet and salty at the same time, tasting of salt water and something else that made her feel alive.

Her hands swept up his back as their mouths moved in perfect harmony. His lips were hot, his tongue exploring every inch of her mouth. His hands moved beneath her shirt, caressing the soft skin of her back in an almost reverent touch. Everywhere his hands went he left a trail of fire that made Caitlin ache for more.

Oh, how she wanted him.

Kai’s hands moved further, exploring her body slowly as if he wanted to savor every tantalizing moment. His fingers traced circles on her hips before traveling down her thighs and underneath the hem of her dress to the ridged skin of her legs.

Caitlin gasped as his finger touched a scar that ran along the side of her calf. Instantly, reality crashed back in and she sat up abruptly, scooting away from him.

“I...I’m sorry.” She scrambled to her feet and fled along the beach.

Footsteps thumped behind her and Kai’s strong hands settled on her shoulders, spinning her around. “Caitlin, I’m sorry,” he said, his voice full of self-recrimination. “I shouldnae have done that. Forgive me.”

Forgive him? Was he serious? Forgive him for making her feel more alive than she ever had? For making her feel special, wanted, for the first time in... forever?

She shook her head. “There’s nothing to apologize for. It’s just that...just that...”

“There is *everything* to apologize for,” Kai replied, sternly. “I knew ye didnae want me ever since that morning after we fled the fair. I should have respected that.”

Is that what he thought? Is that *seriously* what he thought? That she didn’t want him?

“Kai, that’s not it. That’s not it at all. You don’t know how hard it’s been to resist—” She trailed off and looked away, struggling to find the words.

Kai’s grip on her shoulders tightened. “Then what is it?”

She bit her lip and looked up at him. “You might think you want me but you don’t. Or at least, you wouldn’t if you saw me. If you knew the truth.”

“What are you talking about? Of course I would. Caitlin, ye are the bravest, most beautiful woman I’ve ever met.”

“Brave? Beautiful? I’m neither of those things. If you only knew—”

“Knew what?” he snapped. “What aren’t ye telling me?”

She whirled away from him, walked a few paces, and stood staring out to sea.

She felt him take a step towards her. “Lass,” he said softly. “Caitlin. Why dinna ye trust me?”

She turned to face him. “Trust you? Of course I trust you.”

“Then why willnae ye let me in?” There was pain in his voice and in his expression.

How could she make him understand? *Because I don’t want you to know how broken I am!* she thought silently. *How weak I am!*

She held his gaze, not knowing what to say. He stepped forward, ran his finger along her jaw.

“Ye are not the only one who is frightened,” he said, his voice soft. “I am too. All this stuff with Leif Snarlsson frightens me. But ye lass, ye terrify me. What ye make me feel...I havenae felt this since—”

He cut off abruptly and looked away. Caitlin put her fingers on his chin and turned his face to look at her. “Since what?”

He blew out a breath. “Since Lorna. Ye asked what she was to me. She was my first love but things ended...badly. After that, I swore I would never feel like that again. I swore I would never make myself that vulnerable again.” His eyes found hers. “I’ve tried to keep that promise to myself. But I’ve failed.”

He had been so cocky and sure of himself when they first met, parading around Aberfeldy with Mae on his arm like a prize. But now here he was, standing before her in all his vulnerability, wanting something from her that she wasn’t sure she could give.

He deserved the truth—even if it scared her. She drew in a deep breath then quickly, before she could change her mind, pulled off her gloves and showed him her hands. Her palms were red and shiny, covered in scar tissue that even the skin grafts couldn’t completely heal.

Her hands shook slightly as she offered them up, awaiting the look of disgust or worse—pity—to cross his handsome face.

But his expression didn’t change. Instead, he took his hands in hers and gently brushed his thumbs against her palms.

“I know, lass,” he said softly. “I saw when ye were washing that morning by the river.” His eyes lifted to meet hers. “And I remember yer reaction that evening by the campfire. What happened to ye, lass?”

She wanted to tell him. Oh God, how she wanted to tell him! She’d not spoken of it to anyone except her therapist and now the words crowded on her tongue, wanting release. But she hesitated. Still, she hesitated.

Kai squeezed her hands. “Ye can trust me, lass.”

Caitlin squeezed her eyes shut. Then she opened them again with a sigh.

“There was an accident,” she said at last. “A bad one. I told you I was a paramedic, right? I loved it. It was damned hard work, but I loved it. Then last year, everything changed.

I was called out to a factory. There had been a gas explosion. It was the worst call I’ve ever had. It was chaos. Everywhere I looked, there were people hurt and frightened, screaming for help. Firefighters trying to contain the blaze, paramedics racing around trying to get to those who needed help. I managed to get inside the building and it was like a nightmare. People scattered all around me, some shouting for help while others lay lifeless.”

She swallowed thickly as memories danced in front of her eyes. “There was a woman. She was still alive but badly injured. I tried to save her but whilst I worked on her the roof above us collapsed. I was trapped beneath a beam.”

Kai listened quietly, his eyes trained on her face as she spoke. He didn’t interrupt, didn’t try to rush her.

“I was trapped there for what felt like an eternity. The smoke was suffocating and the heat was unbearable. People were trapped all around me, screaming for help, and I couldn’t do anything. I was helpless. It was the worst feeling in the world.” Her voice cracked as she spoke. “I was trained to help people and I couldn’t. I couldn’t help any of them. I tried to push the beam off but it was too heavy and it burned my hands. The woman I had been trying to help, Amy, didn’t make it. I watched her breathe her last right in front of me.”

“So that’s why ye were so determined to help that woman at the fair?” Kai asked quietly.

Caitlin nodded. “But I failed. I’m a failure.”

“A failure?” Kai said incredulously. Anger flashed in his eyes. “I dinna ever want to hear ye use that word about yerself!”

Caitlin blinked back tears, surprised at the intensity of his words. “But I am. I’m broken. I can’t do my job anymore. I can’t even go to crowded places without feeling like I’m going to lose it.”

“And that’s all right,” Kai said. “Ye dinna have to be the same person ye were before. But ye can still be Caitlin. Ye can still be strong and kind and brave.”

“Strong and brave?” she snorted. “I’m neither of those things.”

Kai reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, his fingers lingering on her cheek. “I disagree,” he said softly. “Ye seem to have a strange notion of what courage is. Courage isnae about *not* being afraid. It’s about being afraid and doing what ye need to do anyway. And isnae that exactly what ye’ve been doing since ye arrived here? Didnae ye agree to aid my mission and help those people at the fair, despite all that had happened to ye? Ye are still here. Ye’re still fighting. That’s bravery.”

Kai moved closer. She could feel the heat coming off his body and smell his musky scent. He leaned in, and his hand moved up to cup her cheek.

“Kai,” she whispered, but he cut her off with a kiss.

“Ye are brave,” Kai whispered. “Ye are beautiful. I will show ye just how much.”

He wrapped his arms around her and bore them both down onto the sand, crushing her lips with his own. The kiss was urgent and passionate, full of the emotion they'd both been keeping at bay since they first met. He tasted sweet like honeyed mead and Caitlin felt herself responding with an intensity that surprised even her.

Kai's hands traveled up her legs as their kiss deepened further still, caressing the scars on either side of her thighs along the way. His touch was warm yet gentle—a stark contrast to his bruising kiss—making every nerve-ending quiver in response.

This time she didn't fight him or try to pull away. Kai's hands moved under her dress, slowly inching it upwards until he reached her hips. His fingers were gentle as they traced the scars that crisscrossed her pelvis—a constant reminder of that terrible night. Except now the dark memories didn't come, and instead she let his touch soothe her, letting it banish her fears and replace them with anticipation.

She felt the warm sand on her back as Kai kissed her. The ocean breeze was cool on Caitlin's face but she was warm all over, her body tingling with desire.

Kai slowly broke the kiss and shifted lower, planting gentle kisses along her legs. His soft lips tenderly caressed each and every scar. Caitlin closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation of his lips on her wounds until all she could feel was him. His lips were tantalizingly soft and tender, and his touch sent shockwaves of pleasure through her body.

His fingers walked up the inside of her thigh to the spot between her legs, and Caitlin gasped as he explored her. His fingers caressed and teased, finally coaxing her to let go of all her fears and inhibitions. She grabbed hold of his golden hair and moaned out loud as his fingers slipped inside, sending waves of pleasure crashing over her. His strokes grew more insistent, and Caitlin felt her muscles grow tense.

And then, just as she thought she couldn't take anymore, her climax crashed over her in a wave of ecstasy. She screamed out his name as pleasure washed through her entire body, leaving her feeling completely sated and blissfully exhausted.

Kai lifted his head and looked at her. His normally bright blue eyes were dark with desire. Caitlin blushed, but Kai just smiled, smoothed her dress over her legs, and sat up.

And Caitlin realized then that she hadn't had enough; she wanted more of him—all of him. She ran her hands across his chest, feeling the hard slab of muscle beneath his shirt.

“Caitlin,” he growled warningly.

“Kai, I want—”

She didn't finish the sentence. With a low growl, Kai kissed her again, this time with a hot, urgent passion that left Caitlin breathless. She traced her fingertips along his sculpted body and his muscles tensed under her touch.

“It's no good,” he breathed. “I canna help myself. I want to be inside ye, Caitlin. I want to make ye mine.”

Caitlin shuddered in anticipation. “That's what I want too.”

Kai watched her for a second as though unsure of her words. Then he moved quickly, deftly ripping off his shirt before she could change her mind. His body was all thick, sinewy muscle and strong, powerful shoulders. His stomach was flat with just a hint of a six-pack. Her eyes drifted further down his body, to where a growing bulge in his breeches showed that he was feeling just as impatient as she was.

Caitlin didn't have time to enjoy the view, though. Kai had already slipped off her dress, leaving her only in her bra and panties. He kissed the back of her neck, his lips brushing against her soft skin



as he unhooked her bra then lifted it gently off her shoulders.

Kai moved back then, admiring her. Caitlin felt her cheeks flush and glanced away, not quite sure what to do.

“Look at me,” Kai said, turning her head back towards him. He took her hand and raised it to his lips, kissing her palm. “Ye are beautiful.”

His hands moved over her breasts, teasing her nipples, back and forth between them until Caitlin felt like she couldn't breathe any longer. It was what she'd been waiting for—his touch was what she wanted more than anything else in the world.

“Kai,” she whispered, and his eyes met hers. They were deep, ocean blue and burned with desire. He moved his hands back to her hips, stroking them softly before trailing his fingers further down, gently stroking the sensitive, scarred skin on either side of her thighs. Kai's fingers moved over her until she felt her desire for him pulse like a drumbeat in her veins. Caitlin moaned, her hips instinctively jerking forward at the sensation.

He knelt between her knees and, placing his hands either side of her head, leaned over her, his hair tickling her cheek even as the tip of his manhood brushed the space between her legs.

“It feels so good,” he murmured. “But this feels better.”

Caitlin couldn't hold back a gasp as Kai jerked his hips and slid into her. His muscles tensed as he pulled back and thrust. She moaned and threw her head back as he entered her again. And again. His movements were slow, unhurried, and Caitlin felt herself moving with him. Her hands went to his shoulders and pulled him close. She gasped as he began to move faster and harder.

Caitlin gripped Kai's shoulders, her nails digging into his flesh as she moaned his name. He moved faster and her body started to shake in rhythm with his thrusts. She could feel her muscles tightening around Kai's hard shaft, and her world collapsed into a single point of blissful, intense sensation. Her climax crashed over her, leaving her gasping for breath.

Kai groaned as he thrust into her a final time. She felt his muscles tense as he held himself still, his hands digging into her hips as he reached his own peak. For a long, timeless moment they lay there, Kai's breath warm on her neck, his chest heaving. Then, slowly, he withdrew and rolled away.

His muscled arms wrapped around her, pulling her close. He kissed the side of her face, then her hands, and finally her lips.

“I've wanted ye so badly,” he murmured. “Ever since we met.”

“Me too,” she whispered. “I was just...scared.”

Kai smiled at her. “So was I,” he admitted. He stroked her hair back off her face. “But now that I have ye—” He chuckled. “Well, now that I have ye, I'm not about to let ye go.”

The sound of the water lapping against the shore caught her attention. The tide was coming in and Caitlin was suddenly all too aware of how exposed they were to anyone who might wander by. With a cry of embarrassment, she grabbed her clothes and quickly dressed. Kai sighed in disappointment but then followed her example—albeit a bit more slowly. Once dressed, Kai climbed to his feet and held out his hand.

Caitlin took it, allowing him to pull her to her feet. He playfully chased her around, teasing her with sand before picking her up and carrying her along the shoreline. She laughed and clung to him, her arms wrapped around his neck. As they reached the path that led up onto the docks he put her down gently, but not before lightly kissing her forehead.

Caitlin sucked in a breath. She did not want to go back to Dun Cator. She wanted to stay here, in this living dream she and Kai had crafted. But she knew they both had to return to reality.

Kai was watching her, his eyes dark with emotion, and she wondered if he was thinking the same. She wanted to say something, anything, to help her figure out what had just happened between them and what it signified. But she couldn't form the words. Instead, she walked silently by his side as they retraced their steps back through the village and up to the keep. Kai took her hand and squeezed it as they reached the gates.

"Caitlin," he began. "I—"

"Kai!" shouted a voice. Caitlin turned to see Magnus trotting over. "Lord Tobias has been asking for ye. Where have ye been?"

Kai glanced at Caitlin, a wicked gleam in his eyes. "I've just been showing Caitlin some things."

She blushed as Magnus raised an eyebrow and looked between the two of them. Fortunately, he didn't pursue the comment. "Aye, well. I've been covering for ye best I can but he's getting impatient."

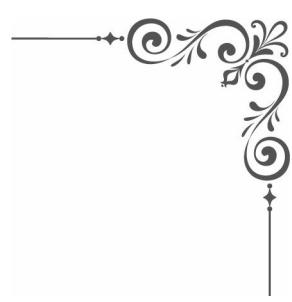
Caitlin put her hand on Kai's arm. "You'd better go."

"Aye," he said, sounding irritated. "But I'll be back. I promise ye that."

Caitlin's blushed deepened and heat rushed through her. "I'll be waiting," she murmured, low enough for only Kai to hear.

He stared at her a moment longer, heat in his gaze, then turned and walked away with Magnus.

Caitlin watched him go, trying to find a name for the emotion blossoming in her heart.



# Chapter 18

Caitlin walked back to her chambers in a daze. She could still feel the warmth of Kai's skin against hers and struggled to concentrate on anything else. But as she rounded a corner, her thoughts were interrupted by a sudden commotion. A group of warriors came hurrying past, their weapons glinting in the sunlight as they rushed to complete some unknown task.

The sight brought her back to earth with a bump. This was no fairytale that she found herself in, and Dun Cator was in danger. She must not forget that. She inhaled deeply and squared her shoulders.

*Right. Think, Caitlin, think.* She had told Kai and the others that she was a part of their team and she had meant it. That meant doing all she could to make sure they kept Dun Cator safe. Kai thought a mole was passing information to the enemy and if that was the case, they needed to find out who it was. *She* needed to find out who it was.

She paused, chewing her lip while she ran through ideas.

Then, making a decision, she spun on her heel and headed off in the other direction. If there was something untoward going on in Dun Cator, it was likely the servants had heard something about it. It was as good a place to start as any.

She reached the kitchens and found them bustling with activity. As Caitlin stepped through the door, she was met by a cacophony of smells and sounds—sizzling pans and bubbling pots, the warm scent of bread fresh from the ovens, and spiced pastries cooling on the counters. The kitchen staff moved around her in a flurry of activity, each focused on their own tasks.

None of them paid her much attention as she wove her way through the throng and took a seat at an empty table near the huge fireplace that dominated the long room. Conall had told her that it was a custom in most castles to keep a place in the kitchen where people could grab a quick meal if they'd missed one: fishermen late in with a catch, servants who'd been too busy to eat, guards on duty—all had a spot where they could come and get something to eat.

As she settled down at the table and took a bannock from the pile on a wooden plate, Caitlin was pleased to find that Conall's information had been correct. Nobody seemed in the least surprised to see her as she sat there, eating quietly. She began to relax. She also began to listen.

The kitchen staff were chatting as they worked, discussing the latest gossip and rumor, just as she'd hoped. Caitlin listened intently, trying to pick up any tidbits that might be useful. Most of it was irrelevant: who'd been caught sneaking a taste of the lord's beer, who had snuck off with one of the guards for a quick dalliance last night, and so on. But then she heard something that caught her attention.

"Did ye hear about the new guest in the castle?" one of the cooks said to another. "The one that Lady Lorna requested herself?"

Caitlin's ears pricked at the mention of Lorna.

"Aye, I heard about her," the other cook replied. "She's supposed to be some kind of healer. Lady Lorna brought her in to help with Lord Alasdair. I'll warrant she's behind the odd supply requests we've been getting."

"What do ye mean?" the first cook asked. "What kind of odd requests?"

The second cook leaned in and lowered her voice conspiratorially. "I heard she's been making strange concoctions and potions. And she's been asking a lot of questions about the lord's health, like she's trying to find something specific."

The first woman snorted. “What’s wrong with that? We all pray for Lord Alasdair’s recovery.”

“Would ye include Lady Lorna in that?”

“I beg yer pardon?”

The second woman put her hands on her ample hips and faced her friend. “Havenae ye ever wondered why Lord Alasdair started to take ill right after Lady Lorna’s wedding? He was hale and healthy, as strong as an oak until then, and as soon as that son-in-law of his arrives, the lord can barely get out of bed!”

“Hush!” said the first cook, looking around in alarm. “That kind of talk will get us thrown out on our ear!”

Caitlin had heard enough. She carefully rose from her seat, thanked the kitchen staff, and made her way out. Her thoughts raced with questions. There was nothing odd about Lorna bringing in a healer to care for her dad, of course, but something about it felt off, especially after what Lorna had let slip the other day. Who was this healer? Could *they* be the mole? Or was it just a coincidence? Either way, she needed to let Kai know about this.

But she couldn’t find Kai and when she asked a servant where he was, she was told he’d gone down into the town with Lord Tobias to survey some of the defenses.

Caitlin paused, indecision gnawing at her. Then she began walking again, deciding to go speak to Lord Alasdair. Lorna had warned her to stay away from her father—which was an especially good reason not to, in Caitlin’s opinion. She retraced the route she’d taken previously to the balcony on which she’d encountered the lord of the castle. As she approached, she heard voices.

“I know ye dinna like it, my lord,” a man said softly. “But ye need to keep up yer strength.”

“Strength!” Lord Alasdair’s voice cracked like a whip. “I’ll show ye strength! Come near me with that vile concoction again and I’ll show ye just how strong I still am!”

“Father!” came Lorna’s voice. “Must ye always be so disagreeable? Canna ye see that we are just trying to help ye? Now please, eat yer soup.”

Alasdair grumbled but then Caitlin heard the sounds of slurping. She pressed herself against the wall around the corner from the balcony and carefully peeped out. Lord Alasdair was sitting in his chair with a blond-haired serving man standing over him. Despite his earlier protests, Lord Alasdair was diligently eating his soup.

“There,” came Lorna’s voice although from this angle, Caitlin couldn’t see her. “That’s better isnae it? Ye will be well in no time.”

The serving man stepped forward, lifting the tray from Lord Alasdair’s lap. Then he left, walking down the corridor in the opposite direction to where Caitlin was hiding. A moment later, Lorna left too, but she came this way and Caitlin quickly pressed herself back against the wall, heart thumping. Lorna was in such a hurry that she walked by without even noticing Caitlin pressed into the corner.

Once she was gone, Caitlin darted from her hiding place and onto the balcony. Lord Alasdair slumped in his chair, eyes closed and a blanket draped over his knees. He looked even worse than he had the other day. There were dark circles under his eyes and his skin held an ashen hue.

She crouched in front of him. “Lord Alasdair?” she said softly. He didn’t stir so she shook his shoulder. “Can you hear me?”

He didn’t respond. His chest was rising and falling steadily but he was deeply asleep.

Her thoughts flitted back to what she’d heard in the kitchen. *Lord Alasdair started to take ill right after Lady Lorna’s wedding. He was hale and healthy, as strong as an oak until then, and as soon as that son-in-law of his arrives, the lord can barely get out of bed.*

*Eat yer soup, Lorna had said. Ye need to keep up yer strength.*

Anger flared in Caitlin's stomach. She knew what someone who'd been drugged looked like—heck, she'd seen it enough in her line of work. And it was Lorna who was responsible! She'd brought in a so-called 'healer' in order to drug her own father!

Caitlin quickly pressed her fingers to Lord Alasdair's wrist, measuring his pulse to make sure he was in no immediate danger, and turned to hurry after Lorna, determined to have it out with the woman. If she thought she was going to get away with this, the damned woman had another think coming!

She sped through the corridors in the direction that Lorna had taken and soon spotted the woman ahead in the distance. She gathered a breath to shout but at that moment Lorna pulled open a door and disappeared from view.

Caitlin followed, finding a set of stone steps beyond the door that seemed to lead down into the castle basements. She hesitated. Something didn't feel right. She ought to find Kai and the others and tell them what she'd discovered. But that would mean leaving Alasdair at Lorna's mercy whilst she went to look for them.

Carefully, Caitlin made her way down the steps, finding herself in a large, damp undercroft with a low, vaulted ceiling. The place was clearly not often visited if the cobwebs were anything to go by. She looked around, letting her eyes adjust to the gloom, and spotted Lorna hurrying down the passage ahead. She approached a large door at the end and stopped. She knocked twice in a strange staccato rhythm before pushing it open and stepping inside.

Caitlin waited a few heartbeats but when Lorna didn't emerge, she cautiously crept closer, pressing an ear to the door. From within came the sound of muffled conversation. She bit her lip, indecision warring inside her. She really ought to leave. She ought to find Kai. But she didn't.

Instead, Caitlin reached out, slowly turned the handle, and pushed the door open a crack, praying that it wouldn't creak. It didn't. She pressed her eye to the gap.

The room beyond was dimly lit, but she could make out three people standing at the far end. The room itself seemed to be a storeroom and it was stacked from floor to ceiling with barrels stamped with labels Caitlin couldn't read in the dim light. The air smelled musty and despite the gloom there were no candles or lamps burning so the only light came from a narrow window set high near the ceiling. It gave enough illumination for Caitlin to make out a table set up near the middle of the room with several chairs around it. Papers were strewn across it; notes written in spidery handwriting along with maps and diagrams.

The conversation had grown in volume and intensity now, with tense voices echoing off the walls of the small chamber.

"How could ye have been so damned stupid!" Lorna's voice cracked like a whip. "I told ye to come in secret and ye let the bloody servants see ye and now these stories of a strange healer are all over the keep! Ye *do* know that Kai and his people have arrived, aye? If they see ye, then all is lost!"

"Give me some credit!" said another voice. It was female and strangely familiar although Caitlin couldn't quite place it. "Kai Stewart and his men willnae discover I am here. And as for the servants seeing me, that was bad luck, that's all."

"Bad luck?" Lorna all but shrieked. "It was bad planning, that's what! If we are discovered it will ruin everything!"

"Easy, my love," said another voice, this one male. Caitlin recognized the deep tones of Tobias, Lorna's husband. "What's done is done."

"How can ye be so calm?" Lorna demanded. "Our plans are so close to fruition! We canna have anything going wrong!"

“And it willnae,” Tobias replied calmly. “All is in place. All we have to do now is wait. Leif’s plan will succeed. *We* will succeed.”

Caitlin went cold. Leif? Leif Snarlsson? Lorna and Tobias were involved with *him*? What? How? Suddenly, the other woman stepped into the light, and Caitlin gasped.

It was Alice Brewer.

So, Alice Brewer was this mysterious healer that the cooks had mentioned? And she wasn’t brewing healing potions, she was brewing sedatives to keep Alasdair docile and unable to interfere with their plans. Caitlin’s mind raced as she tried to process what she was witnessing. Lorna and Tobias weren’t Snarlsson’s next target—they were his allies.

She’d been suspicious of Lorna from the start, but this? This was worse than she ever could have imagined.

“Kai Stewart is not a problem,” Tobias said firmly, looking straight at Lorna. “You can handle him as you always do.” His gaze was full of meaning. “He cannot withstand your charms, my love. Go to him. Distract him. He has always been so besotted with you that he cannot see what is right under his nose. Keep it that way.”

Lorna gave a small smile and nodded demurely. “As my lord husband commands.”

Tobias barked a laugh. “Good Lord, woman, sometimes you frighten even me!” He turned his attention to Alice. “What news?” he asked. “When will the Order of the Osprey arrive?”

Alice shrugged. “Right when we expected them to. Like ye said: all is in place. Now we just have to wait.” She gestured around the room and the large wooden casks filling it. “The way to our goal lies in these casks,” she said. “Enough gunpowder to destroy the great hall and everyone in it.”

Caitlin’s heart stopped. Gunpowder. Those barrels contained gunpowder? Oh no. Oh, no, no, no!

She had to find Kai. Right now. She slowly backed away from the door, trying to make no noise, but she was sure the others must be able to hear the thundering of her pulse.

She turned, ready to make a run for it, but the door suddenly burst open, and Lorna stood before her with a look of shock on her face.

“I thought I heard something! Seems we have a spy!” Lorna cried, grabbing Caitlin by the arm and yanking her into the room.

Caitlin stumbled, but managed to keep her footing. “I was just...I heard voices and I was curious,” she stammered, trying to come up with a plausible excuse.

Alice raced over, her face a mask of rage. “Ye again! Ye were at the fair. Kai Stewart’s whore!”

Caitlin bristled at this, but before she could respond, Lorna stepped between them.

“She knows too much,” she growled through gritted teeth. “We canna let her go.”

Caitlin felt fear creeping into her body, but she forced herself to stand tall and look Lorna in the eye. “I heard you talking,” she said, her voice steady despite her pounding heart. “I know you’re in league with Leif Snarlsson. What are you planning? What are you going to do to Kai?”

Lorna’s eyes narrowed as she sized Caitlin up. Her face softened and she looked almost regretful as she answered, “Oh dear, he’s gotten to ye, hasnae he? Ye are another one who he’s made fall in love with him.” She sidled closer. “I suspected when ye arrived that ye were yet another of Kai’s doxies. He has women strewn all over Scotland. Did ye know that? Did he say ye are special? That’s what he says to them all.” She grinned savagely. “But there has only ever been one woman Kai loves. Can ye guess who that is?”

Caitlin tried to back away but Alice had moved behind her, blocking her escape.

Lorna stepped up to her. “It’s me, Caitlin. It’s always been me. Did he tell ye that we were betrothed to be married?”

Caitlin felt as though she'd been punched in the stomach. Married? Kai had told her that he and Lorna were once lovers but he'd never said anything about marriage.

*He has women strewn all over Scotland. Ye are another one who he's made fall in love with him.*

Lorna and Alice were both watching her intently for some kind of reaction. She'd be damned if she'd give them one.

“So? We all have a past. Why should Kai's bother me?”

Lorna raised an eyebrow, laughing lightly. “Past? Ye think I am Kai's past. Oh no, my dear. I am very much his present. He comes to my bed every night. I keep him warm—and satisfied.” Lorna smiled slyly. “Oh, he likes to wander every now and then but he always finds his way back to me. Tell me Caitlin: did he say ye are beautiful? That he canna resist ye? That's what he says to all his whores. Anything to get them into his bed. But like I said, he always finds his way back to me.” She said the last words slowly, savoring the effect of each one on Caitlin.

She was lying. Caitlin knew she was lying. Wasn't she? She was just saying these things to hurt. Wasn't she? She wanted to slap the woman. She wanted to curl up in a corner and cry. She wanted to turn around and run and never look back.

She did none of those things.

Instead, she looked at Tobias, Lorna's husband, expecting him to be outraged by his wife's words. Instead, he seemed amused, a small smirk playing at the corner of his lips.

“My love,” he said. “Stop playing with your food.”

Lorna turned to him, a pout forming on her lips. “But Tobias, it's so much fun. She's squirming like a worm on a hook.”

Alice scowled at them all. “Enough of this. We need to deal with her. She's a liability.”

Tobias chuckled. “What do you suggest?”

Caitlin wasn't about to stick around to hear Alice's suggestion. She lunged, surprising all three of them, and made a dash for the exit. She felt a hand grab at her dress but shook it off as she burst through the door, leaving Alice cursing behind her.

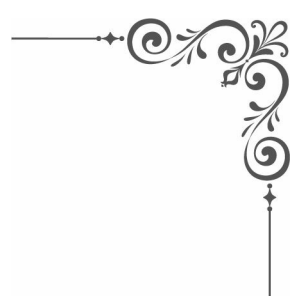
She sprinted, flagstones ringing beneath her feet. Blood pounded in her ears and she didn't dare glance behind, afraid of what she might see. The stairs were just ahead! If she could just make it up to the inhabited levels of the keep—

A sharp pain exploded in the back of her head. The red spots dancing before her eyes were quickly replaced by fear as fingers closed around her bicep like an iron vice.

“Now that,” drawled Alice's voice. “Was a stupid thing to do.”

She had a brief vision of something descending towards her face before everything went black.





# Chapter 19

Kai sat in the overstuffed chair in his room, staring at the report he held in front of him. It was late. Darkness had fallen outside and he'd lit several candles. He read the words for a third time and sighed in frustration. The scouts reported no sign of Snarlsson's fleet. He didn't understand it. Where were they?

Kai tried to think, to figure it out, but his thoughts kept wandering back to what had happened at the beach that afternoon. The feel of Caitlin's skin beneath his fingertips, the smell of her hair... He rubbed a hand over his face. This was no good. He was as distracted as an excited youth after his first kiss.

There was a knock at his door.

"Go away!" he shouted. "I dinna need anything."

He heard the door creak open. "Are ye sure about that?" said a voice. "I suspect I know exactly what ye need."

Kai looked up in surprise.

Lorna stood in the doorway.

She was wearing a flowing green gown that accentuated her hips and breasts and she wore her hair down like she used to when they first met, back when she was a free-spirited girl and he was a warrior in training.

How many years had it been? Four? Five? They suddenly felt like only minutes.

He cleared his throat, mastered himself with an effort, then climbed to his feet and gave her a bow.

"My lady. What can I do for ye?"

She raised an eyebrow. "So formal, Kai? Surely that's not needed between us?"

"Of course it is. So much has changed."

Lorna sauntered over, hips swaying in sure steps. She stopped inches from Kai, her eyes locked on his. "Has it really, Kai? Has it truly changed?"

Despite himself, Kai felt his heart race as he looked into her eyes. They were the same deep pools he remembered, sparkling with mischief, daring him to take a risk.

"What brings ye here, Lorna? Surely, it's not just for a social call?"

Lorna smirked. "Oh, Kai. Ye always were one for getting straight to the point. I do have a proposition for ye, if ye are interested."

"And what would that be?"

Lorna stepped closer, so that they were almost touching. "Oh, I think ye know," she whispered, her breath hot on his neck.

Kai knew exactly what Lorna was hinting at and his body reacted involuntarily, the hairs along his arms prickling. He had always found it difficult to resist Lorna's charms, and now was no different. But *he* was different. He stepped back, putting some distance between them.

Lorna just followed him, closing the gap. "I've missed ye, Kai. Missed ye more than ye could imagine. Missed yer hands on me, missed yer lips on me, missed...everything. Dinna ye remember how good we were together?"

What was she doing?

"I remember," Kai replied. "But that was a long time ago."

“It was,” she agreed with a nod. “But some things never change. Like the way I feel about ye.”

Kai opened his mouth to reply, but no words came out. He wanted to tell her that it didn't matter how she felt about him, that whatever they once had was now gone, but he couldn't seem to find the words.

Instead, all he could do was watch as Lorna pressed herself against him. He inhaled deeply, breathing in the sweet scent of jasmine that clung to her skin. Gently, she reached out and touched his hand. Kai felt electricity shoot through him as their skin made contact.

Oh, it would be so easy to give in. How many times had he dreamt of a moment like this? How many times as he lay alone or next to a woman whose name he could barely remember had he fantasized about Lorna coming back to him? How many women had he bedded, how much whisky had he drunk, all to forget the pain that ripped through him whenever he remembered the woman in front of him now? And here she was, offering herself to him as though the intervening years had never happened. Oh yes, it would be so easy to give in.

Except it wasn't.

As she touched him, it was another face that suddenly flashed into his mind. A face with hair the color of bark and wide, honest eyes that seemed to look right into his soul.

He stumbled back. “This isnae happening,” he rasped. “I willnae dishonor us both. Ye are married and I am in love with another.”

He froze.

*I am in love with another.*

The words echoed like explosions in his head. It was the truth, he realized. He had tried to tell himself that his feelings for Caitlin were merely lust, that what had happened between them that afternoon was merely physical, a release that they both had so desperately needed. But now as he stood with Lorna's scent clinging to his skin, it hit him like a runaway wagon: he loved Caitlin.

A warm feeling blossomed in his chest, something like a slow-burning fire, radiating from his heart and through every part of him.

Caitlin.

Lorna looked taken aback for a moment before her expression turned to one of anger. “Ye are in love with another? And who might that be?”

“It doesnae matter. What matters is that I canna betray my heart or my honor. Ye are married, Lorna. Ye shouldnae be here with me.”

Lorna narrowed her eyes, searching his face for something. “Why the sudden virtue, Kai?” she asked. “From what I hear, ye are not averse to bedding a married woman.”

Kai growled low in his throat. “Is that what ye hear? Then perhaps ye shouldnae listen to gossip.”

As far as he knew, Kai had never bedded a married woman. Although, he conceded, he made of point of never asking. His dalliances had been nothing more than light-hearted fun, a way to ease the hole in his heart left by the woman standing in front of him. None of those dalliances had come close to breaking down his walls, of healing that hole inside him.

Not until Caitlin.

“Who is she? Who is this woman that's taken my place in yer heart?” Lorna demanded.

He had once thought Lorna the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Now though, with her expression twisted into one of petulance and jealousy, she did not look beautiful. How had he never seen it before? Lorna had always been spoiled, always so determined that she could have whatever she wanted. Once, he'd been only too happy to give it to her, only too happy to indulge her whims and desires. But now, he saw the ugliness of it all.

“It is nothing ye need to concern yerself with,” Kai replied, his tone firm. “And I think it’s best ye leave now.”

Lorna’s eyes flashed with anger but then she smiled. “It’s *her* isnae it? The woman who came with ye. Caitlin.”

Kai’s jaw tightened. “What if it is?”

Lorna laughed. “I knew it!” She shook her head in amazement. “Well, if yer heart is content with her then who am I to judge? I’m happy for ye, Kai.” She paused and stepped forward, pushing him gently on the shoulder. Then she smiled softly up at him. “At least join me in a toast. To new beginnings.”

Kai nodded and stepped away from her. Lorna turned to the small table and began to pour two glasses of wine, her back to him. She handed one of the glasses to Kai then lifted hers in a toast.

“To new beginnings,” she said softly.

Kai raised his glass, mesmerized by the glint of the ruby liquid and the promise of a new future. He was about to take a sip when the door suddenly burst open, revealing Magnus and Conall standing in the doorway. They pulled up short at the sight of Lorna in his room.

“What is it?” Kai demanded. For them to come barging in here unannounced must mean something serious had happened. A cold fist seemed to have clutched his heart. “Is it Snarlsson? Is he here?”

Conall faced Kai squarely. “Not Snarlsson,” he said. “The Order of the Osprey. They’ve arrived.”

The fist around Kai’s heart unclenched. Hope surged through him instead, as heady as nectar. He set down his drink.

“This is grand news indeed!” Lorna said quickly. She was still holding her goblet although she hadn’t taken a drink and she looked pale. “And seeing as I am the lady of the keep, I will go and greet our guests.” She arched an eyebrow at the three men. “Ye can accompany me if ye’d like.”

Kai nodded and strode out beside Lorna, Conall and Magnus following. Despite the late hour, the castle was awash with activity. Torches burned in sconces on the walls and servants and grooms rushed around.

When they entered the vestibule that led to the great hall, they found two familiar figures waiting for them.

“Oskar! Emeric!” Kai cried, striding over to them as fast as his legs could carry him. “Ye are all right!” He clapped each one on the shoulder in turn, smiling broadly. He looked them over and let out a breath he didn’t even realize he’d been holding. Even in the weak light of the torches, he could see that neither seemed to be carrying injuries. They looked tired but whole.

Oskar smiled in greeting and Emeric gripped Kai’s arm tightly in a brotherly embrace. “It is good to finally get here,” he said gruffly, but with no little emotion in his voice. “I doubt I’ve ever ridden so far so fast. Lord Brochan was very determined to get here before Snarlsson.”

Kai stepped back and looked at him shrewdly. “How many of the Order are with ye?” he asked.

Oskar and Emeric exchanged a look. “We’ve brought two hundred fighters,” Oskar said, his voice steady but his eyes betraying a hint of uncertainty. “And that is not all.” He shifted. “Lord Brochan will explain.”

“Let us go in then,” Kai replied.

They strode into the great hall and found the cavernous space full of people and noise. Kai recognized many of the faces and he called out greetings. But there were people here he didn’t know as well. There was a group of tall, pale-haired strangers dressed not like highlanders in their plaid and trews, but in thick, heavy cloaks and high boots.

Kai crossed to where Lorna and Tobias stood with two men. One he recognized immediately. Lord Brochan MacLeod, grandson of Laird Callum Sutherland and de facto leader of the Order of the Osprey now that Laird Callum was an old man, was difficult to miss. He was tall and thickly set with russet hair and eyes a startling amber color. The other man, Kai did not recognize. He was older than Kai and had white-blond hair that fell to his shoulders in braids. He was dressed in rich gear with gold brocade trim.

Brochan turned as Kai approached and broke into a grin. "There ye are," he cried. "Kai, Magnus, Conall. It seems we owe ye a debt. Ye've put our enemy within our grasp at last."

"I think it's the other way around," Kai said, taking Brochan's arm in the warrior grip. "Thank ye for coming so quickly. Ye dinna know how relieved I am to see ye. And the warriors ye bring."

Brochan nodded. "Aye, we've seen some bad days these past few weeks," he said grimly. "But ye've done a right fine job thwarting the bastards so far, Kai." He looked then to the white-haired stranger. "And I bring allies. Kai, might I introduce ye to His Majesty, King John of Denmark and Norway."

Kai's eyes widened in shock. Then, remembering his manners, he dropped to one knee, followed by his men. "Yer Majesty," he said softly. "I am honored."

King John gave a small, wry smile and indicated for them to rise. "The honor is mine," he said in a deep voice that held a slight accent. He faced Kai and fixed him with a piercing gaze.

"Word reached me that you were tracking Leif Snarlsson. It seems then, that we have common cause."

"I heard that Leif Snarlsson was wanted in yer court," Kai said. "But I didnae expect ye to come join the hunt."

John's jaw clenched and he looked away. "Snarlsson attacked a ship traveling from Copenhagen to Oslo. The ship sank and everyone on board was lost." His eyes met Kai's. "One of those on board was my daughter. I will do whatever it takes to have my vengeance."

Kai nodded. That was a sentiment he could understand.

Tobias stepped forward and bowed to King John and Lord Brochan. "Your lodgings are ready, Your Majesty, my lord," he said. "You must be weary from your journey. Might I suggest you retire and we convene in the morning for a war council?"

"Aye," said Brochan. "It's late and we can do no more tonight. With yer agreement, yer Majesty?"

King John nodded. "Agreed. We'll gather here at first light and decide what's to be done. Until then, rest." He gave Kai an encouraging smile. "We shall make short work of Leif Snarlsson, so ye can rest easy tonight."

"My lords, if I may," Lorna said, moving to stand beside her husband. "If ye follow the serving staff, we will get everyone settled for the night."

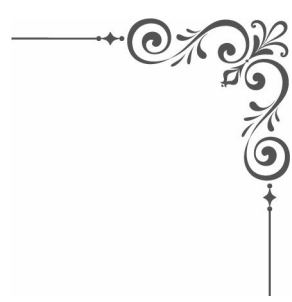
The servants began bustling about, organizing themselves and their guests into groups of twos and threes and leading them to their assigned places. Soon enough, through Lorna's guidance, places for sleeping had been found for everyone and the great hall slowly emptied.

Kai found himself alone with his men. The candles were burning down and the great hall was full of dancing shadows.

*Tomorrow, he thought. It all begins tomorrow.*

He blew out a breath. God help him, he was tired. His thoughts flicked to Caitlin. He ached to see her, to tell her everything, but it was the middle of the night. Let her sleep while she still could.

Bidding goodnight to his men, he left the great hall and walked back to his room alone.



## Chapter 20

For the umpteenth time, Caitlin strained against her bonds, putting every ounce of strength she could into her arms, trying to break free. And for the umpteenth time, the ropes didn't budge. Alice had tied them well. It seemed that tying up prisoners was something of a specialty of hers, along with blowing up fairs and drugging old men.

Caitlin sagged in frustration, taking as deep a breath as she could around the gag that covered her mouth. It too had been expertly secured: not so tight that it impeded her breathing, but tight enough that she was unable to scream or call for help.

Alice. When she got out of here, Caitlin was going to make her pay for this.

*Who are you kidding? she thought. When you get out of this? How the hell are you going to get out of this? Nobody knows you're down here.*

*Kai will come looking, she told herself. As soon as he realizes I'm gone, he'll come looking. I know he will.*

It was the only thought that kept her sane. The only thought that kept the panic from consuming her completely.

She guessed it was the middle of the night although there was no way to tell. Around her, the barrels of gunpowder sat in ominous rows, their innocent appearance hiding the devastation they would unleash.

It had been Lorna's idea to leave Caitlin imprisoned down here. Tobias had been all for throwing her in a cell but Lorna had talked him out of it. That way, when this place went up, Caitlin would go up with it. Lorna seemed to have a personal hatred of her. She'd gloated as she'd said these words, enjoying her fear.

Bitch.

She would make her pay as well.

Her efforts to break free had tired her and she felt her limbs growing heavy as she slumped against a crate and fell into fitful slumber. Then suddenly she was awakened by the tramp of feet and the rumble of many voices. It sounded like an army was marching in. Caitlin's heart began to race. Was it Kai and the others? Had they finally come looking for her?

But the hope died as quickly as it had come. The sound was above her, not outside her door. The sounds were muffled by the thickness of the ceiling but she thought she could hear Kai's voice. Or was that just wishful thinking? There were other voices too, ones she didn't recognize.

Damn it! She needed to know what was going on. She bit her lip, looking around her dimly lit prison. Her eyes alighted on a large crate in the corner. If she could climb on top of it, she might be able to reach the ceiling. It wouldn't be easy—Alice had tied her wrists and ankles so tightly that she couldn't walk—but she could drag herself.

Inch by slow inch, she wormed her way across the room until she was sitting with her back against the crate, her breath heaving through the gag. Raising her bound hands, she was able to grip the edge of the crate with her fingers and use this as leverage to heave herself to her feet, leaning on the crate to stop herself from falling.

With determined grunts, she hauled herself up and managed to scrabble her elbows onto its surface then wriggle and writhe until she got herself atop the crate. She then braced her back against the wall and used her legs to push herself up until she was standing.

She pressed her ear against the cold stone of the ceiling, listening. To her surprise, some trick of the acoustics brought the voices to her loud and clear. There were lots of voices and it sounded as though the room above was filled with many people. There was only one place in the castle that could house so many: the great hall. Caitlin's prison must lie directly below it.

It also meant the great hall was the target. Lorna and her cronies were going to blow it up.

In a frenzy of fear, Caitlin beat her fists against the ceiling and shouted with all her might. "Hey! I'm down here! Hey!"

At least, that's what she tried to shout. With the gag, all that came out were a set of muffled, incoherent wails. With a wave of despair, she realized that nobody up there could hear her. Nobody was coming to rescue her.

Despair and panic threatened to overwhelm her and it took all her concentration not to give into it. Instead, she fell quiet and pressed her ear against the ceiling, listening.

She heard mention of 'the Order of the Osprey' and 'war council' and 'King John of Denmark and Norway.' The import of all this slowly sank in. The Order of the Osprey had finally arrived—and they had not come alone. The king of Denmark and Norway had come with them and they were going to hold a war council in the morning to decide how to deal with Leif Snarlsson.

And then she knew. *That* was Lorna and Tobias's target. They intended to blow up the war council. They would kill Kai, the Order of the Osprey, and the king of Denmark and Norway in one go.

She slid slowly down the wall and sat down with a thump, staring in shock.

It had been a trap from the start. Everything that had happened had been designed to lure the Order of the Osprey and King John here. The fair. The 'dropped' sigil of the Douglas clan. All deliberate. The audacity of the plan was staggering and the implications left Caitlin cold.

Anger. That was what she needed. Only anger could drown the fear. So, she clung to her fury as she listened to the sounds above dissipate and silence descend once more. She guessed that dawn was some hours away. That meant she had a few hours to figure out a way to stop this from happening.

She gritted her teeth and curled her fingers into fists. She intended to use those hours wisely.



CAITLIN WAS PRETTY sure that it was the longest night of her life. Even the time she'd spent trapped in the burning factory hadn't seem to drag as much. Each second felt like hours, each hour felt like days, and every moment of it was spent in a kind of suspended terror, constantly on alert for any sound from the great hall above that would indicate morning had come and the war council was about to start, or for any sound of footsteps outside her door that would indicate Lorna had come to set her plan in motion.

Yet Caitlin heard nothing. As the slow hours ticked by, she could have been the last person left alive in the world, alone and forgotten in this dark hole.

But for the first time in a long time, she did not give into her fears. Kai's words echoed in her head. *Courage isnae about not being afraid. It's about being afraid and doing what ye need to do anyway.*

And hot on the heels of this memory came another. *Ye can choose to stay on this path or ye can choose another. If ye choose the harder, darker path, it will be fraught with hardship. But the destination will make the journey worth it. It will lead ye to where ye are meant to be and the person ye are meant to be.*



They were the words Irene MacAskill had spoken to her and maybe she was finally beginning to understand what the old woman had meant. It was time for her to decide what person she wanted to be.

Caitlin was a climber and she knew her knots. Yes, Alice had tied the knots well, but not well enough. First, she began to twist her wrists, moving them in methodical movements, until the rope stretched a tiny bit, allowing a small bit of give. Then she started working at the knot hooking the tiny bit of slack over the corner of the table and sawing it back and forth.

It took a long time and it hurt—she shaved off more than a few chunks of skin as she worked—but eventually the rope began to loosen. Bit by bit, she worked each strand free, first one side then the other.

After what seemed like hours, Caitlin was finally able to work her hands out of the ropes. She quickly rubbed her wrists together, trying to get some sensation back into them then untied the gag, flinging away the hateful rag and taking long, deep breaths.

She paused only long enough to catch her breath before she went to work again. Propping her feet against the wall, she worked at the ties around her ankles. Now that her hands were free, these were easier and eventually the rope slipped away from her feet and Caitlin sagged with relief.

She was free. Now she had to get out of here so she could warn Kai and the others. She took a few minutes to investigate her prison, running her hands along the walls looking for any cracks or grooves, and crouching down to feel around the corners of the floor. She even prodded at the ceiling with a broken shard of stone. But there was nothing, no way out of this place other than the door—and that was bolted from the outside.

She wanted to scream in frustration. Instead, she took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. There was still one option: wait for Lorna and her cronies to come down here, disable them somehow, and then make a run for it. Caitlin's heart raced as she realized what she was about to do. It wasn't going to be easy, not by any means, but if it meant getting out alive, then it was worth a shot.

She broke a leg off the chair to use as a makeshift club. She tested its weight in her hands, feeling the wood creak and bend under the strain. It wouldn't be much of a weapon, but at least she had something.

All that was left now was for her to hunker down and wait.



# Chapter 21

She awoke with a start. She had fallen asleep slumped against the wall by the door, her makeshift club still clutched in her fist. She blinked her eyes open, wondering what had woken her, then jumped to her feet. What was that sound? Was Lorna coming down here? Was it all about to start?

After a moment the sound came again, growing steadily louder. Footsteps. Lots of footsteps, but not outside her cell. Above her in the great hall.

It must be morning. And the sound of so many people tramping into the great hall could only indicate one thing: the war council was about to start.

Caitlin went cold. That would mean—

“Hey!” she yelled, climbing back onto the box in the corner and smacking the chair leg against the ceiling. “Hey! I’m down here! Help!”

But they couldn’t hear her. Caitlin let out a groan of frustration and slumped back onto the ground. There was nothing for it: she would have to wait for Lorna and the others to come down and try to fight her way out.

Positioning herself by the door and grasping her club, Caitlin waited for what felt like forever, straining to listen to what was going on above her. She could hear the drone of many voices, some raised in anger, others laughing, but without pressing her ear against the ceiling, she couldn’t make out what they were saying.

Was Kai up there? Had he thought about her at all? Or was what Lorna told her true and he’d been lying to her this whole time?

*He comes to my bed every night.* No. She did not believe it. Lorna was lying. She gritted her teeth and waited, forcing herself to focus.

Finally, after what felt like hours, she heard the distinct sound of footsteps echoing down the hall towards her cell.

Caitlin braced herself. This was it.

As the footsteps grew nearer, Caitlin realized there was not one set of footsteps, but three. Tobias and Alice had come too.

“Are ye sure this will work?” Alice asked nervously. “We dinna want anything to go wrong.”

“It’ll work,” Lorna said firmly. “Besides, it isnae like we have a choice; this is our only shot at getting what we want.”

The footsteps came closer and Tobias’s voice said, “Alice, ye will guard the prisoner while Lorna gets the fuses ready. I will stand watch at the steps to make sure nobody comes down here. When all is ready, we will meet at the rendezvous.”

“And ye are sure this willnae bring down the whole keep?” Alice asked.

“Leif is an expert,” Tobias answered. “He’s set just the right amount of powder in just the right place that it will destroy the hall but not the rest of the keep.”

Caitlin’s heart skipped. Suddenly her plan didn’t seem so feasible. She was not a warrior and the thought of confronting these three with nothing more than a chair leg filled her with terror. Even if she managed to overpower Lorna, there was still Alice. Even if, by some miracle she managed to overpower both of them, Tobias would be waiting down the hall. How would she get past all three of them?

She couldn't. She would be killed. There would be fire and smoke and—

She curled her hands into fists, dug her nails into her palms. She would not give in to terror.

*Courage isnae about not being afraid. It's about being afraid and doing what ye need to do anyway.*

And there was still one thing she could do. It would likely mean her own doom but she could still save Kai and the others.

As quick as she could, she tossed away the club, tied the gag around her mouth and replaced the ropes around her wrists and ankles to make it look like she was still tied up. Finally, she positioned herself in the middle of the floor, trying to look like she hadn't moved an inch since her captors had left.

It wasn't hard to look terrified. Her pulse was racing so hard she felt dizzy and she could feel sweat trickling down her forehead as she heard the bolt being pulled back. The door opened and Lorna and Alice stepped into the room, glancing at her briefly.

"Let's get this done quickly," Lorna said curtly.

Alice marched over to Caitlin, pulling out a small knife. "Keep quiet and dinna give me any trouble," she growled.

Whilst Tobias kept watch outside, Lorna knelt by a small box near the wall. Caitlin kept her eyes on the ground, not wanting them to notice any change in her expression as she realized what the box contained: fuses, and strikers—all the materials necessary to blow up the great hall.

Alice gave Caitlin a hard look before stepping back to watch as Lorna began to lay the fuses efficiently, as if she'd done this before. Alice seemed captivated by Lorna's movements and didn't pay Caitlin any attention.

Lorna finished what she was doing and announced it was time to leave. She paused and looked at Caitlin, her eyes flashing. In response, Caitlin began shouting against her gag and struggling to make it look like she was trying to get free.

Alice walked over and slapped her hard across the face. "I said keep quiet!"

After a few tense seconds, Alice turned away with a satisfied smirk, then she and Lorna left the cell.

The door slammed shut and the bolt slid home. For a few heavy minutes there was a deep, oppressive silence. Then Caitlin heard a sudden hissing sound and smelled burned matches and knew the fuses in the corridor had been lit. The wires trailed under the door and all along the floor of the cell, running to the barrels of gunpowder stacked around the walls. Lorna had arranged it in such a manner that they could light the fuses at the end of the corridor and not in the room, thereby giving themselves time to escape.

But Caitlin had no such chance. This was it. She had only moments. Quickly, she untied the ropes around her wrists and ankles and spat out the gag. Heart thundering, she scrambled to her feet and clambered around the room in a terror-filled frenzy, yanking the fuses from the barrels. There were so many! Tiny black wires that were all but invisible in the gloom crisscrossed the floor like veins. If she should miss just one—

She worked furiously, her fingers moving quickly and deftly as she traced each fuse to its source and snuffed it out. Sweat poured down her face and her heart thudded in her chest as she worked, every second feeling like an eternity.

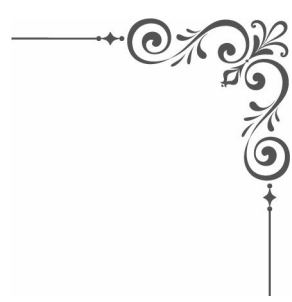
Finally, when she had pulled out the last of the fuses, she collapsed to the floor, her breath coming in ragged gasps. The room was filled with the scent of sulphur and smoke and there was a thick haze in the air. Caitlin coughed and spluttered, her eyes stinging.

She crawled to the door, her hands shaking as she waited. Sure enough, sparks soon showed in the gap between the door and the floor and came racing under it, burning along the fuse that Lorna had lit outside. Caitlin stamped on it furiously, heedless of the sparks that danced around her ankles, ignoring the terror that tried to claim her. She kept on stamping long after the sparks had died, giving in to the terror that roared through her.

Only when exhaustion took her, did she allow herself to slump to the ground and lean against the wall. She'd done it. She'd stopped the explosion—for now.

But she knew it was only a matter of time before they realized their plan hadn't worked and returned. She was under no illusions as to what would happen then.

*Oh, Kai, she thought as despair washed through her. Where are you?*



## Chapter 22

Kai shifted uncomfortably on the bench. The hard wood was turning his backside numb and wasn't improving his temper any.

Talk, talk, talk. That's all they'd been doing for the past two hours. What was there to discuss? They knew Leif Snarlsson was coming. All they had to do was decide how to arrange their forces to stop him. So why this endless debate and counter-debate?

Oskar obviously shared Kai's disdain. The warrior was slumped in his seat, one hand curled around a cup of mead, a scowl on his face. The rest of his men were more attentive but even Conall seemed to be getting restless.

King John was the cause of it all.

The man seemed determined to understand every tiny detail of the coming battle and seemed unable to grasp the fact that they needed to evacuate the lower town when the fleet arrived. He kept asking a million questions, debating every potential strategy and worrying over unimportant minutiae.

Oskar's patience finally snapped. He slammed his fist on the table, making everyone jump. "This is pointless," he yelled. "Ye spend all this time discussing our defenses while Leif Snarlsson's fleet gets closer and closer. We need to act now!"

Kai nodded in agreement but King John merely frowned at Oskar's outburst before continuing his monologue as if nothing had happened. Kai sighed and looked around him helplessly; it was clear that unless someone intervened, this meeting was going to go on for days.

He rubbed his temples in an attempt to ward off the headache that had been growing steadily over the past few hours.

"Yer Majesty," Brochan, the leader of the Order's warriors, said to the king, his voice firm. "I understand yer concerns but we need to evacuate the lower town so that our troops can station themselves there to trap Snarlsson's army when they land. It's our only hope of winning this battle."

It was at least the third time he'd explained this.

The king was silent for a moment, thinking. Then he opened his mouth to speak but stopped as the door suddenly swung open. One of his men walked in briskly, crossed the hall, and whispered in his ear.

"My apologies, gentlemen," King John said to them all. "I must retire to my chambers briefly. A messenger has arrived for me. We will reconvene this council shortly."

Kai ground his teeth as the king left. Lorna and Tobias had already given up on the war council. Although they'd been present at the start, they'd soon excused themselves to go and tell Alasdair what had been discussed so far. Kai couldn't blame them. He wished he'd been able to do the same.

He climbed to his feet. Fine. If there was going to be a delay, he would use it to do the thing he'd been wanting to do all morning: go and speak to Caitlin.

He walked quickly through the castle, ignoring the curious gazes of the servants and guards as he made his way to Caitlin's door. His heart was pounding in his chest as he raised his fist to knock. He swallowed hard. What if she'd changed her mind about him? What if she didn't feel the same way he did? He knocked but there was no answer.

Kai turned the handle and found that it wasn't locked. "Caitlin?" he called, stepping inside and looking around. The room was empty.

Her bed had not been slept in and her shawl was gone. Striding out of the room, he quickly grabbed a nearby maid. "Where is she?" he asked urgently.

The maid looked surprised at his sudden appearance and stammered an answer. "She isnae here, my lord," she said hesitantly. "She wasnae in her room when I came this morning. "

"Then where is she?"

"I dinna know. Could she have gone to the kitchens for breakfast?"

But she wasn't in the kitchens. Nor was she in the stables petting Smokey. Unease settled into Kai's stomach. He checked the gardens and the library and road to the village but there was no sign of her. He asked servants and other castle inhabitants if they had seen her, but none of them had. His anxiety grew.

Where was she? Where was Caitlin?

Suddenly, Kai heard someone shouting his name. He turned to see a kitchen lad running towards him.

"My lord," he gasped, his face flushed with exertion. "I heard ye were looking for the Lady Caitlin. I saw her yesterday afternoon in the kitchen and then later on by the steps down to the undercroft."

Kai was already running before the lad finished speaking, racing towards the undercroft. Why would she have gone down there? It had been disused for as long as he could remember, ever since one of the serving lasses had slipped on the stairs and broken her neck. Since then the inhabitants of the castle avoided the place, thinking it cursed.

Dear Lord, had Caitlin slipped and hurt herself?

The thought made him go cold.

He reached the door at last and burst through it, leaping down the steep steps. He noticed a thin line of soot reaching along the floor to a door at the end, but took no notice. His eyes were searching for Caitlin, his heart pounding with fear that he might be too late. He called out for her as he ran, his voice echoing in the dark depths of the stairwell and only his own echoes coming back to him in response.

The air was thick with dust which had collected over years of neglect. Kai had to stop several times to clear his throat and take deep breaths before going on again.

"Caitlin!" he yelled. "Caitlin! Are ye down here?"

And then he heard it. A voice so faint he thought he'd imagined it.

"Kai?"

It was coming from behind the door at the end of the corridor. He sprang over to it, shot the bolt holding it closed, yanked it open, and then suddenly Caitlin was there, staggering through the door and into his arms.

She was trembling and covered in soot and dust, but she was alive. Kai held her tightly, relief flooding through him. "What in God's name are ye doing down here?"

Caitlin shook her head and buried it against his chest, unable to speak for a few moments.

"Lorna," she croaked. "Tobias."

"What about them?"

"It's them," Caitlin said, her voice raw as though she'd spent the night shouting. "They...locked me in there. They were going to..." She trailed off, trying to catch her breath.

Kai shook his head. "I dinna understand any of this. What are ye saying?"

She gripped his shirt in her fists and her expression tightened with frustration. "They're in league with Leif Snarlsson! They've been planning this from the start. They want to kill the king and the



Order of the Osprey. Gunpowder. In there. Beneath the hall.”

Kai felt his blood run cold. Lorna and Tobias? They were his allies. It couldn't be true. But the fear in Caitlin's eyes was real. He glanced at the room behind. It was stacked with crates just like the ones in Alfred's wagon. Black wires ran from them as if...as if...

His eyes strayed to Caitlin again. She was covered in dirt and soot. There were discarded ropes and a gag lying on the floor inside the room.

And the door had been bolted from the outside.

Fury flashed through him, so hot and consuming that for a moment, he couldn't think. Without a word, he scooped her into his arms and carried her up the steps to safety.

He could feel Caitlin's heart pounding against his chest as he carried her through the hallways, one thought and one thought only pounding through his head. He would kill them for what they'd done to her.

“Kai!” Conall's voice suddenly sounded behind him. He was accompanied by the rest of Kai's men. “Where are ye going? The council is about to reconvene—” He trailed off as he saw Caitlin in Kai's arms.

Oskar drew his sword and looked around for enemies. “What happened?” the swordsman growled.

Kai didn't have time for their questions. He needed to find who'd done this to her and make them pay. But Conall laid a hand on his arm.

“Kai,” he said, his voice urgent. “What is going on?”

“It's all right,” Caitlin said to Kai. “Put me down.”

He was reluctant to let her go but he followed her instructions. He passed a hand over his face, trying to regain a measure of self-control, then crouched in front of her and took her hands in his own.

“Caitlin,” he said softly, his voice heavy with emotion. “Tell us everything.”

Kai listened incredulously as Caitlin told them what had happened: of Lorna and Tobias' betrayal, their imprisonment of her, and how she'd managed to douse the fuses before the barrels could explode.

And this woman thought she wasn't brave? Dear God, she was braver than anyone he'd ever met. When she'd finished speaking, Kai leaned forward and gently pulled her into an embrace, cradling her against his chest like a precious gift.

“Damn them both!” Oskar growled. “We'll make them pay for this betrayal!”

“Aye,” Kai agreed, anger burning in his stomach like coals. “We will. Magnus, take Caitlin and get out of here. Go to the tavern on Lower Row. Ye should be safe there. Guard her as if yer life depended on it. Conall, go warn Brochan and the others. Secure the undercroft and seal the keep. Nobody is to go in or out. Emeric, Oskar, ye are with me.”

His men nodded in grim determination and Conall hurried off to warn the Order.

Kai brushed his thumb against Caitlin's cheek. “Go with Magnus,” he said gently. “He'll keep ye safe.”

Caitlin shook her head. “No way,” she said firmly. “I'm coming with you.”

He stared at her then nodded, respecting her decision. “We need to find Lorna and Tobias,” he said. “And quickly. Before they realize their plan has gone awry.”

“Lord Alasdair,” Caitlin replied. “That's where they will have gone. Lorna told me herself she wanted him dead. This is their chance. They can finish him off and say he died in the explosion!”

“Then let's go.”

Almost at a run, he led the way to Lord Alasdair's chambers. As they moved, they heard commotion behind them as Conall and the Order of the Osprey moved to secure the keep, but in the upper levels it was eerily quiet. Too quiet. It set Kai's hair on end.

As they reached Lord Alasdair's rooms, Kai motioned for Caitlin and the others to stay back, then slowly pushed the door open, peering inside. It was empty, with no sign of Lord Alasdair, Lorna or Tobias. Kai cursed.

"The balcony!" Caitlin said suddenly.

Kai nodded and ran down the hallway, his feet pounding against the stone floor in an urgent rhythm. They reached the large wooden door that led to the lord's balcony and Kai kicked it open without ceremony, sending him spilling into the narrow space.

Lorna and Tobias were indeed there, standing over Lord Alasdair with a servant beside them. Lord Alasdair was trying to sit up in his chair, but he seemed too weak or sick to do so. Tobias had a bowl of steaming soup in one hand and a spoon in the other, pushing it towards Lord Alasdair's mouth.

Kai snarled in rage and rushed forward. "Stop!"

Lorna and Tobias spun around with an expression of surprise mixed with fear on their faces. The servant quickly backed away.

"Kai!" Lorna exclaimed, her voice slightly trembling. "What are ye doing here?"

"Ye know damn well what I'm doing here, traitor!" Kai growled, his gaze flickering to the bowl in Tobias' hand. "What have ye done to Lord Alasdair?"

Lorna's expression hardened. "That's none of yer concern," she spat. "What's important is that we finish what we started."

"And what is that?" Kai demanded, taking a step closer. "Destroying the Order? Killing innocent people?"

"They're not innocent," Tobias spoke up, his voice cold and calculating. "They stand in the way of progress. They're holding us back."

"From what?" Caitlin asked, her voice filled with anger and disbelief. "From your thirst for power? From your ambition to rule over everything?"

Lorna's eyes narrowed. "Ye know naught," she said, her voice low and dangerous. "Ye never have. Ye are naught but a bunch of fools who cling to outdated ideals and traditions. The world is changing, and we will be the ones to shape it in our image."

"Ye willnae shape anything," Kai said fiercely. "Ye'll be lucky if ye dinna end up swinging from the hangman's gibbet."

Lorna laughed, a high-pitched, mocking sound. "Ye think ye can stop us? Ye are nothing but a bunch of children playing at being heroes."

"Enough," Kai said, drawing his sword. "Yer plan has failed, thanks to Caitlin. Surrender. It's over."

Tobias and Lorna exchanged a glance. Surprisingly, they didn't look worried. Instead, their faces were impassive with no fear in their eyes. Kai wondered at their demeanor; he couldn't tell if it was courage or arrogance. He had a feeling it was a bit of both.

Lorna crossed her arms and smiled an almost taunting smile at Kai while Tobias chuckled softly, shaking his head. "We canna do that," Lorna said in a soft voice that held an edge of anger. "This is bigger than us now."

Suddenly, a groggy voice interrupted them. "What are ye all doing in here?" Lord Alasdair blinked his eyes open, looking around in confusion. "What is going on?" He struggled to sit up. "Kai?"

Lorna?”

Lorna ignored her father. Her eyes were fixed on Kai.

“Will ye tell him?” Kai said to her. “Will ye tell him how ye have been poisoning him so ye can take his lands and title?”

“Not her,” Alasdair wheezed. His knuckles clutched the arms of his chair and it seemed to take all of his effort to remain upright. “Him.”

Kai’s glance sprang to Tobias but Caitlin, he noticed, was staring beyond them all, towards the shadows at the back of the room.

Her eyes narrowed before widening suddenly. “You!” she cried. “It’s you!”

A figure stepped out of the shadows—the manservant Kai had seen with Lord Alasdair before. He had short blond hair with a beard to match and wore a faintly amused smile.

A trickle of unease went through him and he tightened his grip on his sword hilt. “Who are ye?” he asked.

The man merely smiled, his gaze wandering around the room. “All right. Ye’ve got me,” he laughed softly. “I’m caught red-handed. But what will ye do about it?”

“Who are you?” Kai repeated, trying hard to keep his voice calm while his eyes flickered to Caitlin. She was still staring at the man.

“Dear God,” she breathed. “You’ve been here all along.”

The man smiled. “It’s been most amusing watching ye all blunder around, making yer preparations for my arrival. As ye can see, I arrived some time ago.”

Kai stared at him in shock. Could it be?

The man bowed his head solemnly. “Leif Snarlsson,” he said with a smile. “At yer service.”

All around them, silence fell. Caitlin breathed in deeply, her eyes still fixed on the man. “All those people at the fair,” she said. “You killed them. You’re a murderer.”

Leif laughed quietly, a low, mocking sound. “Murder? I like to think of them as casualties of war. For make no mistake, Caitlin of the twenty-first century, we *are* at war.”

Kai narrowed his eyes. The twenty-first century? How did he know where Caitlin came from? There was only one explanation.

“Ye work for the Unseelie Fae,” he said, his voice a low whisper.

Leif nodded, and Kai felt a chill settle over him. The Unseelie Fae, those cruel, inhuman masters who would destroy humanity if they could.

“It doesnae matter,” he growled. “Yer master’s plans have failed. Give it up now, while ye still can.”

Leif merely laughed, a cold, cruel sound that seemed to echo around the room. “Ye have no idea how deep my plans go,” he said with a smirk. “Or those of my masters. This was just an opening skirmish. The war is yet to come. Ye will discover that right about...” He held his hand up and cocked his head as if listening. “Now.”

A sound like a thunderclap suddenly split the air and Kai was knocked to the floor by a concussion that rocked the building.

He looked up just in time to see a wall of the keep explode outwards, sending rubble and dust raining down from the sky. Thick smoke billowed out from the opening, obscuring the view beyond.

Leif Snarlsson grinned at Kai and said, “Still think ye can stop me? I’ve always been three steps ahead of ye and yer precious Order of the Osprey. It’s beginning. After what just happened nothing can stop it. War is coming. Chaos is coming. I’ll see ye all soon.”

With that, he darted through the door before Kai could stop him, leaving Kai and Caitlin and his men alone in a cloud of dust and confusion. Kai staggered to his feet, coughing against the smoke as it swirled around him. He needed to go after Snarlsson...needed to stop him.

But it was too late. The man was already gone.

Caitlin was lying on the ground, her eyes wide and fearful. He rushed to her side and gently lifted her up, holding her close as he brushed the dust from her hair. "Are ye all right?"

She nodded weakly, blinking away tears. Kai hugged her tighter and kissed the top of her head before helping her to stand on shaky feet.

"What the hell was that?" Emeric cried. "I thought we *stopped* the explosion!"

Magnus staggered to the front of the balcony where he could look out at the devastation. "Clearly, we were wrong."

Kai heard a strange sound behind him, an odd wheezing noise. He turned to see Tobias slumped against the wall next to Lorna, both of them being guarded by Emeric and Oskar. Tobias's shoulders were shaking.

It took Kai a moment to realize he was laughing.

Fury seized him. He grabbed Tobias by the shirt and hauled him to his feet. "Why?" he demanded. "Why would ye do this? Why would ye destroy yer home?"

"My home?" Tobias cried. "This isn't my home! I'm English and the only reason I've endured living in this disgusting hole for so long is because my masters commanded it! Now they will get what they've worked for so long. Alba will be destroyed!"

Kai shoved him away with disgust. "Ye are insane. None of this will bring about Alba's destruction."

"Willnae it?" Tobias asked. "It will when war comes to this land. It will when the combined might of Norway, Denmark and England come here seeking retribution."

"Horseshit. Norway and Denmark are our allies."

"*Were* yer allies," Tobias said. "Not anymore. Not when they discover what happened here." His smile widened. "Don't you know who was staying in that apartment?"

Kai felt a chill run down his spine as he realized what the man was hinting at. He released Tobias with a shove and stepped back, his mind reeling. Snarlsson had been right. He had always been a step ahead of them.

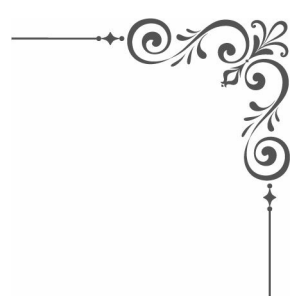
"Kai?" Caitlin said, her voice anxious. "What's wrong?"

"He left the council," Kai breathed. "He went back to his apartment to speak to a messenger."

"Who did?" Caitlin asked, confused.

Kai pointed at the devastation, the mass of debris and wreckage where one of the guest apartments had once been.

"The king of Denmark and Norway."



## Chapter 23

Caitlin shook her head to clear it. Her ears were still ringing from the explosion and she was struggling to make sense of all that had happened since Kai had freed her.

Part of her still couldn't believe she was free. Part of her still thought she was dreaming and that any moment now she would wake back in that room alone.

With an effort, she tried to focus on Kai's words. She was so disorientated that she couldn't figure out what it all meant or what the implications might be.

But then it hit her and the force of her realization left her reeling.

The king of Denmark and Norway had been in that apartment. If he had been killed in the explosion...

*That's what he was talking about, she thought. That's what Snarlsson meant.*

If the king had been killed on Scottish soil, then war between Scotland, Denmark and Norway, was inevitable—and Snarlsson, Lorna and Tobias would have won.

Resolve hardened in her stomach. *No, she thought. Not on my watch.*

"We have to get over there," she said to Kai.

Kai nodded, his eyes determined as he took her hand and led her towards the wreckage. The others followed behind, their faces grim with the weight of what was at stake.

When they reached the steps up to the apartment, they found them blocked by rubble. Some of the king's men were trying to shift it, but it was slow going as there were so many large chunks of masonry and furniture scattered across the stairs.

Magnus and Oskar joined in, helping the other men throw aside debris and carrying bits down from the stairwell.

But Caitlin knew it would do no good. Time was their greatest enemy now—every second they wasted brought them closer to a war.

She clutched at Kai's shirt. "Is there another way up?"

Kai shook his head, his face filled with sorrow. "No," he said, his voice gentle yet firm. "There's no other way."

Caitlin shook her head fiercely at him. She couldn't accept that there was nothing she could do—she had to help. She ran to the door leading outside and looked up. There was a sheer wall above her but she thought if she tried hard enough then maybe, just maybe, she could climb it and reach the hole in the wall where the explosion had occurred.

"I have to try," she said. "He might be alive up there. I might be able to save him."

"No!" Kai growled, gripping her shoulders. "It's too dangerous! I willnae lose ye! I canna!"

"Kai, listen to me! You know what will happen if the king is dead. War." She gripped his arms fiercely, trying to make him understand. "You told me once that Irene MacAskill had a plan for me, well this is it!"

"Caitlin, this is madness. It's too late. He's already dead!"

"You don't know that. I have to try."

Caitlin knew he was right, that it was madness, but she also knew she couldn't just stand there and wait for the worst to happen.

Kai studied her for a long moment, then nodded slowly. "I know ye do," he said. "It's who ye are." He pulled her into his arms and held her tightly. "I swear to ye, I will find a way through to ye."

Caitlin hugged him back tightly. “I know you will,” she whispered, before pulling away.

Before she could change her mind, she ran towards the wall, jumping onto a piece of debris to gain height. She reached up and grabbed a protruding piece of stone, her fingers and toes finding purchase on the rough edges and tiny gaps. She was used to climbs like this but she was *not* used to doing so without a harness or any kind of safety gear. She refused to look down or dwell on what would happen if she slipped.

As she climbed, she could feel her heart pounding in her chest, her breathing ragged and heavy. She could feel sweat trickling down her face and her hands slipping on the rough bricks. But she didn't stop. She couldn't stop. The fate of Alba depended on her reaching that hole in the wall.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, she reached the top. She peered into the hole, her heart sinking at the sight of the destruction inside. But then, through the smoke and debris, she saw movement: a hand reaching out, grasping.

She flopped over the edge and lay for a few moments on her back, trying to get her breath before flipping onto her stomach. Through the thick smoke, she could see that the apartment was completely destroyed. The ceiling had caved in and debris littered the floor.

And the room was on fire.

Caitlin's heart raced as she saw the flames licking at the edges of the room, devouring the bedding and the curtains.

The heat was oppressive, and Caitlin felt her throat constricting, the memories of being trapped in the burning factory rushing back to her. The smoke seemed to fill her lungs with every breath she took, and she felt the terror rising inside her as the realization hit—she was going to be trapped in here.

It was happening again. Oh God, it was all happening again! She was stupid to think she could do this. She couldn't do it. She couldn't!

*Courage isn't about not being afraid. It's about being afraid and doing what ye need to do anyway.*

She had come too far to fail now. Slowly, with shaking arms, she pushed herself into a sitting position. A few paces away, a body lay motionless amidst the rubble, partially buried under a pile of debris. She crawled towards it, ignoring the sharp pain in her hands and knees as she moved across the broken bricks and shattered glass.

As she got closer, she saw that it was a man. He was alive, but barely. Blood was seeping from a wound on his forehead and his breathing was shallow. She began to dig through the rubble with her hands, pulling away chunks of bricks and wood until she could reach him.

She checked his pulse—it was weak and thready, but it was there. He was badly injured—cuts and bruises all over his body—but the head wound was the most serious. She quickly lifted his shirt and noted a deep gash along his ribs that looked like it needed to be stitched up immediately or else infection would set in.

She grabbed a piece of fabric from the remaining bedding and ripped it into strips. Using them as makeshift bandages, she wrapped them tightly around the man's wound and ribs, hoping it would be enough to stop the bleeding, then also bandaged his head.

The smoke was thicker now, and she could feel the heat becoming more intense. The fire was spreading, the flames burning closer.

She knew it was a bad idea to move a patient in this condition but she also knew that she had no choice. If she didn't, they would both die. Gritting her teeth, she grabbed him under the armpits and heaved but he was a dead weight. She couldn't move him.

“Kai!” she bellowed. “Kai!”

She screamed his name as loud as she could, hoping he could hear her over the roar of the flames. She screamed until her throat was raw, until her voice was nothing more than a rasp in the smoke-filled air.

But there was no answer, only the sound of crackling flames and falling debris. Despair washed over her. She was alone and trapped, with no way out. She hugged the injured man close to her, trying to shield him from the heat of the fire, and closed her eyes.

Then the door burst open, slamming back against the wall with enough force to send dust raining from the ceiling.

“Caitlin!”

“Kai!” she tried to shout but it came out as a croak.

Then suddenly his arms were scooping her up, holding her tight against his hard, strong chest. She felt the heat on her back and the smoke in her lungs as Kai carried her out of the burning room, Magnus and Oskar lifting the injured king. She clung to Kai, burying her face in his shoulder.

Kai stumbled out of the room and down the steps into the chaos of the castle courtyard. People were running and shouting, horses were neighing and rearing, and the air was filled with smoke and the stench of burning.

Kai set her down gently on the ground and she coughed, trying to clear her lungs of the smoke. She could barely see through the tears that were streaming down her face, but she could feel Kai’s arms around her, holding her tight.

“Ye are safe now,” he murmured into her hair. “Ye are safe.”

Caitlin leaned into him. She was shaking all over. “You...you came.”

Kai looked at her with such intensity that she felt like he could see into her soul. “Of course I came. I told ye I would find a way to ye,” he said. “I’ll always protect ye. Always.”

She looked up at him, into his bright blue eyes. Somewhere along the way, she had fallen in love with Kai. She had tried to deny it, tried to push it away, but it was there, burning bright inside her heart.

“I know,” she said softly. “I know you will.”

He leaned down and kissed her forehead, his lips warm and soft against her skin. “I love ye, Caitlin,” he whispered. “I’ve loved ye since the moment I saw ye, and I’ll love ye until the end of time.”

She laid a hand against his cheek. “I love you too.” She leaned up to meet his lips with hers in a fierce kiss. She could taste the smoke on his breath and feel the heat of the fire on her skin, but in that moment, nothing else mattered. All that mattered was Kai, and what burned between them.

Finally they pulled apart, both of them breathless and dizzy. Caitlin looked around at the chaos in the courtyard, remembering what had brought them here. “How is the king?” she asked, her voice full of anxiety.

Kai shouted over to Magnus, relaying Caitlin’s question, then turned back to her. “He will live, thanks to ye.”

“And Snarlsson and the rest?”

“Conall brought news right before we broke into the king’s apartment. Lorna and Tobias are in custody. Lord Alasdair is with the healers. And as we speak, Brochan and the Order of the Osprey are tracking Leif Snarlsson and Alice Brewer. They willnae get far.”

Caitlin breathed out in relief. “Then it’s over.”

Kai smiled. “Aye, it’s over.” He paused, then took her hands in his. “My mission is complete and if I’m to keep my promise, I must take ye to my brother so he can send ye home.” His voice shook



slightly. "But I can no longer keep that promise."

"What do you mean?"

"The man who promised ye that isnae the man before ye now. Ye have changed me. I wouldnae have made that promise had I known what ye would become to me. I canna lose ye." He looked up, met her gaze. "Caitlin Summers...will ye stay? Will ye marry me?"

For a moment, Caitlin couldn't breathe. She had never expected this, had never let herself dream of such a thing. But in that moment, with Kai looking at her as if she was the only thing in the world that mattered, she knew what her answer must be.

"Yes," she whispered. "A thousand times yes. I'll stay. I'll marry you."

Kai laughed with delight and swept her up into his arms again; spinning around in a circle as he shouted, "She said yes!"

All around them people cheered and clapped their hands in celebration. Kai smiled and leaned down to kiss her again and Caitlin felt like every worry or fear she'd ever had melted away into nothingness. What was left behind was something new, something that filled her with quiet joy and was as bright and pure as the Highland sky above them.



## Chapter 24

“Can you guess what happened next?” Rosa asked with a wicked smile. The older woman sipped from her beaker of mint tea as she waited for Caitlin’s response. The two of them were seated at the little table in front of the fire in Caitlin’s room at Rosa’s inn.

“I’ve no idea,” Caitlin said with a laugh. “I swear your tales become more outlandish every time!”

The older woman grinned. “She left them both standing at the altar and ran away with the priest!”

Caitlin snorted, almost spraying tea over her lap. “She did not! You’ve made that up!”

Rosa was full of tales from her home in Spain and this one had been about the local lord’s daughter who had been pursued by two rival suitors.

Rosa put an arm around Caitlin’s shoulders and gave her a gentle squeeze. “But I’m sure you won’t be running off with the priest—not when you’ve got a man like our Kai waiting for you! And who knows? Years from now it might be you telling your own daughter stories on her wedding day.”

“I hope so,” Caitlin said, squeezing the older woman’s hand.

They had returned to Aberfeldy as soon as things were settled at Dun Cator. The Scottish king had sent men to take charge of the place until Lord Alasdair was well enough to resume his duties, although Caitlin wondered if he would ever recover from his daughter’s betrayal. King John of Denmark and Norway had recovered from his wounds and returned home, his alliance with Scotland renewed. Leif Snarlsson and Alice Brewer had not been captured and it was the only dark cloud that hung over the day.

Caitlin pushed it from her mind, determined not to dwell on it. With the combined might of Scotland and Norway hunting for them, they would not remain free for long.

Caitlin spent the next hour getting ready—Rosa helping her put on the lace-edged gown and veil while fussing with her hair, trying to get it just right. Finally, Rosa was satisfied, and stood back to admire her handiwork.

“You look beautiful, little dove,” she said, and Caitlin felt her cheeks grow warm with pleasure.

“Thank you,” she replied, then took a deep breath. “I’m nervous.”

Rosa chuckled. “Of course you are! But you have nothing to fear. Kai loves you more than anything in this world. You’ll be fine.”

Caitlin nodded, feeling her pulse quicken with excitement and nerves. She took Rosa’s hand and followed her out into the courtyard where the inhabitants of Aberfeldy had gathered to watch the wedding ceremony. Conall and Magnus were waiting outside the door.

All four members of Kai’s band had argued about who would get to give her away. In the end she had settled the argument by choosing Conall and Magnus. Who said you couldn’t have two people giving a bride away? She had chosen these two because they would both soon depart on missions for the Order—Conall to join the hunt for Snarlsson, Magnus to root out their spy network, and she wasn’t sure when she would see either of them again.

Magnus breathed out slowly. “My, my, Kai is a lucky man.”

“Aye,” said Conall with a grin. “It isnae too late to change yer mind ye know, lass? It’s not unheard of for the bride to run away with the groom’s better-looking friend.”

Caitlin laughed. “I’ll tell him you said that!”

Magnus and Conall took up positions on either side of her and Rosa fell in behind as her maid of honor. Arm in arm with the two men, Caitlin began walking across the courtyard towards the waiting crowd.

Kai was standing at the altar, flanked by his brother, Rory, as well as Emeric and Oskar—all of whom insisted on being his best man. Kai's family had made the trip as well: his parents, Deryn and Maddy, and sister-in-law, Leah, were seated on the very front row, along with Rory and Leah's twin daughters who were wriggling on their mother's lap, already thoroughly bored with proceedings.

As she reached the altar, Magnus and Conall released her and Kai extended a hand to help her up the steps. She took it, feeling the warmth of his skin against hers, and stepped up to stand beside him. He squeezed her hand and gave her a reassuring smile.

The priest began the ceremony, the words rolling off his tongue in a steady rhythm. Caitlin could barely concentrate on what he was saying, her mind too full of Kai and the life they would soon share together.

Finally, the moment arrived when the priest asked if anyone objected to the union. Caitlin held her breath, half expecting Leif Snarlsson to burst into the courtyard with his sword drawn, but nothing happened. The priest continued with the ceremony, and soon it was time for Caitlin and Kai to exchange their vows.

"Kai, I love you more than anything in this world," she said, her voice shaking slightly. "I promise to stand by your side through good times and bad, for all time."

Kai's eyes softened with emotion. "Caitlin, when I first met ye, I knew that my life would never be the same. Ye have brought light to the darkness that resided in my heart and have shown me what true love is. I promise to cherish ye and protect ye always, until my dying breath."

The priest took their hands and placed them one on top of the other and wound a cloth around them, binding them. Then finally—the moment they had been waiting for—the priest declared them man and wife. The crowd cheered and applauded as Kai dipped Caitlin in a dramatic kiss, causing her veil to flutter around them.

As they pulled away, they were met with a round of wolf whistles and catcalls from the gathered townsfolk. Caitlin felt her face flush with embarrassment and playfully swatted Kai on the arm.

"You're lucky I love you," she teased.

Kai grinned down at her. "Aye. Ye are stuck with me now, love."

Caitlin laughed and leaned into him as Kai took her hand and led her down the steps and into the waiting crowd of well-wishers.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of celebration and revelry. There was a feast, with an abundance of food and wine, and music played by local minstrels. Caitlin danced with Kai, with Magnus and Conall, Deryn and Rory—and even Emeric, who surprised her with his skill on the dance floor.

As the night wore on and the guests began to leave, Caitlin found herself alone with Kai, sitting on a bench under the stars. They were both a little tipsy from the wine, and Caitlin rested her head on Kai's shoulder, feeling drowsy.

"I can't believe it," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "We're married."

Kai chuckled, placing a soft kiss on the top of her head. "Believe it, love. Ye are mine now, forever."

They sat in silence for a while, watching the stars twinkle above them. Caitlin's eyes grew heavy, and she yawned widely.

Kai stood up, scooping her up in his arms. "Time for ye to get some rest, my love."

Caitlin snuggled into him, feeling safe and warm as he carried her towards their room—the best room in Rosa’s inn.

Once inside, Kai gently placed her down on the bed. As he lay down beside her, she snuggled into his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

The room was dimly lit by a few flickering candles whose flames danced shadows on the walls. Caitlin felt her eyes close heavily as Kai’s fingers traced gentle circles on her back. The alcohol had made her sleepy, but she didn’t want to sleep, not yet.

She tilted her head, capturing his lips in a searing kiss. Kai responded eagerly, and Caitlin’s hands reached up to tangle in his hair.

As they pulled away, gasping for air, Kai began to explore her body, his hands roaming beneath her dress and over her curves. Caitlin felt herself relax under his touch, no longer self-conscious or ashamed. She moaned softly, her body coming alive beneath his touch, all drowsiness forgotten. She pulled him closer, her fingers trailing down his back and along the waistline of his breeches.

“I love ye,” he whispered.

She reached up and brushed Kai’s hair out of his face. “I love you too.”

He smiled, then captured her mouth again, kissing her deeply before pulling away. His eyes were dark with desire as he slid her dress slowly up over her head. Caitlin was left in only her underclothes, the candlelight casting a warm glow across her skin. She reached up, fanning her fingers across Kai’s taut chest, the muscles rippling in response to her touch.

He kissed her again, deeply, then began to slowly remove her underclothes, taking his time. Caitlin shivered at the contact, her body growing hot. She moaned softly as Kai’s hands found her breasts, caressing them lightly and reached for the ties of his breeches, eagerly sliding them off, leaving his bare skin exposed in the candlelight along with his already hard member.

He positioned himself over her, his hardness brushing against her skin, making her hold her breath in anticipation. Then, holding her gaze with his own, he slowly slid inside her.

“My wife,” he murmured. “Mine. For all time.”

She felt her muscles tighten around his member, causing him to moan softly. His long, deep thrusts matched the rhythm of her heart, and soon they were moving together in a hot, sizzling dance.

Caitlin’s moans became louder and louder as pleasure took her. She moaned his name as his thrusts became faster and wrapped her legs around his hips. Then, with one last thrust, they were both lost in an explosion of ecstasy.

They lay together for a while in the afterglow, moving apart only to get under the covers. Kai snuggled in close beside her, and she turned to face him. He stared into her eyes, and she felt her passion stir again. His lips were so close, his body so close. Even though they’d just finished making love, desire roared through her again. She would never stop wanting him.

As she reached up and pulled him down on top of her, she suspected it was going to be a long night.

The morning sun streaming through the open window woke Caitlin the next morning. She stretched her arm out, expecting to feel Kai beside her, but the space beside her was cold.

She sat up, rubbing sleep from her eyes. She climbed out of bed and threw on a simple dress, one of the many gifts Kai had given her. She brushed her hair and teeth, before heading down stairs. The inn was quiet and empty and when she peeked inside the kitchen, she found Kai cooking with a griddle pan over an open fire.

He grinned when he saw her. “I was going to surprise ye with breakfast in bed,” he said with a laugh. “But I guess that plan is ruined now. Go and take a seat in the common room. I’ll be with ye

shortly.”

Caitlin did as she was bid, surprised to find that he had already set one of the tables. She took a seat and Kai soon joined her, carrying a plate full of—

“Are those pancakes?” she asked incredulously.

“Aye,” he laughed. “My mother’s favorite twenty-first century breakfast.”

He winked and took a seat across from her, taking one large helping for himself. They ate in comfortable silence until Caitlin finally broke it with a laugh.

“What?” Kai asked between bites.

“I just never imagined our first breakfast together would be pancakes and syrup.”

Kai shrugged. “Well, what do ye want for our second breakfast?”

Before Caitlin could answer, a loud pounding sound echoed through the inn. Caitlin shared a worried glance with Kai, then they hurried to the door. Kai threw it open with a shout, ready to turn away whoever was on the other side.

To Caitlin’s surprise an elderly woman dressed in traveling clothes stood there. She smiled kindly up at them both. “I heard someone was serving pancakes.”

Caitlin stared in shock. “Irene?” she whispered. “Irene MacAskill?”

“Were ye expecting someone else?” Baxter, her cat, sat at her feet, staring up at Caitlin with wide, unblinking eyes.

Before either she or Kai could say anything, the woman and cat walked over to the table and took a seat, as if nothing strange were happening at all.

“Now then,” Irene said brightly. “Let’s get started on these pancakes.”

Caitlin exchanged a bewildered look with Kai. Irene ignored them both and went about making herself at home, pouring syrup onto her pancakes and humming to herself. Baxter hopped onto her lap and curled up contentedly.

Finally, Caitlin found her voice. “Irene, what are you doing here?”

Irene looked up at her with a twinkle in her eye. “I could ask ye the same thing, my dear. But I think the answer is the same for both of us.” She took a sip of her tea. “We are here because of choices.”

Irene fixed her gaze on Caitlin and said warmly, “Ye chose to come here, Caitlin. Ye have done everything asked of ye. Now ye have another choice: do ye want to go home?”

Caitlin blinked, taken aback. All she had wanted at the start was to go home. Rory, Kai’s brother, had already offered to take her home and she had refused. And now here was Irene MacAskill offering her the same chance.

She thought of all the new friends she had made and the family that had accepted her so readily. And finally, she thought of Kai’s warm smile and strong embrace, and knew deep down that this is where she belonged.

She reached out and took Kai’s hand. “No thank you, Irene. You once told me I had to find the person I was meant to be. I think I’ve done that. And she belongs here.”

Irene’s face lit up and she clapped her hands in delight. “Excellent choice! Now pass me that butter, will ye?”

They took seats at the table and Kai passed the butter to the old woman, speechless for the first time since she’d met him. Caitlin couldn’t help but smile. She watched in silence as Irene chatted with Kai, Baxter perched happily on her lap, and realized that it didn’t feel strange to be sitting down to breakfast with her husband and a Fae.

It felt right.

THE END

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