

PLUS ALL THE

*Hearts Aflame Series*

BOOKS

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# SEDUCED BY HIGHLAND LIES

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*All her words were tantalizing lies... And he  
believed them all.*

**HEARTS AFLAME: LOVE IN THE MACPHERSON CASTLE**

**BOOK 4**

**KENNA KENDRICK**



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## THANK YOU

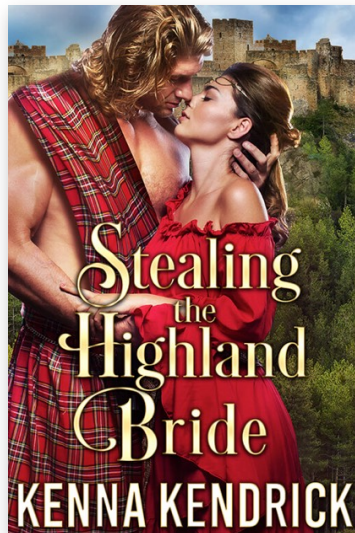
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## ABOUT THE BOXSET

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Welcome to the captivating world of “Hearts Aflame: Love in the MacPherson Castle,” a breathtaking series of Historical Scottish romances that will sweep you away to a realm of passion, intrigue, and the enduring power of love. Immerse yourself in a quartet of tales where secrets, deception, and desire entwine, forging bonds that defy the odds.

In Book 1, “The Deceived Highland Bride,” Cameron Hay seeks to uncover his mysterious past and finds himself entangled with Lady Ella MacPherson. Bound by a bet to become her guard, their journey is fraught with deception, desire, and a past that binds them in unexpected ways, threatening to shatter their newfound love.

Book 2, “The Highlander’s Vixen,” introduces Blair MacDougall, determined to protect Ada MacPherson from the darkness he believes lurks within him. As he tries to distance himself from her, fate intervenes, forcing them together one

last time. Their journey becomes a battle against secrets and time, as they grapple with their forbidden love.

In Book 3, “The Highlander’s Sweet Surrender,” Helen Ridley embarks on a treacherous mission to dismantle the powerful Chattan clan, only to cross paths with Cory Chattan, the laird’s son. Lies and fate bind them in a false marriage, and they must navigate a dangerous web of deceit, loyalty, and desire as Helen’s mission teeters on the brink of failure.

Finally, in Book 4, “Seduced by Highland Lies,” Cecily Ridley’s desperate act of stealing her cousin’s husband becomes her only chance at survival. She enters a false marriage with Kai McLaren, a man who despises the idea of matrimony, especially with an English lady. As their hearts entwine amidst deception and danger, they must confront the truth that threatens to unravel their newfound love.

*Prepare to be enchanted by a series that explores the depths of human emotion and the enduring strength of love, set against the breathtaking backdrop of the Scottish Highlands.*

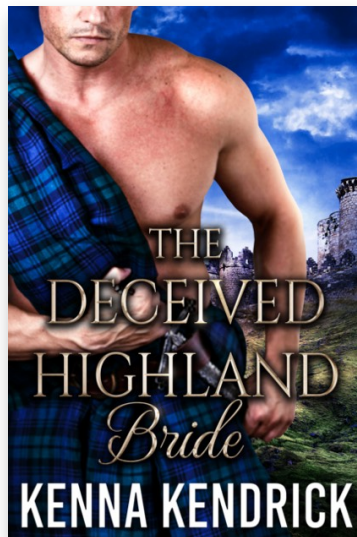
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# THE DECEIVED HIGHLAND BRIDE

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## CHAPTER ONE

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*L*aggan, Scotland, August 1648, Clan MacPherson Lands

*Ghàidheal Tavern*

Alice McTavish was no well-bred lady, and that was the way Cameron Hay preferred it. With vigor and glee, she wrapped her thighs around his waist, and he held her tight against the wall of the back room of his tavern, thrusting hard. When they first started, she'd looked into his eyes, then pulled him in for a kiss, but as his efforts grew more frenzied she leaned her head back, crying out his name at each advance of his hips.

She grew so loud that he clamped a hand over her mouth to muffle the sound. As Alice came quickly, trembling around him, she bit on his fingers trying her best to hold onto him. A few more deep thrusts and he was finished too, pulling out quickly and spilling into his hand. Every time with her was fast and pleasurable. She landed on her feet, and he reached out a hand to steady her as she pushed her rumpled skirts down in place around her.

Brushing a strand of blonde hair from her sweat-covered brow, Alice beamed at him, revealing a row of strong white teeth.

She was a bonnie lass to be sure. There were many men keen for her attentions, knowing her willingness to offer them.

“Cameron, lad, it is always so good with ye,” she said fighting to draw sufficient breath. She gave him a cheeky grin while he wiped away the evidence of their coupling, tying his trews securely again.

“Aye,” he agreed, uncomfortable with the aftermath of such things, and not knowing what more to say.

He only wanted quick fun, as did many of the women he slept with, just flesh on flesh like animals enjoying what God had given them—and then they were off. There was usually no conversation or at least not much, and they each got what they wanted until the next time.

When he was fixed up, Alice stood up on her tiptoes and pulled him close. She wrapped her hands around the back of his neck and pressed a wet kiss on his cheek, which sent a shiver down his spine—only, it was not out of pleasure this time, but a strong need to just run toward the door and disappear.

“Let me stay a while, Cameron. Let me stay this time.”

“Nae a chance, Alice, and ye ken it.” He gently pulled out of her grasp and stepped back, but not before bending down to press a kiss on her cheek, not wanting to insult her. “I dinnae want another encounter with yer husband like the last time.” He pointed to his still-swollen darkening eye. “Best tae keep things secret here, where nae one kens about yer whereabouts.”

“But why’d ye risk it? Asking me tae come here taenight after what happened the last time?” she countered.

He pulled on his jacket and watched as Alice’s expression change to slightly sullen. No, this would not do at all. That was why he had liaisons with married women; they had homes and lives to return to and did not think to cling to him as a true partner or lover. He had his reasons for asking her, and he was sure as hell not going to tell her.

“I think ye ken, Alice. Same reasons as ye. I couldnae stop meself from enjoying yer sweetness once more,” he pressed his swollen lips, still red from her bites, to hers for a mere second. “Now, go on. I will see ye again soon. I have work tae get back tae.”

She sighed and nodded, “Fine then, Cameron. Suit yerself. Until the next time.” Alice left out the back way, still adjusting her skirts, and slammed the door a little harder than usual.

*There we go again ...* Cameron rolled his blue eyes, pushing up his jacket sleeves over strong forearms, and left through a door leading to his tavern, Ghàidheal, or Highlander. He wore no colors, even though his tavern stood at the border between Grant and MacPherson land. He preferred to stay out of the politics of land and battles, and even though his best friends were guards and soldiers, for him it made no difference.

Fighting for one’s life, even though Cameron was an exceptional swordsman who won battles with ease, was far less appealing to him than a life of pleasure and merriment. And with his towering muscular frame and winning smile, those two things came easily.

He stood behind the long wooden counter and returned to his work as if he'd been there the whole time, taking a wet cloth and running it down the length of the wood. His long blond hair was tied in a knot at the base of his neck. Easier that way with all the vigorous *work* he'd been doing of late.

The two friends working with him, Seamus and Julia, were busy taking care of the many customers so there was spilled ale for Cameron to wipe away. The tavern was full, and it always made him swell with pride when he saw everyone having a merry time.

*'Tis mine. All this, at last.*

As he looked out at his successful venture, his hand brushed across the golden brooch pinned to his loose white shirt, unbuttoned at the throat. It was a rounded oval with gold filigree around the outside. If he looked closely, he could see the faint outline of an engraved Scottish thistle across the middle.

He was never without it, and he touched it to remind himself where he'd come from, even if the past was still shrouded in mystery. It had been found on him when he was but a babe left on the doorstep of the healer's hut. Taken in by the kind old woman, he'd never known the story of his past. All he had was this one golden brooch, and it was the only clue he had to finding out the truth one day. But that day would not be today.

"Och, there he is!" a familiar voice called, and he looked over to see three of his friends sitting around a low, circular table by the large stone hearth.

He grinned, glad to have a little distraction that night after Alice's little scene. Tossing the cloth aside, he strode up to them, bringing a chair next to the men and leaned his arms on the strong wood of the tabletop.

“Well, lads, it seems ye three are havin’ a right party. Good timin’ too. I expected ye a bit later, though.”

“We couldnae wait tae have our last drink with ye, Cameron, ‘afore we’re off tae battle.” Rory McKinnon, his hair as red as carrots, winked at him. “Besides, ye’ve got a bet tae win.” He pulled out a bag of coins from his coat pocket and plopped it on the table, pushing it across to Cameron.

Cameron chuckled, tapping at the bag and loving the feel of good hard coin under his fingertips. It meant he would not go hungry. “What’s this for, then?” he asked with a cheeky lift of the brow.

“Och, ye ken!” Alistair, Rory’s twin brother chuckled. “We saw Alice McTavish comin’ in through the back to yer rooms, lad. I cannae believe ye slept with her again, after what happened naught but two days ago! Thought ye werenae desperate for another hit tae yer eye. But I suppose ye couldnae resist the bet and earning some good coin.” Alistair and Rory laughed heartily before drinking from their tankards of ale.

Cameron, smiling, turned to face his best friend, Blair MacDougall, who sat directly across from him with his arms crossed and his dark brown eyes frosty. People often thought Blair and Cameron were twins, both with the same blond hair and bright smiles. But Blair was a few inches shorter than

Cameron, his hair cropped closer to his head, serving him well as a laird's guard.

But even though many a lass could not decide which handsome lad to flirt with between the two of them, right then none of them would have chosen Blair, who looked so frustrated with his best friend that he was stabbing daggers with his gaze.

“Yer ale looks like it’s untouched, Blair,” Cameron said, a tinge of uncertainty in his tone.

Blair was the only person in the world whose good opinion he sought or even cared about. If he was upset with him, then Cameron knew it was for a good reason. Right now, he did not wish to really know what it was about, yet he could hazard a guess.

“So it is,” Blair returned with a nod, turning away from him.

Frowning, Cameron turned to his other friends. “Aye, I didnae want the trouble, but ye ken me. I dinnae make a bet I am nae sure tae win. I asked her tae meet me and there she was, nae needing a second invitation.”

He picked up the bag of coins, tossed it up in his hand and then stuffed it into his pocket. “Now, let me get me own ale and join ye lads.” He stood and asked for Julia behind the bar to fill in for him. “How are things here taenight, lass?” he asked her.

Julia smiled, her golden curls bouncing as she moved. She was nearly sixteen, and he knew he'd have to start watching the men in the tavern to make sure they kept their hands to themselves. She and her twin brother Seamus had been working at his tavern for two years since he'd found them on their own, practically starving to death. There was less than ten years between them, but when he'd seen them outside on the edge of the woods, their bodies thin and drawn, clothes tattered and Julia bruised and beaten, he'd felt like a righteous father. He had been given a chance when the old healer had taken him in, and he'd seen the chance to help Julia and Seamus in turn. They'd become his good friends, his confidantes, even though his fatherly protective instinct toward them still stood strong in his heart.

"Just fine, Cameron. Ye dinnae have tae worry about me, ye ken," she said, pushing a full, frothy tankard into his strong hands.

"That's good, Julia. But ye ken I always will." He winked at her and then sat down with his friends again, a mug finally in his hands.

"I think the worst part about goin' tae this blasted battle at Preston is leavin' ye two, and nae bein' able tae make any more bets," Alistair said, scrunching up his nose.

"Aye, true enough," Rory echoed. "Blair could've come with us tae the battle, but he chose tae remain guard at MacPherson Castle this time. Bloody good fighter he is, and what a waste."

Blair remained silent still.

Cameron leaned back in his chair on two legs and eyed his friend. “Go on, what is it, then?” he asked Blair. “Ye are nae kent tae keep yer ale in its tankard, especially when it’s fresh.”

Rory and Alistair chuckled, and Rory said, “Och, he’s been a bit sour since we saw the lass go intae yer room. Ye ken him and his madness...”

“Och, is that it?” Cameron asked not leaving Blair’s gaze for even a second.

His best friend leaned forward, his hands wrapping around his tankard. “I think we should give up this foolish betting. ‘Tis nae the way of good men, betting on whether or nae a lad will sleep with a lass. ‘Tis nae right, Cameron.”

Cameron crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. He’d heard all this before. Bloody nonsense it was. He had no interest in a wife or a family. He wanted only pleasure and to run his tavern as he saw fit. *And tae find out who me parents were.* But that was a different issue entirely.

He stared at his friend. “Come now, Blair. Ye have been tryin’ tae convince me of this for years, but ye willnae dae it, nae matter how many times we discuss it. I have nae need of a wife, only lovers, and the lovers I take are only interested in just that.”

He guiltily thought of Alice, who had begun to look at him in a different way that night, hoping for more. He lifted a brow at Blair, waiting for a reply.



“But ye could just settle down with a good woman, a lass ye would love, and everythin’ would come right in yer life. I ken it, Cameron. Ye would have everythin’ ye ever wanted,” Blair replied, the frostiness gone from his eyes.

“Good lord, what is this shite he speaks of?” Rory asked, laughing loudly.

“But look at ye, Blair. Ye are constantly telling me about how I should dae it, when ye have nae even done it yerself. Why dae ye nae find yerself a good woman, since ye have always wanted a life like that?” Cameron challenged.

“I will. One day.” Blair looked around between them. “Too many wars tae be fought, but I stayed back this time. Ye all think me mad, but I want tae find her. Tae find the lass who will fill me heart and mind, make me want tae be a good husband.”

“Bloody hell,” Alistair said, polishing off his ale and waving down Julia for another.

“So, does that mean ye will finally come and work here at the tavern with me? As partners? Then ye will have the time and lack of danger tae get that family ye want with a sweet and meek lass to look after ye,” Cameron said, shaking his head. “I have nae idea why ye never agreed before, as I have asked ye more than once.”

“Nae. It is nae yet time,” Blair said stubbornly. “Working at the castle is good money. And I need more money if I am tae be a proper provider for me family.”

“Fine then. Suit yerself.” Cameron threw up his arms and took a drink. “I say we talk of other things, since we cannae agree on the subject.”

“Aye!” Rory said, lifting his tankard in the air while Julia brought Alistair a fresh one.

It took a few seconds, but Blair followed suit, and the four of them touched tankards as Alistair began to tell a tale. But after about two minutes, it was cut short when Cameron heard Julia calling to him from the side of the bar. He stood and excused himself before running up to his young friend.

Grabbing her shoulders, his heart flipped in his chest. “Are ye hurt? What’s wrong, lass?”

To his surprise, she shook her head, worry possessing her eyes, “Cameron, there is trouble out in the alley. Two men are attacking two young ladies. Will ye help, please? Seamus has gone, but I ken he’ll be killed if he tries anything, the idiot!”

Cameron took her hand, stroked it, and they exited the tavern through the back door into the alley.



*An hour earlier:*

“Be quick!” Ada MacPherson told her sister Ella as she came into the room already wearing her black cloak, hood up over her head. “What are ye daeing?”

“Calm down,” Ella whispered, pulling on her own cloak and tying the strings so it covered the golden brooch pinned near to her heart. Ella loved it so much she could never bear to take it off. Many years before as a young girl she’d taken a shine to it, having seen it in her Aunt Anne’s room. Her aunt had been kind enough to let her have it, and after her tragic death, Ella wore it in memory of her who had become like a mother in the absence of her own. The brooch was smooth except for the gold filigree and the engraving of a Scottish thistle.

“I am almost ready. Besides, we should nae talk so much; someone will hear us!” Ada narrowed her brown eyes at her sister in frustration.

Ella smirked, tapping a finger to her smiling lips before she pulled the hood over her plaited red hair. Together, they moved quietly out of the room and down the hall of MacPherson Castle, a home and also their prison for far too long. At least she had not been alone; she had Ada, both her sister and best friend, and the two of them nearly alike in appearance with the same bright long red hair. Yet while Ada’s eyes were a dark brown, Ella’s were the color of a loch on a sunny day.

Her heart fluttering, Ella reached over to grab her sister’s hand. When she turned, Ada gave her an encouraging nod, assuring her that they were doing what they must do. Since they could not find freedom and were not granted much by their father, Laird Graeme MacPherson, then they would seize it. And tonight was the night.

They had planned and waited long enough to taste a bit of the outside world for once. As they stepped closer to the doors at the end of their passageway, Ella found she was much hungrier for freedom than she’d realized. Pulling her hood back, she stood tall, and pushing Ada a bit to the side, she opened the double doors so that Ada was hidden behind the one of them.

As expected, she spied their personal guards standing just outside the door.

“Angus, Darren, would ye help me? I was goin’ tae dae it meself, but then I realized I wouldnae be able tae carry it.”

“What is it, Me Lady? We would be happy tae help,” Darren said, bowing his head a little, his hands folded in front of him, sword at his side.

The guards looked like twins, with matching brown mops of curls on their heads and a serious expression on their faces. They were attractive enough, but they were her father’s age. Her father, terrified of what might happen to them, thought having young men watch his daughters was far too dangerous.

“Ada is nae well.” The lie she practiced came easily to her lips. “Could ye fetch a pail of water or two and leave them here just inside the door? I need tae help her wash, and I dinnae wish the servants tae come, in case they fall ill, too.”

“Aye, of course. We will go right away.” Angus bowed, and together he and Darren turned to go.

As planned, Ella shut the doors behind them and waited, her breathing loud in the silent space as she and Ada stared at each other. Though they were close, they could not have been more different, for Ada enjoyed the excitement of adventures and reckless plans, while Ella did not. She was more rigid, more responsible, and found herself in need to organize everything before taking part in any sort of “adventure.” It had taken time for her to work up the courage to go through with this tonight’s foolhardy plan.

“Now!” Ada said, and Ella quickly opened the door again, and they slipped out into the main upper hall, silently closing it behind them. This would be the first time they’d ventured out on their own in so many years she’d lost count. Grabbing Ada’s hand, Ella pulled her down the passageway until they reached an alcove with a secret door. Opening it, they rushed down the stone steps and into the darkness of the tunnel.

The one thing their father, Laird MacPherson, never planned on was that imprisoning his daughters meant that their whole world consisted of the castle. That they knew its every crack, every turn, every stone. There were more secret passageways throughout the old structure that Ella was certain even her father didn’t know about them all. Hand in hand, they hurried down the familiar tunnel in the dark until they felt the draft of sweet night air on their cheeks.

“So close!” Ella breathed.

“I cannae believe it. Dinnae lose yer courage now, sister,” Ada warned.

It had taken years for them to gain the courage to escape. And when one of them gained it, the other would falter, and they would be right back where they started. Mostly it was Ella whose courage waned. But now she could taste what she desired in the air.

*Freedom.*

If only for a night. If only for a few hours. They would go to the village tavern and see what the world had to offer. It would

be one night of freedom, and no one would ever have to know they escaped.

She slowed her gait until her hands brushed against the rough oak of the door. "Here we are," Ella whispered. She worked at the metal bolt on the door, and together they pushed it, heaving a little until it strained open. A rush of air hit their faces, their skin pinking in the cool of the night, and they grinned at each other.

"Hurry. We must put a small stone in the door to keep it open. We cannae open it from the outside otherwise," Ella said, having made thoughtful and careful plans over the past weeks, walking by the door many times.

"Aye." Ada reached down to pick up the stone she'd collected for that purpose, pushing it between the door and the jamb. It was thin enough not to be recognized at first look, and when the heavy door laid against it, she stood. To be safe, she pulled against the door, relieved when it easily moved outward.

"Ready?" she asked, turning to Ella.

"Aye. I have never been more so."

They put up their hoods, and hurried away into the night, hoping their dark cloaks would shield them from the watchmen and the torchlights. At least the woods were close enough to the castle so they only had a small stretch of green to cross before they were well-hidden amongst the dark trees. She paused only once to turn back for a moment to look at the castle and to take a deep breath.

“Finally, Ada. It is our time.”

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## CHAPTER TWO

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Ella giggled as they held hands, running swiftly down the path toward the village, and finally seeing the lights and the outline of buildings as they got close.

“The tavern, remember? That has tae be our first stop. Marcia kens how full of men it is,” Ella said, her eyes flashing, and Ada laughed.

“My older, responsible sister is talking tae me of men? I cannae believe it.”

“Aye. It is time we spoke tae someone else besides Faither, the servants and guards.” Ella ground her teeth together.

“Aye, and I wish tae fall in love and talk tae as many men as possible taenight.”

Ella paused. “Dinnae be too wild, Ada. We dinnae ken the men we go tae see.” Ella’s excitement was mixed with fear, but Ada had far more wildness about her.



The reason Ella had feared to leave before was because she wasn't sure what Ada might do if set free. But it was time for them both to enjoy themselves a little, even if it was only for a few hours.

She'd tried years ago to persuade her father that the kidnapping of their youth had not been successful, that it had simply been an unusual accident, and that they could move on. But alas, he kept them locked up as if they were caged birds he wanted to keep from growing up and experiencing life.

It made her furious, and each day the anger worsened, but now she would forget about that. She wanted to enjoy this time with her sister. It might be the last breath of freedom she would have before she was eventually married, if her father ever let her do even that.

The tavern drew near, the closest building to the castle, and she could see the wooden sign hanging above the door, a lantern hanging next to it.

"Ghàidheal," Ella breathed, tears in her eyes. "I feel as if this is another land we've traveled to. That nae one will ever be able tae find us again."

She closed her eyes, and Ada squeezed her arm. "Aye, and we've only traveled naught but a few minutes."

They could still see the castle in the distance in all its torchlit guarded glory, yet she looked back at the tavern to make sure it was real. Winding her arm through Ada's, she nodded.

“Are ye ready? Shall we go?”

“Aye.”

They were just about to take a step forward when they turned at the sound of crunching twigs from behind them.

“Nae, stay with us a while, lassies,” one of two men walking behind them said.

Both of them were dark-haired with scruffy beards and dark clothes. She could tell they were drunk by the way they stumbled, but when they got close to Ada and Ella, they smiled. Ella’s heart raced, and she gripped Ada’s hand.

Never before had she spoken to a strange man. But looking into their dark eyes and watching their yellow, leering smiles, she felt something was wrong. Her heart told her so as it pumped wildly against her ribs.

“Come, Ada. Nae, thank ye, gentleman, we will be on our way now.” She turned away, clutching Ada’s hand, and the two of them dashed toward the tavern, but the men were too fast. She felt herself pulled back by her cloak until she was flat against the man’s chest. She struggled against him, her lungs filling with screams, as a thick, calloused hand covered her mouth.

With stale breath, the man whispered in her air. “Dinnae scream, or I shall have tae hurt ye bad. But if ye cooperate, all will be well and over in a few.”

He chuckled, and she grimaced, knowing but not truly knowing what he meant. He moved her along down a narrow alley, unable to see but hear Ada's struggle behind her with the other man. He leaned down to gather up her heavy skirts, pushing her against the wall, his breath rank and rough.

"Och, just a young one, so it is. Perfect." His grip on her mouth loosened but only a little.

"Stop it, ye dobber," said the other man who held Ada. "Dinnae touch her, Kenn. All the laird wanted was tae bring them tae him alive."

"Aye, so he did." Ella squirmed when Kenn groped her bosom with such strength she heard the material of her cloak tear apart, but this only made him hold her tighter. "I am nae goin' tae kill her. But he didnae say that we couldnae have a little fun."

The other man cursed, and Ella wished he'd try again to convince Kenn to stop, but he didn't. She looked at him with pleading eyes, and it was then she noticed the colors the men wore. Under the lamplight, she could tell the shades were those of Clan Grant, and her heart fell. Could this be another attempt at kidnapping? *Again?*

The laird of that clan had attempted years ago to take them, but she'd never learned why. Only that her father had been so terrified of it happening again that he'd trapped his only two children in the castle, never letting them out. But this was more than a kidnapping, as she felt the man's cold hands on her thigh trying to push her gown away. His rough fingers found the warmth of her leg, and his firm squeeze made her feel nausea building in her throat.

She bucked against him, trying to fight his arm away, and she could hear Ada's muffled scream. Was this what her father had hoped to protect her from? Being raped by a stranger in a dark alley?

"Oy!" a voice called, and she turned quickly to see a lad with rough brown hair, pointing at the two men. He was young, though, maybe sixteen, and her heart faltered as the brief hope she'd had of escape fizzled out.

"Get away from those lasses!" the boy cried, fury written on his face.

*Och, he's going tae get himself killed!*

For the time being, the men's movements had been halted. Ella could feel tears welling up in her eyes as she prayed for help, hoping that these men would be damned for what they were about to do. The man holding her tightened his calloused fingers around her neck.

Her eyes blurred as she felt the heavy pressure to her throat. No air. No air was getting into her lungs. She bucked and kicked.

"What are ye goin' tae dae about it, lad? Ye are just a boy," the man laughed.

"But nae me," a deeper voice thundered, and Ella saw a tall shape looming over her kidnappers.

Instantly, she was freed with a curse, and she spluttered and coughed, backing against the wall, fighting to breathe.

“Ella!” Ada cried, running to stand next to her, having also been suddenly released.

They watched as their rescuer started with the first man. As the first fists flew, Kenn groaned, and he quickly fell to the ground after one hit to the jaw.

“Have sense, lad!” the other man called, lifting his hands in the air, but the tall, fearsome savior of theirs did not stop. He hit the other one as if he couldn’t care less that the man held up his blade while madness was written in his eyes.

Ella watched in awe the two men groan in pain as they were pummeled into the ground once more. In a flash, she could see the fierce highlander pull out a dagger and hold it to her assailant’s neck.

“If I ever see yer face around here, it’ll be yer blood on me blade. I dinnae care whose men ye are. Now get the hell away!”

The attackers scrambled to their feet, cursing even as blood spouted from their lips.

They ran off, and Ella averted her eyes, never wanting to look upon them again. She put a hand to her chest and felt for the brooch. Her cloak had been yanked away in the attack, but the brooch was still pinned close to her heart, and she closed her

eyes, thanking God they were safe. Her clothes had been ripped, and she wrapped her arms about herself to cover her breasts, which were threatening to show. She shivered.

A young blonde woman emerged from the tavern, holding out two cloaks, and the large man took one up. “Here ye are, lass,” he said, his voice quiet and comforting. He took the large cloak and put it over her shoulders. She quickly covered up her torn bodice. Then, with a breath, she gained the courage to look up at their savior for the first time and met his eyes.

When she saw those two orbs of blue, the first words that came to mind were, *avenging angel*.



Cameron held out a hand, “Are ye all right, lasses?” he asked, his eyes moving between them.

Only the first one he looked at, the one with long red hair that had been tied back, nodded. She was still breathless, her lips parted, and she clung tightly to the cloak he’d just given her. He helped the other lass put on her cloak as well, and she looked equally afraid, her brow furrowed with shock.

“Aye, sir. Thank ye,” the first woman swallowed, finding he could not look away from her.

*Such beauty.*

Cameron cleared his throat, trying to ignore the very big distraction that had fallen into his arms, especially when she had just been through such a terrible ordeal. Yet he couldn’t

help but glance at the full bosom showing through her ripped bodice.

*I'm an animal, for God's sake; she was almost taken against her will.*

“Come, come inside,” he said, trying to push lustful thoughts to the back of his mind, including the maidenly anatomy revealed before him, and the redhead’s distressed moans in his ears.

He gripped her elbow while Seamus hurried to help the other, who was obviously younger. Inside, the crowd continued as merrily as before, completely unaware of what happened outside. He was glad for that. He didn’t like the idea of the women getting further attention directed at them. And with a face like that, the first one was sure to glean attention wherever she went.

“Sit here, lasses.” Cameron and Seamus helped the young women inside to tall chairs which stood along the wooden bar, sticky with spilled ale.

The crowd seemed to have doubled in size since he’d been gone. He allowed himself to relax, knowing the throng of patrons would give the two women a bit of privacy and anonymity without being stared at as they entered the room. He was grateful for that, knowing that the lasses—especially the beautiful one he’d rescued—undoubtedly drew attention, both unwanted and wanted, wherever they went.

“What are your names?” he asked.

“Ella,” the blue-eyed one said, still trembling. “And this is me sister, Ada.”

“Well,” Cameron smiled his most reassuring smile. “Welcome to my tavern. Give me just a moment, and I will bring ye both food and drink.”

He left them and found Rory, Alistair, and Blair waiting, watching him with puzzled looks.

“What was it, then?” Rory asked.

“A couple of bastards trying tae rape two lasses. They’re shaking from the scare, but I am certain a bit of food and drink will help,” he explained, flexing his aching hands after the pounding they’d taken.

He’d hit men’s jaws before, but never before had he had to jump to attention so quickly. He’d often considered how Julia had been harmed before coming to live with him, and he wished he could have pummeled that man’s jaw as well.

Blair pulled his ale towards him. “What did ye dae?”

“Hit them, threatened them. They had Grant’s colors—his guards most probably. Have nae idea how or why they suddenly decided to choose these two lasses to hurt.”

Blair looked grim. “Grant is nae a good man, so it is nae surprise that his men are nae either. They’ll take any lass that crosses their path.”



Rory chuckled. “And what of Laird MacPherson? Exactly because of events like this the man is worried about every little thing, keepin’ his daughters so locked away for years. I might do the same if I have a lass someday. Damn, I’d kill those bastards.”

Cameron had heard that the MacPherson laird was a fearful sort, and he’d pitied the girls, but tonight was a perfect example of what the laird feared: the world was a dangerous place for lovely ladies alone.

“I dinnae want me tavern littered with dead bodies, or else I would have considered killin’ them meself.” He rubbed a hand over his face and behind his neck, glancing back at Ella speaking to her sister. But the din of the crowd quickly covered them again, and he turned back to his friends.

“Jesus, but the one is bonnie, I wish ye could see her,” he told them. “It would be a danger for her tae ever set foot outside her home.”

“Och, let me check, then; maybe she’ll need some comfort,” Alistair chuckled and tried to get up his chair only to be pushed down roughly by Cameron.

“Dinnae ye dare bother them; they’ve had enough unwanted attention taenigh, ye arse. She’s too bonnie for ye anyway.”

“Do ye mean tae make a new bet, lad?” Alistair chuckled.

“Bloody hell, the lass has just been attacked!” Blair finally spared them a word, leaning forward.

Cameron didn't answer, but grinned at Alistair. “Aye, she will be me next catch, I think.” He stood tall, brimming with confidence. He'd rescued her; she was his.

He had become very used to the way he affected women, and now that he'd saved her, he was sure she would fall to his charms soon enough, easier than ever. He was her savior, after all. Blair shook his head, huffing out a sigh while Rory and Alistair just laughed.

“I'll see ye lads a bit later. Got tae treat the lasses tae some food and drink now. Calm their nerves, ye ken.”

Cameron turned away, his friends still chuckling, and he moved behind the bar. “Good lad, Seamus,” he said to his young friend, tousling his hair. “But we'll wait until ye are a bit bigger 'afore ye go out alone on a rescue, ye understand?”

“Aye, Cameron.” He gave a guilty abashed grin. “I am sorry I couldnae dae much. I was afraid too.” Seamus twisted his fingers anxiously like he did every time he was fretting about something. “Will ye teach me how tae fight, Cameron?”

“Aye, of course. I have already taught ye much about fightin', but the fear needs tae be overcome.” He lowered his voice, and with a smile whispered, “But those lasses are grateful tae ye,” he nodded his head to them, and Seamus blushed, making Cameron laugh. “Bring food for the two of them, would ye, please?”

He left Seamus and moved to stand by Ada and Ella, leaning his elbows on the wood. His hair was mussed from the fight, and a length of it hung over one shoulder. He folded his hands and looked between the two girls. “What will ye take tae drink, lasses?”

“Anything ye recommend,” the one called Ada said, giving him a bright eager look. She seemed to have recovered more easily than her sister.

He chuckled, glad they were settling already. But not quite on the right woman, however. Ella continued to watch him with wariness. It was amusing. No woman, *especially* not one who had just been rescued by him, had ever looked at him with suspicion. It made her all the more intriguing.

“We dinnae need anything tae drink, sir. In fact, it is best if we return home as soon as we can.”

“With lads like that about? Nae, stay a while. Yer food is comin’, like I said. It will warm ye, take away yer tremors.” He turned around and poured them both a glass of whiskey, serving it with another smile. “Here ye are; best in the Highlands, so they say.”

Ada brought it to her lips, but Ella reached out to stop her a second before the liquid caressed her lips. “Ada! Dinnae drink that. We dinnae ken the man; we have barely just been saved from an attack! Nor dae we even ken the man’s name! And he has a swollen black eye already, as if he fights often.”

Ada put the glass down, pinning her sister with a glare. “Why must ye always chafe, Ella?”

“Aye, Ella, why must ye dae that?” Cameron echoed, a teasing glint in his eyes, amused that she’d noticed the swollen black eye despite her fresh ordeal.

My, but she was a beauty. Her eyes, blue as a loch on a cold day, were now staring right back at him fearlessly. Her lips were full and pink, and freckles smattered over her perfect pale skin. She had fixed her tangled hair, its smooth ginger tresses now tied high and away, its length brushing against her shoulders, not unlike his.

She straightened, staring him down. “Ye could easily have put anything in that glass. Ye might try tae poison us, take us away and dae what those men were planning.” She narrowed her eyes at him, and he laughed, putting a hand to his chest as he felt the rumble of mirth roll through him.

“Then why should I care if other men touch ye if I was going tae dae a thing like that? Why would I save ye and then hurt ye meself? That doesnae make any sense, lass.”

She crossed her arms, and her gown shifted a little. The cloak that had covered the torn bodice slid away from her shoulder, and he started when instead of her firm bosom he saw a brooch. It was golden, just as his was, with the same filagree, the same engraving sparkling back at him.

*Where on God’s green earth did that come from?*

There were many more questions he wished to ask, but he could not fire them at her now. When he looked up at her, she was still angry, piercing him with an icy blue stare.

“It doesnae matter. Men clearly dinnae think, or else they wouldnae be so *dangerous*.”

“Dangerous?” he grinned, pouring himself a glass of whiskey too and gulping it down pointedly. “Ye can see it is safe enough. Besides, lass,” he said, leaning closer across the bar until he heard her breath catch, “I dinnae need a sedative tae get a woman intae bed. Usually, they come of their own accord begging me tae bring them pleasure. Simple enough. Och, and me name is Cameron, by the way. Cameron Hay.”

Ella gasped. He saw a flash of movement, and seconds later his face dripped with whiskey.

“Best in the Highlands,” she said sweetly before grabbing her sister and rushing from tavern as fast as they could go.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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“*A*re ye mad, Ella?” Ada asked, breathing hard as they raced away. “We could find those men again on our way back! We should have stayed a little while longer and had someone escort us home!”

“Just run,” Ella huffed, her hand still holding her sister’s wrist. “We were fools tae go out like we did. It’s time tae go home, and I didnae want that rogue tae be the one tae take us there. We had tae get out of there ‘afore somethin’ else terrible happened.”

Ada pulled out of her grasp, but Ella was glad her sister didn’t stop running. For a moment she feared Ada would dig her heels in and stay in the tavern, talking to the man just to be difficult.

*A mistake. What a horrible mistake. Faither was right about it all. We shouldnae have gone. I kent it, and I didnae listen!*

They made it back to the door they’d propped open, and when Ella leaned down to remove the stone, she jumped, thinking she heard the crack of a twig in the woods behind her.

“Go,” she said to Ada, “Quickly!” Ella pushed her inside before slipping in herself, shutting and bolting the door behind her.

Finally, she could breathe easily. Even unable to see in the dark tunnel, she knew her sister was staring at her with her hands on her hips.

“What dae ye think ye are doin’?” Ada demanded in a harsh whisper. “We were goin’ tae stay awhile with that brawny lad who rescued us! We were goin’ tae dae what we set out tae for the evenin’. Drink, eat, be merry. Dae ye nae remember the plan? The plan we spent weeks creatin’ and preparin’ for?”

“Ada, dinnae be foolish,” She gripped her sister’s arm and led her down the passageway. “If those two men were just outside the tavern, who kens how many more were inside it? And the one who rescued us might have been the most dangerous of all.”

His smile certainly had been. When she’d first seen it as he wrapped the cloak about her, her heart had betrayed her. She’d not met many men—alright, she’d met almost no men—but this was a handsome one. His strong jaw, blue eyes, blond hair, and a smile to weaken the knees had made her realize what a dangerous place the world was for a woman. She’d felt weak and helpless in his presence, and she had the oddest sensation of wanting him to carry her away.

*I am a fool! I need tae get some sense intae me head! What if something bad had happened to Ada?*

He also wore the brooch. The very same brooch she'd taken from her Aunt Anne.

“What? I dinnae ken what ye mean,” Ada replied.

“Of course, ye dinnae!” Ella snapped as they stopped outside the secret door in the alcove. She didn't open it yet, knowing their reckoning lay just beyond where they would have to face their frenzied guards. “Ye never think about the dangers of things, Ada! Those men outside the tavern were there tae take us, and they wanted tae hurt us as well! Just for their own amusement. Then that one, that blond man, wanted ...”

She couldn't think what he wanted, but she knew it wasn't good by the way his smile affected her insides. Her father might have imprisoned them, but he'd also taught them the ways of the world well enough.

“What? What did he want?” Ada said, snapping back at her. There was now enough light from a crack in the door for her to see her sister's angry face. “Ye think ye ken everything, but ye dinnae! Something could have happened, but it *didnae*. That man saved us, and ye thanked him by throwin' whiskey in his face and rushin' off as if he were the bloody devil!” Ada threw up her arms and pushed through the door, with Ella following after, brooding silently.

Ella's muscles tensed as they approached Angus and Darren, who turned to look at them only to do a double take. She realized suddenly she had not thought this through enough.

“Lady Ella, Lady Ada—*what?* How did ye—” Angus stopped short, unable to find the words.



“It’s a long story, Angus. We will tell ye sometime, I’m sure, but right now, we wish tae go tae bed.” Ella pushed past him and opened the door, but Darren grabbed it.

“Are ye both well?” He looked her up and down, and she straightened her shoulders, pulling the new cloak tighter around herself.

It would only worry him if he saw her ripped clothing. “Aye.”

Darren eyed Ada. “I thought ye were ill, lass.”

“Much better now, thank ye,” Ada said cheerfully. “After that.” She pointed somewhere toward the wall, to the secret door, and the men looked confused.

Brawny as they were, Ella knew they were not that clever. That was something, at least. They would never know the full extent of the nocturnal adventure.

“Ye ken we will have tae tell yer faither about this,” Angus, the wiser of the two muttered, scratching the nape of his neck.

“Aye, so I dae. Ye may dae so whenever ye see fit.” With one last defeated glance, Ella caught Ada’s hand and together they pushed past the guards and into the passageway to their chambers.

The doors closed heavily behind them, and Ada pulled out of her grasp. “Stop it, Ella,” she said. “I can walk perfectly well

on me own, ye're nae me máthair, ye ken?"

Ada was in a snit when she walked into their shared chamber. Ella watched her sister as she pulled off her cloak and boots, then sat down on her bed doing the same. Ada was right. She'd grown up into a young woman, and she was only two years younger than Ella's own twenty years. She was no longer a child, even if Ella wasn't sure she could trust her not to act rashly. The lass was almost raped and not even scared, for God's sake.

*There is nae even one bone in her capable of feeling fear...*

"I'm sorry, Ada. I really am. I ken ye were lookin' forward tae taenight."

"So were ye!" Ada stood and spun around to face her. "We planned this for so long, we didnae even care that faither would probably find out, and ye rushed away at the first sign of trouble."

Ella gritted her teeth. "Like I said, Ada, those men wished tae hurt us. How could ye nae be afraid?"

"Of course, I was! But I didnae want a couple of terrible men with bad breath tae ruin perhaps me last chance at a night of freedom away from these stone walls! I will go bloody mad if I have tae spend the rest of me life in this room!" Ada huffed and turned away to the far side of their chamber, looking out the window into the darkness below.

Slowly, Ella pulled off her boots and cloak and laid them at the side of her bed. The cloak was dark and far too big for her. It was a man's cloak really—Cameron had given it to her after he saved her.

*An avenging angel. Or the devil in disguise?*



“Shite,” Cameron uttered to himself as soon as he saw the two women disappear through the side door of MacPherson Castle.

He ran as fast as his legs could carry him through the dark woods back to his tavern, not wanting to come across any of the MacPherson guards. What would he say if he was found lurking around like a criminal?

*The laird's daughters? They came tae me tavern? He thought of Ella, bonnie as a bright spring day, making him crave her with a single look. Or a single glass of whiskey tae the face.*

He was amazed. Dumbstruck, really. And once he was free of the woods, he walked more slowly, trying to understand what he'd just seen. The laird's daughters had left their castle for whatever reason and came to his tavern. They'd nearly been raped by Grant's men, and Cameron had given them shelter for a time, desiring Ella as his next conquest.

“But the brooch. How does she have the same bloody brooch as me?” he whispered to himself before walking through the front door of the tavern, deep in thought.

At first, his fear was that she might be somehow related to him. But in the end he decided not. They looked nothing alike, and he'd seen Laird MacPherson many times as well. The man looked nothing like him, either. Perhaps, however, he had some relative with the money to pay for such an expensive trinket. He went straight to the bar counter, filled another tankard with ale and found his friends still sitting at the exact same table.

“What is it?” Blair asked as he sat, looking at his friend closely.

Cameron took a few seconds to gather his thoughts before he rubbed his hand across his face and said, “Ye ken how I helped those two lasses and kept them up by the counter?”

“Aye, and how ye planned tae make the one come tae yer room for a little nightly sport?” Alistair teased. “Is that why ye are late, ye bastard?”

Cameron didn't respond to that, but merely frowned and said, “I offered them a drink, but one thought I had poisoned it or somethin', and she threw it in me face. I tried me usual tricks but they didnae work. She was immune and acted as if I were the devil or something.

Rory almost spilled his drink. “She threw the whiskey in yer face? How did we miss that!”

“But when they ran out of here after that,” Cameron continued, pretending his friend's jests never happened, “I couldn't let them go home alone, ye ken. Gentleman and all,

so I followed them, tae make sure they returned safe and sound.”

“Och? That was kind of ye,” Rory said, nodding to himself.

“Aye,” Blair agreed. “So why dae ye look as though ye have seen a ghost walkin’ through the woods, Cameron?”

“Because ...” he trailed off, a little embarrassed that he’d flirted so shamelessly with the one, especially now that he knew who she was. “When I followed them, I saw them walk intae none other than the laird’s castle.” His friends looked at him in astonishment not saying a word. “Lads, they’re the laird’s daughters.”

For a few more seconds, no one spoke, and the sounds of the busy tavern filled his ears. But Rory and Alistair, very drunk by then, burst into laughter, clutching at their sides as tears rolled down their cheeks.

Blair laughed too, but he looked concerned as well. “Ada and Ella were outside the castle.” He put his hand to his blade, and his brow furrowed. “Why? What? How?” he couldn’t seem to make his sentence come to an end.

“I dinnae ken. They told me their names but naethin’ else, Blair. I am only glad they returned home safely without more of Laird Grant’s men after them.”

“But that is the reason Laird MacPherson locked them away in the first place! Tae keep them hidden away from Laird Grant.” Blair leaned back and crossed his arms. “They must have been

on their way tae kidnap them from the castle when they saw the girls on their own, findin' the perfect opportunity.”

“But that doesnae make sense either,” Cameron said. “Too much of a coincidence.”

“I dinnae ken. Or maybe they have always been positioned tae lurk around the walls, waiting for them at all times ...”

Rory and Alistair's laughter had slowed. “Why are ye so worried about this? They are back safe and sound now. I reckon all they wanted was a bit of adventure, and then ran intae a bad pair of men,” Alistair said. “I dinnae ken these lasses for they arenae allowed tae talk tae any men besides their faither and their personal guards, but I have seen their faces at times when inside. They are miserable! Nae doubt they wanted a chance for a bit of freedom. A bit of feelin' like a normal lass.”

“Aye *normal*. And they get nearly ravished for choosin' that. Bloody bastards, those soldiers,” Blair said.

Cameron took a long swig of his ale, nearly finishing half the tankard before he set it down again and wiped foam from his mouth. “Like I said, the one called Ella is the bonniest lass I've ever seen. It is nae wonder her faither wants tae keep her hidden away,” he remarked.

“I believe ye said she would be yer next conquest, lad,” Rory said with a chuckle. “Now, with the extra challenge of her bein' the laird's daughter, will ye be able tae fulfill yer end of the bet?”

Cameron smirked at his friend, his mind cast back to the surprised, angry, suspicious look on Ella's face when he offered her a drink and gave her his best smile. It would be a challenge, certainly, but not something he couldn't handle. Besides, he really needed to find out why she had that brooch, and if she knew where he came from. "Nae a challenge, Rory. Nae one at all," he said confidently. "It will just take a bit of doin'."

"Aye, since her faither keeps them holed up in the castle," Blair said, looking amused.

Suddenly, his friend leaned forward, and with a wicked gleam in his eye, he said, "Cameron, I tell ye this. How about we make a bet of our own? If ye can make Ella MacPherson fall in love with ye, then I will quit me time as a guard and soldier and come tae work with ye in the tavern—as partners."

Cameron's brows lifted, shocked that his friend would offer the one thing he'd wanted from him all these years.

"Truly?" he asked. "Ye arenae lyin' tae me?"

"Nae. I will dae it. But ye have tae make the lass fall for ye. I will give up me plans at the castle and come and dae as ye wanted."

Cameron rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "What a good idea, Blair. Now, let's shake on it."

"Och, ye forgot tae ask what happens if ye lose," Blair said, a big grin crossing his face.

Rory and Alistair leaned in, listening with interest. “Aye, I’m curious meself,” Alistair said.

“Lose?” Cameron scoffed. “I dinnae think I will have any trouble.”

Blair shrugged. “Still, it’s part of a good bet tae make sure that both sides ken what they are gettin’ intae.”

“Fine then. What will happen if I lose the bet?”

With satisfaction, Blair leaned back as he spoke. “If ye lose, then ye must put an end tae all this foolish bettin’. Start daein’ somethin’ serious with yer life. Find a good woman who makes an honest lad out of ye.”

Cameron chewed on that for a little while. He had no fear of losing, but he knew it would take a while for Ella to be convinced that she cared for him. *And tae ever go outside of the castle again*, he reminded himself. There was a slim chance she might not fall for him, and he pictured that life. Being serious, no more sleeping around or enjoying pleasure instead of pain or boredom—settling down as Blair wanted him to.

It was not a life he wanted for himself, but this was the greatest chance he’d ever had at getting Blair to finally be his business partner. And to finding the secrets of the brooch. The temptation was too strong to handle. He felt like he was on the precipice of uncovering the mysteries of his past and getting what he always wanted. All he had to do was throw himself over the edge.



“All right,” he said, holding out a hand before another doubt crept into his mind. “Agreed. Now, how tae get started?”

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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In the morning, Ella awoke early, feeling unrested. Her conversation with Ada the night before stuck in her mind, and it would not let her rest. Across the room, she could see her sister's form in her own bed under the blankets, fast asleep.

The cool dawn light streaked in through the windows, and even though it was late summer, the weather was chill. Embers were low in the hearth, and it was yet too early for the maids to come stoke the fires and bring warm water.

*So, I will stay abed. It is nae as if this will be a good day. It will be filled with the ire of me faither.*

She pulled the fur blanket closer, covering herself up until her chin. Her eyes were a bit swollen from the silent tears she shed after their return last evening. Ada was right. This would likely be the last time they were *ever* let out of their father's sight. Marriage too seemed unlikely, for he wouldn't dream of giving them away, would he? Somewhere he could not control their safety?

Sighing, Ella closed her eyes and tried to drift off again. Only it was not sleep that came, but the memory of the night before

when the avenging angel came to their rescue, his fists slamming the jaws of the men who'd grabbed them.

It had been such a strange thing to see men fighting. She'd never seen the like, nor had she ever looked upon such fierceness. But then to have him turn to her, tender as could be, and drape a cloak over her shoulders—that was odder still. It had been even more odd to see his charming smile as he handed them glasses of whiskey, wanting to be trusted.

*And only because of his good looks.*

She groaned, switching sides, hating how that was what she remembered from the night before. Those blue eyes, those straight white teeth, the chiseled jaw and strong shoulders. Even his swollen, black eye seemed to add to his charms.

*And the brooch. Ye cannae forget the brooch. Perhaps someone gave it tae him as a keepsake? Someone me family kens?* She frowned over that thought for a long while until she heard Ada stir. When her sister turned in bed to face her, they met eyes across the room.

“I suppose today is the day of reckonin’,” Ada said morosely.

“Aye, I suppose so.”

Groaning, Ada leaned back and covered her face with a hand. “I wish Faither would see that we are now grown women. That we have lives tae lead, and if we stay in the castle forever, then naethin’ of note will ever happen tae us. Is that what he would want for his own children?”

“Keep that for him, Ada. Tell him how ye feel.” She knew that even though her father was overprotective, he cared deeply for them. Didn’t he?

She had always felt his love, even if her response to that love was often one of anger and frustration. And he had the constant argument that she did not know his feelings since she was not a mother and did not have children of her own to worry about.

But still, in many ways it was not fair. She would often see the village children from her window playing, running, and jumping, and she wanted a life like that. She’d had it once, so long ago, before the kidnapping had taken place. She hardly remembered it now; it was only hazy faces and dark clothes, and hands grabbing ahold of her. That was it. Yet her father pretended as though it had happened only yesterday.

“I will,” Ada said. “But he willnae like tae hear it. I ken he will yell.”

“Ye have tae be the one tae tell him how ye really feel, Ada, because he will nae yell so loudly at ye. He will look tae me. Tae have been so thoughtless as tae allow us tae leave the castle.”

Ada groaned again. “I wish one day someone would see me as havin’ a mind of me own. That I can make me own decisions and am nae constantly forced intae actions by others.” After a pause she added, “I will tell him that as well.”

For whatever reason, Ella started laughing. The situation was so hopeless, and their fates so sealed, it was morbidly humorous. After a few seconds, during which Ada stared at her, mortified, she joined in, and the maids found them laughing together when they finally came in to attend to the fires and washing water. The girls' laughter ceased when they saw the maids' confused looks, and Ella got out of bed, pulling on a woolen robe to warm herself as she stepped closer to the hearth.

Rubbing her hands by the growing heat, she wondered what her father might say.

"Yer faither is askin' tae see ye both when ye are ready, Me Lady," the maid Susan said, averting her eyes.

"Aye, I thought he might. The main hall?" Ella asked.

"The private family dinin' room, he requested," said Mary, the younger one, pulling out a beautiful dark green gown from Ella's wooden wardrobe.

"Fine. So be it."

An hour later, when Ella and her sister had washed, dressed, and had their hair pinned, they walked together with the guards down to the family's private room. Ella was shivering. At the beginning of the plan, she wasn't so afraid of her father's ire once he understood but now, when she was a breath away from his anger, she was rightly terrified. Not about her so much, but for Ada. Her sister was the more mischievous one and her father was not blind to that, and sometimes she feared he would banish her to a nunnery.

Ella brushed her fingers across the smooth surface of the brooch to give her courage. Her aunt had always known how to quell her father's temper and protective instincts, but Ella and Ada never learned how to master that skill. Ah, Anne could be so helpful now.

Angus and Darren led them to the outer doors of the dining room, their faces grim. No doubt they'd experienced a tongue-lashing like no other, and perhaps a real lashing for letting the girls get away from them. She felt guilt pricking at her but, at the same time, she and her sister had needed that brief bit of freedom, and the taste of it had been so sweet. At first. Although she would never tell Ada that for as long as she lived.

Each guard put a hand on the door to open them inward. At the end of the long table, sat the girls' father, Graeme, staring at them with his arms crossed, his food untouched.

"Leave us," he said to Angus and Darren, and once the girls had moved inside, Ella's feet feeling like lead, the guards closed the doors behind them with a loud screech.

Ella took a breath and folded her hands in front of her. She was going to remain calm and sensible, as usual, and then perhaps her father's diatribe would be over soon. She looked just like him, everyone had always said, with bright red hair and blue eyes. But his hair and beard were now acquiring a bit of gray, even though his arms remained strong, and his build wide and solid.

As he began to speak, he stared at them, still seated. "What in God's name were ye thinkin'?"



When he woke up, Cameron's head ached. He'd stayed awake late into the night with his friends, drinking until whatever odd feelings he had after meeting the blue-eyed witch—Ella, to be exact—had subsided, at least a little. When he wandered out of his bedroom at his usual early hour, he was met with Julia and Seamus smirking at him.

“Bloody hell, what is it?” he said, tying back his hair with a leather strip, listening to Julia's chuckle.

“I dinnae think I have ever seen ye drink so much since I have kent ye, Cameron,” Julia noted, wiping down one of the tables.

Seamus was upturning chairs, and he grinned. “Aye, the four of ye could have cleaned the whole place out of whiskey and ale last night.”

When they started laughing again, Cameron groaned and shut his eyes. “Keep yer voices down. I feel as if I have a hammer in me head, bangin' against me skull. Yer chatter is killing me.”

He poured himself a tankard of ale and drank down half of it, hoping for quick relief for his pain. It was true; as a tavern owner, he never drank so much to feel this bad. But last night had thrown him off in more ways than one with too many things happening at once. Like making a bet that would change his life no matter who won or lost.

“Whatever happened tae those lasses?” Julia asked calmly. “I hope they’re all right.”

“Aye, they’re fine. I watched them get home safely.”

“Good.” Julia turned away to scrub at the table while Seamus approached him.

The young boy whispered, “She was bonnie though, Cameron. Ye were right. I have never seen the like. Her younger sister as well.”

Despite his headache, Cameron grinned. “We will make a ladies’ man of ye yet, Seamus,” and he roughed up the boy’s hair.

“I heard that!” Julia called. “Ye will fashion him like yerself, havin’ clandestine meetings in yer room and ruttin’ like animals.”

Cameron’s eyebrows shot up, and Julia laughed. “Ye think we dinnae ken what ye dae in this tavern, Cameron?”

He shook his head, pointing at her, a smirk on his face. “Ye had better shut those eyes and ears, lass, or ye will be tainted.”

“Aye, already done,” she teased, and they both thought of her unfortunate past.



But Cameron didn't have a chance to answer before Blair burst in through the door, looking both smug and most certainly not ill like him.

*He looks bloody fresh this morn, damn him.*

Cameron eyed him with suspicion. "Come to gloat about yer lack of a bangin' head this mornin'? Full of sense ye are." He grabbed his tankard and sat down at one of the empty tables.

Smiling, Blair joined him. "I am refreshed by the desire tae see ye begin yer plan tae get the bonnie lass tae fall for ye."

"Plan?" he asked, his memory hazy from last evening and what they decided.

"Aye. Ye are comin' with me tae the castle. Taeday."

*Shite.*

He forgot about that. He knew he had to get close to Ella, but he'd forgot what they'd officially discussed.

"Aye, right. But I dinnae ken how we are goin' tae dae that."

Blair laughed, and he stood, hitting Cameron's shoulder. "Tae yer room. I have a plan, and it's goin' tae give ye the chance tae get close tae her as well as hide who ye are. I want ye tae lose, but I dinnae want ye tae get caught in a lie."

With dragging feet, Cameron followed Blair to his room, where the latter leaned against one wall and said through the smirk now glued to his lips, “It is yer lucky day, me friend.”

“Why?” He crossed his arms just as his head pounded at the loud timbre of Blair’s voice. Damn, the man was loudmouthed.

It certainly didn’t feel like a lucky day for him.

“Because after what happened last night, the laird is askin’ for new guards tae be put in charge of his daughters. I offered me services, and I suggested me best friend, a great soldier who was away at battle for a few years.”

Cameron pierced him with his gaze. “And who might that be?”

“Dinnae fash, Cameron, ye’re a great warrior so nae one will ken ye were tae nae battle. Laird MacPherson dinnae want any of the men who are staying during the upcoming war, and he trusts me opinion. So, it will be ye and me, so ye can really try yer hand at gettin’ Ella tae fall under yer spell. Ye’ll have a fair chance at workin’ on yer end of the bet. That is nae any good news for me, however.”

Cameron nodded, surprised. “Well, then, I am shocked at this turn of events. Ye really trust that ye are goin’ tae win this bet, or ye would never have suggested I get tae be so close tae the lass. *All the time.*”

Blair grinned again, and he brandished his dirk. “I am confident of me victory, aye, and the next thing is we’ve got

tae hide ye.”

“What’s the knife for, then?” Cameron asked, amused.

“Tae cut yer hair.”

His headache forgotten, Cameron stepped back, holding up his hands. “What in God’s name dae ye think yer goin’ tae dae? Hold me down and chop me hair off?”

“Nay,” Blair said with a laugh. “Ye are goin’ tae sit down like a normal lad and I am goin’ tae cut yer hair.” He lifted the blade, and Cameron sighed.

“How much?”

“All of it.”

“All of it?” His hair had been like a talisman of protection. It made him both fierce and handsome, or so he thought. “Is that necessary?”

“Aye. She cannae recognize ye, or she will tell her faither ye’re a tavern owner and he will change ye as one of her guards. She wouldnae wish tae keep ye, the man who tried tae charm her intae bed after savin’ her, as one of the soldiers who is closest tae her chambers, now, will she?”

“I suppose nae.” With a groan, he slid into a chair, and Blair looked gleeful as he moved to stand behind him. He was

*gloating*, for God's sake.

"Here we go." Blair started to cut, and Cameron winced as the blade cut sharply through his long blond locks, which started to fall on the ground in hanks and wisps.

A half hour later, Cameron stood and he brushed hands over his hair, which was now close-cropped to his head, even closer than Blair's. For the love of God, he felt exposed.

"Bloody hell. She willnae recognize me now," he said.

"Nay, but I think there is still more we can do." Blair pulled a metal object with an attached string out of his belt. Passing it to Cameron, he smiled and waited to watch his reaction.

"What is this?"

"A mask."

"What? Ye want me tae wear this metal thing on my face? *All the time*? Ye dinnae think the hair is enough?" Cameron asked, unbelieving.

Blair was having far too much fun with this, the devil. "Nae, I dinnae. She looked at yer face for quite a while from what I understand. Och, and I forgot, ye practically stared at her for a long while as ye spoke tae her, so I am certain she willnae forget ye."

“How dae ye even ken what I did? Ye couldnae see us!” Cameron said, fingering the string of the mask.

“But I ken ye,” Blair said with a laugh. “Am I nae right?”

Cameron rolled his eyes. “Fine. I’ll wear it.” Blair chuckled, and Cameron put it over his face and tied the string around his head. “I look mad, dae I nae?”

“Ye look as though ye are hidin’ an infirmity, and that is why it is half a mask. A full mask makes ye look suspicious and dangerous, but with half a mask, people dinnae ask questions. Maybe ye have an ugly scar under it. Maybe somethin’ is wrong with yer skin. Besides, it works perfectly intae our plan. The laird never wanted young handsome virile men tae guard his daughters, and if he kens that ye are hidin’ a large mark or injury on yer face, then that is even better. He will have naethin’ tae fear from ye.”

“Then why he’ll let ye be a guard when ye’re nae old and gruesome?”

“Because he trusts me enough tae let me do it. And he kens I’m probably the only one that could handle Ada, his younger one. Damn, she’s a pain in the arse. Let’s see how the mask looks on ye.”

“Christ,” Cameron said, trying to adjust the cold metal on his face. “Anythin’ else?”

“Nae. Finished. Ye are a good fighter, so there is nae trouble there if the laird wishes tae test yer abilities. Come. It is time

we go tae the castle. The laird awaits us.”

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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“*N*ae, really, I would like tae ken what the two of ye were thinkin’ when ye tricked yer guards and left the castle, without any chaperones, in the dark, tae God kens where with God kens whom!” Her father began to count on his fingers as he spoke, ticking off their transgressions.

Ella stiffened. His face had grown red, nearly matching the shade of his hair, and she knew he would listen to nothing. He would be amenable to nothing except agreement to his conclusions about their behavior.

“As to whom we might be with, Faither, we ken *nobody*! We were thinkin’ that it was time we get a little freedom!” Ada said, stepping forward, her eyes fiery. “We have been kept in this castle, locked inside of it really, unable tae be alone and free for years now. And all because of somethin’ that happened years ago, Faither! We are now grown up, nae longer children!”

“Ada, dinnae even attempt tae explain this away. Ye both ken naethin’ of the world, and yet ye decided that ye would head out at night and see what there was tae see.” His tone was both angry and sarcastic.

Ada spoke quickly and bravely. “If we ken naethin’ of the world, why dae ye think that is so, Faither? It is because ye are keepin’ us here for our whole bloody lives! How are we supposed tae learn anythin’ when we cannae leave the confines of our own chambers?”

Ada threw up her arms and began to pace the room while Laird MacPherson only grew angrier. He turned away from her and stared Ella down instead, his intense gaze burning into her soul. Ella had always wished she could be as brave as Ada when speaking to him, but it stung her too deeply to see him hurt.

Frowning, he said, “Ella, how could ye be a part of this scheme?”

“I am also locked away here in the castle, Faither, the same as Ada. It was as much her idea as it was mine,” her gaze fixed boldly on his.

She’d not expected to say that, and from her father’s shocked expression, he hadn’t expected it either. Standing, he walked toward her, and glanced back at Ada.

“Neither of ye kent this, but last night, me men spotted some of Grant’s army movin’ toward the village. There is nae notion of what their plan was, but I am sure they would be very happy tae see the two of ye if ye came upon them.” He narrowed his gaze as he looked between his daughters. “Did ye happen tae meet any of Grant’s men while out on yer little *adventure*?”



Ella paled, and her hands clenched together so hard her nails were dug into her palms, but she said nothing. Her eyes moved to Ada, and her sister gave her a nearly imperceptible shake of her head. If they spoke of the two dangerous men, there was a chance he'd never even let them leave their private wing in the castle.

"Nae," she said. "We didnae. Ye think he means tae try and take us again?" Ella asked, lifting her chin to look him straight in the eye.

"Perhaps," Laird MacPherson said. "It is a good thing ye didnae meet them, for nae one kent that ye were gone last eve. It was only when ye returned that they noticed, and bloody waited tae tell me until this morn about it. Ye could have been taken, killed, raped, or whatever else Grant wants tae do with ye, and I would have been none the wiser until it was too late." His voice cracked with emotion.

"Aye, I ken. I ken it all, Faither." Gripping her hands together, Ella licked her lips and tried to say what she really meant, but he cut her off.

"So, those guards have been replaced. Angus and Darren will be punished, and they'll return tae me regular ranks, instead of as yer personal guards."

Ella blinked, surprised that her father would make such a rash decision. Angus and Darren had been their guards for years. They were like close family friends. She looked to Ada, who was frowning.

“It is nae their fault, Faither. We had been plannin’ our escape for weeks,” Ada said. “And we ken more about the secret passageways of the castle than anyone else. Ye ken that. Ye dinnae need tae blame them for our poor choice!”

He humphed and sat down again, pulling his plate toward him. “They need tae watch ye at all times, and they should have informed me the moment ye returned, nae waitin’ like cowards tae come and own up tae their part in all this.”

He cut into his meat with angry fervor, and Ella moved to sit down next to him. “Faither, again, it is nae their fault. I dinnae wish tae bring shame upon them simply because we were tired of bein’ kept inside all this time.”

“Then ye should have thought of that ‘afore ye both whisked yerselves away tae leave without anyone else kennin’.” He stuffed a piece of meat into his mouth. Even his chewing was furious, and Ada sat down across from Ella, looking just as angry. After he swallowed, he pointed to Ada with his knife.

“I would expect such a thing from Ada, my headstrong foolhardy child, who thinks only of excitement and nae of consequences.”

Ada let out a cry of rage, but he ignored it, pointing his knife at Ella. “But ye, Ella, are the eldest, and ye have always been the more responsible one. It is yer duty as well tae make sure yer sister is well taken care of. Yer aunt is gone, as is yer máthair, so it is fallin’ tae ye tae take care of Ada, tae make sure tae protect her from herself.”

“Faither, ye act as though I am nae here!” Ada cried, and Ella clenched her jaw, her fury rising.

“Ye should have thought, Ella. How can ye nae have?! Yer personal guards will be replaced this very day. In fact, the replacements are on their way as we speak, and ye can be assured that ye are nae tae be let out of their sight.”

“What?” Ada and Ella cried in unison.

“So, we will have nae privacy at all?” Ella asked.

“Ye will be allowed tae dress of course, and tae bathe, but that is all. Everythin’ else will be done under their watchful eye.” Laird MacPherson seemed to calm after he finished his speech, and as he looked at each of them, his eyes softened. “One day ye will understand me feelings about this, me lasses. I love ye dearly, and with yer máthair gone all these years, ye are all I have. Can ye just dae as I ask?”

Ella could feel tears welling up in her eyes. Ada had been too young to remember their mother, but she could recall her in flashes of memory. Her aunt had been a good replacement all those years ago, but one yearns for the love of a mother all the same. She wondered how she would have felt about them being trapped them in the castle.

Graeme presented his logic as sound, and then claimed that it was all for the love of them, but now that Ella was older, and had had at least a few minutes of freedom to do as she pleased, she could see the flaws in his thinking more than ever before.

Standing up, she looked down at him, hoping her elevated position would give her more power. “Nae, Faither, we dinnae understand yer thinkin’. We want tae live our lives like normal young lasses. We understand that we are laird’s daughters, so we cannae simply dae whatever we please, but this,” she said, motioning to the castle around them, “this is nae solution tae yer fear.” Her anger rose as she spoke, as did her volume. “The world may be a dangerous place, but we dae need tae learn how tae comport ourselves in it. We are nae longer children, as Ada said; we are young women. We need friends, lives—*true* lives—and cannae sit by any longer and watch as ye lock us away without any hope of reasonable release. What is yer plan, Faither? Tae keep us hidden until when? What time can we be released from this prison?”

She could feel tears on her cheeks as she seethed. Ada watched her with astonishment. Taking a breath, she tried to calm herself, but this anger she’d kept inside would no longer remain entrapped. She didn’t even realize it was there until Ada began to make things clear. It was time for them both to get out or at least fight for their freedom as best they could.

“I am a woman of age now, and ye should treat me as such,” she said, ending her tirade.

Her father finally spoke, his face red again. “Well, then, since ye are so old, me dear, then there is another matter for grown women that ye must attend tae.”

“What is it?” she asked apprehensively.

“Marriage, Ella. It is time for ye, a lass of twenty years, tae be married. Perhaps a husband can take ye off me hands and keep ye safe for me. Maybe ye will listen tae him if ye willnae listen tae me.”

Ella was dumbstruck by laird MacPherson's sudden decision, and said nothing for what seemed like an age. She looked at Ada, whose expression was as terrified as her own.

When she finally regained herself, she found the strength to object. "Faither, ye cannae mean this! There is nae one I have met or ken that I could marry all these years past. And we have nae experience with gentleman, Ada and I. I wouldnae ken how tae act in front of a man, whether he is me betrothed or nae! I would make an utter fool of meself, and nae self-respectin' family would want tae have me as one of their own!"

She let out a morbid laugh, but then she saw her father's face. He was serious, and he lifted his chin arrogantly, challenging her to engage him yet again.

"Ye cannae be in earnest, Faither." This time when she spoke, the earlier fire had vanquished her temper.

"So, I am. I have even begun the search. I thought perhaps tae present a family with me respectful, intelligent, responsible daughter, but I suppose ye will have tae dae. Mark me words, lass. As soon as someone is chosen for ye, ye will be married. Then, ye willnae be me problem anymore, nae matter how much I have tried tae love, help, and protect ye all these years. And dinnae think other maidens have more experience than ye."

He stood and walked to the door, only to turn around slowly. Ella's heart leapt in hope, thinking that perhaps he changed his mind, that he would not pawn her off as easily as if she were a plot of land traded between clans.

Instead, he said, “Yer Aunt Isla comes tomorrow. It is tae be a time of welcome, happiness, and celebration. I dinnae want this tae be how we will act for me sister’s arrival. We will forget all of this nonsense until she is gone.” He looked between them again one last time, but did not wait for answer.

When he left, the sound of the door shutting echoed loudly in the room. Ella slunk down in her chair, and after letting out a long breath, she looked to her sister.

“Well, it seems that I have only made things worse.”

“Worse?!” Ada cried, jumping up to run around the table to meet Ella, seizing her hands. There was a big smile on her face. “Ye were wonderful!”

Confused, Ella laughed, she was so surprised by Ada’s reaction. “What? What are ye talkin’ about?”

Ada leaned down to hug Ella around the neck. “I am so proud of ye, sister. Ye spoke tae him like ye never have before. And the look on his face when ye did!” She laughed again. “It was the most beautiful sight I have ever seen in me life!”

Ella stood, watching Ada’s happy face. “But Ada, he has changed the guards. They will nae let us out of their sight. He will force me tae marry! And then ye, after me! Why are ye nae worried?”

Ada waved a dismissive hand in the air. “Because, when Aunt Isla comes, things willnae be as strict for a time. He doesnae

wish her tae ken the full extent of how he hides us away. And then we will have the chance tae make new plans.”

“New plans?” Ella asked doubtfully. “What new plans are these?”

“Sit down. Let us eat somethin’,” Ada said.

Ella felt numb after such an intense conversation, but her sister looked excited.

“I dinnae ken yet what we will dae, but we cannae stay like this any longer. I love Faither, but if he insists on treatin’ us like prisoners, then I say we leave again, and this time, we dinnae return.”

Ella took a breath, her heart aching with the thought of abandoning their only remaining parent. “It would break his heart, Ada.”

“Aye,” Ada said solemnly. “But if we stay, then we break our own hearts. Even just last night, we saw there is a whole world out there, and we remain inside, too afraid tae see what it’s like. I cannae stay that way any longer. I’m tired of being miserable, Ella.”

Her sister’s bright smile made her smile. Ada was right, even if the thought terrified her. If they stayed, they would break their own hearts, wouldn’t they? But if they left, they would have a new beginning, even if it was away from their father.

*If I stay, then I will be forced intae a marriage tae a man I dinnae love. Would that nae be an even worse fate?*

For some reason, she thought of her avenging angel, Cameron Hay, and how, if she and Ada left the castle never to return, they might one day meet him again.



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## CHAPTER SIX

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“*D*ae ye think Julia and Seamus will be fine at the tavern?” Cameron asked as he and Blair walked to the castle with Cameron dressed in the uniform of a MacPherson soldier.

“Aye, and I will send two men tae watch them. They couldnae be on their own for as ye ken, Seamus is nae yet ready tae handle things if somethin’ happens tae Julia.”

Cameron’s heart sped up nervously. “And naethin’ will happen tae her, Blair,” he said, grabbing his friend’s arm, making him turn around. “I want tae win this bet because I want ye tae come and work with me as a partner, as we always planned. But Julia and Seamus are under me protection. They have had a rough life. I cannae risk them bein’ hurt again. Especially nae after what happened tae Julia.”

Blair’s smug expression faded, and his dark eyes softened. “Cameron, lad, all will be well.” He gripped him by the shoulder. “I have sent soldiers that I meself have trained. Trusted by the laird, I can use the men as I wish. Julia will be perfectly safe.” He smiled, and Cameron felt a little better. “Well, for all ye tell me ye dinnae wish a family of yer own, those two have certainly become one tae ye.”

Cameron nodded. “Aye. When I die, they will have the tavern. I ken what it is like tae be unwanted and tae have nae place in the world, Blair.”

“Aye, me friend, so ye dae.”

They were silent as they made their way through the woods until they reached the clearing of the castle. Blair raised a hand in greeting to the soldiers guarding the ramparts as they neared the large wooden gates where two guards, upon seeing Blair approaching, hurried to open the heavy doors for them.

Cameron had never been this close to the castle before, nor had he ever had a chance to be inside it. Since the laird was too afraid for his daughters, he never held feasts or gatherings, and if it was a holiday, they would gather out of doors while the young girls remained inside. His breath caught as he followed Blair, his hand on his blade.

The castle was ominous and strong, the gray of the stone an overwhelming sight as they entered the gates and down a long passage, pausing only when they reached the base of a staircase. They walked up a set of steps into a round entryway. When it opened, Cameron’s eyes looked up at the expanse above. He could see the castle from the tavern, and sometimes he would sit on the roof with Julia and Seamus, looking through the barren wintery trees, gazing at the lights of the keep as guards constantly watched and protected it.

It was like a monster that always hovered nearby but never too close. It made one feel both safe and fearful at the same time. And as his eyes took in the architecture, stairs, balustrades, windows and hanging armor, he could understand Rory’s assessment of the girls’ reason for fleeing the castle.

It was like a true prison, even if it was their home. It was not a warm place; everything about it was sharp and forbidding. To never be allowed to leave, or to feel the warmth of the sun on one's face was enough to make one mad, he was sure. He wondered for a moment what he would do when Ella fell for him? Would he take her away, give her a new life, or save her?

*Nae, what are ye thinkin'? Ye will tell her just as ye tell the rest of them. That ye dinnae wish tae marry. That it was only a bit of fun, and they should move on tae find a lad who can give them all they like. A laird most probably. Marriage, children, whatever it is their heart desires, but that it willnae be me.*

But he could not imagine saying that to bonnie Ella's face, especially not if she proclaimed a deep love of him herself. He shrugged off that thought with an easy grin; he knew he could handle her. He was only mixed up because of her beauty. Beauty like that made many a man confused, and he would not be the first nor the last.

"Cameron," Blair said, shaking him.

"I could hardly get yer attention for a minute or so," Blair said in a low voice, "starin' about with yer mouth hangin' open. Stand tall, lad, and prepare yerself tae meet the laird."

"Aye," Cameron replied, straightening his shoulders and taking a deep breath. If he was going to play the part, he had to do everything right. Act as the proper soldier with the laird and be the proper charmer with the laird's daughter. "Where is he?"

“This way. He’s requested tae meet us in his study. He’s already told the lasses about us.”

Cameron nodded, but a little tingle of excitement and nervousness ran down his spine. He followed Blair, their boots reverberating along the stone floor, and their blades slapping against their sides. When they reached the end of a particularly long corridor, they turned to face a large, oaken door.

“Here.” His eye caught the brooch on Cameron’s chest. “Och, ye must take that off as well.”

Cameron put a protective hand over his brooch. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d taken it off, other than to sleep or bathe.

“She’s seen it, nae? That thing is always pinned ta eyer chest.” Blair asked with raised brows.

“Aye, so she has.”

“Then take it off. Hide it away.”

Cameron did as he was bid, even if it didn’t feel right to remove it after all this time. As Blair knocked on the door, he stuffed it into his pocket. He would have to figure out some way to get Ella to speak of hers, he vowed to himself, without giving away his own knowledge of it.

“Come,” a gruff voice on the other side called out and Blair heaved open the large door, leading the way inside.

“Laird,” Blair murmured with a bow, and Cameron followed suit. “I have brought the other soldier, me friend I told ye about.”

“Och, MacDougall, good. I needed a bit of good news this morn.”

Cameron acknowledged the man as the girls’ father the moment he looked up. The laird was a perfect match, having the same hair color as both young women and the same eyes color as Ella. The knowledge that Cameron was not related to her by blood made him feel more confident in his mission to make her fall in love with him.

“This is Cam Hamish,” Blair made the introduction, putting a hand on his shoulder. “He’s a good soldier, experienced in fighting and discretion; he is pleased with the wage ye will pay.”

Cameron glanced sideways at his friend, who’d chosen a name without discussing it with him first. Well, it would be easy enough to remember.

“And this, Cam, is Laird Graeme MacPherson,” Blair concluded.

“Good, very good.” The laird stood, and Cameron could see that despite his age the laird was well-built, and he must certainly be near to fifty-odd years. He came around the side of the desk and thrust out a hand. “Welcome to MacPherson Castle, Mr. Hay.”

“Thank ye, Laird MacPherson,” Cameron responded, shaking Graeme’s hand. “Ye willnae be disappointed.”

“Aye, I should hope nae because ye dinnae want the consequences.” He scowled and returned to his seat behind the desk. “The others, old as me they are, were returned tae the normal ranks for their carelessness. I trust them too much to banish them away altogether.”

Clearing his throat, Cameron asked, “Might ye be able tae tell us what happened, laird? I ken that the lasses got out last night, but dae ye ken how?”

Laird MacPherson paused, and out of the corner of his eye Cameron saw that Blair looked a little worried. “I mean only tae ask so it can be avoided in future,” Cameron supplied, realizing being privy and curious were not good qualities when one worked for the laird of the clan. *Damn, he had erred already!*

Nodding, the laird crossed his arms. “Aye, a good question. All I ken is that they asked the old guards for a bucket of water. It was tae be left just inside the doors tae their corridor. Fool men as they are, I cannae claim they are the brightest of soldiers. They went together tae get the water, and left it just inside the door tae the girls’ passageway. They did as they were asked, and they didnae see the girls the rest of the night, which was nae unusual. So, their absence was nae spotted until me lasses appeared out of nowhere, Angus said, and the two idiots were shocked tae see them out of their rooms when they’d never seen them leave.”

Then Graeme shook his head, and Cameron could see the lines of concern etched into his face. He couldn't imagine being a father to two daughters. Having Julia to look after was hard enough, given the worry that consumed him whenever he could not be there to protect her.

“I should have let the other guards go a long time ago, I think. But I only have a host of mostly young men at me disposal, and I find it hard trusting anybody when it comes to the lasses,” he shot them a wry gaze. “Ye can understand a faither's reluctance tae let young, virile men spend so much time around his daughters.”

“But ye make an exception for us?” Cameron asked, and Blair shot him a quelling look to hush him. Oh, it was harder than he thought to keep his mouth shut.

“Aye,” the laird seemed not to mind the question. “I wanted clever, strong lads because the girls are getting out of hand, and Blair is the best we've got. He has his mind set on love and marriage, not just a romp in a tavern somewhere. All the time I hear Rory and Alister jest him about it, the devils.”

Blair smirked, and Cameron fixed his gaze on the floor. The mask pinched at his face, but he knew he'd have to adjust. Furthermore, it concealed his black eye, which was extremely useful at the time. It did keep strange questions at bay.

*Another good reason tae leave the tavern for a time. Nae doubt Alice's husband will come back around again for another fight.*

“I trust Blair with me life,” the laird added.

“Aye. He is a good man,” Cameron agreed. “Ye said yer daughters came out of nowhere? What does that mean?”

“I dinnae ken, a bit frustratin’ it is. But me men stand by their word. Said they seemed tae simply appear out of the wall. One minute they were nae there, and the next minute they were. I cannae make sense of their speech.”

“Is there a passageway there?” Cameron asked, and Blair tapped him on the elbow to cease his talking.

“Aye, but it is never used, and I never told the girls about it. I dinnae think it would even open after all this time,” Graeme replied. He then sighed and rubbed a hand over his tired face. “There are, in fact, far too many passageways in me castle such that I could never remember them all.”

“Aye, very good,” Cameron said. “Thank ye.”

“Aye, thank ye, Laird. I will take Cameron tae our quarters and show him around tae get familiar with the castle,” Blair finished.

“Very good. Ye will start in the mornin’. I have other guards there this evening, but I want tae make sure both ye are well-rested and fed, so ye can begin the day with energy tae deal with yer duties. And believe me,” he said, looking suddenly fatigued, “ye will need the energy.”

“Ye can depend upon us, Laird,” Blair said.



“Aye, I promise they willnae leave me sight,” Cameron chimed in.

“Good. Off with ye then,” the laird said with a dismissive wave.

After a bow, Blair led the way out of the laird’s study. Once the door was shut, he turned on Cameron quickly, pinning with a warning glare.

“What were ye thinkin’?” Blair demanded, obviously annoyed.

“What? I am only askin’ questions. Is that nae right? I want tae ken how they got out, so it doesnae happen again. If it does, then we will lose our posts once more, and our bet will be for naught.”

“Och, fine, then. But I want ye tae remember tae keep attention away from ye. The laird can be a little temperamental. He doesnae like tae be questioned, so he often has a difficult time with his daughters, or at least one of them.”

“Och? Which one?” Cameron asked with a smirk, imagining Ella as she feistily argued with him the night before, her eyes bright and sparkling with life.

“Ada, if ye must ken, although the both of them can be a little difficult. But Ella is meant tae be far the wiser and more sensible. Ye probably ken that,” Blair said with a grin, “since she pulled her sister out of the tavern as soon as ye’d begun tae turn on yer roguish charms.”

“Aye, sensible,” Cameron said with a chuckle. “I will have tae find a way tae make her forget all her rules.”

Blair shook his head. “Ye dinnae have even the slightest chance in the world, me friend. For all her bonnie looks, Ella wouldnae dare take a lover or even fall in love without her faither’s approval. But I’ve seen her have a few rebellious moments when she thinks nae one is lookin’.”

*But I will always be lookin’ now, I suppose. And she willnae be able tae rebel without me knowledge. Although, I think I should like tae see that.*

“Come, it is time ye eat, just as Laird MacPherson says. And ye might have tae prepare yerself for a little battle.”

“Battle? Why?” Cameron asked, following alongside his friend as he led the way out of the long corridor into another and down a dank set of steps.

“Because this is one of the most coveted positions in the castle, and ye are unknown tae the others. There may be a slight bit of anger and resentment.”

“Bloody hell,” Cameron said, rolling his eyes. “Thanks for tellin’ me.”

Grinning, Blair shrugged. “I willnae resist the sight of ye fightin’ again. It has been a long time, but I have every confidence ye will win, nae matter yer opponent.”

“Thank ye,” Cameron said, watching Blair pause.

“Perhaps I should say ye have *most* of me confidence.”

“Ye bastard,” Cameron growled while Blair’s laughter echoed against the walls as they descended deeper into the castle.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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After their extraordinarily eventful breakfast, Ella and Ada spent the rest of the day in the main hall, reading in oversized fur-covered chairs near the hearth. It was a risky move, since their father did not often let them spend time there, inasmuch as people walked through it many times during the day. But as Ada said he would likely keep his strictness hidden away for the time being before Aunt Isla's arrival and during her visit, they thought it was the perfect time to push a few boundaries. They spent a few happy hours there, and Ella had begun to relax a little after the upsetting argument earlier.

Even if she did not look forward to talking or seeing him again, she was the slightest bit proud of herself. She had often wondered how Ada came by her courage and fire. And Ella thought all this time that she might be missing it entirely, that she did not have one rebellious bone in her body. But after both arguing with her father and throwing whiskey in the captivating, comely proprietor's face at the tavern, she was glad to see that there was a little spark in her. She was not so far gone and dull as Ada often accused her of being.

“So, dae ye think they will be handsome?” Ada asked suddenly, looking up from her book.

“Who?” Ella returned, lazily turning the page of her book, not listening closely.

“The new guards! Pay attention, Ella!” Ada said, closing her book with a snap.

“Why should we care if they’re handsome? And if faither chose them, then they certainly willnae be. He fears we may be ravished, I suppose.” She shook her head, closing her book and yawning.

Living life trapped inside the castle had some good points, but a lot of the time she was terribly bored. She’d read nearly every book in the library three times over, and even the one in her hands was a well-worn volume.

“Aye, I suppose,” Ada laughed, and Ella leaned to the side to better look at her sister.

“What would have happened last night, Ada? If that man hadnae saved us?”

She’d spent the night thinking about it at times when she should have been trying to sleep. The fear was gone, but the chilling memory remained. Despite her father’s ire, he had never touched them in a violent way. In fact, besides her family members, she had never been touched by anyone else before, save perhaps a maid pinning her hair. That was why the avenging angel’s touch had been so unique and different, and why the two men’s violent grasping had so frightened her and made her feel small and insignificant, like she could be easily broken. She still felt that disgusting sweaty hand grasping at her thigh.

“I dinnae ken, really. But I think they would have done what a man does tae a woman. Pushes somethin’ inside of her until she screams.”

Ella frowned, even though pink color stole across her cheeks. “That sounds terrible. How dae ye ken about that?”

“Well,” Ada grinned wickedly. “Even though we are often watched and taken from one place tae another, people forget that we can hear nearly anythin’ we wish, since there are so many secret passages in the castle. I once came across a room where I heard such a thing goin’ on inside.”

“Och, and the woman? Was she all right?”

“Aye, it seemed so. After she screamed, she emerged a few minutes later with a big happy smile on her face. The man who came out after looked even more pleased.” She shrugged. “But I dinnae think we would have been pleased by those brigands last night.”

“Nae,” Ella said with a firm shake of the head. “They spoke tae us with evil on their tongues.” She shuddered. “I loathed it, every second. It was almost as if I could feel their hatred, even though I had done naethin’ wrong.”

“Aye,” Ada replied softly in retrospective contemplation.

For a few seconds they sat in silence, staring at the flames, hearing the distant footsteps of servants moving about. It was an odd experience they’d shared, and Ella was still confused

by it, but she knew it was wrong. She knew it was the very evil her father so feared, and she was grateful that nothing awful happened, and that Cameron had come in time to save them. *Cameron Hay*.

“But forget all that!” Ada cried suddenly, making Ella jump and nearly fall off her seat. “I want tae ken whether or nae ye think these soldiers will be handsome.”

Ella chuckled and rolled her eyes. Ada was always the one to bring the conversation to lighter topics, and was sometimes grateful to her sister for reminding her there was still light and happiness in the world.

“Well, I suppose if they are nae older soldiers from faither’s ranks, then likely aye, they will be somewhat handsome. I have seen some of his men, and there are many with strong, handsome faces. And big strong arms. And their chests are just \_\_\_”

Ella stopped short when she noticed how Ada bit her lip, trying to contain a smile. “There is one soldier whom I find very handsome indeed, and I ken he is a good man.”

Frowning, Ella said, “How dae ye ken that? Who is this man? Why have ye never said?”

“I have only seen him a few times, and it is because he is faither’s head man at the castle. The best warrior, the leader of all the soldiers. He is said tae be quite skilled and fierce in battle, but he has kind eyes. I can tell.”

“Och, Ada, I dinnae think one can judge a man’s goodness by his eyes. That seems like a dangerous rule tae make.” She thought of the deep blue of Cameron’s eyes, and how they stopped her breath, and made her think of bright, sunny days. *Does that mean he is truly good? Nae, such a foolish thing tae think.*

“Ye should test the theory I have. Once the new soldiers are assigned tae us, then we will look intae their eyes, decide if they are good men, and then as we get tae ken them, we will soon learn the truth of it.”

Ella sighed. “Fine. We can dae that, but ye have nae told me the name of this soldier ye find so handsome.”

“Blair. Blair MacDougall, I think. Ye ken him. Faither speaks of him often.”

“Aye, of course.”

Ella had often seen Blair in the background of things, very close to her father, protecting him. He was tall, strong, and very large, but she had never felt a flutter in her chest when looking at him, not like ... *Nae like when I looked at Cameron.*

“He is handsome, Ada, so I doubt Faither will have chosen him tae guard us.”

“What a terrible shame,” she said with a sigh. “All right, but maybe the other one will be handsome, too. I would at least like handsome guards, if we are tae have guards at all. It seems



a lovely little entertainment, tae have breath-catching men about.”

Ella burst into laughter. “Ada, ye sound as though ye have experience with men, or that ye havenae been trapped as long as I’ve been, away from the company of others. Besides,” she said, lowering her voice, “someone may hear ye and tell Faither what ye are talkin’ about.”

“What dae I care about that?” she said in a low growl. “He has done far enough tae anger us; surely we can anger him in return.”

Ella couldn’t help but agree with her sister. They talked for a little while longer until a servant approached them.

“Forgive me, Me Lady,” the young woman said with a bow, “but yer faither will be takin’ his evenin’ meal with his men. He asked that we set the private dinin’ room for ye both. He willnae be there.”

“Aye, that will suit me just fine,” Ella said, standing up and stretching.

The servant left with hurried steps, and the sisters left the main hall, books in hand. Once they reached the dining room, they met their old guards looking forlorn. Angus and Darren stood on either side of the door, not meeting the girls’ eyes. After a quick glance at Ada, Ella stepped forward and touched her hand to Angus’ arm, for he was the elder.

“Ye must forgive us, Angus,” Ella said, feeling tears well in her eyes. “We dinnae mean for this tae happen. Only that we wanted a bit of adventure for ourselves. That is all. I am so sorry that ye were punished for this.”

Angus looked up and smiled, his eyes also looking a bit cloudy with endearment. Ella knew their guards felt close to her and her sister after all those years. “Ye are very kind, lass, but it was our job tae watch ye, and as ye ken, we are nae the brightest spots. We should have kent better. But,” he said in a whisper, “we understand ye entirely. Ye both deserved a bit of freedom on yer own.”

“Aye, I hope ye enjoyed yer time,” Darren said with a wink, making Ella feel a little better.

“Aye. So we did. We wish ye well,” Ada said, and then the doors opened.

Once they were inside, they were surprised to hear a key scrape and turn in the lock as it clicked into place. So that was how it would be. Ada scowled, and Ella looked back at the door, but she eventually turned away to sit at the table.

“That perhaps puts a little bit of a twist tae our plans,” she said, but Ada sat down across from her, looking deep in thought.

“Perhaps, but all we need is tae be locked intae a room with a secret passage, and we will be gone. But I dinnae wish tae leave until we’ve seen Aunt Isla. Perhaps she can work tae convince him that he shouldnae marry ye off and that he should stop treatin’ us as though we were still young bairns.”

“Aye,” Ella said, taking a sip from her cup of wine.

She looked around the small private dining room. As it happened, and with their father knowing for sure, there were no secret passageways in this room. It was merely four walls of heavy stone without even a window. In the winter, they could feel the slight draft of an icy breeze from time to time, but that was all. The knowledge that there was no way of escape there chilled her spine. She had been locked away her whole life, and yet never truly locked into a room as she was now.

They ate, and after a little while, they went upstairs to bed. It had been a solemn, solitary evening, very like the ones they had spent every night for the past ten years. When Ada fell asleep, Ella wondered if this truly would be the way of the rest of her life. Or if she did stay, would her husband act just the same? She could not yet decide which future would be worse.



An hour before, Blair and Cameron had just finished their food, and the first disgruntled man approached the pair of them. Cameron knew Blair would be safe from their anger, for he was their leader, and because the man's angry eyes turned directly to him.

The rest of the soldiers were sitting at long wooden tables deep in the bowels of the castle, as they ate their midday meal. There had been a few strange looks thrown his way when he first entered, and he knew it had to do with his odd mask. Everyone would no doubt wonder what lay beneath it. But he had to forget about the slight to his ego to focus on the task at hand.

The angry man put a fist on the table in front of him, and said, "Look here, they've found a diseased brute tae play soldier tae the lasses. I ask ye, why could they nae choose one of us?" the man shouted, calling out to the others.

A few soldiers called out agreement in response. Blair said nothing, and Cameron could see his friend smirking to himself.

*Damn him*, Cameron thought. He was not interested in fighting anyone, especially not when he had so many other things on his mind.

"*Diseased brute?*" he murmured, his ego trying to fight for itself again.

But he adopted a bored tone, attempting to appear casual, and the soldier grinned at him, showing one blackened tooth. He was young, around the same age as Cameron's twenty-seven years, but he had been worn down by too much time in the outdoors, or so it seemed.

"Aye, diseased brute. For why else would ye wear a mask on only half yer face, lad?" the man teased. "Come now, did the laird have pity on ye, think that the lasses wouldnae be afraid of ye if they saw yer mask?"

"Aye," Cameron said, nodding and putting down his fork to look the man in the eye. "I think that is perhaps what it is. They dinnae wish tae use such a handsome man as yerself, for certainly when the two lasses' eyes fell upon ye, they wouldnae be able tae resist ye."

He grinned when the man beamed with pleasure. *Idiot.*

But soon, the man's smile faltered, and fury built again in his eyes. He pounded his fist into the table again, shaking it. Cameron sighed.

“Dinnae think ye can tease me, lad, without experiencin’ consequences,” the man threatened, leaning close to Cameron’s face. “Ye are new, and so ye dinnae have the protection of havin’ friends around ye.”

“Aye, true enough.” Cameron stood, and his bruised ego swelled a little when he saw the man’s surprised face at how tall he really was. “I am new, but I have been chosen for the task, and so I think it wouldnae be wise tae question the laird’s choice. Dae ye nae?”

He tilted his head to the side and put his hands on his hips, begging inwardly for the man to see sense. If he was going to try to charm Ella, he did not want his face to be injured or his knuckles bleeding. That would not draw a woman to him, especially a woman who had hardly seen anything of men.

Except when those two bastards tried tae hurt her. His anger burned. It would be a difficult task indeed, to charm a woman who only had that experience as her guide. He clenched his fists at the memory of how good it felt to hit those two men in the jaw until their noses bled, and tears streamed from their eyes.

“Leave him be, Fraser, dinnae bother. He’ll probably be out before we can say ‘ale,’” another soldier yelled from the back,

but Cameron couldn't see his face.

However, Fraser, the angry man, obviously only grew angrier and he stood tall against Cameron, stretching his shoulders as far back as they could go. His fists clenched at his sides and he tilted his chin upward to look Cameron in the eye. Silence had fallen over the room, and all the other soldiers turned to look at them both.

“Ye dare tae question me loyalty tae the laird?” Fraser growled and then, without another word, leaned back with a fist in the air.

Cameron watched the way the man's body moved and knew what would happen next. With a smirk, he reached up and grabbed Fraser's fist before it met its mark on his jaw. The soldier's eyes widened with both surprise and fear, and because he didn't want to deal with anything else, with his other hand he punched the man's gut at the perfect spot to expel his breath with a loud *whoosh*. Fraser's groan filled the air, and Cameron stepped back, releasing his fist so that it fell to his side as his opponent bent over in misery.

Cameron looked around at the others, and they watched him with a mixture of fear and awe. *Perfect. Now they will stay away.*

When Blair stood, he said, “Now that's finished, we will take ourselves tae our own rooms. If anyone else wants tae fight the new lad, then let him dae so. Only be warned,” he added, tapping at the mask on Cameron's face, “this disease is strong, and it could touch any one of ye if ye get too close.”

Cameron snapped his head up to look at Blair who smirked despite the serious look on his face. *Damn it.*

No one said anything. “Good then. Until later, lads,” Blair said with a hand on Cameron’s shoulder, leading him out of the soldiers’ dining room.

Behind them the angry Fraser was still bent over, groaning in pain.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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When the maids arrived the next morning, Ella requested hot water for a bath. It was early, and the sunlight was still weak, but the lasses frequently awoke before the sun rose, despite the fact that they didn't have much to do with their days. Unfortunately, a letter from Aunt Isla had arrived late the night before, stating that she would be unable to visit them after all because important matters at home had arisen. Ella and Ada had both felt the loss keenly. It would imply that their father would remain as strict as before, and they might not have enough time to plan their escape. Ella was also sad at the loss of her aunt's warmth and kindness. It always reminded her of what her father had been like before the kidnappings.

Ada left to wander the castle, as she often did to get some exercise. She did this frequently and knew her sister would want to bathe first, so she never bothered to wait for her. She smelled her favorite lavender oil when the tub was ready and asked the maids to leave as she slipped into the water, enjoying her privacy. She wondered if guards would be placed inside the room when the lasses bathed to ensure they did not escape.

That seemed overly solicitous, and she wondered how her father could wish for such a thing when he was always so concerned about the girls being in danger, especially from



men. Well, the thought of bathing with Angus or Darren in the room did not excite her in the least, but the thought of a young handsome man in the room at the same time sent a tingly frisson down her spine. The idea of someone watching her in such an intimate space made her feel terribly dark and dangerous.

In the absence of their mother, Graeme spoke endlessly about how to maintain purity and be good young lasses worthy of a laird. She and Ada had always dismissed his warnings, for they'd never really understood what they meant. But after her recent experience outside the tavern, she understood the evil that lurked about, and especially being touched by drunk smelly old men.

But that was not her fault, and yet she knew somehow that if those men had been allowed to do what they'd wanted, her father would no longer think of her as pure or worthy. She knew he would also not think her pure or worthy if she let her mind wander as it was doing at that very moment, imagining a man watching her bathe.

*Dear Lord, what's happening tae me!*

In her imagination, she knew how she would respond, but she realized that reality would not be the same. In fact, she would not know what to do if someone as handsome as Cameron stood nearby while soapy water ran in rivulets over her skin, watching her with his deep blue eyes and strong clenched jaw.

Swallowing hard, Ella did not know what to do with the sudden wave of heat that possessed her body. Her skin tingled everywhere, and even the water seemed to stroke her in a sensual way that only added to the heat.

*For the love of God, what is that?*

A new ache or a sort of longing opened inside her. It was as if their night out of the castle had changed *everything*. It felt like mere minutes, and yet as each day passed, she discovered new things about herself, things she did not know existed. It was as if that choice to step outside the keep walls was the catalyst to unlocking all the hidden desires and anger she'd kept deeply buried inside her.

As she took the cloth and scrubbed slowly over her skin, she leaned her head back and closed her eyes. She recognized the feeling of *want*, the desire to have something or be brought something, not unlike the deep desire for a particular food or drink, or the great desire to leave her prison. It pulled at her every muscle, begging to be fulfilled, but this time she wasn't quite sure what she wanted. Normally, she could identify the want that centered in her belly, but now it was somehow different, stronger.

Her thoughts flew again to Cameron and the way he'd watched her with interest and amusement. Even though she'd been furious with him, tossing whiskey in his face before she left, she knew she would give a lot to have him look upon her that way again. To have those blue eyes cast their gaze across her flesh. The thought gave her goosebumps, despite the warmth of the water.

*Ye are a fool, wanting such a ridiculous thing. Just because he's the only man ye've met disnae mean ye like him.*

It was a thing that could never be and should never be. She would be stuck in this castle forever, and even if she left, she

and her sister would be so destitute they would surely die within weeks of leaving the place. As she considered her options, she thought of the man her father would choose for her to marry. Would he be a good man? Would he be young and handsome? Would he too think of her as a thing to be locked away?

She sank beneath the water, frustrated with the frenzied path of her thoughts, moving from one topic to the next, and the strange desire that made her skin prickle and her heart race. When she emerged, however, and wiped soapy water from her eyes, she heard a knock at the door.

“Come in,” she called, thinking the maids were there to help her dry off.

But she gasped when she saw in front of her just what she’d been dreaming about. A young, handsome man in the room, looking at her openly.



When Cameron woke up that morning, he’d expected anything but this to be presented with the most glorious female body a man ever had the privilege to look upon. A wet, soapy, voluptuous, entirely feminine female body, enough to make him practically groan aloud with sudden heat and desire.

That morning, Blair had jostled him awake in the barracks, and he’d been angry at that, having always been able to wake up on his own time when he only had to work in the tavern. But now, he had a new and important duty to complete, so with a scowl he’d dragged himself out of bed in the cool, early dawn light, hoping there would be no more trouble from the other soldiers in MacPherson’s rank. And after he and Blair

had dressed and eaten, they walked upstairs to perform their first day of duty as the lasses' personal guards. Cameron wasn't quite sure what it would be like, but he knew that the laird would be watching them, would gain information about them. So, he would need to perform his duty perfectly if he would be allowed to stay. He also had to make sure that Ella did not recognize him.

Laird MacPherson had stressed again that morning when he had seen the men that they were meant to keep an eye on his daughters at all times. Of course, there would be times when the girls would need to bathe or perform more private matters, but overall they would not be left unattended. So, before they began, Blair told Cameron that he should go and introduce himself to make sure that the girls knew who he was and that they would feel comfortable in his presence.

In fact, he'd said it with a smirk on his face, jabbing Cameron with his elbow as he winked. "Go on then, show them yer charms."

With a sigh, Cameron pointed to the mask on his face. "They will nae be able tae see all, so this could take a bit longer, ye ken."

Rolling his eyes, Blair had laughed. "So ye say, but I have seen ye win a lass with hardly a look, so I dinnae think ye will have any trouble at all. Go on then. Their rooms are the first door in the passageway." Blair opened one of the doors to the private corridor, and Cameron stepped inside.

"Aye, then. Until I return."

He walked forward and heard the soft click of the door behind him. It was a dim passageway, not only because it was still early in the morning, but also because there were hardly any windows.

*The laird certainly kens how tae imprison his daughters.*

He arrived in front of their door, and straightened his shirt and jacket, brushing a hand over his shorn locks. It was strange not to have his long locks hair anymore, and he would lie if he claimed he didn't grieve them. At the prospect of seeing Ella again, he felt his heart flutter a bit, nervous about her reaction. Of course, she wouldn't know who he was, but still, *he* would know. He would remember their interaction, and the way she'd intrigued him with only a look. It would be simple, he told himself, to make her feel more for him. Thus, he was confident he would win the bet, and soon Blair would be at his side, working hard at the tavern for the rest of their days, just like he'd always dreamed about.

With another deep breath, he lifted his hand to the door and knocked sharply.

"Come in!" a voice from inside called out, and he opened the door, shutting it behind him as he entered.

A wooden screen stood on the left side of the very large room, and the room smelled like fresh herbs—lavender and rose, and he took a deep breath. Living and working in a tavern had always produced smells of various malodors, so this was lovely—nearly intoxicating.

Unable to see the lasses anywhere, he walked in a little further until he paused, his eyes blinking at what was behind the wooden screen. When he saw *her*, it felt like his boots were suddenly nailed to the floor. His mouth went dry, and the breath he'd just taken caught in his throat.

*Dear God in heaven* were the only words that came to his shocked and muddled mind.

Ella's eyes were closed, and her neck rested on the edge of the metal tub. Her long, red hair was wet, and it fell down each shoulder, covering her torso. He had seen her dry, of course, when she'd sat under the dim light in his tavern, and he'd thought her a beauty then. But under the morning light streaming in from the windows, she was an utter vision. She looked mythical, a water creature from the fairy stories told by old healers.

He must have made some noise, for her eyes quickly opened and she turned her head to him. Gasping, she did the last thing he expected her to do. She *stood*. If he thought the initial sight of her was breathtaking, he discovered that was nothing once he saw the soapy water slide down her perfect body, and his eyes would not look away as he took everything in—her lovely creamy neck, her breasts large enough to fill his hands, her flat stomach which curved into her hips, and her long, lovely legs. Below her belly, he saw a tuft of reddish hair. Not an inch of her escaped his gaze, and he found no words at all to say. No words he could express for such glorious beauty.

“What are ye daein' in here?” Ella demanded, and his eyes snapped to hers, blue and cold as ice.

With her hands on her hips, she stared him down, unabashed by her nakedness. Words flowed through his mind, but he

couldn't grab hold of them. They were fuzzy and vague, and when his eyes darted again down her naked body, she gasped, and covered herself, slipping down once again into the water.

This time, she spoke with her eyes closed. "Go away," she said sharply. "I thought ye were the maids when I let ye in."

Clearing his throat now that her naked body had disappeared from view, he found he could think a little more clearly.

"I am yer faither's new choice for yer personal guard. One of them at least."

Even though she closed her eyes and covered her chest, he could see the blush on her cheeks. "Get out of here. I dinnae care who ye are, at least nae right now."

He slid behind the wooden screen and turned around, this time with a smirk on his face. While he'd hoped to make Ella fall in love with him, and he'd imagine they'd share a few kisses to spur on her affection, never in a thousand years did he expect to see her naked, fully bare before him.

"I am tae watch ye at all times, ye ken," he reminded, unable to keep the mirth from his voice.

"Are ye laughin'?" she asked, horrified. "Get out, or I will have ye killed, or I will kill ye myself, I promise ye!" she said, but not convincingly, and this time, he burst into laughter.

“Aye, I am laughin’, but it is nae at ye, if ye are worried about that. At least nae at yer... shapeliness.” He couldn’t think of the right word to describe what he’d seen, and that certainly was not it. “I am laughin’ at the fact that ye think in any way that *ye* could hurt *me*.”

She made a huffing sound, and the water splashed as if she’d punched it with a fist. “It doesnae matter,” she said angrily. “Get out, really! Ye are nae tae be in here.”

“Fine, fine,” he said, his hands raised. “But how long must I wait? I am tae watch ye every moment,” he said with only the slightest bit of pleasure. “So, I need tae be aware of when ye’ll be done in here.”

“God save us!” Ella cried, and he started chuckling again. “I will be dressed in *ten minutes*,” she said. “Dinnae come back any sooner!”

“All right, then. Forgive me, Me Lady,” he said, peeking around the screen to bow hurriedly.

Her horrified eyes opened wide, and she splashed at him. “Get out, ye horrid man!”

Still laughing, he left, and he could hear her angry growl from outside the room. When he got outside, he was still chuckling, and Blair looked at him with quizzically.

“So, how did it go?”



“Och, it’ll be easy as pie, lad. Easy as pie,” Cameron replied, crossing his arms with a smug smile on his face.

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## CHAPTER NINE

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*Dear God, I pray that dinnae happen. Please, say it dinnae.*

Ella squeezed her eyes shut and put her hands over her face. She still sat in the tub, naked as the day she was born, but after what just occurred, she wasn't sure she could move. The embarrassment was far too strong, and she could feel hot red blush spreading over every inch of her skin.

Ada had predicted rightly. The other personal guard besides Blair was handsome. Too handsome. Even with a half mask on his face, Ella could tell that the man was a fine specimen, his jaw strong, and his smile charming—the type that would make any woman weak at the knees, as she had been when she'd foolishly stood up.

Why on earth had she stood? *Begorra*, she'd been naked, showing the strange man everything! Now she knew that every time they looked at one another, he'd be thinking of that moment, and she'd likely die of shame. Just this once she agreed with her father. She wished that he'd continued using old men as their personal guards. Choosing young men was already causing trouble.

*For heaven's sake, get out of the tub or the man will be back before ye are dressed!*

Stepping out to dry herself off, and when there was a soft knock, Ella went to check who it was first. She let Mary in and then dressed with only a minute to spare, or so she thought. The guard reappeared like clockwork, along with Blair and Ada, who was smiling from ear to ear like the cat who ate the canary.

"I see we have our new guards," Ada said, still grinning foolishly.

As for Ella, she continued scowling, especially when her eyes met the new guard's. He was still smirking at their little secret. She tore her eyes away from him and then turned to face Blair.

"Greetings, sir. I hear ye have been appointed, along with this *gentleman*, tae be our new personal guards."

"Quite right, Lady Ella. I hope it will be an easy transition, but I am sorry for the loss of Angus and Darren. This is me good friend and fellow soldier, Cam Hamish. But I ken ye've already met."

*"Met" is a word ye could use, I suppose.*

"Aye," she said stiffly, wanting to cover her arms over her breasts again, but she knew it would only draw his eyes there once more.

Now that her temper had cooled a bit, she was able to look at the scenario in the bath with a different viewpoint. When she stood up and found that his eyes traveled from her face all the way down her body, it had felt the same as a caress. She'd been angry, furious even, but it was not enough to disguise the heat that had crept over every inch of her skin, and she wondered if she'd stood up on purpose. The moment was just as her imagination told her.

A young, handsome man in her room when she bathed felt both intimate and wicked, and it had only inflamed the desire she'd secretly kept hidden. But how? How could she feel both the same sudden desire for this masked stranger as well as her avenging angel? It was true there was something similar about them, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. Perhaps she simply preferred golden-haired men with strong shoulders and a way about them that made her thoughts fuzzy.

“We are very honored tae have his very important position. We will be at yer service, whatever help ye might need,” Blair said kindly, and Ella had the chance to look away from Cam to realize that Ada was right yet again, this time about Blair, who was very handsome and the kindness in his eyes only made him more so.

Now she could not completely judge her father, for Blair was safe, while the masked man made her feel dangerous and unsteady, as if something wild might happen at any moment. She thought of him like an animal: crouching, ready to pounce. The thought should have been more frightening than it really was to her. In fact, she was exhilarated.

“Thank ye, Blair, Cam,” Ada said, still grinning. “It is very kind of ye.”

“Aye, well, we will be just outside, when ye are ready tae leave for yer day’s activities.”

“Whatever those might be,” Ada mumbled, her smile fading.

“Thank ye,” Ella said, following the guards into the hall. “If I may, Mr. Hamish, I would like a word with ye.”

“Of course,” Cam replied, turning to her while Blair pinned them both with an odd look.

“Dinnae worry, Blair, all will be well. It willnae take long.”

“Very well,” he agreed.

She shut the bedroom door, so that a surprised Ada could not listen, and soon Blair was outside the passageway doors and it was just her and Cam. Her heart suddenly beat fast, and her mouth went a little dry while he smiled down at her. She knew what they were both thinking about.

“Mr. Hamish—”

“Cam, lass. Nae need tae stand on ceremony.”

He grinned, and she lost her focus for a few seconds, watching his smile.

*Cam. Near tae the name of me avengin' angel. 'Tis odd, isnae?*

Shaking her head to regain her mind, she continued. "Cam, I ask that ye dinnae tell me faither about what happened taeday. Nae only would he kill ye and nae let ye stay in this position, but he would kill me as well. He would be so furious about it all that he would tear the castle tae pieces, and then none of us will have any peace." She hoped she painted a fearsome enough picture, even though most of it was not true.

Though she knew Laird MacPherson would kill Hamish if he'd seen such a thing, and Ella would die of embarrassment. Which was the crueler death?

"Och," he said with a slow nod, putting his hands behind his back.

She straightened, looking him in the eyes. Blue they were, like the sky on a sunny day. They were light and merry, but there was something else behind them, something unknowable. She was curious about the mask. Illness? Injury? Knowing the man, she thought it was likely he did it to increase his mystique, aware that it intrigued those he met.

"All right, then. I will keep it tae meself, but I dae wonder if ye would refresh me memory." He frowned, but she knew he was trying to hide a smirk. "What did happen taeday that I must keep from yer faither?"

She inhaled sharply, not understanding how the man could be so impertinent. "So, I was right on me first assessment. Ye are a hard man and certainly nae gentleman."

“Certainly nae, but why should I be? Yer faither expects me tae kill at any moment, tae dae, anythin’ tae protect his daughters.”

Her mind quickly flashed back to the night they’d left the castle, when her angel Cameron had fought off their two attackers with swift brutality like she’d never seen before.

*But I have nae seen much of anythin’, so perhaps it was nae as brutal as I thought.*

And yet, she’d been both afraid and mesmerized. That man had done whatever it took to save them, and she knew her father would wish her guards to do the same.

“So, I think ye will just remind me of what happened, and then I will ken exactly what I shouldnae tell yer faither.”

“Fine,” she said, stomping her foot and eliciting another chuckle from the impertinent guard. “It was that moment when ye saw me... in the altogether in the bath. That is all. I dinnae wish for me faither tae hear of it. And,” she added with a smirk, “ye should nae wish it either.”

“Agreed.” He stretched a hand out in front of him, and Ella looked down.

*He wishes me tae grasp his hand? Surely nae.*

But when she looked up at him again, his one visible brow lifted expectantly. Slowly, she took his hand and he shook it, but before he let go, he lifted it to his mouth. Ella bit her lip to keep from gasping as his kiss brushed against the back of her hand. She swallowed, annoyed at her feelings, reminding her of the sudden heat his eyes ignited earlier that morning.

When he finally let go, she put her hand at her side, and it trembled. “Very well. We are in agreement then.”

She stepped away, but thought she heard him laughing still when she slipped inside her room.



Cameron knew he was playing a dangerous game, yet he found he couldn't stop. It was far too fun and easy to fluster her. Ella's face, when she was angry, blushed a bright red, and it lightened the blue in her eyes, melting the ice he often found when he looked into them. But at the same time when he angered her or flustered her, he never came out unscathed.

His body reacted to her more than it ever had with any other woman. And it was dangerous, he knew. Maybe that *danger* was why he was so excited about her. But he had a job to do, and he would not shy away from a bet. He never had before, and he wouldn't now. Yet, he didn't think he could bear to be the village laughingstock when Rory and Alistair heard about it.

As he left the passage, only staying behind to look at her door a little longer, Cameron realized that even when she was not in front of him, he still imagined the vision she made standing in her tub. Her body was so curvy and lush he'd wanted nothing more than to take her in hand, to see her face flush with



pleasure as he gave her the greatest ecstasy he knew she would ever experience.

He cleared his throat when he came out of Ella's room and found Blair watching him again. "Did something happen already?" he asked.

"Nay, why?"

"I have never seen Lady Ella ask tae speak tae her personal guards on their own, but I suppose I wasnae always there tae see them. What did ye dae?"

"Nothin' at all. We didnae quite get fully introduced this morn, as she was too tired," his quick mind suddenly supplied a handy reason. "She wanted tae make up for it."

"I see. But she didnae look happy," Blair added, looking at him suspiciously.

"Would ye? If ye were trapped away like these two are?" He hooked his thumb back at the door, and Blair shrugged.

"Fine then."

"Come now, Blair, am I nae supposed tae dae everythin' in me power tae charm the lass? She asked tae speak tae me, so I willnae shy away from such an opportunity tae practice me charms, as ye put it."

“Inflict, ye mean,” Blair teased, and Cameron rolled his eyes.

“They work. Always. That is why I win so many bets.” He looked his friend in the eye. “Ye could learn a thing or two, if ye wanted it, Blair. Tae help ye find the lass ye so wish tae make a wife. Ella’s sister seems tae look at ye with more than a passin’ interest. What say ye?”

Blair’s face darkened, and he lifted his chin, looking at Cameron with a narrow gaze. “I wouldnae think of askin’ one of the laird’s daughters tae court or marry in earnest. Even if they are bonnie, they are his daughters, and so they would deserve far more than someone like me, a mere soldier, askin’ for their hand. Besides, the lass is all fire and wildness. She doesnae listen tae a word of sense.”

Blair punched Cameron in the shoulder, and he stepped back. It was true. He’d always pictured Blair finding a woman who was calm and respectable, not the kind of woman who yelled back at her father or tried to escape her home.

“All right, fine. I wasnae tryin’ tae insult ye or them. I see yer happy enough tae get me tae flirt with the eldest lass, but when I mention the younger, ye get frenzied about it? What the bloody hell is that about?”

Blair looked away, straight in front of him. “It is none of yer business. Focus on the task at hand.”

Seconds later, the girls appeared on the other side of the door, and Ada said, “We wish tae paint out of doors, if ye would oblige us, gentlemen.”

“Certainly,” Cameron said, moving aside so that they could get past.

Glancing at Blair again, who was not looking at him, they followed the two girls who each carried a small bag. He could see that Ella had now braided her long lovely red hair and spun it in a circle at the base of her neck, pinning it into place. He could see the bare space below on her neck, and he bit the inside of his cheek to distract himself from thinking about putting his lips on it. The skin would be soft, he was sure, but it didn't help to think about it.

The four of them remained silent as they walked through the castle until they reached the outside. Ella had called a servant to assist them, and once they were outside, stationed on the grass in front, two more servants arrived with chairs, canvases, and easels. He and Blair stepped back to stand along the wall while the two girls settled themselves on their chairs, opposite their easels.

“We should be close enough tae see them, but nae close enough that we hear their conversation. Or else they willnae trust us.”

“Aye,” Cameron said, stepping further back at Blair's instruction.

He watched the two lasses as they painted, his eyes always trailing to Ella. Her first assessment of him had been correct, but at the same time his first assessment of her had also been correct. She was graceful, elegant, feminine. And her every move was like a dance. It was frustrating that all he had to look upon was the damned bare space at the back of her neck. And very often throughout the time they watched them, he had to look away to distract himself elsewhere.

But Blair would often elbow him to get him back to attention.  
“We must watch at all times, me friend.”

“Och, what will happen here? It is the late mornin’ and they are paintin’. I cannae think what could happen if I look away for a few moments,” he countered, and he thought he saw Ella’s head move to the side, like she was listening.

“Even so, watch.”

But it was getting to be the slightest bit torturous. He gripped his hands tightly together behind his back to make himself think about anything else besides her. After an hour or so, his feet ached. And he was getting a little warm under the sunlight that peeked out through the clouds. Two young maids came, carrying a tray of breakfast and tea to the young ladies. He thought it odd they’d not eaten with their father, but then he wouldn’t want to eat with his jailer either. One maid had dark hair, long and curly, and the other had reddish hair, with bright eyes. They were both young and bonnie, and he knew within moments that these young lasses would fall prey to his charms if he attempted to use them.

*Better tae distract meself this way than by sittin’ around,  
lustin’ after another.*

He winked at one, and she blushed, curtsyng to him before scampering away with the other, whispering as they hurried away arm-in-arm.

*Perfect.*

His gaze followed their departure, planning to meet them again, but when he returned to Ella, she was staring at him, an angry little crinkle between her brows. He was taken aback. Her cheeks were flushed as she turned away.

*Did that bother her?*

He took a breath and, ignoring Blair's glare, kept on smiling. As expected, it was going to be far easier than his old friend thought.

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## CHAPTER TEN

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Ella knew jealousy was childish and foolish, and completely out of place in this situation. Nevertheless, she was jealous. At least that's what she thought, for she'd never really experienced the odd and uncomfortable emotion before. She'd been jealous of other young lasses whose fathers did not imprison them in the family home, but she'd never felt jealous about a man's attention before.

For the past few hours, however, she'd secretly enjoyed the feeling of Cam's eyes on her as she went about her morning. As she and Ada sat outside, she could feel them practically boring into her, analyzing and admiring. Then when she turned around and saw him wink at one of the young maids, making them giggle, a jolt of sharp pain shot through her. But when he caught her looking and blushing, she'd quickly turned back to her painting.

*Flirtin' with the maids? I should have expected it the way he has already teased me so. Clearly, the man is used tae such female attention. Well, I willnae give him the satisfaction.*

She lifted her chin and gave a few strokes of her brush, but she knew he was already aware of her reaction to him. She instantly flushed whenever he looked at her or made a comment, and it had only been a few hours! How was she

going to survive if he was her personal guard for the next few years?

*Well, ye will likely be married before then.*

Would her husband make her feel like this? Like she wanted to melt into a hot pool of want and need? And no matter where she touched her skin, it still tingled as much as it had that morning. She absently stroked the brooch pinned to her chest, and thought about what marriage would be like if she chose that route. If it was like that morning, it might not be such a hardship after all. In fact, it might even be pleasurable, if not distracting.

“Ella, are ye even listenin’ tae me?” Ada broke in, and Ella jerked her head to the side to see her sister holding forth a cup. “The maids have brought tea, and ye’ve been lost in a world for the last minute.”

“Och, I’m sorry. I was just thinkin’ to meself.”

“Aye, so ye were. Thinkin’ so much it looked like ye got lost.”

“Right.” She took the cup of tea and lifted it to her lips, drinking the warm liquid down, hoping it would ease the trembling in her limbs and the racing of her heart.

In fact, perhaps pleasurable was not the right word. It almost felt like she was unwell. She looked up to see Ada watching her. Their backs were still turned to the guards, and they were far enough away so Ella hoped that neither of them would be able to hear what Ada was about to say, because she could tell

from the look in her sister's eye that it would be something salacious.

Ada glanced back at the men before she said with a grin, "I told ye they would be handsome, Ella."

"Aye, but so what? What does that matter?" Ella said uncomfortably, clearing her throat and looking away so that Ada wouldn't somehow see on her face what happened in the room that morning.

She shrugged. "It is just more interestin', that's all." Ada glanced back again, and Ella knew she was looking at Blair. "So, now that Aunt Isla willnae be comin', Faither has more time tae start searchin' for yer fiancé. We should begin tae think of an escape as soon as possible."

"Aye, I agree." Ella lowered her voice. "But with these men here and so about us as they will be, I dinnae ken how we will get the chance."

"Well, they are nae there all the time. They have tae eat, tae sleep, so there will be others that will have tae take their places a time or two. It will likely be Angus and Darren, and they will be watchin' us fully this time." Ada sighed, leaning back in her chair. "I wish there were a secret tunnel from our rooms or our passageway," she said, exasperated.

"Me too." Ella finished her tea and took a bite of a warm pastry. "Maybe we havenae looked hard enough. But we have tae wait a little, Ada. Faither will also be watchin' us like a hawk so soon after what happened."



“We cannae afford tae wait, Ella!” Ada said sharply and then she lowered her voice, glancing at the guards again. “It will only lengthen the time we are stuck in this bloody prison!”

Her face had grown red, and Ella reached out to grab her sister’s arm. “What happened, Ada? You were so bright and cheerful this morning, smiling, but now ye are as angry as bull.”

“Because I am now reminded of our fate, and I can see it in yer eyes. Yer falterin’ again and losin’ yer courage.”

“It is nae that, Ada,” Ella said. “Really. I was just surprised by the men this morn. I didnae realize they would look like that, or rather that *he* would look like that.”

Ada’s anger dissipated, and she laughed. “Aye, that was quite a surprise. Even with the mask, he is more handsome than the devil.” Leaning in, she whispered, “Why did ye need tae speak tae him on his own?”

Ella flushed, but she kept her gaze steady. “I wanted only tae introduce meself further, tae let him ken...” she paused.

“What?” Ada prompted.

“Tae tell him just how our faither is,” she settled on a topic. “I was disconcerted at how young they are, and I didnae wish Cam Hamish tae think he could take liberties.”

Ada looked surprised. “Ye continue tae impress me, sister. My, where did me sister full of responsibility and rules go? Now, she is talkin’ tae men with fire in her eyes, demandin’ they pay her the proper respect, and throwin’ whiskey in their faces.”

“Aye,” Ella said with a laugh. “I dinnae ken where she went, either. But I think I like the new Ella.”

“I always liked the old one too, even if I got angry with her.”

“I’m glad. Well,” she said, standing, “let’s get up and find somethin’ else tae dae with our time. I dinnae ken about ye, but I have nae interest in runnin’ intae faither taeday, and so I want tae keep movin’ about.”

“I am quite of the same opinion, sister,” Ada said, motioning to the waiting servants at the door to assist them. “I think we shall return tae the library for a little while before we rest.”

“Agreed.” Ella watched as the servants cleaned up the easel, chairs, and canvas and she sighed.

She wasn’t sure if she even liked painting, but it was something to do. And as she looked around at the bright sunny day, she worried she was missing out on something. Well, she was. But when the weather was good, it made that feeling all the keener. She looked down across the hill through the slice of woods nearest the castle. She thought she could almost see the roof of the Highlander Tavern. She closed her eyes for a few moments, imagining that the two men had not tried to harm them when they sneaked outside the night before.

She imagined that she and Ada had entered the tavern freely, happily, and sat down to drink with the others as if they were among the common people. Then she likely wouldn't have fought with Cameron, nor would she have thrown whiskey in his face. They could have stayed for hours, talked, danced, and maybe met even more men. It could have been a true night of freedom and enjoyment, but those two bastards had ruined everything. They'd made her fearful again, and even though the new Ella was a little bit different, wishing to throw caution to the wind, the old Ella was still inside somewhere, safe and bound by convention.

A light touch jolted her out of her reverie. She turned around and felt a hand touching her lower back. It was *him*, and he looked at her straight-faced and with a bit of concern.

*Dinnae let him trick ye!* she cautioned herself.

“Are ye ready, Me Lady?” Cam asked, and she stepped away, wishing to be free of the warm, comforting feel of his touch.

“Aye. I was only thinkin’.”

“Well, ye must let me ken if ye would like tae think on yer own somewhere. We are here tae dae yer biddin’ and would follow ye wherever ye go if ye wish tae walk on yer own. Without yer sister, I mean.”

She looked into his eyes. In the sunlight, they appeared even bluer. She expected to see teasing in them, but she didn't. Instead, he said exactly what he thought; he was sincere.

“Nae, thank ye,” she said with a quirk of the brow. “I dinnae think it wise that I should go anywhere with ye on me own. Besides, I’m sure in yer off hours, ye would like tae spend yer time with a few other lasses.” She leaned around him, spying the maids who’d come out of the castle, no doubt simply to look upon him again.

He turned around, and when he faced her again, he was smiling, all teasing returned. “Me Lady, I hadnae thought ye the jealous type, so angry ye were at me earlier. But rest assured, I think ye are the bonniest of all.” He winked, and Ella gasped again, pushing past him.

“As if I cared about yer bloody opinion on the matter!” Annoyed, she felt a wee tingle of pleasure sizzle in her belly.



“Christ, ye certainly have her angry already, man,” Blair said once the ladies were closeted within the library.

“Aye, so I dae. But it is all workin’ out well.” He passed a maid and gave her a wink too, only to be rewarded with a blush before she scurried away, cleaning cloth in hand.

Blair rolled his eyes, but Cameron felt better. He didn’t want to admit it, but the fact that Ella didn’t react to him like so many other women hurt his ego a bit. A quick wink here and there, along with a responding blush made him feel better for the moment and bolstered his confidence.

“I didnae say that part of the bet was also flirtin’ with all the castle staff. How will she...” Blair whispered, making sure the

girls couldn't overhear them. "How will she fall for ye if she sees that?"

"Blair, me old friend, ye understand naethin'."

"Sir, we've arrived tae assist ye." Cameron turned to see Angus and Darren, standing at the library door.

"Good, thank ye. Until later, men." He nudged Cameron with his elbow, and they walked away down the passageway.

"What was that? Are nae those the men who let them escape the first time?"

"Aye, but I have convinced the laird tae give them another chance, just tae take our places now and again. Besides, they willnae make the same mistake twice. Come, I'm hungry. We'll eat, and then we'll head back tae the library or wherever they are."

In the barracks, they were once again sitting at long tables with food brought to them on large plates. It was good, too—meat, bread, and potatoes. Back at the tavern, Cameron usually had to make his own food, or one of his few staff members would do it. But that was rare, and he didn't like it because he enjoyed cooking and eating in peace. He also didn't like to take up a worker's time when they could be free to serve his customers.

That was why his tavern was one of the most popular in the village. One could always get a drink and a hot meal, never having to wait too long. He looked around the barracks,

searching for the angry black-toothed man who threatened him yesterday and received a gut punch in return. But if he was there eating in the castle, Cameron didn't notice him. All the other soldiers went about their business and swallowed their food with little conversation. He knew it was safe to assume that he would not make any new friendships while he was at MacPherson Castle, but that mattered little. He would soon make Ella fall in love with him, he would win, and then it would all be over. He'd returned to the tavern with Blair at his side. The future was clear.

“Are ye nae a little bored by this, Blair?” Cameron ventured.

It was only the afternoon, and they still had a whole day as well as a night to get through, switching shifts with Angus and Darren, of course, or switching with each other. He hadn't been apprised of that information just yet. Blair glared at a soldier who dared look over at them when Cameron asked his question, and the soldier looked away quickly, suitably chastened.

“Nae, but we will have our own free time. Of course, the laird wants us tae keep our exercise up as much as we can. Ye and I will have tae take turns as well, especially at night tae keep watch.”

“I suppose now that ye passed up the opportunity tae go tae war with Rory and Alistair, this is what ye wanted—tae protect the castle and the lairdship.” He squinted at his friend, a little surprised at his choice. “That's the real reason ye stayed, right? Ye care about all this?” He waved a hand in the air at their surroundings.

“Aye, that is why, and the reason I told ye at the tavern. I didnae want tae go tae war again when I could find the woman

I want tae spend me life with. To make a home and all that. It is what I want.”

Cameron had the distinct idea that there was certainly more to it, but after how Blair had reacted when he mentioned Ada, he didn't want to risk saying anything else. He gave his friend a pat on the shoulder. “I'm sorry that I mentioned the lass. I only thought—” he stopped himself and shook his head. “Never mind.”

They finished their meal, and as they were walking upstairs to relieve Angus and Darren of their duties, a servant rushed up to them.

“Laird MacPherson wishes tae see ye both,” the young boy said, breathless.

“Aye then. Make sure Angus and Darren stay in their places for a little while,” Blair commanded.

“Aye, they are. The lasses have gone up tae their rooms now.” The young servant scurried off up the stairs.

After the boy's mention of the room, Cameron thought of the bath and Ella standing up in it, water sluicing down her body. He coughed to rid himself of the image, even though he knew it would be burned into his memory for the rest of his days. Blair turned around and nodded to him, thankfully not noticing Cameron's sudden need to quell a wave of unbidden lust.

Blair thumped him on the shoulder, and Cameron sped up. “Come on, then. Dinnae ken what's gotten intae ye. Perhaps

it's better ye didnae get a position in the castle in the first place. Ye cannae seem tae function well in the mornin' or afternoon hours."

They laughed, but Cameron most certainly agreed. He was not a morning person, and he preferred to stay up late, as made sense for the owner of a successful tavern. However, there most definitely *were* parts of him that functioned very well before the afternoon hours. He'd had proof only that morning, and it would be tough to forget.



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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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The girls retired to their chambers to rest. Ella assumed they were both sleeping, but when she awoke to a persistent scratching or tapping, she turned to see that Ada was not in her bed. It didn't even look slept in.

“Ada!” she called, turning her head one way to the other, trying to find her.

But she was nowhere to be found, and there was no answer. Slowly and tiredly, Ella got out of bed, and stretched her arms. The scratching was louder now, and there was even a little bit of grunting. Confused, Ella walked toward the window and the sounds grew closer. She looked down from the window, and when she saw Ada attempting to climb down the side of the castle, she screamed.

“Ada, what in God's name are ye daein'?” she called down, lowering her voice to an angry whisper.

If their father learned of this, he would certainly yell and stomp and perhaps even add further restrictions, like having a guard stand at the window while they slept. Thankfully, Angus and Darren were still too shy to have come into the room with them during their rest.

“I am searching for a proper way out!” Ada answered, not looking up. Instead, her concentration was entirely on the challenging external matter at hand. “But I suppose I could have thought a little more before I began me descent,” she muttered.

“Of course, ye should have! Foolish Ada! Always runnin’ intae things without thinkin!”

“And Ella, always thinkin’ too much before takin’ a step!” Ada called back, clearly not in such danger that she was unable to shoot out a barb.

Furious, Ella looked around the room, searching for anything to assist her sister. Even if Ada sounded cheery or at least strong enough for a verbal sparring, Ella knew it didn’t mean she wasn’t afraid or in trouble. Ada had a knack for pushing away negative feelings with a smile or a laugh or just downright stubbornness and fury. Finding nothing useful aside from the long, woolen curtain that hung near the window to keep out the light, Ella grabbed it, stuffed it through the open window, and called to Ada again.

“Will ye just come up again? Ye are closer tae here than the bottom, I think.”

“Nae! Leave me be! I’m thinkin’.”

Ella growled at her sister, furious that this was what their afternoon was going to consist of, for then it surely meant their evening would be listening to their father rage at them again. “Och, will there never be peace!” she said aloud into the room,

and then with a little flutter of fear, she leaned over the window and tried to figure out how Ada had managed the climb.

Ella knew she would not forgive herself if something happened to her, but there was no way she was going to tell that to Ada just then, for as stubborn and pig-headed as she was, she would merely yell at her until she lost all concentration and fell either to her death or grievous injury.

But Ella did not care for heights. It was one reason she always stayed away from the ramparts of the castle, even though Ada often went there. She could imagine the appeal of the fresh air and the exercise, but Ella was too afraid. In fact, she was always too afraid. However, in that instance, her sister's life was very likely on the line, so she swallowed back her fear, lifted her skirts, and swung one leg over the stone windowsill.

She closed her eyes, trying to catch her breath once she saw how far it was to the bottom. She feared both for herself and her sister, but she had to try. She planned to bring the long curtain down to Ada so they could both have an anchor to pull themselves up to the room and safety.

As she swung her other leg over and grabbed hold of the cumbersome wool curtain, she briefly felt sorry for Angus and Darren. They would certainly get into trouble again, and she hoped her father would at least spare them the lash. Ella began to lean back, putting her weight against the curtain, but it was only then she realized that her foot had not fully cleared the windowsill. In fact, the shoe was both lodged in her skirts and the long, old, tattered curtain, causing a loud, large tear.

The loud rip made her lose her balance, and with a sharp gasp she lost her grip on the curtain and fell hard against the stone,

her foot still caught in the length of fabric. Her head pounded where it hit the stone wall, and now a strong breeze threatened to shake her loose from her precarious position. When she realized her state, she screamed, clutching at the curtain desperately.

*God in Heaven, I dinnae want tae die like this!*

Those seconds hanging in the air felt like hours and Ella didn't know how or even if she could be rescued. But her scream caused Ada to look up. Of course, then she screamed as well.

“Christ, Ella! What folly is this!” Ada's voice was now tinged with panic, and Ella could hear her attempt to scramble back up the wall toward her.

“Stay there!” Ella said, her voice desperate. “I dinnae want ye fallin' as well.”

“Nay, I cannae stay and watch ye just hang from the window. Are ye mad?”

“Go and get help if ye can climb down,” Ella said, her voice shaking. “I think this will hold for now.” Her foot was also still caught in her gown as well as the curtain, and she dared not move lest her hold loosen.

Ada tried, but Ella could tell that she made no progress, but at least she had been able to grab hold of the edge of the curtain. She heard footsteps, and a banging on the door.

“Lady Ella? Lady Ada?”

*Shite.*

Apparently, Ada had locked the door to their room by way of rebellion. Angus and Darren were yelling, but they weren't able to enter. The bolt was strong, solid oak, and the lock always held fast.

She prayed, wishing that this would not be the end, that she had not spent most of her life imprisoned in the castle, just to die ignominiously this way. She had accomplished nothing in her life! She hadn't drunk ale in a tavern. She hadn't walked on her own for years, and she had not yet kissed a man. Tears welled in her eyes when she realized that she might never get to do those things. From what she could see of the ground below, it was too high for her to survive, especially if she fell head first.

At the same time, she thought of her avenging angel as well as the new mysterious Cam. Her first kiss could have been one of them if life hadn't gotten in the way. She craved the experience, the adventure. She realized just how safe she'd created her life to be. It was not all her father's fault; her own fear seemed always in the way. Had it all been just an utter waste?

In that moment, she desired to be like Ada more than at any other time in her life. At least she would have died with a desire to have done more instead of being afraid right up until the very last moment. But then, as she was just about to give in to her apparent fate, pounding footsteps sounded on the mossy stones below.

*“Jesu!”* she heard Cam mutter, while Blair swore beside him as they both looked up in disbelief.

Other men appeared too, and Ella closed her eyes, glad she was not fully exposed to all of them. But then, unfortunately she heard her father’s angry voice cursing with the others.

“What in God’s name is happenin’ here?” he thundered.

“Ye might consider helpin’ us out!” Ada snapped, and if Ella hadn’t been dangling in fear of falling wretchedly to her death, she would have laughed out loud.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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They'd heard the scream from the study, but it sounded distant, like a person being startled in the dark. They'd chalked it up to that as Laird MacPherson continued his instructions to the new guards.

“Blair, I want ye tae choose a second tae head up the attack, for I will need ye and Cam here tae continue yer guardin’ duties.” He looked around the room, scrutinizing the other men he’d invited to join him in his study.

“It is time we put an end tae Laird Kenneth Grant after all. Me daughters have been locked up for far too long, and once I get me hands on him, I ken the fears of their kidnappin’ will pass. I want tae finally be finished with constant worry.” The laird looked fatigued, with dark circles under his eyes and lines of strain etched on his forehead.

Cameron could understand the worry of having young women under his care, but he did not envy the man his duty, considering what his daughters were like, and how as a family they seemed always to be fighting against one another. And he knew the man’s worries were justified. The men who’d nearly raped his daughters had worn Grant colors, had seemed as though expecting them to leave the safety of their castle and

head to the tavern. It was far too coincidental to be an accident.

“We will discuss the plan in a few days once I have drawn up the official path. Go, men,” he said to the others. “Blair, Cam, stay here.”

As the other men filed out, Blair and Cameron stepped forward to the desk. Cameron was glad he would not have to go to battle, for he had no interest in bloodshed. He wanted only to find out the truth of the brooch and gain his friend as a business partner. That was the extent of his dreams.

“How goes the guardin’ thus far taeday?” Graeme asked when a harried servant rushed into the study, gripping the door frame as he caught his breath.

“Lady Ella and Lady Ada are climbing the wall!” the man gasped, out of breath. With a hand to his sword, Cameron turned like lightning, Blair crowding next to him.

Graeme stood up from his desk. “What dae ye mean, lad?”

“I mean they are climbin’ the wall outside their quarters! Climbin’ down! I saw it when I passed the courtyard below. Ada cannae move further, and Ella is hangin’ upside down, sure tae break her neck if she falls! She is caught in the curtain!”

“Jesu!” Laird MacPherson uttered, reaching for his sword, his heart in his throat.



Cameron and Blair had dashed out immediately, running on ahead. What in God's name were those damn fool lasses thinking trying to climb down the castle wall? While he did not know them very well yet, Cameron didn't think it possible that they would try to escape that very afternoon. And certainly not like this. It wasn't just crazed; it was foolhardy.

Cameron was outside first, with Blair just behind him, right after the manservant. The laird, huffing and puffing, followed soon after. A small group of men had formed beneath the wall where Ada and Ella hung. Cameron remembered the only time he had felt something like terror when a tavern patron tried to proposition Julia. He'd been busy at the bar and didn't notice that an older man had dragged her into one of the small hallways, pushing her up against the wall.

Julia had cried out, she later said, but the tavern was so loud and busy that evening they heard nothing at first. It was pure luck that he had walked by the hallway to pick something up and he'd found the man lifting Julia's skirts as she fought back. Terror—that was exactly what Cameron felt at that moment, even though he fixed the situation immediately, leaving the unlucky patron passed out on the floor. But now as he stared up at Ella hanging upside down outside the castle wall, clutching the curtain, he felt that same terror anew.

“Wait, lass, and hold fast!” he shouted, his voice sounding less sure than he felt.

But why? He barely knew her. He was there for his own selfish gain and his own selfish plans. Why should he care what happened to her, really, aside from the fact that he never cared to see an innocent human come to injury? And then he remembered that morning, and heated just thinking of Ella bathing.

His mind swirled with ideas. There was a tree close by and he saw Ella's eyes move to it, but he wasn't sure if she would be able to make it, or if it would support her. He saw her reach out and try to grasp the closest branch, leaning away from the castle wall.

"Nae!" he cried, along with many others. "Just wait!"

*Think! Think!*

Blair had moved under Ada as she struggled to shimmy down the wall bit by bit. "Jump, Lady Ada!" he called to her. "I will catch ye."

Ada was low enough that it would make sense for him to catch her, but Ella was far higher. Even so, Cameron had the same idea. He rushed to where Ella had swung out and failed on her first try, and even though he yelled up to her, she seemed not to hear him.

"I will catch ye!" he cried, and just as he said it, she swung once more, missing the branch but freeing her leg from its trap in the process.

She screamed, and his heart leapt in his throat again, but he held out his arms and watched as she fell in slow motion, bit by bit, second by second, landing fully in his arms. But she'd been high up, and the impact was strong. He staggered back and fell, with Ella rolling on top of him.

A few seconds he waited, his heart thumping wildly as he tried to assess their injuries. Thankfully, she was not unconscious; she had landed fully on him which broke her fall. He pushed himself up, helping her to sit up too. The wind had been knocked out of her, and she looked tousled, her hand to her throat as she gulped deep breaths of air. He thought she was beautiful in an adorable roughed up way. If he had not known how she had come to be mussed up this way, he would have thought she'd been tugged somewhere in secret.

“Ella, thank God,” he said, standing with a grimace and reaching down to help her up. He was a bit dizzy, but he lifted her to her feet.

At the same time Ada lost her grip and screamed, falling into Blair's arms, while Graeme was already at Ella's side.

“Ella, what in bloody hell?” Laird MacPherson said, rushing to her and taking her in his arms.

Cameron opened his mouth to object, not yet sure of her injuries, but he held his tongue.

“I'm fine, Faither. The new guard broke me fall.” But when she spoke, he could tell she was in pain.

A trickle of blood dropped from her arm onto the mossy stones they stood on, and Cameron stepped forward, reaching out a hand, “Ella, yer—”

But he stopped short at a quizzical look from the laird, and he stepped back, clasping his hands together behind his back. He

was just a guard, that was all. He was no one—only there to dutifully protect the laird’s daughters. He cursed himself that he had been so foolish as to say her name aloud without her title in front of the laird and reach for her as if he were a lover. Surely Angus or Darren had never thought to do such a thing. And he knew that if he made one wrong move he would be back at the tavern, and his dreams of running it with Blair would be over. In addition, his hopes of discovering the origin of the shared brooch would be lost. He could see it now, still pinned on her chest. It seemed she attached much importance to it, just as he did.

“Cam, take her tae her room. I will send the healer there right away. After that, I want tae see her in me study. Ella,” the laird said again and kissed her head. “Thank God yer safe. Ada, damn it!” he exclaimed, rushing to his other daughter who had been caught squarely in Blair’s arms, still on his feet and holding her securely in his arms.

“Come on, Lady Ella,” Cameron said, wrapping a hand gently around her waist and guiding her away. “Everythin’ is goin’ tae be all right.”



Ella couldn’t speak. As she’d tumbled down toward the wet stone, everything in her life, every small little bit she’d ever experienced, had flashed before her eyes. She’d expected to hit hard solid ground and then darkness. But instead, she’d fallen against something cushiony soft, and a man’s voice grunted suddenly as he fell back, still holding her tightly in his arms.

It was Cam. She vaguely thought she’d heard him calling to her, but in her effort to grasp the nearby branch, she’d not really heard the words. And then her foot came free, and she was falling. She still wasn’t sure exactly what happened, but

she was suddenly on solid ground, and found herself not thinking quite straight.

Cam was pushing her, but she didn't know why. Her head ached and her arm hurt; she felt the warmth and wetness of her own blood. Gripping it with one hand, she turned around, croaking her sister's name.

“She's fine, lass, Blair caught her safely.”

“Ada,” she said again, not hearing him, and then she was heaved up over his shoulder. “Och! What are ye daein'?” she demanded, finding her words at last.

“Takin' ye upstairs. Ye need tae be seen tae, and I want ye in bed now.”

The words stuck in her mind, and she gasped, looking up to see the other men watching her, slack-jawed. Her father, Ada, and Blair were nowhere to be seen.

Growling into Cam's ear, she ground out, “Ye are humiliatin' me! I am the lady of this house.”

He snorted. “And ye are also the one who foolishly tried to topple out yer own window, lass. So, I dae believe ye have done all the humiliatin' yerself.”

She cried out in rage and began to pummel his back to the amusement of the other men, but Cam only held her tighter. And her arm began to hurt more, so she stopped, furious that

he would treat her this way. If her father knew, he would be equally enraged.

*Or perhaps nae. He did wish someone else would get through tae me.*

Cam stomped upstairs, carting her like a sack of grain. “Tell me,” he drawled in a mocking tone. “What did ye plan tae dae? Reach over the side and grab her hand tae help her up?”

“I dinnae see why it is any business of yers,” she said through gritted teeth, only to hear him chuckle richly.

*Really, is the man constantly amused?*

“As yer guard, it is naturally me business.” When he finally got upstairs, he saw Angus and Darren frantically trying to get inside as Blair glared at them both.

“What is this?” he demanded, putting her down while Ella appraised him, only slightly sheepish.

“It seems that Ada locked the door,” she explained, seizing her sister in a hug and whispering, “Thank God yer all right.”

“Ye too, Ella,” Ada said, squeezing hard. “I’m sorry. I didnae wish ye tae get hurt.”

“Of course, nae,” she said with a smile. “Are ye hurt?”

“Nay,” Ada replied.

“I am tae take Ada down tae the laird’s study tae be the first tae explain.” Blair looked grim.

“Aye, but I wanted tae see ye first, tae see that ye were well,” Ada protested.

“Aye, Ada. Go on. I will see the healer and then I will come,” Ella assured her.

“But first, we must deal with this,” Blair said, pushing Angus and Darren aside.

Now, she could really see their age. They looked ragged and fatigued. “I am sorry tae ye both,” Ella said. “I will speak tae me faither on yer behalf.”

“Thank ye, lass,” Darren said, nodding gratefully.

Blair and Cam both frowned at the door. “We will have tae break it down,” Cam said, and Blair nodded.

“Aye, but here is the key first.” Ada pulled it out of a pocket in her gown and handed it to Blair.

Ella caught a look between them, or so she thought, but it was only brief. It was full of meaning, but she wasn’t quite sure what. Blair inserted it into the lock, and it clicked open. There was only the wooden bolt left to break through. She thought

she heard Cam utter *shite* before both young men rushed at the door shoulders first. She grabbed for Ada and shrieked at the sound of breaking wood, and the sound of both men falling to the floor. Putting a hand over her mouth, she rushed forward. “Dear God,” she said, “Are ye all right?”

“Aye, nae tae worry,” Cam said, while Angus and Darren helped them up.

Ella watched as he brushed down his chest and arms, little splinters of wood everywhere. For a moment, her eyes imagined the sight of him without any uniform or armor, and it made wetness flow between her thighs again.

*Ye are a foolish girl!*

She blushed at her own thoughts, glad they were kept hidden within the confines of her mind.

“There we are,” Blair said with a smile. “I will ask someone tae come and repair the door as soon as possible.”

“Thank ye,” Ella said, and she walked inside to her bed, grasping the post for support.

“I will take the men and Ada tae the laird,” Blair offered.

“Aye,” she replied softly, and Cam stayed behind, to her relief. She was glad he’d stayed, even though she’d given him an earful on their way up.



“Sit down, lass. The healer will be here soon.”

Nodding, she sat in one of the comfortable chairs by the fire, and when she motioned to show him to take a chair, too, he sat down across from her, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. He looked into her eyes, and she wanted to look away, but the feeling it gave her was so new, so heated, she didn't want to. Not yet. The fall had reminded her of all the things she had not yet done in her life, and it was time to make some changes. She knew her father would be furious about what happened, that he would yell at them until their ears bled. But she realized she didn't care. She wanted to live. Even though it still scared her, she wanted to take the first step into a new chapter. And deep down, she had a feeling that the new freedom would somehow involve the masked man in front of her.

“How is yer head? I saw ye hit it.”

“It's fine,” she said, clearing her throat and tearing her gaze away.

Ella could think of nothing but kisses. Cam made her skin flush, and she clasped and unclasped her hands, not sure what to do with herself in the moment. “Thank ye,” she added, breathing out.

“Are ye nervous?” he asked, and her eyes snapped back to his.

“Nay, what dae ye mean?”

“The healer.” He motioned with his head toward the doorway.  
“Ye are afraid of what she will dae?”

“Och, nae,” she replied with a relieved sigh. “I am still just shocked about everything.”

They’d argued all the way up the stairs, but now she wondered where her strong, fiery edge had gone.

“I understand.” He reached over and took her hand. She looked down where he rubbed his thumb across the back of it.  
“Ye took quite a fall.”

“But ye were there tae catch me.” She looked up at him, her heart beating double time.

“Aye. I wouldnae ever let ye fall.”

Ella noticed for the first time that his blue eyes had tiny flecks of yellow in them. They were mesmerizing, and now when she looked at his face, she hardly saw the mask. Seconds ticked by, and she knew what she wanted to do, what her body ached to do. Leaning forward to kiss him would start her journey of breaking free. But just as she determined to do it, the healer walked in, and their hands pulled apart.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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“Dear God!” the old healer said, hurrying over to kneel at Ella’s foot. “I heard what happened. Lass, ye nearly gave me a heart attack!”

The healer had a kind face and kind eyes. Cameron was reminded of Arla, the woman he’d called máthair for so many years. She’d been kind, too. He had an upbringing like many children couldn’t even imagine. Seamus and Julia certainly couldn’t. But she had been nearly sixty summers when she took him in, and so when he was about five and ten, she passed away. After that, he had to make his own way in the world.

“Och, Deborah, ‘tis fine, only a scratch,” Ella replied, pointing to the wound on her arm.

“We shall see about that.” Deborah sat on a nearby footstool with the basket she brought up with her. Taking out a piece of wool, she went to Ella’s side table where she found a pewter basin of water. She dipped the cloth inside, wrung it out, and placed the wet cloth on the wound.

“Good, ‘tis just a scratch. That is fine. I have already made a poultice for ye.” Deborah reached inside the basket and

emerged with a small canister. Dipping her fingers into it, she removed a portion of a gray paste and began to apply it to Ella's wound. The lass winced, and instantly Cameron jumped to action, worried about her pain.

“Should I distract ye tellin’ about the time I found me young brother drunk under the table one night at only sixteen summers?”

“Aye,” Ella said, chuckling and turning toward him.

“Well, I shouldnae say he is me brother; more like a found child he is. I found him one day outside me family home.”

“What happened?” she prodded with interest.

“He was a skinny thing when I found him, had hardly eaten in recent days. So, when I let him first stay in the house and gave him a meal, we all went tae bed. But I awoke hours later, for there was a weird sound that I couldnae identify.” He chuckled, remembering how Seamus had sounded from inside the tavern's main room.

“I crept out with me candle intae the main room, and I heard it, clear as day. Hiccups.”

“Hiccups?” Ella asked with a knowing smile.

Deborah had begun to wrap the wound with a clean white cloth, but Ella didn't seem to notice. She was fully engaged by Cam's story.

“Aye, and so I went in search of the sound, and I found him, under one of the long wooden tables, leaning back against the table leg. He was hiccupping, his head slumped over, and he had a bottle of me finest whiskey between his legs. It was nearly finished!”

Ella laughed, and Cameron joined her. Finally, he saw her smile, and the sound of her laugh was like a bubbling brook to his ears. He looked away, surprised by the sudden flood of warm feelings in his chest somewhere close to his heart. He had to remember to keep his mind on what he was trying to do. It was she he was trying to charm, not the other way around.

“What happened next?” she asked.

“Well, in the morning, I hauled him out from under the table, groanin’. When he came tae, he told me that he’d never had whiskey before, so he desperately wanted tae try it. Poor thing thought I was goin’ tae be angry, but I told him it was the funniest story I’d ever lived. Sadly, it’s been two years, and the lad cannae have even a dram of whiskey tae save his life. Even a wee bit makes him want to meet his maker.”

Ella was still giggling when the healer tied off the scrap of cloth, completing the arm bandage. Deborah stood and brushed her hands together.

“Anythin’ else?”

“Her head. She hit it against the wall,” Cameron remembered, wondering why he was being so solicitous. Had he not already

saved her life? Deborah looked over, assessing him with narrowed eyes, watching him from head to toe.

Smiling, she said, “Ye must be the new handsome guard. All the maids are talkin’ about ye, ye ken.”

Cameron chuckled, and surprisingly, felt a warm blush inch up his neck.

“He caught me,” Ella said, reaching out to squeeze his arm and then pulling back quickly as if she remembered where she was and whom she had touched in such a tender way. She also seemed to forget the fact that she was jealous of him winking at the maids earlier in the day. Or had he imagined it—wanting to elicit such an emotion from her? Because for him, her indifference was far worse than a jealous lassie spouting indignation.

“Well, very brave indeed,” Deborah stated, looking at the back of Ella’s head. “Hmm, there are nae cuts, which is good, but it is a bit swollen. Are ye dizzy?”

“Nay,” Ella answered.

“Good. Then, stay awake a little while, and then go tae bed a bit later for yer rest. Ye have had a busy day.”

“Aye, Deborah. Thank ye.”

Deborah smiled at them both, picked up her basket and took her leave. Cameron didn’t want to leave yet, and had the

impression that she wanted him to stay a little longer for whatever reason. Yet it was perplexing and unlike her.

They sat in silence for a few moments before Cameron reached to adjust the mask's string. But when he did, he winced as he touched the wound where his head had hit the ground.

"Ye are hurt!" she cried, leaning closer. "Yer head. Ye must have hit it when I fell on ye. Och, why did ye say naethin' tae the healer?"

"Tis fine," he said, pulling his hand away and sitting taller. "Tis just a scratch." He winked at her, and she put her hands on her hips, standing up.

"Why did ye dae that? Ye risked gettin' terribly hurt for me. That was a great height I fell from. I could have killed ye meself."

She watched him with suspicion, as was becoming habit, but this time he could tell there was no heat in her, no anger. She was genuinely interested in why he did what he did. He had been asking himself that same thing repeatedly ever since it happened. Of course, it was only right to help a fellow human, especially one in such a terrible situation. But there was so much more to it. When he saw her fall, his heart nearly came out of his chest, and instinctively he'd held his arms out, ready to catch her.

He hid whatever was going on inside him with his usual handsome smile. "I would dae anythin' for a lass in trouble," he said, and caught her rolling her eyes.

“I dinnae think so. Ye really could have gotten hurt, Cam.”

“Aye, but it is me job,” he said more seriously. “And I didnae think it right that a lass as young as yerself who has seen so little of the world should die that way.” He shrugged. “And dinnae forget I was on duty, too.”

“Well,” she considered, letting out a slow breath. Her face had changed entirely from suspicious to touched. “That is very kind of ye, and I thank ye for it. I was thinkin’ the same thing, that there is so much in the world I havenae yet experienced.” She took one long breath for a few seconds and then continued. “I didnae want tae die. Nae yet. So, ye deserve a favor in exchange for savin’ me life. For ye and Blair savin’ both our lives. What is it ye want? A better room? Better food? Anythin’. Ye must only name it.” She smiled again, looking down at him, and Cameron realized she had just asked a very dangerous question indeed.



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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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Ella knew she'd asked a dangerous question. She knew it the moment the question left her lips and she caught the look in his eye. It was a hungry look, one that felt as though she might step forward and offer what she had.

Cam stood slowly as they gazed into each other's eyes. She again noted his height and strength, and she kept her hands firmly at her sides to refrain from reaching out and caressing every plane and curve of him despite her every impulse to go right ahead. He was in uniform, of course, but she could still envision the physical work of art that lay beneath. It was a work of art she needed to see, and she would never risk death again without seeing such a sight.

*Be bold, Ella.*

Despite knowing what she *should* do, she was newly energized by her recent shenanigans inside and outside the castle.

“Nae matter how foolish ye are, lass, I couldnae imagine lettin’ ye get hurt,” he said, stepping impossibly closer until her hands rose between them, and she placed them on his chest.

She tilted her chin up to meet his eyes. He took an eon looking into her eyes before bending down over her mouth, hesitating only a moment before kissing her. Ella's eyes fluttered closed, and she allowed it, surprised that he read her thoughts. The kiss was warm and soft, with a streak of boldness. She parted her lips at his touch, her hands pressed against his chest as he cupped her face in both hands.

This was what she'd dreamt about for so long, to be so desired by a strong man that it felt like she'd reached heaven. But she did not expect to be so gripped by desire that it made her shiver. She wished she was bare before him again like she'd been when she bathed so he could touch her everywhere, soothing the ache between her thighs that grew steadily insistent.

But even though she hoped her bold side would prevail, it was not yet stronger than the sensible side. Remembering herself and the fact that the doors to her room had been broken open, and they were both fully exposed to anyone's view, she pulled away reluctantly. She stepped back and stared at Cam with wide eyes, covering her mouth with one hand as her other hand flew out to slap him with the other.

She watched his head turn from the force of the blow, and his eyes narrowed as his hand touched his face. He pinned her with a sharp questioning look as he studied her carefully.

"What was that for?" he asked at length.

*You mean the kiss? The kiss that threatened tae melt me tae the floor in a heap?*

“What did I do?” he held her gaze curiously.

“I—” she began and then stopped, stepping back to put distance between them.

Why had she hit him? Hadn't she thought about kissing him herself, that she hadn't been just about to reach for him to pull his mouth down to hers? But something felt strange about him doing it first, like he'd read her mind. She wanted to be the bold one, to take the first step, and he'd done it instead. It had been the same that morning in her room. He was the one to see her naked first, to see her at her most vulnerable. And yet again, he had done the same with the kiss, catching her off guard to see just how warmly she reacted to him.

It had been the same when she fell from the wall. She was the vulnerable one, always showing her weakness, not her strength. For once in her life she wanted to be strong enough. She wanted to be the one who struck out and did as she pleased.

*I suppose I did throw whiskey in a man's face and pull me sister out of his tavern.*

That was true, but it was brief, and Cam hadn't seen that. She wouldn't have cared about his opinion anyway at the time, even if he had been there. Unfortunately, Cam had scrambled all her senses nearly from his first hungry look. She was already wanting, already jealous. And now, despite all their arguments throughout the day, he knew exactly how she felt about him in the physical sense, and it infuriated her.

“What are ye about, sir?” she asked, stepping back again.

It couldn't hurt to stay as far away from him as possible. The closer she got, the stronger his power grew, almost as though he were a magician. She wondered if there was a creature like this in fairy tales—a man with the power to seduce with only a look, a touch, or just a breath.

Cam smirked, one side of his mouth quirking in a way that made him both handsome and dangerous at the same time. She wasn't sure how he accomplished that feat. He did it so well that she reacted just as she was sure every other woman in Christendom reacted many times before.

"I thought it was what ye wanted, Ella. I could see it in yer eyes," he explained.

Annoyed that he understood her true desire yet again, she pointed at him. "I could tell my faither about this, ye ken. He wouldnae be happy. And it's *Lady Ella* to you."

Cam chuckled and took one step closer to her, leaning in slightly. "Would ye really do that?" He shook his head. "I dinnae think so, *Lady Ella*."

Ella sucked in an exasperated breath, furious and ready to yell at him again, to tell him exactly what she thought of him. How dare he look so pompous and smug and proud! It was as if he had heard every compliment ever uttered about him, and he believed every single one of them. She disliked people like that because it meant there would never be any improvement or growth made. Those lofty people believed themselves kings among men, and Cam was exactly like that.

He turned to leave before she could respond. This was her time of rebellion, and she'd imagined him as a part of it, but she'd lost her nerve in the heat of the moment, and he knew it. She tried to think of something clever and witty to say as he walked out, but nothing came to her.

*Damn it!*

In a huff, she sat down, crossed her arms, and winced when she grazed the bandage on her wound. Cam turned around at the door. "I dinnae think ye will, because ye enjoyed that kiss. A man can always tell." He winked, and as her mouth opened to spew fire, he left.

She huffed again, furious. How did Ada find it so easy to be rebellious and strong? Because she was afraid one moment and bold the next. And everyone seemed easily able to read her mind. Even a man who just met her that very morning. Cam was right. She *had* enjoyed the kiss, far more than she wanted to admit to herself. Standing, she walked to the bed and threw herself upon it, groaning. Perhaps tomorrow would bring about a better, bolder, Ella. Maybe even sooner than that, she hoped.



Cameron left Ella's quarters with a smile on his face, but by the time he reached the end of the passageway, he stopped.

*Shite.*

He had to watch her; he could not leave her, especially after all that had happened. He stood there, unsure what to do. He couldn't go back after the way he left. It was all part of his

strategy. If he teased her in his usual manner, she'd be like putty in his hands. Even if she didn't realize it, one had to leave a lass wanting more. If he kept playing it this way, Ella falling in love with him would be easier than ever.

*Was it part of yer plan tae feel somethin' durin' that kiss?*

It certainly was not. He, of course, expected to feel the usual tightening under his kilt, and to enjoy the fun of having a normal kiss with a normal lass. Instead, in that brief kiss with her, he'd felt something different—a desire to pull her close and never let go. That strange, sudden desire scared him, but he'd been unable to pull away from the sweet taste of her kiss. For it had been sweeter than any other he'd ever had in the whole of his life. Her lips were plump, soft, and as even inexperienced as they were, they'd enflamed a lust inside him he'd never known before. The kiss had scared him too, and deep down he was glad she'd been the one to pull away first. He knew he would not have been able to do it himself. Leaning back against the wall, he clunked his head once and closed his eyes.

*What the hell is wrong with ye, lad?*

He rubbed a frustrated hand across his face. It was surely only because he'd just helped her survive a near-deadly fall. It only made *her* feel more protective because she'd seen him almost die. That would change anyone's feelings about another, wouldn't it? He exhaled slowly. Over the years, there had been many women, but none of them really special. He never really wanted to choose anyone like that because he didn't know what it meant to give one's life to another. Or rather, he was afraid to do it because of the loss of the mother who'd taken him in. And the loss of his real mother, whom he never knew. And he'd seen the bad cards dealt to Seamus and Julia, and he certainly didn't want to bring that upon anyone else.

Cameron reflected that Blair had never really understood him. Then again, he didn't know the full history of Blair's past. He assumed that he had a good home life and grew up well due to his stern and firm principles. But the man was rather tight-lipped about most personal affairs, evidenced by the way he reacted when Cameron had mentioned Ada. He was a man who hated being questioned and maybe what happened to him was not as pleasant as Cameron thought, yet he could never be sure.

Most people didn't understand that when one didn't know where they came from, it changed them. It made Cameron not trust anything around him, as if the whole world was unstable, and he had to find something to hold onto that would make him look away from the darkness and uncertainty that had always surrounded him.

Seamus and Julia were as much his rocks in life as was the tavern. His pleasure, too, was also an anchor. It was always there for him, ready for the taking, which was why he always played into Rory and Alistair's bets. They were easy, and reminded him that pleasure was equally as easy to find. It distracted him from thinking about the brooch and who had given it to him, how he didn't know who put him on the healer's doorstep, and how he might never learn the truth.

When he heard footsteps, he stood tall again, moving closer to Ella's quarters. Blair couldn't fault him for not being nearby, as he and Ada appeared in the doorway. They both looked flushed, and Blair wore a strange expression on his face, something like a smirk.

*What was happening here?*

Cameron looked between them with a smile, trying to gauge the situation, but Blair shot him a warning look, straight-faced. Cameron winked at him, while Blair shot daggers with his eyes.

“Ella needs tae go to the laird’s study,” Blair reminded his friend sharply. “The man is waiting, mind ye.”

“Aye, and good luck tae her. He is as hard as nails and just as stubborn,” Ada noted, standing in her doorway. “He willnae listen to a word I say.”

“How are ye then since the fall, Lady Ada?” Cameron asked. She seemed fine, only fiery and upset. He looked at her fully, seeing she was nearly Ella’s twin, except for her dark eyes. And there was something about the way the corners of her mouth turned up that seemed as if she always entertained thoughts she wished to tell no one else. She was lovely, very bonnie, but when he looked at her, there was no flame of lust like he felt with Ella. He wondered what sway she had over him that others did not. If he did not know she was upset by their recent kiss, he might have thought she’d put him under a spell to draw him to her.

“I am well enough,” Ada answered his question, “although I wish I could have gotten down from the wall on me own.” She snuck a peek inside the room looking for Ella and then whispered, “And I wish me sister hadnae climb out after me.” A guilty look passed across her face. “But I thank ye both for saving us. I confess I feel a little foolish. But ye must understand, it was all because...” she stopped, and Cameron saw tears of frustration in her eyes. “It doesnae matter. Ye are our guards, meant tae keep us inside.”



Blair looked grim again, folding his hands behind his back as he listened. “Aye, and ye should rest, Me Lady,” he said to her, and with a sigh Ada stalked off to her bed. “I have asked someone tae begin making repairs tae the doors,” he added for Cameron’s benefit.

“And there will certainly be a bolt on the outside now, rather than the inside!” Ada called from across the room, her voice testy and her manner rankled.

Ella met Cameron in the passage outside her room. She looked frustrated, her cheeks still blooming with angry color. “I suppose ye are tae take me tae me faither?”

“Aye,” he said, not meeting her eyes after the kiss and its corresponding upheaval.

“Very well. Let us go then.”

Nodding to Blair, Cameron let Ella lead the way out of the passageway and down the stairs to her father’s study. Her back was straight and rigid, her arms tense. He knew she was still upset about what happened, but didn’t know exactly why. She had enjoyed the kiss, just as he had. She had not wanted him to leave, and she’d stepped closer too, pressing her hands gently against his chest. Her mouth had opened to his, welcoming him. Then why did she inexplicably pull back and slap him? And then ask him what he was up to, as if it had all been a surprise to her?

Was it only because she didn’t want to show him that she wanted to be kissed? He couldn’t understand what was

shameful about that except for the fact she didn't want to show weakness to *him* in particular. Shaking his head at the confounding woman, he waited outside the study when she entered, and the maelstrom began immediately with the angry sound of the laird's voice.

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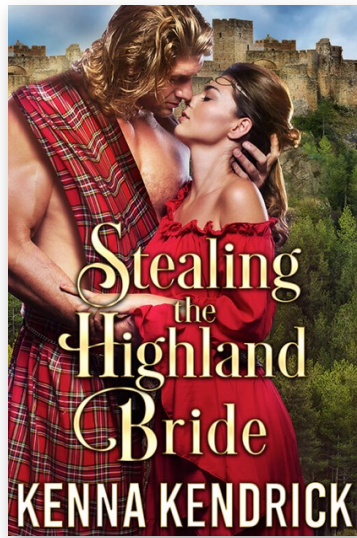
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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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Ella ground her teeth as soon as she stepped inside the study, ready for the wave of anger she was about to receive. Leaving Cam outside, she shut the door and leaned against it, only opening her eyes once she was fully inside. Her father sat on the outer edge of his desk, arms crossed as he glared at her, banked fire glowing in his eyes.

“Has Deborah looked at ye?”

“Aye,” she said, lifting her bandaged arm.

A flicker of worry crossed his face. “Are ye well?”

“Aye, all is well.”

“Good.” He nodded, and suddenly the look of worry vanished and his voice rose. “Then, tell me why in bloody hell ye went after yer sister when she was doin’ a foolish thing like scaling down the castle?”

Ella sighed and stepped forward, trying to remain bold even when she ought to feel guilty for her foolishness. The old Ella

would have been able to think of only that, but this new version of her felt only partially guilty. The rest of her was angry, with a new courage she desperately wanted to fan into hot flames.

“I was thinkin’ that I didnae want tae watch me sister fall tae her death when I might do somethin’ about it. I ken that I wouldnae have been able tae live with meself if she died or gotten injured and I simply stood at the window.”

“Ye could have sent the guards for help! And what bloody good use they were! Nae comin’ tae yer aid. Blair convinced me tae allow Angus and Darren tae work in their stead when he and Hamish are eatin’, sleepin’, and the like, but I kent it was a bad choice. The other two are simply too old, and they cannae be entrusted with the task!” He stood and began to pace.

“Please, Faither, dinnae punish them. It wasnae their fault that they couldnae get intae the room. Ada had locked and bolted it.”

“For the sake of Christ!” he cried, a look of shock on his face.

Ella winced. “I suppose Blair didnae tell ye he’s sent for workers tae begin makin’ a new set of doors.”

“Och, I suppose they had tae break them down then,” he said, hands on his hips as he glared at her.

“Aye. Blair and Cam. So perhaps the only fault of Angus and Darren is that they were too old tae break through the strong

bolt. But Ada unlocked it first for the men as well.” She sighed again. “I ken ye think it was all foolish, but we are well and safe now.”

“Aye, but who kens when ye will try again! And the new guards ought tae have been in the room with ye when ye rested, as per me new instructions! Ye will be moved tae new rooms until the doors can be completed!”

Ella reddened with fury. “Faither, surely ye cannae expect that, nae really! And nay matter what ye say, I ken that Angus and Darren have far too much respect for us tae burst in on our privacy like that.”

“Well, it wasnae as if Ada was even really restin’!” he started pacing again. “It doesnae matter. I am tired of this headstrong foolishness, Ella. I thought I could depend upon ye tae help Ada nae tae dae such things! That I could depend on ye both!”

“I think it is time ye stopped expectin’ so much of me. If ye havenae realized, Ada is now a woman with a mind of her own, and she must be allowed tae make some of her own choices, or she will fight and fight until she gets what she wants. Ye ken what she is like. That is why she climbed down the wall. It was rebellion against this madness, and I cannae say I dinnae understand her.”

“Well, that is nae possible!” he said, louder than before, his eyes wide. “I have told ye! Until the man who abducted ye has been defeated, I can never let ye leave the castle, or he will surely take ye and kill ye as he did—” he stopped then and closed his mouth, turning around to lean over the hearth, his hands on the stone mantle above.

Ella, too, was angered, hating the fact that she couldn't and would never understand her father's logic. If the kidnapper took them when they were children, why would he suddenly want them now? Since the incident occurred so long ago, any resentment the man felt toward her father had most likely faded by now. *I hope.*

“Say ye willnae punish Angus and Darren. Let them continue in their duties assistin’ Blair and Cam.” She waited, watching his back, hoping he would give her that at least.

“Aye, I agree tae that.” He spun around, and for a moment his gaze softened. “Why have ye turned intae yer sister, lass? Fightin’ me at every turn, instead of always doin’ as yer asked?”

Ella frowned, hating that image of herself. It was still there inside her, but she was ready to push it away, to let it go. Some sense was good, to be sure; it would keep one from risking their neck and climbing down castle walls. But too much sense was boring, and it kept her safer than she wanted to be.

“Faither, would ye really want me tae act this way? It makes me sound as if I have nae life in me body, nae a thought of me own.”

He turned away at that and went to sit at his desk, pulling a paper towards him. “Ella, it doesnae matter any longer. Ye will begin tae grow intae yer responsibility as yer life takes a new turn.”

“Och? What dae ye mean?” Her heart thumped wildly as her eyes moved to the paper he held in front of him. She had a



feeling she knew what he was about to say, and she prayed it wasn't so. Not yet. It couldn't be yet. There was still so much to do and experience.

*Aye, but ye pushed Cam away after that kiss, slapped him too. Ye wasted yer chance.*

“I mean that after taeday, I have decided it is time for ye tae marry. It seems that I am nae longer able tae keep the both of ye safe. Ye are now old enough tae marry, and *should* be married at this age. Yer máthair would have wanted it so.”

He put down the paper and folded his hands on top of it, pinning her with blue eyes that now seemed cold. She swallowed hard over a lump in her throat.

“It is sooner than I planned, but I ken it is time.” He tapped his finger on the desk. “I have chosen yer betrothed.”

Ella's heart sank. It was just as she feared.

Without her even asking, he said, “It is the neighboring laird's son, Neil MacThomas. I have already sent a message to him, and the laird has written back, acceptin' eagerly.”

“But ye couldnae have received the letter in so short a time. After the wall, it was only about an hour.”

“So it was, but—”

“Ye sent it before,” she said in growing horror. “After ye kent Aunt Isla wasnae comin’.”

“Aye,” he said, stiffening under her gaze. “I wanted tae see if the man was even interested, if he hadnae already selected a wife for his son. But Laird MacThomas was most interested in my offer. I too was very surprised at how quickly he wrote back tae me. But that doesnae matter. It suits our purposes perfectly.”

“*Our* purpose?!” she cried, leaning over the desk to look down at him.

A tear dropped from her cheek onto the letter below. They both heard it but neither acknowledged its presence and what it signified.

“Faither,” she begged. “Can ye nae wait?”

“Nae,” he replied, looking down, and she knew he was avoiding her gaze. “There is nae reason tae wait, especially now that we ken Neil is interested. So, the weddin’ will be announced in a few days. All the plans are bein’ made.”

“A few days?” she asked, horrified, stepping back.

“Aye. It will all be over soon, and ye will have a new life as lady of a new clan. It is all as it should be.” He still didn’t look at her. “So, ye must go and prepare, Ella. Yer life in this *prison*, as ye and Ada so often put it, will soon be over. Yer new husband will watch over ye now.”

Ella watched him for a few seconds, wondering how he could think this was a solution. In years past, she would never have thought it of him. But now, it seemed his fear had so affected him he was making choices he would not normally have made.

Without another word she stalked out, hardly noticing Cam just outside, and not hearing his footsteps as he hurried after her.



Cameron chased Ella as she dashed out of the study, barely looking at him. He'd heard some of the words spoken in the laird's study, but not all of them, so he knew things weren't going well. She did not, however, run upstairs to her bedroom as she should have. But why would he expect her to do what she ought? The Ella he'd met never did what she ought, right from the start.

She didn't seem to hear him as he hurried after her while she rushed through the corridors, only leaving through a side door leading to a private courtyard. It was different than the one outside her bedroom window, and this one seemed old and mostly unused, with no windows looking down upon it.

"Lady Ella," he finally beseeched once they reached the garden. "Are ye well?" He couldn't think of anything better to say, and Ella spun around, eyes sparking and cheeks red.

"Nae, I am nae bloody well!" she cried, throwing up her hands before turning again and walking to the far side of the courtyard to sit on one of the wooden benches.

Cameron walked slowly toward her, hands behind his back. He had never known what to do in the face of female tears. He had seen many, having grown up in a healer's household. Women came from all over the village with various ailments, seeking aid and cures. And the healer had always spoken to them with soothing words and a calm voice. She had always known how to help him when he cried as a young boy. But now, without Arla's help and without anyone else around, Cameron wasn't quite sure what to say to a bereft young lass.

Ella wiped inconsolable tears from her face, trying to catch her breath. "I suppose ye are quite gleeful now that ye have seen me at me worst yet again."

He frowned. "When have I seen ye at yer worst?"

Lifting a brow, she said morosely, "Only today as I hung upside down from me window, caught on a curtain and tryin' tae grab a branch from a tree."

They stared at each other for a few seconds before they each started laughing in spite of themselves. The laughter grew until Ella held her stomach and gasped for breath. When he saw it, Cameron smiled at her change of mood. But when Ella saw him watching her, her smile faded and she looked away.

"Aye, it all sounds a bit ridiculous now." She stood and smoothed her skirts before brushing away a few stray red hairs and pulling her plait over her shoulder. "I suppose I should return tae me room."

*Nae*, Cameron wanted to say. It had been too brief, that time of sweet companionship, when Ella let go and laughed, showing

him a genuinely happy smile. Why had she been crying, he wondered? What had her father said to make her despair?

“Och, he says we are tae move tae new rooms until the doors can be fixed,” Ella said before leaving the courtyard. “I suppose I will have tae find out where those will be.”

“Someone will dae it,” he answered, and with a grim look she left, and he followed dutifully after.

It was not lost on him that Ella was going to be in a room of her own, but he tried not to think too much about it, or else his imagination would run away with him, and he would be in greater trouble than he needed at the moment.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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When Ella returned to her chambers, she saw that Ada and the maids were packing a trunk, and two maids were already packing her own things. Everything had been normal until she'd decided to take her first step out of the castle. Then Cam had arrived, and things just started changing. She'd started changing, and now she and Ada were not going to be in the same room they'd shared since they were little.

“Faither’s man has been by tae tell us we are movin’ tae new rooms until the doors are fixed,” Ada said without looking up, passing something to one of the maids to place in the trunk.

“Aye, I ken. He told me himself.” She watched the maids with a distracted eye, wondering how they felt about moving the laird’s prisoners from one room to another.

The maids were usually silent, however, and she'd never known what that meant. Did they wish for her and her sister to be free as well? She closed her eyes and sighed. Normally, she might have instructed the maids on what to take and how to take it, but now she didn't care. The day was growing worse and worse. It seemed it had all begun with their wild decision to leave the castle for one night of freedom, but now she could see that it had started long ago. She was starting to see so many things she had never seen before.

Ada stood and faced her. Ella looked up from her seat on one of the chairs, and her sister approached her, concerned.

“What did Faither say?”

“His usual, which ye ken well,” Ella replied.

“Aye, I dae. Nothin’ more?”

“I will tell ye later,” Ella said, gesturing to the maids. “There is somethin’ ye should hear,” she said in a lower voice.

She did not wish anyone else to know yet about her forced marriage. It was all too humiliating. Even if she was the daughter of a laird, having one of the highest positions in the Highlands, she was still little better than a sheep. She was little better than one of the maids in the room, just doing as she was instructed.

“Aye,” Ada replied with a wicked look in her eye. “Ye come tae me room, and ye will tell me all. I have a treat for ye.”

“Och? That sounds wonderful. I dae believe the pair of us could use a bit of a treat.”

“True enough.” Ada leaned over and squeezed her hand before returning to assist the maids.

After the preparations, Ada was called once again by their father. Ella watched as her sister went forlornly, and she wondered what it could possibly be about. Hadn't he done enough? Her fists clenched at her sides, wishing that she could stand right beside her and fight alongside her. It had always been easier to fight against him when Ada was with her, not that she'd had much experience until recently in talking back to him. Perhaps that was why he'd been speaking to them separately now. The guilt was now too much to have to deal with when they both looked at him like he was a villain.

With the servants' help, Ella had her things taken to her new room and she was delighted to see which room had been chosen for her. It was kindly right next to her sister's, and there was a secret passageway that connected the two rooms. But what she was certain her father did not remember was that there was also another passageway leading out of her room. It was in a far corner, hidden by a large wooden shelf. It led down and down, connecting to nearly all the other passageways on that side of the castle.

*What luck!*

Outside the room stood Angus and Darren, looking a little shaken, but she was glad to see it appeared they had not been physically punished. She had noticed that Blair and Cam had not escorted her from their rooms with their trunks, but with so many servants around, she was certain her father had thought it acceptable. However, since they were at their new rooms, she questioned the old guards about their whereabouts.

“Where are Blair and Cam?” she asked, annoyed that she was disappointed at their absence.



Being teased by Cam would lift her mood or at least distract her from all that had happened. She might have been able to focus on his teasing, handsome smile instead of her anger at her father, who thought nothing of marrying her off without so much as asking her opinion on the matter.

“They are cleaning up, and yer faither asked that Deborah look at them as well. He wants them tae be in the best condition—only the best guards for his daughters,” Angus said sadly, not meeting her gaze.

Ella smiled at him. “I see. That is a good idea.” She remembered that Cam had hit his head when he fell catching her, and she hoped he was well, even though he infuriated her at times. “I hope ye werenae punished for what happened today. It wasnae yer fault. I told me faither as much.”

“Aye, ye did well, Me Lady. Yer faither was lenient with us, and we were able tae keep our positions here.”

“Good. So, the other guards are down in the healer’s room?” she asked, an idea coming to her, one that was full of mischief, wickedness, and boldness.

*Just what I need. The bold Ella will nae falter now.*

“Likely nae any longer. They are now in their quarters, sharing so they are, since they are working taegether,” Darren said, and Ella thanked them, pushing past them to her new room.

She shut the door behind her and leaned against it, staring the wooden shelf in the corner of the room, thinking. It was

possible that Angus and Darren would hear her moving the furniture to get to the passageway door. It was also possible that they would just assume she was unpacking. If they did come to the door when she moved the shelf, then she would say just that. With determination, Ella stalked across the room and shifted the heavy shelf a bit. It made a light squeak against the stone floor, and she paused, waiting.

When no one came to the door, she pulled again until there was a big enough space for her to slip behind it. Quickly, without giving it another thought, she squeezed behind the shelf and through the door to the passageway, shutting it behind her. It was a risk, she knew. If Angus and Darren called to her and she didn't answer, they would open the door and see that the shelf had been moved. But most likely, that wouldn't happen.

First, they were still too polite to remain in the room with her when she was doing what they would call "women's business." Also, they would have no way of knowing about the passageway, and they would likely not even recognize that the shelf had been moved, for she was thin enough to slip through just a small opening.

Once in the secret passageway, she was cast in darkness, her plan forming quickly. She didn't have much time, and it was possible it wouldn't work, but she wanted to give it a try. This was her chance to be the one seeing Cam in a vulnerable light. He had already seen her so many times as the weaker one, and this time she wanted to be in control. Slapping him had been an attempt at that, but it was feeble and they both knew it. With a little tingle of excitement in her belly when her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she moved forward.

It did not take long to find the soldiers' quarters, for they were always the loudest. It would be a guess as to which belonged

to Blair and Cam, but she had a feeling she knew, for it would be the best one. When the castle had first been built, all the soldiers' quarters had small doors which led to the secret passages, so they could move about the castle freely, and to escape enemies. She stood outside the one she knew to be the best of the soldiers' quarters, and she pressed her ear against the small door.

"I will be there soon," she heard Cam tell Blair when the door closed.

*I hope it is Cam who remains and nae Blair.*

If it was Cam, the slosh of water let her know she had planned it all perfectly. This was to be her revenge. He had seen her naked, and now she would get the chance to see him. She swallowed as she realized how excited she was at the thought, knowing exactly what she would see. Or rather what she thought she'd see based on how he'd felt beneath her hands.

Pushing the door open slightly, she peeked inside, and what she saw stole her breath away. Cam stood next to a basin of water without a stitch of clothing on his entire body except for the mask. Her gaze raked him from head to toe. *Wall*, was the first word that came to mind when she saw him. He was like a wall of muscle, created by a forge, then carved and smoothed by an artist. From his broad shoulders over his muscled chest to his rippled belly that tapered to a thin waist, Cam Hamish was well-made. In fact, perfectly made. His waist connected to strong, muscled thighs and legs, and in the center of it all under to a curled thatch of hair, hung his manhood.

The sight sent shivers of desire all over her, sparking her mission to new life. She had no idea what it was meant to do to her, but at the same time, her innocence made her all the

more curious. She wanted to know what it was and what it did. Ella had not realized what beauty a man could possess or the power a mere look could have over a woman's sensibilities. She was slack-jawed as she took him in, unable to stop looking. But as he began to wash himself with a cloth, she remembered her goal to put him off guard and catch him in a vulnerable situation.

*Tae be the bold woman I wish tae be.*

Opening the door, she slid into the open and stood in his room. His eyes instantly snapped up to investigate the noise, and in a flash his dirk was in his hand. Emotions flashed in a collision course across his face. At first he was angry, ready to fight with a fearsome darkness in his eyes. And then incredulity... followed by delight.

“What is it that brings ye here, lass?” He peered around her as he put down the dirk. “Och, I see ye kent where I'd be housed, and ye couldnae wait tae see me for yerself. Is that it?” He held out his arms, displaying his sculpted body for her viewing, which she admired before meeting his eyes.

*Dinnae falter, lass. Be bold.*

“It seems only right that I should return the favor of seeing ye how ye have seen me. It didnae seem fair,” she said with a lifted brow as she coyly put her hands on her hips.

His mouth quirked up in a smile, and he stepped closer, his powerful leonine body making her body flame with desire.

*Ye are the one tae put him off balance* she reminded herself.

“Mmm ...” he said, nodding, the sound sending another shudder of pleasure through her.

He stood closer until he was less than an arm’s length from her. He lifted a brow, and smirked, almost expectant. The scent of his body was heady. The soap he used was something spicy, musky, harsh, and masculine. She moistened her lips at the thought of tasting his golden skin.

“And what dae ye think of it?” he asked, still teasing her.

Lifting her chin in mock boldness, she stared right back at him and stepped closer.

She trailed her finger across his abdomen, walking a circle around him, her fingertip rising and falling with the slope of his muscles. Once she was in front of him again she said, “I think yer opinion of yerself is far too high.”

That was all she said before she rose on her tiptoes to press her mouth against his. This time, despite her innocence, she took strength from her moment of courage and wrapped her arms about his neck, opening her mouth to deepen the kiss, eyes closed, which made boldness easier.

It didn’t take long for Cam to respond, wrapping his arms about her tightly and pressing against her until she felt him strong and hard, eliciting a sudden gasp of wonder from her. She remembered this was her chance to throw him off balance,

and she was the first to reach out with her tongue against his, and he groaned, suffusing her skin with heat.

His hands moved to grasp her buttocks, grinding himself against her as she tasted him and he tasted her. But it was too much, far too much, for if she was not careful, she would submit to him again, showing her weakness instead of her strength. Finding whatever strength she had left, she pulled out of the circle of his arms.

For a moment, they merely stood, breathing hard, looking at each other. His lips were parted, his eyes full of fire and unfulfilled hunger. Yet again he reminded her of a beast in captivity, ready to lunge as soon as the cage door opened. When her eyes moved down his body, she saw his manhood, and she bit her lip to keep from gasping at the size and turgidity of it, standing straight up, thick and long. Moving her eyes back to his, she began to back away.

“It seems ye are nae unaffected, Mr. Hamish,” she said, closing her mouth, hoping he couldn’t hear just how breathless the kiss had made her.

“I never pretended otherwise, lass,” he said, leaning closer, but she jumped back out of reach again, finding herself against the wall by the secret door, and at the same time, knocking over a sturdy pair of boots, as well as a sword that had been leaning against the wall.

Looking at them with horror, she looked up again to see him smiling at her.

*Nae, nae! Calm and collected is what I must be.*

She chuckled, trying to return to her earlier confident state. “Aye, I suppose, but it is good to ken that ye are nae the only one who can surprise a person when they are in such an...” she let her eyes trail down his body again, pausing on his length and size, “...intimate moment.”

His jaw clenched, and she grinned. “I suppose ye will have tae attend tae that, will ye nae?” she asked, pointing at him. “I’m afraid I am far too busy tae assist.”

“Is that so?” he asked, taking a step closer. “It seems ye came all this way just tae find me here, on me own in the altogether. Yet now ye claim ye are too busy?” The teasing glint danced in his eyes, and Ella knew she had to be the one with the last word if she was to win the battle of witty banter.

“Aye, well, I had hopes of something, I suppose, but I have come, taken, and seen, and now I must leave.”

At his surprised look, Ella smiled prettily and waved. “Until later, Mr. Hamish,” she said with surprising calmness, and she opened the door wide, hitting a wooden table which made a loud crash, and then she was gone out the door and into the cool darkness of the passageway.

As soon as the door shut, she paused, basking in the cool air, hoping it would quell the heat which had seeped into her very bones.

*Dear God, can I dae anything in front of the man without losing me breath or me wits?*

For a moment, she expected Cam to come racing after her, then glad that he didn't, she turned and hurried away to her room, hoping she'd been able to show him just how *sassy* she could be.



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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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Cam stood still for a time, staring at the closed secret door which blended once more into the stonework of the castle wall. He blinked. Had that just happened, or had it been a dream? Moments before, he'd said goodbye to Blair and was just about to wash himself after the events of the wild afternoon when *she'd* entered. Ella. *Lady* Ella, the woman who left lust in her wake wherever she went, however she moved, whatever she said or did.

Had she just snuck to his room, gazed at him as if he were a moving feast, and she near to starvation, and then leaned up to kiss him, bold as brass? He looked down at his length, now hardened like a diamond, standing at attention, ready to find its release, and he knew.

*Aye, this was nae dream. She was here.*

He smirked, then chuckled, and then laughed outright, dipping the cloth into the water. This bet was getting more interesting all the time. Blair could never know about it, but Cam was confident that soon he would be winning, and Blair would be telling the laird that he had to move to work in a tavern instead of the castle.

Cam knew he had to rush to meet Blair, for there was no quick rendezvous with the laird's daughter on his schedule before returning to his duties. He hurried to wash himself and dress, all the while thinking of the way Ella's mouth felt against his. The way her body melted against him, and the way she tasted like sweet honey. It created a craving he knew he would never slake, and would think about it long after he left MacPherson Castle.

Shaking himself off, he left the room. It held far too many memories for him, and he worried about returning later that night. The sooner this bet was finished, the better, for Ella MacPherson was becoming far too intriguing to leave behind.



When Ella returned to her room, still trembling, she waited only a minute before going to Ada's quarters. Blair was already outside Ada's door, but Cam had not yet returned, so Angus had remained in his stead.

*I wonder how they chose who would guard whom? Or did Father choose for them?*

“I would say lock that door, but nae doubt Blair would have the idea tae break it down just like he did the other one, and then we would have tae move again,” Ada remarked, digging inside her trunk.

“Aye, well, it was the only way tae get intae our rooms again,” Ella said with a chuckle, sitting down in one of the comfortable chairs by the snapping fire.

It was late summer, but the castle was always cool, and in the nearing evening it was even cooler. Ella had only felt the kiss of a truly warm summer's day a few times in her life, but it was rare, with the cold river running nearby and the lush green of the forests. In the Highlands, everything was touched with coolness, and winters were nearly frozen while summers were pleasant and refreshing. But the heat she'd felt in Cam's room downstairs had seemed as though the sun was right in the room with them, nearly burning through her flesh.

Now, in front of her sister, she tried to cool herself, knowing her cheeks were still red. She hoped that Ada would think it was just the hustle and bustle of movement through the castle.

"I dinnae wish tae have dinner with Faither," she said, and Ada nodded.

"Aye, I have asked for our meals tae be brought here. But the maid already said Faither had requested that."

"Excellent. What did he want tae see ye about?"

"Och, just another reminder tae behave along with a bit of a threat. Seems tae think I am a bad influence on ye," Ella said, rolling her eyes. "I can only thank God if that is the case," she added with a chuckle. "I left hastily after that, and he did nae call me back, thankfully. It seems he wants tae see us as little as we wish tae see him."

*It is because he is feeling guilty.*

She'd seen it when he told her the news about the betrothal. She just hoped that he might change his mind. That he might look and see what he was asking his daughter to do and try to find a different solution. One that didn't make her want to scream and pound the walls.

“Good.” Ella watched as Ada stood up, brandishing a dark bottle in her hand with glee.

“Here it is! The treat,” she said with wide eyes, grabbing two pewter cups from a side table and handing them both to Ella.

Uncorking the bottle, she poured dark liquid into each, broadening her smile. Ella could smell the distinct scent of whiskey. Just then, she heard Cam's unmistakable voice from outside the door, having just arrived. She was eager to know what he was thinking right then, and her cheeks flushed again.

“Where did ye get this?” Ella asked as Ada recorked the bottle, grabbed her cup, and sat across from her.

“I took it from faither's study a few weeks ago. I was waitin' for just the right time tae open it, and I feel this is the perfect occasion. Our plans have been foiled; we almost fell tae our deaths, and our imprisonment has become even stricter, although I'm surprised that Blair and Cam have nae entered the room tae drink said whiskey since they are nae doubt listenin' tae us.”

Her eyes flashed mischievously, and she took her first sip. Ella followed, enjoying the feel of the burning liquid as it slid down her throat. Her father had never let them have any, for he

thought it too strong a beverage for proper young women, so it felt like a little drop of rebellion, and it was all too sweet.

Ella chuckled. “I think ye are growing more and more rebellious with each moment,” she said, and Ada raised her glass.

“From ye, that means a lot.” Her smile fell, and her brow furrowed. “I am sorry, Ella, I didnae mean tae involve ye in what I was tryin’ tae dae. I thought it would be easier tae climb down than it was. Then, that way, we could sneakily get out of our rooms without the guards kennin’, and we could find another passageway out of the castle. I doubt the guards will be in our room when we are sleepin’.”

Ella shook her head. “Faither seems tae think that an appropriate idea, so I dinnae ken that will work, but there is nothin’ tae be sorry for. Ye were just tryin’ tae find a way, like we talked about. Although I wish ye would have told me, and we might have come up with a safer plan together.”

“I ken,” Ada nodded, taking another sip of her whiskey. “I just wanted tae show ye that I could dae it. Faither thinks me so young that I cannae think on me own. And ye must think that of me as well.”

“Nae at all. I told him that ye are now a young woman, that ye want tae begin makin’ choice for yerself or ye’ll go mad.” She lowered her voice. “And that he must nae continue tae blame me for whatever choices ye wish tae make, tellin’ me I must have done better tae stop ye.”

“I am sorry about that too,” Ada replied.

“’Tis alright.” She drank down a generous gulp, and then bolstering her courage, she said, “Ada, there is something I have tae tell ye.” Glancing at the door, she added, “But I will lower me voice a bit so that the men cannae hear *exactly* what I say.”

“I am already intrigued!” Ada said gleefully, leaning closer, her dark eyes sparkling.

If she was going to believe that Ada really was a young woman, ready to take on new challenges in life, then Ella should begin treating her thusly. The first step was revealing the truth about what had happened with Cam. Besides, she couldn’t keep it to herself. It threatened to eat her up inside, and she hoped that Ada would be able to give her some insight into her own feelings.

“Well, something interesting happened this morn, and later as well.”

“Och?” Ada smiled and held her whiskey cup with both hands before taking another sip. “This mornin’, ye ken, ye were out, and I was takin’ me bath.”

“Aye, so?”

“So, I heard a knock at the door, and I allowed the person tae come in, thinkin’ it was the maid. Instead, it was the new guard, Cam.”

Gasping, Ada put a hand over her mouth before she descended into giggles. “Nae!” she said when she could breathe again, and with a little blush, Ella nodded.

She twisted her cup in her hands as she continued. “And the worst of it is, when he came in, I was so surprised that I stood up, demanding that he leave the room!”

Ada threw her head back and laughed this time, loud and long, while Ella chuckled herself. It sounded so crazed that it was like it wasn’t even real. How could she have stood up? And for so long, too! But she would not reveal that part to her sister, nor the part about how she’d dreamed of someone watching her just before Cam had entered.

“Ye cannae be serious. What did he dae?” Ada asked, her eyes wide.

“He teased me for a bit, and then he eventually turned around and left. Och, I went back intae the water before then, of course, demanding he go. It was so humiliating.”

Ada nodded. “My goodness. What a thing. But he is a very handsome man, despite his mask.”

“Aye,” Ella said with a slow nod. “There is more. After Deborah came tae help me, and ye were down with faither, he kissed me.”

“What?!” Ada cried, standing up.

“Aye.” Ella closed her eyes. “I kissed him back, and then I slapped him. And then later... I went tae his room and kissed him again.” She covered her eyes with her hands, waiting for Ada’s remonstrances, but she only started laughing again as she filled their cups.

“Och, the passageway in yer room. That is how ye achieved it.”

Ella nodded, her hands still over her face.

“I have never been prouder of ye, sister,” Ada said, and Ella looked up at her.

“Truly?”

“Aye! How bold ye were! Ye finally are giving intae yer desires, thinking only about what ye want. Nae wonder faither is so furious with ye. Ye are a far cry from the Ella I have kent for so long. Although I kent she was in there somewhere, before all this happened.” She motioned to the room around them and sat down again.

Ella let out a breath, a smile on her face. “It is good tae hear ye say that. I wanted tae be bold. After we both nearly died, I realized I have been living me life too safely. I want more adventure, and I wish we would have stayed at the tavern that night. That man...” she remembered the roguish Cameron Hay, wondering if his kiss would be as good as that of Cam Hamish. “He could have helped show us a merry time, I think.”



“Aye,” Ada said, sipping at her drink. “But perhaps ye were right tae have us leave as well. Who kent what could have happened?” Frowning, she leaned back in her chair. “But we dae need tae leave here. That is the truth of it.”

The food arrived for their evening meal, and they ate for a little while, enjoying the safety of each other’s company, but Ella knew she had to unburden herself fully. To tell Ada all of what was to come.

“Ye are right, and there is a bit more.” She folded her hands together, the happiness of her moment with Cam washed away with the memory of her upcoming marriage. “Faither has chosen a husband for me. Neil MacThomas of the neighboring clan.”

“Dear God,” Ada said, slack-jawed.

“Aye, and the wedding will be announced in a few days, he says. I should prepare meself.” Her heart ached with pain.

Even if she’d mustered enough boldness to finally kiss a man, to see a man naked, and to start making choices merely for her own pleasure, it would all be over soon. She would be a wife, locked up in another castle, forced to live a life of drudgery with a man she had not chosen. Bold Ella would once more be crushed into the dutiful, responsible one.

“Nay!” Ada cried indignantly. “We cannae let this happen. Come, Ella, we will think of something. This cannae stand! How many days dae we have?”

“I dinnae ken,” she said tiredly. “But perhaps three?”

“Then we will start as soon as we can. We can plan tae make our leave as soon as possible.”

Ella bit her lip. “What if I simply told Faither that I wasnae going tae dae it? That I would dae anything else but that?”

Ada shook her head. “He wouldnae listen. I dae nae ken who he is anymore, nae really. He is desperate tae keep us safe from the man who kidnapped us.”

“Well perhaps I should encourage him tae fight back so that there would be nae need tae rush intae the marriage. Aye,” she stood, smiling. “This would give us more time, and perhaps then he would free us, if there was nae one tae fear any longer.”

“Perhaps,” Ada agreed, when there was a knock at the door.

“Yer faither asks that ye go tae bed now,” a male voice said through the door.

Ada rolled her eyes and yelled back, “Ye cannae be serious, Blair.”

“As the devil, Lady Ada.”

Ella thought she saw a smile flicker across her sister’s face, and she went to the door. Blair and Cam were waiting outside,

and her heart moved to her throat. Now that Cam was fully dressed, whatever had passed between them felt like a dream.

“And yer faither asks that we remain in the room while ye sleep,” Blair said, looking uncomfortable.

Ella’s gaze shifted from Blair back to Cam, and she nodded, saying goodnight to Ada before following him to her room. She could hear Ada’s protest as Blair shut her door behind them, and then all was silent. Her blood sang as she opened her door and stepped inside, the large man coming after. How could her father think this was appropriate? He would have been horrified at the thoughts going through his daughter’s mind just then.

“I wonder why me faither allows ye both tae be here. At night. With us. It is odd, dae ye nae think?”

Cam’s expression didn’t change, as he said, “I just dae what the laird asks. He’s afraid ye’ll leave again, nae doubt. Or try tae get yerselves both killed by jumpin’ out of the castle.”

Turning to the hearth, she put her hands on her hips and began to pace. She had the great urge to stick her tongue out at him. Her conversation with Ada about her future had emboldened her. She wanted to speak to her father about it all, to tell him that it would not happen, she would not simply be married off. It wasn’t right, and deep down, she knew her faither felt it too.

Turning around to face Cam, she said, “I would like tae go and see me faither, right now.” She looked him up and down. “I suppose ye are meant tae accompany me.”

He leaned against the door. “Nae, I dinnae think that is a good idea.”

Ella felt her rage surge yet again at being told what to do by a man. “Why can I nae speak tae me faither in me own house? There is somethin’ important I must tell him, and it cannae wait.”

“What is it, then?” he asked, his gaze narrowing, and Ella sighed.

She wanted to believe that he was just being as pompous as every other man of her acquaintance, but she realized from his expression and his tone of voice that he was genuinely curious, and at the same time, a little concerned.

“If ye must now,” she said, resuming her pacing, “He has told me that I am tae be married, but I willnae have it. He believes me tae be too strong, and he nae longer wants tae deal with me. So, he thinks that marriage is the answer, and then he will only have Ada tae contend with.”

“I see.” Cam nodded. “I am sorry about that, lass, but I am honestly tellin’ ye, I dinnae think it is a good idea tae speak tae him now.”

She moved to walk to the door, but Cam stopped her, his hand nearly brushing against her arm. A tiny prick of longing sparked within her, and she wanted to scream. What power did this man have, that he could make her desire him even when her anger was taking ahold of her?

“Cam, ye are nae of any relation tae me. Ye are simply a guard. This is what I wish tae dae, and ye must obey me.”

“Yer faither isnae in a fine mood, lass, he willnae like it,” Cam said. “I ken well enough of angry men, and it is far better tae talk tae them when they are more sensible. Besides, I think he has had a bit tae drink. He will be in a fine state by now.”

“I dinnae care what mood he is in!” she cried, trying to reach around him but he grabbed her wrist, and spun her to face him, their bodies pulled together. “I will tell him that it isnae acceptable,” she said, trying to ignore the renewal of the heat, which was always around them, always between them.

“Tomorrow, lass. In the morn. Once he’s had time tae rest. I swear tae ye, that will be a better time. But it is nae uncommon for people tae arrange marriages. It happens all the time among ye wealthy lot.”

“Och!” she cried, indignant, stepping back, but he did not let her go at first, releasing her wrist slowly so that she could yank it from him.

His eyes traveled down from her face to her chest and remained there. He asked a question she had never in a thousand years expected him to ask.

“Where did ye get that brooch?”

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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Eameron knew it was hasty, and he also knew that it might remind her of his true identity. But things between them were far more heated than he'd ever expected, and he needed to remember the other part of his mission in working in the castle. Finding out the truth about the brooch and getting the link to his past would finally make him feel like a real person. A whole person.

Ella opened her mouth and closed it again, confused. He wasn't surprised. They'd already shared two kisses and seen each other naked. He'd saved her life, and she'd felt his hard arousal pressing up against her, eager to take her. This had all been in the space of one day, and so it was not a surprise that she looked confused after having seen his eyes move to her generous breasts and then ask about an obscure piece of jewelry instead.

Her hand flew to it, caressing its shining smoothness out of habit, not unlike himself. "It was something me aunt had. Me Aunt Anne. I asked for it, and she gave it tae me."

"Yer aunt," he said with a frown, not knowing of any sister of Laird MacPherson, not that he'd known the family all that well from his spot in the next village.

“Aye,” Ella said with a nod. “Why dae ye ask?”

“It is merely curious,” he replied, searching for an excuse. “Tae wear something so often, especially something like that. Something so beautiful and precious.” He found that when he said those words, he had given up looking at the brooch and was instead looking at her.

*So beautiful. So precious.*

“Aye, well, I care for it so. Everyone has left in me life. Me aunt died as did me máthair, so now I keep this as a memory. I dinnae want another person tae leave again,” she turned away, her voice thick, and she went to sit on the bed. “I dinnae ken, but I think I wear this tae keep that from happening. Like magic.” She stroked it again and looked down at the floor. “I suppose ye think me foolish.”

“Nay,” he said, stepping forward, his voice earnest. “I understand ye completely.” He was nearly on the edge of revealing his identity, to let her know that he too wore the brooch as a sort of spell to help him find out who he really was.

But he held back. And instead of stepping closer to her, he sat down in a nearby chair. He could tell something was on her mind and that she was wrestling with it. Fingers kept clasping and unclasping in her lap. He waited, wondering if she’d share it with him, *wanting* her to share it with him. It was not just that her answer might reveal more of his own past, but he genuinely wanted to hear what she had to say.

“So, ye will really stay in here tonight?” she asked, looking up at last to find him watching her.

“Aye,” he shrugged. “It is our duty, lass, although I dae nae think it now a strange thing, for ye came tae me room.”

She smirked and looked away again. “I dinnae want a marriage of convenience,” she said suddenly and boldly.

He had heard the two sisters pouring drinks into their cups, and so he wondered if the drink was making her even bolder with her words. Not that she needed any help being bold with her actions, as he knew firsthand.

“I daresay I dinnae think anyone does, lass, but it is the way of the world.”

Ella stiffened, and she frowned at him. “I want a marriage tae be full of love and desire. How could I go from one prison tae another? For that is what it will be. It is what it always is for women.”

His heart ached for her. He thought of Julia, and how he would never give her to a man she did not care for. He had never wanted marriage for himself either, and even for him, a man, it seemed like a prison. The way that Alice MacTavish had looked at him the morning he’d last tugged her, such hope in her eyes that he’d try to give her more. That in itself had felt like imprisonment. But with someone like Ella, he wasn’t sure it could be viewed as such.



“Ye think yer husband would also treat ye badly?” After the kiss they’d shared in his room only a little while before, Cameron did not like the thought of someone else having Ella, marrying her, making love to her, pretending as if he knew her.

But why should he care? He had a tavern to return to and *soon*.

*And ye dinnae ken her yerself!*

“Men like tae control,” she said, shaking her head. “I dinnae ken many men, but I ken that. That is what me faither has taught us. He hates when we dinnae listen because he wants tae be the one tae tell us what tae think and how tae be. I cannae remember the last time he didnae lecture us about something.” She brushed a piece of hair behind her ear and then played with the end of her plait. “I will speak tae him in the morn, as ye say. When he is in a better mood. I cannae marry when there is nae affection.”

She stood up and came to sit in the chair next to him, and together they sat in comfortable silence for a few seconds, staring into the fireplace. “The maids have always told us what desire feels like. It makes one’s toes curl, they say.” She giggled, and Cameron knew that she’d drunk something for there was no way she’d say this to him sober.

“I suppose that is one way tae put it, aye,” he said, his hands folded in front of him, his elbows on his knees.

Why the laird thought it was a good idea for him to put him in Ella’s room for the entire night was a wonder. He would not have done it if he knew the way Cameron wished to reach over to pull her into his lap, to comfort her, to kiss away her

troubles, to make her feel good and happy, even if it could not be for more than that night.

“How would ye put it then?” she asked, and he looked up.

She appeared genuinely interested, and he cleared his throat. “Desire is like a hunger. It reminds me of wolves, how they seek out what they wish, and are nae satisfied until exactly what they want has been found. And if ye cannae find the fulfillment of yer desire, then ye remain a beast within. That hunger becomes yer undoing.”

It was certainly in danger of becoming that.

“Aye, a hunger is just the right word. I should like that in a marriage. I wouldnae want tae be married tae someone I couldnae stand. Or who made me shudder tae look at him or be touched by him.”

“Nae that would nae be pleasant,” he replied, sweating under his clothing.

Why did she persist in discussing this? While it was good fun to kiss in her room or his earlier during the light of day, when they were rushed, it was dangerous to even comprehend it at this dark hour, when he was the one meant to be guarding. There would be no one to stop them from doing whatever they pleased for as long as they wished. He let out a breath, trying to calm the strong desire that threatened to choke him. Had she no idea of how she enticed him? Had she not seen the way he had hardened the instant she'd sneaked into his room only hours before?

Their chairs were close as well, and in such a tight space, he could smell her. It made him close his eyes to try to think of anything else but her and her presence. He heard a rustle of fabric, but he didn't have time to open his eyes before he felt her lips on his. With a gasp, he pulled back, and she colored prettily in front of him.

"I ken perhaps it is too much in one day, and I have been very bold," she said, backing away, but Cameron didn't want to take that chance.

"Dinnae ever apologize for being bold, lass," he said, just before he stood and pulled her to him, kissing her back.



Ella was drunk, or rather, she had drunk a little too much, and her mind was now swirling with wonderful warmth and new boldness. She'd kissed Cam again, and now he was kissing her, drugging her with the movements of his tongue as his mouth slanted across hers. She pulled him close, her fingertips pressing into the hard muscled plane of his back.

*Too many clothes.*

If she was going to be married, forced into marriage by her father to a man she did not know and did not love, then she would enjoy her time of boldness before then. She would not hang back any longer, and she would allow herself the pleasure she wanted. But when she leaned in to kiss him and saw the look of surprise on his face, she thought she'd done something wrong, that perhaps she had been too bold that day. But his eager response quelled her fears.

Her hands moved up to grasp his neck, and she felt the coolness of the metal against her hand. Why did he wear a mask? She could not imagine disfigurement, for he was so beautiful in every way. But still, curiosity pulled at her, and before she could touch the mask to try to remove it, Cameron stepped back.

“Ye should go tae bed,” he said in a low voice, his hands pushing her to stand a little away from him. With reluctance, he pulled away, and his arms hung awkwardly at his side. “This is nae a good idea. Nae with me in here the whole night.”

“But why nae?” she asked, her mouth dry. “This is what I want. Dae ye... nae want it?” she asked, and he smirked.

“Lass, ye wouldnae care tae ken what wicked thoughts are swirling about me mind right now.” He chuckled, but then he looked grave again, as if it were a terrible mistake that he’d spoken.

Where was the bold Cam from earlier? The one who’d held his arms out in his room to display himself proudly for her? What had happened to make him disappear? A cold chill of fear rushed down her spine at the thought that perhaps he now found her repugnant, that he regretted what they’d done, or that he’d been punished for something in relation to her.

“I think I would very much like tae ken them,” she said, staring at him boldly. “What happened? Why are ye nae as smug as can be? I am asking ye tae touch me, tae kiss me, and yet ye recoil? I thought...” she broke off, her thoughts muddled, knowing she sounded like an utter fool. “Ye were different before when I found ye in yer rooms. Ye were

different in me room, also. Smug is the word I'd say, glad tae see that ye affected me."

He swallowed, and he put his hands behind his back. "Aye, so I was. But now I am here, in yer chambers, for the whole of the eve. It wouldnae be wise. When there is naething tae stop us."

She sighed and nearly stamped her foot in frustration. He was not saying that he did not wish to touch her or kiss her, but that it would simply not be wise. Of course, the moment when she wanted to throw all caution to the wind, the moment when she actually had the perfect opportunity to do so, he had second thoughts. He was the one who was touting wisdom.

She could now understand how frustrated Ada must have been with her all these years. It was infuriating to hear someone talking about responsibility and being wise when all one wanted to do was something rash. She wasn't quite sure what that was yet, but it had something to do with him, his mouth on her, and his skin against her own.

Ella lifted her chin and stepped closer, watching as he visibly reacted to her proximity. His eyes never left hers, but his hands remained firmly behind his back.

"Cam, if ye dinnae wish tae touch me, that is one thing. But if ye dae, and ye are merely holding back because of propriety, then propriety be damned. I have had far too much of it in me life of late." She bit her lip, continuing to gather her courage. "I want ye tae touch me, tae make me feel good. There has been so much bad in me life of late, and I want tae think of nothing but pleasure. I will be living in another nightmare soon enough."

A sort of helpless sound came from him, at least she thought it was him. It might very well have come from her own voice.

He stepped forward then, and he leaned close, but then he said, “Ye may regret it, once the whiskey has cleared from yer mind in the morning. I dinnae want tae ever make ye regret something.”

She smiled. “I think I am very capable at kenning what will make me feel regret, sir. I have felt guilty for most of me life, but tonight, I dinnae want tae think of that.”

Thankfully, he said nothing else, only looked her in the eyes for a little longer before his mouth descended to hers. Instantly, she melted against him, wanting his kiss more than ever, pulling him back toward the bed. She wanted the weight of him against her, for now that she’d seen his bulk in full, she wanted nothing more than to feel it pressing her into the bed.

He came willingly, their mouths still fused as he lay atop her, pressing up with his elbows so as not to crush her. This time, he broke the kiss only to move his mouth down the line of her jaw to her neck. Ella leaned into him, crying out as the line of fire moved down her neck, placed there by the fire of his lips. She had never wanted something so much in the whole of her life. It was second only for her desire to be free, but this felt like a sort of freedom now, this giving in at long last to desires she’d hidden away so fiercely.

His hands started to roam as his mouth returned to hers. She explored as well, wishing they could be rid of the thick clothing between them. His calloused hand met the soft skin of her leg as he reached down to lift her skirts.

She whispered *yes* against his mouth when he paused, and then his rough hand found her center, fingers pressing into wet folds. The surprise of his touch made her arch up with a jolt and a moan.

Dear God, that was where the desire came from, where it pulled and plucked at her. It was there, and with his touch against her, slowly moving as his fingers explored her, she began to breathe faster, her heart racing to match the warm pleasure spreading like lightning and molten lava through her veins.

Their kiss broke, and his gaze met hers. She hardly knew the man, and in many ways he was danger personified. But then, tangled in the space of his arms, his hand reaching into her most sensitive hidden place, she felt safe. They stayed like that for a little while, his fingers moving gently over the tiny bud nestled at the top of her center. Then one finger slipped inside, and she gasped, leaning up towards his hand again.

The movement felt so wicked and yet so good. She began to move with him as his finger moved gently in and out. Ella never broke his gaze. She wondered if this motion gave him pain, for she could see a muscle tick in his jaw as he looked down at her. As if he was holding something back.

“Ye dinnae—” she began, not wanting to cause him any discomfort when another finger slipped inside, making her head fall back against the bed.

A sound like she’d never uttered before came out of her mouth as the two fingers pulled and curled inside of her, practically dragging out long-awaited pleasure. To her surprise, she felt

the cool air on her thighs as he lifted her skirts again, and then he was there, between her thighs.

But before she could say another word, lifting up to question him, she fell back again when his fingers were replaced by his mouth. Her hands gripped the sheets of her bed and the woolen quilt as she felt the warm glide of his tongue against her wet folds.

She was wet there, and did not understand why, even though Cam seemed to enjoy that fact. He spread her thighs even further apart and pushed them up, giving him greater access to her. Her head turned from side to side as pleasure built. No longer could she think of anything else besides heat, the feel of his mouth and his tongue against her, exactly where she ached and needed to be touched.

Need took over her body like a claiming, this wild pleasure like a line of fire over and around every muscle. She arched up once more as it reached its head, crying out when it finally burst into rippling waves of ecstasy. She quickly covered her mouth with her hand, smothering most of the cry, and then she was a trembling mess as Cam pulled away, brushing a soft kiss against the tender skin of her inner thigh.

When he appeared again, he wore a wide grin, and she was breathless, surprised at what they'd just done. It was as if she'd been transported to another time and place altogether, only to be dropped right back in the same place with the same problems.

"I—what was that?" she asked, genuinely curious, and a throaty chuckle filled her ears.



“Yer pleasure, lass. Something I have been wanting tae give tae ye since the moment we met.”

“Since we—but that was so recent,” she stammered.

“Aye, what does that matter?” he asked with a lifted brow, coming up to lie next to her, his one hand brushing along her arm. “I wanted ye then, and I still want ye now.”

Licking her lips, she leaned close to him again, kissing his mouth, wanting to feel him on her again, the full, lovely weight of him. But he broke the kiss, his fingertips coming to draw a line on the edge of her jaw.

“What are ye doing?” she asked. “Is there nae more?”

“Nae now,” he said with a smile. “I want ye tae think about that first. It could ruin everything, and I would nae let that happen tae ye.”

Ella sucked in a breath. The pleasure that had wracked her body like no other was still traveling through her limbs. He was being kind and considerate. The dangerous man who’d seemed like an animal primed to pounce was thinking of her and what she wanted. It was very good of him, but it was also frustrating. It only made her ache for more.

“Stay with me then. Here, in the bed.”

“Aye, I can dae that,” he said, pulling her close, tucking her into his arm.

She closed her eyes, her limbs heavy, and her mind dulled by whiskey. It was not a surprise that she fell asleep in seconds, feeling safer and happier than she had in years.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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Cameron couldn't sleep. He wanted to, and it was awfully tempting to sync his breath with Ella's as she curled up next to him. But he couldn't because he couldn't allow himself to enjoy the pleasure. It felt wrong, especially given how much she didn't know. It had taken everything he had not to take her body, open her legs, and pleasure her until she screamed again, just as she had requested.

But, despite the fact that tasting her, touching her, and giving her ecstasy had been the most incredible experience of his life, he couldn't take her virginity away from her. Not when she had a life to lead that didn't include him. He had a tavern to return to, a brother and a sister to care for, and a past to solve.

So, as she slept next to him, her hand resting on his chest, and one leg linked over his, he lay awake, his eyes on the canopy above, taking slow, even breaths.

*Blair will have me head for this if ever finds out.*

He knew it had been Blair's idea for the bet, but he also knew that he would give his right arm to protect these two girls. He did not mean for Cameron to take advantage. He cursed himself, and to further torture himself, he looked at her. The

fire had faded, but there were still enough embers to lend an orange glow to the room.

It only made the red in Ella's hair lovelier and more brilliant. He had the greatest desire to brush a loose curl across her cheek, but he kept his hand where it was. Touching her only made the longing worse. Her lashes fanned out across fair cheeks, and her lips were slightly pursed and parted, as if in sleep, she was ready to deliver a witty remark.

He had started the bet knowing that he would be able to make her fall in love with him, but just then, he knew the real truth: this was a woman *he* could love. For the first time, he had met someone he could imagine giving his whole life to; he could imagine giving up everything just to be with her. Turning away from her, he let out a gusty sigh.

*No, keep yer mind sharp, lad. Ye've a job tae dae. She is half in love with ye already, nae doubt, and then ye will get yer dream.*

But it felt hollow now, and as he spied the glint of the brooch on her bodice, he knew he was no closer to understanding that mystery either. Still, that did not seem to matter as much to him anymore. It was strange, this relinquishing of something he'd held so dear for so long. He rushed to cling to it, though, knowing that if he fully let it go, he would never get it back.

A few hours later he woke, realizing that he had eventually slept despite his best efforts, and Ella's fingers had begun to trace a line down his chest. Looking down, he could see his arousal, hard as a rock, straining to be free of his kilt. When he turned to look at her, she smiled at him sleepily.

“Ye stayed,” she said, looking even more beautiful in the morning, freshly rumped from sleep.

“Aye,” he said in a voice that did not sound like his own.

Desire in the early hours before dawn’s light was like a hungry beast. Cameron knew that no one else could ever make him yearn like she did. But, as he’d explained to her, his desire was like a wolf pacing within him, desperate for only one thing. And it was that desire that would be his undoing.

She kissed him, but it was a quick good-morning kiss. “I am happy ye stayed,” she said, looking to the windows. “It will nae be light for some hours yet.”

“Aye,” he said stupidly, unable to think of anything else.

He’d always been so confident and suave with women, but now with Ella in his arms wriggling and moving closer to him, smelling and feeling divine, he was devoid of speech.

“Dae ye never remove the mask?” she asked, clearly seeing his struggle and attempting to help him.

He was glad she did not seem to notice nor ask about the hard line of manhood tenting his kilt just then.

“Nae,” he said. “I dae nae,” he added, attempting to start the flow of speech.

Thankfully, she didn't press him. Ella merely propped herself up on her elbow to look at him. He couldn't look away from her then as her hand continued to trace a pattern on his chest.

"I have never seen a man so large," she said idly, and Cameron wondered if she was still a little drunk.

"Well, I wouldnae think ye have seen many men," he countered.

"Aye, this is true," she said with a laugh. "Tell me something then." She took her hand away and simply looked at him. "Will ye tell me a bit about yer family? Or about Blair? Anything ye'd like tae tell me. I want tae ken."

He looked to the window where the light of dawn had not yet begun to streak across the sky. In that moment, it was just the two of them. It was like a time between times. There were no consequences, no one to come running to demand he leave the room, and there was nowhere else to be except there. With her.

"All right," he said. "Well, I did tell ye the story about me young brother."

"Yes, you did. Something else, then," she said with a bright smile.

"I dinnae have any parents, or rather I dinnae ken them if I dae. I was found, placed outside the healer's house in the next village. Put inside a basket."

“Was she a kind woman?”

“Aye, Arla was the best of women,” he said with a fond smile.

Ella tucked herself into him again. “Tell me more.”

“Well, she was old then, but she had such life in her, such vigor. I couldnae have asked for a better máthair who wasnae even meant tae be me máthair.” He talked, and Ella listened, her hand sprawling on his chest again.

He wasn't sure what had loosened his tongue. Perhaps it was the reason that someone had finally asked him something. A woman finally wanted to hear more about his life than merely asking him to tup her. And besides Blair, no other man in his life had asked him such questions as these.

Together, they talked, and she listened. She listened with her whole body, and Cameron knew he was in trouble. But it didn't stop him from sharing, giving little pieces of himself he'd never given to another. Just then he decided the truth of the brooch could wait, could it not?



Ella's head ached from all the whiskey, but when she woke in Cam's arms, she didn't regret what happened one bit. In fact, she wanted more. More of this masked stranger who listened to her, gave her pleasure, and slept at her side with his arm wrapped around her. Outside, the light had not yet begun to shine, so there was still time to be in this place before her reality came to find her again.

Her wedding was to be announced in a few days, and she was sure to meet her fiancé sooner rather than later. But right then, all she needed to do was listen to the soothing tones of Cam's voice as he told her stories and feel the warmth of his large body next to her.

“Me friends, Rory and Alistair, a pair of devils, went off tae fight in Preston. I think ye ken them. They were guards here at the castle.”

“Aye,” she said, “I think I have heard of them. At least heard the maids mention them a time or two. Apparently, they are quite the rogues about the castle.”

Cam chuckled. “I dinnae doubt it. We are always teasing each other about those kinds of things. They like tae make bets with me.”

“Och?” Ella asked. “What kind of bets?”

“Foolish ones,” he said, scratching at his head. “Ones where they wish me tae charm a lass intae bed. They bet me that I cannae dae it.”

Even if Ella should have been horrified, instead her body warmed at the thought. She knew Cam was perfectly capable of such a thing, but last night when she'd asked him for more he did not give it to her, and she wondered why. What had made him hold back when he was clearly so eager to do it with others?

“I assume ye are always winning these bets?” she asked.



He nodded. "Aye, but it is a foolish bit of fun, really. I sound like an utter shite saying it aloud," he said ruefully.

"Perhaps. But I suppose if I was a man, I might dae the very same thing," Ella admitted.

"Well, I dinnae like the thought of ye being a man, but perhaps ye might have done. So, I think that is why I dinnae want tae marry for meself. I understand why ye hesitate, lass. Even if marriage is a normal thing for so many, and arranged marriages very normal besides, I cannae think I would like tae step intae one meself."

Ella's face softened, and she gave him a genuine smile. She sighed, wondering if she hadn't just fallen a little in love with him.

"What?" Cam asked, confused.

"I have never heard a man say such a thing." She paused and rolled her eyes. "And I ken that I dinnae see men very often, and I have only me faither tae compare tae. But the fact that ye would say that means there is hope in the world. That nae all men feel the same way as me faither."

She wasn't saying any of this right, but she wanted to get it out. To let him know that he made her feel different; he made her feel bold and listened to. She barely knew the man, and yet somehow Ella felt like she'd known him for a long while.

He chuckled, and she could feel the hum of it in his hard chest. "I am very glad ye dinnae think I am like yer faither."

"Nae, nae at all," she said, grinning back.

He turned to face her on his side, and his brilliant blue eyes seared into her own. She took a breath, searching those eyes, asking a question of him. Her smile fell, and her hand pressed against his chest, fingers grasping at the fabric there to pull him closer.

This time, she did not need to be the one to kiss first, for his lips found hers, and it felt like sweet relief. That day, she would find out more about her marriage, perhaps might even see Neil MacThomas in the flesh, and she wanted this to remember. Sinking into the kiss, she found herself under Cam, his mouth probing, his tongue delving deep between her lips.

She wasn't as experienced as he, but her body ached for his touch, arching up to meet the hardness she'd felt before and seen lifting his kilt. She could feel it against her center now, and she drew him in closer, wanting more. He pulled away from the bed and stood.

They stared at each other for a little while, before he said, "Is this what ye want, lass?"

"Aye. I cannae longer control what happens after this, but I can choose this. I want ye," she said, swallowing back any fear that threatened to stop her.

"And I want ye," he said, beginning to remove his clothing.

She did the same, her nervous fingers fumbling to remove what she could. When his chest was bare, he turned her over, pulling at laces to remove her bodice and then the stays. She helped him kick off her skirts, and then she moved to lift the shift from her skin, dropping it softly to the floor off the side of the bed.

Lying in the center of her bed, she looked up at him nervously, completely exposed before him. She might have secretly left the castle, tried to save her sister from attempting to climb down the wall of her prison to escape, but right then, this was the boldest thing she had ever done. Exposing herself utterly to another person. She watched with trepidation as his eyes raked over her skin. Very pale light peeked through the windows, and she waited with bated breath as he assessed her.

“Magnificent,” he said, a new awe in his voice. “I kent that ye were bonnie, lass, but I never thought it would be like this.”

Without another word, he leaned over her, catching her gasp in his mouth as he kissed her again, this time, not holding back. The kiss was hungry, ravenous even, and her fingers trailed along the hard muscle of his body as he leaned, his arms pressing down on the bed on either side of her. The kiss moved down her neck, over her chest, and he paused above her breasts, eyeing them both before grasping one, kneading it in his hand before leaning down to pull the pink nipple into his mouth. With a surprised gasp, she fell back on the bed, her body moving up to meet his mouth as he suckled and licked.

How could such a thing make her limp with desire, make her muscles feel like liquid fire? He moved to the other breast, and this time a soft sound escaped her lips—a sound she did not recognize. It was want, raw desire, the craving to be admired,

touched, and loved, the same feeling she'd felt as soon as Cam's eyes had seen her in the bath that morning. Or even when the roguish Cameron Hay had looked at her after saving her and Ada from the hands of villains. She wanted this, and slowly, with his tongue, Cam was unraveling all her fears and crushing them into dust.

His mouth moved lower, over her belly, and then he paused above the soft, downy hair between her thighs. He looked up, his hands sliding up her legs until one touched her there, moving between the slick, wet folds, and she let out another cry.

His thumb brushed over her pleasure nub, the place she'd often found herself when trying to release the ache that had plagued her for so long. One finger slipped inside, curling up, and then soon it was followed by another. She rose to watch the movement, still wanting more. Her eyes trailed to where Cam's hardness was evident under his clothing.

"Show me ye," she said, breathless. "I want tae see ye too."

"In time," he replied infuriatingly, and then his mouth was on her again, and she lost all sense.

Who knew someone was so skilled with his tongue and could practically pull pleasure from her body with each practiced flick? Her orgasm came quickly, racing through her without warning as his finger joined his mouth, pressing into her while his tongue worked the nub above it. She bit down on the edge of her palm to keep the cry from reaching her sister and Blair next door. It would ruin everything if they were to be caught, and she wasn't yet ready to deal with the consequences.

He rose over her breathless form, and she could see his smile. Reaching for him, Ella could see the glint on his lips from her desire. He quickly shucked off his kilt, and then he sprang forward. She sat up to look at him, smooth flesh over hardness. It was even bigger now, she thought, seeing it this close, and when he nestled between her thighs, she wondered if it would fit.

“This will hurt for a bit but only a bit,” he said, standing on the edge of the bed and pulling her legs close to him. “Ye are sure?” he asked again, his brow furrowed with concern.

“Aye,” she said, now eager to feel him there, to press into her, to curb the ache that grew anew.

Brushing his thick member against her opening, he shuddered a little. He pushed forward, and she leaned up to meet him, wincing only a little.

“Are ye all right?” He asked, trying to pull away, and she held him there.

“Aye, keep going.” He pushed forward again, and slowly, her body accepted him.

He was patient, leaning over to brush kisses on her face as he kept moving forward. When he was halfway inside, he thrust forward sharply, and there was only a tiny pinch of pain before they both stilled.

Her heart beating fast against her ribs, Ella’s hands slid down his body to his hips, beckoning him forward. He began to

move, his eyes not leaving hers. Her body matched his rhythm, amazed at the sensations that started at her center and spread everywhere else. It was as if his mouth had been on her, but different as well. Now, she was *full* of him, and the way he moved in and out of her set her body afire, tingling with a fierceness she had never experienced.

His movements were faster, and she found her heart and breath keeping pace in a wild rhythm as he kissed her. She made sounds she'd never heard before, and he swallowed them all, drinking them in as his hips beat a furious rhythm against her body. She wrapped her thighs about him, bringing him impossibly deeper.

The climax this time had been slow and steady. At its peak, it broke over Ella with a power that drew such a cry from her she broke from the kiss and bit down on his shoulder to muffle the sound. He kept his pace as her boneless body lay against the covers, completely spent, and then he cried out, removing himself to spill a warm substance against her belly. After they parted and their breathing calmed, Cam began to laugh.

“What?” she asked, horrified, turning to face him. “Was it so terrible?”

He shook his head. “Nay,” he replied, kissing her gently. “It was the most beautiful thing. But I dinnae ken how I am going tae explain this bite on me shoulder.”

Ella took a look at the impression she'd made, blushed, and then groaned, covering her face with her hands. Cam only laughed harder.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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*A*n hour later, Ella allowed the maid entry to her room, while Cam stepped out of it. He'd dressed hastily, trying not to think too hard about how wonderful he felt, and how much he was smiling. Once the door closed behind him, and he saw Blair next to him, looking equally disheveled and fatigued, he laughed.

"Rough night, me friend?" he asked. "Tis a long while tae ask a man tae stay awake."

*Nae that I stayed awake the whole night. And nae way in hell I'll tell him what happened.*

Even though Cam was bursting to tell someone what he'd just experienced, how coupling with Ella had been like no coupling he'd ever had before, how touching her and bringing her pleasure had felt like he was close to heaven, touching divinity. He'd never wanted it to stop, and yet just like always, morning came, and it was over.

"Aye, true enough," Blair said, looking a little grumpy.

He wondered for a moment if Blair had had a similar evening to his with all his mysterious reactions to Ada, but then Cameron shook his head. Blair would never allow such a thing to happen. Not with his principles, even if he desired it with all his heart. He was far stronger than Cameron had ever been.

They stood in silence for a little while until Blair said, “Angus and Darren will take our places while we go tae sleep, lad. We’ll need it. I’m sure the laird will want tae see us again too. Tae make sure we are all prepared for the plan he wants tae enact.”

“Aye, we havenae finished speakin’ of that. The incident prevented him from finishin’.”

“Right. So, I will ask him again. I want tae be perfectly prepared, and I ken without as many soldiers here when he leaves, the castle will need protecting. It will be a little harder for us, tae make sure the lasses are all right. They seem tae ken every passageway in the whole damn castle.”

*They certainly dae.*

He bit back a chuckle as he remembered how surprised and delighted, he’d been to find Ella in his chambers below the castle, when he was naked as he could be. He heard footsteps from down the passageway, and he expected and hoped it was Angus and Darren come to relieve them, but instead, it was a servant. The young boy who’d come to bring them to the laird the day before.

“Laird MacPherson wants tae see ye both and his daughters in the main hall. A guest has arrived.” Blair nodded, and the



young boy scurried off.

With a sigh, they both turned to the girls' doors and knocked. Cameron's head was heavy with fatigue, but he was glad that he would still get to accompany Ella downstairs, that he would still get to see her for a little while before he went to sleep. When she emerged, she was bright-faced and cheerful, looking up at him with a pretty smile.

Her hair had been tied high on her head, and the cascading red curls fell over one shoulder. He wished he had undone her hair last night so that he could have twisted his fingers in it, breathed in the scent of it. It was a color he'd never seen before, coppery and gold at the same time.

"Good morrow," she said, allowing the maid to pass before she was able to close the door and stand before him.

Her scent drew him in. It was soft and sweet, like she'd bathed in rosewater, and he wished he could kiss her again, to drag her back to the bed and this time, take his time with her, not let her out until they were both breathless and completely sated.

"Good morrow," he said, swallowing back the sudden wave of desire.

He cast his eye toward his friend who was watching their interaction with wariness. But then Ada emerged, and thankfully, Blair's focus was taken by her.

"Ready?" Blair asked, looking at the two ladies, and they nodded. "Apparently, there is a guest, and yer faither wants us

tae go and meet them.”

“Och, and go we must, since he has called us,” Ada said bitterly, stepping around Blair to lead the way down the corridor.

When both Blair and Ada’s backs were turned to him, Cameron felt a little brush against his hand. He looked over to see Ella smiling at him, and he ached to lift the soft, small hand to his lips to kiss it. But he refrained, settling for a mere wink instead.

Ella skipped away from him to walk alongside her sister, and he fell into step beside Blair. He took a few seconds to watch as Ella’s hips swayed underneath the thick wool of her gown. He knew now what pleasures lay beneath her clothing, and he felt as if he’d been gifted with something he didn’t deserve. For a moment his smile faltered, and he felt the requisite guilt. He knew it had been wrong, but when she’d been so eager, so hopeful, desirous of boldness and for finally making a choice for herself, he hadn’t been able to resist. He wished that he’d had more stalwart principles like Blair, and then he wouldn’t have to feel so consumed by the guilt that came after. But guilt was one thing and regret entirely another. He did not regret what they’d done and never would for as long as he lived.

“I wonder who’s come,” Cameron said idly, looking to Blair, to which he shrugged.

“It is nae often that the castle receives visitors. Even though the laird likes tae keep his daughters locked away, he too doesnae go places very often. Nae after the death of his sister many years before.”

“His sister ...” Cameron mused. “Was her name Anne?”

“Aye, the one who died at least,” Blair said in a lowered tone. “How did ye ken?”

“Lady Ella mentioned the name tae me,” he said. “I asked her where she’d gotten the brooch. She said she took it from her aunt.”

Blair frowned. “I see. But she kent naething else about it?”

Cameron shook his head. “Naething that could help me figure out why I have the same brooch.” He thought again about the possibility of being related, and he shuddered, hopeful that wasn’t the truth.

But deep down, he truly didn’t think they were, and he was glad that Blair didn’t mention it. They followed the girls through a long corridor until it opened into the grand entranceway. Ada pushed through the tall double doors into the main hall, and it was there that she and Ella stopped once they saw who was inside.

Fear and apprehension tickling the hairs at the back of his neck, Cameron looked to Blair, and at the same time, they put hands to the swords at their sides and moved to stand in front of the girls. They too stopped at what they saw in the hall. For Laird MacPherson stood next to another older man, and across from them, staring heatedly at Ella from across the room was a young man, who looked far too pleased to be there. Far too pleased at seeing Ella.

*This must be her future husband.*

It took Cameron far longer than it should have to remove his hands from his sword.



Ella could feel a scream inside her fighting to escape, and she pressed it down as she had for so many years, even though it had become increasingly difficult as of late. She knew this reckoning was coming for her, but in the pink hours of dawn, as she lay next to Cameron, spent and warm from his lovemaking, she thought she still had time, that life wouldn't catch up with her just yet. It had now arrived in the form of her future husband, Neil MacThomas. She'd known him since they were children, before all hell broke loose and she was imprisoned.

He looked the same now, still boyish, still slightly pudgy under the chin and around his belly. And he was looking at her like she was a treat to be savored. It made her take a step back. While the hungry look in Cam's eyes had set fire to her body, the look in this man's eyes, this stranger soon to be her husband, chilled her to the bone.

"Good, ye've come. Join us for breakfast." Graeme waved a hand at the table.

Ella could feel the heat of Cam's gaze as she walked forward, taking Ada's hand. The men remained standing as they approached.

"Ada, Ella, ye remember Laird MacThomas and his son, Neil."

“Aye,” Ella said with a nod, and Ada echoed her words stiffly, both in formal tones.

They curtsied, and the old laird smiled. “What a pair of fine young daughters ye have, Graeme,” he remarked. “They have grown intae such beauties. Yer Ella will be the perfect wife for me son. What lovely children they shall have.”

Ella bit back a retort, but when she turned to Ada, she saw her sister was about to explode. She sat down next to Neil, feeling as if ice was running through her veins, and gave Ada a warning look. Not yet; it wasn’t time to fight yet.

“Good tae see ye again, Lady Ella,” Neil said, still appraising her with a hungry look as if he’d never seen a woman before, barely sparing Ada a second glance.

“And ye,” Ella was able to muster.

Breakfast turned to ash in her mouth as she ate in relative silence, listening to the men talk. “And so, the wedding will be in two weeks’ time. Laird MacThomas wanted enough time to have a proper festival. It will happen here, and we will invite all the surrounding clans, of course. In two weeks, ye will be a bride!” her father announced, speaking with his mouth full as if too hasty to get all the words out.

He’d said the words coldly. Looking at him, she hoped she could send him a message with her eyes, begging him to reconsider this terrible situation, but he looked away, and she knew he would never be convinced.

“Faither, dae ye nae think this too soon?” Ada asked suddenly, speaking for the first time since the breakfast began. “Surely a young bride should have time tae get tae ken her husband ‘afore she weds. If she is nae allowed tae choose him,” she added spitefully, gaining an angry look from Graeme.

“There is plenty of time for them tae get tae ken each other after the wedding, Lady Ada,” Laird MacThomas stated, which Ella knew would only make Ada more furious.

Ada stood. “I wonder if men feel the same way about marriage, that they are forced intae an unwanted trap as we women are.” She didn’t shy away from glaring at both Neil and Laird MacThomas.

When the laird sputtered to reply, her father said sharply, “Ada, take yerself upstairs. Blair, take her with ye, back tae her room. She is nae fit for guests.”

“Gladly,” Ada replied, looking to Ella with compassion before stomping away, Blair at her back as she left the room.

Ella was touched that her sister would fight so for her, especially in front of their guests. It was rare for a woman to stand up to a laird, and Ada was superb at it. She tried to take strength from her sister’s fire. Neil blinked at her, looking as if he wondered whether she would echo the same sentiment, but nothing came to Ella’s mind. She was numb, frozen over what appeared to be the inevitable.

She would have to marry this man. Her father would not relent, and now with personal guards watching her she would

not be able to leave. But even if she had been able to convince Blair and Cam to let them go, she wasn't sure she wanted to. Now that she had tasted the sweetness of being inside of Cam's arms, connected to his body, she was reluctant to leave it. She turned to seek his gaze and found him already watching her, his expression grim.

If this was to be her last few weeks before she had a new life to lead, then she wanted it to be with him. She knew it sounded mad, for she'd only just met the man, and yet he made her feel more alive than she ever had been. If only roles were reversed and it was Cam sitting on the bench next to her, her soon-to-be husband.

She shook her head for her foolish thoughts. How could she think of marriage to him? She had never wanted it for herself, and they had only just discussed in her room how he didn't want it either. She'd known the risks of giving herself to him, and yet she could not have resisted. And yet, she knew she would make the same decision again if she had a choice.

Her world had seemingly turned upside down after that morning with Cam in her bed, and she briefly yearned for the old order of things, where everything at least made sense, even if they were unbearable. They finished their meal, and she stood, eager to get out of the main hall.

Brushing her hands against her skirts, she said to her father, "Might ye excuse me? Since there is so little time, I thought I might begin the preparations."

Her father's eyes softened when he looked at her, and the corners of his mouth turned up in a rare smile. The lie had come easily to her, and she was glad he suspected nothing, merely relieved that she'd not fought back as Ada had done.

“Of course, love. What a good idea. The laird will provide many provisions as well, but I will leave the remaining details tae ye.”

“Thank ye.” The other men stood and Neil took her hand, kissing it with wet lips as he bowed over it.

Ella fought to keep a grimace from her face, and she managed a weak smile. “Until next time, Master MacThomas.”

“Aye, until then,” he said, grinning from ear to ear, and she noticed that his teeth were slightly yellowed and chipped. It was odd for so young a man, and she wondered at it.

“Good day tae ye, Laird MacThomas,” she said, and then she left the hall, glad to feel Cam’s comforting presence next to her as she shut the door. “Ready the horses for ye and for me. Me faither will let me ride if there is a guard beside me.” She glanced up at Cam’s grim look, and nodded sharply. “I will get some food, too.”

She left him then, not looking back, afraid he might not listen. But she wanted the chance to see him again, to spend every moment she had with the man who lit a fire inside her, one she had not even known existed. It was the only way to savor what little freedom she had until it was completely gone. She wondered bleakly how she would survive the rest of her years on mere memories of the joyful moments Cam Hamish had given her.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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Cameron did as he was asked, not caring that Blair might chastise him, or that he might be punished by the laird. The matter they discussed in the hall had turned his blood to ice and created a weight in his stomach that made him feel like he'd swallowed a boulder. He knew she was going to get married; she'd told him that herself. He knew it, and yet hearing the words and seeing the chosen man in the flesh only made it even more real.

She was never going to be his; she was going to live with that man and be linked to him for the rest of her days. She would have his children, lie under him while he rutted atop her, and he would own her. That was what consumed Cameron's mind as he waited in stony silence while the small group ate breakfast and discussed the future. It would all be such an utter waste. Ella, with all her brilliant beauty and fire, kept away and forced into a marriage with a man who would never appreciate what Cameron saw and cherished in her.

All those thoughts roiled inside him as he went to fetch the horses. Once they were saddled and ready, he led them to the entrance of the castle where Ella emerged, carrying a sack and wearing a cloak. He paused. It was one of *his* cloaks. The night she'd been nearly attacked, Julia had given cloaks to the girls, and she still had hers, wearing it now. He almost felt

jealous of the man he truly was, but then he tamped it down as foolishness.

“Here we are,” she said, far more brightly than expected after what she’d just endured.

He came to her side quickly and lifted her onto her horse as if she were a wisp of grass. She straddled the mount, and he smirked at the unsurprising act before jumping atop his own horse.

“Lead the way,” he said, and she started off, racing into the distance, her coppery curls flowing behind her.

He followed blindly, knowing again this was likely not a good idea, that he was growing far more attached to Ella than he should be. Just a few days ago, he would not have cared who she married. He was used to leaving the nobility to themselves, to do whatever they pleased up in their castles while the villagers struggled to get by every day. He remembered Arla and how hard she always worked, her fingers calloused, dying younger than she might have if she had not been forced into constant, grueling labor.

But now, after only a few days in Ella’s company, in her bright, fierce presence, he didn’t know what to think anymore. All he knew was that he wanted to—had to be—near her, and so follow he did. She slowed once the castle was a little way past, and they were near the edge of River Spey. A little grove of trees stood nearby, and she paused there, pulling up on her reins.

“We will stop here for now,” she said breathlessly, and he jumped down to help her dismount. “This is far enough.”

His hands remained holding her sides and did not let go. She looked up at him, and he saw the fear in her eyes, and the sadness at what was going to happen.

“I am sorry, lass,” he said forlornly, unable to think beyond his remorse.

He was helpless against her father. If there was a way to save her from her fate, he would do it, wouldn't he? Even if it meant letting her go, letting her take the secrets of the brooch with her.

“Dinnae pity me,” she said, pulling away and walking to the edge of the river.

Cameron tied the horses and followed after her. She had spread out the cloak and now sat upon it, pulling food from the sack and laying out apples, cheese, and a bottle of wine. He smiled as he sat, staring off into the distance. He knew there would be consequences for this, but for now he was going to enjoy himself in Ella's company.

“I've always loved the river, ever since I was a child,” she said, handing him a hunk of cheese and an apple.

He took it gratefully, biting into the apple while she spoke. “Faither never let us come alone after everything happened, and eventually he did nae like us going away at all.”

“He will nae like this then,” Cameron said, keeping his eyes on the vision in front of him.

“Nae, he will nae,” she said, staring down.

The river wound around the hills and the distant mountains, dark blue against the lush green of the grass surrounding them. The water looked pure and clean, and he wanted nothing more than to jump in it, pulling Ella in with him. He smiled, viewing the image in his mind.

“But I dinnae care,” she said. “I will be bending tae his will in the end, even though Ada wants me tae run away.” She paused, as if surprised she’d told him.

“Aye, I am nae surprised. The lass seems determined tae dae such a thing, even if it will get her killed.”

“Aye,” Ella replied, chuckling. “It is our greatest wish, tae be free. But perhaps after I am married, and Faither has vanquished whatever enemy he has, Ada will have more freedom. Perhaps she will be able tae dae as she pleases. That would make me very happy, indeed.”

“But ye would still be trapped,” he said, a deep furrow in his brow. “There is nae way yer faither will relent?”

“Nae, I dinnae think so. I was going tae speak tae him this morn, but I could see the look in his eye. I didnae expect that he would bring me fiancé here with him taeday, that he would surprise me like that.”

She looked away and idly fingered the brooch again. He reached out for that hand, and this time, without anyone watching, he brought it to his lips, bringing her eyes to look at him.

“I say we open that bottle of wine, lass,” he said, “and enjoy what time we’ve got before everyone comes running.”

“Aye, I agree with ye.” She pulled out the bottle and uncorked it, pouring the liquid into two glasses. Before she lifted it to her lips, she said, “Thank ye, Cam. I wouldnae have had courage without ye.”

He swallowed the lump of guilt in his throat. Perhaps it was for the best that she was going to get married. If she found out what he’d come to the castle to do, then she’d likely hate him anyway.

“I did naething. Ye have a courage inside yerself that I could never compete with,” he said, staring at the river.

She was far better than he could ever be, for all he’d done was try to focus on the pleasures in his life, thinking about what felt good and doing that. He had thought about the brooch and what it meant to him and his past, but he’d never really taken steps to find out, until now, while she had been fighting to escape a prison for years, fighting to deal with a stubborn father who would not see reason.

“I dinnae think that is true. Ye fight. Does that nae take courage? I heard about the man ye pummeled down in the barracks. Ada told me.” Ella giggled, making Cameron turn to

face her again. “The maids talk about it often, thinking ye are the handsomest soldier in the castle.”

“Och, that was a small thing. Nae bravery, at least. Merely what I had tae dae.”

She nodded, chewing thoughtfully. She swallowed and said, “And what was that about?”

He cleared his throat. “They didnae like that I was chosen tae help guard ye when they had been working there for longer than me. That is all. Men’s trifling business.”

“I see.” She tilted her head back, and he was mesmerized as her throat worked over a swallow.

He wanted her again, and he knew that this was likely the last time they would get the chance, especially if her father would punish him for taking her outside. In a fit of mischief, he stood and began to peel his clothes away, dropping them to the side as he went toward the river. Ella laughed and called after him.

“What are ye doing?” she asked, and he shrugged, turning back to her.

“Swimming! Ye want tae to come?” he asked, and then in a final rush of boldness, he tore off his mask and threw it to the ground.

Now that things were escalating in a way he didn’t expect, he threw caution to the wind. He didn’t have to tell her who he

was, but if she remembered, then so be it.

Once he stepped into the water, he blew out a breath at its chill. He dunked himself down and then emerged, turning to see Ella coming toward him. Then it didn't matter how cold the water was, for as soon as she removed her clothes, showing him her glorious body, his own body heated with wonder and desire.



Ella was drunk with boldness. The previous night had been life changing, and now she wanted to join Cam in the river and forget everything else. He watched as she entered the water. It was cold, but she hardly noticed. With his gaze on her skin, she was warm with wanting him again, and they were silent as she reached for him in the water, bringing him close to her. His arms wrapped around her, grasping her buttocks and squeezing them, forcing her legs up to wrap around him.

Now that he wore no mask, she saw there was no deformity, no hidden problems. She traced the red line the mask left on his skin and frowned. A flutter of recognition went through her. He had the same eyes as her avenging angel. Now that she could see them both, she was astonished.

*The very same!*

“Why dae ye wear it?” she asked, breathless at the beauty a man could possess.

The fact that two could possess such beauty was a wonder indeed. Cam Hamish was like a god, built of ancient things, and she was now wrapped around him, warm, safe, protected.

If anyone could stop time and whatever would come in the future, she felt that he could.

“It keeps people at a distance,” he said. “Keeps them afraid, and sometimes that is very useful as a soldier, as a guard. When people dinnae ken what ye hide under there, ye can wield whatever power ye like.”

His cheek pressed into the hand she laid against his skin, and he closed his eyes. Leaning forward, she kissed him on his eyelids and then his lips.

“I cannae imagine fearing ye,” she said softly, and his eyes fluttered open again. “While I can imagine yelling at ye, ravishing ye, and getting angry at ye, I cannae imagine fearing ye.”

A wicked grin crossed his face, and Ella couldn't help but smile back, loving the way his smile plucked at her insides, making her feel warm and tingly. His mouth had done so many things to her already, and she wanted more.

“Ravishing me, eh?” he asked. “I never thought I would hear ye say those words. A prim and proper lady, so ye are, screaming at me tae leave yer room when I first saw yer naked loveliness.”

“Aye,” she said, blushing and hiding her face against his neck. “And I stood there for so long.”

“Aye, ye did! Why was that?” he said, and he spun her around in the water.



The river's flow was quick, but Cam was strong, feeling his legs grounding them securely. With the sun out, and the cool of the water stroking her skin, it seemed a beautiful, perfect day. Like nothing could go wrong.

"I dinnae ken," she said, peeking from between her hands, still blushing. "But I liked it."

He threw his head back and laughed, and she groaned again. "Why are ye laughing?"

"Because ye are embarrassed tae say things which are good. Things that make me happy." He smiled then, and she leaned in to kiss him.

The kiss quickly turned passionate, and she ground herself against his hardening length, telling him with her body what she wanted. She gasped as he walked out of the water, still carrying her with her legs locked around his waist. She did not break the kiss until she felt the softness of the cloak beneath her back, and Cam's lovely body pressing her down onto it.

Nodding she said, "Make love tae me again. We dinnae ken how much time we have."

He did not need convincing. His mouth worshipped hers, and his tongue made soft strokes against her own, making her breath tremble in her chest and her limbs turn to molten liquid.

"So bonnie," he whispered as his lips trailed from her mouth down to her chest, where he spent time nuzzling against her

breasts.

He swirled his tongue around one peaked nipple, and she watched as he did the same to the other before clasping his mouth around it, heating her blood.

“Cam,” she begged. “Please.” She had never before wanted anything with such urgency.

The apex of her legs throbbed and ached for him, wet with her need. Grinning, he leaned up so that his hand could move down her body, shaping and tracing her until he ended up stroking between her folds. Arching up at a new rush of desire, she could see him watching her as she took the pleasure that he gave her.

Stroking once, then twice over her nub, he slid a finger inside her and then two, moving to a rapid rhythm that made the blood sing in her ears. Needing a place to hold onto, to anchor her while pleasure sent her adrift, she gripped his muscled forearm. Only then did she let herself fall prey to the ecstasy and heat, crying out to all of nature just what it felt like to be touched like this.

Gently, Cam kissed her back to herself as her body recovered and her mind regained logic lost in the haze of his lovemaking. She smiled as he lay atop her, and lifted her hips, as he pressed against her. With the top of his manhood at the edge of her opening, he thrust in, this time hard and brutal, eliciting her surprise in a fresh gasp of pleasure.

They kept each other's gaze as he began to move, this time with more urgency than the last. She clung to his back, nails

pressing into his skin while he rode her hard. In response, she wrapped her legs even tighter over his waist, bringing him deeper, making them both groan with pleasure.

Despite the brutal movement of his hips, he leaned down and kissed her lips, her cheek, her neck, whispering gentle words in her ear before nibbling on it. He slowed then, just as her pleasure built, as if he wanted to savor it—to make it last. She lost herself in his wet kiss, and the slow, sensual movement of his hips. She matched him thrust for gentle thrust until her pleasure came, this time like a whisper instead of a roar. Cam swallowed her moan as she trembled underneath him, and he continued to thrust, stopping only when the same expression of exquisite pleasure came over his face and he removed himself to spill onto the grass beside the cloak.

When they stilled, he pulled her close, and she tried to stop the aching that bloomed throughout her body. It would all be over soon, and she would become Neil MacThomas' wife—not Cam's.

In a quiet voice, she said, "In another lifetime, I think I could have loved ye, Cam Hamish."

She didn't think that Cam heard her, for his only response was the slight tension in his arms as he pulled her closer.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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Eameron wondered if guilt could kill a man. If it could one day swallow him whole, then there would be nothing left. Just a deep, dark void where he used to exist. After he made love to Ella by the river, and he heard those soft, beautiful words she whispered in his arms, his heart swelled and broke, both at the same time.

He'd won, hadn't he? Shouldn't he be celebrating his victory? Instead, he was spending his afternoon holding tight to a lass who would never be his. His sleepy, sexually satisfied mind was making up a future with her when there would be none. And she had not recognized him after all, so the guilt only worsened. His lies were only increasing, it seemed.

"We should return," he said woodenly, peeling himself away from her even though it felt he was tearing off a piece of himself. "People will wonder."

A cracking sound from the grove of trees made him look up, and his eyes narrowed as he stared. But nothing was there.

*Likely just an animal, or the horses getting restless.*

And yet Cameron couldn't get rid of the feeling that a pair of eyes was on him as he stood, naked, helping Ella to her feet. He brushed it aside, however. What reason would anyone have to spy on them? If it was Blair or someone else sent by her father, then they would just come right out and take them back, leading them to their punishment.

They dressed in silence, and with a slightly dour expression he helped her mount her horse. He paused, staring into the trees again. Right next to the tree where they had tied the horse was a footprint, clear as day in the mud. But his eyes snapped back to Ella, not wanting to raise fear. It was time to return home, for whatever lurked in the shadow of the grove was not friendly.

"I will explain it all," she said to mollify him, thinking he was likely upset about returning. "There will be nae recourse for ye. Besides ye have only just begun, and he will think ye dinnae yet ken the ways of guarding a MacPherson lass."

Cam nodded, but he didn't smile as he knew she expected him to. They rode off, Ella leading the way again, and it took them a short time to return to the castle. He helped her dismount, and with a long look, she left him to return the horses to the stables. Handing them over, he walked back in through the barracks, wanting a bit more time to compose himself before he had to see Blair or the laird, or even Ella again.

*At least I have gotten her home now. She will be safe from whomever was hiding.*

But he had a feeling he should tell Blair, if no one else. He passed the men reposing from their work, and realized just how tired he was. They had not yet been allowed to sleep, and the activity of the night before and then the day was getting to

him. His bones ached, and his muscles ached too. He was used to making love vigorously, to be sure, but with Ella his every muscle was tense as it had poised to give her pleasure. It had been all about her and watching her come to her own ecstasy tore his own climax from him.

Walking tiredly up the stairs, he did not stop until he reached the main hall, where he found Blair and Ada sitting together. He thought he heard something like laughter from his friend's throat, but when he entered Blair stood up hastily, putting his hands behind his back and stepping away from where Ada sat at the hearth.

“Och, Cam, ye've returned. Where is me sister?” she asked.

“Coming soon, I am sure. I had tae return the horses.”

Ada nodded as if it were the most normal thing for him to say. But when he turned to Blair, his friend looked angry.

“Why in the devil did ye dae that?” Blair said, stepping closer, his tone like ice. “If the laird finds out, he will punish us both and the girls, too.”

Cameron nodded, feeling weary. “If he finds out, I will tell him that I did what I was bid. The lass is agreeing tae a marriage; surely she can do what she likes until then.” He pinched the bridge of his nose as a headache seized him.

Ada stood up. “She willnae agree tae that marriage. I willnae let her. 'Tis a terrible thing!” She made to leave, but Ella came into the hall, looking flushed as if she'd hurried.

The cloak was gone as was the sack, and her hair had been hastily brushed and repinned.

“It is a terrible thing, but I have tae accept it, Ada,” Ella said with more equanimity than either one of them expected.

Cam ground his teeth together, his jaw nearly breaking. He did not know the MacThomas heir, and yet he wanted to punch the man’s face to a pulp for looking at Ella as he had. For gloating over the prize that he was going to win. For a prize she surely was.

“Ye cannae!” Ada said, rushing to Ella’s side. “The man is a fool! Ye will regret the match forever.”

“It doesnae matter,” Ella said. “If I marry, then ye will have more freedom. Then perhaps Faither will have time tae finish whatever he needs tae dae tae secure your safety so ye can have a life.” She smiled at her sister, but Cameron looked away.

He didn’t want to think anything warmer about Ella at the moment. His heart was threatening to do something dangerous, something foolhardy, and looking at her talking about sacrificing for her sister was enough to push him over the edge.

“We can have a life together once we find a way,” Ada said, clinging to her sister’s hand, narrowing her eyes as she caught Blair and Cameron watching. “I suppose I should ask that ye nae tell me faither any of this,” Ada said, looking pointedly at Blair.

Blair, to Cameron's utter amazement, shook his head. Cameron wanted to ask him about it, but he held his tongue just then. He would do so later once they'd both had a bit of sleep. As if hearing his inner desire to rest, Angus and Darren appeared in the hall, ready to take over.

"Ye may take yer leave," Angus said, and with hardly a backward look at Ella, Cameron left with Blair behind him.

They ate downstairs and then retired to their shared room, thankful that he fell asleep quickly, slipping into oblivion to give him some respite.



Ella looked for a sign from Cam as he walked away, but there was none. He'd turned away as soon as Angus and Darren entered the room, almost eager to get out of her presence. What had she done to deserve that reaction?

Was it the prospect of being punished for what they'd done that caused his attitude to shift? He had remained silent after she had whispered those loving words to him. She found a seat, a hand on her belly, feeling suddenly ill. Could he have heard? Was it his disgust that drove him away?

She chided herself for being so young and foolish. The man likely slept with many other young women, and she was just one of many. He had asked her, and he had made sure that she wanted to, but the way he made love showed he had the experience. Since she was going to marry anyway, it did not matter if she cared for Cam or he for her. There was nothing



they could do about it anyway. And yet the fact that he did not look her way hurt her soul.

“What’s wrong, Ella?” Ada asked, drawing her closer to the fire.

A few servants passed by, and Ella waited until they were gone to speak. “Do ye think Faither kens I went for a ride?”

“Nae, but we dinnae ken if the servants or stableboy will tell him or nae. Although everyone seems tae keep tae themselves. At least others understand our plight and dinnae wish tae make it worse for us.”

Ella nodded, looking down at her hands; hands that had caressed his muscled arms and solid chest. She remembered caressing his rippled back, smoothing their way down to grasp his tight buttocks, gripping him as his hips bucked into her. She blushed, and Ada leaned forward.

“Dear God, ye look positively ill!” When Ella looked up, Ada frowned. “Wait a minute. What happened?”

Ella bit her lip, deciding how much to tell her sister. Ada certainly would not judge her, but still it felt so personal to tell all. The moment between her and Cam had been so earth-shattering she was certain that it was not usual to be that way between a man and a woman. She knew it would never be that way between her and Neil after their marriage. Her experience was very limited, and yet she’d known pure ecstasy down to her very core.

“I think it very strange that Faither asks the guards tae stay in our rooms with us at night. Dae ye nae?”

This time, it was Ada who blushed. “Aye, I dae,” she smiled. “Although I was happy that Blair decided tae be the one tae guard me,” she said, smiling dreamily.

Ella laughed. “I was wondering about that. Who made the choice? I thought perhaps Faither had.”

“Nae, I dinnae think it was necessarily chosen. But when Blair returned first from bathing and seeing tae his wounds, he sent Darren away from me door,” she beamed.

“Well, I think Blair a very good man. He didnae try anything with ye, did he?”

“Nae! Nae at all. He would never, even if I wanted him tae,” she said, her voice trailing off. “I was drunk, however, and might have said a few things tae him that had him blushing.”

“Ye didnae!” Ella said, grasping her hand. “Ye must tell me everything.”

“Nae, nae until ye tell me what happened with ye and Cam. Did he try something with ye? And why dae ye look ill after returning from the horses? Och, I suppose ye saw what a fool Faither wants tae marry ye tae. That would be enough tae make me ill.”

Ella's chuckle was soft as she pulled her hands from Ada's and turned to the fire. "Ye must say naething, Ada, not tae anyone. But last night, and then again out by the river, we... were together."

"Together," Ada repeated, her brows knitting together. "Ye mean—"

"Like how ye described the woman and the man ye saw in the castle. I think I ken exactly what ye meant about her screaming."

Ada put a hand over her mouth. "Ella, but Faither, yer maidenhood!" She shook her head, and Ella felt instantly worried that she'd made the wrong decision about telling her sister.

But then Ada removed her hand and she was smiling. "I think it is the perfect revenge tae have against both Father and yer soon-to-be husband. If they will give ye nae choice about who tae wed, why can ye nae make the choice about who tae give yer body tae?" She reached out to grab Ella's arm. "I never thought ye would dae it, and ye have!" She started laughing. "Ella, Faither would go mad if he heard about this! He has nae idea! Tae think he put Cam intae yer room tae keep ye from running away!"

She continued to chortle, and Ella joined her for a bit, but then she sobered. She feared how Ada would respond to what she would say next.

Once Ada calmed, she said, "Ada, I am glad ye understand what I mean. It feels so good tae finally make a choice for

meself, and I dae nae want tae lose this moment. There is something between us; I can feel it. I dae nae want tae leave 'afore I can enjoy all of it. There are two weeks until me wedding, and I want tae spend it all with Cam. So, I dinnae think I want tae worry about running away. If I run away, I will never see him again. I will lose what time we could have had.”

Ella felt tears come to her eyes, and she was surprised at the fervency of this wish. There was so much she did not know of life or of love, but she truly knew this. She would regret it for the rest of her life if she did not spend this time with him before all would be lost. A little worry pricked at her heart, however, after Cam had not looked back. She hoped that he would be amenable to this idea.

Ada looked somber, laughter completely gone from her eyes.

“I see,” she said. “Ye willnae change yer mind?”

“Right now, nae. But perhaps Cam doesnae want this, and so I am a fool for thinking so.”

“Why dae ye nae marry Cam? Surely ye could both run away and do that?”

Ella shook her head. “I am nae so much a fool as tae think of that. Besides, I ken Cam doesnae wish tae wed. He told me so himself. And Faither would track us down tae the ends of the earth if he found out that we’d left together. I would hate tae see Cam hurt.”

Ada kept nodding. “This is why yer the sensible one, Ella. Ye think of all the outcomes, all the possible consequences.”

“Aye, but then it makes life a bit dull around the edges,” Ella said with irritation, leaning back. “Dae ye think me very foolish?”

“Nae,” Ada said, sighing. “If Blair would ever look me way, I think I could understand ye wanting that time. Tae steal what ye could ‘afore yer next unwanted step came.”

For the first time, Ella saw something like want in her sister’s eyes. “Do ye really feel something for Blair, Ada?” she asked, and Ada pulled back.

“I do nae. I want ye tae be happy, Ella. Dae what ye must. But if ever ye want tae leave again, then I am there, ready. I care nae what we leave behind here. Clearly, Faither doesnae care for our well-being any longer. He doesnae care what we want.”

They stood and pulled each other into an embrace. “Nae, he doesnae. I think he will regret it one day, but for now, we must dae what we can.”

Ada held on a little longer. “Ye dinnae have tae do this wedding, Ella. Please, tell me ye will think about running away. Perhaps the night ‘afore, even.”

Ella nodded and pulled away with a smile. “Aye, I will think on it. But I dinnae want tae make life even harder for ye. Just

think, ye might even be able tae choose the man ye love, and nae have tae marry whomever Faither says.”

A little flicker of something like hope filled Ada’s eyes, but she shook her head. “How can I be happy if ye arenae?”

Thankfully, Angus and Darren were far on the other side of the room, still giving the girls the space they desired no matter what punishments they’d endured.

“Now, let us go do something fun, something that makes us laugh.”

“I agree,” Ella said, grateful for her sister. She could not imagine a life of imprisonment without Ada by her side, “And then perhaps ye might tell me what kinds of things ye said tae Blair that made him blush.”

Her laughter trilled as Ada groaned.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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When Cameron woke, it was night. He saw Blair sitting up across the room, and slowly, he started to get out of bed too, not eager to return to their duties.

“I suppose we are back on the night watch then,” he said, his voice thick with sleep.

He’d slept enough hours, but his body still ached with fatigue. Rubbing his face with his hands, he leaned his elbows on his knees. He would have to see Ella again, spend a whole night with her. He wasn’t sure if he’d be able to do that again without things getting complicated, at least in his heart and mind. Women used to be so simple for him, but this one was different. Different in a very dangerous way.

“Aye, Angus and Darren are set tae take their time off once we get up there,” Blair said, his throat thick with sleep.

“Her faither doesnae want them tae spend the night with the lasses, then?” Cameron asked with a laugh.

“I suppose nae. Although ...”

“Although what?” Cameron asked, his head snapping up to look at his friend.

He feared that Blair might have heard something or suspected something, but he knew his friend would have taken him to task for it. Blair shrugged, stood up and started to get dressed.

*There must be some other reason he thinks the laird unwise.*

With a chuckle, he said, “I suppose because he doesnae ken that the soldier he’s asked tae guard his daughter is trying tae win a bet. Tae get the lass tae fall in love with him.”

Cameron was glad for the darkness, or Blair might see the guilt in his face. But he was also relieved. At least his friend was unaware of the vigorous lovemaking that had been going on of late. For it had indeed been vigorous. By the river, he’d surprised himself with how much he wanted her, and his desire for her had turned him into a craven beast. Until he’d gotten enough control to soothe the speed, to take her slowly, lovingly.

*Dinnae think of love!*

“Aye, he wouldnae let me otherwise, nae doubt. But I am surprised he wanted young men instead of the older ones tae watch over his precious daughters by night. It seems a bit odd.”

“So it does, but he trusts me.” Cameron could hear the note of strain in his friend’s voice. “I can do naething that will harm his daughters in any way.”



“Aye, I understand,” Cameron replied. “Ye never would, Blair. Ye are a good man.” He laughed. “Far better than me. I sometimes wish I had yer principles.”

“Ye could if ye tried. But ye dinnae wish tae, I think.” Blair pulled on his clothing and Cameron followed, moving a bit slower than his friend.

“It is nae that,” Cameron said honestly. “I just think I could never compare, Blair. Ye are far superior tae me. Whatever wife ye choose in the end should consider herself lucky. Ye would be as loyal as a dog.”

Blair patted Cameron on the shoulder and let out a throaty chuckle. “I think I should thank ye, but I am nae sure.”

“So ye should. I always like when yer grateful tae me, old friend.”

“Och, time tae go, lad,” Blair said, annoyed but grinning, and Cameron followed him out the door.

They ate quickly and then rushed to relieve Angus and Darren, surprised that they had not yet been summoned to the laird to account for the day. Or that Laird Graeme hadn't chastised Cameron for riding out with Ella. When he arrived at her room, he stopped just outside the door. His fist was raised to knock, but he took a deep breath before allowing it to make contact with the door. He found himself excited to see her, even though he knew he had almost won the bet. Then he'd have to tell Blair, and they'd leave, and it'd be over.

But he didn't want it to be over. Not just yet. When he knocked, he heard her call, and he opened the door, pushing it closed and then leaned against it. His mask had returned, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to again risk her seeing him without it.

"Cam," Ella said, seated at the fire in a woolen wrapper, her lovely hair braided down her shoulder, a glass of wine in her hand. "I see the mask is back in its place." She seemed desirous to ask further, but she didn't, and he was glad. "Do say ye will join me."

He stayed where he was. His skin prickled with awareness of the way she looked at him. Usually when he bedded a woman, the lust was quick and then it was doused as soon as he'd found his pleasure with her and she him. They went their separate ways, and that was that. But Ella was different. Every taste of her seemed to only increase his craving and desire, and he knew it would never be sated.

"Wine?" he said, the hairs raising on the back of his neck. He felt as unschooled as a young boy, even though he had already been with her twice now.

"Aye, wine," she said, her eyes crinkling again at the corners with mirth. "Are ye all right?" Her smile fell. "Me faither didnae say anything tae ye, did he?"

"Nae, he didnae," he replied, and she looked relieved.

"Good. Tae be honest, I think the servants are quite loyal tae our plight, Ada's and mine. I wouldnae think they'd like tae

share such a thing if it meant they would have tae witness, at least for a little, the laird's wrath."

Cameron relaxed, and he went to sit across from her, accepting a glass as she poured the wine into it. "Was yer faither always so angry?"

"Nae," she said softly, looking into the flames. It was an even cooler evening than the night before, the kind of chill reminding Cameron that summer was soon over. It reminded him of the slow passage of time and what it meant for them.

*From the warm brightness of Ella's smiles tae never seeing her again.*

"He wasnae. When me aunts were around, he was always laughing. They kent what tae say tae stop him from being so serious. But then me aunt died, and me other aunt married, and then we were kidnapped. He has been rather serious ever since."

"Ye have two aunts?" He asked, thinking about the brooch and if the other aunt also had one.

The wine swirled in the glass in his hands as he listened to her answer.

"Aye. Anne and Isla. Isla was meant tae come for a visit, but something held her back. She didnae arrive." Ella looked forlorn about that fact as she sipped at her wine. "It is too bad. It would have helped tae slow his plans about this wedding, I

am sure. I cannae wait tae hear the tongue-lashing she will give him once she hears.”

Cameron watched expressions move across Ella’s face in a matter of seconds. He had not known her for long, but he’d only recently seen the bold, fierce streak inside her. Gleaning what he had heard from Blair and what he’d heard her sister say, Ella had not always been that way. Even the night in the tavern, he could see a glimpse of it. The desire to be thoughtful, organized, and careful. But it warred inside her now.

“It will nae be in time, ye believe,” Cameron said softly.

“Nae, it willnae be in time. Although perhaps I should write tae her, if Faither is keeping it from her on purpose.” After another second, she turned to Cameron with a smile.

“Will ye tell me more about Arla? She sounds lovely. Me own máthair died ‘afore I was too old.”

“Och, I am sorry for that, lass.” He smiled at her. “It seems we ken each other’s burdens.”

Yet another thing that linked him and Ella together. Clearing his throat, he tried to focus on answering her question. It was a long night to get through, and despite the wine, he wanted to make sure his focus was in the right place.



“When I was younger, all the young bairns in the village thought she was a witch. They said she had been healing from

the beginning of time. I started tae believe them, but I told them I'd watch and see if she did anything strange that told me she was as old as the beginning of time."

Ella was enraptured. Cam told stories with every muscle and fiber in his body. She'd known he was charming from the moment he found her in the tub and teased her mercilessly. But she was beginning to realize that he did enjoy sharing stories, and he did so very well. She imagined him telling tales in front of a fire at some future family gathering. Her sudden realization of what she was thinking brought her to a halt. She averted her gaze from him, hoping he didn't notice anything foolish on her face, such as longing for a future with him.

"Well? What did ye find out?" she asked, hoping to help herself focus on the subject at hand.

"I told them what she did, and that she went tae bed at night, and that she ate, things they said witches didnae do, and so they got bored after a while," he grinned. "We never did find out how old she was, but I do think she was nearing sixty when she found me."

"What a shame! Then ye could never quell yer curiosity about her."

"Nay," he said with a shake of the head. "But then we got older, and it didnae matter. And then she was gone."

Ella leaned over and touched his arm, wanting to comfort him, to take away the serious, grim look that had stolen over his face. "I am sorry for yer loss, Cam."

“And I for yers,” he said, turning away from staring into the fire back to her eyes.

They were close enough that he reached up and brushed his thumb along the line of her cheek. “It seems we understand each other, ye and I.”

She swallowed, nodding. Yes, it was becoming more like that all the time. Of course, their bodies seemed to fit together quite well, and she had never felt such pleasure as he’d wrought in her. But it was something more, something about his nearness and his manner that struck a deep resounding chord within her. A chord that played a tune in concert with his.

“Aye, I think we dae,” she said softly, and his thumb moved to brush along her lower lip, his eyes following its path.

He leaned in and kissed her, this time so slowly, that Ella felt frustrated by the sudden wave of desire that had grown inside her. She wanted him to take her to the bed, but his lips opened over her hers, his tongue moving slowly, silkily against her own, teasing but also loving.

Her hands clutched at the back of his neck as his mouth worked against hers. This was a kiss unlike any they’d shared before. Unfortunately, even if she wanted him to bed her again, especially as vigorously as he had that afternoon, she knew her body would not be too happy about it. Her innocent muscles had begun to ache a bit due to the newness of such an activity. It would have to wait.

She broke the kiss and leaned back, putting a hand over her mouth. “Ye are far too good at that, I think, Mr. Hamish.”

He laughed, leaning back as well, looking casual and smug as if nothing at all had happened between them just then. As if he hadn’t just nearly brought her heavenward with only the strokes of his expert mouth.

“I should think so. I have made it me life’s work tae be good at such a thing.”

“Have ye?” she said with a lifted brow, not unaffected by a little prick of jealousy at his having so many young women to practice with. “How noble of ye, I am sure.”

“Thank ye,” he said, standing up, reaching down for her hand. “Now, dae ye wish tae go tae bed?”

“Aye,” she said, feeling suddenly very fatigued. All the excitement with Cam had made her forget it. But now the weight of her future wedding, as well as her growing feelings for her personal guard, were on her shoulders. “Will ye join me?”

“Aye, but,” he paused, looking almost sheepish. “I will hold ye only. I think ye are likely hurtin’ a bit.” He frowned. “Are ye?”

She blushed as she nodded. “Aye, but that has naething tae dae with me lack of enjoyment in what we did. Or any regret for that matter,” she said, brushing a hand down his chest.

“It is the way of things, I believe. When a woman first lies with a man.”

She nodded again. “Aye, but it wasnae as if we did much ‘lyin’,” she answered with a wry grin. “Now, come tae bed,” she said in a softer voice, reaching out her hand for him.

Her plea came out in a far more earnest tone than she expected, and her traitorous mind wandered to whether she might say it to him in their home, in their own bedroom. Shaking herself, she took his warm, calloused hand and led him to her bed. Once inside, she laid on her side, and Cam pulled her closer, removing his mask and putting it on the bed beside them. She felt his warm kiss on the back of her neck, and then his strong arms wrapped around her.

Ella slowly descended into slumber, the sounds of their matching breath lulling her to sleep. Her last thought before she gave way to the night was wondering how any other word could be more perfect for the moment than *bliss*.



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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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When morning came, Angus and Darren arrived earlier than expected. Not wishing to wake Ella, Cameron slipped out of bed, and carefully put on his mask and boots, walking softly until he left the room and closed the door behind him. Blair was doing just the same as they greeted the older guards, looking just as tousled as he did, and he wondered if he'd slept on duty as well.

“The laird wants tae speak tae ye both,” Darren said, not meeting Cameron’s eye.

“Very good.” He left, following Blair through the passageway and down the stairs, his heart pounding.

He wasn’t sure how he would answer the laird if the man brought up how he’d ridden away with Ella to the riverside for a long while. He did not feel regret, only guilt, and he knew it would show on his face as soon as he was pressed about it. He tried to school his features, however, as they made their way to the study door.

“Nae doubt, he wants tae discuss the plan,” Blair said, rubbing a hand over his face to shake his fatigue. “How did ye sleep?”

Blair watched him out of the corner of his eye. Cameron tried to act natural, as if he hadn't just spent the night curled up next to the woman he ...

*The woman I what?*

“Good, and ye?” he answered. “I can imagine the Lady Ada makin' it very difficult for ye tae get tae sleep. She seems an angry sort as of late.”

“Aye,” Blair said with a surprising smile. “She is nae happy about this marriage. But it is understandable. I shouldnae like it meself if it happened tae me or me sister.”

“Nor I,” Cameron replied, just as they were nearing the door.

“How goes yer plan?” Blair said in a low voice. “Are ye having' success?”

Before his guilt threatened to make him confess all, Cameron said, “Aye, I believe so.”

Blair knocked on the door, and at the sound of the laird's gruff permission, they entered.

“Blair, Cam, good tae see ye. I ken it is a bit unusual, but I want ye tae remain here while I take me daughters tae the MacThomas castle today for a day or two. I think it a good plan for her tae see where she will reside after the wedding, and it will be good for her tae meet those she will live amongst. I too have an interest in makin' sure all is safe.”

“So, Angus and Darren will accompany ye?” Blair asked, confused.

“Aye. Ye both need the rest, and I prefer tae have Angus and Darren guardin’ when I am nearby and awake.”

“Very good,” Cam said, his hands clasped behind his back so tightly, he knew the knuckles were white.

He didn’t like the idea of Ella going to her betrothed’s home, to have the young man’s eyes move all over her body, desperate and hungry. Not when he could not be there to protect her, or at least to stare daggers at the man by way of retribution.

“Laird, what of yer attack plans?” Blair said, stepping forward. “We didnae get the chance tae finish our discussions due tae the incident on the wall.”

“Aye, I ken,” Graeme said, standing up and going to face the small fire in his hearth. “I want this tae be sorted first. Once Ella is married, then I have only Ada tae worry about. Then, I will be able tae put me full force in action tae remove Laird Grant.” He turned around, wearing a scowl, his thick brows pushed together. “But right now, me daughters are standin’ together tae defy me. I think it will be far better once they are separated from one another. Ella will return tae her sensible self, always willin’ tae dae what she’s told, and Ada will be less strengthened by her sister joinin’ in her foolish schemes.”

Cameron had to keep himself from biting his tongue to say what he really thought of the man. The way he had begun to

look at his daughters as simple creatures to shepherd and corral, instead of to love and to cherish, hurt him and did a disservice to the Ella he was coming to know. She was far from biddable, he thought with some amusement, but he feared that a life forced into marriage with someone she didn't care for would turn her into a broken woman.

“Aye, laird. We will wait then. Ye will return tomorrow?” Blair asked, looking unaffected by the plan.

“That or the next day. I will send word. Ye may go tae yer quarters,” he said with a wave of his hand, and they both turned to leave.

Cameron was nearly seething by the time they reached the lower level of the castle. “Come now, Blair, ye cannae think that is the way the man should handle things with his daughters? Ye never said it was as bad as that! Only that the man refused tae allow them any entertainments and freedom. Nae that he would consider them near property tae be married off and pushed about like animals. And the way he talked about them! Separating two sisters who have only each other tae understand the burden of their imprisonment.”

He sat down on the edge of his bed and put his face in his hands. Blair said nothing, only sat on his own bed and waited. Cameron realized he'd said far more than he needed to.

“What is this, Cam? Why so angry?” Blair asked in his usual sensible tone.

“Answer me about the laird. Did ye ken he was like this?” Cameron asked, looking up at him across the dimly lit room.

Blair looked stricken. “Nae, I promise I didnae. I kent that he was extreme in the way he kept his daughters so close tae him, but the way he spoke of separatin’ them. I confess, I didnae like that.”

“Then what can we dae?” Cameron asked, desperately, standing up and starting to pace. “We cannae leave it as it lies.”

“Aye, we can,” Blair said sharply, making Cameron pause. “They are naething tae us, Cam. We are only meant tae guard them, nae get in the way of how a faither deals with his daughters.”

Cameron swallowed, realizing that Blair spoke sense, but he didn’t like it still. And he wasn’t yet ready to confess anything further.

“Aye, true enough,” he said. “But it is nae fair.”

“Nae, but that is the way of it for now. Now, ye should sleep. Easier tae think and argue on a rested mind.”

Cam sat down on his bed and laid on it without removing his boots. He stared up at the ceiling, and all he could think about was how Ella would feel when she heard the news about going to meet her betrothed.



“Today?” Ella asked, her voice cracking as she spoke.

“Aye, today. As soon as we are done eatin’ and as soon as yer maids can get ye packed for the trip. The both of ye.” Her father’s eyes turned from her to Ada.

“I will accompany her?” Ada asked, incredulous.

“Of course! After all yer nonsense, dae ye think I would allow ye tae be on yer own in the castle for two days? We would never hear from ye again,” he said grimly.

“Quite right,” Ada muttered, but Ella nudged her, sending her a desperate message with her eyes.

*It will be easier if Ada is there with me.*

“Aye, then,” Ada said, surprising their father with her sudden agreement.

“It is a normal thing, tae go and spend time in the home of yer new family, tae meet those ye will live with, tae acquaint yerself with the place. Lady MacThomas has a desire tae meet ye as well, now that ye are goin’ tae marry her son.”

Ella nodded, trying not to think about how warm and safe she’d felt wrapped up in Cam’s embrace last night as she slept. That was what she assumed marriage would be like or could be like, if one married the right person. But for now, she had to face this future with equanimity. Until she could think of another way out.

“Aye, true enough,” she replied.

An hour later, they were set on their path to the MacThomas castle. Even though she wasn't happy about their destination, she smiled as she looked out the window and clasped Ada's hand. They had not traveled since they were younger, and this was the most she'd seen of the surrounding countryside since she was a child. The castle was a few hours away by carriage, and when they came upon it, it looked rather glum and imposing on the lovely green around it.

Thankfully, their father had chosen to ride alongside the carriage, with Angus and Darren, so she and her sister could speak as they wished. Ada grimaced.

“It doesnae look very pleasant,” she said aloud, and Ella clapped her on the shoulder.

“I ken that very well, but ye will have tae help me look at this in a different way if I am goin' tae survive it.” Tears welled in her eyes. “Ye cannae simply say every bad thing that comes tae mind while we're here.”

“Aye, I'm sorry,” Ada said, coming to join her on the seat next to her and pulling her close. “Yer right. Ye ken I often say just what I think, whether it will be helpful or nae.” She bit her lip and scrunched up her nose. “I think it bothers many people.”

Ella wondered if she included Blair as part of that group, but she didn't press. The carriage was slowing, and she had her fiancé to see again.

“Nae, ye are wonderful, Ada. It is just that I am tryin’ tae stay afloat and hearin’ heavy words such as those will only bring me sorrow.”

“Ye are right, sister. I will dae me best to improve my demeanor.”

With another squeeze of hands, they descended the carriage and, along with their father, made their approach to the castle gates.

Once servants had hurried them inside, Ella saw Neil standing with his parents in the main hall. She clasped her hands together, straightened her shoulders, and approached them.

“Lady Ella,” Lady MacThomas said, coming to greet her with open arms. “Ye are even lovelier than I ever could have imagined! I havenae seen ye in some time,” she said.

Ella was warmed by her greeting. “Thank ye, Me Lady, for yer hospitality.”

“Of course. We are soon tae be family.”

“Lady Ella,” Laird MacThomas said with a gallant bow while his lady greeted her sister and father. “Ye are most welcome.”

Neil was the last to greet her. “Lady Ella,” Neil said, looking eager to reach out for her hands.



Again, she saw the hungry look in his gaze, and she wondered at how strange it was that she should welcome it so much in Cam's eyes, but not in Neil's.

"Master MacThomas," she said, allowing him to take her hands as she curtsied.

He grinned, showing his yellow teeth again. "We are very glad tae have ye here. I am glad," he said in a lower voice, "tae see more of ye."

She shivered and nodded. "Thank ye," she managed to bite out.

The party moved to sit at a large table, and servants began to bring food. Ella could feel Neil's gaze on her no matter what she did. She hardly spoke, but instead merely answered questions when directed to her. Kindly, Ada took up the reins of conversation, even often distracting Neil from his constant perusal of Ella many a time.

A storm rolled in during dinner, and it began to clamor against the walls of the castle. They ate and drank, retiring closer to the fire after eating, and Ella kept Ada close. But after another hour or so, Lady MacThomas spoke.

"I think it is time we took ourselves up tae bed. One can hardly think in this weather, let alone hear each other. Yer rooms have been set for all ye, and I will have servants take ye." The lady motioned to the servants, and Ella was so much relieved she even smiled.

“Very good, thank ye,” she replied, glad to be rid of everyone’s companionship for the rest of the eve.

At least she could have time on her own to think about her future without Neil’s eyes raking over her. It was a suffocating presence, and one that made an odd oily feeling settle in her stomach. He was not unkind, nor was he rude, but there was simply something about him that she didn’t like.

Once she was behind her bedroom door, she rushed to the hearth where sat a comfortable chair. Throwing herself into it, she tried to take deep breaths. How could her father not see the way this future marriage affected her? How did he not notice the unusual way her betrothed looked at her, as if she were a treat to be consumed? This was not love; this was not the future she had for so long dreamed about as a young girl. For so long she’d dreamed about marriage as an escape from her prison, but this was not the way.

Neil was not the man she wanted to be with for the rest of her days. She could tell he was not a man who would love and support her, make her feel safe and warm, remind her that she could make her own choices and do as she pleased. Ella couldn’t do this. She knew that now—that she could not bring herself to align with a man whom she did not know and whom she did not love. But was there not someone she *did* love? Someone she would consider such a relationship with?

There was only one name that rang in her mind and when it did, she began to cry. It could never be.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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When Cameron and Blair woke, they spent time practicing their swords, fighting one another bare-chested until they were both drenched in sweat. It did little to rid Cameron of his uneasy feeling. Ella was now hours away, no doubt in the arms of that hungry-eyed boy, and it drove him mad.

“Christ,” Blair said, sheathing his sword and breathing hard. “I have never seen ye fight like that before.”

In fact, they had drawn a crowd of other men who watched them eagerly. But Cameron didn’t care. He sheathed his sword and wiped his face with his forearm.

“Aye, ye might say that I am nae quite meself,” Cameron said sourly, and Blair chuckled.

“Aye, ye might say that. Especially since the lasses have gone tae the MacThomas castle. Ye have been a blood nuisance.”

“How would ye ken? We were asleep!” Cameron said roughly, picking up his shirt from where he’d tossed it, pulling it over himself.

Blair kept on chuckling as they dressed and left the practice area, hurrying to the barracks for a meal. When it was served, Cameron ate glumly, trying not to think about Neil MacThomas stealing a kiss.

“Ye ken what I think?” Blair asked.

“What?”

“That we should go tae the tavern tae see how they fare. Clearly, we are nae needed at the moment, and so we have time. Perhaps ye might want tae check up on Seamus and Julia?”

“Aye,” Cameron said, his mood lightening a bit. “I would like that. But it will have tae be tomorrow since it is dark now.”

“Aye, tomorrow.”

The next day, they waited until almost evening to stride out to the tavern. It did not appear as though Ella and Ada would be returning that day, and so Cameron had to settle for the tavern.

“So, are ye goin’ tae tell me what yer mood is about?”

“Me mood?” Cameron asked as they walked along. “Is that what ye call it?”

“Aye, ye have been surly ever since she left. Now, what is goin’ on? Ye said things were goin’ well, that ye were goin’ tae win the bet. So, what is the problem?” Blair sounded desperate now. “I have never seen ye like this. Ye are always cheerful.”

Cameron paused, turning to face his friend. “It doesnae matter.”

“I think it does,” Blair retorted, and Cameron scowled. “Ye dinnae need me tae say anythin’. I dinnae have tae confess anythin’.”

“Nae, but I dinnae ken why ye willnae. We are old friends, lad. It is nae as if we are strangers.”

“Aye,” Cameron replied gruffly.

“So? Will ye tell me?” When Cameron said nothing, Blair nodded and made a sound low in his throat. “Och, I see.”

“What? What dae ye see?”

“Ye have fallen for the lass!” Blair said suddenly, and Cameron reddened and walked faster.

He nearly turned to throw a punch when he heard Blair’s low chuckle. “I am right, are I nae?”

“Nae,” Cameron grunted, but there was no heat in it.

He wouldn't be able to keep it from his best friend, the man who'd known him longer than anyone else. And yet he wasn't sure how he felt about Ella. All he knew was that being apart felt wretched, and the thought of her being touched by another man was torture.

"I think otherwise," Blair said, a little jump in his step. "And ye are deathly afraid of it all."

"Say another word, Blair, and I will put a fist intae yer jaw," Cameron growled, turning a menacing look to his friend.

But Blair was smug, and he put his hands on his hips, shaking his head. "I never thought I would see the day." His bright smile faltered. "So, then what are ye goin' tae dae about it?"

Cameron thought about hitting him, ending the conversation altogether. But seeing the earnest look in his friend's eyes stopped him. Deflated, he shook his head.

"Naething. There is naething tae dae. Just as ye said, we are nae tae feel anythin' for the laird's daughters."

He trudged on, heartened only a little by the sight of his tavern in the distance. A little puff of smoke rose from the chimney, and he hoped his adopted brother and sister were doing well together, and that Blair's guards had kept Julia safe.

"Besides, once she finds out the truth, she will hate me anyway."

“The truth about what?” Blair asked.

“The bet, ye fool. Once she learns that, she willnae care about anythin’ else. I ken her, even though it has been so little time. She is a fiery one, nae matter what her faither has tae say about her. She will hold her anger until the day she dies.”

Blair snorted. “It likely runs in the family,” he said bitterly. “But perhaps she will find it charmin’?”

“Doubt it. And nae only that, but the brooch. I have nae come tae find out more of the brooch, and that was the other reason ye suggested I work as her guard—why we have been put so much together. I needed tae find out about me past and that brooch has somethin’ tae dae with it. The very brooch that Ella herself wears.”

They’d stopped walking by then, and Blair leaned against a tree trunk. “Ye think ye are related?” he asked, and Cameron turned away.

“Nae, I really dinnae. But there is some connection between us. There is some reason we have the same piece of jewelry, and I need tae find out what it is. But I ken if I stay longer as her guard, then ...”

“Things will get worse,” Blair finished, and Cameron hated how perceptive he was, when he could not speak so freely about his own life.

“Aye, but I suppose she will be wed soon anyway,” he said, kicking his boot against the tree. “But it doesnae matter because I dinnae love her.”

Blair laughed, and Cameron’s fists clenched as his eyes narrowed. “Come of it now, lad. Ye are clearly besotted, and I have never seen the like before. Nae in ye at any rate.”

He leaned against a tree near Blair, but wished to sink to his knees. What a fine fettle he’d gotten himself into now, falling for the one person he could not have. The one person who made it difficult now to find out about his past and why he’d been left on the healer’s doorstep. “Ye will disapprove, I am sure. The way ye barked at me after I mentioned Ada.”

Blair looked away, rubbing at a sore spot on the back of his neck. “Aye, so I did. But one cannae help such things. I think ye always thought so, but now ye are right in the middle of it. Unable tae let it go.”

Cameron merely nodded, wishing he could press Blair about Ada, yet knowing it was not the right time.

*One day, Blair will get his comeuppance.*

“Ye should fight for her, then.”

Cameron laughed, and pushing himself off the tree, he started pacing. “Fight for her, against the laird?”



“Aye, make it kent that ye want her instead. If she loves ye tae, that is, which I believe ye think she does.”

“But the brooch,” Cameron said, liking the idea of fighting, taking her away from the MacThomas castle, but he knew that it would not be so easy.

“Och, aye. I think ye should wait then until ye ken there is naething of family betwixt ye. That there is naething dangerous either ‘afore ye make yer plans tae fight.”

“Aye, right enough.” He turned to walk toward the tavern, and Blair patted him on the shoulder.

“It will come right, I think,” Blair said with a smile.

“What has ye so bloody happy?” Cameron asked, surprised at the sudden change in his friend.

“Ye, I think. Ye were bein’ an arse, and now yer nae.”

Cameron laughed, but he knew Blair wasn’t telling the whole truth. And one day, he was going to find out more about it.



When Ella awoke, a maid helped her dress, and then Ada met her outside of her room. Solemnly, they walked downstairs to breakfast.

“How did ye sleep, sister?” Ada inquired.

“Nae well, but I suppose that is nae strange. A different place, after all.”

“And such things tae think of,” Ada said, holding her arm.

“Aye.” As they walked, their footsteps were the only sounds heard in the passageway. “Ada, I think I have made a terrible mistake,” she said.

Ada paused. “What dae ye mean?” Her eyes widened with concern.

“There ye are,” their father said, emerging from a side room and meeting them in the passageway. “It is good we can go down tae the meal together.”

Ella swallowed back what she was going to say. It would keep until later, but she thought in the morning light that she’d made a decision.

“Ye did very well yesterday, Ella,” her father commended, walking alongside her, his hands behind his back. “The family seems taken with ye.”

“Thank ye, Faither,” she said quietly, disinclined to say anything else lest she state her plan to him in plain words.

“I think ye will be very happy together,” he said, looking around once they entered the main hall. “This is a fine home, and a proud clan. Ye will serve them well one day as their lady.”

She nodded, biting her cheek to keep from screaming. Ada looked at her, but Ella kept her eyes forward. It would all have to wait.

The family greeted them, and just as before, Neil’s eyes wandered to her. He helped her into a seat, putting her right next to him. And as the discussion began over the morning meal, he leaned in, his hand reaching under the table to brush against her leg.

She jumped and gasped at the contact. Everyone turned to look at her, but she shook her head.

“Forgive me,” she murmured. “I adjusted my chair.”

When everyone turned away once again, she looked at Neil, who grinned from ear to ear.

His hand had not moved. In fact, it made its way onto her knee, and he whispered, “Ye cannae begrudge me a touch, Ella. Ye are soon tae be me wife.”

“Aye,” she said, her voice shaking.

He did not move the hand but merely stayed, pressing against her knee. She could feel the heat and sweat of it as she tried to

eat, for he never moved it. It was as if he were claiming her for his own.

“Tell me, what dae ye like tae dae?” he said, eating with one hand as if everything progressed normally. “What will ye enjoy while ye are here?”

“I...” she began but paused when he squeezed her knee again. “I like tae read. Tae ride. Tae paint.”

“I see. Very good pursuits.” He nodded, and Ella tried to envision her life with this man, this boy, talking to her like she was a child coming to stay for an extended period in his home.

It was not possible. She could not see it. Instead, as had happened so often the night before, it was Cameron’s face which crossed her mind when she thought of such things. And it would not leave her. She had to follow her heart, she realized, even if it caused problems she might not be able to undo.

“Ye will be allowed tae dae as ye please,” he said, making himself seem just a shade better than before. “Although yer faither tells me that he wants ye tae be protected. There is some business of the past.”

“Aye,” she said, “But he will handle it soon. And we are very far from the source of the trouble. Here, I mean.”

“Good, that is good.” He smiled at her, and she turned away, wishing that someone could save her from the conversation.

It was not that he was terribly bad, but that he made her ache more for Cameron and the safety she felt in his arms. With Neil, she felt uncertain, as if she unsure what his next move would be.

Eventually, he released her leg as they stood to tour the castle. While he led the way, Lady MacThomas took Ella on her arm, and she was grateful not to have to walk alongside Neil.

“Dae ye think ye will miss home very much?” she asked. “Once ye are wed?”

“I dinnae think so,” she replied honestly. “It will be nice tae have a change.” She was feeling better now that Neil wasn’t crowding her, and her plan was slowly taking shape in her mind. All she had to do was talk to Ada so they could put it in motion.

“That’s good. I am glad ye will be happy.” Lady MacThomas patted her hand. “I want the wife of me son tae be happy. I ken this is a little strange for ye, but nae entirely unusual. Me own marriage was one of connection,” she smiled. “But we found our way well enough, and so will ye.”

“Thank ye, Lady MacThomas.” She was touched by the woman’s words, even if it meant that she had to change things later.

After the tour where she hardly paid attention to anything, they returned to the main hall, and her father said, “I wouldnae like tae spend too long takin’ yer hospitality, friends. I am concerned about the large storm last eve, and I wish tae return home tae make certain there are nae preparations I need tae

make for another one, or if there are damages needin' tae be repaired.”

“Of course,” Laird MacThomas replied as Ella’s heart swelled with joy, and she exchanged looks with Ada. “Ye would be welcome tae leave whenever ye are ready. I shall have the servants prepare yer things, and the cook a bit of food.”

“Thank ye,” he said, and Ella approached him with a questioning look.

“So soon, Faither?” she asked, trying to hide her glee.

“Aye, I was thinkin’ of it as we wandered the castle, lookin’ at their various methods of building and protection. The storm was strong, and I hope we weathered it well at home.”

Ella said nothing, wondering if it was not a bit of guilt she saw in her father’s eye. But she didn’t argue with him.

“Very well. I am happy tae return home. We both are,” she said, looking at Ada who was in conversation with the laird.

“Good,” he said, squeezing her hand but not looking at her.

In two hours, they were waving goodbye to the MacThomas family and riding away, alone in the carriage once more.

“Thank God,” Ella said, leaning back in her seat, while Ada crossed her arms.

“All right, now ye have tae tell me what is wrong. Ye have been actin’ strange all morn, nae that I blame ye,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“I cannae marry him,” Ella said bluntly, covering her face with her hands.

It was so beyond what she thought herself capable of, defying her father in every way, but in her heart, she knew it was not right.

“Good! I am so glad ye feel that way!” Ada said brightly, leaning forward to take Ella’s hands from her face, her dark eyes sparkling.

“Me too, although ye may find me mad for what I am about tae say tae ye, and what I suggest we dae as soon as we return home,” Ella said, wincing.

“What is that?”

“I am in love with Cam Hamish, and I want tae run away with him.”

Ada’s mouth nearly fell to the floor in shock.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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Cameron and Blair burst through the tavern door to see Julia and Seamus behind the bar. He removed his mask and hid it into his pocket, glad to finally play the role of the man he truly was. That was one good thing about not having Ella around. He didn't have to worry about being himself, or the guilt that came with it.

"Cam!" Julia said, rushing around the bar to embrace him.

He laughed, feeling a little more lighthearted than he had in the woods, and Seamus approached him as well, embracing him once Julia let go.

"It has hardly been more than a few days, lass," he said to Julia kindly, and she smiled.

"I ken, but ye have nae been away this long before." She turned to Seamus. "Has he?"

"Nae. Are ye back now for good?" Seamus asked eagerly.



“Nae,” Cameron said, shaking his head, glancing at Blair.  
“Nae yet. But we wanted tae come and see ye both.”

He walked forward to sit at the long counter, looking around at the other men who sat drinking and eating in the tavern. “All is well?”

“Aye,” Julia said. “Blair’s guards have been very helpful.”

“Och, good tae hear, lass,” Blair said with a bright smile. “I told them it was very important that they dispatch this duty as well as they can.”

“Thank ye,” she said, blushing.

“Aye,” Seamus said. “I have nae had tae fight anyone off. Besides, Cam is meant tae show me how tae fight properly, when the time is right. That way we may nae need guards in the end.”

“True enough, lad,” he nodded to Seamus. “When I am returned from the castle, we shall begin.”

“How is the lass?” Julia asked suddenly, making Cameron’s eyes snap to hers. “She is well? The one from the castle?”

“Aye,” he said, trying not to redden. “She is very well.”

He looked around, envisioning Ella in such a place. Would she be happy though? Living as a tavern wife?

*Wife? Are ye mad, lad?*

He had not thought of that, only that he wanted to fight for her, that he did not wish for Neil to have her. But now, thinking of her here in his space, it made him happy, and it made his heart flutter. The tavern in that moment felt more like home than ever.

*If only Ella willnae hate me once she kens all.*

“Good. I would hate tae hear that she was hurt from what happened.”

“Have ye seen those men again?” Blair asked, his brow furrowed.

“Nae, nor any Grant men nearby,” Seamus said sternly. “At least nae surroudin’ the tavern. I think ye sent yer message with those two other men well enough.”

“Good.” Cameron pounded a hand on the table with a smile. “Pour me an ale, please,” he said. “Och, and one for Blair as well.”

“Very good, sir,” Julia said with a laugh, walking off to do as he asked.

Cameron felt much better a few hours later. He’d had a few ales, and his mind and body were both warmed up. Blair and Seamus were telling stories, and he and Julia were listening as

the crowd in the tavern grew. The siblings would occasionally rush up to do what they could, but then they would return to spend more time with Blair and Cameron.

He'd eaten, and if he had any say in the matter, he'd soon be drunk. It was far preferable to sitting in the castle barracks, thinking about Ella. But now he had to consider how he would tell her the truth. He had to prepare himself that she would be angry, too, but he hoped he could soothe it by telling her how much he cared for her, that they might have a future together if she allowed him.

*If the laird allows me.*

He knew the laird would be furious once he found out the truth, and he might even become violent.

"Ye seem tae be in a more pleasant mood," Blair said.

"Aye, so I am," he grinned. "I dinnae think it will last, but I will enjoy it all the same. Until we return."

"Aye, should we go tonight or in the morn? The lads at the castle ken where I am," Blair wondered.

"Ye dinnae think the lass will be comin' back today?" Cameron looked outside at the growing dark, wishing desperately for Ella's return.

"Nae, well I dinnae ken, but perhaps after the storm last night, they may want tae return, just in case. I ken the laird is always

worried about the castle walls and grounds. Worried about how they will fare under duress.”

“Tae keep his daughters imprisoned, the walls must be strong,” Cameron said sarcastically.

“Aye.” Blair lifted his cup of ale and drew it to his lips. “So, I suppose ye think I should come and work with ye here at the tavern now. Now that ye won the bet, and Lady Ella is in love with ye.”

Cameron could tell Blair was drunk by the way he was grinning stupidly. “I didnae say that.”

“Aye, but ye ken it. Ye thought ye were goin’ tae win.”

“Well, then, would ye come and work here with me? As ye promised?”

Blair tapped his chin. “I will have tae think about it. Surely things are a little changed since the bet didnae turn out as we’d discussed. Terms are different now.”

Cameron rolled his eyes and then polished off the last of his ale. A surprised Seamus went to get more for him.

“Hardly, lad. I think that would be unfair,” Cameron said with a chuckle. “Ye ken that me dearest wish was tae have ye by me side. Maybe ye start thinkin’ about yer own future then. With the woman ye wish,” he said, watching his friend as Blair looked away and downed at his ale.

“It is a temptin’ thought,” Blair agreed.

“Then dae it!” Cameron said. “And we will find out the secrets of the brooch as well. I will finally ken the secrets of me past and how Ella and I are connected. Somehow. But first, I have tae tell her the truth of it all. However, how tae dae it after all the lies I have told her ...”

“Ye l-o-v-e her,” the drunken state of Blair was playing on Cameron’s nerves, so he pushed at his friend’s shoulder, dying to shut his mouth. He didn’t want Julia and Seamus to see him as a silly lad under the spell of a lass.

“I am nae in love with Ella, ye fool. And shut up,” Cameron snapped.

Just then, the sound of a glass breaking close by to him drew his attention. No one else seemed to notice, but a tavern owner was always aware of such things. He turned, and his breath caught when he saw who was staring at him. In cloaks, the ones he’d loaned them, were Ada... and her. Ella stood over the broken glass, and he stood as well, unsure of what to say.

*Shite.*

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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*O*ne hour before

Ada was giggling as they waited for the potions to take effect.

“Be quiet!” Ella said, grasping her sister’s arm as they waited on the other side of her door. “Or they will suspect somethin’!” Only minutes before, she and Ella had produced mugs of warm tea for the guards, under the guise of apology, and they’d accepted them gratefully.

However, they’d been laced with a little potion from Deborah’s stash, and it was likely the most brilliant of Ada’s escape plans. Ella was surprised her sister had not thought of it before. As they waited breathlessly, it didn’t take long for them to hear twin slumps onto the ground outside Ella’s room.

“Finally!” Ada said, pulling the door open to find Angus and Darren lying on the ground, their cups having fallen from their hands to the floor. “Deborah has a good mind for such things!” she said. “We willnae have long, though, and then we have tae head tae the tavern. I heard Darren say the other guard told them that Cam and Blair were there. They didnae ken we were tae be back today.”

She closed the door on the sleeping guards and locked it. Looking at Angus and Darren, Ella had felt only partially sorry, but excitement quickly replaced it. This was her chance, her final chance to get out of the castle and take a step toward the life she really wanted. After seeing Neil and his family, she was firmly decided. She would not be forced into a marriage and certainly not to him. She would take matters into her own hands and rush after the man she loved. It was bold, it was brash, but it made Ella feel more alive than she had in years. It felt so deeply and achingly *right*.

As they rode home from the MacThomas castle, she and Ada hurriedly discussed the plan of escape. Ella loved that her sister had not questioned her about her love but had jumped into making plans to help her along the way. That was what she loved about Ada. Even if she was foolhardy at times and hasty as well, she knew she would never fight her on matters of the heart. She had never told Ella that she was a fool for listening to what she truly felt deep within herself. Now she had an ally, and was grateful for it. Even though she wanted this, she wasn't sure she'd be able to carry out the plan alone.

“Dinnae worry about them! They will wake within the hour!” Ada said. “‘Tis only a light sleeping draught,” Ada said. “I have asked for it many times tae sleep, and this time Deborah thought naething of makin’ me a little extra.”

“Thank God,” Ella said, following her sister from the door to the corner of her room, from whence she'd been able to find Cam's room that one bold afternoon.

Together, they moved the shelf but only just, and then slipped behind it through the secret door. Once they were in the dark passageway, Ada turned to her.

“Are ye certain, Ella?”

“Aye, I am certain. We have tae go. I simply cannae marry Neil MacThomas.” She tapped her head against the stone. “It will kill me if I dae.”

“Say nae more. Ye and me, sister, we will dae this.”

Ada took her hand and together, they rushed through the passageway until they came to the end. This time, the door brought them out into the dark forest. Ella felt her breath catch with the cold as she emerged. They were wearing cloaks, and yet it was colder than she’d expected. Autumn had arrived, and even so, there was a hint of frost in the air. Ella pushed aside the thought that it was her conscious attempting to stop her, to keep her thinking logically and clearly.

*Yer life will be safer if ye return tae the castle. It will make sense, and ye will never have tae worry about a thing,* her conscience prodded as if it were planted on her shoulders.

It seemed her old way of thinking still remained underneath all that boldness.

Inwardly she replied. *It would be safe, but it would be terribly dull, and I would be caught forever in a life that I didnae choose, with a man whom I dinnae love. Is that nae a worse fate?*

“How long will we go on waiting, Ada?” she asked, knowing the answer but also not knowing.



“As long as it takes for faither tae see sense, or for us tae find lives that suit us. For ye tae tell Cam how much ye love him. And if somethin’ goes wrong ye can always seek shelter with Aunt Isla. I know she’ll help us, and probably deliver sense tae Father.”

Ada pulled her along, for Ella’s legs felt like wood as she raced along the line of trees, heading toward the tavern in the dark. She tried not to think of the last time they’d done this, when they’d stumbled upon those terrible men, bent on satisfying themselves. That was the night when the world as it was had been thrust into their face so that they couldn’t help but see it. They ran hand in hand, and Ella didn’t want to think too hard as they came upon the tavern. Smoke curled from its chimneys, and its windows were warm with golden light spilling into the darkness.

*This could be a home*, she thought speculatively. A place that was warm and happy. A place whose walls did not keep her bound and did not tell her how she was to live her life.

“Here we are, sister,” Ada said, smiling from beneath her cloak. “Are ye ready?”

“Aye,” Ella said, suddenly eager. She wanted to make it all happen now, to pull Cam into her arms and tell him the truth of her heart. “Let us go.”

Inside, the tavern was busy. She couldn’t see Cam or Blair or anyone she recognized, aside from the two young people serving drinks and food. But it was warm and happy, and it felt miles away from the castle. Miles away from what would

happen when the guards woke, and her father found out once again where they'd gone.

“Come,” Ada said, looking expectant and happy. At the long counter, Ada asked the young man to serve them drinks, and then they wandered, drinks in hand, through the crowd in search of Cam. Doubt flooded Ella, but she tried to keep it at bay, to keep anyone from preventing her from doing what she needed to do. The sisters kept their hoods up, not eager to join in conversation with anyone else.

And then she spotted him. She paused, touching Ada's arm when they saw him, and they both stopped short. Blair and Cameron were laughing and drinking, and the two young people had gone to sit with them again. Ella heard Cam's voice, and it warmed her heart. It had only been a little while since they'd been separated, but it felt like an age, and now seeing him without his mask, her heart fluttered. She stepped forward, a smile on her face, and then she heard what he was saying.

“So, I suppose ye think I should come and work with ye here at the tavern now. Now that ye won the bet, and Lady Ella is in love with ye,” Blair said, making Ella's heart fall like a lump of lead.

*A bet?*

“I didnae say that,” Cam replied, but he was smiling.

“Aye, but ye ken it. Ye thought ye were goin' tae win.” Blair looked at Cam smugly, and Cam looked just the same.

Ella swallowed, her hurt overwhelming everything else, making it hard to take in a breath of air to help her think. This was the man she chose to fall in love with? This was the man she intended to give up everything for?

“And we will be able to find out the secrets of the brooch as well. I will finally ken the secrets of me past and how Ella and I are connected somehow. But first, I have tae tell her the truth of it all. However, how tae dae it after all the lies I have told her ...”

*The brooch?*

Ella couldn't breathe. And then at his next words, her heart shattered into small pieces. She was broken.

“Ye l-o-v-e her,” Blair was obviously drunk for Ella almost didn't understand what he said.

“I am nae in love with Ella, ye fool. And shut up.”

Her glass fell from her grasp onto the floor, filling the room with a horrible splintering sound that made her wince. But she didn't look away from Cam. It wasn't possible just then. Her entire world had been turned upside down, partly due to her own actions, but she now realized she had made another terrible mistake. She had placed her trust in the wrong person. Foolish, unworldly girl that she was, she'd put her heart on the line for the first man she'd met after escaping the castle. She'd given him more character and integrity. She'd also given him her body and renounced the future that her father had planned for her. All for this man. For a liar—a man who clearly didn't care about her in the least. A man who didn't love her.

“Ella,” Cam said, shocked when he looked up at hearing the glass break, but she shook her head and backed away.

And with his mask was off, she finally fully realized who he was and pieced everything together. It had been before her the whole time. *I’m such a fool!*

“It’s ye,” she whispered. “Me avengin’ angel.”

“What?” he said, bewildered.

“The man who saved me from those men that first night I came here with Ada. But ye, ye were Cameron Hay, with long hair, ye—” she stopped, knowing she sounded like a fool.

“Aye, that is me.” He at least had the decency to look sheepish, staring at the floor.

“*Why?*” She turned around then, not wanting to see him or talk to him.

All that boldness, and for nothing. It had been all a waste, and now her father would surely think her mad for what she’d done. In fact, *she* thought herself mad. She hurried away, and she’d nearly gotten to the door when a warm hand gripped her arm and spun her around.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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Eameron was desperate. He hurried after Ella and grabbed at her. When she turned, her eyes were so full of hurt, he felt instant pain directly in the gut.

“Ella, please, it wasnae true what ye heard,” he said, hoping and praying she would stay.

Under his hand, her muscles tensed, and he feared she would bolt away, but instead, she simply pulled out of his grasp and fixed him with a withering look.

“How *could* ye? Why? Ye came tae work at the castle just for a bet? Tae make me fall in love with ye? Without ever wanting tae love me,” her dead dropped, her face a study in misery.

He swallowed hard and rubbed a hand over his face. He’d wanted time to prepare a special speech for her, and now both drink and nervousness clouded his mind.

“Aye, but nae, Ella, please just wait a moment. Me head is poundin’. I want tae tell ye all. I didnae realize that ye would be home now. I thought it would be tomorrow, that I would have time. It is nae as it seems really, just listen,” he begged.

“Cameron bloody Hamish, ye had better tell me what is goin’ on!” she threatened angrily in a louder voice than she’d ever used, and he looked down, frozen with regret and shame.

“Hamish is nae me name. It is Hay, as ye said. I came tae the castle for a bet, yer right. Tae get me friend tae come back home tae me, tae work the tavern with me. But it wasnae because I wanted tae hurt ye, Ella. I swear tae ye, it wasnae that.”

Tears began to dampen her face, and he paused, his chest aching. He placed a hand there to swipe it away, but it remained, stubbornly twisting and pulling.

“Ella,” he said. “I didnae ever try tae hurt ye.”

“Nae? But it seems I was just one of the many lasses ye made bets on. Bets ye kent ye would win, just as ye said.” She crossed her arms, and he could see her shake with anger and mortification. “I trusted ye, Cam. I left everythin’ because of ye. I... I thought—”

“What dae ye mean?” he asked, his heart leaping with hope.

“We ran away from the castle tonight, as ye obviously ken. We returned from the MacThomas keep, and I told Ada I cannae marry Neil. That I had tae see ye instead.” She lifted her chin then. “So, I have left everything for ye, and now I find out who ye truly are. I see that fallin’ for ye was just a waste of time and a waste of heart. I—” she stopped, as if the words caused too much pain to utter, not to mention the humiliation of the entire tavern’s attention turned to her.

He swallowed, trying just to keep breathing. Had she truly fallen for him? He didn't know for sure, and now that he knew his own feelings, he wanted her to want him more than anything he'd ever desired in the world.

“Ella,” he said, reaching out to her, but she practically hissed, stepping out of his way.

“Nae! What kind of a monster are ye? Ye have fooled the world long enough with yer mask, but it is now quite clear tae me. I never want tae see ye again Cam Hay, or Hamish, or whatever the bloody hell yer name is! And dinnae dare follow a lass ye dinnae love,” she cried as she turned away and rushed for the door.

Cameron stared at the door for a few seconds, unsure if everything had just happened as he thought. Had Ella claimed that she'd fallen for him? Had it truly happened? He wasn't sure how it was possible, but he felt both triumph and heartbreak at the same time. And now, the most important thing was to go after her.

A group had moved between Ella and Cam after she left, so he had to push through them to get to the door. He pushed them aside roughly, threw open the door and plunged into the night. It was true; he'd had a few too many drinks perhaps, but it was not the ale that made his head ache and his limbs rubbery. It was everything all at once—the realization that he loved her, the need to keep her with him, his willingness to give it all up—even the tavern if she so wished it, and the need for her forgiveness for everything he'd done wrong.

“Ella!” he shouted into the darkness, as he headed into the woods toward the castle, listening for anything, hoping she’d call back to him.

*But, shite, I didnae say that, did I?*

No, in all the mass confusion and anger, Cameron still had not revealed his feelings for her. It was no wonder she’d rushed out into the cold night after her angry speech. He’d merely stuttered and fumbled over his words.

“Ella,” he cried. “I’m sorry. Come back!”

But the woods were empty. At least they sounded so, but a chill ran through him as he remembered the footprint in the grove by the river, and the eyes he’d felt on him then. He felt them now as he looked around, searching the darkness with only the dim light from the tavern as a guide.

Ella, his Ella. Was it possible she had come to harm again? But then why didn’t he hear her? His heart raced with fear as he began to search in earnest, this time silent in case sound would draw forth enemies with ill intent. He cared nothing for the brooch or tavern by then, but only for Ella and her safety, and for the moment when he could take her in his arms, tell her he loved her and that he would keep her safe forever.

A low grunt caught his attention, and he turned toward the sound, his heart in his throat and took off, following the sound. He vowed to search until he found her. She had called him her avenging angel, and that’s what he intended to be as he set forth. He prayed this would not be the end, and a spark of hope burned wildly inside him. He could get there, find her, even if



his legs stopped moving and the weight of guilt stopped him. No matter; he would drag himself until he found her. Avenging angels never gave up.



Ella wanted to scream with rage as she hurried through the woods. Tears froze her face, but she ran harder than she'd ever run before. She had to get away from the tavern, away from him and betrayal and humiliation. She didn't care where she ended up. But she realized that being imprisoned in the castle was better than forcing herself upon a man who did not love her. She was chastened and rebuked by her headlong fall for a man of false principles. She'd changed her life for him when he only wanted to prove he could win a bet.

*I cannae believe it. I thought I had changed, that boldness was the way of things now.*

But it wasn't the case. She had done things, forward independent things, and they had all ended in nothing. As she ran, she didn't watch where she was going, but she realized her lungs demanded more air. She paused, leaning against a tree to rest for a moment. But before she had taken two breaths, rough arms seized her. At first, she thought it was Cameron coming to explain himself again, but then when she smelled the man, she knew it couldn't be him.

*Dear God, nae.*

Her heart fell. It could not be those men again, the same men who had come upon them in the woods. How was it possible for them to find her? A meaty hand clamped over her mouth just as she tried to scream, and a lethal voice in her ear froze her blood.

“I have ye at last. The time has finally come after all these years, and I willnae lose me chance now.”

*Laird Grant.*

It was him. She *knew*. Flashes of the past and the kidnapping hurtled through her mind. She would never forget that voice. It came to her occasionally in nightmares, but she had been too young to remember much. But that voice—she had never forgotten. How had he found her? How could he possibly have known that she would leave the castle tonight unchaperoned? She was too afraid to struggle as he pulled her tight against him and dragged her through the darkness into the woods. A scream gathered in her throat, but couldn't surface. It froze with terror.

“I got rid of that bitch, yer aunt, and now I will dae the same tae ye. Far too sweet, this,” Laird Grant raged in her ear. “Sweet revenge.”

*Aunt Anne?*

Tears pricked at her eyes as he dragged her along. She had known of her aunt's death, but she hadn't known how it happened. It had all been such a great mystery, and her father never spoke of it. She didn't want to know more, for fear it would be worse, and it made her freeze as the awful truth penetrated her brain.

He laughed madly, pulling her closer, but then Ella's energy came alive. She pushed against him, jumping forward so violently it caught him off guard. His arms unlocked

involuntarily, and she spun around to face him. He grinned, his hand on his dirk as he yanked it from its sheath, as she tried to reason.

“Why are ye doin’ this? I am not your enemy.” But he only smiled at her smugly.

“It doesnae matter, does it? All that matters is getting me revenge.”

“I think it does matter. It seems ye have nae real plan after all,” she looked all around. “Where are yer men? The ones who attacked me and me sister the other day.”

“They are elsewhere,” he spat bitterly. “They are far too drunk tae be useful anyway. I can handle this meself,” he said, grinning evilly. But then he paused, looking at her bodice.

“Where in the bloody hell did ye get that?” he asked, suddenly wild, his eyes fixed on her brooch.

Instinctively, her fingers flew to it. She could not imagine why this small piece of jewelry drew so much attention. Even Cameron had mentioned it again. And then she remembered. Her avenging angel had worn a brooch the first night she came to the tavern. She struggled to sort out the puzzle

“Me aunt gave it tae me,” she finally answered. It was not entirely true, but it didn’t matter. Either way, her answer seemed to anger him further, and he stepped closer, his blade facing her.

“That was meant tae be buried, deep intae the ground,” he growled.

“Well, it is nae, is it?” she bit back, and shrieked as he slapped her face with a strong arm.

Her face turned hard to the left from the blow and her hand went up to touch her face, and he laughed.

“Ye are just as much a foolish bitch as yer aunt was, thinkin’ yerself so high above me. Thinkin’ ye can talk tae me as if ye would talk tae any other man.”

“I dinnae ken what ye are speakin’ of. I ken naething about me aunt’s dealings with ye.” She swallowed, trying to keep hold of what little courage she had left. She could run, but she feared he would thrust that blade in her back and be done with it. Even though the man was far older than she, she knew he would capture her again.

“I wanted her like I wanted nae other. I offered marriage, a secure life, money, a title, and yet she refused me. Stupid lass. There was someone else she held in her heart,” he ground out. “And her brother, yer foolish faither, was the one who convinced her nae tae accept me. I ken that, and so I took me revenge upon them both. Killin’ her meant she could have nae one else. Kidnappin’ ye meant I could get me revenge against yer faither. He has kept ye well-protected for a long time now. But it seems tonight he is a wee bit lax.” He grinned at her, his teeth feral in the moonlight.

Ella trembled with fear. All the anger she held against Cameron had vanished in an instant, and she desperately

wished him there with her. It was not only the teeth that were gleaming in the moonlight, but the blade in his hand, too. Her eyes trailed its movement. It would all be over too soon. And then she thought about the waste she had made of her life, akin to hanging on the castle wall, afraid of falling. A waste.

But now the truth about Anne was out in the open and Ella's heart broke over her aunt's suffering at Grant's hand. She wondered why her father never told her anything about her aunt and the brooch.

“What will ye dae?” she asked shakily, taking a hesitant step backward.

He seemed to notice, and took one step forward, lifting the dagger high. “I will take ye just as I took Anne; it is the only way me revenge will be complete against yer faither. That means I will find yer sister and kill her, too,” he prattled.

In a flash, he lunged forward, and Ella closed her eyes in terror, knowing that death was imminent.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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Cameron clamped an iron grip around the damned laird's neck, pulling him away from Ella.

“Nay, ye bloody willnae!” Grant cried, and Cam saw his Ella from the corner of his eye, sinking to the forest floor in a faint or terror, he knew not which.

Cameron clenched his fists, but the laird stood firm despite his age. The men struggled for a few moments before Grant summoned enough energy to shove Cameron backward, but Cam spun around to face him. “What worry about a brooch? Why bury it?”

“Ha! Ye think that I answer tae ye?” From behind the man, Cameron saw Ella feebly grasping a tree for support.

He wanted her to run, but he knew that he might not be able to get to her in time before Laird Grant did. He pulled the brooch from his own pocket and tossed it at the man. “What is this then? Why dae I have the same brooch?”

Laird Grant narrowed beady eyes at him, and a scowl crossed his face, but then he nodded in realization. “Och, I see...” he

said, drawing out the words as Cameron wrapped his hands around the man's neck to strangle him.

But he could not kill him. Not yet. Not until he had the answers he wanted—answers he needed to move forward with his life and put the mystery of his past behind him.

“I gave this brooch tae me lover; before Anne,” the laird said weakly, his throat constricted. “Ye must be the bairn she bore. Just a bonnie piece of skirt, that, and she got herself pregnant. I had nae use for her or ye then. She must have given the brooch tae ye.”

Cameron boiled with rage, but kept his weapon at his side. It was not yet time. There were more answers to be had. He expelled his breath, trying to calm himself. The effect of drink had worn off by then, and he was too angry. Yet, a thought formed starkly through the mist of fury—Grant was his *father*.

“Did ye kill me máthair too?” he bit out furiously.

“Nae, only sent her away, although perhaps I should have done it,” the laird replied, eyeing Ella. “That way me own son wouldnae be here with his hand on his weapon, gettin’ in me way. This has naething tae dae with ye,” he warned. “Take yerself away now.”

Cameron swallowed, and heard footsteps from behind, more than one person. He leaned back, catching the glow of a flare, knowing that Ada had run after him, as well as others from the tavern.

“It was ye then, watchin’ us in the forest that day,” Cameron said, everything becoming clear to him.

“Aye,” the laird replied, hardly looking at the people behind Cameron. “I couldnae get tae ye then, for ye were far too busy with this one,” he said, hooking his thumb behind him. He laughed then. “Is it nae ironic that me own bastard has fallen in love with a laird’s daughter? Beware of the lass, though. They bite ye when ye least expect it,” he said flatly.

“Dae ye have nae other men with ye?” Cameron sneered.

“So I dae, and we will slaughter the lot of ye,” he said without wavering.

Cameron looked at the old man. He hadn’t even had a moment to process that the man was his father. The disgusting man with dirk in hand, had plunged the blade into a woman he dearly loved. Cameron was disgusted.

“I dinnae think so,” he answered, and took the first step, bringing out his sword.

Cam didn’t care who the man was and his connection to him. All he knew was he had to be removed, for he was a dire threat to Ella. Yet, for an older man, Grant was swift. He ducked and swung with his dirk, giving himself enough time to pull out his own sword. When he straightened again, he defended Cameron’s swing. The clash of metal echoed through the forest. He needed Grant to confess in front of everyone standing there. He wanted to hear the truth *again* and try to understand that he was in some connected to the vile man. So, he talked slowly, provoking a nerve to twitch on his brow.



“Ye thought ye could just kill Laird MacPherson’s daughters? That ye wouldnae be killed for it afterward?”

“Nae one would ken. They would find their bodies on the road, thinkin’ they’d been taken advantage of after they left their prison. Only their faither would ken, and that is all I ever wanted. For him tae feel me rage.”

Grant swung again, this time striking Cameron’s arm, Ella crying out when he winced with pain. Cameron could feel blood from the wound, but he would not stop now.

He kicked the laird’s leg out from under him, and the man went down. “He will feel it!” the laird called, but Cameron shook his head.

The man was clearly mad, so hungry for revenge that he thought nothing of killing two innocent women who had nothing to do with the old rivalry Grant pursued.

“Nae, he willnae,” Cameron said, leaning over his father, plunging his sword into his belly.

But he gasped at the same time Grant thrust his dirk into Cameron’s ribs. He collapsed to his knees in agony, hearing Ella’s scream as she raced to him. But Cameron would not die without removing this evil man from the earth. He twisted the blade, and the man groaned, rapidly weakening until he fell lifeless to the ground.

For a few seconds, all Cameron could hear was his own ragged breath and the pounding of blood in his ears. Time slowed and the world grew blurry around him. He faltered on his knees and gasps and shrieks were heard from those around him. He felt hands on his shoulders, neck, and head. He caught her scent, *his* Ella.

He wavered for a moment and then fell back with a harsh thud onto the cold ground where everything was ungodly cold. Except for the warm blood seeping from his wound.

*Ella*, Cameron heard himself mutter. He reached for her. At least he thought he did. Desire burned him, desire to touch her, desire to see her, to kiss her. One last time.

He knew silent drops of blood fell on the ground—his blood. He heard Blair's voice but couldn't make out the words before all went black.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY

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Ella could barely keep her eyes open by the time they returned to the castle, but she never stopped holding Cameron's hand, even as the men carried him. She held onto it for dear life, praying the heavens to spare his life. They took him into the lower depths of the keep, placing him in the healer's room.

"What's this?" Deborah cried at the sight the very second they put Cameron on the bed.

"Send for me faither," Ella ordered.

The guards rushed to do her bidding. Ada stood at her side, as did Blair. She couldn't lose him. Deborah looked between them, but she didn't wait for a reply before she started and rushed to Cam's side. Quickly, she assessed the wound and began to press on it, calling for Ada to assist her, for Ella was too stunned to move a limb even if her life depended on it.

At her side, Blair looked speechless, pale and confused. Ella wondered if she looked exactly the same. She felt drunk, as if everything around her was moving, the floor playing under her feet. She was drunk with the fear she'd had that night. Now

Cameron, *her* Cameron, was lying on a bed, bleeding. What would she do if he died?

“I will go tae yer faither,” Blair said, turning away and leaving before anyone had a chance to stop him.

“Laird Grant,” Ella finally whispered to Deborah, “stabbed him.”

“Quiet now,” Deborah responded quickly, calmly caressing her arm, and Ella realized she was crying. Hot tears of fear and agony streamed down her cheeks as she looked at Cameron’s pale visage. “He will be well, lass. I will dae me best. But ye should go, Ada will help me well enough.”

“Nae, I cannae leave him,” Ella cried, unable to move from the spot.

But Deborah helped her into another bed nearby, and before she could muster enough strength to fight, a strong tea flowed down her throat. Everything around her was confusing—the sounds, the movements, the sights. Before she knew it, sleep overtook her.

When Ella woke, her eyelids still felt heavy, almost as if they were swollen. She slowly opened them and looked around her. For a few seconds she couldn’t remember where she was or why she was there. When she sat up, her muscles ached. She groaned, realizing they must have drugged her like they did Darren and Angus the previous night. She did, however, feel the stinging pain in her cheek. Putting her hand up, she could feel the swollen bruise.

Laird Grant. Cameron. He was Grant's son.

Her eyes shot to the far corner of the room and she saw Cameron still lying on the bed. Ada was gone, but Deborah was still there fussing about him. Ella jumped out of bed without thinking twice but then regretted it. Her head ached and her muscles screamed with pain; she almost lost her footing and stumbled on the ground.

“Deborah!” she called. “Is he—”

“He lives lass, I can tell ye that. As long as we can keep infection away, he will be fine.” Deborah nodded her head at him, and Ella went to his side.

Thankfully, he was less pale now. But she stroked down the length of his arm. There was still so much to discuss, still so much to talk about, to forgive. There was so much to apologize for. He simply couldn't die.

When she squeezed his hand, his eyes flickered open, and Ella tried her best to smile at him.

“Ella,” he whispered, despite his obviously sore throat. The sound of love in his voice nearly caused her heart to break, and she began to laugh and cry at the same time, although she tried to hold back her tears.

“Thank God ye are well,” she said fervently.

“I will leave ye two,” Deborah said, shuffling out of the room.

“I didnae think I would be,” he replied, trying to sit up.

“Ye dinnae need tae,” she said, trying to stop him, but he wouldn’t let her.

She pushed a pillow behind his back, and then he could face her, those blue eyes now so beautiful and familiar. He was the man she’d first seen at the tavern, and she couldn’t seem to muster any anger over his deception any longer.

“I want tae look at ye,” he said, slowly lifting her hand to his lips, wincing only a little with the effort.

“Dinnae hurt yerself,” Ella insisted. “Ye must rest.”

“Nae. I cannae rest ‘afore I tell ye all. Please, Ella. Last night I thought I would die without tellin’ ye that I love ye more than anythin’ else I know.”

She paused, her heart racing. He continued, his eyes fixed on hers.

“I have spent me life wonderin’ where I came from and why me life turned out the way it did. I wanted tae ken the secrets, and I thought it unfair that I could have nae máthair and faither like other children did. All I had was the brooch tae guide me, and when I saw it on yer chest when ye first came tae the tavern, I kent that I needed tae find out the truth once and for all. I came tae the castle tae be near ye, so I could learn the secrets of it. Blair helped me, and aye, we made a bet, but it was only for a joke. It was never tae hurt ye, although I can

see now I have hurt ye so deeply.” He looked away, ashamed, and she reached out to brush a hand over his cheek.

Oh, how she loved this man for all his foolishness.

“I wanted tae ken about me past, and so I thought I could dae both. Tae both get Blair tae leave the life of a soldier and come and live with me, workin’ as partners in the tavern, and I could also learn the truth of me parents. I thought ye held all the answers.” His mouth quirked up in a smile. “Ye did, although they werenae the answers I was expectin’.”

“What dae ye mean?” she asked, smiling back at him.

His face was still covered in dirt and blood, and yet she had never thought him more handsome. “I mean that ye have given me the answers of what it is like tae be a truly happy man.” He kissed her hand again. “I love ye, Ella, please say ye will marry me. That we can have a future together and a family. I will speak ta yer faither, I will fight that silly lad, Neil, and I will dae whatever ye say. Just please be me wife.”

She laughed, unable to keep the joy from bubbling out of her. “But I thought ye didnae want any of those things. I thought yer aim was tae seek only pleasure.”

“And pleasure I have found,” he said with a wicked grin, pulling her closer.

“But,” she said, unsure why she was arguing, and her argument lost all heat once her lips met his.

The kiss was slow at first, but as she opened his mouth to his, she could hear his sigh of contentment, and his hand moved from hers to hold her close at her back. When his tongue slid across hers, she shuddered with delight. Who knew that she could marry a man whom she desired like nothing she'd ever known? That she could find both in a partnership?

But quickly, he pulled away, and he frowned at her. "But ye havenae given yer answer."

She leaned back and lifted her brow, happy to tease him. "I suppose it would be rude nae tae," she said, and he shook his head.

"Me Ella, always likes tae fight back. Full of fire and spark."

"Ha! Ye should tell me faither that."

"I will as soon as I ask for yer hand." He put a thumb to her cheek, and she winced.

"I am sorry for that, that I wasnae there sooner tae help. I am glad I killed the bastard, even though he is... he *was* me own faither."

"I am sorry ye had tae dae that, Cam," she said. "May I call ye Cam? Or dae ye prefer Cameron?"

"I think I prefer avengin' angel," he said, pulling her closer again, and making her giggle.



“I dae love ye, avengin’ angel,” she said. “*Me* avengin’ angel. With me whole heart. Dae ye think I would have rushed off intae the night toward the tavern if I didnae?”

He shrugged. “I ken how much ye wanted yer freedom. But please dae me the honor and answer me, will ye please marry me, Ella MacPherson?”

“Aye,” she said, and she leaned in for another kiss when they heard a deep male voice clearing his throat from the doorway.

They both turned around, and she reddened when she saw it was her father. He looked contrite, penitent even. His hands were folded behind his back as he looked between the two of them. Yet, there was no anger in his eyes. There was only guilt. *Infection*.

“Ella,” he said, stepping closer.

She could punish him, she knew that. But instead, she rose and pulled him into her arms, kissing him on the cheek. Quickly, his arms wrapped around her tightly, and he sighed against her ear.

“I am so glad that ye are nae hurt. That ye have come back tae me. I am sorry, Ella. Please say ye’ll forgive me.”

She could hear tears in his voice, and when she pulled back, she smiled at him. “All is forgiven, Faither. I now ken the truth of it all. About Aunt Anne, about the laird and his plans. What fear ye must have had all these years. And anger.” She squeezed his arm, and she saw gratitude in his visage.

“It was a terrible thing tae lose her, Ella. And yer máthair. I couldnae lose me daughters too.”

“Aye,” she said in a soothing tone, but then she returned to Cam’s side and took his hand. “But now, ye must let us be free, Faither. Tell me ye willnae stop us from marryin’. I want tae take this man for me husband. Nae Neil MacThomas.”

Graeme nodded, and to her surprise, he reached out a hand to Cameron. “I cannae thank ye enough for savin’ me daughter’s life. I would be proud tae have ye as a son-in-law.”

Cameron smiled, and Ella’s heart leaped for joy. She jumped up to embrace him again. “Thank ye, Faither. Ye will have naething tae fear now.”

“Tae have children is always tae fear, I think,” he remarked. “But I wish ye both well.” He paused and cleared his throat. Ella watched him curiously. “There is more tae say, and there will be more time tae deal with it, but I thought ye should ken somethin’.”

Ella turned to Cameron who was watching with interest. “Laird Grant had nae male heirs. His wife is dead, and she had nae one. There was nae one else who could take up the role of laird, except for his son. And since the event of last night had such an audience, all people ken it is ye, Cameron, who is the rightful heir tae the lairdship.”

Ella realized the implication of this. “So ye mean ...”

“Aye,” her father said. “Cameron is now Laird Grant. And I can think of nae one more deservin’.”

Her father smiled, and finally Ella could see the man he had once been without all the cares on his shoulders that had weighed down on him for so long. There was no longer any fear or any desire to imprison.

Cam appeared so shocked that he didn’t know what to say. “But Faither, ye will tell the MacThomas laird all this? That the weddin’ will nae be goin’ on as planned?” Ella implored.

“Aye, leave it all tae me,” he said, turning away.

“And Ada will nae be me replacement, ye understand.”

“Aye, I understand,” he said. With a chuckle he added, “As if she’d let me dae that. And that Neil is a weak, strange bastard anyway.”

Everyone laughed, and Cameron said, obviously still stunned by the realization, “Thank ye, me Laird. I am glad ye told me, for I could never have guessed what the future held for me.”

“Aye, well I will see ye later. Now,” he said, awkwardly turning away. “I will leave ye be.”

When he was gone, Ella said, “Cam, I cannae believe it! Ye a laird and ye didnae even realize what yer birthright was! How are ye feelin’?”

“I am happy, lass, I am happy. But nae in the way ye think. I’m happy for I am tae marry the woman that I love. Lairdship or nae, I am happy because of ye,” he said.

She dove into his arms, and when he groaned, she pulled away sharply. “Och, I am so sorry I caused ye pain!” she cried, clapping a hand over her mouth. “Forgive me, please. I will be more careful.”

He smiled at her and pulled her close. “Give me those lips of yers, lass. I cannae wait until I am well again so that we may be closer, but I will have tae satisfy meself with yer mouth for now.”

“Och, I would be happy tae oblige, me love,” she said, kissing him again.

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## EPILOGUE

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*A few weeks later.*

Ella held onto Cameron's arm as they walked once more around the castle. "I dinnae ken why ye make me dae this," he said with a laugh. "I am perfectly well now. The wound wasnae as deep as Deborah thought, even though I lost a lot of blood. The stitches are healed. Ye shouldnae worry."

Ella shook her head, only pulling his arm closer. "I will always worry about ye, Cam, now that ye are tae be me husband. It is me right, and ye must let me dae it. It is good that ye walk and make sure ye are back tae yer usual health and vigor." He shrugged and sighed, but he was not really angry. He was grateful to finally have someone who truly cared about him. After all this time and all this mystery, he had finally found a place tae call home. Ella was his home.

"Are ye sure there is nae another reason why ye want tae make sure I am well? Our weddin' is tomorrow after all."

Even though she did not look at him, he could see the color rise in her cheeks, and he laughed. "What?" she asked.

“I ken what it is,” he said, “and ye are too embarrassed tae tell me.”

“Ye ken naething of the sort, Cameron Hay,” she said with her head held defiantly high. “Ye only think ye ken everythin’ because ye are a man.”

“Perhaps,” he said, lifting his arm out of her grasp to run his fingers along the back of her neck.

She shivered, and he thought he heard a little moan of desire escape the lips of his betrothed. He chuckled, and she threw him an angry look, stepping out of his reach.

“Why are ye doin’ that?”

“What?” he asked innocently, his brows raised.

“We are simply walkin,” she said, taking his arm again and walking.

“Fine, fine,” he said, but after a few seconds of silence, he added, “But it has been a long while, me love, since we have been together, ye ken. I have been injured, and now yer faither watches us like a hawk, day in and day out.”

“Aye,” she said, “I ken,” the color rising in her cheeks again.

They walked around the side of the castle until they were out of view of the front gate and Cameron turned and pushed her

up against the stone. Ella gasped, but when she looked up at him, she softened. He smiled. Now he always knew his true love wanted him when desire was etched clearly across her features.

He knew it echoed what was on his own face, and he leaned in to capture her mouth. It had been weeks since they'd last been able to touch like this. So, he saw an opportunity and took it, savoring every moment. Ella gasped at the first feel of his tongue, and her arms came about his shoulders. His body pressed her flat against the wall so that he could feel the shape of her. His hands moved from the wall to the sides of her body. He had been waiting for this ever since she'd agreed to his proposal. It was a lucky thing he was going to marry the woman he wanted more than anyone else.

“Cam,” she breathed against his ear as his mouth moved from hers down her neck, wishing he could tear her bodice from her skin right there outside and look upon her pearly-skinned beauty.

He pulled away from the kiss roughly and stared down at her swollen lips. They were both breathless.

“Lass, I could die from wantin’ ye.”

She smiled, looking almost smug. “Tomorrow night,” she said, placing her hands upon his chest. “Ye and me.”

“Aye.” He pulled away with a frustrated sound, rubbing a hand over his hair.

It had started to grow back in recent weeks, and he wanted to let it grow long again, to remind Ella of when she'd thought of him as her avenging angel, to return to a life without secrets.

“Come inside now,” she said, taking his hand and adjusting her lovely red hair. “Faither will be after us soon if he suspects anythin’.”

“Aye,” he grumbled and, laughing, Ella led him away.



It had seemed like forever to get there, but eventually, Cameron found himself standing in the MacPherson main hall, a cup of ale in his hands, listening to music, and staring out at the hundreds of guests that had been invited.

“Ye are married now,” Blair said, coming up to him. “I dinnae think I can believe it.”

“Nor I,” Cameron said, taking a sip.

It had been a beautiful wedding. Ella's hair was covered in flowers as she walked down the length of the church toward him. The priest's words were dulled in his ears as his mind focused only on her. Ella, the woman who had stolen his heart from the very first moment. He'd hardly been able to think clearly during the ceremony, and then he was leaving the church with her on his arm, and they were transported to the castle where the festivities began.

“So? What about ye?” Cameron asked, turning to Blair with a wide grin. “It seems we cannae go tae the tavern, since I must



return tae Clan Grant, but what about yerself?”

“I was thinkin’ about that,” Blair said, looking around the room. Cameron thought he saw Blair’s gaze linger on Ada as she danced with a young man, but he couldn’t be sure. “Julia and Seamus have the tavern well in hand. Why dae I nae come with ye? It seems ye will need new men, especially after Grant’s were led by the maniac. And two of them tried tae rape Ada and Ella. I think I could be of use tae ye, *me Laird*,” he said with emphasis, his one fist pounding into the other hand. “In setting some discipline among yer ranks.”

Cameron smiled and he clapped Blair on the shoulder. “I would be honored tae have ye. How does war chief and man-at-arms sound? I could think of nae one better, and then I will still get me wish. Tae have ye close by.”

Laughing, Blair embraced Cameron, and when they pulled apart, he said, “Quite right.”

“So now, perhaps ye’ll have the time tae start thinkin’ of that future ye wanted with a woman ye loved.” Cameron’s eyes flicked to Ada who was now dancing with someone else. “And now, Graeme is far more amenable tae others marryin’ his daughters.”

Blair’s smile faded a little. “Ye dae realize that ye’re a laird, lad,” he said with a laugh. “What laird would nae wish their daughters tae marry another laird?”

“Blair—”

“Enjoy yer eve, Cam,” he said with a wink, and then turned away into the crowd.

Cameron watched his friend disappear until he felt a hand on his back. He turned to see Ella looking up at him sweetly.

“What have ye been doin’, Laird Grant? I thought ye might like tae dance with me.”

“Och,” he said, pulling her into his arms, “I would like tae dae a lot more than that,” he said by her ear, kissing the side of her neck.

“Cam!” she cried, but her arm came around his shoulder. “Should we leave? Nae one would ken we are gone.”

He chuckled low in her ear and pulled away. “Aye, so we should.”

But as he took her hand to leave, two familiar voices called out to him. “Cam!” they cried, nearly in unison.

Cameron turned around, and he spotted Rory and Alistair coming toward him, drinks in hand of course. “Lads!” He said, “Ye have returned! We didnae ken if ye would be able tae join us!”

He embraced them both, glad that they did not look the worse for wear. “Tell me all,” he said.

Rory and Alistair's eyes turned to Ella, and Cameron put his arm about her waist. "This is Lady Grant, Ella McPherson."

"Och, of course, lass," Rory said, taking her hand and kissing it. "Ye probably dinnae remember us."

Alistair did the same, and Ella beamed at them both. "Of course, I dae. I told Cam that it is the maids who ken of ye and talk of ye most of all."

Rory and Alistair turned to each other and burst into laughter. Rory had tears of mirth in his eyes, and Alistair leaned back as he laughed.

"Quite right, lass, I sure hope they dae remember us," Alistair said. "I would be disappointed if they didnae."

Rory wiped the tears from his eyes as his laugh subsided. "Well then, ye certainly ken more about us than we realized. I wish ye both the greatest happiness. It seems that our Cameron here won the bet after all, in more ways than one."

Cameron tensed, but he felt Ella's calm hand on his arm. "Aye, so I did, but I think I rather lost it, for I was the one tae love her first," Cameron said, turning to her. "It came upon me so suddenly, I didnae see it until it was right in front of me."

Ella leaned her head against his shoulder. "Ye most certainly have won," she said with a wink. "How was the battle?" she asked the men. "I am glad tae see that ye werenae injured."

“Aye, it was gruesome tae be sure, but we are glad tae be home. Cam, I thought perhaps ye might like a pair of new shoulders at yer castle and for yer land, since ye are a laird now. So much has happened since we’ve been away!” Rory said.

“Aye, I would be honored,” Cameron said, shaking both their hands. “Now, if ye will excuse me,” he said, motioning to Ella with his eyes, and Rory and Alistair nodded.

They were always the friends who understand the need to bed a willing woman with haste. “Say nae more. Good night tae ye. We have a feast tae enjoy.”

“A good night tae ye,” Ella said, and then Cameron leaned down to whisper, “Dear God, lass, let’s get bloody clear of this hall before someone else stops us.” Giggling, Ella let him lead her out of the hall and into a door that somehow appeared in the wall of the corridor.



Ella’s heart was racing as she yanked Cameron into the secret passage on the edge of the corridor. “What in God’s name?” he asked, and she laughed, pressing him against the door to close it.

“This is how we were able tae escape. I’m sure me faither told ye of all the secret passageways of the castle.”

“Aye,” Cameron said. “But he didnae ken all of them.”

“He didnae remember them, rather, but come along,” she said, taking his hand in the darkness. “This is how we can avoid bein’ seen as we return tae our room for the night.”

Cameron thanked God aloud for secret passageways as Ella led him along, making her laugh. Despite the wine in her blood, she was able to find another door lodged into the wall of stone, and she pressed it, leading them into their room. It would not be the room in which they would live as man and wife, but she didn’t care. It was comfortable, warm, and all prepared for the newly wedded man and wife.

“’Tis lovely,” she said aloud, turning around, not having been in the room for years, when she felt Cam spin her back into his arms and kiss her.

She gasped, and his mouth took hers with abandon. It was true; it had been far too long since they’d been alone, truly alone, and she lost herself in the kiss. Her every muscle was primed and ready, and her blood sang in her veins as his hands roamed over her body. Leaving the castle the last time had been worth it, even though she was almost killed, and Cameron had to kill his own father.

It was all worth it for this moment, with the riddles solved and Cameron now the rightful laird of Clan Grant. He lifted her in his arms, and carried her to the edge of the bed.

His voice was thick and hoarse with desire as he said, “Clothing off. Now.”

She giggled at his inability to complete a sentence in the throes of passion. Slowly, teasingly, she began to work at the ties of

her bodice, and giggled again when, impatiently, Cameron began to help her. It took some time to free her of all her garments, stays, skirts, and undergarments, but finally she stood before him, as naked as she was the day he appeared in her room as she bathed.

“Your turn now,” she ordered, tugging off his jacket as he undid his belt, letting it drop to the floor, joining the pile of her clothing on the stone floor.

She pulled at his shirt, lifting it over his head, and then her hands were on his warm musky skin and muscled chest. Devouring her with his eyes, he kicked away his boots and unpinned the kilt, letting it drop to the floor. In a flash, she found herself lying on the bed underneath him, pinned beneath his glorious body.

“God, Ella, I have been dreamin’ of this for days. I have hardly slept a wink.”

“Nor I,” she said, smiling coyly. Her hand reached up to cup his face, and she stared into his eyes. “I think I have loved ye from the very first sight, Cameron, when ye saved me from those two terrible men.”

“And not a soul will ever hurt ye again, lass. I love ye.” He kissed her nose, and then claimed her lips.

His kiss was hot and wet, with his tongue plunging into her mouth to taste her sweetness. She responded in kind, her fingers spreading across his back and down below his hips. Her legs opened to cradle him, arching up to beg for what she really wanted.

“Please,” she said, when she felt the first surge of his hips against her.

“It may be quick,” he warned in a low voice rough with desire.

“I dinnae care. We have the rest of our lives tae take our time, but taenight we have waited long enough.”

“Aye,” he said with a soft chuckle. He raised himself on his elbows, and then Ella opened, welcoming him in.

He was inside her in one swift thrust of his hips, and she cried out, reveling in the freedom they now shared. Their love was no longer a secret, and she didn’t fear that she would be sent away, forced into the arms of a stranger not of her own choice.

“Aye, Cam,” she said when he began to move.

They gazed at each other, and in that moment she felt the true connection of heart and soul with another. Their bodies moved in ancient rhythm, and they melded together in deep satisfaction. Needing more, she wrapped her legs around his waist, and pressed him ever deeper.

With delight on his face, he moved faster, this time dipping his head to kiss her mouth, face, and neck. Ella clung to him, her pleasure rising. She moaned as her climax broke, shuddering as she rode cascading waves of ecstasy.

He kept moving, driving inside her again and again until he stopped, trembling above her as he spilled his seed inside her for the first time. When it was over and he stilled, she wrapped her arms around him, holding him there as they both basked in the drunken aftermath of their joining. She kissed his neck and jaw, and then he moved to her side, releasing a long sigh of contentment as they held each other.

He took her hand and brought it to his lips. “Nae secrets ever, lass,” he said, and she nodded in agreement.

“Aye, nae secrets now. Although,” she said, turning to face him. “It seems we may have tae help Blair along, for there is someone he holds in his heart, I just ken it. And I think I ken who it is.” She put a finger to her lips teasingly, and Cam chuckled.

“I dinnae wish tae be discussin’ Blair on me weddin’ night,” Cam protested even as he grinned.

“Fine, then, another time,” she agreed, snuggling into him. “But now that I am so happy, I want everyone around me tae be just as happy.”

He kissed the top of her head. “With ye nearby, they always will be, lass. They always will.”



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## **BUT THERE'S MORE...**

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# THE HIGHLANDER'S VIXEN

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## PROLOGUE

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*S*cotland, 1633

“Ye will nae win tonight, lad,” James MacDougall said to his son Blair and ruffled his already messy hair.

Every evening, in the dim light of two little candles and burning ashes in the fireplace, they played cards on a weathered wooden table in the center of their modest cabin. At the table, there were just two chairs, and other than a couple of beds in the other corner and a few kitchen utensils close to the hearth, there was not much else. It was all they had in the world.

“Ye dae ken that I am now old enough tae win at cards, Da? I am nae longer a child.” Blair grinned, playing his next move and winning the trick to his father’s surprise.

“Aye, I suppose so, fourteen winters now and all. Ye’ll be a man soon.” James straightened up, looking down at the cards lying in a pile in the center.

He spread a weather-beaten hand next to them on the table, and the motion drew Blair’s eye. His father’s hand had seen

much work back in the day, including casting iron, melting metal, and completing a steady stream of orders. But, the small village's blacksmith shop was now in decline.

"Am I nae a man now?" Blair asked, waiting for his father to play a card.

James looked up at him after he laid down a three of spades and tilted his head to the side. Blair was nearly his father's exact image, only younger, and many in the village mentioned it whenever they saw them together. He had nothing of his young, beautiful mother in him who'd had red hair and green eyes. He missed her more than anything else in the world.

"Soon, lad. Ye will ken it once ye become a man. A power will come over ye, and ye will dae somethin' ye never thought possible before then. Ye will ken when it comes."

Blair frowned. *What does he mean by this?* What would come over him? How could he possibly do something he never thought possible? Yet, he smiled and played his card pointedly, knowing his victory was just around the corner. However, his father seemed so distracted that evening, as he had many evenings in the past few months, that he didn't notice his son's move.

Every so often, he caught his father looking to the doorway, albeit the late hour.

"Are ye waitin' for someone, Da?" Blair finally asked once they finished the game, and James hardly seemed to notice that he'd lost.

He stood to his feet with a slight groan. “Nay, nay. Just tired, lad.”

His father was not old, yet he’d seemed to age in the past few months. New lines had formed at the corner of his brown eyes, and a little gray had sprouted in his blond hair.

“I am for bed. I should nae have kept ye up so late, son, for ye’ll be helpin’ me in the morn.”

“Right, Da,” Blair put the cards away as James stoked the fire.

Just then, the night’s heavy silence was broken by a loud bang on the door. Blair, his gut twisting with fear, turned to face his father, who had grown pale and stared blankly at the wood.

“Hide, son, go,” he whispered, pointing to the broken wardrobe where they kept their clothing. “In there. I will deal with this. Just dinnae come out, whatever happens!”

Blair was stunned; he’d never seen his father like this, so... *afraid*. He obeyed without hesitation, but after being locked within the wardrobe, he also became angry. Finley, the Highlands’ most ruthless creditor, the man without a face, had sent his men after his father. He was certain it was them. Blair had sensed his father desperation, but why take money from such a brute?

He trembled as he heard the group burst into the house once his father opened the door, and he leaned forward to look through the small crack in the wardrobe.

“MacDougall,” a man said, smiling at his father with his blackened teeth. “It seems that ye are a man who cannae pay his debts. It’s a pity, aye?”

Blair trembled in terror at the sound of this voice sounding like a snake slithering. The black-toothed man, undoubtedly the leader, stepped forward as his father started to move backward. Four more people crammed into the cabin with them, making it appear even smaller than before. They were all bearded, had chilly eyes, and greasy hair.

“The business is bad of late, lads. Surely yer boss understands such a thing,” Blair’s father said, his voice trembling. “I can give ye almost all, but I need more time for the last few coins.”

“Well, speakin’ of which,” the leader said, pulling out a dirk and running a finger along its edge, “we will double the debt because it is a few days late.”

“Nay! Dinnae dae that!” James cried, only to have all five gazes snap to him, and the black-toothed man reared back and hit his fist into Blair’s father’s jaw, sending him to the ground.

The man spat in his face and said, “We can dae whatever we like. I am nae the one who asked for a loan of money. We are given orders, and we are given the freedom tae handle them as we please. Are we nae, lads?”

“Aye,” they said in unison, chuckling a little as Blair’s father tried to stand up again.

“I just need a little more time if ye want the debt tae be doubled. But I swear tae ye, ye will get all that ye need.”

The man nodded, showing his black teeth once more and still caressing his knife. “I dinnae believe in the promises of men such as yerself, MacDougall. A man who has nae paid his debts in some time is nae a man tae be trusted.”

Blair watched as the man walked around his father, stroking the knife along James’ arm while the others watched, their hands crossed and wicked grins on their faces.

*They enjoy this.*

Blair could hear himself breathing so loud that he put a hand over his mouth to quiet it, clutching the dirk at his side with his other arm.

“Aye, but it will be different now. There are plans—” his father began, but the men just laughed.

“Is it nae the same with all the men, lads? They are always beggin’ for mercy when it was Finley who gave them mercy in the first place and money when they most needed it.” The man stood behind James, gripping his shoulders as he spoke. “Ye have a son, dae ye nae, MacDougall? Children are useful, especially sons. They could pay off debts, work hard, and be of use while their fathers die as useless pigs.” He kicked the back of his father’s legs until his knees bent, and he knelt on the ground.

Blair sucked in a breath. His heart resounded like titanic footsteps in his ears, but he could not tear his eyes away. Frozen to the spot, he felt as though time slowed, marching on only bit by bit, like the beating of a slow drum towards doom. Doom. The air stunk with it.

“Nay, please. Me son has nothin’ tae dae with me debts. I will handle them meself.”

“I think the time for that has passed,” the black-toothed man said from above him. “What dae ye think, lads?”

“Aye, true enough, Sean. Ye handle him.” Another man nodded, and Sean, the leader, chuckled.

“Ye heard them, MacDougall,” Sean said.

Blair saw the glint of the knife in the candlelight and its slow movement towards his father. He also saw his father turn to the wardrobe. He knew very well that it did not close properly, and the crack was enough to see through. He caught Blair’s eye, and he shook his head. It was then that Sean struck, pulling the knife along his father’s neck, cutting his throat.

A scream built up inside Blair, but it did not come out as he watched his father get thrown to the ground, forever silenced. Blair’s every muscle tensed, his heart ached, and the press of tears pushed behind his eyes. Sean wiped his blade before he sheathed it as if it was the easiest thing he’d just done in the world.



“Search the house then, lads. See if there is anythin’ of value he merely did nae wish tae share with us.” The men began to move, and Blair, unable to think of anything else, burst out of the wardrobe in a flash, thrusting his dagger into the first man he found.

They would pay for this death, for the end of his family. The man screamed, and then collapsed to the ground. Blair’s strength pulsed through his body as he thrashed and struck, stabbed, and cut. The men’s cries filled the cabin, but he didn’t hear them. Only his father’s silence could be heard, and it was louder than anything else.

Finally, he found himself panting, his knife at his side, staring at what he’d done. The men were all bleeding and still on the ground. He blinked once, twice, wondering if it was all a dream. It was not.

Tears welled up in his eyes, but he knew he couldn’t stay for long. He hunched over his father’s body, sobbing uncontrollably until the ringing in his ears subsided. When he stood up again, he knew he had to leave. Blair had only made things worse.

*“A power will come over ye, and ye will dae somethin’ ye never thought possible before then. Ye will ken when it comes.”*

Blair knew.

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## CHAPTER ONE

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*L*aggan, Scotland, 1649, Fourteen years later

*Clan MacPherson Lands*

“Ada, ye will drive me tae distraction, lass! Where have ye been? Ye were meant tae eat with me an hour ago,” Graeme MacPherson said from the head of the table from his laird’s position.

Angrily, Ada sat down next to him, and she picked up her glass of wine. It was already filled, and the place had been set, waiting for her. She took a long sip and stared back at her father. At nineteen years old, she was ready to be free of her father’s control. Making him wait for her at dinnertime was the least of what she wanted to do.

“I was readin’ in the library,” she said innocently and began to eat.

“Nay, ye bloody well were nae. The men could nae find ye again. Ye will drive Blair mad, so ye will.” Graeme drank his wine angrily as well, and she let out a breath as she chewed her food.

Making Blair angry was something, at least.

*It might ruffle a feather in that perfect composure of his.*

Blair MacDougall had been frustrating her ever since he started working as her guard. He was always infuriatingly calm, no matter what she did to try and rile him up.

“Fine then. I was readin’ near the library in one of the secret passages. What does it matter? It is nae as if I went outside of the castle, yer *worst* fear.” She rolled her eyes. “I was safe, Father, and that is all that matters tae ye. Nae only that, but I thought ye would feel safer now that the old Laird Grant is dead. There is nae one left who wishes tae harm us.”

Laird Grant, whose castle resided a few hours away, was an old rival of her father’s. He had fallen in love with Ada’s aunt many years ago and proposed marriage, but her aunt had refused him. In his anger and jealousy, he took it out on her and killed her. Then, in another act of revenge, he’d attempted to kidnap Ada and Ella, but failed. Since then, her father had kept them hidden and protected them beyond what was necessary, all to avoid that happening again. But only a few months before, her old guard and now brother-in-law, Cameron Hay, had killed Grant in a fight when he’d tried to take Ella away again. Yet her father still did not believe that the danger was gone.

She and her father had had this conversation a thousand times, and each time, Ada seemed to get nowhere. She thought things would be better once her sister Ella had gotten married to Cameron, who turned out to be Laird Grant’s heir. But no. He

was still as protective as ever, even if he was a bit gentler and more loving these days.

“There is always one who wishes tae harm a beautiful young lass like yerself, Ada. If only ye would listen tae me, allow me tae teach ye of the ways of the world since ye dinnae ken of them yerself.”

She gripped her fork so tightly her knuckles turned white. “And why dae ye think I dinnae ken of the world, Father? I could learn a few things if ye would allow me the normal freedom that comes with being a laird’s daughter. I ken that Ella and Cameron dinnae plan tae keep their child indoors for the rest of her days, if she turns out tae be a girl.”

“Ha!” her father laughed, tearing into his piece of bread as he spoke. “Cameron will see the light once he becomes a father himself. There is nae greater fear than losin’ yer child.”

“Father, if only ye could see that I am ready for the world. I am ready tae experience things and make friends, to feel as though I have me own life and nae one contained inside of these stone walls.”

She took in the dim gray stone of her family’s castle. A fire was crackling in the hearth, and the food in front of her was plentiful and tasty. Her father did not harm her, and she was free to learn whatever she wanted, reading whatever she could find in the library that piqued her interest. Home was supposed to be a safe haven where one could feel loved, protected, and cared for. And, while all of that was true, her home, her safe haven, felt more like a prison. She desired more than anything to see more of the world beyond those walls.

*Now that Ella is married, he will perhaps allow me tae visit her on me own.*

“Perhaps it is time that ye too get married,” her father grumbled between bites, and Ada sighed.

He did not listen to her heart, and she wondered why he was hardened against her now after so recently losing Ella to marriage.

Ada said nothing, and they finished their meal in silence until Graeme dismissed her. “Ye will go straight tae yer room, lass,” he said. “That is yer punishment for disappearin’ today. Angus will take ye.”

She nodded in defeat, leaving her father behind without so much as a good night, and she met the older guard outside the main hall door. She reserved a smile for him, however. Ever since she and Ella were little, he had always been kind to her, along with Darren, who often watched them as well. But now that it was just her in the castle, she no longer needed to be two guards.

She was *alone*.

“Off tae bed now, lass?”

“Aye, Angus,” she said, walking alongside him.

As they went up the steps, Ada was lost in thought. She twisted a finger around her ginger hair, hanging loose as usual.

It was one of the small, perhaps ridiculous, ways she tried to experience a little freedom for herself. But she was at a loss.

Outside her door, she bid Angus goodnight and went inside to sit by her crackling fire. Picking up the stolen whiskey she usually absconded with from her father's study, Ada poured herself a glass. The nights were lonely now without her sister by her side. She was happy for Ella and her newfound happiness with her husband. But still, something was missing in her own life. Without her sister, she had no confidante, no true friend. Her father's forced isolation meant she was on her own.

*I will make me escape one day, just as I told Ella before.*

But she'd hesitated after her sister's marriage, hopeful that her father had changed. However, now she knew that it would still be the same until she began to fight back. Taking a sip, Ada started to make her plans.



*Why did I agree tae this job?*

Blair had asked himself that nearly every day, multiple times a day, since Ella and Cameron had married and he'd been asked to return to MacPherson Castle to serve as Ada's guard until she married. He had been Cameron's man-at-arms, but he and Ella thought this would be best. He'd returned a few months before, and it'd been one crazy day after another. Ada MacPherson couldn't sit still and follow orders. She made his job a hell of an ordeal.

And that particular instance was no exception. He was standing beneath the tree in the castle courtyard, watching Ada strain to reach a kitten. He hadn't arrived in time before she made the decision to climb the tree and stop her. Whenever the guard changed, the lass always found a way to do something risky. *Damn it!*

"What in God's name are ye doin', Lady Ada?" he called and turned when he saw a group of young children hurry into the courtyard.

"See? I told ye the lady was up there tryin' tae get our kitten!" one of them cried.

Blair rolled his eyes and rubbed a frustrated hand over his face.

"I am tryin' tae help a poor creature in need of assistance," Ada called back, turning to look at him through the branches. Her long ginger hair was hanging over her shoulders, and even though she pinned him with an angry glare, he was struck with just how lovely she was.

*Ada is always lovely. There is never a time when she is nae, even when she is acting so foolish.*

He sighed, trying to talk some sense into himself. Thinking about Ada as a woman did him little good. She was his *duty*, and he needed to be able to fulfill said duty without such unsettling thoughts about how bonny she was.

“Ye ken that ye could come and help me with this, Blair,” she accused, “instead of just watchin’ me, since ye think me so frail and unable tae handle me own affairs.”

“Ye are nae able, Lady Ada,” he began, but he paused when he saw the interested looks on the children’s faces. “Ye may fall, and then where will we be?”

“I have climbed trees before!” she yelled as she strained for the kitten, but it meowed and crawled back further onto another branch.

“Ye can dae it, me lady!” one little girl with hair of gold cried, and the rest of them clapped their hands in encouragement. “It is me kitten, sir, and she told me she’d help.” The lass stood beside him, looking up at Ada with awe.

He understood the look entirely, even though Ada’s reckless actions would soon be the death of him. Despite his anger at what she was doing, he couldn’t help but smile, just a little.

She was a conundrum. She liked to act spiky, constantly snapping back or teasing, trying to get away with things. But at the same time, she had a heart of gold. She’d do anything for her sister, and now, she was risking her life to help a silly kitten down from a tree to make one of the little girls happy.

“Almost there!” Ada had moved to another branch, and Blair’s heart flipped as he saw it was too weak to hold her.

He stepped forward as she reached out for the small white cat. “Be careful!” he cried, his sudden outburst surprising her.



Her scream pierced through him as the branch broke, and then so many things happened at once. Blair raced forward, pushing the children out of the way so that they wouldn't get hit as Ada fell from the tree. He made it just in time, his arms outstretched to catch her before she reached the ground.

"Shite!" he cursed as they both fell to the grass, and the cat hissed, scratching Blair's face before scampering off.

The children dashed after it, not before thanking her, and then it was just them in the courtyard, breathing heavily. His arms remained tight around her, holding her firmly as his heartbeat slowed. Her hair tickled his face, and he swallowed, trying to ignore the sensation of relishing her proximity.

"Lady Ada, are ye all right?" he asked.

"I am well," she groaned, trying to wriggle free of his grasp. "I wish ye would call me Ada, though. Lady Ada is far too formal. I call ye Blair, after all."

He sat up and aided her in standing, brushing dirt from his clothes as he did so. Blair's eyes moved anxiously over her body, assessing her as she straightened her skirts and removed the leaves from her hair and dress.

"Are ye sure ye're all right?"

"Aye," she said, but he could see her hands shaking.

He yearned to reach out for her, to pull her close and comfort her, to smell her scent, which always drove him mad. It reminded me of meadow flowers, something wild, earthy, and pure. It encompassed everything she was. To avoid the temptation, he took a step back and wrapped his hands around his back. It would not end well for either of them.

“Good,” he said, then replacing his calm tone with one of slightly veiled rage, he asked, “Then why in the bloody hell dae ye keep tryin’ tae kill me, woman?”

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## CHAPTER TWO

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It wasn't just the fall that had Ada's heart racing a mile a minute and her lungs filling up with hard, fast breaths. It was Blair and how close they'd just been. He hadn't let go after they'd first fallen, and she'd savored the feel of his hard chest against her for a few seconds. It had been bliss to hear his rapid heartbeat and the sound of his breath. Until he spoke and ruined the moment, that is.

Now, he was looking at her with jaw-clenching fury, and she stood a little taller, annoyed that even when he was frustrating her, he aroused a desire within her that was never quenched.

"Kill ye?" She scoffed and put her hands on her hips. "If I meant tae kill ye, I would have done it a long time ago. Ye can believe that," she said, stepping a bit closer.

It was the first time in a long time that she saw him show some emotion. He was like a brick wall, in more ways than one. Blair MacDougall was essentially a tall wall of muscle. From his jawline to his calf, he was muscled all over. She did not have to see underneath his clothes to know what she would find there. His uniform stretched tightly over his body, and whenever he'd held her close during one of the many times he'd saved her, she could feel just how hard and unyielding his body was.

With his close-cut blond hair and brown eyes, Blair was handsome too, and even though he was often serious, there was a softness to his gaze at times. He was kind, even though he might not wish anyone to know it.

Blair rolled his eyes. “For God’s sake, Ada, I ken now why yer father continues tae keep ye locked up inside this bloody place even though Laird Grant is now dead at Cameron’s hand. Ye are irresponsible and reckless and for nae reason.”

Anger flooded her along with the other heat that filled her whenever he was near. “I was helpin’ that little girl and savin’ the poor creature!” She pointed at the door to the courtyard. “Dae ye think that is irresponsible or reckless?”

“When it is goin’ tae endanger yer life, then aye,” he said back to her in a low tone, his eyes sparkling with fire. “Ye dinnae seem tae consider others. There is yer father who worries about ye constantly, and then there is me, set tae watch ye, and ye continue tae dae these dangerous things that could hurt us both. This is now the third time in our acquaintance that I have had tae catch ye, lass. How many more times must there be before ye realize that what ye are doin’ is dangerous?”

They were standing close, and she wanted to be angry, to feel completely enraged. She wanted her fury to take control of everything, but her body still reacted to him. Why couldn’t Blair see she was a prisoner there? She wanted nothing more than to be free, and her reckless actions were her way of gaining some freedom while also trying to avoid the boredom that came with her confinement. There was also the fact that she was a little clumsy, but that was unimportant.

“I dinnae see why I need tae have a guard any longer, now that Laird Grant is dead. There is nae danger now, and yet I am forced tae be constantly watched like a child with a nanny.” Blair bristled at that. “And if ye had nae scared me, I would nae have fallen this time. Ye had tae go and yell at me, and then I fell. I nearly had the kitten in me hands!”

She noticed then a red line across his cheek, and she blushed, realizing that the kitten had done it. But she would never apologize for that. Never in a thousand years would she apologize to this ridiculous man.

The cat appeared in the courtyard again, and pushing away from Blair, Ada went to it, brushing by him as she did. She tingled with the realization that his hand had touched her skirts. As she cooed and knelt to pick up the kitten, she thought about how much she’d wanted Blair to touch her ever since they’d first known each other. She thought she’d encouraged him with her light flirtations, but Blair was having none of it.

*Every night the man guards me inside me bedroom, and nothin’! It is as if I repulse him, or he thinks of me only as a child.*

“All ye can think about is that kitten at a time like this? Dae ye nae even wish tae apologize?” he asked from behind her.

Angrily, Ada spun around with the kitten in her hands. “What should I apologize for? Ye did nae have tae come and find me. Ye are nae required tae dae anythin’!”

“It is me job, Lady Ada, tae protect ye!”

She noticed how he used her title again, even though he had forgotten it before. The little girl returned to the courtyard, and smiling, Ada dropped the kitten into her arms.

“Keep him safe now, lass,” she chirped while Blair stood angrily at her back.

When the little girl darted off, Ada straightened and turned to give him a piece of her mind but her father’s angry voice boomed outside the courtyard.

“Ada! Come here, now! Me study.”

She could hear his angry footsteps as he walked away, and she followed him without looking at Blair, who was looking smug, no doubt.

*What day is complete without another scolding from Father?*

Inside the study, her father was pacing, but when she opened the door, he paused and stared at her with his sharp blue eyes.

“Why must I hear about yer reckless acts from the servants? Ye fell again from a *tree*, and Blair had tae catch ye once more? This is the third time ye’ve fallen, lass, and only because ye refuse tae listen tae reason!”

“I did nae realize that climbin’ things was against the rules in the castle,” she said stiffly, shutting the door behind her.

“Nay, I suppose nae, but clearly, ye are nae skilled at it, and Blair has been there every time tae make sure that ye dinnae hurt yerself.”

She swallowed, clutching her hands behind her back.

*Dae nae think kindly of the man. He was only doin' his job. It is nae as if cares whether or nae I really hurt meself.*

A tiny voice inside her told her that wasn't true, but it was far better to think of Blair in a bad light than to think of him in the way she really wanted to.

“Then, ye have nothin' tae worry about, Father. Yer praised soldier has done his duty yet again. He has saved me, and now we can move on with our lives.”

“Nay, we cannae, Ada,” her father said, rubbing a hand through his red hair before he sat down and picking up a piece of paper. “Sit here,” he said, pointing to the chair across from the desk.

Ada's belly filled with nerves as she noted his serious tone. Slowly, she took her seat and wondered why he'd always treated Ella with more kindness. Even when her sister had done something he disliked, he hardly ever screamed at her.

*It is because he hates me for what I did tae Mother.*

Ada's thoughts wandered to the past as her father spoke about responsibility and not acting like a child. She remembered overhearing a conversation between him and his sister, Isla. She would never forget it.

*“Maura would never have gotten ill if she hadn't had Ada, Isla. Ye ken that's true.”*

*“How can ye say such a thing about yer own child?”* Isla had said in return. *“Is she nae precious?”*

Ada remembered sinking back against the wall when her father stood.

*“She is, of course she is, yet Maura was precious tae me—me only wife, the love of me heart. And now she's gone. The lasses now have nay mother. We should nae have had another child. It was too much for her.”*

Ada had put a hand over her mouth to keep her sobs quiet, and then she'd left, unable to listen to any of it anymore. She'd only been eight at the time, and ever since then, she'd noticed her father's behavior towards her. He was always angry, no matter what she did. She knew that he was punishing her forever, and now that her sister, his favorite, was gone, it would only get worse.

“Are ye even listenin' tae me, lass?” her father boomed, his forehead crinkled as he paused to stare at her angrily.

“Aye, Father, I am listenin',” she lied, standing a little taller.



She could never let him see the way the past had hurt her. For she was the one who'd killed her mother, his wife, and nothing could fix that. And in his mind, she would always be the baby who did that.

“I dinnae see how ye can expect tae live on yer own or run a household on yer own when ye act so irresponsibly! Climbin’ a tree when ye could have nearly broken yer neck! And ye hurt Blair besides.”

*Och, precious Blair. Me father cares more for him than he does for me. Blair has never disappointed him.*

“When are ye goin’ tae grow up, Ada?” he cried, pounding a fist into the desk.

Ada’s eyes fluttered to the papers he’d been holding, where his fist had hit. What were they for?

“I am grown up, Father. This is what grown women wish tae dae: be free. Men dinnae understand because they wish tae trap us forever and keep us compliant for their benefit.” She crossed her arms and turned her face to the side. Shockingly, her father sighed instead of coming back with another angry outburst.

“It is enough now, Ada. I have done me best with ye both. I have tried tae keep ye safe and tae love ye as I could, but it is time now that I let ye go. I can dae this nae longer.”

She turned to face him, her heart in her throat. But she didn’t see what she hoped to see on his face. His expression did not

hold favorable promise.

“What dae ye mean?” she asked, a cold prickle of fear tingling on the back of her neck.

“Ye will marry.” He stood, not meeting her eyes. “I made this decision weeks ago. Yer betrothed will be here in a few hours. It was goin’ tae be a surprise, but I think it best that ye ken about it in case ye’re plannin’ tae dae anything stupid.” He shot her with his glare. “Marriage is the best thing for ye, Ada, for I can nae longer look after ye.”

Ada gasped, and as she rose, she felt every muscle in her body tense. She was ready to fight. And yet the shock had robbed her of the vehemence she wanted to instill into her tone.

“It was just the same with Ella,” she said, trying her best to hold the tears back. “Ye could nae let us be as we wished, and so ye forced her tae marry, actin’ as if we are just problems that ye need tae rid yerself of.”

Before she allowed him to respond, she turned to rush out the door, slamming it behind her. Tears were running down her cheeks before she made it back to her room, and she barely heard the usual footsteps racing after her.

*I am getting married.*

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## CHAPTER THREE

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*B*lair felt sick when he'd first seen Ada rush out of her father's study. He'd overheard some of the words between them, and then when she'd emerged, not sparing him a glance, he thought he'd notice a glister of tears in her eyes. And so, even though he raced after her to her room, he stayed outside for a few moments to allow her some peace. He did not like to see anyone hurt, for when she did, it was like a knife to his gut.

*It is only because me duty is tae protect her.*

It was what he'd always told himself from the very first day. He had to tell himself that, or he'd go mad if he spent time on the other option. He looked down at his boots, waiting, afraid that she might choose that moment to escape down a hidden passage, but he did not yet want to disturb her.

*She is tae be married.*

He'd been told as well, only hours before, and he hadn't yet had time to think of it. But now that he stood alone with Ada on the other side of the door, it hit him. She was going to be *married*. She was going to leave, and he might never see her again.

*Good. It will stop these wild thoughts from enterin' me head.*

But he knew that those wild thoughts would not let him rest even when she did leave. The thoughts of wanting her would only be replaced by thoughts of hating the man she married, wishing that—

*Ye are a fool, a bloody fool.*

Believing that enough time had passed, he turned and knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Ada said almost cheerfully, and when he entered, he paused in the doorway, seeing that she was brushing her hair while sitting at her dressing table. “Well, come in all the way.”

Through the looking glass, he could see her rolling her eyes at him, and he shut the door, barely able to breathe. It was frustrating that her father forced him to stay inside the room with her in order to guard her properly, for it only reminded him of her beauty, her ease when speaking to others, her humor, and every other bloody thing that made her irresistible to him. One of his favorite features of Ada's appearance was her hair. It was the perfect shade of red, with auburn highlights running through it, and when she brushed it, it caught the sunlight streaming in through the window. To him, it sometimes looked like spun gold.

To distract himself from staring open-mouthed at the vision before him, he uttered, “Ye ken that yer father will force ye tae come back upstairs and change intae a proper hairstyle. He

will nae allow ye tae keep it down. Yer betrothed is comin' in a few hours."

Even saying the word made him hate the man, whoever he was.

*But why? It is nae as if I should ever think tae be with a woman like that, a laird's daughter.*

It was the same thing he'd always told his best friend when Cameron would tease him about Ada. Why should he, a blacksmith's son, think himself worthy of her? It didn't even bear thinking about. And the fact that his friend had married her sister didn't do anything to sway him. Cameron had turned out to be the secret son of the neighboring Laird Grant, but there was no secret lairdship waiting for Blair.

*Just the dark and terrible past... and Finley.*

A little tingle of fear crept up his spine as it always did whenever he thought of the name. His fingers twitched with the memory of his dark deeds.

*Nay. Stay here. Stay in the room with Ada, far, far away from the darkness.*

"I dinnae care, Blair," Ada said.

Her voice brought him back from the darkness and into the light. She brushed her hair once more before facing him. The dark ginger tresses hung over her shoulders, caressing areas on

her he'd considered touching far too often. He forced himself to look into her eyes.

"I will dae as I please," she said, her dark brown eyes flashing at him. She took a step forward, and he would have stepped back, but there was no space. There was only the door behind him.

"I'm sorry," she said, reaching up to touch a finger to his cheek.

He winced, and she pulled her hand back. "About the scratch," she said, still standing close to him.

Blair had forgotten that the damned cat had scratched him. He swallowed and then cleared his throat. She was far too close to him for him to be able to think straight, but he had to try.

"Are ye ready tae go down?" he asked, not recognizing his voice. "Or would ye like tae stay here?"

Ada put her hands on her slim hips and chewed the inside of her cheek for a bit, assessing him with her eyes, always sharp and ever watchful.

"I dinnae think ye have a single idea of what I *want*, Blair MacDougall," she said, and then when his mouth fell open, she sighed. "Let's go."

He quickly pulled open the door, and she strode out before him, not looking back. Trembling a little, he shut the door and

walked after her, wondering what her words had meant.

Why should he know what she wanted? Why should she care if he did know or not? In that moment, it seemed like she was angry at him and not in the usual way he saw daily. There was something deeper, like something she'd held in for a long time. As they entered the main hall, he heard voices, and then with surprise, he saw a young man standing next to the laird.

*The blaiheard has come early, I see.*

“Och, we have been blessed with a surprise!” Laird MacPherson said, an uncharacteristic smile on his face as he patted the young man on the shoulder. “Ada, come here and meet yer betrothed.” He waved to his daughter.

Blair could see the tension in her back as she walked towards the pair, and Blair's fists clenched at his sides. He nearly touched the sword on his hip, but he restrained himself. He kept to the side of the hall and watched the interaction.

“Ada, this is Irving, Laird MacIntosh's son.” Laird MacPherson smiled at his daughter, and Ada curtsied.

“A pleasure tae meet ye, Irving,” she said with a stiff tone.

Blair would have been amused at her sudden good behavior if he wasn't so angry at the man standing before her. He was tall with blond hair and broad as well. When he smiled at Ada, it was wide and charming, and Blair could tell he was handsome and thought so of himself. No doubt many lasses thought so too.

*Shite.*



Ada was still shaking a little from her interaction with Blair in her bedroom when the blond, tall man appeared in the hall far earlier than expected. He was handsome, too handsome for his own good. One might even call him perfect. And this is exactly why she hated him.

“It is a great pleasure tae meet ye, Lady Ada. Yer father has told me much about ye, and now that I have seen ye with me own eyes,” he paused and lifted her hand to his lips, “I ken that all those good things are true.”

Ada cleared her throat, a little uneasy at the long look he gave her. But it was to be expected, was it not, that her betrothed should find her attractive? He was certainly good-looking enough but in a very ostentatious way, a way that made it certain he knew it.

*He has likely been told many times about it.*

His smile was almost smug, and it made her wary of him.

“Ye are very kind, sir,” she said in an uncharacteristically polite tone. If it was not so tense a situation, she could imagine that Blair might laugh at her.

*As if he would crack a smile.*



“Come now, we shall dine together,” her father said, clapping Irving on the back and leading him to the table. “I have already ordered that a fine meal be served tae celebrate yer arrival.”

Servants brought wine, and Ada sat reluctantly at the table on the other side of her father. It brought her fully into Irving’s line of sight, and occasionally she caught him looking at her. Each time she did, he smiled with his perfect white teeth.

“Yer father wrote that he was too busy tae make the journey, lad,” her father said as the first wine was poured.

“Aye, he thought it best I go alone, for there are a few land disputes goin’ on at the moment amongst the farmers, many borderline discussions.”

“I see.” Graeme nodded. “Well, it is a disappointment that ye cannae be there tae assist. For that will certainly prepare ye for takin’ over the lairdship when yer father passes.”

“Ye are quite right, Laird MacPherson. But dinnae worry. Me father is preparin’ me now that I am old enough. He has been ill from time tae time of late, and so he has been worried that he will pass before his time.”

“I am sorry tae hear that,” her father said, and Ada merely took another long sip of wine.

If her betrothed was going to be laird soon, that meant she would soon be a lady, a lady of a clan and a castle. The idea

was attractive, if not also frightening, because it meant that finally, perhaps, she might have some freedom over her daily choices.

*And maybe father will start tae see me more as a grown woman and nae a child he likes tae imprison. Nae that it will matter, since I'll be gone in MacIntosh Castle.*

“What dae ye think about it all, Lady Ada? Will ye mind livin’ a few hours away from yer family?” Irving asked.

She looked up from her plate of food and glanced at him. It felt odd that he should speak so assuredly about the marriage, and he did not seem fazed that she had not been asked for her opinion on whether the marriage should take place. Instead, two men had made the decisions about her life, and she had simply been told that it was going to happen. *Men are such an arrogant tribe.*

“Nay, I should nae mind,” she said with a quick look at her father.

*In fact, the farther the better,* although she knew it would be hard to be so far away from Ella.

“That’s good. I would nae like tae get married and then find out that me bride is so unhappy that she is far away from her family.” Irving started to laugh, as did her father, and Ada frowned, looking over to Blair out of habit.

She felt left out of the joke, and even though her glance was automatic, it was almost as if Blair had expected it. He was

watching her already, and when caught in his gaze, she could not look away. He appeared stiffer than usual, which was truly saying something, and with his hands folded tightly in front of him, he stood tall with his chin lifted. Even from a distance, she could tell that his jaw was tight.

*What a specimen of a man, so strong and powerful.*

Realizing how it must look for her to stare at Blair so, she tore her eyes away, wishing that she could be anywhere else. She wondered why she was not being rude to her guest or railing against her father's dictates. It was so unlike her. But the moment with Blair in her room had shaken her, and she was not yet able to be herself. She'd stepped close to him, even touched him, and she'd wanted to do more.

His hands had hung limply at his sides, although he did not appear unaffected by her closeness. In that moment, she'd wanted nothing more than for his hands to be on her, to pull her close and tell her that he could think of nothing else but her.

*Wait, what? Get yerself together, Ada.*

"Lady Ada," Irving said again, causing her to jolt out of her thoughts, and her hand hit against her wine glass, sending it to the floor with a crash.

*Och, for the love of God.*

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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*B*lair was across the room in a moment as soon as he heard the crash and saw Ada hurry to pick up the pieces herself.

“Let me, Ada,” he said, bending down next to her and gently touching her hand so she stopped picking up the pieces. “I dinnae want ye tae get hurt.”

He could hear the mumble of her father sending for a servant, but he would do this himself in order to keep her safe. He would do *anything* to keep her safe. He did clearly hear, however, the sharp and angry tone of Irving MacIntosh, who was standing and leaning over the edge of the table.

“And who is this person who should address ye so informally, *Lady* Ada?” he asked.

Keeping a tight lid on his fury, Blair slowly turned to look at him while Ada rushed to introduce him.

“This is Blair MacDougall,” she said, her hand moving near to his shoulder, but she did not touch him. “He is me personal guard at me father’s orders.”

“I see,” Irving continued in the same sharp and now suspicious tone.

Blair stared back at him, hard and unyielding, but the man did not shy away. “MacDougall, ye say?” he asked, and Blair nodded. “Very well. But be quick about it, and make sure that Lady Ada’s wine is soon filled again.”

Blair wanted to strike him. No, he wanted to murder the silly man for his arrogance and demanding behavior, yet the only thing he did was look at Ada. A color had risen in her cheeks as she looked across at her betrothed, and Blair could tell that she was angry.

*Good. At least she does nae like the bastard.*

If he could tell that she liked him, then that would have been far harder to bear, and he would have had to leave MacPherson Castle sooner than he thought. Ada gave him another puzzled look, and when the servants arrived to assist him, she stood and returned stiffly to her seat. She sat in silence for a little longer, and the men didn’t seem to notice. Blair, his hands slightly stained from the wineglass, returned to his position against the wall, a ball of rage growing inside him, bigger and bigger. But he’d spent years suppressing his anger, knowing what it could do; it was best that he kept it safely locked away. It still pressed against him, longing to be free.

Irving MacIntosh looked like a prized bloody idiot. He sat chatting with Graeme, but neither man seemed to notice the growing discomfort of the woman who also shared their table, a woman whose voice Blair secretly looked forward to hearing when he woke up and every time he returned to his guarding

shift. Her ideas intrigued, excited, enraged, and entertained him all at the same time. He couldn't imagine wanting Ada to be anything other than who she was, and silence was the last thing he wanted from her.

“Will ye excuse me, gentlemen?” she said suddenly, slowly standing up. “I should like a bit of fresh air after that meal. I will return presently.”

“Of course, Ada, that would be agreeable,” Laird MacPherson said, nodding his head to her.

Ada left and, from a distance, Blair followed behind. He did not agree with the laird's desire that she should constantly be watched, and so when she entered the castle gardens at the back of the castle, he hung behind a little, letting her get ahead of him and watching her form in the torchlit dimness. It was a cold evening, and the sun had set early, for winter still hung heavy in the air. But he knew he'd rather tear into his own skin than give her an order just then. She didn't seem to notice the cold either, simply walking down the garden path, her green woolen dress seeming to be enough for her.

As he passed a rose bush, he was disappointed that it was yet too early for the roses to bloom. He wanted to pick one and leave it in Ada's room secretly, so that she'd know someone out there made her smile at the end of this dreadful night—dreadful for him, at least.

*What a foolish thought. Ye will be gone soon once she is married. Ye will nae have tae think of the lass again.*

It was wiser and better that way. Even if Irving was an asshole, he didn't have Blair's dark past—a past that kept him awake at night and made him remember things he hoped to forget. Then there was Finley, the man who, no doubt, was lurking in every shadow, ready to kill him for what he'd done to his men as soon as he could find him. Blair knew he could never do that to a woman he wished to call his wife. And he would definitely never do that to Ada.

When he heard the crack of a twig, he looked up to see Ada paused, half-hidden by a large tree. He, too, paused, watching her from the shadows but keeping his distance. He was aware that she was aware of his presence, and he hoped that it brought her comfort rather than irritation. He leaned against a nearby tree, shivering slightly as an icy breeze passed by, and hoping she would want to go in soon, or he might freeze his bollocks off.

*What good are they anyway? It's nae as if I've used them in a while.*



It was freezing, but Ada didn't care. She was cooling down from the rage that had boiled inside her after Irving's treatment of Blair. Blair, the man who had saved her life time and time again, who was everything that was good and noble, a man who had rushed to her side just to help her pick up the pieces of a damned glass she'd broken, was being ridiculed by a guest to her castle?

*I dinnae think so. Handsome or nae, the man is obviously an arse.*

Irving had looked disgusted that Blair should even speak to her, let alone be so close to her. When she had looked up into her betrothed's eyes and seen the disgust there, she knew that she could never marry him. Not that she'd planned to anyway, but now it was even more solidified in her mind.

*I could never marry a man such as that, full of such self-importance.*

He reminded her slightly of her father, and if her married life was going to be just as bad as her life growing up in her family home, full of rules made by men who expected her to obey them, then she wanted no part in it.

The anger she'd seen in Blair's eyes after Irving had spoken to him had frightened her as well. Blair looked almost murderous, and for some reason that she could not identify, she was embarrassed to be seen in the same room with Irving, let alone be presented as his fiancée.

*Dear Lord, what a mess.* She'd sat back down, but after the meal, she was desperate to get outside and breathe in air that Irving was not breathing. Now that she stood in the cold garden, she sucked in a breath, closing her eyes as the chill of it made her tremble. But it was better than anger.

Knowing that Blair was behind her, she didn't walk too fast, but she could tell that he was giving her space. It warmed her heart, and she put a hand to the spot where it ached. How could someone want another so badly, but they did not want them in return? That, along with her forced betrothal, made Ada want to scream at the moon.



Hearing hushed voices at the far side of the garden, she opened her eyes and looked for the source of the sound. When she couldn't see the people right away, she walked a little further down the path and then backed up against a bush when she noticed Irving speaking to one of the maids. She covered her mouth to keep back a gasp, fearing that she was about to see him attempt a flirtatious interaction or perhaps worse.

But instead, the two of them stood a distance apart, and under the torchlight, the maid looked a little confused when Irving handed her something. She shook her head, and when Ada squinted her eyes, she thought that the maid looked as though she'd been crying. Breathing in, Ada worried that Irving had done something bad to the lass to make her look so, but she couldn't be sure from such a distance.

The thing he handed her was white, and despite her squinting, she couldn't tell what it was. When the girl shook her head yet again and stepped backward, Ada strode forward, making her presence known, for she couldn't stay away any longer. She would help her if she could. But as she approached, the maid took the small thing into her hands.

Irving turned to Ada when he heard her footsteps, and without blinking, he smiled. "Och, there ye are, Lady Ada. I was just comin' tae fetch ye so that we could return tae yer father."

"What are ye doin' with Jane?" she asked, motioning to the young woman.

"I was just helpin' the lass. I heard her cryin' out here when I came tae fetch ye, and so I handed her a handkerchief. I am a gentleman after all." He grinned again, and Ada looked at Jane, who did look as though she'd been crying.

*But was he the source of it?*

“Is that true, Jane?” Ada asked, looking to the young girl and feeling her body tense by the second. There was something unpleasant about staying next to Irving, and she couldn’t shake the feeling off.

“Aye, Lady Ada,” she said, holding up the handkerchief between her fingers and then dabbing her eyes.

Ada frowned. The maid seemed almost at ease now. But what had she seen? Had she made something up in her mind because she wished very much to dislike the man her father had betrothed her to?

“Very well. Ye may go now, Jane. Let me ken if there is somethin’ I can dae tae help.”

“Thank ye, Lady Ada,” the lass said hurriedly, curtsying quickly before she scampered off. Ada then turned to Irving who was watching her curiously.

“Dae ye often go wanderin’ off on yer own, lass?” he asked, a little curl to the edge of his lips, but in his eyes, she did not sense humor.

“Why should it matter tae ye? It is me home after all, and I ken its every in and out.”

He nodded. “That sounds very reasonable.” He took a step closer, and biting her lip to keep from gasping, Ada stepped back slightly.

The uneasiness crawled on her skin, making her heart race faster and her palms sweat. It was not the same lovely uneasiness she felt when in Blair’s presence but rather one that made her think of dark and dangerous things.

“So, how come yer guard, Blair if I’m nae mistaken, is nae walkin’ with ye around? Should nae he be followin’ yer tracks, makin’ sure yer sound and safe?”

“I am nae prisoner, me laird. A walk in the gardens is nae so dangerous.” *Unless I have someone watching me steps like ye do.* Ada didn’t want to admit that most probably Blair was going to come any second now, which calmed her to no end.

“How long has he worked for yer family?”

“A few years now,” she said with a frown, wondering why he should care about such a thing.

“I see. And so yer father kens him well. Dae ye?”

Ada’s brows knit together. “Why must ye ask such things? He is the guard assigned tae me because of me father and his constant worry for me protection. Why should ye care about him at all?”

“Well, it is somethin’ that a betrothed would ask about a man who is by yer side at every moment.” Somehow, his smile grew even larger, and one brow lifted as his gaze raked over his face. “It is unusual, then, I suppose, that I should find meself alone with ye now.” His hand reached out to brush a finger along the inside of her arm. Ada shivered and moved her arm out of the way.

“I think it is time tae return inside, dae ye nae?” she asked.

She turned to walk away with a few fast steps, but Irving grabbed her elbow and roughly pulled her back in front of him.

“I dinnae get dismissed by others, lass,” he said with a change in his tone. It sent goosebumps over her skin and a tingle of fear down her spine. “I dismiss others. Why dae ye nae stay with me? Ye are me betrothed after all, and we should nae be afraid of one another.” He pushed her back toward the hedgerow and crowded into the space in front of her.

Ada’s breath came sharp and fast. There was nowhere to go, no place to run and hide. Irving’s grip on her arm was tight. It began to hurt, but she did her best not to show her unease.

Suddenly, Irving moved back from her, and she gasped when she saw Blair standing between them. His hand was on Irving’s chest. “Lady Ada asked tae return inside, sir,” the guard said, looking magnificent and powerful in the torchlight.

She let out a relieved breath, grateful that he’d come in that moment—not that she could ever tell him so.

She stepped out from behind him and tried to steady her breathing. The nearness of Blair made all the fear she'd just felt slowly melt away.

“Och, ye have many duties tae protect, dae ye nae, Blair MacDougall?” Irving asked as the men stared one another down, but eventually, he stepped back out from underneath Blair's touch. He looked at Ada. “I meant ye nae harm, lass. Ye must ken that. We are tae be married. Why should I wish any harm tae me betrothed?”

“Nae one said anythin' about harm,” Blair said, his voice lower and surlier than she'd ever heard it.

Irving took a step back and, in a high-handed tone, said, “I am the son of Laird MacIntosh, MacDougall. Keep that in mind. Yers is a name easily forgotten.”

With that, he stalked away, and Blair looked down at her. His hand fluttered by her face, but then deciding against it, he touched the arm Irving had grabbed.

“Are ye all right, lass?” he asked in a gentler tone than he'd ever used with her.

“Aye,” she nodded, not wanting tears to come. “I am well.” She looked deep into his eyes, wanting to see the warmth and affection she felt for him then, but it was gone in a moment.

She wondered if it had ever been there or if she had made that up too.

“Good.” He pulled his hand away and stood rigid before her.  
“Let’s go back intae the castle, Lady Ada.”

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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*A* da followed him, and they walked side by side towards the castle. Despite her gratitude that he had been watching her and had come to her rescue, she was irritated at him for demanding yet another order from her. However, she did not want to stay in the dark gardens any longer, and so she listened, her fists clenched as she walked in silence for a bit. It wasn't fair. It certainly wasn't fair to Blair, but she was just so tired of men. Irving's last interaction had made it even worse.

But before she could speak, Blair said in a low voice, "It was irresponsible tae rush off like that intae the gardens. Who kens what lies in wait for ye there? I was givin' ye space, and I should nae have done, especially in the bloody freezing weather!"

"Blair, how dare ye accuse me of what just happened? Whatever Irving says or does, has nothin' tae dae with me. Are ye quite clear about that?"

They had made it inside and up the stairs, and they were just at her bedroom door. Blair's jaw clenched, his eyes fiery, but he nodded.

“Aye, of course. I did nae mean tae say it like that. I just... I ken what men think and how many men believe that a woman is somethin’ they can use tae their own advantage, nae matter whether she gives her consent or nae.”

Ada’s heart softened a bit as she saw Blair struggle to explain to her about a man taking a woman’s virtue. She was still trembling a little at how close Irving had been, the way he’d grabbed her arm at the end where she’d tried to leave, and he didn’t like it. It reminded her of months before when Laird Grant’s men had grabbed her and Ella. She’d thought at first that they would simply take them to their laird. But instead, they’d attempted to do far worse until Cameron had come to save them. Ella called Cameron her “avenging angel.”

*I suppose Blair should like a nickname like that as well.*

“Ye should nae create risks like that. I am tellin’ ye for yer own good!” he said, and she frowned.

“I can dae whatever I like, Blair. I am so sick and tired of man after man tellin’ me what I can and cannae dae. I will choose for meself.” She poked a finger in his chest and then turned to open her door, not shutting it behind her as he was certain to come in anyway.

He shut it behind him and said, “Why dae ye have tae make everythin’ difficult, lass? I only want tae keep ye safe.” His tone was pleading, and she turned around to face him, her hands on her hips.

“But it is nae I who have chosen a guard for meself. Ye are only here because of me father. I did nae ask for this!” She



pointed between them and saw a flash of understanding in Blair's eyes at her hidden meaning. Blushing, she turned away again and said, "Despite what every man thinks, they would see that I am perfectly capable of takin' care of meself if they would let me breathe for one moment! I dinnae need ye comin' after me all the time, right on me heels, stayin' in me room. I dinnae." She repeated, but her voice had lost its firmness.

Her skin tingled, and she could feel his presence behind her.

Spinning around, she said, "Can ye understand that?" Her voice was a bit louder now, but she paused when she saw how close he was. Their eyes locked. "We-well? Can ye?"

"Aye, I can understand that," he growled. "But since it is me job tae dae what I have been asked tae dae, I will follow ye wherever ye go, Ada. I will follow ye tae the ends of the earth if need be."

In that moment, Blair was far more beautiful than she'd ever seen him. He was bristling with fury, but there was more to it than that. His eyes were like gemstones, sparkling with intensity as he looked at her, searching her eyes for something. It was almost like he was asking for permission.

Ada did the last thing she expected to do. She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. She felt the stillness of his mouth and lips as soft as silk, which she never expected. A warmth pooled below her stomach, and her skin felt more sensitive than ever. Blair froze under her touch, and she pulled away quickly, surprised at her own boldness. She had wanted it for so long, but she'd never expected that her courage would reach that level. Her cheeks burning, she put a hand over her mouth and stepped back.

“I...” she said, unable to think of anything that would help make the situation any better.

But then Blair stepped forward, pulled her hand from her mouth, and with one last look in her eyes, he kissed her again. She moaned as she felt the warmth of his strong hands on her lower back, pressing her closer against him as his lips prodded her mouth open. She leaned into the soft press eagerly, sinking into the warmth and loveliness of his kiss and reaching her arms up to his shoulders to embrace him, to keep him in there in case he would second guess himself as she had.

Ada had never been kissed, not once in the whole of her life, and she felt it had been sorely lacking in her education. Blair was an excellent teacher. He was at the same time gentle and demanding, his tongue reaching past the threshold of her lips to seek her own. Tentatively, she reached out to touch it, and a frisson of heat soared from her mouth to everywhere else, making her nipples peak and her toes clench.

“Dear God, ye are everythin’, lass,” she thought she heard him say as his mouth moved down the line of her jaw and the length of her neck.

But she wasn’t certain. Her mind was cloudy and unfocused, her body sharpened and primed to pleasure as his hands lowered to her buttocks, grasping her there and pushing her against his hips. Something hard prodded against her belly, and she let out a sound.

It made Blair jolt and pull back, his hands dropping to his sides so quickly that Ada had to steady herself.

“Wh-what’s wrong?” she asked and then nearly rolled her eyes at her stupidity.

“This. This is wrong,” Blair said, rubbing a hand over his face and then through his hair. He looked tortured. Was he so sorry for what he did that it was actually torturing him? “I need tae go. I will send Angus or Darren tae ye.”

*No, dinnae go.* But she couldn’t say a word. He backed away, and then when he turned around, he tore open the door and left, slamming it shut behind him without another glance at her.

Ada, her knees still weak from everything that had passed, stepped backward until she felt the cool stone against her back. She pressed her palms against it, hoping it would keep her from falling into a heap on the floor. Something she’d wanted for so long had actually happened. She’d made a decision for herself that had made her happy.

*I kissed Blair just like I wanted tae kiss him. And he kissed me back.*

But then, he’d run away from her, looking disgusted as he backed away and fled as fast as his leg could carry him.

*He does nae want me, and now he will never look at me the same again.*



The terrible voice that spoke to Blair of his wrongdoings and his failings was loud inside his head now.

*How could ye dae somethin' like that—defilin' a laird's daughter and kissin' her like ye had nae breath left, and she was yer key tae it? Ye will bring darkness upon her.*

Blair ran from the room without a thought to where he was going. He had to find Angus and Darren, but he couldn't think or speak. He stopped in a passageway and hid inside an alcove to catch his breath.

*Shite.*

He breathed deeply, closing his eyes to help balance himself again. He had to think clearly in order to make sure someone was watching Ada; he had to find Angus or Darren. But when he closed his eyes, all he could see was the moment when she'd kissed him with such purity and innocence. Her lips had been softer than he'd ever dreamed of, and when she pulled away, he knew then that he could not waste another moment without having her mouth on his again. It had been a moment of weakness, and he knew he'd pay dreadfully for it.

And yet it had been the single brightest moment of his life since Finley's men had brutally killed his father. He'd spent all these years in a darkness full of pain, regret, guilt, and secrets. But when he kissed Ada, everything seemed to fall away, and it was just the two of them, their lips and tongues touching, his hands roving the shape of her body while hers explored him. Her taste had sent him heavenward, and it was one he would never forget, even if he did not kiss her for the rest of his days.

*And I cannae. It can never happen again.*

His eyes snapped open, and stepping out from the alcove, he set his jaw and flexed his fingers before he clenched them into fists. Damn it, his whole body was aching for her. He tried to move his hard member to a position that would not be so visible under his kilt, but that was just not possible. He couldn't even remember how long it had been since it last stood at the ready like this. With a grunt, he walked down the passage, searching for the other two men to watch Ada as a decision formed in his mind. He would have to leave MacPherson Castle and return to Grant Castle with Cameron and Ella. Being here so close to Ada was becoming insupportable when all he wanted to do was kiss her again and carry her off to some hidden place and make her his own. He longed to claim her with his kisses, to teach her what pleasure was. His manhood twitched at the thought.

*For the love of God...*

But filial happiness was not to be his. He was a dangerous man, and even though no one else knew of his secrets, they would come out eventually if he tried to seek out the good in his life. Bad things were bound to happen if he asked fate for more than he deserved.

*I will go tae Cameron. He will understand. But I will have tae find a way tae make Laird MacPherson understand that I am nae longer suitable. I cannae stay around her. I cannae dae this.*

He found Angus in the barracks in the lower part of the castle, just finishing his meal.

“Lad, will ye take over for me for a little while?” Blair asked.  
“I have some business.”

“Aye, of course,” the man said, delighted as he got up from his chair and patted Blair’s back in a friendly greeting.

Since the two girls had escaped a few times under Angus and Darren’s watch, Laird MacPherson had initially demoted them back to the ranks of his other soldiers. However, Blair convinced him to continue to use them, for they had the girls’ best interest at heart. Now that there was only Ada to guard, it was far easier, even though she was the naughtier of the two.

*Naughty she is, aye.*

Angus left, and Blair sat down at a table on his own. A servant served him a bowl of stew and a mug of ale. He thanked them quietly, and he ate without tasting the food. He wasn’t hungry, but it gave him an excuse to sit down there until he had a good reason to speak to Laird MacPherson about why he was leaving. As he sipped at his ale, he wished that there was a whole river of it that he could drink endlessly from so he could numb his mind and body from remembering just how good it had felt to be with Ada. But no, that memory was firmly placed, and he knew it would take a herculean effort to remove it.

When he was done, he stood and slowly made his way to the stairs. He would just have to say that he had stayed long enough at MacPherson Castle for Graeme to find him a replacement. He was meant to be Cameron’s man-at-arms, but he’d agreed to help with Ada until Graeme found someone else. Now that she was betrothed, she would be leaving soon, but Blair couldn’t stay there another minute. He couldn’t be

sure that he could trust himself to not kiss Ada again or doing more—like kidnap her and take her away from Irving.

*I have tae leave as soon as possible.*

His gait was very slow as he made his way to Graeme's study. When he got there, the door was closed, and he could hear voices inside—*her* voice. He paused, unsure what to do when the voices raised, and then the door swung open and Ada rushed out, right into him. Together, in a twist of limbs and arms, they fell to the ground.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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*A*fter the kiss, Ada had stayed in her room for a little while, trying to wrap her brain around it. It had been everything she wanted a kiss to be, not that she'd had any experience, but she knew deep down that it had been the *perfect* kiss. Every sense had been awoken by Blair's touch, the feel of his mouth and tongue and scrape of the scruff on his jaw as he deepened the kiss.

Just like she'd always wanted, his hands had been on her, grabbing at her and pulling her close like he never wanted to let go. It had been heavenly, and she'd also pulled at him, wanting more. But then, it was over. Like jumping into an ice-cold loch, it was over, and a change had come over him in an instant.

After he'd left, she'd waited, wondering what would become of them. Blair had looked afraid as he'd fled, and she feared he would do something rash such as leave or perhaps even tell her father. And then, the pacing had gotten to be too much.

"I must go and speak tae Father now," she said. "I cannae go through with this betrothal."



She opened the door and, with steady steps, made her way to her father's study.

*I will tell him that I must go tae Ella's before the wedding is tae be had. That will surely convince him, and I could find an escape from there if Ella will nae get in me way.*

“Och, me lady,” one of the young maids said, rushing towards her, a little breathless. It was Jane, the maid that she saw earlier speaking with Irving. “I have a note for ye. Or rather it's for Blair, but I could nae find him. I looked everywhere, and he seems nowhere tae be found.”

Ada blushed. *That was me doin'.*

“Here,” she held it out. “I thought perhaps that ye could give it tae him yerself since ye see him so often.”

“Aye, of course, Jane. Thank ye.” She took the note and looked into the girl's eyes, searching for something but unsure of what. “Are ye alright? Ye were upset earlier. May I help ye with somethin', whatever it is?”

“Nay, me lady. I'm alright. It was just a moment, nothin' tae fear. I thank ye for yer kindness.”

Ada took the note in her hand and pushed it into the pocket of her gown while Jane scurried away quickly. She would see to it later. Right then, she needed to resolve the matter with her father. Knocking on the door, she didn't wait until he allowed her in before she strode in confidently and shut the door behind her.

“Father, I ken what ye are goin’ tae say,” she said, not looking at him but holding a hand up. “But there is somethin’ I wish tae discuss with ye.”

Her father was quick to reply, “Ye ken that Irving has left now. He has taken his carriage and gone. He was tae stay the night, but he decided that he had urgent business and needed tae leave. What have ye done, Ada?”

“What have *I* done?” she said, getting entangled in her father’s accusations as usual before she could state her own point. “I did nothin’. I merely needed air, and then when I went outside, I saw Irving speakin’ tae a maid and givin’ her somethin’. He claimed it was a handkerchief, but there was somethin’ strange about it and about him.”

Her father rolled his eyes and stood leaning over the desk, his fists holding him up. “We are tae have good relations with Clan MacIntosh. They are powerful in these lands, and yer marriage was meant tae help solidify our relationship with them.”

She crossed her arms. “I thought it was meant tae trap me intae yet another prison and set ye free from watchin’ over me.”

“Ada,” he began, his voice getting low. “I dinnae have time for this. What matters is that ye fled the table when a guest was here, and nae doubt Irving has taken offense, so much so that he has gone and left!”

“Father, ye were nae there. Can ye nae listen tae me? I felt so uneasy with him, so unsure. There was somethin’ about him

that frightened me.”

Her father dismissed her words with a wave of his hand, and she steeled herself against the emotional pain it caused. “Ye are only tryin’ tae lie tae get out of marryin’ him. I ken ye well, lass. But this marriage will happen, and ye will understand why I have pushed it so in the end. He’s a handsome man, powerful and strong. He’s perfect. What dinnae ye like?”

*He’s too perfect, and nothin’ good can come of it.* Ada was about to rush out, but she stayed where she was. There was no use in arguing about Irving, but she could find a way to make her escape.

“Very well,” she said, and her father paused as if he hadn’t heard her properly. “If I am tae marry this man, then perhaps ye can give me one last thing before I wed.”

“Och, and what is that?”

“I should like tae visit Ella and Cameron for a little. Spend some time on me own with my sister before I must go away tae a new castle.” She tried to keep her face placid so that her father could not see the plan in her eyes. “I miss her, Father. Seein’ her will settle me nerves.”

Ada even released a tear and felt bad for lying to her father. But what choice did she have? He frowned and sat back down. His fingers drummed on the table as he thought.

“Aye, I can understand that, lass. Very well, I will allow ye tae go. So, ye should go and prepare yerself.”

“Thank ye, Father. I am glad ye understand.”

“Ella has been writin’ tae me about it as well, and I ken ye would like tae be near yer sister while she is expectin’.”

Ada smiled genuinely at the thought of becoming an aunt. “May I go tomorrow?”

Graeme nodded with a small smile. “Aye, and send her me love. I would rather ye go sooner rather than later so that I can keep the marriage date set with Irving.”

“Ye already kened the date?” she asked, her anger returning, but she quickly tamped it down. It would no longer do for her to spew her anger at him for she needed him to agree to let her go.

“Aye.” There was nothing like guilt in his eyes, and she nearly sighed with frustration.

“Well, when is it?”

“In a month’s time. They wanted tae prepare a few things first.”

“Then I will go tae Ella as long as I can, perhaps three weeks.”

“Very well,” he said resignedly. “Aye, ye may go tomorrow morn, so be prepared. I will make the arrangements.”

“Thank ye, Father!” She was amazed at how easily he’d agreed. Maybe the heavens were smiling on her.

She rushed around the side of the desk and kissed him on the cheek. But then she backed away, surprised at her own actions. It had been some time since she’d done that—not since she was a child. He looked surprised too.

“I will go get ready,” she said quickly, opening the door.

In her excitement, she didn’t see that someone was already standing in front of the door, and as soon as she hit him and they tumbled to the ground, she knew exactly who it was.

Ada had always desired to be like her sister Ella, so beautiful and elegant. Ella was the daughter who did everything right and would never break a glass, fall from a tree, or topple into her guard until they were twisted together in a heap on the ground.

*But nae, it seems that fate is continually against me.*



How was it possible to become entangled with the same woman over and over, and why did it have to be the woman whose touch enflamed his desire in every way? Blair thought the world unfair. The one person he could not touch and should not touch was the one person he wanted to touch literally *all the time*.

Her silky hair was kissing his face, her leg was between his two, and her left hand was dangerously close to his manhood that didn't need much to get excited once again. For heaven's sake, even the lavender smell she carried was enough to keep him hard for hours.

"Shite," he said, groaning as he sat up, his arm wrapped around Ada. "Are ye tryin' tae kill me, woman?" he asked, surprised at his familiar tone. "Forgive me, Lady Ada," he said hurriedly, catching her eye as he helped her to her feet.

When she was steadied, he could finally take his hands away from her sides. His fingertips tingled as he pulled away. It was as if his skin came alive only when he touched her.

"I was just—" She pointed with her thumb to the door and then turned back to him. She looked confused, as if she didn't know why she'd started a sentence. It was an unusual look for Ada, who always seemed to have a ready word.

"Seein' yer father?" he completed for her.

"Aye, aye," she replied, nodding.

Blair wasn't sure if he'd seen Ada that embarrassed before, for that was what it appeared like. Her cheeks were growing red, and she wasn't able to come up with a witty retort.

"Well, I'm here as well tae see him," Blair said. "I've sent Angus up tae yer room."

“Fine, then,” she said, turning to go.

As she turned away, Blair realized that he wasn't sure he liked this docile version of her. What had her father said that had muted her normal enthusiasm and energy? Or perhaps it was the kiss. *Perhaps she also kens that it was a mistake.* She paused, and he turned away so that she didn't realize he'd been staring at the back of her.

“Och, I almost forgot. Here.”

Blair looked down to see that Ada was passing him a square bit of paper. He took it between his fingers, being careful not to touch her again. But when he looked up, he paused. Both their hands were on the paper, and they didn't move. She had come close enough to him that he could see the pulse fluttering rapidly at her throat.

“Thank ye, me lady.” He finally tore himself away and pulled the note into his hands, shattering the magical moment into pieces. It was either that or kiss her into unconsciousness.

He stuffed it into his pocket. She left without another word, yet her cheeks were more crimson than ever. After that, Blair turned back to the door and let out a breath. How could so much desire be packed into one interaction? He knew now that he was making the right decision by leaving the castle. He could not bear that day after day. It was torture, wanting someone more with each moment in their presence. Finally, he got himself together and knocked on the door, and after hearing the laird's grunt of approval, he opened it.

“Laird MacPherson,” he said, closing it and coming to stand in front of his desk.

“Aye, Blair, what is it?” Graeme asked, scribbling something on a sheaf of paper.

“I think it is time that I take me leave.”

That made the laird look up. “Leave? As in the castle?”

“Aye.” Blair nodded and let out a breath as he remembered the idea he’d conjured up to make an excuse. “Ye ken that I am tae be the man-at-arms at Grant Castle and that I was only meant tae be here for a brief time until ye found a replacement or Ada married.” He swallowed. “Ada is now goin’ tae be married, and I feel that I am overdue in fulfillin’ me duty tae me friend. I have been here long enough for a replacement tae be found. Will ye allow me tae return tae where I am needed, me laird?”

Graeme sighed, and leaning back in his chair, he crossed his arms. “Has me daughter done somethin’ tae ye? I ken that she has hurt ye many times—”

“Nay!” Blair cried, his eyes wide. The last thing he wanted was to get her into trouble. “Ada... I mean, yer lady... I mean, yer daughter has done nothin’ wrong.”

*Very well, Blair, ye’re officially an idiot. Why can I nae speak properly anymore?*



Laird MacPherson snorted and stared at him with a puzzled look, and Blair knew the man assumed he was joking. He hadn't realized that his sudden departure might land Ada in another argument with her father.

"I only wish tae return tae me duty. Ye remember our agreement. It has now been long enough, I believe."

He stood tall, hoping that he had not come off rude to the laird. But it was true. He'd gone above and beyond in his duty, and he hoped the man would be reasonable and allow him to leave without too much argument. Laird MacPherson assessed him with his stark blue eyes, and he got a taste of what Ada must have felt all the time. It didn't make him respect his employer any more.

"All right then, Blair. I will dae as ye say. Ye are quite right. I should have been searchin' for yer replacement, but I trust ye the most out of all me men. I was reluctant tae allow ye tae go." He paused. "And ye're certain there is nothin' I can dae tae tempt ye tae stay even after Ada is wed and gone? Ye are a leader; the men respect ye. I can always use a man like that tae lead me clan intae battle if need be."

Blair was touched by the laird's words. He had not felt satisfied with himself for as long as he could remember. Graeme's kind statements reminded him of his father, and an ache he'd done well to hide for many years pressed up against his chest.

"Thank ye," he said quickly. "That is kind of ye, me laird. But it was a long ago promise, the one I made with Cameron. I want tae see it through. He was a friend tae me when I was on me own."

“I understand. Ye are a good man, Blair.” Laird MacPherson stood and shook his hand.

“Thank ye, me laird,” Blair was so relieved that his request had been fulfilled. “Ye have taken a lot of weight off me mind.”

“Good.” He turned to go, but the laird said, “I have one last request, however.”

“Och?” Blair turned, hoping and praying that the request had nothing to do with Ada.

“As I told ye, lad, I trust nae one more than ye, and that is why I put ye in charge of watchin’ me daughter.”

The repeated words of trust began to hit like a knife. The laird trusted him, and yet he’d kissed his daughter like he hadn’t a care in the world. He also thought about Ada in more ways than were proper. He’d imagined caressing her neck, biting her silky lips, holding his strong grip on her beautiful hair while she was down on—

*STOP IT!* This man thought well of him and wished him to stay, unaware of the truth. An escape to Cameron’s castle would relieve him of the guilt of his deception.

“Aye,” Blair said, turning back.

“Ada has requested that she be allowed tae visit her sister and Cameron at their castle before she is wed. I agreed, and she wishes tae leave tomorrow. But...” The laird paused, and Blair nearly sighed, knowing what was about to come next. “Since ye are wantin’ tae go there anyway, and I trust ye like nae other, then I wish for ye tae accompany Ada tae Grant Castle. What say ye?”

Blair hesitated but only for a moment. He had been trying to escape Ada, and now she was following him to where he was heading. *Is this a jest? Yet it is only for a time, and then she will be wed. One last time...*

Reminding himself of that felt like he was twisting the knife in his belly.

“Aye, me laird. I will dae it, and then I will send someone tae accompany her on the way back.”

“Thank ye. That would help a father tae sleep well at night, lad.” He laughed, patting Blair on the shoulder. “Tomorrow then.”

“Tomorrow. I will make the arrangements for ye. We can leave at first light.”

“Excellent. I will see ye off in the morn tae say a proper goodbye. But we will see one another again since ye will still remain within the family.” Quickly, an image of him and Ada married and happy flashed through his mind, but he stifled it.

“Thank ye again, Laird MacPherson.”

The older man smiled a little, and Blair left. Once he was out of the study, he sighed and closed his eyes. How was he going to survive an hours-long carriage ride with Ada?

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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*A*s evening passed, Ada and the maids were still packing. She kept thinking about how her father had seemed delighted at her easy acquiescence of the wedding. He'd easily given her the gift of going to see Ella as well, and when she'd kissed him, he'd appeared both perplexed and pleased.

She'd shocked herself. Her father and she hadn't had that kind of relationship since Laird Grant's kidnapping. He had already locked her and her sister away, and because of her frustration with him, she felt as if they only ever disagreed these days. But she'd forgotten all that bitterness in that moment when he agreed to let her go.

*I missed this so much, yet it will nae happen again, especially nae when I make me way away from Ella's to somewhere else far, far away.*

"Will ye take this, Lady Ada?" a maid asked, holding up a piece of clothing, and Ada shook her head.

"Nae, I dinnae think so." She turned back to watch Jane pack another one of Ada's trunks.

She left her own packing to walk up to Jane and start a conversation once more. The mystery of Irving rattled in her mind, and the fact that her father did not believe her bothered her. She'd try again to ask her if something was amiss with her betrothed.

"Jane, how are ye?" she asked, and Jane smiled at her.

"Very well, miss."

The tears had dried from her face, and she looked just as she always did, calm and slightly cheerful. She looked a hundred times better than when she had given her the note for Blair and a million times better than during the conversation with Irving. Maybe her fiancé really didn't do anything untoward and just wanted to help. *Maybe I'm just paranoid.* But Ada was still curious about what she'd seen in the garden between him and Jane.

"Good, I'm glad," she said with a smile, and then she let her be.

It was another half an hour before the late dinner she ordered earlier arrived, and she dismissed the maids to return later that night. She ate on her own with a glass of wine and wondered what Ella would think of it all. Now that she was soon to be a parent, would she understand Ada's desire to leave anymore?

*Surely she still remembers what it was like for us tae be so locked away, even though now she is enjoyin' such freedoms.*

But Ada still worried that somehow something would get in the way of her leaving her father forever. She had no idea what she would do if she could not stay with Ella, but she would think of something. She'd sat and waited long enough for things to happen in her life. Now was the time for action. Finishing her meal, she stood and worked on the finishing touches of her packing, the maids joining her a little while later.

She got to bed late, excited about the prospect of seeing her sister again and telling her everything that had happened. Ella had already begun to tease her about Blair, but Ada had always tried to brush it off since she did not think that he would ever look her way. But after the kiss, things had changed.

And with those thoughts, she drifted off only to be woken up abruptly in the morning by hard knocks to her door. She groaned, sliding out of bed in only her shift, and she walked to the door as it continued to rattle. Why would Angus be pounding on her door like that?

“What is it?” she asked, swinging it open only to see Blair on the other side.

He sucked in a breath and then turned around. “Why in God’s name are ye openin’ the door like that, lass?” he asked.

Ada tried not to let his abrupt turn insult her. It was bad enough that he'd fled from the kiss, looking terrified as he did and asking Angus to take his shift as her guard. And yesterday when they'd toppled together, she had felt his reluctance to touch her.

“Why are ye bangin’ on me door at this hour? Ye normally stay inside with me in the night, and then this morn ye could nae simply open the door?” She crossed her arms, and even though she could not see his face, she could hear his hesitation.

“I was tryin’ tae avoid this,” he said, and she caught his meaning.

Usually, she awoke to Blair going out the door, trying to give her some space to dress. Her father wanted her watched but not at all times, of course. He was still reasonable some of the time.

“Well, why are ye wakin’ me at this hour? It is nae even dawn! I went tae bed late, and I need me rest before the long journey.”

“It is time. Dawn is only in another half an hour. I wanted tae come and be sure that ye were awake and ready. I think it best that we start as early as possible so that we have enough daylight in case somethin’ happens along the way.”

“Ye are comin’ with me?” she asked, incredulous. If Blair was with her at the castle, then she would never be able to implement her plan.

“Aye, yer father asked me tae go with ye. But it is because...” She saw his twisted expression and got worried that something was wrong. “Because I’ll...” Blair was clenching his jaw so hard that Ada thought the vein on his forehead would explode.



“Blair, is everything alright?” She touched his hand without realizing what she was doing, and he took a hasty step back as if she were the plague itself. She felt a painful pang in her chest.

“I will be leavin’ the castle. I will be goin’ tae stay with Cameron and Ella,” he blurted out in a rush and looked everywhere but her eyes.

“Ye...” she began, but she didn’t want to say anything foolish that would embarrass her further. Her heart shattered piece by piece. He was leaving because of *her*. “Fine,” she growled, not being able to recognize her cold voice. “I will dress first, and then the men may start tae take me trunks.”

“Very well,” he said, staying where he was.

She started to shut the door, and then boldly she said, “Unless ye want tae come in.”

He walked off down the hall a bit. “Nay,” he uttered, and Ada only gave him a tortured smile before she closed the door and leaned her back on it, feeling the refreshing coldness.

He could not know that she had poured everything into that kiss the day before, that it had made her happier than she’d been in a long while. She would tease him instead of him knowing how much he was crushing her heart with his cold rejections of her.

She thought of their upcoming journey in a carriage together, and she sighed. It would be a long one, especially if he was

going to treat her like that. Or perhaps, it could be another chance.



Blair's heart wildly thumped as he waited outside of Ada's room for her to dress. Why did she have to answer the door like that in barely anything but her shift? He wanted to run off, to put himself as far away from her as he could until they'd be forced into a journey together, but he'd already sent Angus away.

Even in the quick moment that he'd glimpsed her, he'd been able to see the shape of her, and from the torchlight outside her door, he had seen her pointed nipples through the thin fabric. Groaning aloud, he leaned his head back against the wall.

*Only a little longer and then it will be over. We will be apart, and she can marry someone who is better than me who will nae bring darkness intae her life.*

But he knew that Irving was not a good man. It had been obvious from the very beginning, not to mention the way he'd treated Ada in the gardens. He wondered if she had mentioned the strange incident to her father and if that was what they had been yelling about in the study.

He stood tall when he heard the screech of her door open, and Ada walked out, dressed in full now in a dark woolen dress, comfortable for travel. She wore a cape as well. The hood was up, but he could still tell that her hair was down, unbound and free.

*Very much like her.*

“I am ready now,” she said, holding her arms out to the sides. “Shall we leave in all haste?” she added in a sarcastic tone.

“Aye.” He cleared his throat. “Let’s go down tae the carriage. Cook has prepared food for us, and the men will come tae collect yer things.”

They started to walk together when she said, “Och, did ye read that note I gave tae ye? What was it?”

Blair paused for a moment, patting at his jacket. He had forgotten about the note.

“Nay, nae yet. I will read it while we wait for everythin’ tae be ready. Thank ye for bringing it tae me mind. I forgot about it.” He nodded at a window as they passed. “Ye can see it is light out now, Lady Ada.”

He didn’t have to see her to know she was rolling her eyes at him. “I still say that it is far too early for any human tae wish tae be out and about,” she grumbled. Blair stifled a grin, as he had on many occasions. He often found her humorous, but it wouldn’t suit their situation if Ada knew just how entertaining he found her.

*I bet that Irving would rather she held her tongue.*

A little pang of guilt hit him in the chest as he thought about how he was leaving Ada to her fate with the man. After their kiss, he knew that he couldn’t stay any longer, but also, after

devoting his time to keeping her safe, it felt wrong to just let the marriage happen.

Perhaps the laird would come to his senses, and Blair could feel at ease. He could speak to Cameron about it as well, and maybe his friend would be able to talk some sense into his father-in-law. But Blair doubted it. Laird MacPherson was oddly determined in his way of thinking about his daughters. Everyone had thought that after the danger from Laird Grant had passed, he would soften and begin to treat them as people, as the daughters he claimed to love so much. But it was as if the pattern had already been so ingrained in his mind that Graeme could not move away from it. And Blair knew from personal experience how any time with Ada would drive a man mad. That wasn't helping matters any.

“Ye can wait here, lass,” he said once they arrived in the main hall. “It will be warmer with the fire.”

“‘Tis a bloody cold morn, Blair,” Ada said with a little shiver. “Yet another reason why a person should nae wake so early before the sun has truly begun tae shine in earnest.”

“Aye, I ken. But ye will start tae feel better in the carriage. There will be hot whiskey.”

“Truly?” she asked, her eyes widening as she stared at him from her seat. “Blair, ye have thought of everythin’. Ye ken how much I like whiskey.”

He smiled at her pleased expression, but then he quickly removed it. “Aye, well, it is only good sense on a cold day with a long journey.”

He left the hall, and while Ada was waiting, Blair went to see to a few more tasks before he pulled the note out of his pocket. Why had a maid delivered this note? And why had she given it to Ada and not to him? As he unfolded it, he wondered if Ada had glanced at it herself. Who would write to him besides Cameron or perhaps the laird?

Question upon question filled his mind as he opened the paper, and the blood drained from his face as he saw the signature at the end of the note.

*Finley.*

He had found him.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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*B*lair,

*Ye have kept yerself from me for a long time, hidin' in a way that I could almost be proud of. But now, ye are mine. And it is only a matter of time before ye get what ye deserve. The blood ye have on yer hands could never go without consequences, even though ye might have thought ye were safe after so many years. Soon, it will be yer blood on me hands. Yer father's was an easy, quick death. But for yers, I will relish takin' me time.*

*Finley*

Years of training kept Blair from dropping the note to the ground in shock and panic or allowing anyone else to see the fear that spread through his body like wildfire. Slowly, he looked around him at the men moving things into the carriage. Blood rushed in his ears, and dread formed a heavy ball in his stomach.

The time had come.

What he'd been waiting for and expecting for years was now upon him. Crunching the note in his fist, he thrust it back into

his pocket and went to collect Ada. She could never know who hunted him, and once they'd officially parted ways after her visit to her sister, she would stay safe forever. Without him in her life, she could live.



Ada and Blair rode in silence for a long while. She stared out the window as the carriage rolled away from the castle, and slowly, wonderfully, it disappeared from view in the growing mist. Snow was coming and soon. Normally, she might have been afraid of such danger on the road, but with Blair just across from her and a cup of hot whiskey in her hand, she felt safe and warm. Finally, her father was gone, and she was free of the castle walls. Delicious freedom was in her grasp.

Ada let her eyes wander to Blair, and since he too was looking out the window, she took the time to study him. There was a line in his forehead that had not been there before. Something had happened between their teasing in the main hall and their getting into the carriage.

*He is concerned about somethin'.*

And since she had done as he'd asked and gotten ready in a timely fashion, she was certain he wasn't worried about her.

*Maybe it was the note. What was in that note?*

She wondered if he'd had a chance to read it and if he would tell her about it if he had. No, she knew he wouldn't. He was a private man always and even more so when it came to her. Occasionally, she would see him talking to the other men, and there was an easiness about him that people seemed to enjoy.

When he spoke to Cameron especially, his eyes would light up, and he would even deign to smile. But everything changed whenever Ada walked into a room. Blair would always grow distant and quiet and serious.

*Well, I am nae spendin' the next hours with a silent, concerned man. This was the chance I wanted, right? Perhaps I can open him up a bit.*

“Ye ken that yer job is a bit easier today,” Ada said, making his head turn toward her.

The line of concern was still there, but she could tell he was attempting to smooth it for her benefit. God, he was handsome. Everything about him was strong and powerful, and there was an unknown world behind those eyes.

*If only he would let me explore it.*

“What dae ye mean?” he asked.

Motioning to the carriage walls, she said, “Well, ye can be certain that I will nae attempt tae jump out of a movin' carriage, so ye can rest easy. All ye have tae dae is sit there.”

He hmphed. “I am nae worried about the journey tae Grant Castle, lass,” he said. “I am more worried for the poor blaiageard who I will find tae take ye back.”

“Take me back?” she asked, her brows raised, a cold dread spreading over her skin.



She drank from her cup to feel the heat again. She did not want to think about going back. Never again would she return to being a prisoner.

“Aye, of course. There will be someone who will guard ye on yer return in three weeks’ time.” He cleared his throat and averted her gaze. “I dinnae ken if yer father mentioned it tae ye, but I have asked for him tae let me return tae Grant Castle, and so that is another reason why he wanted me tae accompany ye there. I must perform me duty for Cameron as his man-at-arms. I was only meant tae be with ye for a short time until yer father found a replacement... or until ye were tae be wed.”

Ada had wondered why there were many more trunks than simply her own on the carriage. She ground her teeth together as he struggled over the word “wed.”

“So, ye will simply up and leave without even going back with me? Were ye even goin’ tae say anythin’ about it unless I’d brought it up, that ye were going tae stay there *for good?*”

She knew it wasn’t fair to be angry at him, not really. And he told her he’d leave, didn’t he? It was a job; he worked for her father. But still, after everything that had happened between them, it felt like a kind of betrayal. Did he truly not feel the connection they’d shared in that kiss? It was like sending fire to one another, a meeting of souls in a way that she’d never experienced. Was it really only she that had felt it?

He shifted in his seat, rubbing at the back of his neck and then over his face, looking fatigued. “Aye, I would have told ye it

was so soon. I just did nae want ye tae think that ye had anythin' tae dae with it."

For some reason, his words stung more than she'd expected them to. "Well, that is good then," she replied, pasting a smile on her face.

*Never let a man see yer weakness.*

"I would have been surprised if I'd heard ye were leavin' because of me. Ye've already put up with me for so long that I would think ye'd be used tae all of it by now. Angus and Darren never kenned how tae make heads or tails out of me, but they've stayed."

He let out a breath, and Ada paused. "Was that a laugh, Blair MacDougall?"

He froze, looking up at her. "So what if it was? Can a man nae laugh, even if he is meant tae be a guard?"

"Aye, of course," she replied and felt her cheeks blush. "I have been hopin' tae hear ye laugh for a long time now."

"Is that so?" he asked, crossing his arms again and pinning her with his soft, brown gaze. She realized how her words might have sounded and lifted a sardonic brow to dismiss any thoughts that she was flirting with him.

"Only because I hoped tae find out if ye were actually a person and not a brick wall. I confess that I am still unsure."

He smirked this time, and she did as well, gratified to get that out of him at least. It was odd that neither of them had mentioned the fiery kiss they'd shared or how their bodies had pressed against one another for a few intense moments. She had certainly known him to be a person *then*.

"Hmm," he said and then said nothing else, turning his gaze to the window again.

*I shall have tae settle for that.*

Outside the window, snow began to fall. It was gentle at first, but it was growing in speed. She poured herself another whiskey. Snow would make escape very difficult. But she would have to think of it another time. First, they had to reach the castle. But anything seemed possible now that her father, MacPherson Castle, and Irving were all nowhere to be found.



Blair's eyes watched the snow steadily fall. He had thought it would come when he saw the white clouds covering the sky that morning, but selfishly, he'd pushed on, wanting to get out of the castle as soon as possible. But it would cause trouble on the roads, and with a quick glance at a thoughtful Ada, he knew he had to keep her safe. Hot whiskey would do well enough for a little while, but the carriage could get stuck with the snow falling as fast as it was. Ada could freeze to death.

*That is nae goin' tae happen.*

He knew the path to Cameron's castle very well. The nearest inn was too far to ride to in this weather, but there was an abandoned cottage that Cameron had had his men fix up. There was a stable as well with a room for the coachman. It was a sort of halfway point between the families in case there was some trouble. It would have to do.

"I think we will have tae stop, lass," he said. "The snow is gettin' too thick, and we will have a blizzard on our hands if we dinnae act quickly."

"Stop? But where?" Ada asked.

Blair didn't answer, but he hit the top of the carriage. When it slowed, he opened the door and sucked in a breath when a rush of freezing cold air and snow blew into the carriage.

"Sorry," he said, getting out, shutting it, and going to speak to the driver.

"We should go tae the cottage, aye, Blair?" the old man asked.

"Aye, as fast as ye can. I dinnae want tae get caught in this mess." The man nodded sharply, and once Blair was back inside the carriage, it jolted forward at a quicker speed.

It was a risk to ride quickly when the snow was settling onto the path, but he did not want to get so stuck that they'd become snow-blind.

“What cottage is this, Blair?” Ada asked, looking concerned for the first time.

“It is somethin’ Cameron found on one of his journeys tae Grant Castle. He has now made sure tae build it up properly so that anyone can stop when they need tae. It is more for the family as they pass between the castles in visits. It will have all that is necessary.”

She nodded, and he was surprised she’d just taken his answer without complaint.

“But why did ye nae tell me about it?”

*There was the complaint.*

“What need was there tae tell ye? It is nae as if ye can go anywhere.” He regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth, but when he saw her angry, hurt face, no other words came to him.

“Quite right,” she said sharply and turned away.

They were silent for what felt like an age when she spotted the cottage and pointed at it.

“Perfect,” she said. “I shall start me way there.” Due to the growing snow, the carriage had slowed enough, so it was easy for Ada to open the door and jump down from the carriage and onto the ground before Blair could grab her.

“Jesus Christ!” he called out loudly, and his anger fired up when she slammed the door in his face.

He hit the top of the carriage so that it stopped, and he jumped out after her, cursing the frozen winds once more as snow swirled around them. Ada looked like an angry, hunched old woman in the blurry snow ahead of him, her cloak wrapped around her as she trudged towards the cottage.

“What in the bloody hell was that, woman?” he cried out when he got near her. “I thought ye said I was tae have an easy time of it today, that ye would nae jump out of a movin’ carriage.”

He waved to the driver to keep on coming.

“Ye are right, Blair MacDougall. I never go anywhere, and so why should I nae consider jumpin’ out of a carriage? It might be a bold adventure, somethin’ me life has been sorely lackin’ and nae for want of tryin’.” Her nose was in the air, growing red from the cold, and he rolled his eyes.

He had been a perfect arse to her and for no reason really. But he supposed she seemed just as irritated that they’d been pushed together on this trip after that kiss he couldn’t stop thinking about.

“It is nae what I meant,” he said softly. “I am sorry about that.” She spun to look at him, but she’d done it too quickly. She tripped, falling into the snow at her feet. His heart leapt, and with quick movements, he reached down to grab her arm. Ada shook a fist at the sky.

“Fate is against me!” she cried, and it struck Blair as so funny that he burst into laughter.

She allowed him to help her, and when she stood and saw his smiling face, she laughed too.

“Ye ken that it is nae right that ye laugh at a lady who’s just fallen,” she said, snowflakes landing on her dark lashes, making her look like a faery queen.

“Aye, I ken,” he said, unable to stop smiling, his one hand pressing against her waist inside her cloak.

“Ye should smile more often, Blair. I can now see that ye are nae brick wall.”

With a smirk, she slipped out of his grasp and walked to the door. A little surprised at the jolt of happiness he’d just experienced, Blair pushed the heavy wood door for her, and she walked in, shivering a little.

“I will start a fire,” he said, his smile gone. He had to make sure that she was well. “Cameron always leaves the right tools and wood.” While she found a seat, he went to the fireplace and worked to light it, striking a flint to make a spark.

“I am afraid, Blair,” she said suddenly, and unrelated to the cold weather, a pang of ice shot through his heart.

“What dae ye mean?” he asked softly, getting a spark going and pressing it into the kindling. He did not turn around but

tried to focus on the task at hand. “Because of the blizzard?”

“Nay,” she said. “I am afraid that this is what it will be like.”

“What *what* will be like?” Finally, the spark caught, and a flame grew.

He stood from where he’d been on his knees and brushed off the dust. When he turned around, she was eyeing him curiously.

“That all because of a kiss ye will nae longer be able tae stand me. Will that be what it is like for the rest of our days?”

Blair breathed out, shocked at so honest and bold a question. He found that he didn’t yet have the words to answer. In his mind, he kept repeating the phrase, *all because of a kiss*, until he finally finished it.

All because of a kiss, his life would now be changed forever.



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## CHAPTER NINE

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Maybe it was the cold, the whiskey, or maybe it was the excitement of being caught out in a storm with a man she had longed to be truly alone with, but Ada had just blurted out her bold question. It had been what she'd thought the whole ride to the cottage, and now that she said it, she saw that she'd stunned Blair. He stood before her, his mouth opening and closing, and she cast her eyes down.

*Why did I hope he would pick me up intae his arms and kiss me, that he would confess his long-held love for me if I just acted boldly?*

Clearly, she'd only served to make him uncomfortable.

"I will come back in a moment, lass," he said. "I need tae see tae the coach driver first and the horses."

"Aye, of course," she said, waving a hand in the air, wishing for once that she was not herself.

If only she had been easy and sensible like Ella, who no doubt never said anything untoward or ridiculous. Cameron had

seemed to be besotted with her from the very first, while Blair only stared at Ada with indifferent yet mysterious gazes.

While he was gone, the fire grew, and she moved closer, taking her cloak off so that she could dry out her dress a bit. It was good that she'd worn sturdy boots, or she would have certainly called herself a fool for jumping out of the carriage and into the snow, no matter how angry she'd been at Blair's words.

A little while later, when she was feeling sufficiently warmed, Blair returned, carrying the basket that the cook had prepared for them. The bottle of whiskey was inside it as well.

"It is a good thing we did nae eat any of this on our journey here," he said, joining her on the floor in front of the fire.

Snowflakes were on his shoulders and head; without thought, she leaned forward to brush them off. His eyes met hers, and she tried not to let the pain of his thousandth rejection cut her to the core again.

"Aye, a good thing," she replied, returning her hand to her lap. "What has cook provided us?"

"Cheese, bread, apples. It looks as though there are tarts in here as well."

"How wonderful!" she said, picking up a bit of cheese and bread from the basket. "I am starved."

“We should nae eat it all in case we must stay another night, but I hope the storm will be over by then. A blizzard is nae a usual thing here. It seems that we set off on a bad day.”

“Aye.” She nodded as she took a bite and pointed to the whiskey. “Have some,” she said. “Ye did nae drink the whole of the journey.”

“I wanted tae keep me wits about me,” he said honestly, but he relented and uncorked the bottle, drinking straight from it.

As she chewed, she watched the lines of his strong neck, wondering how it was possible for a man to have so much muscle. When he was finished, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and passed it to her.

“It will keep ye warm.”

“I have had so much already.” She laughed.

Around her father or Ella, she might have felt guilty, but in front of him, she felt more alive and reckless in a sort of freeing way.

“Aye, but we are here for the night. If the fire goes out in the night, ye will need this in yer bones.”

“Thank ye,” she said, putting the bottle to her lips.

It was intimate to touch the same place his lips had touched. He seemed to be thinking about that as well, for he watched her while she drank. It was like he was drinking *her*; swallowing her every movement. She felt a blush finding its way on her cheeks, and she couldn't blame the whiskey. It was all Blair. After she drank her fill, she put the bottle between them and continued eating.

The space was heavy with so many unsaid things, and they weighed on her. She wondered if she should break the silence, ask him again about the kiss, or tell him that she planned to escape after spending time with Ella. But nothing came out.

Instead, looking at the flames, Blair said, "I am sorry if I have been cold tae ye since then. That was nae me intention. I assure ye."

But he said nothing else. There was no explanation of his actions, nor was there even any mention of the kiss. "Since then," was all he'd said, as if it was something he very much wished to forget.

Suddenly, she said, "Why dae we nae pass the time with ye tellin' me about yer past? I never hear anythin' about it. I only ken yer time at the castle and the bits and pieces that Cameron has told me or yer old friends, Rory and Alistair."

Blair coughed on whatever he was chewing, and then he swallowed it. "There is nothin' much tae tell. I come from far away, and I will nae be goin' back. There is nae family. Cameron is me family now, and so I will make me life there." He didn't even give her a space to question him again when he asked, "And ye? How dae ye feel about this betrothal?"

This time, he did not look away as he asked the question, instead pinning her with his heated gaze. She could tell that Blair did not like Irving, but she wondered if he cared if *she* liked him or not.

It was possible that she could tease him or make jokes about it as she usually might have done. But out there in the cottage with the snow swirling around them, she felt as if it was only the two of them in the world. She knew she could be open with him, and he would not make fun, nor would he tell anyone else.

Swallowing hard, she said, “I dinnae ken why me father should wish me tae marry such a person. Ye saw his behavior yerself. But me father did nae believe me. He thought I was merely tryin’ tae get out of the engagement.” She reached for the bottle again and took another sip. “I am afraid, Blair, that if somethin’ does nae happen, I will have tae marry that awful person and be hidden away in his castle for the rest of me days. And who kens what he is really like behind closed doors? When ye came between us in the garden, he claimed that he was innocent, that he was nae really doin’ anythin’ wrong. But once I am his wife, he will be permitted tae dae anythin’ he wants.”

She breathed in sharply and could feel the tears waiting behind her eyes. She drank from the bottle again to avoid that, and the liquid burnt her with its sweet fire. When she put it down again, she saw Blair’s kind eyes watching her.

“I am sorry that yer father did nae believe ye. Perhaps there is a chance he can be convinced.”

“Nay, I dinnae think so.” She bit her lip. The tiny shock of pain kept the tears back yet again. “But I hope that I can dae

somethin' about it.”

He narrowed his eyes at her and leaned back a bit. Blair was giving her his usual questioning look, which showed he was worried about what she would do or say next.

*That is all he thinks of me. To him, I'm just a child who does wild things and cannae think for herself.*

Whatever safety in opening up she'd felt with him earlier was now gone.

“What are ye goin' tae dae?”

She was not going to tell him about her plans of escape, for he would surely attempt to stop her. But then a new idea came to her head, and her mouth fell open a bit. She was surprised at how quickly it had come to her and how utterly simple it was. It was simple in that it could be a quick solution to her problem. If only Blair would do it for her.

“Well,” she said, moving a bit closer to him on the floor.

She had hoped her movement toward him looked rather sensual and graceful, but instead, she had to slide on her knees around their tiny picnic in front of the fire. It was hardly elegant. Blair was still watching her with narrow-eyed confusion.

Tentatively, she reached out for his hand. He jerked away at first, but then he put it down again. She took it in both her

hands. It was a very large hand, rough and masculine yet gentle in its own way. Those hands had touched her before, held her tight, or caught her, saving her life.

But in truth, she had no idea of how to seduce a man. The kiss with Blair in her room had been the impulse of a moment. It was a moment without thought, and luckily Blair had kissed her back. But right then, as her idea to get out of the marriage was blossoming in her mind, she wanted to make sure she approached the situation right and with thought.

She turned his hand so that his palm was open in hers. Then, she moved it to her waist, but with a cry of pain, Blair yanked his hand back. Ada's breath caught. Was this how he would reject her again? Would he do it so cruelly and heartlessly?

“Dear God, woman,” he said, putting his finger into his mouth. “What dae ye have back there?”

“What?” she asked, and then putting her hand to the back of her, she felt a pin sticking out. “Och,” she said, reddening. “I am so sorry.” She pulled it out and laid it on the ground. “This dress does nae fit as well anymore, but it is the most comfortable for travel. I had tae pin it in the back.”

She watched as Blair sucked on his finger a bit before pulling it out again, and the two of them chuckled in low tones. At least he was not angry. But her attempts at getting closer to him were not as successful as she'd hoped them to be.

“Blair,” she said, choosing to express her idea rather than show him, for that wasn't working very well. “If I am ruined, then Father will be forced tae give up the marriage. Irving will

likely nae want me for a wife, and then I will be free. It is the perfect plan.”

Blair opened his mouth, but she leaned over and put a finger on his lips. “Please, Blair,” she said, showing him a nervous smile. “Perhaps ye could be the man who will ruin me.”



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## CHAPTER TEN

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Yet again, Ada MacPherson shocked Blair into wordlessness. After a few seconds, her soft finger fell from his lips, and her eyes searched his. His body was screaming for him to do it, for it had wanted Ada for so long, but his brain and his heart spoke against it. He needed to protect her from himself, especially now that Finley knew where he was and would likely have spies watching him. If Finley knew how he felt about Ada, then all was lost. She would not be safe.

“Ye want me tae ruin ye?” he asked in a low voice.

His breath was shallow, and even as logical words went through his brain, his heart beat fast. He could not stop looking at her. In the firelight, her eyes and face expectant, she was even more beautiful. The fire glinted off her hair, showing all its colors. Now that she was warmed by the heat of the cottage, her cheeks were a little pink, as were her lovely, soft lips.

He was enchanted by those lips that he now knew the feel of and would never forget, lips that called to him then, begging him to taste them once more.

“I want ye tae take me, Blair, here in this cottage. Ye may have me, and then it will ruin all chances there are of me bein’ wed tae the terrible man.”

She slid closer on her knees, and she reached for his hand again. Even though better sense was in his mind, he let her take it. Again, she placed his hand on the curve of her waist, and instinctively, he felt his fingers tighten on her body.

*She kens nae what she does.*

“Take me, Blair. I want ye tae.”

She leaned closer and waited for him to respond. It would not be wise. It might ruin everything if he leaned in, but they were alone in the cottage. The storm was not abating and would not for some time. It would be just the two of them, the last time it would be so before she left Grant Castle and he remained.

His body propelled him forward, and with his free hand, he caressed her cheek, placing his lips on hers. Ada’s arms wrapped around his shoulders, and he pulled her closer as her mouth opened underneath his. She tasted sweet from the whiskey, and his body hardened as her tongue boldly slid against his. The kiss was wet and deep, and for a few moments, he unleashed the passion he felt for her, his hand moving up to the side of her breast, tempted to feel the shape there.

“Ye can,” she said when his mouth was on her neck, and she placed his large hand on her breast.

The fire raged inside him as he caressed the breast in his hand. He moved to her mouth again and deepened the kiss. He groaned as his hand gently squeezed. Ada made a sound as well, a sigh of contentment and pleasure, but that was what brought him back to reason. Shaking, he pulled back, sliding a bit away from her so that he would not be tempted again.

“I-I am sorry, Ada, but I cannae. I cannae dae this. It’s nae fair.”

His body ached for her, called out for her. Blair wanted Ada like he wanted no one else, and that was why he had to do the right thing. And the right thing was to step away.

“What dae ye mean?” she asked, coming towards him again, still panting softly from the kiss, her cheeks red with her arousal. *Damn, she is a beautiful sight.*

“Nay, Ada,” he said, raising a hand, and she shut her mouth tight, her eyes getting red.

He swallowed, afraid that he had hurt her far more than he’d intended. “It is nae ye, I swear it.”

But he saw a tear slide down her cheek, and she turned away. “If it is nae me, then what is it?” she asked as she stared at the fire, her body so far away that he couldn’t feel her heat anymore.

“Ye will nae understand, but I cannae love a woman. And ye deserve tae be loved, Ada. Ye dinnae deserve tae be taken

here, in a cottage in the middle of nowhere by a man ye can never be with.”

Slowly, he stood, and she asked, flushed with embarrassment and obviously hesitant to spell out her next question, “Blair, would it be possible that ye... well, dae ye... When ye say ye cannae love a *woman*... does that mean ye would prefer tae love... a man?”

“Nay!” he cried, and she cut him short before he could go on.

“I will nae tell anyone, I promise. Dinnae worry about it.”

“Ada, it is nae that. I just... me life is so that it would nae be right for me tae have a woman, tae be with them and take care of them. I want ye tae have everythin’, and I could nae give ye that. Ye will find another.”

“But I will nae, Blair MacDougall.” She pulled her knees up to her chest and crossed her arms over the top of them. “Ye have just cursed me intae marriage with that blaiheard, Irving MacIntosh, because ye cannae *give* me enough?”

For a moment, he thought about trying again, of telling her just how he felt. He wanted to be with her, body and soul. He took a step forward, considering for a moment of doing just that and cursing Finley to burn in hell. But then, he paused. He knew what kinds of men Finley sent to do his dirty work. That meant that Finley was far worse, and if he came after Ada, then Blair would never forgive himself if she came to harm.

“There will be a way tae escape the marriage, Ada... just nae this,” he said in a subdued tone. “I will get more wood for the fire. Eat up. We will need our strength for the journey tomorrow.”

As he turned to leave, he heard her grab up the bottle and take a swig. At least he could allow her that comfort.



Ada found one of two beds in the corner of the cottage, and she laid down on it, facing toward the wall. Blair had been gone for a few minutes, but she would not be there to face him when he returned. She wondered if her face would forever burn in embarrassment. Twice now she had given herself to him, and both times he had pulled away, looking horrified.

*Dear God, why dae I persist in this? He does nae want me, nay matter what he says about it nae bein' somethin' tae dae with me.*

She did not understand what he meant about him not being able to care for a woman. Could they not love each other if they decided to go forward? She'd been tempted to tell him after the kiss that she wasn't a child and didn't need to be looked after anymore. But the tears had started, and she'd been unable to say anything. Then he'd gone and abandoned her, leaving her more humiliated than she'd ever been.

Even her father, with all of his domineering ways, could not have humiliated her in such a way. Her heart was broken. Blair wanted to love her and treat her as an equal—as a woman, not as a young girl whose father kept her locked away, refusing to let her grow up. When they kissed, it seemed as if he did, and

he was ready to give his life to her as she was to him. But then something in his head snapped, and he backed away from her.

It was as if she had done something to frighten him so much that he had to back away and not even touch an inch of her skin.

*I disgust him, I suppose. I will leave him be and think of me own plan. I will nae marry Irving MacIntosh. And that is a vow I will make tae meself here and now.*

Ada fell asleep before Blair returned, but when she awoke, she saw him in the bed on the other side of the room. She turned away, not wanting to look at him. There was still time left for them to ride to Grant Castle, but she would have to find a way to bear it. Going to the window, she pulled back the sash to see that the blizzard had stopped. The sun was out, and some of the snow had melted. She prayed it was enough for them to begin their journey, for she could not bear another day and night in such close quarters with a man she'd never have.

Turning at the sound of his waking, Ada saw him rise and move out of bed quickly. He was a soldier and likely used to rising at exactly the time he needed to.

“Good morrow, Lady Ada.”

“Good morrow, Blair,” she said, going to the table where he had put the basket and the remainder of their foodstuffs. “It seems the storm has stopped. Perhaps we can resume our journey?”

“Aye, I think so,” he said, looking out of the window.

Ada looked down at the food she was picking at instead of Blair, who looked very handsomely tousled. His face, a little swollen with sleep, was not so sharp-edged with fear and disgust as it had been yesterday. It made her want to try again, to pull him into her arms and beg him to love her, to take her and ruin her for every other man as if he hadn't done that already.

“Good.” She popped a piece of bread and cheese into her mouth, and he went to the fire.

“I will make the preparations tae leave after I light the fire.”

She said nothing, only nodded as she continued to eat. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched him work by the fire. He sat on his haunches, and her eyes kept moving to the shape of his buttocks through the kilt. He was so efficient, so knowledgeable. She wanted to be just like him: strong, confident, and able to walk through the world without fear.

*But I will nae be allowed tae fend for meself.*

Once the fire was lit, he left, and she kept looking at her food. It was another hour before they were ready to go, and inside the carriage, Ada could feel the tension as if it was another passenger inside with them. It pressed on her so heavily that she couldn't take it anymore.

“Does Cameron ken that ye are comin'?” she asked finally.

“Nay, and neither does Ella ken ye are comin’, but I think they will welcome us just the same.”

She turned to look out of the window then, sighing with resignation. So, this was how it would be between them. Even despite her anger, she could feel her body buzzing in reaction to how close he was. Crossing her arms, she frowned. This would not do at all. Ella, perhaps, would have a solution, and at least at Grant Castle, he would not always be on her heels. He would likely have other duties to attend to, since he was to be Cameron’s man-at-arms.

Finally, the castle came into view, and against the bright white snow, it looked even more impressive. When the carriage slowed, Blair opened the door and jumped out, and he helped Ada down, reaching up for her hand. When her hand was in his, she looked up at him, and their eyes met. From his gaze, she could feel all the energy from the evening before: heat, passion, and sparks of fire. It was all there. She knew that she had not made it up.

But it was only there for a split second before he tore his gaze away, making her question her sanity.

“Blair? Ada?” Ella called from the open door of the castle, and she rushed out with a shriek of delight. “It is so good tae see ye!” she cried, and Ada ran towards her, falling into her dear sister’s arms.

Between them, she could feel the growing baby bump, and she smiled. “I’m sorry for the sudden arrival, but it is me last gift before Father sees me wed.”



“What?” Ella cried, holding onto her shoulders as she looked at her.

Ada sighed. “I will explain everythin’.”

Ella frowned, and then she turned to Blair. “Blair, it is good tae see ye,” Ella said, pulling him into a warm embrace as well. “Cam will be very glad tae see ye.”

“Aye, so I will!” Cameron called, rushing from the castle to greet them with a wide smile on his face. Now with him and her sister standing before them, the embarrassment of the evening before washed away from Ada, and she felt like she could stand tall. Her father was not around either to control her movements or to lock her away as soon as she entered.

“Come in,” Ella said. “We are servin’ the afternoon meal now. Ye must join us, warm yerselves, and tell us everythin’.”

Ella took her arm, and they led the way while the men spoke together behind them. In the castle, it was warm and welcoming, a far cry from MacPherson Castle.

“Who is Father havin’ ye wed tae?” Ella asked with a frown as the doors to the hall were opened for them, and Ada could smell warm, delicious food.

“Irving MacIntosh. And he’s terrible. Father does nae budge.”

“I am nae surprised.” When they sat down together, Ella asked the question that Ada had been dreading. And with Ella’s

teasing smile, she knew exactly what her sister was thinking.  
“So, why did ye come tae Grant Castle with Blair?”

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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*B*lair had made a right idiot of himself, pushing away from Ada last night like he had. He should have let her down more gently or at least explained a bit more of why he could not be with her the way she wished—or the way *he* wished.

*But she would only try tae tell me that it did nae matter.*

Ada was determined and feisty, but because of her father, she was ignorant of the ways of the world. She did not know true darkness. Only twice had she come close with her almost kidnapping by Laird Grant and her almost rape by two of his men. But she ever heard about his past and the way so many men had died by his hand, she would never look at him the same. She would never look at him with those dark eyes of hers, so full of eagerness and longing. The darkness that he had seen and the darkness that had come from his own actions had changed him. It did not even deserve to be in the same room as her purity and light and honesty.

Now, they were at Grant Castle, and Ella and Cameron were looking at them with slight smirks on their faces.

“I...” Blair began, and then he looked at Ada who also seemed to be attempting to explain.

“Father wishes me tae marry Irving MacIntosh. In fact, he has already made all the arrangements and the plans, so I asked that I be allowed tae come and visit ye as me final gift before I wed.”

Cameron frowned from the head of the table, looking very noble. Months after he'd worked at MacPherson Castle, helping Blair to guard the two daughters, his blonde hair was beginning to grow back. For a long time, Cameron had kept it long when he was only the owner of The Highlander Tavern, which was on MacPherson land. But Blair had shaved it for him when he was going to work at the castle, for he was meant to go in hiding as their guard. Ella and Ada had already seen him at the tavern when he'd rescued them from two of Laird Grant's men. Cameron had been determined to know that answer as to why he had a golden brooch and why Ella MacPherson wore the very same one.

Now, they were here, in Cameron's castle. He was a *laird*, and he was married to Ella. They still wore their gold brooches, and on the table, Cameron's hand was on his wife's. His life had changed completely, and Blair was happy for him. He had found love, just as Blair had encouraged him to. Cameron had spent a lifetime of betting about which women he could get into bed, but this was far better. This was much more suited to him, Blair thought. But Blair knew that it would not be right for him to follow in his friend's footsteps.

“It seems the man has nae learned his lesson,” Cameron said gruffly, looking to Ella, and she nodded with concern.

“Ye're right. Why must Father persist in this?”

“Well,” Ada began a little hesitantly. “He may have been pushed into it, so tae speak. It was soon after I had fallen from a tree in order tae save a kitten, and Blair had tae catch me.”

“*Again?*” Cameron lifted a brow and threw Blair an amused glance.

“Aye, again,” Blair said, and Ada frowned at him.

“It was tae help one of the children in the castle,” she explained. “The young girl was missing her kitten, and so I climbed up the tree tae get it. But Blair had tae come in tae yell at me tae get down. It startled me, so I fell.”

“Intae his arms then,” Cameron said, still looking amused, and Blair nearly kicked him from under the table.

“Aye, intae his arms.” Ada cleared her throat. “But the manner of me rescue has nothin’ tae dae with anythin’. After that, I argued with Father about how I should be allowed tae dae as I like within the castle, but he did nae agree. He said that I was gettin’ tae be too much tae handle and that I would be wed. He’d already made the arrangements and had sent for Irving tae come, so it was nae me fall that was the last straw. It was a decision already made. Irving came early, and so I had the chance tae meet him. And that is that.” She breathed out in a large huff, finally finished with her story.

Blair was curious why Ada had not mentioned the incident in the garden, but he thought perhaps she would share it with Ella later. It was not his tale to tell, so he remained silent.

“In order to get Father tae agree tae allow me tae come here, I simply did nae fight against him. He agreed the moment after that when I suggested it, thinkin’ it very rational since ye might like me tae visit before the bairn comes.”

“Wonders never cease, Ada,” Ella said, sipping at her wine and looking a bit thoughtful. “Perhaps we can think of a solution. Cam?” She turned to her husband.

“Aye, I will think on it.”

“But ye are nae upset that we have come tae the castle without warnin’?”

“Nay, of course nae.” Cameron smiled. “We are very happy tae have ye back.” He patted Blair on the shoulder. “I am happy tae see ye, friend.”

They ate and talked about the latest gossip, and when the meal was over, a few children ran shrieking into the hall, the cook chasing after them. She paled when she saw everyone from the table watching her.

“Forgive me, my laird and Lady Ella. But me children are bein’ a fright this afternoon.”

Ella laughed, her smile brightening her face. “It is nae trouble at all! Please dinnae trouble yerself. But perhaps we can help ye?” Ella suggested, nodding to Ada. “Me sister here is very good with troublemakers.”

“I am?” Ada asked with a laugh.

“Aye, for she is one herself.” Ella winked at her sister, and Blair inwardly agreed. Ada was certainly a troublemaker, one that was causing him endless trouble, which was not entirely her fault.

As the sisters walked off after the bairns, Cameron turned to him with a playful expression. “Shall we dae a bit of sparrin’ like old times? I have a few questions for ye.”

“Of course.” Blair stood, glad to get a bit of exercise after that long journey and the time in the cottage.

Together, they walked to the center of the castle where Cameron had set up a fighting area. It was out in the open, but it was spacious and safe. However, it was still very cold, and snow lay in drifts along the walls.

“It is a good space, out under the sunlight. Ella had thought tae have a garden, but then we decided this was best. A garden is bein’ made at the back of the castle. It will be good for the children.”

“Children?”

“Aye.” Cameron turned to him shyly, a happy look on his face. “We are nae certain, but the midwife is almost positively assured that there will be twins. She is so big already.”

“Och, congratulations!” Blair laughed as he hugged his friend. “Dear God, ye were goin’ tae be a father but now perhaps the father of two? I cannae believe it. Ye’re such a far cry from the Cameron I kenned, always tuppin’ some lass in the back room of the tavern.”

Laughing, Cameron went to a small alcove in the wall where the swords were kept, and he chose one at random, nodding to Blair that he should choose one as well. The one he usually wore had been removed when they arrived and put with the other things. It would now be put in his room, he supposed. He chose one at random as well, enjoying the uncertainty of it.

“That is all behind me, man,” Cameron said, moving to the center of the dirt floor of the fighting area. It had been raked of snow. “I have now a wife I love more than meself. But I think perhaps that ye might need tae tup someone.”

“What?” Blair asked just as the first swing came towards him.

He jumped, unprepared for the sound of metal against metal.

Cameron laughed and jumped back, circling around him. “Och, I have waited for this.” He switched the sword between his hands as Blair clenched his jaw and prepared his stance. “I think I ken just who it is ye wish tae tup.”

Blair was prepared this time for the next swing of Cameron’s, and he gave one of his own. “I dinnae need *tuppin’*,” he said. “I need a good fight.”



“Well, then I will certainly give ye that,” his friend said with a wicked gleam in his eye.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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“So, what’s wrong with ye?” Cameron asked as he swung, and Blair deflected, pulling back a bit.

“What dae ye mean?”

“Ye dinnae seem right. It is about Ada, is it nae?” he asked, only fueling Blair’s fury. Cameron hit again, and this time, Blair pushed his blade against him, forcing him backward.

“Nay,” Blair growled.

Cameron stumbled and then grinned. “Aye, I can see it. Why are ye here?”

“I have come tae take over me duty as yer man-at-arms.”

“That’s wonderful!” his friend said, and Blair took the opportunity to hit him in the side with the handle of his sword.

“Oof!” Cameron cried, bending over and stepping back. “Blaignard.”

They began to spar again, and Blair added breathlessly, “I have gotten permission from Laird MacPherson. I will be back here, if ye will have me.”

“Of course, we will. We have been waitin’ for ye. Have ye come because Ada is tae be wed?”

“Nay... I mean, aye. I dinnae ken... but aye, somethin’ like that.”

Blair grunted when Cameron’s swing hit hard. He spun around to get a better angle to hit back, and his friend laughed.

“All right then. I think we make a bet. We have nae made one in a while.” They lowered their swords and began to circle each other. “If I win, then ye will actually tell me what is wrong with ye and why ye are here.”

“And if I win?” Blair countered with a smirk.

“If ye win, then I will nae ask ye anything, and ye can start yer life here right away.”

“All right then.” Blair was eager not to talk about Ada or anything to do with the fact that he’d left because of her, and now he wasn’t quite sure how long he’d be able to stay if Finley was after him.

“Are ye ready?” Cameron asked, holding out his sword.

“Aye. Let’s dae it.”

They were well-matched in swordsmanship; they always had been. But since Cameron had left MacPherson Castle, Blair had been so busy catching up with Ada and making sure that she was all right that he’d neglected his exercise. Now he’d could feel the built-up tension in his muscles slowly easing. But clearly Cameron had been practicing where Blair had not, and he tired a bit quicker than usual.

“Ha!” Cameron said when he tripped him, and Blair fell back on the ground, only to have his friend press on top of him, his sword against his. “Now I have ye. Say ye surrender.”

Blair was too tired to push. “Aye, I surrender,” he said with a grunt, and Cameron let him up.

Smug, he said, “It seems ye have nae been practicin’ as ye should.”

Cameron went to put his sword back, and he looked up at the sky. Snow had begun to fall again.

“Nay, how could I?” Blair asked with frustration as he put the sword back in its place on the far wall of the alcove. “I have tae always be ready tae catch a lass fallin’ from a tree every other day. There is nae time for me tae dae such things. When I am nae with her, I am sleepin’ or eatin’. Ada has kept me off me feet for months.”

“I thought ye used tae call her *Lady Ada*,” Cameron teased, and Blair flushed under his collar.

“Aye, so I dae. *Lady Ada*, I meant.”

Cameron laughed and put his arm around Blair’s shoulders. “Come with me tae the study. We will talk there.”

Blair had begun to feel the chill in his bones even after the exercise, so he was grateful when his friend put a glass of whiskey in his hands as he sat by the fire in his study.

“Go on then. Ye lost the bet.” Cameron’s eyes sparkled from behind the glass as he took his first sip and sat down.

Blair leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, savoring the warmth of the fire. “I am here because somethin’ from the past has now come tae call.” He sighed, wondering if he should tell the whole truth of it. It was probably time. “I ken that I have never told ye this. I have never told anyone, but me father did nae die in a normal way.”

“What does that mean?” Cameron asked, eyeing him over his glass.

“He was killed, and I was there and saw it happen.”

“Dear God, Blair,” Cameron looked pale. “When was this?”

“When I was but fourteen winters. Me father owed a lot of money tae a lender. He could nae pay. The blacksmith business he owned was fast goin’ downhill, and things had nae worked out the way he’d planned. Those in the village did nae need his services as they used tae, and the population of the village had dwindled so much that he could nae keep his business afloat.” He drank and paused for a moment.

He hadn’t expected it to be so easy to tell anyone, but Cameron was his best friend after all. It felt like a weight was being lifted from his shoulders to be able to tell another. Blair rubbed a finger against his temple before he spoke again.

“Finley is the name of the lender, but I never saw him. He sent five men tae me father. Five! What need was there of that? They threatened him, me father made suggestions, but in the end, I watched as they cut his throat.”

“And where were ye?” Cameron leaned forward as he listened.

“I was in the wardrobe, watchin’ it all through a crack. It was the worst thing I have ever seen in me life, and ye and I have seen some terrible things, nae the least of which occurred among yer tavern patrons. Yet, I could nae tear me gaze away.”

“Aye,” Cameron said. “I am sorry, Blair. But why did ye nae tell me? Ye kenned that I was alone as well, that I had nae parents tae speak of.”

Blair felt the pang of guilt that always came when he talked about this story. “Because ye dinnae ken the rest of it. After that, me mind just snapped. I dinnae ken what it was. It was

like a darkness took hold of me. I rushed out from the wardrobe with me dirk at me side, and I went mad. I killed all the men there, left them bleeding tae death before I took me things and ran off. All five, Cam, I murdered all five of them.”

“Ye killed them all,” Cameron said in astonishment, “at fourteen winters.”

Blair did not look up at his friend. He leaned over his glass, feeling the heat of the fire on his face.

“Aye, I did. I dinnae ken how I did it. Somethin’ filled me, rage or grief. I had just lost me father, and I did nae ken what else tae dae.”

“Ye did well, brother,” Cameron said, using the endearment he sometimes did, for they were like brothers one way or another. “I am sorry that ye had tae go through that.”

“Well,” Blair continued, not wanting to linger on it any longer, “this man, this Finley, has nae been able tae find me for years. I kenned that he would try tae take his vengeance on me, so I hid well. Unfortunately, he has now found me. I was given a letter at MacPherson Castle from him, and it said that it was time, that I would get what I deserved.”

Cameron furrowed his brow, and Blair felt bad for bringing this danger to his friend.

“I am sorry, Cam. In the moment, it was all I could think tae dae tae come here. But perhaps it will put ye and yer family in danger.”

“Nay, ye did well comin’ here. It’s far better that ye got out and brought Ada with ye.” He frowned. “We will protect ye, Blair. I swear it.”

“But I dinnae ken what the man even looks like. I can give nae aid in that way.”

“It does nae matter. We are like family, and we’ll stick together.” Cameron paused for a moment, and Blair looked up to see him watching in his direction. “But what about Ada? How goes things with her?”

“They are fine,” Blair said stiffly.

There was no chance in hell he would tell anyone about the kiss. Or rather, kisses.

Cameron smiled. “Well, if things are fine in that quarter, perhaps ye should work out whatever tension ye have with a willin’ young lady. I ken ye are nae usually up for a bit of fun like that, but I am certain there will be someone in the nearby village who would oblige ye.”

“Nay,” Blair said, coloring again, “nae necessary.”

“If ye say so.” Cameron took a long sip.

Blair knew his friend did not believe him, at least not about that. And who could blame him?





“Now that that nonsense is sorted,” Ella said to Ada, leading the way into the library, “ye and I can sit alone without the men.”

Ada chuckled. They’d just helped the children find an apron of their mother’s that they’d lost so that she would not be tempted to make them go without supper. Once she and her sister were settled in the library, she sighed.

“I am so glad I came, Ella, and I am glad that this time Father is nae with me. I ken that last time we visited he was still constantly worried about me and what I was doin’. He still had me guarded. What is it like livin’ here away from him and so many suffocatin’ rules?”

Ella looked out of the window for a moment before she turned her gaze to her sister. “It is more wonderful than I could have ever imagined. I was afraid tae tell ye though, afraid that ye might be so jealous that ye would dae somethin’ drastic. But Cameron kens what I have been through, and he is nothin’ like Father, even though he worries from time tae time, especially now that I am with child.”

“I can only imagine, it,” Ada said with a distant look in her eye. “I cannae understand it, but here I am gettin’ a taste, I suppose. This is what freedom could look like.”

“Aye, and ye will find it. But perhaps ye can also find freedom *and* love.”

Ada turned away, angry. “Dinnae say that I will find the like with Irving. He is a horrid man, and I am completely bewildered as tae why Father believed him tae be suitable, of all people. He looks perfect, ye ken, handsome, powerful, and well-spoken. Yet, there is some ominous feeling surrounding him. Sometimes I wonder if it is all a part of my imagination, yet I’m sure it is nae. It is as if Father wishes tae punish me for something that I have done.” She crossed her arms, knowing she was getting dangerously close to telling Ella what she’d heard when she was younger between her father and aunt. “If only Aunt Isla could come tae visit again tae make sure that he behaves himself and talk some sense intae him.”

Ella smiled at her. “She will come if ye write tae her. And I dinnae mean Irving when I mention love. I am thinkin’ of a handsome guard who has spent a lot of time with ye of late and who, I remind ye, took ye here and accompanied ye on his own without anyone else but the coachman. He also rode *inside* the carriage with ye.”

“We also had tae stay a night at the cottage in between the castles due tae the storm,” Ada said, trying her hardest not to blush.

“Ada! Why are ye keepin’ these secrets from me? I confess, when ye arrived, I was so glad tae see ye that I did nae think of the storm. Thank God ye are both all right!” Her eyes looked concerned, and Ada saw that she’d covered a hand instinctively over her belly.

“I did nae mean tae distress ye, Ella. It is a good thing that Cameron has made the cottage so comfortable. We were very well inside. And cook had prepared food for our journey, so everythin’ was well in hand.”

*Except for the kiss and the man who backed away from me.*

“Good.” Ella breathed out with relief. “Now, ye must tell me everythin’. What of Blair? Have ye given up thinkin’ of him?”

Ada blushed after all. “How did ye ken I’ve been thinkin’ of him?”

Ella rolled her eyes and laughed. “Because we are sisters, and I ken ye better than ye think. Ever since he came tae the castle, ye have been moonin’ over the lad. And I understand. He is very handsome, and he is a good man. If Father kenned of yer feelings, then perhaps he would allow that marriage tae take place instead.”

“Nay,” Ada said, looking down at her hands. “I will never tell him that, and I should nae. Blair does nae care for me in that way.” She hesitated only a moment before she said, “After the news of the betrothal, he and I kissed in me room.”

Ella gasped, putting a hand over her mouth. “Why, that’s wonderful!” she said after a moment. “I kenned that he felt somethin’ for ye from the way his eyes always follow ye about. Ye must tell Father.”

“Nay! Listen, Ella,” Ada said sharply. “After the kiss, he ran off as if he could nae get away fast enough. And then, at the cottage...” She trailed off, her face blooming red. Was she really going to tell her sister such a thing?

“What? What is it?” Ella asked, looking both curious and concerned.

As she spoke, Ada kept her head down, too embarrassed to look at her sister. "I thought perhaps that he could ruin me for marriage, so that I would nae be married tae another. I asked him tae, and we kissed. But yet again, he pulled away." Tears began to fall down her cheeks. "He said that he cannae care for a woman, that it would nae be right for him tae dae so." She shook her head and wiped away a tear. "I was a fool, and now I am humiliated. Twice now, we have kissed, and twice now, he has run away. I should learn me lesson."

Ella watched her with a frown. "I am so sorry that ye were humiliated, Ada." She paused. "But the fact that he kissed ye back means that he is nae disgusted. He is likely tryin' tae be a good man. He does nae wish tae perhaps 'ruin' ye as ye asked him. Besides that, Cameron tells me that Blair has never really felt worthy of anythin'. He has always talked of marriage and a family, but he has always had some excuse tae keep them at bay." Ella shrugged. "I think that is why."

"Nay," Ada said, shaking her head. "I cannae keep thinkin' that there is some hope, or I shall go mad. That was the last time I wish tae be embarrassed by him. I will have tae try and move on from him, or I will nae survive. But I cannae marry Irving, that I ken." She clenched her fist as it lay on her lap, and she looked Ella in the eye.

Her sister nodded. "Aye, I suppose ye may be right if he is fightin' this much against it, believin' himself unable tae care for ye."

Just then, a maid entered the library, and after a curtsy, she said, "Madam, there is a matter needin' yer attention."

“Aye.” Ella stood and placed a hand on Ada’s shoulder. “I will be back soon.” And then Ada was left alone with her thoughts.

She stood and went to the bookshelves. It would be easy to occupy her time at Grant Castle if she could find a number of volumes to read that she had not read before. She’d already read everything in the MacPherson library and was in need of something new.

“Och, here is somethin’,” she said excitedly, pulling the volume from the shelf when she felt a strong hand clasp at her shoulder.

With a gasp, her mind instantly flew back to the moment outside Cameron’s tavern, when they’d been accosted by those two strange men, ready to take their virtue and perhaps worse. She spun around, her book as her weapon, and she swung it as hard as she could at her attacker’s head.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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With a groan, the man fell to the ground, covering his head with his hands.

“Forgive me, Lady Ada!” he cried, and Ada, who’d been holding the book aloft to hit him again, blinked at him, slowly putting the book down.

“Who in the bloody hell are ye?”

The man didn’t move from his prone position. “I am Cory Chattan, the laird’s advisor,” he said from behind his hands.

Ada flushed profusely and hurriedly put the book back on the shelf. “Forgive me. Why in God’s name did ye come in so silently?” she asked.

He started to get up, eyeing her as if she was an odd specimen suddenly flung in from God knew where.

“I did call, but ye seemed so absorbed.” When he stood, he was nearly a head taller than her, and she saw now just how large he was compared to her.

She also noticed how handsome he was.

“I did nae hear ye,” she said quietly. “Please forgive me. I am nae used tae people comin’ up tae me like that,” she said, trying to explain it away, but she knew it sounded perfectly ridiculous.

“It is nae trouble,” he was smiling now, and Ada could see a sparkle in his light blue eyes.

“Ye are kind,” she said. “Nae everyone is so willin’ tae forgive a book in the head so quickly.” She blushed again.

“Well,” he said shrugging, “I was told that ye might be a bit different.”

“Told? By whom?”

“Laird Grant, of course,” he said with another grin, clearly enjoying her distress. “Lady Ada, I only came tae inform ye that ye are needed in the Great Hall. They are makin’ dinner preparations, and Lady Ella told me tae come and find ye.”

“Aye, then,” she said. “But will ye at least let me look at yer head tae make sure I did nae dae any permanent damage?”

He put a hand to where she’d hit him and winced a little. “I am certain it is fine,” he said, and Ada noted the largeness of his arm.

*Why are ye noticin' such things? Och, perhaps because of all that unfinished kiss business.*

Clearly the man was just as much of a soldier as Blair, and she spotted the large sword hanging at his side.

“Just allow me. It will make me feel a bit better and nae so guilty.”

“Very well.” He knelt and bowed his head forward.

Chuckling, she took a look. “There is a bump, I’m sorry tae say,” she said, spying it through his red curls which matched the color of his light beard.

“It will heal,” he laughed, gazing at her. Just then, the door slammed open, and Blair stood on the other side. When he saw the two of them, Ada could see the fire in his eyes. She narrowed her eyes at him and put her hands on her hips.

*For what reason does he have tae look so angry?*

“Ye are asked tae dinner, Lady Ada.”

“Aye,” she said with a smile, suddenly getting an idea. “I already ken, Blair. Ye should nae have bothered coming. Cam’s advisor, Mr. Chattan, has come tae tell me. It was very kind of him.”



Cory turned to look at Blair, and she placed a hand on his large arm. Cory looked down at it, but said nothing. With satisfaction, she noted that Blair's eyes moved there as well.

"Aye, well," her guard said, putting his hands behind his back and putting out his chest a bit. "They will begin dinner without ye if ye dinnae come *now*." With that, he stormed out, and Cory cleared his throat.

"Dae ye ken that man?" he asked as she removed her hand.

"Aye, Blair is me personal guard. He has come tae be the man-at-arms here, so ye will meet him soon enough, I'm sure."

"I'm sure. Shall I escort ye?" he asked, offering her his arm, still piercing her eyes with his warm gaze. Yet, unfortunately, handsome or not, the flutter in her stomach when she had looked in Blair's eyes was far from gone.

"Thank ye, sir," she replied, feeling a little gratified that her flirtations with Cory had gotten such a rise out of Blair. But her tiny bit of smugness faded as soon as Cory escorted her to the hall and left her at the door where Blair noticed her arrival, but he still looked rather angry.

*It is nae as if he will dae anythin' about it. Although why he should be angry, I dinnae ken. I showed him I wanted him twice now, yet he ran away in fear both times.*

She sat down slowly next to Blair on the long bench, and she could feel the heat from his body. It made her look straight forward so as not to get too distracted. *It's pointless.*

“So sorry, Ada. There was somethin’ with the maids I had tae deal with,” Ella said from her spot at the table.

“Nae trouble, sister. I found a book, and I met yer advisor, Cam.”

“Och, very good. He will join us on another night, I think. Perhaps he also has a solution to the Irving marriage problem,” her brother-in-law suggested to Ella.

Ada turned and caught Blair’s eye, and she saw that he’d been watching her. But when she saw him, he turned away quickly. The food was served, and Ada flinched a little every time Blair’s arm brushed against hers when he cut his meat or reached for something. She had sat rather close to him but had not realized that every touch would make the spark light again with a fury. It was so unfair, for he seemed so untroubled by it. But it also kind of looked like as if he was doing it on purpose.

Blair joined in the conversation from time to time, but only with a few words here and there. Something seemed to be troubling him, and it was more than her presence.

“What was the problem with the children earlier?” Cameron asked, and Ella grinned.

“Yet again, they soiled their mother’s best apron as well as lost another, so we were merely helping them find it so that poor Cook could get back tae work. They are rather rambunctious, that trio.”

“They certainly are,” Ada said, and she accidentally dropped her knife on the floor. “Och,” she said, “nae again.”

Out of habit perhaps, Blair leaned down at the same time as she did to fetch it, and they were closer now than ever and partially under the table.

“I have it,” she said softly, pulling the knife into her hand and holding it tight, meeting Blair’s gaze.

There was no mistaking it. He appeared to be both angry and desiring something else. For a split second, his gaze was drawn to her mouth, and she swallowed. But he couldn’t do it again—make her think he wanted her and then back away, humiliating her in the worst way possible. She sat up quickly, replacing her knife, and looked at Ella, who was looking at her puzzledly, but she shook her head.

The rest of the meal was spent in pleasant conversation, but Ada’s mind was elsewhere. She didn’t even notice when the meal was finished. They sat in more comfortable chairs by the fire and were served wine. She’d regained some equilibrium, but her heart was still beating a little faster than usual.

“I have tae thank ye for allowin’ me here. I feel freer than I have in a long time,” Ada said, hoping to distract herself.

“Ye ken that yer guard is still here,” Cameron teased, getting an elbow in the ribs from his wife.

“Aye, well,” Ada said, looking at Blair. “He has nae been so much on me heels this time,” she said haughtily. “I can

breathe, and I can meet whomever I please.”

With satisfaction, she noted a tick in Blair’s jaw as she said those words, and she settled back in her chair. That was what they were reduced to: clever jibes and angry looks. It didn’t matter, though, because soon enough, she would be off and away from him.

“Lady Ada,” a young voice called from the other end of the hall.

Ada saw it was Malcolm, one of the cook’s children she spent the afternoon with, and she waved him down with a smile.

“What is it, darling?” she asked, leaning forward to meet his eyes.

“I ken that mother does nae want me tae bother ye, but I found this.” He pulled out a frog from his pocket and showed it to her.

“How lovely. Ye should keep him inside or find him a warm puddle tae jump in. I dinnae ken if the ponds around here are yet frozen.”

“That’s what I wanted tae ask ye. It is too cold for him tae be out of doors.”

“Well, but he kens what tae dae when the winter comes. He is a very intelligent frog, I think,” she said, patting the top of the frog’s head.

Malcolm grinned. "I think so too."

"There is a small fish pond in the garden," Ella supplied. "It is nae yet frozen over. I think he rather belongs there than in the castle, Malcolm. He will take care of himself."

"Perfect!" Ada said, smiling at the young boy. "What dae ye think of that? He might even have other friends tae play with there."

The child grinned, showing her his missing tooth. "Perhaps I can help him tae meet new friends there."

"Well, dinnae forget tae wrap up warm if ye dae go. It is cold out there, so much snow!"

"Och, I am used tae it," he said, backing away. "Thank ye both!" he called.

He held onto the frog and rushed out of the room.

"Clever boy," Ada said, and she noted Blair was watching her again. Only this time, he did not look angry, only curious.

"Lady Ella," a maid said, walking up to them with a fresh bottle of wine, and she set it on the table between them. "Should ye like the herbs tae go in all the fires this eve?"

The young woman was tall and lean with bright green eyes and curly blonde hair. It peeked out from under her cap. When she smiled, a small dimple appeared on her left cheek.

“Aye, thank ye, lass,” Ella said. “Ye two dinnae mind if Sara burns a bit of sage in yer fires, dae ye? It will keep the rooms smellin’ fresh.”

“Nay, I dinnae mind at all,” Blair said pleasantly, and Ada turned to him, surprised to see that his gaze had now been taken by the young and lovely Sara.

A little spike of jealousy pricked her belly. And of all things that could irk her in that moment, he *smiled*.



Sara blushed under his gaze and smile, and she grinned back.

“But are ye certain that I should have a guest room?” Blair asked Ella, feeling Ada’s angry eyes on him. “I am only yer man-at-arms.”

“But of course! I should think we could find a room for ye that will always be yers. Cameron has told me of yer decision tae stay, and I think it is wonderful. We are so very glad tae have ye.” She looked at the maid once again with a pointed look.

“Please take sage tae all the fires, Sara. Dinnae listen tae Blair if he says he does nae want tae trouble us.”

“Aye, Lady Ella,” the maid said with a curtsy and left with just another playful glance at Blair.

Blair smiled even though he knew he was being a fool. It was not as if he could do anything about Ada or pursue her in any way. But seeing Ada with Cameron’s advisor in that intimate way, him on his knees before her doing God knew what, had boiled his blood. He had not been ready to take her as she’d asked in the cottage, for there were far more dangerous things at play. Yet he did not wish that she should find someone else, at least not so soon.

*Ye are bein’ a dobber. Ye told her ye cannae have her and that yer life is nae fit for love or a woman. Ye must focus on Finley.*

He sighed, and with a glance at Ada, he stood. “If ye will excuse me, I will be but a moment.”

He left and went outside to get some fresh air. He crossed his arms and leaned against the back wall, watching his breath curl up in a cloud of white. The snow had stopped falling, and everything was quiet and dark. This reminder that he was on his own soothed him. He had battles to fight ahead of him, and those he cared about needed to be kept safe and far away from him.

He returned inside through the well-lit kitchen entrance when his mind was sufficiently clear. It would be warmer there. When he walked in, he found Malcolm at one of the long tables, while the other servants and the cook were busy washing dishes.

“Och, sir, could ye help me with somethin’?” Malcolm asked.

“Aye, lad,” Blair chuckled, rubbing his hands together. “What would ye like?”

Blair had been mesmerized by the sight of Ada speaking kindly to him after dinner. She was always attentive to children, and she seemed to have a way with them. It was her father she could not seem to get on her side, but he had no doubt that the cook’s three bairns were all already in love with her.

*How could they nae be?*

“I need some herbs for tea for Lady Ella. Me mother asked me tae help. But they’re on a high shelf in the larder, and I cannae reach them.”

“Very well,” Blair said, blowing a bit of warm air into his hands as he stood in front of the kitchen fire. “Ye just have tae show me what ye want, and I will get it for ye.”

He helped Malcolm down from the table, and the young boy whistled as he led the way down a short passage to the larder.

“Here it is,” Malcolm said, hooking a thumb towards an open door that revealed a dark room. “Ye just need to go in, and they’re on the top shelf on the back wall. It is a glass jar, ye’ll recognize it.”

“Very well, I will help ye, lad. It shall be a task easy enough, so dinnae rush off. I will be back in a second.” He mussed the boy’s hair and strode into the room, realizing that he should



have brought a candle. “I think I need a candle, lad,” he began to speak, but when he turned around, the door to the larder was shut.

And he could hear a lock click.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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A cold sweat lifted on the back of his neck at the ominous sound. Instantly, he thought about Finley. Was this the moment? Was this when it all ended for him after all these years? He'd been running for so long, hiding along the way, making it so that Finley would never be able to find out who he really was, and now it ended in a dark larder on his own? Had Malcolm somehow been pushed into helping the man get his revenge?

*How did he find me so quickly? And why would a child help him?*

Somehow, it didn't feel right. It didn't feel like something Finley would do, not that he knew the man well. But knowing that he'd sent five men to kill one all those years ago, Blair did know that Finley enjoyed the dramatic. He enjoyed demonstrations of power, and this was not one of them.

This was a cowardly way out, for no one would get to see the pain and suffering Blair was about to go through when the blade finally hit his flesh. Even so, he couldn't help the trickle of fear that slid down his spine. He tried to breathe steadily. He put a hand to his side, but then he remembered the sword would not be there. It was far away in his room, packed away with his things. For whatever reason, at Cameron's castle, he'd

let his guard down, and he'd made himself feel even for just a little while that everything was going to be all right. He'd let his feelings for Ada become just a little bit stronger.

*And I left me bloody sword in me bloody room!*

And now because of his idiocy and a cruel twist of fate, it was over, and he would never see her again. Death was not so bad, for it would finally put an end to his misery and running from the past. But the thought of never seeing Ada again was like ice in his veins. He had planned it, thought about it, and had even expected it. He was trying to push them apart so desperately so that she never got to see the darkness inside of him and would never be hurt by it. Yet when the truth of never seeing her came slamming into him, he knew that he did not want that. He wanted to see her every day for the rest of his life. He never wanted to be parted from her.

*Ada.*

The sound of her voice in his mind made him want to sink to his knees in despair. His heart ached for her, and he stumbled forward into the larder only to hear the lock undo. The door opened, and a brief sliver of light showed in the darkness. A figure walked inside, and the door shut and locked again quickly.

“What in God’s name?” Blair asked the same time as the person screamed.

He knew that scream. “Ada?” he asked in the darkness.

“Blair?” He walked forward toward the door. His eyes were slightly adjusting, and he saw her fumbling about a bit. “What are ye doin’?” He touched her on the arm gently. She jumped a little, and he steadied her, gripping her elbow.

“Sorry,” he said, removing his hand quickly.

In his relief that the situation had not been contrived by Finley to kill him, Blair had forgotten about his promise to not touch Ada or even be near her. Any touch would ignite all the desire for her that he held so tightly back, and it wasn't helping that he was locked in a dark room with her, *alone*.

“Malcolm asked me tae come and help him reach a jar of herbs for Ella's tea,” he said, his body still recovering from the fear.

“Och, me as well. That little snipe! How dare he lock us away?” He smirked in the darkness, almost thanking God that she'd come in at exactly the right moment and showed that fiery side of herself. She was being Ada, just as she always should have been. Oblivious to his feelings or the way he was watching her, Ada turned back to the door and began banging on it with ferocity. “Ye let us out of here, Malcolm! Nae one may find us until the morn!”

She waited and then huffed and stamped her foot when no one responded.

“Bloody Hell! Who does this sort of thing?”

She spun around again, and Blair could tell her eyes had adjusted to the light. She could now see him, but she did not say anything. He turned away, unable to think of anything to say either. He didn't want to think about how it was Ada that he'd thought of when he thought a knife was going to come out of the dark and cut his throat. Even though he knew his true heart, that he didn't want to be parted from her, it still didn't change the fact that she could get hurt by Finley if he brought her into his life. None of his feelings for her changed the fact that she could get hurt if he made any moves forward and shared his heart with her.

"I suppose everyone will be goin' tae bed soon," she said, more to herself than anything else, and he saw her wrap her arms about herself, looking dejected.

It was a little bit colder than the kitchen, and if they were going to stay the whole night, then they would be very uncomfortable, especially once the kitchen fires burned out for the evening.

He was about to step forward to offer her his coat when she asked all of a sudden, "Did ye have fun with the maid?" Her tone was both biting and sarcastic.

*Leave it tae Ada tae be angry about that at a time like this.*

Blair froze, and a little smirk appeared on his face. "I dinnae ken what ye mean, lass," he said innocently.

So, his plan had worked, after all. It had been a childish one, and he knew that he shouldn't have done it. But it was gratifying to learn that his tiny flirtation with Sara had irked

her. He liked to know that Ada didn't just think of him as her guard. His presence affected her like hers did to him.

She huffed again. "Ye went off tae meet her after ye smiled like a dobber at her. I was surprised ye even kened how tae smile, Blair," she said tightly. "*I certainly have never seen it.*"

He shook his head. "And that bothers ye, does it nae? I still dinnae ken what ye are talkin' about though. And ye have seen me smile before this, Lady Ada. I am nae so hard-hearted as ye believe," he said, stepping a bit closer. He saw her chin lift defiantly another inch.

*She deserves a little taste of her own medicine. That will bring her down from her high horse.*

Feeling rather wicked and angry, he said, "Will this Mr. Chattan be the next man ye ask about ruinin' ye so that ye dinnae have tae marry that blaigeard, Irving? Or, I'm sorry, have ye already asked him?"

He heard her suck in a harsh breath, and her arms fell to her sides. "Blair MacDougall, that is enough! Ye're bein' offensive. We are nae longer at MacPherson Castle, and ye dinnae have tae act as me guard and tell me what tae dae with me life. I am now here with me sister, and I dinnae always need a person at me heels, whisperin' admonitions in me ear."

"Perhaps ye dae, lass. I think many people would argue that ye dae. For I dinnae think—"

“Why should I take advice from *ye* when ye were with that maid, likely caressing her and kissin’ *her* instead of...” She paused and turned away.

“What? I did nae dae anythin’ of the sort,” he said hastily. Perhaps the plan had not worked as he’d hoped. Ada thought he’d gone off to be with Sara? “I admit that I smiled at the lass, that I teased her a bit, but I did nae go after her. I went outside. I needed a few minutes tae meself.” He sighed then, thinking about how she’d nearly said that he could have been kissing her instead.

It was true. He could have, and he would have loved it.

“Well, whatever ye did, it does nae matter. It is nae as if I care. Why should I? And whatever ye have done, ye still have nae right tae tell me what tae dae like this.” She spun around again to face him in her fury. When she spoke this time, he could hear the genuine fear and frustration in her voice. “Ye have nae idea what it is like tae live like this, tae have tae spend a lifetime makin’ up for the past and have everyone thinkin’ that there is somethin’ wrong with ye, some deep evil inside ye that ye need tae atone for. That is why me father keeps me imprisoned, why he treats me like a child who is reckless and needin’ tae be restrained.”

She broke off then, and he had noticed the slight squeak in her voice as she spoke the last words. His heart swelled, and he stepped closer. He did not like to see her like this: broken and hurt, stomped down by life and her fool of a father.

He let the words hang in the air for a moment before he asked, “What dae ye mean, lass? What evil? What could ye possibly have done that ye need tae make up for tae yer father?”

She breathed out, her gaze on him steady. They were close enough now that he could see the whites of her eyes. She was silent for so long that he wasn't sure she would actually say anything. But inside, he begged her to. Even if it was a foolish desire, he wanted to be close to her in more ways than one. His time was running out, even if today was not that day, and he wanted another chance to be there for Ada. He wanted to protect her, perhaps even to love her.

In a low, soft voice, she said, "I killed me mother."



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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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“*W*hat?” Blair reached out for her instead of recoiling and placed a strong hand on the side of her arm. “What are ye talkin’ about?”

She looked away from him, but she did not step back. His warmth caressed and gave her comfort. The anger she had felt a moment ago was slowly dissipating and being replaced by a new emotion. Never in the whole of her life had she told anyone what she was going to say to Blair. But it felt like the right time, oddly the right place, and it felt like the right person.

“Me father thinks so. When I was young, I overheard him talkin’ tae me Aunt Isla. He told her that me parents should nae have had me, that I was a mistake and me mother was nae strong enough. When she gave birth to me, she fell ill afterwards. Nae havin’ been strong enough in the first place, she was nae able tae recover and died a few weeks after I was born. So I am told.”

Ada shrugged as if it didn’t matter, but she knew that her emotion was in her voice. She knew that she would not be able to lie to him entirely.

“Since then, he has treated me like this, as if I have nae mind of me own, as if I am some strange thing that appeared on his doorstep and needs tae be kept contained.” She brushed a tear away quickly and added, “He claims that it is for me own good, but I ken that it is nae. It makes nae sense any longer that he should imprison me so. I beg that ye dinnae tell me any longer what tae dae. Ye cannae understand the agony of this life.”

She waited, and the only sound she could hear between them was their breath. Ada was amazed at herself that she had spoken so much. She had revealed a secret she’d never thought to tell anyone ever. It felt like she’d been opened and drained out. Yet, another secret remained, one she did not wish to tell, for it would only embarrass her further. That one she would have to keep close to her heart.

“I ken what it is like tae live a life of agony,” Blair said, and he cleared his throat. His tone was different. No more commanding, no more teasing, but instead, it was honest, open, and genuine. “Me mother died when I was young, and then, when me father’s business went bad, he borrowed money. But he took it from the wrong man, and he paid for it with his life.” He breathed in, and Ada could tell it was not steady. “It-it... it was five men that came tae call upon me father tae collect what they were owed. I saw them cut his throat in front of me while I hid away.” Ada’s heart broke in the smallest pieces when she saw the pain in his eyes. “When I emerged, I killed them all in me rage and fury. I killed them *all*, Ada. I stood over them, shaking, unsure how it had all happened. And then I ran; I ran for me life.” His voice quieted as he finished his sentence, and Ada’s soul swelled with love and affection for him, not the fear and disdain he was so obviously expecting.

She felt compassion for that young man who’d had to endure that. At least she had not been there to see her mother’s death.

But she did not know what to say to Blair. She wanted to pull him close, to kiss him, to tell him that everything was all right and that the past was gone now. But she was afraid that he would run again, and whatever words she might say, she knew they would not be enough to erase the past.

“I ken that ye must think me a monster,” he said, moving away, and she stepped forward, closing the gap between them.

Her hand was on his arm, and it slid down until she took his hand. As her fingers intertwined with his, she said, “I cannae imagine livin’ a life like that, Blair—tae have seen what ye did, tae have taken yer vengeance at such a young age and then run away. Ye have built a life after that, and ye are strong, the strongest man I ken. It is nae many who could dae what ye have done.”

“Ada,” he said in a way that made her heart thump so fast she thought he could hear it. “What ye dae tae me, lass...” His hand moved to her cheek, and she swallowed.

There were many things she wanted to say in that moment, things like, “Please dinnae hurt me” and “Dinnae run away again,” but she kept silent. The warmth of his hand on her face steadied her and kept her grounded. The choice would be up to him now.

“What dae I dae tae ye?” she asked softly, listening to the sound of his breath as he sighed.

“Ye make me mad with wantin’ ye,” he said before he leaned in, capturing her mouth with his.

Ada freed her hand so that she could wrap her arms around him. His hands moved to her waist as the kiss deepened. Tears welled up in her eyes as she felt his bold tongue brush up against her own. This kiss was different, very different. She felt no hesitation from him, only desire as his hips ground against hers and as his hands slid down her body until they grasped her backside.

She was afraid that any sound from her would wake him up from this beautiful dream. But when his hand came to tilt her head just a little more so that his tongue could plunge even deeper into her mouth, she moaned with delight. Blair was kissing her, really kissing her, and he did not seem afraid, nor did he seem disgusted.

Her breasts were crushed against the hard line of his chest. Her nipples peaked with each movement of his lips across her own, and the space between her legs warmed and ached. As his mouth moved down her neck, a slick of wetness appeared, and she let out a trembling breath.

“Blair,” she breathed, unable to stop herself, and he leaned up to look at her, his hand moving up her front. “Touch me,” she said, her hands taking his and placing them on her breasts.

His hands flexed and squeezed, and his fingers moved up to her neckline where his finger slipped under the fabric. His eyes were on her, but he said nothing. She could hear the sounds of their rapid breathing as he breached the first physical barrier between them. He leaned down to kiss the tops of her breasts. His tongue flicked in the space between them as his hands continued to knead her breasts as best as he could over her stays.

*Damn them!*

They could not risk undressing her; she knew that. Blair did not have to say that for her to know that was what he was thinking of. Whoever had locked them in the larder would likely come back for them soon enough, and she did not want to be caught exposed.

Instead, she moved his hand to her side, helping him lift her skirts. She did not know the ways of men and women, but she knew how she touched herself. She knew that she wanted him to do it. He kissed her again as her skirts lifted, and he gently pushed her so that her back was pressed against one of the shelves. Her skin felt cool as her legs were exposed to the air, and she felt Blair's rough hand on her thigh.

She gasped. He pulled back, but she replaced his hand, not allowing him to stop.

"Did I hurt ye?" he asked, and she shook her head.

"Nae, dinnae stop," she urged, and she leaned up to kiss him again as his fingertips moved slowly through her slick folds, brushing across her nub of pleasure briefly.

A moan escaped her again, and while at first he seemed hesitant, he now no longer was, his fingers rubbing in a sensuous circle. She leaned her head back against the shelf as the ache and throb of desire heightened.

"Ada," he said softly, and after kissing the tops of her breasts again, he went to his knees.

“What are ye—” she began, but then she bit her lip to stifle the scream as his head disappeared under her skirts. She felt the warm pressure of his mouth. “Och!” she finally let out as his tongue flicked along her seam.

Ada held onto the shelves as best she could as his mouth began to do things she had not expected. A strong hand lifted her thigh and placed it on his shoulder. She covered her mouth with her hand as she felt his tongue slide inside her. He kissed, caressed, suckled, licked, and it drove her mad. She was nowhere at all, and she remembered nothing, thought of nothing except the great onslaught of pleasure which was coming over her in small yet persistent waves. They were building towards something, something she knew from touching her own body, but when she touched herself, it had never felt as complete as this.

“Hold ontae me, lass,” Blair murmured against her skin as she felt herself teetering.

Her hands moved to his head to keep steady. At the feel of Blair’s final flick against her center, she cried out his name as a pleasure like no other coursed through her every vein and sent her skyward. Her legs shook, but Blair held her steady as he slowly moved to stand up, placing her leg gently on the floor again.

“Dear God, woman,” he said with astonishment, but Ada didn’t let him finish, for she leaned up and kissed him again.

She wanted more, so much more, but then, suddenly, the lock clicked. The door swung open, and the room was filled with light. They jumped apart so quickly that Ada lost her balance and fell to the side, making a cloud of flour burst into the air.

*Damn it.*

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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*B*lair backed away from Ada so quickly that she fell, and before he could catch her, she'd dropped onto a few sacks of flour. One must have been slightly open, for a cloud of flour rose into the air, and Blair started coughing.

“What in God’s name—” the cook began, but she paused. “Mr. MacDougall? Lady Ada? Why are ye locked in the larder?”

Ada started coughing as well, and Blair leaned down to lift her to her feet. Her face was practically completely covered in flour, which was better because otherwise, the pink arousal on her cheeks could serve as an obvious hint of what they were doing.

“We were locked in,” Ada said between coughs.

Blair wiped a hand over his forehead. Apparently, he was covered in flour too.

“Yer son Malcolm asked us tae—”



“Get some tea, did he? Och, that lad.” She put her hands on her hips and shook her head. “In fact, it is all me children. I am so sorry. Please come out.” She stepped out of the larder, and Ada walked out first, Blair just behind.

“Mama!” Malcolm cried when he saw them come out into the kitchen, dusting themselves off. The other two children appeared as well, looking distraught. “They were nae ready yet. Ye were nae supposed tae let them out so soon.”

“Malcolm, when are ye goin’ tae learn that this is nae the way people solve their problems? Forgive me, Mr. MacDougall and Lady Ada, he will be punished.”

“Nay,” they said at the same time and looked at each other.

Even through the haze of flour, Blair could see the look in Ada’s eyes. There had been something different in that kiss than the others. And then they’d done even more, and Blair could hardly put words to it. It had been like a dream. She had tasted like honey and salt and pure heaven. He would never get that taste out of his memory.

“It is nae trouble,” Ada said with a weak smile, looking back at the children.

“I am sorry if ye’re angry,” Malcolm said with a shrug. “We always lock Mama and Papa up in there whenever they are havin’ an argument, or sometimes they dae it themselves. They always come out happy, so we thought it might help ye too. We’re nae sure what they’re doing, but it seems to hel—”

“Malcolm!” the cook interrupted him, blushing a little, and Blair tried not to smile. “That is quite enough. Please dae let these kind people go on their way. Shall I ask for baths tae be sent tae yer rooms?”

“Aye, that would be most helpful.” Ada turned away, a blush on her own cheeks.

“But did ye come out happy?” Malcolm asked before they walked away, and Blair and Ada glanced at each other again.

“Aye, lad, all is well,” he said, and Malcolm looked pleased.

“Allow me tae walk ye tae yer room,” Blair said to Ada, hoping she couldn’t see the heat in his cheeks.

“Aye.” He was surprised she did not fight him, but likely they had already experienced enough awkwardness and shock that, like him, she wanted to just get away.

They were quiet as they walked up the stairs, and thankfully, they did not meet Ella or Cameron on their way, who had likely already gone to bed. But a few servants gave them some odd looks as they walked past.

Blair was trying to think of the right words to say, words that did not make him sound like a damned fool, but after what had happened, he didn’t feel quite right in the head. The taste of her, the feel of Ada, the woman he had wanted for longer than he could remember, had been even better than he’d ever imagined. He wanted to drink from her always and forever and to make her come again and again. When she’d reached her

pleasure and yelled out his name, he'd felt like all the past with Finley was nothing. He could fight any battle and live any way he pleased if he only had Ada with him.

*But it is nae nothin'. He is still searchin' for me. Finley is still a danger.*

“Well, that was interestin’,” Ada said at last, and to his surprise, they both chuckled a little under their breath. Outside of her door, she turned to look up at him and held her arms out. “I must look ridiculous, covered in flour.”

“Nae at all,” he said, his hand reaching for her face again.

He set his jaw. Whatever was going on with Finley had to be fixed before anything could truly happen with her. He had to keep her safe, no matter how safe he'd felt in her arms. His thumb brushed her lower lip, remembering the feel of it. He wanted to forget everything, to push open that door and take her on the bed, just as she'd asked him. But he stepped back instead.

“This should nae happen again, lass. I did nae think,” he said, even though the words sounded wooden to his ears.

She stiffened. “I kenned ye would run away again, Blair,” she said. “What are ye so afraid of that ye cannae tell me?”

He looked deep into her eyes. They were the eyes of a grown woman expecting a man to give her a deserving explanation of why he acted strangely every time they kissed.

“Ye must understand why I cannae tell ye. It is tae keep ye safe.”

She huffed and turned away to open the door. “I dinnae ken why ye think so little of me, Blair, that ye believe I would nae be able tae hear yer explanation. Good night.”

“Ada—” he said, but the door shut in his face. He stared at the dark wood, sighing with frustration.

Softly, he reached out his hand and placed it on her door. He wondered if life would have been different if he hadn’t jumped from the wardrobe to kill those men all those years ago. Would he feel good enough for Ada then? Would he feel safer in his life if someone was not always waiting in the dark for him? As he turned away, he knew that his life would then have instead been focused on getting revenge for his father’s death. He would never have been satisfied if those men responsible had not died by his hand when he had the power to do so. Now, he had to live with the consequences of fulfilling that revenge and keep running from Finley, the man who had started it all.

Blair walked to his room, knowing that he would get no sleep that night and for more reasons than just Ada. This Finley business had to be solved, or else, he realized, he would never be able to truly live.



The next morning, Ada stared into the looking glass and sighed at her reflection. Her face looked slightly swollen after crying once more in her bed last night. Would there be no end to how many times Blair MacDougall could make her cry? At least she had been able to tell he was not disgusted with her. He was not repulsed or reviled by her, and that was something.

And yet he did not think her worthy enough to know his secret.

*He still thinks me too young and naïve, nae doubt.*

She wondered how he could ever see her as a grown woman, someone he could both respect and trust.

*If me father did nae lock me away before I could learn anythin' useful, then perhaps Blair might see me as more.*

The maid arrived to help her dress, and she was deep in thought as she descended the stairs for breakfast. As she passed a couple of windows on her way, she noticed that the snow was beginning to melt. Hopefully, another storm would not come if she had to run before Blair loaded her into the carriage again to return home.

“Och, Lady Ada,” a warm, cheerful voice called up to her from the base of the stairs.

Looking up at her was the handsome and kind Cory Chattan. “Mr. Chattan,” she said, her face breaking into a smile as she approached him. “I see that ye are walkin’ about just fine. I did nae cause any personal damage.”

He chuckled, and the sound was a happy one. She tried to focus on it, to remind herself that she should leave thoughts of Blair behind.

“Dinnae trouble yerself, lass. All is well,” he said with a gentle tap to his head. Holding out his arm, he asked, “May I escort ye tae breakfast?”

“Certainly.” She slid her hand under his arm. “Are ye joinin’ us this morn? Cameron said that ye would at some point.”

“Aye, I will be with ye all this morn. Last night, I wanted tae allow ye tae speak without a stranger amongst ye.”

“Ye are hardly a stranger if Cameron calls ye his advisor, but I understand. Thank ye for that.”

He nodded. “I confess that I came specifically tae escort ye tae breakfast. I mean, I rather hoped ye would be comin’ down the stairs when I arrived.”

“Och?” Ada asked, surprised.

“Well, I wanted tae ask if ye would go ridin’ with me this morn. Cameron says that ye have nae yet seen the grounds because yer father was here last time and did nae allow it. I would be happy tae show ye around, if ye like, unless ye have made other plans with yer sister.”

“Nae, nae at all,” Ada said hastily, a little dizzy from the slightly forward invitation.

She was unaccustomed to receiving interest from men and wondered if this was what the world was like for women who were not so imprisoned. But at the same time, did Mr. Chattan

realize that she was unhappy in her engagement? Surely, Cameron would have mentioned to him that she was betrothed or perhaps Ella?

*Or perhaps he is only askin' out of duty tae his laird.*

“I would be happy tae go. I thank ye for yer kind invitation.” Whatever the reason, she wanted to say yes to him. She knew it was a little childish, but it soothed her hurt ego after the last evening, and she wanted Blair to see that she did not need him. She could move on and live her life and flirt with people who actually thought her a grown woman, intelligent and able to make her own choices.

“Wonderful. I shall make all the preparations.” Cory smiled at her as he led the way into the main hall where the others were already gathered.

“Forgive me if I am late,” Ada smiled, her heart beating a little faster than it just had at the sight of Blair.

“Nay,” Ella said, grinning up at her. “Ye are perfectly on time. Blair only just arrived.”

Ada tried not to look at him, wondering a little why he did not come to escort her. She was so used to having him near her at night that it was strange not to see him as often.

“Good. How did everyone sleep?” she asked, digging into the food.

She looked at Ella who smiled with her hand on her belly. “Very well. I need the sleep; I am feeling tired so often! But I hope that will pass once the babe comes. And ye? Did the sage keep the room smellin’ fresh?”

Ada was glad that Ella did not give the chance for Blair to make his answer, for she was not certain she wanted to know the answer to that. He likely slept well, remaining on his high horse after dealing with her. *Bastard.*

“Aye, it was very good.”

“Aye, quite fresh, Lady Ella,” Blair agreed.

“Blair, I think ye should call me Ella. We are like family after all, since ye are like a brother tae Cam.”

“Och, well, I dinnae wish the others here tae hear me address ye so.”

“That does nae matter,” Ella said, waving a hand. “But it is up tae ye.”

Cameron grinned at him from the head of the table as he tore off a piece of bread. “So, I can understand how excited ye must be, old friend, tae come here tae the castle. Ye ken that ye dinnae need tae start right away. Ye have worked so constantly for so long that ye may wish a time of rest, away from everythin’ and everyone.”



Ada felt the breath tighten inside her chest. She looked down at her food, frustrated at how hard the words hit.

“Och, Ada, I did nae mean—” Cameron began to say after a short pause.

“It is nothin’.” She looked up at her brother-in-law. “Blair, ye should answer the question. Will ye hurry tae begin work or will ye take a time of rest?” she added a little breathlessly, only sparing Blair a quick glance.

Ada took a bite of her food, annoyed at herself for feeling so much in that moment. What did it matter? She knew he was going to leave, and she was going to leave as well. They each had their lives to lead, and clearly there could be no future between them because he did not respect her. He did not believe her worthy of him.

“I dinnae ken,” he began, looking at her for a moment. “But I thank ye that ye are givin’ me that option, Cam. I will think on it.”

For the rest of the breakfast, Ada was silent. Occasionally, Cory would ask her a few questions, as did Ella, but she would only answer briefly, avoiding Blair’s eyes. He must have told Cameron how excited he was to leave MacPherson Castle after so long. It was her, no doubt, which was pushing him away and all the times he’d had to help her or save her.

*It is nae as if I asked him tae guard me. It is nae me fault that he should be so keen tae leave such an occupation.*

When the meal was over, Cory left, nodding to her on his way out to remind her of their meeting. Ada wished for a moment that she could transfer all her feelings to Cory, for he was kind and handsome and seemed to be interested in spending time with her. He did not run. He was charming and kind-hearted. But he was not Blair.

“I am off tae the stables, sister. I will see ye later,” Ada said, standing up soon after and patting Ella on the shoulder.

“Aye, then. Enjoy yer ride!” her sister called, and Ada did not look back at Blair.

As she walked out of the hall and down the passage to the stairs, she heard footsteps run after her, and a hand grabbed her arm roughly. Her heart skipped a beat, and she turned around to see Blair standing close to her. She tightened her lips so as not to even think for one moment about kissing him or saying something foolish. He looked handsome, everything about him once again precise and soldierly after the unkempt moments in the larder. She remembered his face covered in flour after he'd walked her to her room, his lips on her and his hands squeezing the softness of her breasts that were now aching for his touch. He'd looked at her so tenderly and had caressed her so softly before he'd told her that it should not happen again.

“I did nae say anythin' tae Cameron of that sort, that I was excited tae leave MacPherson Castle and begin me work here. He was just assumin', I suppose.”

“Assumin' that because of how much ye have had tae put up with me?” she lifted her brow.

His eyes flicked to her mouth. “Nay, that is nae—”

Ada put up a hand. “Please, Blair. Ye are right behind me father in thinkin’ that I am only a nuisance. But I am glad for ye that ye are finally able tae escape the prison as gleefully as Cam has made it out tae be. It’s all alright, nae need to apologize.”

She turned to go up the stairs, and he grasped her hand. “Ada \_\_\_”

“I dinnae have time for this at the moment. I am tae meet Mr. Chattan at the stables. I must change.”

He dropped her hand, allowing her to walk up on her own. When she turned down the passage and he was out of sight, she folded her hands together. He had never touched her like that before, so openly and eagerly. It was not furtive; anyone could have seen them. Yet she was angry. Why did he need to come and explain anything to her? And why was he so eager to explain that, but he could not tell her why the hell taking care of and loving a woman was not something he could do in his life?

*Ye must forget him. He is playin’ games with ye.*

She tried her best to put it out of her mind as she got dressed and left for the stables. She was meant to be enjoying Cory Chattan’s company, not acting miserable about a man she could never have. But as she left the castle and walked out into the sunshine, she slowed. By the stables stood Mr. Chattan *and Blair* together, each holding the reins to a horse, and another horse’s reins were in Blair’s other hand.

“Here ye are, Lady Ada,” Cory called to her with a smile and a wave. “Yer guard Blair asked if he might come along, and since he must look after ye, I suppose that is normal. I have said it’s fine,” Mr. Chattan shrugged as Ada turned to face him.

“Is that so?” she asked, taking the reins of her horse from his hand, her gaze not leaving Blair’s.

She thought he might look away, slightly guilty, but instead, he stared right back.

*He’s definitely the best player in a game I dinnae ken how tae play.*

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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“*A*ye, I thought how we never get tae ride at yer father’s castle and how we might both enjoy it.” It was a flimsy excuse, but it was all he had prepared in the few moments it had taken him to make a decision.

Ada glared at him. “*I* dinnae get tae ride, ye mean,” she corrected.

He knew that Ada would be angry, but he had to come. He was her guard, after all, and he shouldn’t neglect his duty entirely.

*Ye ken that is just another excuse.*

Blair jumped up on his horse and shook his head. He had to not listen to that voice if at all possible. He was just doing his duty; that was all. Once she was gone back to MacPherson Castle and married, then he would never have to think of that duty ever again. But he would do the right thing until then.

*And is kissin’ her and tastin’ her inside a locked larder all a part of yer duty?*

He cleared his throat, watching as Cory eagerly went to Ada. Blair had not helped her on purpose, for he knew that touching her would only make the thoughts worse.

“Let me help ye, lass,” Mr. Chattan said, appearing at her side, and he helped her into the saddle.

When she was on level with Blair, she frowned at him and trotted on ahead. Once the silly advisor was in his seat, they rode off, and Blair hung back a bit, allowing them to ride on ahead. He could see how keen the lad was to ride with her, and that was the major reason why he decided that he too would join.

*That eagerness of his is one of the very many reasons I did nae want the two of them ridin' together alone.*

An hour later, after passing the fields, hills, and dense forests of Cameron's land, all lightly covered with snow, they spotted a small brook on the edge of a line of trees. “The horses can rest here,” Cory announced as he smiled at Ada.

He'd been speaking most of the time, and she'd listened. Blair had caught a few of his statements, but he was more distracted by her as she spoke to Cory. She looked perfectly at ease and listened with a smile to everything he said. Blair wondered why he could not be like Cory, so comfortable and at ease around her, instead of feeling like everything was alight inside him whenever she was near, like he might at any moment burst into flames.

He slowed in front of the brook and jumped down, tying the horse's reins to a thin tree nearby, and the animal bent its head

down to drink from the small stream. He caught the sight of Cory's hand on Ada's waist as he helped her to the ground, and Blair stepped forward, feeling on edge.

"Beautiful land ye have here, Chattan," he said instead through gritted teeth.

"Aye, it is," Cory grinned and turned around to look at the cold scenery, thus taking his hands away from Ada. "I feel lucky tae have been asked tae live here amongst all the beauty. Even in winter, like now, when it feels as though the bones inside yer body are goin' tae freeze, it is still beautiful."

"Cameron is quite lucky that he has become laird," Ada said, patting her horse. "And what land it is. I had nae idea that Laird Grant had such plentiful forests and green fields."

"Aye," Cory said, looking proud. "But he is the one responsible for bringin' it out. The land was a little neglected under the old Laird Grant's time. But now, everythin' is thrivin'. I grew up here, so I feel blessed that we have been given such a fine laird."

Blair was proud of his friend. "Aye, he is a good man."

"What—" Ada said, but the sound of a rush of wind by Blair's ear cut her off. "What was that?" she asked, and his blood ran cold.

He would know that sound anywhere. It was an arrow piercing the air, nearly hitting him. "We must go," he said, reaching for Ada as another arrow flew by and then another.

“Bloody hell, we are under attack!” Cory said, removing his sword and stepping around the side of the horses towards the edge of the woods.

The sound spooked Ada’s horse, and it moved forward. Another arrow whizzed through the air, and Ada screamed. The sound wrenched at Blair’s heart, and his eyes widened as he took hold of her arms and saw that an arrow had pierced her shoulder.

“Shite!” he called and removed his sword as four men burst out of the nearby trees, rushing towards them.

“Get behind me, lass!” he cried to Ada, and with Cory at his side, they ran forward.

He knew that the arrows were meant for him, but there was not a chance in hell that he would allow Ada to come to harm. Cory was the first to find a man, and he struck him in the face with the blunt end of his sword, knocking him to the ground. Blair spun his blade around just as he neared the next two men. They’d thankfully dropped their bows, and now they’d raised their swords against him. But his rage was too fresh.

He thrust his sword forward into the first one, surprising him as the blade went through his belly. He collapsed to the ground, and Blair moved on to the next, his blood-splattered sword dripping and coloring the ground. The man screamed as Blair’s blade cut into his arm, and fury covered his face as he fought back in a frenzy.



Blair stumbled back at his blows, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw Cory struggling with the fourth man. Gritting his teeth, Blair pushed back and kicked the man in the chest, sending him to the ground. Only then, Blair plunged his sword into his body, listening to the sound of death all around him. When he turned, he saw that Cory had taken care of the last man, and they stared breathlessly at each other for a few moments. Blair lacked the words to explain.

*Shite, Ada!*

He rushed away from the dead men to Ada who was now sitting on the ground, her hand touching her shoulder and her face twisted in pain. Turning pale, Blair scooped her up into his arms.

“We must return tae the castle at once.” He placed her on the saddle while he jumped up behind her, not waiting for Cory, but he heard the thunder of hooves behind him as he rode away.

“Who were those men, MacDougall?” Cory asked, and Blair shook his head.

“It is me fault. I will explain later. Ye did well, man, thank ye,” he said, and then they were silent.

It felt like an age until they returned to the castle. Ada was silent, but he could hear the small sounds of pain she made at the horse’s movements. He slowed the animal at the front of the castle, calling out to anyone who could help them.

Guards came to assist Ada down from his horse, but as quick as he could, Blair jumped down after her, reaching out to take her into his arms. They could see the urgency in his eyes, and they rushed on ahead to open the doors for him.

“The healer! Where is the healer?” he cried.

“I will take ye,” Cory said, running forward down a passage, and Blair quickly followed.

“I am sorry, lass. It is all me fault,” he whispered to Ada, sensing the sweet aroma of her that now was entangled with the copper smell of blood in the air. She had closed her eyes by then, and he could see the white pallor of her face. Crimson drops trickled down her shoulder, and he fought back the tears. He could not lose her. No, he *refused* to lose her.

“Dinnae worry, Blair,” she said gently, and he could feel her hand tighten on his arm.

Once they made it to the healer’s room, he laid her down on one of the beds and stepped back, shaking a little.

“An arrow,” he said to the old healer before she asked. “It came out of nowhere. We killed the men who were after us, but... but they struck her.”

“Let me see, lass.” The healer bent over Ada’s shoulder, her brows knit in concentration. She ripped open her clothing so that she could see it better. “It will be fine, lad. It is nae as deep as I feared. Calm down now. Ye dinnae look well.”

“Good,” he said. “Good.” He felt dizzy with relief, and stumbling back a bit, he put a hand to his forehead.

“Are ye all right?” Cory asked, steadying him with a hand. Blair didn’t even know when the man came inside the room.

“Aye, I am well.” He found a seat and sat, his elbows resting on his knees. His heart thumped so wildly in his chest, it felt like it might break through the sinew and bone.

“Once I remove it, I want ye tae take her upstairs,” the healer said. “She will be more comfortable there. But ye should prepare yerself,” she added, looking him up and down. “She may scream, and ye dinnae look strong enough to handle it. Ye can leave if ye want.”

*Mad woman, as if I’d leave Ada even with a blade on me neck.*

Hours later, Blair was still shaking as he sat by her bed. She had groaned in pain when the arrow was removed, but the healer had been quick and efficient in cleaning and suturing. However, Ada had not woken. He carried her upstairs, and Ella and Cameron had come running to see to her. Still, she did not open her eyes for even a second.

Ella looked at him across the bed, and his friend looked grim. “What happened, Blair?” she asked at long last.

No one had spoken for some time after Cory had shared a little of what they’d gone through, explaining to Cameron that they needed to return to collect those bodies.

“Men came out of the trees after the arrows rushed by. It was an accident, I think. They wanted me. I was lucky that Cory was there or else worse might have happened.” He swallowed, trying not to think about that. His hand itched to reach out for Ada’s and hold it tight, but he held back, clasping his own hand instead.

Ella sighed. “Cam has told me a little of yer troubles. We thought ye would be safe here amongst us.”

Blair caught her touching her belly, and the guilt consumed him. He had not only brought danger and trouble to Ada but also to his best friend and his wife. How could he have been so selfish?

“Aye, so did I. But I hope that I can put a stop tae it.” He looked at Ada’s face.

She was pale, but she had stopped bleeding. The healer was very confident that she would wake up soon enough. Her skin was smooth and her expression placid. She looked relaxed and calm. It was such a change from her usual varied expressions from joy to fury to excitement.

“We should go tae rest. Ye have been here watchin’ and waitin’ for hours. Ye need yer rest, as does Ada. She will be well in the morn, the healer has assured us. Come, let me take ye, me love,” Cameron said to Ella, who nodded at him as she stood with his help.

“Aye,” Blair said, standing and looking at Ada once more before he followed the others out of the room.

He waited until they disappeared from view, pretending to leave, and then he returned to Ada's room and shut the door quietly, locking it as well. He could rest, of course, but he would not leave her side, not after what he'd done. Boldly, not caring what others might think, Blair slid into bed next to her, leaning up on his side to look at her for a few moments before laying his head to rest beside hers. This was where he was meant to be. No matter how foolhardy it might have looked to others, Blair knew he would not be able to part from her until he knew she was well. He needed to know that her beautiful dark eyes would open once more and look upon him with the eagerness they usually did. He had to see that sight again. With his arm draped gently over her, Blair fell asleep.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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A da felt like she was swimming in warmth and comfort. When her eyes fluttered open, she sighed. She had never been so warm and comfortable in her life, and yet—she winced. A sharp pain panged in her shoulder when she slightly moved it, and then she remembered.

She pictured the arrow, the woods, Blair and Cory killing all those men, and blood, so much blood. Slowly, she turned, and she breathed in softly when she saw Blair sleeping next to her. His arm was draped over her, and she smiled a little, wondering if she had not yet awoken but was stuck in a dream.

*If it is, then I never wish tae wake up.* Her fingertips trailed through the coarser hair of his arm, moving over his skin until they reached his shoulder and then the side of his face. His beard was a little longer now, for he had not shaved yesterday, and the hair grew fast. Her thumb moved over the bristle of his jaw, savoring the moment in which she could explore him at her ease. He slept peacefully, the usual furrows and lines around his brows now smooth. His mouth was slightly open, and she looked at his lips, thinking of what they had already done to her. She swallowed, remembering the pleasure that far outweighed the sting of her arm.

When his eyes flickered open, he did not jolt or move away as she half-expected he might. “Is this a dream?” she asked in a low voice, and he shook his head. She turned on her good shoulder so that she could face him, and his hand remained where it was, sliding over the contours of her waist and back.

“Nay, it is nae a dream, but it feels thus. How is yer pain?” The furrows returned to his brow, and she put a finger there, wishing she could smooth it again.

“I am fine,” she said. “Dinnae worry about me. It is only a little pain.”

The relief in his eyes was like a drug, and a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “I could nae let ye be, Ada. I was afraid that ye would nae wake up if I was nae here tae wait for ye.”

“I am so glad ye did,” she said. “Are ye hurt?”

She remembered the way he’d made quick work of the men in the woods, transforming in front of her from his usual reserved and gentle self to a man of strength and fury. He’d probably looked the same when he murdered all those men many years ago.

“Nay.” His hand cupped her cheek, and she noticed his gaze moving to her mouth.

She wanted that too. There would be time for it, but right then, she needed answers.

“Who were those men, Blair?” she asked. “Why should they attack us on Cameron’s land?”

He looked away then, closing his eyes and sighing. Thankfully, he did not remove his hand, and she held her breath, wondering if this was the moment when his truth would finally be revealed to her.

“I dinnae ken the men precisely, but they were there for me. I ken that. I am sorry that ye were caught in the crossfire.” When his gaze met hers again, he looked sad. “Ye ken me past already. But now, there is still a man left whom I have nae taken me revenge against, and he is now takin’ it against me. He is the one who me father owed money tae, and his are the men that I killed. I have been runnin’ ever since I killed them, kennin’ that Finley would be after me.”

“Finley?” she asked, afraid for Blair.

Now that she had found him, no one could take him from her. In that moment of safety and warmth, though, she wondered how fear had any place in their tiny world of blankets.

“Aye, that is his name. I thought I had evaded him for years, but then, while at yer father’s castle, I received a note.”

She nodded, waiting for him to continue.

“He told me that he will now take his revenge, and I shall suffer tenfold for what I’ve done.” His thumb brushed over her skin, and he took her chin between his thumb and forefinger. “That is why I could nae risk ye, Ada. He is a dangerous man,



and he has nae scruples about hurtin' others all for the sake of profit or revenge."

"Who is this man?"

"I dinnae ken. I have never seen him, nor have I heard his surname. I have only that: Finley. So, he is even more terrifying, like a spirit in the dark who could find me at any time. I thought when I was locked in the larder that he'd found me here as well. But instead, something much more pleasurable happened."

He gave her a weak smile, and she smiled back. "Aye," she said, snuggling closer. "But now it seems they have come in truth."

"Aye." His hand returned to her waist and pulled her closer. "I cannae put ye in danger, nae when I feel..." Her breath caught as he paused. "Nae when I feel as I dae about ye. If somethin' happened tae ye, I would nae survive, Ada. It is more than me bein' yer personal guard. I need ye."

The sincerity in his words made tears well in her eyes. She had never in a thousand years thought she'd hear Blair say that.

"Then why can we nae fight this man together? Ye cannae dae this alone," she said, and when he began to shake his head, she touched his face again. "Please, Blair. What is the alternative? Us bein' apart because of this man who is continuin' tae ruin yer life? Perhaps we can all find a solution together. Cam and Ella can help us as well. For I..." She couldn't yet gain the courage to share her love, for he had not said it either. "I need ye too. Dinnae push me away any longer."

He said nothing, only looked at her for a few brief moments before he leaned forward and kissed her. A tear slid down her cheek and fell between their mouths, but they didn't stop. Gently, he turned her onto her back and kept kissing her, her mouth opening to his to accept him. Ada knew it was possible that he would run away again and not allow her to fight this battle with him. But she didn't care. She had him here now, the pressure of his body pressing her into the bed, and his mouth worshipped her own as if it had never done so.

"Blair," she whispered into the air as his mouth descended to her neck and over her chest.

His head moved up, and he looked down at her. "Did I hurt ye?"

"Nay," she said with a smile. "Ye could never dae that."

Not willing to let him go, she spread her thighs a bit so that he could settle between them and wrapped them around his hips. He breathed in, his eyes boring into hers. They were questioning, and she knew the answer she wanted to give.

"Please, Blair," she said. "I need ye too."

He blinked once, and then when she feared he would reject her, he leaned down to kiss her again. The kiss was slow and gentle this time, his lips pulling at her own. Ada felt the pull all over her body, but it was strongest between her legs, where his hips were now slowly grinding into her.

She was only wearing a shift, so when he sat back to take off his shirt, all she had to do was pull up on her own fabric and toss it to the side. He slid out from under the blanket and off the bed to remove his kilt, leaving him completely naked in front of her. Ada's gaze swept across his face and skin, from one muscled inch to the next.

When she saw his manhood, erect and large, her eyes widened. Ella had often spoken to her about the pleasures of the bedroom, so she was not afraid. In fact, she was ecstatic. She needed to touch him, feel his skin against hers. She needed to know that everything was real. When her gaze returned to his face, she saw how nervous he was, so she smiled.

“Come here,” she said, lifting a brow when he didn't move.

“Are ye the one givin' orders tae me, lass?”

She laughed low in her throat. “As if ye were ever the one givin' me orders, Blair.”

She sat up, and the blanket fell away from her breasts, revealing them in full to him. His eyes moved there, and she watched him swallow before he leaned over and grabbed the blanket that covered the rest of her. Slowly, reverently, he pulled it away until she too was naked in front of him.

Her breath caught. Would he approve? Would he finally treat her as the grown woman she was, ready to fall in love and bring a man into her bed and heart?

He just stared for a few moments, and she opened her mouth to speak when he said, "Perfect. Ye're so bonny."

His eyes met hers, and he crawled onto the bed. A tingle spread along her skin as his body came over hers, and he kissed her briefly before his mouth moved lower. She sighed as a corner of his tongue peeked out to taste her, moving along the skin of her neck.

"These," he said with breathless awe, leaning back a bit to grasp her breasts in his rough hands. "I have imagined them for so long, and now here they are, more perfect than even me imagination."

She swallowed, that tug pulling even more in the space between her legs. "Ye imagined them?" she asked breathlessly, and when he chuckled, it rumbled in his chest.

Ada blushed, and then when he laughed a bit harder, she laughed with him. The sound was like nothing she'd ever heard before. It was summer rain, spring sunshine, and the feel of cold loch water on a hot day, all wrapped into one.

"Ye really did nae ken?" he asked, his thumbs lazily brushing across her peaked nipples.

The smile he gave her would have melted any heart, and hers was just the same. Blair MacDougall was now in her heart and would never leave.

"Did nae ken what?" she asked, leaning up on her elbows, pressing her breasts even more into his hands.

“How much I wanted ye,” he said huskily, leaning forward to capture her lips before he slid down again, his mouth brushing against the side of her breasts. “How much each night I struggled tae get me body under control when I had tae stand in yer room.”

Ada gasped when his tongue flicked across her nipple. “How each day was both painful and beautiful because I got tae see ye, sometimes got tae touch ye, but I could never have ye, nae really.”

“But—” She was cut off by his mouth clasp ing over her nipple entirely.

She looked down and saw him watching her, which made the heat in her body rise to a nearly unbearable level. And then his tongue began to move. She moaned, leaning her head back as he suckled at her. His hands squeezed and kneaded, and his mouth pleased first one breast and then the next. Ada was trembling by the end, making sounds she did not know she could make.

With a soft chuckle against her breast, Blair moved lower. Instinctively, her legs opened for him, and she closed her eyes when she felt the first brush of his lips against her center. A sigh of delight filled the air as he kissed and licked, his finger coming to slowly push itself inside her.

“More,” she said, surprised at her boldness.

Blair listened. Another finger followed, and he was pushing inside her over and over. Hips arching, Ada felt the pleasure

build until she couldn't stand it anymore. She came, and it burst out of her almost unexpectedly. She moaned and sighed and shook around Blair's mouth and hand, and tears welled in her eyes again. He was there, doing this to her. He was making her feel the way she wanted to feel around him. It felt too good to be true.

"Dear God, woman," he said, sitting up and settling his hardness between her thighs. "I never thought it could get better than it was in the larder." He leaned down and kissed her, a thumb brushing a stray tear from her cheek.

"Why dae ye cry?" he asked, concern in his eyes.

"It is nothin'," she said with a grin, trying to hide behind her usual mask. "I want ye," she said, lifting her hips up again.

He smiled back, his hands resting on the bed on either side of her shoulders. "It may hurt a little at first. But then it will go away. I promise."

"I trust ye," she said, her arms snaking around his shoulders, wanting this man more than she'd ever wanted anything in her life.

She'd always yearned to be free, but now she felt as if being with Blair was freedom. Loving him was like finally opening the doors of her cage and soaring out into the unknown. He stroked his length along her seam, and then slowly, he pushed. It was tight, and she held her breath as she held onto him, looking him straight in the eye. His hips moved forward again, and she grit her teeth as the tightness felt like a pinch.

“Are ye well?” he asked, a hand stroking her face.

“Aye, I am always well,” she replied in her usual teasing way.

With a smirk, Blair cocked his hips forward, and she let out a little yelp. The pain was quick, like a snap, and then it was gone. Blair breathed hard as he leaned over her, watching her expression.

“Please,” she said again, smiling up at him and pulling him low for a kiss.

“Ada,” he breathed just before he kissed her, and his hips started to move again.

It was like nothing she had experienced before. The fullness and pressure against her middle pressed in exactly the place where she throbbed and ached with need. Blair, grabbing her buttocks, angled her slightly upward, and he sank deeper, pulling a gasp from her throat.

She moaned loudly when he hit a particular place at the heart of her, and listening as he always did, Blair kept his movements there, pumping into her again and again. Ada fell apart in his arms. She tried to hold onto him tightly, to feel the movements of his hips as he thrust, but her head fell back against the pillow. Her eyes closed, and she fell victim to the pleasure he was pulling from her body.

In her ear, he whispered sweet words of love in their mother tongue, and tears welled again as she took him deep. He moved to kiss her, and on one deep thrust, she cried out into

his mouth as the pleasure broke once more, falling in ripples over her skin and through her muscles and veins.

*I love ye.*

The words sang in her mind, but as she lay limp underneath him, spent with pleasure, she did not say them. Blair's roar of pleasure as he removed himself from her made her eyes flutter open. He turned her and pulled her close, laying a kiss on the space below her ear.

"Sleep, lass," he said.

She wanted to stay up, to talk for hours about what had happened or argue with him that he should not give her orders. But instead, she listened, closed her eyes again, and fell asleep in the cradle of his arms.



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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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*B*lair woke when something soft tickled his nose. He blinked his eyes open and saw that it was Ada laying against him, and it was her hair that had tickled his nose. She was still on her back to protect her shoulder. His head was near hers, and his arm was draped over her body—her incredible, perfect body that he had only guessed at for months and which had kept him up at night whenever he had to take care of himself in order to get the throbbing and the desire to stop.

It had been a long time since he'd been with a woman, but it had never been like this. In that moment last night, when they had finally come together, Blair knew that he was giving all of himself, and that Ada too was giving herself to him. Fear gripped him in the early morning light. He still did not feel worthy of such affection. Having her come apart in his arms because of what he was doing to her made him feel like a king, like he was close to heaven and she an angel. But could it always be like this? What if Finley's men came again, and this time, they killed her because they knew he cared for her?

*Calm yerself.*

But he couldn't. His thoughts were racing. He had wanted last night to happen with his whole heart, but now that it had, he knew he still had to do whatever it took to keep her safe.

When he glanced down at Ada, sleeping peacefully, her lips slightly parted as she took in slow breaths, he knew that she had crawled her way into his heart. Slowly, he pulled away from her when that realization hit.

He had loved his parents to his core, and now they were gone. He had seen his father killed in front of his eyes in a cruel way, falling to the floor as blood pooled around him. His mother had left the two of them alone without her love and her smile, dying before her time.

Blair had survived all that. He had grown hard and bitter and strong, but if Ada died, if the light of his life ceased to shine, then what good was he? Life would be nothing, and he knew that he would not survive that blow. Even if Ada continued to shine elsewhere or for another man, that was far better than having her light snuffed out by the cruelty of Finley.

*I love her.*

He gritted his jaw, grinding his teeth together to avoid those words. They didn't help anything. He made it out of bed without waking her and pulled on his clothes. Unlocking the door, he slipped out into the hall. He would walk. Outside was good; fresh air was good. It would help to calm his racing heart and his racing mind. It would return him to cold logic, logic that had served him well all these years and would continue to do so. Logic would keep Ada safe and help him find his revenge.

He sped up his walk until he found himself outside of the castle in the dim morning light. It was freezing, and yet he didn't care. He stalked around the outer edge, rubbing two hands over his face as he tried to blur the memory from last night. But it was not as if he'd had whiskey, and his brain was

already muddled. No, his mind was clear, so clear in fact that he could see everything vividly. He thought of Ada's wide eyes as she took his length, her smile as she teased him and asked him for more, the way her body felt wrapped around his, and the sound of her ecstasy piercing his ear and making him also tumble over the edge. The memories were so vivid that he would never forget them.

*And yet, ye had promised that ye would never dae that. Ye would never take Ada's virtue.*

Besides the fear that filled in all the cracks in his mind, the guilt came hard and fast. He had told Cameron on countless occasions that he was not worthy of a laird's daughter. Ada stood so high above him and always would. And he had just defiled her with his darkness, his past, and heaped the weight of revenge upon her shoulders.

"Shite," he said, pausing to lean against the castle wall to take in great gulps of air.

The icy air pricked at his lungs, and after a few breaths, he felt calmer, if not less guilty. He turned away and leaned against the cold stone, staring out into the distance. Things would get better one day, surely. One day, he would not have to look over his shoulder, waiting for the knife to fall. One day, he might be able to stand proudly, knowing that he had taken vengeance on his father's death. Perhaps even one day, he could offer Ada himself, if she would have him. It all felt so distant from him, like tales from another life that he could never reach.

"What in God's name are ye doin' outside at this hour?" Cameron asked, looking amused as he rode up towards him.

The horse's hooves crunched over the frosted ground, and Cameron's face looked reddened by the cold wind.

"I could ask ye the same question, friend." Blair stood up, trying to put something like a smile on his face.

"Come inside, ye blai Beard. Whiskey is what we'll need."

"It is only mornin'," Blair said.

"And?" Cameron laughed. "We dinnae need a reason even though we have plenty." His friend left his horse with a guard, and they were silent as they walked to his study.

Once inside and while Cameron's back was turned while he poured the whiskey, Blair asked, "What were ye doin' outside so early? I thought ye might be abed still."

"Nay." Cameron shook his head as he turned, handing him a glass. They both sat down in front of the recently stoked fire. "I slept for a little, but the attack weighed on me mind. Ella's been worried sick as well. I rode out with me men this morn tae search the area. I also set up guards out in that spot and around tae keep an eye out."

"Thank ye, Cam. Ye did nae have tae dae that. I could leave this very day and take away all these troubles with me."

"Aye, so ye could." Cameron was always practical. "But ye will nae," he added, looking him in the eye. A smirk flitted

over his mouth. “Why dae I get the sense that somethin’ happened last night?”

Blair poured whiskey down his throat and drank it all in one gulp, holding out the glass to be filled again. Laughing, Cameron did so.

“Ye were right, ye ken?” Blair said, once his whiskey glass was once again filled.

“Och, is that so?” Cameron asked with a big smile. “I always love tae hear such words. I will be tellin’ Ella about this for certain.”

Blair rolled his eyes. “Listen, man, ye were right about Ada. I love her. I have loved her ever since I first met her, and I dinnae ken what tae dae now that there is a threat hanging over us all. It is me fault that she is injured.”

Blair surprised himself when tears filled his eyes. He leaned his elbows on his knees and stared hard into the flames in the grate. “I would never be able tae forgive meself, Cam. I would never be able tae survive if somethin’ happened tae her because of me. I should go and leave her be, let her marry Irving or another man. I’ll let her find someone better, nae someone who would endanger her at every step.”

“But last night was the point of nae return, aye?” Cameron asked gently, his fingertip brushing around the circle of the glass.

“Aye. I made love tae her because I wanted tae, and she wanted me. I love her, and I believe she loves me. I want tae tell her, tae get on me knees and beg her tae be me wife, but ye ken what I said tae ye in the past. I am nae worthy of a laird’s daughter. I am a blacksmith’s son who has this stain of blood and revenge upon him. I am nae worthy tae even touch the tips of her toes. And yet here I am, tryin’ tae reach, tryin’ tae have everythin’. I feel like a selfish cad.”

He put his whiskey aside and put his head in his hands. Cameron cleared his throat.

“Ye are the best of men, Blair MacDougall. I hate hearin’ ye like this. Ye saved me life, always made me see sense and pushed me tae dae better. That is why I want ye by me side. Ye are strong, courageous, and ye will never dae somethin’ that would hurt somebody else. Ye made me see the light, that me life was just nothin’ without Ella. I had nothin’ without a goal. Why dae ye speak of yerself this way? Laird MacPherson kens what goodness is in ye. I think he would be proud tae have ye for a son-in-law. Look at me. I was the guard as well, and yet here I am, married tae a laird’s daughter.”

“But ye were also a secret son of a laird, Cam, and now a laird yerself,” Blair said, taking another sip. “I am nae that. I am far from that.”

“So even if there was nae threat from Finley, ye would still nae pursue the lass?”

Blair frowned, thinking about that for a moment. Would he if that revenge was over? Would he find himself worthy enough to ask her to marry him?

“I dinnae ken,” he said honestly.

“Well, ye should. Dinnae be an arse and waste yer life thinkin’ ye are nae good enough for it. Ye have spent long enough puttin’ aside yer happiness, and now that ye have found it, ye should seize it! God, when I think about nae tellin’ Ella me feelings, it makes me want to shudder in fear. I would have missed out on the life that I have. So, I will help ye, friend. I will help protect ye and give ye the life that ye deserve. Be with Ada. She loves ye; I can see it in her eyes. Spend the rest of yer life catchin’ her out of trees and off walls.”

Blair chuckled, despite his fear. He rubbed a fist over his heart where the ache was. When he let himself think about that life, it made him happier than he ever had been.

“Whatever ye dae, I think ye should be honest with her and tell her how ye feel. Even if ye want tae keep her safe, she deserves that much.” Cameron shrugged. “She is family now, so I want tae protect her and make her happy as well. If that is with ye, then I will support that. But I will nae have ye hurtin’ her just because ye are tryin’ tae dae some noble thing.”

Blair nodded, and he agreed to some extent. But he knew what Ada was like. When they were together in bed, she’d told him that they could fight together. He knew that she would not give up once she’d turned her mind to something.

“I will think on it,” he said finally, finishing off the rest of his whiskey.

“Good. And ye should dae so before the lass leaves.” Cameron laughed as he stood up and stretched. “There will nae be

endless amounts of time before her father calls for her tae return tae the castle.”

“Aye.” Blair put aside his glass and stood.

“I want tae return tae me bed for a bit of time. Ye are welcome tae stay if ye like or wander about like a lost dog as I found ye outside.”

“Och, thanks, man,” Blair said with a smirk. “I will take meself back up tae bed as well, I think.”

Cameron quirked a brow. “Good. Maybe ye will tell her now.”

Blair tried not to blush as his friend left him on his own in the hall, laughing as he went. Slowly, he turned his feet towards the stairs, walking back up to return to bed. But which bed would he return to?

He could return to his own, but Ada would awaken, convinced that he’d abandoned her without a word.

Or he could go back to her bed, pull her close, and tell her his feelings. He could tell her that he never wanted to be apart from her and that once the matter with Finley was resolved, he would ask her father for permission to marry her. He stood at the top of the stairs, indecision ruling him. His knuckles turned white as he gripped the wooden balustrade.

Why was life always so difficult? He’d lost his family, and now he was about to lose the love of his life. If he took that



step away from her, nothing would ever be the same.

“Mr. MacDougall,” a voice called from the base of the stairs.

Blair turned around to see a young soldier at the base, his fist clutching something. “What is it, lad?” he asked with a frown.

“A note has come for ye,” the young man said, looking nervous. “It was given tae me by a maid who asked me tae search for ye. It is urgent.”

The soldier handed it over and rushed away before Blair could unfold it. Blood thrummed in his ears as he read the words.

*Blair,*

*Ye think that ye have escaped, and I was impressed by yer handiwork. But next time, we will nae miss. Now that I ken about yer young lass, the way ye rushed home tae care for her, she will receive an arrow through the heart. But I will have mercy. Return the money yer father owed me all those years ago, and leave Grant Castle. Send yerself out intae the world with nae friends, nae connections, and live out yer days on yer own. I think that a fair compromise, dae ye nae? But if ye dinnae listen, ye ken what will happen. Ye will lose it all anyway.*

*Finley*

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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*B*lair felt like a stone was in his throat as he swallowed, rereading the note over and over. Hope had flitted across his vision for a mere moment, but Finley was already there ahead of him. He would not let him rest until his vengeance was had. And Ada would be the one to pay the price if he didn't find a way out of this. Instead of turning towards her room, he rushed down the stairs in search of the servants' quarters.

He passed a few maids along the way, asking if they were the ones who'd received the note, but they all shook their heads. Finally, in one of the last rooms, he found Sara, the young maid who'd smiled at him in the main hall on their first evening.

"Sir," she said, standing up quickly when he stood in her doorway. "How can I help ye?" She looked surprised at first but then pleased, and she playfully twirled one of her blond curly strands between her fingers.

"I wondered if ye had received this note and had it sent tae me?"

She came close and looked down at it. “Aye, that was me, but a guard gave it tae me when he found me in the entrance. He did nae say who it was from.”

“Shite,” he said with a groan, stuffing the note into his jacket and turning to go.

But then he turned back and looked at Sara. She lifted a brow in question, then smiled as if she knew what was on his mind.

“What can I help ye with, sir?” she asked.

“I want ye tae meet me in me room in a little while if ye are able.” A cold sweat lifted over his skin as he said the words. He knew he was being an arse, but this was the only way to keep Ada safe, no matter how awful he felt. He was becoming more like a brute with each second. He would burn in hell, he was sure of it. “For some fun, of course,” he added, using a charming grin. *I could kick me own arse at the moment. Damn, ye’re a moron, Blair.*

“Aye,” she replied, “I would be happy tae.” She gave him another big smile, and then she bit at her lower lip.

The sensual movement did nothing for Blair, especially after he’d been inside Ada only hours before, experiencing a bliss like no other. But this was the way forward.

“Aye. Meet me there in about a half an hour. And then, I want ye tae dae somethin’ for me.”

“Aye?” She stepped forward, and she looked up into his eyes expectantly as if she wanted to begin right then.

“Before ye come tae me room, I want ye tae get a servant tae alert Lady Ada and tell her that she should come and meet me in me room as well.”

Laughing, Sara said, “Och? Well, I see I misjudged ye, sir. Ye wish more than one woman at a time. I would be very happy tae help ye.” She trailed a finger from his neck down to his chest, and Blair swallowed.

He wouldn't go through with anything, of course. He would have to explain later to Sara, but he needed to convince Ada somehow that all was over between them. It was the only way she would agree to let him be and not get involved in his fight. Hopefully, somehow, Finley or his spies would know this and stay away from her for good.

“Good,” he said. Giving another big smile, he walked out of the door. “See ye soon, lass.”

“I look forward tae it.”

As Blair walked out of the servants' passage and up the stairs, his steps grew heavy. *He* most certainly was not looking forward to it.



Ada woke with a smile on her face. She reached out, hoping to feel the warmth of Blair's skin underneath her fingertips, but all she felt was soft wool. Blinking her eyes open, she turned

and saw that Blair's side of the bed was empty. Leaning up with a slight wince, she saw that his clothing was gone too.

"Blair?" she asked to the empty room, the smile she'd worn upon waking slowly fading.

He was gone. The warmth that had enveloped her when she'd first opened her eyes was missing too, and she slid the blanket up and over her naked form. *Why had he gone away?*

She supposed she should accept it. It wasn't like anyone would find them there alone together, naked amidst her bed's twisted blankets. But her heart ached to see that he wasn't there to kiss her awake, and they couldn't bring their bodies together again to feel the height of their ecstasy.

She leaned back on the pillow, feeling a numb pain where the arrow had hit. Both her mind and body remembered the feel and the taste of Blair. Ella was right. The pleasures of the bedroom had exceeded all her expectations, especially because they were with Blair. He had kissed her and touched her so lovingly with the skill of a man. Her heart ached for him once more.

She thought back to the way they had touched, the way he had given his body to her and had given her hope of his love. He had told her he needed her, and she had begged to be part of his fight.

*Will he allow me in?*

A knock at the door made Ada's head turn, and with a flutter in her chest, she said, "Come in."

It was only the maid. *Damn it!* "Lady Ada, how are ye feelin'?" she asked.

"Well, thank ye."

Her shoulder was nothing; the strange pain in her heart was worse enough to erase all else. Blair had left without any word. Perhaps he had meant not to wake her, but she knew that she would have loved to receive a kiss goodbye from him so that she would know he thought more of her than just as a bedmate.

"Shall I bring breakfast up tae ye, Lady Ada?"

"Nay." She sat up, keeping hold of the blanket on her chest. The maid's eyes flitted to her bare shoulders, but she said nothing. "I should like tae go downstairs and eat with me sister."

"Of course. I will help ye dress so that ye dinnae hurt yer shoulder. The healer will be up later tae look at yer wound."

"Thank ye." Ada tried to focus on what had happened between herself and Blair rather than the fact that he'd left while the maid dressed her.

Soon enough, she was walking on her own down the steps, holding her one arm close to her body so as not to jostle the

shoulder. She kept her head high as she entered. Perhaps Blair would be at breakfast, and then she could allay all fears of him leaving her again.

“Ada!” Ella called as she entered the hall, and her sister rushed to her. “Ye should be in bed, restin’.”

“It is only a small shoulder wound, Ella,” she said as her sister took her other arm and walked her to the table. “I will go mad if I stay abed for any longer. Ye must understand that. I have had enough of bein’ trapped in me life.”

“Aye, of course.”

But it was only she and Ella at the table, and Ada looked around. “Where are Cam and Blair?” she asked innocently.

“Cam is sleepin’, havin’ gone out tae scout for any others who’ve come tae hurt ye or Blair. But I dinnae ken where Blair is, I’m afraid. Perhaps he is sleepin’ as well? The way he looked when he carried ye upstairs, Ada...” Ella shook her head, growing a little pale. “I have never seen a man look thus. It was as if he was at the end of his rope. He was at yer side constantly, worryin’ over ye.” She reached across the table and placed a hand on Ada’s. “I am so glad tae see ye are well, sister. When ye did nae wake, I thought the worst.” Tear after tear started sliding down Ella’s cheeks, and Ada soothed and brushed them away.

“Ye ken that I could nae be felled by a mere arrow, sister,” she teased. “How many troubles have we gotten intae in our lives and come out on the other end? The countless trees, the walls, the battle in the forest, the men outside the tavern...” She

grinned, trying to give herself strength as much as Ella. “We are made of stronger stuff than that, I think.”

Ella laughed, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. “I could nae lose ye, Ada. And I could see that Blair felt the same way.”

Ada let out a breath, wanting to believe it truly. She finally wanted to relax in the comfort and confidence of his love for her. But something held her back. He had to let her in fully, or they could not move forward.

“Are ye all right?” Ella asked, and Ada looked up.

“Aye, I am well.”

Just then, the cook’s children rushed into the main hall, and they came to Ada’s side. “Are ye happy, Lady Ada?” Malcolm asked.

“Aye, I am, thank ye,” she answered with a smile, even though it was far from the truth.

“We’re sorry we locked ye in that room,” Hannah added, frowning. “Mother wants us tae apologize, so we came up here tae dae so right away.”

“All is well,” Ada blushed deeply, and Ella lifted a brow.



“I heard ye got hit in the shoulder with an arrow.” Malcolm looked impressed, his eyes wide as he stared at her shoulder.

“Good day, children,” Ella said hurriedly. “Me sister needs tae eat her breakfast tae keep up her strength.”

“Aye, me lady,” they said, rushing off with laughs and giggles.

“Ye were locked in somewhere?” Ella asked as she began to eat.

“Aye. The children locked me and Blair in the larder together.”

“Is that so?” Ella smirked. “Why did ye nae say?”

“It does nae matter,” she said. “It was only for a brief time.”

“Och.” Ada could tell her sister was watching her while she tore of a piece of bread and began to butter it. “Have things changed at all? Or have ye decided tae give up on him?”

“I dinnae ken,” Ada said honestly, her cheeks reddening, and Ella put down her fork.

“All right, then. Ye must tell me what has happened. It is nae like ye tae keep so many secrets, nae from me.”

“Is it nae?” Ada asked, not quite sure who she was anymore.

Ella folded her hands on the table, and Ada looked at her sister. She knew that she would not be able to escape. She let out a breath and told her of everything that had happened. At the end of Ada's tale, Ella smiled, tears in her eyes.

“But that's wonderful, Ada! Ye will nae have tae marry Irving! Ye can have Blair, just as ye always hoped for! Ye were so worried that he did nae love ye, but clearly he does! I kened it right from the start.”

Ada rolled her eyes. “Well, I dinnae ken. He has said nothin' of love, and he will nae ask me tae marry him, I dinnae think, especially after what happened with the arrow. He is tryin' tae fight everythin', and he will keep me away in the process, I think.”

“Och, Cam told me of this. But could ye nae speak tae him?”

“I have!” Ada said loudly, and she put a hand over her eyes. “I dinnae ken what else tae dae. The only conclusion is that he does nae love me enough tae want tae be with me despite the dangers.”

“Or maybe he is doin' his best tae protect ye because he loves ye.”

Ada shrugged that away. “I cannae sit around waitin' and hopin' for that tae be true.”

She turned at the sound of the main hall door opening up. “Och, Lady Ella, Lady Ada, I am glad I found ye.”

“Cory, please come in,” Ella said brightly. “Will ye nae join us?”

“Nay, I have eaten, and I am off tae complete a task for the laird. But I was hopin’ tae speak tae Lady Ada if ye dinnae mind.” His kind eyes turned to her, and she nodded, glad to get away from the conversation with her sister for the moment for it was making her anxious.

“Aye, of course.” She got to her feet and followed him out into the hall, and he led her down the passage until it was certain they were alone. Frowning, she looked up at him.

“Is all well, Mr. Chattan?” she asked.

“Are ye well?” he asked, his eyes concerned as they examined her shoulder.

“Aye. Thank ye. It was nae very deep, and I am well-recovered. I will feel just perfect in a few days, I should think.”

“Good, good.” He smiled at her quickly, but he still looked nervous. “Lady Ada, I wanted tae extend me apologies tae ye.”

“Why?”

He looked down at his feet. “I should nae have asked ye tae ride with me. First of all, it put ye in danger. And second of all, I did nae realize that ye were already in connection with

Blair. I did nae ken there was anythin' between ye, and I should nae have gotten involved. I am sorry for me forwardness in askin' ye tae join me."

"Och, nay!" Ada cried, her cheeks reddening once again. "Please. Ye dinnae need tae apologize." She breathed out. "Ye did nae ken there was any danger, so ye cannae blame yerself for that. As for me and Blair... there is nothin' between us," she lied.

He lifted a brow at her. "Anyone could see that somethin' lies between ye, whether ye have both acknowledged it or nae. After ye got hit with the arrow, I have never seen a man look like Blair did. I have never seen someone so worried about the well-being of another, except for perhaps the laird and his wife."

"Och," she replied, unable to think of anything else to say.

It was two people now who had mentioned Blair's reactions to her injury. She had been practically unconscious, so she had not recognized them herself. He had been concerned for her.

*He cares for me. I ken that at least. But is it enough?*

"I dinnae wish tae embarrass ye, I only wish ye tae ken that I did nae want tae get in the way."

"Ye were nae in the way, but I thank ye, Mr. Chattan. That is very kind of ye tae say. I did nae realize either that Blair had reacted so very strongly. Me mind was focused elsewhere at the time, of course," she said.

She chuckled then, and Cory grinned. “Aye, I should think so.” He looked at her arm. “I hope ye will recover soon.”

“Aye, me as well. Thank ye for what ye did, helpin’ tae protect me.”

“Och, it was nothin’.” He beamed while also rubbing the back of his neck. “I should let ye return tae yer sister.”

“Aye, thank ye.” She curtsied, and they parted ways. Before she could return to the hall, a maid stopped her.

In a low voice, the lass said, “Lady Ada, Blair is waitin’ for ye. He has asked tae speak tae ye upstairs in his chamber. He has sent me tae fetch ye.”

Her heart started thudding. “Aye, thank ye.”

She turned slowly to the stairs after watching the maid walk away. Her heart was light. He was brave enough to reveal his love if he was bold enough to ask someone to get her to come to his room. As she ascended, a smile spread across her face. Perhaps this was the moment that would change everything.

Her heart pounded furiously as she approached Blair’s room, and she tried to hide her smile. She didn’t want to hope just yet, not until she heard Blair’s words of love. She slowed as she approached when she heard whispering and feminine giggles. It was soft, but she could still hear it.

*What in God's name?*

She thought they were coming from Blair's room, but that couldn't be. Why should he ask her to meet him there if he wasn't there and the maids were laughing together while cleaning? But she tried not to jump to conclusions. Blair would have a good reason to meet her there, and he would definitely be there. Outside of the door, Ada could hear the giggles a bit louder, and then she heard a man's voice.

"She must nae catch us here, lass. Ye should go. I must speak tae her," Blair said from the other side of the door, sounding wooden and stiff.

"Just a second more, sir, she will nae come so quickly," the female voice said with another giggle, and then she let out a sigh.

Ada knew what that sigh meant. She had uttered that very same sigh from her own lips. Her stomach sinking like a stone, she lifted her hand to the knob and opened the door. Her stomach fell clean out of her body when she saw what was in front of her.

Sara, the maid, was straddling Blair in a chair, and her head was bent over his, kissing his neck while his hands roamed her backside. His eyes caught Ada's as she entered, and it felt like a thousand arrows pierced her body all at once. The wound in her arm felt like nothing in comparison.

"Blair?" she asked, feeling dizzy.

“Ada!” he cried, lifting his brows as if surprised to see her.

What was this, some cruel game? After a few seconds, when Blair said nothing to explain himself, his mouth ajar as if he didn't expect her to be there, Ada left, unable to look at the scene any longer. Her heart was breaking just as she always feared it would, and she ran, tears streaming down her cheeks as she went to find safety.

She felt dead.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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*B*lair had known it would be hard to do this to Ada, but he hadn't anticipated the searing pain in his chest that had resulted from seeing her expression upon discovering them. It felt like he'd been stabbed in the gut. The extra whiskey he'd consumed after putting his plans into action had only dulled his mind's speed, not the pain, as he'd hoped.

Perhaps he should just let Finley finish him off after he'd done something so cruel to the woman he'd long since fallen in love with. Sara seemed completely oblivious to the way his body had tightened or the way his hands had fallen away from her now that Ada was no longer in the doorway. Her mouth on his neck sickened him, and he felt guilty for dragging her into this as well.

"Sara," he said gently, pushing her aside so that she slid off and could stand. "It is done, lass."

"What is done?" She put her hands on her hips and nodded at the doorway. "Why did the lady run off? Was she too scared tae dae what ye wanted?"

She got near as he stood, running her fingers over his chest. "I am nae afraid, sir. Ye can take me as ye wish." She stood up



on her toes to kiss him, and he gently pressed down on her shoulders.

“I am sorry, Sara, but this cannae happen. I dinnae want it any longer. I am sorry for askin’ ye tae help me with this.”

She stepped back, looking as if she’d been struck. “Well, I thought ye were a hulking, good-lookin’ bastard with a kind heart. But I see I was wrong about that.” She grabbed her maid’s cap from the floor, and stomped out without looking back.

Blair left soon after, racing toward Ada’s room, where he found the door slightly ajar and Ada sitting shocked on the bed.

“Ada,” he said, his voice sounding like it was a thousand miles away.

“What dae ye want, Blair?” Her eyes narrowed into thin slits as she stood, walking farther into the room as he closed it and went towards her.

He swallowed, trying to return his expression to an austere coldness. He couldn’t afford to let Ada see the love in his eyes. She had to think that it was all over between them.

“Why did ye run off?” he asked.

“Why did ye ask me tae meet ye?” she threw back, now looking into the fire and not facing him.

“I did nae,” he lied. “Another servant must have done so in order tae play a joke. I am sorry ye had tae see that.”

He saw her lift her chin another inch. He knew she was trying to be brave and strong like always. He loved that about her. He loved this woman wholeheartedly, so he would do anything to protect her, even if it meant lying and denying what was between them and being miserable until his last breath.

“It does nae matter. I should have kenned that men have sexual appetites tae feed, and after they have ye once, they will never want ye again.” She sounded far older than she really was.

Everything in Blair screamed to refute her words and let her know that she was the only woman he could ever love or wish to be with, but he stood stock still. This was what he had to do. He rubbed a hand over his face and let out a sigh. The whiskey had done little to prepare him for this.

“Are ye drunk?” she asked with a bitter laugh, turning to face him now.

“Aye, a bit. Listen, Ada,” he said, trying not to look anywhere else but her eyes, “what we had yesterday was good. But I have done what ye asked. Ye are now ruined as ye had hoped for, and ye can decide whether or nae ye want tae tell yer father that. But ye will be returnin’ tae yer life, whatever it may be. Ye are also still betrothed and will need tae find a way out of that. I have given ye that chance.” He cleared his throat, unsure if what he was saying was even making any sense.

His skin felt cold, and his heart had slowed to a dull thud. He resisted the temptation to step forward to draw her into his arms. What he saw in her eyes broke his heart in two. She looked bereft, hurt, angry, and despairing all at once. He had never seen such a look in her eyes. The Ada he knew was always fierce and strong. But now, she had been broken—by *him*. And God, how he hated himself. He clenched his fists at his sides. No, he would not tell her the truth. This was what had to be done.

“Blair, I did nae ken ye tae be such a heartless man. I did nae think ye tae be a blaiheard like so many others. I was a fool.” She shook her head, a bitter smile lingering on her face. Crossing her arms, she sat up a bit higher. “Was there ever even a moment in which ye loved me, even a second? What of all the words ye said when we made love?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “I dae care for ye, but as I told ye, I am nae sure if I can love a woman truly as ye deserve tae be loved. Ye dinnae want me. The momentary pleasures are the easiest for me.” He lowered his voice. “And I will leave the castle. I cannae stay at Grant Castle with this man after me. It would nae be right or fair for anyone. I have done me duty by ye.”

“Have ye?” she asked, growing pale, and he could tell she was trying her hardest not to cry. “I suppose it is a good thing ye did nae spill yer seed inside me then. Ye have saved me that embarrassment.”

“Ada...” His heart was breaking with each moment that passed. Was it even possible for a heart to break even more after it was already shattered, smaller and smaller until it became dust? Blair knew now that it was.

“Just go. Leave me.” She turned away. “I dinnae want tae see ye anymore.”

It was another stab wound to the gut, but he could take it. He had been through it before, losing someone and being there when they were lost to him. He could survive this too.

*As long as Ada is safe, I can survive this.*

“As ye wish, Lady Ada,” he said, backing away until he turned around and left, shutting the door behind him and hearing her bitter laugh when he called her by her title.

He then returned to his own room and locked the door, dragging the bottle of whiskey from where it sat on a table near the hearth. The only solution now was to get as drunk as possible. There would be time to fight Finley, but just for a little while, he wanted to drown his troubles. As he threw back the first glass, he knew that he would never get the wounded look on Ada’s face out of his head for as long as he lived.

*It is less punishment than what I truly deserve.*

He threw back a second glass.



When Blair left, Ada sat down, feeling like there wasn’t enough air in the room. She put a hand to her chest. It was tight and heavy, and now that she didn’t have to hide any longer, she finally gave in to the tears. They came hot, hard, and fast, and she leaned forward, bowled over by the pain in her heart.

Blair had just been “doing his duty,” doing what she’d asked of him. She closed her eyes, remembering the feel of his touch, the look of his gaze, and the words of love he’d whispered in her ear as his body had filled hers.

*But that cannae be true. I saw his eyes. I saw somethin’ in them. Had he lied about needin’ me?*

Seeing him with his hands on another woman, her mouth on his neck, had convinced her at least somewhat. Clearly, he was moving on and trying to prove it to her. But she did not know why he had to be so cruel about it. He did not have to leave her in the morning, nor did he have to move on so quickly. Ada sat for a long while, letting the tears flow and wishing that she could tear her heart out and throw it out into the cold day. Perhaps it would freeze, and then she would be free of the searing pain of loss.

*I have tae leave tonight.*

Her escape was now imminent, and she had no choice but to leave. For a brief moment, she had hoped that Cameron and Ella could help her and Blair in escaping the darkness that pursued him. She’d hoped that after they’d made love, he’d let her join him in his fight and stand by his side. But there was nothing left of that for her here at Grant Castle. There was nothing left for her at her own home with her father. Tonight was the night.

She would ride fast away from Grant Castle to God knew where. She’d probably go to her aunt Isla and ask her to stay hidden from everyone. She would not abandon her niece in the world, even if it meant deceiving her own brother. Ada had

some money, and it would have to suffice until she could figure out what to do next. A small voice in her head warned her that leaving on her own without preparation was a bad idea, but she ignored it. She didn't care.

*Yer shoulder—ye will nae be able tae ride. Nay, I can bear the pain,* she responded to the voice in her mind.

Any other pain was better than being heartbroken. Once the tears had finally dried, she stood and went to her trunk. She would only pack a few things so that she could ride light. She would write a note for Ella too in order to keep her happy and to let her know that all would be well one day.

*Sometime far, far in the future, Blair will regret what he's done.*

She spent time on her own for a little while, buried in her thoughts, until a knock at the door made her lift her head. “Ada,” Ella said, coming inside with a smile. “Are ye all right? Ye have been up here a long while. I thought perhaps somethin’ had happened with Mr. Chattan.”

“Nay, forgive me. I had forgotten somethin’. I came upstairs, but then I could nae remember what I’d forgotten.” She smiled, brushing down her gown, hoping that her face did not look too swollen from tears.

“Are ye drinkin’ whiskey on yer own?” Ella teased. “Ye should have asked me tae join ye.”

“Nay.” Although, she wished she had been drinking.

“I thought ye might like tae go on a walk with me. Despite what Cam has tae say, the healer believes that walkin’ will help keep the baby healthy. I cannae sit around all day on me arse. Like ye said, we both have had enough of confinement tae last us a lifetime.” She glanced out of the window. “The snow is nearly all melted by now.”

Ada’s heart felt hollow, but she nodded. “Aye, I would like that.” It would at least give her time with her sister before she left her for a long time.

Once they were out of doors in their cloaks, Ella took her arm. Two guards followed closely behind them, and Ada was grateful for that. Cameron had definitely made a few new rules since the situation with the arrows.

“I think this land is so beautiful.” Ella smiled as she looked out over the expanse of cold green. “We will have tae stay by the castle though, so Cam tells me. I fought but only a little. I would never wish tae risk ye again.”

Ella’s smile made something sink inside of her. She would be so hurt by her departure, but there was nothing to do for it.

“It is beautiful. And I was able tae see a lot of it with Mr. Chattan. Walking around the castle is fine with me.”

“So, what did Mr. Chattan want this morn? I have the feelin’ that ye have turned two men intae yer slaves. He looked like one smitten.” She giggled.

“Did he?” Ada asked, a lump in her throat. Shaking her head, she said, “He was apologizin’ about the arrow, and he said that he was sorry for askin’ me tae ride. He did nae ken that there was somethin’ between me and Blair.”

“Is that so?” Ella laughed, looking up at the white sky.

Ada worried that snow would once again come to coat the land around them. It could put a damper on her plans, but still, she could not stay another moment with Blair in the castle after what he’d said—after her knowing how he truly felt.

*I have done me duty by ye*, he’d said.

“Aye.” Ada sighed, and Ella nudged against her.

“What did ye say?”

“I told him that there was nothin’ between us and that he should nae apologize.”

“Ada,” Ella replied in a low voice, “ye ken that is nae true.”

Ada bit her tongue to keep from crying again. “Like I told ye, Blair has said nothin’ tae me of love. I will nae wait around for him tae be strong when I have been strong already.”

“Ye told him of yer feelings?”



“Somewhat.” She pulled her cloak a little tighter, hurting her shoulder in the process, and she winced.

“Are ye all right?” Ella asked, looking panicked. “Och, we should nae have walked, perhaps. I was a fool tae ask.”

“Nay, nay,” Ada said, brushing away her sister’s concern. “I will nae sit inside either. Me legs are nae injured. I can walk.”

“Of course.” Ella laughed and put a hand to her stomach. “I think this baby is makin’ me even more concerned about all those that I love. And I dinnae like the look in yer eyes. I have nae liked it since ye arrived from Father’s castle. I wish I could talk some sense intae him. He is dousin’ the light inside ye, Ada.”

Ada nodded slowly. That was certainly one way to put it.

“He would never think so. He would never believe that he has done so,” she said woodenly.

Ella’s expression shifted from happy to frustrated. “I am confused, though. After things happened between me and Cam, Father understood everything. He did nae fight against it, and he even apologized for it. I thought he would be different with ye, that he would give ye more freedom than he ever gave tae us before.”

Ada shook her head. “We are different, Ella. He sees us as different people.” The bitterness in her tone was far too obvious.

“What on earth dae ye mean?” Her sister paused as they were turning the corner of the castle, and she pulled her arm from Ada’s. “Tell me.”

Ada faced her. Ella didn’t understand the differences between them, and she wasn’t sure if she ever would. “I dinnae think Father truly loves me.”

The words fell like shards of ice onto the cold ground.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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Ada had once thought to tell Ella what she'd overheard as a child, but she couldn't bear to. She would turn into the protective older sister and try to refute what their father had said. She would try to make Ada believe that he didn't actually think that, but Ada could not scrub the memory from her mind. He had said those words, and so it meant that he believed them. His behavior towards her was even further evidence of that fact.

“Surely, ye cannae think that!” Ella cried, putting a hand to her chest and confirming Ada's choice not to tell her what he'd said to Aunt Isla all those years ago. “I ken that Father would be heartbroken if he kened ye thought that.”

*I dinnae think so.*

Ada looked into her beautiful, kind, happy sister's eyes. “I only mean that Father thinks of ye differently. Ye were the perfect child, the one who followed all the rules. Ye were easy tae love.”

She laughed and looked away. “Maybe until the end, when I drove him tae push me intae marriage. I did nae want tae be

that way, Ada. I only thought it was the best way tae survive our imprisonment.”

“I ken.” Ada reached out for Ella, hoping that her sister did not think that she was angry with her. “It is nae yer fault, Ella. But ye have always been able tae get a smile out of him or a kind word, even when he was angry with ye. But he will nae dae the same for me. I only serve tae make him angry, nae matter what I dae. Sometimes, I am nae even intendin’ tae make him angry, and somehow, he is furious with me. Any step I make, he does nae like it. I dinnae understand.” Ada turned away in case Ella could see her straining to hold the tears back. “There was one moment before I left, at the moment he said I could come tae visit ye. I hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. We both were so surprised that I had done it. I had nae done it since I was a child. He does nae love me like he loves ye, Ella. And that’s alright.”

Ada could see the pain in Ella’s eyes. “Dinnae say that, Ada. He just is such an afraid man. He has forgotten what it is like tae nae be afraid, so he does nae ken what else tae dae when ye dae yer wild things.” She grinned. “But that is what I love about ye. Ye are so different than everyone else. Ye dinnae care what people think, and ye fight for what ye want. Father does nae understand that because he has been livin’ in his own world for far too long. He only thought I was doin’ the same, thought I was givin’ him what he wanted by remainin’ docile. But that is nae truly me. If I was still at home, actin’ as I dae now, I ken that he would treat me just the same as ye.”

Ada breathed out, and she could see the white curl of her breath as it left her mouth. “Thank ye, Ella.” She took her arm again, and they continued to walk. “Perhaps ye’re right. If only I would get the chance tae see ye as ye really are here with Cam every day.”

“Dae ye nae?” She chuckled. “I suppose yer stay has only just begun, but ye should ask Cam. He is driven tae fury nearly every day because I dae somethin’ that gets his heart pumpin’ nervously.”

“Och? Have ye been caught fallin’ out of windows again, sister?” Ada asked.

“Hardly, nae with the baby, of course. But I have spent a considerable amount of time explorin’ the secret passages of this castle.” She grinned mischievously. “I tease him that it is so I can escape him if ever I need tae, and he does nae like that. Really, I just want tae explore me new home, and they are rather convenient. Sometimes, it’s easier and quicker tae pass through them then tae use the passageways of the castle. Often, I lose track of time, and he has tae come and find me. He does nae like that either. He is often thinkin’ that I’ve been taken or some such nonsense.”

“It seems that all the men in our lives cannae forget what happened with Laird Grant, even though he is now dead.” She spoke the words in a sharp way as if somehow, with her anger, she could get all of said men to stop being ridiculous.

“Aye, but many of his unscrupulous men are still about, so Cam says, even though he dispersed them. But he is nae like Father at all, thank God. He barks and yells and puts up a fight about me teasin’ ways, but at the end of the day, he never tells me what I must dae. He never attempts tae put rules upon me, except for perhaps the guards here, but that is just good sense.”

“I am happy for ye, sister. Ye deserve a love like this.” She leaned against Ella’s shoulder. “Yer child will be happy tae grow up in such a family.”

“I hope so.”

They were silent for a few moments before Ella asked, “What will ye dae, Ada? If ye will nae tell Blair yer feelings or if he does nae tell ye, where will ye go? Surely ye will nae marry Irving.”

“Nay,” she said stoutly. “I will nae dae that. I dinnae ken yet. I still have some time; perhaps with yers and Cam’s help, we can convince Father there is another way. Besides, once he kens that I am nay longer a virgin, he will be furious.” Even though she was lying to her sister a little, the thought of making her father angry brought a light to her eyes.

“True,” Ella said with a smile. “I hope yer heart is well. I ken that the pleasures of the body are glorious, but I can imagine they would hurt greatly if they were shared with someone who simply left afterwards or did nae return yer affections. Will yer heart be well?”

“It will be.” Ada breathed out. “One day.”

It had to be. She certainly couldn’t live like this, like she was carrying a rock in her chest instead of a heart. She couldn’t envision it, but she was sure that one day Blair would be a distant memory, and she would have a life of her own. Perhaps then, there would be someone else.

*Maybe there will be someone who would love me for all me faults, someone who would nae run away each time we got close.*

“Ye ken that I am always here, Ada. Ye can always run tae me when there are too many troubles. Husband or nae, baby or nae, we are sisters. We are blood.”

Ada could feel tears in her eyes again, but she swallowed them back. “Thank ye, Ella.” She looked over at where the stables stood, and her heart set to racing as she thought once again of her escape plan.

A guilty pang worked in her chest, but she ignored it. Ella would be sad, but this was the only choice. She would get away and free everyone from having to deal with her burden. Along the way, she would finally be able to carry that weight on her own and prove to all the people in her life that she did not need them. She was not a little girl anymore who needed to be fixed and restrained.

She also needed to know that for herself.



Whiskey did little to soothe the pain in Blair’s soul. That’s how low the pain had reached in him. It had sunk deep into his skin and then beyond, where it had settled. He knew it would be there forever. But he also knew that the pain would be far worse if Ada died because of his own selfish need to keep her with him against all odds.

That was the only thing keeping him from hurling the whiskey bottle into the fire, fleeing the room, and carrying Ada over his shoulder. They could run and run without looking back. However, the note hung heavy in his coat, threatening her life.

Finley would exact his vengeance if Blair did not follow instructions, and he would, just not right now.

He took another sip and thought about his father for the first time in a long time. What would his father advise him? Blair felt a twin ache in his soul as he recalled the image of his kind but tired face. The whiskey was perhaps breaking down some of his defenses. He avoided thinking about his father whenever possible. But at least he had known that he loved him. That was something he had that Cam did not have, a loving father, even though he'd been cut down in his prime in front of his child. Blair put a hand over his eyes. It was too much to bear.

A knock on the door roused him from his dark thoughts. "Mr. MacDougall?" a maid asked, and he grunted.

She opened the door, and he was glad to see that it was not Sara on the other side, ready to fight with him again.

"Laird Grant wishes tae see ye in the fightin' area."

"Thank ye, lass," he said with as much kindness as he could muster.

By the look on her face, he knew that he looked a bit frightening, and he stood, rubbing his face a few times before he went to see his old friend. Years and years of hiding a secret had made him good at it. He would do so now. He couldn't afford for Cameron to learn what he'd done to Ada in order to send her away. He would be gone soon, and everyone would eventually understand. Once he found his way to the fighting area, he found Cameron already practicing. He nodded at him but kept moving, practicing on one of the straw dummies.



“The lasses are out walkin’, so I thought ye and I could find some time tae get our skills in order. Remember, we have a battle tae fight, and we dinnae ken when it will be.”

Blair pulled out the sword he had at his side, taken from his room. It felt comfortable in his hands and made him feel strong. That sword had seen him through many troubles, making him feel like he could fight any battle. He swung it in his hand and looked at Cameron.

“Nay word? Nay changes? Nothin’ found?”

“Nay, nothin’.” Cameron shrugged. “I dinnae understand. But it is difficult with snow still on the ground in some places, and by the looks of the sky, snow will come again and may hide even more clues.”

Blair looked up. Perhaps the snow would prevent Finley from making any advances.

*But how he is getting his messages tae the castle? Who is his spy?*

“Nae one seems tae ken who is sendin’ the messages?”

“Nay.” Cameron swung his own sword, getting into his stance. “Everyone says that it was another soldier or another maid who gave it tae them. Nae one seems tae remember seein’ someone unusual in our midst. It’s bloody infuriatin’.”

He came at Blair so quickly that he had to jump out of the way, unable to strike. But once he'd gathered his wits, he fought back. The space soon filled with the sounds of heavy breathing, clashing metal, and male grunting. By the end of it, they were both sweating, and the sharp, icy prickle of the winter wind was nothing. Blair had removed his jacket and shirt, circling around Cameron again.

“Well, I suppose we may have tae get them all together and ask them all at once,” he suggested, and Cameron laughed.

“That is hundreds of people, and that does nae include those who come from the village with deliveries or other needs. There would be nay way we could possibly get everyone together in order tae question them all about our mysterious guest.”

Blair looked dismayed. His idea had given him a little flicker of hope, but now it was truly dashed.

*It is nae as if Ada would forgive me anyway.*

“True. Well, maybe the storm will keep him at bay for a little while until we can figure it all out.”

“I hope so. I just imagine the bastard freezin’ tae death in a blizzard, and it makes smile. After that, then ye can be free, Blair.” Cameron grinned at him after he dealt a particularly hard blow, making Blair stumble back. “Did ye tell her?”

Blair shook his head. It was only a matter of time before servant gossip got back to Cameron. The storm might be good

to keep Finley at bay, but it might also impede Blair's plans of escape.

"I need time," he said. "I will think about it."

"All right, I will nae push ye." Cameron stepped back and put his sword in its scabbard. "I think we are done here. Me heart wants tae burst out of me chest."

*Aye, I ken the feelin'.*

Blair nodded, and put his own sword away, glad for the distraction of the exercise and the heat and blood now pumping through his veins. He was slightly drunk, and yet it hadn't stopped him from working his body up to a sweat. As he leaned down to pick up his clothing, he heard a little squeal from the doorway, and he looked to see Ella and Ada there, the latter watching him with hurt in her eyes.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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Ada had known life was cruel; she had always known. But seeing Blair in his masculine, shirtless glory, glistening in sweat over all the curves and lines of his body, really reminded her of its cruelty. She would never again get to see him like this, nor would she get to touch him. He had made certain of that by his actions.

*How could he just go on as if everythin' is normal and he did nae just break me heart?*

Ella squeezed her elbow. “The two of us have certainly chosen strong men to have our hearts,” she whispered, making Ada blush profusely.

Ella walked forward into her waiting husband’s embrace. For a moment, Ada’s gaze slid to Cameron, where he looked down at his wife with such love and acceptance that she thought it possible her heart could break again. Ella had found a love so dear and wonderful despite the way they’d been raised. They’d been kept in their homes for so long, and yet Ella had found her way out of it eventually. That fact should have given Ada hope, and yet her future looked quite bleak before her.

Her mood plummeted even worse when he saw Cameron draw Ella's fingers to his lips and ask, "How is me lovely wife?"

Swallowing hard, she turned her eyes to Blair. He was still breathing hard, but his kind eyes were watching her. There was no judgment or confusion or anger in them. They were just watching, as if he was drinking her in for as long as he could. The heat in his gaze made her lips part. It made her think of their time in bed, and the way his length had felt between her thighs. The memory was so strong that she nearly drew her thighs tight together, hoping to quell some of the ache.

*I did nae make it up in me mind. There is somethin' between us.*

And yet he'd decided to make love to giggling and beautiful Sara. Sara would most likely never annoy him, and he would be able to get through his day without having to catch her out of trees or watch her sleep at night. But she knew she wasn't entirely wrong. She was humiliated by what she'd seen with Sara kissing his neck and his hands all over her, but Ada knew deep down that she hadn't been so wrong to think there was a connection between her and Blair.

But as long as he fought it, she couldn't be the one to drag him back. She didn't want to be. She had to turn away and leave him if she wanted to prove to everyone in her life, especially herself, that she was strong and didn't need people to guide her. He had already left her anyway. But turning away from that warm gaze and leaving the fighting area's doorway with a half-naked Blair only feet away was the hardest thing she'd ever done. She cleared her throat and tried to think about other things, like what she should pack and what she should say in her letter to Ella. Pushing Blair out of her mind would be hard, but she was hopeful that she would succeed eventually.

Before she reached the stairs, however, she felt a hand on her arm. “Lady Ada, are ye all right?”

She spun around quickly so quickly that he stepped back and held up his hands. It was Cory.

“Forgive me,” he said. “Ye’re nae goin’ tae break a book over me head again, are ye?”

She laughed, even though the sound wasn’t right to her ears. “Nay, I am sorry, Cory. I was just thinkin’ and did nae hear ye comin’.”

He nodded. “Well, I shall leave ye tae yer thoughts.” He turned away, and then she reached out to grasp him.

“Nay!” she said, more loudly than she meant to. “I should like some company, if it is nae too much trouble.”

He lifted a brow, but he offered her his arm. “Have I shown ye the castle yet?”

“Nae in full,” she replied. “That would be the perfect thing. I dae have a few questions actually.”

“Och, well then ye must ask away.”

Ada knew that she was using the poor man, but it was the best way to learn even more about the secret passageways

throughout the walls before she snuck out that evening. And the fact that she heard footsteps behind them and saw a shirtless Blair spot the two of them on their way down one of the hallways only added to her satisfaction.

*Let him ken that I dinnae need him. He may go and kiss whomever he likes.*

“What is it ye should like tae ken?”

“Ella has told me a few things about secret passageways. I should like tae ken if there are any in me room or any that pass out of the castle?”

He frowned at her, but then he shrugged. “Aye, there are. Yer sister enjoys the use of them more often than the laird likes.” He grinned. “So, I am nae surprised that ye should enjoy them as well. I would be happy tae show ye. Dae ye make use of them at yer father’s home?”

“Aye, so we dae. Or rather, only I dae now, for I am on me own. But usin’ the passageways is far easier than havin’ tae deal with me father. And he keeps me constantly under watch by a guard.” She did not say Blair, but she was certain Cory knew who was her guard.

“I am sorry tae hear that, Lady Ada. Lady Ella has only mentioned some of what has happened at home with the two of ye.” He shuddered. “I cannae imagine what it must be like.”

*Nay, a man never can.*

Ada was glad for the conversation, even if underneath it all she was still raw and bitter. “So, please show me the first one.”

“Very well.”

When the sun had set, darkness had descended heavily, and the fire in her room was at its peak, Ada sat to write a letter to Ella. She couldn't leave the castle until everyone was asleep, so she'd spent the last few hours trying to find the right words. Having taken dinner in her room, claiming a headache, she had had even more time than she knew what to do with. It made her nervous about her plans more than ever, but she tried to push it aside. There was nothing she could do now. She would not respect herself for stopping now. There was a lot ahead of her, and she needed to be brave. She'd been waiting her entire life for this moment. It was time to take the first step toward freedom.

“Will Ella ever forgive me?” she whispered to herself, staring down at the meager words she'd attempted to pen on the paper before her.

*If anyone kens the need tae be free, it is she.*

It felt like a ripping of the soul to have to leave her sister. She didn't know how long it would be or if she'd ever see Ella again, and she'd done her best to write her goodbye.

Ada folded the letter and went to the stone slit window when it was finished. She looked out into the night. The moon was pale and full, casting light across the icy ground. She shivered as a light breeze blew through the casement. It would be a long, cold night, but she would ride as far as she could and



wait until daylight to find the first village. That way, she'd be far enough ahead of anyone who followed her. She took a few deep breaths, attempting to calm the racing nerves in her stomach.

Her body was tense, and she knew she'd be sore in the morning from holding every muscle so tightly. She turned away from the window, pulled up the hood of her cloak, grabbed her bag, and left. She walked down the passage as quietly as she could, pressing her boots' toes so gently into the stone that she could barely hear herself. She'd honed this skill as a child, and it had only gotten better with age and constant practice. When she needed to be quiet, she knew how. She knew how to hide. At the very least, her father had taught her these things, which she would now use to save her life.

The only sound was her breath and the pounding of her heart in her ears. Her grip tightened on her pack as she passed Blair's room and down the stairs. His face flashed in her mind once more, the one that had looked down so lovingly while stroking inside of her. She had hoped she'd get to look at it for the rest of her life. She pushed it aside, thinking of her horse, her path, and the way forward.

*Irving is nae an option. Returnin' tae Father is nae an option. Livin' and lovin' with Blair is nae an option. It is only this.*

She could hear the rustle of guards outside the main gate, so she turned away, sneaking down a side passage until she found a secret door. Ducking inside, she let out a breath of relief. That afternoon, Ella had told her a little about the secret passageways of the castle, especially the ones that led one outside without guards interfering. Cory had done the same, and this was the one he'd showed her in particular. Apparently, sometimes, Ella still did it just to feel the rebellion sing in her blood. Cameron apparently had no idea and never would.

*“He would fall over dead if he found out that I sometimes spent a few minutes out of doors at night, breathing in the darkness. It is a feelin’ like nae other,”* Ella had said.

She felt her way through the passage, bit by bit, until she reached a door at the end. Pressing it open, it gave way, and she tumbled out into the night, her boots crunching on the ground. She shivered, letting out a curse into the night. It was far colder than expected, but at least it hadn’t snowed. However, it hung heavy in the air, and she knew it would be coming soon.

*Ye ken what a blizzard is like. Ye may lose yer way.*

The logical side of her mind poked at her, but she didn’t listen. There could be no more waiting. As she ran, crunching over the ground, she could feel goosebumps running from her neck down her back. She might have attributed it to the cold, but she knew instead that it was a deep sense of foreboding. It felt as though a darkness lay ahead or perhaps that eyes were watching her.

*Everyone is abed. Even the guards will nae see me in this cloak. They will nae wander so far from the castle in this cold.*

Still, the feeling persisted. Eyes, perhaps more than one pair, were on her. She could feel it.

*Better tae get intae the stables quickly and be on me way. Whoever is watchin’ me does nae wish tae stop me.*

She tried not to recall the moment the arrow struck her in the shoulder. It had been such a shock to know that people had been lying in wait, and it was a fear she'd never experienced before. That was all, she told herself. It wasn't like there was anyone there. She dashed to the stables to retrieve the horse she'd ridden with Mr. Chattan and Blair earlier that day. The horse wouldn't scare when she came in, making things even quieter. She knew she'd have to make sure the man in the stable didn't wake up when she arrived.

She crept forward towards the stalls once inside. The horses jostled a little, but it was enough to drown out the sounds of her footsteps. She found her mare, the one she had ridden the day before, and smiled, patting the young horse on the nose. She brought out a few lumps of sugar from the castle, which the beast eagerly devoured. Looking around, she didn't see or hear the boy who worked in the stable, so she felt safe opening the door and stepping inside with the mare.

*I will just put on her saddle, and then I'll be gone.*

Her fingers were freezing. She tried to warm them up while she worked, gathering the saddle and placing it on the horse's back, but it was slow work. Eventually, she was able to lead the mare from its stall, but she had no idea how much time had passed. She itched to get going, fearing that dawn would come faster than expected. The horse's hooves padded softly on the straw floor of the stable, and she sent up another prayer that she be allowed to get out and away and nothing would stop her departure now.

She was just outside and shutting the door when she heard the crunch of a footstep. Ada stiffened, and the goosebumps returned. This time, they traveled over every inch of her skin, and she shivered. Shaking her head and chastising herself for her foolish fear, she continued forward, pulling on the reins of

the horse. Soon, it would be far enough away from the stable for her to mount.

But then, she heard another footstep. This time, she swung around, afraid that she'd come to meet the confused stable boy. Awkward explanations came to her mind, ways she could get out of him letting Cameron know what she was doing. But when she turned around, there was nothing and no one.

Frowning, she looked around the side of the stable, but there was nothing there—only the dark blackness of the cold ground and the trees far beyond.

“Ada, ye really are goin’ mad,” she muttered to herself, and then when she turned back around and grasped the reins, she shrugged.

Walking forward a few steps, the footsteps came again, this time one after another. But she didn't have time to turn around. She felt a sharp pain in her head, and then everything turned black.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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After the evening meal, Blair bathed in his room, then sat on his own, putting plans into motion. He was not surprised that Ada had not been at dinner. The way she'd looked at him when she'd come across them earlier had been enough to split him in two. However, he hadn't been able to keep the love out of his eyes. He had hoped for a brief moment that she would be able to read the message and understand that he was doing this for her to keep her safe forever, but he knew she hadn't received it. She'd turned around, and she hadn't looked back.

Then, he'd left the fighting area and found her arm-in-arm with Cory. That sight had stopped him short, and he saw her glance back at him briefly before they walked on, deep in cheerful conversation. He would have to get used to that idea of Ada and another man, even though it made him sick to his stomach.

*She deserves happiness with someone like Cory, a good man and a happy one, nae fueled in life by the desire for vengeance.*

On his own with a new whiskey bottle, Blair's entire being craved her. It had only been a day since they'd had each other, but it felt like an eternity. His mouth craved her kiss, the taste

of her tongue and her skin. His hands were itching to grasp her tightly, to feel the shape of her curves beneath his fingertips and know that what he was doing was pleasing her. His ears missed the sounds of her voice as she lovingly called out his name. And her scent, her lovely familiar scent, lingered in his nose despite the fact that she was far away in her room with a headache or, more likely, furious at him and refusing to even look at him.

He allowed himself to fantasize about what it would be like if they could be together for a moment. He could awaken with his arms around her, kissing the soft skin of her shoulder. He could feel her plump breast under his hand and inhale her scent. It would be heaven. Maybe she'd turn to him with a tired smile and reach for him, their mouths meeting. He'd softly pull her beneath him and sink back into her, making slow and beautiful love to her.

The ache in his body felt like it was screaming for her. But he'd have to put it aside and focus on what came next. Tomorrow held a new future for him, and he needed to prepare.

Ella had looked at him with interest during dinner, and Blair had remained silent, wondering if she knew the truth. Had Ada spilled her heart to her sister? He hated the thought of Cameron thinking worse of him for what he'd done, but it was all part of the plan. Finley had asked him to cut all ties and leave that place as his penance for his father's debt and Ada's safety. So that's what he was going to do.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there. It might have been hours or days or years, but Blair didn't care. A knock on the door made his head jerk up, and he turned to see that young soldier again with a note in his hand.

Blair's blood froze in his veins. He knew what it meant.

"Give that here tae me, lad," he said, standing up. "Where did ye get this?"

The boy stepped back, looking pale and afraid. "The guards, sir. A guard handed it tae me."

He nodded, and the soldier left. This time, the piece of paper was folded a few times, and it was a bit longer than the others had been. Slowly, and with his heart thudding in his ears, Blair unfolded it. Something fell from it to the floor, and he knelt to pick it up.

Breath caught in his chest as his fingers picked up a strand of hair—*Ada's* hair. He would know it anywhere with all its shades and colors, not unlike the shades and colors of the woman herself.

"Dear God," he said, his mouth having gone dry, his heart and mind leaping to attention. "He has her."

He didn't even need to read the note to know that, but he read it anyway, feeling sicker with each word.

*We have her, Blair. Come tae the cottage between Grant and MacPherson Castle. Ye ken the place well, I believe. Come and get yer lass. It's yer life for hers.*

Blair was out of the room in an instant, the note falling to the floor, and as if to make sure this wasn't just all a terrible nightmare, he went to Ada's room. He burst in through the door, and fell to his knees when he saw that it was empty. When he saw that she had left willingly, her cloak gone and a letter for Ella on the desk, he made a strangled sound of pain in his throat, and he put his face in his hands.

It was too late. He had not been able to keep her from getting taken. And what if Finley didn't keep his word? What if he killed her anyway despite anything Blair did?

He rose on shaking legs. He thought Ada would wait at least, that she would ask for her sister's and Cameron's support to get out of the marriage to Irving, but he knew his Ada. He knew that what he'd done to her had sent her away in a rush.

*It is all me fault.*

Now, she was at the mercy of Finley and God knew who else. Sick to his stomach, Blair turned out of the room and shut the door. He would go now. He would leave for the cottage and send Ada back home safely. But ten minutes later, when he was riding hard through the dark, he knew that he would be going to his death. Finley would likely not give Blair the freedom he'd offered by asking him to leave all he loved behind. He would kill him.

That was all secondary. All Blair needed was to make sure that Ada lived, and then he would go to his death willingly. He would do anything for her, and despite the fear that clawed at his throat, he rode harder. It was time at long last to meet the man who'd sent his father to death.





Ada felt like she was swimming with slow, languid movements. It was almost the same feeling as before, when she'd awoken in bed in the warmth and comfort of Blair's arms. She let out a moan, hoping to turn and curl her body more into his, but the air was cold. No blanket touched her, and instead, she felt a rough, scratching pain around her wrists. Her shoulder ached too, and she finally opened her eyes with a wince. She sucked in a breath, her heart racing, wondering where she was. The last thing she remembered was the stable.

*I was takin' the mare from the stable. I was—*

Something moved underneath her. She nearly screamed, but no sound came out. When she looked down, she saw that she was on a horse, and her hands were tied to the top of the saddle, keeping her straight on it. Darkness spilled out in front of her, and it was only due to the full moon that she could see the landscape. The castle was not far, but she was no longer facing the stables.

“What?” She turned into the darkness, and then she heard voices behind her and froze.

“Why did ye need tae hit her? She would have come with us if we'd asked.”

Ada felt sick to her stomach. She couldn't see the man, but she knew the voice. It was Irving.

*What in God's name?*

She heard hooves approaching her, and her heart sped up even faster as she saw a cloaked man coming closer out of the corner of her eye. She pressed her lips together to keep from screaming when the man reached out for her. In his fingers, he took up a lock of her hair, and she shut her eyes tight when she heard the sound of him cutting it off.

*What is this? Is he sendin' a message tae Father? Is this blackmail tae force me intae the marriage? Surely there is an easier way!*

“Here, take this,” the cloaked man said, his voice low and deep and chilling.

Ada had never heard a voice like that before. It was as if all joy had been sucked from it, and there was only darkness and sadness left. It made a hollowness ache in her chest. Hopelessness filled her. If this man had her, then there would only be one end: death.

She heard the crinkle of paper. “Take this tae the castle. Ye ken tae whom.”

Another man with a higher voice, said, “Aye, Finley, I will.”

*Finley? Could he be Blair's Finley? What is Irving doin' with him?*

Her heart sped up. *Why is Irving with a man so clearly tied tae death?* It was difficult for her to keep her breathing steady. Fear was setting in. She heard hooves again, and when she

turned slightly, she saw the man riding off towards the castle, no doubt clutching her lock of hair. Ada remained motionless, unsure of what to do or say. She was trapped. Her heart was in her throat as she realized something was seriously wrong. A drop of sweat trickled down her back, and she tried not to cry at the prospect of what might happen next. Irving had always seemed off to her. No one else could see the darkness that existed within him. But why would he take her?

“How long dae we wait, Father?” Irving asked. Ada’s eyes opened wide, and she bit down on her lip to keep from gasping.

*Finley is Irving’s father? Finley is Laird MacIntosh?*

How could her father not have known? Why did he think to pair them through marriage? Her mind searched for an answer, but she couldn’t let go of the terrible fear that clung to her every muscle. What was going to happen to her?

“We ride tae the cottage. MacDougall will ken where tae meet us,” Finley said. “Grab yer lass. We must ride while there’s still time.”

Ada’s horse was prodded into action, and she closed her eyes, the animal following the two dangerous men into the night.

It was all lost. Whatever plans she might have had were over. All she could think about was Blair.

*Will I ever see him again?*

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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*Ada was eight years old again, listening to hushed voices as she crept through the castle. Ella was upstairs, asleep, but Ada couldn't drift off even for a second. She loved to explore, and even though her father got angry when he found out, she needed that freedom. Following the sound of the voices, she stopped at the doorway to her father's study, spying Aunt Isla sitting across from him.*

Deep down, she knew she was dreaming. It was the dream she'd had many times since the real scene had first happened all those years ago, and it always came around again when something bad was happening. But she couldn't wake herself up. She never woke until the dream played out, and she heard those terrible words from her father's lips.

*"Maura would never have gotten ill if she hadn't had Ada, Isla. Ye ken that's true."*

*"We should nae have had another child. It was too much for her."*

Even though it was just a dream, Ada could always feel the tears streaming down her cheeks. She always felt that hollow ache in her chest that had first struck her at eight winters,

listening to her father. But the dream was different than what had really happened. In the dream, she knew what would happen next.

Aunt Isla's words going against her brother were always muffled, but she could hear her father's words clear as day. And then, instead of running away, she would see her father turn to her slowly. He would stare at her with his cold blue eyes and point at her.

*"We did nae want ye,"* he would say. *"It is yer fault that yer mother is dead."*

And then she'd wake up with a gasp. However, this time, it was not in a familiar bed. She was still atop the blasted horse. Her neck ached from having lolled around loosely as she'd slept, and her wrists chafed as well. When she looked up, she saw Irving staring down at her. Straightening, she glared right back at him, and he grinned.

"Did nae expect it, did ye?" he asked, looking rather smug.

She wished that she could have had her hands free to punch him in the face.

"Och, ye dinnae seem surprised. Perhaps ye were awake earlier, and we did nae ken." He pointed at her. "Very clever, ye. Ye would make a perfect wife. And ye still can if all goes accordin' tae plan."

"Ye still want tae marry me? I dinnae understand. What can we give ye? Why are ye doin' this?" She looked to the side,

but his father was not there.

Instead, he was riding farther ahead in the darkness, no doubt to keep an eye on anyone who might come their way.

“I am a dutiful son, Ada. I will dae what me father asks of me. Although,” he reached out and stroked a finger down her chin, “I dinnae think that ye are a dutiful daughter.” He frowned at her, and she wondered how she had ever thought him remotely handsome.

Evil was writ in every one of his features, and she tried to keep him from noticing her shiver of fear and distaste. If only he was close enough, she could bite off the finger that stroked her.

“Nay, I am nae. I will never listen tae someone that I disagree with as much as me father on so many things.”

“Tsk, tsk,” Irving tutted, and she yanked on the ropes at her wrists, hoping that one sharp pull would set her free, and she could lunge at him on the other horse. But when the ropes stayed taut, he laughed, noticing her attempt. “Ye’ll be dutiful one day, Ada. One can learn tae be dutiful, and just like a wild horse, I will break ye in until ye learn.”

She couldn’t help the gasp that escaped her lips and made ice run through her veins. He had said the words so coldly and cruelly that she believed every one of them.

“That maid at me castle, ye had given her a note tae give tae Blair, did ye nae?”

“Aye.” He cocked his head to the side and grinned. “Ye were perceptive then, but I had hoped tae distract ye with me fine looks.” His face twisted into a grimace. “But ye did nae seem tae care about those. Instead, ye wanted Blair, the foolish MacDougall who has never paid me father back for what his father owed him and ran away from his responsibility all these long years.”

Ada was breathing hard now. How far had they come? Where were they? Where were they going? She tried to get out of the ropes again, but it was to no avail. Finley called back to them.

“We will rest the horses here for a bit. There is a stream.”

“Aye, Father,” Irving said, riding on ahead a bit.

It gave Ada time to think. If they were resting the horses, then perhaps they would allow her off. They would untie her and give her a chance to stand on her own feet, to rub at the chafing on her skin for a little while. Then she remembered her dirk. She had packed it as one of the essentials of her journey to keep herself safe. She only knew a little of how to use it against someone, but the perfect way it could help her was to untie the ropes, if she could just reach it.

“Here we are.” Irving jumped down from his horse and reached up to Ada’s, untying the rope that tied her hands to the saddle.

She tried not to grimace as his hands gripped around her waist, far too familiar. He seemed to enjoy it as she slid down his front, and he grinned at her.

“Ye will come around, lass,” he said. “I will show ye all the pleasures ye can have.” His hips thrust into her, and she made a disgusted sound in her throat, stepping back a little. It only brought fury to his eyes, and it looked as though he might strike her when his father called out to him.

“Stop gettin’ distracted, lad. Get yer horse sorted. I want tae keep ridin’. Now that MacDougall has seen our note, I am certain he will be on his way soon.”

*Another note?*

She remained silent, hoping that the two of them would be distracted enough for her to figure out a way out. Her hands were still tied together, but not to anything else. Ada slid her hands down to her boot as Irving and his father spoke quietly between the horses. She’d kept the dirk there so she’d have it whenever she needed it.

She slid it out of the leather quietly and pressed her two fingers together, hoping it didn’t fall to the cold ground with a thump. That would undoubtedly catch their attention. She hid behind her horse, moving her body slightly, and began to cut when she was able to twist the knife around. She moved the knife across the braided rope slowly, and sweat beaded on her skin. It frayed bit by bit, and she prayed and hoped that she would only have a few more seconds to get rid of them. She’d have just enough time to flee and hide before they came after her again.

*Perhaps I might even find Blair along the way.*



The last part of the rope popped, and they snaked around her wrists to the ground. She bit back a groan of relief. For a few heart-stopping moments, Ada stood still. She listened for their low voices, and then she turned away, stepping gingerly away into the darkness. The darkness would hide her for now. She could make it.

A few steps later, her breath came hard because her excitement was growing. She was escaping. She could be saved, and Blair would find her. All would be well. He could take his revenge on Finley, and then perhaps, she could find a way to convince him that he was being ridiculous and stubborn, that he was—

“And where dae ye think ye’re goin’?” Irving’s voice felt like cold fingertips up her spine.

She turned around and saw him looking at her, holding out a long blade in front of him.



Blair could hardly move as the icy cold wind rushed past his face. He couldn’t recall being this cold before. It reminded him of Ada, and he hoped Finley was keeping her warm in some way. Blair didn’t want to arrive at the cottage and discover that she was already dead because they hadn’t thought to protect her.

Thinking of her dead didn’t make any sense. She was fire itself, capable of melting anything. She was stronger than he could ever be, knowing there would be a fight ahead, but she’d wanted to fight alongside him—for him. Losing Ada would be like losing the sun from the sky and Blair couldn’t let that happen. He would give himself up a thousand times over just

to see her smile and know she was safely returning home to her family.

His mind tried to focus on finding his way to the cottage rather than the cold wind or the fact that his hands were frozen to the reins. He needed to consider what he would say to Finley to ensure Ada's survival. He didn't have enough money to repay his father's debts if that was all Finley wanted. But he'd come up with something. He would trade himself in a heartbeat if it meant saving her.

As he rode, he remembered catching her from the tree while she was trying to save the kitten, how they argued, and how she blamed him.

*"Then why in the bloody hell dae ye keep tryin' tae kill me, woman?"*

*"Kill ye? If I meant tae kill ye, I would have done it a long time ago. Ye can believe that."*

A little laugh escaped him. That was his Ada, and he never wanted her to change. He wanted only her, and even if he was going to die that night, he would tell her so. He wouldn't leave the earth without her knowing just how he felt.

He wasn't exactly sure how long he rode, but the moon was still full and bright in the sky by the time he reached a small creek. Ahead, he could see three horses and three figures. He slowed, his fingers feeling like pieces of ice as he gripped the reins and squeezed his legs into the side of his horse.

Once he had slowed enough, he jumped down. They were far enough away that they would not see him. His backdrop was a little copse of trees behind him, and he tied his horse to one of the trunks, patting him reassuringly on the nose. Slowly, he moved forward in the darkness, and he could hear the sound of muffled voices. His hand lingered over his sword, ready to pull it out when it was needed. But it froze when he heard a familiar voice.

“Ye think ye can just dae whatever ye like, me lady?”

It was Irving, the blasted bastard. He would recognize the voice of that blaireard anywhere. And the tone of his voice as he spoke to Ada was enough to chill anyone’s bones. At the same time, it sent a jolt of angry heat through Blair, and his hand gripped the hilt of his sword. They still hadn’t seen him.

*What in the bloody hell is he doin’ here?*

And as he got closer, the thing he’d feared most shot into view. Irving was on top of her, pushing Ada down into the hard ground, and Ada was squirming, kicking, and trying to fight back.

“Get off me, ye animal!” she cried.

“I think ye ought tae receive a little punishment for tryin’ tae run away. Once we’re done with Blair, ye’ll be all mine anyway.”

That was it. Blair pulled out his sword, and he stepped into their view.

“Over me dead body,” he said in a cold voice he didn’t recognize.

Irving jolted upright and looked at him, awareness growing in his eyes. But then his surprised expression turned to one of smug pleasure.

“That can easily be arranged. Welcome, Blair MacDougall.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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Something flickered in Ada's heart when she heard the sound of Blair's voice from behind her.

*He's here. He has come.*

She'd been fighting Irving's advances tooth and nail as he pinned her to the ground, grinding his hips against the space between her thighs. Something deep within her had been warning her of what was to come. It was bound to happen. She knew the kind, loving touch of a man, but the look in Irving's eyes as he pushed against her was anything but. It would be horrifying and scarring, and she was certain she would never forget it. That night outside the tavern with Ella had seemed so long ago, when she'd thought they'd both be victims of an angry man's touch before being saved. But, for a brief moment, she believed there was no one who could help her. Everything had seemed hopeless in that frozen, moonlit night until she heard Blair's voice.

She could feel Irving's surprise. He didn't move his hands from where they were on either side of her body, but he was distracted.

"That can easily be arranged. Welcome, Blair MacDougall."

It was in that moment that she started to fight against him again, using whatever she could to get out from under Irving. She was definitely in support of being rescued by a man who had her heart, but she wanted to fight too, to make sure that the person who hurt her and was planning to hurt Blair would also get hurt. She was desperate to show her strength, to prove to everyone that she was not some weakling to be imprisoned and hidden away.

Irving groaned and grunted at the feel of her knees and hips pushing him away, her hands scratching at his face as he scrambled to get away from her.

“Bitch!” he cried, and she shrieked when his hand met her cheek.

It stung, and it had been so hard that it dazed her for a moment. She wasn’t able to look up and see what happened next. But the shadow of Blair’s large form skidded across the darkness and into Irving’s body, taking them both to the ground.

“Ye will pay for that with yer life,” Blair growled, and she could hear the muted pleas of Irving as Blair laid on top of him.

Slowly, Ada tried to sit up to assist, but she felt the cold metal of a blade at her neck and sucked in a breath and held it.

Finley’s voice sent chills in each part of her body, “I would nae dae that if I were ye, Blair.”

Blair froze from where he was on top of Irving, and slowly, he turned around. When he did it fully, Irving scrambled out from under him, and with a foolish, trembling hand, he held up his sword towards him. She could tell Irving was attempting to regain authority, and even though she was terrified, she nearly spit in his direction. He was like a boy, standing cold and trembling, compared to Blair's tall, quiet, and courageous masculinity.

"Stand up slowly," Finley said to Blair, grabbing her arm and helping her to her feet.

Ada was desperate to breathe, but when she tried to do it as slowly as she could, she winced at the feel of the cold blade against her throat. The hand wrapped around her arm tightened.

"We meet at last," Finley said.

Ada's heart beat fast as she stared at Blair's face. In the moonlight, she was able to see every line, every expression. For the first time in the whole of their acquaintance, she could see that Blair was afraid. The color had drained from his face, as if he was looking at a ghost, and perhaps, in some way, he was.

"So, we dae," he managed to utter.

Not once did his gaze move to her, even though she couldn't take her eyes off him.

“Now,” Finley said with purpose. “Even though it is bloody freezin’ out here, I think we can make our arrangements quickly and easily, can we nae? Ye would nae want anyone tae get hurt, would ye?”

The gruffness was mixed with a sickening sweetness, as if the man knew how to easily change his voice to get people to do what he wanted.

*Well, he is leadin’ a double life as both Finley and Laird MacIntosh.*

Blair nodded, but the fear hadn’t left his face. His whole body tightened with it as well.

“Just toss yer sword tae Irving, and then we’ll move along.” Blair didn’t hesitate, and he did what was asked.

Irving made a little *oof* sound as he attempted to catch the blade. Finley pushed his weapon a little more into her throat, and she breathed in sharply this time, sure that he had broken skin. The motion made Blair step forward, his hand outstretched, but Finley cut him off with a click of his tongue.

“Dae nae dae anythin’ foolish now, lad. Ye are here tae keep the lass safe, like I said in me note. She will be perfectly safe and be left alive if ye dae exactly as we ask.”

Blair gave a slow nod. “Only tell me what this is all about. Can I nae have that much? Why is Irving here?”



“Och, I suppose we have time for that.” Finley chuckled, and she could feel the vibration in his chest as he pressed into her back.

It made a sick feeling rise in her throat, but she swallowed it back as best she could.

“I have been waitin’ me whole life tae get me hands on ye after what happened all those years ago. I would nae want it tae be over too quickly. Irving is me son.”

Ada’s gaze flicked to Irving. He had regained his equilibrium somewhat, and he’d now moved closer to Blair, poking him in the arm with one sword, the other sword held out towards him.

“Yer son?” Blair asked, clearly surprised. “Ye are Laird MacIntosh?”

“One and the same. How clever of ye.” Finley laughed again, but it was the most soulless, darkest laugh she’d ever heard in her life. “How clever ye are, but I suppose ye needed tae be clever tae evade me all these years. Nae one has ever achieved that, especially nae yer father.”

Ada could see Blair’s reaction to that. The rest of his body tightened up, and she saw a muscle move in his jaw.

“Ye remember,” Finley said in that sickeningly sweet voice again, “the young boy hidden away, cowardly watchin’ as his father’s throat was cut.” Finley stopped, and Ada thought Blair might burst into flames. “Or I should say ye watched as yer father pleaded for another chance tae pay the money back,

even though he'd already had plenty of chances. He never could make a single bloody payment."

Finley's voice had now lowered to a growl, and just hearing it against Ada's skin made her body feel paralyzed with fear. Was there no way out of this? Irving seemed to be about to plunge the blade into Blair, forcing her to watch as the man she loved died in front of her. And who was to say she wouldn't be next? Finley, like everyone else, might decide she's too much trouble and slide that knife down her throat. With Blair gone, the prospect of death didn't seem so bad.

No one said anything for a few agonizing seconds, and Ada just kept breathing slowly, feeling the prick of the knife against her skin increasing. She didn't even notice the cold of the night. She was kept warm by fear and a flicker of hope.

"Me clan is always in need of money, and it takes effort tae run a lairdship, tae make sure that yer people are the strongest in the Highlands. So, I operate as Finley when I need tae, and me son marryin' MacPherson's daughter was definitely enough money tae keep us lastin' for a while. He offered a pretty high dowry. Clearly, he wants tae get rid of the lass, nae that I blame him. She seems like a pain in the arse." Finley laughed in his throat again, and Ada closed her eyes.

Would her father even care if she died? Did he care right now that she was in the clutches of a murderer with a knife at her throat?

*He would probably say that I was makin' it all up, that it is all in me head, and would still likely go through with the weddin'.*

“So, I will make ye a deal, as promised, even though ye dinnae really deserve it for what bloody acts ye wrought upon me men. I will keep yer woman safe and spare her life if ye get down on yer knees and beg for yers. Beg for yer life until me blade crosses yer throat.”

Blair stood resolute. “I thought ye wished for me tae run away, break all connections, and leave everyone I loved behind—tae have an empty life.”

“Aye, so I did.” Finley chuckled, as did Irving. “But I have changed me mind. Get on yer knees. Lose yer life for the woman ye cannae seem tae live without.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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It had been many years since Blair had felt the fear he felt now. Looking at the real Finley in the cold, dark eyes, with his hand on the blade at Ada's throat, he felt the same fear he'd felt at the sight of his father. Looking through the crack of the wardrobe while his father died on his knees sent the same painful ache through his chest as watching Ada now.

Finley claimed that he was giving Blair a deal, that he would truly spare Ada if he gave up his life, but there was no guarantee it was true. Nor did he have any way of knowing if Finley would kill her even before he killed him.

All he could do was take the chance he was offered. He hadn't been able to give his life for his father's, but he had the chance to do this. And so, he sank to his knees.

"Nay!" Ada cried. "Blair, dinnae dae this!" She struggled against Finley, but she screamed when Finley held her harder and pressed that knife a little closer.

The scream tore through his brain like wildfire. "I would be happy tae beg for me life, Finley," he said with a croak, "but I want ye tae let the lass go first. I want tae see her ride off on

me horse, and then I will beg ye for everythin'. I will dae whatever ye want. Ye may take me life whenever ye wish. Only, let her go."

Ada paused, and he finally met her eyes. It had been too hard to look at her through the rest of the exchange, but he was too greedy to not get one last look before he'd never see her again.

"Please, Ada," he said. "Ye need tae go, lass. This is what I was tryin' tae avoid." His jaw clenched, and he could feel the rest of the words he wanted to say piling up behind his teeth, sitting heavy on the tip of his tongue. "I never wanted tae hurt ye," he said.

For a moment, it was simply the two of them out there in the wilderness under the bright, full moon. It lent a silver glow to her cheeks, and her hair was like fire, all its colors showing in all their beauty. She would be his Ada forevermore in his heart and in his mind, even if his blood was spilt right there and then on the frozen ground.

"Nay," she said. "I cannae leave ye here." Tears started streaming down her face, but she stood tall and strong, still shaking to get free of Finley despite the blade.

It made him love her all the more. He made his voice low and stern, hoping he could get the message across that he needed to. She needed to bloody well listen to him, or she would die as well.

"This is nae yer fight. It was never yer fight, lass. That was why I had ye catch me with the maid," he let out a breath and watched as understanding dawned on her face, "so ye would

nae join this fight and that ye would be safe. But it did nae work.”

Finley laughed again, and Blair closed his eyes. The sound was like sharp fingernails scraping along his insides.

“What a poor attempt at gettin’ yer lass tae think ye’d been unfaithful. Well, we thought we would take yer Ada anyway. Besides, I think me Irving has taken a likin’ tae her.”

Blair nearly swung out behind him to clobber the fool Laird MacPherson had betrothed to his daughter, but he took a breath. It was important that he act wisely now. He could do nothing to harm her, and one false move could make him lose everything.

“What say ye, Finley? Will ye let her go?”

Time ticked past as Finley thought. He adjusted his hold on Ada’s arm, and Blair could see her flinch as the blade moved on her skin. Eventually, he nodded.

“Aye, I agree, since ye are so willin’ tae give yerself tae me with ease.” With an abruptness neither Blair or Ada expected, he dropped his blade and his hold on her.

She rushed towards him, falling to her knees in front of him. Dimly in the background, he could hear Irving fighting with his father. But in that moment, all he could see was Ada. Her eyes looking into his, and his hands lifting to frame her face.

“Please dinnae dae this, Blair. Dinnae sacrifice yerself for me. We can die together.” She held tightly to his shirt, her hands grabbing fistfuls of it on his chest.

“Me love,” he said calmly, leaning forward to kiss away her tears, “ye ken that they will only make ye marry Irving if ye stay.” He leaned in and whispered, glad for the background of the father and son argument, “By escapin’, ye have a chance tae live a new life. Ye dinnae need me. I am nae worth it.”

“Blair, ye bloody fool,” she said, suddenly kissing him, and for a second, he let himself fall into the kiss, opening his mouth to hers and tasting the salt of her tears and the sweetness of her tongue. “Why did ye have tae dae that with the maid and push me away when I love ye so much?”

He smiled even though his fate was soon coming to find him. His thumb traced her cheek, still damp with tears.

“I told ye already, tae keep ye safe. Now go. I love ye, Ada MacPherson, more than life itself. I will nae have ye die because of me. I will nae. Go.”

He pressed against her shoulders so that she would sit back and away from him. Tears pushed behind his own eyes, ready to fall, but he had to be strong for her.

“Go,” he said again, more firmly this time.

She looked at him pleadingly as if she might resist, and he tried to harden his expression, to convince her of the rightness of this path. It was all they had, to do this or else lose her life.

“Come now, lass,” Finley said finally, jerking her to her feet and pushing her away. “This is yer chance.” Blair had the instinct to hit him for his treatment of her, but if it got Ada away from them faster, then he could accept it.

“Me horse is there, tied tae the tree.” Blair nodded forward, and she nodded back to him. She stumbled away, looking dumbstruck under the moonlight as she disappeared into the darkness.

He sank in relief when he heard the sound of horse hooves. She was free; she was gone, and she could now live her life in peace, eventually becoming a crotchety old woman. The thought made him smile, but he saw the hunger in Finley’s eyes as the man approached, his blade in hand.

“Well now, we have gotten rid of the lass as ye’ve asked, and now it is just ye and me.” Finley spun the blade around his fingers, and Blair sat up a little taller on his knees, ready to accept his fate.



Ada wiped at the tears with her sleeves, angry at such foolishness. What good did tears do when there was solid thinking to be had? Logic, she needed to find logic in order to find a way to help Blair. He might have thought she’d disappeared, running away like a scared little girl, but no. She’d made it seem like that, pulling the horse along a few steps back towards the forest where she tied it again.

The blade was still in her boot, and reaching down, she picked it up, feeling the strength in its wooden handle. Blair loved



her. If that was not enough to make sure he lived, then it was enough that she'd finally had the courage to tell him as well. Her heart was his and would always be thus. Stepping quietly out of the forest, Ada moved slowly. She could hear mumbled voices in the darkness ahead but couldn't see them any longer. Irving had made a small fire before Blair had arrived, but it was fading a little. The bright moon was now getting covered by dark clouds.

That darkness would protect her, and she was glad for it. So many words crowded her mind, telling her she was foolish, flighty, weak, and unable to do what she set out to, but she kept moving forward. Just because her father thought her to be a certain way, it did not mean she was. She could be whatever she liked, and if Blair liked her for who she was, then was that not enough?

She was now close enough that she could see the shadowy forms. Blair was still on his knees, and Finley was standing above him. Irving was not far off, watching the proceedings.

“So ye will nae beg for yer life like ye agreed?” Finley asked, and the clouds parted a bit, making the moonlight glint off the dirk at Blair's throat. “Perhaps I should send me son after that lass of yers and have him dae what he intended tae dae, treat her a bit rough as punishment. I bet ye've already taken yer prize from her anyway.”

“Dinnae speak of her like that. She has nothin' tae dae with this.”

“Then beg,” Finley said, angrier this time.

“I can beg, but I dinnae see the point. Ye will kill me anyway, and me life is worth nothin’ if Ada is nae in it.”

Ada pressed the handle of the blade to her chest, trying to quell the ache of Blair’s words. If she lost him that night, then she lost the meaning of life. Blair was everything to her, and she would have to return to an empty existence without him.

“Beg, or I will find Ada and murder her slowly, a cut at a time,” Finley said, lifting the blade higher.

Blair breathed out as if in frustration, but his tone was genuine as he said, “Please, Finley, I beg for ye tae spare me life. It was nae me fault that me father had such debts. I was a boy, and I kenned nothin’ of his true difficulties or the fact that he never made one payment. I was a boy who witnessed his own father’s brutal death. I watched as his blood spilled out from his body onto the ground. I will never forget the sight. So, have mercy upon me. Ye ken that I have been through much. Have mercy on me and spare me life so that I might go and be with the woman I love.”

“Better,” Finley said, sounding amused. “I’ll admit it’s a bit of a shame tae lose a man whom I could make useful. Yer father was weak in more ways than one, but if I could turn ye tae me side, ye would be far better in a fight with yer courage and strength than me own son.”

“Father,” Irving protested.

“Shut up!” Finley barked, moving the blade closer. “Good, Blair, ye have done yer beggin’, and now it is time for me tae hear ye scream.”

Ada was close enough now that if she made one sound, they'd turn to her. So, she had to be quick. Just as Blair lifted his neck to be cut and Finley placed the blade at his throat, she rushed out of the darkness, her own dirk in hand. She lifted it high with a cry and brought it down towards Finley's back, meeting flesh and hearing his angry cry in her ears.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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*B*lair wondered for a few seconds if he'd already died and was now in heaven, watching as Ada avenged him. But when Finley turned towards her, his face mottled with rage, Blair knew it was no dream. Ada had come to save him. The blasted woman had not left as he thought she'd done.

*I should have kenned, the bloody woman!*

He didn't have much time to think before he jumped up and rushed into Finley to bring him to the ground before he did something to Ada. Irving growled from behind him as Finley groaned in pain.

"'Tis only his shoulder, God damn it!" Ada cried. "I could nae see well enough; I am sorry, Blair."

"Ye are apologizin'? What in God's name for?" He paused when the thundering of hooves stopped them all, and Finley and Irving started laughing.

"It seems that ye underestimated us," Irving said as he inched closer to Ada, his blade outstretched.

Her dirk was pointed forward towards him, and Irving grinned. “We did nae come on our own. We have our men with us as well in case we could nae handle things on our own.”

Blair’s fear rose as he lifted off Finley and went to stand in front of Ada, crowding her behind his body. He looked all around him and watched as men appeared on horseback from the trees. The bright moon had come out from behind the clouds again, so he could see the colors they wore: MacIntosh. They were surrounded by at least twenty men.

“Stay where ye are, love,” he whispered back to Ada as Finley struggled to his feet.

Strangely, his son did not help him.

“I want tae help,” Ada argued as usual, but she quieted when Finley faced them, his hand clutching his shoulder and his face pale.

“There is nae deal any longer, lad,” he said. “Yer woman will receive her punishment now for what she did. And there can be nae runnin’ either.” He called out to his men, “Capture the man, but leave his death tae me. Dae what ye like with the lass.”

Blair’s heart leapt in fear as the soldiers charged forward on their horses. He had no blade. It was still in Irving’s hand. As Ada sprung out and away from him, back toward Finley, his mind raced with ideas.

Really, was the woman mad? He followed her just to push Finley out of the way as she attempted to dive for him with her dirk. Irving arrived soon after, but the thundering of hooves remained in their ears. They would at the very least kill Irving and Finley before his men arrived. He easily pushed Irving aside, taking his sword from his grasp and turning back to face him.

That's when the hooves grew closer and more numerous, and he heard metal clashing. Looking up, he saw Grant's colors filling the forests and entering the clearing, fighting back with a vengeance against the MacIntosh men.

"Dear God, it's Cameron!" Ada cried, one hand on Blair, one on her dirk.

Irving took this distraction to scramble out from underneath Blair, and he started to run away. He snapped his gaze back to the men as Finley, too, tried to get to his feet and limp away, his hand still clinging to the wound on his shoulder. Blair's gaze narrowed. His breath was coming fast, but now there was hope.

His best friend was there. Ada was still alive, and he turned to her. "I have tae get Finley and Irving. Stay here."

"Ye're bloody jestin' me!" she cried, racing after him as he got to Irving first.

He pushed Ada back as Irving swung madly, his eyes crazed with fear. That night he'd seen the man in the garden trying to intimidate Ada was long gone. This man was far different, his whole body riddled with fear and attempting to get away.

“I did nae want this,” he cried as Blair easily deflected the swings of his blade.

Finley was coming closer, and Blair kept an eye out for Ada who had still not listened to him about staying away.

“I wanted only money and power. I did nae want tae die for this! I will nae!” he raged.

A few Grant soldiers jumped down from their horses, and Blair nodded to one to take Ada away and keep her safe. She screamed at him, but Blair could not let up the fight.

“Och, but I think ye will, lad,” Blair said. “Ye nearly raped the woman I love, and ye planned tae either kill or marry her and make her life miserable. Dinnae think that I will have any mercy on ye.”

Irving shuddered in fear, but he stepped back when Finley attempted to strike at Blair. When the latter turned toward the older man, the man who had haunted his nightmares for years, all mayhem broke loose. All the soldiers had finally come down from their horses, for it was easier to fight on foot in the low light than on horseback. Screams and grunts and metal filled the air, and Blair had to keep focus. He wanted to be the one to kill his father’s murderer, and he swung towards him. But Finley still had fight in him.

His blade came out and cut Blair across the shoulder. “So, we have matchin’ wounds now,” he called over the mayhem.

Blair winced, but he did not stop. Finley was soon crowded back by the fighting of the other soldiers, and Blair pushed through, searching for him.

“Cam!” he cried, watching as his best friend cut down a MacIntosh soldier with ease, kicking him to the ground.

“Blair,” he grunted. “Fine mess, this.”

Blair let out a hollow laugh, his eyes narrowing on the figures around him. *Finley, where in the bloody hell is Finley?* A sharp cry ripped through the air. He found them, Irving and Finley, and Blair rushed forward. The crowd parted a little when everyone saw what had happened. Finley stood, a look of shock on his angry face, staring forward at his son. Irving too looked shocked and shaken, and Blair looked down to see that Irving’s hand was around the blade that was now sunk deep into his father’s chest.



“Bloody bastard!” Ada cried while the soldier held her back. “I can fight too, ye ken,” she said from the sideline as the man chuckled behind her.

“Aye, I am sure ye can, lass, but I have been given strict orders tae keep ye safe, both from Blair and yer brother-in-law. I will nae lose me position for nae followin’ them.” He held her only tighter, and Ada had to watch with fear as the soldiers beat each other to death, her eyes following Blair.

He was strong, no longer cowed by his fate, and hope welled in her chest now that Cameron had come. Would Blair still love her at the end of it all? Would he still want her when it



was all over? Or had his words only come because he had wanted her to leave him to die? She choked back the fear, and in a few minutes, after a cry that chilled her bones, the fighting fell still.

The last MacIntosh soldier who had not surrendered fell, and the crowd was parting. She saw with widened eyes that Irving stood in front of his father, his hand on the blade sunk deep into Finley's chest. He'd wound up accidentally stabbing his own father in the midst of the battle.

Perversely, she had a great desire to laugh. Irving would never have known that the outcome would be this, that he would be the one to kill his own father and in the sight of the Grant army.

"Will ye let me go now?" she asked the soldier, and he released her, letting her rush forward until she could hear Cameron's words.

He yanked Irving back from his father, and he had such a hard grip on the sword that it came with him, letting Finley fall to the ground in a limp heap.

"We will put him in the dungeons," Cameron cried to Cory, wiping a wrist over his forehead. "Tie him up and take him away."

Irving said nothing as he was pulled back by three Grant men, including Cory, his arms tied behind him, and unceremoniously, he was thrown over the back of a horse. Ada had not realized how much time had passed until she noticed the beginnings of dawn were filling the edge of the sky. She

looked around her. The clearing was strewn with bodies, mostly MacIntosh, but a few Grant men as well. She grieved for them and the fact that they'd had to lose their lives to such a foolish, greedy man.

She felt a hand on her shoulder, then turned to see Blair. Blood-streaked and breathing hard, he was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. She wrapped her arms around him.

"Thank God," she breathed against his neck, kissing the skin there and then pulling back to hold his face between her hands.

Her eyes searched his, and a little fear rose in her chest. Would he still love her? *Did* he still love her? Or had all his lovely words been in order to keep her away from the danger?

She opened her mouth to say something, but Cameron interrupted, pulling her away from Blair. "Come lass," he said. "Yer sister is on tenterhooks waitin' for ye tae return. She will nae sleep until she sees ye full in body." He then nodded, but she kept looking at Blair.

He nodded to her. "Go, lass. I will help the men tae collect the others."

Cameron helped her onto his horse, then rode off into the night. As Ada leaned back against her brother-in-law, fatigue pulling at her eyelids, she wondered if it had all been a dream. They had fought desperately against the MacIntosh men, and she'd wanted to join the fight as well. But what had it really been for? Was it just to free Blair? Or had he been fighting to have that future with her?

She fell asleep before she could decide, but Cameron woke her up when they returned to the castle. He helped her down, and she leaned against him as he walked her into the house.

She noticed she was still trembling. “Are ye well, Ada?” he asked.

“Aye, I am well.” *If only in body and nae in spirit and heart.*

“I’m sorry.” He was shaking his head. “I should have protected ye. I should have done more tae help ye. I’m sorry, Ada, I will dae more. Ye must stay with us as long as ye need tae. Ye dinnae have tae go back tae yer father. I will say whatever ye want tae him.”

Ada smiled. “Thank ye, brother, for ye are a brother in truth now.” She patted his arm. “Now, where is me worried sister?”

They entered the main hall, and Ella rushed forward, tears in her eyes. “Thank God,” she said, pulling them both close to her and hugging them tight. She kissed Ada on the cheek and then reached up to kiss her husband. “Ye are both brought back tae me. Where is Blair?”

“He is well,” Cameron said, stepping back and rubbing a hand over his face. Ada’s acceptance of her apology had not seemed to work just yet. “He’s helpin’ the men tae gather the bodies. We’ll have tae return tomorrow as well, but I needed tae bring Ada home tae show ye, me love. I did nae fail ye all.”

“Fail us? Ye could never.” Ella pulled him close. Then she reached out for Ada’s hand. “And ye saved me sister. Ye saved

Blair. Everything is goin' tae be alright now."

"Finley is dead," Ada said. "There will be nae one tae fight against Blair any longer for the past. But Irving is still alive. He is Finley's son. It is all such a mess. Cameron has had him taken tae the dungeons."

Ella's eyes widened in surprise. "Dear God," she said. "And tae think Father wished ye tae wed."

Cameron added, "Aye, I want tae ask yer father about this as well. I have sent word tae him that he should come. Together we will find a way tae punish the man."

Ada nodded but didn't want to think about her father coming. Her uncertainty about Blair was back, and she couldn't see the future.

"I would like tae go back tae sleep," she said softly.

Ella hugged her one more time. "I saw yer note, Ada. Ye were goin' tae run away. That along with Blair's note from Finley made Cam rush after ye both. Why would ye run? We would have helped ye."

Ada looked down at her feet. "I did nae want tae be a burden. I wanted tae prove tae everyone that I could be strong. Blair had tried tae make me think he did nae love me, and I thought all was over. I had tae just leave." She brushed a stray tear away as Ella looked to her husband.

“I see. Well, there is nae need tae talk about it any longer this eve. I’ve already had maids prepare a bath for ye, Ada. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight tae ye both. And thank ye, Cam.” Ada walked upstairs, wondering when she would see Blair.

She hoped that despite everything they’d shared and said to each other, he wouldn’t leave again, believing some foolish lie that he wasn’t worth it. She took a bath in her room, and slipped into bed once she was dry and clean. There were no more tears. It was only fatigue that weighed heavily on her shoulders. She fell asleep as soon as she closed her eyes.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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It seemed like an eternity until Blair and the men returned to the castle. Cory was in charge of everything, and Irving was escorted to the dungeons. Those Grant men who had died and those who had been injured were led inside to the healer's room. Everything would be fine once they'd all gotten some rest. It was already morning, and he felt more tired than he had in a long time.

He greeted Ella and Cameron briefly before walking upstairs to find a tepid bath waiting for him. He bathed and went to bed, and his last thoughts before falling asleep were of Ada. It was dark outside when he awoke. He rose from his bed, stretching his arms over his head. The healer had mended his shoulder wound, but it still hurt. He sat on the edge of his bed, his elbows resting on his knees.

It was over. It was all over. He could think clearly now that he had rested. He didn't have to die. Finley was gone, and so was the desire for vengeance. There was no longer any anger or fear. He simply felt liberated. Before he could stop them, tears began to flow from his eyes. As he wiped them away, he began to laugh.

There was still life to be had. There was hope for the future. The weight that had been in his chest for so long had vanished.

He smiled, content and eager to take the next step. And Ada was the next step.

“Shite,” he said, standing up and dressing quickly. “She likely thinks I’ve run away again.”

He’d been in such a daze after the battle that he hadn’t been able to talk to her properly. Once he was dressed, he rushed down the hall towards her room. When he opened the door, she wasn’t inside, and he cursed.

He closed it quickly and then hurried out into the hall again, and he saw her coming back down the passage. His heart leapt in his chest. He could now look at the woman he loved without fear of tainting her with darkness or bringing her into danger.

“Ada,” he called to her, running down the rest of the way until he picked her up in his arms and hid them in an alcove where nobody could see them.

“Blair?” She sounded surprised, but she wrapped her arms around his neck anyway.

He held her tight like that for a few seconds, unable to drop his hands from her body. He needed to feel that she was alive and well. That there was so much life yet to lead.

“I have ye,” he said, pulling back from her and touching his hands to her face.

Her eyes searched his with confusion.

“Are ye well?” she asked. “I was afraid that yesterday—”

He cut her off with a searing kiss, enough to send sparks down his veins, and his hands drew her in close to him again. She responded quickly, her mouth opening to his, submitting to the pleasure he wanted to pull from her.

“Dear God,” he said breathlessly, his mouth moving down her neck, taking in deep breaths of her. “I thought I had lost ye, but now ye are here, restored tae me.”

“Aye, but ye saw me yesterday after the battle,” she said as well as she could, but he could tell she was softening under his kiss. “Ye said nothin’ before Cam took me away.”

He pulled back and then grabbed her hand as he led her further into the dark alcove, hidden away. His hips ground against her as he looked into her eyes.

“I was in shock, and Cam needed tae bring ye home. I... I love ye, lass,” he said, taking her lips yet again. “Dinnae doubt it now, ye promise? Dinnae doubt it.” He was breathing hard now, and his hands grasped at her skirts as he lifted them above her waist and thrust his hand underneath them.

“I will nae,” she said softly and then cried out when his fingers touched her silken flesh.

In slow undulations, she pulsed against his hand, and he kissed her again, a smile on his lips.



“I love ye, Ada. Tell me ye love me.”

“I love ye, Blair,” she said and then moaned as he slid two fingers inside.

Between kisses, he said, “I want nae one but ye, and I never will. Tell me ye will be mine forevermore.”

“Aye,” she said, her head dropping back against the stone as his fingers moved in and out, and his thumb brushed across her moist nub.

“Blair!” she cried, nails digging into his shoulders as she suddenly shook around his fingers.

Grinning, he removed his fingers and pulled at his kilt to free himself from its bonds. With a gasp, Ada reached out to stroke him.

“Dae ye want me, Ada?”

“Aye.” She stroked up and down and nodded. “Now, Blair. I want ye now or I shall die.”

He chuckled, happiness overflowing from inside of him. “Ye will have tae wrap yer legs around me, lass,” he said.

She lifted her skirts, and he grabbed under her backside to lift her around his hips. Once her legs were there, he pressed her

against the wall, and she let out a whimper of need.

“I took ye soft and slow the last time, Ada, but the need is stronger now. I want ye, and I was this close tae losin’ ye. I want ye tae *feel* me love. I will nae let ye go again.”

“Aye, Blair, please.”

He fit the tip of his length along her seam, and she let out a low soft moan as he pushed inside her roughly. With his hands gripping her backside and pressing her against the stone, he thrust forward, pushing even deeper inside her as Ada cried out. Her hands scrambled for a place to take hold, moving over his shoulders and pushing through his hair, and he began to move.

There might be more obstacles before them, but he didn’t see them now as the thrust inside her again and again. Ada arched against him, her eyes closed, her mouth letting out moans and whimpers of pleasure the harder and faster he thrust.

“Come for me, lass,” he said in a low growl against her neck, kissing the skin there.

Seconds later, he heard her clamp a hand over her mouth as she came around his length, shuddering and whispering his name. He kept his pace, thrusting hard into her until it tingled at the base of his spine, and he came as well, still moving in erratic thrusts as he spilled into her, his seed pulsing out of him and drawing out his pleasure.

After a few breathless seconds, he helped her to her feet, and he kissed her. He leaned his forehead against hers. "I love ye like nae other, Ada," he said, and she licked her lips.

"And I ye. So, why were ye holdin' that back from me?"

Blair laughed out loud, the joy threatening to split his heart in two. And then they heard their names being called down the hallway. Once they were dressed and appeared only slightly ruffled, they went out of the alcove as if nothing ever happened there.

A servant said, "Lady Ada, yer father is here." And with that, the brief joy Blair had held onto plummeted.



"Thank ye," Ada said to the servant, and the young woman walked away down the passage.

She turned to Blair and saw his concerned face. She was concerned too, but after the revelation of their love and the way he'd just made love to her as if nothing else mattered, she was not losing him again.

"Come," she said. "Let us go and speak tae him. "

She leaned up on her toes and kissed him, her hands rubbing along the stubble on his jaw.

"We will tell him the truth, all of it. And I will nae take nay for an answer. If he kicks us out of the castle, I will go with ye.

There is nae question. So dinnae fear.”

She took his arm and walked down the stairs to greet her father as he passed through the entryway. Ada tried not to feel hurt when she saw her father greet Ella kindly and cheerfully, commenting on her pregnant belly and firmly shaking Cameron’s hand. Cameron was still upset, but she hoped that a good night’s sleep had helped him realize that what had happened was not his fault. She walked down the stairs slowly.

She was nervous. She had never been nervous about an argument with her father before. Despite her nerves, what had just happened in the alcove moments before made her skin tingle with pleasure and satisfaction. She had finally seen the true Blair, with all of his many layers, unmasked. He wasn’t just stoic, angry, or tough. He was kind and passionate and infuriating. He was worried about his future with her at times. But she knew of his love now. She felt it in every muscle in her body.

“Father,” she said, calling to him from the base of the stairs, and he looked up.

Just as she knew it would, the light in his eyes that he’d shown to Ella faded a little.

“Ada,” he said, pulling out a note and lifting it in the air. “I was sent this by Laird MacIntosh. It said I should come and see what trouble me daughter has been getting intae here. What have ye been doin’, lass?”

There was silence for a moment as Ada scrambled to think of what to say. She wanted to find the perfect words, to show her

father her strength and tell him that she was so much more than whatever rebellious creature he pinned her as.

Blair spoke first, and he even stepped in front of her a little. Her father noticed the gesture, but he did not comment.

“Laird MacPherson, I think we should all talk about it. But ye should ken that Ada was nae at fault.”

Her father nodded, glancing at her once more before turning towards the main hall, where Ella led him in on her arm. She spoke to the servants about bringing food and wine. Ada closed her eyes as she felt the warmth of Blair’s arm around her shoulder.

“As ye said, we can do this.” He kissed her on the cheek, and she smiled.

Anything was worth fighting for Blair’s love. As they sat and Cameron poured them all wine, Blair spoke. It was the most she’d seen him talk in the whole of their acquaintance. But she was proud of him.

“I have a past, Laird MacPherson.”

Her father listened as he spoke of Finley, the debt, and how it was to be repaid. He spoke of how he’d been hiding for years, but now Finley had finally found him and threatened to hurt Ada.

“I tried tae keep her away from it, pretending that I did nae love her.” Her father sat up at that.

“Love her?” he asked, and Blair nodded, looking to Ada with a bright smile.

“Aye, me laird. I love her like nae other. She is me life. She cannae marry Irving. I would like yer permission tae ask her meself.”

Her father frowned. “Perhaps that is why Laird MacIntosh sent me this note, afraid that Blair was swoopin’ in and takin’ ye away from his son.”

Ada had run out of patience. She stood and looked down at her father, pointing at him.

“I ken that ye are too hard-hearted to see the truth. But this is the truth. Blair was there. Cameron was there. There were witnesses. Finley, the man who was after Blair for so many years for vengeance, is Laird MacIntosh. Irving is his son, and this family is cold-hearted and bloodthirsty. They are the ones who had taken Blair’s father in front of him by cutting his throat. It is the family ye wanted me tae marry intae. I told ye that there was something wrong with Irving. He had tried tae force himself upon me back at the castle, but ye did nae believe me.” She took a deep breath and looked at Blair and Ella for strength.

“And so, I dinnae care if ye disagree. Ye may kick us out if ye like, but I’m going tae marry Blair because he is the man I love. He is a good man, and ye ken it. Ye have loved him as a

son, just as ye love Cameron, even if ye dinnae love me the same as yer daughter.”

“Is this true?” he asked, not really to anyone but just to the air. Everyone grunted an agreement, and his cold blue eyes turned back to Ada. She thought for a moment, perhaps, that they’d softened. But she did not wish to hope too much.

“I did nae ken about Finley and his dealings. I thought he was an honorable man.” Her father looked uneasy as his eyes darted between them all, landing finally once more on Ada. “What dae ye mean I dinnae nae love ye as a daughter?”

Now was the time for the truth. She’d been living with this secret for far too long. Even if nothing changed in her relationship with her father, at least he would know that. At least she could start her life with Blair, with no secrets between them any longer.

“I ken that ye blame me for Mother’s death, and that is why I could never be what ye wanted me tae be. I could never live up tae Ella or whatever yer idea of a dutiful daughter was. Nae matter what I tried, ye were never happy. So, now, I am free of ye. I will form me own path, and Blair will join me. Ye can say what ye like, Father, but me mind is made up.”

By the end of her speech, she was breathing hard, and Blair reached up to hold her hand. Her father’s hands were on the table, curled into fists, and he was looking down at them. Even if she was going to break ties with him, a small part of her still hoped that he would forgive her. She hoped he would tell her that what she’d always thought was wrong.

Slowly and softly, her father spoke. “Ye both did nae ken me father. He was a hard man, always givin’ tae tantrums and yellin’ whenever one of us did anythin’ wrong. He died young, nae doubt because he was so full of anger and fury at all at times. Nothin’ we did ever pleased him. It was worse for me because I was tae take over his legacy and his people. He watched me like a hawk, nae matter what I did.”

Finally, her father’s eyes lifted to Ada, and he quirked a little smile. “I was always getting’ intae trouble, and I just began tae more and more because nothin’ I ever did seemed right for him. Ever since ye were little, lass, ye reminded me of meself. I’d never understood me father and his anger until I had me own children, and I saw what a dangerous world lay beyond the stone of our castle. I could nae afford for ye tae dae wild things because then it would mean that I could nae protect ye. I could nae protect yer mother. And then with Laird Grant, when he nearly kidnapped ye...” He broke off, and Ada saw tears in Ella’s eyes.

“It nearly broke me. I had tae dae what I could tae keep ye both safe, and it became an obsession. If ye were both safe, then life could go on as it was. I am sorry, Ada. I made the same mistakes with Ella, but with ye and how ye reminded me of me wayward self as a younger lad, I had tae protect ye the most. Or, I thought I had tae.” He looked at Blair and Cameron. “It seems that I am overruled but also that I should never have had two handsome young lads guardin’ me daughters in their bedrooms.”

He shook his head and stood. Despite the tension in the room, everyone laughed a little. Ada breathed in, wondering if it was really happening. Had he really apologized to her?

“Ye must dae what ye like, lass. At long last, I see what ye mean. Ye must feel as I felt with me own father. Tae tell ye the



truth, I was glad when he died, for I was free. I should never wish that me own daughters would think that. I dinnae want tae lose ye.” He looked to Blair. “He is a good man; ye are right. Ye have me permission, lad.”

Everyone waited, and then Blair scrambled to his feet, kneeling in front of Ada. Ella and Cameron laughed at his hurried manner, as he almost stumbled down in the rush.

“Ada, I will tell ye again and again. I love ye; ye are everythin’ tae me. Ye are like fire, and ye have burned yer way intae me heart. Please say ye will be me wife. We can dae whatever ye like, go wherever ye please. I only ask that ye stay by me side.”

Grinning, happy tears running down her face, Ada held her arms out to him. “Aye,” she said. “I will marry ye.”

Blair jumped up and held her close. He spun her around as the others clapped.

“Finally!” Ella called, leaning her head against Cameron’s shoulder.

When Blair set her down, she turned to her father. He too had tears in his eyes, and he drew her into an embrace.

In her ear, he whispered, “I ken that it may take time tae forgive me. I should nae have said those things about ye when yer mother died. It was never yer fault. She loved ye and wanted ye dearly. We both did. Ye have been a light in me life, Ada. Go on then, and continue tae shine.”

He kissed her on the cheek, and she smiled, bigger and wider than she had since she was a child. Turning back to Blair, she pulled him close for a kiss, not caring about everyone else around them.

“So, where will ye go after the weddin’? Me plan about takin’ some time tae travel still stands,” Cameron offered.

“Aye, and the dowry will be plenty for ye tae dae so.”

“What say ye, me love?” she asked Blair. “Shall we travel together and never have tae look over our shoulders?”

“Aye, Ada. That sounds perfect.”

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## EPILOGUE

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*O*ne month later

Blair ducked from the blade as quickly as he could. Cameron swung again, and this time, it hit Blair in the shoulder.

“Shite!” Blair hissed, grabbing at his arm and ducking away. “What in the bloody hell are ye thinkin’?” he cried, and he swung his sword around his fingers, getting ready for the next blow.

Cameron stepped forward, but then he lifted his sword away and started laughing.

“Jesus,” Blair said, still clutching his shoulder. The cut from the fight with Finley had healed, but it was still sore, and Cameron had only just made it worse. “What are ye laughin’ about?”

“Yer bloody face,” he said. “I thought ye could use a bit of time tae get out yer energy before yer weddin’, but ye’re too distracted. Ye would never normally let me get a hit in.”

Scowling, Blair sheathed his sword and shook out his arm. “I am just as good a soldier as always,” he said, but he knew that Cameron was right.

He was far too distracted. But it wasn't anyone's fault except for Laird MacPherson, his soon-to-be father-in-law.

Cameron was still snickering as he sheathed his own sword. “So, how have things been goin', me friend? It has been a month since ye have been in the bed of with yer betrothed, am I right?” He slung an arm over Blair's shoulders, and Blair wished he could knock off his friend's arm.

He continued to scowl. “I did nae realize that ye were keepin' count, lad.”

“Och, we all are! Ella and I make sure we count the days. We are really enjoyin' yer restraint, Blair, and Ada looks as though she is teeterin' on the edge of madness. But I suppose that's rather normal for her.”

“I had nae idea that Laird MacPherson would put guards on our rooms and set us at opposite sides of the castle.”

Cameron threw his head back and laughed again. “I dae feel sorry for ye really. Ye ken that Ella and I did nae have this much tae go through for our weddin'. We might have had tae wait a week or so.”

“Thank ye for the reminder.” Blair threw him an angry look, but it only entertained his friend more. They left for the main hall, and by the fire, Blair poured them both a whiskey. “I

wonder why the laird has set our weddin' so far intae the future."

He nearly groaned and sank to his knees. It had been a month, a whole bloody month since he'd bedded Ada, the woman he loved and wanted to be with forever, the woman he'd proposed to and confessed his love to in front of her father. He thought about that time in the hallway above in the alcove more than once in the night, and he had to help himself to get relief. But it was not the same.

"He says it is because of the snow. He wants everyone tae be able tae travel safely for yer weddin' as well as his sister."

"His sister is here already!" Blair said, throwing his whiskey back before he before he could be tempted to dash it against the wall.

"The other relatives then." Cameron sighed and put his feet up on the nearest ottoman. "Sit down and enjoy yerself. Ye ken that it will be all the better for nae havin' it."

"It'll be too fast is what ye mean?"

Cameron put a hand to his chest and descended into yet again another fit of laughter.

"I did nae realize ye were so merry about this, friend," Blair said, pouring himself another measure of whiskey. "Ye seem tae take pleasure in me pain."

He rubbed the scarred wound on his arm. It had been a month since the fight with Finley. There would always be scars, both on the inside and on the outside, but each day brought him a new bit of happiness he hadn't known existed. This ruling by Laird MacPherson, on the other hand, would drive any sane man insane.

“Och, I enjoy seein’ ye so flustered. Honestly, since ye and Ada have confessed yer feelings and since all that business is done with Finley, ye are like a different man. Ye show yer emotions! Ye are nae so strait-laced or a pain in the ass. It is wonderful tae see.”

Blair wanted to scowl even more, but he couldn't help but shake his head and laugh a little. “Ye really mean that she has torn me insides out and changed me forever.” He finally sat down. “Aye, but it was for the best. I needed a change, so I made one.” He remembered his lovely Ada and how, since he'd finally been able to love her freely with his heart, that love had grown with each passing day.

They saw each other at least, even if they were never close, and each time he saw her, he was surprised by all the new ways he loved her. Smiles and laughter came more easily to him now than they had ever before—except when Cameron was teasing him about the laird's decision to make them wait until marriage.

“Good. I am glad ye see it that way, Blair. Ye will be a good husband, ye ken? Ada is lucky tae have ye. I have never met a more loyal man, and I will be very happy tae have ye both back at Grant Castle once yer travelin’ is done. Where will ye go first?”

Blair grinned. He'd spent the last month making plans for his and Ada's travel after the wedding, and it was a complete surprise to everyone.

"It is a secret, even for ye, Cam. I will nae tell anyone. I have sent letters and made preparations. I thank ye for the use of the carriage, and it is good that Laird MacPherson has already given us the dowry. We will leave as soon as the weddin' feast is over."

"Good. I hope ye will be happy. Ye deserve this, Blair. Just think. Ye can idle away yer hours with the woman ye love, and ye dinnae have tae look behind ye at all times. There will be nae fear, and ye can just enjoy yerselves and learn a bit more about the world besides. Aside from England, of course—it may be difficult tae travel in such a place." He shuddered.

Blair's face finally broke into a smile. "Aye, I dinnae think we will stay long there—only tae pass through, ye see."

"Och, dae tell me more." Cameron grinned, and Blair waved a hand at him.

"Leave me be, lad. Dae ye nae have a wife tae annoy?"

"So I dae, but I believe she is with her sister. There they are now." Cameron sat up, and Blair's body hummed with the awareness of Ada's arrival.

He didn't want to turn right away, afraid that his body would betray him. Whenever her brown eyes looked upon him, heat flooded him, and since they hadn't been together in a long

while, all the blood would flow to precisely the wrong place. He was afraid everyone would see the evidence of his obvious desire for her. He took a breath and turned around slowly.

Ada's eyes met his instantly, and she smiled.

Cameron reached for Ella as she approached, and he knelt, kissing her growing belly. Blair was surprised that their father did not suddenly appear, so he leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek.

"Careful now," Ada said with a laugh when he pulled away.

Behind her, he could see one of the usual guards coming to stand near them, and he took a step back, scowling.

"This is beyond insufferable," he said.

"Tomorrow is yer weddin' day." Ella beamed, looking between the two of them. "I am certain ye can wait until then."

"Can I?" he asked and then flushed when he realized he'd said it aloud.

Both Ella and Cameron were chuckling, and even Ada was smiling. He rolled his eyes and put his hands behind his back to keep from reaching for her.

"Ye ken that one day there will be a great revenge," he said, giving his friend a cold smile. "One of these days, I will think



of somethin' tae get ye back for all yer teasin'. Mark me words." He shook his finger at Cameron who only shook his head and smirked. "Dae ye forget that I am quite good at this revenge business?" Blair lifted a brow.

"Och, once all is well again, ye will forget yer need for revenge." He clapped Blair on the shoulder. "Dae be careful with him, Ada, though, for I got a hit on him during our little sparring match."

"Did ye now?" she asked, looking at him with barely suppressed glee. "That sounds out of the ordinary."

"Aye, it was a mere accident," Blair said. "I was simply distracted, and Cam took advantage." He rubbed at his shoulder.

"Well," Cameron stood and wrapped an arm around Ella's waist. "We have some business tae conduct. Can I leave the two of ye alone for a little?" He didn't wait for an answer, and he and Ella walked off, chuckling to themselves.

"I swear it, Ada; they will receive vengeance!" He shook a fist at their backs, and Ada smiled, reaching out to touch his wrist. He shook his head. "Dinnae touch me, lass, or I may burst intae flames."

The guard stepped even closer, and Ada sighed. "Aye, I suppose ye're right. Best tae leave it until tomorrow." She started to back away with a secret smile on her face. That smile alone was enough to harden him, and he watched with a slightly open mouth as she left, calling to him, "See ye later, love!"



Ada always enjoyed teasing Blair no matter the situation, but in this case, she felt just as bad as he did. Or at least, she thought so. Each night was spent in reflection on the only two times they had been together—the way their bodies moved, the way his skin felt on her own, and how his kiss heated her blood. She would toss and turn most nights and curse her father for his foolishness.

Her father knew very well that she and Blair had already been together, and she was certain that was why he was paying his last vengeance upon her now. She supposed that it was not all that unusual that he'd decided upon this ruling until their wedding day, but what she did hate was the fact that he'd put guards at their doors every evening and set them on opposite sides of the castle. The audacity of him!

*But that is all over now.*

She was decided. After the evening meal, she went up to bed, supposedly to get a good night's sleep before her wedding day on the morrow, but once she was in her room and the guard was set in place, she made her plans.

Why should she wait any longer for the man who filled her heart with joy? She wanted a night with him, for tomorrow would be full of merriment and celebration, and they might not even have time to be alone together for a long while. It had to be tonight.

She waited a little while until the guard outside would make the assumption that she was asleep. Then, slowly, she snuck to

the secret passage that led from her room, and with a candle in hand, she hurried down the low, cramped path. Unfortunately, there was no passage that led straight to Blair's room. That would have been far easier. But there was a passage that led to the courtyard outside his room, and in that courtyard was a tree.

When she made it outside, she blew out the candle and left it inside the door of the passageway. All was quiet in the courtyard, and the moon hung high in the sky, giving her just enough light to see the tree and the window which was her destination.

“Ye can dae this, lass,” she whispered to herself.

It was the only way. And even though she'd nearly fallen to her death in that tree before, that was Blair's fault. She was perfectly capable of climbing up it to the window now. With a deep breath, she started her ascent, hoping that the sound of branches cracking didn't alert any of the night guards. It was freezing, but she could bear it, for inside Blair's room it was sure to be cozy.

Once she reached the top, she had to reach out and grasp the edge of the stone window. It was big enough for a woman to fit through, but she hoped Blair would be able to help lift her inside.

“Blair!” she whispered. “Blair!”

She heard a slow movement from inside, and then the sash went up. “Ada! What are ye—”

He didn't finish his sentence before he grasped her arm and helped her inside the room. Their movements were so awkward that they tumbled back from the window, and she fell on top of him. Her skin hummed when she realized he was not wearing a shirt. In fact, he was not wearing anything.

He started laughing, and he helped her to her feet. Ada tucked her hair behind her ears as she watched her betrothed's smiling face. Blair was like a new man now. With the weight of Finley's death lifted, he was free to smile and laugh as much as possible. His laugh warmed her heart every time she heard it.

"What are ye doin'?" he asked, stepping closer, his arms reaching out for her.

"I am comin' tae see ye," she said, lifting her arms to wrap around his neck.

She could feel his length between them, and she smiled when she saw his lovely green eyes darken with desire. It never got old, seeing him look at her like that.

"Ye had better nae be teasin' me, lass. One kiss, and I will have trouble lettin' ye leave."

"Nay," she said. "I am tired of me father keepin' us apart. I want tae spend the night here with ye." She tapped a finger against his chest, and then his arms were tight around her, his mouth bent to touch hers.

A moan came out of her mouth as soon as she opened her mouth to his, letting his tongue delve in to taste hers. “Blair,” she whispered as he kissed down her cheek and neck. “I have missed ye so.”

“And I ye,” he said gruffly, pulling at ties and buttons. “Ye will have tae help me. I cannae think straight,” he said, making her laugh.

She helped him remove her simple gown and shift, and then he hauled her up in his arms, carrying her to the bed.

“Did ye ken I would come?” she asked with a laugh as he lay over her, propping himself up on his arms.

“Nay, why?”

“Ye are sleepin’ naked.” Her eyes dragged down his chest lower until she saw where his manhood stood perfectly straight, pointing at just where she wanted it to go.

“I always sleep naked, lass,” he said, moving in towards her mouth before he kissed her soft and deep. “That is somethin’ ye will learn.”

As his mouth moved down her body and his lip closed over one hardened nipple, she gasped. “So does that mean I must sleep naked too?” she asked, surprised at the waves of pleasure rushing through her.

It had been far, far too long since she'd felt the caress of his beautiful mouth.

"I would insist on it," he said against the skin of her breast. "Although I may nae be able tae keep me hands off ye if ye dae."

She gasped again as his hand found the space between her thighs where she was already slick with need.

"Och, I have missed this," he said in a low voice, and she nodded.

"Me too." With a grin, he slid down her body until he was between her thighs, and he gripped them, opening them wider before he kissed her there.

She leaned up to push against him, and he groaned, licking and sucking, making goosebumps lift all over her skin. His mouth was firm but gentle, and each scoring of his short beard against her sensitive skin sent a new rush of pleasure through her veins. How did she last a month without this man?

When his tongue slid inside her, she broke, covering her mouth to keep from crying out too loudly as her body came for him. He kept licking and kissing until she pulled at his head to come up. She was still shaking when he kissed her on the mouth, and she raised her hips so that he could settle his own between them.

"I love ye, Ada," he said, his hand touching her cheek.

“And I love ye.” She breathed in when she felt his hard length at her entrance.

“And I like that ye found me a day early. Ye’re just like ye always were, rebellious tae the end.” He grinned down at her as he slid inside her in one big thrust.

She whispered his name as she wrapped her thighs and arms around him. Slowly, he began to move. This was so different from their lovemaking in the alcove. They had been so desperate for one another, yet Ada enjoyed this, Blair taking his time. His gaze met hers as he moved in a rhythm again and again, her body meeting his.

One hand slid down to clasp at her breast as he continued to move, and he lowered his head to kiss at her neck.

Ada held tight to him as she felt her pleasure grow. She wanted to live there forever, to be forever caught in his arms, riding the rhythm they made together. But when he angled her hips a bit higher, she came, her climax rolling over her in a rush. Her nails dug into his skin as she shuddered underneath him, and his pace quickened before he pulled away from her, spilling his seed onto her belly, hot and fast.

Breathless, he turned away, grasping at a cloth from a side table to clean her skin. Soon, he pulled her close, and they lay together in the dim light.

“Ye are kind tae think of me, Blair,” she said. “Ye dinnae spill inside of me.”

She could feel his grin against her skin before he kissed her shoulder. “We are tae travel together, tae see what we can of the world. I am bein’ selfish perhaps. I have spent so long in wantin’ ye that I want ye all tae meself for a little while.”

“It is nae selfish at all, Blair,” she whispered, her eyelids getting heavy. “Nae one has ever wanted me all tae themselves before. It is a beautiful thing.”

Her eyes closed, and she felt finally at peace, listening to the sound of his breath behind her.

“Where are we goin’ first?” she asked before she drifted off to sleep.

“Ye will have tae wait, me love,” he said, pulling her even closer. “I want it tae be a surprise. Now, go tae sleep. When we wake, I will finally take ye tae the church and marry ye. It is all like a dream.”

“It is, Blair. But now, we have dreams that can come true.”



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## **BUT THERE'S MORE...**

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# THE HIGHLANDER'S SWEET SURRENDER

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## PROLOGUE

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*F*oyers, Scotland, near Loch Ness, 1644

*Chattan Castle*

“Shite,” Cory Chattan muttered under his breath as he ran down the long passageway to the Council Room.

He was perpetually late, but it surprised even him that he was late that morning. That was the morning they were to read will of the late Laird Gregor Chattan, his father. Soon, he would be carrying an enormous responsibility on his shoulders.

*Ye can dae this. Ye can be laird of yer clan.*

It was something he had been repeating to himself since his father had been found dead suddenly in his study a few days ago. It had been odd to see him so cold and... gone, yet his eyes were open, and he had had a look of surprise on face, as if he realized that death had come for him too soon. Cory had been surprised as well. His father had been hale and hearty, a loud, aggressive presence in his life ever since he could remember. As he rushed, he told himself again that he could do this, even though his father had hardly prepared him for his

new role and had even neglected him in the past few years. It had been Ruairidh, his cousin, who had been Gregor's favorite, but now they were united in their grief.

He slipped inside the sizeable oaken door of the Council Room, his boots clunking on the stone floor.

“Forgive me, Council members,” Cory announced, nodding his head at the line of solemn and fatigued-looking old men at the table in the front of him .

He then proceeded to sit down next to his cousin and faced the council. When he was a child, his father had brought him to a few meetings, and he had thought at the time that the men were older than life itself, but even now, years later, they looked positively ancient. At twenty-two, however, perhaps all men with white hair and beards looked old. He wondered if they had ever cracked a smile in their entire lives.

The man sitting in the center, the most frightening and oldest looking of all, narrowed his steely-eyes at Cory. “Now that we are all finally reunited, let us begin the reading of the will. It is nae like a future laird tae be late when so much is at stake,” he added looking directly at Cory. If it was possible, the old man's gaze narrowed even more.

“Forgive me, Elder McCreary.” Cory nodded and gave the man a brief smile, which was not returned.

He sat up in his chair and looked around the room. All the servants and soldiers of his father's castle were present, and they all stared stonily ahead. Only a few glanced his way, and it was with pity, he realized. Everyone undoubtedly believed

that his heart was sunken in grief, when actually he was much more surprised and afraid than bereft. Ruairidh nudged him.

“Listen, ye dobber. Ye are about tae hear of the fate of yer clan,” his cousin whispered in his ear. “Nae a surprise that ye would show up late.”

*Me clan.*

His whole life, Cory had thought of it as his father’s clan, feeling like an outsider despite being the laird’s son. And now, it would all be turned over to him. People would look his way, expecting him to know what to do in times of battle. He folded his hands together on his lap and leaned forward, eager to hear what the old men had to say. The oldest man cleared his throat, unrolled a scroll, and read.

The will began with a list of minor details, discussing his father’s plans for the servants and soldiers of the clan. Cory felt his mind wandering to his morning as Elder McCreary droned on and on, his voice never changing as he divided Laird Chattan’s wealth.

Only a half hour had passed since Cory had been standing in front of his father’s grave, a thing he thought would not happen for many years. He had looked with a feeling of distance. He and his father had not been close for many years, and he knew his father disapproved of him in many ways.

After leaving the graveside, he felt the need to see Millie before the reading of the will. Her green eyes, red hair, plump lips, and mostly her view on life made everything much easier to bear. She would know just what to say to make him feel

better, and so he had hurried off to her house in the village, only to notice that she was waiting for him on the edge of the graveyard.

“All will be well,” she had said, allowing him to kiss her lips and pull her close, breathing in her familiar scent.

They were soon to be married, and he could not wait. He had fallen in love with her the day he had first laid eyes on her. But now he felt the burden of the future on him. Could he possibly take over a clan and be a new husband?

When the old man cleared his throat again, Cory’s mind jumped back to the matters at hand. “And now we will read who is tae take ownership of Clan Chattan and become the next laird. As you all know, the laird raised his son Cory and his cousin, Ruairidh, together. It was up tae Laird Chattan to decide which of these young men, of the same age, would take over the clan after his passing.”

Cory felt an icy chill run through him. His father would never have believed he could take over the clan, but then again who else could have? He was the man’s blood heir, his rightful son. They were identical, with mahogany curls, a light reddish-brown beard, and blue eyes.

Even though Ruairidh had come to live with them long ago and had always been considered family, Cory was certain that blood would win out in the end. As the old man started to read the next lines, Cory reached up to touch the golden chain around his neck, from which hung a pendant from his father. It was a C, with a pointed V at the bottom edge. He had been gifted it by his father years ago, in a rare show of affection.

*“Never take this off, no matter what. One day it may give ye all the answers ye need,”* his father had told him, his blue eyes urgent.

The Elder continued. “Laird Chattan had specific and unique wishes for the transfer of ownership of Clan Chattan.” Cory glanced at his cousin, who was leaning back in his chair, arms crossed.

“The lairdship of Clan Chattan will go to Ruairidh Chattan, son of Arya Chattan, sister to Laird Gregor, who raised him. He is now Laird of Clan Chattan.”

For a moment, everything was still. No one spoke after the elder councilman spoke the last words, and Cory felt like he had been submerged in an icy loch. No, this could not possibly be true. How could his father have chosen his cousin to be the laird? Cory was the rightful heir. He tried to breathe, but the air would not enter his lungs. He felt as though he had been punched in the gut and he felt that his veins were filling with ice.

Ruairidh slowly rose, and Cory realized this was all reality. He had been pushed aside for his cousin. His insolent, angry, and cruel cousin who had not shown Cory one moment of kindness in all their years together.

“Yer father always approved more of me, ye ken.” Ruairidh gave Cory a thin smile. “It is only natural that I should be chosen. I thank ye, council members,” he said louder. “I will lead this clan with honor, as me uncle did.”

Cory sat there, amazed. The silence in the room was broken when everyone rose to give their allegiance. While he dragged himself to his feet, his mind raced. If he was not the laird, then what in God's name was he supposed to do?



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## CHAPTER ONE

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*1 650, six years later*

Helen Ridley pulled at the bodice of her work-worn woolen gown, adjusting it so as to flatter her cleavage. She stared at the tavern in front of her and grimaced a little. One of the best places in the country to get real information about a war was the tavern. However, despite this being far from her first time, Helen was never eager to set foot inside one. It felt like the men's eyes were undressing her and, more than once, she had felt a rough hand on her backside as she walked around to seek information.

*I suppose I should not complain as I am attempting to play a lady of the night.*

With a deep breath, she stepped forward, ensuring her cloak was open enough to reveal her bosoms on display. She hesitated for an instant in the breeze of the March night, pushing aside a dark blond curl that had sprung free. Then, biting her lips to give them more color, she pulled open the door, and the loud sounds of merry men, drinking songs, and arguing filled her ears. The smells hit her nose: the wheat of the ale, the warm food, and last but not least the odor of men's bodies cramped into a small space after a long day of work.

She held her head high as she walked in. One must always portray confidence in every situation. Helen had learned that over the past year. People responded to confidence and courage. It was why so many foolish men were in power when they should not be, including her brother, Anthony. He never faltered and he never backed down, even when he was making terrible and sometimes cruel decisions.

Noticing a few eyes watching her, she made her way to the center of the activity, a long wooden counter stretching nearly the entire room. There were chairs lined up against it, and she sat down on one, pulling a letter out of her pocket and placing it on the wooden surface in front of her.

“Whisky, please,” she said to the oily barkeeper, who only grunted at her before pouring her a glass.

He pushed it towards her.

She looked up at him with her bright green eyes and flashed him a smile, tilting her head slightly. In a moment, as she expected, the man colored and his stern expression melted.

“Thank ye,” she said, and he nodded, looking definitely less grumpy than before.

It always helped to have allies, especially in a place like this. That was why she was always polite, when possible, and why she used the Scottish accent that she had learned from her mother rather than her English one. No better way to remain hidden in Scotland as an English lass than to speak the brogue as much as possible. As she spun the whisky glass in her hand, her eyes glancing down at the letter, she watched things out of

the corner of her eye. Men were looking her way, which was a good thing. It meant she would find out some secrets that night. It would also mean she would have to listen to the terrible flirtations of drunken highlanders who took little care of their own bodies but liked their women to be pristine.

As no one had yet approached her, she had time to read the letter in her mind again for the hundredth time.

*Helen,*

*I sincerely hope you are not wasting your time gallivanting about on my coin. You always were the more frivolous of the three of us, but you shall make it up to me with your service to the English. As I am aware you long to know, Cecily is well. I have kept my word and have not married her off as I had threatened. But you must keep your word and return with information about the Scot's next moves. You have been gone too long, you must return to England as soon as possible. I never shall understand how you could turn away from our father to side with our Scottish mother, but now you shall do your country justice. You shall assist us to defeat those bastards, those savages that live among the rocks of the dark Highlands. Send word.*

*Anthony*

Helen took a large gulp of the whisky.

*One of these days, Anthony shall receive his due. And I certainly hope it shall be me who gets to give it to him.*

She took another sip and let out a breath. She had never thought she would find herself in this position, but it had been the only way she could think of to save Cecily from being forced to marry a complete stranger by their half-brother, Anthony, the Earl of Seton. Cecily was the one person who did not despise her for the shared Scottish blood of their mother, although she had favored their father, and she was far warmer and malleable than Helen had ever learned to be. Home had become even more insufferable after her father had died. Her family hated her for what loyalty she held to her mother, especially now that the Scottish and the English were at war.

War was a way of life between the two nations, and they had been battling each other for years. When Anthony had suggested she help him get information about the Scottish, she had accepted. The excitement about the dangers this implied had made her heart beat faster. The constant travelling and required focus also helped to lessen the pain of feeling that she no longer had a true home.

She finished the whisky and held out her glass for another. A few drunken mumblings about war and the English had caught her attention. She turned slightly and saw a rough and tumble group of men bending over their cups, leaning close to each other and talking.

One of them, a bald man, looked up and saw her watching; he shooshed the others and then smoothed a hand over his shining head. Swallowing back her bile, Helen rose from her seat.

*You know what to do. Think of it as unveiling another secret.*

Swaying her hips just so, she took her newly filled glass of whisky and walked towards the table of four soldiers in dirty

uniforms, and they all gazed up at her with drunken looks of lust.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” she said. “One of ye might be interested in an evening of company.” She gave them her charming smile as well, and all the men’s eyes darkened with lust. She sat down next to the bald one.

He slid a hand around her waist and pulled her close, smiling into her face. Helen smiled back, but she could feel the bile rising in her throat at the smell of him. Sweat and ale and stale breath. The remains of his food were stuck in his teeth, and his clothes looked as though they had not been washed in a very long time.

“Just give me a minute or two, lass, and then ye and I can have some fun.”

“Och, I am in nae rush, lads. Why dae I nae join ye for a wee whisky first?” Helen lifted her glass and tried to slide away from the man, but he held tight.

“Very well. Angus, what is it ye were sayin’ about Clan Chattan,” the balding man said.

Helen smiled and looked down at her glass. No one thought that women of the night cared about anything, they simply did not matter. They were consistently ignored, even more so than regular women. Helen could feel that she was on the brink of finding out something good.



Cory Chattan stood on the battlements with Laird Grant, or Cam, and they stared out over the land. Cory had been Cam's advisor for a year now, but they had become more like friends and confidants. The man next to him was a good one, strong and true, with long blonde hair akin to a lion's mane. He loved his wife Ella and their twins dearly. There was much to envy about the man, but Cory could not help but feel only good things about him.

It was evening, a cold and dark one, but the moon was full, and Cory took a deep breath of icy air. His auburn hair was tied back, but he could still feel the tickle of a loose hair on the back of his neck.

"It will snow taenight," he said. "I can feel it in the air. It hangs heavy."

"Aye," Cam said. "The village will need some help. The last time, too many rooves caved in. We rebuilt them, so we will see if they can handle the weight of this snow. Och, there it is, the first flake."

Cam reached out a finger to catch a snowflake as it fell, and Cory smiled. "Aye, it seems we are tae be plagued with snow, even in the spring. Let us hope April brings us less woe."

"I hope so. It has been bloody cold of late. I cannae drink enough whisky or sit in front of enough fires tae warm me bones."

"Och, but what of Ella?" Cory teased. "Surely that is a wife's duty? As it is a husband's. Tae keep one another warm at night."

“Aye, true enough.” A look of pleasure passed over Cam’s eyes, but then he coughed, and his face turned a bit more serious. “Sorry for yer disappointment with Ada. I ken that ye were interested in her.”

Ada was Cam’s sister-in-law, who had been visiting at the end of the previous year. She was bright, beautiful, intelligent and feisty. She did not take anything she did not want to. For a brief time, Cory had flirted with the idea that she could perhaps be the one for him. That he could finally forget about the past, his failures, and the way he had lost his clan and family and move on. But it was not to be. Ada was in love with her guard, Blair.

“Och, it is nothing. It is nae as if I really expected anything tae happen.” Cory shrugged and shivered a bit when an icy breeze blew past him. “I suppose we ought tae go inside again. Maybe drink a dram or two ‘afore I set off again.”

Cam put his hand on Cory’s shoulder and faced him. “I can send the men, Cory. Ye are always doing too much, and ye donnae have tae. There is plenty ye can dae here in the warmth, as me advisor.”

Cory smiled and laughed, but he knew he would not listen. He had to make himself feel useful.

He patted his stomach. “I could dae that, but then I fear I will get a bit longer around the waist.” He winked at Cam. “I have tae keep up me physique if I am going tae find another lady, one who is nae already in love with another.”

“Aye then.” Cam patted his shoulder, and the two of them headed down from the battlements to a door in the wall.

Once inside, the air was instantly warmer, and Cory became aware of the sound of the whipping wind.

“The storm is comin’ fast,” he warned.

He always helped during storms and any other time the clan needed him, but it did not mean he did not sometimes feel fear. As Cam had said, it would take many whiskeys and many hours in front of the fire to warm his bones again once he returned.

“They always dae. I daenae have much use for God, but in storms, I find meself praying like a zealot.”

They went to Cam’s study and found Lady Ella already there, holding a pot of tea.

“Och, the two of ye,” she said, smiling up at them from a chair by the fire. “Come and sit. I heard ye were up on the battlements, and so I brought ye both some tea.” Cam took her in his arms and kissed her.

Cory looked down and folded his hands in front of him. He had never seen a husband and wife so taken with one another, and as unusual as it was, he found he rather wanted that for himself. It made him think of Millie and what could have been.



*Och, traitorous, heart-breaking Millie.*

Once the announcement of Ruairidh's ascension as laird of the clan had been made, Millie conveniently forgot what she and Cory had shared. She had claimed passionate love for Ruairidh instead, and they had married, making her Lady Chattan, with all that went with it.

"Are ye cold, Cory?" Ella asked, and he looked up again to see her smiling at him.

"Nae. Thank ye. I am well. I will leave the two of ye."

"Nonsense!" she cried, pulling herself out of her husband's embrace, but he still held one hand on her waist. "Ye two have much tae discuss, I am sure, with the storm comin'. I was only passin' by. A good evening tae ye."

"Until later, love," Cam said, kissing her again before she giggled and pushed his arms away, nodding at Cory before she went.

With a sigh, Cam sat down and poured each of them hot tea flavored with rich spices to warm the heart. He handed Cory one, and he lifted a brow.

"Ye look as though ye have something on yer mind besides the storm."

"Just thinking about 'afore, I suppose."

“Yer family?” Cam took a sip of tea and leaned back, his keen eyes watching him. Nothing seemed to get past the man, even though Cory had done his best not to share the painful parts of his life.

“Aye, something like that. What is the latest in news about how me cousin is farin’ as laird?”

Cam nodded, staring into the flames as he thought. “Aye, we daenae have much dealings with one another as ye ken. But I hear he has strength in numbers, and he is a rather powerful leader, nae always so focused on kindness and compassion.”

“That sounds just about right.” Cory drank a sip so fast that it burned his tongue, and he winced. The tea did, however, warm him a bit. When he had finished, he put it down and stood. “I suppose I ought tae go.”

“Ye should get some food in ye ‘afore ye leave. Keep watch when yer out there,” Cam frowned. “There are many English soldiers about these days. Sometimes, they like tae take advantage of the storms.”

“Aye, ye can be sure I will be on the watch. Thanks for the tea.”

“Cheers. Good luck tae ye.”

Cory left the room and shut the door, focusing on the night ahead. Hopefully, no one would be in need of too much help so that he could soon return home and sit in the warmth of his fire.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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Helen tried her best to sip the whisky slowly as she leaned in to hear the mumbled and slurring words of the soldiers.

“Aye, that new laird is a right blaggard,” the one called Angus said. “Only put in place six years ago, and he is nae even the son! He has taken the clan and made it strong, but I heard tell of his evil around. That he is so cruel, even the devil himself would nae wish tae face him.”

“Och, but what of their loyalties? Ye think they want Scottish independence?” the bald one asked.

Angus shook his head, his dark eyes narrowing as he put his fists on the table. “Nay. All he cares about is money, so he does.” He leaned in, as did the others, Helen as well, as slowly and softly as possible. The stench of the group was rather unbearable, but she breathed into her mouth and listened in. “I heard that he is selling weapons tae the English, and giving them space on their lands tae camp, prepare, and even give them some insight intae what other clans are doing. I ken those English villains are planning the attack soon enough. They daena like the king we have chosen.”

“Nay, they daenae,” a ruddy-faced man at the far end of the table said. “I ken ye had always better keep a close eye on the English. Cunning is in their blood.” All eyes turned to Helen, and she pulled back quickly, showing the men her bright smile again.

“’Tis a good thing we have a proper Scottish lass here among us.” The bald man put his arm around her again and kissed her cheek. “Come then, lass, shall we go have us a good time.”

He let go of her long enough for her to slide away, and he rummaged in his pocket for a few coins to put on the table. The other men did the same. Helen’s breath came quickly. She could deal with one man, but more than one would be more difficult to handle, even if they were drunk off their feet. With them being soldiers, even if they were older, she knew they would be strong.

“Come along then, lass.”

“Aye,” she said, again trying to muster a bright smile.

*Stop being afraid. You have done this many times, and you can do it again.*

Now that she had some interesting information, she wanted to go immediately, but she had to deal with this man first.

“What is yer name, then?” she asked, sliding a hand through his arm to act as if she was eager to go. “I think ye should be the man tae pay me bill at the bar.”

“Och, is that so?” He winked at her before producing another coin and slapping it onto the counter, making the barkeeper jump slightly.

He pulled on Helen’s arm, and she followed confidently, swaying her hips once more, catching the eyes of a few men on her way out.

*Just play the part.*

“Come with me,” she said to the man once they left the tavern.

Thankfully, the other men had not followed them, so she would only have this man to deal with. Pulling him towards the alley, he chuckled and stumbled along drunkenly after her. This would be easy enough.

“Eager are ye then, lass? Havenae had a real lad in some time, is that it?”

“Surely ye can rectify that, sir.”

“I certainly can.” His eyes darkened, and once they were in the alley’s shadow, he drew closer, his breath hot on her cheek.

“Just a moment,” she said, giving her best feminine giggle as she pushed against him. “Turn around for a moment. I want tae undress a bit for ye.”

“Och, ye dae ken how tae entice a man.” As the man turned around, her girlish smile fell instantly as she raised her hand and made it fall hard against his neck, hitting the vein in just the right spot.

As she had hoped, he crumpled to the ground like a sack of potatoes, and she breathed a quick sigh of relief. “Thanks be to God.”

Hurrying away, she took one more look behind her in the alley, where she saw the shadow of the slumped man. She put up the hood of her cloak, buttoned up the front over her bodice and continued on.

*An evening's work done. Now to find the Chattan Castle and get there before they give too much information to the English. Cannot have Scotland getting too much of the short end of things.*

She smiled to herself as she hurried off into the night. She noticed the snowflakes falling around her and cursed aloud, looking one way and then the other. It was not safe to stay in an inn after what had just happened. Her eyes moved to the far woods.

*Perhaps the snow will not be so bad. I could wait it out until the worst is over. Then no one will be out and about as I return to my room to gather my belongings.*

Convincing herself of her choice, she trotted toward the woods as the wind blew harder, and the snow came faster. Once inside the woods, the wind abated somewhat, and she wrapped her cloak a little tighter. She wished she had eaten a morsel or

two at the tavern instead of only drinking two drams of whisky. But that would keep her warm at least.

She had to hide after what she had just done. They would not notice for a while, but the men inside, drunk as they were, were sure to come after their friend soon enough, and then they might start looking for her. Helen could not afford to arouse suspicions. When she had walked far enough into the woods, she came across a large boulder facing away from the wind, and gleefully, she sat down against it, much more protected from the wind. She watched as the snow fell softly around her. No one would find her there, and she could rest peacefully for a few hours. Her eyes closed as the whisky and the rush of what she had just been through caught up with her now. Protected from the wind, she felt warmer and cozy, and she fell asleep.



“God in Heaven.” Cory’s teeth chattered as he rode back to the castle on a lone, wintry road.

The storm had taken a turn, and the snow was piling up quickly on the edges of the road and submerging the villages. He had just finished securing one of the newly built rooves in the closest village, and every part of his body was cold. It felt as if his very veins were filled with ice, but he tried to stay focused as he rode home in the dark, saying soothing words to his horse, Maitheanas.

“Come now, lad. We can dae this.” Cory clucked and nudged against the poor steed’s icy sides, hoping to encourage the horse to continue.

“Jesus, it’s feekin’ cold,” his riding companion and soldier, Tobias, said at his elbow. “I cannae believe anythin’ could survive this.”

In the silence of the night, it felt as if they were the only beings in the world. When he and Tobias blew out their breath, it swirled around them like twin clouds, making Cory dream of whisky and fireplaces.

*And perhaps a warm body tae come home tae.*

Where in God’s name had that thought come from? He blinked in surprise and encouraged Maitheanas to ride faster to get home all the quicker. He had not thought of being with anyone in such a long time. Not in that way, the way that meant he would return home to them night after night. For so long, it had only been Millie that he had thought of: her lovely mouth, her warm, smooth body, and the way she had always screamed in pleasure as if he were the only capable of giving it to her.

*All a lie. She had cared nae a whit for me.*

But after that evening’s conversation with Cam, Cory had thought of perhaps one day finding someone he could return home to. Who would smile at him, embrace him, and lead him to bed.

“Cory? Ye all right?” Tobias asked, his teeth chattering loudly.

“Aye, just thinkin.’ I hope that roof holds, but we may have tae think of somethin’ else once the snow melts if it doesnae.”



“Aye. We will. The family were grateful tae have us come. I hope the other soldiers are on their way back as well. The snow has stopped a bit, but it came in a big rush there for a while.” A twig cracked in the woods on one side of the road, and both their heads jerked in that direction. “What is that? Dear God, if it is wolves, I will warm up soon enough rushin’ back tae the castle.”

Cory chuckled, glad for the distraction from his earlier uncomfortable thoughts, full of longing and desire. “Nay, I doubt it. But the fight would certainly warm us up a bit.” He narrowed his eyes and saw a boulder and a figure slumped beneath it. “Better go and take a look, though. Go on ahead. I can dae this on me own.”

“Thanks be tae God,” Tobias said, riding off, and Cory turned his curious gaze back to the trees.

He turned Maitheanas towards the woods, and the horse diligently obeyed. He jumped down, patting the stallion’s flank for comfort.

“Just a wee while more, lad. Just tae check on this.”

He trudged forward, his hand hovering above his dirk in case it was something dangerous. The moon was high and full enough to give a haunting light to the dark trees, bouncing off the snow, painting everything around it. When he got close enough, he saw that the slumped figure was not an animal but a person, and he hurried forward when the figure suddenly gasped, stood up, and Cory, bewildered, found himself on his back in the snow.

“What?” he cried in shock. No one had ever moved that quickly before or bested him with hardly an effort.

But when he looked up, a young woman stared down at him, her hair falling about her, and her cloak hood fell back. Her hands were on his shoulders, and she was straddling him. He was so surprised by what had just happened that it took him a few seconds to realize that an icy blade was at his throat.

“Who are you, and what are you doing here?” she breathed, her white teeth bared in a sort of grimace.

Her thighs gripped his sides tightly, and he knew that if she had slung them around his neck instead, he would have choked in a matter of seconds. She was such a stark difference from the usual young ladies he met in his life among the clan villages, who batted their eyelashes at him and pretended to faint or feel ill so that he or another young man would have to catch them.

The lass was strong, but now that he had his wits about him, he could overpower her with a few quick moves. He waited. The sight above him was mesmerizing, and he had no words for the moment. He wondered if he had collapsed off his horse and knocked his head on the icy road, for it appeared a goddess straddled him. Her every breath and slight movement radiated fire, strength, and courage. He felt envious, for he was not sure he had ever looked as powerful as she did right then. Even in the darkness, he could tell that her eyes were fiery, and her voice was strong and confident. For a moment, he did not know what to say, and then he realized that if he did not speak soon, his back would become fused with the frozen ground beneath him, and then the both of them would be caught in the woods, freezing to death.

“Listen, lass,” he said, and he felt the blade press even closer, the chill of it making him gasp, reminding him just how close the point was to his throat.

“I am no mere lass,” she growled at him.

If it was possible, her eyes showed even more sparks.

*Ye certainly are nae.*

“I—” he started yet again, but then out of nowhere, she sneezed.

The movement was in stark contrast to her general demeanor, her gloved finger moving up to brush against her nose as she turned away daintily to sneeze. The blade loosened on his throat as the sneezes wracked her body. Two more came soon after, and as her body vibrated with the motion, Cory laughed. His goddess was entirely real, it seemed. And much more of a proper lady than she had wished him to notice.

“How dare you laugh?” she cried, looking as if she was about to sneeze again, when Cory reached up, grasped her wrist, and spun them around until she was now pressed underneath him. Her hand, still holding the knife, was now held above her head, and she was looking up at him wide-eyed, her red nose pointed in his direction.

For a moment, Cory paused. In those fateful few seconds, the cold was no longer seeping into his bones. The breeze above had blown aside a few of the bare branches of the trees, and the moonlight could now cast light more fully onto her face.

He sucked in a breath, wondering if he had ever seen a bonnier lass than the one he was looking at right then. Her lips were parted, and her eyes met his with a confidence he had never seen before in a young woman, except perhaps Lady Ada and Lady Ella. And with her pressed beneath him, his hips between her legs, his mind had no trouble in wandering to other occupations.

But he was a gentleman. He was not his cousin, who took pleasure where he found it. Clearing his throat, he furrowed his brow and tried to focus. She was just a woman, not a goddess, and he had to figure out a way to get out of there so that they both did not end up dead.

“By God, woman, we are goin’ tae both freeze tae death if ye daenae come with me. All I wanted tae do was help ye, so daenae fash but move quicker tae my horse and let’s get going.” He squeezed the wrist that held the knife, and she let it go, muttering something under her breath that he thought sounded like “bloody scoundrel.”

He stood, pulling her up with him, and she pulled out of his grasp as quickly as she could, but not before he could reach down and pick up her dirk, pushing it into his boot. He gave her a quick smile.

“In case ye are thinkin’ about stabbin’ yer rescuer again.”

The way her eyes widened and her mouth gaped open made Cory want to laugh again. “That is the last thing I would ever think to call you, you... brute!” she cried indignantly even though she stomped after him out of the woods towards his

waiting horse. “More like someone who is keen to interrupt one’s peaceful slumber!”

He grinned, spinning around to face her once he reached the tree where his horse had been hastily tied. “Och, the peaceful slumber of a lass who is slowly freezin’ tae death. Ye’re right. How dare I dae such a thing?”

She had no response to that except for an angry huff, and Cory tried to stifle another chuckle. He was surprised. He was freezing his arse off, and yet the young woman had made him laugh three times in the span of their brief yet very interesting encounter. And forget the fact that it was bloody cold.

He patted Maitheanas’ gray sides, noting just how cold the horse was. “Come with me for the night, and I will give ye shelter, and ye can go yer way tomorrow. I cannae just leave ye here, but I daenae want tae stay in the cold tae protect ye from the wolves.”

He stared at her for a few seconds while she thought about it, looking him up and down. “I do not care for your self-assuredness. It is a very unattractive quality.” She huffed. “You know that I could just put you down on the ground again. You caught me in a moment of weakness with that sneeze.”

“Of course, I ken that. But I think there are other more important matters at hand, such as getting warm and finding food. What dae ye say? Will ye come with me?”

She took a breath, and then taking a step forward, she did the last thing he thought she would do. She crumpled into his

arms.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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“*J*esus!” Cory said, shocked that she had actually fainted.

When her face came under the light of the moon again, he saw just how blue her lips were. “All right then, lioness, I shall take ye home tae get ye warm.” He scooped her up into his arms and placed her on the saddle while he jumped up after her.

“Come now, lad,” he cooed to Maitheanas. “We have a lass tae save.”

With the horse able to speed up his pace a bit more, Grant Castle came in sight far sooner than he had expected, and after hurrying to the stables and leaving his poor horse with the surprised stable boy, Cory carried the woman towards the castle, entering through a wooden side door. It was no use waking anyone else up, for he had his own room and handled his own affairs. She was a wee lass. Although tall, she felt like a feather in his arms, and he feared that she had not eaten that evening or perhaps even more.

He hurried up the stone steps to his chamber and burst inside, glad to find a servant had already lit the fireplace while he was

out. Cam must have seen to it that everything be ready and waiting for him upon his return. The room's heat was very welcome, and Cory quickly placed the young woman on the bed. As he worked her cloak off her shoulders, which was damp from snow, he gazed down at her face. She was utterly breathtaking, and he only realized he had been holding his breath when his chest tightened.

*God in Heaven.*

Her skin was pearly pale, and her lips were full, the color coming back to them a bit. With her eyes closed, her dark lashes fanned across the tops of her cheeks, which were scattered with freckles. He could not exactly tell the color of her hair, for the snow had dampened that as well, but strewn about her, it looked to be a dark golden color. With the light of the fire casting over her, it showed some red reflections as well, as if she had some Scottish blood coursing in her.

His smile quirked at that. From the fine English accent she had sported out in the woods, he was certain that was not the case. Clearing his throat, he tried to focus again, and set about removing her boots and making sure her dress was dry enough for her keep on. Trying not to touch her too much, he covered her, and then he went to sit by the fire, pouring himself a dram to warm his bones. He was not sure how long he sat there, trying to get warm, the crackle of the fire in the air, but his eyes finally grew too heavy to stay open.

When he rose again, he rubbed his eyes, noting the faint glimmer of dawn outside the sliver of the castle windows. He stood, stretched, and when he turned, he remembered the fiery lass from the night before who had nearly stabbed him in the throat. Slowly and softly, he crept to the bed and spied her on her side, her mouth slightly open, breathing deeply and heavily.



“Thanks be tae God,” he whispered, seeing just how much color had returned to her cheeks and mouth.

She was covered in the woolen blankets up to her neck, and it seemed she'd curled nearly all of them around her body, leaving none to spare.

*Ye greedy little lass. What could yer name be?*

He could feel the smirk on his lips before he straightened up, annoyed at that thought. The cold must have gotten to his brain after all.

He left to go fetch breakfast and hot water so that she could bathe as soon as she arose. When he returned, she was still sleeping, but the maid had entered, carrying buckets of hot water to pour into the bath. He took a bit himself to wash at a table in the far corner, listening to the sound of the maid closing the door behind her before he removed his shirt to take a wet cloth over his skin. He stared out at the snowy expanse below his window, trying to think of what he was going to do with the woman.

He hoped she did not feel like a prisoner in the room, for from the way he had found her last night, he doubted she had anywhere to go. He thought of himself a few years ago as he had left the family castle, unsure of where next to call home. He had never felt more alone in the world. No proper family, no true love, no birthright. It had all been taken from him in a matter of days, and he was left standing empty-handed, with the desire to leave Chattan Castle at the forefront of his mind.

Almost as soon as Ruairidh had been named laird, Millie had told him she would marry him instead. That whatever had been between them had all been in his mind. Cory had lost his clan and his heart all at once.

He might have been tempted to let himself freeze to death in the forest as well, but something had kept him going forward. He had eventually found a new life, and perhaps he could help the young lass find her path as well.

He was just about to turn around to face the woman again when he felt the pinprick of a blade at his back. He jumped a little, and then he rolled his eyes, a smirk spreading across his lips again.



“Come tae kill me again, lass?” he asked. “Or perhaps I should call ye Sassenach.”

“I do not care what you call me, but why have you brought me here?”

Helen’s heart was thumping. She had woken suddenly, in an unfamiliar room. That man had his back to her. She would escape if it was the last thing she did; no way she was going to be taken by a man against her will and be trapped in a room for his pleasure. Although the room did feel deliciously warm and she felt more rested than she had in a long time.

“I think, if ye would just turn yer head a little, ye would see why.” She did not turn, and he pointed to his side. “There is food there and a bath if ye’d like it.”

Finally, she turned, the hunger in her belly making it hard for her not to give in to the temptation. A plate of warm porridge, cheeses, and some fruits sat on the small table near the fire, as did a metal tub, steam rising over the top. Quickly, she hid her blade and straightened. Slowly, he turned around, and she stepped back from him.

Having spent a lot of time with men over the past months, Helen thought she had become immune to the charms of the handsome ones. However, this one made a gasp rise from her throat in surprise, which she swallowed back. She had not noticed his strong good looks last night in the forest when she was colder than a witch's tit, and when she had thought he was trying to rape or kill her or whatever men did to women in her world.

But now she was getting a good look at him in the light of day and the fire. He was at least six inches taller than her and looking down at her face with bright blue eyes.

*Kind eyes.*

His hair was auburn and tied back, and he had a dark beard. A gold pendant hung around his neck in an odd, pointed shape, but her eyes were distracted by his muscular neck, his bare broad shoulders and chest, reddish-golden hair lightly sprinkled over the skin. Swallowing, her gaze fell lower still, noting just how hard and chiseled his stomach was before she saw the edge of a kilt around his waist.

“Well?” he asked, faint amusement in his voice. “Are ye hungry?”

Instantly, her mind went to the basest meaning of the words, thinking about how his appearance, had sparked a fresh desire in her, one she knew not to trust. Men were not to be trusted, especially not ones as handsome and godlike as this one. Putting her hands behind her back, she took another step back and turned away from him to look at the food. She desired him, but she could not let him see it made her nervous and made the blood pump faster in her veins.

“Yes, thank you.... And I must apologize for my behavior.” She went to sit in front of the plate, picking up the piece of buttered bread. Before she took a bite, she narrowed her green eyes at him. “Why are you doing all this?”

She was far too well-versed in the ways of the world to know that kindness was often not free. He crossed his arms over his broad chest, *naked chest*, showing the muscles there to their finest advantage. She wondered if he was aware of what he was doing to her insides, but he merely shrugged.

“Maybe I am just a good man,” he smirked. “I couldnae very well let a lass freeze out in the forest. Especially nae a fancy Sassenach one like yerself.”

She arched her brow and lifted her chin a bit. Her stomach was aching with hunger, but it could wait for another few moments.

“There are always reasons for kindness, especially when it comes to men.” She waved a hand at his bare chest.

But there was no heat in her words, and he chuckled, sending fresh tingles down her skin at the happy, almost boyish sound. “Not this time. I swear.”

With a grin, which was far too handsome to be on anyone’s face, he made a motion over his heart, and then grabbed his shirt from over the back of the chair. “I will leave ye tae bathe on yer own, lass.” His face grew serious again and she watched him walk out the door, tucking the shirt into his kilt as he did.

She frowned at the closed door before she descended upon her food, finishing it in a matter of minutes. Then she hurriedly undressed and sank blissfully into the hot bath. She sighed with relief. With her eyes closed, Helen scrubbed her skin, thanking the mysterious man for saving her from a freezing death in the woods. What an ignominious death that would have been, and it would have pleased Anthony far too much to learn that she had died in such a foolish and unremarkable manner.

And then, Helen thought more about the mystery man. She wondered at how chivalrous he had been, leaving her to bathe on her own, seeming to expect nothing even after he had saved her life. Especially after she had threatened to kill him twice now, and not exactly been kind to him. As her hands slid over her soapy skin, the tingles remained at the thought of being this close to a man who looked like that. A man who had the trappings of a good heart and whose eyes were kind.

*Perhaps I should reward him, as I have so often told others I would.*

It was not as if she regarded her virginity as special in any sort of way. She might be a titled noblewoman in England.

However, with her family's disdain for her, especially her brother's, it was not as though she had scores of eligible suitors at her door. Besides, Helen did not wish to be traded in such a way. Perhaps a handsome, well-muscled, kind-eyed, and respectful Highlander was just the man she could give her body to. She had no doubt that he would be up to the task. All she had to do was make sure that he did not know just how much he affected her with that smile and those eyes.

*Or is this stupid? Helen, you are spending way too much time thinking of becoming a courtesan!*

And yet she could not say that the thought did not appeal to her, to just get over with this thing and see what the fuss was all about. And so, once she had bathed, she dried herself with the scrap of cloth left outside the tub, brushed out her long dark blonde hair, and then went to lay on the bed, naked as the day she was born.

*How does one perform a proper seduction?*

It was far easier to do so when she was only playing a part, when she knew very well that it would never take place and the man would be unconscious soon after. But now, at the thought of offering herself to a man in truth, it made her as nervous as she had not felt since she was a young girl. After years of standing up to her brother, especially to protect her younger sister, Helen thought herself immune to such nerves. But there they were, making her prickle and breathe hard. And she felt a little foolish as she tried to assemble her limbs in a way that would appear to be seductive and enticing.

She was in the middle of such thoughts when the man knocked and entered the room, his head bent down as he read something in his hand.

“You’re back,” she said, far too brightly than she had intended to for someone attempting a seduction, and the man’s head snapped up.

She had never ever before seen the phrase ‘eyes nearly burst out of his head’ in real life, but that was exactly what it looked like to her.

“Jesus Christ, woman,” the man said, his eyes wide and his cheeks coloring as he rushed to her, grabbed a pillow and a nearby tartan and piled them on top of her.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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*H*elen began sputtering, attempting to remove the items that he simply could not stop piling on top of her. Was this man mad? Had she been saved by a very attractive, yet mad Scotsman? Or maybe he was just not attracted to her? What in God's name was going on? When she finally managed to peek out, she spotted him searching for more things with which to cover her, and she laughed.

“Is this your attempt to kill me, then? To suffocate me with wool and down feathers? What on God's green earth is wrong with you? Am I so disgusting to look upon?”

The man froze, and when he turned to face her, he was breathing hard, his eyes trained on her eyes as if trying very hard not to look anywhere else.

“It is nae that,” he said. “It is just that ye daenae need tae dae anythin' for me because I saved ye, and done with honor, it was.”

Helen opened her mouth and then shut it again. Really, this man was most confusing. She had spent the past months batting men away as they tried to press her for favors, and now the one time she had offered herself to a man, he refused to do



so, so much so that he nearly suffocated her with blankets and pillows. And was that a spare kilt? She tossed it aside and leaned on her one elbow out from under the pile of blankets.

“You did not force it on me. You already know that I would fight tooth and nail to keep someone from taking pleasure from me without my permission. Surely you did not forget our interaction in the woods so quickly.”

“Nay, I daenae think I could forget that so quickly.”

His jaw clenched again, and Helen smiled faintly. He was not disgusted. He wanted her too, but he was trying to be chivalrous. She did not want kindness, however, she wanted to think of herself for once instead of constantly worrying about saving her sister or avoiding Anthony’s wrath.

“I wanted to repay you for your kindness. There are not many who have such honor as you do. I thought you would want this.” She sat up, blankets falling from her bare skin, until the man turned around and held up his hands.

“As I said, ye daenae need tae dae this. Ye speak as if it were a transaction, like I am owed a fee for me services.”

Helen frowned and stood out from under the pile of blankets, standing bare in front of his turned back. She crossed her arms. He was right, but what he did not know, was that that was because she did not know how to seduce a man. She knew the general rules of smiling and nearness and compliments, along with giving a man an eyeful of her plentiful bosom. But beyond that, Helen did not know how a woman should go

about offering a man her body. She thought that this would suffice, but clearly not.

She picked up a blanket and held it in front of her. “Here, you can turn around.”

He did so hesitantly, and then when he saw she was covered again, his eyes moved up to meet hers. “I have brought ye a few things,” he said.

She nodded, and he stepped forward a little. Smiling, she reached out for his arm and said, “I do not know why you are afraid. I swear to you I am honest in my offering. It is not a payment or transaction, as you call it.” She could tell he was listening, but he was bending down to pick something up from a nearby table to hold out to her.

She had a bold streak that had always gotten her into trouble, and she could not refrain from dropping the blanket from her body just as he was standing in front of her again.

“Christ, lass, here.” He handed her a dress. “The maid brought ye a woolen dressin’ gown if ye would like tae change intae somethin’ else.” His eyes were looking anywhere else except at her as he held it out for her. Helen laughed even though his rejection once more hurt her.

“Really, this is most unusual.” But she took the dressing gown anyway, and with a great sigh, she pushed the blankets away, stood up, and pulled on the dressing gown. “There, your eyes are free to look now.”

When he turned around, it was with a scowl. “Ye act as though me honor annoys ye.”

She pulled her hair out of the back of the gown so that it hung low on her back. “Perhaps it does,” she replied with a genuine smile and an arched brow. “But I will accept it, and I will thank you in words then.” She sat on the edge of the bed. “I do not know what I would have done if you had not come.”

The man nodded tightly and then strode to the chair by the fire and sat down. He sat in silence for a few seconds, staring into the flames, and his hand idly reached up to grasp the pendant at his neck. Helen realized that he was a man of few words. She could practically feel him thinking over his sentence carefully from afar, and with a sigh, she stood and sat in the chair across from him. When she crossed her legs, the pale skin of her leg showed for just a moment. Helen saw his eyes snap to it and then turn away, and she smirked as she covered herself up.

*So, he is not entirely immune to my charms, then.*

“So, what shall we do instead?” she asked cheerfully, and finally, the man turned to look at her.

She swallowed, for even if he spoke little and refused to bed her, his blue gaze was intense and direct. It was as if he could see straight to the heart of her, where far too many secrets lay.

“First, ye could tell me yer name, I suppose if ye’d like. My name is Cory Chattan, and I am the man-at-arms for Laird Grant. Ye are in Grant Castle.”

Helen was very used to not reacting to information, schooling her features into an imperturbable mask. But Chattan was the name the men mentioned last night. The clan that was robbing Paul to pay Peter, so to speak. Nevertheless, they were not at Chattan castle, so it was possible they were not related.

*And yet this man could tell me what I need to know.*

“I see. Are a part of Clan Chattan, then?”

He inclined his head.

“And why are ye nae at yer own castle? Is it far?” she asked, tracing a finger along the wood of the chair arm, not looking at him for a moment.

She hoped she was hiding her eagerness for the information, but she could not hold back from asking.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that he had turned back to the fire, his elbows leaning on his knees. “Nae too far. Foyers. Roughly a day’s ride from here. And why I am nae there is a long story.”

Instantly, her curiosity was piqued. It had been a trait sha had had since she was a child, and Helen could remember her father trying to punish it out of her.

*“Young ladies should never ask so many questions, Helen. You are the daughter of an earl, and you should be looked upon*

*and hardly heard, if you can help it,*” he had told her many a time.

“And ye? Are ye nae goin’ tae tell me yer name?”

She had let her mind wander for a bit too long, and now she found herself in his gaze again. “Oh. My name is...” She paused. Normally, it was not wise for her to give out her name. She never had before, and when she did, it was always simply one of her aliases. But this time, she wanted to speak the truth. For the oddest reason, she wanted to hear her real name slip off his tongue. “Helen,” she whispered.

“Helen,” he repeated, and she tried to ignore the shiver that ran down her spine at the sound of it in his brogue. “Nae surname.”

She grinned at him, folding her fingers in her lap. “Just Helen, if you please.”

He nodded, and she thought she could see his mouth quirking up in the corners. “Well, Helen. I am glad ye are feelin’ better.”

“Thank you.” She pointed at the chain around his neck. “Will you tell me about that? It is rather unusual.”

“Och.” His hand reached up to grip it, and she saw just how big it was when he enveloped the pendant in his thick grasp. “Twas a gift, a family keepsake.”

Again, her expression showed nothing, but her heart raced. A Chattan family keepsake? In addition to a long, mysterious story of why he could not return to his clan and castle. Things were getting more and more interesting. All Helen needed to do was take that keepsake and make her way to Chattan Castle. It was time to hopefully return home and satisfy Anthony with what she learned.

*Tonight. I will take the keepsake while he sleeps.*



This was the most Cory had spoken to a woman in a long, long time. Of course, he had chatted with Lady Ella and Lady Ada over his time at Grant Castle but he had not actually sat down and spoken to either of them for this long. His last real conversation with Lady Ada on horseback with her guardian, now husband, Blair, had occurred the previous year.

He fingered his pendant, the gift he never took off, ever. No one had ever really asked him much about it, but the lass next to him seemed intrigued by it. It made his hand tighten around it, wanting to keep it safe. It was like someone prodding at an old wound that he thought had fully healed. But it seemed it had not, and he wanted to hide it from the world. It was much easier that way.

“Very well,” she replied with a calm smile, and Cory felt his heart lighten.

Now that things had settled and her body was covered, his mind could focus a bit more, although he knew that the image of her lovely, soft, naked form on his bed would never leave his mind’s eye. He had to keep looking away every so often to not imagine her naked yet again, wanting him, asking him to

join her in bed her. And when he saw the flash of her calf as she settled into the chair across from him, his eyes went there of their own accord before he could tear them away again.

His body had reacted strongly to seeing her undressed. Now he felt like an utter fool. Surely, no other man would react that way, nearly suffocating a lass in order not to have to look at her naked body. But as soon as he had entered the room and seen it, her hips rounded and soft, her breasts full, and her lips pink and parted as she looked at him, everything in his body had gone hard. Cory feared that she had seen his kilt tenting as he threw tartans, pillows, and kilts on top of her.

And now, she was smiling at him, and he could see her eyes were a bright and lovely green. Their almond shape made it look as though she always had something interesting on her mind, and the way her lips were always quirked up in a sort of smirk made him feel as though he knew nothing at all.

As they spoke, he tried not to let her see just how much her presence caused his heart to race. Having such a beautiful woman in his room made it hard for him to think, covered or not.

He folded and unfolded his hands. "Why are ye in Scotland?" he asked, trying his best not to sound breathless.

He had not been attracted to a woman like this in what felt like a lifetime. Even Lady Ada, bonny as she was, had not heated his blood to this extent. Even Millie, boyish and lustful as he had been at that age. It made Cory wish that he had never met the woman. He could not afford to lose himself to another again, not like he did with Millie. His heart and his cock were obviously poor guides to love.

“I am visiting relatives,” she said calmly, still tracing a finger on the wood of her chair arm.

His gaze followed, mesmerized by the movement of her one delicate, long, graceful finger. But when his mind went to thoughts of where she might trace her finger, he turned his gaze back to the fire.

*Dear God, I could use another whisky. Or perhaps a whole bloody bottle.*

“In the woods?” he asked.

She snorted a little indelicately, and it made him smile.

*Not quite a lady, perhaps.*

“That was an accident, I... got lost on my way back. But tomorrow, I shall be able to find my way in the light.”

“Tomorrow?” He looked back at her, and he wanted to roll his eyes at the disappointment in his voice.

“Yes, tomorrow. There is no need for me to impose on you any longer. I am certain you have a lot of duties to fulfill. I would leave sooner, of course, but the snow is still thick outside.”

*If I had said aye tae her proposal tae bed her, we could have been doin' that instead of talkin' about what duties I have.”*



“Aye, true enough.” He stood, realizing it might be rude, but he was making too much of a fool of himself. “I have tae meet with the laird,” he said.

“Of course.” She smiled brightly at him again, and he felt his heart flip over. “Please do what you need to do.”

“I will bring ye the evenin’ meal. Are there any more clothes ye need?”

“No. They will be dry soon enough once I hang them before the fire.”

“I will be back later.” Cory stood for a moment, hesitating in front of her, but then he nodded at her and left, sighing at himself as he shut the door.

He rushed away a few seconds later, needing to do anything else but think about Helen, how she looked at him, or how the dressing gown seemed to cling to her every curve. He had things to do, and he would throw himself into them today. But all he could think about was the fact that he had been right in his first assessment.

Her hair was a dark blonde with streaks of red in it.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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Eory returned to bring her a meal later, but left soon after. Helen believed that she made him uncomfortable, and she wondered if it had more to do with her earlier offer or if she had been too eager in her questions about his pendant. After she ate, she slipped into bed and chewed on the inside of her lip.

No one had ever made her drop her role before, and she worried she had slipped up. If he was suspicious, then it was possible he would not come and stay the night in the room, making it difficult for her to take the pendant and head off to Chattan Castle.

Turning her head to the side, she saw a pile of books on a far table in the corner. She had been so distracted that she had not really noticed. She stood up and books and rifled through them.

*Perhaps one of these will entertain me until I fall asleep.*

But as she picked one up, she saw a map underneath it. “Oh, thank God.” She spun around the desk to look at the map right side up.

She took it to the bed along and searched for Foyers. She knew she was in Laggan now, and she slowly drew a line to Foyers. She would have no horse, so she would have to walk. A day's ride would mean longer to walk.

*Or I might buy passage along the way once I return to my room in the village to collect the rest of my belongings.*

Putting the map down, she sighed. This was her last mission. It was perfect information for Anthony, and it should be enough to keep him from marrying Cecily off to a man.

When she heard booted footsteps outside the door, she squealed and folded the map up, putting it on the table beside the bed. Then she slid under the covers and turned away. She could not afford to have more conversations with Cory that night, she did not want to risk augmenting his suspicions.

The door opened more slowly this time and the boots quieted as he took soft and slow steps. Something in Helen's chest tightened a bit. The man was truly kind. He had saved her without asking for anything in return, he had given her food, and now he was attempting not to wake her. They did not know each other, and yet he was doing all this.

*Well, he knows me better than any other man, I suppose, now that he has seen me naked.*

Helen bit her lip to keep from giggling at the memory. She would never forget how utterly terrified he had looked when he had first come in and spotted her. That memory would entertain her for a long time.

With her eyes closed, she listened to the movement of a man returning after a day's work. She could hear the fabric shift as he shod his shirt and boots. She wondered briefly if he would slip into bed beside her, but then she knew he would never do that, which strangely made her slightly sad. The sound of wood creaking gave her an answer, and an hour later, she could hear his breathing while he slept.

As quietly as she could, she put on her old dress. It was now dry, but it still felt dirty as she slipped it on. She did her best to tie up the laces in front and daydreamed momentarily about the hot, soapy baths back at Seton House.

*Not until everything is finished here.*

She put on her cloak and carried her boots in her hand. Tiptoeing towards Cory, she paused when she reached his side.

The fire had lessened, but she could still see the chiseled outline of his jaw, covered in the dark beard. His mouth was slightly open, and his face was turned away from her. Luckily, the leather ties of his chain were visible to her, and with shivering fingers, she reached out to untie it. It easily slid away from his neck, and he did not move at all or even break the pattern of his breath. Knowing that he was a heavy sleeper felt intimate, and she tucked the pendant into her glove.

*Go. Go now.*

But something held her fast, and she stared down at him, wondering for a moment if she would ever have this intimacy again with anyone. If she would ever get to look upon a man's face as he reposed in sleep and feel contentment and

happiness. She felt tears fill her eyes, and horrified, she put a finger to each of them, hoping to stop their flow. She needed to leave, but before she did, she did a foolish thing. Leaning down, she brushed her lips ever so gently across the man's bearded cheek, and then she was gone.

While Cory had been out for a few hours, she had taken the time to memorize the path to the closest door out of the castle. She could not afford to be seen by the laird or stopped by any servant on her way out. Thankfully, she had found a door near to his rooms, and she hoped that there would not be any guard standing outside. When she stepped outside the room, she took one last look at Cory sleeping in front of the fire.

Her heart ached for something she did not even know, and she felt like she was leaving something special, although she felt foolish.

*It is only the fatigue and the fact that I nearly froze to death. I barely know the man!*

But it took courage and strength to finally close the door on a warm, sleeping Cory and slip on her boots before turning away down the dark passage towards the door out of the castle. Out in the darkness, it was just as frozen as the night before, but at least it had stopped snowing. She removed the pendant from her glove and put it around her neck as she hurried away. Better not to lose it in her hurry. She eyed the stables jealously, wishing for a moment that she could simply take a horse. But then, she knew Cory would find out she had gone, and he would soon be after her.

For some unknown reason, she would not mind seeing his face again, although she knew it was not wise. She had a job to do, and then she would go home. To save Cecily and to finally

figure out a way to distance herself from her brother at long last. She turned to take one last look at the castle and ran off into the woods.



Cory woke, his eyes slowly opening as he breathed out and turned. Hopefully, it was the last night he would be sleeping in his armchair.

*Helen.*

He stood and slowly turned to look at her form in the bed, not wanting to wake her. But when he did, he saw she was not there. The blankets were all clumped together as if she was, but when he peeled them back, he realized she was gone. The blankets dropped from his fingers, and Cory took a step back in surprise.

*She just left, just like that.*

He cursed his ability to sleep so well. It had gotten him into trouble more times than he could count. And now it had caused him to not hear the lass as she left the room and left... him.

*Left me life.*

Cory cursed himself again. "Why in the bloody Hell are ye thinkin' like that?" he said aloud angrily, growling at himself as he dressed. "She is nae me lass, and she can go wherever she pleases."

Nevertheless, the fact that she had slipped away so mysteriously without a goodbye hurt him and confused him to. Had he been so terribly rough and unpracticed in the way he had rejected her advances that she had been desperate to get away? Or perhaps he had simply been so awkward that she simply could not bear to be around him any longer?

“Shite,” he muttered.

Yet again, he had made a bloody fool of himself around a woman, and he angrily splashed cold water on his face and then roughly dried it with a cloth. But then, when his hand brushed against his neck, he did not feel the scratch of the chain and pendant. Putting his hand there, he gasped.

“What in God’s name?”

The pendant was not there. Quickly, he searched the table which held the bowl and his shaving knife and cloth, but it was not there either. He searched on the floor of the room, and then went to the chair, but he could not find it. His father’s words rang in his ears. He was to never take it off. Ever. And now it was gone.

He had not taken it off, he was sure. Then he straightened and thought of something he had not considered before.

*Did Helen take me pendant ‘afore she left?*

Minutes later, Cory was in Cam’s study, groaning as he slumped into the chair across from him. Cam had been reading

some papers on his desk when Cory entered, and when he sat, his friend looked up with a smirk.

“Somethin’ wrong, lad?” he asked.

“Nae. Nothin” Cory rubbed two hands over his face roughly.

Jesus, would he never not be made a fool of? First his father, then his cousin, then Millie, and now this mystery lass with soul-piercing green eyes.

*A thief as well.*

“Clearly, it’s nothin,” Cam said with a chuckle, putting down whatever papers he had been reading and pushing them aside.

“Is it the villagers? Did things nae go well last night with the rooves?”

“Nay, all was well.”

With a nod, Cam folded his hands on the table and stared at Cory. “Go on then. Ye are a man of few words, but yer body is speakin’ loudly enough. What has happened? Has Thomas been givin’ ye trouble? I already told the lad’s father he was nae a swordsman, and he could be put tae better use elsewhere.”

Cam shook his head, and Cory said, “Nay. It wasnae that.”



Cory looked into the slowly burning hearth, and Cam said, "Och, I ken."

When his gaze snapped back to his laird and friend, Cory saw Cam smile. "Ye ken?" he asked.

"Aye. Yer reaction means that it has somethin' tae dae with a woman. Now, out with it. I didnae ken that ye had a woman, but I dae ken that half the village lasses always make moon eyes at ye whenever ye go by."

Cory could feel his cheeks coloring, and he looked down. He had noticed the stares but did not realize that other people had. He had never considered himself anything special, especially after Millie had teased him into thinking she loved him and then had traded him in for his cousin. Perhaps when he was younger, full of pride that Millie, the most beautiful girl in the clan, had chosen him, he had considered himself brawny and handsome. But not now.

"Och, I didnae realize," he lied. "But aye, ye are right. It is about a woman, but she is nae my lass. Some Sassenach I found in the woods."

A furrow married Cam's brow. "A Sassenach. Wanderin' around on her own?"

"Aye. Nearly froze tae death, so I took her back tae my room tae warm her up."

Cam grinned. "Is that so?"

Cory rolled his eyes, but he could feel his cheeks coloring again. “Nae like that. Surely ye daenae think me the type tae push myself on a woman, even more so one on the brink of death?”

“Nae, of course nae.” Cam chuckled, his hands folding over his stomach. “I didnae mean that at all. None of my men have ever treated a woman that way. I was only teasin’. But the way ye are actin’ makes it appear somethin’ happened.”

“Well,” Cory shifted in his chair, and Cam burst into laughter again. “Why didnae ye tell me? And besides, ye ken that ye could have given the lass a room. I am nae so hard-hearted of a laird that I should deny someone in need a room.” He held out his arms to his sides. “Ella would have enjoyed havin’ someone tae dote upon who is nae a screamin’ child.”

Cory grinned at that, grateful that his laird and friend trusted him. “That is kind of ye, Cam. But she has gone, a bit of a cheeky lass. I think she stole from me.”

Cam lifted a blonde brow. “Och, is that so? Somethin’ important?”

Cory’s expression darkened again. “Aye. Me pendant.”

Before Cameron could respond, a knock sounded on the study door, and a servant entered. “A message has come, milaird. For sir Cory.”

“Come in then, lad.” Cam waved the young man in, and Cory turned to him, confused.

A message had never come to him before in all his years at Grant Castle. It was not as if he had more family than his cousin, and his cousin did not know his whereabouts, or so he thought. Nor did he believe Ruairidh or Millie had any interest in speaking to him again.

“Thank ye.” Cory took the message into his hands and glanced up at Cam before his thumb brushed along the wax seal on the outside of the letter. “’Tis from me clan,” he said, his heart picking up pace.

“I will wait outside for yer reply,” the servant said, and Cory nodded.

With a queasy feeling in his stomach, he broke the seal and opened the letter.

*Dear cousin,*

*I would like to welcome ye home after all this time. I have decided I will hold nae angry feelings about the past any longer. I would like ye to come and celebrate the birth of my son. We are all family now, ye, Millie, my son and meself. It would be good for my heir tae meet the wayward uncle. The celebration will be in three days from the day you receive the letter. Ye are nae far, so I am certain that yer new laird can spare ye.*

*Ruairidh*

“Feck’s sake,” Cory said, crumpling the letter and tossing it towards the fire.

“What? What is it?”

“Me cousin, after all these years, wants me home. Tae celebrate the birth of his child.”

Cory ignored the pang in his chest. It had been six years since Millie had left him for his cousin, and now they finally had a child. It brought up all the pain from the past like an icy gust of air.

“Well, then, I suppose ye ought tae go.”

Cory ground his teeth together. “Nae a chance in hell. What good would that dae? Ye should have read the letter, Cam, to see how much the man regards me.” He stood and leaned over Cam’s desk to grasp a bit of paper and quill. He scratched out a ‘nae’ and then left the study to hand it to the messenger. “Ye may send this right away.”

When he returned to the study, Cam asked, “Are ye certain, my friend? There are a lot of unanswered questions, dae ye nae think?”

Cory shook his head. “I have seen all I need tae see. Nothin’ but a miracle would force me tae see me cousin again after all this time.”

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## CHAPTER SIX

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*H*ours ago, Helen had grabbed her things from the room she had stayed at in the nearby village, and then once dawn pinked the horizon, she looked for a passage at the next village to Foyers and Chattan Castle. Once inside the rough wagon, filled with straw and a few animals, she breathed out a sigh of relief and yanked off her boots.

“Praise be to God,” she said with a chuckle, leaning back against the jolting wagon’s wooden side.

It would be a rough ride, but it felt glorious after all the walking she had done overnight in the freezing cold and without her bloody map. She could not believe she had left it on the night table next to the bed, and she had had to muddle through, asking for directions along the way. She closed her eyes, exhausted, wondering why she could not have waited perhaps one more night in that glorious, blanket-covered bed.

*With a gloriously muscled Scotsman not far off.*

Her eyes snapped open as she stared up at the dawn-lit sky. Why had this man been constantly in her thoughts throughout the journey? What was so special about him? She could not understand, yet she knew he was different.

Slowly, with a few goats for an audience, she untied the pendant from around her neck and looked at it in her gloved hands. Now that it was light, she could see that it was the shape of a C with a pointed bottom. Her fingertips glided over the metal, making her think of how it had lain on his strong bare chest. Even in the cold air, her cheeks flushed.

Never had she been attracted to a man in such a way, and she now wished that he had agreed to be with her.

*Well, it is over now. I will never see the man again. It does not matter anymore.*

She quickly tied the pendant around her neck again and closed her eyes, listening to the jostling of the wagon as it rolled over the dirt road, away from the village and headed towards Chattanooga. When had her life become like this? She could not even remember a time in the recent past in which she had felt happy and safe. Not since her mother died, perhaps, ten years ago. The sound of a rich Scottish brogue and the flash of red hair and green eyes sparked through her mind.

*Mama.*

The wagon went over a deep rut, and Helen's eyes snapped open again as she reached out to steady herself on the side. One goat nearly slid into her lap, and she laughed. Truly, her life had become somewhat of a joke.

"All right then, are ye?" the old, gray-haired driver called back to her.

“Yes! Thank ye!”

He turned his head forward again, and this time, as she helped the goat up to its feet, she stared off in the direction they were headed. The ground was still covered with snow, but at least no more was coming. She could see a large stone castle in the distance, slowly getting closer. That was Cory’s home, or had been.

*Why does he not go home anymore?*

The question niggled at her for a long while. He seemed like a decent man, and she could not imagine parents not loving such person. Maybe he had a family like her own, with a power-hungry older half-brother who would stop at nothing, including betraying his own country to gain money and status.

It was some time before the wagon slowed, and the man’s voice penetrated her consciousness.

“We have arrived” he called, and Helen sat up, rubbing at her eyes.

“Blast,” she cursed, rubbing at the back of her neck where it had been lying on the hard side of the wagon.

Slowly, she slid out of the carriage, bits of hay falling after her, and she walked up to the driver, digging in her bag for a coin.

“Here you are, sir. Thank ye.”

He showed her a mostly toothless grin. “Up there it is. Ye cannae miss that monstrosity.”

She followed his pointing finger toward the front of the wagon, and she saw it. A monstrosity, it certainly was.

“Thank you.”

She gave him a tired smile, and he rode on, leaving Helen standing on her own just outside what seemed like one of the biggest castles she had ever seen in her life. Not that she had ventured far from Seton House in England, but this looked like something out of a story of magic, witches, and fairies. She had to crane her neck to look up at it as she approached, her mouth falling open a bit as her boots crunched on the ground.

*How does England ever expect to win a war when the fortresses are such as these?*

She supposed that with the villages looking as they did, with wooden homes, thatched rooves, that soldiers could burn them to the ground and get lairds to do whatever they pleased. On the journey from Laggan, she had seen a few redcoats riding on fine horses or walking in small groups, but she had seen no sign of an army. What she did know was that Scotland was attempting to raise its own army and had done so successfully at least once before. It now needed to prepare for England’s next moves.

“Stop there!” a gruff voice called out to her. She stopped to look at the towering Scottish soldier in front of her.



Another stood across from him, one on either side of the large portcullis to the castle. The first soldier's hand was held out in front of him as if he thought she would walk right into him.

“Gentlemen,” she said with a pleasing smile, batting her eyelashes as she turned her head to a demure angle. “What dae ye mean, stop? Am I nae able tae go intae the castle and visit the laird?”

The soldiers frowned and looked between them. “What sort of accent is that, lassie?”

Helen colored, her fatigue now making her façade chip a bit. She had to think of something else. Why had she not thought about this step of the plan? She took a breath and then realized that nothing had come out. This had never in her time as a spy happened before. She wanted the earth to swallow her up or a sudden snowstorm to come back.

“Aye, what kind of accent is that, lassie?” a voice, strong and familiar, said from behind her.

She closed her eyes and breathed out. She knew exactly who that voice belonged to.

*Cory Chattan.*



*A few hours earlier*

After leaving that note with the messenger, Cory hurried up to his room to grab a few things before he returned to Cam to discuss further improvements for the surrounding villages. When he entered, he could smell the scent of Helen still in the air. He could not put his finger on it, but it was there, and he hoped it would leave soon, or he would not be able to sleep without dreaming of the lass.

As he went to his desk to search for the map, he saw it was not there. "Shite," he cursed. "Is this the day on which I lose bloody everythin'? One lass comes intae me life, and suddenly, I lose my head?"

He growled at himself, spinning around to see if it was anywhere else. He spied a bit of paper on the side table next to the bed, and when he opened it up, breathing a sigh of relief, he realized that a faint line had been drawn from Laggan to Foyers, and he swore.

This was most certainly Helen, he thought. She had asked him so many questions about himself. Why, she had even stolen the pendant. With another growl, he grabbed his thick woolen coat, shoved the map into the pocket, and rushed out of his room. He had to catch the messenger before he rode off with the note to Ruairidh. He would accept his bloody cousin's invitation.

Hours later, Cory cursed his bad luck as he rode hard and fast from Grant Castle to his former home. Cam had been eager for him to go, telling him it could put a few terrible things to bed, but Cory was not so certain.

Ruairidh was devious. And this sudden invitation felt odd somehow. But it was possible he simply wanted to taunt him yet again after all these years, especially now that Millie had borne his child. He could put up with a bit of taunting if it got him his pendant back, the one thing that told him his father had cared for him at least somewhat.

When he had finally arrived outside his family home, he had seen Helen striding right up to the castle, bold as brass. He rode up to her and jumped down from his horse, listening to her terrible Scottish accent and the guards' derision.

"Aye, what kind of accent is that, lassie?" he asked, and he could tell she recognized his voice, for her back stiffened.

Slowly, she turned around, and he could feel his chest catch. Cory had never thought to see the mysterious Helen again, and he rather hated just how breathtaking she was. It would dazzle any man, and he knew she would find her way into the castle on her alluring beauty alone. But why?

The rough guard from behind her looked up at Cory, and his angry scowl smoothed. "Welcome back, sir," he said. "'Tis been a long time."

"Aye, Dermot, so it has. And ye, James." The other guard nodded to him.

Helen looked at them all with a scowl.

Dermot said gruffly, "Ye cannae enter the castle without an invitation, lass."

“Truly?” she asked, and Cory stifled a chortle when he saw her fingers trail along the bodice of her gown.

Everyone’s eyes went there, just as she no doubt hoped. Cory turned his gaze back to her face. To his surprise, she looked almost helpless. He frowned at her.

*What are ye up tae, minx?*

“What is goin’ on here, then?” he asked Dermot.

Dermot sighed, his one thick dark brow lifting. “This lass thought she could simply walk in out of nowhere without even announcin’ herself. I daenae ken from where she comes, but this isnae the way we dae things here. Nae on Chattan land.”

“Aye, true enough. She is—”

“His wife,” she said far too bright, and she came to stand at his side, wrapping her arm around his. “You are right, gentlemen. My Scottish accent is very poor, for I am a Sassenach, as you call it. I thought it would make you feel a bit more comfortable if you did not hear my English vowels, considering...” she shrugged, and the two guards grunted.

Cory was looking at her as if she truly was mad. Perhaps she was a mad lass, and he simply had the misfortune of getting tangled up with her.

“I didnae ken ye were married,” James said, crossing his arms. “Surely yer cousin would have kenned about this.”

“Nae, I didnae tell him,” Cory said, still shocked that he was married to the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and perhaps the most insane. “But ‘tis true. We are married.”

The words did not fall smoothly off his tongue, and he could tell that Dermot and James realized. “Aye, well then,” Dermot said hesitantly. “Ye of course would be welcomed intae the castle. And ye, milady.”

“Thank you, ye are too kind,” Helen preened at his side, and Cory nearly broke his teeth; he was pressing them so hard together.

The guards lifted the portcullis, and together, Cory and his apparent wife strode into his family’s castle. He was nervous, but he was even angrier that Helen had thought about getting her way into the castle, claiming to be his wife. Was this some sort of odd revenge?

“How lovely,” Helen said at his side, and he let out something like a growl. Helen smirked. “Behave yourself, dear husband,” she said as they walked up to the base of the stone steps.

Cory tensed, his arm pulling Helen ever so slightly closer when he saw Ruairidh and Millie descending the steps, arm in arm. For a moment, it was as if no time had passed. He was still Cory, not yet laird but soon to be, in love with Millie and ready to ask for her hand. Ruairidh was simply a mere nuisance that Cory had to put up with because his father had told him he had to.

Swallowing, he felt the brush of a soft hand over his, and he looked down and saw that Helen had placed her free hand over his fist. Perhaps it helped to have a fake wife after all.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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“Cory,” the man said as he strode down the stairs with all the ease of a laird, his arm held by a red-haired young woman who looked tired.

If Helen was not mistaken, it seemed that her eyes were red as well, as if she had been crying. Helen could feel Cory tense at the sight of these two people, and without thinking, she placed her free hand over his, which he had clenched into a fist. She saw him glance down at it, and she had the urge to pull it away quickly, but then she remembered the little game she had instigated. She was now to play Cory Chattan’s wife.

“Welcome to Chattan Castle,” the beady-eyed man said just as he and his lady approached the last step, towering a few inches over them both. “It has been such a long time.”

Helen tried to hide a shiver that ran down her spine at the sight of this man. He had similar features to Cory, but instead of the rounding, firm masculinity that Cory had, this man’s nose was beakier, and his chin sharp. His eyes were dark and bottomless, and Helen knew. There was something dark about this man.

“Welcome to you both, it seems.”

“Cousin,” Cory finally spit out. “I thought I would come meself instead of sendin’ a message.”

“Ye did well.” The man’s frightening gaze slowly turned to Helen. “And who is this, Cory? Ye havenae introduced us.”

“This,” Cory cleared his throat. “Is me wife, Helen.”

Despite her fatigue and her poor attempt to flirt with men to gain entrance to the castle, Helen’s façade returned. She gave Cory’s cousin and who she assumed to be his wife, a bright smile. It did not matter that the sound of Cory calling her his wife had made her heart patter like raindrops on the sea.

“Helen,” Cory continued, holding out his free hand towards the couple who continued to tower over them, “This is my cousin, Laird Ruairidh Chattan, and his wife, Lady Millie.”

Helen curtsied. “A pleasure to meet you both.”

“Ye have married a Sassenach, Cory? That seems an odd choice, dae ye nae think?”

*Honestly not if ye are playing both sides in the war, Laird Chattan.*

“Aye, so I have,” Cory said dryly, turning to look at her.



She smiled at him, even if she could feel her cheeks coloring under his intense blue gaze. A gaze she thought she had never see again. She was rather relieved that she had not been right.

“I am rather offended ye didnae think tae invite us tae the wedding, Cory,” Laird Chattan said, eyeing his cousin beadily.

Still, the red-haired young woman said nothing, hardly even looking at them. Helen’s heart went out to her. What a world men have made and how women suffer in it. She had a pretty good idea of why this young woman had been crying, and why she looked rather tired and dejected. Her rather shadowy husband.

Cory nodded. “It was fast and small. We didnae wish tae make a big celebration out of it. Right, love?” Helen jumped when Cory pulled on her arm, and then she realized he had been talking about her.

*Oh yes, I am his love.*

“Right.”

“Very well then. Millie, get the maids tae prepare a room for the married couple. I will take them tae the gardens while ye dae so.” Millie inclined her head a bit, and then she disappeared up the stairs, the laird leading the way down the steps and through the castle.

As they followed, Helen turned back to see the young woman paused on the stairs, watching them both. But when she saw Helen, she turned away again, rushing up the stairs.

“It has been a long time since ye have been here last,” Laird Chattan said, walking in front of them, no doubt used to leading the way in many matters. “I have made many improvements. The east wall was mended, and now that wing can be entirely used for guests. I have quite a few celebrations and feasts throughout the year.”

Helen rolled her eyes, and then noticed Cory frowning at her. It made her blush once more, and she looked ahead again, keeping her arm tightly fastened to her ‘husband’s’ side.

“I have also made improvements tae the gardens in the center courtyard. That is where we shall be while we wait, since ye didnae send a message tae warn us of yer incumbent arrival.”

She could still feel the tension in Cory’s muscles, and even though she did not know exactly what had kept him from home, she knew that, just like with Lady Millie, Cory’s tension and discomfort had something to do with his cousin.

They walked out of a pair of doors at the end of a passageway that led down into a lovely courtyard garden. It was snow-covered, to be sure, but even so, it was peaceful and lovely, and Helen automatically looked up at the wide-open sky. Despite being surrounded by tall gray stone walls in the courtyard, she felt as though she would float up and away.

*To freedom.*

Laird Chattan turned around; his thin hands folded in front of him. He wore a sword, but Helen noticed with amusement that

it seemed to be smaller than the other ones she had seen Scotsmen wearing. Especially Cory's.

"I never thought ye would find a lass tae put up with ye, cousin." He glanced at Helen, and she could see his eyes dragging over her bosom, where she had adjusted it slightly to distract the guards. She wondered if that was another reason the lady of the castle could not bring her eyes to meet hers. "He was always an awkward child, ye see, always very nervous around lasses. Were ye nae, Cory?" Laird Chattan's grin was wicked and not playfully teasing. "I am so glad ye found someone who can stand tae be around ye like I have with my Millie." Something flashed in the laird's eyes, and then he turned around, walking forward, continuing to drone on about various improvements to the gardens.

Helen felt calloused fingertips over her bosom, and she looked down to see Cory pulling up her bodice. "Christ's sake, woman. He is eyein' ye like a hungry wolf. I daenae like it."

Despite the chilled day, Helen's entire body warmed at the feel of his fingers on her breasts, and she could not think of anything to say in return. Instead, Cory left her side and went to walk closer to Laird Chattan. He left Helen to adjust her bodice on her own. The memory of his touch burned into her skin.



Seeing Ruairidh's greedy eyes on Helen's body made Cory's blood boil. That is what had made him reach over to pull up the woman's bodice, accidentally touching the swells of her lovely breasts as he did. The act was very unlike him, but his anger at Helen assisted him.

Why had she told the guards that they were married? If she had given him a bit of time, he could have come up with something, or better yet, and he could have told her to get the hell off his land and return to England.

*And return me bloody pendant.*

After he had lifted her bodice and noted the that had bloomed on her cheeks, he left her to speak to his cousin. Or rather, listen to him drone on about all the improvements he had made to Chattan Castle over the last six years.

“Cory, ye never would have done what I have accomplished here. The castle is stronger than ever, so we are well-protected from English attacks.”

Cory glanced at Helen, who seemed occupied with the buttons of her cloak. “Aye, true. Because I would have spent my money on the villagers and farmers who worked our land instead,” he whispered back. “The English are here tae decimate it, tae take what we have held dear for so long. It is those people I would have wished tae protect.”

“Tell me, lass,” Ruairidh started, turning to face Helen, whose gaze slowly lifted to meet his. “Why is it that ye married my cousin? It was certainly nae for the money. With yer accent, ye seem like ye might be a fine lady. Surely a fine lady doesnae need tae come tae Scotland tae find herself a brute tae marry.”

Cory’s fists clenched, and he thought that by the time he left Chattan Castle, he would have broken at least three of his own teeth by grinding them together so hard.

Helen, confident as usual, sauntered forward with a smile. “Laird Chattan, I came to Scotland to find a strong man. Men in my country pretend they are strong, and they believe it. But in the thick of it, you see just what weaklings they are. War is always proof of that.”

Cory’s mouth opened as she spoke so confidently to a man like Ruairidh, a man whose anger had no bounds, who would have no qualms about hitting a woman if she displeased him. It made him feel sad for Millie, but he tamped that down. She had made her choice long ago, leaving him in the dust.

“And so,” Helen continued, stepping forward to slide a hand around Cory’s arm again, making his body harden once more, “I have chosen Cory, the strongest man I know. He may be a brute,” she said teasingly, turning towards him. She reached out a finger to trail along his jaw. “But he is certainly handsome, do you not agree?”

Cory was glad for the beard, for he felt his cheeks grow hotter than they had ever been in the whole of his life. And in front of his cousin, on top of it. What was this lass up to? He could see a sparkle of mirth in her lovely eyes.

Ruairidh snorted. “It seems ye have a way with the lass, then. Perhaps yer more skilled with what is between yer legs than I thought, Cory.”



Helen was used to insolent men, but this one was the worst she had come across. He was clearly jealous of Cory, for she could not imagine a young woman not drawn to the handsome, brawny Highlander. And she also believed that it was likely he was very good with what was between his legs.

*Not that I will have time to find out.*

Cory had colored in rage, but before either of them could say anything else, Ruairidh plucked off a dead branch from one of the garden plants and said, “Why did ye nae send us news that ye got married? Ye could have at least had that courtesy. Now, Millie has more tae prepare.”

“Listen, Ruairidh,” Cory said through gritted teeth. “I didnae need tae tell ye of anythin’. It is nae as if ye have sent letter after letter over these years. And why should we communicate at all?”

He started saying more, but Helen could tell that his cousin was barely listening, looking around the garden as if he were bored with the interaction. Cory’s speech was losing steam as well, and he stuttered a bit, as if so angry that he could not quite form the words. Helen reached out for his back. She placed her hand softly in the middle of it, wanting for the first time since Cecily to comfort someone instead of to trick them.

He turned slightly, pausing his speech, and Helen lifted her eyes to Ruairidh. “Forgive the surprise, milaird. I understand your concerns and your wife’s. I was planning to visit my family nearby, and when your invitation came, we thought perhaps that it would be a good chance for me to meet you all. We thought it would be nice to be a surprise. I hope that is understandable.”

The cousin narrowed his eyes at her, but he gave her a stiff nod. “Certainly. It is a surprise.”

Helen's hand did not move, and she could feel Cory relaxing a little. She could see that Ruairidh was watching their interactions.

“Ye ken ” he said “I simply cannae imagine me cousin getting married so quickly and not learning about it.” And with that he turned and walked towards the doors to the castle. “I assume the rooms should be ready by now, it is bloody cold out here.” His eyes darkened, and a muscle ticked in his jaw as he stalked determinedly to the door.

Helen was not about to let the man get away so easily from abusing his cousin, or his wife. When they were walking beside a dead rosebush, she stretched out just the tip of her foot, making sure it caught under his.

With a sharp cry, the laird fell into the thorns and hard branches, and Helen watched the scene with a smile.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Cory was not sure if he should laugh or cry as Ruairidh struggled to free himself from the rosebush. He made no move to help the cursing man, and when he turned to his ‘wife,’ she was beaming proudly as she stared down at him, also not lifting a finger.

When he caught her eye, he could not help but smile back at her. The cheeky lass had done this! He was sure of it! He had never met the likes of such a woman, bold as brass. As Ruairidh struggled to his feet with a final curse, brushing off his jacket and kilt, he turned to them both with an angry glare.

Proud of his fake wife, Cory took her arm and asked, “Are ye all right, cousin?”

“Nae thanks tae ye,” Ruairidh said angrily, stomping towards the door once more.

Cory leaned close to Helen and whispered, “I ken what ye did, lass.”

“Surely, you already knew that about me, Sir Chattan,” she replied demurely. He chuckled to himself while Ruairidh



continued to mutter inside the passageway of the castle.

“Millie!” Ruairidh boomed, and Cory saw his former lover jump a little as she descended the stairs.

“The rooms are ready,” she squeaked. Cory frowned.

Millie had always been strong and fiery when he had known and loved her. She had been sensual, beautiful, and sharp, and now she seemed like a mouse, frightened to death of an angry lion.

“Good. Take them up. They can see the little lad later.”

“Yes, Ruairidh,” she said and turned up towards the stairs again.

Trying not to growl aloud at his cousin, Cory followed behind with Helen still on his arm. He refused to feel sorry for her after her betrayal, but the slight woman who led them silently to their room seemed like a completely different person from the one he had known.

“Here ye are,” she said after a minute, turning towards a large wooden door. “The maids have provided a bath as well. Ye must simply alert them when you want a fresh one brought.”

“Thank ye, Millie,” Cory said, having difficulty looking into her eyes.

“Ye are most welcome. Tae ye both.” Millie lowered her head and turned away, leaving Cory to open the door for Helen to enter.

Once they were in, he shut the door and leaned against it. “Bloody Hell, Helen, why did ye have tae say that we were wed? What is that about, lass?”

She smirked at him as she undid her cloak and laid it over a chair. It took everything in him not to look at what it revealed. He had never known his lust to spike with such urgency. Not since he was a young boy.

“It was pretty clever. I must say, Cory. They believed it.”

“Ha! Ye saw how hard it was for my cousin tae believe it. Ye made me a fool.” He stomped over to her and pulled up her bodice again, eliciting a gasp from her. “Besides, with yer bodice like that, they willnae think ye are my wife. But they may think I have hired ye tae play the role.”

After he pulled up the woolen fabric, his hands lingered there for a moment as their eyes met. He could feel the rise and fall of her chest, and he quickly removed his hands.

“Why have ye come?” he practically growled at her, pulling away and rubbing a hand over his face and beard.

By God, the room felt small, and his clothing felt too tight. He tore off his coat and tossed it aside. He wanted to do anything but turn around and look at her or think about how she made his normally clear and logical mind fuzzy.

“It is not as if I expected you to be here, Cory. I came of me own accord and on me own business. Why should I explain anything to you?”

He quirked a sarcastic smile and leaned against one wall, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Ye must have forgotten, that man and wife tell one another these kinds of things. And I, as the husband, should nae have been unaware of what my wife was daein’.”

His whole body was trembling. It was anger, regret, fear, guilt, and desire all rolled into one. He had practically frozen his balls off on his fast ride over and stepped into the castle he thought never to step into again, all because of the infuriating woman before him.

She crossed her arms, too, mirroring his gesture. “I would like to take a bath, husband, before the water gets cold. I have been wandering around for hours because I got lost, and now, I just want to warm my aching bones.”

He started chuckling and shook his head.

“What?” she asked, frowning at him, and it only made him laugh a little bit harder.

“Perhaps ye got lost because ye’d forgotten this?” He went to the jacket he had tossed away, and pulled out the map and unfolded it before her eyes.

She gasped a little. “So that is why you have come? Because you wish to exact some sort of revenge upon me for leaving without saying goodbye? I thanked you for your kindness already.”

He dropped the map and crossed the room in seconds to stand before her again. As he approached, her chin lifted so that she could more easily look into his eyes.

“It is nae that, and ye ken it.” He stared deeply into her eyes, willing her to tell him she had stolen the pendant. “Who are ye really, lass? Have ye come here because ye wish tae learn more about Clan Chattan? And if so, why?”

He did not want to outrightly accuse her of theft just yet. He wanted her to come to him with it. Some part of him wanted to see the remorse in her eyes.

“Cory,” she said firmly, not backing away even though he towered over her. “Remember that you were the one who found me. It is not as if I went searching for you. Now,” she backed away, pulling at the laces of her bodice, his eyes flicking there, “If you do not leave the room now, I will simply have to undress with you in it. And we both know how unappealing you find that idea.”

She lifted a challenging brow and removed her woolen gown from her shoulders, letting it drop to the ground in a heap. Then, she unpinned her hair, dropping the pins to the ground too. Cory’s heart thumped wildly against his chest and he backed away with a grin.

“Ye wouldnae dare,” he said, believing that the lass was merely teasing him again. But in seconds, she had removed the shift from her shoulders, and she stood naked before him, turning to step into the bath.

“Christ,” he groaned to himself and hurried to the door to pull it open and get the hell out.

They had been in the middle of an argument, and she had not given him a satisfactory answer. Instead, she had changed the subject entirely and distracted him fully with the sight of her lush naked body again. In his haste to get out, he pulled the door far too hard, and like a fool, the heavy oak hit him right in the head. Stunned, he fell to the ground, and he heard a cry and the splash of water as Helen rushed toward him.



“Cory! Are you all right?” she asked, kneeling down beside him to make sure that he was not unconscious.

But he was not moving, and her wet hands moved to his bearded chin, turning his face towards her. “Jesus, what a fool he is. All to get out of seeing me.”

She clicked her tongue, and just then, Cory’s eyes fluttered open. For a moment, her shoulders sank with relief, and she stared down at him with a smile. He looked at her, his blue gaze unwavering, but then she saw it flick to her bare breasts.

Helen had nearly forgotten that she was naked, but she did not rush to cover herself. Instead, she found herself frozen to the spot as his eyes feasted on her flesh. She had been stared at many times in her life, with hungry as well as angry gazes, but

this — even though Cory’s eyes were on her nakedness — was different. His gaze was not one of greed or conquering. It was more as if he was looking upon something he saw as a rather undeserved gift. His expression almost bore guilt, although that was not quite the right word either.

Helen likely should have slapped him, but she gripped his chin and lifted it up a bit. “You know you are staring, sir.”

His mouth, which had been opened, then closed, and she could see him blush, even though his beard did well to hide most of it.

“Hard tae miss ye when ye undress so hurriedly like that.”

There was no censure in his tone, only a slight tinge of embarrassment. Helen lifted a brow and then stood, watching with no small delight that his gaze returned to her body again. But the gaze, which now darkened his eyes, made her blush as well. Even if she had pretended to be a common woman, giving out her body’s delights for pay, she was just a young lass who had never been touched in that way. Who had never been looked at the way Cory Chattan was looking at her. Her strong woman act broke a little in the same second his eyes pierced hers.

With a little skip in her step, she hurried to the bath and stepped inside, slipping down under the warm water, unable to keep from letting out a sigh. Her eyes, which had dropped, lifted slightly when she heard a footstep at the doorway. She saw that Cory’s hand was on the door, and he had now turned back to her. This time, his gaze was no longer lustful. It was angry.

“Are ye really wearin’ me pendant right in front of me, lass? I would have thought a skilled thief such as yerself would have been much better at hidin’ what they had stolen.”

Helen lost all the confidence from the moment before. Her wet hand reached up to brush against the cool metal on her chest. She closed her eyes.

*Damn it.*

There was no way to truly explain it, and she had to think of Cecily’s future and safety. Instead, she quietly and dutifully removed it from her neck and held it out over the edge of the tub. He stalked over and grasped it from her, tying it around his neck. His gaze was markedly on her face now, even though she had not begun to use the soap, and the water was clear.

“It doesnae become anyone tae steal from the very one who saved them.”

Cory’s eyes were dark, though the pendant now hung around his own neck, safely in his possession. Her mouth opened, and Helen hoped something would come out, but nothing did. It was not as if she could explain why she had done it. She had to inform her brother about the Scots and the English to save her sister.

“So then,” she said in a soft, demure tone. “Is this why you came after me?”

“Aye.” Helen could see the tick in his jaw. “I would never have come tae this bloody place again if nae for ye. If nae for

this. My father was the laird before Ruairidh, and this was me only legacy, while me cousin got the lairdship. It was a gift from my father, and I was told never tae take it off. I never had, until now.”

Helen’s guilt weighed heavily in her chest. For so long, she had been used to tricking men to make sure that they believed whatever she told them, that she had forgotten that some men were innocent. Sometimes her actions hurt people.

*They are not all bad. They are not all so vicious, with only their selfish desires in mind.*

“I am sorry, Cory. I did not intend to hurt you; I vow it.” She lifted her chin and gazed into his eyes, hoping he could see the truth in them.

It seemed to mollify him. “Good.”

He turned away then, but before he could leave, someone opened the door. Helen gasped, reminded that she was utterly naked, and sank lower into the water as though it would help. She saw Cory move to stand in front of her while the maid entered.

But when the young girl saw the two of them, Cory standing doggedly in front of Helen in the tub, the maid let out a surprised and embarrassed squeak and fled the room.

“What was—” Helen asked, but Cory spun around, and any anger or shyness had disappeared.



“As yer husband, lass, surely ye ken that only I am allowed tae see ye naked.” He winked, and Helen’s heart skipped.

He backed away then, still grinning. “I didnae realize it was the maid, though, so I will get her. It willnae dae tae have yer maid so frightened that she cannae return.”

“I... well... thank you,” she whispered, and then he was gone.

With a sigh, Helen leaned back against the tub and a smile crossed her face. What on earth had just happened?

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## CHAPTER NINE

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Cory did not go back downstairs to the main hall after he left the room. Instead, after he had spoken to the maid, he headed outside the back entrance towards the open hills and fields and went to the stables. He barely noticed the cold or the crunch of old snow under his boots. His mind was buzzing from what had just happened.

*So, she had stolen the pendant. She had been wearin' it the whole time, and I was too transfixed by her perfect breasts tae even notice it at first.*

For perfect they were. Everything about her body was perfect. And the way she did not scream or simper at him even though she was naked made it even more attractive. Who was this woman, and why on earth had he not asked her why she had stolen the thing? He had even gone so far as to tease her at the end and bloody wink at her. The woman was a thief! Yet she had oddly felt like a friend after she had tripped Ruairidh in the garden.

*Shite. Shite. Shite.*

Cory had the feeling that he was in over his head, but he was not exactly sure how to get out of it. He had been living a

rather placid life for the past six years, without much excitement besides the occasional battle with the English. Well, and that one time that a man wishing to take vengeance on Blair, Ada's husband, had shot at both him and Blair through the bushes one afternoon. But other than that, his life had been almost... boring.

Now that this green-eyed vixen went around naked, offering her body and stealing pendants for no reason was in his life, things had become a lot less boring and far more confusing.

“Ah, Master Cory,” the older stable hand rose from his seat inside the warm stables, looking at him with a smile. “It has been some time since I have seen ye here, lad.” The old man's face darkened soon after. “We all thought it wrong the way yer father chose yer cousin as laird.”

Cory stiffened. “Ye had best nae say things like that, Seamus, or ye might find yerself out of a job. I didnae come tae overthrow me cousin; I hope ye ken.”

“Of course.”

“The inn should be bringin' Maitheanas back tae me soon, so I can take any horse except the one I switched him for.”

“Aye, certainly.” Seamus went to fetch Cory a horse, and as he saddled it, he said, “What occupies ye now? Ye are happy, I hope?”

Cory let go of the tension he had been feeling since he had arrived at the castle. Of course, he left because of his cousin

and the way things had turned out at the end after the council meeting. But that did not mean that everyone he had known throughout his life there had made him unhappy. Or that they had done anything bad. He smiled at Seamus, who had often been like a father to him in those times when his own father was less than fatherly.

“Aye, sir. I am happy.”

Cory was not sure if that was true, but he was at least content in his life. He had not had to fight for a place or to feel guilty in his time with Laird Grant. He could simply be, and that was far more than many people could say.

Seamus chuckled. “Listen tae ye, callin’ me sir, when ye are a grown man now.” The squeak of leather filled the stables as Seamus went about his work. “I hear ye have a pretty young wife now. What is her name?”

Cory nodded, trying not to expose just how false that was, at least the part about he being his wife, not that she was pretty. Far too pretty.

“Aye, Helen.”

“What a nice name. A Sassenach, then?”

“Aye, she has family around these parts. We met on one of her travels here.”

“And she couldnae help but be ensnared by the charmin’ likes of ye.” Seamus chuckled. “Good for ye then. I should like tae meet her. Servants are sayin’ she is a fiery lass.”

Cory smiled, unable to help it. “Has word spread so fast? Aye, she is that. I wouldnae have it any other way.”

It felt strangely calming somehow to speak as if he truly had a wife and that he truly had chosen her because of her personality. He had always liked fiery women, and Helen certainly was that. It was what had drawn him to Ada in the first place.

“Here ye are then.” Seamus led the way out of the stable with the horse and patted its flank.

“Seamus,” Cory asked as he took the reins and jumped atop the new horse. “How is the young lad? When was he born?”

“Och, a month ago now, I believe. He is a good lad. Good and strong. I think he gets that from his mother’s side of the family.” Seamus winked, and Cory smiled, even though the thought of Ruairidh having a child made him sick.

“Thank ye, Seamus.” He rode off, hopeful that a ride would somehow clear his mind and make him continue to feel the contentment again that he had spent so long acquiring.

He could not bear to be inside those castle walls a moment longer. When he crested the far hill, he looked down at the river he had known his whole life. Pulling on the reins, the horse stopped as he stared down at it. This river had been a

haven for him when he was younger. There had been a time when he could not understand why his father had treated Ruairidh with such kindness and understanding, while Cory had received harsher punishments for his actions.

Despite being given the pendant from his father, he really had no other way of knowing if his father had truly loved him or not. It made him feel unmoored even though he had now found his own life and settled at Grant Castle.

*“Ye will be laird one day, and then I will be yer lady.”*

Millie’s words one night in a moment of passion rang in his head. He had never forgotten them all these years. Seeing her again brought them back. Had she only been interested in being Lady Chattan instead of simply being with him? Did she speak like that to Ruairidh now? Would he ever be able to put everything fully behind him once he returned to Grant Castle?

A breeze blew past, brushing a stray strand of hair from the side of his face. He reached up to the side of his head and winced. What an idiot he was for knocking himself out on a door in his haste to get out of the bedroom. It was already a swollen egg, and he laughed at himself now that no one was around to judge him.

His mind then turned to Helen. He could not help but smile as he thought about their interaction.

She was the only person who could make her thievery somehow charming, and with how she had apologized, he had known she meant it. The color of her cheeks, when he had told her he was her husband and the only one who could see her

naked, was enough to get revenge on her for the time being. He still did not know her or why she was there at his castle, or why she had stolen his pendant. But even though he had wanted to rush out of the castle at that moment, he found now he wanted to return to a bath-warmed room. To a naked woman with green eyes who never answered a question directly, and who had a smile that made his heart do strange things. Things he had never done before.

And so, he turned his horse back to the castle, and rode hard and fast back to the stables to return his steed, trying not to dissect things too thoroughly.



Helen had eventually dismissed the maid after her bath, and she was on her own behind the changing screen when the door burst open, and she heard the suddenly familiar footsteps of Cory entering.

“I see you do not stand on ceremony, husband,” she said drily. “ Hoping to catch a glimpse again, were you?”

She smiled at the chuckle she heard from the other side of the screen. “I think I have already had plenty of eyefuls today, my love. I have heard we are due down tae the hall for a meal and tae meet the new child.”

Helen smiled at his sarcastic use of the endearment. “Yes, the maid told me. I am dressing as we speak. I mentioned we left so rushed that we had no clothes, so the maid has brought me a few gowns and you some clothing as well.”

Helen heard a sound of surprise from Cory and heard him walk to the bed where the clothing for him had been laid out. She spied on him through the crack in the changing screen, and he peered over the bed, reaching out to grasp the Chattan kilt laid out for him. She paused in her attempts to select the proper gown, and she simply watched him. Now that she was there in his castle and had unwittingly said they were married, she was not exactly sure what to do. She could attempt to spy, but she also had a role to play, and people would now be watching her more closely.

In her wildest imagination, she had never imagined that she would have to feign attraction to a man she was already very much attracted to. A man who kept showing her new layers. Swallowing, she tried to look away but found she could not. The man had been hurt in his time there, and clearly, there was something wrong with a father who did not choose his blood soon to be the next laird.

*He has lost out on his birthright.*

Helen breathed in a shaky breath when he removed his clothing to change into the garments on the bed. She had seen his chest before, but now that his back was turned to her, she was able to see the strong, broad lines of it, along with a few scars. She felt the odd urge to run her tongue along them and taste the sweat of his skin. Heat bloomed in her stomach and below as he removed his kilt, and he was utterly bare before her.

His buttocks faced her as he reached out for the other kilt, and they were strong. As they clenched slightly in his movement, she could imagine how they would look if he was buried between her thighs. Shaking her head, she stepped back from the screen and tried to turn her attention to her gown.



*What is wrong with me?*

“What is takin’ ye so long, Helen?” he called, and with trembling hands, she pulled on the shift the maid, Mary, had given her.

“I wish to make a good impression, of course!” she called, hoping he could not hear the tremble in her voice.

“Why? It is nae as if we care what they think or that ye are actually my wife.”

She searched her hazy mind for an explanation. Her fingers slid over the various gowns, unable to choose one, her mind still focused on what she had just witnessed, the vivid image of them naked together stubbornly not leaving her thoughts.

“Helen?” he asked, and she thought he sounded nearer.

She picked up a gown hastily and held it over her breasts. He did not come around the screen, and he had already seen her naked, but now, it was different. Now she cared and she had seen him, too.

“What?” she hissed. “You can go down if you are so eager to spend time with them. But I am not yet ready.”

Silence was her response, and she felt a little guilty for her sharp words. But it would be better if he left. That way, she

could focus herself again, remind herself of her goal, and bloody get dressed.

“All right then,” he said. “I will go downstairs and tell them ye are on yer way.”

“That is good. Thank you.”

She held her breath until she heard the door shut, and then she sank onto the trunk that sat behind the screen. Putting her face into her hands, she tried to remind herself of why she had begun this and stolen the pendant and raced to Chattan Castle as fast as she could.

*You do not need anyone, Helen. You are only there to help Cecily, and then you will make your own way in the world. Put him out of your head and stop being nonsensical.*

After a few breaths, she stood and chose a green gown. It was beautiful, and it amazed her that Lady Millie had allowed her to take it, or so the maid had said. She had been so used to dressing herself over her travels that it was easy for her to put on her front-tying stays, skirt and bodice. When she was finished, she timidly stepped out from behind the screen. She walked to the looking-glass to assess her appearance.

She put her hands on her hips and turned. The skirt was slightly ruffled to add bulk but not as wide as it could have been without a proper crinoline underneath. She hoped no one would notice, and she trailed a finger along the line of her bodice. This time, it was more modest. But under the ruffled lace, she could still see the swell of her breasts, and she

smirked at the thought of Cory's fingers there again, pulling it up.

*That shall not happen at dinner.*

The maid had already come to do her hair, and it hung in golden curls, tied back over one shoulder. It was not exactly what she might choose for an English dinner, but it would do.

“Remember your goal,” she said to her reflection. Then she left, slipping on her shoes before she did.

Dinner with her fake husband and the people who had seemed to steal his lairdship from him was no little thing. Her heart felt like a frightened bird in a cage as she descended the steps. If she made a mistake, she could kiss her chances of finding out the secrets of Clan Chattan goodbye.

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## CHAPTER TEN

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“Welcome, Cory,” Millie said with a slight smile as he entered the main hall.

He had hesitated for a little while, wandering about before he walked in, wanting to delay the meeting for as long as he could. Millie and Ruairidh were honestly the last people in the world he wanted to see. It felt like pulling teeth to be alone in the same room with them, trying to pretend no treachery had ever happened. But Millie’s half smile confused him. However, as he got closer, he could see she held the babe in her arms.

“Thank ye, Millie.” He coughed and stepped closer. “Cousin,” he said to Ruairidh, who sat nearby, already sipping on an ale.

“Here is young Matthew. Matthew, this is yer Uncle Cory.” Millie was speaking to the babe then; she walked up to Cory and leaned closer. “Would ye like tae hold the bairn?”

“A-aye.” Cory surprised himself by agreeing, and soon, she put the tiny baby into his arms, and he held his breath as he looked down into the little lad’s sleeping face. “Look at ye then, Matthew. So wee, are ye nae?”

“Aye, we were worried when he was first born.” Cory looked up to see Millie looking lovingly down at her son. It was the most animated he had seen her since their arrival. “He was a little bit early. We have had trouble conceivin’ over the years.”

“We certainly have,” Ruairidh grumbled from his seat close to the fire before he took another long gulp from his cup. “I had hoped to have married a fertile wife, but apparently, it was nae tae be.”

Millie looked down at Matthew again, twin circles of color on her cheeks.

“Ye must be very proud of yer new son, Ruairidh.” Cory wished he could leap across the room and tear his bloody cousin limb from limb. “He looks good and strong.”

“Aye.” Ruairidh looked away as Millie cooed to her child.

For a moment, Cory watched her. The old hollow ache he had pushed aside years ago reared its head again. This could have been the two of them, living in Chattan Castle, cooing over their baby, dreaming of the future. When Millie left him, she had crushed more than one of his dreams, and he was angry about it. Far angrier than was perhaps healthy to be. That was the reason he had kept it away all these years. It did no good for him to remember the past, and so he stayed away, locking all his pain away deep, deep inside him.

When she looked up at him again, he saw the past reflected in her green eyes, but only for a moment. “We are tae have venison tonight. A few of our men went huntin’ this morn.”

“Wonderful,” Cory said quickly before handing Matthew back to her.

He stepped back then, wanting to put as much distance between them as possible.

“I hope Helen enjoys venison as well. I ken that is yer favorite.” Millie smiled again.

Cory lifted a brow, surprised that she had done something like that solely for him, with her husband within earshot. “Ye are kind. Aye, venison is also a favorite of Helen’s. She is on her way down.”

“Och, there she is,” Millie said quietly, and Cory turned around just as the doors to the hall opened again.

His jaw sagged a bit when she walked in, looking straight ahead at the small group as she shut the door behind her. “Forgive me. I am perhaps a little late.”

“Nay,” Millie said kindly. “Come and sit. The gown looks lovely on ye.”

Cory could hear Ruairidh getting up to come and sit at the table, but his eyes were only on Helen as she walked towards them. He had now seen in her in a cloak, half frozen to death and in an unremarkable woolen gown. He had seen her naked as well, but he had never seen her like this. Now she was wearing a gown fit for a lady, and it made the breath catch in his chest.

Her eyes caught his. He thought he saw her slight smile as she approached him, her golden hair styled over one shoulder, making her look rather more innocent than he knew she was. Helen was perfect in every sense of the word. And Cory wondered if she had dressed on purpose to shock him into speechlessness and make him look yet again like a fool in front of his cousin and former lover.

“Are ye goin’ tae sit, Cory, or are ye goin’ tae continue gawkin’ at yer own wife?” Ruairidh sneered, and Cory put his lips together and looked away.

*Soon, I’ll be out of this bloody mess and never have tae hear me cousin’s voice again.*

“Laird Chattan, my husband is welcome to gawk as much as he pleases,” Helen purred at his side, laying her hand on his arm and forcing him to look up again.

“Ye look very bonnie, wife,” he said awkwardly, hoping this was how husbands behaved with their wives.

But he knew he meant it. She looked more than bonnie. She looked almost like... home.

“And ye,” she whispered in his ear before he turned and led her to the table.

At Ruairidh’s behest, servants began entering the hall, bringing endless plates of food. Cory wondered if this was another one of his cousin’s improvements, no doubt starving the rest of the villages to feed themselves at the castle.

“How wonderful,” Helen said as they were being served.

A young servant girl poured everyone a glass of wine, and Cory noticed Helen’s hand shaking a bit as she picked up the glass.

*Is the lass nervous?*

“So this is your new son,” Helen smiled at Millie, who continued to hold the baby from her seat at one far end of the table.

“Aye. Matthew. The nurse should be along in a moment. But I must say, I cannae bear tae be much away from him. Nae when he is this young.”

The sounds of Ruairidh chewing on his meat were all everyone could hear for a few seconds before he grumbled. “Doesnae make any bloody sense. If he has a nursemaid, why she doesnae use her is beyond me.”

At his father’s loud voice, Matthew suddenly woke and wailed. Both Cory and Helen winced a little as his cries became piercing. Millie stood hastily and shushed him, rocking him back and forth.

“Why dae ye need tae bring him tae the table?” Ruairidh demanded.



“Because he is our son, Ruairidh.” It was the first time Millie had spoken forcefully, and Cory turned to see his cousin’s eyes darken with rage.

“But he doesnae belong here, wife. It is nae as if he can sit with us and eat. He should go upstairs tae his nursemaid.”

Just then, the nursemaid appeared. Millie hurried over to hand the screeching Matthew off to her before docilely returning to the table, her eyes downcast. A twinge of concern moved in Cory’s chest, but he tried to push it away. Millie had done him wrong, and now she was getting her just deserts.

He picked up a slice of bread and then jumped when Helen started to cough furiously. She picked up the cloth napkin beside her and held it to her mouth.

“Are ye well?” he asked her, and she nodded.

Neither Ruairidh nor Millie said anything, clearly still sullen about their argument. But then Ruairidh began droning on about something or other, and Cory whispered to Helen, “What are ye daein, lass?”

“I feel sick when I eat venison,” she groaned. “I hate it.”

“Shite.” Cory rolled his eyes.

It was just one problem after another.



“What is wrong with that?” Helen asked, affronted, a little shiver having run down her spine when she had tasted the meat.

“Ye must eat it,” Cory whispered harshly into her ear. “I told everyone it was one of yer favorites when they asked me.”

“But why would you say that? Whose fault is that?” Helen asked back, and then they both turned to see that Laird Chattan had stopped speaking and Lady Millie was watching them, too.

“Is everythin’ all right?” Lady Millie asked, and Helen smiled at her.

“All is well. I just choked on something. I will be fine, thank you. What a delicious dinner,” she said with perhaps far too much emphasis before shooting Cory an angry look.

“Well, we pride ourselves on our meat up here in Scotland, Mrs. Chattan. Ye English certainly ken naethin’ about it. Nay Englishman that I have met seems tae have a refined palate.”

“Oh,” Helen replied, sliding a piece of venison to Cory’s plate quickly before anyone noticed. “Do you happen to converse with many Englishmen? From what I know, it seems that the Scots and the English are at odds.” She shrugged and giggled, pretending that she was merely a helpless female who knew little of politics.

It had always worked in the past, but at her question, Laird Chattan's beady eyes focused fully on her, and he did not look happy.

"Of course, nae often. But they are around us like bloody weeds, so it is impossible nae tae come intae contact with any of them. And as laird, I have occasion tae hear from English soldiers from time tae time."

"I did not know," Helen said with another smile before she turned away and looked down at her plate.

*Ugh. Venison.*

It was the slimiest and gamiest of all the meats in the world, and she hated it with passion. Her stomach was already roiling, and she had no desire to eat a thing when the sight and stench of venison were before her. Why did it have to be venison when she was already struggling to play her role properly? She had seemed to incur the wrath of the laird with her question when that was the exact opposite of what she wished to do. But his answer was interesting, however, and he did not seem happy, which usually meant he probably had something to hide.

When she looked up, everyone was watching her, as if expecting her to take another bite. Her mind thinking fast, she knocked her fork from the table and heard it satisfyingly clunk on the stone beneath the table.

"Oh, how clumsy of me," she said and then bent down to search for it.

She heard Lady Millie and her husband chat about dull matters, and Helen punched a fist against Cory's legs.

"Christ," he said, peering under the table. "What is it?"

"Can you help me, please? I cannot find it."

"It is right—"

She reached up and put a hand over his mouth, his eyes widening.

"You need to help me get out of here, or I will be sick over the table. And that would not be a pleasant way for us to enjoy the dinner. I think the both of us have already incurred enough of your cousin's wrath for one evening."

She could see him lift a brow as if he might challenge her, but then he removed her hand. "Very well, but let me eat a little somethin' 'afore we go."

For the next few minutes, Helen tried to take steady breaths and tiny bites of other things that had not touched the venison on her plate. A light sheen of sweat had come out over her forehead and the back of her neck, and finally, Lady Millie noticed.

"Are ye nae well, Madame Chattan?"

Thankfully, Cory cut in. “Nae, she is nae. She was kind enough tae allow me tae eat a little ‘afore I took her out of doors. She has been feelin’ poorly in the last week, with all the cold, ye ken.” He stood and reached for Helen’s elbow.

She allowed him to help her stand, and she found she was far woozier than she had expected. Muttering a quiet “thank you,” she wrapped her hands around his brawny arm.

“Forgive me,” she said to their hosts, and Lady Millie waved a hand.

“It is naething. Please feel better. I will send the healer tae yer room?”

“Nae yet. I will walk with her a bit. Thank ye.” Cory led the way then, his back straight and confident as they left the dinner table, Helen trying to focus on taking calm breaths.

They were silent until they reached the courtyard, and Cory left her to sit on the side of a low wall. “Let me bring ye something tae drink, lass,” he said with a soft smile, and she nodded at him before he left.

Now the smell of venison was out of her nose and she could breathe in the crisp, cold air. At least the gown was warm enough with its thick wool and long sleeves, but she knew she could not stay out there for long. Her eyes looked up at the sky again, thinking if she could just lift out of there and fly away, she could return home at long last.

*But you still do not have the information you need.*

She grimaced at herself. This was going to be far harder than it needed to be and feeling sick was not helping. Her ears perked up when she heard voices coming from the far edge of the courtyard. One of them was a cold, stern voice she recognized. Feeling well enough to stand, she crept along the path until she could hide behind a few bushes and watch Laird Chattan in a window, talking to someone.

*He must have snuck away from dinner as well. I bet Lady Millie was thrilled about that.*

She could not hear everything, but a few words caught her ear. “English soldiers”, “kill”, and “weapons” stuck out to her. With her heart beating wildly, she thought back to what the one man had told her at the brothel back near Grant land. The rumor was that Clan Chattan supplied weapons to the English and information about the Scots’ next moves. It seemed it was true, and she could believe it of Laird Ruairidh. She would just need a bit of proof, perhaps letters of some kind, to take back to Anthony.

Clan Chattan was a large and powerful clan, and Anthony would be satisfied if he found out that bit of juicy information. He would leave Cecily alone, and she and Helen could leave Seton House and leave as they pleased.

*I hope.*

Then she heard Laird Chattan mention Cory’s name. It made the blood freeze in her veins. Even if she could not hear exactly what he was saying, she could hear his anger and malice in every word. She heard Cory’s name mentioned a few more times, and then she knew, deep down, that Cory was in

danger or at least that Laird Chattan was a dangerous, bloodthirsty man.

The way he had looked at her at the dinner table was enough to chill anyone's blood, and she would have to tread carefully when searching for evidence. Remembering that Cory was to return soon, she tried to stand up from the bushes but she let out a yelp when a thorn scratched at her neck, and her clothing was caught by an entire branch of them.

She leaned back against the wall of the courtyard, clapping a hand over her mouth. Laird Chattan had stopped speaking, and her eyes widened when she spied him leaning out of the window to look around the garden. Her heart pounded in her ears, but her breath was quiet behind her hand. If she was caught, she knew there was no way she would survive Chattan Castle, even if the laird believed her to be his cousin's wife. After painfully long seconds, Laird Chattan pulled back inside and then she heard his footsteps walk away down the passage.

Slowly, Helen moved her hand away from her mouth, and she let out a sigh of relief.

“What are ye daein’ in the bushes, wife?”

Helen jumped and looked up to see Cory looking down at her with a smug, yet confused, expression.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Cory was smiling. Helen had nearly gotten them into trouble at the table with her dislike of venison, but now she was crouching in the bushes, looking up at him with a child-like guilty expression.

“I am simply admiring the garden. I thought it would help me to... feel better.” Helen tried to stand, but the sound of snagging pulled her back, and Cory burst into laughter.

“Stuck in the thorns, are ye?” Cory put down the drink he had brought her on the low wall, and then he reached down to help loosen some of the thorns attached to the sleeve of her gown.

When he crouched down in front of her, he could hear her breathing, but he looked down at the thorns instead of in her eyes. It would only distract him and he needed to focus.

“We wouldnae want ye tae ruin this gown. It is far too lovely tae be torn tae shreds.”

“Hmm-mm,” she replied, and he still did not look at her, removing one thorn at a time.



Chuckling, he said, “I think this must be yer punishment for trippin’ me cousin and lettin’ him fall intae the bushes.”

She gasped at first, but then she laughed. Cory looked up at her with a little fluttering in his chest. Even though he did not think it possible that she could be any more beautiful, she was, as the lovely sound of her laughter filled his ears.

“I did not think you noticed that,” Helen said, still smiling. Shrugging, she added, “It did not seem right, letting him just walk away to mistreat his wife after abusing you. It was but a small revenge, nevertheless it still felt good to do it.”

Cory plucked out the last of the thorns, then rose, leaning down to offer her his hand. With her eyes still on him, she slid her hand into his and got to her feet, standing very close to him.

“And it felt good tae watch it, however small a revenge it might have been.” Their smiles faded a little as he realized they were very close indeed.

In fact, his eyes were moving to her mouth, and a wave of desire rushed through him yet again. But then he looked away and stepped back. He had a content and quiet life before her, and he did not need any distractions. Besides, he barely knew the woman, and she had already stolen from him!

*And she is here at me cousin’s castle with a reason I ken nae.*

“Yer water. ‘Tis there,” Cory said, gesturing awkwardly before rubbing at the back of his neck and taking another step back.

“We should return tae the room. The healer is likely there tae help settle yer stomach.”

“Yes, of course,” Helen smiled and then picked up the cup of water, drinking it fully before she followed Cory out of the courtyard.

Now that their moment had passed, like sparks lifting from a bonfire, a shadow had fallen over her expression. Helen walked quietly beside him up the stairs to their shared room, and he opened the door for her. They were alone only for a few minutes, moving around each other awkwardly, unsure what to do when a knock sounded, and Helen let the healer in.

Thankful for the distraction, Cory poured himself a drink from the table in the far corner of the room and watched Helen speak to the healer. The old woman handed her a mug of something, and then she left, leaving Helen to sit by the fire and drink in peace.

“What is it, then?” Cory asked, stepping closer, his own drink in his hands. “What did she give ye?”

“Something bloody awful.” She coughed, and Cory started laughing, coming to sit next to her.

The lass never ceased to surprise him. “Well, then that means it is probably good enough tae heal ye.” He leaned his elbows on his knees, his hands holding his glass. “What happened with venison that ye daenae like it?”

Helen seemed to be avoiding his eyes, but after another sip and grimace, she stole a look at him.

“I know that it sounds odd, but to me it tastes like old, slimy leather. Ever since I was a child, it made me shudder whenever we had to eat it. My father was an accomplished hunter, and it often was served for dinner.”

Cory spun the glass in his hands, turning his eyes to it, wondering why he was so happy to know even something small about this strange woman. It was one of the very few things she had shared with him.

“Perhaps that is why ye daenae like it. Ye had it too often. That can happen.”

“I suppose you are right. But my brother never was aware and I would never told him, because if he had known he would have had it served all the time just to spite me. The cook is a kind, old woman, and she makes me something else when venison is served.”

Helen finished the contents of her mug while Cory leaned back and frowned. Ruairidh was the closest thing he had to a brother, but he had never acted like one. However, if Cory had had a real true blood brother, he would have thought the man would treat him with love and trust

“I suppose we ought tae go tae bed. It has certainly been a long day.” He gave Helen a scolding look, but it had no heat in it.

She smirked at him. “Yes, it has. I suppose this means you’ll be sleeping in the chair again.”

“Nay, in fact, I think I will put a few blankets on the floor next tae the bed.”

“Oh,” she said lightly, getting to her feet and putting down the mug.

When she looked at him, Cory was afraid to stand, lest they stand close to one another again. Then, he might kiss her like a fool and forget everything that she had done, and all the things she might yet do.

“If we are surprised by someone, like a maid, come morn’ or even in the middle of the night, I want it tae be easy for me tae jump intae bed and make it appear Id been there all night. It would be much harder if I were to sleep across the room in a chair.”

She nodded. “Right, of course. That makes sense.” She left his side to move behind the changing screen. Cory trained his eyes on the fire in the hearth as he heard the swish of fabric, trying not to envision her naked. “I suppose they must think it odd that we arrived with nothing. I made excuses, but I don’t know if they were good enough. Do you think they will ask again?”

“Well, what did ye say?” he asked, still refusing to look back at the screen.

It was hard enough to keep a rein on himself as it was.

“I said that we had an accident along the way, and we lost all our things in the river. And that was why we arrived in the haphazard way that we did.”

Cory scrunched up his nose. “But they may think it odd if the guards tell them that ye arrived without a horse, and I rode up on one.”

He could practically hear her smile as she said, “Then we will tell them that we had an argument, and I walked off ahead. You had to cool down before you rode after me. That sounds believable, do you not think?”

He snorted. “Aye, so it does. Ye seem tae think of everythin’. As if ye’ve had tae come up with plans like this before.” He stood and went to fill his glass again, careful to keep his back to the screen as much as possible.

Whisky was in his mouth when she said, “You can turn around now. You are safe.” The sarcasm was obvious.

But when he turned around, he choked on his whisky at the sight of her. And he prayed for a sweet death.



Helen put her hands on her hips as Cory spluttered, putting down his glass and putting a fist to his mouth.

“What? What is it? Surely this is nothing so scandalous!”

She thought he must think her terribly provocative, the way he always reacted so strongly around her, no matter what she wore. The nightgown was one of Lady Millie's as well, and it was rather pretty, even if thicker than what she'd wear in England. She believed it to be very sensible, with long sleeves, but as she looked down over her form, she realized the bodice was a little low. Her hair was also down, and the curls hung down her back.

Sighing, she rolled her eyes just as Cory seemed to come to himself again. "Nay, it is nae so scandalous," he said, but his voice sounded strained.

"Ah, that is why you nearly choked to death when you saw me. Or perhaps I am so disgusting that I repulse you and makes you have such a powerful reaction."

"Nay!" he cried, and then coughed once more before he said the word a little softer. "It is nae that, I swear it. It is only that I didnae expect a woman's nightgown tae be so..."

"So..." Helen walked over to the bed, passing in front of the fire, where she stopped and held out her arms. "So what? It seems perfectly normal to me."

His mouth fell open yet again as his gaze slid down her body. "In Heaven's name, Cory, what is the matter?"

"I didnae expect it tae be so sheer."

She frowned and looked down at her gown, and then she could see it. The light from the fire was now fully behind her, and

she could see her legs. With a little gasp, she hurried away towards the bed, but still she pinned him with a frustrated look.

“You act like you have never seen a woman before, Cory Chattan. It is just a nightgown. Something warm to sleep in.”

Cory nodded, but she was not sure if he had actually heard her. Rolling her eyes again, she slid into bed and pulled the covers to her chin.

“Surely, that is better. You do not have to see a single inch of me.”

Cory said nothing, and she turned on her side, away from him. She could hear him remove his clothing and closed her eyes, trying not to think about what she had seen of him earlier through the crack in the changing screen. But she opened them when she saw him lying down blankets on the floor next to where she was on the side of the bed.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her eyes unable to help themselves from gliding along the muscled lines of his bare chest as he slid under his blanket.

Firelight danced in his blue eyes, and he had removed the tie from his hair so that it hung around his shoulders.

“I am layin’ down next tae ye, as we just discussed.”

*But you did not say just how very delicious you would look.*

Helen's eyes grew wide, and she could feel her cheeks heat at her ridiculous thoughts. She laid her head on the pillow and stared at the ceiling instead of at him.

*The man is not a cake.*

“Fine then,” she said.

“Fine.”

She listened as he adjusted himself on the ground and was quiet. It had been a strange day, and Helen realized as she lay on the softest bed of her life that she was very tired. She wanted to sleep desperately, since she had spent her last night trudging through frozen woods without a map and trying to figure out a way into Chattan Castle. But with the handsome shirtless man next to her on the floor, who was confusing her and surprising her every second, she found she could not just go to sleep.

It was not only that. She knew that Laird Chattan was up to something concerning Cory, and it would take a lot more than tripping him into a rosebush to stop him. Also, Cory seemed more than just uncomfortable in his old home. So uncomfortable, in fact, that he had agreed to play along with the woman who had stolen his beloved family heirloom from him and tried to disappear.

*Why did Cory agree to play my husband? He could have told them right then and there who I was, that I had stolen his pendant, and that he did not know why I had come to the castle. But he did not. Why?*



That question kept poking at her. She was grateful to him for keeping everything a secret, for now at least. It gave her more time to think of her plans and to prove Laird Chattan's guilt so that she could finally return home at long last.

Turning on her side again, she looked down at the hulk of a man sleeping on the floor at her side. Before she could second-guess herself, she reached out a hand to his, leaning down so that she could hold it.

He turned to her, and she could tell he had not been asleep but simply lying with his eyes closed. "What is this?"

She whispered, afraid that if she spoke too loudly, it would take away her courage. "Thank you for not telling them that I am not your wife."

Cory said nothing, but eventually he turned away, and she noticed he did not let go of her hand. She did not let go either. And she simply fell asleep with a man she did not really know, hand in hand.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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Eory woke, and when he tried to move, he realized he was touching something, or rather someone. He looked down at his hand, and with a smile, he saw Helen was still leaning over the edge of the bed, her small hand folded into his. She was still fast asleep, so slowly, he pried his fingers from hers, laying back for a few moments with his hands on his chest, letting his heartbeat settle.

He might have had several women in his life, and he might have cared for some of them, but never in all his days had he woken up holding hands with any of them. It was far too intimate a gesture for him to ever have engaged in with anyone before. But he found he liked it. And he found that he liked it because it was with Helen. There was something innocent about her even though she seemed to always portray confidence and experience. Her thanking him last night for something he should not ever have done endeared him to her much more than it should have.

He held his breath when he heard her stir, and then her green eyes were on him, looking down from her place on the bed, where she lay tucked under the covers. Thank God for that. He was not sure he could bear to see her in such a lovely, ruffled state in the morning light with a nightgown that hardly covered her as he thought nightgowns did. It was nearly more erotic than when she had been laying naked before him. And it

was even worse when he had seen her let down her lovely golden curls last night. It made him think of all sorts of lovely instances when she would look the same, most of them connected to her nakedness or being underneath him, writhing with pleasure.

“Good morning,” she said, not moving, and even though their hands had become unclasped, her arm was still hanging over the edge of the bed.

“Good morn’, lass. Did ye sleep well?” He sat up on his elbows, and the blanket fell from his chest.

With no little satisfaction, he noticed that her eyes moved there very briefly. “I suppose we ought tae—”

A maid knocked at the door, and without a second thought, Cory jumped from the floor and into the bed, pulling a lovely warm and soft Helen close to him.

“What are you—”

“Come in!” he called, and two maids entered, one carrying pails of water, and the other with clothes over her arm.

“We are man and wife,” Cory muttered into her ear. “And we must look the part.”

But seconds later, he removed his arm from around her and slid out of bed, the maids’ eyes widening at his near nakedness, but they went about their work, building a fire and

pouring the water into large bowls for Cory and Helen to wash. Soon after, they left, and Helen chuckled.

“Those poor young lassies. I do not think they are used to seeing such large virile men without their clothing on so early in the morning.”

Cory grinned as he washed himself in one of the bowls. “Virile, ye say?” he asked, and Helen scoffed.

“You know very well what you are doing, Cory, no matter how much you play innocent or act as though seeing my body is such a crime.”

They said nothing for a little then, and Helen disappeared behind the changing screen to put on a fresh gown while he also changed into new clothing.

“Are ye ready, lass?” he asked after a time, waiting by the door. “They may find it strange if I show up without ye again.” She appeared around the side of the changing screen, this time in a daytime gown, a darker color, but her hair was yet again tied to the side, and she lifted a shoulder.

“I do not think they worry much about us, Cory. You saw the way they interacted yesterday. I feel rather sorry for Lady Millie, to be stuck with such a cold-hearted man.”

Cory stiffened, and he could tell that his reaction had not gone unnoticed by her. He held open the door, and together, they walked silently through the passages until they reached the main hall. Millie and Ruairidh were already seated at the table,

grumbling to one another about something, but Millie's eyes brightened a bit at his approach.

“Good morning tae ye. Welcome. Sit and eat. We always have so much food, and it is so nice tae share with someone else.”

“Why dae ye say it like that, Millie? We should have plenty of food. I am the laird and ye are my family,” Ruairidh said, barely acknowledging the two of them.

“When will the celebration for your new son be?” Helen asked, looking cheerful to see no venison on the table.

“In three days' time. Just a large meal with a few of my men and some prominent families in the area,” Ruairidh replied.

Cory bit back a scoff so as not to attract any notice from his cousin. But Helen played her role perfectly, the lovely, kind wife.

“How wonderful.”

“So, we ken that it is cold, but Ruairidh wanted tae stroll with ye about the castle grounds, all together. He wants tae show ye a few more of the improvements he's made in the years since ye've been gone,” Millie said, pushing a bit of food around her plate.

Little Matthew was not present, and Cory had no doubt there had been an argument about it that very morning.

Cory's heart felt hollow as he digested the words. 'Since ye've been gone', she had said, as if he had simply decided to leave the castle and never return. As if it had not been the hardest thing he had ever done. As if the birthright he had been born to accept, he had been raised to believe would be his, had never been taken from him.

They finished their breakfast, keeping the conversation light, and Millie asked Helen a few questions about her family. Cory listened carefully, but she spoke in vague terms, and he wished the woman would not continue to make herself such a mystery. When the time came, they all rose, and without a word, Ruairidh led the way out of the hall to the castle gates. Millie called a maid, and she brought a tartan for Millie and Helen.

"Our walls are strong, and the English willnae be able tae penetrate their thickness," Ruairidh said proudly, waving to Helen to approach as he spoke.

He pointed at something, and Helen nodded, looking none too pleased. She left Cory's side, and then he and Millie walked out of the castle together into the cool spring air. Guards shifted out of the way, and then it was just the openness beyond.

"I didnae think ye would ever get married, Cory," Millie said, looking straight ahead as they walked out of the gate and onto the road outside the castle.

"Ye didnae think a lot of things about me, Millie," Cory replied cryptically, noticing that she had stolen a few glances at him. "But I congratulate ye on yer son and the life ye have chosen."

“Aye. It is a good life,” she said without emotion, and he wondered if she had practiced that over and over until it made it seem real. “And ye? Ruairidh tells me ye are at Grant Castle as the second-in-command.”

“Aye, although I daenae ken how he figured that out. It is a good place for me.” He watched as Ruairidh spoke to Helen, and his blood boiled.

They were not touching and yet Cory could practically feel Ruairidh’s desire to, and he wanted nothing more than to rush up and jump in between them. Thankfully, Helen turned around to face them as did Ruairidh. It seemed he had something important to say.

He held his arm out over the green fields far beyond the castle. “We have expanded each field, combining families’ farms. I thought it better that families work together or decide who would take over based on how long they had lived there. But a lot of the land we had tae make intae grazin’ fields. So much clothin’ is needed durin’ war, and we needed the wool.”

Cory blew out a breath. “And what of the families who had farmed those lands? What happened tae them?”

“They found a place, I’m sure,” Ruairidh said nonchalantly.

Cory wanted to punch Ruairidh’s face into the ground, but he held his hands tightly behind his back.

“Cory was always so thoughtful of others, ever since he was a child, even when he didnae have tae be,” Millie said, reaching

out to brush a hand over his arm while Ruairidh looked out over the fields again, surveying his domain.

Cory bristled at the touch, and when he turned to Helen, he saw that she had noticed it. He also saw something he never would have expected: jealousy.



If she looked deep inside herself, Helen knew that the feelings of jealousy she was experiencing at that moment were entirely ridiculous. It made little sense to be jealous of Cory, when he'd rejected her advances, and she was in his castle to take advantage of his family for her own gain. And yet she *was* jealous. Ever since they had arrived yesterday, Helen had noticed something in Lady Millie when she looked at Cory, if she deigned to look at him at all.

Helen had seen longing before many times, like whenever her brother had longed for many a woman, young lasses in the surrounding village or even in Seton House or at balls even. His eyes would take on a darker quality, the same as she had seen in many a drunken man in taverns over her time away from home. Lady Millie had that look.

She was not as obvious as a man with her longing, but whenever Helen saw her eyes turn to Cory, something was there. She could not be certain, but Helen thought that Cory and Lady Millie had been something to one another in a past life. Cory's expression also changed whenever he looked at Lady Millie. Not longing but hurt looks, as if she had caused him pain and he was waiting for an explanation. Helen hated it. She knew it was wrong, and Cecily would tell her she was being selfish and foolish, but she did not like it one bit. She wanted Cory only to look at her.



Even if his absurd jaw drops and confused looks whenever she was naked or barely clothed annoyed her, she liked them deep down. It meant that she was something more to him than just a horrible person who stole pendants and rode off to clan castles for no reason.

“Ye are too kind, Lady Millie,” Cory said aloud, and Helen tensed when he smiled faintly.

Laird Chattan glowered at the pair of them, but he said nothing, and Lady Millie still was looking up at Cory as if she expected him to say something more. She was leaning into him slightly, and Helen could have sworn she had seen the woman brush her hand against his arm just a moment before. She knew that nothing good would come of her jealousy, but she could not help what she did next.

She stepped forward, and said, “Yes, it was one of the many reasons that drew me to Cory in the first place. So kind and gentle.” She was standing right in front of him, meeting his blue gaze, and then she stood up on her toes and did the first thing that came to her mind to claim him. She kissed him.

As soon as their lips touched, she knew that she had made a mistake by kissing him so suddenly in front of everyone. She felt him stiffen but she knew he would not pull away. They were meant to be husband and wife after all. Her hands rested softly on his chest as she closed her eyes, wanting to savor the moment for just a few seconds.

A hush fell over the group, and the only thing she could feel was his soft mouth against hers. Slowly, with difficulty, she pulled away, but then she felt his arms move around her back

and pull her closer. Helen had never felt so safe and warm before in her life, and finding herself in Cory's embrace felt better than she knew it should. His mouth moved ever so slowly against her own, and she felt a shiver run over her skin. Breathing in his scent, that glorious, manly musk of him, made her heart race and her belly filled with heat, that moved straight down between her legs. Helen knew in that instant that she was playing a dangerous game.

*Oh, why did I kiss him?*

But then it was over. Cory's lips had left hers, and his hands were on her arms as he pulled her away and held her back from him. Her fingers reached up to touch the edge of her lips, and her eyes met his. He was staring at her, breathing hard through his nose, his jaw clenching tightly. She could tell he was not happy, but she could see the heat in his gaze.

*The longing.*

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Millie watching Cory, and she also did not look happy. Her hand fluttered to her chest.

"Come now, wife," Ruairidh said roughly, grasping at Lady Millie's arm to walk ahead. "We shall go on. There is much I want Cory tae see."

When they walked away, Helen said, "Did something happen between you and Lady Millie when you lived here?"

Cory stood a little taller so that he could tower over her a bit more. The look he gave her was serious, and she could tell he was attempting to intimidate her. But he was not succeeding. Even when he was angry or lustful, his eyes remained kind. She knew he would never hurt her.

“Since ye daenae answer my questions, then why should I answer yers?”

He crossed his arms over his chest as if he feared she would kiss him again. “Perhaps we ought tae agree nae tae ask one another anythin’.” He leaned closer, his breath brushing against her ear. “For I ken that ye will never tell me anythin’, especially nae somethin’ I would wish tae ken about ye.”

And then without looking at her, he stalked off after the laird and his wife. Helen was left, touching her mouth where their kiss was still burning on her lips. She found that it had not satisfied her, anyway. It had only made her crave for more.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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Three days had passed, Matthew's celebration was upon them. Helen had busied herself around the castle as best she could, but she realized she had no notion of what a wife did with her time. Back at Seton House, with her parents gone, and her brother not caring whether she lived or perished, really, she could do as she pleased. She read books, walked in the gardens, rode her horse, and took tea with family friends. She had no one's eyes on her, watching her every move.

But in the castle, it appeared the laird and lady were watching her and Cory to make sure they were really together. The kiss had clearly not convinced them of their love.

*Likely because you did not kiss him to prove that but because you were jealous. It was hasty and awkward and completely unbelievable.*

That was what Helen's was thinking as she walked around the castle grounds on her own in the late afternoon. Thoughts of that kiss had plagued her for three days, and every night when they slept, she dreamt of it too. In fact, in her dreams a lot more happened. At this point she just had to find evidence of Laird Chattan's guilt, and then she could be gone. She would

never have to think of Cory Chattan again or the way he had kissed her back ever so slightly.

“Lost are ye?” A voice said, and she turned around to see Cory leaning against the castle wall, a little grin on his face.

He was not wearing furs or a thick coat because the snow had now melted, and the spring sunshine was upon them. Helen had a basket in her hand, hopeful of gathering a few spring flowers to bring to their room. She and Cory had hardly spoken more than a few sentences to one another in the past three days. It seemed he was angry about the kiss and her question about Lady Millie. She was certain there had been something between them years ago. Something that had hurt him deeply. She was determined to find out what it was.

“No, why should I be lost? Surely you know I walk around the castle every day.”

He chuckled at that, and when she turned away, he walked beside her. “Ye have a habit now, dae ye? We have only been here three days.” His eyes dropped to the basket. “What are ye daein’ with that?”

“Collecting some flowers. I know that the snow has only just left us, but I was hopeful of gathering some early buds for our room. Sometimes in the winter, I get very sad, and the buds remind me that full spring will come soon.”

He nodded as he put his hands behind his back. “But tae kill a new flower so early seems rather harsh. Ye are a wily one, Helen.”

She laughed, but the comment hurt her. That was what men always thought of her; wily, devious. That was what a woman had to do sometimes in a men's world, to get ahead in life or to be free.

*But he is different, is he not?*

It was not a terribly useful thought to a woman who was trying her very hardest not to be attracted to that man. But it was true. Cory Chattan was not the typical male that she met in her travels or had grown up around. For all his muscles and dark looks, he had a sweetness about him, he was soft when he needed to be soft. And the way he had held her hand all night showed her he had a side he perhaps did not wish others to see.

*But he showed it to me.*

“I wonder, sir, are you always so forthright with the women in your life? Perhaps you were the same with Lady Millie?”

She turned her head to look at his reaction, and he shook his head. One corner of his mouth tilted up. She had attempted over the past three days to ask him about Lady Millie in subtle ways that did not include outright questions. But he had always avoided answering.

“Is that what ye are, Helen? A lady in my life?” He smiled in full now, and Helen blushed before she looked away.

*I hate it when he smiles. It makes me lose all rational thought.*

“I thought we were no longer supposed to ask one another questions. You remember the pact we made, do you not?” she threw back.

“Well, I only meant tae see if ye were well. There will be a few guests tonight, and some have arrived already. I thought tae warn ye that it might nae be a good idea tae state that ye are also married tae them.” At her gasp, he grinned and started backing away toward where he came from. “Since that seems tae be yer habit of late.”

“Cory Chattan, you are a cad!” she said with no heat.

He laughed. “Until later, lass.”

Helen was still smiling by the time she had gathered the buds and returned to her room. When she had asked after Cory’s whereabouts to a passing servant, the young lady had told her he was with his friend Kai, a visitor to the castle for the celebration of the bairn. Helen thought she could take this chance to investigate a little. It was still early spring, and the sun was fading. People would be about their tasks, and the light was not so pronounced. Besides, Lady Millie and Laird Ruairidh would be busy preparing for their guests, and Cory now had a distraction in his friend Kai.

Once she had removed her cloak and laid down her basket, she left the room, opening it quietly before she shut it just as quietly behind her. Over her time in the castle, she had been able to wander about a bit, claiming that she had never been in a Scottish castle before. This was true, and Lady Millie seemed disposed to allow her to wander on her own. Therefore, she knew the location of Laird Chattan’s study, and that would be her first stop.

Helen had no proper use for God, but she sent up a prayer or two, hopeful that Laird Chattan would indeed be busy with guests instead of in his study. She passed a few servants along her way through the passageways, and she nodded to them. She returned to her usual mask of confidence when she was on a mission to find information, no one could suspect anything. This had to be quick and simple.

Thankfully, as she neared the darker passageways closer to the study, there was no one else around.

*I hope the evidence is right there on top of the desk so that I will not have to stay for long.*

As she got closer to the large door which led into his study, she cursed herself for not bringing a candle with her. For what if she entered the study, and it was too dark? Then she would have to fumble around, unable to find what she needed and perhaps get caught.

She took a deep breath just outside of the castle door, reminding herself of everything that she had achieved.

*Helen, you have come this far. You have elicited much information from men who did not know who you were. You were able to bring them to their knees, and they were none the wiser about who you were. You can do this. Find a letter or anything. Take it, and then be gone.*

Not hearing anyone around her, she reached out for the door, ready to open it, but when she pulled on the iron latch, it did



not budge. She tried again, but then realized with frustration that it was locked!

*Damn!*

She was about to try again, hoping that her desperation would somehow get her magically inside and lead her to what she needed, when she heard loud footsteps behind her coming down the passage. It was dim, but the person would certainly see her, and there were no nooks to hide in. She froze, realizing that she had been too foolish to think that she would not get caught with so many people around. She hoped for it to be only a servant, but then she felt a strong hand on her arm, pulling her around. Her blood ran cold.

“Laird Chattan,” she said, as confidently as she could, but she could hear the tremble in her voice.

“Madam Chattan. What in God’s name are ye daein’ outside of me study?”

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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“*M*arried?” Kai, one of Cory’s good friends from a long time ago, asked. “Well, I should say congratulations, then.”

Kai was younger than Cory, but they had been as close as brothers ever since they were children. He was taller, broader, and darker, with long dark hair, a beard, and tattoos from his various battles. He had grown up in the nearby village, but he was now a soldier of another clan, only visiting to celebrate Matthew’s birth.

“Aye, thank ye.” Cory felt uncomfortable lying to his good friend, but it was not as though they had spoken much in the past six years.

And he could tell him the truth once this celebration business was over, and they were both gone from the castle. They sat in the library with tumblers of whisky in their hands, both staring at the flames.

“What of Millie?” Kai asked, not looking up when Cory did. “I remember how much in love ye were with the lass.”

Kai rubbed his beard with his thumb, and he looked at Cory straight in the eyes. “Ye have been away for a long time, Kai, busy with war and battles. Here...” He trailed off for a moment, taking a long sip from his glass before he continued. “Things changed. Ye can see that the lairdship went to Ruairidh, and so did Millie. One day, she just left me and decided tae marry Ruairidh instead.”

“Och, I see. Aye, we have discussed about yer father’s choice in a few letters over the years. But I still daenae understand in full. There must be some mistake. And I thought perhaps somethin’ had happened between ye and Millie tae make her choose another.

Cory finished his whisky and stood to pour another. “It doesnae matter anymore. Come, let us go tae this bloody dinner and get it over with. The sooner we celebrate, the sooner I can be back home at Grant Castle.”

Kai stood, but he was frowning. “But dae ye really call that yer home? Even after all this time, surely Chattan Castle is still yer home.”

Cory looked around the library, beloved by both his parents and himself when he was a young child. An old feeling flickered inside his chest, and he snuffed it out.

“It is like a stranger tae me now. I have nae need tae ever return once we are done here.” He threw back the rest of his drink and put down the glass, heading for the door.

He did not want to talk about it anymore. Kai fell into step beside him while they left the library.

“So, will I get tae meet yer wife? Where is she?”

Cory rubbed a hand over his face and beard, and the back of his neck. Talking about Helen did not exactly make him feel any better.

“Nae sure, but I think it’s likely she’s somewhere, causin’ trouble.”

Kai chuckled, making Cory smile, but it was true. Over the past three days, Helen had taken to wandering around the castle and the grounds as much as possible. She always claimed that it was for flowers or fresh air or out of boredom and the fact that she’d never seen a castle. But Cory was not so sure. When they reached the main hall, he bid Kai goodbye to

“I will be there shortly. I had better look for her first.”

“Very well.”

He hurried up the stairs, and when he neared the room he shared with Helen, he heard hushed voices. Walking inside, his anger nearly choked him when he saw Ruairidh’s hands on Helen’s arms, holding her in a vice-like grip.

“What dae ye think ye are doin’, cousin?” Cory asked, surprised at the deep sound of his own voice, nearly trembling with rage.

Ruairidh caught his eye and let go of her. “How about ye tell me why yer wife is wanderin’ the halls when there is a dinner tae be had? I found her just outside of me study, tryin’ tae get in.”

Cory narrowed his eyes when he turned to Helen. He did not question her, but instead, he felt his heart soften when he saw the fear in her eyes.

“What does it matter, Ruairidh? Are we nae guests in yer home?”

Ruairidh snorted, his dark eyes fiery, and his cheeks were a mottled red. “What sort of guest does such a thing?”

Cory could see that the man wished to harm Helen; it was as plain as day, and he slid in between them, crossing his arms and staring his cousin down.

“I am sure it was nothing more than a misunderstanding, cousin. I think it time ye leave, we will be down tae celebrate shortly.”

Ruairidh tried to look around him, but with a scoff, he turned away. “It is unsafe for either of ye tae be wanderin’ around me castle at night. Ken that, *cousin*.”

Then he stomped out of the door. It was not until Cory heard his fading footsteps that he turned to Helen. Her eyes were on the door, and he could hear just how breathless she sounded.

“Are ye all right?” he asked gently, reaching out to cup her cheek in his hand.

She turned toward him, her eyes still wide, and she nodded before she jumped into his arms. Even though he was surprised, a rush of pleasure and protectiveness filled him as he held her close for a few moments. His eyes closed as he breathed in the scent of her. It was growing more familiar and comforting the more time they spent together.

“Aye, I am well,” she said at long last, dragging her arms around his shoulders until they stood face to face.

“Good. What were ye daein’ there? I wouldnae want ye tae ever come up against him again. I saw the look in his eyes, lass. He is a brutal man, through and through.”

Helen swallowed, and she still did not quite look at him. “I was just wandering around, as you said. I got lost and was trying to find my way back.”

She still seemed breathless, and Cory was now breathless himself. He had never wanted to keep someone safe so much, or to see someone smile again. With a shaking hand, he lifted his finger to her chin to tilt her face to meet his. He could see her lovely green eyes turn to his lips, and he wanted more than anything to kiss her again. This time there would be no one watching them, and he could kiss her as long as he liked, whether was a good idea or not.

“Helen, I—” he began, leaning down towards her when he heard a familiar voice.

“Och, this must be her!” Kai said. Feeling the need to punch his friend for the first time, Cory turned to see Kai standing in the open doorway, smiling at them both.



The first thing Helen thought when she looked at the doorway was that a bear man had come into the house somehow. And so her first instinct was to be afraid. But the man smiled as he looked at her.

“Ye must be Madam Chattan. My name is Kai.”

“Yes, that’s me,” she said, turning to Cory for confirmation.

His jaw was clenching again, and she wondered if this was someone else who had hurt Cory in the past, but her *false* husband said, “Dae ye always stop into people’s rooms, Kai? Surely yer mother would be upset tae hear that’s what yer doin’ now that ye’ve returned from war.”

Kai let out a gruff chuckle as he shook his head. “Nae. Forgive me for that. But I forgot somethin’ upstairs, and I wanted tae retrieve it ‘afore I went down tae dinner. Shall we all go together?”

“Aye.” Cory was still grinding his teeth together. “And ye were right. This is Helen, my wife.”

Helen shifted closer to him when she felt his firm hand on her lower back. It was possessive, warm, and the smile she wore was genuine. Only moments before, she had been terrified after what had passed between her and Ruairidh, and then she

had been about to kiss Cory. Or rather, he had been about to kiss her, she was sure of it, and she would have been a keen participant.

“Nice to meet you,” she said, fully recovered now. Now that she knew he was not a bear but a man, she saw he had kind eyes, too. “This is a friend of yours?” she asked Cory.

“Aye, a friend.”

Kai seemed amused by Cory’s sour mood, and together they left the room and walked to the feast. Inside, Helen did her best to keep away from Laird Chattan. Her mumbled excuses about getting lost had not placated him. And after finding her outside of his study, he had dragged her up to her room, telling her she should be punished for putting her nose into other people’s business.

His dark, soulless eyes had frightened her more than anything she had ever experienced. Even Anthony, no matter how little he cared for her, had never looked at her like that, as if he wished to obliterate her from existence. She was so glad Cory appeared when he had, for she was not sure what was going to happen next. In Ruairidh’s tight grip, she had felt helpless, and she hated that.

It had been pure instinct to jump into Cory’s arms, to feel warm, safe, and protected again after feeling like everything was falling apart. Now that she was in a room with other friends of the clan, she tried to distract herself with conversation. But she could feel Laird Chattan’s eyes on her wherever she went. Even if it terrified her, she knew she was right. He was attempting to hide something. This was not the behavior of a man who simply valued his privacy.



After they had eaten, Helen was tired and she excused herself, hopeful that Laird Chattan would be too busy with his guests to bother coming after her again. Once she was inside her room, she sat at one table and pulled out a piece of paper, ink, and a quill. She would write to Anthony to let him know just what she had been up to. For a long time, she sat there, tapping the top of the quill to her mouth, thinking.

Even though she had just been scared out of her mind, she enjoyed the idea that this room was for her and Cory alone. She turned toward the fire, which was crackling happily in the hearth, blissfully unaware of all the strangeness, the danger, and the secrets that surrounded her. Writing to Anthony only meant that she had to hurry to live up to what she wrote in the letter. Putting her quill down, Helen wrapped her arms about herself and closed her eyes.

The room smelled like him: it was the most comforting, warming scent. If only she could bottle it and take it away with her to bring out whenever she was afraid or uncertain.

*Pull yourself together, Helen. You have never acted this ridiculously because of a man before.*

Her eyes snapped open, and she picked up her quill again and bent over the paper, the sounds of the fire in the background. It took longer than she expected to explain everything and then make sure she had been clear and concise. She had hinted she had some information but needed to find out more. She also informed him she would come home as soon as the evidence was found, so he should keep Cecily safe. When she sealed the letter, she rose and went to the door. It would not be wise to wander the halls after Laird Chattan's warning. But Helen was

not used to listening to what she should not do, and the letter had to be sent.

With a deep breath, she pulled open the door and hurried down the passage and down the stairs. She waved down a servant and handed them the letter.

“When can this be sent?” she asked, looking one way and then the other.

“Tomorrow in the morn’, Madam Chattan,” the young man said, taking her letter and stuffing it into his pocket.

“Very good. Thank you.” She nodded to him and walked away, listening to the sounds of merriment coming from the hall.

It was done. Anthony would be satisfied soon enough, and then she could hurry home to Cecily. She walked back through the passageways slowly, wanting a breath of fresh night air before she returned to her room. As she wandered there, she thought of her dear sister.

She had not written to her because Helen knew her brother would confiscate the letter, read it, and then burn it before he gave it to her. Cecily was not capable of standing up to Anthony, so Helen worried, every day she was apart from her, about leaving her with Anthony. At least Cecily pleased him in that she was not headstrong like Helen. She was quiet, biddable, and sweet. Any man would be proud to call Cecily his wife, but Helen would be damned before she allowed her brother to choose for her. He would choose some brute he called a friend, and Cecily would accept whatever choice he made, even if she hated the man or was terrified of him.

Her thoughts were interrupted by grunting and a clash of metal. She looked up, hearing the sound coming from straight ahead through the doors to the courtyard. One was slightly open, and she snuck forward, her heart beating fast.

A deep, heavy feeling hung in her belly as she stepped closer. It was dread, for knowing Laird Chattan at least to some extent, she had a feeling that what was going on behind those doors was not a good thing and was likely dangerous. And yet she stood strong, bracing herself for whatever she might find behind them. Something pushed her to look and see what was going on. She slowly opened the door and slid a hand over her mouth to keep from yelling out at what she saw.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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“**S**he has gone, she left some time ago,” Kai said to Cory when he had gone over to speak to him at the feast.

“Och, that lass.” Cory shook his head, glad to see that Ruairidh was still in the room, although that did not mean she would not face danger.

He had never seen that angry look in his cousin’s eyes before, and even though Cory had stood tall against him, it did not sit well with him. There was something wrong. Why was Ruairidh so angry about finding Helen outside of the study? It was suspicious, but Cory believed that was only because he was the one who knew that Helen was not really his wife. And that she had already stolen from him. Ruairidh knew nothing about all that, yet he assumed Helen was wandering the castle for some suspicious reason. There could have been many plausible explanations. Perhaps she was lost, or perhaps she was just nervous about meeting all of Cory’s friends and relatives for the first time. There were a thousand other reasons why Cory’s ‘wife’ might have been wandering the halls. But Ruairidh had settled on the idea that she was there to search his study.

*That means there is somethin’ tae be found.*

“Ye seemed upset upstairs, Cory,” Kai teased, popping a sweet tart in his mouth from one of the tables. “Did I interrupt an intimate moment?”

Cory growled and turned away so that Kai did not see the color under his beard. “Aye, like I said. Is it yer habit tae walk in upon a husband and wife?”

Kai chuckled. “Nae, but it was fun tae see yer face when I did. I havenae seen that face in a long, long time. Has it been a while since ye have kissed yer woman, Cory?”

*For three days, but that was nae a proper kiss.*

“What business is it of yers?” he continued, grumbling.

It was not safe to tell Kai that it was not a proper marriage, but Cory wanted to. However, he knew that would only increase his friend’s teasing. Because his attraction to Helen was obvious, at least to his friend, and it was not something that could continue. Once the celebration was over, he would leave Chattan Castle and Helen behind.

*But perhaps we might finish that kiss first.*

“None.” Kai clapped a hand on his shoulder. “But I dae enjoy seein’ ye flustered. It has been a long time since I have seen ye redden over a lass. She is special, then?”

“She is me bloody wife, Kai! But, aye.” That was not a lie, at least. She was special in nearly every way, and he knew that even when they parted ways, he would still think of her. Years and years could pass, and he was certain he would never forget their first meeting with her thighs around his middle, her icy blade at his throat. He had wanted her even then. “I suppose I ought tae go find her. She kens that this wasnae easy for me tae come here, and so I daena think she felt welcome by our hosts. As I didnae.”

“Very well.” Kai patted him. “Go on then, lad. Get yer kiss from yer woman.” Kai winked at him.

Cory rolled his eyes and left his friend on his own, placing his cup on a table as he passed out of the hall. When the wooden doors shut behind him, the noise of the feasting was muffled. He was glad to leave early, even if Millie had been stealing regretful glances at him throughout the evening. Why should he have to celebrate the child of a woman he had once loved, who had chosen his black-hearted cousin instead of him?

*And she has the audacity tae feign guilt with me.*

If that was what it was. He could not exactly decide what was inside of Millie’s eyes whenever she looked at him. The best way he could describe it was that it seemed there was something on the tip of her tongue that she could not say. But he should not care about that any longer. It was over; it was past, and he wanted to leave it there. Now that he was outside the main hall, he could finally hear himself think, and he felt a little trickle of fear run down his spine.

Was Helen not at dinner because she wanted to wander around again? Or was she perhaps ill? He had smelled the venison in the air when he had arrived in the hall, and she had likely felt

too ill to remain in the hall for much longer. Or maybe Ruairidh was sending someone out to hurt her instead of going himself? Or to question why she had been wandering around in the first place. Fearful and feeling a little helpless, he turned down the passage to heading towards the courtyard. They had sought refuge there when she was ill the day before, and she might have gone there again to get some fresh air before returning.

When he got there, the doors were closed, and he stepped out into the night, taking a deep breath of cool air. He was glad that the snow had melted in the last few days, and that the weather was better than it had been. It had made it easier to be outside, and it was like a refuge to escape the confines of his family home and what strange feelings and people now inhabited it. The outdoors seemed like a refuge for Helen as well.

*Helen.* Since when did a lass take up so much time in his mind? Not since Millie, but he had been a boy then, unsure of where his next steps would take him. He had been eager and lustful, and Millie had made him feel as though he was the best man in the world. His feelings for her had been those of a young boy, desperate to be loved. Who better than a bonny young lass?

Now that he was older, and a new woman had turned his head, he felt different. He still felt lacking in some way, and desirous for her good opinion but other times he felt like Helen needed him. When she had jumped into his arms after getting caught by Ruairidh, she had held him tightly, breathing close to his ear, nearly pressing her mouth to his neck. He had felt *needed*, a strange feeling after so long. Certainly, Cam depended on him to be wise and logical, to lead his men to protect the castle or to head into battle. But it was not the same. Helen seemed to need him, to *want* to need him.

*Ye fool.*

“She is nae here, it seems,” he said to himself, looking around the empty, cold courtyard garden.

He turned to go, but then he heard the snap of a twig, and his senses heightened. Cory paused, reaching for the sword at his side, when he realized it was not there. He had removed it for the sake of the feast, and now he regretted it. He could see it in his mind’s eye, lying on the side of the bed, now utterly and completely useless.

Cory heard nothing else, but fear prickled at the back of his neck as the hair lifted. He was not alone, and he knew it. And it was not Helen who was secretly walking through the garden, for she would have spoken to him, making her presence known, especially if she was trying to avoid suspicion. She was playing a role with Ruairidh and Millie, acting as his wife, but even when they were alone, Cory had a feeling that she was still playing a role.

Slowly, he stepped forward towards the doors to leave the courtyard. His eyes were wide open now, and his fists clenched at his side. Even so, listening closely and tensing his body to fight, he was unprepared for the hard hit of a punch on the side of his face from behind.

It brought him to his knees, and then there were three men upon him. They kicked and punched, and he yelled out, as he tried to fight back, shielding his face at the same time. But there was nothing to be done. He had no weapon and was already slightly dazed from the first hit. He fell back against the hard ground, his heart pounding.



What was this? Was this the end? Another kick to the gut made him groan in pain, and he kicked out, catching one of the men. His eyes were hazy, and it was too dark to see perfectly, but he could tell the men wore cloaks and hoods over their faces. They said nothing, and so he did not know who they could be. When he heard metal sliding across metal, he noticed the glint of moonlight on a blade that rose high above him.

The other men held his arms, exposing his torso to the pointed sword, which he knew would soon pierce his flesh. It would be over then, but why? Even if Helen was suspicious, this could not be her doing. He swallowed, knowing it likely had something to do with Ruairidh. His last few thoughts were of Helen as he tried to prepare for the death that awaited him. Perhaps it was for the best if he died. There was no future for him, nothing that held much meaning.

But then, just as the hooded man raised the sword a little higher, he fell to the side with a groan, his sword clattering down to the ground.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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*H*elen could see that it was Cory on the ground, three hooded men kicking and punching him until he lay back. They had not seen her yet as she waited amidst the bushes, fear pricking at her like a hundred needles to the flesh. What could she do? She was strong, and she was a fighter, but her against three men with swords? It did not bode well. And she had not even brought her dirk with her, having left it in the room like a fool. Cory must have done the same, for she did not see a sword with him.

But then, when two men held out Cory's arms, and the third lifted a sword high in the moonlight, her heart stopped. She knew she had to act. Even though she knew little about Cory, and it was his clan that was obviously selling items to the English army and giving away information, she could not let him die. It made her ill thinking about a good man like him not being in the world any longer.

*And not being with me.*

Glancing down, she saw a large stone to her left, and creeping forward, she picked it up. The men were still working hard to subdue Cory, and so she had a bit of time. Just as the third man held up the sword even higher, ready to plunge it into Cory's

chest, she raised the stone and brought it down hard over his head.

The man groaned, and he fell to the side, letting the sword loose on the ground. Breathlessly, she stared at the surprised men. One of them let go of Cory's arm and came for her, his eyes dark and angry under his hood. He wore a mask as well, and she was glad not to see the horrible face as he grabbed for her. She ducked, allowing Cory to kick away the other man and pick up the sword.

The man raced after her again, and she kneeled in front of him, making him trip out on top of the man who was already unconscious. Cory made quick work of the man he had been fighting, turning to the other, who was just getting up. Slowly, the man roused the others, and with a curse, they limped away, out of the garden while Cory waited, sword in hand. Helen and Cory stood next to one another for a few seconds, trying to catch their breath.

"We should not have let them live, perhaps," she said, wiping her cheek where she could feel a bit of blood.

"Nay, that would have been even more suspicious," Cory said, sounding in pain.

When she turned toward him, he nearly stumbled into her arms, the sword clanging to the ground again.

"Hold on to me," she offered, reaching for the sword before she wrapped her arm around his waist.

“Thank ye, Helen,” he grunted in her ear.

“We should tell the laird,” she stated. “Or some of his soldiers.”

“Nay, we must just go up tae the room. They cannae ken, or we will be tae blame, I am sure of it. Especially after Ruairidh catchin’ ye outside of his study.” He breathed in sharply, and she quickly apologized, adjusting her hand slightly.

“Sorry. We had better hurry, though, if we are to get upstairs before anyone sees us. Should I send for the healer?”

“Nay, nay.”

He was quiet then, and she focused on helping him up the steps and down the passage, opening the door as best she could with a large man leaning on her for support.

When they were inside, she led him to a chair, then hurried to the door to shut it and lock it. Now, in the firelight, she could see just how injured he was.

“By God, Cory!” she cried, worry seizing at her heart. “You could have died!”

“Nae, it is just me head that aches. That was why I fell intae ye as I did. The rest will heal.”

She stepped closer, seeing the cuts all over his face. “You must remove your shirt so I can see.”

She helped him, lifting it over his head and gasping at the array of red marks and quickly growing bruises over his ribs. But no deep cuts. His odd-shaped pendant still hung around his neck, lying flat against his hard chest.

“I have been in battle before, lass,” he said with a grin, making her heart flutter. “This is naethin’.”

She smiled back at him. “I am sure, but you would normally have had a weapon. Yours is here in the room, I see.”

“Those soldiers must have kenned that, which was why they jumped upon me. Perhaps that was connected tae Ruairidh’s earlier warning tae us both. Nae tae wander about at night on our own.” He rubbed a bloody, dirty hand over his face, and Helen shook her head as she went to collect a bowl of water from the side table.

She returned with it and a cloth and set it down on a table next to his chair. Dipping it into the water, she said, “I do not want to think about it just yet. I just want you to feel better.” She pulled a chair close to him, dabbing his cheeks and the cut on the side of his head. He winced a few times, but he was generally silent, and yet his eyes spoke volumes.

Their blue depths followed her as she moved, and she could feel his gaze on her even when she was not looking at his face. It made her feel naked despite her clothing, and she tried to focus on cleaning all the wounds. Then, she took his hands and washed them thoroughly, amazed at the strength in each of

them. His whole body was covered in corded muscle, including his hands. Rough, calloused, and yet somehow beautiful and gentle. Hands she could imagine touching her. Hands she wanted to touch her, although she felt like a fool offering herself again. It seemed he was immune to her poor attempts at seduction.

“Helen,” he said once she had cleaned his other hand, which sat in hers.

“What?” she asked, not looking up.

“Why were ye outside the study? Were ye lookin’ for somethin? Is that why ye came tae the castle?”

Finally, she breathed out and took the chance to look up into his eyes. Her hands still held his large one between her palms. The air in the room felt warmer and heavier somehow, and the thudding of her heart filled her ears. The ache of desire, which was always heightened when he was near, grew stronger. No one was there; no one was coming, and the door was locked. It was like they were in their own little world, away from everything that threatened to ruin what was between them.

“What of our pact, Cory? You cannot ask me anything. You agreed.”

She hated it, though. Cory was the first person she wished she could unburden herself to. Cecily was too young, and Helen did not have friends she could count on. Everyone seemed to believe that her love for her mother and her mother’s heritage was disgusting. Not worthy of an English nobleman’s

daughter. Out of everyone she knew, Cory was the one who would most likely understand her and would not judge her.

He nodded with a sigh and a slight smile. “Aye, that is true. I seem tae keep forgettin’ that when I am around ye. I suppose it is because ye intrigue me so, lass, and I am desperate tae unlock yer mystery.”

He leaned forward, and Helen’s lips parted, her breath coming harder. With his kind eyes, low voice, soft nature, and beautiful body, this man was undoing all the logical plans she had made. She had never been undone like this, unraveled like a cord of rope. She was the one who was meant to be strong and sensible. For as long as she could remember, she had to be the one to save herself. Her mother had told her as much before she died.

*“Ye will have tae depend upon yerself, lass. That is the only sure thing in this world.”*

“Oh?” was all she could manage before he leaned closer.

He smirked, and his eyes flicked to her mouth briefly before he said, “What was that kiss when we were outside with Ruairidh and Millie? Why did ye dae it? Or perhaps I should say it like a statement, so that ye can nae accuse me of askin’ ye questions. That kiss was a surprise. It seemed like ye did it out of desire rather than playin’ a role.”

“Well, I—” she took a deep breath, trying to keep the buzzing of her blood out of her ears, but he was so close, and his eyes so gentle.

If he only knew how much she wished she could simply kiss him and let go into his arms. How she wished she could tell him everything. Perhaps then he would not suspect her any longer.

“It was... I know not. It was just...” Helen sighed, frustrated that she could not find the end of her sentences, but Cory seemed amused.

His eyes lit up and a dark brow lifted. She gasped softly as his hands lifted to her cheeks.

“Could it be that ye were jealous? Jealous of what ye think has passed between me and Millie?”

Her cheeks heated, and her eyes widened. “Jealous? No! Do not be ridiculous, Cory.” She laughed, but it sounded crazed. “Leave it to a man to think that the only reason a woman would kiss him was because she was jealous.”

She frowned at her words, for they did not exactly make sense and did not have the intended effect upon Cory. He was smiling.

“You are always smiling so smugly, Cory. You know how I feel about smugness.” As she spoke, Cory spread his legs and pulled on her chair arms to bring her closer. Her heart beat even faster, and she continued speaking, hoping to calm her nerves. “It is simply the worst kind of qual—”

He kissed her. She had been in the middle of a speech, and the man bloody kissed her! Helen paused and so did he, his mouth



soft and open upon hers. Out of instinct, her eyes closed, and she feared that if she moved or took a breath, she would realize that it was just a dream. How could he be kissing her when he had rejected her more than once already? When she had surprised him with that kiss, and he had eventually broken away as if it was the last thing he wanted to do.

She did not move until he did, his hands moving to her waist as his mouth opened, and his tongue brushed against her bottom lip. Surprised, still unbelieving, Helen raised her hands to the back of his neck and allowed herself to give in to the kiss. Her fingers tangled in the pendant's chain. She had kissed before, but this time, the feel of Cory's mouth was the spark to a flame, and heat spread out over her skin as if she was being consumed by it. The kiss had begun slowly, but it grew, their tongues tangling, and she sighed into his mouth as he deepened it.

Who knew that such a good man like Cory, a man with honor and principles, could kiss her as though she were his lifeline, his last breath? She barely registered that he had brought her to her feet, still kissing her. And then, in one swoop, he picked her up and placed her on the table next to them, lifting the skirt of her dress and shifting and stepping in between her legs.

"Helen," he breathed against her mouth before kissing down her cheek and jaw, not stopping until her collarbone.

Her name sounded like a benediction, a desperate prayer, said so reverently against her lips, it made her shiver. Helen thought she had known desire, but this was nothing like what she had imagined. Her entire body was on fire, but it settled between her thighs, throbbing and aching with a need she did not know she possessed. It made her open wider and pull on his hips to draw him even nearer. She could feel the hardness between his legs, and her curiosity was growing. She wanted

to see him, to feel all of him, to know what it was to feel a man inside her.

His kiss returned to her mouth, and his one hand left her side and slowly slid up her thigh, taking the skirt with it.

“May I touch ye?” he asked throatily, just before he nibbled at her bottom lip, making a whimper of desire escape her lips.

“Yes,” she replied, hoping it did not sound as desperate to his ears as it did to hers.

He grinned against her mouth before taking it again, licking the inside while his fingers drew nearer to the ache and warmth between her legs. His thumb caressed along the edge of her inner thigh, and she lifted her legs a bit to wrap around his hips. His mouth caught her gasp as his fingers met the folds of her bud, stroking softly up and down. Helen felt wet, as she had felt before when pleasuring herself, but this was so much more. She worried it was perhaps too much and she would come undone completely.

Cory pulled away from the kiss long enough to look into her eyes as one finger pushed inside her. Her mouth fell open at the tightness and beautiful pressure. This was exactly what Helen needed, and she clung to his shoulders as his finger curled inside her and moved around.

“Do not stop,” she whispered, and she saw his grin.

Her cheeks reddened furiously when she realized she had said it aloud.

“Yer wish is me command, lass,” he grinned, slowly pushing two fingers inside her while his calloused thumb brushed against the source of her pleasure.

Her embarrassment quickly faded as her focus turned to the tightening between her thighs. When she slid her legs higher and tighter around his waist, they both groaned aloud as his fingers plunged deeper. He moved them in and out, and even though she was doing nothing to him, the man seemed breathless by what he was doing to her.

“Ye are so wet, Helen.”

She bit her lip as both fingers curled inside of her, and his thumb had begun a steady rhythm. “Is that a bad thing?” she breathed, fearful that he would reject her and leave her aching.

“Nay,” he said with another grin. “Ye are perfect.” He kissed her again, his fingers working on her slowly at first and then faster.

Pleasure roiled and built and grew until it snapped, breaking and spreading and rushing through her veins. She held him close for a moment, breathing his name in his ear until she could hardly hold on any longer as her body shook.

His mouth was on her neck and ear, nipping and licking as his fingers slowed. His arm wrapped around her to hold her steady, and then when he moved his fingers, Cory held Helen with both arms as she tried her best to come to earth again.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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“Eory,” Helen said, when she had lifted her head again.

He was smiling down at her, his eyes sparkling wickedly. “I have never heard a woman enjoy pleasure so beautifully.”

It was God’s honest truth. No woman had ever made him want more. Beneath his kilt, he was as hard as a rock. And he knew just how blissful it would be to press between the softness of her thighs and enter her again and again until she screamed with pleasure. But it was not the right moment for that.

She put a hand to her cheek, and he could see just how red she was. “I have also never seen a woman blush in such a bonny way, either.”

Helen jutted out her chin, and her one brow lifted. He could tell she was about to pretend to be angry, but he saw in her eyes that she was not. That she was perfectly, if rather surprisingly, satisfied. And that made him stand just a little taller.

“Do you have such experience with women that you are flaunting it in front of me now, making me feel foolish for all

my blushing and my... enjoyment?"

Cory could not help it. His cousin was a brute, and he had just about died, likely by his cousin's hand, but at that moment, he was happy. He laughed, unwilling to let her go just yet. Her legs were still around his waist, and her skirts up, her lips swollen from his kiss, but she was still trying to be angry and fierce.

"I only wished tae compliment ye, Sassenach. Ye are lovely." He leaned forward to kiss her again, her lips warm and soft.

He knew he could never get enough of her, no matter how many times he would have her. "I only blush because of all the things you say. They are so surprising."

"Good. I like surprisin' ye. Ye have surprised me so many times and continue tae dae so."

She smiled at him. "All right then."

He easily lifted her up into his arms, and she squealed with surprise.

"You are injured; ye should not be carrying someone. You nearly collapsed on me on your way up the stairs!"

"Mmmh," he murmured close to her ear. "If only that were true. I think things could have been a lot more interesting."

“Cory!” she cried again as he laid her gently on the bed, and he climbed in beside her, tucking her in next to him. “You act as though you did not nearly just get killed!”

“Helen, listen tae me, lass. We just had a lovely time together. I daena want tae think about dyin’ when I can think about ye. Yer kiss, the feel of yer soft lips, and the way me fingers felt inside ye. That is what I want tae think about, and I am fine. Stop worryin’.”

When she was finally silent, her hand placed on his bare chest, he started chuckling. “I can tell even without lookin’ at ye that ye are blushin’ tae high heaven. Which surprises me, after how bold ye were showin’ me that sweet body of yers with nae shame.”

“Shame? Why should I feel shame about it?” she asked with indignation, and he grinned.

“Exactly. Ye shouldnae. But ye seem a different lass now. What is it?”

She breathed out, and Cory was concerned. He still knew nothing about her, not really, nor why she had gone to Ruairidh’s study, but he knew that he wanted to keep her safe. That he was smitten with her, and he did not want to think about all the other details.

When she said nothing, he turned to face her, and he found her beautiful, enormous eyes on him. He could not help it, but he leaned down to kiss her again. This time, when her mouth opened underneath his, he groaned into it, wanting so much more but knowing it would be unwise to have it.

Her hand gently touched his face. “I only wish for you to be careful around your cousin,” she said. “He is not a good man; I can see that. And I fear he may be behind that attack.”

His expression hardened as he slid a thumb across her cheek. “Aye, I am always careful, lass. Now go tae sleep. There is much tae think of, but it will have tae wait until the morrow.”

“But what of you?” she asked, and he smirked when he saw her eyes glance down at his still-tented kilt.

“What of me?”

“Do you not wish for me to give you pleasure as well?”

He kissed her soundly. “I would like nothin’ more, but I dinnae think it wise. Ye have already done so, more than ye ken, and I dinnae expect payment, as I have already told ye.”

She quieted, and he tucked her in closer to him as they fell asleep. He knew it was more sensible to think of Ruairidh, his near death, and why on earth his cousin wished to kill him. But all he could think about was the beautiful thief he held in his arms, who had come apart when he had touched her, and who had breathed his name so reverently in his ear when her pleasure had taken hold of her. He knew his dreams would be fevered that night and would have nothing to do with dangerous attacks.



It was some time before Helen woke again, and she was turned on her side with Cory's arm around her. But in his slumber, he had loosened his hold a bit, and slowly, she slid out from underneath the weight of it until she could stand on the stone floor out of bed. She looked down at him, and her heart clenched.

*You are getting far too attached, Helen.*

She knew it was true, far more than she wanted to admit to herself. She did not want it to be even harder when she left him. And so, even though it hurt, she knew she had to complete her tasks as fast as possible and leave Cory behind. At this stage, she hoped that her heart might still be her own when she left, and that she could somehow put the pieces together again more easily.

She turned away from him and did not look back. Carefully in order not to wake him, she opened the door and shut it just as quietly, pausing for a moment to let her eyes adjust to the dark hallway. That evening had surprised her. When she had carried Cory up the stairs, she had thought she would have to remain at his bedside all evening, tending to his life-threatening wounds. But then, that *kiss*, the way his fingers had slid inside her so expertly, the way they had drawn pleasure from her body was like pulling on a loose string.

It was a dangerous thing to have done. Now her heart was so clearly entwined in the situation. But at that moment, she had been incapable of doing anything else but fall prey to it. She had known what happened between men and women, but she had never thought it would be like that, so all-encompassing, beautiful, and achingly *right*.

*Focus, Helen. You have a job to do.*



She took a deep breath and then walked down the hallway on her bare feet. She hoped she was quiet enough to escape all notice until she reached Laird Chattan's study again. Her logical side was whispering to her she was making a big mistake. That night, she had been accosted by that frightening man and threatened, and Cory had nearly died, no doubt at his hand. The conversation she had overheard between Laird Chattan and someone was starting to make more sense already.

And yet she knew she had to do this. She had to get what she needed and then head home. It was the only way Cecily could keep from getting married off, although Helen was not even positive that he would not marry Cecily off anyway. So she had no choice but to hurry to finish what she had started.

At least a few of the torches were still lit as she wandered through the empty halls. There were no more sounds of merriment, and so she assumed all the feasting was over, and the guests had gone to their beds. When she reached the passageway which led to the study, she paused at the edge of it, waiting and listening, but she heard nothing besides the faint whistle of the wind outside and the crackling of a faraway fire. But that was all. Taking courage, she hurried down the passageway until she reached the study, and after pressing her ear against the door, she tried the latch again.

This time, it opened, and seeing that it was dark inside, with only embers in the hearth, she rushed in and shut it behind her.

*Thank God. The laird likely thinks himself safe now that he has sent his men after Cory and threatened me.*

Her eyes adjusted to the room, darting about in search of what she wanted. She hurried to the desk and rifled through the few papers that were there. But she saw nothing to incriminate him. And she believed that he likely had hidden them away, especially after he had seen her wandering about outside earlier.

Frustrated, she turned around in search of something else, when she paused. There was a tapestry that hung on the wall behind the large desk, but at the bottom of it where the wall was visible, Helen could see the outline of the door. Holding her breath, she slowly slid the tapestry aside, and she found she was right.

*A hidden door. How curious.*

Looking back at the door to the study briefly to make sure no one had snuck in, she faced the hidden door again. Helen ran her hands over the smooth wood to find the latch or the knob. It was completely flush with the rest of the wall but then, her hand struck something iron. It was smooth as well, but it was different from the rest of the door.

Wishing that she had brought a candle, Helen pulled the tapestry the other way so that the waning light from the fire would help her see it better.

“A keyhole,” she whispered to herself, running her fingers along the odd shape of it.

It did not look like any keyhole she had ever seen before. It was like the shape of a diamond on its side, and when she

traced along it with her fingertip, she found that the space was big enough for her to slip her finger inside it.

She did so, curling it a little so that she could pull against the door, thinking perhaps that this was the way it opened. But it did not budge. It did not even rattle or shake, and she let go, breathing out with irritation.

*Yet again a stumbling block.*

She let the tapestry fall, and it swung into place as she spun around. There was nothing else in the room that could hide anything; not even the desk had any drawers, it seemed. She knew that there was something behind that door, something that Laird Chattan had taken great pains to hide away. All she needed was the strange key for that door, and then she would find just what she needed.

Standing for a few minutes in the dark study, hoping that something else would come to her, Helen finally relented. She tiptoed to the door, opening it and peeking her head out. At least this time, she did not get the prickle of fear that someone was near. And so, with another deep breath, she slipped back into the passageway and shut the door tightly behind her.

She made her way back to her room. She could not stop thinking about the key. It was one thing to have a secret door. But why would the key be so strange? Laird Chattan was so worried about someone finding out his secrets that he had created a secret door and a unique key. She had a feeling, though, that she would know the key when she saw it. Being careful not to wake Cory, she slipped in bed beside him when she reached their room, enjoying the feel of his heavy arm around her again. It was foolish and selfish, perhaps, but she was going to savor the last few months she had with him.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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The next morning, Cory woke with a smile on his face. His dreams had been fevered indeed. And when he reached out for the soft, warm body he had been dreaming about all night, he found she was not there. No longer dazed by sleep, he jolted up, searching around the room, praying that something had not happened to her in the night.

*What a fool. I should have kept watch all night tae make sure that she was well. That Ruairidh wouldnae come back for her, perhaps thinkin' that I was now taken care of?*

He slid out of bed, fear clutching at his heart and not letting it go. When Helen popped her head out from behind the changing screen, he was so relieved that he sank back onto the bed, and a broad smile crossed his face. He had never been so happy to see someone before.

“A good morning to you, Cory,” she said.

Cory’s heart skipped a beat as he saw how she was looking at him so brightly and cheerfully. As if she was very glad to see him.

“Good morn’, lass.” He chuckled nervously, amazed that he had jumped to such hasty conclusions before he had even fully checked the room for her. He had a feeling he was in even deeper than he knew, but he pushed that thought aside. “I was worried when I didnae feel ye beside me.”

“When?” she asked, her smile falling.

“This morn’. Just now.” He stood again and scratched at an itch on his chest. “I thought perhaps somethin’ had happened. But never mind.” He went to find a clean shirt.

“You sleep hard,” Helen continued, moving back behind the screen, and he heard the rustle of fabric. “A maid came by to say that she is bringing hot water for baths for us both. Perhaps you would like one?”

He chuckled. “Are ye tellin’ me I stink, lass? That doesnae seem like a thing a proper English lady would say.”

“I did not realize that I was a proper English lady,” she retorted, peeking out from behind the screen with a wicked look in her eye.

The look went straight to his cock, and he turned away slightly so that she would not see just how much she inflamed him with lust every moment.

“More proper than meself,” he said, glad when she disappeared again, and he could sit in the chair by the empty hearth. “I am nae even close tae bein’ a proper English lady.”

Her throaty laugh from behind the screen made him feel lighter. He wished they could preserve those few moments before he had to open the door to the room and deal with what had happened last night.

“Well, I shall leave you to bathe on your own, and then I will return. I would like to go for my usual walk and the maid also said that Laird Chattan would be in the council room today.”

Cory nodded to himself, his expression becoming grim. “Aye, I will see him then.”

When Helen emerged, she was fully dressed. She walked over to him to brush her hand against his. “Remember to be careful, Cory,” she said softly.

He put his other hand on top of hers, grateful that someone cared about him at long last. He was not sure why she cared, but he did not want to think about that right now. He was too busy planning what he would say to Ruairidh.

When the knock came at the door, Helen turned to it. “The maids are here. I will see you later.” Then she left without another word.

The maids dutifully filled the tub, and then, once they were gone, he slid into it, glad for the chance to spend a few moments collecting himself. After last night, he felt glorious. It had been the best he had felt in his whole life. Being close to Helen, touching her, hearing her sounds of pleasure. But now, he knew that real work had to be done. He was going to confront his cousin and find out the truth. It was to be a day of reckoning.

When he was finished, he dressed and walked down to the council room like a man on his way to his execution. This time, he had his sword with him as well as his dagger. He would not be surprised again by an attack that came out of nowhere. He made a note to himself to watch his cousin's reaction as he told him the news of last night or when he walked in alive and well, despite Ruairidh's efforts.

When he arrived outside the room, he could hear others inside discussing. Despite all his years of fighting, Cory was nervous. This room held bad memories. In this very room, his father had let go of him and chosen another instead, and his entire world had come crashing down around him. Instead of breaking the door down, he paced just outside. As he was doing this, Kai appeared, and he smiled until he saw Cory's grim look.

"What is it, lad? Ye look as if ye have taken ill. Is it Helen? Did somethin' happen last night?" Cory saw Kai's hand flick to his sword, but he shook his head.

"Nae, nae, she is well. It is only that—" He paused when Kai came closer and looked at the cuts and bruises on his face.

"Jesus, what happened tae ye?"

Cory's rage only soared higher at the fact that the council room door remained closed. He had visions of himself running into it, breaking it down, and demanding an audience. But he knew that would only make his cousin laugh, and Cory was not in the mood to be made a fool of. He did not need a reason to kill Ruairidh even more than he wanted to right then.

“I need tae speak tae Ruairidh. Can ye go in and tell him I am here waitin’ for him? It is particularly important.”

“Aye, aye, of course.” Kai’s dark brow furrowed, and he looked like he was about to say something more, but he simply nodded and walked into the council room.

The other reason Cory did not break down the door was that he did not know who had come to kill him last night. They might very well be inside that room. He had no interest in having them see his wounds and his fury, even if they had not achieved their aim.

*All thanks tae Helen.*

Kai came out a few minutes later, but he shook his head, shutting the door. “Ruairidh said ye will have tae wait, lad. I am sorry. I tried tae convince him, tae tell him how ye looked, but he wouldnae have it.”

“Och, he wouldnae, would he?” Cory asked, gritting his teeth, and beginning to pace again. Punching his fist into his other hand.

“What is it that has ye so upset? Surely it can be worked out. Yer cousin is a reasonable man.”

Cory turned around to face Kai with his finger pointed at him. “Daenae say those words, for they are nae true. In all me years, I have never met a man as terrible as that one in there.” He pointed to the door this time.



Kai looked shocked. “I ken ye are angry about the will, but that was yer father’s choice for the lairdship. And Millie’s choice, too, tae marry him.”

Cory huffed and started pacing again, but he stopped when he saw Ruairidh step out of the door and stare him down.

“A word cousin,” Cory said harshly, keeping his fists clenched in order to avoid hitting him while the other members of the council filed out of the room.

When everyone was gone, Cory and Ruairidh stepped inside the council room on their own. “What is it? Why the bloody Hell are ye steamin’ outside of me council room as if ye have any right tae do so after what happened yesterday?”

Ruairidh slipped behind the table and sat with his arms crossed, looking at Cory as if he was as insignificant as a fly on the wall.

Cory leaned over the table, trying to keep a tight rein on his rage until he said what needed to be said. “Aye, I am here tae speak about what happened last night. Three men attacked me in the garden after I left the feast.”

“What?” Ruairidh asked with a laugh, smiling, and shaking his head. “Ye cannae be serious.”

Cory’s jaw clenched as he saw red. His cousin had given little away when he had first seen Cory outside of the council room. His expression had only shown anger that Cory was there,

demanding a word. Nothing more. There had been no shock that he was still alive. But Kai had warned him about his presence, and so he had had time to school his expression before coming to speak to him. But now he looked like he could not care less about what had happened.

“Look at me wounds,” Cory said, pointing to his face and pulling up his shirt to show the bruises. “The men planned on killin’ me until Helen came tae me rescue.”

“Now, I think ye really are jokin’,” Ruairidh said darkly, leaning forward to meet Cory’s harsh gaze with his beady one. “For how could a woman like that, a tiny slip of a thing, rescue ye? And it seems she was still wanderin’ about last night after all, despite me warnin’. Ye had better keep a tighter leash on yer wife, lad. I ken ye are nae a strong man, but I thought ye were strong enough tae handle a meddlin’ woman.”

Icy anger coursed through Cory’s veins. “Choose yer words carefully, cousin, or I will have me hand about yer throat and squeeze it until the life goes out of yer eyes.”

Ruaridh smirked. “Ye wouldnae dare. Nae when yer true love is still about. Ye wouldnae dare tae tarnish yerself in Millie’s eyes.”

Cory blinked for a few moments, caught off guard by Ruaridh mentioning that. They had always danced around what had happened with Millie, and since his arrival, Ruairidh had not said a word to him until now. Strangely, when he first mentioned true love, Cory instantly assumed he had meant Helen. It was not until he said Millie that Cory knew what he really meant. But why should he mention it now? Was his cousin still worried about how Millie saw Cory?

“Dae ye ken anythin’ of what happened last eve. Or why three men, masked men, would try tae kill one of yer guests?”

“Nae, I daenae because it didnae happen.” Ruairidh stood and moved around the table, pushing past Cory and knocking him on his shoulder on the way.

“Daenae touch me, cousin. For I will find the truth.”

Ruairidh’s back was turned, but at those words he spun around, fire in his eyes, and his entire face changed into one of rage. “How dare ye accuse me? All ye have ever been is jealous that yer father chose me instead of ye tae rule this clan. Everythin’ ye dae, all yer lies are because of that. I willnae be dishonored by this lie ye present me with now.”

“I will dishonor ye,” Cory said, rushing towards him until Millie appeared in the doorway, and she cried out.

“Nay! Stop. Think of yer guests!”

Cory stopped, his fist in the air, held over Ruairidh’s face when he put it down again. Ruairidh smirked smugly at him.

“It seems there is a messenger for ye, Ruairidh,” Millie said nervously. And without even looking at her, Ruairidh left, stalking away as if he had not nearly been crushed in the face by one of Cory’s large and furious fists.

“Is Kai outside?” Cory asked, stepping out to look for him.

“Nay, but I wished tae have a word with ye, if ye daenae mind, Cory.”

Cory turned back to see her standing in the room on her own, looking at him expectantly. For a moment, his mind flashed back to when she had waited for him like that to have time away from his duties at the castle. To meet her outside by the river or at the base of the hill or even on the edge of the village when they were bold enough. Slowly, and a little reluctantly, he stepped inside, wondering if she was about to reveal just how evil her chosen husband was.

“What is it?” he asked, not wanting it to show that she had hurt him long ago.

But even as he remembered the pain, he realized that since arriving at the castle, it had diminished. For so long, it had been like an open festering wound. He had had to remove himself from Chatham Castle to heal and forget the fact that the woman he had loved so deeply had turned away from him with ease and chosen the opposite of him. She stepped closer to him and he tensed a little, looking at her with wariness. He thought he had known Millie, but clearly he had not. Even if she seemed to put on a show that she was not happy with her husband, Cory was not sure what the reality was. Was it possible she was in league with Ruairidh to kill him?

“I wanted tae tell ye somethin’ afore ye leave the castle for I ken that I willnae have another chance. Now that the celebration for Matthew’s birth is over, I have nae doubt that ye will be off soon. I couldnae live with meself if I didnae say what I needed tae say.”

Cory frowned when he saw her put a hand to her chest, and tears welled in her eyes.

“Ye ken that it wouldnae be wise for yer husband tae find us here, lass. I nearly killed him then, and he will likely kill me if he sees us talkin’ so quietly alone.” Cory would have been happy to come against Ruairidh’s rage in that moment, but he needed an excuse to escape.

He had no idea what Millie was about to say, and he realized he was not all that interested. And if he was going to fight his cousin, he did not want it to be about his past love that Ruairidh had stolen. He turned to go, but Millie reached out and grabbed his hand, and he froze.

“Please,” she said a little more eagerly than before. As he turned around, she dropped it, and he faced her again. “I need ye tae ken that I made a mistake, Cory, all those years ago.”

Cory was not sure if he was dreaming. He had imagined Millie saying those words repeatedly over the past six years. But when he saw a tear slip down her cheek, he knew he was actually there in the moment, hearing her confess her guilt.

“I shouldnae have married him.” She put a hand over her mouth as a little sob snuck out. “I should have married ye instead, for me heart has been broken for years, ever since yer father chose Ruairidh tae be laird of the clan over ye.”

He opened his mouth, but then closed it again when the realization of what she was saying sank in. She seemed sad that she had married his cousin instead of him and that she believed herself to have made a mistake. But at her words, he

knew why she had married Ruairidh. It was all about who his father had chosen to be laird of the clan. That was the only reason she had been interested in him in the first place, and then she had easily switched to the one who had eventually been chosen. For some reason, hearing it spoken aloud was like opening that wound all over again. He shook his head and stepped back.

“This decision has cost me everythin’, but please understand there was so much pressure from me parents, more than I ever thought possible. I feel lonely and miserable even though I have made them happy. And although I have now had child after so many long years of tryin’, I wish every day that child was yers, Cory.”

“Please,” he huffed, his anger and hurt growing.

There had been not one word from her all these years, and yet she was pouring her heart out to him now? She did not know that he would come to celebrate her son’s birth. But suddenly, she was overwhelmed with the need to tell him of the love she had always had for him. No, he was not at all sure she was sincere in any way, even if the old Cory would have jumped at the chance to hear these words from her.

“’Tis true.” She stepped closer to him, leaning on her toes to kiss him.

Quickly, Cory’s hands shot out to grasp her shoulders, and he pushed her back down. Even though he was angry about the past, angry that he had poured so much of his heart and life into someone who cared only for her status, he did not want to go back. He might have easily kissed Millie not too long ago, but now, she nearly disgusted him. All he could think about was if Helen saw them. What would she think, especially after

their moment last night? When Millie looked at him, confused, he shook his head. No, he could not do this. He would not.

Still not understanding, Millie put her hands over his and got closer. “Cory, what if I became yer mistress? I ken that I am married, and that can never change, but we could still have each other as we did in the past. It could be like old times again.” He could not believe it as she batted her eyelashes at him. “All we need tae dae is keep it a secret from our spouses, and then we can be tae each other what we once were. We nae longer have tae be alone, hatin’ our lives.”

Cory pressed against her shoulders again. He truly could not believe she was offering herself to him, that she would even consider such a thing. He shook his head again.

“Nay, Millie. I daenae want this. I daenae want ye anymore. Ye made yer choice long ago, and ye got exactly what ye wanted. Tae be the lady of the clan. Now, let us leave the past in the past and leave me be.”

Millie’s eyes widened, and her mouth opened. She looked so different to him now. All his love for her was now gone like a puff of smoke, as if it had passed away in a breeze. As he turned away and left the council room, it seemed like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. The pain was gone. All that he had held on to all these years because of her was gone. Thoughts of Helen flashed through his mind as he realized he had a future he wanted to pursue. And he wanted it to be with Helen.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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Helen leaned back against the wall of the passageway, listening to Millie ask Cory to be his mistress. Hearing her remind him of their past together and how much they had loved one another. Helen had gone in search of him after her bath and knowing that Cory would likely be at the council room to confront his cousin about what had happened, she had gone there. But she had not expected to find this.

*So, all my assumptions were correct. They were something to each other.*

But as soon as she heard Cory's hesitation after Millie asked for them to love one another and keep it a secret from their spouses, Helen hurried away. She tiptoed down the hallway, so that she did not have to hear him agree. She rushed up to their room, tears in her eyes. It had to end. She had always known that. And Cory was a virile man with plenty of women who likely wished to be with him, women far more suitable, who did not steal from him or have dangerous secrets. But after what had happened between them the night before, how her heart had opened to him, it would be hard to think of him only as a man who had saved her life. It hurt more than she wanted to admit that he was going back to the woman he had first loved.



Back in the room, she just wanted to get away. And she knew that if she rushed out in the daylight, Laird Chattan would likely find her and threaten her again. So she searched through the trunks that the maids had filled with clothing when they first arrived. If she dressed in disguise, then no one would know. She could leave the castle and spend time away without anyone realizing it.

When she found a set of clothes for Cory, she knew they would make the perfect disguise. There were English breeches. Happy, she pulled them on. She knew how to wear them, having donned them a couple of times to spy, when acting as a lady of the night would not suit the situation.

When she was dressed, she took her dirk with her and left, heading out the back of the castle. She passed the weapons room, and grabbed a helmet. Her mind was not focused or thinking logically, but she wanted to keep people from recognizing her, at least for a while. It would not do for her to go just yet, but she was tempted to leave Chattan Castle and never look back.

She had come with the purpose of finding out if the rumors of the collaboration with the English were true. But she had also come, intending to make sure they knew what England was up to in the war. However, after she had met Laird Chattan and learned of his treachery and behavior toward Cory, she had no interest in helping him in any way. She wanted to see him fail and to lose everything he held dear.

Enjoying the freedom men's clothes gave her, Helen was rushed towards the edge of the woods. She hoped people would think of her as a young soldier doing his duty guarding the castle. Once she had reached a sturdy tree, she took out her dirk and threw it against it. Anyone passing would simply think of her as a soldier practicing his skills while wiling away

the time. As she threw and retrieved, she could just envision it, Cory taking Millie in his arms and kissing her, desperately evoking once again how much love they had shared once upon a time.

*I am certain she kisses far better than me, anyway. And she will likely give him more satisfaction than I did.*

It sickened her. Thoughts like this filled her mind, and only contributed to worsening her mood. It helped to keep pulling at the dirk once it was buried deep in the tree trunk and throwing it again. The sound of a bubbling brook not far off helped to entirely distract her, and she did not notice that a man was approaching her. When she finally saw him, she turned and gasped, seeing that it was Cory himself.

*Why is he not with his mistress?*

“Lad, ye seem tae be a bit far from the other men. I was lookin’ for a sparrin’ partner, if ye are interested.”

Helen was amazed that he did not recognize her, and she felt a wicked sort of glee. He was there with her instead of with Millie, and he was also giving her a chance to fight him. That would be extremely satisfying so she agreed with a nod. She knew she could not speak, or else he might recognize her voice or realize that she was not a man.

“Excellent,” Cory said, tossing her a spare sword he had brought with him.

Helen reached up and grasped it easily, sheathing her dirk in her boot before she got into her stance. She had not been taught sword fighting, even though she had seen it many times. But she had learned a little on her own. It had been necessary for her to survive. And what was the difference between fighting with a dirk and fighting with a sword? It was only bigger, because men seemed to enjoy big things.

“Begin,” Cory said, and he stepped forward, taking the first move while Helen ducked out of the way of his first swing.

Cory smirked at her, and then they continued, him swinging and her ducking out of the way. After a few times, she could get her own hit in, listening to the satisfying sound of a surprised and slightly hurt man.

If she were dressed as herself, she might have advised Cory not to exert himself after everything he had gone through the night before. But she did not much care at that moment for his well-being. Perhaps he and Millie had not had the time to continue their rendezvous and had scheduled it for later that night. Helen would sleep alone in an empty bed, thinking about the two of them together.

“Ye are rather good, lad,” Cory grinned. “I confess I didnae expect it of someone so young.” He sheathed his sword, breathlessly.

“Thank you,” Helen said before she could catch herself. And she closed her eyes, hoping that Cory did not notice her mistake.

She tossed the sword back to him, and he sheathed that one as well. But then he stepped forward, his arm out.

“Thank ye. Ye have done me a great service, helpin’ me tae get a bit of energy out this afternoon. I sorely needed it.”

*But surely you will get it out later when you are buried between Lady Millie’s thighs.*

Helen hesitated, knowing that if she showed her hands, then perhaps he might recognize her. But she knew she could not refuse either. When she reached out her arm, she looked into his eyes, and he smiled at her. She grasped his powerful arm, and then he suddenly pulled her close, so quick that she tumbled forward. They fell to the ground together, her helmet tossed off her head.

She was so surprised by the sudden movement that she did not hear Cory’s laughter at first. “Och Helen,” he said with a bright grin as he lay on his side, looking down at her. “Ye are a foolish lass.”

“How did you know it was me?” she asked. “Or did you only recognize just now? You do not seem very surprised.”

“Aye, lass, I kened it was ye just as soon as ye looked at me.” He grinned at her. She wondered how he could look at her like that when he was going to see Millie later.

But she said nothing, only stared back at him with a hurt look until his hand reached out, his thumb brushing along her chin, and then his eyes looked down at her mouth.

“Why are ye out here, lass? Throwin’ daggers at a tree? And dressed like a man?”

Helen tried to school her heart into not feeling anything. She reminded herself that he still loved another. That he was going to give himself to that other person. It was only a matter of time. She was likely just someone he wanted to entertain himself with. It made sense. How could he truly care for her after all the mystery she had shrouded herself in? After she had stolen from him, after she’d been caught outside of the laird’s study? And still not having told him why she was really there at Chattan Castle?

And yet something deep down inside her, something that she had pushed aside long ago, twinged. Something she had buried deep inside her after her mother died, after hope had died, when her brother had turned out to be such a scoundrel. This thing hoped for something more with Cory. It knew he was special, but she had to be the sensible one, no matter what she felt inside.

“What should it matter to you, Cory?” she asked. “I was merely entertaining myself, and I thought that in costume I would not be recognized or bothered. I especially thought that the laird would come and threaten me again if he saw me leaving the castle or doing something that he found suspicious.”

He looked her up and down, and he smirked. “Aye, I suppose that is true, although the clothes look a bit big on ye, and the helmet doesnae exactly fit with the fact that ye are wearin’ breeches and nae armor. And—” he reached around to her hip and grasped at her buttocks gently, making her gasp. “Ye

would have been discovered eventually with such a bonny lass bottom inside of these breeches.”

She could tell he was joking, and she wanted to laugh too, but her pride would not let her. She wished he would just go back inside and do what he was going to do instead of teasing her like this. But then an idea came to her, one that would distract him and get them off the conversation of why she was really out there.

“Well,” she said, getting to her feet. “I believe I will take a bath in the river. It is not far, and it would be quite the adventure for me, a proper English lady, as you say.” She took a few steps, turned back to him just as he was getting up and asked, “Would you like to come along as well?”

“Is that a trick question?” he asked, lifting his brow in disbelief.

“Which part?” she asked as she backed away, her hands on her hips.

“Both. That ye think I wouldnae want tae go with ye, and that ye wish us tae dump ourselves intae a freezin’ frigid river.”

She looked up at the sky. “It is warm out, and we are both glistening with sweat. Make your choice,” she said, skipping away, although she slowed down when she heard his footsteps behind her.

She put a finger to her lips to cover her smug smile. They had only to trek a little through the woods until they came out to a

secluded edge of the river. Helen was happy he had followed her, but she was still confused about what had happened between him and Millie. Surely Millie would have been angry to learn that the man whom she had just asked to bed her was now running about with a woman who was not really his wife. And he was eyeing her hungrily, like he had the night before, when he had brought her to such rapturous pleasure. It made her feel a little giddy, like she had had too much wine.

“Ye mad, lass,” he said, standing on the edge, staring at the river.

She grinned. “I think we knew that already.” She backed away toward it, kicking off her boots and slowly removing her clothing.

She saw with satisfaction that Cory’s eyes never left the movements of her fingers, and when she was finally naked in front of him, she dashed into the water.

“Ye really are mad!” he called before tearing off his own clothes and heading towards the river.

Helen stared in awe. He had seen her naked many times, but she had never seen him fully naked. As he stalked into the water, her mouth fell open at the sight of his powerful body. His limbs were strong and sturdy, muscles rippling as he walked. And what was between his legs was even more impressive than she had imagined it... and hard.

*Hard because of me.*

She might have swum away if she was still teasing him, but she stayed right where she was, not even noticing the cold water as Cory swam towards her. “Jesus Christ, woman,” he said, grasping and holding her tight. “Ye daenae even care if someone sees ye, dae ye?” he asked.

He was now at eye level, for his hands were around her waist, and he had brought her hips to his. She could feel his hardness against her center, and she reached up to wrap her arms around his neck.

“I care that *you* see me, Cory,” she said, blushing a little as she boldly wrapped her thighs about his waist, bringing his hardness even closer to her.

She could hear the low rumble of a growl in his chest. “Ye are dangerous,” he said. But she smiled, knowing that he was not referring to her secrets but because of how his desire was clear in every inch of his expression, bubbling below the surface.

“I think we have established that already,” she said, eyes dragging to his mouth.

He could have been inside with Millie, making love to her. But instead, he was there with her, pressing his naked body against hers, and looking at her as if he would rather look nowhere else for as long as he lived. Her fingers tangled in the soft curls at the base of his neck. His hair was still tied up, and his beard was now thicker than ever.

“Why did ye go outside, lass, dressed like a foolish boy?”



She frowned at him, but then she realized she had little to lose by telling him the truth. She might never see the man again and this weight on her heart was too much to bear.

“I overheard what Lady Millie said to you in the council room. I was not intentionally eavesdropping, but I heard her ask you to be your mistress. And then you hesitated, so I left, unable to bear hearing that you wanted her. That you would be with her. And I know I cannot expect anything from you or that we know anything about each other. But I must know—” she paused to take a breath and to search his eyes for the truth. “Did you say yes?”

Slowly, as she watched his face, Cory’s eyes lit up, and his beautiful smile widened. “What?” she asked. “What is it?”

She was about to put her hands on her face to hide her own disappointment when she heard the answer, but Cory pressed her closer and kissed her. He pulled away quickly, and she blinked at him, confused.

“Ye are a pain in the arse, Helen, but ye are still the only woman I want.”

She smiled, her heart having never been so happy, and she leaned forward to kiss him again, this time, wrapping her arms tightly around him. She never wanted to let go.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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The kiss was long and deep. And Cory was harder than ever when they came up for air. His hands slid down her back under the water and gripped her buttocks, rubbing her against his length.

“I have never wanted anyone like this in me life. And the fact that ye can keep me hard in bloody freezin’ water like this is a miracle.”

She laughed, still holding onto him, and with a wicked look in her eye, she rubbed back against him, making him groan.

“Just wait a bit, Helen,” he said, his voice gravelly.

He was a saint, so he was trying to keep his control around the woman who had so quickly become important to him. “I want tae tell ye the entire story.”

“Very well,” she said, bouncing a little in his arms as she settled herself, making him groan again.

“Was that on purpose?” he asked, and she gave him an innocent look.

“I would never,” she teased, her green eyes even fiercer and lovelier than the first time he had looked upon them.

He shook his head at her, unable to stop smiling. Keeping her close so that they could stay warm in the water, he began his story.

“Ye were right about Millie and me, even though I didnae want tae tell ye at the time. We were lovers many years ago. Six years ago, tae be exact, but we have kenned each other since we were children.” Helen listened intently.

He kept his eyes on her face, however, for he could see her lovely breasts bouncing in the water, and he wanted to finish his story before anything else happened.

“I was in love with her, and I thought she was in love with me. I wanted tae ask her tae marry me, but after me father died so suddenly, things were difficult for a bit.” He remembered the horrible feeling of finding his father dead in his study.

It had felt like a nightmare, and it still made a bitter line of dread trail down his spine. He shook his head to focus again on what he was saying.

“So, the council was tae read me father’s will a few days after his death, and I wanted tae wait until I had been named laird tae ask her tae marry me. I thought it would be perfect, and we could start a life together, and I would be able tae move on

from me grief if she was by me side. But then—” he paused, the pain of it still hot in his chest.

“But then, Ruairidh,” she whispered, and he nodded.

“Aye. I wasnae the only one shocked by the council’s decision tae name Ruairidh as the next laird, accordin’ tae me father’s will. There was nothin’ left for me, and it felt like a worse betrayal than I could have ever imagined. But Ruairidh didnae seem surprised by what had happened, claimin’ what I had feared all along. That me father had cared more for him than for me.”

“Oh, Cory,” Helen said, her soft hand brushing along his jaw comfortingly. “I am so sorry.”

He looked into her eyes, and even though there was so much he still did not know about her, he could see the kindness there. The true words she spoke to him.

“So, after that, I went tae find Millie after the meetin’ for confort, but I couldnae. She was nowhere tae be found. When I went tae find her again in our usual meetin’ place, she told me the news.” He sighed, still disbelieving after all those years. “She was engaged tae Ruairidh, and they would be married within weeks. She claimed we had only been friends who had enjoyed each other for a time, but that it was time for us to both grow up. I was shocked that she would say that. I had heard her tell me of her love time and time again. After that, I was so angry and hurt that I just ran off. There was nothin’ left for me. Eventually I found me place at Grant Castle, and I have been there ever since.”

She nodded, still touching the sides of his face. “And what about now? When she spoke to you in the council room, she mentioned the past, and how it was a big mistake that she had chosen yer cousin over ye.”

“Aye.” His jaw set as he remembered her audacity, assuming that he still pined after her after what she had done to him. “She said that it was pressure from her parents, but also that she could never forgive me father for choosin’ Ruairidh in his will instead of me. So, I kenned then, that it had only been about me potential tae be laird of the clan. It had never been for the love of me. Perhaps I should be glad that she chose Ruairidh for then I wouldnae have had tae live a life with a woman who didnae truly care for me.”

He wondered then if the woman in his arms was one such woman. One who cared for him, truly, and did not want him just to use him.

“So, what did you say to her?” Helen looked almost breathless, waiting for the answer, and he squeezed her tighter, his eyes on her mouth as he replied.

“I told her nay, that what was in the past should stay in the past. That I nae longer loved her, and clearly, she was only with me for the status it would bring her. She was nae happy; I can tell ye that. But I finally feel free of her. I feel like I have been given another chance tae live a real life. A life without the pain of the past holdin’ me back.”

He swallowed a little nervously, knowing what would happen next. Cory might not have much more time with Helen, but he wanted to use what time they had. He could not let a chance like this slip away.

“I am glad of that,” she said, her thumb coming to brush against his bottom lip, and her eyes went there. “You do not know how happy that makes me.”

“And ye make me happy too, Helen,” he said honestly, a little nervous that he was going to be so exposed in front of her. His fingers spread on her backside as he pushed her against him again, and her beautiful eyes went wide. “This time, will ye let me bed ye, lass? Make love tae ye?”

Helen grinned smugly, clasping her hands behind his neck when she said, “So you are finally giving into me, are you?”

Laughing, he stood and kept her in his arms as he walked out of the river. “I think we should acknowledge the fact that I have shown great restraint this whole time, and that I am givin’ intae me now unlimited desire for ye, Helen. But only if ye want me tae.”

She shivered a little as they stood naked and wet in the warm, spring air.

“Yes,” she replied confidently. “I would like nothing more.”



Helen was more nervous than she had thought she would be at the prospect of giving herself to another. But she knew it was because she wanted this man wholeheartedly, and if she gave herself to him once, she would want to do so again. This was no mere craving for a man’s touch. It was a need.

“Come and lie down on these clothes,” he said, as he gathered the clothes until they were a soft pile on the grassy edge of the river.

She did as he asked, and he kneeled in front of her, leaning forward, putting his weight on his hands which caged her shoulders.

“Ye are the bonniest thing I have ever seen, Helen.” He shook his head in disbelief and lowered his soft, warm mouth to hers.

She moaned when he moved his weight to his elbows, and then his large body was covering hers, keeping her warm and making her feel safe and protected.

“I have wanted ye from the very first moment,” he breathed against her mouth before kissing her neck.

“And yet ye didnae take me when I asked,” she said softly until he pulled back and looked down at her.

“Aye, and ye ken why, lass. I didnae want a quick moment with ye in the bed, only tae have ye leave me soon after. I wanted ye like ye are now.” Helen’s heart ached as he caressed the side of her face. “We ken each other better now, and I think we have started tae care for one another.”

*Do not cry.*

She could feel tears coming to her eyes, but she could not yet give into them. Helen's heart was already lost to him. She loved this man who had saved her and who had shown her such kindness and grace, who was honorable at every moment.

"Yes," she said briefly before drawing his mouth back down to hers again.

Cory's mouth spread like a line of fire down her skin until he reached her breasts. Using one hand to squeeze her right breast, he leaned down to pull the nipple into his mouth. She arched against his hand, moaning as warmth spread down her belly to that place that had ached for him since the beginning.

"Such perfect breasts," he groaned as he took the next one.

The wicked sounds of sucking and licking made her even wetter. And then his hand slid between her thighs. She gasped, surprised yet again at the pleasure she took just from feeling him there, sliding his fingers between her soft curls.

He pressed a finger inside her while he looked down at her, and his eyes were asking something. "Dae ye want this, lass? Dae ye want me in full?"

"Yes," she nodded, her fingers pressing into his shoulders as his finger moved. "But I cannot become with child. You will have to be careful."

"Aye, I can dae that." He slowly slid down her body, moving until his head was between her legs.



She sat on her elbows and watched as he lifted her thighs to his shoulders. “Cory, what are you doing?”

“This,” he said with a chuckle, his eyes on her as he pressed his mouth to that warm, wet place.

She let out a moan of pleasure, far louder than she had intended, and then she heard him chuckle against her sensitive skin. But Helen was not laughing. She wrapped her legs around his shoulders as his mouth sucked and licked. His tongue pressed inside her until she arched upward and then cried out with sweet release.

As she trembled, Cory’s body came up over hers again, and he took her leg to lift and wrap it around his waist. “Are ye ready?” he asked, and she nodded.

He entered her swiftly, and she cried out as a flash of pain caught her off guard. Once he settled inside her, he looked down at her in shock.

“Ye were a virgin, Helen,” he whispered.

Defiantly, she wrapped her thighs more tightly around him and pulled him closer. “What of it?”

“But ye—” he blinked, and she knew what he was thinking.

“Yes, I know you are wondering why I offered myself so freely, but it was because I wanted to, I have always wanted you, and I want you now. Whether I was a virgin makes no

difference to me. Unless it makes a difference to you?" She waited with bated breath as he considered.

"Nay," he said with a slow smile. "I think I just feel lucky tae be the first one inside ye." He then took her mouth again, and they forgot everything as he moved his hips.

She gasped at how quickly the pain had gone. Now it was just the feeling of beautiful fullness as he slid in and out of her. He kept his gaze on her as he thrust, and he tilted her hips upward so that he could thrust even deeper inside her. And that brought out a groan from them both. Soon, Helen learned the rhythm, and she pushed back against his thrusts. They soon grew merciless. He kissed her as he thrust into her harder and harder, and she could feel the pleasure growing inside of her again. When his hand slipped between them to rub briefly against where they were joined, the pleasure broke swiftly.

Helen cried out his name as she came, pressing her nails into his back as it took control of everything; her mind, her body, her heart. Cory did not stop thrusting, and she could hear his ragged breathing in her ear as he did. It was only seconds later when he pulled out of her with a cry, spilling his seed on her belly.

For a moment, they merely stared at each other, breathing hard. Helen wanted to cry, but she bit her tongue to keep the tears at bay. Instead, she moved her hands to the back of his neck and pulled his mouth down to kiss him, slowly, soft and deep.

She loved this man, and she was happy she had at least lost her virtue to a man she loved. It was on the tip of her tongue to let him know, but she also knew that it would make no difference. It could not. Besides, once he found out what she was there

for, he might hate her. She wanted to preserve these beautiful moments while she could, and she wanted to tell him with her body what she could not say with her words.

Cory slid off her to the side, and then he looked up at the sky. “We should get back, Helen, ‘afore we are missed. I would hate for someone tae come searchin’ for us, and for them tae find ye this way.”

“Yes, I suppose we ought to,” she said.

Quickly, they dressed, and giggling hand in hand, they raced back through the woods and towards the castle, trying their best to avoid any awkward eyes.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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*B*ack in the room, with their clothes drying in front of the fire, Cory and Helen lay in bed together, naked again. His fingers were on her shoulder, tracing patterns as they talked. They did not go down to dinner but had food brought to them instead, and she was glad to have just a little bit longer on her own with him.

They ate naked, and Cory grinned across the small table at her. “I suppose I could get used tae this, lass. Sittin’ here, eatin, watchin’ ye without a stitch of clothin’ on.”

She giggled. “You did not like my form before, if I recall. You nearly suffocated me in piles of clothing.”

He groaned, and as he covered his eyes, she could see that he was coloring a little from embarrassment. “Daenae remind me, lass. I was only tryin’ tae be sensible and honorable. I hated the idea that ye thought ye owed me for somethin’ that should only be natural from one human tae another. Tae save a life when it needed savin’.”

She reached across for his other hand, and when she took it, he removed his hand from his eyes. “You are both sensible and honorable,” she said. “And I thank you for what you did. It

only showed me what a good man you were, and it made me feel—” She paused, knowing exactly what she had been about to say.

“Made ye feel what?” he asked, turning her hand over in his until their fingers intertwined.

“Comfortable and safe. I knew I had nothing to fear from you.”

His face fell a bit, but he still smiled. “Well, I think we should head tae bed again, lass,” he said, standing and helping her to stand. “We have eaten our fill, and I am hungry for somethin’ else.”

Helen’s heart swelled, and she shrieked a bit as he picked her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. When their lips met, she forgot about all her worries, and instead, she let herself give into desire once more. This time, their lovemaking was slower, and when it was over, they lay entwined, and she traced fingers on his chest, tracing the outline of his pendant over and over. Cory eventually fell asleep, his breath becoming deep and even, and her eyes lingered on the pendant’s shape. She continued tracing it, wondering why it seemed familiar to her. And then her eyes widened when the realization came over her.

*The strange diamond keyhole. This pendant, with its diamond shape at the base, must be the secret key.*

Helen glanced up at Cory to see if he was still asleep. His eyes were closed, and his lips were parted as he breathed. Helen decided on a plan of action. She knew he might not forgive

her, but she had to try this key out in the lock. She had to know what was behind that door, especially if it meant saving Cecily and being able to find a new life for them both. She sat up higher to remove it from his neck, but she hesitated.

She wanted a life with *him* now, but she wanted to save Cecily as well. Torn between her duty and her new feelings, Helen reminded herself of her original plan, she could not see Cecily married off. And so, she slid her fingers gently behind Cory's neck, and she removed the pendant, slipping out of bed soon after. Grabbing a woolen dressing gown, she wrapped it around herself and then left the room, hoping that she had not woken him.

It took a few minutes for her to steel her resolve to leave the door behind and walk down the dark passageways to the laird's study.

*It is for the best. He might even like to know what is behind the secret door, for he was given the pendant that will unlock it. At least I think so.*

Helen kept her mind focused on the task at hand. She slipped like a ghost past the torches on the wall, glad to not encounter anyone. She hoped that the laird and Lady Millie were not suspicious of why she and Cory had stayed in their room throughout the evening, and she hoped that he would yet again not be in his study, for he still had guests to entertain. When she reached the door, she opened it, and then whispered a prayer of thanks.

Her heart thumping wildly against her ribs, she slipped inside and shut the door, wincing as she made a slight sound, closing the latch. This was the moment of truth. The next step she would take in her life would be determined by this moment.

Even if the laird and Lady Millie believed her to be Cory's wife, she did not really have any reason to stay. She could easily leave once she had what she needed. Despite her urgency, she took slow steps toward the tapestry-covered wall, holding the pendant out in front of her, readying it.

She slipped the tapestry to the side, and then she pushed the pointed corner of the pendant into the diamond-shaped keyhole. It was such a strange keyhole that she was not exactly sure if she needed to push or turn it, so she pushed first. Nothing happened. The door remained as it was, flushed against the rest of the wall. However, it fit so easily into the hole that she was certain this was the key.

Then she twisted it to the left and, faintly, she heard a click. Her heart skipped a beat, and she smiled. She cursed her earlier hurry as the door pulled back to reveal a dark room beyond, for she did not bring a candle with her. She turned back to the desk, spotting an unlit one. Grasping it, she went to the fading embers of the fire and lit the wick, after some difficulty. Satisfied, she went back to the open door.

When her candlelight filled the room, she saw it was much smaller than expected. There was only a desk and a chair. But there were piles, and piles of papers covering it.

*Why on earth would someone wish to hide desks and papers so inconspicuously?*

She had half expected the room to be filled with gold. Stolen treasures or payments from the English for information about the Scottish movements. This did not exactly make any sense. These papers would take time to go through, and she was not sure exactly how much time she had. It was late, and the laird was very suspicious. He could arrive at any moment.

But as she stepped up to the desk and lifted the candle higher, she noticed Cory's name scrawled on the top paper. As she read further, she saw that all the papers mentioned a Laird Gregor, whom she assumed was Cory's father; the laird who had strangely chosen his nephew as opposed to his son to take over the lairdship.

And then, with a shaking hand, she leaned forward and saw right at the top of the papers, a will and testament. Her breath trembling, she lifted it so she could read it better.

"Dear God," she whispered to herself. "This must be the real will."

In it, it left everything, including the lairdship to Cory, not to his cousin. She quickly put it down and placed a hand on her forehead. What did it all mean? Why had his father hidden this will? For it did not seem that Ruairidh had ever had access to this room. Something was afoot, and it made the hairs lift on the back of her neck. She should have been focusing on evidence of Ruairidh's treachery with the English to share with Anthony when she returned home, but all she could think about was Cory and the lairdship that had been taken from him.

She exited the room, removing the pendant from the keyhole, and closing the door again. Hiding the tapestry over it, Helen knew she had to tell Cory she had to give him a chance to fight for his birthright, to take back what was rightfully his. But standing alone in the dimness, with only the light of a small candle in a study, Helen felt true fear. If Ruairidh was to enter at that moment, he would have no qualms about killing her and putting her body somewhere so that no one would ever find it.



She took a breath and then went to the study door when she suddenly heard footsteps. Feeling her stomach fall, she blew out the candle and quickly slid underneath the large oaken desk just as the door to the study opened. Helen could feel the end coming near. Tears stung her eyes as she realized she would die, and Cory would never learn the truth of what had happened. That somehow, his cousin caused all this ruin. He must know the truth.

She realized that if she died in that moment, she would never get the chance to tell him just how much she loved him and what a wonderful man he was.

Her heart ached with agony, but then she heard the voice of a woman. She paused.

“Och shite, I kenned it was somewhere. Mrs. Harrow is goin’ tae kill me if she finds out I left me a candle in here.”

Helen covered her mouth so that her sigh of relief did not expose her. She leaned back against the wall of the desk, so glad to hear that it was just a maid coming in to collect something in the middle of the night. When the door shut again, she waited a few moments to make sure that the room was empty before she left her hiding place.

Sliding her hands along the wall to come out of the desk, her fingers came against what felt like a couple of drawers. Frustrated that she had no light anymore, she pulled on one. Digging her hand inside, she felt another pile of papers. She knew she was taking a risk staying even longer in the study, but she had to find out what they were. When she pulled them

out, she snuck out from under the desk and went back to the hearth. The embers were just bright enough to read.

“God in heaven,” she said to herself when she saw what the papers held in them. This was another will and testament but this one put Ruairidh in charge of everything, leaving Cory absolutely nothing.

She might have thought it was real, except the signature of Laird Gregor at the bottom was different from the first. In fact, the handwriting was entirely different from the first will. And when she looked at the other papers signed by Ruairidh himself, she saw that he had created the fake will to claim the lairdship for his own.

The other documents in the pile were just what she had been looking for. There were contracts and letters between Ruairidh and a few English officers discussing the movements of the Scottish as well as supply needs. She took a couple of them, folding them and then tucking them into the pocket of her dressing gown. Those would be enough to convince Anthony of what she had discover. However, she still did not know what to do with the will.

She considered putting it back, but she knew that if Ruairidh suspected that someone had been in his study, he would presumably remove it and hide it away in a new place and Cory might never be able to prove Ruairidh’s treachery. So, she gently folded that up too and tucked it away. She needed the evidence to show it to Cory so that he could one day return and fight for what he truly deserved.

Perhaps it was best that they left the castle before they had enough people on their side. Ruairidh clearly had soldiers who

would do his bidding, even killing his own blood if it that was what he wanted. Helen could not risk losing Cory again.

Once she had everything she needed, and she had replaced the other documents under the desk, she opened the door to the study. Peeking her head out, she finally slipped away up the stairs, back to their room.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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Cory slept the sleep of bliss. He was dreaming, and it was almost as if he had somehow stumbled into heaven. Everything was beautiful and tinged with a rosy glow. He knew it was because his feelings had now solidified. Yesterday had told him everything. He was in love with Helen, even though their future was uncertain and her background was a mystery. He knew she was far better than Millie would have ever been for him. She had not used him for status or money, and the genuine look in her eyes when they made love the day before had spoken volumes.

He was certain that she loved him back, but also that she was too afraid to tell him, just like he was too afraid to expose his heart again.

In the dream, he kept reliving the day over and over; laying Helen down on the pile of clothes by the edge of the river and bringing her to pleasure more times than he could count. The rest of the dream was simply them being together with glimpses of their future. Cory saw her dressed in fine clothing, smiling at him. He saw them inside Chattan Castle. He saw a bairn in his arms while Helen caressed his shoulder. He even saw his father sitting by the fire across the room, lifting a glass in the air to him.

It was a beautiful dream. It was the life he might have had if his father had not died. But now, he knew he could be thankful for everything that had happened, even Ruairidh in some small way, because becoming laird of the clan had meant that he would one day meet her. Even when he half awoke, drifting in that place between dreams and reality, he smiled to himself.

He would tell Helen how he felt. He would tell her they could run away together, that they could live wherever she wished, do whatever she pleased. But as the dream continued, suddenly something dark cast its shadow over it.

Cory was not used to good dreams; he normally had nightmares, and he knew what was happening. He could feel the lightness of the dream fading. Helen, who had been holding his hand, backed away from him, her smile falling. He too could feel a heavy weight in his chest and something like dread snaking through him. Something was wrong.

The words *discover the truth* came to his mind, and then, just as the dark clouds of the dream seemed to get even worse, choking him, he was roused awake by a fearful Helen.

“Cory, wake up,” she said, her hand on his shoulder, shaking him roughly. “We must go.”

He sat up to face her, reaching to put his hand on her cheek. Her eyes were wide, and her face was pale. It was still the middle of the night. He had only seen her look this fearful when his cousin had threatened her, his hand hard around her arm.

“What has happened? Has Ruairidh hurt ye?”

He was about to swing himself out of bed to get his sword and slice his cousin into half, once and for all, but Helen shook her head.

“No, nothing like that. But we need to go. I will answer all your questions as soon as we get on the way. But we need to make sure we are safe first, far away from this place. Will you trust me?” she asked, pulling on his arm.

For a moment, Cory still was not sure if he was in the dream or the nightmare, and why the dread still hung heavy in his belly. He put a hand on the pendant around his neck. For some reason, his father felt nearer than ever, the version of him he had known as a young boy. The loving father, who paid him attention, who talked to him about living a life as the laird and what it meant to be honorable and good.

He had questions. A lot more questions, but he also knew that what his dream had told him about Helen was true. That he loved her desperately, and he wanted a life with her.

“Aye,” he said. “I trust ye. I will go with ye.”

Helen gave him a relieved smile, and they quickly packed up a few of the things, leaving the rest. It had not been theirs in the first place.

But before they left the room. Cory said, “I must leave a note for Kai. I care little about Ruairidh and Millie, but I daena want me best friend tae believe I have left without a word.”

“I understand,” she blurted. “We can pass it under his door as we walk out.”

Quickly, Cory penned a note to his friend, telling him what was happening and where they were headed. When he was finished, he folded it.

“Ready?” Helen asked as she waited by the door.

He nodded and approached her, taking her face in his hands and kissing her. His heart nearly burst out of his chest, but he knew it was not the time to speak words of love, not when she looked like that, when fear and urgency filled in her eyes. A little voice of logic spoke inside of him, telling him to question what was happening, that he was putting a lot of faith in someone he hardly knew, someone who had more secrets than he could count. But he brushed them all aside. This was love, was it not? He did not want to let fear or insecurity to impede him from finding happiness again. Finally, at long last, he could leave his cousin and his former lover in the past. He planned to leave Chattan Castle forever.

“Aye, lass, I am ready,” he said against her mouth, and then they both turned to the door, shutting it tight before they tiptoed down the hallway.

When they passed Kai’s door, Cory slipped the note underneath, ensuring no corner poked out, for if his cousin saw it, he might be tempted to pull it out and read it. And then whoever had tried to kill him the other night might try to do so again. When he straightened, he took Helen’s hand in his, and he brought it to his lips, before they rushed down the passageway leading to the back of the castle.

“This way, nae one will find us, lass. I didnae see any guards there. They seem tae be sparse, and only in the front, as if he dennae expect attacks of any kind.”

Helen did not say anything. He could hear her shaky breath as they raced towards the stables. Once inside, Cory was unafraid to wake Seamus, the older stable hand.

“Och, what is it, Master Cory?” the man asked, looking at him with sleepy eyes.

He went to light a lantern, as Cory explained. “We cannae tell ye all, but we must go. I will take me horse, but can I have another for me wife? It will be easier if we ride separately.”

“Aye,” Seamus grinned. “The laird willnae like it, but I will be happy tae give ye one. One of the best mares too.” He winked at Helen.

“If ye are given any trouble, then ye must just say that I stole them to makes things better for ye.” Cory put his hand on the old man’s shoulder.

“I will deal with him when the time comes, lad. Daenae ye worry yerself about it. Now, let us get ye those horses.”

Cory and Seamus worked together to prepare the horses, and then he helped Helen onto the mare.

“Thank you, Seamus,” she said to the man from her perch, and even under the moonlight, Cory could tell that the older man



was blushing a bit.

“Ye are most welcome, lass. I dae hope tae see both of ye again.”

Once Cory was up on his horse and took the reins, he faced Seamus again. “Once I am settled again, I will send for ye if ye like. If ye are nae happy here with yer current master.”

Seamus put his hands together, folded like in prayer. “Ye are a good lad, ye always were. Yer father raised ye right. That would be most kind of ye, Master Cory. Now, a good journey tae ye both. Ye had better go ‘afore the light creeps across the sky.”

“Thank ye again,” he said, and then with a nod to Helen, they left, riding out into the darkness towards Grant Castle.

That dark feeling still did not leave him, but he believed that this was how he would get what he wanted. All would become clear in good time. He just had to do what Helen asked of him: to trust her.



Helen knew Cory could sense her fear because she was not being her usual self. A cold sweat had lifted over her skin, and she could not escape the sickly dread that filled her entire body. It was not only because she had stolen documents from Ruairidh’s study; it was only a matter of time until he realized where they were, that she and Cory had left the castle, so their lives were certainly in danger.

But it was also because Cory had left with her, believing her without explanation. He had looked into her eyes, and he had said yes, kissing her before they had left, putting his entire faith in her. She had hoped for that so they could leave quickly to save themselves, but it was also a great weight upon her shoulders. He did not yet know the truth of everything, and she had promised him she would tell him, eventually.

Even though she knew he cared for her, she was not sure that he could forgive her. He might think she was like Millie, using him for her own ends. It was true in some senses, she could admit to that. And of course, it had been true at the beginning, but things had changed now.

*I never planned to meet him. He saved me in the woods that night, it was unexpected.*

She had used that excuse before, but it would sound weak now. When she had crept back into the room to awaken him earlier, she had first tied the pendant around his neck again, so that she would not have to answer questions until the time was right.

“Lass, are ye well?” Cory asked, matching her speed as they rode down the dark path, the dawn approaching fast. “Ye are nae too cold?”

“No. I am well. Thank you. Are you?”

“Aye, I am filled with the heat of urgency. Ye wanted tae ride quickly, and so we shall. Only I dae want me answers at the end of this journey.”

“You shall have them,” she promised, smiling at him.

When he smiled back, she soaked it in. Helen wanted something to think back to if he rejected her and sent her away, if the life she kept dreaming about with him would not happen.

She did not like how it felt when she considered being away from him. She had never thought much of love and had never really understood it. All she had known was that forced marriage was not it, and that was why she was fighting so hard against Anthony’s plans for Cecily. Love and marriage were somehow bigger and more beautiful, happier than anything else in the world. She thought she had seen it with her own parents, at least in part. That was why her father had gone against his family to marry her mother after the death of his first wife.

Trying to get her mind off everything, she asked, “Do you think that Kai will come and join you back at Grant Castle?”

“I mentioned it in the note tae him, but I daenae ken. He has his own life tae lead, and he has been a soldier for so long, I imagine he will continue bein’ so. But I would like it if he came, at least tae stay for a time. We were like brothers, he and I, and we have been too far apart these past years.”

Helen could see the sad look in his eyes. It was a wonder to her that there was such goodness in a man who had such a tainted family, with a past so filled with sadness and loss and betrayal.

“Well, it would be very nice if he came to see us.” She gasped at her slip of the tongue. “... you. He seems like a cheerful man and a far better brother to you than your cousin.”

When Cory said nothing, she turned to him, and in the early morning light, she could see him smiling smugly.

“What did I say about smugness?” she asked.

“I think I have every right tae feel smug, lass, now that I ken ye are thinkin’ about ye and me and the future we might have. It means the world tae me.”

Helen swallowed the lump in her throat. If only there was not so much secrecy in her past. If only she had not agreed to become a double agent to save her sister. There would not be so many lies.

*But then you would have never met him.*

She let out a long breath, and then she said, “Cory I—”

But she did not get to finish because both heard the pounding of hooves, many hooves, coming down the path behind them.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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“No!” Cory heard Helen say as they both turned back to see the men coming after them.

There were six dark, cloaked riders and even if Helen and Cory had sped up, there would have been no match for the six stallions who could easily catch them.

“They are the same men,” she said, speeding up despite the lack of hope. “Six of them, this time, but they are wearing the same cloaks as those who hurt you in the courtyard.”

“Aye, I see it. I think we may have tae dae battle, lass, if we want tae get out of this.”

Cory did not want to give up hope just yet. Seconds before, he’d been filled with happiness at the realization that Helen wanted a future with him, but now, fear filled him. He was afraid that he would not be allowed that happiness, for how could they fight two against six, even if they were both good?

“We ride as long as we can,” Helen said. “I do not have a sword. I will have to fight with only my small blade.”

Cory gritted his teeth. This was his cousin's doing, surely, even if he did not yet understand everything. How could he still hate him after all this time, when he had already taken everything from Cory?

*I suppose it is in Ruairidh's nature tae keep takin' and takin'.*

“We will take a sword off one of them and pass it to ye. We will have tae work together, lass. Ye have saved me once before, and now I will help protect ye.”

“As you saved me once as well,” she shot back.

“I ken.” He smiled. What a woman he had fallen for; she was more wonderful than he ever could have hoped for.

*And I will bloody nae see her die.*

“The pines, Helen. We will lead them through the pines.” He pointed ahead. “The branches are thick, and they may fall if we ride hard enough. I ken these woods better than anyone. Ruairidh never bothered tae come outdoors.”

“Yes, let us.”

Cory led the way, wanting to keep Helen at his side, but knowing that he would have to have her ride behind him.

“Stick close tae me,” he commanded, as he veered off the road and right into the woods.

The pines there were dark and tall, but they had not changed in all the years that Cory had been away from his home. There was just enough light to see, and he bent his head forward as the trees brushed past him. Helen was shorter than him, and he would break the branches before she reached them. With his hands tight on the reins, he leaned forward and nudged Maitheanas to increase his speed. He could still hear the thundering of the hooves of the men following them, despite the loud cracking and swishing of branches. However, twice, he heard thumps and cries of pain, so he knew he had made the right choice leading them into the woods. Four enemies were better than six

He would ride in the woods for as long as they could. Minutes later, they entered a clearing, and it was then that he went to the far edge, calling to Helen and turning around to face the four remaining.

Four gasping riders emerged, one of them with his hood off, but the rest still covered. Cory slid his sword from its sheath, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw Helen pull out her dirk and hold it out in front of her.

“Let us battle like gentlemen,” he said, jumping down from his horse.

The others did the same, but they did not reply. Helen jumped down on her own accord, and he could feel her tension as the men drew their swords and stepped closer.

“Ye take the lad tae the right,” Cory said out of the side of his mouth. “Three I can dae.”

“We shall see,” she said, and Cory nearly laughed.

Teasing him at a time like this?

Before the men could reach him, Cory let out a brutal yell, rushing at them until he could see their eyes widen with surprise. He swung at the first, who screamed when Cory’s blade hit his middle. As he swung around, he hit the other, knocking him to the ground. Cory had never felt such anger or energy in his body, and this was the only way to get it out. To fight until Helen was safe.

The third man lunged at him, but he ducked out of the way and then hit him in the face with the hilt of the sword, eliciting a pained groan. The man fell backward, and Cory turned to face Helen and her last man. She was breathing hard, bobbing and weaving, but he saw her cut at the leg of the man she was fighting, and he hissed, raising his sword to hit her. Cory rushed forward to shove his blade against his, and the metal clang filled the clearing.

“Why dae ye dae this?” he growled at the man before he kicked him in the chest, down to the ground.

“Duty,” the man said, but nothing else, and Cory fell upon him, punching until the man’s eyes closed.

When he rose, Helen had fought another man who was now standing again. With a quick swipe, she cut his arm. Cory made quick work of the last two, fighting them off easily since they were dazed and already bleeding. When he cut them both, but not enough to kill them, he backed away.



“We ride, Helen,” he said. “Get on the horse. We shall go, and we will get ahead of them.”

Helen nodded, and he helped her onto her horse. All the men were down on their backs, some moving, some not. Satisfied, he led the way again, rushing through the woods as fast as possible. Only this time, there were no riders behind him.



Helen’s lip was a little swollen, and she had a cut on her arm, but as she rode behind Cory, knowing it was not serious. She could still hold the reins with firm hands, and she smiled as they passed through the trees like a river cutting through rock. She trusted this man with everything, and there he was, being incredible once again, thinking of a way to trick the men who had come to kill them in such an ingenious way.

Eventually, they made it to the other side of the woods onto a dirt road, and Cory kept moving just as fast, far too fast for them to speak any longer. That was good enough for her. She still needed time to recover from what had just happened, what she had seen. When the men had stalked towards them on the ground, and she had fought, she could see the beady eyes of Ruairidh staring back at her. There had been no time to tell Cory, but now it was confirmed. Ruairidh wanted Cory dead, and he had been one of the men who had attacked him in the courtyard. He was desperate to kill his own flesh and blood, the only living member of his family. That was why he had invited him to celebrate the birth of his child. It was so he could forever be the laird.

Why he had waited so many years remained a mystery to her. But it did not matter; he was doing this now, and they had to

keep themselves safe. After an hour of riding away, Cory slowed.

He trotted next to her and said, "I think we can rest these horses for a bit. Give them a drink of water. We will have tae keep goin' soon. I would like tae get tae Grant Castle."

"Yes, the perfect place. We will be safe there."

"Aye, I believe so. Laird Grant will be good tae us, and he would welcome ye too, now that he will ken that ye are there this time."

"Thank you, Cory."

"Are ye all right?" he asked, tilting his head as he looked her up and down.

"Yes, I am well. Just a little bruised and a minor cut. The one good thing about fighting against men is that they rarely expected you to be so tiny or so quick."

"Aye," he said with a laugh. "It is a good skill tae use against them. And ye use it well."

"Are you well?" She looked at him pointedly, not wanting him to lie to her.

"Aye, all is well." He held out his arms. "I feel good, but I ken we will tire as we continue our journey."

They stopped at the edge of a brook. It was now nearing the afternoon, and she looked back down the road.

“Do you think they will come after us right away?”

He shook his head. “I think they will probably gather more men or send others who are nae injured. I cut some of them deeply. They wouldnae be able tae ride. I think we are safe, just for a little. Besides, we cannae afford one of those horses tae break an ankle.” He patted his horse’s neck and turned away from her, looking up at the sky.

They were both still recovering from the frightening experience they had just had. Boldly, she stepped up behind him and wrapped her arms about him. He paused, then placed his hands on hers, and she breathed out on his back. It was far easier to hold him like this, to show him she cared when his face was turned away from her. She closed her eyes and tried to memorize his scent, the feel of his warmth. As they got closer to Grant Castle and her reckoning, she realized that he would likely not forgive her. She would be painted with the same brush as Millie.

“What is this for, Helen?” he asked softly, turning his face so she could better hear him.

“It is only that I could have lost you again, or I could have died and never seen you again. Either of those would have been terrible.” Cory turned around in her arms to embrace her.

He kissed her on the cheek. “But we didnae die. We fought because we have a future we want tae get tae.”

She pulled back and looked up at him, wishing she could have confidence in that future. He pushed a piece of hair from her face and sighed.

“There is much tae say tae ye, Helen. But I daenae want this tae be the time. It will have tae wait.”

“Yes.” She shivered a little, and he held her closer. “And it is the same for my explanation. I want there to be enough time.”

“Good.” He took her mouth hungrily, surprising her, but she sighed into it, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him close.

She wanted to remain there forever, with their lips touching, but she knew they had to leave. She pulled back and touched a hand to his face.

“We should go,” she breathed, hoping her eyes could tell him what her mouth could not yet.

“Aye.” He kissed her on the forehead and then helped her onto her horse. “I think I am one lucky blaiageard, Helen.”

“Why?” she asked with a fake smile.

“Because when those men were comin’ upon us, I kened I could count on ye tae hold yer own. That ye wouldnae give up without one hell of a fight.”

“You do have that right. I would not have given up, especially if it meant helping to save you.”

He grinned at her in such a way that made her feel warm, reminding her of their feverish lovemaking only the day before.

“Onward,” he said, clucking to his horse, and then they were off again.

Their speed was so great that Helen could cry in peace, and Cory would never know.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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*I*t felt like a lifetime until Grant Castle came into view, but when it did, Cory thanked God they had finally made it. He could not help but smile as they rushed up to the familiar and beautiful walls. He had never thought he would be so happy to see the walls of a castle that was not his own. He stopped and jumped down from his horse, grabbing Helen as well. He kissed her then, passionately, even though he was tired, hungry, and fatigued.

She kissed him back, whimpering into his mouth as she pulled him close. But then he could taste salt in his mouth, and he pulled away from her to see that she was crying.

“Overjoyed, are ye?” he asked, his thumbs brushing away her tears before he kissed her lovely mouth again.

This would be the beginning of it all, the beginning of his true happiness. It was like he had lived the past years in the darkness or a dream, but now he was finally waking up.

They were interrupted by the call of a familiar voice. “Cory! Ye have come back!”

Cory turned to see Cam striding out from the gates, a pair of guards at his back. He turned and motioned them to return to their stations, and then he was grinning at them.

“Come with me, Helen,” he said, taking her arm, and striding up proudly to the man he knew at long last he could finally call a friend.

“We barely escaped with our lives, Cam,” Cory said, reaching out for Cameron’s arm, who took it heartily, but his expression was grim.

“What dae ye mean?”

“There is much tae explain,” Cory replied. “But first, I want ye tae meet Helen.” He touched her back, but he could feel the tension there.

When he looked at her, he saw she had paled a little.

“Is that so?” Cam’s blue eyes were kind, but they looked a little wary. “Nice tae meet ye, lass. From whence dae ye hale?”

“I am a Sassenach,” she said, straightening a little, but Cory could hear the tremble in her voice.

What was wrong? She had just done well, fighting against that group of men, and she had not seemed afraid. When they had stopped by the brook, and she had hugged him, she had

seemed a little tired, but nothing like this. Now she was pale, and her tears were plain to see.

*Remember the dream? Discover the truth, it said. There is somethin' she is still hidin' from ye.*

But Cameron chuckled, and he put his hands on his hips. "Och, the lass he found in the woods days ago?"

She nodded stiffly.

"I am glad tae hear that Cory has already been teachin' ye the Gaelic. How long will ye be stayin' with us?"

He looked to Cory, and Cory pulled Helen closer, his hand tight on her waist. "We will have tae discuss it. But I think it is best to go inside, bathe and rest. We can talk at dinner with ye and Ella. If ye will allow us."

"Of course! Forgive me. It is good tae see ye well and back with us. I was worried ye would leave us for yer home again."

"Never," Cory said with vigor.

Cam looked like he wanted to ask more, but he turned and pointed toward the gates. "Aye, it is gettin' freezin' out here anyway, this late in the day. Ella will be glad tae see ye. But I will send for baths tae yer rooms."

"She will stay with me," Cory said, again with passion.



Helen still did not speak.

“Very well.” He could tell Cameron was trying not to grin. “Ye ken the way of course. We will meet ye later at the evenin’ meal.”

Once inside, Cory took Helen’s arm again and led her down the passageways until they entered his room once again. As she walked in, he closed the door and leaned back against it.

“Thank God. Alone at last.”

She smirked and went to sit on the bed, patting it. “We were alone this whole time,” she said. She was avoiding his eyes again. “I remember how lovely this bed is.”

“Well, I would be happy tae show it tae ye again, if ye like.” He removed his jacket as he walked towards her, but Helen stood quickly, and her lovely big eyes widened.

“We must speak first.”

He tossed the jacket over the back of a chair and stopped walking towards her. “Aye, I suppose yer right. A dram?”

“Please,” she begged, and he turned away to pour them each a glass.

When he turned around, he saw she was already sitting in front of the fire with her cloak on. Frowning, his heart twinging a little with worry, he handed her the tumbler of whisky, and she took it quickly, drinking its contents while he took a slow sip.

“What is wrong Helen?”

“We need to talk.” She stared into the fire, and he sat down.

“Aye. So, then tell me. Why did ye need us tae escape so quickly? Nae that I really minded. I was happy tae leave that cursed place.”

He breathed out before taking another long draught of his drink, staring at her while she spun the glass in her fingers. He brought back the bottle and poured her another dram.

“Thank you.”

She breathed out, and he could still hear the tremble in her breath. He wanted to reach over to grasp her hand, comfort her, and tell her that whatever it was, he would understand, but he held back.

“I am listenin’, lass. I will listen to anythin’ ye have tae say.”

She threw him a brief smile, but then looked back at the flames again. “You wanted to know why I went to the castle in the first place. Why I was in Scotland at all.”

“Aye.” He nodded slowly.

“Well,” she began. “I was in Scotland to seek information. If I found it, it would be very helpful to my family. When we met, you took me to Grant Castle, but I was already on my way to Chattan Castle because of the rumors I had heard.”

“Rumors, what rumors?” Cory asked, leaning forward, putting his elbows on his knees.

“There were rumors that your cousin has been supplying the English with information about the Scots in the war, giving them supplies as well.”

Cory did not know what to say at first. He just stared at her for a few seconds, confused. “But how do ye ken all this?”

She looked down at her hands before quickly finishing the contents of her glass yet again. “Because I have been collecting information about the Scottish for a few months now. I act as a spy for my brother. I came to Scotland to learn more, and I have been posing as various things, especially a lady of the night, to get the information I want. The night I met you, I had just learned about the rumor at a tavern nearby. I was heading off to make my travel plans for Chattan Castle, until the snow was too much. I am a spy, Cory.”

“Ye what?” he asked, standing, his face twisted with fury.

The woman who sat there in his room was a stranger, a complete and utter stranger. He thought he loved her, but she

was just like Millie. He could not believe he had been such a bloody fool yet again.



Helen's hands were shaking, and she wished that she could have more whisky. But all the whisky in the world would not take away the truth of the fact that she had lied to him, or rather kept the truth from him. The important, truth, that she was on both sides, burned in her throat, and it was on the tip of her tongue to tell him, but she bit it back.

It was better that he thought her treacherous and evil, rather than risk his life by letting him know she was a spy for both sides. Anyone might do something dangerous about that information..

“I went to the castle to find out the truth so that I could bring that information back to my brother.”

“I see.” He was angry, and it frightened her, only because she had never seen him like that. She was right in believing that she would never be forgiven. “So let me get this right, Helen, if that is even yer name.” He drank his whisky and then slammed the cup on the table before spinning around again.

Helen tried not to gasp at the wild look in his eyes. Cory, her Cory, was now lost to her, and he did not even know everything about Ruairidh.

“Ye went tae me family's castle in order tae confirm a rumor about their involvement with the English.” He threw up his arms and paced in front of the fire. “So ye must have been bloody pleased when I came intae rescue ye like a fool. I had

jumped intae yer game, Cory Chattan, the perfect person tae use while ye were at the castle, temptin' me with yer body so that I might look the other way when ye did things ye shouldnae have."

"No, it was never like that; I swear it. I really was asleep in the woods, and I did not know who you were until you told me your name. That is God's truth." She held up a hand, and he shook his head, scoffing.

"As if I could believe a word of what ye say, lass. I had a dream about ye last night. It was beautiful but then a dark shadow came across it. The words 'discover the truth' came tae me mind, and I kenned I had tae figure out who ye really were afore I could trust ye in full. But I was so bloody in love with ye that I didnae care!" His voice was loud now, and his pacing only increased.

Helen wanted to cry at the loss of the look of love on his face, but she did not. She remained where she was, and just like she had taught herself so many times, she masked her feelings with a stoic expression.

"Cory, you do not know everything. It was not like that. But while I was there, I knew I had to find everything out so that I could help my family. That is why I took your pendant. I thought it could help give me access to the castle. I thought it could help the laird trust me. But then you found me, and that is that."

"That is nae that!" He turned towards her, his face red and angry. "Ye lied tae me. Ye used me tae get what ye want. I wouldnae be surprised if ye stole me bloody pendant again tae dae whatever ye would like with it."

“I-”

“So ye did! Jesus Christ, how could I have been such a bloody fool? Ye are just like Millie. It seems I havenae the right temperament tae find a good-hearted lass.” He put his hands on his head and sighed, his eyes wide with frustration, shock, and anger. “I cannae believe that it has happened again. After all these years, and after the lessons, I thought that I had learned. What a bloody, cursed fool I am!” he roared.

Helen stood slowly, her heart fluttering with sadness and fear that he might kick the room down.

“I wish you would understand that I did this for my family. It was never my plan to hurt you or to—” she paused. “To bed you, if that is what you think.”

“Ha!” he laughed. “Ye had nae plans tae bed me, and yet as soon as we were acquainted, ye stripped down and offered yerself tae me? What does that mean, then?”

Helen’s cheeks burned. He would not listen to the truth. He was far too angry. The fake will was tucked inside her bodice, and yet she did not remove it. She feared he would take it and rip it to pieces and then there would be no evidence to prove against his cousin.

“There is so much that you do not know, Cory, if you would only listen and let me speak it all out. You would find that there are things you need to know.”

He was pacing again when he shook his head. “Nay, I daenae want tae hear any more of this. I need ye tae go. Take the horse ye rode on here and leave me be. Forever. I will never trust love again, that is certain.”

“Cory, please—” she begged, but his voice lowered to a dangerous level.

“Go, Helen. Now. I daenae ever wish tae see ye again.”

Knowing that all was lost for her now, Helen took one look at him, nodded silently, and left. And as soon as the door shut behind her, the tears she had been holding back fell down her cheeks.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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Eory did not know how long he paced in his room. It could have been a few minutes, or days upon days. He felt numb as he passed from one side of the room to the other. He was not sure how he had walked into such a mistake again. Why was there no one in the world he could trust? Why did it feel as though the world was against him? And any time he tried to heal and to get close to someone again, something bad happened?

Eventually, he slumped down in his chair and, leaning forward, he put his head in his hands. Helen was on the side of the English, acting as a spy for the war. Of course, Scottish men and women were always hesitant and suspicious around English people. But they had become such a part of their lives for so long that he knew sensibly that not every English person was bad.

*Ye lie. Ye ken that ye were bewitched by her bonny looks and her ways.*

That might have been true. But he had also enjoyed her company immensely. He liked how she was bold and courageous, intelligent and quick-witted. Helen knew her way around a knife and was not afraid of a man out to hurt her. She did not wait around expecting to be saved, even though he



desperately wanted to save her repeatedly. She was like no one he had ever met before. And when they were together, it was as if things seemed right in the world.

*But it was all a lie.*

And yet in those few moments, it had not felt like a lie. When they had made love, it had felt real and beautiful, and he was certain that no one was as good an actor as that.

*But clearly, I ken nothin', for I have allowed two treacherous women tae tear me heart out and nae look back.*

And now he had to be sensible. He had to return to this life where he was the second-in-command for Cam. He now had a purpose, a home, and a future. It might not have been what he had been dreaming about for the past few days, but what did that matter? He was now away from his cousin and from the threat those other soldiers had caused. They would not dare approach Grand Castle and its sturdy walls and skilled soldiers.

He poured himself another whiskey when a knock came at the door. Tensing, he went to answer it, afraid that Helen had returned to charm him into believing her once again.

“Tobias,” he said, when he opened the door. The young soldier looked frightened and concerned. “What is it?”

“Cory, ye must come! The laird sent me tae fetch ye. Soldiers are riding towards the castle, but we cannae see their colors. They daena carry a white flag, or any sort of message that

they come in peace. Come, we are readyin' for battle. The laird is on the battlements."

"Aye, go lad, I will come." Tobias scurried away from the door, back up the passageway.

And Cory, his heart thumping, had his sword at the ready as well as his blade. He switched it out with one of his others and even put a spare one in his boot.

*They couldnae possibly have followed us all this way,* he thought to himself.

But then he realized that Tobias and Cameron would not have been afraid of six men on horseback, even if all of them had healed enough to ride after him. This must be another group. Once he was prepared, he hurried out of the room, trying to push Helen out of his mind as he raced towards the ramparts of the castle.

When he arrived, Cam looked relieved. "Is that lass still there with ye?" he asked, and Cory shook his head. His friend looked concerned, but he said nothing more about it. "Look out and see what ye make of this."

Cory looked out over the edge of the battlements of Grant Castle. He saw soldiers with dark cloaks racing towards the castle, dressed like the other soldiers who had come to attack him and Helen on their way back. There were more than six, though. There were at least forty.

Cory turned to Cam. “We must prepare the archers,” he said. “The rest can go down tae battle on foot.”

“Aye, the men are ready, but what is this? Grant Castle has kenned peace for some time.”

Cory nodded, and his heart twisted with agony. Yet again, something bad was happening in his life, and the dark shadow was casting itself over it. It seemed it would never go away.

“I must tell ye, Cam, and I am sorry I didnae do it earlier... While I was at me cousin’s, three men attacked me in the courtyard, and nearly killed me if nae for Helen. They were dressed just like this, the same dark cloaks, the same way of moving even.”

“If nae for Helen?” Cam asked, and Cory continued.

“Then, on our ride back, six men attacked us as well, but we were able tae get away. It seems that someone wishes me dead, and they are desperate tae come and claim their prize. I am sorry that I have brought this tae yer doorstep.”

Cory could feel whatever future he had planned after Helen had left, slowly slipping away. Surely, Cam would no longer want a second-in-command bringing enemies to their door.

With a hand over his heart, he said to his friend. “I will leave once this business is over. I daenae wish for ye tae have tae deal with whatever shadow follows me. It is dark and ever-present, and it willnae relinquish its hold on me.”

“Daenae talk like that, Cory.” Cam put a hand on his shoulder. “We will get tae the bottom of this. Ye are a strong man, and I consider ye a friend and a brother. We will fight side by side, and we will put a stop tae whatever shadow hangs over ye. Ella and the children are safe, but I worry about the lass. Where did she go?”

“She is a traitor, Cam. We will speak nae more of it, nae now at least. Battle is here.”

The archers were already assembled. And as the men approached, they paused outside the castle walls, calling up to the laird.

“We are here for yer second-in-command. Give us him, Laird Grant, and we will leave ye in peace.”

“Ye think that ye can threaten a laird with only forty men at yer beck and call?” Cam called down to them.

He nodded to the archers, and they sent dozens of arrows flying from the battlements in a split second. Yells and whinnies lifted from the ground just as Cam and Cory hurried down from the battlements to head down and out of the castle. Their men were already waiting for them, and Cory stepped out first to lead the way.

“This is me battle, Cam. It is I who will risk me life tae fight against whatever force of evil is at work against me.”

“Aye, then, but daenae think that I wouldnae die for ye as well, brother,” Cam said grimly.

Cory was touched, not realizing that even though Grant Castle was not the home he had expected or been taught to expect, he still had a family.

“Open the gates!” Cory called, and as the metal lifted, he readied his sword and led the men out into battle.



It took some time for Helen to find the horse she had rode in on. And the stable boy seemed confused when she arrived, her eyes filled with tears, muttering something about needing to get away. Once she was firmly on the horse, she rode, instantly desiring to leave the castle walls behind her back, not knowing where she would head first.

*You fool. You should go back home. You have the information you need to tell Anthony and to free Cecily. If Cory will not listen to you, then you can do nothing for him. He has made his choice, and now you should think of yourself.*

Her old logical side was bothering her, telling her she had a goal that she had just achieved it. She had bought hers and her sister's escape. It was everything she had ever wanted and worked for. But the thought of Cory not knowing what his cousin had done gnawed at her. Knowing that he was the rightful heir to the lairdship, and his cousin had taken it murderously, made her burn with rage for him and on his behalf. But he was being a stubborn arse.

*I still love him, despite that. I still want him tae be happy.*

But she rode away from Grant Castle, her heart and her head arguing at odds. Then she heard cries of men, and she slowed the horse at the edge of a copse of trees, turning to see that soldiers had amassed themselves at the front of the castle. Her heart leaped to her throat. They were dressed the same way as the men had been who had attacked them on the road and Cory in the courtyard.

“Ruairidh,” she breathed.

How could they have come so quickly? She had seen it was him underneath the cloak when they had been attacked out on the road, but she had been able to hurt him. Had he already had other men at the ready to follow her and Cory once they had fled? It made little sense and it made her wonder if Ruairidh was entirely human, for he seemed more like a demon.

She was deciding what she should do next when she heard a rustle in the trees ahead of her. Her heart suddenly kicked into high gear, and she waited for a moment, reaching down into her boot to bring out her blade. Slowly, she jumped down from her horse and entered the trees. The rustle had come from afar, so it was possible they did not notice her horse. Nonetheless, she held the blade at the ready in case someone jumped out at her. When she got close enough, she saw a man standing behind a bush, and as quickly as she could, she rushed forward and placed the blade at his neck.

She heard a quick gasp, and then she spoke. “Who are you, and what are you doing out here? Are you here to also fight against the men at Grant Castle?”

“Nay,” the man said. “I am here tae save it. Although now, I am relievin’ meself in these trees.”

She was not one to believe strange men, but how he said it made him sound honest and familiar. Slowly, she released the blade from his neck and stepped back, keeping it in front of her in case he turned around and hurt her. But when he did eventually turn, her mouth dropped open.

“Kai?” she asked.

“Aye, ‘Tis I.” The bear man smiled underneath his dark hair, and he chuckled. “Ye are a quick one with the blade, I’ll say, *Madam* Chattan. What in God’s name are ye doin’ out here? Does Cory ken? He will bloody burst if he finds out yer outside when a battle is afoot. For that is what it looks like tae me from here.”

Kai reached out for her arm, but she pulled back from it. “No,” she said, shaking her head. “I am certain he would like me to be right in the thick of it so I might come to harm.”

Kai rubbed his beard. “What does that mean?”

Helen sighed and motioned back to the soldiers outside of the castle. “Are you certain that you want to stand here and talk about things, or are you meant to go and fight with the other men? Why are you here anyway?”

Kai’s expression turned from light to dark in a flash. “I received Cory’s note, the one he wrote when the two of ye left so suddenly. As soon as I did, I left the castle. I never trusted Ruairidh, and once I saw Cory had left, I kenned that somethin’ was afoot.” Kai shook his head and looked ashamed. “He’d told me about bein’ attacked by those men in

the courtyard. But I didnae want tae believe that Ruairidh could really kill his own blood, nae after he had already obtained everything he wanted. I feel so ashamed. But I had started tae follow him lately, kennin' just how much Cory hated him.”

“And?” Helen could feel the documents practically burning holes in her skin. But she knew it would feel so much better to hear her knowledge confirmed by another, someone Cory trusted.

“I saw he was often talkin' tae men on their own, in hushed whispers. I saw a few things bein' delivered from the castle elsewhere. I kenned that somethin' was wrong, and I kenned it had somethin' tae dae with the war, since I had gathered a few things in the conversations I had struggled tae overhear. So, when Cory left, I kenned that I had tae follow him tae apologize and explain everything.”

Helen nodded and dug in her bodice, handing Kai the documents she had found. “I searched for these in his study, and I found them.” She sighed, no longer really caring about hiding her identity any longer.

The one person she had been afraid to tell the truth of her history had condemned her for it.

Kai read the letters between the laird and English officers, and his eyes widened. “So, it is true, then?” he asked.

“Yes, it would appear so. I took the letters because I need to prove something to someone. To my brother, in fact.”



Kai watched her calmly for a few seconds, and she saw a wrinkle forming between his brows. “Why did ye go in search of these?” he asked, holding them up.

“I am not Cory’s wife, Kai,” she replied. “My name is Helen, in truth. But Cory and I are not married. In fact, we met recently. I came to Scotland with the sole purpose of finding out information about the Scots and the English about the war. It was not for any political reason or for money, it was for my brother. He is very engaged in the Anglo-Scottish Wars, and he threatened to marry my sister off if I did not do this. So, I came in search of information, and now that I have it, I can return to my brother, and he can release my sister. But there is more. So much more.”

Slowly, she put her fingers inside her bodice again, removing the fake will. She handed it to Kai. “I found a secret room in Ruairidh’s study, and it was filled with so many documents, all of them relating to Laird Gregor. I found his original will, naming Cory as the heir to the lairdship.”

“Dear God,” Kai breathed, his eyes searching the will in front of him. “I cannae believe it, but it fits with Ruairidh. He killed the old laird tae put himself in his place. After all his uncle did for him...” Kai shook his head. “But why did Cory agree tae be married tae ye, or tae pretend that it was so?”

“He did not know the truth of everything until just half an hour ago. It was my idea when I came upon the castle, and he came as well, responding to Ruairidh’s invitation. And so, he just went along with it. And then we were there, fully ensconced in the story. I then I tried to search for the information I needed during that time.”

“Shite, ye told Cory all about this?” he held up the will.

“He would not let me speak. He was so angry that I had lied to him about my real purpose for being at the castle. But I swear to you, I did not seek him out. He found me in the woods, nearly frozen to death, and he saved my life. I admit it was convenient for him to act as my husband so I could get into the castle, but it is now so much more than that. I love him dearly, but he has kicked me out and refuses to hear anything about my other reasons or the truth of Ruairidh.”

Kai grumbled. “That dobber. He will hear this. We should join the battle and tell him the truth of it all. I bet that is Ruairidh now.”

“Yes, it must be. But I am not sure Cory will want to see me again.”

“Och, he will, the bloody fool, once he hears what ye have found. Once he kens the truth of it. Besides all that, he loves ye, I can see it in his eyes. Nae once did the marriage ever look fake tae me. That time I interrupted yer kiss in yer room, he nearly punched me in the face later.”

Helen could not help but smile at that memory. “Yes, well, I am uncertain, but I do like the idea of going to help fight.”

“Normally, I would balk at a lass comin’ tae fight, but I see yer skills. Come. I was waitin’ tae see if there was a better way tae get inside, but I think we ought tae just go right tae the front of the battle. Get on yer horse, lass. Let us ride.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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Now, feeling as though there was some hope for the future, Helen rode alongside Kai as they raced up to the Grant Castle walls. If Cecily could see her, she would scream and tell her she was being a fool. Of course, she had fought before, and she had injured men, and she had mostly come out unscathed, but she had never been in an actual battle or a real war. Her skin felt chilled, and a shiver ran down her spine. The closer they got and the louder the men as they battled in front of the castle.

“Feck; it is them,” Kai said from her side once they stopped far enough away to dismount.

Now the men’s cloaks had been removed, and the colors were Chattan colors. Helen was breathing in, slowly and deeply, as she stood and watched for a few seconds, her hands still on the reins for the horse. Kai had stepped forward, but when he saw she was not with him, he turned around to look at her.

“Ye daenae need tae come, Helen. This is nay yer battle. Ye have yer information for yer brother, and ye could ride home and back, away from all this right now. Like ye told me, Cory was angry enough tae push ye away. It might serve him right if ye did go, for I ken he will regret it later and come for ye. I

shall speak with him the first moment I get... This is nae a place for a lass, much worse than I thought.”

“No,” she said, gripping the blade in her hand and dropping the reins. “For so long my brother has tried to make Cecily and me afraid, thinking that because he is a man and in power, he can force us to do whatever he wants. I see that Ruairidh is just the same, and it burns my blood that people like that exist, taking lives away to gain power. I love Cory, and I will help him if I can. I hope with all my heart that he will learn the truth, whether we can be together or not.

“Good God, lass,” Kai muttered. “I have never met the like, a lass so brave and full of courage. Is yer sister like this too?”

“In her own way,” Helen said with a quick smile.

She winced when she heard another cry from a man in battle, and she leaned against the cold wall of the castle. “But I must warn you, I have never been in battle before. The men will not expect a woman to be there, so I will use that to my advantage.”

“And so ye shall. Here, take this, another blade for ye. Ye will need more than one. Be sure tae always watch yer back, and tae make yer eyes see everywhere. Stay close to me, and I will keep ye safe.”

She wanted to laugh at the nearly impossible task. But with quick nods, they agreed to go, and Kai led the way, sneaking around the castle. Before she was ready, Kai jumped in, and she followed him. His loud yelling, his large frightening body and face drew much attention. It gave her time to capitalize on

their distractions, and she cut through a few men who were busy trying to fight against Kai. She kept on the outskirts of the men, her eyes searching for Cory and for anyone who was noticing her movements.

Being small and not dressed for battle kept her a little inconspicuous for a time. She surprised one man who was simply shocked to see a woman on the battlefield. It made it easy for her to plunge her blade into his chest till he fell to the ground. Helen was breathing hard now. She wished for it all to be over. She could not seem to find Cory anywhere, and she prayed that he was not dead, bleeding out on the battlefield just because of a jealous cousin.

And then she saw him. The day was cloudy, and it smelled like rain was soon coming. It seemed like the light shone down upon Cory's face as he fought. She pressed back against the castle wall as she stared at him, her heart full of love for the man who had won it. She was not sure she could bear his death if the battle ended badly.

*I must not think of that now.*

Time slowed briefly as she walked towards him through the crowd. If only he could see that she was there to fight alongside him, to prove to him that her heart was true, then maybe he would forgive her. But as she approached, she spotted someone at Cory's back: Ruairidh.

She recognized him, yet he looked different to her. He was even more the devil now that he was out in the light, all his motives now revealed. He was the demon she had imagined him in more ways than one. And then she saw what he was about to do. Men fought around her, their swords swinging, arrows flying in the air down from the battlements. She saw

Ruairidh raising his arm, ready to plunge it down into Cory's back and be Laird Chattan without contest until his son took it over.

Helen raced to get there but had to fight someone off, and she was too far away. Time still felt slowed and blurry, so when she cried out, she worried it was too soft for Cory to hear.

"Cory! Behind you!" she cried as loud as she could, waiting to see if he could hear it.

Ruairidh also let out a yell, bringing the sword down. But at the last minute, Cory spun around, and Helen heard the clash of metal as he brought up his sword to deflect Ruairidh's blow.



Then rain began to fall. It felt only right that it would, as Cory found himself fighting against Chattan men. Luckily, he recognized almost none of them, for Ruairidh must have changed the soldiers as soon as he had become laird to rid any connection to the old laird and laird's son. The rain felt appropriate when Cory found himself face to face with Ruairidh, their swords pushing against one another.

He would not have seen his cousin trying to kill him, had he not heard his name being called by a voice he recognized. Why had she not gone?

"What is this game, Ruairidh?" he cried, loud enough for his cousin to hear, for the battle grew louder around them. "Ye have everythin', and yet ye fight against me as if ye daenae? As if there is somethin' left that ye wish tae take from me?"

He pushed his cousin backward, and Ruairidh stumbled, his sword still in hand. He looked different now. As boys, they might have played for a few years, but soon enough, Ruairidh's true character had become known. He was never kind, never understanding. Everything was about power and gaining an edge over Cory. There was never any kinship, love, or brotherhood, and Cory could see it clearly etched in Ruairidh's expression just then. It was lined with anger, his dark eyes fiery. Nothing in him was recognizable as he bared his teeth at Cory.

“As long as ye live, there is something I wish tae take from ye, cousin,” Ruairidh spat, lunging forward, only for Cory to deflect once again.

But the blade nicked him deeply. He gasped, but then he bit his lip so Ruairidh would not hear him.

“What will me death give ye? Ye already have everything.”

“Nae exactly,” Ruairidh said, jumping again, but Cory moved away.

Ruairidh pointed his sword at Cory's neck. “That pendant of yers, a gift from yer father, was his last curse tae me.”

“What dae ye mean?” Cory asked as they circled each other. His heart was racing, and it had nothing to do with the battle or the fact that he could die at any moment.

“I found a secret door in my study with a strange keyhole. I have been thinkin’ for years how tae open this bloody thing, and I invited ye tae the celebration of the birth just tae see if I could find out. As soon as I saw yer pendant, I kened it was the key. And so, I tried tae figure out a way tae get it from ye.”

He jumped forward, nicking Cory’s other arm before Cory pushed him back and then wiped the rain out of his face with the back of his hand. “What does all this mean?”

He knew there was no time, that someone might come for him and stab him in the back. And yet he felt that Ruairidh had been waiting for this moment for a long time. He would not allow others to do what he so desperately wanted to do himself.

“That it was I who killed yer father, so I could take the lairdship for meself. He always treated me so well, I had hoped that he would consider me for laird, but in the end, he loved ye more and wished for ye tae have it.” Ruairidh spat, and the rain fell a little harder. “So, he had tae go. I couldnae find the original will, but I kened that he must have hidden it from me. Once he was dead, I could write up me own will quickly. And since nae one could open that secret door, where I feared the true will was, I had nay fear that anyone would fight against me. I was able tae forge his signature at the bottom easily enough. It all worked as I wished it tae.”

Cory’s breath had been kicked out of him. His sword hand fell to his side, and he stared at his cousin. He had always known Ruairidh to be cruel and selfish, but this was something else. This was something straight from hell, an evil so pure that no human, surely, could do such a thing and believe themselves to be justified in what they had done.



“Ye killed me father?” he asked, his voice low and dangerous.

“Aye, and it was so easy. Just a bit of poison, it all seemed natural.” Ruairidh chuckled. “And then, takin’ yer lass was easy enough. She was so desperate tae be a lady, that it didnae take much convincin’. Her parents were happy tae give her tae me. Too bad she was an infertile cow until recently.”

Ruairidh wiped his hand over his face, and Cory took the chance to take his sword and head straight for him. He would run his cousin right through the middle, knowing now what he’d done, taking his father away from him. But when Ruairidh jumped away easily, Cory growled with rage.

“Why did me father treat me thus if he was goin’ tae give the lairdship tae me in the end?” Cory demanded, needing to know that answer before Ruairidh was sent straight back to hell by Cory’s own blade.

“Nae doubt he felt the pressure of carin’ for his sister’s child, and he kenned the truth inside me from the first day. He saw what I was, who I was. I wanted all his attention, and so I took it from ye. He noticed that the more he was mean tae ye, the less I bothered ye. He even said it once. It was like a silent agreement. But what a fool he was in the end, thinkin’ that good treatment would spare his life.”

Cory yelled out again, and then they fought. This time, he would not give up until his cousin was dead and had paid for all the pain he had caused so many people. Time was slow as he swung and hit, not stopping until Ruairidh sliced at his arm, and then stumbling, Cory nearly fell onto the ground as he tripped over a body.

“Cory!” Helen cried again, rushing towards him through the crowd of men.

But before she could get to Ruairidh, his cousin grinned and grabbed at Helen’s hair, pulling her close and placing his blade at her neck. “Ye now need tae make yer choice, Cory. Will ye save her life by givin’ me yers and the pendant? Or will ye watch as yer beloved bleeds out her English blood on Scottish grass?”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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*I*t was now so clear to Cory after all this time. He thought that fate had been against him all this time, that there was merely a dark cloud, a curse hanging over his life that would not lift. But now he knew the truth. Ruairidh had been the dark cloud, that curse, the demon who was plaguing him and now he had Helen in his grip.

The rain had slowed, but both Ruairidh and Helen were soaked to the bone. Her eyes were even greener in the rain, and they were wide with fear as she stared at him. Even though she gritted her teeth in pain as Ruairidh pulled her hair to keep her head pulled back, she said nothing to him.

Only a little earlier, Cory had poured his rage out on her, kicking her out of his room and the castle he had made his home. He had thought there had been a chance for the two of them, but then she had revealed her lies, how she had used him to get what she wanted. He stared at the two people in front of him that had both hurt him. But he could not equate them. Helen had lied and used, but deep down, Cory knew he still loved her. He would not see her die.

*She came back after all. After everything I said tae her. It is nae just anyone who would dae that.*

He was frozen to the spot, afraid that if he made a move, that silver blade would plunge into her neck, and she would be lost to him forever.

“So? What will ye dae, cousin? Yer little spy wife has been up tae nae good, hangin’ around me study at night, tryin’ tae find all kinds of things. Comin’ tae hit me on the head in the courtyard when ye were near yer death, and I would have had everything forever.”

“That was ye?” Cory asked, and Ruairidh laughed again.

“Ye are a fool. It is better that I am laird than ye.”

Kai approached through the haze of battle, and Cory blinked at him, afraid he was seeing things. Had Kai followed them after he received the note?

“She is here tae help ye, Cory,” he said, not getting too close to anger Ruairidh. “She was tryin’ tae help both Scotland and England, and it was only tae save her sister. Nae tae hurt ye.”

Helen kept looking at him, and Cory felt his heart ache. He loved her, no matter what she had done, and now that she was there instead of miles away on horseback, he realized she loved him too.

“I will fight ye instead, Ruairidh. Come and take me life, if ye ken.”

Cory held out his sword and rushed forward to distract Ruairidh. He hoped and knew that Helen was skilled enough to get out of a hold, and even better if the man was distracted. She did so, kicking at him and slipping out from under his blade and to Kai's side. When Ruairidh realized what was happening, he began backing away, only to bump into Cam behind him.

"It seems that ye are surrounded," Cory said, walking closer.

Cam was at Ruairidh's back, Kai at his side, and there was no place for him to go. His cousin's soldiers were too afraid for his life to come closer, knowing that this might cost him his last breath.

"Ye will feel guilt for this for years tae come, killing yer kin... Believe me it never stops hauntin' ye," Ruairidh said, attempting to think of an excuse, but there was no way that Cory would not kill him now.

*He will only continue tae spread his evil, even if he is banished from Chattan land.*

"I dinnae think so," Cory replied before he plunged his blade into Ruairidh's chest.

It was brief, the flash of anger in Ruairidh's eyes before it faded, and he sank to the ground, the sword still in his chest. Cory watched the sight with satisfaction before Cam turned to call to his men.

“The leader is down!” he cried. “Go home if ye can, Chattan men! For ye will receive nae mercy here!”

The battle stopped suddenly, as if it had never begun, and to his surprise, Cory looked up to see sunshine breaking through the clouds. There were bodies scattered around on the grass and only two Chattan survivors. And at the sight of Cam’s men, and Ruairidh dead on the ground, they raced away, grabbing their horses and galloping off into the distance. The rest would no longer have anywhere to go.

“Thank ye. That was long overdue,” he said to Kai and to Cam, and then he felt a light touch on his arm.

“Cory,” Helen said, her beautiful eyes wet with tears looking up at him. Blood was smeared on her face, and her hair was in disarray. “I am so sorry,” she said. “I swear to you; I did not want to hurt you.”

He smiled, feeling more tired and more in pain than he had in a long time, but he still took her face in his hands, and his eyes searched hers. “Will ye stay with me? And then we can figure all of this out. I want tae hear the truth of it now. Every word.”

She put her hands on his wrists and smiled through her tears. “Yes, I will stay with you.” And then she leaned up on her toes and kissed him.

He did not know everything yet. And there was an aching chasm inside him about what had happened to his father, but now the darkness has fled his life. And the person who made him whole again was there, kissing him instead of leaving.

When they pulled away, Cam laughed and said, “Let us go inside, then. The men will handle dealin’ with the refuse here. There is much tae dae and tae understand, and I believe, tae celebrate.”

Cory nodded, he took Helen’s arm and together, they left the battlefield and went towards the castle. A new beginning was underway, and Cory finally felt like the best was yet to come.



Lady Ella had refused all excuses from everyone until they had been sent to bathe and to the healer. Helen could tell that Cory was injured. But she was not allowed to spend any time inspecting him, for he was whisked away to the healers, and she was taken upstairs to bathe. Lady Ella was beautiful, blonde, and vibrant, and she smiled and laughed as she took Helen to her room. It was like there had never been a battle.

“I confess I have never met an Englishwoman before,” Ella said. “It is most excitin’.”

“Well, then ye are likely the first tae say so in this part of the world. But I thank ye.” As the maid filled a tub, Lady Ella sat with her.

“I hear that ye are with Cory?”

“Yes, I suppose. It is a long story.”

“Well, I simply cannae wait tae hear it. I am so starved of female company, and I miss me sister so dearly, that ye willnae begrudge me the chance tae hear yer tale?”

Lady Ella had been so kind and eager that Helen laughed and agreed. The maid helped her to undress, and once she was sunk into the bath with a bar of soap, she began her story. There was no fear of telling Lady Ella everything, for it felt good to relieve herself of the guilt, and it was practice for when she would tell Cory. Ultimately, she felt clean in more ways than one, and Lady Ella shook her head in disbelief.

“Dear God, ye have been through so much, all for a sister’s sake. I ken yer feelings entirely. Ye say that Cory doesnae ken yet?”

“He knows only part, but now that the battle is won, and his cousin is dead, we can talk. But I fear he is injured.”

“Daenaie worry. Our healer is one of the best and will help greatly. I must tell ye how happy I am. Cory is a good man, and I hoped he would find a woman who loved him as much as he loved her. He thought for a moment that it might be me sister, Ada, but she was desperately in love with one of our personal guards, Cam’s good friend. They are married now.”

Helen smiled. “There is hope, then, of true love in the end?” She scrubbed a bit of blood on her hand.

“Och, aye, and it is the best thing in the world. Ye must never run away from it, no matter how scary it seems. I think it is good that ye returned tae show Cory yer true feelings. Now, if I might be so bold, I will send for a few dresses of mine so that ye might choose what tae wear this eve. There will be a feast tae celebrate our victories.”



“Were any of yer men killed in the battle?”

Lady Ella smiled, and Helen thought she was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. “Nay, as if forty men could slay the men of Grant Castle! There were far too many on our side, and me husband said that the Chattan side seemed less skilled than was expected of a laird’s men. There were many injuries, tae be sure, but they nearly slayed all the Chattan men.”

“That is good, then.” Helen was satisfied.

“Well, I will leave ye tae dress, and me maid will come along shortly with those gowns.”

“Thank you, Lady Ella. You have been so kind.”

“Just Ella is fine with me,” she replied with a smile, and then she was gone.

After Helen dressed, she felt far better than she had in days. There were no longer any secrets, and while she had to return to Cecily at some point, it would not be that night. That night was reserved for speaking plainly with Cory. She would tell him all, put her heart out on the line. It did not matter that there was risk involved; she would not run away any longer until everything was said. If he still refused her after it all, she would go, but at least she had done her best. She could return home to Cecily and tell her she had tried her best. She had had enough courage to tell a man she loved him with her whole heart.

That night, she wore a green gown, one of the prettiest she had seen, with bows and ruffles, and a rather low bodice. The maid pinned her hair back and she took one look in the looking-glass before she left the room, eager to speak to him.

*But there is a whole feast to get through first. I suppose we will need to do that.*

Walking to the main hall felt like it took ages, and her heart bounced between her throat and stomach. The doors were opened for her, and she smiled at the many men that were already there, soldiers surely, who had fought in the battle. Laird Grant, smiling, and standing out amongst the others, walked towards her with an outstretched hand.

“I believe that ye may be our heroine of the eve,” he said, grasping her hand.

“Me?” she asked. “Whatever for?”

“Ye will see.”

He led her to the front of the room, where he and Lady Ella were seated. Cory was seated there as well, and once he set eyes on her, they darkened, and the corners of his mouth lifted. She knew that luck, and it sent a warm tingly feeling all the way from her heart to her stomach and lower. Helen wanted nothing more than to speak to him alone, but it seemed that was not to be.

“Welcome all. We have here our guest of honor.”

“I do not understand,” she whispered, but the laird continued.

He put a glass into her hands, and then raised his own. “Cory Chattan has been with us for some time. We have fought beside him, and we have seen his courage, willingness tae fight, and tae lay down his life. He has been so much more than a second-in-command at Grant Castle. He has been a brother and a friend, but he has had a plague on his life. This woman here, Helen, has uncovered the truth and brought it tae light. She is the one who has proof of Cory’s cousin’s treachery, and who can now help bring Cory tae his rightful place at Chattan Castle!”

The men cheered and lifted their glasses in the air. Laird Grant continued. “We will be sad tae see him go, but it is for the best. He is finally steppin’ intae his true place, and it is only thanks to this lady that he is getting the chance tae dae so. Tae Helen.”

“Tae Helen,” the men repeated, and then they drank to her.

Helen watched in surprise as nearly a hundred Scotsmen drank in her honor. She turned to look at Cory, who was still watching her eagerly.

“Music! We shall have music and celebration.” Cameron called for the musicians, and they began.

“Enjoy yerself, lass,” he said, kissing her on the cheek. “Thank ye for savin’ me good friend.”

He let Helen go, and then she was on her own, wondering if it was all real. As the festivities began, and the men and women started to dance, Cory approached her slowly, his hands behind his back. She swallowed hard as she looked up into his eyes.

*Be brave. You can do this.*

He looked far too handsome for a young woman to think straight. He had been entirely cleaned up, although a few cuts showed on his face. His hair was tied back, and his beard was clipped. When he smiled, Helen nearly spoke about her feelings right then and there.

“I never thought a Sassenach would be toasted in these halls,” Cory said wryly as he looked about him.

“Nor I,” she replied, taking a long sip from her glass before she set it down. “I do not think it was quite deserved. I hardly did any of the fighting.”

He stepped closer, making Helen suck in a breath. She breathed in his familiar, comforting scent. It was soap but also uniquely him. A scent she never wanted to be without. She lifted her eyes to better look into his.

“Ye did more than ye ken, lass. Kai told me all.” He reached for her hand, and he drew it to his lips. She closed her eyes as she felt his mouth caress her skin.

“Will ye dance with me?” he asked. “And then I think we should speak. For a long, long time.”

“Very well,” she whispered, still caught in his gaze. “But I am afraid that I do not know this dance.”

The song was not a familiar one, but Helen did not care. Just to be in his arms was enough.

“I will teach ye lass.” He whisked her away towards the dancers, and Helen lost all sense of where she was as they began to move.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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The song was slow, a little tragic sounding. Helen did not know the steps, but Cory was a good teacher, pressing at her back or her arm, teaching her body how to move with his as they joined the others. When they were done, he tucked her hand into his arm and grinned.

“Now, that was a pleasure, getting’ a Sassenach tae dance tae a Scottish tune and a Scottish dance. Will ye come with me now?”

Helen felt like she was floating on air. Was this really what it was like to be in love? Helen could hardly think straight, and she had never been that way. She had always had a plan, and found a way to sort out any problems that might come her way. She had had to be strong for her sister, but now she believed she could give into her feelings, to let good things come to her at long last.

“Yes,” she said, sounding far breathier than she wished to.

“Come with me.” Cory led her out of the hall while the musicians kept playing. “I am sorry that ye didnae get tae feast yet, but we will come tae that. I couldnae wait any longer tae speak tae ye.”

“Nor I,” she said, letting her hand fall from his arm to grasp his hand.

He led her down the passageways until they reached a large set of doors. Once he opened them, and walked in, she smiled when she realized it was a library.

“Cory, this is beaut—”

But her mouth was suddenly engaged, and Cory kissed her as he backed her up against the library doors. She did not hesitate to give into his kiss, slinking her arms about his neck as his finger pressed down on her chin to open her mouth even more.

“Christ, woman,” he said as he kissed her neck, his hands squeezing her waist. “I was barely able tae think for the past few hours.”

Helen could barely hear him as his kiss got lower and lower until his tongue licked between her breasts over the lacy edge of her bodice. “I thought you wanted to talk,” she teased, chuckling as he rose, looking like a man both deep in desire and love.

“True.” He leaned his forehead against hers, as his hands reached around to grasp her buttocks and press her against him. “I want ye tae tell me everythin’. But I may have tae sit there while ye dae, so I can focus.”

She laughed as he backed away and sat on the edge of a wooden table. “Did Kai speak tae ye?”

“Aye, and he told me what an utter fool I was nae tae listen tae ye in full. He even threatened tae hit me until I saw sense.” Cory rubbed the back of his neck as he spoke, and his shy smile was so handsome that Helen’s heart melted. “Can ye forgive me for that, Helen? I was so afraid of gettin’ hurt again that I made quick assumptions once I learned about you deception, and I am sorry for that.”

“Yes, of course I forgive you. You had every right to be angry and hurt. I did lie to you, and I took your pendant to help me find out the truth of things so that I could save my sister.”

Taking a few steps back, she leaned her back against a shelf and began her story. “My brother, Anthony, is an earl. But he is only my half-brother, and I was born after my father married a Scottish woman a few years after Anthony’s mother died. I loved her so dearly, and when she had my sister, I found someone else to love as much”.

“But then, when I was ten, my dear mother died along with my father, and Anthony became the earl. He looked down on me and Cecily for our Scottish blood, especially because we wished to learn more about where she came from.” Helen crossed her arms and sighed, sinking into the past.

“But because of the war, we were to look noble and purely English as an earl’s family. Anthony wanted us to forget everything to do with Scotland and the memory of our mother. I was vocal in my anger about this, so he took to hating me, believing that I represented everything bad that had ever happened to him. He wanted to make a name for himself in politics and to gain an edge, so he sent me to Scotland as a spy. It was a punishment: giving me what I wanted, to be close to my mother, but also threatening that if I did not give him



useful information, my sister Cecily would be married off to a man of his choosing.

Knowing him, I feared the man would not be a kind and noble gentleman but rather a monster and that my sister, good as she is, would not fight too hard against his will. So, I came, pretending to be a woman of the night to gather information from drunk men. I took it from both sides, whatever I could get, and I sent part of it back to Anthony. But to get back at him, I would often give the Scottish soldiers information I had heard to try to balance the power, I suppose. I felt bad for betraying my blood, so I stood in the middle of the war, trying not to take sides.”

Cory was watching her intently the whole time, his hands gripping the edge of the table tightly. “Ye did all this for yer sister? But it was so dangerous.”

“Certainly.” She smiled. “That was rather the appeal, and clearly you have seen that I am a little handy with a blade.”

“So ye are, lass.” He laughed. “So, what else?”

She told him the rest, how she had come to be in the woods, and then she had moved on to speak about what she had found in Ruairidh’s study. “I did not have a chance to tell you this, but Kai told you the truth.” Before she had come downstairs for the feast, she had remembered to pack away the documents she had taken from the study into her pocket. Helen pulled them out one by one, walking over to the table to lay them out. “I was looking for evidence that Ruairidh was working with the English, but I found so much more. That pendant of yours is a key to the secret door in your father’s office. In it is a small desk with piles of papers. I found the real will, Cory.” She smiled. “You can see that Ruairidh drew up a fake one.

Since he could not open the study, he could not find the original. And I guess you were just too hurt to even go into the room and notice the lock shaped as your pendant.”

Cory nodded, standing to turn and lean over the documents with an unreadable expression. “Ruairidh told me what he had done tae me father, killin’ him just for the sake of the lairdship. And tae think all this time I simply thought that he didnae love me.”

He sighed and looked up at her. “I cannae thank ye enough for findin’ this.” His hand moved to the pendant around his neck. “It is nae wonder me father told me I might need it one day. That I should never take it off.”

Helen winced. “Sorry about taking it. Twice.”

Cory shook his head at her, but there was still a smile on his face. “I cannae be angry with ye now, Sassenach. Ye have saved me.” He reached for her, placing his finger underneath her chin so she would meet his gaze.

“I love ye,” he said plainly, his eyes steady on her while her heart soared at the words. “I was in love with ye from that very first day, and I ken that ye have responsibilities, but I wonder if ye might be willin’ tae stay. Tae stay with me and be with me. There will be more and better questions later. But right now I need tae see if there is even any chance that ye care for me as I care for ye. If ye feel even a fraction of what I feel for ye, then I say it is enough for us tae make a life together. And I will help ye with yer sister.” He sounded breathless, and a furrow formed between his brows as he waited for her answer. Helen paused for a moment, trying to find the right words. Cory added, “That is, of course, if ye

want me tae. But I ken see clearly that ye daenae need others tae fight yer battles for ye.”

Cory looked nervous and uncertain, and Helen smiled, reaching out to cup his cheek. “I came down to the feast with the sole purpose of telling you my heart, telling you just how much I love you. How in love with you I am and how I wish to stay in Scotland. With you.”

He grinned and stepped closer, his hands finding their way to her waist again. With ease, he lifted her onto the table, and she laughed at the shock of it. His one hand lifted to pull at a lock of her hair, and he stared at it reverently.

“I had a feelin’ ye had some Scottish blood in ye, Helen. While ye slept, I noticed some red strands of hair in yer locks. Bonny. The bonniest woman I ever laid eyes upon. Even though she tried tae kill me the first time she saw me, I thought she was a goddess. Come down from the heavens tae grace me with herself.”

Helen lifted her skirts and widened her legs so Cory could stand between them. He eyed her movements with a quirk of the brow.

“A goddess?” she asked. “Then it was no wonder you nearly choked to death every time I showed you my naked body.”

Laughing, he pulled her closer. “Aye, I nearly died at the sight of ye. But if I am bein’ honest, ye become bonnier every time I look at ye.”

This time, Helen had no words, and she pulled him closer to kiss him, the man she loved. When he kissed her back with a new hunger, Helen wanted nothing more than to feel him inside of her again. She arched against him, and with his mouth still on hers, his hand slid up her thigh until it met the place she needed him most.

“Yes,” she breathed against his neck as he moved to nibble at her ear.

“Yer desire is so beautiful, me love,” he said as he slid a finger inside and then another.

Helen wished she was not wearing such a proper dress, for it was far more difficult to remove. But after he began, she lost focus as Cory’s fingers took on a rapid pace, and his thumb rubbing was making her mind fuzzy. She came quickly, fingers pressing into his shoulders as she shook, allowing herself to give in fully to the great pleasure.

Then, Cory took over, his hands working the back of her bodice until he could remove the top half of her gown so that she was bared before him. With a groan, he took her breasts in his hand and leaned down to clasp one puckered nipple into his mouth. She leaned back on her arms, her breasts pushing forward towards his mouth as he took the other, hands kneading, lips suckling.

“Ye are perfect in every way, Helen,” he said as his hands went to his kilt. “May I?” he asked, and she nodded.

“Please do.”

He pulled her forward, and lifting his kilt, he moved between her legs until she gasped when she felt the head of his manhood at her entrance.

“There will nae longer be any pain now,” he said with a wicked grin before he entered her swiftly and hard.

Helen could not help the long moan of pleasure that practically erupted from within her at the feeling of his fullness so deep inside her.

“Wrap yer legs about me waist,” he commanded, and she did as his hands moved to grasp her buttocks.

And then his gaze lifted to hers, and he looked at her as he moved inside her. The thrusts were slow at first, stroking against a place inside her that made her whimper each time he entered. And then he sped up, and she tried her best to cling to him as he slid home again and again.

Her eyes widened when her peak of pleasure came, and then he kissed her, swallowing her deep moans of pleasure as he continued to thrust mercilessly. She nearly screamed into his mouth as he continued, still stroking that spot of ecstasy when he froze, his body remaining inside hers. And then she heard him groan as he thrust two more times inside her, his muscles trembling.

“I love ye,” he said breathlessly, kissing her forehead and then her mouth.

“I love you, Cory,” she said, so happy that she did not know quite the right words to say.

He had spilled his seed inside her. It was a promise of what was to come.

“Next time, ye ken, we are goin’ tae dae this in a bed.”

She laughed as he helped her to dress again and then took her hand so she could jump down from the table. “Perhaps, but I rather like these exciting poses. Promise me that we will not always do it in a bed.”

“Nay,” he said, kissing her hand. “Once we are back in Chattan Castle, me love, then we will be able tae dae it wherever we please.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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Cory made love to Helen two more times that night after the feast, but as they lay in bed together, he knew he would always want her. For he loved her more than himself, more than anything he had ever encountered in the world. And he would do what it took to keep her at his side.

When they awoke, the preparations had begun for Cory to return to the council at Chattan Castle. Cam and Ella helped them, and then once all was prepared, he, Kai, and Helen set off. The body of Ruairidh was in a coffin, which would ride behind them.

Cory stood at the gates of Grant Castle with his laird. “Ye have given me so much, Cam. I cannae thank ye enough. Ye have given me friendship, brotherhood, a life, and a purpose. I hope ye daena think me ungrateful that I return home tae claim what is mine.”

“Nay, nae at all!” Cameron pulled him into an embrace. “Ye have done well here, but I kened it was nae always where yer heart was. I kened that a man like ye had a greater purpose in this life, and now ye are goin’ tae fulfill that purpose. Go in peace and strength. Ye deserve the lairdship and all that comes with it. We will have tae visit of course.” He winked at Cory. “When ye have the weddin’.”

“Aye, I will tell ye as soon as I ken the date.” He shook Cam’s hand, said goodbye to Ella, and then they were in the carriage, riding away towards home.

Kai had elected to remain above so that he and Helen could have time on their own.

“What will you do when you get there, Cory?” she asked as they rode away.

“I will tell them the truth of things. We have all the evidence, and I will open that bloody room and see what is inside. I will call a meeting with the council, and then me life will be far different from how I had imagined it all these years.”

Helen shifted in her seat, looking out the window, appearing almost troubled. “What is it, lass?” he asked, leaning over to grasp her hand.

“What will you do about Millie and her child? Do you still feel anything for her, Cory, I cannot help but wonder?”

Cory moved to her side of the carriage and put her face in his hands. He kissed her. “Where is this comin’ from? Have I nae proved meself completely captivated by ye, Helen? That there is nae other woman but ye?”

She looked down. “It is only that I do not wish to cause you any trouble. Perhaps the council will not agree to allow me as lady, and they will want you to follow a more sober tradition.”



He shook his head and chuckled. “As if they could keep me from ye, Helen. Nay, they will listen tae what I have tae say, after nae realizin’ all these years that there was something suspicious about the will Ruairidh had showed them.”

He pulled her close against his arm, and she leaned her head on his shoulder. “I feel naethin’ for Millie anymore, love, and I think she will be pleased tae return tae her family, away from the castle and all its bad memories. I have nae doubt that she was greatly mistreated there.”

Helen nodded, and they rode in silence. When they arrived at Chattan Castle at the end of a long day, he no longer dreaded being there. He stepped down out of the carriage and helped Helen down. She would be his wife once he took the moment to ask her, and then this would be their home for the rest of their days. He just had to prove to her that she was the one he wanted and no one else. Kai jumped down from the carriage and grinned.

“The moment of truth, me friend. This, today, is yer destiny.” He clapped Cory on the shoulder as they strode forward with determination.

As they reached the gates, the familiar guards called out to them. “Sir Cory! Madam Chattan! We have nae seen the laird in some time. We thought he would be returned by today, but nae yet. However, Lady Millie is inside.”

“Good. I will need ye tae send a message tae the council, tae tell them that Laird Ruairidh is dead, and that his treachery has kenned nae bounds. His body is there and can be carried inside. I must tell Lady Millie the news.”

The guards, surprised, hurried off without questioning him, yet Cory was sure he would not forget all the question marks written in the men's eyes. He, Helen, and Kai walked into the castle with their heads held high, and when they entered, Millie came running down, the bairn in her arms. "Cory, what is this about?"

She looked a little frenzied. And he wondered if she was expecting her husband to return, but she was not yet prepared.

"We have returned, Millie," Cory said soberly. "Tae give ye the information of the last events, although they are nae pleasant ones and I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news. Ruairidh is dead, Millie. He died in battle at... at me hand, once I learned of his treachery."

Millie gasped, and she weakened, swaying a little. Helen rushed forward to take hold of her elbow to steady her, while taking the wee bairn into her arms. Cory thought she might faint, but she breathed out in astonishment.

"Thanks be tae God," she said, and tears sprung to her eyes. "Matthew and I are saved from him at long last. Cory, thank ye!" She fell to her knees, and Helen kneeled beside her, trying to comfort her and the baby.

At first, Cory did not know what to say to this odd turn of events. "Did ye ken it all, Millie? How he had taken the lairdship?"

The nurse came, and Helen handed Matthew off before she helped Millie to her feet. When she wiped her cheeks, she

said, “Aye, at least most of it, I believe. I couldnae believe what he had done tae ye, Cory, but he only told me after we were wed, and then I could dae nothing about it. But I wanted ye; I swear I did.” She rushed into his arms, and after a brief embrace, Cory set her back again.

He could see Helen’s look of concern behind Millie. “Millie, I need tae meet with the council. I have evidence of his treachery, and then there will be a new lairdship, the one that my father really wanted. The one that was meant tae be.”

“Aye,” she nodded.

“And ye can return home tae yer family.”

“That will be good,” she agreed, looking slightly surprised. “I will send someone tae call the members together.”

“I have sent a soldier. But for now, I will bring Ruairidh’s body and go tae me father’s study.”

After Ruairidh’s coffin had been brought in and placed in the hall, Cory took Helen’s hand and strode to his father’s study. Now that it was to be his, he no longer felt anger. Only sadness that his father had had to die at Ruairidh’s hand, at the very desk that stood before a tapestry.

“It is here,” Helen said, pushing the tapestry aside to reveal a secret door, flush with the wall. She tapped a diamond-shaped keyhole.

Cory took his pendant from around his neck and pushed it into the keyhole, turning it until he heard a click. They opened the door, and inside, it was just as Helen had described. Papers covered a small desk, and she went in first to pick up the real will.

“Here it is, Cory. You must show it to the Council.”

“Aye.” He could not take his eyes off the paper where his father had written him as laird of the clan. It had been his plan all along. “I cannae believe it,” he whispered.

“You deserve it, Cory,” she said, smiling.

“I have been workin’ for another for so many years now. I am nae certain that I ken how tae lead. How tae lead a whole clan as Cameron does.”

She took the will from his hands and put it down again, placing her hands on his face. “You are the perfect choice. You are selfless, kind, and loyal. You understand what work is, and you know how to listen to others. You will never be the way Ruairidh was—cruel and ruthless. You will lead your people with courage, strength, and dignity. You will be perfect, Cory. I know it.”

She was watching him with such wonder that Cory leaned forward and kissed her. “I daenae ken what I would dae without ye.”

“It is good you remember that, Cory,” she teased. “For I am certain you will occasionally forget it when you are cross with

me.”

“Never,” he said with a chuckle. “Although I am certain we will both be cross with each other from time to time.”

Likely more than that.” She grinned. “But we should go to the council and await the members.”

“Aye.” He took up the will again and folded it, putting it into his pocket. “The moment of truth has come at last. Thank ye, Father.”

They locked the door again, and he returned the pendant around his neck. Hand in hand, they walked to the council room.



When they arrived in the room, the old members had assembled. Cory looked at Helen, and she smiled but released his hand, heading to the back of the room. Kai, Millie, and the other soldiers were there as well, but Cory remained at the front of the room, standing tall, his hands behind his back. She had given him all the documents, and he was prepared. Everything would change for him, and Helen worried only that she would be enough for him, for the council to agree for her to be the new lady. She loved him and knew he loved her, but she had seen how Millie had flung herself at Cory when she'd realized that he would be laird.

*But he told you he doesn't want her, he wants you.*

Helen's self-doubts were distracted by the head council member calling the people to quieten. All the men looked ancient and as if they had just been roused from their graves only moments before.

"Ye are lucky, Sir Chattan, that we werenae far away and could assemble with the urgency ye seemed tae have required."

"Thank ye, gentlemen. I willnae waste any time since ye have done well in comin' so quickly. I must inform ye that Ruairidh Chattan is dead. His body lies in the hall, if ye wish further proof of that."

Gasps and mumbles went over the crowd and across the council of men. "We shall, sir Cory. And now, I suppose ye mean tae tells us what this is all about and how ye kenned of it? Shall we discuss who the next lairdship will be given tae?"

"Aye." He dug in his coat and removed the two wills, walking forward to place them on the long wooden table in front of the center member. "Ruairidh forged a new will, makin' himself the laird, but nae before killin' me father first. Here is the original will, with me father's handwriting, and then the fake will. Ruairidh admitted tae it himself at the last battle in front of Grant Castle, where he tried tae kill me. There are witnesses for that as well, and two of them are here today."

The old man blinked at Cory for a few seconds, clearly in shock, before he opened the papers and stared down at them. His only reaction was the lifting of a white, fluffy brow. He passed the wills to the other gentlemen. The room was silent for minutes, and Helen felt like her heartbeat was so loud that everyone could hear it. Could they possible refuse him? She watched as they put their heads together to discuss softly. And

she worried that they were thinking of a way to oust him or perhaps to make him marry Millie just to keep things consistent.

“Well, ye are the rightful heir to the lairdship, milaird. As it should have been a long time ago,” the man took a deep breath before he got up and put a hand on Cory’s shoulder. “Ye are now Laird Chattan,” the oldest member said, and she could see from Cory’s shoulders that they sank with relief.

“Thank ye, Councilmen.”

“But there is somethin’ we ought tae say tae ye, milaird.” The man cleared his throat, squared his shoulders, and stared at Cory. “We can see now just how at fault we were, and I dare speak from the name of all of us, who have been working as council for many years. Back then, we feared that somethin’ was afoot with the lairdship. That Laird Gregor would never have chosen a nephew over a son, and yet the fear was real that we all had of Ruairidh. Threats were made, and we dae believe that money passed some hands. Those members are nae with us today,” he continued. “But we must apologize for our easy acceptance of the will. Now that I see the two wills side by side, I can tell that yer father’s hand wrote the original one, and it was Ruairidh who wrote the other. We ask your pardon, and we hope that ye can forgive yer council for its misdeeds, milaird.”

Helen waited to hear what Cory had to say. He had such a right to be angry, and a part of her wished he would eviscerate them all, threatening death for them to understand the treasonous way they had behaved. How they did not fight for the true laird when they could have done so and when they had the suspicions that something strange was at play.

Instead, he cleared his throat and said loudly and clearly, “Ye are forgiven. I ken firsthand the fear that Ruairidh liked tae instill in others. Many fell prey tae him, and even here when I was visitin’ for his son’s celebration, he tried tae kill me. I understand, gentlemen, and yet I hope that we can all make sure that we daenae take suspicious things lightly in the future. That we dae our best tae find out the truth and seek what is right.”

“Very good, Laird Chattan,” the man said in reply. “Ye are wise, and we will strive tae be just as wise. Despite our mistakes and our failings, there is nay one here who can say that the things Ruairidh accomplished durin’ his time as laird were fruitful. He sought wealth, and thus he cared nae about the issues of others. The villages are failin’ because of him, and I hope ye can set things right.”

“He also gained wealth by sellin’ military secrets and plans tae the English. Here is the proof of that.” Cory produced more papers and set them on the table. “That will be put a stop tae immediately, and I swear upon me life that I will dae what is best for this clan. I will attempt tae bring back what me father did. The focus is on the people and the clan, as opposed tae wealth and status. There is war in our midst, but I carenae for sidin’ with the English or takin’ their gold. I want only what is best for the Chattan Clan.”

The men nodded to him, looking pleased as they passed the documents to one another. “We believe in ye, Laird Chattan. Ye have yer father in ye.”

Helen watched as the oldest member turned to look behind Cory. “And who is this woman amongst us? I recognize the others.”



Cory turned around to face her, setting her heart into rapid motion again. “This, gentlemen, is someone very special to me.” He waved to her with a smile, and with her spine straight as a tree, Helen rose from her seat, walking slowly towards the front.

This was the moment of truth, when she would find out if they approved of a Sassenach or not, if her life would be what she hoped it to be, with Cory by her side forever and ever.

Cory’s hand came to rest on the small of her back as he said, “I should like tae present tae ye me future wife, Helen.” He leaned in to whisper in her ear, “Ye should probably tell me yer last name, lass.”

Helen was surprised about his words, but she still muttered “Ridley” under her breath.

“Yer wife?” the councilman asked.

“Aye. If she will have me.” And then Cory turned towards her in full and he took her hand in his, and he stared straight into her eyes. Helen had known it was coming. She had hoped it was coming, yet nothing could have prepared her for the utter rush of happiness that assailed her. She smiled as he grinned at her.

“Helen Ridley, Lady Helen Ridley, tae be accurate. I want ye like none other.”

Helen’s cheeks colored at the realization that so many others were in the room. So many were watching his proposal.

“Ye would make me so happy, endlessly happy, if ye would take me for yer husband, if ye would consent tae become Lady Chattan, and live with all us heathens in Scotland.”

Helen bit her lip to keep from smiling too widely. “Yes. I would like nothing more. I will consent to take you for my husband, Cory,” she said.

“Thank God.” He rose and drew her into his arms for a kiss, the room erupted in cheers and applause.

Helen knew Millie was in the back of the room, and yet, after that proposal, she no longer cared. “I love ye,” he said against her mouth.

“I love you too.”

“Now, I think we ought tae leave and go upstairs.”

“Cory,” she said, reddening even further when everyone stared at them.

“This is yer wife, milaird? A Sassenach?” a councilman standing in the back asked.

“Aye, she will be, just as soon as we can get the minister ready. Be sure tae put that at the top of yer list, gentlemen. Now, if ye daenae mind, I have other business tae attend tae.”

He took her hand and led her out of the council room. Helen was certain she could hear laughter as they did.

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## EPILOGUE

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*Two weeks later*

“He has sent another note, milady,” Helen’s maid, Lorna, said, handing it over to her while she stood in front of the mirror. “It seems the laird is most persistent.”

Helen burst out laughing. “Ah, yes, that is the word to describe him.” But she knew the word to describe him was more like ‘amorous.’

She opened the letter and saw that Cory had written the same words again.

*I need ye. I cannae bear it any longer.*

Helen chuckled. Over the past two weeks, they had been sleeping in separate quarters. She had had her courses, and then she liked the idea of saving their wedding night and making it special. Cory, however, had been less than enthused, and he had shown his eagerness to bed her through notes. When they had met during the day, he had attempted to lure her into lovemaking many times, but she had put him off each

time, loving the fire of both his and her needs. Since it was her wedding day, she knew that night would indeed be fiery.

“Well, I will write a note back, Lorna, and you can have it delivered.”

“But we are soon tae the church.”

“Yes, I know, but I will enjoy it so.”

“Aye, milady,” Lorna said with a grin. “Ye certainly ken how tae tease a man. Perhaps I should learn a thing or two from ye.”

“Perhaps, Lorna,” Helen said, “I think deep down all men enjoy a bit of a tease.”

She finished the letter, folded it, and handed it to Lorna. When her maid left, Helen looked at herself in the mirror again. It was her wedding day, yet she had no one from her family to be there. Her parents had died, and then only last week, Cecily had written in reply to her letter to tell her that Anthony had died in some deal gone bad. Helen returned to her desk and opened the letter, comforted by Cecily’s familiar scrawl.

*He has died, and now I am on my own, but I will come to you whenever you call for me. I want to see you again, Helen. We are free of him now, yet there is much here to organize with only me around, until father’s cousin takes the title.*

Helen had written right after inviting Cecily to come to Chattan Castle. The title of earl would go to that cousin, and so there was no need for Cecily to remain in England at the family home. She only wished Cecily would have received it in time for her wedding.

“Are ye ready, milady?” Lorna asked as she returned, and Helen put down the letter.

“Yes, I think so.” Her gown was a cream color, but the tartan of Chattan colors hung across her body.

“Ye look lovely.”

Helen thought so, her hair pinned back in a lovely mix of braids, and her smile adding a glow.

“Thank you.” She turned to go, and Lorna took her arm as they left.

When she arrived at the church, she knew Cory was already inside. Laird Grant had agreed to walk her down the aisle, and he was waiting for her with a bright grin.

“Ye look perfect, Helen,” he said. “We have been waitin’ eagerly for this day.”

“Thank you, Cameron,” she said. “So have I.”

Her breath caught as they entered the church, and everyone fell silent. It seemed there were more people than even in a royal wedding in St. James' in London. The room was packed, but it was still quiet as the grave as she walked forward on Cameron's arm. Cory stood at the end of the stone aisle, next to the minister. When he turned to look at her, Helen smiled.

This was love, true, genuine love, something she had thought was only for those who were illogical, weak-minded, or fanciful. She never imagined it could fill her with such happiness, contentment, and utter joy. This man knew her in full and loved her in full. He was kind and selfless. As she walked closer, he put a hand to his chest, and the look of love on his face said it all. He was happy as well.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen," the minister said. "We are here tae unite in marriage this man and this woman, Laird Chattan, and his choice of bride, Lady Helen Ridley."

The crowd quieted, and so did Helen's mind. Cory's rough, large hands held hers, and she stared up at the eyes she loved so desperately. The minister walked them through their vows, but Helen hardly heard him. All she could imagine was what would happen after. There would be the feast, and then finally, at long last, she and Cory could be alone. Now, it would not feel strange, like they were stealing moments.

"And now I pronounce ye husband and wife," the minister said. "Laird Chattan, ye may seal yer marriage with a kiss."

Helen's heart flipped as Cory took her waist in his hands and stepped closer, leaning down to kiss her. She touched his face, kissing him back. She could feel the desire and hunger in his kiss, and she wanted to do so much more than kiss, but she

pulled away. She could lightly hear the applause in the background as he leaned his forehead against hers.

“Ye have been ignorin’ me letters, lass,” he said in a gravelly voice.

“Yes, as a proper bride should. I wrote one in return, though.”

“A letter is nae what I wanted in return.”

She smiled. “You were being a rogue and a scoundrel Cory, and I had to put a stop to it.”

They both turned at the same time to face the crowd with smiles. He leaned down to her ear and whispered, “So what if I was? I thought ye rather liked that about me. Considerin’ that I was far too pure for yer tastes at the beginnin’ of our... acquaintance.”

She chuckled softly as they walked down the aisle together and out into the cold sunshine of the spring day. There was still a chill in the air, but the snow had melted, and it seemed it would not come again, not for a long while.

“That’s true. Consider it a small revenge for what you did when we first met.”

“So, this is ye coverin’ me with clothes, so tae speak? Tae keep me away from ye?”



His eyes moved down her face, down her neck, slowly, slowly, down her body. They were man and wife, but there was still the feast to get through. Helen could feel her whole body throbbing, aching for him. It seemed he knew exactly how to get her to comply. When she could think straight again, she nodded.

“Yes. Exactly.”

But the smug look on his face told her he knew just what he did to her by a mere look. “Now, I suppose we ought tae go tae the feast.”

“So, we shall.” He gave her his arm, and she took it, her body still tingling with the knowledge of what would come that evening.

As a group, they walked to the castle, and when they reached it, Helen and Cory greeted their guests in full, welcoming and thanking them. Cory had invited the entire clan, it seemed, and everyone was happy to see a change in leadership. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched as Cory showed kindness to each person, asking about land here, or the building of a house there. He looked at every guest as if they mattered, and each one of them seemed so pleased.

Helen and Cory found their seats as the food started to be served and music began in the background. They sat in a pair of chairs next to one another overlooking the filled hall before them.

“I am sure it has not known such joy in some time, Cory.”

“Aye, yer right. It has nae.” He placed his hand on hers, which rested on the arm of the chair, but he continued to look out at his people. “I hope I have made me father proud today.”

“You have, I am sure of that.” Helen leaned her head against his shoulder. “You will be a good laird, but I will tell you if you are not. Have no fear of that.”

He laughed before he lifted the cup of ale to his lips. “Do ye think ye will be happy here, me love? Scotland can be a rather roguish place, full of cutthroats and snowstorms. It is nae many who have the backbone tae stomach it. That is why the English have had so much trouble defeatin’ us over the years.”

“Oh, is that so?” she teased with a smile, turning to look at him. Her heart swelled with love for this man who had become so dear to her in such a short time. She lifted her hand and touched her finger to his chin, turning his face to hers. “Yes, I will be happy here. I was tired of England and Scotland has been in my blood all along, begging me to return home.” At his smile, she added, “And I shall be satisfied at having so very handsome a husband. I think you become handsomer the more I look at you.”

Her words had the desired effect, and she could see the look of barely concealed lust in his eyes. “Ye tease me, lass.”

“But it is true. I am merely stating facts.” She brought her wineglass to her lips and took a demure sip, but she could feel the heat of his gaze still on her.

He started to say something, but then Kai approached them, looking just as bear-like as usual, but happy as well. “Will ye

dance for us laird and lady?”

“Aye, so we shall. It is as good a time as any tae get this Sassenach proper practice of dancin’ a Scottish reel. Get a group together then, Kai.”

Cory was laughing to himself as he practically dragged her from her chair out toward the open floor. “This is revenge, is it not?” she asked as she heard the bagpipes practicing a few notes before the real song began.

“But of course, me love,” he said, turning her in his arms and whispering in her ear. “And well-deserved, I think.”

She gasped, but he grinned as he stepped back from her, and the other ladies and men took up their places. It was one thing to dance when it was just a normal feast, where she was not the center of attention, but this was the feast of her wedding day, and she was an Englishwoman. She could practically feel the eyes of the clan on her as the music began, and she tried her best to follow the steps.

Every time she and Cory came together, he was grinning, and she worried she was doing a terrible job. But when the song was over, and she was breathless, she heard cheers and applause from those who were sitting at the feasting tables.

“Well done,” Kai said, coming up to congratulate her. “That dance is bloody hard even for Scotsmen, but ye accomplished it well just by watchin’ the steps, Lady Chattan.”

“Thank you,” she said, wiping her brow with her fingertips. “But I think I will avoid dancing for the rest of the evening.”

With a flush in her cheeks, she left, and Cory caught up to her, his fingers entwining hers. “How is it that ye can be perfect at everythin’ ye dae?” he asked, and she turned to look at him.

He pulled her close, not caring who watched them as the next dancers began on the floor. “I know not what you mean,” she said. “I was terrible, and you are terrible for making me dance on my wedding day, a dance I do not know, with so little practice.”

She jutted out her chin at him in faux displeasure, and chuckling, his finger traced the side of her cheek. “I wouldnae lie tae ye, lass. Ye were perfect.”

She let out a sigh of relief. “Thank God.”

She was about to return to their table when he held her hand. “I think we have both waited long enough now,” he said with a wicked grin, pulling her towards him as he backed away towards the doors.

“But Cory, we have not eaten.”

“Nay, we havenae, and I plan tae feast me fill.” His eyes darkened and trailed down her body again until she shuddered.

“You are wicked.”

He licked his lips and shook his head, still backing away toward the doors. “Ye have been hidin’ yer desire from me, Helen, just tae tease, but I ken ye, woman. Ye want me as bad as I want ye.”

She blushed, but she did not disagree, and once they were out of the hall, he scooped her up into his arms and kissed her. Somehow, he carried her up the steps, but her mind was entirely lost to his kiss.

“You are a wonderful kisser,” she said once they were in their shared chamber as laird and lady.

“Good. I am honored by your compliment.” He set her down and opened the door, shutting it quickly and locking it.

“Why are you locking it?” she asked as she walked into the beautiful, large room.

A fire was in the hearth, filling the room with warmth. There was a large bed in the center of the far wall, covered in fur, hers and his.

“I daenae want tae be disturbed.” He pulled at his pin and tartan, dropping them to the floor as he removed his coat.

Her heart racing, Helen worked at the ties of her gown. But her eyes were stuck to watching her husband’s desire for her, so clear in his expression and his every movement. It was intoxicating.

“I daenae want ye tae have a stitch of clothin’ on,” he said in a low voice, and she nodded, watching as he removed his shirt to bare his chest.

But she struggled with her gown, and she turned around. “You will have to help me.”

“That I can dae.” As he removed her bodice and skirt, he kissed what skin he bared.

His kisses made her dizzy. And once her gown was on the floor along with her stays, she stepped out of the pile and then turned back to him, ready to remove her shift from her body. But in one swift movement, he tore it apart and threw the shredded pieces to the side.

“Cory!” she cried, but then he tore off his kilt and threw it to the floor, kicking off his boots as she backed away toward the bed.

“That is exactly where I want ye. Lie back,” he commanded, and she did. “Spread yer legs for me, wife.”

She did so, her skin flushed pink with lust, and he grinned when he leaned over her, sliding his fingers through her wetness. She moaned and lifted herself to meet his hand, wanting so much more.

Grinning, he said, “I cannae believe ye have kept this from me for two bloody weeks. I will have ye screamin’ afore we leave here Helen. It is as much as ye deserve.”

She gasped as he moved his body down so that his head was between her legs. Roughly, he lifted her hips, and then his mouth was there. His tongue was relentless as he licked her, suckling gently on her nub of pleasure before thrusting his tongue inside her.

“Cory!” she screamed, her fingers tightening around the bedclothes as her back arched. She came hard and fast, but he kept her shaking thighs around his face, licking her as she kept trembling.

She pulled at his hair when it became unbearable, and he lifted with a grin. “I told ye,” he said, and she rolled her eyes.

“Who knew I had such a vengeful husband?”

“Well,” he replied, lifting up on his knees. “How about I make it up tae ye, and ye can make me scream this time?”

Her mouth fell open as he grasped her waist and lifted her up on her knees, so they were hip to hip. He lowered himself, and then with a grin, he spread her over his waist. Helen wrapped her arms around his shoulders and smiled, and she gasped when he lifted her until she could slide down over him.

She kissed him as she lifted and pushed down again, moving to a rhythm all her own while he ground her against him, his hands spreading wide on her backside. She took satisfaction in his groan when she sped up, but then she came again first, moaning into his mouth as pleasure took her. He thrust into her hard and then came with a groan, and their eyes met as he spilled inside her, clenching inside.

“I love ye, Helen.”

“And I you.” She kissed him softly, and then they laid down side by side.

“Christ,” he said after a few seconds. “I cannae believe how good it is with ye.” He pressed her open palm to his lips. “It will only get better.”

“Well, I see that my plan worked then. To keep us wanting one another for the past two weeks only fueled the fire.”

He poked at her side and growled at her. “Dannae ever dae that again. I nearly died.”

“Oh? I don’t think anyone has died from lust, Laird Chattan.”

He grinned as his finger tucked back a strand of hair behind her ear. “For ye, I would have, Lady Chattan. Now, ye should rest a bit afore I take ye again.”

“Cory! We must return to the feast!” She giggled as he tickled her sides.

“We are nae leavin’ this bed until I have ye once more, love, and then we can feast tae yer heart’s content. Let me keep ye here a little while longer, Helen. For I am the happiest man in the world, and I mean tae savor this moment.”



“Very well,” she sighed, embracing him. “Now that the bed has been used, perhaps we ought tae make use of that very sturdy desk over there.”

His laughter made her heart even fuller.

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## **BUT THERE'S MORE...**

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Eager to learn what the future holds for **Helen and Cory**?

Then you may enjoy this **extended epilogue**.

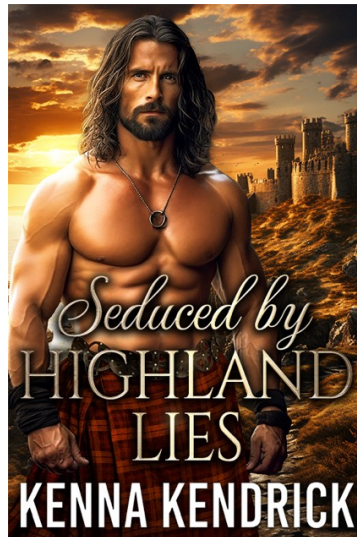
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# SEDUCED BY HIGHLAND LIES

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## PROLOGUE

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*R*ichmond, England, 1650

*Seton House, winter*

Lady Cecily Ridley had never been renowned for her rebellious nature. That distinction belonged to her dear sister, Helen, especially within the more refined circles of England. However, in that particular moment, as Cecily was stealthily navigating the corridors of Seton House under the cloak of night, her heart pulsing with a newfound sense of rebellion. An exhilarating sensation coursed through her, infusing her with vibrant, tingling energy, though she was well aware that what she was doing was not without its dangers. This was evident in the rapid rhythm of her heartbeat as she approached the door nestled within the stone passage where her brother's study was located.

The candle she carried was dwindling, its flickering light casting wavering shadows as a droplet of wax seared her hand, sending a swift pang of pain through her. Suppressing the urge to gasp out loud, she bit her lip, resolved not to reveal her whereabouts or her purpose. This constant need for concealment within her own home had become a prolonged ordeal. As the sting subsided, she reached into the pocket of her robe to retrieve her half-brother Anthony's key. Casting

furtive glances in both directions along the dim corridor, she slipped it into the lock, turning it quietly. She entered the room beyond in silence, gently closing the door behind her. She felt like a criminal, lurking around the house in the middle of the night and going through Anthony's things without his knowledge.

*I've done it.*

Releasing the breath she hadn't realized she was holding, she advanced into the room and placed her dwindling candle upon her brother's imposing wooden desk. The same desk that had once belonged to her father, a poignant reminder of his warmth and affection, now served as a stark emblem of her brother's severity. Anthony lacked any hint of kindness or affection. Though he treated her better than he did Helen, their relationship was far from the camaraderie of true siblings.

"I *must* find something," she whispered to herself, furrowing her brow as she embarked on her quest amidst the scattered documents strewn across the desk's surface.

At that moment, nothing revealed itself to her eager eyes. Frustration began to chip away at her determination as she rifled through drawers, extracting assorted documents.

Cecily's desperation to aid her sister, Helen, was profound. A few months earlier, fueled by animosity toward Helen's audacity and her resemblance to her and Cecily's Scottish mother, Anthony had dispatched her on a treacherous mission: to spy in Scotland and gather intelligence regarding the Scottish movement during the Anglo-Scottish War. Helen's reluctant compliance had hinged upon Anthony's menacing threat—to force Cecily into an unwanted marriage.

Helen's departure had occurred without resistance, despite Cecily's impassioned pleas. The burden of guilt gnawed at her ceaselessly. Not a moment passed without Helen occupying her thoughts—her worries unending. While Helen possessed adept skills in gathering information and defending herself, the inherent danger of her undertaking was undeniable. Furthermore, Cecily's questioned whether Anthony would honor his promise and spare her from an undesirable marriage even if Helen's mission succeeded. What she did not yet know from her sister, who had only just discovered this information, was that he was not just spying on the Scottish but also engaging in weapon trades with some of the clans. Thus, she had decided to undertake her late-night journey to his study while he caroused elsewhere, presumably drowning himself in drink. Her goal was clear: to unearth any leverage she could use against him, compelling him to bring Helen back to England.

Each successive letter from Helen had carried escalating tension. Her perilous and exhausting work ignited Cecily's fear for her sister's safety, especially when Helen recounted her exploits of extracting information from inebriated men at taverns. While Cecily sorted through a stack of letters, the sound of footsteps resonated in the corridor. She froze, her heart pounding, waiting for confirmation if it was merely a maid concluding her nightly duties. The hushed tones that followed shattered her hopes, filling her heart with trepidation.

Cursing under her breath, she swiftly returned the letters to their drawer, tightly clutching her candle. Her only option was to conceal herself behind a long tapestry adorning the wall. Extinguishing the flame, she positioned herself, her heart pounding audibly in the silence. The tapestry fell back into place, veiling her in obscurity. Though she believed herself inconspicuous, her heartbeat felt deafening in her ears.

Her heart raced as she braced herself for the impending seconds.

Since her father's passing, fear had been her constant companion—a dread of others' perceptions and actions. Now, at last, it seemed to have reached its zenith. Why had she embraced this rebellious course? If she were discovered, Anthony's retaliation was something she deeply dreaded.

“Why the concern for those documents? They're not your concern, but mine. I am the Earl of Seton, cousin, not you,” Anthony's voice asserted, carrying an undercurrent of tension.

Cecily remained motionless, her heart racing, as she strained to identify the person arguing with her brother. She knew the voice, it was their cousin, William Cavendish—or rather, her father's distant cousin. His typically cold demeanor appeared inflamed by anger, something she'd seldom witnessed. He was typically passive, but now his voice was filled with rage.

She peered carefully through the gap between the tapestry and the wall.

“It's prudent for someone else to be privy to such matters, cousin, to know their whereabouts,” William retorted, his hands resting on his hips. “You can't safeguard such secrets, or the title will falter. Surely, that isn't what you desire.”

Cecily observed that the man wore a peculiar yellow ensemble—an odd choice of clothing, comprising a yellow jacket, a shirt and cravat of faded yellow, and yellowish breeches. This incongruity momentarily diverted her attention from the

intensity of the exchange. She pondered the purpose of William's presence; to her knowledge, he and Anthony were not on friendly terms. Deeper behind the tapestry she withdrew, her fear intensifying.

They'll leave soon. They'll inspect the documents and then depart.

She tried to steady her breathing, but because of the dust in the tapestry, a sneeze escaped her, and she clenched her hand over her mouth. Fortunately, her brother's hand suddenly slamming onto the desk coincided with it, muffling the sound—she hoped.

"I've no inkling as to why you're even here, cousin!" her brother's voice rang out, revealing his inebriation.

She kept her hand over her mouth to stifle her breathing, hoping she had not been heard. For a time, silence descended. Anthony's gaze flickered momentarily toward the tapestry, then returned to fixate on William. The exchange provided her a momentary reprieve from her precarious concealment.

"Now, tell me why you are here." His finger jabbed at William's chest.

"I'm here to ensure you haven't misplaced that wretched document, Anthony," William retorted, his tone tinged with a snarl.

Cecily frowned. Her father's cousin had never spoken to her for this long or engaged in a dispute. What document could be



of such consequence? Observing her brother's stance stiffen, she sensed he was summoning his most authoritative tone. However, his response surprised her.

"I'll show you, and then you can leave me be!" Anthony declared, his words slightly slurred.

She watched as he scanned the papers on his desk, mirroring her earlier search. She was profoundly relieved that he failed to notice any evidence of prior exploration in his documents and correspondence. William leaned over him, scrutinizing his actions. When Anthony's initial search yielded nothing, he impatiently pulled out a drawer.

As she observed him hunched over the desk drawer, Cecily's gaze remained fixed on William, noting his subtle shift. He tracked his cousin's movements in their search, but her curiosity piqued as she watched him reach into his pocket, extracting a slim blade. Her mouth fell open, a gasp teetering on her lips, a desperate attempt to intervene rising within her. Swiftly and with astonishing dexterity, William thrust the blade into Anthony's neck.

Her hand flew to her mouth once more to suppress the scream that threatened to escape. Blinking in shock, she bore witness to the horrifying sound of flesh being rent and the subsequent groan of agony as Anthony crumpled from the drawer to the floor. Just as adeptly as he had executed the act, William withdrew the knife and concealed it within his pocket.

For a few suspended moments, he surveyed the prone figure, the fury that had possessed his visage now supplanted by his customary frigid facade. Retrieving a handkerchief, he cleansed his hands of the bloodstains before departing the room.

When the sound of the door closing echoed in her ears, Cecily hastened to emerge from the confines of the tapestry, her steps directed towards her fallen brother. Lingered hope had whispered of a chance to rescue him, but his lifeless form extinguished that glimmer. The vitality in his eyes had dimmed, and Cecily sank to her knees, a hand muffling the sound of her sob.

Grief for him mingled with the dread of what his demise might signify for the title, yet not enough to elicit tears. Anthony's cruelty had spanned her memory, a ceaseless torment. Gradually, she rose to her feet. The household needed to be informed of Anthony's death, but they mustn't learn of her presence in the room, so she was left with no choice.

Quietly, she left, softly closing the door behind her.



*A week later*

Sleep had evaded Cecily in the tumultuous week following her half-brother's passing. A whirlwind of confusion and sorrow had swept over her as his body was prepared for burial and the somber funeral unfolded. Yet, the prevailing question in everyone's thoughts pertained to the heir of the earldom. With no apparent successors, uncertainty gnawed at Cecily. Neither she nor Helen could inherit, leaving the identity of the next earl a source of unease. The family attorney had been summoned, but his arrival was delayed due to business in London, and he could not arrive until that very day.

Tea sat untouched upon a tray by the hearth, but Cecily couldn't bring herself to sit down and partake. Who would be the new earl? And where had William gone after committing the unthinkable act? The secret of her presence as a witness burdened her; she dreaded the possibility that William might turn his malevolent intentions toward her if he discovered her vantage point behind the tapestry. As she paced, the anticipation of Helen's company tugged at her, even as her sister's more recent letters had taken a swift turn and now celebrated her newfound love and commitment to remain in Scotland as a clan's lady. Cecily shared in her joy, yet that meant Helen's return was postponed.

*Once the new earl takes on his responsibilities, I'll journey to see Helen. Staying here, among those who aren't my close kin, serves no purpose.* The notion provided solace—a promise of an impending departure as soon as the new earl assumed his role. However, Cecily wondered why the attorney hadn't sent a message to inform her of the successor's identity.

At that very moment, the door swung open, and Cecily let out a soft gasp at the sight of William's approach. He wore a deep crimson suit this time, from coat to waistcoat to cravat.

"William," she greeted, her posture stiffening as she clasped her hands together. "What brings you here?"

She had to maintain the pretense of encountering him for the first time in a while. He offered a smile and a slight bow, his demeanor as malicious as ever. She had always instinctively felt an aversion to him since childhood. Not that she had seen much of him growing up, but when she had, he had never offered her more than a glance and had seemed entirely disinterested in her and her sister's well-being after their mother's death. However, now, having witnessed him extinguish another's life, she felt a malevolence emanate from

his features. Not unattractive, his green eyes gleamed with suspicion and malice. Tall and slender, he had slicked-back white-blond hair.

“Is this how one greets a cousin, Cecily?” he asked, his smile widening—a sight that heightened her unease. “I am here to offer comfort during your time of need. With your guardian gone and your sister absent, you stand alone. I thought you might appreciate companionship.”

“Why now? It’s been a week since Anthony’s passing.” She swallowed, trying to maintain her composure as William approached, his hands concealing their sinister intent.

“I was visiting a friend in Scotland; it took a while for me to return. The attorney needed time to locate me.”

She recognized his lie, suspecting that he’d been lurking somewhere nearby. Fury surged within her; her life had long been controlled by ruthless men, and she’d grown weary of it. She wished he would leave, for she was well aware of her own strength. Cecily couldn’t hold back, allowing the one thing she shouldn’t say to slip from her lips.

“Well, cousin, the color yellow suits you far better.” Her teeth clenched as she exhaled, instant regret washing over her.

Comprehension dawned in William’s eyes, her heart skipping a beat as the door opened. An older man with spectacles stood behind the housekeeper.

“Mr. Wallen, Lady Cecily. Your father’s attorney,” the housekeeper introduced.

“Thank you, Mrs. Fields,” Cecily replied, fighting to steady herself as the old man entered the room with a bow.

“Lady Ridley, I am Mr. Wallen, and I have come to convey your father’s will and announce the next heir,” he said, turning to William. Cecily introduced them.

“Ah, splendid timing, Mr. Cavendish. It’s fortunate you’re already here.” He extended his hand to shake William’s.

“What do you mean?” Cecily inquired, the dreadful truth slowly dawning.

“This gentleman, your father’s cousin, shall assume the title of Earl of Seton.”

A chill raced through Cecily as her face paled; her grip on the back of a chair was her only anchor against fainting. Meanwhile, William smiled at her.

“I trust you don’t mind, Cecily. It will be wonderful to reconnect as family. There’s much to discuss. Mr. Wallen, please, have a seat. I’ll call for refreshments, and we can delve into the details.”

He led the attorney toward a table, but Cecily was paralyzed. As William neared the door, he paused beside her, gripping her arm.

“Join us, cousin,” he suggested, and as they moved toward the table, he leaned in and whispered, “I know you want to be with your sister. But if you go, you’ll lose the only family you have left. Because I will find her and repeat my actions.”

Cecily straightened, allowing William to guide her to the table alongside Mr. Wallen.

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## CHAPTER ONE

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*O*ne year later

Cecily gazed down at the sparse words she'd managed to write for her sister.

*Dear sister,*

*I know that I have still not come to see you, but I want to reassure you that I am doing well here at Seton House.*

She let out a sigh, hovering the quill above the paper as she pondered her next words. The transformation of her life since William had taken over as the new earl had upended everything she once knew. However, with his daughter Adelaide now part of their household, Cecily had forged a genuine friendship, a solace amidst the changes. But the absence of her sister lingered, a constant ache in her heart.

Cecily had discovered William's habit of reading her letters not long after his arrival. From then on, her words had been constrained, veiled in a facade she knew he expected. The thought of escaping had crossed her mind, but the fear of William's wrath, whether directed at her or Helen, had rooted

her in place. With a heavy sigh, Cecily continued to pen the version of reality that William dictated.

*It has been such a pleasure in the past year to help William and Adelaide set up the house. He has done well as the new earl, and he has made quite an impression in the society. Adelaide and I are like sisters, and I feel like father's cousin is the father I have been missing for years. Anthony was not affectionate, you know this, so now I feel safe under his guardianship. We are happy here and I am sorry that you have not yet had a chance to see them and meet Adelaide.*

*How are you and Cory? I know you were eager for me to come and visit you, as was I, but there is so much to be done here, and William needs me. I cannot abandon them. Once they are more settled in, I might perhaps be able to come and visit you both at long last. I want to know all about your home and the clan. How is it to be a Scottish lady? Mother would have been so proud of you.*

Cecily quickly brushed away a tear that had trickled down her cheek. She couldn't risk smudging the ink with her tears. If William didn't notice the tear, Helen surely would, and her perceptive sister would demand answers. Cecily felt trapped, more so than ever. Since the day she had hidden behind the tapestry in her brother's study, she had felt like a ghost haunting her own life. Even when Anthony was alive, despite his flaws, he hadn't made her feel so utterly powerless. Most of the staff who were present during Anthony's time had been replaced by William's own people. Their polite demeanor concealed their watchful eyes, reporting her every move to William. If only she could find a way to communicate with Helen without alerting William. Suppressing her fleeting hope, she dipped her quill into the inkwell and continued to write.



*My living situation has improved; I've been moved to a new room that offers a breathtaking view of the sunset. It's a small comfort to watch the sun dip below the horizon, knowing you might be doing the same. William has allowed me to personalize it to my liking, and I've taken full advantage by selecting the most exquisite curtains.*

*Your tapestries have found their place here, adding a touch of home to my surroundings. And that dress you gifted me for my birthday fits me like a glove; I'm wearing it as I write this letter. It's as though I've found a way to bridge the distance between us through these simple things. Know that I hold you dear in my heart, Helen.*

*I miss you terribly and eagerly anticipate the day we can reunite.*

*Until then, remember me and think of our moments together.*

*With love, Cecily.*

She signed her name with a flourish, stifling the tears that threatened to overwhelm her. As she blew on the ink and folded the letter, Cecily knew that Helen would read her words and believe the façade she had crafted. Her sister would remain blissfully unaware of the truth that lay beneath the carefully constructed sentences. Cecily's gaze wandered around the cramped room she was confined to—a stark contrast to the luxurious life she had once known. The windows were bare, devoid of curtains or tapestries. Those she had received from her sister had been swiftly claimed by William and offered to Adelaide instead.

The gown gifted by Helen was the sole remnant of her sister's affection, yet even that now hung loose on her diminished

frame. Over the past year, Cecily had been treated more like a servant than a family member, and the once plentiful meals had become scarce. She caught her reflection in a dusty mirror, her appearance now a far cry from the vibrant young woman she used to be. Her radiant cheer had faded, replaced by weariness and neglect. Dark circles clung beneath her eyes, constant reminders of the sleepless nights that had plagued her since the traumatic events in her brother's study. The sound of footsteps echoed from above, causing dust to rain down from the ceiling. This cramped space beneath the stairs, her new abode, was a cruel reminder of her fall from grace.

She had been forcibly relocated from her spacious bedroom on the hillside to this desolate corner. She couldn't help but wonder if William had orchestrated this confinement deliberately, imprisoning her not only physically but also emotionally. The mere mention of his yellow suit still tormented her thoughts, the weight of her mistake haunting her daily. If only she could erase those fateful words and find sanctuary within the walls of Helen's castle, free from William's grasp.

Thank goodness for Adelaide, she remained a source of solace; that was the only truth in the letter. A gentle knock at her chamber door pulled her from her thoughts, and she rose with a yearning for a reprieve from the mundane tasks that dominated her existence. As she opened the door, a surge of hope coursed through her—it wasn't another servant bearing instructions. Instead, Adelaide stood there, a welcoming smile lighting up her features.

“There you are,” Adelaide chimed, stepping into the room and casting a curious gaze around. The family resemblance between them was striking. Both had cascading blonde hair, fair complexions, and vivid green eyes. The topic of their likeness had faded with time, yet their shared features still drew attention.

“Cecily, I wish you’d allow me to speak with Father. This situation is preposterous. You’re family, yet he’s assigned you to these quarters. The room he had refurbished for you has been ready for weeks now. There’s no excuse for this any longer.”

Cecily hesitated, her own predicament tightly bound by her knowledge of William’s watchful eye.

“No, please, Adelaide, I beg you not to intervene,” Cecily implored.

She feared that if Adelaide intervened, it might worsen their situation. William might even take measures to keep them apart, and Adelaide was the one bright spot in Cecily’s life.

*I couldn’t bear that.*

Adelaide put her hands on her hips. “Very well, but don’t think I’ll let this go. Anyway, I came to tell you that Father has suggested you go with us on a trip to McLaren’s land in Scotland to arrange my betrothal.”

“Scotland?” Cecily asked, her mouth going dry. “I did not know that he was seeking a husband for you outside of England.”

Adelaide grimaced, and she picked up a book idly and flipped through it. “Nor I, but apparently he wants the strength of a Scottish clan behind him. With Helen now the lady of the Chattan Clan and her no longer helping the English in the war,

I imagine he wants to make sure he has a foot in both camps. Alas, I had hoped that after his own disastrous marriage, he would allow me to choose my future husband, but he will not. So, will you come with us? We travel tomorrow.”

“Yes! I will start getting ready immediately!” she hurried to gather her things, and Adelaide laughed.

She stopped and smiled, trying not to give away the plan that was now forming her mind. “Very well. Thank you for including me.”

“Of course. You are family, and we are friends.” Adelaide squeezed her hands with affection.

Yet all Cecily could focus on in that moment was the hope that this trip to Scotland might provide her with the opportunity she needed—to slip away to Helen’s castle and find the freedom she so desperately craved.



Kai McLaren’s ears reverberated with the rhythmic pounding of his own heart. Amidst the chaos of the battlefield, the cacophony of agonizing screams and the clamor of clashing swords melded into an otherworldly din. Every sound seemed to drift to him as though he were submerged beneath the depths of a loch, far removed from reality. Time itself had slowed, and his own movements followed suit. Blood stained the earth, transforming the grass into a morbid tapestry of crimson.

His gaze fell upon the figure of his brother, Torion, and a shout tore from his throat. Torion pivoted, a momentary smile

illuminating his face at the sight of Kai still alive amidst the ferocious skirmish. Yet, a lurking shadow emerged, an enemy soldier stealthily advancing upon him. Before Kai could muster a cry of warning, the soldier's blade descended, striking Torion down to his knees. A scream tore from Kai's chest, an agonizing heartache that reverberated through his entire being. But his own fate soon caught up with him—a searing white pain engulfed him as his vision blurred.

Glancing downward, he found a blade buried between his ribs, agony radiating through every nerve. A panoramic scan revealed that his other brother, Rae, was not among the chaos. Collapsing to his knees, sweat drenched his body. The fight was over for him, and hands promptly seized him, hauling him toward a waiting cart. Bound and weakened, he was unceremoniously thrown inside. His screams blended with the anguished cries of others, fading as the distance grew. Darkness claimed him.

The piercing ordeal subsided as his eyes snapped open, and Kai lay there, grappling for breath. The bed was drenched with sweat, a cruel testament to the relentless grip of his recurring nightmare. Reality flooded back; he was ensconced in his bedroom, miles away from the battlefield's horror. He touched the area on his side, once occupied by a blade, only to find the pain absent, replaced by healed flesh. Warily, he pushed himself up, propped on his elbows, and covered his eyes.

The relentless intrusion of these dreams gnawed at him, leaving him feeling powerless and vulnerable. Each time he awoke, bathed in perspiration, he struggled to remember the true extent of his safety, untethered from the shackles of captivity. Freedom was his now, unburdened by the chains that had bound him. If only his mind could be convinced of this truth during the torment of sleep.

The recurring weakness of these nightmares left him feeling as though he was still shackled to the past, captive in ways beyond the physical. Even now, three years later, with his enemy defeated and his role as laird solidified, his psyche remained ensnared. Yet, he was free, and his younger brothers, Rae and Torion, were safe.

With a groan, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and rose, his feet making contact with the icy stone floor. Progressing to the tall mirror in his room, he cast a scrutinizing gaze upon himself. He had fallen asleep naked, and despite his formidable build, the scars that adorned him revealed a narrative of past suffering. His shoulders and ribs were etched with these markers of his history. Fingers traced their path, an act of commitment, a means to acknowledge and assimilate the unchangeable past.

He had attempted to conceal these scars beneath an array of tattoos, yet he knew their location intimately, a map of his torment. His hands brushed the one his dream had centered on—the one he had cloaked with a hawk tattoo, a futile attempt to quell the nightmares. Yet, the phantom pain of the blade's intrusion remained as tangible as ever, the dream's vividness akin to the torment of reality. Kai's fist clenched, despair creeping into his resolve. The nightmares were a relentless reminder, striking terror into his core, yet he could not fathom sharing his vulnerability with another soul. The deep-rooted fear of his past still clung, refusing to release its grip.

A knock echoed at his door, rousing Kai from his introspection. He responded, swiftly dressing in a kilt and shirt, before opening the door.

“Me laird, I wished to inquire about your well-being this morn. The meeting room holds much to discuss,” the voice of his father's old advisor greeted.

Kai's gaze bore into the man, irritation simmering beneath the surface. His father's recent passing had thrust him into the role of laird—a title he felt ill-prepared to carry. His advisor, despite his incessant queries and demands, had offered solace during the turbulent period following his father's death. Yet, the constant demands, the relentless pace, irked him, even preventing the opportunity to mourn his father's loss.

“Mr. Murray, I thought that we've already mulled over enough for a lifetime?” Kai's hand raked through his unruly brown hair, his piercing green eyes reflecting his frustration.

“I am afraid nae, me laird. There is news. Ye should come tae the council room.”

“Very well.” He shut the door and grumbled as he made himself presentable.

Kai McLaren cursed under his breath as his hands plunged into the frigid water at his table. Another inward curse followed as he washed his face and neck, the cloth tracing trails that sent icy droplets trickling through the scruff of his beard. Winter's sting was ever a surprise, a biting cold that could infiltrate skin and bone if one wasn't vigilant.

Having grown up amidst the harsh Highland environment, he should have been accustomed to it, yet each year it managed to pierce him anew. It was the sort of cold that, left unchecked, could creep into one's very veins, turning the body into a vessel of ice. He'd learned to anticipate the biting winds, the frost, and the relentless snow, ready to face the challenges of the season. Awakening before the fires were rekindled was an exercise in enduring the freezing embrace of the morning.

As he tied back his unruly hair and donned his boots, Kai's coat followed, and he bundled his white shirt into his kilt. His broadsword hung by his side, a steadfast companion, and a hidden dagger resided within his boot. The battlefield that had nearly claimed his life, along with those of his brothers, had left an indelible mark. His weapons were no longer ornamental—they were a lifeline, a constant reminder of his vulnerability, and a lesson he'd been taught by his father. War's harsh education had shown him the necessity of being ever vigilant, ready to safeguard his loved ones at a moment's notice.

But the guilt of his father's passing was an insidious weight that hung heavily upon him. Despite the attempts of his brothers to console him, the truth lingered: he hadn't been able to protect his father. The pain of that failure would remain with him indefinitely.

Now, the council's audacity had reached a new height. Mere months since his father's death, their eyes were already fixed upon the issue of succession, pressuring him for a wife while he still wrestled with grief and a newfound responsibility was an affront. A growl of outrage had erupted from him upon learning of their intentions. The mantle of a lairdship may have demanded it, but Kai was far from prepared to be a husband or to entertain the notion of a wedding.

When he approached the council room, its door stood closed. However, the low hum of discussion within reached his ears. He pressed a hand against it, taking a moment to summon the memory of his father's wisdom and strength. His father had been a paragon of patience and tact—a stark contrast to Kai's own bristling demeanor. Clinging to his father's legacy, he gathered strength before pushing open the door.



Mr. Murray stood, while the other council members held their positions. Every gaze fixed upon him, Kai could sense the weight of their expectations. It was Mr. Murray who broke the silence.

“It is better ye know now than when yer bride arrives,” the advisor began, his tone brimming with an odd mix of formality and sympathy. “The council has made a selection for ye.”

“What?” The word erupted from him, carrying the full force of his disbelief and frustration. This time, he allowed his anger to surface without restraint. Whatever patience he’d invoked just moments earlier had vanished like a wisp of smoke. “Aye, and the lady in question shall arrive today.”

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## CHAPTER TWO

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“*W*hat in Heaven’s name dae ye mean? Ye have chosen the wife, and she is tae appear this very day? Why did ye nae tell me afore this?”

One of the other council members looked far too calm, and they glared at him as if he was still the young boy, they had known all those years ago.

“Because ye have refused every other woman we have selected, even outright refusin’ fer a time the idea of a marriage. But ye must wed, me laird. It is the way, and the fate of this clan hangs in the balance. Ye are nae merely thinkin’ of yerself when ye become a laird, ye must think of everyone else under ye. Like your father did, bless his soul, and unlike what you have been doing since you took his role.”

Kai glared right back at the man, stomping up to the table and leaning over it. “And dae ye ken this from all yer experience bein’ a laird yerself?”

He did not need some old man telling him what he knew already. That being a laird came with responsibility. His father had taught him that at a young age, and it now terrified Kai

that he could never be half the man his father was. The council member stiffened, and he rose.

“Ye may be the laird, but I have lived a life. I have advised three lairds in me time. And if ye will not make the right choices, the council will have to make them fer ye. This is what needs tae be done, is it nae, Murray?”

“Aye, Stephen, aye.” Mr. Murray looked at Kai with kind eyes. “I ken that it is hard fer ye, lad, but since the surprise of yer father’s fall, we daenae want anythin’ tae come in between ye and the lairdship. Ye are the blood heir, and the clan will be better fer ye as their leader.”

Kai’s anger lessened a bit. He did want to follow in his father’s footsteps, to make him proud, even from beyond the grave.

“I only wish that ye would have told me at least a day in advance, but I have perhaps only hours tae prepare. Who is this lass anyway?”

“She is a Sassenach.”

“Ye are lyin’,” Kai said with a morbid chuckle.

“Nay. This man, an earl, the Earl of Seton has quite a bit of land and money. As things are movin’ towards greater connection with England, then we will find strength by bein’ tied tae them in marriage. Then, in the future, as the battles rage in the war, we will have protection. And of course, there is the money. This alliance is of utmost importance for our clan.”

“What is her name?” Kai instantly thought of his best friend Cory who had just become married to a Sassenach himself, a young Englishwoman named Helen.

They were greatly in love, and he had stayed with them for long periods, but he never imagined his clan would choose a Sassenach for him as well. It seemed strange, and he wondered if his father would have approved of such a thing.

“She is the eldest daughter of William Cavendish, the new earl after the other died. Her name is Adelaide, I believe. So, you should go tae the main hall, fer I am certain, that she will be here very soon, and we can greet them there.”

Kai grumbled, “Will me brothers join me? Where are they?”

“They went out huntin’ this morn before dawn,” Mr. Murray said, leading the way out the door of the council room.

Kai followed, not looking back. The less he had to deal with those bloody council members, the better. He had little patience for their ancient views. He wished he could be free of them, and do just as he pleased.

“I cannae believe they can still stomach killin’ fer fun.” He shook his head in amazement at his brothers.

He was glad though, for them, that they did not have to suffer as he did. During their shared captivity, he had done his best to be brave for them all, to take as much punishment on his

shoulders as he could to spare them of the nightmare that his life had now become.

“Well, we dae need the meat, my Laird, so that is somethin’.”

“Aye, true enough, Mr. Murray. Ye are always wise, I think.”

The advisor laughed. “Ye have given me a reluctant compliment, me laird, but I shall take it. I think that I am likely lookin’ far better tae ye than Stephen at the moment after what he said.”

Kai’s mood soured again, and as he stood in the hall, he began to pace. “I wish I didnae have tae deal with his sharp tongue...”

Mr. Murray laughed again, to Kai’s surprise, and then Kai sighed with a reluctant smile. “I suppose ye ken that me father was much better at diplomacy than I.”

“He was a good man; God rest his soul. But ye have his blood, and ye will learn, just as he did.” Mr. Murray patted Kai’s shoulder, the gesture imbued with warmth and encouragement. Kai welcomed the fleeting sense of reassurance.

As his thoughts shifted to the daunting prospect of conversing with a woman he had been betrothed to without his consent, he found himself at a loss. While speaking with women wasn’t foreign to him, engaging with a Sassenach, forced into this marriage much like he was, posed a unique challenge. He contemplated seeking advice from Mr. Murray when the clamor of guards shattered his contemplation.

The hall's entrance came into view, and Kai's attention snapped to the doorway. A breathless guard rushed in, his words tumbling out in haste. Kai approached, his concern evident.

“Laird, the party with the bride was ambushed on their way here. We could see them from the battlements, but there's been an attack. It seems that few among them have survived.”

Kai turned to Mr. Murray, whose expression had drained of color. Turning back to the guard, he spoke with determination.

“Gather our men. We're heading out tae investigate. We'll see what we can dae.”

Leaving the hall, his mood darkened, Kai prepared himself for another grim ordeal.



Cecily's heart raced as she stared out of the carriage window, fixated on the Scottish landscape outside. Unfamiliar with their location, William hardly exchanged words with her during the journey. Yet, the specifics were inconsequential. Each passing moment brought her closer to Helen, her sister, and a chance for escape. No more threats from William, no more chains.

“He can never control me again,” she thought, a sense of determination swelling within her.

No longer would she remain hidden beneath the stairs, relegated to servitude and isolation, trapped within a stagnant existence. The prospect of reuniting with Helen, tasting freedom, and forging a new path painted a secret smile on her lips, carefully hidden from her cousin. She couldn't afford to let William detect the hopeful plans taking shape in her mind; he likely suspected her intentions.

“Father, can you tell us anything about the man I'm to meet?”  
Adelaide's voice broke the uneasy silence.

“He's a warrior, now the laird of McLaren Clan following his father's recent passing,” her father answered.

Adelaide sighed, relief tinging her tone. “So, he's not elderly. That's a relief.”

A sidelong glance at Cecily revealed the young lady's admirable composure. For someone about to marry a stranger, Adelaide was taking it far better than Cecily would have anticipated. Although this trip aimed at fostering familiarity, marriage seemed a distant notion for now.

“No, Adelaide, he's not old,” her father replied tersely. “But age is hardly a concern. Your marriage is a matter of advancing our family's interests.”

Cecily's attention returned to the window, allowing their conversation to fade into the background. She struggled to comprehend her cousin's inclination for vibrant and daring attire. Amidst the Scottish landscape, his clothing stood out like a bizarre anomaly. How would Clan McLaren perceive him? And she wondered if she'd have the opportunity to learn

about Helen's clan, Clan Chattan, and find a way to join her sister.

"What's that?" she mused aloud, spotting figures in dark garb emerging from the trees as their carriage trundled along.

More figures joined them, and still, her cousin remained silent.

"What do you mean?" Adelaide leaned toward the window, her voice rising in alarm. "Father, men! They're coming for us! It's an ambush!"

"In the name of Heaven," her father exclaimed as the carriage doors were thrown open on both sides. In an instant, William, Adelaide, and Cecily were pulled onto the ground, harshly dislodged from their conveyance.

Cecily landed with a jolt, the impact jarring her body. Her dress was torn, and her heart raced as chaos unfolded around her. Five guards who had accompanied them lay defeated, each felled by the blades of marauders cloaked in darkness. The attackers descended upon the carriage, their intent unmistakable.

Fear surged through Cecily's veins as she struggled to her feet, her legs unsteady. Helen had always been the protector, the courageous one. Now she was alone, and terror gripped her chest. Vulnerability enveloped her, and the possibility of fainting seemed all too real.

However, when she saw Adelaide attempting to rise, an instinctive urge to shield her overcame Cecily's fear. Without



hesitation, she rushed forward, positioning herself between Adelaide and a menacing brigand.

He grinned, missing a tooth, his eyes as dark as a moonless night. “And who’s this?” he jeered. “A brave lass, are we?” With a swift motion, he struck her across the face, the blow dazing her as stars danced before her eyes. She fell to her knees, pain radiating from her cheek.

Men could be cruel, the world even crueler. But never had a man struck her in such a way before. The impact stole her breath, leaving her senses reeling. Turning, she watched the brigand move on to assist in dismantling the carriage, while William lifted Adelaide into his arms. Their eyes locked, a silence charged with unspoken emotions. Over the past year, their interactions had been sparse, strained by Cecily’s suspicion of William’s involvement in her brother’s death. Yet, they had never openly addressed it.

Amidst the chaos, a sense of reckoning hung in the air. Her cousin hadn’t killed her, despite her doubts, but his actions had tormented her, leaving her emotionally adrift. The bond of family had fractured, if not shattered entirely.

And then he turned away, fleeing the scene with a fainting Adelaide in his arms, abandoning Cecily to her fate.

Cecily sank to the ground, tears streaming down her cheeks as she gazed at the sky. This was her moment, her final chapter. Death awaited her, and the chance to reunite with Helen slipped through her fingers. It was all due to her cousin, William, and his malevolent influence. Anguish clenched at her heart; she felt powerless against his darkness.

Footsteps approached, and though her body trembled, she lacked the strength to rise and meet her captors' gaze.

“Och, I see they’ve left the lass. And she’s still alive. Looks like we are goin’ tae have some fun, lads,” one of the brigands teased, and Cecily closed her eyes, letting the tears continue to fall.

As shadows cast their silhouettes over her prone form, Cecily despised the sensation of fear coursing through her veins. It left her feeble and helpless, emotions she abhorred. When their hands gripped her and lifted her to her feet, a surge of rage erupted within her. The mere touch of their fingers against her skin ignited a fury that had simmered since her half-brother assumed the earldom and seized control of her life. From him to William, and now these men, each believed they could impose their will upon her without consequences. A scream of suppressed anger tore from her throat, a vocal manifestation of her defiance.

Her eyes snapped open, fierce determination dilating her pupils. As they raised her, she kicked and scratched, her limbs becoming instruments of retaliation. With an instinctual surge of strength, she struck out at the closest man, a wildfire burning in her gaze.

Yet, the thundering hooves of galloping horses shattered the captors' focus, diverting their attention. In that fleeting reprieve, they released their hold, and Cecily crumpled back to the ground. The echo of her scream lingered in the air as her surroundings shifted. Two figures, mounted on powerful steeds, charged forward to confront the attackers.

Cecily's gaze remained fixed on the unfolding clash. Men collided, blows exchanged. A few assailants fell in the face of

the assault, and within the chaos, her overwhelming fear began to recede.

Collapsed on the ground, heart pounding, she felt the world around her blur into darkness. A fleeting sensation of relief washed over her, as if the unconsciousness enveloping her was a sanctuary from the violence that had engulfed her.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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Cecily's nostrils caught the faint scent of blood, a familiar odor that pierced through her consciousness. Instantly, recognition flooded in—her body pressed against the wall behind the tapestry. Memories of her brother's death mingled with the recurring nightmare that haunted her. She leaned forward, peering through a narrow opening. Dread surged as the nightmarish scene replayed itself. William stood over her brother, his figure casting a shadow of menace. A hitch in her breath accompanied the memory of the blade piercing Anthony's neck. A silent scream echoed in her mind until reality intervened, jerking her from the depths of her dream.

As consciousness reclaimed her, Cecily's breath came in ragged gasps. Her eyes fluttered open, met with the presence of an elderly woman. A gentle yet weathered hand rested on her arm, grounding her amidst the disorientation. The sight of the woman's lined face, marked by years of experience, provided solace.

"Calm yerself, lass," a woman said, and she could feel the gentle yet rough-skinned touch of a hand on her arm.

Cecily turned her gaze to the old woman, her head swathed in a cloth. "You have taken a hit, lass. Rest your head. Don't

worry about anything. You're safe now. We're in the healer's cottage, and I am Dora."

Cecily exhaled, trying to steady herself as her surroundings gradually clarified. The attack's memories rushed back, fitting together like puzzle pieces. The assailants, the blow to her head, her cousin's hasty departure with his daughter—images fell into place in rapid succession.

A movement caught her eye at a nearby table, drawing her attention to the healer's actions. The room slowly came into focus, and Cecily struggled to make sense of reality. Suddenly, a male voice cut through the air, and she turned to its source.

"Here ye are, lass," one of the men said as he stood up. "You look well. We didnae want tae startle ye as ye woke up, so we waited a moment as ye regained yer bearings. I'm so sorry about the attack."

Cecily blinked, momentarily taken aback by their presence. The man's features bore concern, one eyebrow raised inquisitively. She realized he had spoken and struggled to reply. With effort, she croaked out, "Yes, it came out of nowhere. What happened? Were you the ones who came to our rescue?"

A smile graced the lips of the first man, his brother chiming in. "Aye, we were out huntin' when we heard the ruckus. We found ye alone and brought ye to the healer's cottage in the closest village tae McLaren Castle."

As the pieces clicked into place, Cecily grasped their identities. "You're McLaren men?"

“Aye,” the first man, Rae, confirmed, his hand resting over his heart. “Forgive me fer not introducin’ meself sooner, Miss Cavensish. I’m Rae, and this is me brother, Torion.”

Amid a whirl of emotions, Cecily grappled with the situation. These Highlanders were a stark contrast to the refined gentlemen she was accustomed to. Their brawn and raw strength set them apart, making them seem like a different breed altogether. She couldn’t help but wonder which of them was meant to be Adelaide’s intended.

The truth, however, weighed heavily—she wasn’t Lady Cavendish. Yet, the prospect of deceit flickered, offering a glimmer of safety.

Rae and Torion didn’t seem to notice anything unusual. They both smiled twin smiles, and Torion said, “Wonderful. A pleasure tae meet ye, lass.”

“And you as well,” she managed to say back, breathlessly, and she lowered herself back onto the pillow again, and they moved closer.

She had led them to believe that she was the laird’s betrothed. That meant she was to marry the McLaren laird. And if Adelaide and William never returned, and she found out where Helen was and could manage to escape then she would actually have to marry the man.

*But how hard would it really be? Being married to one of these kind, god-like men?*

“I didnae ken that brother was tae be married tae a Sassenach, although I should have kenned when they told us the name of yer father this morn,” Rae said.

“Yer brother?” Cecily asked, and then someone burst into the room, nearly breaking the door and making her scream.

The new arrival slammed the door shut and eyed the occupants of the room. He was a giant, resembling a bear in size and stature, with a beard and long dark hair. A tattoo peeked out from beneath his sleeve, and an air of intimidation surrounded him. His bright green eyes gazed onto Cecily’s, and a whimper of fear might have escaped her.

“Bloody hell, all we found when we arrived was a pile of dead men and a carriage. I thought something had happened tae ye both,” he grumbled, still looking at her.

She swallowed hard, hating just how much fear consumed her, just like it had before when the brigands had nearly done Heavens knew what to her. But it was quickly followed by that same rage. If the bear man was to come closer, she knew that she would do her best to fight back against him. That she could at least promise herself, even if she wasn’t successful.

“We had tae bring the lass tae Hannah, for she was unconscious when we found her. It seems one of the blaiyards hit her in the face,” Rae said with a grumble, and something dark passed over the bear man’s face.

He still hadn’t looked away from her, and she had the great urge to pull the woolen blanket up and over her face to hide

herself.

“Ye are Lady Cavendish?” he asked in a tone far softer than expected.

He stepped closer, and then he glanced at Hannah who was watching him with amusement. “Are ye well?”

“Aye, of course, lad. She just needs a bit of rest.”

“Thank ye.” He gave Hannah a brief smile, and it transformed his face, but then it was gone again in a flash when he looked back at Cecily.

Stepping even closer, he said, “It seems, Lady Adelaide, that ye have nae had a proper introduction tae our country, and for that I am sorry. But I have been told that I am tae be yer betrothed.”

He put a hand to his chest, and she stared right back at him.

“Yes,” she said. “I believe you’re right. But you got my name wrong. I must point that out if we are to be... family. I’m Cecily. Adelaide is my sister and probably some confusion happened with the letters. My apologies on my father’s behalf if this is the case.”

“Me deepest apologies, lass. The ancient members of the clan must have misunderstood. Me name is Kai McLaren, and I am the laird of the clan. These are me brothers.”



“Greetings to you, Kai.”

“Greetings tae ye, Cecily. Now, what can ye tell me about those blaiyards?”



Kai's gaze remained locked on her, an unexpected enchantment woven between them. As he looked upon her, he found himself caught off guard by her appearance. She possessed an ethereal beauty he hadn't anticipated, a captivating allure that held him captive and made his heart quicken. Despite the fear lingering in her eyes, she met his gaze with unwavering steadiness, her irises an entrancing hue. Pale cheeks, evidence of her ordeal, contrasted against lips delicately tinted with pink, a detail he couldn't help but notice. A softness graced her features, a refinement reminiscent of sculptures and paintings he had seen.

He blinked, clearing his thoughts, and addressed her. “Ye've been through quite a frightful experience, it seems.”

Her response was a mixture of uncertainty and fragility. “I, well, I don't know. They just seemed to come out of nowhere while we were riding to your castle.”

A wave of frustration swept through Kai, mingling with the unease that had plagued his morning. He winced, shoving aside the haunting dreams that had disrupted his sleep. “I apologize for this, lass.” Turning to his brothers, he sought their insight. “Did ye notice any markings or colors on their attire?”

“Nay.” Rae sighed, putting a hand on his sword. “They were dressed in dark colors with hoods. I think they were merely brigands, out fer the chance tae steal from a highborn carriage. An English one at that. It was a simple opportunity. And there wasnae enough of them tae be any real cause for concern.” Rae’s eyes flashed knowingly, and Kai nodded.

Since their capture, his brothers, though more carefree than him, had remained cautious of strangers on their land. Their father’s death had only deepened that wariness.

“Are ye well enough?” he asked her, afraid that if he stepped too close, he might frighten her again. “Can ye walk?”

“Yes. I am well, just a headache and I fear a bruise forming on my cheek.”

She touched her cheek, and a surge of anger coursed through Kai at the sight. “Aye.” He gritted his teeth and clenched his fists at his sides. “What kind of men strike a lass?”

“I think ye should leave her tae rest a bit ‘afore ye return,” Hannah said suddenly, wiping her hands on her apron and turning to face him with her familiar look.

Since childhood, she had been a motherly figure to them, tending to their wounds and offering advice along the way. It had been a long time since their mother passed, and Kai’s memory of her had faded.

“Will ye go collect a few things for me, as ye used tae?” she asked, a glint of amusement in her eyes.

Kai frowned. "Herbs?" he asked.

"Aye. I just need a couple of things from the garden." She handed him a scrap of paper. "Will ye?" she asked, and he glanced at Rae and Torion who also looked amused.

"Fine then. We'll be back." He left with his brothers, but as soon as he turned to the garden, they turned away toward the castle. "And where are ye goin'?"

Grinning, Torion said, "We will leave ye with the lass tae escort her back tae the castle. I think ye both need a bit of time on yer own. Seems ye might want tae stare at her in peace."

"Watch yerself lad or me fist may meet yer jaw."

Both his brothers burst into laughter. Had it been that evident that he had been staring at her? Had she noticed? If he were prone to blushing, he might have done so furiously.

"Get out of here," he called, "and get the soldiers tae help ye take care of those men. Scout the area as well."

"Fine, fine!" Rae called back to him, and then they were gone, leaving him on his own to try to remember what the healer had taught him about herbs many years ago.

Finding the herbs was straightforward enough, but he grumbled to himself about having to pull them up even as a laird. His mood soured further, and he realized that only the

lass had emerged from the carriage. That's what he'd been told at least. No one else except the deceased guards had accompanied her.

*But I thought she was meant to come with her father, the one who signed the betrothal contract? Where is he?*

He pulled out the last herb and then stood, nearly toppling into Lady Cecily in the process.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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Eecily's gasp slipped from her lips as a strong arm suddenly enveloped her, preventing her from stumbling to the ground. The sensation of his arm around her sent shivers down her spine, and for a moment, she was lost in the proximity of the laird's presence. Blinking, she regained her composure and gingerly stepped away from him, feeling a flush of embarrassment warm her cheeks.

"Forgive me," he uttered, his dark brows knitting together as he also moved back, creating a polite distance between them. "I did not hear ye approach."

Kai's gaze remained fixed on her, and she felt her heart quicken in response. Her earlier curiosity about his opinion of her resurfaced, and she wondered how he perceived her—a stranger now betrothed to him. Clearing her throat, she maintained her composure. "Hannah suggested I step outside for fresh air. Seeing you here, I thought I might assist if needed."

His response was abrupt, a mixture of confusion and dismissal. "I did not require assistance." He quickly amended his tone, clearing his throat again. "I mean, ye should rest. However, I can escort ye back tae the castle and ensure ye're settled in yer own chambers."

As he gathered the fallen herbs, Cecily detected an unexpected shift in his demeanor. A peculiar blend of sternness and vulnerability seemed to intermingle within him. With quiet resolve, she walked alongside him, the sound of their footsteps punctuating the silence.

Her mind swirled with thoughts—from the incident with the brigands to the unexpected encounter in the garden. Suddenly, an idea struck her. She spotted a vase by the cottage door, seized the opportunity to be helpful, and swiftly picked it up. She turned to offer it to him, but he was lost in his thoughts and inadvertently bumped the vase. Both of them reached for it simultaneously, their movements out of sync. The vase plummeted to the ground, shattering on impact as they accidentally collided and lost their balance.

In the aftermath, Cecily found herself sprawled over Kai's chest, her pulse racing from both the fall and the intimate proximity. Embarrassment engulfed her as she hastily pushed herself away, scrambling to her feet. Her appearance was no doubt disheveled, and she inwardly cringed at the situation.

"I apologize," she murmured, her voice laced with chagrin. "I did not mean for this to happen."

His response conveyed both sympathy and reassurance. "It's nae a concern, lass. I should've been more careful, especially given yer condition."

Cecily's gaze dropped to his hand, and her heart twinged as she saw the cut across his palm. In her instinctive desire to help, she stepped closer, her fingers lightly grazing the rough calluses on his skin. The sensation of his hand beneath hers

was a world away from the privileged world she had known. It told stories of battles fought and challenges overcome, a stark contrast to the delicate lives of noblemen she was accustomed to.

“You’re injured,” she murmured softly, her attention fixed on his hand. Despite herself, she felt an odd connection—a bridge between their vastly different worlds—forged in that simple touch.

Amid her contemplation, the significance of their physical proximity hit her. Drawing a breath, she focused her thoughts on his injury rather than the swirl of emotions threatening to surface.

“Aye, but it is only a scratch.” His voice was soft now, nothing like the bellow from earlier, and that trickle of heat deepened even further in her belly.

Still, he did not look up, and she was surprised that he did not pull away from her.

“Let me help you.” She dropped his hand and walked into the cottage. “I know how to bandage such things.”

“But—” he answered, and she walked in to see that the healer was not present. “It is nae matter, lass, we can return tae the castle, and I can bandage it meself.”

“No. I can do it.” Cecily wasn’t sure why she was being so forceful about it, but there was something about feeling the need to do something that she wanted to do. Feeling needed,

useful, and making the choice to be so. She didn't want to pass up the chance, not while her confidence had a sudden boost. "Sit here." She pointed to the chair next to the hearth, and he sat obediently.

Cecily might have been amused under different circumstances, but the immense presence of the laird suppressed her inclination to smile or laugh.

Extending his hand toward her, he patiently waited, his eyes fixed on the task at hand.

"It does not appear too deep at least," she said after a small inspection before she walked to the healer's table to collect a bit of cloth, some water, and an already prepared poultice that Hannah had made for her cuts.

"That is good. It doesnae hurt."

She grinned at that. "Everyone says that before the wound is cleaned, or before a poultice is pressed upon it." She searched for a bit of spirits, and when she grabbed it, she returned with her items to Kai as he sat.

He watched her come toward him, and something skipped in her chest at the sight of a man watching her as he did. It was with interest, as if he was curious about what she would do next. It had been a long time since anyone had cared about what she was going to do or say, and Cecily found she rather liked it.



“Now, this may sting.” She sat down and took up the water, brushing the wound quickly with a wet cloth. And then she took the spirits.

Just as it always happened, whenever she touched spirits to a wound, the man would hiss in pain, and she bit her lip to keep from laughing.

But he saw it. “It seems ye are entertained by this,” he said through gritted teeth as she continued to clean the wound.

“It is always satisfying when one realizes they are right, Laird McLaren,” she teased.

“Kai,” he corrected, looking at her, and she nodded at him, noting that it was her heart that was skipping beats whenever a look passed between them.

“Very well.” She took another bit of cloth, placed a poultice on the wound, and wrapped it tightly. “I know you think it unnecessary, but the last place you want to have an infection is in your hand. There are so many things you do with your hands.”

This time, at his broad smile, Cecily knew she was the one who was being teased. Her cheeks instantly heated, and she looked down at her work in tying the bandage.

“Aye, that is true. I dae use me hands for many things.” She did not look up, but she could hear the way his voice had lowered.

She was virginal, and she had never been courted or kissed or anything like it, yet she could take his meaning. She felt it in every fiber of her being as if he'd touched her bare skin with his hands.

“Well, there you are.” She finished tying the bandage, and then she pulled back from him, glancing only briefly up at his eyes to see that he was still watching her.

“It is strange that a lady such as yerself kens such things.”

His gaze finally turned to his bandage, and she folded her hands together to keep them from trembling.

*He must not know the truth, and here I am giving myself away!*

“Well, I think it very wise that a young woman knows many things, not simply the useless skills we are taught by our mothers in order to attract a man.” She stood again and crossed her arms.

Slowly, he stood, his eyes on hers, and she bit her lip again watching that much power come to stand in front of her. There she was, arguing with a Highland laird, when she, Cecily Ridley, was tiny and had never done anything brave. Not really. Bravery of late seemed to only get her into trouble, and she could sense trouble in the offing. Trouble in the form of a bear-like, handsome Highlander, with eyes like emeralds.



Kai's awareness remained attuned to every detail of Lady Cecily. Despite their initial awkward encounter, he found

himself drawn to her efficiency and grace as she swiftly gathered the items she needed to assist him. Her fingers, despite bearing signs of recent struggle, worked with remarkable competence. The sight of her bruises only accentuated her resilience, and he found himself appreciating her determination and spirit.

Observing her, he detected a subtle shift in her demeanor. Her crossed arms and defiant posture seemed to convey a challenge, as if she dared him to contradict her statements. Despite the mishap they had encountered, he couldn't help but be intrigued by her audacity.

Standing up, he maintained eye contact with her, attempting to decipher the emotions flickering across her expressive features. Despite her delicate appearance, her defiance and the fire in her gaze held his attention. His mind was a tumult of thoughts, ranging from his own reservations about the betrothal to the undeniable attraction that seemed to spark between them.

In the midst of their unspoken exchange, he appeared to have caught her off guard. Her arms relaxed slightly, her lips parting as she seemed to grapple for a response. He found himself drawn to her mouth again, admiring the prettiness of her lips and the innocence they radiated.

Her hesitation only intensified his curiosity, and he voiced his thoughts impulsively. "Aye, I was taken aback when I found out about our betrothal, nothing more. Dinnae think me opinion matters much in this, though." He noted her reaction—arms relaxing further, lips parting—suggesting that his words carried some unspoken weight. The contrast between her delicate appearance and the turbulence in her gaze was striking. He suspected that her strength ran far deeper than he'd initially assumed.

She was undeniably alluring, her curves an unexpected delight to his senses. Yet, a nagging sensation persisted that he was a somber figure cast against the lightness she emanated. This realization only intensified his conviction that their engagement was a misguided course.

Despite grappling with his own confidence since his captivity, Kai remained driven to uncover her story. However, he understood that the query may have touched on a sensitive topic. His frustration regarding their impending marriage found voice in the words he chose.

Her gentle admonition prompted him to consider the appropriateness of his inquiry. He chose to adopt a gentler approach. “Well, we are tae be wed, lass, and I reckon it’s good tae get tae ken one another. It’s nae for any sinister reason, I can assure ye. I’m simply curious tae ken.”

The tension between them seemed to increase as she hesitated before answering. Her response revealed a vulnerability he hadn’t anticipated. “If you must know, I have never been kissed.”

An amalgamation of emotions surged within him—surprise, intrigue, and a peculiar sense of gratification. Her innocence was enchanting. He decided to probe further, savoring the moment. “Would ye care tae experience it?”

As the words departed his lips, he watched her reaction closely. Her widened eyes and flushed cheeks revealed a mixture of surprise and uncertainty. He felt an inexplicable urge to explore this uncharted territory, to witness her response to his questioning. Leaning in, he nonverbally conveyed the

intent of his words, inching closer as if to demonstrate the concept of a kiss.

Yet, her reaction was utterly unexpected. Before he comprehended it, a sharp sting resonated on his cheek—the unmistakable impact of her palm connecting with his skin. Stunned, he staggered back, his gaze locking onto her wide-eyed, startled expression.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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Cecily's memories of her sister's lessons on asserting herself surged to the forefront of her mind as she stood before the laird. The tingling sensation in her hand from the slap she had delivered reminded her of Helen's words, which had shaped her understanding of independence. The encounter with Laird McLaren seemed to validate the importance of safeguarding her control over her own choices.

She had not been prepared for his advance, for the unsettling mixture of emotions his proximity triggered. The sudden memories of Helen's actions had given her the courage to defend her boundaries. She had acted on instinct, an act of self-preservation.

Kai's response was measured, his hand grazing his cheek where her slap had landed. As she stammered to explain herself, the entrance of Hannah provided her a momentary reprieve. Her embarrassment mingled with frustration, Cecily's feelings of inadequacy and fear threatening to overwhelm her. Hurriedly seeking Hannah's forgiveness, she fled the cottage, seeking refuge in the castle.

Her steps carried her away from the scene, tears of frustration prickling her eyes. Everything felt like a whirlwind. The lie she had told to the McLarens, her impulsive act of violence,

the turmoil of her emotions—it was all too much to bear. She wanted to escape her tangled existence, to find Helen again and rewrite the course her life had taken.

With each step toward the castle, her thoughts tumbled in a chaotic dance. Her mind replayed the moments that had led her to this point—her decision to impersonate her betrothed, the encounter with the brigands, the confusing and intense exchanges with Kai. She realized the precariousness of her situation, and the weight of her lies pressed down upon her.

Part of her expected Kai to emerge from the cottage, demanding an explanation or an apology. But silence followed her steps, intensifying her inner turmoil. The castle gates loomed before her, and as she neared them, she encountered his two brothers scouting the grounds around the castle, their smiles fading as they took in her solitary arrival.

“Lady Cecily,” they greeted her, their expressions etched with concern. Their inquiries about Kai’s absence highlighted her actions, and she fumbled to provide an explanation. Her voice trembled, betraying her anxiety. “He is remaining with the healer. He cut his hand on a vase, and she is fixing it for him. I told him I could go ahead on my own.”

Her words elicited caution from the Highlanders, their worry for her well-being palpable. Torion expressed his concern, reminding her of her recent attack and the uncertainty surrounding it. She focused on maintaining her composure, walking between the protective figures flanking her toward the open gate of the castle.

In the midst of their conversation, her mind whirled with thoughts. She found herself entangled among these strangers, and her fabricated identity grew increasingly difficult to

uphold. The vulnerability of her position weighed heavily on her, and her responses to their questions became a struggle to keep her voice from wavering.

“It is a surprise ye were ridin’ alone in the wilds of the Highlands. That yer father sent ye out on yer own,” Torion remarked, highlighting the unusual circumstances.

A surge of emotions coursed through her. The McLarens’ genuine concern for her safety was unexpected, as was the unexpected camaraderie she felt despite her deception. Crossing the threshold of the castle gates, the uncertainty of her path ahead felt daunting. Yet, the presence of the Highlanders provided a sense of protection she had not foreseen.

Cecily’s eyes widened as she realized that it was possible, they had seen William and Adelaide rush off from the fighting and leave here there. That would confuse everything if they had seen it, and she had not even thought to explain it. Thankfully, they seemed to think she had ridden alone, and she was grateful for that. That would be far easier to keep up her lie until the marriage had gone through.

“Well, my father has many business matters to attend to, of late, as the new earl. And I think he wished for me to come and learn more about my future home on my own. And they were many of his men with me, so...”

“I see.” Torion frowned as they walked inside the castle passageway to the entranceway. “But surely, he will wish tae attend the wedding. For I was given tae understand that the wedding would be in a couple of weeks.”



Cecily cursed silently, but she maintained her calm demeanor. “I see. Perhaps there was a miscommunication of sorts. But surely, we can write to him to let him know to come. I was told that it was just a trip to get to know one another, that was all.”

Rae’s chuckle broke the tension as they reached the base of the grand stone stairs in the entranceway. He paused, hand resting on the wooden banister, a grin playing on his lips as he addressed her. “Have ye enjoyed the start of gettin’ tae ken our brother? It seems things are nae goin’ too well, since he’s neglected his manly duty of escortin’ his future wife tae walk tae his castle. His future wife who’s also injured. He should be the one tae guide ye about, nae us.”

Cecily quickly responded, attempting to defend herself. “Oh, well, surely that doesn’t matter. It’s not as if we’re betrothed in heart. Only in name.” At the raised brows of the brothers, she realized she was perhaps speaking more than she should. She was only digging herself into deeper trouble. “But I’m certain we’ll get to know each other well enough soon. And as I told you, he’s only neglecting his duties, as you say, because his hand was cut, and he’s having it dressed. I found the cottage to be too stuffy to continue waiting there.”

The brothers exchanged a glance. “I suppose Kai frightens ye too. He is rather like a bear in many ways, is he nae?”

Caught off guard, Cecily stumbled over her words. How was she supposed to respond to that? Admit that he did remind her of a wild animal, but one that she found handsome and strong? That he had tried to kiss her?

Cecily dug deep and tried to find her equilibrium once again. They burst into laughter at her awkward non-reply.

“Forgive us.” Rae smiled at her, his dark eyes twinkling with merriment. “We daenae mean tae tease or make ye uncomfortable. But we enjoy teasin’ our brother, and he seemed surprised tae see ye. He could hardly take his eyes off ye. That is why I thought perhaps he frightened ye as well.”

“No, he did not *frighten* me,” she said quickly, even though her tongue had gone dry, and her heart felt like it was going to burst out of her chest; it was beating so fast. “Do not worry about that.”

“Again, forgive us,” Torion added, looking a little shamefaced. “Ye must be very tired. First, I will lead ye tae yer room and send for a maid, and then—”

Their conversation was interrupted by the entrance of an old man with a long white beard and bushy white eyebrows. He wore dark robes and had an air of Highland strength despite his age. A small blade hung from a belt at his waist. The old man’s eyes went from Cecily to the brothers, and he placed a relieved hand over his chest.

“Thanks be tae the Heavens. Nae one sent word about what happened. Is all well?”

“Aye.” Torion touched Cecily on the shoulder, and she turned to face the old man.

“Mr. Murray, this is Lady Cecily Cavendish.”

“Ye are most welcome, me lady. Although I was told it was Adelaide who the laird was tae wed.” Mr. Murray bowed.

“Oh, well, like I told the laird, I think there have been many confusions. Adelaide is my younger sister, but I am the eldest, and so he wishes for me tae be wed.”

“I see.” The old man frowned. “I am so sorry that ye have been attacked. Are ye well?”

He stepped closer, and she could see that he was scrutinizing her, attempting to assess her injuries. “Dear God, ye have been hit. We must send ye tae yer room at once.”

“Yes, Mr. Murray, but Mr. McLaren was just about to do that. Do not trouble yourself overmuch. Hannah the healer has seen to me. That is where I was all this time.”

“Very good, very good. But where is Kai? Is he nae here tae bring his future bride tae his castle? And where is yer father, me lady?”

Cecily’s palms began to sweat, but she maintained a composed smile. A few more minutes, and she could retreat to a room with a warm bath and a soft bed. She longed to hide away for a few days after everything that had transpired and the knowledge of what was to come.

With a glance toward the brothers, she answered, “My father has chosen to send me with a group of guards. Unfortunately, the guards did not survive the attack. However, I was fortunate to be saved by the laird’s brothers here.”

“Kai didnae get there in time.”

Mr. Murry frowned. “I had been told by yer father in a letter that he would come with ye. We have matters tae discuss.”

Cecily swallowed hard, feeling the weight of her sister’s shoes to fill. She wished Helen were there to assist her out of this tangled web. “I apologize, but it seems his plans changed at the last minute. He had some pressing business, but I also suspect there may have been a miscommunication. I was under the impression that this journey was for the purpose of getting to know each other, not just for the wedding.”

Mr. Murray frown lingered . “I suppose it is not unheard of that a father nae share his plans with his daughter, but still, I am a little surprised that he didnae tell ye all. Yer arrival means that ye agree tae the marriage, and it will happen when it can be planned.”

Cecily exhaled slowly. This was good after all. She was trying to hide from William, and this was the best plan. She could be married before William and Adelaide returned to the castle.

“Very well. We can send word to him, and then he will come as soon as he is able.”

“Thank ye, me lady. Now, please; I beg that ye go and rest. Ye have been through much difficulty today.”

“Thank you, Mr. Murray.”

“I will accompany ye upstairs, me lady,” Rae said, offering her his arm, and she took it.

“You must call me Cecily,” she told him. “We are to be family after all.”

“Cecily.” He smiled. “Then ye must call me Rae.”

They walked up the stairs, and Cecily felt more and more relief the closer they got to her room. At least the family she had found herself in was a kind one.

*Well, except for Kai. I do not know quite what to think of him yet.*

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## CHAPTER SIX

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*A*fter Lady Cecily had slapped him and then run out, Kai had stared at the door for a few seconds, still in shock. His cheek stung, and he held it with his hand.

*What in Heaven's name? Such power in such a tiny person.*

He felt guilty, though, for teasing her so much that she'd done that to him and then left.

*She is runnin' out tae where the brigands were! The castle is close, but I should accompany her tae prevent such a thing from happenin' again. What a fool I am fer waitin' at all!*

He moved toward her when he felt a soft touch on his arm. "Leave her be, lad," Hannah said kindly, amusement in her eyes.

"She could get hurt," he returned, but Hannah shook her head.

"She is a strong one, and the castle is close. She will find it, and she will be well. Sit down. I see ye are injured."

He did as she asked without question, and wondered how many times that day someone was going to demand that he sit and how many times he was simply going to obey.

He shook his head in disbelief.

“So? Will ye tell me what happened then?” Hannah said with a chuckle. “It seems that I walked in on somethin’ important.”

“I am nae exactly sure what happened,” he said honestly, watching as Hannah put down her basket and pulled out the chair across from him to inspect his hand under the bandage. “But I think I offended the lass.”

“I can see that. She slapped ye harder than I’ve ever seen before. It must have stung.”

Hannah was smiling, and she glanced under the bandage quickly. Kai rolled his eyes.

“I see ye are enjoyin’ this.”

“But of course. I always love tae see young women standin’ up for themselves and showin’ their strength. This has been cleaned and bandaged well. Did Lady Cecily dae this fer ye?”

“Aye.” He looked down at the work, remembering the soft feel of her fingers against his rough palm. “She seemed tae ken exactly what tae dae.” He nodded to the table. “I have put yer herbs there.”

“Thank ye. But what happened?”

She leaned back in her chair and folded her hands on her lap. It seemed that Hannah was not going to let him go until he shared all. Sighing, he fiddled with the tie of the bandage.

“She was tryin’ tae help me, and she handed me a vase. But I was surprised, knocked the vase out of her hand, and when we tried tae catch it, we fell as did the vase. Me hand fell ontae a broken piece.”

Hannah clicked her tongue. “My, my, Kai. I daena think I have ever heard of ye bein’ so clumsy before.” She cocked her head to the side and lifted a gray brow. “Perhaps ye were distracted? A little surprised at just how bonnie yer betrothed is?”

Kai glowered, making Hannah laugh even more. “I confess it was a surprise. But now I ken. Now I will be focused entirely, although after what happened just now, I am nae sure that she will still want tae marry me.”

“Och, ye will find a way tae charm her, I am sure of it.” Hannah leaned forward and patted him on the cheek just like she used to do when he was a child. “Ye were always a charmin’ one.”

He let out a morbid laugh. “Now, ye must be jokin’ me.”

Hannah’s eyes were heavy with sadness. “I would never joke about that, lad. I remember the way ye were, ‘afore the battles,



‘afore yer father’s death and all this responsibility. It made a light go out inside of ye. But perhaps love will bring it back again.’

“Love? Mr. Murray and the councilmembers have decided that this is the lass I will wed. They didnae consider me feelings on the matter, nor did they consider hers, I’m sure. Who’s tae say love will result?”

“I think it possible.” Hannah smiled. “I like her. She’s a fighter.”

“She is a delicate little thing. I feel as though I could crush her by a mere flick of the finger.”

Hannah chuckled. “Ye are a large man, that is true, but she is stronger than ye think.”

He chewed on the inside of his cheek. “Dae ye think it even remotely possible that a union between a beast like meself and a delicate flower like her could ever work? I fear it will be doomed from the beginnin’.”

“Sometimes, delicate flowers have the toughest hearts. Ye shouldnae underestimate her just because she is a lass and a small one at that. Ye were small once.”

He grumbled. “It isnae that she is a lass. Only that...”

*She seems beautiful, pure, and perfect, and I still have a demon on me back. I still have fears I cannae put away.*

“Only that what?” Hannah prodded, and he shook his head.

“Nothin’.”

“She may turn out tae be the tough one, dear. In the end.”

He laughed, imagining it. “What dae ye mean?”

“I mean that that lass fought those brigands so fiercely when they grabbed hold of her, that her nails were broken, and her fingers were bruised and swollen from hittin’ them. Nae delicate flower would ever dae somethin’ like that.”

Kai grew grim at the reminder of what she’d just been through. Guilt consumed him as his mind had been on teasing her about kissing and pretending that he was going to kiss her too. She had just fought off a group of men no doubt intent on one goal.

*And I made her feel afraid again. The devil, what a dobber I am.*

“Damn it,” he said in a soft voice. “And here I am, hurtin’ her again.”

“Ye’ll learn how tae treat her, Kai. I ken it. Now, ye ought tae return tae the castle. Yer brothers are nae doubt teasin’ her about ye already.”

He stood up with a groan. “Aye, ye are likely right. Thank ye, Hannah. Good day tae ye.”

“And tae ye, Laird McLaren,” she said with a glow in her eye.

He went to the door, unsure if he would ever get used to being called laird.

“Ye will dae well, ye ken. Yer father would be proud of ye.”

He did not turn around, but the words warmed him. “Thank ye, Hannah. Until we see one another again.”

“Come back another time for me tae see the cut on yer hand. Or perhaps the lass can help ye.”

Hannah’s soft chuckle in response to Kai’s frustration only elicited another eyeroll from him. Determined to avoid any potential embarrassment, he swiftly left the cottage, mounting his horse and riding toward the castle. He had a pressing need to reach there before his brothers, fearing they might reveal something embarrassing about him in his absence. Upon arrival, he dismounted and handed his horse over to a guard before hurrying into the hall, where he expected to find his brothers, but only Mr. Murray was there.

“Yer brothers are off with the guards tae discuss what tae dae with the bodies and tae see if they can find any traces of the men who attacked the carriage. They will bring the carriage back tae the castle as well as the horses. They are well, but all the trunks but one has been ransacked.”

“Very good.” Kai poured himself a drink, and then he turned back to Mr. Murray.

“Murray, was there nae a father tae accompany the lass? I thought ye mentioned that ‘they’ would be arrivin’ taeday.”

“Aye, so I did.” Murray pulled at his beard as he thought. “But the lass told me that there was a miscommunication of sorts. That her father had a last-minute business matter tae attend tae, and that she was under the impression that the trip was only about gettin’ tae ken one another. Either the father didnae tell her the truth of it, or he too was confused. And it is nae Lady Adelaide has come, but her sister, Lady Cecily. Yet again, there has been a confusion.”

“Aye, she told me. How odd.” He threw back the whisky in his glass, and then he poured himself another. “But I suppose she and I have that in common at least. That we didnae ken we were tae be wed so soon.”

He threw Murray a glare and the man sighed. “I ken, I ken. The other councilmembers wanted tae keep it from ye, lad. Nae me. But now it is all out in the open. Ye can wed whenever ye see fit.”

He laughed. “Whenever I see fit? Are ye certain? I wouldnae be surprised if the council would like tae decide that too.”

He swirled the liquid in his glass as he waited for Murray’s answer. “Aye, but I have told them that ye may decide. The only thing we ask is that it be soon. Nae further than a month away.”

*A month.* Kai had a month in which to get to know his betrothed, the woman who had just slapped him and run away from him. He had a month to see if they were even suited, but he was certain that neither her father nor the council could be dissuaded at this point. And he was also certain that she would not like to be riding back to England any time soon, after her harrowing adventure that day.

“Fine.” He finished the rest of the whisky and put the glass down. “Then we will have tae send word tae her father. And I suppose we ought tae have a celebration.”

“Aye, ye will. Tonight is a good start, but I dae believe we can plan somethin’ proper in a weeks’ time, for the village tae be present tae celebrate the marriage of the new laird.”

Kai nodded, annoyed that it was all happening so fast, but he found that he was somehow more accustomed to the idea. Now, his mind was filled with the curious lass who had practically burst into his life. Marriage would certainly not be boring if it was to her.

“Good.” Murray smiled, and then with a lowering of the head, he left the room and left Kai on his own.

Some hours later Rae and Torion met Kai in his study. He’d been making marks on the maps of the area, after the guards had informed him of the carriage whereabouts, and he’d been thinking about who the brigands could have been. He had also drafted a few letters to neighboring clans, asking if they too had had recent troubles. He looked up when Rae and Torion entered the room.

“Och, so ye like tae come in unannounced, dae ye?” he asked drily, returning his eyes to the map for a moment before he put down his pen and leaned back. “What is it? Any luck findin’ anything?”

“There are hoofmarks and footsteps, but we lost them after a few miles away from the accident. Besides, it is growin’ dark soon,” Torion said, coming to plop himself in a chair in front of their father’s large wooden desk. He leaned back and kicked his booted feet up to lay on the edge of it, and Kai chuckled.

“Makin’ yerself comfortable, I see.”

“But of course. Ye may be laird, but ye are still our brother.” Rae sat down as well with a teasing look, and Kai feared what they were going to say.

“So, I have made the preparations that the dinner be a grander one tonight. There will be a greater celebration later.”

“Ye seem tae have easily come around tae the notion that ye are tae be a husband,” Torion said, and Kai shook his head.

“It wasnae easy; I can assure ye. But I see nae way out of it at the moment. She too has been forced, and now that she has been attacked, there is nae way in Hell that I can send her back to England. She will stay here with us where she is safe. And the council will have their way, nae matter what. We will wed.”

Rae nodded, glancing at Torion. “Well, are ye pleased with her? She is very bonny, and she seems to be strong as well, the

way she survived the attack from the brigands while so many others fell.”

“Aye, she is that.” Feeling his body warm again with embarrassment at his strong reaction to her, Kai looked down at the papers on his desk and began to scribble something.

“So, dae ye think it will be a good match?” Rae asked.

“It doesnae seem that me feelings matter a wit tae those men. They will dae what they will, so it doesnae matter what I feel on the subject. I only hope that I daenaе terrify her.” He looked up at that, surprised to hear the genuine tone in his voice.

He rubbed at his jaw from where she’d hit him, and Torion frowned. “What happened tae ye?” he asked. “Yer actin’ like ye’ve been hit.”

For a second, no one spoke. Kai’s mouth fell open in an attempt to explain, but no words came out. Rae leaned forward with a surprised look, and then he asked, “Kai, did the lass hit ye?”

He cleared his throat and swallowed. “Aye, perhaps.”

His brothers burst into laughter. Torion was the first to speak, “Nae wonder she ran off towards the castle like she did, on her own. It seems that she would rather thrust herself back intae danger than sit around with ye a minute longer in the healer’s cottage. What did ye dae?”

Kai reached for the bottle of whisky on his desk, and he poured them each a dram, passing them two glasses. He was humiliated, and his brothers' entertainment on the subject wasn't helping.

"I teased her, and she didnae like it, all right? Let us just leave it at that."

"Kai McLaren, teasin' a lass." Rae shook his head and clicked his tongue, reaching for the whisky glass. "It has been a long time since I have heard of him daein' any of that. Perhaps there is somethin' ye like about the lass."

*I dae. She has spirit, knowledge, elegance. But she is so much above me.*

"I shouldnae have teased her. The slap surprised her, though. And that is why I think she ran off. I ought tae go apologize tae her."

"Aye, I think so." Torion removed his feet from the desk and leaned forward, annoying Kai with his smug smile. "I think I will like this Sassenach after all. She is very well-mannered, for she gave nothing away. Only that she agreed with ye that yer marriage is only in name, nae in heart."

Kai stiffened. It was hard enough for him to be forced to wed someone, but at least he was the laird of a clan and a man. He could do exactly as he pleased. Marriage would do little to stop him. But for a woman, it was something else entirely. Lady Cecily had been removed from her home to a new home and a new land, new culture. She was now entirely beholden to her husband, and her father had not even accompanied her. Kai



found he did not like the man for that. How could he have left his daughter on her own?

“Well, she is right about that. I only wish that she willnae be too unhappy.”

His brothers grinned at each other before they turned to face him again, and he rolled his eyes. They were almost like twins for they were close enough in age, and they always did things together.

“What is it?”

“Only that I think ye will get far more than ye bargained fer brother. Like we told ye before, ye were starin’ at her like I have never seen ye stare at a lass. There is somethin’ different about her, and it is nae just her beauty. I can tell. Ye may be very happy in this marriage after all.” Rae smiled.

Kai groaned, and then he waved his hands towards them. “Get out now, the both of ye. Ye are botherin’ me, and I want tae send these letters ‘afore the dinner tonight.”

Laughing, they both stood up and went to the door. Torion gave him one last glance, “Very well. But think on what we said, Kai.” Kai was surprised by the sudden change in his cheerful brother’s voice. “The captivity was two years ago now. And even though Father has now passed, none of this means that ye cannae be happy. Dinnae close yer heart tae it all. I think ye might find just what yer lookin’ fer.”

Before Kai could respond, they both snuck out of his study and slammed the door shut. Kai stared at it for a while, his shoulders sinking. He had never hoped for such a thing, and he knew that he didn't deserve it. Why did his brothers feel that he did?

He grumbled to himself as he rose from his seat, knowing that he needed to go prepare for dinner. He would marry the lass, and he would be the husband he was meant to be as well as the laird, doing all that was right and good, putting his duties above himself. Kai tried his best to suppress the idea of finding love, he would not dare admit he craved it even to himself. No, he could never hope for love, and certainly not the love of a good woman who knew how to put a man like himself in his place. But at least now he knew that marriage, even if it had been forced upon him, would not be as terrible as he'd once thought.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Eecily had barely settled into her room when a maid arrived, rousing her from her rest. “Forgive me, me lady, but the laird instructed me to bring hot water.”

“Of course. How kind.” She smiled at the young, dark-haired woman who looked far more nervous than she should be.

Slipping out of bed, her body and face aching slightly, she wondered how disheveled she appeared. There was to be a dinner that evening, and she couldn’t fathom attending it looking as she did. In fact, upon entering her room earlier, she had deliberately avoided glancing at herself in the looking-glass, fearing what she might see.

“There ye are, me lady. Ye can begin, but I will return with more buckets.”

“Thank you. Oh, may I know your name?”

“It’s Dora, me lady.” The young girl curtsied. “Might I help ye with yer dress?”

“Oh yes, please. Just the buttons, and the laces, and then I can do the rest myself.”

“Very good.” Dora flurried to her back where she undid the buttons and helped to loosen the laces of her stays, and then Cecily was on her own.

With a sense of relief, Cecily approached the bath by the large fire. As she sank into the warm water, a sigh of contentment escaped her lips. Just then, Dora reappeared, silently adding two more buckets of warm water before disappearing once more. Cecily closed her eyes, savoring the soothing warmth on her skin. It had indeed been an exhausting day.

Reflecting on the events that had unfolded, Cecily couldn't help but marvel at the challenges she had faced. From fighting for her life against strangers, to lying about her identity, to planning a marriage to a man she barely knew—she was navigating a bewildering web of deceit and uncertainty. Her thoughts drifted to her sister, Helen, who had also lived a life of intrigue and deception. Yet, Helen had managed to find love, despite the risks she had taken.

Cecily felt a glimmer of hope. Could she find love in this unusual situation as well? She pondered the man she had slapped after he tried to kiss her. Her thoughts wavered between skepticism and curiosity. She knew firsthand the dangers of men, their self-serving nature and thirst for power. Helen's experience with her husband Cory had been an exception, and Cecily couldn't easily accept that Kai might be different from other men.

Kai likely had a dark side underneath any charms she might have noticed, even if his eyes spoke different words and even if his touch softened her heart.

And even if he was very handsome, far more than she'd thought upon first and such sudden acquaintance, he still had a man's heart underneath it all. It would show itself in the end, and so she knew that she had to be careful. She could not allow herself to feel anything.

*Why should I feel anything? Why should I even be concerned about that?*

She blushed, even though she was on her own, and she began to furiously rub soap over her skin, annoyed that that had even been in her thoughts. Why indeed was she worried that she should feel anything when it came to the bear man who had made her fall, ripped her dress, and had tried to kiss her?

*"Would ye like tae be?"* Those words rung in her mind, the ones he'd said just after she'd told him that no, she'd never been kissed.

Had she been a bolder woman, like her sister, she might have said yes. She might have embraced his broad shoulders and welcomed his kiss. But she was not that woman. She was Cecily, timid and fearful. Determinedly, she pushed these thoughts aside and focused on finishing her bath. The maid entered a few minutes later to help her to dress.

"It is tae be a big celebration this eve, me lady. The other maids have said so."

Her heart started thumping away so hard she feared that Dora could hear it. "Oh? I did not realize. How could they have

prepared something so quickly? It has only been hours since I arrived.”

“Well, ye are tae be the laird’s lady! They have been hopin’ fer this since he took on the lairdship.”

In the looking-glass, Cecily could see Dora’s blushing face as she buttoned the back of her gown. “Ye are a lucky woman, me lady. The laird is a handsome man. There were many a woman in the villages who hoped he’d look their way. Everyone downstairs was surprised that he’d chosen a Sassenach.”

*Sassenach.* Cecily had heard one of Kai’s brothers using the word earlier, but she hadn’t stopped to ask what it meant.

“Sassenach?”

“Aye, an English person.”

“Oh, I see.” She pressed a hand to her belly, hoping that she looked well enough for the large event that Dora spoke of.

Even if she’d been trained as a proper young woman, she had not had a mother for some years, and she still could never be as social or confident as Helen in front of a large group of people. And in this case, it was all strangers.

“Ye look lovely. This is a fine gown,” Dora said, brushing the shoulders and smiling at Cecily’s reflection.

“Thank you.” She let out a breath trying to calm herself.

It was the gown that Helen had given her. It still didn't quite fit her, since she was still thin, but Hannah had done well in tying it back and making it look as though it did fit.

“Ye will just need tae fill out a bit for it tae look absolutely perfect.” Dora touched her waist, and Cecily nodded.

“Yes, perhaps this feast this evening will be just the thing to help me do that.”

Dora barked out a laugh. “Quite right, me lady. The kitchen has been workin' furiously. Ye willnae starve, that is fer certain!”

She smiled, glad that everyone she had met thus far was so kind and welcoming. It was only her betrothed whom she was afraid of seeing. “The hall can get a bit chilly, so ye must wear this tartan.”

Dora draped a tartan with yellow, green, and red colors over her shoulders, and she belted it around her. It was warm and comfortable, and for some reason, it made Cecily feel suddenly more at home. The feeling was so overwhelming that it nearly made her cry.

“Thank you,” she said softly, and Dora cooed.

“Ye daena need tae thank me, lass. It is only me daein' me duty.”

But still, Cecily had not experienced kindness like that since her father died. She and Helen had been left alone with Anthony, and then now, the past year with William had felt like a lifetime. But right there, right now, in a strange land and in a strange place, she felt more at home than she'd felt in years.

“Now, ye should go. They will be waitin’ for ye, nae doubt.”

“Thank ye.”

She took her leave of the room a few seconds after Dora left, but as soon as she opened the door, she gasped when she saw the figure of a tall, bear-like man, waiting just outside it.



“Heavens, I’m sorry,” Kai’s voice wavered, his demeanor uncharacteristically unsure. The sight of the lass in her fine gown, as opposed to her battle-worn state earlier, left him stumbling over his words and blushing like a lad of fifteen. Cursing inwardly, he rubbed the back of his neck, feeling an awkward heat rise.

“I only wanted tae come and escort ye down, seein’ as I didnae dae me duty earlier and escort ye tae the castle.”

“Oh, that is nothing, Lai-... I mean Kai. Really, you must not think of it. The castle was not far.” She paused then and bit her lip, and Kai’s gaze flicked there for a moment before they returned to her lovely, mesmerizing green eyes.



“Still, it wasnae right.” He began to fiddle with the bandage on his hand, and she looked down at it.

“How does it feel?”

“Very well, thank ye. Ye did a good job.” He cleared his throat and shifted on his feet, feeling far more awkward than he ever had in his own castle. “How did ye ken how tae dae such things?”

“Like I told you before,” she replied, shutting the door and moving to the side of him, “it is not wise for young ladies to only be taught certain things, certain useless things such as dancing and embroidery. I chose to learn more.”

The scent of her soap, the very soap made in his castle, surrounded him. Strangely, her presence felt comforting, a sense of home within his own walls. “Well, I think that’s very wise of ye. And useful, as ye say.”

“Thank you. Well, shall we go down to dinner?” She looked impassive, but there was something about the look in her eyes that told him she was nervous.

Was her apprehension due to his earlier actions or the attack they had both experienced? He observed the developing bruise on her face, but even with the mark, she looked lovely. Dora had done a fine job with her hair, and the gown she wore, while fitting for a lady of her status, seemed slightly too large on her slight frame.

*She is thin, as if she hasnae eaten in some time.*

The idea of that bothered him, but he couldn't dwell on it in that moment. He had to take her down to dinner and to make his apologies.

“Aye. Let us go.” He offered her his arm, and hesitantly, she took it.

But her hand laid gracefully on his, and then they began to walk down the passage.

“I hope ye will be comfortable, lass.”

She nodded, her eyes downcast, but the motion held a wealth of unspoken emotions. He tried to order his thoughts—after everything that had transpired, he found it unexpectedly difficult to engage in conversation, especially with women. Helen was an exception, and her rapport with Cory was uniquely strong. Helen had a way of drawing a man out of his shell.

Descending the stairs, the aroma of the sumptuous meal wafted through the air, and he hoped Lady Cecily would find it to her liking. It might differ from her accustomed fare, but it was hearty and nourishing, especially during the cold months. The castle's chill was pervasive, but with her on his arm, it felt remarkably warmer, almost as if her presence had thawed the air around them.

*Speak tae her. Apologize, ye dobber. It will make things easier in future.*

Gathering his resolve, he cleared his throat, knowing he had faced battles, captivity, wounds, and the loss of his parents, yet none of those experiences had unnerved him like this delicate woman before him.

“I must ask yer forgiveness,” he said quickly and suddenly, wishing that he’d spoken a little more confidently.

“Oh,” she said calmly and softly but said nothing else.

“Aye, I apologize fer me teasin’ earlier. I didnae mean any harm; I promise ye, lass. I also promise ye that I will never touch ye without yer permission.”

He heard her exhale, and her shoulders sank. He wondered if it was with relief.

“Thank you, Kai. That is very kind of you. I suppose I ought to apologize that I slapped you.” She shrugged. “I have never slapped anyone before, so I surprised myself when it happened.”

He couldn’t help but chuckle, the sound resonating through the halls—an unexpected note of happiness amidst the castle’s stony walls.

“Ye surprised me too, if that helps ye. But ye daena need tae apologize. I was bein’ an arse and deserved it.”

Her soft giggle made him pause. It was so youthful and innocent, yet there had been something from her bearing from the beginning that showed she carried a weight of some kind. A weight he suddenly felt the desire to shoulder alongside her.

“Well, I don’t know about that, but thank you again.” She turned to face him now that they were stood outside of the large oaken doors of the main hall.

He frowned, listening to the sounds inside the hall. “It sounds far busier than I expected it tae be.”

“So it does.” She looked at the door, that nervous look returning to her face.

“Daenae worry, lass. Ye daenae have tae say anythin’ tae anyone if ye daenae wish. The dinner is only tae celebrate ye, tae celebrate us, nae tae make ye become the victim of incessant questionin’ by me brothers.”

She smiled at that. “They have already done so.”

He groaned. “Daenae say that.”

She laughed again. “Don’t worry. They were very kind as well.”

He nodded. “Good. I am glad.” Breathing out, he put a hand on the handle of the door. “Shall we enter?”

“Yes.”

With a determined stance, she straightened, and he opened the door for her. She stepped inside, and he followed her. As they entered, the entire hall turned toward them, and a cheer resonated through the crowd. It appeared as though the entire village had been invited to the dinner.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Cecily had attended gatherings before—balls, dinners, and soirees back in London. But the bustling hall she stepped into right then felt far more alive and vibrant than any of those formal affairs. Her breath caught, eyes widening in awe. It was one thing to meet her betrothed’s family, but this was an entirely different experience. The entire village seemed to have gathered, and each person’s gaze was fixed on them with wide smiles, drinks in hand. The crowd erupted in a lively cheer as they entered.

Rae and Torion stood at the forefront of the revelry, holding large tankards of ale, their grins extending from ear to ear. Cecily couldn’t help but be taken aback by their similarity in appearance; they seemed to mirror each other’s actions in perfect harmony. They approached her and Kai, and she glanced at her betrothed, only to find him wearing an expression of anger, bordering on fury.

“What in God’s name did ye dae?” he asked them, his voice low and dangerous.

His large fists were clenched at his sides, and Cecily could imagine what a terror the man could be if he turned his rage on someone. Rae and Torion laughed, likely used to their brother’s moods.

Rae said, "It was Murray's idea, but we sent riders tae the closest village tae let them ken a feast was afoot. They brought food tae join in the festivities, and Cook had already been preparin' since she'd been told of the lass' comin' afore ye did."

Kai gritted his teeth, and Cecily could see a muscle tick in his bearded, strong jaw. "Ye shouldnae have done this. The lass has been through a lot today, and here we are, actin' as if nothin' has happened."

"Do not worry on my account," she said, placing a hand on his strong arm, surprising herself. He looked down at it, and quickly she pulled away, shocked at the intimate gesture. "It is kind that so many people want to celebrate us."

Rae and Torion turned to her, their smiles now for her. "Ye are a good lass." Torion winked. "So, ye should take yer place at the head table, and then Kai can make the introductions fer ye. He will make a toast as well. As the laird. Enjoy yer evenin'."

"Very well." Kai offered her his arm again, and she took it.

Together, they pushed through the crowd. Cecily, remembering her training as the young daughter of an earl, smiled and greeted people kindly as they passed, but she had never been so nervous before. Everyone was strange and different. They wore different clothing, had different accents, and she was in a strange, faraway land not her own.

*But I will get used to it soon enough. Helen has done so, and she seems very happy.*

They reached the elevated head table, which overlooked the hall's other tables. Kai's large hand guided her gently to her seat by pressing against her back. She swallowed, feeling the heat of his touch through her thick gown, an unexpected sensation that heightened the nervous tingle at the back of her neck. As she sat down, he positioned himself in front of the empty seat next to hers. Two tankards filled with ale were already set on the table before them—he pushed one toward her and held the other in his hand.

“Friends!” His voice boomed through the hall, and the chatter lowered as everyone turned to their laird. “Thank ye for comin’ tae celebrate the arrival of me betrothed and our future weddin’.”

Attempting to calm her racing heart, Cecily took slow breaths, but the reality of the situation began to sink in. The weight of what she was doing, the deception she was perpetuating, and the potential consequences weighed heavily on her. She was lying to so many people, usurping Adelaide's rightful place. Someday, this web of lies could come crashing down around her. But for now, she would smile and agree with whatever anyone said.

“Me bride is from a faraway land, and so we will make her feel welcome.” He turned to look down at her, and there was the ghost of a smile upon his lips.

*Lips that nearly kissed mine.*

Cecily blushed, turning her gaze back to the people, annoyed at her own strange thoughts.



“She will come tae love the Highland people and our ways, and we will love her in return. Tae Clan McLaren and tae the future Lady McLaren!” he cried, lifting his tankard, and everyone did the same with a cheer.

She lifted hers as well, and then the room was silent for a moment before everyone drank. “Sit, eat!” Kai said. “Join in the merriment.”

Then, he sat down, and the sounds of the crowd filled the room as everyone sat to enjoy their meal. Soon, servants appeared with full plates, placing them in front of her and Kai.

“My goodness,” she said, her eyes wide as she stared down at it. “So much food.”

He grinned, and she noticed just how handsome he was, when he was not angry and trying to be as frightening as a bear.

“And ye deserve it. It looks like they daenae eat as much as they should in England,” he added.

She looked down at her food, a little embarrassed.

*So he has noticed the way I look gaunt and thin. That will be difficult to explain.*

“Forgive me,” he said softly, his voice impossibly closer. “I only meant that ye should eat as much as ye like, lass. Ye will hear nae complaints from me.”

She smiled then and began to eat, again feeling more comfortable in a strange castle than she had in her own home.

“Well, I dae hope ye will stay a while. Unless ye mean tae return tae England afore we wed.”

A little warmth spread in her chest, and she felt lighter and happier. Someone wanted her. Even if that someone didn't realize who exactly she was, but they still wanted her. She was not a hindrance or an annoyance, but she was the person they wanted to be around.

“You are very kind, Kai,” she said again, after swallowing a lovely bit of meat. “I will stay, if you do not mind. As I told you, I believe it had been communicated that I was to return after this trip, but I fear that I am not quite ready to do so. I would rather stay here, where it is safe. After today, I am afraid to brave those wilds again on my own.”

“Och, I understand ye.” She thought she saw him attempt to put his hand atop hers, but then it returned to his side of the table again.

Sitting at the laird's table, surrounded by the festivities, made them feel secluded from the crowd below. The music played, people ate and drank, and they seemed like the only two souls in the world. The atmosphere was warm and secure, and despite the weight of her deception, Cecily found herself able to relax.

“Will ye take a sip from yer ale?” he asked. “Or perhaps ale is nae the proper thing for a lady. I can ask for somethin' else.”

He turned away, but she touched his arm. “No, I should like to try it.”

She grasped the tankard, and she surprised herself with how heavy it was at first. With a smile, Kai leaned over to press a hand underneath it to help her, but she waved him away.

“I can do it.” She then lifted it to her lips and took a sip.

It was cool and slightly sweet and fizzy. When she put it down again, she blinked at him in surprise.

“I have never been given the chance to taste ale, but I find I rather like it.” She grinned, happy that she was free enough to do as she pleased. There would be no one to stop her for the sake of propriety or simply for the sake of control. Kai laughed at her, the sound rumbling in his chest.

“What is it?” she asked, and he pointed.

“Ye have a bit of foam atop yer lip.”

“Oh,” she said flushing, trying to lick it off, but then he reached across to her mouth, his thumb extended.

“May I?” he asked, and to her surprise, she nodded.

Then, his thumb moved across her upper lip, rough against her skin. Their eyes met, and she sucked in a breath as she felt a

new wave of heat in her belly. When he pulled away, she felt bereft, longing once more for his touch.

*Do not be a fool. He was only being kind.*

“There ye are, lass,” he said, his voice lower than it had been before, and his eyes slightly darker.

He put his thumb to his mouth and sucked briefly before he took it out, and Cecily’s mouth went dry.

“Thank you.” She turned back to her food then and began to eat.

It was best not to explore such odd sensations. She was only playing a part, and once the part was played, she could find Helen, and then she could figure out what she was meant to do with her life.

Kai continued to lead most of the conversation, discussing the clan and asking questions. Despite his words, her ears were still ringing with the memory of that simple touch. Why had such a basic gesture ignited a surge of heated emotions? He had touched her before, but this was different. He had never touched her mouth, let alone with his thumb. Somehow, it felt even more intimate and gentle than a kiss. His subsequent action of tasting his own thumb only deepened the lingering heat, leaving a lasting imprint in her mind.

After a while, the clanspeople began to rise from their seats, pairing off to dance to the lively tunes. Cecily watched in amazement as men and women laughed, touched, and moved

in harmony to the distinct rhythm. The interactions were far more open and expressive than the decorum she was accustomed to in England.

“What dae ye think of it, lass?” Kai asked from her side, sounding amused.

She stammered a little, embarrassed to have been gawking so. “I find I do not exactly have a ready opinion. But it is certainly different from what I am used to. The dances we do in England are perhaps far too proper.”

He chuckled low. “I have never been tae England, but I could imagine that tae be true.”

Cecily’s gaze widened in mild horror as Rae and Torion made their way through the crowd of revelers, heading toward them. She closed her eyes briefly, trying to steady her breath in anticipation of what they might ask.

“Kai, Lady Cecily, please dae come and dance. I ken the people will want tae see it.”

Cecily swallowed nervously. “I do not know how to dance this dance, I’m afraid.”

“Och, it is simple as anythin’,” Rae replied. “And most people here are drunk off their arses, so they willnae notice if ye make a mistake.”

Kai turned to her, and he shrugged. “What say ye, lass? I can teach ye. The dance is especially fun once ye’ve had a few pints in ye.”

Cecily wanted to be bold like Helen. Ever since she was a child, she had wanted it. And so, despite her fear, she picked up her tankard, drank the rest of the ale at the bottom and stood.

“Very well, then, I will do it.”

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## CHAPTER NINE

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*K*ai felt a warmth flicker within his heart as Cecily stood up, wiping the foam from her lip with the back of her hand. He grinned up at her, and his brothers cheered, recognizing the captivating nature of this unexpected guest. She continued to surprise him, transitioning from moments of fragility to moments of bravery without hesitation.

“Ready?” she asked him, still standing, looking as if she was trying her best to bolster her courage.

His heart softened. “Aye, lass. I am ready.” He took her hand, and he led her down the steps towards the dancing.

He could feel her fingers tightening around his hand. “Like I said,” she whispered, “I do not know this dance, and so I will likely fail.”

He whispered back, “It doesn’t matter. Like me brother said, everyone is bloody drunk off their arse.”

Cecily looked a bit uncertain, possibly not understanding his terminology, but he hoped his words had a soothing effect. She smiled as he drew her closer to the swirling couples.

“Just follow me,” he said, pulling her closer, his hands on her waist and beginning to jump in time to the music.

A small shriek escaped her lips, and she did her best to join in, her gaze fixed on her feet as they navigated around other couples who were more adept at the dance. Her breath quickened as she struggled to keep up with the lively pace.

The dance shifted, and Kai stepped back, indicating for her to hold his arm as they spun in a circle. Their feet continued to move rapidly, and Cecily seemed to be growing fatigued.

When the song ended, she was breathing very hard, and she put a hand to her chest.

“I’m sorry, but I suppose I will need to practice that dance if I am to do it with any success.”

Kai beamed at her, and he shrugged. “Ye were perfect, but ye are right. Perhaps a bit of practice will dae us both good. I have never danced with someone who didnae ken the dances, and I want tae make sure that I am helpin’ ye properly. I hope I didnae hurt ye.”

His concern was evident in his gaze as he looked down at her. He had to be cautious with his movements due to his size.

She shook her head, her cheeks blushing furiously, and she stepped away from him. “Not at all. But perhaps I ought to go and sit down again. I could do with another tankard.”



He laughed and led her away from the dancing. “Aye, lass, I can dae that.”

After a few more hours of revelry, Kai escorted Cecily to her room. He reflected on the evening and the joy he had experienced. Most of the time had been spent with Cecily, and he’d introduced her to some of his closer friends from the village. They had been fascinated by her presence, asking questions and listening intently to her responses, undoubtedly charmed by her accent.

She had managed everything with poise and grace, even in moments of nervousness. As they walked, he noticed her fatigue; she was undoubtedly ready for rest.

“Ye have had a long day, lass. Ye amazed me with how well ye spoke tae everyone and with such patience. I ken many of them were too drunk tae think properly, but ye were kind tae them.”

She laughed. “Why should I not be kind? I do not begrudge them their drink. I too enjoyed myself.” Her face did look flushed from the ale, and he noticed that her lips were a becoming shade of red.

Clearing his throat, he averted his gaze. He had promised not to touch her without her consent, and he would uphold that commitment. He hoped she would grant him that permission, even though their marriage was based on a lie. As unconventional as their situation was, he found himself drawn to his Sassenach bride in more ways than he expected.

“I’m glad. Now, I hope ye have a good night.” He paused in front of her door, and he opened it for her.

“Thank you, Kai. Rest well.” She passed by him and shut the door behind her.

Waiting only a brief moment in the corridor, Kai pondered the unusual day he’d had before making his way back to the hall, where the festivities were still in full swing. It would be several hours before everyone retired or settled into makeshift sleeping spots. Rae had already retired, leaving Kai to invite Torion for a drink in the library. It was a place they both cherished, a space their parents had adored and spent much time in together.

“Ye seemed tae have a good eve, brother,” Torion said, walking beside him down the dim passageway, torchlights flickering as they passed them.

“I did. As did ye. I think Cecily enjoyed herself, even if ye forced her intae that dance.”

He threw Torion an annoyed look, but he couldn’t be mad about it. It gave him a chance to be close to her, to see a look of concentration upon her face, and to watch her try to be bold.

“If we hadnae, then we would never have seen just how bold she was, risin’ up and finishin’ off that tankard as if it was nothin’. I confess I will never forget that sight for as long as I live.”

A little pang of jealousy coursed through him. “Ye had better forget it, brother,” Kai said, surprised at the sudden possessiveness.

Torion laughed and shook his head. “I see ye are warmin’ tae the idea of marriage very well. Just as I thought ye should. Good, good. Then consider it wiped from me mind.”

They halted outside the library door. Kai let out a sigh, annoyed with himself for revealing his jealousy so openly. What right did he have to be jealous? They weren’t yet married, and he had known Cecily for only a few hours. Pushing open the door, he was about to say something to Torion when both their words faded upon witnessing the scene before them. An angel, it seemed, had descended from heaven and settled in their library, seated in an armchair and engrossed in a book.

It was Cecily, lost in her reading, her golden hair cascading around her like a halo. Wrapped in a bright white night robe, she emitted an almost ethereal glow. She was in his home, and she was to be wed to him – the dark, brooding laird haunted by his nightmares.

“Get out, Torion,” Kai said, for he did not wish to share the sight of this angel with anyone else.

He could hear his brother chuckling as he took his leave.



Cecily had not been able to sleep, and so she sat in the most beautiful library she’d ever seen, reading a book in front of the warm fire. But her mind couldn’t focus. It could only think

about the evening she'd just had, and how much fun she'd had even though she was living a terrible lie, and even though she wasn't sure where William was, and if he meant to come after her.

*But he thinks you are dead. That is why he left you there with those brigands.*

Oddly, the notion brought her comfort. If he thought her dead, he would likely return to fulfill the marriage contract he'd intended. Marrying promptly seemed the best course of action. She felt guilty about deceiving Kai, who had shown a degree of kindness in his own way. His kindness had been evident that night, even though she remained skeptical of men. But he didn't deserve a deceitful bride, yet her desperation was overpowering.

She had lived in a prison for the last year, in possession of a terrible secret, that would cost her her life if she shared it with anyone, and it was time for that to be over. No longer could she stomach living with William and being under his thumb.

"Lass," a voice said, and she jumped so much, she nearly dropped her book to the floor.

Kai swiftly reached out and caught it, gingerly placing it on the table before her. "Apologies," he murmured sheepishly. "Sorry," he said a little sheepishly. "I thought ye noticed that we'd come intae the library."

Cecily, blushing from being caught out in thoughts of him and her deception, looked up at him. He looked red too from the amount of drink he'd consumed, but his eyes were clear, and

there was a smile on his face as he looked at her. Why did he have to smile when he looked at her? It made her lie all that much more difficult.

“No, I did not, but it is no matter. It is your house after all. I couldn’t sleep, and so I came here.” She hesitated, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear, and realizing that her hair was completely loose in front of a strange man. “I hope that’s all right.”

“Of course! Dae what ye will. Make yerself comfortable. May I sit with ye?”

She nodded, a flutter of excitement coursing through her at the thought of him staying with her, even though she was clad in her night robe. He settled into the chair adjacent to hers, looking entirely at ease despite his imposing size. He smiled at her, and she swallowed nervously. In England, this situation would warrant immediate marriage if discovered.

*You are already to wed, you fool.*

She pulled on a strand of her hair. “You know, it is rather improper that you are here with me while I am in my nightclothes.”

He grinned wider and chuckled softly. Lifting his hands into the air, he said, “I’m nae sure why it should matter. We are tae be wed after all.”

“Oh, that is true, I suppose,” she said, looking down at her hands to avoid blushing so much in front of him.

Hopefully, soon, she would stop blushing, and she would be able to answer him firmly and confidently. The way Helen no doubt spoke to her husband.

“Did ye have a good time, lass?” he asked, then, in a soft tone.

She wasn't sure when he'd started calling her lass, but the word made her feel warm and wet inside, as if she was finally home and safe, and good things were going to happen.

“Yes, I did, very much so.” She couldn't help but smile at that. “Everyone was so kind and welcoming. Although I'm still embarrassed about that dance.” She made a face, and Kai shook his head.

“Nay. How could ye ken how tae dance like that? It is so different fer ye than what yer used tae.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Well, then, is that the reason ye cannae sleep, or is there somethin' else?”

The intensity in his gaze made Cecily feel as though she were the center of his attention, a sensation she'd rarely experienced from anyone other than Helen. The alcohol had loosened his inhibitions, yet his eyes held genuine curiosity and interest.

She fidgeted with the tie of her robe, meeting his gaze. “It is only that this is a new place for me. I did have a good time; I

promise.”

“Good, good.” He nodded.

She added, “But I can see just how very different we are, even down to the dances we do. Might I show you a dance from England?”

He lifted a brow. “Would that make ye feel better?” he asked.

“Yes.”

With sudden enthusiasm, he stood and extended a large hand toward her. Cecily smiled and took it. His grip was rough, yet strong and warm. Rising to her feet, she led him to a more open area of the library. He positioned himself uncertainly, arms at his sides.

She chuckled. “Don’t worry. You look as if you’re about to head to your execution.”

“Och, nay,” he said, rubbing at his neck. “I just have never danced this dance before.”

“Then, you will learn exactly how I felt. I will teach you the allemande.”

He nodded, and then with a smile, she adjusted his stance so that they were standing side by side. She took his hand.

“Follow me,” she said, and then she kicked up her leg, and he followed.

They turned, hands joined, executing the steps in reverse. Together, they spun in a circle, hands their only point of contact.

“You see? That was why your dance was so shocking to me. In a dance in England, we only touch hands, and it would be unseemly to do more.”

“I see,” he said in a low, rough voice, and she could feel her heart beating faster.

They finished the dance, and then they were stood facing one another again. “So, that is the allemande. Very delicate, very proper.”

She could see his big Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. “Aye. But what if someone were tae dae somethin’ improper in a ballroom in England in a dance?”

Her breath caught, and her mouth felt dry. “What dae ye mean?”

He shrugged, and then took a slight step closer. “What would happen if someone touched more than just hands? What if they did somethin’ like this?”

He reached out for her waist and pulled her close. She gasped, looking up at him, surprised at the sudden movement.



“I don’t know what would happen,” she said, not afraid, only shocked, only a million other things.

He sucked in a breath, his eyes fixed on her. “What would ye want tae happen, lass?” he asked.

Before she could respond, Torion burst into the room, causing them to pull away from each other.

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## CHAPTER TEN

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*K*ai's hand still tingled from the warmth of Cecily's touch. He felt like a scoundrel, having promised her he wouldn't touch her without her consent and yet breaking that promise. "What is it, Torion?" he demanded, irritation lacing his words as he turned toward his brother.

He paused when he saw him, for Torion looked pale, his chest heaving for breath. "There is an emergency council meetin'. Ye had better come, brother, and now."

Kai looked down at Cecily's surprised face, and the moment was gone. He now needed to tend to business no matter how little he wanted to.

"I'm sorry, lass, but I must go."

"Of course," she said, backing away, even though each step hurt him a little. "Please go."

He nodded sharply and then turned toward his brother, rushing out with him into the passage.

“They are in the study, for only a few of them could be roused from their beds at this hour. Some are away on business,” Torion said.

“What is it about?” Kai asked as they raced down the hall.

“Ye will see. It is better they speak tae ye.”

Kai nodded, though anxiety churned within him. Council meetings signaled grave matters: war, alliances, deaths. The prospect of dealing with any of these unsettled him deeply.

Upon entering the study, the door ajar, Kai halted at the sight of the ancient robed council members seated within, their eyes turning towards him.

“Laird,” Mr. Murray said, motioning him to sit in his chair. “It is time we speak.”

“Aye.” He stood tall and walked to his seat, wishing that the title had not been given to him as early as it had been. He wasn’t ready, and it was times like this that made him want to scream. “What’s happened?”

Mr. Murray looked pale, and tired as did the others. “We have roused those we could from their beds for a meeting. It seems that an enemy clan has been spotted nearby. We are afraid this means that an attack is imminent. And if word is spreading of yer soon-tae-be marriage, then they may be hopin’ tae attack afore that happens, and thus ruin the line of McLaren.”

Another council member shook his head, and he pointed at Kai. “We must be certain that the line is secure. We must hasten the marriage tae the Sassenach lass.”

Kai frowned, looking between the members. “Is that what ye all think? That a quicker marriage will be the best fer the clan?”

“Aye,” Mr. Murray said, nodding. “So, I think we will have ye wed within the week, instead of waiting the couple of weeks as originally planned. I will send word tae the father tae alert him that he must come as soon as possible if he means tae attend the weddin’.”

Kai slowly nodded, thinking it all over. He would be wed to Cecily in a week. What would she think of that? He breathed out slowly.

“Aye,” he said softly. “I understand. We will marry in a week’s time.”

Mr. Murray’s white brows shot up, and his mouth fell open. The other members looked just as surprised, and even his brother was shocked at his easy acquiescence. He had surprised himself too, but now that he had seen her, he knew that even if marriage was not what he wanted at the time, he had a good feeling that he and Cecily could make a go of things.

“Are ye in earnest?” Mr. Murray asked, and Kai nodded, rubbing a hand through his beard.

“Aye. We must put a stop tae the other clan’s plans, and if it as dire as ye say, we must secure the union as soon as possible. I wouldnae want tae lose everything my father worked fer tae build up the McLaren Clan.”

“Very good, lad, very good.” Mr. Murray smiled, and he patted Kai on the shoulder. “She is a good woman it seems, and she was very elegant at the celebration. The people will like her, and she will be a good Lady McLaren.”

“Aye.” He nodded, and he thanked the men after making plans of what they would do on the morrow. He and Torion left the council room, and he said to his brother, “We will send out riders tomorrow. I think we should put guards out on the farther outskirts of clan land. I willnae have another situation like what happened before.”

His side throbbed as he pressed his hand against the wound on his ribs. He wouldn’t allow himself to be overpowered and taken captive again. The torment he’d endured had felt like a daily nightmare for far too long. Defeating their current adversaries might finally grant him respite from the nightmares that had haunted him relentlessly.

“Aye, brother. It will be done as ye say, but ye should go and rest. Ye have had a long day and much tae drink. On the morrow, we will make our plans.” Torion patted his arm and chuckled. “And there are hastened wedding plans tae make.” He winked, and he and Kai parted ways.

Kai walked to his room in a grave mood. Not because he was forced to wed, or because of the enemy clan nearby, although that was partially the reason. No, what he most worried about was what Cecily would say when she found out that their wedding was to be moved a couple of weeks closer.



A couple of days later, Cecily sat in her private sitting room, engrossed in a book. Despite the motive behind her arrival in Scotland and the urgency of finding her sister as a result, the recent days had been filled with a sense of freedom she hadn't known in years. While she hadn't seen much of Kai, due to urgent clan matters, she relished the autonomy she'd been granted. She read, took leisurely walks with a discreet guard trailing behind, and explored the castle at her own pace. Gone were the days of servitude and confinement. Cecily felt a newfound agency in her life, a chance to make her own choices.

Nonetheless, she couldn't help but wonder why Kai hadn't visited her. Perhaps he was avoiding her after their library encounter interrupted by Torion.

What had transpired in the library, exactly? Her thoughts strayed to that moment when Kai's strong arm had encircled her waist, pulling her closer. The memory kindled an unfamiliar longing within her. She hadn't been afraid, nor had she desired him to stop. But the intensity of the feelings that had rushed through her were unnerving. What did they signify?

*They mean he is handsome. That you think him handsome.*

Cecily flushed, her thoughts betraying her feelings. The library moment replayed in her mind like a loop, and she wondered what might have occurred had Torion not barged in. Would she have allowed Kai to kiss her? He'd broken his promise, touched her without her explicit request.

With an attempt to refocus on her book, she sighed and eventually discarded it onto the table before leaning back in her chair with a resigned air. Dealing with men, particularly one who was to be her husband, was proving perplexing.

She needed to get back to concentrating on her priorities: escaping the danger that William posed and finding Helen.

Abruptly, the door swung open, and Kai burst in. Cecily's scream pierced the air and his laughter resonated throughout the room. She pressed a hand to her chest, struggling to regain her composure. "Good Lord! Why did you do that?"

He grinned at her, and shut the door, crossing the room to sit down across from her, brushing himself from the pieces of mug that had shattered on him. Cecily could feel her skin tighten the nearer he got. She hadn't seen him in a couple of days, and if it was possible, it seemed that he had grown in handsomeness since she'd seen him last. His hair was tied back, and his beard had grown a bit longer. But his green eyes were brighter than ever, and by the fresh, cool scent of him, she believed that he had just been outside.

"Ye'll have tae forgive me, lass, but I dae love tae tease." He winked at her, and she felt that warm, wet feeling inside again. Although this time, it was a little different. It made her breath catch and her mind a little fuzzy.

"Well, I suppose I will just have to get used to it."

She smiled back at him, and it seemed to make his eyes sparkle.

“It is nay matter. I see that ye are a fighter, just as Hannah told me.”

“Oh, Hannah told you that?” she asked, still rubbing at her chest to make sure that her heart and breathing were right.

“Aye. She saw the results of how ye’d fought against those blaiageards.”

Cecily felt a little cold at that reminder. She’d tried her best not to think of that and what could have happened, but living there at the castle was slowly wiping that memory from her mind.

“But I suppose I should be wary,” he continued to tease. “For ye are practicin’ what it will be like tae argue with ye, I think, and we are nae even married.”

Cecily laughed, surprised by his audacity. She’d only met the man a few days ago, yet an inexplicable connection seemed to bridge the gap between them. She wondered if Adelaide would have felt the same had she met Kai.

“I didn’t know just how vicious I could be, so you had better be careful, then.” She teased right back, feeling a sudden confidence that she didn’t know she had.

“That I will. But I think I like a bit of fire. It would be terrible if ye were dreary and always did what ye were told. I worried that was what ye were goin’ tae be like. That the councilmen had aligned me with a dull, colorless lass.”



Her smile broadened at his unexpected compliment. To think he found her spirited and passionate, traits she had never embraced so boldly until now.

He stood. “Now, I burst intae here for a reason, it wasnae only tae tease ye. But I want ye tae go and get ready and meet me at the stables. I have somethin’ I want tae show ye.”

“Is it safe?” she asked. “I have been walkin’ with a guard every time I am out of doors.”

He gave her a heavy look, pausing for several seconds as he stared at her. “Aye, there are guards about, but ye should ken, Cecily, that with me, ye will always be safe. I would never let anythin’ happen tae ye.”

Warmth and something else, a tender emotion, surged within her. She nodded, at a loss for words, as he turned to leave.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Eecily blinked at the door he had shut behind him, her stomach aflutter with anticipation. Was this an opportunity to deepen their acquaintance or something else entirely? Despite the blissful past days, during which no one dictated her actions, she couldn't shake the fear that William might return to find not only that she'd survived, but that she'd taken Adelaide's place.

*It is only a surprise, a little something he wants to show me to be kind.*

She walked to the door, and placed her hand on it, thinking of how she had teased him back when he had teased her.

Her newfound boldness seemed to emerge with each passing day. It was as if her time with William, confined to servitude beneath the stairs, had unearthed a strength she hadn't known she possessed.

She then looked for her cloak. It was a Scottish winter, far colder than any winter she'd ever experienced, and so she also put on the woolen mittens that Dora had left for her and rushed back down to the castle gates.

With a smile, Cecily continued on her way, eager to join Kai at the stables. She was about to embark on a ride with a remarkably handsome man who seemed eager to share something with her.

Following the guard's directions, she made her way to the stables. Inside, the warmth enveloped her, carrying the sweet scent of hay and horses.

"Kai?" she called, peering into the dim interior. He emerged, leading two horses.

"Follow me, lass," he said, guiding her out into the light.

One horse was a majestic dark steed, befitting a warrior. It was undoubtedly Kai's. The other, smaller and a lighter brown, exuded an air of cheerfulness. She assumed this one was meant for her.

Cecily approached the brown horse and patted its neck. A pang of sorrow struck her—when William had become the earl, he'd sold her beloved mare, a loyal companion since her childhood. She hadn't ridden since then, caught up in the endless tasks assigned by William and even other servants.

Kai came to stand next to her, his hand joining hers on the neck of the horse. "She is a good lass," he said, moving to pat the horse's nose. "Her name is Gràidh, or the Gaelic word for loveliness."

"Ah," Cecily couldn't help the broad smile that crossed her face. She shook her head. "What a beautiful word and very

fitting for this lovely *lass*, as you say. I think you and I will be good friends, dear girl.”

She patted the horse, and Kai nodded. “Aye, I think so. She has been without a rider fer some time, for us men like tae ride our large steeds, and often we forget about this poor girl. But I thought ye and she would suit. She is kindness itself.”

“I’m sure she is.”

“Let me help ye ontae the saddle,” he said, and then he came close to her.

His eyes searched hers, and they seemed to be asking a question. She nodded to him, feeling a little dizzy with breathlessness, and he grasped her around the waist, lifting her easily into the side saddle.

“Thank you,” she squeaked, once she was settled, amazed at the strength in his arms.

From below, he winked at her. “Ye should prepare fer a long ride, lass. I’ve brought food. There is somethin’ special I want ye tae see, and maybe this place will become special tae ye too.”

Her stomach fluttered with excitement. “All right, then,” she said, still smiling.

He led the way, but soon she caught up to him, and they rode side by side slowly along the path. “So, it will take a bit tae get

there, and we can ride faster, if ye are comfortable. But I dinnae want ye tae think that we must, in case ye cannae ride well.”

“Laird McLaren,” Cecily replied, a teasing smile on her lips. “I think you don’t know very much about English women.”

“What dae ye mean?” he asked with a lifted brow.

“I mean that while we are taught a lot of useless things, one of the things English women always know is how to ride and to ride well.” With a little shriek, she kicked the horse in the sides, and she raced off with ease.



Kai was in awe of this woman. At every turn, she surprised him, and he found that he rather liked that. Laughing, he raced after her.

“Lass! Ye dinnae ken where tae go!” he called as he raced past her, but she kept up well enough.

Soon enough, they made it to the spot, and he held up a hand to let her know to slow down. She followed, the pounding of the hooves softening on the dirt path as they neared the opening in the trees.

While she trotted next to him, she asked, “You see? I am not so delicate as you might think.”

“Nay,” he chuckled. “I have been learnin’ that ever since ye arrived, and I have bruises all over tae remind me as well.”

Her eyes widened, and she put a hand over her mouth. “Oh goodness, I’m sorry!”

He burst into laughter. “Aye, dinnae ye worry. Well, we can stop here,” he said, pulling on his horse’s reins, and then jumping down with ease.

His heart skipped a beat as he reached up for her. She put her hands on his shoulders, and he put his hands on her waist and helped her down, perhaps a bit more slowly than was necessary.

“I wanted tae say somethin’ tae ye,” he said as soon as her feet touched the ground, and he stepped back. Rubbing his neck with discomfort, he said, “I have been feelin’ guilty fer days. I told ye I wouldnae touch ye unless ye asked me tae, or unless ye allowed it, and then in the library, I pulled ye close in the dance. Will ye forgive me fer that?”

Her shock showed in every feature. For a few seconds, she merely blinked at him, her lips apart. He schooled his gaze not to look there for that would only encourage thoughts of wicked things, things he’d been trying to keep a hold of since they’d met a few days ago.

“Of course, I will forgive you. I did not even think of it. Is that why you’ve stayed away?” she asked.

There would certainly be no secrets with this lass; she seemed as open as they came.

“Perhaps in part, but we have been rather busy. There is an enemy clan that is attemptin’ tae cause trouble. I have been workin’ with the men, puttin’ out more guards, plannin’ what we will dae in an attack.”

She tensed. “But they will not find us here?” she asked.

“Nay, it is a secret place, far away from any danger. Besides, like I said, when I am with ye, I will take care of ye. Ye dinnae need tae be afraid.”

She let out a breath, and Kai smiled, enjoying the feeling that she trusted him.

“Thank you. Well, now will you show me?” She turned her pretty green eyes towards the opening in the trees, and then he nodded.

“Aye. Come with me. It has been a favored spot since childhood.” He walked forward, and she followed at his side. “It is a place I used tae come when I was younger tae think.”

“And now?” she asked, and then she stopped in her tracks and gasped.

Kai grinned at the view before them. It was like a fairyland. The trees opened up to a river where there was a large pond-like area above which fell a waterfall, tumbling down over a

mossy cliff. It could never be found unless one stumbled upon it. He'd found it once after an argument with his father where he'd raced off into the woods not caring where he was going.

“Kai, it's beautiful.” Even in winter, the waterfall fell, but the water was icy cold. The trees surrounding it were evergreens, so the area always looked cheerful and as if it was in the middle of summer. “Thank you for showing me.”

“Of course, lass.” He cleared his throat, trying to gather the courage to tell her what he needed to say. “I've got somethin' tae tell ye.”

He hadn't told her before that the other reason why he'd stayed away from her for days was because he was afraid to tell her about the wedding. He knew it was a bad idea, for his brothers had chastised him for keeping it a secret from her, but he couldn't bear the thought that she would reject the idea and perhaps even resent him for it. Then they would be wed, and they would start of their life in a way he didn't want to begin. Kai had a feeling, however strange, that their marriage was going to be a good thing. He just didn't know if Cecily felt the same way.

“Oh?” she asked, breathing out with a smile, and turning to look at him.

He nodded quickly. “Aye. I'm sorry that I didnae tell ye before, but the councilmen decided that because of the threat from the enemy clan, we should move up our weddin' a few weeks.”

“A few weeks?” she asked with widened eyes.



“Aye.” He looked down at the ground. “They told me a few days ago that it would be this Saturday.”

“But it is now Wednesday,” she said calmly.

“Aye, I ken. I feared tellin’ ye in case ye would be upset.”

She opened her mouth to say something and then closed it again.

“We have sent a message tae yer father already, lettin’ him ken that he should come quickly if he means tae attend.”

He thought he noticed her pale a little, but then it was gone in an instant. “What does the threat of the clan have to do with us?” she asked, again calmly.

He couldn’t tell if she was angry, but she didn’t seem it. “The council believes that they wish tae topple the new lairdship. Me father died only a few months ago, ye see...”

“Oh, Kai, I’m so sorry,” she said, touching a hand to his, and he looked down at it, a sudden spark of heat moving through his bones.

“And so, because I wasnae wed, they daena wish fer the clan tae kill me and then leave McLaren without a solid heir.”

“Oh, I see.” She now looked down, and he could see the blush on her cheeks. “Not that I wish you dead, but you have your brothers as heirs.”

“Aye.” He chuckled. “But the clan would likely try tae attack us all in battle.”

After a pause, she said, “I’m sorry you worried about my reaction. I am not angry at all.”

When he looked up, he saw that she was smiling. “Och, well that is a good thing,” he said, surprised. “I am glad that ye now ken it, and now ye ken that preparations are already underway. I truly hope ye will be happy here, Cecily.”

“You have been very kind already.”

He wasn’t so sure about that, but he turned back to the pond. “I wanted tae show ye this so that we could spend a little time gettin’ tae ken one another. We have tae marry so fast yet I didnae want ye tae feel as though ye were marryin’ a complete stranger. So, I thought I would show ye my favorite spot and show ye somethin’ I like tae dae.”

“And that is?” she asked.

“Throwin’ daggers.”

Her smile turned into a laugh. “You are going to show me how to throw daggers?”

“Aye, ye are goin’ tae throw some yerself. But first, we eat.”

“All right then, Laird McLaren. Let us dine.”

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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They sat beneath the trees, sharing a meal in the brisk but not too cold weather. The warmth of the food and the companionship enveloped Cecily, making her feel as though she'd returned home after a long absence. Their laughter and conversation flowed naturally, transcending the pretense that had brought them together. In this moment, the ruse seemed to fade into the background.

Yet, amidst the joy, Cecily's worry about the letter she knew Kai had sent to William lingered. She hoped it wouldn't reach him in time or that he wouldn't be home yet. She needed to be married to Kai before William discovered her whereabouts, ensuring that he couldn't intervene.

But amid the enchanting ambiance, with the sound of flowing water nearby and Kai's gaze fixed on her, Cecily pushed aside thoughts of the uncertain future. She wanted to relish this time, living in Adelaide's shoes and enjoying the company of this Scottish nobleman. It felt real, almost as if she truly were contracted to marry him. Anthony's unwitting act of bringing her to this situation felt serendipitous.

An unfamiliar feeling stirred within her, one she struggled to trust. Deep in her gut, a sense of optimism bloomed,

suggesting that her marriage to Kai might be a positive turn of events.

Kai brushed his hands together and rose, gazing down at her.

“Shall we throw daggers then?” he asked.

“Yes.” She rose, and he pulled a few daggers from his boot, laying two in her hand.

The daggers were compact yet finely crafted, reflecting the sunlight. “Ye can start with two, and then ye can try more. We will aim at that tree, I believe,” he said, turning and pointing at a sturdy oak that stood only ten feet away.”

“Now, ye can watch me first, and then I shall show ye.”

He stood in front of her, and with a breath, he threw one of the daggers. It hit straight at the tree level to his arm, and it hung, blade embedded in the bark.

“My goodness,” she said with surprise.

“Now, yer goal is tae hit the target I’ve created.” He went to get the dagger, and he returned to her side.

“Come and stand here,” he said, waving to her, and she walked forward to the spot he pointed out. They were close again, and this time, she could smell the smoky scent of him, and out in

the freshness of the space with the sound of water nearby, it nearly put her into a daze.

“Ye’ll need tae focus,” he said, but when she looked up at him, she saw that he wasn’t looking at her but at the target.

*Thank goodness he has not noticed that it is he who steals my focus.*

“Use the strength of yer arm tae send the blade, nae yer wrist. And once ye throw, point yer arm at the very target ye wish tae hit.”

She nodded and then held up the dagger. He reached out for a hand and asked, “May I?”

“Yes.”

He adjusted her grip, pushed her elbow against her side, and then nodded. “Very well. Go.”

She launched the dagger with all her might, but it bounced off the tree, landing softly in the grass. “Well, I suppose it will take some practice,” she commented, her attention diverted by Kai’s proximity, the temptation of his nearness without physical contact.

“Try again,” he said with a smile.

Her eyes moved to his mouth quickly, and she licked her lips. Kai had no business having a mouth like that, so strong and firm yet somehow soft-looking and welcoming. A mouth she wished she had let kiss hers.

“All right.”

She tried again and missed, but after a few tries she was able to hit a bit lower on the target. She jumped up and clapped, and he laughed at her excitement.

“Very good. Now, I should show ye what else I like tae dae here in this spot.”

“What’s that?”

“Swimmin’ here in the river.”

“Ha! No, I will not do that.”

“And why nae?” he asked with a smirk.

“It is freezing and winter, and I will certainly not undress to go in the water.” She blushed furiously. “Even if we are soon to be wed.” To be naked around him would mean being more vulnerable than she had ever been, and she was not ready.

“Och, of course.” He shifted on his feet and stared out over the river. “It is freezin’, ‘tis true, and I guess I have nae thought of

that in some time. Although I never meant to suggest you to undress, lass.” He added with a wink.

She blushed a bit, then shrugged off his last comment and laughed. “What do you mean? How could you not have thought of it?”

“Thought of what, exactly?” He asked, giving her a snarky look.

“Oh, you understood perfectly what I meant!” said Cecily, with a smile drawing on her lips.

“I did, I did. Pardon my audacity. “ He glanced at her, longingly. She felt his eyes observing her expression carefully for a moment before continuing. “Ye ken, me whole life, swimmin’ here was like a cleansin’. Nay matter the weather or the time of day, I would come and swim, and if there was any trouble in me life just then, it wouldnae matter. The water, cold or warm, would just wash it away, and I would come out feelin’ stronger than ever. Ever since I was a wee lad I came here to swim with my brothers. I have such fond memories of this place.”

He put his hands on his hips and studied her. “But I willnae force ye, of course. Just thought ye might like this place as much as I do. And ye dinnae have tae be undressed tae enter the water. Ye can wear yer dress or even the cloak. Stay as modest as ye like. I want ye only tae experience the way the water can take the weight of fears and burdens away.”

He looked serious, and Cecily wondered if he knew just how much she needed burdens and weights to be lifted. But even if



what he said was true, she knew that no amount of water could wash away the lie that she was keeping.

She shook her head. “No, that would be too cold.” She shivered at the thought, and he chuckled.

“All right then. Well, I think we should play a game for it. I will throw three daggers with closed eyes, and ye will throw six with yer eyes open. If I win, ye go intae the water anyway ye like. If ye win, ye daenae have tae.”

“Very well.” She smirked and picked up three daggers. “But you must truly keep your eyes shut!”

“Of course.” He picked up his daggers, and then she went first.

“I want you to close your eyes while I throw as well. You make me too nervous.”

“Fine, ye go first.” He closed his eyes, she took a breath, and then she threw one after the other.

She was delighted when she saw that two hit their target, and she touched his arm to let him know that she was done. He glanced at the tree and nodded with pride.

“Very good, lass. All right then. I will aim at this tree next. Three with me eyes closed.”

“Yes. And I will be watching you closely.”

“Good.” He closed his eyes, set up his stance and threw three daggers towards the tree. She heard three sunk into the bark, and sighed, as he opened his eyes, and laughed. “It looks like I am the winner. So, Sassenach, what will ye dae about it?”

He turned to face her, and she knew exactly what he was thinking. That she was just a delicate flower, an English rose who could not do anything out of the ordinary or difficult. She lifted her chin to prove to him that he was entirely wrong.

“I suppose it means that I am going in.” She removed her cloak, and walking to the water, she took off the lower, heavier skirt, her boots, and then she jumped right into the water.



Kai would have begun stripping his own clothes, but he found himself rooted to the spot, captivated by the sight of her layers coming off. She was still covered in thick clothing, yet the simple act of her disrobing was the most alluring sight he'd ever witnessed. The image of her shedding her skirt, removing her boots, and boldly diving into the icy water was imprinted in his mind.

“Aren't you coming in?” her hair was now wet as she swam facing him with a beautiful, proud smile on her face, yet he could see she tried to withhold a shiver.

“Aye,” he said, his voice thick, and hurried to remove his shirt and boots and jump in after her. He kept on his kilt so as not to embarrass her further, and swam towards her. “Look at ye, lass. I dinnae think I have ever been more surprised in me life, seein' ye jump in as ye did.”

“Well, I did lose, and I would never have agreed to that game, unless I had been willing to suffer the consequences.”

Her breath was white as it curled up into the air, but her cheeks were red. “It is freezing, although it seems shallow enough for the sun to have done some work to heat it up. But I’m afraid that I’m not a very good swimmer.” She sunk a little, and then she moved her arms to keep afloat.

“Och, then ye should stand on the edge.”

He led her to a spot where a flat stone lay under the water, and she stood there, breathing out with relief. “Thank you.”

He grinned at her. “Ye are welcome. I used tae come here with me father after I’d found the place, and I showed me brothers as well. We used tae frolic the four of us. But it seems that of late, I am the only one who uses it.”

“Do you miss him terribly?” she asked, and he nodded, that little kernel of sadness in his chest expanding. But he swallowed, hoping to keep it down for now. There was far too much to do, and he needed all his strength and focus.

“Aye, but I must look forward tae the future.”

“You will do well, I’m sure,” she said, her eyes settling on his, and he saw and did not imagine that her eyes flicked to his mouth again.

He thought he'd seen it before when they had been practicing with the daggers, but he wasn't sure. And when he saw the corner of her tongue slip out through her lips briefly, Kai thought he would go mad with longing.

"You are close with your brothers?" she asked, her voice different now, and her cheeks were more crimson, as if she could guess the direction of his thoughts. Or that she knew he knew what her thoughts were.

"Aye." He swam closer. "We are close, although ye could probably tell that they are closer with each other than with me. They are near twins."

"I noticed." She smiled, and he watched the curve of her lovely lips.

He trailed as her throat moved in a swallow, and dreamed of putting his mouth there to the white, perfect skin and kiss his path toward her full bosom. He was now close enough to stand on a lower part of the rock in front of her so that their heads were nearly level.

"They seem tae like ye, lass."

"I like them. They are kind, although they made me do that dance, which I am still embarrassed about."

He laughed, his hands fanning out to the side, wanting to grasp at her and hold her tightly but trying his best to avoid the temptation.

“Ye shouldnae be. Ye looked bonny.” He lowered his voice.  
“Ye always look bonny.”

There it was. She looked at his mouth again, and this time, she licked her lips. “Kai?” she asked.

“Aye?” The both of them were breathing hard.

“Perhaps this is a very strange thing to ask, but I wondered if you might tease me again about that kiss.”

He lifted a brow, and then when he saw her eyes, his mouth curved up in a smile. “Is that what ye want, Cecily?”

“Ask me again if I would like to be kissed,” she whispered.

His heart flipped over, and he slid just a little bit closer, their lips nearly touching. “Would ye like tae be kissed?”

“Yes. I very much would.”

She had barely gotten the words out before he pressed his mouth to hers.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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Confidence was buzzing around inside of her, for that was the only reason she asked Kai to kiss her. There had been something about the daggers and the game, and the afternoon of spending time with him that made her wish to feel his kiss more than anything in the world.

His mouth pressed against hers, lightly at first, as if testing her, and when he pulled away, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him back again. She had been courageous, and she would not lose her chance to learn more about life and men by shying away now. If she was going to be kissed, then she wanted a real, true kiss. Especially, when she didn't know how much time she had left living this fairytale that could burst in pieces any minute if someone understood about her deceit.

She had never been kissed before, but when he turned his head a little and slid his tongue along the seam of her mouth, she somehow knew what to do. When she opened her mouth to his, she heard him utter a groan, and his hands came to frame her face. Slowly, she let him school her in the ways of kissing, his lips gentle but firm in their instruction. His tongue moved to explore inside of her mouth, and with another shot of boldness, she touched her tongue to his, wanting to learn the skills of that too. With each stroke of his tongue and nibble of his mouth, Cecily's muscles heated. The water was near

frozen, and yet she felt warmer as if she was under the sun on a bright summer's day.

It made her mind fuzzy, and her stomach fluttery, and her knees weak. With a little moan, she sank against him, lost in the moment of that kiss. He pulled his mouth from hers, and she leaned her head back as he began to kiss down the line of her neck. Her breath was coming in little pants, and he whispered something in Gaelic against her skin.

“So perfect,” he said softly, returning to her mouth, but then he pulled back. “Dear God, I ken I shouldnae say this, for it will make me sound like a fool, but there is nae need tae rush omethin’. Everythin’ will happen in its time.”

Her mind still fuzzy, she stared at him for a little as the words sunk in. He kissed her briefly again on her lips and then swam back to separate them a little. “We should return back tae the castle before we do something reckless. It is better tae swim for a longer time when the weather is nae so bloody cold. I daena want ye tae catch yer death.”

“Yes, of course,” she said softly, turning to scramble out of the edge of the river, wondering if she had returned to earth or if she was still playing amongst the clouds.

“I have brought ye some dry clothes, lass,” he said as he too emerged from the water, droplets streaming down his hard, thick, bare-chested body.

She had not seen him before he'd jumped in quickly but now, she could look at him in full. Her soon-to-be-husband, who had just kissed the sense out of her, looked as though he was

carved from marble. Every line and every muscle was sharp and defined. Strength and power practically oozed from him, but she knew he was not a deity for there were scars along his skin. Some she could see, but others it seemed had been covered in tattoos of all sorts, pictures of birds and plants and words.

Her mouth opened. She had never seen such a beautiful or alluring sight in her life, and she wanted to ask more, to know more, to trace the muscles, the scars, and the tattoos with a finger until she understood every inch of him. But when she looked up at him, she saw that he'd noticed her staring at him, and she blushed heavily.

“You are kind,” she replied with a trembling voice, remembering that he'd mentioned clothing. “So, you knew that I would jump in, then.”

“Aye.” He shrugged. “I hoped for it, and so I asked yer maid tae pack a few things.” He pulled out a small cloth bag from the side of his horse, and he handed it to her. “Over there, ye can hide behind the trees for a bit of privacy.”

She smiled shyly at him. “Thank you.” She took the bag and went behind a small cluster of trees.

As quickly as she could, she peeled off some of the wet layers to replace them with dry ones. It was thoughtful of him to bring dry clothes for her because now that they were out of the water, she could feel the winter's day in full. Her hands shook as she put on the skirt, and then she heard footsteps behind her.



“You know that you are not supposed to sneak up on a lady while she is dressing,” she said, thinking it was Kai come to collect her.

But before she could turn around, strong arms grabbed her, and a hand clamped over her mouth. Cecily’s eyes widened, and she screamed from behind the hand, but it was too muffled for anyone to hear her. She could tell by the smell, and the angry hold, that it was not Kai. And then a spike of fear plunged through her heart. Was this William? Was this the day of reckoning for what she’d done?

Again, she fought back, kicking and hitting as best she could, and she managed to bite the hand that clamped over her mouth. The man yowled in pain, and she screamed, looking to see many men coming into the small section of woods that had once been so pure and so peaceful.

As she kicked, the man held her even tighter, and then, just before she screamed again for Kai, Cecily felt the sharp white pain of something cold sliding between her ribs. Everything went black.



The scream sent icy prickles of fear down Kai’s spine as he finished getting on his other boot. He stood tall, and as it always did in his dreams or whenever he was afraid, time slowed around him, and his senses heightened. He put a hand on his broadsword as it hung on his waist, and he was glad that he’d returned some of the daggers to his boot before they’d both jumped into the water.

He could now hear footsteps and a scuffle, and he hurried towards the clump of trees where Cecily had gone to dress. It

was there he found her in the arms of a man who had just laid her down on the ground. Kai paled when he saw the blade in her side.

“Ye blaiheard!” he cried, rushing towards the man with his sword held high, and he knocked the man down to the ground.

He fell, his head hitting a rock, and he was quiet. Kai spun around as more men entered the sacred space, and he fought them one by one, cutting them or kicking them down until they were unconscious, bleeding, or groaning in pain. His breath was coming hard and fast now, and all his scars ached. His fear was high, and it felt like the nightmare had come to pass while he was still awake.

*Dear God, help me.*

He wanted to tear each of the men limb from limb, to bury them, to destroy them, to never let them be found again after what they’d done to Cecily. But there was no time. He leaned down to pick her up, to remove the blade, and he rushed to his horse. He grabbed the reins of her mare, tied them to his horse, and he placed her on his saddle. Jumping up behind her, he took her into his arms, and he rode off as fast as he could back down the path and through the trees. His blood roared in his ears, and he could feel himself shaking.

*Nay, nay, nay, it must be a dream. I must be asleep and need tae wake up. That’s all it is. Cecily is nae hurt; she is nae near death. I must wake up.*

But he didn’t. He rode as hard as he could to the healer’s cottage, hardly daring to look down at Cecily’s pale face as

she lay huddled in his arms, unconscious. He cursed himself for thinking it was safe enough for them to be out in the wild when the enemy clan was about.

*I was a proud fool, thinkin' that I could keep her safe, that she wouldnae come tae harm when I was there with her. It seems I cannae stop breakin' promises I make tae the lass.*

His heart broke at the thought that his young, lovely bride would die before they began their lives together. The lives that he was now quite excited to begin. The kiss they'd shared and the fun they'd had had told him what he needed to know. Their marriage would be a good one, and there was so much yet he wanted to learn about her. His throat thickened, and he whispered to her in a low voice.

“Stay with me, lass. There is so much yet tae dae. Dinnae leave me when we have so many adventures yet ahead for the likes of ye and me.”

When the cottage neared in his view, he glanced down at the wound in her belly. He had taken out the blade, but now it was bleeding through her gown, and he swallowed, fearful that they would not get there in time.

But why her? Why had they attacked her instead of him? It didn't make any sense. If they wanted to hurt him, they could have kidnapped her, but murder? He didn't understand, but there wasn't time to think more on it when he slowed in front of Hannah's cottage and jumped down from his horse, reaching up to gingerly carry Cecily inside. He kicked open the door and called for Hannah.

She emerged through the back door. “I saw ye comin’ from far off, and I rushed back. What is it?”

“Someone stabbed her in the woods.” He laid her down on the bed, and Hannah pushed him aside, tearing at Cecily’s clothes to look at the wound. It was still bleeding, and she hurried to the table to grab at her mortar and pestle.

“She is a lucky lass, for I made this poultice just now.” She wiped at the wound with a wet cloth and laid over a poultice, spreading it thickly on it.

Kai stepped back a bit, his mind reeling from what had just occurred. His heart was racing; his muscles were trembling, and he didn’t know if he could get out of the feeling that his nightmares were coming true.

“Drink from that flask, lad, and sit down. I have her well in hand, and we cannae have ye faintin’.”

He nodded, unable to think about anything else but Cecily and what would happen to her. He took the flask and drank it down, warm whisky pouring down his throat. Then he sat, but not far enough away that he could not see her.

“She is so pale, Hannah,” he croaked.

“Aye, she has lost a lot of blood, but she is still with us. Dinnae worry.”

Her voice was calm and confident, and Kai closed his eyes, trying to let himself sink into the warmth and comfort of it.

She worked quickly, removing the other wet clothes that Cecily had not been able to remove, and taking her cloak off and laying it underneath her on the bed. “Once the blood has stopped, I will sew it together. For now, I will make an elixir tae bring the strength back tae her.”

She chopped and boiled, placing herb after herb into a heated pot and stirring it. Kai stayed where he was, drinking and waiting, his heart slowly returning to normal.

“Why should anyone try tae stab her?” Hannah asked, perplexed, and he answered, grateful for the distraction.

“I dinnae ken, but there is an enemy clan about. We have tae move up the weddin’, but perhaps they thought it easier that they simply remove the bride. Although why they wouldnae choose tae kill me instead I dinnae understand.”

“Well, it looks as though again, she fought back. There is a bit of blood at her mouth. I wonder if she didnae bite the man who tried tae grab her.”

Kai swallowed hard. That was the strong lass he now knew and wanted to get to know better. “Please save her, Hannah. I dinnae want her tae die.”

Hannah heard the tone in his voice, and she put a hand on his shoulder. “I can stay with her, my laird, if ye want tae return tae the castle. If ye dinnae want tae watch her in this state.”

“Nay,” he said firmly, shaking his head. “I will stay with her until she awakes. Until she is well again.”

She smiled at him briefly. “Then I will send word tae the castle tae send yer brothers down tae join ye. It seems they will need tae roam the woods.”

“Aye, please dae.”

Hannah nodded. She poured the hot tea into a mug, and she handed it to him. “Once this cools a bit, help her tae drink it. It will bring the color back tae her cheeks and give her the strength she needs tae fight the wound. I will be back in a few minutes. I mean merely tae send a messenger tae the castle tae have yer brothers come here.”

“Thank ye, Hannah.”

Kai rose, and with the mug in his hand, he went to sit on the bed next to Cecily. With his eyes on her pale cheeks, he blew on the surface of the tea, trying to cool it a bit. Then, he reached behind her to lift her up a bit.

“Drink, lass. Please. Dae it fer me. I ken I made a fool of meself, and I continue tae break me promises, but I will dae better next time. I swear it.”

He poured a bit of the tea in her mouth, and she swallowed. But then, she made a little groaning sound, and he set her back down, afraid that he had hurt her. She still did not open her eyes, and he put the mug down, returning to his seat not far

from her. He reached out to hold her little hand in his, and then Hannah returned.

“Word has been sent. Were ye able tae get her tae drink?”

“Aye, a little. But she made a groanin’ sound, and I set her back. She is like a doll, Hannah, I fear that I will break her with me large hands. I dinnae want tae hurt her. I feel like such a beast in her presence.”

He could hear the emotion in his voice, and Hannah was kind as she said, “She is nae a doll, Kai, but a flesh and blood woman with more strength in her little finger than many people have in their whole bodies. I have a feelin’ all will be well. Ye willnae hurt her; ye could never hurt anyone ye cared fer.”

“But I told her she would be safe with me, and now she is nae.”

“Calm yerself, my laird,” Hannah said, handing him back the flask. “Perhaps ye should rest too. Ye have had a lot tae think about these past days. Yer brothers will be here in a little while, and then everythin’ can be figured out from there.”

He nodded and then took another drink. “Thank ye.”

With his hand in Cecily’s and leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, listening to the soothing sounds of Hannah’s work. Soon, he fell asleep.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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“*W*hat the bloody hell happened?” Torion said when he burst in, waking Kai up. He jolted away and looked to Cecily, but she did not rise. Her face was slightly pinker, and her chest rose and fell. Relief filled him.

*She will be well.*

“Well?” Torion asked a bit softer as he and Rae approached the bed.

“The woods.” Kai stood and rubbed at his eyes as he tried to clear his head. “We were out in the woods today. I was showin’ her the spot with the waterfall, and then when she went tae dress a little away from me, men came and attacked. One of them stabbed her.”

“God’s teeth,” Rae said, his mouth falling open. “Is she alight?”

“She will be, boys,” Hannah said. “The poultice is dry now, so I will clean and stitch the wound. Sit, drink. I am sure there is much tae discuss between ye. And ye will keep Kai company while I sew up the lass’ injury.”



Kai nodded at her, sending her silent thanks with his eyes, and Torion and Rae sat across from him. He passed them the flask, and they handed it between them.

“We must send men out,” Kai said, feeling more tired than ever.

“Aye, we have done so already; they are scourin’ the area fer miles in every direction.”

“Good.” He shook his head and scrubbed a hand over his beard. “But why hurt her? They must have heard of the weddin’, but how? And why did they not try to kill me? These must be the men that killed Father”.

“They are nae satisfied with father’s death,” Rae said after taking a swig from the flask. “They must take us all as well. Perhaps they saw the opportunity tae get yer new bride out of the way.”

“That is what I thought.” He shuddered as he turned to look at Hannah bent over Cecily, and she still did not wake. “But they didnae ken that she was—is tae be me bride. It is all too confusin’. It was as if they’d been watchin’ us, and then as soon as I took me eyes off her, they attacked, with plans tae kill her and only her.”

“It does seem strange, brother, but we are daein’ all we can. Perhaps next time, ye ought nae tae go out anywhere with her, and nae without us kennin’ where ye are goin’.”

Torion was not chiding him too harshly, for Kai was doing that well enough on his own. “Aye,” he replied, clenching his jaw with fury at himself.

“I did everything I could, me laird,” Hannah said from the bed. “It was nae very wide, so it was easy tae sew. It is clean and ready, and I have wrapped it with more poultice. She will be fine, Kai.”

Kai rose, and he grabbed at Cecily’s hand again, wishing and hoping that her eyes would open, that she would look up at him and prove Hannah’s words right. But she did not.

“Dinnae rush it. She will wake. Give her time tae rest. She has had a busy few days. An attack on the way tae ye, a hastened weddin’, and now, she’s been stabbed. I think the lass deserves a bit of a break, dae ye nae?” she asked with a smile, and Kai nodded.

Torion chuckled. “Hopefully, when she does wake, she will want tae stay with us. It seems a life here at McLaren Castle can be a dangerous one.”

Kai did not say it, but he wished for that too. Hours later, they had all eaten; Torion and Rae had returned to say that nothing had been found except for one dead man, but that was all. And he wore no colors or clues to who he was or why he’d come. They’d buried his body, and then returned. Then, they fell asleep, Kai with his mind’s eye full of Cecily and what she would say when she arose, if she would arise at all.



Cecily was dreaming, and she didn't want to wake up. She was warm and comfortable and laying on something soft. Quiet sounds filled her ears, and she was resting in a cool meadow.

The sun was shining, and she could hear the sound of the river. It was a beautiful day, and she could feel something touching her hand. When she turned to look at it, she saw Kai lying beside her, and she smiled at him. Was he now to be a part of her dreams?

"Kai," she said, and then her eyes snapped open, and she saw him seated in the chair beside her bed, asleep, his head leaning back against the wood of the chair.

His hand held hers, just like in the dream. Blinking her eyes a few times, she recognized the place: Hannah's cottage.

"Yer awake, lass," a voice said from the other side of her, and she turned to see Rae in another chair, a book opened on his lap and a grin on his face. "Thank God. We have all been worried about ye."

"What happened?" she asked, swallowing to find her throat was thick and dry. "May I have something to drink?"

"Aye, of course." Rae rose to collect some, and he handed the cup to her, and she drank greedily.

She looked around to see that Torion was there too in another chair, also sleeping. "We came tae keep Kai company. He refused tae leave yer side, the messenger from Hannah said,

and so we came. Hannah is now restin' in her room in the back of the cottage.”

Slowly, Cecily nodded, and then her stomach ached. A sharp pain jolted through her, and she remembered.

“The woods. What happened to me?”

Rae's face fell. “It seems that ye were stabbed, lass. By a strange man. We have nae explanation. Riders were sent out and we found nae one save one dead man. He wore nothin' tae tell us who he is, and we dinnae ken exactly why anyone would dae this tae ye.”

She breathed out slowly, trying to gather her wits as she woke. The pain grew with some intensity, but she tried to remain calm. At least she was still there, still alive. Her memory was hazy, but she remembered who she feared it had been.

“No one has come to the castle to say anything about it?”

“Nae,” Rae replied with a confused look. “What dae ye mean?”

“Nothing.” She shook her head, and then she turned to Kai, moving her hand inside his to try to rouse him.

He did slowly, his eyes blinking open a few times before he sat up straight and stared at her. “Cecily, yer awake,” he said, and she nodded, her heart feeling lighter now that they were there

together again, that his lovely, pure eyes were watching her with that same look since when he'd first seen her.

“Are ye real, lass?” he asked, reaching out to touch her cheek, and she blushed, remembering that Rae was right beside them, watching them.

They both turned at the same time to see Rae smiling before he snapped his book shut and rose. “Perhaps I ought tae go and fill this whisky flask with what Hannah has in the back.” He grabbed it and left, and then Kai turned to look at her again, such concern in his bright green eyes. He had dark circles under his eyes too, as if he'd been lying awake for far too long.

“Yes, I'm real.” She smiled weakly. “Just a little in pain.”

“Och,” his expression hardened, and he looked down at where the wound was. “I want tae kill those men who did this tae ye. I'm sorry. I shouldnae have taken us out there when there was such a danger. I should have kent better...”

The yearning in his eyes was so much that it surprised her. She reached up slowly and put a finger over his lips, just as he was about to say something else.

“You do not need to apologize or anything to forgive. It was not you who shoved a blade through my belly.” Though, she had a fear she knew who it was, not that William would ever sully himself to kill her if he did not have to, but she was certain he had sent men after her. For why else would that man have stabbed her? This was the only plausible explanation, for no one knew her true identity.

“I ken, but I keep makin’ promises tae ye that I cannae seem tae keep, and I feel like such a fool. I thought I could protect ye.”

“You would have, Kai, if you had known. Please, do not trouble yourself. It looks like you too need your rest.”

He nodded and sat down again, once more taking her hand in silence. Cecily looked down at the gesture, and she wondered if she would end up falling in love with him herself, or if she would break his heart once he discovered her lie.

*He may never look at me like this again, if he ever finds out the truth, which he surely will.*

And for now, she wanted to keep it that way. “I will rest when it is time. Ye found me sleepin’ already, lass,” he said with that handsome smile that was slowly worming its way into her heart.

“I’m sorry that you have such troubles on your mind. That there is so much to worry you at this time. A hurried wedding and an enemy clan.”

*And a lying bride who is trying to save herself by pretending to be someone else.*

He laughed. “Ye try tae comfort me when ye are the one who has just had a blade in her stomach.” He stood and rose to his feet, lifting up his shirt out of his kilt, and he pointed to the scar over his ribs which had a hawk tattooed over it. “Ye and I

are now the same in that we have the same wound in the same place. One blade through the ribs.”

Cecily stared at the spot, noting the dark hawk that he'd had done over it, and then he dropped his shirt down and sat again. He took her hand in both of his.

“I'm sorry, Kai. I did not know.”

“There is much ye daenae ken about me, Cecily,” he said with a smile, but she could see something dark flit across his eyes, as if he was ashamed of something.

It was then Rae returned with the flask, and he smiled as he saw them still holding hands. “More whisky. Perhaps ye would like some, Cecily?” he asked, and she nodded, taking a quick sip of it before handing it to Kai.

“May we return to the castle in the morning? I can rest well enough there, and then the rest of you can be comfortable as well.”

“Too kind, lass,” Rae said with a wink, and she noticed that Kai sent his brother a dark look.

But when she turned to him, it was gone. “Aye, Cecily. We will return tomorrow, once Hannah tells me ye are well enough tae move.”

They spoke for a little while longer, before Kai urged her to drink the tea that Hannah had prepared earlier, and then she

fell asleep again, her dreams returning with a vengeance.



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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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The next morning, Hannah agreed to allow Cecily to go, and the men all left. She tried to stop him, but Kai carried her all the way to the castle, and eventually, she gave up fighting and sank against him, her arms around his shoulders in a tight embrace.

“You are stubborn, I see,” she said, and he grinned as he entered the gates, nodding his head to the guards who greeted him with his title.

“Aye, but so are ye. We will have an interestin’ time of it, I think. Ye and I.”

She laughed at that, and then he began to carry her up to her room. “I can walk myself, you know.”

“I ken that, but I willnae let ye until we are at yer door. Ye should rest yerself, and there is nae point in pushin’ yer strength when ye daena have tae... nae when ye have a strong almost husband like me tae carry ye.” He winked at her, and she felt her stomach fill with butterflies.

She had become so fond of him and no amount of pain from her stitched wound could stop the flood of feelings that overcame her whenever he was around. He kicked open her door when they got to her room, and he laid her gently on the bed.

For a moment he paused there, his face above hers, her arms still partially around his neck. Her eyes met his, and she wished that he would kiss her again, that he would send her body to new heights, but he slowly pulled back, looking almost regretful.

“Where will you go?” she asked.

“I will go tae bathe, for I need it, and then I will return tae ye. I willnae leave yer side, until ye are well enough tae go out on yer own. Until the wound is entirely healed.”

“Kai—” he held up a hand when she’d tried to retort.

“Nae, Cecily.” He quickly replied, as if guessing what she’d say. “I am nae leaving yer side.”

“But surely there are more important matters for you to tend to. The enemy clan, the strange reason someone attacked me in the woods.”

He shook his head, and then he picked up her hand and brushed a kiss on the back of her knuckles. “The others can handle it. They have their instructions. Nothin’ is more important at the moment than ye, lass,” he said breathily and

then cleared his throat, as if he was embarrassed by what he'd just said. "Nae until ye're well again."

Her heart fluttered, making her breath catch.

*Had he really meant that statement?*

*Nothing was more important than her?*

"Very well," she said, not knowing what else to say. "Might I have a bath as well?"

His eyes darkened a little, and he gave her an assertive nod. "I will send fer yer maid." His voice was grave and sharp and then he was gone, leaving her on her own, her body filled with renewed longing, her mind forgetting the pain from her wound for a moment.

After she bathed and dressed and was returned to the bed, Kai knocked and then entered the room. He pulled up a chair and sat down at the bed next to her, and she turned on her side to better look at him. His hair was still damp, but he had tied it back again, and his beard had been trimmed. The scent of rough soap was in the air, the same soap she'd been given to bathe with, and it made her feel even more at home with him now that they had the same scent upon their skin. Despite how handsome she found him, which increased with each time she looked upon him, still, with his dark features and large shoulders, he reminded her of a bear and always would. A man capable of such danger and fear, and yet warm and kind at the same time.

*With a kiss that could drive any woman to madness.*

“You will stay with me all day?” she laughed. “What will we do?”

“We will talk; I can read tae ye; ye will rest. I willnae, however, stay at night here with ye.” He rubbed a finger over his temple, and she saw a shadow cross his face. “I will have a guard set outside of yer door, and I will have a maid stay with ye for the night. I cannae sleep here.”

He seemed eager to gloss over it, and he smiled. “So what would ye like tae dae? But dinnae feel that ye need tae stay awake fer me.”

“I think I should like to eat, if it isn’t too much trouble.”

He laughed and jumped to his feet. “Nae at all. I will have food brought tae ye. We can eat together.”

He then left, and Cecily’s smile faded a little as she pressed her hand to the soft mattress under her. She was in danger of falling for the man who was being so kind and caring to her, and even though she knew he felt guilty, she wasn’t entirely certain that he was staying with her at her side just because of that.

*This could have been Adelaide. I have taken this beautiful chance from Adelaide to marry a kind and good man. A man who would give up his duties to sit with her if she was ill or injured. William would never do that for any woman, not even his daughter.*

She felt the guilt creeping up on her, threatening to consume her from the inside out. It would have been better if Kai did not like her or if he was unkind, for in the end, if he found out about her lie, then she would not have cared. But his kindness and the way he wanted to spend time with her and get to know her before they wed, made things all the more difficult. It made her want things she had no business wanting, wanting things she didn't believe she deserved. She could not help but think she was stealing a future that was someone else's, and she tried her best to push the idea away.

The only thing that could take it away was a letter from William. She was certain that William had already written a letter in response to the one Kai had sent. It had been sent days ago, and if he was back at his home in England, then he should have received it by then.

*What a surprise he must have had to see that the wedding was still to go on. That his daughter was to be wed within a few days.*

She laid back on the pillow and stared at the canopy above her. What if the letter was already awaiting him, and Kai had not yet gone to his study because he was so concerned for her and her recovery?

She closed her eyes, a sudden madcap plan coming to her.

*I could go and switch it out!*

She had no idea if William's letter had arrived or if it *would* be in Kai's study waiting for him, but she had to try. She had to at

least give it a chance for it would mean that at least there was still time for the marriage to happen before William arrived and did God knew what to her.

It was more than just having the chance to go and see Helen. It was about saving her life and getting out of the terrible place she had been trapped in for the past year. That was the only reason she could justify her actions and her lies to Kai.

Kai returned a minute later, and she turned and smiled at him as he entered. When he sat, they began to talk and a little while later, food arrived. It was the most pleasant few hours she'd ever spent with anyone, save her sister, and she knew that Kai was right in saying what he had. That the two of them would have an interesting time of it. She laughed and smiled so much that her face hurt, and sometimes she had to stop laughing to protect her stitches. Then, after that, they slept, and she knew that once he was gone for the night, she would find a way to slip down through the castle to the study and switch out that letter.

It was hours later that she awoke, and she gasped when she saw the pink streaks of dawn outside her window. Cursing herself for sleeping too long, she turned to try to get out of bed. She saw the maid who'd been asked to stay with her was asleep. Slowly and softly, she rose out of her bed and tiptoed to the door. The maid was snoring, so Cecily knew that she was not awoken by the soft noise. She opened the door as gently as she could, and then she froze when she saw a figure seated outside her door.

*Blast. I forgot about the guard he'd sent.*

But as she waited, she heard a soft snore from the guard too, and she thanked the heavens that he had fallen asleep while on

duty. Kai would not be happy about it, but she was very pleased as it allowed for her to carry out her plan. Again, as gently as she could, she shut the door and tiptoed down the hall, hoping that no one crossed her path. Thankfully, it was early enough, and she knew that only the earliest servants would be about, and they were not likely to stop her as she was not only a guest in the castle, but also the laird's betrothed. Pressing a gentle hand to her wrapped wound, she began to descend the stairs. It ached and throbbed a little, but the tea Kai had given her last night to help the pain had really helped it. The poultice was a good one too, and she reminded herself to ask Hannah for the recipe so that she could make some of her own.

*Focus, Cecily. You have an important task to do.*

Over the past few days, she had learned the areas of the castle, and she knew that Kai's study was somewhere near his room. The realization that what she was doing was a great risk struck her. But she knew she had to seek out that letter. Her thoughts then went onto Kai. What if he woke up? What in God's name was she meant to say if he came upon her then?

*But I must do what I can. I cannot let him find it or let him see the truth of things.*

She let that repeat in her mind as she passed into the long passageway away from the main stairs. Dawn light made the lighting dim, but she could see well enough. Thankfully, the slippers she wore made no sound on the stone of the castle floor, and she tried to ignore how freezing it was with only a woolen wrap around her. Soon, she would be back in bed, safe, and the letter would be safe from Kai's eyes too. If it existed, of course. Finding the large study door, she paused, glancing to the side to see another large door, which Rae had pointed out once that was Kai's room. In her mind's eye, she could just

imagine him there, lying in a large bed, for he would certainly need a large bed to fit his large body.

*That may be my bed in a few days. Our bed.*

The idea sent a thrill of pleasure through her belly and her limbs, and she waited a moment at the door of the study, attempting to push the pleasurable image from her mind of being tangled up in bed with him. Once she was focused, she opened the door and shut it quickly, making sure to do so quietly.

There was a sufficiently large window in the room that there was enough dawn light to see by. She smiled as she looked around. There were two large shelves filled with books, two thick armchairs in front of a hearth with embers in it, and a large oaken desk in the center of the room. It was masculine, and the very picture of a laird's sacred study. It smelled like him too –slightly musky, with a hint of whisky, and surprisingly, everything was quite organized.

She'd never expected a man with such brashness and strength to consider organization to be a virtue, but his desk was clear and clean, except for a sealed letter atop it.

Her eyes widened.

*There it is.*

She rushed around to the front of the desk to pick it up, and a chill of fear ran down her spine when she saw the name and



the all too familiar handwriting: *William Cavendish, Earl of Seton*.

The temptation was terrible to tear it open and stare at the words, William likely claiming that Cecily had taken her chance to pretend to be Adelaide, that she'd somehow figured out a way to ride to the castle on her own and then she'd been careless enough to get attacked. Or perhaps, he might take a different tack and believe that everything as well, coming to the castle for the wedding only to get his revenge on her himself.

Either way, she knew that Kai could not see this letter. She took it up, walked to the hearth and placed it atop the glowing embers that remained. Quickly, the letter set aflame, and it burned, curling black as she turned away to write a new letter.

It was a quick one, and she dipped a pen into the ink as she leaned over a fresh sheet of paper, trying to imagine what William might say to a laird he had created a marriage contract with. It took only a few moments to write a proper letter, and she tried to forge his signature as well as she could remember it. Then, she folded it and left it there on the desk.

*But no seal. Will he not think it strange without a seal?*

Shrugging to herself, she just had to hope that Kai wouldn't care or wouldn't notice. And if he asked her, she could think of some explanation.

Then, she went to the door, breathing out with relief. Looking at the hearth, she could see that the letter was now ash, and a

maid would come soon to light the fires again anyway, burning away all evidence that the letter even existed.

Opening the door softly, she hurried into the hall and shut it behind her. And then, her eyes turned to Kai's door. Guilt pressed at her from all angles, and she sent Kai a silent apology. She was just about to turn away when she heard a strange noise coming from his room, and she paused, taking a step toward it. It sounded like a cry, and she walked to the door, pressing her hand against it when she heard another sound of anguish.

"Kai," she whispered in fear, and then, again knowing she was taking a risk, she opened the door.

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*M*y dear reader,

I apologize for the interruption...

But you just stumbled upon a SECRET GIFT!

And if you [download this book](#) for free, you'll get a ONCE ONLY opportunity to join my ARC group.

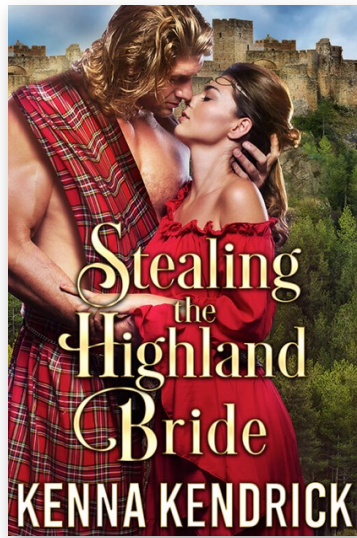
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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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“*N*ay,” Kai kept saying over and over again, shuffling in his bed.

The nightmare had come back, but he couldn't seem to wake up, and this time, it wasn't just Torion and Rae he saw on the battlefield as the enemy attacked. Cecily was there too amongst the soldiers, a look of pale fear on her face as she called to him. He couldn't hear her voice, but he knew that's what she was saying. Just as it always was, he could hardly move in the dream, but he fought as hard as he could to reach her. And then, he saw it, someone coming from behind her to grasp her.

And even though he was in a different position on the nightmarish battlefield, he still felt that cold blade between his ribs, and then once more, he was dragged away, only able to hear the cries of Cecily as he left the battlefield unable to save her. He shook, crying out for her, his body covered in cold sweat, until he heard her voice again. This time, though, it wasn't pained or frightened. It was calm, and then he felt her touch against his skin.

“Kai,” she said smoothly, rubbing her hand along his shoulder and down his arm. “Wake up, Kai, all is well. I am here, and you are safe.”

His eyes snapped open, and he turned to see her there, on his bed, her hand on him, and a kind smile on her face. He blinked a few times, not sure if it was real or if he was still in the nightmare.

“Cecily,” he said in a raspy tone, reaching out to touch her for himself, to make sure that she was real.

He felt her warm flesh under his fingers. “Yer real,” he said, and she nodded, coming to lie next to him on the bed, her hand still on his shoulder.

His eyes followed her movements, unable to look away. She was there, in his room. But why? He should feel very ashamed, which he did, had it not been the fact that she was there, in the flesh, and she had been able to tear him from the nightmare, sending it away from him as quickly as he’d ever experienced. It now just felt like a distant memory, and he reached out to place his hand on her cheek.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

His heart was still pounding in his chest, in anxious thuds. He tried his best to hide this though, and he nodded before leaning forward to kiss her.

He could feel her surprise, but then he felt her sliding closer to him, and her mouth opened to his. Kai’s anguish started to fade away, his anxiety making room for his desire for her. All he wanted was to taste her, to feel her lips with his and the warm curves of her body pressed against his. He moved

himself, so that he was leaning over her, trying not to break their kiss.

The soft mewls of pleasure that came from the back of her throat drove him wild, and he was hard in a moment, ready to take her, pressing himself against her belly as their kiss deepened even further. But then when he heard her say his name, he pulled away and lifted himself off of her, embarrassed that he had allowed it to go so far.

Breathing hard, he looked down at her surprised face as he lay beside her, and he hated himself for nearly crushing her. Had he hurt her? Had she been asking him to stop, and he hadn't heard her? And her wound! For God's sake, she had stitches in her skin, and he'd nearly taken her with a fierceness that he hadn't recognized. All sorts of fears clung to him as he watched her with wide eyes. His mind raced in a whirlwind of worry again and he felt his body stiffen with the fear. Terrible images of Cecily being wounded or even killed, and perhaps even by his hand, flooded his mind, as if one of his nightmares took shape in front of his eyes. He swallowed hard, trying to gather the right words, his mind a confused cacophony. All he knew was that he could not have her there anymore. She had to get out, and that was far better than having her stay and perhaps risk being injured even further.

“Ye need tae go, Cecily,” he said finally, getting up roughly from the bed. “Ye shouldnae be here. I dinnae ken why ye are here.”

“You do not know why I am here,” she repeated, slowly sitting up, her expression hurt, but he hardened himself against it.

He was bare from the neck to his waist, but he wore smalls, and he knew that she could see just how hard he was after that

kiss.

“Nay. Ye should be restin’. Ye are wounded, and ye shouldnae have come. I told ye that I couldnae sleep there with ye.”

“But—” she said and then shut her mouth, getting out of the bed and wrapping her robe a bit tighter around herself. She crossed her arms as well. “Very well. I was down here, and I heard a noise. I came to investigate. I thought you were hurt, and when I saw you here, crying out, shaking, I wanted to comfort you. Surely there can be no crime in that, Kai. You told me we are to be wed, anyway. Are we not to sleep in the same bed, then?”

He clenched his jaw, trying to keep from walking over to her and kissing her again, to telling her everything about his nightmares and the way he had no control over them. He could have hurt her if he’d thought she was the enemy come to take him away again. He could have crushed her in that kiss as well, his body so brutish compared to her delicate one which was still injured; he had to keep reminding himself of that.

“Ye daenaen ken what ye are askin’, lass, or ye wouldnae ask it. All that I will say is that I couldnae sleep with ye, and ye came down here anyway. Ye didnae listen tae me. Ye should return tae bed. I will see ye there soon.”

Cecily straightened, her chin lifting ever so slightly. She was angry with him, furious even, and he could see the fire in her eyes. But her being angry was far better than her being hurt, or than her knowing the truth of what ailed him and would not let go.



“Very well, I will go. But do not worry yourself, Laird McLaren. You do not need to come attend to me in my bed today. I can do very well on my own *without* your company. Oh, and by the way, you should know that you were calling my name when I found you here. So there is yet another reason why I came. I thought you wanted me.”

And then, she turned on her heel and stomped out of the room, slamming the door behind her. Kai watched the door for a moment before sat back down on the bed, leaning his elbows on his knees and put his head in his hands. As usual, he had just made a mess of things.



Although she felt proud after slamming the door behind her, she winced at the feeling of her stitches panging, and she paused for a moment, placing her hand over them to take a few breaths before continuing.

*I will not be dismissed like I was so very often by both Anthony and William. I have spent too long dealing with that sort of men. I will not return upstairs, and I shall do as I please.*

Her wound begged her to reconsider, but her stubbornness took the best of her. She had no idea what had taken hold of Kai during the nightmare or after their kiss, but she tried not to care, and she walked away, hoping to find a bit of fresh air in the garden in the center of the castle. It was a beautiful place, and when Kai had been so busy dealing with the enemy clan for the few days after her arrival, she'd spent many a pleasant hour there as well among the trees and plants that were waiting for spring to come again.

Tears waited to fall as she entered the garden, wrapping her robe about herself. It was not enough, but she didn't care. She wanted to do the exact opposite of Kai's instructions so that she could get her revenge against him.

Why had he kissed her and then suddenly cast her out of his room? She was embarrassed as well as angry, and she wished that she hadn't blossomed under his kiss as much as she had, nearly begging for him to take her right then, despite her wound, and despite the fact that they still were near strangers. It was like something strange continued to take hold of her whenever he was near, and she had no control over it. It never made her feel unsafe or afraid, but it felt out of her control. And then Kai had turned on her.

*I will forget him. It is not as if I have no secrets. I am also keeping some from him. Perhaps this is for the best. He will remain angry with me whenever he finds out the truth, and then it will be easier that way. For us to be angry with one another, to hate each other.*

She was about to sit down on one of the benches in the garden when she heard a familiar male voice speaking to a whispering female one. She peeked through the dead branches to see Rae, grinning down at a young maid who was twirling a plait with her fingers and smiling at him.

Cecily stepped on a twig, and Rae turned around quickly. When he did, the maid scurried out of the other doorway from the garden, and Cecily blushed.

“Forgive me; I did not mean to interrupt. I heard voices, and so I was coming to investigate.”

“It is nae trouble, sister,” he said, coming towards her with his hands behind his back.

He was not fully dressed yet as if he’d been awake all night, and he walked up to her with a frown. “But should ye be out of doors in this weather when ye have a wound tae heal? Me brother will surely nae be happy about it if he finds out.”

“What do I care about that?” She straightened up and lifted a brow. “He can try to bellow and yell if he wants to, but I will not be commanded to do whatever it is he wishes.” She asserted proudly and continued with her rant. “I was there to help comfort him in his nightmare! And then he casts me out!”

She shook her head and then paused, blushing again when she realized that she’d revealed that she’d been in Kai’s room. Rae didn’t seem to notice that, for he said, “Ye must understand something, Cecily, afore ye are married. Kai has had a difficult time of things, after the captivity. And then our father died, and he has had all this responsibility that has been thrust upon him. He has never been the same since, and his nights are troubled.”

“Captivity?” she asked, growing pale, a sinking dread in her stomach.

“Och, I see that he hasnae told ye. He will have tae explain tae ye himself, but aye, we were all captured by an enemy clan tae get our father tae pay a price. It took some time, but eventually, he raised the money, and we were released.”

A cold, dark expression flitted across Rae’s face, but then he shook it off and smiled again. “I never wish tae think of it

again. But ye will have tae be patient with him, lass. He doesnae mean tae bellow.”

Cecily breathed out, her heart softening towards this bear of a man who'd hurt her feelings. “I suppose I ought tae talk tae him again.”

“Aye, perhaps. But remember, ye must rest as well. There is much tae dae fer the weddin’, and ye will want tae be at yer best on that day.” He winked at her and was gone, and Cecily left the garden a few minutes later, walking back to Kai’s room.

She pressed a hand against the door as she had earlier, but then without knocking, she opened up the door again. It shouldn’t have mattered to her, but it did. She wanted to know the truth of her future husband and why his nights were plagued as they were. When she entered, she found him in bed again, and this time, his eyes were already open and watching her.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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“*I* did not know,” she said softly, walking up to him, afraid that yet again, he might ask her to leave.

“Ye didnae ken what?” he asked, rising up in his bed, until the blanket shifted down to his waist, and his chest was bare again.

She glanced at it briefly but then looked at his eyes again. His hair was down, and it added to the wildness of him. His eyes were wary, but his tone was calm, and she clasped her hands in front of her to gain her strength.

“I did not know that you all had been captured. That you have experienced horrors I could not imagine.”

He turned away, standing up out of bed again and scrubbing two hands over his face before he looked at her again. This time, he leaned on one of the bed posts with his arm, watching her with furrowed brows.

“Who bloody told ye that?”

“Rae,” she said softly, and he cursed under his breath.

“He shouldnae have done. Ye didnae need tae ken that.”

“But Kai, I want to know.” She wasn’t sure why, since it was all a ruse anyway, but she did want to. “I thought you were merely throwing me out of your room, believing that it was truly wrong for me to be here, but this is something different.”

She took a bold step forward, but he did not move back. Instead, his expression softened a little.

*Only a little.*

“I daena want ye tae see any dark sides tae me, lass. Ye are all that is goodness and beauty, and I am a big beast. I am afraid I will crush ye.”

Cecily wanted to cry out the truth to him, to let him know that she was far darker than he could ever realize, that at that very moment, she was pretending to be another, but she bit her tongue. Instead, she smiled, feeling her chest warming up at his confession. She felt a sense of lightness envelop her and for a moment her worries faded away and everything seemed bright.

“I do not know about that, but if we are to get to know each other, as you wished, then we should know the dark sides, should we not?”

He shook his head. “It is too early, I think.”

She took another step forward, and his eyes were still watching her warily. “We are to be married in two days, you know.”

“Aye, I ken. I have thought of little else.” He looked down at his feet. “I’m sorry that ye heard me callin’ yer name. That must have embarrassed ye.”

“No, but I was surprised. What were your dreams about?”

He shook his head. “Nae now, Cecily. I daenae want tae speak of it.”

She agreed to that, and then standing right in front of him, she hoped that he would take her to bed again.

*Hang the wound and hang the propriety of things.*

With trembling fingers, she reached out for his chest and muscled stomach, spreading her hands over him, tentatively at first, then gradually growing more confident. Her fingers touched the scars, and she watched her hands as they moved and traced down the shape of his chest.

“Then we do not have to speak of it,” she said softly, staring at his bare torso, her heart pounding so much that she feared he could hear it.

“Good. Then let us nae, Cecily,” he said, taking her hand and drawing it to his mouth.

She looked up at him and licked her lips, wanting so much more than just a touch. She wanted to be closer to him, to feel the safety that he gave her, even though it would all disappear one day, once he discovered what she had been hiding.

His eyes met hers, and then with slow gentleness, he leaned down to kiss her. Cecily reached up on her toes and wrapped her arms about him, opening her mouth to his prodding. She moaned when his tongue met hers, and he grasped her waist before sliding down to catch her backside in his hands. She moaned again when he squeezed her, and then slowly and gently, he led her back to the bed. Scooping her up into his arms, he laid her down very softly, and then he lay beside her.

“Ye turn me blood tae fire,” he said breathlessly, blinking at her as if still surprised she was there. “I daenae want tae hurt ye. That is another reason I pushed ye away earlier. Yer wound...”

“Is healing,” she said, having forgotten it in that moment of passion.

His hand slid along her leg, moving up the skirt of her robe ever so slightly. Her breath increased, and she watched the movement with interest. She wanted this. Helen had written of the love and passion that she and Cory shared, how it was far more than anything Helen could have expected, that it was like seeing another world for a few precious moments.

“May I touch ye?” he asked. “Here?” His hand lifted and brushed ever so gently against the space between her legs which heated and throbbed.



“Yes,” she replied, quakily. “Please.”

His brow quirked up at that, and he gave her a smile that nearly broke her heart. “Stay where ye are. Daenae move. I willnae hurt ye, and I want ye tae be as careful as ye can nae tae break yer stitches.”

He moved to the end of the bed where he settled on his stomach, lifting her robe and her shift until it was above her waist. She gasped at the surprise of it, and he looked at her, his hands on her thighs.

“Are ye all right?” he asked, and she nodded, biting her lip quickly before he knew just how much her body wanted to feel his touch on her.

She had touched herself before, but she had never craved for another to do so. His eyes returned to her, and his face was one of astonishment. “So perfect, lass. So bonny.” He kissed down her leg, and then his kiss landed right between her thighs, making her gasp again as desire and pleasure soared through her so much, she thought she might burst into pieces.

He groaned against her sensitive skin, making the pleasure even greater, and then his kiss continued, shifting from soft gentle touches from his lips to licking and sucking. Cecily forgot about her wound, and as he kissed and sucked her, his hands tight on her thighs, holding her down to receive his pleasure, she tossed her head from side to side. Her hands reached out to grasp the bedclothes, when his tongue slid into her opening, driving her mad.

Pleasure built and grew like a fire being fed more and more until it was practically raging. When his mouth suckled at the top of her mound, and his large finger slid inside her, she was lost – her moans of pleasure grew louder as he pushed it in and out of her, his tongue flicking incessantly. It did not take long before her pleasure peaked, washing over her muscles, until she was left breathless. Still shaking, her mound pulsating, she stared at him in amazement.

He leaned up on his elbows and licked his lips, grinning with mischief as he watched her. “I have never seen nor tasted the like, Cecily,” he said, his eyes dark and his voice husky. “I want tae dae so much more tae ye, but we will wait. We will wait till we are wed.”

He slid up next to her and drew her close, pressing a warm, wet kiss against her neck. “I wanted tae ken if ye will marry me in truth.”

Cecily froze, all thoughts of pleasure and climax forgotten as she listened to his words. “What do you mean?”

“I want ye tae marry me because ye want tae, nae because of the contract. I ken it sounds mad, but I feel this is right, down tae me bones. I want tae marry ye, contract or nay. Will ye marry me?”

Slowly, she turned to face him. In his eyes, she saw warmth and affection. It was not love yet, for that would certainly be mad, but she could see the hope for it in the future.

*And yet he does not really know who I am.*

Putting a hand on his cheek, she smiled at him. Like him, she felt this deep down in her bones. There was something right about it despite all the lies.

“Yes, Kai, I will marry you.”

And then with a big smile on his face, he leaned forward to kiss her deeply. “Now, ye had better go, afore someone finds us. If ye stay any longer, I will want tae ruin ye afore the weddin’, and I daenae want that.

“Very well.” She slowly rose out of bed, and pulled her robe tight, Kai watching the movements with interest.

“Go, lass,” he said jokingly, and she shook her head and left.



Kai was so hard that it took some time before he was able to dress without embarrassing himself, and he went to his study, asking for his brothers to be sent for. He sat behind the desk, and he leaned back, folding his hands across his belly. He could not believe the changes that had happened in his life in the past few days. He smiled to himself, thinking of Cecily and thinking of what Cory would say when he told him he was about to be wed.

*Aye, I should write tae the lad. I daenae wish him tae risk any danger by comin’, but he would like tae ken.*

Just then, both of his brothers arrived, Torion looking a little wary, and Rae looking slightly disheveled. Rae was just tucking his shirt into his kilt when he entered.

“Have ye been busy lad?” he asked him with a wink, and Rae smiled.

“Always, brother.”

“Well, I’ve called ye here tae tell ye that I am tae wed the lass on Saturday. We daenae ken about where the men are who’ve attacked her, but I dae ken that enemy troops are on the move. Surely, they will be here soon. This is the fastest we could prepare everythin’ without causin’ fear in the village. Have ye been sendin’ men out on patrol while I’ve been... busy?”

“Aye,” Torion replied with a smirk. “And we have been out ourselves. Nothin’ seen as of yet, besides the one body. Rae found footprints but nae other signs of formin’ troops. But I feel as though ye can smell them in the air. They are comin’.”

“Aye.” Kai was grim. He didn’t want this. Now that he had found his happiness, he didn’t want anything to spoil it. He looked at his brothers, and especially Rae, who had told Cecily of his past. “I wanted tae tell ye something more, though, lads. This morn, Cecily caught me in the throes of a nightmare. She heard me from outside the door, and she rushed in.”

“Aye, so she said,” Rae added, also looking a little sad. “She said ye can bellow and yell all ye want, but she willnae be told what tae dae. She has had quite enough of that already.”

Torion burst into laughter, and Kai grinned, wondering at the strength of his little wife-to be. “Aye, she was right tae say that fer I was a mean bloody blaight. But she came back, and we discussed it. I didnae tell her all, but I feel that I should tell

ye.” He breathed in, amazed that in the space of a few short hours, he had changed his mind entirely about revealing his struggles.

He had always wanted to be strong for his brothers, but now, with Cecily’s help, he wasn’t sure that keeping it a secret was doing anyone any good. “Ever since the captivity, I have been havin’ nightmares. Nightmares of the battlefield, of losin’ ye both, and of bein’ stabbed and taken away that fateful day.”

Both of his usually cheery brothers nodded and shivered, looking gray. “It was a terrible day,” Torion said in a soft tone, not looking at him.

“Aye, and a terrible time after that. These nightmares claim me most nights, and even durin’ the day. I cannae control meself. I sweat, tremble, and I fear that I will hurt someone, if I dinnae ken if I am in the nightmare world or the real world. I wanted tae keep ye from it and be strong fer ye, but after Cecily found me like she did, I thought it time that I tell ye the truth.”

“Good God, brother,” Rae said shaking his head. “I kenned that yer nights were troubled. Ye shouldnae have kept it from us. We could have helped ye. We are nae longer little brothers but men. We are warriors, just like ye, and can fight.”

Kai nodded, and he turned to Torion. “Aye, I agree with Rae. And ye think we are free from troubles, but we arenae. A dark spirit hangs in our minds as well.”

Rae’s grim look was over, and he winked at Kai. “Perhaps, though, it is the love of a good woman who can bring us out of

ourselves, and banish all darkness tae hell, where it ought tae remain.”

Kai chuckled and rolled his eyes. “Aye, I suppose so.”

“She is a good lass, then. And ye like her. I can tell,” Torion said.

“Aye, I like her.” Kai rubbed at the back of his neck, thinking of only a little earlier when her sweet opening had been spread out before him like a feast, and he had tasted his fill of her. Listening to her cries of pleasure had been the sweetest sound in the world, and he would never be able to banish it from his mind.

“I have asked her tae marry me, contract or nae. I wanted tae hear her agreement in truth.” He cleared his throat, embarrassed at the smug yet happy looks his brothers were giving him. “I think I might be fallin’ in love with the lass.” He shook his head at the strangeness of it. “I ken it sounds mad.”

“Aye, mad, but perfect.” Torion grinned. “I’m happy fer ye, brother. Ye are a lucky man then, tae marry a woman ye love.”

“Aye.” He listened to the beat of his own heart for a time. He had never known that it could take hold of a person like this. He had seen it with Cory, but it seemed so other to him, so foreign that he was certain he would never experience it. “But I fear the darkness.”

“Dinnae. We have had enough darkness in our lives, Kai,” Rae said. “And perhaps there is more tae come. Better tae hold on tae the light where we can find it.”

And that’s what Cecily was: the light. A light who had come to shine in through all his dark places and to rid him of it forever.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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It was the day of the wedding, and Cecily had barely slept the night before for her odd mixture of excitement and nervousness. Kai had said nothing to her about the letter she'd written in William's stead, and so she did not ask him. She hoped he would not think it odd that a girl did not ask about her father, but likely he believed her to be angry with him. He had forced her to marry a stranger in a foreign land, after all, and perhaps a girl in her position would not care if her father were in attendance or not.

*But he is no stranger now. Kai asked me to marry him without thought of contract.*

The single thought of that moment still sent shivers through her body as she reminded herself of the loving tone in his voice and the happiness in his smile after she'd agreed. Since that morning in Kai's bed, there had only been chaste kisses and light touches. They had never been alone for very long, and she wondered if he had done that on purpose. She did not care a whit about being ruined or about her reputation after the life she'd led for the past year. That was all in the past now, and she was looking to the future. But he seemed to care very much that she not be touched in full until the wedding night. It was a little irritating, for her body thrummed with the desire to touch and be touched by him again.



*I suppose he wishes for my stitches to be healed as well.*

Earlier that day, Hannah had removed them and bandaged them tightly with another poultice, telling her she looked very well, and she would be perfectly healed in a couple of weeks. But Hannah had also told her something that had made her blush.

*“Dinnae fear yer weddin’ night, lass. Ye will be well enough tae dae what ye please. Only think of it a little. Dinnae be too reckless in yer movements.”*

When Cecily had blushed to high heaven at the sensitive topic, Hannah had laughed and laughed, and then Cecily had asked if she could help her with anything, desperate to change the subject. It was the reason she had come down to Hannah’s, besides the stitches, and she wanted to get off the subject of her ‘movements’ on her wedding night as quickly as possible. Also, no one was allowing her to do anything at the castle, and so that was why Cecily was out in the healer’s garden selecting herbs, trying to remember her brief lessons over the past year. She was placing them gently in a basket when Rae approached her, grinning down at her as he knelt beside her to assist.

“Rae, what are you doing at the healer’s?” she asked.

“Kai asked me tae come and see if ye were well.” Rae chuckled. “I think he fears seein’ ye afore the ceremony, bein’ superstitious and all. Bad luck or some such nonsense.”

“Oh, I see.” Cecily blushed again, looking down at her work. “He is not upset about the wedding and how rushed it had to

be?" she asked softly, not looking up at Rae.

"Nay, nae in the slightest. In fact, I havenae seen the lad this happy since we were children. Who could have kenned that a strange lass from a strange land comin' tae us would be the makin' of him?"

Rae put his hand on her arm, and she looked up at him to see a kind look in his eyes. "Ye have done this, Cecily. Me and Torion cannae thank ye enough for bringin' our brother back tae life. It has been a dark time in the past years, a dark time for us. But it is like ye have brought light tae us."

"Oh, well, it has only been a week or so since I have been here," she said, guilt like ice through her veins.

"Aye, and that is the magic of it. Ye have done so much in so little time. I think ye must be magical." He laughed and then continued to pull up herbs to add to her basket.

"I am nae who I pretend to be, that is true," she said suddenly, her fingers pausing in the act of laying another herb in the basket.

*Why did I say that?*

Suddenly, she felt dizzy, unable to think of a thing, and Rae had paused his movements as well. She knew he was going to ask her what she meant, and she bit the inside of her cheek to keep the words from spilling out of her. It was too early to tell all; the wedding was that day. She had to get it done with before any truth could emerge.

“What dae ye mean, lass?” Rae asked, a note of curiosity in his tone.

It was not a bad thing, nor did he seem angry, but she licked her lips and tried to think of a reply.

“I only meant that I am not as magical as you think. I feel guilty, as though I am part of the situation which has forced him to wed.”

“But ye couldnae have changed that. Ye are also a victim of it, like he is.”

“I know.” She smiled at him. “But I—” She was just about to continue when a cry rang up from the castle along with a bell.

“God’s teeth,” Rae swore and got to his feet.

“What is it?” Cecily asked, her heart pounding as she saw warriors gathering.

“We are under attack,” Rae said. “Come. Ye must go intae the healer’s cottage. Ye will be safe there.”

Cecily watched in amazement as another group of warriors came from out of nowhere rushing onto the castle and battling the McLaren men.

*Kai.*

He was her first thought, and she wanted to run after him, but Rae took hold of her arm and helped her into the cottage. “Stay here, and ye can help Hannah with the men.”

Rae dashed out, and then another man, blood on his shirt, rushed in. “We need ye, Hannah. There are too many of them. We need help!”

“Aye.” Hannah set to work, hardly making a sound as she prepared things to take up to the battlefield. “Come with me, lass. We will dae what we can, and we must dae our best tae stay out of sight.”

Cecily nodded, stunned, as the fears that William had come overcame her. But would William truly bring this many men? And she feared for Kai. What if he was one of the men who were injured or killed? Then, the life she had dreamed for herself would be shattered, and only in a matter of days. And it would all be because she had wished to take a new life for herself instead of staying where she was. Kai would not be in danger if Adelaide had been there instead.

*If it is William’s men who are here attacking the castle.*

“Take this,” Hannah said, pushing something into Cecily’s hands, and then they left, the sounds of the battle in their ears.



Kai had just been settling something with the minister in the chapel of the castle when the cry of attack rang out. In an instant, his blood ran cold, and his lungs felt tight.

*Cecily.*

Cecily was down by the healer's cottage to get her stitches removed, and he'd just sent Rae down there to look in upon her. "Forgive me, Minister," he said to the man and then he hurried out of the chapel to the gates where many of his guards had gathered.

"Laird," they said, "the enemy clan has come. Far more numbers than we ever could have expected. Our patrol riders came only seconds before they arrived. There are too many, me laird. Too many." The guard was breathless, and Kai felt like he was living in his nightmare again.

He could feel himself tensing, as if he did not have enough air. Why could he not have peace and happiness? Cecily was now a part of his life, and he wanted to start a new life with her. One that was bright and calm. Why did they have to come that day?

"Send the archers to the battlements and as many men as we can spare tae the front," he said, pushing toward the gate, his hand on his sword.

He could hear the cries and clang of metal as the gates lifted, and he walked out into the day, a gasp on his lips when he saw what laid before him. There were already dead bodies scattered about, injured soldiers as well, groaning where they lied. It was just like his nightmare.

"Could it be real? Could I be dreamin'?" he asked himself, looking left and right, seeking his brothers and Cecily.

Mr. Murray grabbed at his arm as soon as Kai took a step forward and pulled out his broadsword, ready to fight, no matter how sick he felt, how shaky his hands were.

“Nay, lad! Ye must remain indoors and safe! There has been nay heir yet, just what they want! Ye must protect yerself, protect yer line!”

Kai shook his head. “I cannae simply leave me people tae die fer that when I willnae fight meself. It wouldnae be right.”

He tore himself out of Murray’s grasp, and then he saw Torion fighting across the field, two men at a time. His father had taught all three of them, and so he knew that all would be well, for Torion was a good fighter, and yet his heart couldn’t forget the nightmare when he’d seen his brother fall, a soldier attacking him from behind. He then turned to see Rae, but a dark feeling crept through him when he saw that Rae was fighting three men. Rae was a very good warrior as well, but three men were too much, and Kai headed toward him first, pushing through the crowd, not listening to Murray’s cries to return.

*How could I forgive meself if I didnae fight? A laird should be with his men, willin’ tae put his life on the line at any time.*

But he could not see Cecily, and he had no idea where she was. Rae had gone to find her, and Kai hoped that he had managed to keep her hidden. While she was a fighter, this was a different situation. It resembled the battles that haunted his nightmares – a conflict no one should witness in their lifetime. He dreaded the idea of Cecily witnessing it, fearing it might leave her eternally terrified. She might even reject his

marriage proposal right then and there, yearning for the safety of her homeland.

“Rae!” he exclaimed, rushing to his side just in time to knock one of the assailants down. He positioned himself back-to-back with Rae, and together they fought, dispatching the remaining two attackers. Kai turned to Rae and gave his shoulder a reassuring pat. “Stay safe, brother. I willnae lose ye.”

“Go, help others!” Rae said, and he left, leaving Kai on his own.

Kai spotted another one of his renowned soldiers, besieged by too many foes. He sprinted over, sword in hand, startling the enemy sneaking up on the warrior from behind. Together, they repelled the other two, as he had done with Rae. Soon, Kai found himself breathless, his thoughts racing as swiftly as his heart. A cold sweat coated his skin, his mind growing hazy.

*Stay focused. Stay focused. Yer clan needs ye. This is nay nightmare now. Stay here with the men.*

Despite his efforts, he grew increasingly sloppy, his mind gradually succumbing to fear’s grip. Why did fear behave like a malady, eroding his physical and mental strength until he could only cry out and succumb to darkness? He aided another soldier, yet this time, he failed to react in time against an attacker approaching from behind. Kai spun around at the last instant, but it proved futile.

An intense pain sliced through his chest, prompting a pained cry as his sword thudded to the ground. Gazing upward, he

could discern Torion and Rae racing toward him amidst the chaos. Their mouths moved, but their words were lost to him. Time stretched, sounds faded, and he drew a labored breath before collapsing onto his knees. No further blows followed, and he watched the battle's fury unfold around him.

His brothers drew near, but he understood they wouldn't reach him in time. Blood soaked his chest, dampening his clothes. Just as he had found love, his grasp on life slipped away. After enduring prolonged darkness, light had finally entered his life, only to be extinguished. Kai pitched forward, his final thought a vision of captivating, mirthful green eyes.



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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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Cecily stood at the battlefield's edge, not far from the healer's cottage, assisting Hannah in attending to the wounded. Soldiers would bring men to them when they could, and Hannah's efficiency was striking as she swiftly treated one man after another, making critical decisions and issuing instructions. Despite their efforts, there were those they couldn't save. In that moment, Cecily was tending to a man with a cut on his chest. It looked bad, and it bled heavily, but it was not too deep.

"It will not be fatal," she said with a weak smile, bandaging it up when she looked up to see Rae and Torion carrying Kai toward the cottage as battle moved around them.

"Hannah," she said sharply, and the healer looked up and followed her gaze.

"Come with me, lass," she said, before instructing the men to stay with the injured, and together, they raced toward the cottage and helped Kai inside.

Rae and Torion put him down on the bed, and Cecily couldn't see him very well until they moved back. She rushed to his

side, tears already streaming down her cheeks at the sight of his prone form.

“Kai, Kai, can you hear me?” she asked, looking at his face, but his eyes were closed, and when she felt his pulse, it was faint.

Hannah’s hands found the wound on his chest, and she nodded to Cecily. “You know what to do, my dear. Get the linen and the hot water. We have a job tae dae now.”

Trembling, Cecily stepped back, relieved to have a task to focus on. She gathered what the healer needed from the table, pouring water into a large jar before handing everything to Hannah. She watched as Hannah cleaned the wound, applying pressure to staunch the bleeding. Kai’s complexion was pale, his body marked with cuts and bruises, his clothing and hands splattered with blood.

Cecily clutched the bed’s edge, struggling to maintain her composure. The man she had known as a symbol of strength and vitality appeared as if his life could slip away at any moment. In her mind, he would forever be the bear bursting into the cottage to find her on the bed, his eyes beholding her as though she were the most beautiful sight he’d ever seen.

*Do not leave me, Kai. Do not die. I need you.*

The intensity of her distress surprised her. In such a brief time, she had grown attached to this man. The notion that he might die imminently filled her veins with ice, casting a shadow over her future.

“All is well,” Hannah said finally, looking up at her and his brothers with a faint smile. “The blood has stopped, but I will need tae spend a bit more time cleanin’ it afore I bandage it up. Will ye take him tae the castle, lads?” she asked. “I think it far too dangerous here.”

“Aye, Hannah,” Torion said, grimly.

Once Hannah had completed a more thorough cleaning and applied the poultice and bandage, the sounds of battle began to fade. Torion and Rae hoisted Kai up, and as a unit, they exited the cottage. On the way out, Cecily grasped Hannah’s hand.

“Ye ken what tae dae, lass. I have seen yer skills already,” Hannah said before she hurried back to the men who were injured on the land in front of the castle.

She followed the men as they made their way long the tree line towards the castle. “The men have done well,” Rae grunted with his load. “It looks like the enemy has run off.”

Torion snorted. “Or we have killed enough of them tae make them weak.”

Cecily said nothing, keeping her eyes on Kai in his brothers’ arms, afraid of what a battlefield covered in dead men would do to her courage. They finally reached the back of the castle, and they hurried in, calling for servants to take Kai to his room while they returned to the battle.

Each of them touched her shoulder in passing, and Rae whispered, “I ken ye will take good care of him, lass. Yer heart

was in her yer eyes when ye saw him.”

He rushed out, leaving Cecily with a blush as she realized that likely everyone had witnessed her tearful reaction and apprehension when she believed Kai’s wound was fatal. Yet, she quickly regained her poise upon noticing the servants’ expectant gazes.

“I will follow the laird to his room. Please, bring hot water and bandages. I need to clean his face. Please also bring yarrow tea if the kitchen has it available. If not, please do send someone to the healer’s to make it.” She followed the servants down the passage to his room.

“Thank you,” she said calmly as they laid him on the bed, and then they left.

Cecily knew it was improper for them to be alone, and for them to be seen to be alone together, but in times of battle, it did not matter. She worked quickly, removing his boots, and then drawing the blankets up to his waist. A maid returned with a bowl of hot water and linen rags.

“Here ye are, me lady. The tea will be along shortly.”

“Thank you.” She waited until the maid left, and then gently, she dipped a rag into the hot water, leaning over Kai’s face to clean off the blood and dirt from the battle. “You scared me,” she whispered to him, as the rag came back brown and red, and she dipped it into the water, grateful to see that there were only tiny cuts on his face.

His eyes fluttered open, and she met his gaze, a sigh of relief escaping her lips.

“Ye frightened me,” he whispered in a hushed tone, capturing her hand and pressing a kiss to the back of her knuckles. “I didnae know where ye were, and I feared ye might have been caught up in the conflict. If they sought ye earlier, they might do so again.”

“I was with Hannah. I was safe. We were helping the injured.”

She noticed that he still held her hand to his bare chest, and a little smile flickered over her face. “Rest now. There is no need for you to be awake.”

“If only tae look at ye, lass.” He said with a grin, and she couldn’t help but smile in return, shaking her head.

“You have been stabbed in the shoulder, and yet you can still make jokes?”

“With ye? Always. I am sorry that the weddin’ cannae be taeday. We will have tae make it tomorrow or the next day.”

“Do not worry about that.” Although her disappointment hung heavy inside of her, she was glad that he was well, and that he had not been taken from her.

She wondered too if he would tell her about William, but he did not. Instead, he closed his eyes. “Stay with me, will ye?”

“Of course.” She pulled her hand away from his and continued to wash the rest of the blood from his neck and chest.

When the yarrow tea came, she helped him to drink a full cupful, and then he laid back. She sat at his side until she could hear the soft, steady breathing of a man asleep. And then, she slid into bed next to him, her hand pressed lightly to his chest. She was tired too, but now, they were safe in the room together. No one would come for them, and there was still time. At least she hoped there was still time, for she feared that despite all logic and restraint, she had fallen in love with him.

Hours later, Cecily awoke to the sounds of tortured cries and low moans, and she awoke with a start, turning to see Kai. His face was screwed up tight, and his mouth was open as he cried out in pain and muttered a few things in Gaelic. His hands were holding tight to the bedclothes, and in the dim firelight, she could see the sheen of sweat on his skin.

“Kai, Kai!” she said, her hand moving to his shoulder to shake him gently.

He awoke with a start, and he was breathing hard as he turned to look at her. At first, it looked like he didn’t recognize her, and Cecily wondered if she had been unwise to ignore his fears of letting her stay with him at night. But then, he sighed.

“Cecily,” he said. “Was I havin’ one of me nightmares again?”

“Yes, Kai. But it is gone now.” She stroked his cheek, and he reached out to grab her hand before he kissed her palm.

But then he put it down. “Ye shouldnae be here. What if I hurt ye? I couldnae bear the thought of it.”

He leaned his head back on the pillow, and he put his hands over his eyes and let out a deep sigh. “Go, Cecily. Ye should go and be safe in yer own room.”

Cecily was tempted to listen to him, for she could hear the sadness in his voice, but she did not want to start off their lives like this, always being separate, him always ashamed of his nightmares.

“No,” she said stoutly. “I will stay here with you.” His hands slid from his face, and he turned to look at her again. She added, “We were to be married this very night, after all, and would you have turned me away then, asking me to go to my own room? I do not think so.”

He blinked at her for a few moments before a smirk tugged at his lips. “Ye are a stubborn one, are ye nae? I heard what ye’d told Rae. That I could yell and bellow as much as I wished, but ye wouldnae be told what tae dae.”

Cecily blushed furiously even though she was smiling. She bit at her lip for a moment, unsure of herself. “Yes, I said that. I have had enough of that in my life, and I will not have it now. And so, I will stay with you because I am to be your wife, and because...” She paused there, humiliated that she had nearly spilled the secrets of her heart to him, when it was far too early, when she had no real idea of how he felt about her.

But in his eyes, now shining, watched her curiously, and she could tell he wanted to ask more, but he did not. Instead, he

said, “Would ye like tae ken why I struggle with nightmares? Why ye find me as ye dae in the night?”

She swallowed slowly, knowing that this was a very important matter, and the fact that he was choosing to tell her meant so much. “Yes,” she replied. “I would like to know.”

“A few years ago, like Rae told ye, we were captured by an enemy clan. We were kept fer a long time. In fact, I daenae ken fer how long because I daenae wish tae remember that time or anything that happened then. It was brutal and bloody. I feared fer me brothers’ lives and fer the end of our line. I ken me father was heartbroken over our loss, but he eventually managed to pay the money fer our release. But I was never the same.” His one hand reached out to skim along the side of her arm. “I imagine it, every night, the battle before they took us. I am there in the thick of it. Time slows, and everything around me sounds dull as if I am nae really there, but I cannae escape it. I cannae see Rae, but I can see Torion, and I call out tae him when I see a warrior comin’ up behind up, and he strikes him down. And then, I feel the knife between me ribs, and me head is covered afore I am hauled away. That is when I wake up.”

“Dear God,” she said, putting a hand over her mouth. “I’m so sorry, Kai. It is no wonder you have these terrible nightmares.”

She touched him, wanting to feel his warmth and closeness, wanting to comfort him. She had known captivity, but not quite like that. A piece of her ached to tell him the truth, the whole truth. “My... father... is not a kind man. He has kept me locked away as if I am a prisoner and not a daughter.” It was a partial truth, but it would have to do. Anthony had done the same to her. “I was always meant to do what he wanted, marry whom he wanted, and act the way he wanted. There was no love there. But I cannot imagine what it must have been like for you. I only wish that I can help you now.”



The words were in her throat, ready to pour out. Could she tell him who she really was, and would he still wish to marry her? Was it possible that he loved her as she loved him, and he wouldn't care about a name?

Breathing in, she was just about to tell him when Kai said, "I think I'm fallin' in love with ye, Cecily Cavendish."

Her mouth stayed open, and she looked at him with wide, hopeful eyes. "I ken it's mad," he laughed a little, "but it's true. I daenae ken what powers brought ye tae me, or how fate has worked in me favor, but I cannae wait tae marry ye."

"Nor I," she blurted out, taking a beat before she continued. "I do not think it sounds mad, Kai, for I—" she couldn't believe she was saying it, but she did. "I think I'm falling in love with you too."

The look on his face when she said that was enough to make all her fears melt away, and he grabbed gently at her waist to pull her closer. "Then, I think that we forget about what I said about waitin' til the weddin' night. Let me make love tae ye, lass. For I am dyin' tae dae so, and I have thought of little else."

"But your shoulder," she said, her skin heating, the place between her thighs beginning to throb. Her blood sang at the mere thought of it.

He lifted a brow. "And yer stomach. But we will make dae. Please say we may, for I crave ye like I crave nay other."

She put a hand over him, and moved even closer. “I have been waiting for you to ask, but you have kept away from me for days.”

He looked embarrassed. “I was tryin’ tae be good, Cecily. I wanted everythin’ tae be perfect.”

“This will be,” she said, and then he kissed her, his mouth covering hers, and all the worries and fears for the moment disappeared.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

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Cecily's leg slid up over his hip, and his hands grasped at her buttocks, pressing her gently against his hardness. A little gasp escaped her as she felt the size of him. Helen had written of lovemaking, and Cecily knew enough of how it worked, but she had never seen a man in his full form before.

His kiss deepened, and Cecily already felt weak with desire, her hands pressing against his cheeks as he moved over her ever so gently, leaning on his good elbow as he kissed her.

"Please do not hurt yourself," Cecily pleaded, when she could feel him pull away the blanket that separated them and then slide down her body.

He chuckled low in his throat as he moved her skirts upward. "I am thinkin' of nothin' else but the taste of ye, Cecily. Ye will have tae help me, though, with yer clothin'."

And then, before she could do anything, his mouth was there again, between her thighs, and thoughts flew out of her head. Her need was so great that it took only a few moments until she was crying out his name, left breathless and trembling from pleasure. He leaned up again, his eyes dark with lust.

“I need ye naked, lass. Now,” he commanded, and her desire grew sharply. He needed not repeat himself – she quickly got up and out of bed and started to work at her buttons and ties.

He did his best to untie his kilt and remove it, tossing it to the side of the bed, and her hands stopped when she saw him naked. His length, hard, and glistening at the tip was standing upward, and his hand came to grasp it and rub it up and down.

“Cecily,” he said teasingly. “Dinnae stop now.”

Swallowing hard, with her eyes on his shaft, she hurried with the rest of her clothing until she too was bare, and she slid in next to him. He shook his head in disbelief as he rose over her again and his eyes drank her in. “Next time, we will take more time with that, for I could spend a lifetime studyin’ and worshipping’ yer body, Sassenach.”

Cecily, unsure of what to do next, but knowing she just wanted him, reached up to pull his mouth down again. He kissed her until he groaned as she explored his mouth with a tentative tongue as well. Then, he broke the kiss and moved down her neck and chest, until he reached one pert breast, the nipple hardened to a point.

“These are the most beautiful pair of breasts I have ever seen in me life,” he said, his sharp green eyes on her before he took one into his mouth.

Cecily thought she had been filled with desire and lust before, but as soon as she saw the wicked sight of Kai suckling her, his eyes watching her reaction, the desire only increased.

“Kai,” she whispered, watching in awe as his tongue swirled, and his lips sucked, his hand holding the breast so that it would go deeper into his mouth.

She shook, watching as he moved to the other breast and did the same. Her head leaned back, and she arched upward, wanting to push herself deeper into his mouth. Her pleasure was intense, and she felt her wetness gushing between her thighs.

Kai rose up with a look of such smug delight that she nearly laughed. “I see I shall have tae dae that more often,” he said, his hips coming to rest between her legs where she felt him hard against her now very wet opening.

“I think ye liked that, I can see it here,” he said with a small thrust that set her lower body ablaze.

She gasped loudly, making Kai laugh aloud, and then he said, “This will hurt but only fer a moment; I promise.” He touched her cheek, and she looked into his eyes. “Are ye ready?”

“Yes, please,” she said and blushed at her need for him.

But that only made his expression darker, and more primal. “I will be careful with ye,” he said, lifting up a bit to press against her.

Cecily’s thighs spread wider as she could feel him entering her, inch by inch. The fulness was unlike anything she’d ever experienced, and she held her breath as he watched her, pulling out once before coming back and filling her again.

“Cecily...yer so tight and wet.”

Frowning, she asked, “Is that a good thing?”

“Aye, so it is.” He pulled back again and thrust forward, a little harder this time.

Something snapped inside her with a little pang of pain that surprised her. He paused.

“Are ye well?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding her head, slowly at first but then faster. She reached for him and pulled him down to her. “More. More, please.”

He chuckled and then said, “Ye will never have tae ask me again, lass,” before he pulled out and then slammed into her, burying himself to the hilt inside.

Groaning, Kai began to move, and then he kissed her. His tongue in her mouth matched the flick of his hips as he thrust, one beat after another while Cecily slowly lost herself to the heat, tightness, and pleasure as he filled her again and again. Her fingers trailed over his back muscles and arms, trying to hold tight to him while he rode her. Her hands reached down from the line of his strong, scarred back to his firm buttocks, amazed at the strength she felt there in his movements.

His name spilled from her lips as she could feel that coil of pleasure growing hotter and hotter as Kai's rhythm increased. His calloused hand reached down to her hips to angle them further, and she spread open even more, and Kai sank even deeper, drawing gasps from their lips.

And then it came – her climax – bright and warm, and even though she closed her eyes and screamed her pleasure, Cecily could see color behind her eyes. This time, it was stronger than any of the time she'd touched herself, and her whole body shook and trembled, feeling lose as if melting.

Kai continued, his lips at her ear, his body moving quickly until he too tensed and groaned, his thrusts slowing until he entered once more, deeply, spilling his seed inside of her.

“Cecily,” he said in a reverent whisper, kissing her cheek, and Cecily knew that she had never heard her name said in a more beautiful way.



Kai pulled her close to his side, both of them damp with sweat, but satisfied. He grinned up at the canopy covering his bed as he felt her snuggle closer to him. His lips drifted over her hair, and then he stayed still.

His shoulder ached, but he didn't care. He had just made love to the most beautiful woman in the world, the woman who would be his wife soon enough. Far below her proper English exterior was a fighting, passionate woman. Hannah had been entirely right. She had no artifice about her, or pretense. She had given of herself so freely to him as if she had waited her whole life for the moment, to be filled and loved by him and to love and captivate in return.

But it was the same for him as well. Kai had thought for years that his life had been broken into two parts. His life before the captivity, and then his life after. But now, it was as if a new life had been given to him without him asking for it, without him feeling like he deserved it. He'd had a life before the captivity, then a different, colder life after, and now, now that Cecily was there, he had something brand new and precious: a second chance.

“I must confess, even if my sister had told me of the pleasures of the bedroom, I never expected it to be like that.”

The awe in her voice made him smile. “I suppose ye are tellin’ me that as a compliment?” he teased, and she turned to face him, her one lovely hand laying across his chest.

“Oh yes, certainly. That was... well, I’m not certain that I have the right words for it, Kai. Perfect, I suppose, although that sounds too disingenuous. I think that—”

Kai stopped her words with a kiss. “Ye dinnae need tae think of any words, Cecily. Only that ye enjoyed it is enough fer me.”

She blushed then, biting at her lower lip, now fuller and more swollen from his kisses. “I suppose you already know that.” She put a hand over her mouth and giggled. “I was certainly loud enough.”

He grinned at that, pulling her even closer. “Aye, so ye were.” He nibbled at her ear.



“Is that a bad thing? I fear I do not know what to do in such... situations. I was overcome, however, and I could not possibly have kept that inside.”

Kai laughed louder, all nightmares now having scampered away back to where they had come from. “Ye are givin’ me the best compliments ye could have, Cecily. And nay,” he kissed her again. “It is nae a bad thing tae be loud like ye were. Ye are welcome tae always be as loud as ye like. Besides, that tells me I am daein’ the right thing.”

“Oh good.” They settled against one another again, and after a little more tired talk between them, they fell asleep.

It wasn’t until morning that Kai rose, blinking his eyes and turning to see the window already full of light. He had spent the night with Cecily, and there had been no nightmares. Turning to look at her asleep, Kai’s heart was full. The pain of the past was a distant memory, and now his heart was full of a young, delicate woman, with green eyes, a bright smile, and a fighting spirit. She slept on her side facing him, her lips only slightly parted in slumber. Her hand was underneath her pillow, and Kai turned in full to put his hand at her waist.

*I love her.*

He couldn’t wait to tell Cory about it all, how it had come upon him unawares, just as it had with Cory. He could finally understand his friend’s mad behavior, and how it made him happier than he’d ever seen him. Pulling her close, he kissed her cheek, and she roused, letting out lovely little hums that had him hardening again.

When she opened her eyes and smiled at him, she reached out and kissed him. The next hour was lost to another bout of feverish lovemaking, only this time, it was slower, sweatier, and they took their time. She came apart underneath him even more violently than the last time, and Kai could feel himself becoming undone.

After, the day was filled with preparations. Kai and Cecily had agreed they be married on the morrow, and Kai couldn't wait. But he was confined to his bed, and eventually, Cecily reluctantly left to bathe and to prepare herself. He slept for the day, with only happy dreams, and he didn't rise until a servant came with hot water for a bath, and he forced himself to bathe, rubbing away the blood and dirt from the rest of his body. It was then he called for his brothers.

When Torion and Rae arrived, he was still in the bath, and they both looked relieved to see him so well.

“The battle,” Kai began. “How did it end?”

“We were victorious, Kai. In the end, we discovered it was the McFarlane Clan, the bloody blaiyards. Still tryin' after all these years tae take hold of us.”

Kai frowned and scratched at this neck. He would need to shave before his wedding. “But why? Clan McFarlane does well. I ken nae why they should attack us, or why they should attack Cecily in the woods.”

Torion shrugged, looking slightly pale. “I dinnae ken either, but it is over now. They have left enough of their dead here on

our land, and so I dinnae think they will be back again.”

Kai watched his brother curiously. “Ye dinnae look well, Torion. Have ye slept?”

“Only a little.”

Rae frowned. “Why should we sleep, brother? Ye were unwell, and we thought we lost ye. But,” Rae glanced back at Kai’s rumpled bedclothes and grinned. “It seems that ye are feelin’ fine enough, and that yer new wife is a good nurse in more ways than one.”

Kai might have had the energy to refute his brother, to stop his teasing, but he couldn’t help it; he smiled instead. “Aye, that she is. And I wish the weddin’ tae be tomorrow. I will be well enough.”

“Clearly,” Torion added, looking a little better.

“So, will ye help in preparations? I ken there is much tae dae.”

“Of course!” Rae clapped Torion on the shoulder. “We will handle everythin’. All ye need tae dae is make sure that ye show up.”

“Aye, that I will dae. Since the weddin’ is earlier than it was planned, be sure tae send a fast rider with a missive tae Cory and Helen. I want them tae be here, if they can.”

“I have already done so,” Rae said. “I kened I didnae want Cory tae miss this, seein’ ye as besotted as ye are.”

Kai knew he could not refute that, and his brothers laughed at him before they left. And then he returned to his bed, praying that Cecily would come back to him and stay the night.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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Cecily's heart fluttered like a bird in her chest, as she stood in front of the looking-glass in her wedding dress. "Ye look lovely, me lady," Dora's voice came from behind, as she secured the final thistle in Cecily's braided hair. "I can hardly wait to witness the laird's expression when he sees you approach the chapel."

Cecily had pondered her wedding as a child, but as she and Helen had grown older, life had taken on a somber hue. Now, she found herself at a wedding she had never expected, donning the gown Helen had purchased for her. Living at the castle had allowed her to flourish, filling out a bit as she relished her meals without fear of deprivation or punishment.

Now, the dress fit her perfectly, and she smiled at it, racing her fingers along the edges of the green bodice. It was embroidered with gold flowers, the same flowers that were embroidered along the hem. "Thank you, Dora. It was a gift from my sister."

"It's a wonder yer sister isnae here tae see ye wed."

"Yes, I know." Something hard lodged in Cecily's throat. "I think my father has kept her away on purpose."

“He will come, surely.”

Cecily wasn't certain how much longer she could maintain the façade, but she had to persist until the right moment.

She shook her head, and Dora looked at her kindly, reaching out to grasp her fingers and squeeze. “Come. It is time tae go.”

Escorted to the chapel within the castle, Cecily waited on the other side of the door, with Rae by her side as Dora slipped inside. Rae appeared handsome and freshly groomed, his clothing free from the stains of battle.

“It seems that yer father didnae get the missive in time, lass. Even though we had tae wait a couple of days tae have the weddin'. I hope ye arenae too sad.”

She turned to glance at Kai at the front of the chapel with the minister and Torion, their kilts and swords on. “No, I am not sad, Rae,” she said, realizing that she had never said a truer thing.

As they proceeded down the chapel aisle, only a small assembly occupied the seats. Cecily was relieved that Kai's friends and family were present, for she still bore her secret and couldn't afford to expose it just yet. Although Kai remained oblivious to her truth, everything had evolved into something she ardently desired. It felt as if this was her destined path, despite the unconventional and perilous journey it had entailed. As she drew nearer to Kai, his gaze upon her made her feel profoundly seen, cherished, and, finally, safe.

The minister's words carried on for an extended duration, yet as he bound their hands and entreated vows between them, Cecily sensed an inner transformation. Her gaze locked onto Kai's, a profound realization permeating her being – that this man was her intended partner, her destined love. He appeared irresistibly handsome, defying the injuries from the battle only days prior. His hair was neatly groomed, and his beard had been trimmed. Dressed in a white cravat and linen shirt, the Clan McLaren kilt cinched at his waist, a sporran attached. His coat was dark, in harmony with his black boots. Cecily struggled to focus on the minister's words; her thoughts were consumed by the vivid memory of their intimate times together.

With the ceremony concluded, they exited the chapel arm in arm, proceeding to the hall for the celebratory feast. Both wore genuine smiles, and Cecily clung to the hope that everything might indeed resolve harmoniously. She just needed to locate Helen; her sister could help make everything right.

“Are ye happy, lass?” Kai asked, leaning down to her ear, making her shiver.

“Yes, so happy.”

“Good. I have sent word for me friends and the villagers tae come tae the feast. I was able tae since we had a bit more time, but I daenae ken if they will come. But if so, I cannae wait for ye tae meet me friend and his wife. Ye will love them.”

“Oh, how wonderful.” In the hall, she was amazed at the food and the decorations. It had been transformed, and she spotted

the musicians in the corner. “I never expected such a wedding, Kai,” she said, and he looked a little worried.

“I ken it willnae be what yer weddings are like in England, and perhaps it is nae as ye imagined it.”

Smiling, Cecily leaned up and kissed him in front of everyone. “It is better than I imagined it. It is perfect.”

A gasp escaped her lips as the musicians began playing a tune she could have heard at an English ball. Turning back to Kai, she was met with a teasing glint in his eyes.

“I asked if they might play something’ from yer country, in which ye could dance the allemande.”

Cecily fell a little more in love with him then, if it were even possible. She curtsied playfully before extending her hand.

“Will you dance with me then, Laird McLaren?” she asked.

“Aye, Lady McLaren. I would be most honored.” He took her hand, and she led him to the floor while friends and family watched from the tables.

All was silent except for the music, and Cecily’s nerves fluttered in her belly. But she had done this many times, with strange men she did not love more than anything like she loved Kai, and she could do it again.



“Follow me,” she said, repeating herself after that night in the library.

Kai complied, mirroring her steps as they danced. Their hands brushed, they spun, and moved gracefully, their gazes locked. When the dance concluded, applause erupted around them. Cecily curtsied, and Kai bowed, then he grasped her hand, urging her to stand straight before he leaned down to kiss her.



Kai couldn't help but think that every man in love believed this about his young bride, but he was convinced that no one had a bride as radiant as his. When Cecily had walked down the chapel aisle, he had been left breathless, recalling how he had considered her an angel from the very first day he laid eyes on her, and she appeared ethereal then. Her golden hair had been artfully arranged with Scottish thistles adorning it.

Her beautiful green English gown now fit her well, and she looked much happier and healthier than when they'd first met. All bruises had healed, and there were no longer any dark circles under her eyes, no matter how much he'd kept her from her sleep for the past two days. She wore a sash of McLaren colors, and she had beamed at him as Rae walked her down to him in front of the minister. The wedding had passed in a whirlwind, and now he was kissing his bride, his wife, amidst the applause and cheers of friends and family. Life was unfolding as it should, characterized by splendor and light, even if there were dark spots that lingered around them. He'd danced a bloody English dance too, but no one had laughed or sneered, and to see Cecily's happy face had made it all worth it.

“Kai,” she said against his mouth. “There are so many people watching us. Perhaps we should not kiss in front of them.”

“Never say that, lass,” he replied with a smile, stepping back, and raising her hand aloft. “Begin the festivities, friends! More will arrive, and we will have ourselves a cheery time.”

Drinks were passed around, and Kai led her to their usual table. When everyone had an ale or a wine in their hand, he rose again. “Tae me wife, Lady Cecily McLaren!”

“Lady Cecily McLaren!” they called and then drank. He looked down at her, still amazed that he had gotten so lucky.

Sitting down, he leaned toward her, and she pulled in a breath, smelling the delicious soapy scent of him.

As they sat down, he leaned toward her, the scent of soap and warmth emanating from him. His lips brushed her cheek, and he murmured in a husky tone, “Ye’re an angel in truth, my love. I’ve believed it since that very first moment. Ye have brought such light tae me life, and I can think of little else of strippin’ ye out of yer fine gown.”

Cecily bit her lip to stifle a giggle, and she blushed. Kai’s heart flipped over, and he was amazed that amidst the shadows, light had found its way to him. The notion was almost unreal, and he yearned for the festivities to conclude so he could carry his bride away to their private haven. She turned her gaze to him, affection radiating from her eyes. It was intoxicating to be so deeply desired, and yet he realized he was as much a captive of his need for her as she was for him. She leaned in, her hand brushing his bearded cheek, and their gazes locked.

“I’m sure we will get to that later,” she teased. “But you said you have friends you would like me to meet.”

“Aye,” he grinned, turning his face to kiss her palm. “I am certain we will.” He winked. “But I daenae ken if me friends will arrive. It is only a hope.”

The hall resonated with music, merriment, feasting, and dancing. As Kai and Cecily conversed quietly, their laughter echoed several times. He sensed their shared happiness, certain that they would find joy in their life together. He was almost tempted to acknowledge the council members across the hall, their solemn expressions in stark contrast to the festivities. But his pride prevented him; he didn’t want them to think that compelling two souls into marriage was an acceptable approach. He hoped no one else would endure a similar ordeal, even though he himself had been fortunate enough to wed the most extraordinary woman he’d ever met.

“I should like to go upstairs and freshen myself, Kai,” Cecily said, rising to her feet. “Since these friends are so important to you.”

“Of course.” He took her hand and kissed it. “Unless ye should like me tae go with ye,” he added in a low tone.

Laughing, she took it away from him. “No! You will be far too distracting.”

Kai watched as she moved through the crowd, chuckling to himself. He followed her steps until she disappeared from view. To his delight, he spotted Cory at the entrance.

Excitedly, he rose, making his way towards his friend and embracing him with genuine joy.

“Cory, Helen, ye are very welcome, indeed.”

“Kai,” Cory grinned, his hands on Kai’s shoulders. “The both of us are very glad we could come, and we cannae wait until we get tae meet this perfect bride of yers.”

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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Eecily hurried out of the bustling hall, trying to maintain a measured pace even as her breath came in ragged gasps. She paused in an alcove by the staircase, stepping into its shadow to catch her breath. She didn't want to rush up to her room, fearing that it would become a refuge where guilt would take hold of her entirely.

*What have I done? I have lied to the man I love. I have forced him to marry me under false pretenses.*

A fresh kind of sorrow, unlike any she'd felt before, gnawed at her heart. She pressed a hand to her chest, attempting to soothe the ache, but it seemed unyielding. What she had hoped would be simple—marriage to secure her freedom—had become more complex. The man she'd come to love deeply hadn't expected to fall for her so fervently, and yet the weight of her deceit lay between them.

What would he say when he discovered it? How could she even confess if it meant their happiness would shatter? Her hand moved to her stomach, her anxiety knotting within. Surprisingly, William had not made an appearance at the wedding, offering her a slim chance of keeping her secret for a little while longer. Her head hung under the weight of her

guilt; this deception was unlike anything she'd ever done and disgusted her.

"Lady McLaren?" her eyes lifted to see Rae watching her with kindness, having crept around the stair.

He smiled when she caught his eye.

"Oh, please, Rae, you must call me Cecily," she said with a brief smile, wiping a stray tear from her cheek and walking out of the alcove. "How did you find me?"

"I heard something', and I thought I'd take a look." He cocked his head to the side. "Are ye well?"

She swallowed and let out a long breath. "I don't know," she said honestly, and Rae offered her an arm.

"Come and sit on the stair, lass. We will have a talk."

She followed him, wondering about his intentions. Once they were seated, she asked, "Why are you doing this?" "

He regarded her with a gentle expression. "I ken that it can be hard tae be with all of us and all at once. The gathering has grown rather large with all the villagers present, and perhaps it is too much for ye, overwhelmin'."

"Yes."

“But ye are daein’ a fine job, and I can see just how happy ye make me brother.” She smiled, but it faltered quickly, and she looked down at her hands.

“Cecily,” he said in a whisper, “tell me. Are ye really Cecily Cavendish?”

Her eyes widened, and she turned to him. This was her chance to unburden herself, yet it would also bring everything to an end. All the love and beauty she had found might vanish like smoke if she confessed.

“No,” she breathed out, so quietly she wondered if he’d actually heard it. “I am the Earl of Cavendish’s distant cousin.” Swallowing back her fears, she added, “Kai was meant to marry my cousin Adelaide, his daughter.”

“I see.” Rae’s voice was calm but sad, and she dared not look at him.

“How did you know?”

“Our conversation in the garden at the healer’s. I have been unable tae think of little else. Somethin’ stuck in me mind after ye told me that ye were nae who ye were pretendin’ tae be.”

Tears came again, and she asked. “Do you find me despicable?” she asked. “For lying?”

He shook his head. "I am nae happy that Kai doesnae ken, but I am certain ye had yer reasons for daein' it. I dinnae ken them and will nae ask ye about them, but Kai needs tae ken them and the whole truth. Tae him, you owe a full explanation. But ye have made Kai so happy... How could I resent someone that loves me brother as much as ye clearly dae? Your affection is plain to see."

She nodded, trying to swallow back more tears that pushed against her eyes. "I do love him."

"So, will ye tell him?"

"I shall, although I fear that everything will crumble when I do. Everything I have now will be gone."

"Nay." Rae shook his head. "I dinnae believe that tae be true. Kai loves ye, and ye are still Cecily, even if ye arenae the same woman he was meant tae wed."

She nodded, a solitary tear tracing a path down her cheek. "Yes, I shall go and tell him. Thank you, Rae."

As she rose unsteadily to her feet, her body trembled with emotion. The day had begun with promise, filled with excitement and joy as she anticipated marrying Kai. Now, uncertainty loomed, just as it always had. Would revealing her secret cause Kai to change before her eyes? She dreaded the thought of witnessing the love fading from his gaze after he knew the truth. Once she confessed, who would she be when he cast her out of his life? Who would she be if she couldn't be with her beloved?



She stood frozen and she looked down to see Rae smiling at her. “Go on then, lass. Ye can dae it. I will be in soon after tae give ye courage.”

Taking a deep breath, she moved toward the hall’s entrance, where the music and laughter resonated. Slowly, she gathered her courage as she stepped into the midst of the revelry. Greetings as the new lady of the house echoed around her, and she acknowledged them with polite nods, though she felt as if she were heading toward her own doom.

*You can do this, she reminded herself. He deserves to know, and he deserves to know now.*

Pushing slowly through the crowd, she smiled at the others who greeted her as their new lady, and she tried to be polite, even though she was walking to her doom. A few minutes later, she caught Kai’s gaze above the people he was speaking to, a man and a woman. He smiled at her and waved over to her. She smiled back, and then she walked toward them, her heart fluttering madly.

“Kai,” she said, and then the two people turned around.

Cecily’s world nearly shattered when she recognized one of the newcomers. Standing before her was her beloved sister, Helen. Dumbfounded and surprised, she struggled to find words, wondering how Helen could have known she was there. Kai appeared overjoyed, ready to introduce Cecily to his dearest friend and his wife.

“Cecily!” Helen said in shock, her lips curling up into a smile.

Kai chuckled, a confused look in his eyes. “Och, and there I was about tae introduce ye.”

“No, there is no need,” Helen said, looking just as surprised as Cecily. “This is my younger sister.”



Kai’s brow furrowed as he tried to grasp the unfolding situation. “No, that can’t be. This is Cecily Cavendish, the daughter of William, the Earl of Seton. We have been contracted tae wed.”

Helen enveloped Cecily in a warm embrace, and Cecily, her face drained of color and her eyes wide, held her sister tightly, casting a fleeting, tear-glistened glance up at Kai.

“Helen, I am so relieved to see you,” she said quietly when they pulled apart, and Kai realized that Helen spoke the truth.

Still grappling with the truth, Kai turned to Cecily. “Is this true? Are ye truly Helen’s sister?”

“Yes,” she replied, her voice trembling, her complexion still pale.

“This is the sister they wanted ye to meet, lad,” Cory chimed in, looking equally bewildered as the rest of them.

Suddenly, it clicked in Kai’s mind. Cory and Helen had spoken often of a Cecily, wishing him to come and stay at the castle when she arrived, but in all the confusion of the recent months,

he'd not connected that their names were the same. Never in a thousand years had he dreamed that the Cecily he had been forced to wed was actually his friend's wife's sister.

“Who are ye then, lass?” he asked. “Are ye the daughter of the Earl of Seton?”

“I was... once. But I am no longer. Let me explain it all to you, Kai.”

“Nay.” The world seemed to fade around him, his focus solely on Cecily's downcast and guilty expression. He had fallen deeply in love with a woman shrouded in lies. Why? Why would she deceive him like this? He had thought he'd found an angel, only to be deceived once again, just like countless other times. The world's cruelty, momentarily forgotten, came crashing back to him. “I need tae leave.”

He turned to go, but just then, Rae caught his arm. “The lass can explain if only ye would listen tae her.”

Kai's glare bore into Rae, his anger and frustration making his voice venomous. “Ye kenned this? This lie?”

“Aye, but—”

“Get away from me, brother,” Kai growled. “I dinnae wish tae speak tae ye or see anyone.”

“Kai, please,” Cecily croaked, and he slowly turned around.

“Tell me this then. Is yer name truly Cecily Cavendish?”

“No,” she confessed on a soft breath, and with a sharp nod, he turned away and strode out. He stormed from the wedding festivities, the grand hall’s doors swinging shut behind him as he headed for his study.

He intended to drown himself in alcohol that night and many nights to come. When he finally reached his study and slammed the door shut, he leaned heavily against it. Collapsing to the floor, a fresh surge of anguish engulfed him, unlike anything he had ever experienced. It was as though a chasm had opened up within his chest, and he longed to tumble into its depths.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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“Cecily, what in God’s name?” Helen asked, grasping hold of Cecily’s elbow as she teetered on her feet.

“Helen,” she whispered, feeling as though the world had ended in mere seconds. “Let us go elsewhere, where we can be alone. Let the people celebrate without my grief.”

Helen nodded, and she and Cory led Cecily out of the hall to her private sitting room at Cecily’s instruction. When they entered, Helen helped her to a chair, and Cory rushed to pour them all glasses of wine.

“I know this is not exactly the right time,” Helen said, “But I did want you to meet my husband, Cory, Laird Chattan.”

Cecily managed a faint smile as she glanced at Helen’s partner for the first time since her arrival. Cory’s dark hair was tied back, and he sported a beard. His blue eyes radiated kindness, though he was not as broad or tall as Kai. Nevertheless, strength emanated from his strong shoulders and hands as he handed her a glass of wine.

“I am pleased to meet you,” Cecily said before she took a sip. “My sister has written of little else.”

Helen and Cory exchanged a look full of affection, their love for each other tangible.

“You are Kai’s closest friend,” Cecily continued, addressing Cory. “It’s an honor.”

Cory inclined his head, his gaze warm. “The honor is mine. Helen talks of you with great fondness.”

Apologizing for the somber circumstances, Cecily’s voice grew heavy with emotion. “Allow me to explain everything. Helen, William is an evil man. After he took up residence, I couldn’t confide the truth in my letters to you. He intercepted them, and after he discovered something... he threatened me into silence, claiming he would unleash something terrible if I spoke.”

Helen’s lovely, familiar face paled, and Cory looked grim, leaning forward. Cecily spun the glass in her hands, and she continued.

“I was searching for something in Anthony’s study, something that would help extricate you from the situation in which you were bound. I wanted to save you, Helen, so that you could come back to me.”

“Oh, Cecily, what happened?” Helen asked, gripping her husband’s hand tightly.

Cecily's voice trembled as she recounted the memory she had kept locked away for so long. "I haven't spoken of it since. It feels strange now, finally confessing it to someone. When I heard someone approaching the room I hid. It was Anthony and William. They were arguing about a document and before I could really understand what was happening, William murdered our brother!" she cried.

"I hid and bided my time, speaking to no one about what had happened. But I did question William's whereabouts when Anthony was killed and I fear he suspected I knew something. He forced me into a life of servitude in the house that had become his. His daughter was kind, but it was no longer a home. I spent my time devising a way to escape to you. When an opportunity arose to come to Scotland, I took it. Adelaide was meant to marry Kai, and he only found out on the day we were due to arrive."

"Dear God," Cory said, and Helen's eyes had widened, her mouth opened.

"Cecily, I'm so sorry that you had to live with this for so long. I should have come for you to save you." Helen began to cry, but Cecily shook her head.

They were both silent as they watched her, and she took another long sip of wine before she continued. "We were attacked, and as men surrounded me, William took Adelaide and left me to die."

Helen gasped, but Cecily continued. "He has wanted me dead ever since he knew I knew, but I wonder if this was his way of getting me out of the way without having to answer any questions. But I survived, for Kai's brothers rescued me, and I have been here ever since."

Cecily looked away from the fire, her heart pounding with anticipation of the next chapter of her confession.

“And ye have pretended tae be Adelaide?” Cory asked.

“Yes,” Cecily breathed, tears now coming down her cheeks, thinking of Kai’s face as the weight of her deception finally unraveled. “They assumed that I was her, and I just let them believe it. But I told him that there had been confusion, that I was Cecily, Adelaide’s fictional sister. I thought it would save me from William’s clutches, for once he found out that I had survived, I knew that he would try to come after me again. I was even attacked out in the woods with Kai, and someone caught me and stabbed me.”

Helen gasped again, but Cecily put up a hand. “I am well now. Do not worry. I knew that once I was married, I would have been able to find you, Helen. I wanted to live a life and not just be forced to do what William wanted. But things changed. With Kai.”

She paused, looking into the hearth, thinking about how happy she had been since her arrival to the castle, so happy that it had not even seemed possible.

“You are in love with him,” Helen said solemnly, and Cecily nodded, brushing away a tear.

“And I believe he loves me too, but now, he will never forgive me. You saw his face. He is hurt by my betrayal, and I fear that I will have to leave and leave him behind. That he believes me to have ruined his life by my lies.”



“Nay,” Cory spoke up. “Just give him some time.” Cory rubbed over his face, and he shook his head. “What a tale ye tell, and he didnae even let ye tell it. It would explain everythin’.”

“Thank you,” she said, breathing out, trying to stop the tears. “But I do not know how I will ever get him to listen to me again. You saw him in there, and if I cannot get him to listen to me, then he will never know the truth, and he will keep thinking me a traitor.”

Cory grew grim, and he stood. “Like I said, give him some time, and he will come around. And I will speak tae him too, lass, for even if ye lied tae him, ye will get a chance tae explain.”

She couldn’t help but smile a little through her tears. “Thank you, Cory.” She rose as well, and she leaned up to kiss him on the cheek. “I know that my sister has found such happiness with you, and I’m so glad for you both. And I’m glad that I get to meet you.”

Cory blushed a little, and he turned to his wife. “I will leave the two of ye now.” With a nod, and a quick kiss to Helen’s cheek, he was gone, and then it was just her and Helen in the sitting room, the sounds of the fire filling their ears.

“I’m so glad you’re here, Helen,” Cecily said, coming to sit next to Helen so that she could reach out for her hands. “Now, you must tell me everything about your new life.”

“Not a chance. Not yet, anyway.” Helen squeezed her fingers between her own. “I want to hear all about how you and Kai fell in love. For it was just what Cory and I had planned for, and it worked out anyway.”

“You did?” Cecily asked, her eyes wide with surprise.

“Yes.” Helen chuckled. “We had plans for you to come and visit while he was staying at the castle with us. And no more stalling. Go on then. Tell me everything.”



The next day found Kai in the stables, engrossed in the rhythm of brushing his horse, trying to quell the storm of anger and bitterness within him. The previous night had brought little relief, only a throbbing headache and a new marital status that left him feeling hollow. He hadn't ventured near Cecily's chamber, nor had she sought him out.

*Ye should have, ye bloody fool.*

He continued brushing, attempting to occupy his thoughts with plans for the coming days as a newlywed and the responsibilities that came with it. Should he have approached her? The image of Cecily's hurt expression from the previous day was etched into his mind, a painful reminder that pierced his heart. Sleep had eluded him as his thoughts oscillated between her and the words he might say if they ever crossed paths again.

*I love ye, and I want ye, and I will never leave yer side.*

No, he couldn't utter those words. The woman he loved had betrayed him, yet the love persisted, gnawing at him despite his anger. How had he fallen for her deception? Did she truly care for him? Why had she married him under false pretenses? Confusion swirled within him, entwined with anger, hurt, and the persistent love he couldn't deny.

His horse neighed, and he realized he'd been brushing too hard. Putting the brush away, he patted the horse's flank, and then he said, "What are we tae dae, lad?"

The horse merely buried its nose in the pile of hay, munching contentedly. Kai left the stall and closed the door behind him, leaning against it with a heavy sigh. The wedding he'd been eagerly anticipating had turned into a whirlpool of emotions, and he had missed out on its joy due to Cecily's deceit. Would he ever uncover the truth?

"If ye'd get yer head out of yer arse, aye, then perhaps ye would."

Realizing that he'd spoken his question aloud, Kai turned to the voice, and he saw Cory in the stable, leaning his shoulder on one of the stalls and crossing his arms.

"What dae ye want, friend?" he asked, pushing away from the stalls to grab more hay for the horse's pail.

"I want tae come and talk tae ye, tae let ye ken that there is an explanation for Cecily's lie, and ye need tae speak tae her about it."

“Och, dae I?” Kai asked, stuffing the hay in the pail, and not looking at Cory.

“Aye, ye dae. Dae ye nae remember how Helen hid something’ from me as well, and I was angry when I found out, but then it all made sense in the end? There is a perfectly reasonable reason why Cecily did this, and instead of listenin’ tae her, ye walked out on her at yer own bloody weddin’ feast.”

“Ye ken nothin’,” Kai said, stomping past him and out of the stables into the grey day.

He knew he was being stubborn, but he wasn’t ready to hear it from anyone else. Both Rae and Torion had attempted to reason with him in his study, but his responses had been nothing more than growls and demands for them to leave him alone. He believed he could resolve this on his own.

“I ken more than ye think, and I certainly ken more than ye ken.” Cory didn’t chase after him, but instead, he called from the stable doors as Kai walked away. “Dinnae be such a stubborn arse that ye will ruin yer life for yer own pride. Ye love her, and ye ken it, nay matter what her bloody name is!”

Kai didn’t turn back, his feet carrying him into the castle. He marched directly to the central fighting area, thrusting open the doors to the armory and grabbing a couple of swords. He intended to sweat out his frustrations, hoping clarity would follow. Swinging and thrusting against the straw dummies, he engaged in a furious display of force, determined to find a solution.

But clarity proved elusive, as doubts and uncertainties continued to swarm within him. He swung his sword with controlled rage, battling his own emotions as he sought a way forward. Would he ever find a way to reconcile his love and the deception that had tainted it? Or was he doomed to remain trapped within this emotional maelstrom?

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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The next day found Cecily standing outside Kai's room, flanked by Cory and Helen. Doubt gnawed at her as she questioned the efficacy of their plan. "Are you sure this will work? He's been avoiding me for days. Do you really believe that cornering him in his room will make him listen?"

"Aye, I dae. I will tell him tae go tae his room for something' for me, and then once he is inside, we will lock the door, and he will be forced tae remain."

Cecily nibbled on her lip, torn between uncertainty and determination. Did she truly want to force Kai into a conversation with her? He had evaded her for days, avoiding meals and any interaction, retreating to his own pursuits. Part of her hesitated to be alone with him as well, unsure of what his reaction might be. Yet, this was her final attempt to salvage their relationship.

She and Helen had discussed their options extensively over the past days. If Kai refused to reconcile, Cecily had the option to leave, return to her sister's side, and seek an annulment. But that possibility, though tempting, didn't sit well with her. A surge of anger rose within her at the thought, a newfound strength accompanying it.

*He is being stubborn and foolish, and if he only listened to me, then he would at least get the truth.*

“Very well,” she said with a nod, and then she walked into his room, Cory and Helen remaining at the doorway.

“We will send him down in a few minutes,” Cory said, and with a wink, and a smile from Helen, they shut the door.

Inside the room, Cecily glanced around, her heart pounding as she contemplated her next move. She chose a seat by the fireplace and settled in, preparing herself for Kai’s potential anger and sharp words. Time seemed to stretch on slowly, and it was hard to believe that just days ago, this room had been filled with their shared passion.

Her heart quickened as she heard approaching footsteps outside the door. “Why in the bloody hell ye need the snuff now, when we are just about tae ride, I dinnae ken,” Kai said, and Cory responded.

“Well, I want tae be prepared if our ride is longer than ye planned. I want tae see yer improvements in the guardin’ and see if I can help in any way. I may want the snuff while we ride, and as I’ve always told ye, ye have the best.”

Kai swore at his friend, and Cecily could just imagine Cory grinning as his friend’s back disappeared into the room. She held her breath when he entered. He didn’t see her right way, coming in to look at a far table, when the door closed, locked, and as he spun around to face it, he saw her sitting by the fire. Hopefully, he didn’t see just how much she trembled with nervousness and uncertainty.

*No, that is the old Cecily. Be the new, stronger Cecily. The one who fights for what she wants and does not give up.*

Slowly, she rose, her heart beating like mad, and her fingers twisted in her skirts as she stared at him. He lifted a dark inquisitive brow, but he made no move to step to the door to burst out or demand to be let out.

“What’s this?” he asked as she took a few hesitant steps forward, her heart aching to feel him against her again.

Cecily summoned her newfound strength, taking slow steps toward him, heart pounding against her ribcage. She quelled her nerves, reminding herself of her resolve.

“No, don’t leave,” she said quickly as she saw his reflexive movement toward the door. “Please, Kai, hear me out. I know you’ve been avoiding me, but there’s so much you need to know.”

Kai hesitated, his gaze shifting between her and the door. Cecily closed the distance, her fingers brushing against his arm. She felt his tense muscles under her touch, but he didn’t pull away.

“There’s a lot I need to tell you,” she continued, her voice steady but brimming with emotion. “I am Helen’s sister. Our father, the Earl of Seton, passed away, and our half-brother Anthony took over. You know about Helen’s role as a spy for Scotland.”



He nodded slowly. “Then, my brother died at the hands of my cousin, William Cavendish, and I was there in the room when it happened. He is the one who has taken over the earldom.”

Kai’s eyes softened a little, but he said nothing. A twig cracked in the fire, and she took a breath. “He knows I was there, and I was trapped in his home for the past year, as almost a servant to him and his daughter Adelaide. I thought Scotland would be the chance for freedom. And so, after we were attacked, I just let you all think that I was Adelaide, the one promised to you. But as you can see, I still kept my name, pretending it was some confusion. You have always known my true name, Kai.”

She took his hand in hers, pressing it to her chest. She met his gaze, her eyes swimming with tears. “I’m so sorry. I know I should have told you, and I should not have allowed the wedding to go through, but I thought I had no choice. William would be back for me when I realized I did not die in the attack, for he left me there, running off into the woods.”

“What?” Kai asked, a dangerous look in his eye now.

She could only imagine what he might do to William if in a room alone with him, and that made her love Kai all the more.

“Yes, and so I needed to get away. Please say you understand. And then, when everything happened between us, I truly wanted to marry you. I promise you, Kai, that when you asked me to answer for myself, it was yes from the bottom of my heart.”

Kai's grip tightened on her hand, his expression a mix of anger, confusion, and a glimmer of something else.

"My name is Lady Cecily Ridley, and I love you deeply, Kai McLaren," she said, her voice trembling with emotion. "I'm sorry it's taken this long for you to hear the truth."

A little flicker of a smile played on his lips. "Ye truly wanted tae be wed tae me?"

"Yes, with all that I am," Cecily confirmed, a mixture of relief and anxiety flooding her.

Kai leaned forward, his lips brushing against her forehead before trailing to her cheeks, brushing away her tears. "You risked everything to keep yourself safe."

Cecily nodded, her heart swelling with his understanding.

He stepped back slightly, looking down at her with an intensity that made her breath catch. "So, you forgive me?" she asked, her voice breathless with anticipation.

"Aye," he said, slowly pushing her back toward the bed. "And I mean tae get the weddin' night that we missed out on because of me bullheadedness."

Their laughter and playful banter echoed through the room as they stumbled toward the bed, the thrill of the moment coursing through their veins.

His hold on her waist tightened almost painfully, his gaze darkening with a mixture of desire and amusement.

“And will you forgive your brother?” she asked out of the blue.

“Ye mention me brother now of all times?”

Cecily couldn't help but smirk. “Yes, you must forgive him. He found out just before I was about to tell you at our wedding feast. I was on the brink of confessing when...”

“When I stopped you,” he interjected, a trace of a smile playing on his lips. “Aye, I'll forgive him then.” He leaned in closer, their lips almost touching, before he paused. “Are we done speaking of him now?”

She laughed softly, tugging him down until their mouths met once more. He lowered her onto the bed, covering her body with his own, their kisses growing long and deep.

“Yes,” she said again, her voice softer this time, the word a mere murmur as his mouth trailed down her jaw and along her neck. Her fingers worked to remove his coat, her desire growing with every touch, every whispered breath.

With urgency, he stood and hastily shed his clothes, a sense of anticipation radiating from his heated gaze. Cecily stood as well, her fingers quickly unfastening her bodice and skirts, eager to reveal herself to him. Soon, she stood before him, her shift falling to the floor.

“Me wife, so beautiful,” he whispered, his fingers tangling in her hair as he gazed at her with a mixture of awe and desire.

Cecily gasped as he lifted her, his strong grip on her buttocks making her shiver. Her legs wrapped around him instinctively, her body already yearning for his touch. A moan escaped her lips when his mouth closed over a sensitive nipple, sending waves of pleasure through her.

Leaning in to kiss his ear, her fingers traced the contours of his skin, memorizing every scar, every mark. But their positions shifted, and suddenly she found herself beneath him, her legs wrapped around his hips.

“I want ye so badly, Cecily,” he confessed, his voice thick with love. Her touch against his beard was soft, her thumb brushing his lower lip. “Nor I,” she replied, her voice heavy with longing.

And then, their movements became a rhythm, his body moving within hers as they found their connection. Words were unnecessary; their moans and gasps communicated their desires as they moved together in an exquisite dance of passion.

“Kai,” she cried out, her fingers digging into his back as pleasure spiraled within her.

Unexpectedly, he shifted their positions, guiding her onto his lap. Surprise and desire flared in her eyes, a gasp escaping her lips. A husky chuckle rumbled in his chest, his hands still on her waist, his gaze searing into hers.

“Now, ye can control it all, my love,” he murmured, guiding her movements as she found her rhythm, her hands on his chest, their connection deep and intense.

Their eyes locked, a maelstrom of emotions swirling between them. She felt his desire, his pleasure, and she rode him with determination, feeling the heat coil within her again.

Their climax was fierce and uninhibited, both of them calling out each other’s names as they found release. He held her close against his chest, his arms wrapped around her as they both caught their breath, their fingers tracing soothing patterns along each other’s skin.

Cecily’s heart swelled as his fingers danced along her back. She nuzzled into his neck, savoring the warmth of his embrace. Contentment settled over them, and she relished in the feeling of being in his arms.

“Ye wield great power, me love,” he murmured against her hair. “Never doubt yer strength or beauty. I love ye as I have loved no other.”

Tears welled in her eyes as he turned to kiss her, sealing their connection with a promise. Everything felt right in that moment, their trials and tribulations leading them to this place of understanding and love.

As they lay entwined, their bodies still intimately connected, Cecily knew that they had overcome the storm that had threatened to tear them apart. Their love was stronger than any deception, and with Kai by her side, she felt invincible.

With a final kiss, they sealed their commitment, knowing that their journey was far from over, but they were ready to face whatever challenges came their way, united and steadfast in their love for one another.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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*K*ai was in the middle of a beautiful dream when a loud sound pounded on his room door. He awoke abruptly, reaching for his sword on the table besides his bed, and Cecily awoke as well.

“Laird! We need tae speak!” a guard said, and his heart pounding, Kai got out of bed, slid on his kilt and went to the door.

The young guard hurried in, breathless and pale. “There has been a break-in tae the castle, Laird.”

“A break-in?” Kai asked hazily, rubbing at the back of his neck. “What dae ye mean?”

“Someone has come in, and they have taken someone.”

“Who? Bloody spit it out, lad,” he said with frustration as Cecily waited in the bed, covering herself with a blanket.

The guard’s gaze slid to Cecily, and he said in a trembling voice, “They have taken yer sister for she cannae be found.

They have taken Lady Helen.”

“No,” Cecily said, eyes wide with fear as she swung her legs from the bed and stood in the blanket.

Kai’s heart nearly stopped. Yet again, when they were about to find happiness, something came to stop them.

“Shite. Go and call the council, lad, and me brothers. I will come soon.”

“Aye, Laird.” The trembling guard left, and shut the door, and Kai turned to Cecily.

She was pale in the faint light in the room, and he could already see that her eyes were glistening with tears. “No, Kai, they have taken her! I knew William would come for me, and that he would hurt me by taking the only family I have. Please, you must help!” she cried, and then he saw that she was about to fall to the floor when he rushed to catch her, and he pulled her close.

“I swear tae ye, lass. We will find who did this, but now, I must go tae the council and meet tae discuss what occurred. Dress, and come with me.”

They quickly dressed, and hand in hand, they hurried to the council chambers. Outside of them, Cory was pacing, and when Kai approached, Cory looked wild, like Kai had never seen him before.



“She was in our room, Kai; I swear it. But I left her to sleep while I took a drink with Torion in the library for an hour or two. I returned, and this was on the table, with Helen nowhere in sight. There was only this note.” He handed it over to Kai, and both he and Cecily read it.

Cecily gasped. “It his him. I know his writing.”

Kai stomach turned as he read the message:

*One wonders how a laird can do such a trick without believing he'll get caught. The contract was with me and my daughter, Adelaide, not that teller of lies, Cecily. And so, Helen will have to pay the price, unless something can be agreed to. If Kai and Cecily get an annulment, and Kai marries my daughter, then Helen will be returned to you all. Everything will be as it should be, and no word of the betrayal shall ever pass my lips. Then, with Cecily, I will get to do as I choose.*

Kai swore and crumpled the note in his hands. The man was a bloody lunatic if he thought he was going to give Cecily away or if he was going to get an annulment. He looked down at his wife and saw her staring off into the distance, her teeth clamped tightly on her lower lip.

He put a hand to her back. “We will find her, lass.”

Cory was still pacing, his hands rubbing frantically over his face. “The men are here,” he said, and he led the way into the council room where the old men were assembled, half-asleep at their table.

Kai wasted no time, addressing the council with urgency. Rae and Torion arrived just in time to hear him say, “We must find a way tae get the Earl of Seton tae believe that we have annulled the marriage.” He passed them the note, and they tiredly looked at it one by one.

Murray was there too, looking nervous and stressed, and he was the one to read the note last. “How dae ye ken it is he?”

“I know,” Cecily said, her voice strong, and Kai was proud of her. “It is his writing, and he has been wanting to hurt me ever since I learned that he was responsible for my half-brother’s death, the Earl of Seton.”

When the council asked further, Kai hurriedly explained the confusion, and that Cecily had lied only to save herself. They listened, but in the end, they were not pleased.

“How can we make him believe there was an annulment?” Mr. Murray asked, scrubbing a hand over his chin. “Is the marriage nae consummated?”

He looked between Kai and Cecily, and Cecily blushed. Kai grimaced. “Aye, of course. But he doesnae have tae ken that. Perhaps we can let him ken that I discovered her deception and so we didnae consummate it. It doesnae matter. She willnae be taken from me, and we will find her sister.”

“This could be bad for the clan, and we cannae risk it,” Stephen, the oldest of the men said. “I do not like how this had evolved, all the lies and deception. This woman is not the girl you were supposed to marry.”

Kai nearly threw the table back upon them. “Ye may nae want tae help us, but I will dae whatever it takes tae save me sister-in-law, who is the family of me wife. So, I will make a plan.”

They were silent for a time until Rae and Torion spoke at once. “Agreed.”

Mr. Murray sighed and looked between the men. “Aye, then, very well. What have ye in mind?”

It took some time before Kai and Cecily returned to their room, and he quickly began to grasp at clothing to shove it into a leather bag. He was going away with his brothers and Cory to look, and he knew that it would be like torture to be away from Cecily. But as he moved, she fluttered around him.

“I want to come. She is my sister, and I need to make up for what I did.”

“What did ye dae? Nothin’! Ye were merely the one who was there when he murdered yer half-brother. That wasnae yer fault, of course. Ye cannae blame yerself.”

“But I could not save Helen when Anthony sent her away. I was too weak and afraid, but I do not want to be that anymore. I want to be strong and brave and keep the people I love safe!” she declared, tears in her eyes.

Kai’s heart ached at the vulnerability in her gaze. He pulled her into his arms, his voice tender. “M’aingeal,” he murmured, pressing a soft kiss to her lips. “Me angel. I have found ye now, so I will keep ye safe. Ye must stay here and wait for us

tae return. We will dae whatever we can tae help Helen, find her and bring her back tae ye and tae Cory.”

“You think me weak too. I know it!” she said stubbornly, pulling out of his embrace and going to sit on the bed, fire in her eyes.

“Daenae put words in me mouth, lass,” he said with irritation, packing the last bits into his bag. “I want only tae keep ye safe. If ye were there with me, it would be like havin’ me heart out in the open, for anyone tae hurt it. I cannae risk that.”

He felt sick at the thought, reminded of how it had felt to see her crumple to the ground after the stabbing in the woods.

She breathed out, her fingers twisting together, and she was biting at that lip again. He hated that he was hurting her, but God knew he wouldn’t be able to survive if he lost her. He went over to her and grasping her hands, he lifted her to her feet and kissed her again.

“I love ye, lass.”

“And I you,” she replied tersely.

“I will be back for ye soon.”

“Goodbye.” She sat down again, hardly looking at him.

With a heavy heart, Kai grabbed his bag and left for the stables to meet his brothers and Cory. The ache of leaving her behind gnawed at him, but he knew he couldn't risk her safety. As he walked away, he whispered "M'aingeal" one more time, a promise to return for her soon.



Cecily glared at the door after Kai walked through it. Men always thought they knew best, and she was tired of listening to them. Especially when she had such plans to do better and to be better, to be stronger. Helen was strong and wonderful, and Cecily couldn't bear the thought of losing her. A hatred of William grew in strength within her, and as soon as she heard Kai's footsteps fading away down the passage, her mind was made up. She packed her own bag as quickly as she could and donned her cloak before heading out the door.

*They may yet be at the stables.*

She raced through the passageways, trying not to be seen, and she went out the back way towards the stables. It was still dark, but there were streaks of dawn in the sky, and she knew that it would be light within the hour if she did not hurry. At the stables, she pressed her back against the wood of the building, and breathing hard, she slid around the side of it until she reached the back entrance. Slipping inside, she found a place to hide, and she could hear the men planning.

Kai stood in the center of them all, strong, tall, his sword hanging at his side, and Cecily, despite her anger at him, was still in awe that he was her husband. So powerful and confident and dangerous, and yet his affection for her was clear and tender. She still shivered at the thought of their passionate lovemaking and the way he'd made her feel powerful. But then that day, she felt weak again.

*He thinks I will faint or something like that when we come to danger against William. But I will not! He has not even given me the chance to prove myself.*

Quietly, she listened to their discussions, waiting for the right moment. When the men finally departed, mounting their horses and riding out, she knew her opportunity had come. As they left the stables, she sneaked inside, her heart racing with anticipation. She located the horse Kai had previously allowed her to ride and opened its stall.

But as she moved, a hand on her shoulder made her startle, her heart leaping to her throat. She turned to find a stableboy looking at her with wide eyes, confusion etched across his face.

“Me lady,” he said, and she put up a hand.

“Do not fret, but I am preparing to leave as well. I was sent word that I too should go in order to comfort my sister when she is found.”

He blinked at her, his eyes moving to the open doors of the stable where the men had just left. And she could tell that he did not exactly believe her.

“Please; I must hurry in order to catch them up. Will you help me to saddle the mare?”

“Aye, then, so I shall,” he said, a little hesitantly, but soon enough she was out on the road, gripping the reins tightly,

racing after her husband and the other men as fast as she could.

As the morning light grew stronger, she could see more clearly. The road ahead was illuminated by the rising sun, but she still felt a sense of urgency. "I can't afford to lose them," she thought, pushing herself and the horse to go faster.

The rhythmic sound of hooves echoed in her ears, growing louder as she approached the group. She strained to see them around a bend in the road, ready to catch up and prove her mettle. Just as she was about to round the corner, a dark shape darted across her vision.

Suddenly, chaos erupted. The startled neigh of a horse pierced the air, and Cecily's heart pounded with alarm. Her horse reared up in surprise, sending her tumbling down onto the dirt path below. The world spun around her as she fell, the ground rushing up to meet her. Pain exploded through her body as she hit the ground, the impact knocking the wind out of her. Everything faded into a haze as the ground and sky blurred together.

In that moment, Cecily's determination remained unshaken, even as she lay battered and bruised. The trials and obstacles had only fueled her desire to be strong, to stand on her own feet. She couldn't allow fear to hold her back any longer, not when Helen's safety hung in the balance. With every ounce of strength she could muster, she willed herself to rise and continue her pursuit, her determination unwavering in the face of adversity.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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“So, are we clear on it all then, men?” Kai asked as they slowed, their horses aligning on the path. “I will meet him in the house he requested, and I will give him the document. At least the councilmembers agreed tae put a false stamp on it tae make it appear real. He will believe it, of course,” he said with a confidence he wasn’t sure he felt.

His mind was still back in his bedroom with a distraught Cecily who thought he believed her to be weak.

“Aye, we got that part,” Rae said with a roll of the eyes. “Ye have only told us five times since we first hatched the plan.”

“Fine then,” Kai retorted sharply. He turned to Torion, who looked strangely silent and grim.

Cory was pale and looking down at his feet. Kai knew he’d been a cad to his best friend, but he could make up for it all with this, with saving his wife.

“He’ll believe us,” Kai repeated, hoping to give Cory strength. “And then I’ll tell him the weddin’ is planned for me and his daughter. I have a note from the council tae prove it tae his



satisfaction. I've already sent word tae the English authorities of what he's done tae Helen and Cecily's half-brother, so they'll be after him soon enough. We just need tae give ourselves more time."

Rae lifted a brow. "And what of the part of the note where he said he would dae whatever he liked with Cecily?"

Kai stiffened again, his fists clenching. He could feel the darkness crawling back to him, threatening a nightmare, but he knew he had to hold on just a little bit longer. He had to be clear and focused in order to pull this off.

"He willnae be gettin' her nae matter what he thinks," Kai said, urging his horse into a cadence again.

They rode on for another hour until a grand house came into view. Isolated and distinctively English in design, it seemed out of place amidst the Scottish countryside. The sight ignited Kai's frustration, knowing that William's arrogance was bolstered by his belief that he could act freely on Scottish soil, making and breaking alliances with clans and most likely scheming for the outcome of the war between the two countries.

"Here we are," he said to the others, jumping down from his horse, his sword jostling at his side.

Darkness lingered at the edges of his mind, and he knew that if he made on mistake, or if Helen or Cecily came to any harm, the nightmare would take hold of him again, and he wouldn't be able to control it. And yet that was his fear but not exactly his certainty. Now that he and Cecily were man and wife in

every sense of the word, he had not felt the touch of the nightmare since. But deep down he could feel it waiting, biding its time until it could return.

“I will go in. The rest of ye wait here,” he said gruffly, grabbing the papers he needed while walking to the door.

His other hand held to the hilt of his sword, and he raised his hand to knock. But it opened before he could knock again.

“Laird McLaren,” an old butler said. “Lord Seton is waiting for you.”

He nodded, and armed with what he had, he entered the house, trying not to flinch at the sound of the door closing behind him.

“Follow me, Laird,” the butler said, and Kai followed him through a dark passageway of the house to a lone door. “This is his study.”

The butler knocked, a voice called out, and the butler opened the door, motioning Kai to go inside. When he did, he found Lord Seton sitting behind a long desk. As the door shut yet once again behind him, Kai had the very great impression that he was in the mouth of the lion’s den.

“Laird McLaren, what a pleasure. I’m so glad you’ve come in response to my note.”

Kai was a little dumbstruck at the man. He was tall and thin with a bird-like face, and he was wearing the strangest color of suit and waistcoat imaginable: sky blue. He blinked a few times, wondering if this truly could be an English earl.

*Was this how they dressed these days?*

“Of course, I bloody came when ye asked. Ye have taken my sister-in-law from me and me friend.”

“Soon not to be sister-in-law,” William said with a flash of his green eyes.

Cecily too had green eyes, but hers were like mossy pools of lovely green, while William’s were sharp and angry like a cat’s. One with far too many secrets.

“Aye,” Kai replied.

“Do sit down. We have much to discuss.” William’s voice was bright and cheerful, and it gave Kai a creeping feeling at the back of his neck.

But he sat and laid the documents on the man’s desk. He was about to push them forward and speak about them when William pushed them aside.

“We will get to that. Can I offer you any refreshment? You have had a bit of a ride, I know.”

“Nay. I want nothin’ from ye except tae return Helen tae her husband.”

“Like I said, we will get to that. You are a gentleman, sir. Surely you wish for refreshment.” He rose and went to a side table where a bottle of wine and many glasses sat.

He poured some into a cup and took a sip. “I never conduct business without refreshment, Laird McLaren.”

“Kai,” he responded with irritation, his fingers absently scratching his beard. He was eager to bring the encounter to its intended conclusion, yet he knew that every word and action must be executed flawlessly to ensure Helen’s safety and to prevent harm to Cory and Cecily.

“Very well, Kai.” William settled back into his chair, his tone bright and cordial. The dissonance between his demeanor and the situation unnerved Kai.

“This house is rather exquisite. It was recommended to me months ago, even before I fixed the marriage contract with your councilmen. I am certain my daughter will be very happy here at your castle and among your people. The surroundings are rugged but striking.”

“Aye, ‘tis true,” he replied slowly, his mind grappling with the unusual circumstances.

William took a long sip while Kai tried to think of a good response. He had never dealt with Englishmen before, at least not in this strange sort of calm setting, and so he was curious

as to what he might do in order to persuade the man to bring him to Helen.

Kai cleared his throat when it seemed that William was not going to speak. He leaned forward and tapped a knuckle on top of the documents he'd brought.

“Everythin’ is here, as ye requested. All proof that the marriage will be annulled, and that the clan will accept yer daughter as wife once we are wed in the church.” Even saying the words was difficult, but he did his best to keep his expression plain. “So, now I think the time might be for ye tae show me the lass.” He put a hand to the hilt of his sword to elucidate his point, and William only smiled.

“Of course.”

Kai was ready to breathe a sigh of relief when a knock echoed through the room, breaking the tense atmosphere. The butler entered with an air of urgency, and Kai’s heart skipped a beat as he wondered if their plan was falling apart.

“Forgive me, me lord, but there is an urgent matter that requires your attention,” the butler informed William.

William rose from his seat with a clap of his hands, offering Kai a disarming smile. “Please excuse me. Earl duties are demanding. You understand, I’m sure. I’ll be back shortly.”

With that, William left the room as if their meeting had been a mere social engagement. Kai’s frustration simmered beneath the surface. He, a seasoned warrior and formidable laird, felt

outmaneuvered by a cheerful Englishman in a sky-blue suit. He knew better than to underestimate the cunning of an adversary, yet he couldn't help but feel that a crucial piece of the puzzle eluded him.

Time passed with Kai seated in the study, his patience tested as he contemplated the situation. He had to be vigilant, for Helen's safety hinged on his ability to navigate this precarious encounter. The door finally swung open, and William returned, his genial demeanor undisturbed.

"Apologies," William said as he resumed his seat. "Now, where were we?"

"Helen," Kai growled, his hand gripping the back of the chair, and his other hand ready to pull out his sword and run the man through. "Bring me tae Helen."

"Very well. Come with me. It is time, as you say." William turned around, and Kai, blinking in surprise, hurried after him.

*That was far too easy.*



Kai followed William down a long, dark passageway, and he spied a door at the end of it. They walked through it, and he saw they were at the back of the house. Looking up, he could see storm clouds rolling in, and they matched his mood. But he kept his mouth shut as he followed the man, spotting an abandoned cottage only a few steps away. Out of nowhere, it seemed, William pulled out a rather large set of keys.

“Here we are,” he said, and then shoved a metal key inside the keyhole on the oaken door and turned it.

Kai, his heart in his throat, stepped inside first, eager to get to her. The room was dark, but his eyes were adjusting.

“She is there,” William said in a low voice, so very different from the one he’d been using in the study as a rather strange attempt to calm or charm Kai; he wasn’t sure which.

“What?” Kai asked gently, looking across the dark expanse of cottage until he spotted a lone chair in the dim light.

When his eyes finally adjusted, he growled out, “Ye bastard.”

Helen was there, a cloth bag over her head, her hands and feet tied to the wooden chair. He thought he heard a soft groan of pain from her lips, and his heart went out to her. She had been there for hours upon hours.

“Jesus Christ, Seton,” Kai said, rushing to her side and reaching out to pull the bag from her head. “What have ye done?” he bellowed, and then he nearly sank to his knees when he did not see Helen’s face beneath the bag but Cecily’s.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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Cecily couldn't open her eyes, but when she heard Kai's voice, her heart lifted. The swish of cotton over her face let a little breeze cool her skin, and she knew she was not dead.

"Kai," she croaked as best she could, but she wasn't certain he could hear her.

"Cecily." His voice too sounded cut short, and she heard him sink to his knees, his hands hurrying to her wrist. "Me love, I cannae believe what he has done tae ye."

Her puffy eyes opened a crack, and she could see now, a little, his face concentrating as he tried to get the ropes untied, but then she saw William coming from behind him. His face was like the devil himself, so full of greed, so full of anger and malice, and she tried to cry out to Kai to warn him, but nothing more than a squeak came out.

And then, William kicked Kai down when he wasn't watching, and Kai fell to the ground, groaning with pain. But as he spun to face William, Cecily could see five more men pouring into the room. Tears slid down her cheeks as she watched as the men kicked Kai down his face, stomach, and back. The sounds



were terrible as they crunched, and Kai's cries of pain rung in her ears.

She saw him fight, saw him try to keep them all away from her, but it was too much for him. "Kai," she tried to whisper, but she knew he could not hear her. Why could she not speak? Why could she not try to wriggle free to save them both from this torment? Her eyes slowly turned to William, and he was watching it all with a faint look of amusement on his face.

"Stop," she tried to say, but again, it only sounded like whimpers and squeaks to her ears.

"Did you think that I would be so stupid that I would believe you'd actually simply do what I asked, McLaren?" William laughed, loudly, and Cecily winced as the sound echoed off the walls. "But I must say I was a little surprised to see your little wife, sneaking around behind you to find her sister as well. I've always thought of her as a shrinking violet, but it seems she has more gumption than I thought." He chuckled, and looked her way, and Cecily hated that the tears were glistening on her face as he spoke.

"Leave it," William said suddenly, and the men stopped, moving away from a groaning Kai who was still laying prone on the ground, trying to recover from his attacks, and the men went to the wall.

The sound of a blade opening up put a tingle of fear through Cecily's belly, and while her eyes were on Kai, she turned and saw that William wasn't there in front of her anymore. Her body began to gain some movement back, and she wriggled a little in the confines of her ties, hating herself for bringing Kai so much pain. If only she'd listened to him and stayed back, then perhaps he wouldn't be hurt on the ground right then.

*If only I had not been so stubborn to prove myself.* Her eyes, turning back to Kai, saw that he had shifted up. He was breathing hard, and his face was bloody, but his eyes stared into hers with such love that her heart broke. And then, she felt the cold, sharp press of the blade at her neck, and a little gasp escaped her swollen lips.

“So easy,” William said, whispering near her ear.

She watched as the expressions on Kai’s face changed from fear to anger as he tried to get to his feet. “It was so completely easy to get you to fall into my trap, little Cecily. Congratulations to you for having more strength than I ever gave you credit for. When you lived at my house, you were so easy to control. Simply by making you a servant, starving you, and forcing you under the stairs kept you quiet with that dirty little secret of yours.”

The blade pressed closer, and Cecily could still see it so clearly in her mind’s eye. The look of avarice and malice on William’s face as he’d plunged the knife into Anthony’s stomach. He surely had the same face now, and Cecily closed her eyes again, wishing to return to that sun-soaked spot in the forest with Kai, where they could just be alone, and no troubles could haunt them.

“But you are a hard woman to kill; I can give you that.” The blade remained where it was as he told his tale, and Cecily’s fingers curled over the edge of the chair, her knuckles turning white as she gripped it so hard, she wished she could break it to pieces. “Not even the stabbing in the forest could kill you, nor could the attack on the carriage as we all rode to McLaren Castle.”

And so, it all became clear. She and Kai stared at one another as everything that William had planned came to light.

“So, it was nae enemy clan?” Kai asked with a hoarse voice, having now risen to his knees with effort.

“No. Well, not that at least. Everything else, yes, for you do have your enemies, McLaren,” William chuckled, and the knife bobbed a little against her throat.

She could feel a tiny prick of blood coming out and sliding down her neck. William’s voice returned to her ear, but she knew he was staring at Kai as he spoke. “It would be so easy to kill you now, Cecily, rid my life of you forever, for all the suffering you’ve caused me.”

*The suffering I have caused?* she wished to demand, if only her voice could work, if only her lips were not so terribly swollen.

“You have made me watch my back after that easy murder, and you wish to take it all away from me, all that I deserved. And then, pretending to be dead so that you can steal Adelaide’s husband from her? She was heartbroken, I will have you know, Cecily.”

Cecily knew that wasn’t true, but she could feel the rage in her cousin as he shook behind her. He could do anything; she had seen it first-hand, and he might take her from a life with Kai. With just one movement from his hand, it could all be over.

“Leave her be,” Kai said, still struggling to stand, and William chuckled again.

“You know, I think I will.” He removed the blade and stood back, and Cecily was more surprised than ever.

William snapped to his men, and she could hear them moving around the room, but she wasn’t able to see what they were doing.

“I think I will find a different way to punish you, dear cousin.”

And then she could smell it. The smoke. Things crackled around her, and smoke filled her nose.

“Enjoy your last few moments together, Cecily. Perhaps McLaren will get you out in time, but perhaps not. Those ropes are very tight after all.” She watched in horror as he called his men to leave, and he backed toward the door. “Good luck to you, of course.”

He left, and the fires grew. Tears continued to slide down her cheeks as Kai scrambled to her, reaching out to her face.

“Me love,” he said, his own eyes filled with tears as the room began to heat. He pulled at something around her mouth, and he tossed it to the side.

She realized then that her mouth had gone numb from the gag, and she tried to get her lips to work again as she looked at him.

“Kai, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t think of that now. I need tae get these ropes of ye.” He worked hurriedly, but he had no knife. “They bloody took all me weapons,” he said, trying to untie the ropes, but they wouldn’t budge.

Her heart was full; she knew he loved her, but she couldn’t let him die for her. What a waste it would be to see him give up on a life he so deserved: to be laird of his clan and follow in his father’s footsteps. She loved him so much, and she wouldn’t let him waste his chance.

“Go, Kai. Leave me be. You must take your chance to live. I cannot have you die with me.”

“Ye’ve got tae be bloody jokin’,” Kai said with a near laugh. His face grew grim then as his hands stilled on her arms, the room getting hotter and hotter. “Better for me tae die with the one I love, than tae live a life without ye, Cecily. Ye are everythin’ tae me. Ye have changed everythin’. I willnae let ye die on yer own.”

Sobs came to her dried throat, and he leaned in close, his cheek against hers. “I love ye. So much. Forgive me for all me stubbornness and blunderin’. I shouldnae have wasted even a second of our time together by bein’ angry.”

“Kai,” she cried, and he turned to look at her, his hands coming to caress her cheeks. He kissed her. “I love you,” she said softly. “I love you so dearly, and I’m so sorry. I wanted to live a life with you.”

He kissed her again, but then she heard the sizzle of water on flame, and they pulled away from one another to look at the doorway. It was Adelaide with dozens of men behind her.



A woman Kai didn't know stood in the doorway. There were men pouring into the room with buckets of water, putting it out while another rushed in with a knife in hand.

It was Cory. "What?" Kai asked, unable to even form a sentence.

"Ye have helped me save me wife; I am nae goin' tae let ye lose yers, old friend. Nor yer life neither." He hurriedly cut through the ropes, and Kai, his stomach and back aching, knowing he'd broken a rib or two, tried to get up as Cecily was freed.

"I'll carry her," Cory said, and then Kai nearly fell over in a dizzy heap before Rae and Torion entered and grabbed at his arm.

The fire was sizzling all around them as the men worked quickly to douse it. The strange woman was still in the doorway, making commands, and he wondered who she could be? Who did he have to thank for bringing his life back to him? He coughed hard as they rushed him out into the open air.

"There we are," Rae said softly in his ear, and they helped him to sit on a tree stump just outside the main house while the cottage smoked.

Kai was still coughing, but he spluttered out, “Cecily, where is she?”

“Cory has her,” Torion said, turning towards the horses where Cory was helping her onto one. “We have tae go, lad. William is gone with his men, but they could come back once they realize we’ve escaped.”

Torion wiped a wound on his face, and he saw that both his brothers looked a little battered.

“But the woman. Who is she?” he croaked, getting to his feet again, and his brothers helped him to a horse.

“William’s daughter, Lady Adelaide, apparently. She’s come with the constables and his men in order to take her father back. Some have already gone in pursuit.”

Kai’s mind still felt fuzzy, but the clear, fresh air was making it a bit better. Rae jumped up behind Cecily on the horse, and he gripped the reins.

“Torion will take ye,” Rae said, but Cecily stopped him.

“We cannot go without Adelaide. And where is Helen?” she cried; her voice stronger now than it had been inside the room. But his heart ached at how beaten and bruised she looked. Her neck and cheek had cuts on them as well.

“Helen is here,” Cory called, his arm around Helen, walking her to a horse. “Thank God.”

“Oh, Cecily,” Helen cried, coming up to her and grasping at her leg as she sat on the horse. “I am so glad you’re well. When I was taken, I—”

“We had better go, love,” Cory said kindly, stroking Helen’s hair. “I want tae be well clear of these bastards.”

“But Adelaide. She’s saved us. We cannae leave her with her father!” Cecily tried to get down but Rae stopped her.

Just then, they turned to see Adelaide approaching them, the men still at work behind her to put out the fire.

She looked similar to Cecily in a way with golden hair and green eyes. But there was a certain timidity in her that Cecily had never had.

“Allow me to ask for your forgiveness. My father... he is a cruel man,” she said, her voice halting. “But I came here with the constables, once I’d overheard him talking about his crimes to one of his men in his study. He mentioned you too, Cecily.” Her eyes rose to her cousin, and Cecily looked stricken. “I’m so sorry.” Adelaide let tears slip down her cheeks. “I didn’t realize—I swear to you, Cecily—”

“All is forgiven,” Cecily said, and Kai, with his arm leaning on his brother, smiled up at his wife whom he adored now more than ever. “But you must come with us. We cannot leave you here on your own.”



“I am well and safe. These men will help me, and we will find my father. There are many things to take care of.” She nodded her head and began to back away.

“Thank ye for savin’ us, lass. Ye didnae have tae dae that,” Kai managed to get out, leaning a little bit more on his brother for strength.

She smiled, a little sadness in her eyes. “But I did. And you’re welcome.”

She turned away then, and hurried back to the men while the others got onto their horses and rode off home. Kai fell into darkness before they arrived.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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*O*ne week later

Cecily sat by her husband's bedside as he slept. The past few days had been torturous; he had been unconscious when they arrived at the castle. Hannah had attended to him immediately, tending to his injuries as best she could. He had slept for three days, gradually regaining consciousness, weakened from his broken ribs. They conversed, but Cecily encouraged him to rest as much as possible. There was much healing to be done, and she wished for him to regain his strength fully. She longed for her Highlander, robust, bear-like, and full of vitality.

"Here you are," Helen said, surprising Cecily with her quiet footsteps into the room and handing her a cup of tea. "You have been sitting here for a long time today."

"Wouldn't you?" Cecily asked, and Helen pulled up a chair and sat next to her.

"Yes, of course."

Cecily had witnessed the tender exchange between Cory and Helen back at the manor. He had embraced her tightly,

showering her face with kisses as if confirming her realness. Helen had leaned into him, resting her head on his chest, her arms entwined around him. Cecily had never seen her sister so vulnerable and in need of someone. It was only now that she truly comprehended it.

“How has Cory been?” she asked, her eyes still on Kai.

Helen rolled her eyes and took a sip of tea. “He’s becoming insufferable. Barely lets me leave the room on my own.”

Helen sounded frustrated, but Cecily saw a smile on her sister’s lips. “He loves you deeply. Anyone can see it.”

“I love him just as much,” Helen sighed, extending her hand to touch Cecily’s arm. Her gaze shifted to Kai. “And now I see you’ve found love as well.”

“Yes,” Cecily sighed, reflecting on the arduous journey they had taken to reach this point. They had both narrowly escaped death numerous times, all thanks to William’s greed. She placed her hand over Helen’s. “But what if Adelaide hasn’t captured William? What if he returns with his men? He infiltrated this place once, despite the presence of soldiers and stalwart Highland warriors.”

Helen’s demeanor turned serious. “I believe he’s truly gone now. The castle is fortified, and one of his men posed as one of us, wearing McLaren colors. I think William’s reign of terror has come to an end; the constables are after him, and justice will be served.”

Cecily nodded, her gaze returning to Kai as he stirred. Helen stood.

“Drink your tea, sister, and don’t focus solely on the hardships. Life is filled with worries and concerns,” Helen advised, kissing her cheek. “Embrace the joy you have now; these moments are precious.” She motioned toward Kai. “Don’t let them slip away.”

With a wink, Helen left the room, her voice mingling with Cory’s just outside the door, where he undoubtedly waited to resume his attentive guardianship. Cecily took a sip of tea, placing the cup on the table beside the bed. Her hands reached out to clasp Kai’s arm, and she closed her eyes.

Yes, she vowed not to let fear mar her hopes for happiness any longer. She refused to be confined like she was under the stairs, hidden away due to the fear of getting hurt. She held her breath as Kai’s eyes fluttered open. She had given her heart to him, unwittingly, and now she was willing to embrace everything that love entailed, including the fear of losing someone dear.

“Kai,” she said, with a big smile, bringing his hand to her mouth to kiss it. “I’m sorry; did we wake you?”

“Nay, love.” He grinned and coughed a little, and Cecily’s heart melted at how handsome he looked. “I wondered if ye might climb intae bed with me.” He patted the space next to him, and Cecily found herself blushing.

“You know that you aren’t yet well enough for any of that kind of activity,” she retorted with a lifted brow. She couldn’t help

the smirk that came to her lips.

His gaze bore into her, igniting a fire in her belly and beyond. Would this yearning for him remain a constant companion in their marriage? His mere presence seemed to stoke her desire, a feeling that surged whenever he gazed at her in that particular manner—truth be told, whenever he was near.

“I ken,” he said finally with slight disappointment. “But I just want ye close tae me.”

Smiling, she slid into bed next to him, gently moving so as not to jostle his ribs, and he put his arm around her shoulders and kissed her temple.

“I cannae believe I nearly lost ye, lass.”

“I cannot believe you nearly died with me in that blaze.”

“But of course. I cannae believe ye wanted me tae leave ye tae burn in that fire.” He sighed, shaking his head.

Softly, Cecily began to stroke designs onto his chest with her finger. “I am not used to someone loving me so dearly. My parents have been dead for a long time, and my brother was not a good man. Only my sister loved me fiercely. But men, you see... I... I could not—”

“Trust them,” he said in a wooden tone, and she nodded.

“I think that’s why I justified lying to you so easily. I couldn’t believe that you had any goodness in you for the men in my life have shown me otherwise time and time again. That was also why I feared so terribly when I started to love you, that I would be wrong, and you would somehow change and turn against me.” A tear slipped down her cheek. “I am sorry for that and for so many other things, Kai.”

“Ye dinnae need tae be sorry fer that. The men in yer life were terrible blaiageards, and I wish they were here so I could pummel them intae the ground meself.”

Cecily managed a smirk, feeling her heart settle, reassured by his protective demeanor. She focused on steadying her breath, allowing herself to be enveloped by a sense of serenity. “I am sorry about following you too. I would not have been captured if I hadn’t ridden after you.”

“Quiet, lass,” he said soothingly as she began to cry. “Ye dinnae need tae be sorry fer that either. Ye wanted to save yer sister, and I should have listened tae yer desire tae show yer strength. But I couldnae bear the thought of somethin’ happenin’ tae ye. I still shudder tae remember the way ye looked when I first found ye. The blaiageard beat ye bloody, and ye could hardly hold yer head up.” Cecily turned to see tears were in his eyes as well. “We could have figured out a compromise, I’m sure. And if ye hadnae come, then Helen would still be there too, still captured, just as ye were.”

Cecily nodded. “Helen told me what happened.”

“Tell me.”

“She was found by one of William’s men in McLaren colors, and he knocked her unconscious. Then, he took her away, leaving the note behind, and they placed her in the cottage just like me. And then...” The memory of the frenzied ride after Kai came back to her memory. “And then when I was riding along, someone came across my path, and I fell, knocking myself unconscious, and they took me away.”

She shuddered, but Kai’s soothing fingers on her shoulder calmed her. “Ye dinnae need tae speak of what they did tae ye, lass. If ye dinnae want tae.”

In the past week, their conversations had touched only lightly on the painful events. Cecily didn’t want Kai to be consumed by anger, inhibiting his recovery. She sighed, grateful for his calming touch. “They beat me, as you said. Asking questions, berating. I can remember it as a sort of feeling, though not the pain, for I was already in a daze by then.” She swallowed. That darkness would hang in her heart for a long time, but being with Kai would help to soothe it. “And then I was put in the room and tied up. Helen said they let her go without explanation, sending her out into the woods, and she stumbled along, confused, until she spotted McLaren colors and came hurrying back.”

“Och,” Kai said. “Cory was overjoyed tae find her again. I have never seen me friend so relieved.” He kissed her temple again. “I ken that feeling now more than ever. I hated that I couldnae protect ye, Cecily.”

“I know. But I do not want to live a life of you worrying about my safety. I am not a delicate flower in need of constant supervision.”

“Nay, ye certainly arenae,” he said with a chuckle, pulling her even closer. “I am glad ye didnae take that cad’s words tae heart, about ye bein’ a shrinkin’ violet. Ye were strong; ye are strong, and as I have told ye before, ye are me angel. Ye have saved me from a life of darkness and misery. If only I could marry ye again.”

“Well,” she began, continuing to trace her fingers over his chest. “Perhaps you could.”



Kai’s body was marked with the wounds of their recent trials—two broken ribs, a deep gash along his side and head. He was swathed in bandages, the effects of laudanum inducing a slight dizziness. Yet, with Cecily nestled beside him, her warm form against his, the softness of her skin beneath his fingers ignited a passionate longing within him. Over a week had passed since they had been together, and his desire for her had grown insatiable. Too much time had been squandered on anger, followed by a mere fraction of time for reconciliation before danger struck again.

“I know what you’re thinking about it,” Cecily said with a slight teasing lilt to her voice.

“Hmm...” he said back. “I’m certain it’s quite easy tae see.”

In fact, the light sheet over his body did not hide his desire, and he could see both their gazes turning to it.

“Kai!” she laughed. “You are far too injured, and I should not even be in this bed with you, filling your head with ideas.”



“Och, I’d love tae fill ye with somethin’, lass,” he said with a grumbly tone, his teeth coming to nip at her ear.

“Kai McLaren,” she said, a breathy sigh escaping her as he found that sensitive spot behind her ear she liked so much.

Her reaction fueled his desire, and his hand reached out to trace the soft fabric of her gown, finally resting on her breast with a gentle squeeze. Cecily gasped, arching into his touch. Suppressing a triumphant grin, he bit his lip.

“It seems I am nae the only one who is ready for us tae return tae lovemakin’.”

Breathing heavily, she replied with a blend of breathlessness and determination, “You are a blaiheard yourself, Kai,” she said, wriggling free of his touch and slipping out of the bed.

He groaned with the cold emptiness left by her, and she smiled, leaning her hands on the space next to him, coming close enough to kiss.

“Soon, my love,” she said. “For I expect us both to put full... *effort* into our lovemaking, when both our bodies are hale and hearty.”

“Ye are killin’ me, Cecily,” Kai said, his hand caressing her jaw, and she leaned down to kiss him.

The kiss was tender, unhurried, yet brimming with eagerness as their tongues danced in a silent promise of passion. She pulled back slightly, her fingers patting his chest.

He captured her hand before she could move away completely. “I think ye enjoy teasin’ me, my love.”

“So I do.” She smiled, and his heart leapt. “I think I’m getting a taste for it.” She pulled her hand away from him, and he chuckled, loving her more with each second in her company. “I will let you rest now.”

“But wait—what did ye mean about us gettin’ married again?”

She sat down in her chair and pulled her tea onto her lap. “Well,” she began, blushing a little. “I thought perhaps since the feast was not all that it could have been, we could—”

He tried to sit up a little. “Have another?”

“Yes. A proper one. Where you and I are there the whole time.”

He nodded. “All right then. I think it a good idea. We can celebrate the marriage in truth, me tae Lady Cecily Ridley and nae Cecily Cavendish.”

“Oh, I suppose we must change the names in the register,” she said, paling with eyes wide.

“Ye let me handle that. Now, ye should leave afore I gain enough energy tae pull ye back down with me again.”

She laughed, picked up her tea, and headed for the door. Kai sighed, his gaze lingering on her form. He yearned to recover swiftly, to resume his life. Yet, he knew it would all be worth it. The only lingering worry was whether William had truly been captured, a matter that remained unresolved. The threat of the enemy clan still loomed, but in that moment, his thoughts were consumed by her: her slender waist, her perfect breasts, her inviting lips, and her penetrating green eyes.

*I need tae get better as soon as possible or I shall perish here from longing..*

*Yet, what a way to perish it would be...*

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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In the following days, preparations for the upcoming feast progressed steadily. As the newly appointed Lady, Cecily embraced her role, though it felt unfamiliar. Accustomed to being in a subordinate position, living under William's control had exacerbated this. Leadership and authority were foreign concepts to her. Gradually, however, she found her stride, gradually growing into her responsibilities.

Evening meals were filled with merriment, but Kai remained confined to his room, while the others gathered to enjoy each other's company. Cecily felt a yearning to be by Kai's side, yet her desire to be a gracious hostess kept her occupied with the guests.

On one such evening, Cecily assumed her place at the head of the table, surrounded by Rae, Torion, Cory, and Helen. Laughter and anecdotes flowed, with Rae's tales eliciting hearty chuckles. Cory and Helen, in turn, recounted how they had first met. "It seems that the Ridley women are full of secrets," Torion said at the end of the story, a smirk on his face. "But all secrets have come tae light now."

"Yes. At long last." She made eye contact with Helen. "But it was not as if we really wanted to keep secrets. Well, I suppose

Helen's was the far more interesting one."

"How goes the war on yer side of things?" Rae asked Cory.

"Still bloody English hangin' about," Cory replied, nodding his apologies to his wife and to Cecily. "But we havenae had trouble since the truth of me lairdship came tae light. And since... well, since the previous Lord Seton can nae longer make secret weapons trades with Scottish and English."

"I wonder, though, if William has begun to do so again," Helen replied, leaning on her elbows on the table. "I wouldn't be surprised, given that he was so eager to be aligned to a Scottish clan."

Even though it wasn't that cold with the merriment of the people, and the heat of the few fires in the hall, Cecily shivered a little. Why hadn't Adelaide sent them any word yet about her father's capture? It seemed odd, and Cecily also feared that something had happened to Adelaide. William was a terrible man, but was he really so low as to hurt his own daughter?

*Perhaps not, but only because she is a tool he can use for his own gain, as he almost did with Kai.*

Amid the chatter, Cecily's thoughts wandered. Adelaide had appeared altered when she arrived with those men to apprehend her father. An intensity she had never before seen in her friend had emanated from her. Cecily had always perceived Adelaide as gentle and somewhat submissive, reluctant to oppose their father's wishes. Despite their year together, Adelaide had displayed sympathy towards Cecily's

predicament but hadn't actively attempted to sway her father's heart.

"Cecily, are you all right?" Helen asked, touching her arm, and talking in a whisper.

"Yes, I think so," she said calmly. "But I can't help but feel that something isn't exactly right."

Her gaze drifted to Torion, who was listening in on the other men's conversation but seemed a little distant somehow. His cheerfulness had waned since the surprise attack from the McFarlane Clan, and she wondered why.

"I think William is still at large," she added softly.

"Surely not!" Helen cried, and then cleared her throat and continued in a whisper. "Adelaide and her men came only just after William had raced off into the woods with his. They will surely use all the resources they need to catch the murderer. He is now a wanted man."

"Surely." She smiled at her sister. "I think I'm simply tired, and I worry for Kai's welfare."

"Go and see him, then! Do not worry about sitting up with us and entertaining us. You have a husband to care for as well as a party to plan." Helen patted her arm again and Cecily stood.

"Good night, everyone. I believe it's time for me to retire," Cecily announced, feeling grateful for the excuse to leave. She

welcomed the relief of closing the door behind her and sought solace in Kai's presence.

On her way to his room, she encountered Dora. Requesting a bath be sent to her room, Cecily explained that she had been staying there to attend to Kai's needs. The memory of their intimacy surged within her, reminding her of the urgency she felt for him. However, she resisted, determined to allow him to heal fully before indulging their passions.

"Och, me lady, it is already done. I was just comin' tae find ye in the hall."

"Thank you, Dora. You're always so efficient," Cecily acknowledged, smiling warmly at her before continuing on her way to Kai's room. Yet, she abruptly changed course, climbing the stairs to her own room, her unease gnawing at her. Despite her desire to dispel her misgivings, a heavy sensation clung to her chest.

Upon entering her room, fatigue weighed heavily on her, and she yawned. However, her exhaustion was replaced by a startling sensation as a strong hand suddenly gripped her waist, and another hand covered her mouth. Shocked and wide-eyed, Cecily barely had time to release a muffled cry before lips pressed against hers.

As recognition set in, she smelled his familiar scent: Kai. Her knees weakened, and though she yielded to his probing kiss, her last vestiges of rationality prevailed. Gently pushing against his chest, she frowned at him.

Desire rippled through her belly and below, a serpent of want coiling within her. He looked both familiar and dashing, his dark hair pulled back, his beard neatly trimmed, his bandages removed. Clad only in his kilt and partially open linen shirt, he revealed his strong, inked chest. A corner of his mouth quirked up playfully, yet she folded her arms and lifted her chin, forcing her focus onto his eyes.

“And what do you think you are doing, Kai McLaren? Scaring me half to death by acting like one of those men who attacked me.”

His face went pale, and his smile faded. He reached out for her shoulders. “Och, forgive me, lass. I didnae think of that! I was just so desperate fer ye, and I couldnae wait. I wanted tae surprise ye in yer room since ye’ve taken tae stayin’ here instead of with yer husband.” He lifted a scolding brow, and she could help the smile that crossed her face.

“You’re forgiven.” She reached out and snaked her arms about his neck. “But what of your injuries? Are you sure you’re well to be up and about and doing...things?”

He grinned, once again his mischievous, wicked, lust-inducing self, the husband she’d married whose heated looks could burn her alive. “Aye, I’m well enough.” He held out his arms to the sides and pulled her hands from his neck, stepping back so she could get a delectable view of him. She loved to see the ink of his tattoos creeping out through the opening in his shirt, and her mouth went dry. “Well, am I fit then, love?” he asked.

Her eyes dragged from his face down his neck, his hair and ink-covered chest which tapered into a thin waist, his hips, and his strong legs underneath his kilt.



*Oh, yes.*

“Well,” she said, licking her lips, realizing that she wanted Kai to banish the dark thoughts from her mind, dark thoughts that even then continued to press upon her. They were happy together, and she wanted that reminder. “You look very well to me, but I suppose you’ll have to prove your...strength.”

He threw back his head and laughed, and then surprising her, he stepped closer, gripping the nape of her neck, and kissed her passionately. Cecily gasped into his mouth as he pressed her against the door, his strength evident in the muscles beneath her fingers as she explored his body. Swiftly, her hands removed his shirt, granting her greater access. Meanwhile, his hands roamed her body, caressing her neck, shoulders, sides, and finally cupping her breasts. His thumbs brushed against her nipples, sending shivers through her despite the layers of wool.

His hands descended lower as their mouths melded in a frenzy of desire. Grasping her buttocks, he pressed her against his throbbing arousal, his lips now near her ear.

“Let me show ye just how strong and recovered I am, *M’aingéal*.”

Desire tingled through her as his grip tightened, lifting her until her legs instinctively wrapped around his waist. Cecily’s widened eyes met his as he pressed her back against the door, his hardness aligning with her heated, moist core.

“We have never tried this,” she breathed, her curiosity piqued by the novelty.

“Nay, we havenae,” he agreed with a chuckle. “So, shall we?”

His eyes still on her, he fumbled with his kilt until his manhood was freed, and then the blunt head was placed at her entrance. They both let out gasps as he sank into her. It had felt like an age since they’d been joined. Cecily’s hands rested on his shoulders as Kai gripped her hips, her legs tightly wound around his.

He moved slightly backwards, and then she let out a moan as she felt him slide even deeper inside her, stroking that place he now knew so well.

“Kai,” she whimpered before she kissed him, and his thrusting continued as their tongues tangled.

“All I could bloody think about was bein’ with me wife,” he growled at her neck before licking the salty moisture from her skin.

Cecily could no longer speak. His hips had begun a tireless rhythm, the fullness inside her making pleasure coil and tighten. Her hands moved and clasped wherever she could, little mewls of pleasure dropping from her lips every time he pulled out and entered her again. His hands moved back on her thighs a bit, lifting her ever so slightly higher, and she let out a scream as the angle brought him deeper, so deep, and he thrust hard, making her come apart in his arms. The door was solid at her back, but she still felt completely powerless to pleasure as her climax took her. Kai held her tight, still thrusting into her

before he whispered her name like a prayer into her ear as he shuddered between her thighs, his length fully inside her, bathing her womb with his seed.

Moments later, he eased her down onto her feet, and a sense of clarity began to return. Their heavy breathing intertwined, and Kai's gaze, affectionate and playful, fixed on her as he tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

“So, ye see? I am well enough, me love, tae bed ye properly.”

She laughed a little, grasping at his arm to hold her steady. “That was anything but proper, husband. But I would not have it any other way.”

She turned to gaze longingly at the bath, and he read her mind.

“Come, let us bathe together then.”

With shared intent, they undressed, her fatigue replaced by an eagerness to be close to him. In the bathtub, Cecily leaned back into his embrace, his hands stroking her arms as contentment washed over her. This was her life now. Why couldn't she simply embrace it fully? Why did her heart insist on harboring shadows? They had faced danger and come out alive. All should be well, shouldn't it?

Her gaze fell upon the side table where the soap usually resided, but something caught her eye—a piece of white paper. A sense of foreboding clenched her stomach as she reached for it. When the words unfolded before her, she let out a small gasp.

*We know that your marriage is a sham, for you are not truly Cecily Cavendish, but Cecily Ridley. Your marriage is null. Leave now, or face the consequences.*

“Dear God, no,” she said, putting her hand to her mouth, and Kai cursed.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY

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*K*ai was consumed by a roiling fury. The anger simmered within him, a relentless fire demanding an outlet. As he watched his wife, her shoulders trembling as she held the tear-stained note, his heart clenched in sympathy. He reached out and gently took the soggy paper from her hand before setting it back on the table beside them, his expression a mix of concern and determination.

“Kai,” she said as he wrapped her arms about her from behind. “It is no wonder we haven’t heard from Adelaide about William’s capture. He is still here, still close by, ready to do anything to get his hands on an alliance with you.”

Kai shook his head, kissing her temple. “I daenae think it could be him, lass. Fer in what world could he imagine that I would allow an alliance with him?”

“He could capture me again and force you to marry his daughter.” She shuddered in his arms, and he kissed her temple again, his hands strengthening as he grasped her forearms.

“It is possible that he already thinks ye dead, love. He backed away while we were trapped and injured in that room. I could

barely stand, and I had nay knife tae cut yer ropes.”

“But word could have spread.” She still trembled against his front, and Kai wanted nothing more than to be able to comfort her, to bring her back out of the darkness like she had done to him. “Since we returned, I have felt a heaviness in me, something I couldn’t shake. I thought it was just that I couldn’t allow myself to be happy, but I think it is this. Something must not be right.”

He slowly pushed her forward so that he could stand up and out of the bath. He grasped at a towel to dry himself as she stood as well. His eyes couldn’t help but rove over his lovely wife’s pearlescent skin, rounded in all the right places, delicious to the taste. Having sat in a warm bath with her buttocks against his length, he was already half hard, but he had to focus.

He dried her next, kissing her lightly on the lips. “I will find out about this, love. Daenae worry. I want ye tae come with me, so that ye can remain in the hall with the others. I daenae want ye alone in yer room without anyone tae guard ye.”

She nodded, her tears drying, but the weight of concern still lingered in her eyes. They dressed swiftly, and he held her arm as they made their way to the hall. He berated himself for not knowing what was happening in his own castle. Who could be behind this? William? It seemed unlikely given the circumstances. The English authorities wouldn’t have permitted his return. Then perhaps someone from the McFarlane Clan seeking revenge? But how would they have learned Cecily’s true identity?

*A traitor amongst his ranks?*

He didn't realize he was glowering until Cecily turned into his arms just outside the doors of the main hall, and she pressed a finger to the furrow on his brows.

"Find him, Kai," she said. "I don't want this darkness hanging over our lives anymore. There has been too much already, for both of us. I want us to be happy now."

"Aye, love. But despite whatever forces are at work here, I am happy," he said, looking deeply into her lovely green eyes before he kissed her again and then opened the door to find his friends and brothers sitting around at the main table.

"Yer feelin' well enough tae join us! Excellent!" Rae said, standing, picking up a bottle of wine and holding it in the air. "Come and join us."

"Nae yet," Kai said, laying the note on the table in front of everyone. "Just found this in Cecily's bedchamber."

Cecily moved to sit next to Helen while everyone read it, and the mood instantly dampened.

"What in God's name?" Torion asked. "Is it the bloody English weasel again? It seems his daughter couldnae catch him."

"But that cannot be!" Helen cried. "The English are rather dogged in finding fugitives, especially if they have come all this way."

“But I suppose they could have been paid off. He is an earl after all. He willnae hang fer his crimes, even if he may be held for years on end,” Cory said, rubbing a soothing hand over his wife’s back.

Kai grimaced, and he rubbed at the scar in his belly, tinges of the nightmare coming at the edge of his vision.

“Nay, I daenae think it could be him, but perhaps someone from Clan McFarlane? Although how they would ken of Cecily’s name, I daenae understand. But they have some other reason tae attack us, a reason which I daenae ken just yet.”

Sitting down, he covered his face with his hands, the weight of his thoughts and his history bearing down on him. “Just when I think we can live a normal life, have a normal family, without father, and the threat of the past, we have this. An enemy clan who attacked us for nae reason.” He glanced at his brothers, who both looked grim at the memory. “A madman hungry for somethin’, forcin’ me tae get an annulment from the wife I love tae marry his daughter, nearly killin’ us in the process. Me sister-in-law gettin’ taken in the night by the same man. And now, this, another note left in the room full of threats.”

He glanced around the hall at his brothers, the people who had become his family, and felt an unspoken understanding among them. The shadows of their past had followed them, and it was time to confront them head-on.

“I don’t want us to make hasty decisions, but we need to search the castle, to see if there’s a traitor among us or someone lurking in wait. I’ll stay with Cecily in her room



tonight. I have an idea.” His gaze turned to Cecily, and he could see the uncertainty in her eyes.



Cecily’s anger burned beneath her skin, fueled by the ominous note and the realization that shadows from the past refused to relinquish their hold on her life. Yet, as she looked at her husband, her fierce and protective Kai, a glimmer of hope arose. She had come so far, and she refused to be shackled by fear again.

“What’s your idea?” she asked him, her voice steady despite her unease.

Kai’s strong gaze never wavered as he spoke, his words laced with conviction. “I will stay with ye in yer room tonight, lass, but we will make a show of it that I am nae. The servants are used tae me sleepin’ in me chamber while I am recoverin’. Then, I will use the secret passages of the castle tae return tae yer room as quickly as possible. I will remain there with ye, and we will act as bait.”

She lifted a brow, and everyone remained silent as he explained. “Whoever wrote that letter is eager tae be rid of ye. So, if they think ye are ignorin’ the summons, then they may come tae get ye, tae...” she saw his throat work over a swallow, “give ye those consequences ye threaten.”

“But brother, ye are nae yet well,” Rae trailed off, but he was quelled by an angry look from Kai.

“I am now healed. I’ve spent far too long in me bloody bed and nae in a good way. Rae, I want ye tae take Cecily tae bed

in an hour or so. Question the servants first, and then return tae the hall. I will remain here with her until ye return.”

“Aye.” Rae looked determined, but he winked at her across the table.

“Torion can walk with me tae me chamber, and perhaps we can make sure someone hears us that we are tae have a drink before bed.”

Torion nodded solemnly. “And I?” Helen asked, looking a little piqued at having not been included.

“Perhaps you too can walk with me to bed, and then Rae can escort ye while Cory is off doing his duties,” Cecily suggested, holding her sister just a little bit tighter.

“I would be delighted,” Rae said with a handsome smile, and Helen nodded.

Kai stood and he went to Cecily. Nervous, Cecily accepted his hand, and she stood next to him, hoping and praying that she could one day be the lady he so deserved.

“We will get tae the bottom of this bloody nonsense. I am glad ye are all here with us.”

“Us too.” Cory was grim as he nodded. “I’m off tae the men.”

“And we’re off tae the servants.” His brothers left.

“And I will remain in the hall in that far corner with my book. I know that if I attempt to go anywhere this evening without accompaniment, my husband will scold me again.” Helen rolled her eyes and slipped away to the corner while Cecily turned into Kai’s arms.

“Are you certain you are well enough?” she asked, comforted by the familiar scent of him, that soap lingering in her nose. “To fight someone, I mean if they come in to the room to attack?”

Kai growled softly in her ear, his arms tightening around her possessively. “Let me remind ye, wife, that it was I who took ye against the door in your bedchamber, hard and fast. I willnae have ye doubting me, for I’ve already had my fill of being unable tae protect ye from danger.” He turned away from her and moved toward the hearth, his expression conflicted.

Cecily followed, subdued. It seemed the both of them had doubts, and she hoped that by the end of the night, they could be obliterated.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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The moment had finally arrived, and Cecily found herself ascending the stairs, flanked by Rae on one arm and a silent Helen on the other. The weight of recent events pressed heavily on her mind, casting a shadow over the usually jovial atmosphere Rae's chatter might have provided. Her grip on his arm tightened, her thoughts consumed by the impending encounter that Kai's plan was designed to provoke.

Rae's voice carried on, oblivious to her distraction. "Ye see, I have never been very good at sayin' goodbye tae a lass, and so I think it sometimes easier tae say nothin', and tae move on. They eventually understand." He chuckled, and normally, Cecily might have scolded him for such foolishness, but she was not in the mood.

She gripped his arm tightly, strangely hopeful that the dark figure would come to their room and would attempt to hurt her so that it could all finally be put a stop to. The servants had not seen anything unusual, and Dora had sworn that the note was not there when she'd been preparing the bath for her mistress. Mr. Murray had also been questioned, but he'd been on a recent errand to the village and so he had nothing of any use to impart. The soldiers had been dispatched on patrol, and Cory would soon return to take Helen from Rae's womanizing company. While they were on their own, she and Kai had

spoken little, but he had told her what she must do when he arrived in the room.

“Douse the light when ye get inside. If there is someone lyin’ await, in the wardrobe or elsewhere, I want them tae nae see me. And daenae speak either; just let me slide next tae ye,” he had instructed her earlier.

Cecily’s heart pounded within her chest as she tried to steady her breathing. The plan’s simplicity was both a comfort and a source of anxiety. Questions had swirled in her mind, but she had held them back, refraining from questioning Kai’s intentions. She couldn’t afford to let doubt undermine the trust they were rebuilding.

“I did not know of the secret passageways. You never said,” she had told him.

It was the first smile he’d given since the news of the letter. “Aye, well, I didnae want tae scare me proper wife, or else I might have used it a time or two. When ye were still an innocent, and I wanted ye like nae other.”

“Well,” she had replied, teasing him with a lightness she did not exactly feel, “I am no proper woman anymore. You’ve seen to that.”

He had reached over then and took her hand, bringing the fingers to his lips. “Ye are me angel. Be as improper as ye like.”

Time had marched on, and the appointed hour had come. Kai and Torion had engaged in a theatrical discussion about drinking before bed, providing a cover as she, Rae, and Helen had climbed the stairs. Soon, Kai would traverse the hidden passageways and wait on the other side of her door.

“And so, I told her that I had nae interest in marryin’, ye see. She didnae take that well, and so I thought it better nae tae say anythin’ when the time comes tae end the affair.” Rae was still saying.

“Rae, you sound positively rakish! You would do well in a London ballroom, I think,” Helen said, again feigning lightness, and Rae chuckled.

He was playing his role very well. “Aye, I think I would. Perhaps it will be an English lass for me then as well.” His eyes flashed at them both, very rakishly, indeed. “And here we are, dear sister,” he said outside of their door.

He bowed low, with his usual flourish and kissed her hand. “Good night tae ye.”

“Good night. To you and Helen.” She kissed her sister on the cheek and then waved them away as they left.

The passage filled with the sounds of their footsteps, and with a breath, trying to collect whatever bravery she had at her disposal, she opened the door. As soon as she entered, she doused both candles, and then she went to the bed, removing her shoes and slipping under the covers. The room was so silent, except for the beating of her heart, and she wished for a storm. A wild, ravenous storm that would at least keep her

thoughts from turning too much to fear, waiting for someone to arrive. She jolted a little at the slightest scraping noise, and then, a body was at her side, laying on the bed, over the covers.

She said nothing as promised, and she felt his kiss upon her temple. All would be well. They lay together in silence, and her eyes closed. Her heart was thundering away wildly, but she felt stronger with Kai at her side. The husband that was there to protect her, that needed to protect her, for it seemed that he would not be satisfied until he had kept her safe.

*He does not realize there were far more dangers than he could ever have imagined or ever could have prepared for. He does not realize all he has already done for me in saving me from my life of loneliness and fear. Of bringing me out into the light.*

Her hand clasped his over the cover, and he squeezed it back. So, he did love her, even if she had turned into that pale, helpless creature only a few hours before. The heat from the fire mixed with her great fatigue loosened her muscles and made her relax against the bed. She was nearly asleep when she heard the click of the door, and the soft padding of footsteps.



Kai's every muscle was tense. So, even though the fire was warm, and his wife's lush body was curled up beside him, he could not relax. This was the final straw against the people he loved and cared for. He could not get his father back, but his brothers were safe, and he would keep them so. Now, he had a wife to care for and to protect, and he'd already made a bloody mess of things. But now, he was not going to let that happen. He was going to stay alert every night for the rest of his days if it meant that he could keep Cecily from harm. If it meant that

they could finally start in their new lives together without having to look over their shoulders.

He was laird of a clan now, a clan that he was in charge of protecting, even though he felt lacking in so many ways, it made him want to scream. But it was his, for better or for worse, and whoever was trying to take that from him, spreading fear through his people and those he loved, would receive the highest of consequences.

He had his sword at his side, but it was still sheathed, kept tied to the belt on his kilt. Instead, he held a dagger in his fist on the other side of Cecily, while her lovely, small hand was tucked into his other. She had given her heart to him, had put it into his keeping just as he had done his. He did not want to disappoint her, and he never again wanted to feel the agony of being weak and helpless while he and his brothers had been captured. The thought of losing Cecily like he'd had the nightmare about twisted in his gut. But listening to her soft breath in the darkness comforted him. And then he heard it: the slide of the door as it opened ever so gently. The soft pad of footsteps as they entered into the darkness. Even the sconces from the hallway had been extinguished, and so if she was asleep and on her own, she would never have known about their arrival.

He lay there, stock-still, waiting. He had placed his body, thankfully, between her and the door, and so now, his body would be the first to meet the intruder. The blade was gripped tightly in his hand. He wanted more than anything to yell out, to thrust his blade into the belly of the stranger, but he needed to bide his time.

They shuffled closer, ever closer, and as they neared, he could hear the rough breathing, as if they were struggling a little. Frowning, he turned ever so slightly. He had been staring so



long into the darkness that his eyes were adjusted. He could see the faint glow of white as they got closer, and then he saw the silver of a blade in their own hand. Keeping the grip tight on his own, he waited until they were just above him.

He saw them lift the dagger high, and then before they could bring it down, he plunged his dagger right into them, listening to the groan of pain, and the clatter of their blade as it fell to the ground. Quickly, he jumped out of bed while Cecily sat up, and he lit a candle. He could hear other footsteps thundering down the passage, and he prayed that there were not more of them. But only Rae and Torion appeared, breathless and panicked.

“We’re here! Came tae help!” they cried nearly in unison.

The match struck, and the wick lit, and together, they all looked down upon the groaning man on the floor, writhing in pain.

“Stephen?” Kai asked, angry and bewildered at the ancient pale, frail ghost of a man clutching at the blade in his side. Stephen was the oldest member and the head of his council, the one who had spoken so harshly to him upon Kai first hearing about his marriage contract with an Englishwoman.

“What in the bloody Hell is goin’ on?” Rae asked, his hands on his hips.

Kai didn’t know what to think, what to say, when Mr. Murray rushed in, holding a candle in his hand. “Dear God, nay,” he said, getting down to his knees with effort.

He reached over and pressed two hands to Stephen's wound, who was still spluttering in pain. Angrily, Kai watched the scene, his mind racing as he glanced back at Cecily. She looked disheveled and confused. Not afraid, though, which made his heart unclench a little.

"What is the meanin' of this, Murray?" he asked, and his father's advisor gave a long-suffering sigh.

"Forgive me, Kai. All of ye. I should have thought tae warn ye." He pressed on the wound, and Stephen spluttered again.

"Rubbish, ye are, me laird," Stephen said, shocking everyone in the room. "Yer father wouldnae have refused his duty as ardently as ye did. He wouldnae have been so reckless, fightin' the council at every turn, gettin' mixed up with a troublesome Sassenach who wasnae even the right lass." Blood seeped through Murray's fingers as he pressed on the councilman's wound. "He wouldnae have nearly got himself killed in a battle outside his castle at so young an age. We were goin' tae start again. I cannae kill ye with the blood of yer father in yer veins, and yer brothers are much worse replacements for ye. But I could begin again with a new bride. One who was actually the one we needed. Bring strong blood back tae the clan."

He coughed, and Kai's anger filled him to the core. It raged and flowed. It filled his every space. Everything he'd feared for his entire life was being spoken out loud. He'd spoken it countless times himself, felt it whisper at the edges of his brain, even when his father was alive. He could never live up to the man who had been his sire, a man with such compassion and patience that it was nearly impossible to do so. And then it had been handed to him, this title that he wasn't ready for, too young for, and now he was receiving the consequences. The head of his council ready to kill his own wife in order for Kai

to make a clean start of things. Everything ached inside him as he felt the eyes of his wife and his brothers on him. Did they think this of him too? That his father would have been a better leader?

And then he felt the soft touch of a hand on his shoulder. He turned to look into Cecily's lovely eyes, so full of affection and warmth that his anger was gone in a moment. She was his angel, having come into his life in a surprising way, but she'd saved it. His father might not have made such a mess of things as he had, but Kai knew that marrying Cecily was the best thing he'd ever done.

"Get this man out of here," Kai said, glancing at the blood. "Send for Hannah. We will deal with him later."

Rae and Torion solemnly did as they were asked, lifting a groaning Stephen into their arms, and Mr. Murray started to walk away too.

"Wait," Kai said, standing up, his hand clutching at Cecily's as she rose from the bed. Murray turned around, looking ashen. "What did ye mean about warnin' me?"

Murray cleared his throat and ran a hand through his beard. "I kenned Stephen was stuck in his ways. He was heartbroken when yer father died, for he was the best man he'd seen as laird. Then, when the two of ye continued tae fight over everything, I saw him get angrier and angrier. He was afraid the legacy of yer father was leavin' the clan, and he feared that he too would die in shame, as head councilman of the McLaren."

Murray shifted on his feet, and Kai knew there was more to be said. “I had a feelin’ he was goin’ tae dae somethin’ rash. He wanted ye tae marry for an heir, but he was uncertain about her bein’ a Sassenach. When the man didnae come for his own daughter’s weddin’, he was furious, and then we all found out the truth of the earl’s treachery as well as the deception.” He glanced at Cecily. “Pardon me, me lady.”

“It is all right, Mr. Murray,” she said in an enviably calm voice, still holding tight to Kai’s hand.

“And so... I’d seen evidence that he’d written tae the earl, askin’ tae meet. When they did, it seemed they had somethin’ in common. Tae be rid of the lass. Stephen apparently agreed for the earl tae handle things, but after the earl’s attempt was unsuccessful, I suppose he decided tae take matters intae his own hands. I didnae ken exactly when or how, and I was waitin’ tae see if I could provide ye with firm evidence. It was more of a feelin’, snatches of conversation here and there, a glimpse of a name, but I had nothin’ tae approach him with. He is the head of the council; he can dae as he pleases. But then, tonight, I got such a bad feelin’ after the receipt of that letter, that I kenned it would come soon. I came tae the lady’s room.” He shook his head and put it in his hands. “Forgive me, me laird, fer I have failed ye.”

Kai cleared his throat, and he turned to Cecily, the both of them still in shock after the news.

Turning back to his old advisor, he said, “Well, Murray, he may nae live out the night, and that will be his punishment. But if he does, I will deal with him. He can nae longer be allowed tae lead this clan or reside in the castle.”

“Aye, of course. I think it time the laird take more control of the council now anyway.” He gave him a weak smile, and there was a look in his eye that told Kai everything he needed to know.

Mr. Murray did not share his councilmember’s belief about him, and that was something.

“Go now and tend tae him. Alert the others tae remain on watch but that the man has been caught. We will deal with all come mornin’.”

“Very good. Good night tae ye both.” Mr. Murray bowed and turned to go. He paused at the door and said, “But I dae think the two of ye should get the names right on the register. Perhaps another quick weddin’ would be the way tae go?” He winked at them both and then shut the door and left them on their own.

Instantly, he went to the washbasin, and washed the blood from his hands before he turned back to Cecily, watching as she stared at him with so much love, he feared his heart would break. A little nervous, he leaned against the post of the bed.

“I fear that everythin’ I always worried about has just been stated out in the open for all tae hear.” He rubbed at a callous on his hand and bit his lip. “And I fear ye should think it of me as well. That I am nae well-suited tae this task of leadin’, protectin’. That I have done a poor job of it, and everyone thinks so.”

Cecily smirked a little, and she shook her head. Before he could say anything else, she jumped into his arms and held

him tightly, placing a warm, soft kiss on his neck. His eyes closed, Kai sank against her, his arms bracing her against his body.

“We have the same fear, you and I. What fools we are. You are the best man I know, Kai McLaren, and you have been through many battles in your life.” She leaned back and put her hands on his cheeks, staring into his eyes. “When I first saw you, I thought what strength, what ferocity, what *passion*. All those go into making a great leader, my love. But you have so much more than that.” She kissed him gently on the lips. “You have love and kindness and compassion.”

Whatever bits of darkness had remained in his soul had vanished with Cecily’s light.

“You are everything to me, and you have saved my life yet again this night. Do not think that you are less than your father. You are a wonderful leader and husband and laird. And brother. All of us think it, believe it, *know* it.” She looked down then, and he braced his hands on her waist, knowing she looked uncertain. “It is I who fear I am not strong enough for you. That I shrunk into myself when we got the note. That I cannot be what a Highland laird deserves for a wife.”

He grinned then, and then he chuckled. “Aye, what fools we are, love,” he said. “From the very first, Hannah told me ye were full of fire, and I feared that I would break ye fer ye seemed so delicate tae me, so like a doll.”

She nodded, tears in her eyes, and his knuckle lifted her chin to look at him. “But strength is not in the breadth of one’s shoulders, me angel. It is in the very life we give tae others, the passion and zest we use tae fight back against injustice. It is kindness and love and warmth. Ye are all that and more. I

love ye as I have loved nay other, and ye are everything I need and want. Ye are just what a wife should be, and ye have honored me by agreein' tae marry me."

She smiled up at him, and he kissed her cheek. "That is if ye dae agree tae marry me. Like Murray said, a new weddin' might be in order. One in which I marry the right lass, a certain Cecily Ridley."

Laughing, she threw her head back, and when she looked at him again, her eyes were gleaming with happiness.

"Of course, Laird McLaren, I will marry you. Again."

"Good then. Now that we have that out of the way, how about I show ye yet again just how perfect ye are for me?"

Cecily grinned, looping her arms about his neck and bringing his mouth to hers. Kai smiled against her mouth and drew her to the bed. There was no more talking, worrying, or being afraid for a long time after that.

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## EPILOGUE

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*Three months later*

It was no longer winter, and Cecily relished the opportunity to bask in the rare sunshine on the verdant fields. She reclined on a blanket, propped up on her elbows, observing her husband Kai, his brothers, and Cory engaged in a playful battle, each trying to outmaneuver the other.

“Isn’t this a bit ridiculous?” Cecily turned to her sister, who sat beside her with a glass of warm wine.

Cecily’s gaze wandered down to Helen’s slightly protruding stomach. The news of Helen’s pregnancy had been delivered earlier that day when Cory and Helen had visited. Four months until the baby’s arrival.

“Yes, quite ridiculous,” Helen said, sipping from her glass, her eyes not leaving the sight of Cory and Kai, locked in a wrestling match while Rae and Torion looked on, cheering. “Although, if one was to see the merits of such an act, they would have to agree that it does put our husbands in a rather pleasant light. Good for... inspection.”



Cecily giggled as she turned back to look at the sight. It certainly did. For all four Highland men were bare-chested in the warm day, and as Kai and Cory grappled with one another, she could see the bulge of hard-earned muscles, flat stomachs, and broad chests with a smattering of hair over them.

“You are right,” Cecily said, blushing a little at the memory of Kai’s hands on her that very morning in bed, his rough palms squeezing her backside as he yanked her atop him.

“Well, I suppose they enjoy a bit of a show as well.” She nodded to the little cluster of servants and villagers who’d appeared outside, both men and women, watching with good humor.

When it was Rae’s and Torion’s turns, the maids all looked transfixed as the two handsome brothers fought. Rae won, pinning Torion, and he stood up, his fists in the air while the maids and Cecily and Helena clapped.

Cory’s arm found its way around Kai’s shoulders after a match in which Kai had triumphed. The two brothers sauntered over to their wives. Cecily’s eyes traced the contours of Kai’s dark hair tied back, his full beard, his tanned skin, and his broad chest. Whenever he disrobed in front of her, it always took her breath away. His stomach and arms were full of muscle she didn’t think it possible to have, and the tattoos only made it better, made him look stronger, more fearsome. And she also knew what lay under that kilt of his: firm thighs and buttocks, and his member that had brought her to more screams of bliss than she could now keep count of.

He winked at her as he approached, leaning down on the blanket to kiss her. She’d been embarrassed a little at first, to show how much she desired him. But then he seemed to love

it, grinning every time he caught her stare, and his desire for her was evident as well, his heated gaze at mealtimes, the way his length hardened against her thigh when she pulled him close in bed. But it was so much more than that. They played games together. They went on long walks or rides. They sat up late in bed and talked. She spoke of her time with her brother and her father. He told her about how his father had been a good and kind man and funny tales from his childhood.

She sometimes wished she could have met that carefree Kai all those years ago. The Kai that had not been broken by captivity or grief or death. But this was her Kai now, and she loved him with a fierceness that surprised her sometimes. He brushed a strand of hair out of her face, and she smiled.

“So, is this what men do with one another? Tackle each other?” she asked, looking between him and Cory who’d come to sit next to Helen, his arm around her protectively.

“Aye, we cannae seem tae get enough of competition,” Cory said with a breathless grin, nodding to Rae and Torion who had started fighting again, this time Torion fighting with a blaze of anger in his eye.

“I bet he’s just jealous that Rae received applause for his efforts from all the young ladies of the castle,” Helen mused. “That seems the way of things for Rae.”

“It certainly does.” Kai sighed, his fingers tracing the length of Cecily’s spine. “But perhaps one day, he could find a lass.”

“I doubt it.” Cory snickered, rubbing a hand over his forehead to wipe the sweat away. “He enjoys his popularity far too

much I think.”

“A bit of a womanizer, is he not?” Helen mused. “You should’ve heard the things he said when I first met him.”

Helen, Cecily, and Kai burst into laughter, Kai laying back on the blanket, his hand on his stomach as he laughed and laughed.

“Christ, I’ll bloody kill him!” Cory said, scrambling to his feet. “Why did ye nae tell me?”

“It was nothing, my love,” Helen said, still chuckling. “You know it is not as if I took him up on his offer or anything of the sort.”

His jaw ticked. “Of course, ye wouldnae dae that. I keep ye as satisfied as any proper husband should. More so.”

“Of course, you do,” Helen said, grinning from ear to ear.

Cecily put a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing yet again. “That is a good thing, old friend,” Kai said with a wink.

Cory rolled his eyes and turned away. “I’ll kill him. Damned blaiageard!” he yelled, calling out to Rae while the rest of them laughed after him.

“Did that truly happen, Helen?”

“Oh yes, and the strangest thing was, it was on that very night, he was escorting me back to Cory’s room after we left you at yours. I thought it very bold of him and very amusing.”

“Cory looks like he’s goin’ tae pummel him tae death,” Kai said with a sigh, getting up to his feet. “I guess I ought tae go and help, talk some sense intae that brother of mine.”

He raced off towards them, and Cecily got to her feet as well, helping Helen to stand. “Let us leave the men to their arguments,” she said with a chuckle. “I wanted to tell you something without the men around. I wanted you to be the first to know about it.”

“Oh, I do love an intrigue. You know me.” Helen winked, and Cecily dug in the pocket of her gown, bringing out an opened letter.

“From Adelaide,” Helen said, taking her arm out of Cecily’s to open it. She read aloud, “Dear Cecily. I truly hope you are well, safe and tucked away with your beloved. I’m sorry I could not write sooner, but it took some time to find my father and to make sure that he was truly kept hidden away. He has his ways, and he has tricked the constables a time or two. And I have been so busy with everything to prepare for in London that I confess I did not have the time. But that isn’t all. I was also ashamed, and the times I did try to write to you, I tossed the words into the flames, embarrassed that I could not get the right words down in just the right way. I am staying now with an aunt and uncle in a different part of the city in order to stay out of sight. As you can imagine, Father being incarcerated has done little for my reputation. They haven’t decided what to do with him just yet, for he is an earl, and he will not hang for his crime. I thank you for writing the letter of evidence for the magistrate here. That was helpful, and it will go a long way to getting the justice needed.”

“My goodness,” Helen said. “She has so much on her shoulders.”

“Read on,” Cecily said with a lump in her throat.

Helen continued. “I know this will do little to make up for the past, but I do want to say that I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry that my father treated you as he did. That you had to suffer as a servant when you were an earl’s daughter. That he was unkind to you and that I did nothing to stop him. You may say that I was just his daughter, that I was afraid of him, or that I couldn’t have done anything. But I could have fought him. I have always known he was a bad sort, and I had a bad feeling about what happened to your brother. But now I see the truth, and all I can ask is for your forgiveness. I wish to make up for the past by helping to keep my father where he belongs. Where he can no longer hurt anyone. Again, I hope you are well. Adelaide.”

Tears were in Helen’s eyes as she folded the letter and handed it back to Cecily. “What kind words, I can practically feel the anguish in them.”

“I know.” Cecily’s eyes were not dry either. “Me too. I do not hold it against her any longer. It was not she who was full of evil. And she has helped save us from her father now. We are free. Free forever.”

Helen hugged her, and then she pursed her lips in thought. “What will you write back to her?”

“I will send my forgiveness, of course.”

“Well, what if you did more? Invited her to come and join you here?” Helen’s eyes turned mischievously back to the men where Rae was desperately and charmingly still trying to be the victor against Cory.

“Join me?” Cecily asked, and then her gaze settled on Rae. “Ah, I see...” She smiled. “Perhaps some charming distraction?”

“Exactly.” Helen tapped at her arm. “Now that my first work of matchmaking is completed, I thought we could continue. Seeing just how happy you and Kai are, of course.”

Cecily laughed and took her sister’s arm again as they returned to the castle. “I will mention it to Kai this very evening.”



Kai felt like a bloody smug bastard. He leaned in a chair in the hall, a drink in his hand, his legs stretched out before him, and his bonny wife was sitting across from him, watching him through lowered lashes, her lips turned up a bit with a knowing smile. He knew that look, it was a look that meant she had a secret, and that she had ideas about things: good ideas that led to lovely actions. Although they had guests at the moment.

“Dinnae look at me like that, woman,” he said with a laugh. “Or I shall leap across the chair tae ye, and take ye here in front of all and sundry.”

She grinned at him, twisting a loose thread in the chair on her lap. “While I would be very intrigued to see that happen, as it would not be the first time, I just wanted to talk to you about something.”

Torion and Helen were in the far corner playing chess, and Cory and Rae were by the tables, discussing fighting techniques as they continued to eat. They were like family now, and Kai wouldn't have it any other way.

“Well then, it sounds important.” He sat up a bit and took a sip.

She took out a letter and passed it to him. “I wanted you to read this yourself. I'm sorry I didn't say sooner, but there is so much in it, that I needed a bit of time to think on it.”

Frowning, he opened the letter, and he read the words quickly. “Good Lord,” he said in amazement. “What a lass. She has a lot tae deal with, doesnae she? But I'm glad tae hear that that blaiageard is finally where he deserves tae be.” He folded the letter slowly. “How dae ye feel?” he asked.

It was the one shocking thing about marriage for Kai. They spoke to one another of their feelings, they shared in a way he never thought possible. While his brothers were his blood, and he loved them to no end, and Cory was his best friend through thick and thin, Cecily was a different thing altogether. She was his truest, greatest love, and his dearest friend at the same time. He wanted her body as much as he wanted her mind, her heart, her soul. And seeing her look a little uncertain or sad made him ache in places he didn't know he had.

“I feel sorry for her that she has suffered so, and that she feels such guilt.” She smiled then. “Helen and I have an idea. We thought perhaps to invite her here as well as give my forgiveness, of course. We thought perhaps she might enjoy a bit of the charming... scenery.” She grinned, her eyes moving beyond his shoulder to look at Cory and Rae.

Kai turned around, glanced at them, and then he knew what she was about. “Ye mean tae matchmake, dae ye?”

She shrugged, again twisting the fabric on the pillow. “Perhaps. She is good through and through, and Rae needs a good woman. And Adelaide has spirit and fire; she just needs someone to show it to her.”

He rolled his eyes, but he couldn't help but feel intrigued by the idea. “I suppose. And she will have nae family now. Now that her father is hidden away.”

“So, what do you think? And of course, we would say nothing of this to Rae. But he would only be too glad to play chaperone or host to a young, beautiful lady like Adelaide. I confess I do not know her as well as I ought, for there was always a forced separation between us, but I can see now what sort of a woman she is. I think the council would be pleased by another marriage in the family.”

“Damn the council,” Kai grumbled, folding his hands over his stomach.

Stephen had been banished from the castle, remaining in his own house on the edge of the village. His brothers had told Kai to execute him, but he couldn't do that, not when he was



meant to be good, kind, and merciful. When the man was old enough for a breath of air to kill him at any moment. But he was no longer a councilman, and he was guarded every day, to make sure that he did not return. Murray led the council now, but as promised, the laird was truly in charge, and the council become more as trusted advisors.

Cecily rose from her seat, and Kai's eyes followed her as she sat in the chair next to him, those lovely hands of hers coming towards him to grasp his. He turned his hand over to link their fingers together, and he sighed.

Bringing her hand to his lips, he looked into her eyes. "Ye ken that ye could convince me of nearly anythin', me angel."

"That I do know," she said, the smug one this time. "So what say you? Allowing Adelaide to come to the castle, and requesting Rae escort her about a bit."

"Och, very well." When Cecily's smile widened, his heart did a little skip.

He would never get enough of making his wife happy. It was like a drug to him, one he would partake in every day. He rose, reaching down for her hand and drawing her up against his body. He kissed her, and Cecily gave into it for a moment before she pushed away.

"I thought you said we have guests, husband" she replied, teasingly.

“Aye, so let’s go upstairs for a bit. I doubt they will miss us for a little while.” He grasped her hand and led her out of the hall, getting a wink from Rae in the process.

*Poor little brother. He has nae idea what is about tae befall him.*

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## BUT THERE'S MORE...

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Eager to learn what the future holds for **Cecily and Kai**?

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## AFTERWORD

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Thank you for reading my novel “**Seduced by Highland Lies**”. I really hope you enjoyed it! If you did, could you please be so kind as to [write your review HERE](#)?

It is **very important for me to read your thoughts** about my book, in order to get better at writing.

Please use the link below:

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## DO YOU WANT MORE ROMANCE?

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If you're a true fan of the Scottish romance genre, here are the first chapters of my previous best-selling novel: **Marrying a Highland Outlaw**

Desperate to protect his family, Taveon MacDonnell embraces the role of a traitor. When tasked with abducting a lass for ransom, his world changes as he discovers a darker plan—she'll be forced into marriage against her will. Unable to stand by and watch this happen, Taveon's heart becomes entangled with the spirited and brave Hannah MacKinnon's, as he faces a heart-wrenching struggle between love and duty. Because saving her means to face his family's downfall...



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# MARRYING A HIGHLAND OUTLAW

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## CHAPTER ONE

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*E*dinburgh, Scotland

*May 1304*

Shivering slightly, Taveon Macdonell wrapped his heavy woolen cloak tighter across his shoulders as he entered the tavern. The oak door slammed shut behind him and he looked around. He blinked, half-blinded by the sudden near blackness. He could scarcely make out more than dull shapes in the smoky, noise-filled interior.

He cursed inwardly as his eyes adjusted to the dim light. He was bone-weary, fatigued by his life as a hunted man, sick and tired of the distance he'd been forced to keep from his home in the Highlands. And oh-so-fed-up with seeing a stranger reflected back at him whenever he glanced in a looking-glass. He scarcely recognized himself – his hair darkened, his jaw shaved, his clothes shabby and nondescript. All he wanted was to cast aside this damned disguise and get his life back.

His heart cried out to be able to return to Macdonell Castle, to his brother Payton and his precious little sister Arya.

His gaze fell upon the two men who awaited him, seated at the rear of the room. On heavy, aching limbs he slowly made his way to their corner table. As he approached, one of the men rose menacingly, a dirk grasped in his hand.

The man, grey-haired and grey-bearded and burly, snarled. "Who the devil are ye? Ye're nae Taveon Macdonell."

Taveon scowled for he knew this man. His name was Tal Macintyre and if Tal didn't know him, at least he could be assured his disguise was doing its job.

"Ye stupid arse, Macintyre," Taveon countered. "Of course I'm Taveon Macdonell. Have ye nae eyes tae see?"

The man grunted. He was half a head taller, looming over Taveon. "I remember ye as fair-haired and bearded."

"I once was. But blessed be walnut juice for dyeing my hair and this sharp knife for keeping my beard trimmed." He placed his hand on the hilt of the sharp dagger sheathed at his waist, making no bones about his own ability to fight, if this meeting turned out badly.

"The password." The seated man spoke abruptly. He was the younger of the two, his light-brown, greasy hair, tied at his nape, his shirt and britches of fine cloth.

Taveon spat the word. "*Gaisgeach.*"



The man laughed. “Ah yes, the Scot’s word for warrior.” He spoke with an English accent. “Name’s John Sykes, at your service.” He indicated a space at the table. “Join us Taveon Macdonell.”

As Taveon pulled up a chair, Sykes signaled to the tavern keeper, who hurried over at once.

“Three tankards of yer best ale,” Sykes said smiling affably. Once the man had departed, he turned his attention back to Taveon, his smile fading. “Are ye ready and willing to do our bidding Macdonell?”

Taveon leaned back in his chair folding his arms across his chest, biting his tongue on an angry retort. He spoke his answer in measured tones. “I’ve done all that was asked of me. Made meself a traitor tae Scotland tae suit William de Coughran’s blasted cause. And all tae keep me wee sister safe. I’ve nothing more tae give of meself.” He shook his head, a determined glint in his green eyes.

“There’s yet a month before I’m due in Carlisle tae deliver the details of the Scots’ battle plans tae yer English masters and I’ve sworn tae complete me mission. Ye cannae command more from me.”

The man gave him a tight-lipped smile. “You’ll do as you’re told Macdonell. That is, if you wish to see your family again.”

Shaking his head, Taveon went to rise, but Macintyre’s hand shot out, grabbing his arm in an iron grip, forcing him to stay in his seat. Gone was any pretense at civility.

“Ye’ll sit and listen tae what we have tae say, Macdonell, and ye’ll keep yer blasted mouth shut.”

Taveon drew in a deep breath, filling his lungs with the smoky air, steadying himself, holding back the torrent of rage building inside him.

*So, this is what it has come tae.*

He was nothing more than a pawn in the traitors’ games, helping the English against his own countrymen.

But he reminded himself that, after his mother’s death giving birth to his baby sister Arya and his father’s decline into drink and gambling ending in his murder by the hand of William de Coughran’s men, he and his brother had made a sacred pact, one they had kept without faltering. The older brother, Payton, would fulfill his duties to the clan, while Taveon would be responsible for his family. It was Taveon’s sworn duty to keep his sister and brother safe from De Coughran, who was his father’s creditor and had vowed to make them pay for their father’s sins. If his actions were to save his kin from harm, he had no choice but to abide by whatever was asked of him now by his enemies.

“Go on, then,” he said, gritting his teeth as Macintyre twisted his wrist and pressed his hand to the table. Before Taveon had a chance to pull free, the man brought down the sharp point of his dirk, piercing the flesh between Taveon’s first and middle fingers, pinning him to the table, trapping him.

He watched, stunned, as a bubble of blood welled and trickled onto the worn oak table-top.

Sucking in a breath, ignoring the pain in his hand, he met John Sykes's gaze front on. The man's gray eyes flicked over him, lingering on Taveon's bleeding hand for a moment, his lips spreading into an ugly grin.

"You may recall Castle Ardtun," he said, clearly amused at Taveon's plight. When he received no response other than a thunderous scowl, he continued.

"The MacKinnon Clan's seat, the home of Laird Blaine MacKinnon? Surely, you recall the family." Sykes gave a sharp laugh. "I am sure you have not forgotten your long months of incarceration there, waiting for the hangman to put a noose around your neck."

Taveon's mind shot back to the time he'd spent imprisoned on the Isle of Mull after he'd been captured on his way to the English. He'd been treated well, better than he had deserved, eventually making his escape with the assistance of a sweet young woman. He'd heard, later, that she'd wed the laird's younger brother. He had forgotten her name, but he recalled her gentle, anguished words before she'd freed him from the dungeon. Her quest to free him resembled his own, a vow to protect her siblings. He wondered if she hated herself as much as he loathed himself while doing so.

"I remember it very well, Sykes. Although I cannae see it's any of yer treacherous business whether my memory serves me well or nae."

"Oh, that's where you're wrong." Sykes swilled another mouthful of ale. "Your memory of the MacKinnons is exactly what my business is with you today. We have in mind a fitting

punishment to be dealt to the MacKinnons. They must be taught a lesson and made to understand we will not be interfered with. We need reprisal for your imprisonment, something that will cut deep, cause pain. Something that will bring down a hail of nightmares, prevent them from sleeping.”

“I dinna follow yer train of thought, Sykes. Castle Ardtun is well guarded. Sir Michael Wemyss attacked and tried tae take the castle, but his men were nae match for the MacKinnons and their clansmen. Ye’ll find great resistance if ye attempt another raid.”

Sykes pshawed loudly. “No, Macdonell, we’ve nothing so clumsy in mind. We’re counting on your knowledge of the castle and the country surrounding it. We’ve an altogether different and far more painful retribution in mind.”

He leaned forward, a sneer on his bloated features, his beery, rancid breath assailing Taveon’s nostrils. “You are to return to Ardtun and there you will whisk the laird’s younger sister out from under his nose. Once you’ve captured her, you’re to take her to Sir William at Castle Lochnell. If MacKinnon wants his sister safe back home with him in Castle Ardtun, he’ll have to pay a bounty to the English, in exchange.”

“Ye can count me out, ye lying bunch of bastards.” Taveon’s voice rose. “I’ve done what I was asked and that’s it. Nae more. I was told that once I’d delivered the Scots’ plans tae the English ye would leave me family alone. Me father’s debts would be overlooked and we could live our lives in peace.”

“You forget yourself, boy. You’re impertinent. Let me remind you that you’ve still to fulfill your side of our bargain. The plans have not yet reached the English commanders.”

Taveon slumped in his seat. His hand was throbbing steadily now, and a pulse beat in his forehead ached like the devil. Would he never be free?

“Ye ask too much of me. I was promised my actions would nae bring harm to any soul directly. My task was tae steal the plans and take them tae the English side. Nae more than that.”

Sykes cackled gleefully. “And were you such a prize fool Macdonell, that ye believed you’d be harming no one by giving the plans to the Scots’ enemies? The Scots will be slaughtered once the plans reach the army. And that will be on your head.”

Taveon shuddered. Of course, the man spoke the truth.

“So, if you want to keep your family safe, you know what is required of you.”

Taveon gave a weary nod. He could see no way out for himself but to accept this cursed new mission.

“I’ll do what ye want,” he said, his green eyes fixed on Sykes. “But I want your sworn word on one thing. Nay harm will come to Hannah MacKinnon while she’s held captive. She’ll be returned to her brother as soon as he pays the ransom.”

Sykes flicked his forefinger at Macintyre who ripped away his dirk, freeing Taveon.

“Of course,” Sykes said smoothly, as Taveon rose to his feet, blood still welling from his injured hand. “You have my sacred word on it. No harm will come to the girl and she’ll be returned, unscathed, to the heart of her family in due course.”

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## CHAPTER TWO

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*C*astle Ardtun, Mull

*May, 1304*

Peeping through the leaves in the hedge, Hannah could just make out little Mirin half-hidden behind one of the shrubs in the garden. Mirin's twin sister, Alba, stood in the middle of the lawn, eyes closed, counting to ten.

It was a golden day of sunshine. Apart from a few puffy white clouds, the sky was blue, perfect for a fun game of hide 'n seek with her nieces. Spring was all around, daffodils were blooming and Hannah's favourite tree, the crabapple, was covered in buds, soon to be bursting into a mass of fragrant pink flowers.

Pulling up her kirtle, she hugged her knees. The girls would never find her in this spot. It was a hollowed-out space between the hedges, perhaps made by an animal sheltering over the winter, but it made for a perfect place to stay hidden, even though the girls were hardly more than an arm's length away.

Squeals and giggles indicated that Alba had discovered Mirin's hiding place. Now both twins were searching for her.

"Hannah, Hannah. Come out." Alba called.

"She's nae here," Mirin whispered.

"Perhaps the little people have taken her," Alba said, her voice suddenly fearful.

"Hannah, please come out," pleaded Mirin.

Hannah could stand it no longer. The game was only fun if no one was scared by it. She leaped to her feet. It was at the moment that she heard the sound of men's voices entering the garden. The girls swirled around and took off.

"*Athair*," they cried in unison.

Hannah's heart did a flip. It was their father, Blaine. Her brother. Straightening her kirtle and brushing leaves out of her hair she ventured out of her hiding place. It was unusual for Blaine to be in the garden. This was the place where the women came to chat, to embroider, or attend to their mending. It was her favourite place within the castle walls. She often came here with the twins and her sister-in-law Edina's sisters Margaret and Skye, who were around her age.

Here in the garden, they could chat and make as much noise as they liked without an angry face appearing at their door telling them that girls should be seen and not heard. She also



frequently came alone, just to sit and enjoy the birds and butterflies and the flowers coming into bloom. It was a peaceful place, a respite from the duties and busyness of the castle.

Now, disturbing the gentle harmony of the place, was her brother.

*Whatever does Blaine want?*

She stepped hurriedly out of the hedge, feeling foolish and off-kilter under the watchful presence of her brother. Her foot caught on a protruding tree root as she hastened forward, sending her head over heels. She squealed, putting out her hands to break her fall. But despite her best efforts, she landed face down on the grass.

Mirin and Alba raced over, giggling as Hannah struggled to sitting position, her hands muddied and her kirtle covered in grass.

Alba tugged at her aunt's braids. "Oh wait, Auntie Hannah, ye've a ladybird in yer hair," she shrieked, gently removing the little insect.

Blaine stood watching them, his mouth screwed in lines of disapproval, his eyes narrowed.

It was not until Hannah had finally risen to her feet, and was brushing her tangled skirts and neatening her hair, that he spoke.

“I regret intruding intae yer area, sister, but it seems ye pay nae heed tae my requests for yer presence. Thus, ye give me nae other option but tae come here in search of ye.”

His displeasure was rolling off him in waves, and Hannah noted with dismay that the vein in the middle of his forehead was prominent. Always a sign he was in a rage, but containing it.

Her stomach lurched. She *had* received his summons but the time seemed to have flown and she’d lost track of when she was to have the meeting with him.

“I’m so sorry brother. Please forgive me. I was nae heedless of yer message, but simply unaware of the time passing.” She looked around. Gillebride had taken the twins by the hand and was leading them out of the garden.

It was only then that Hannah saw Errol, her other brother, standing quietly at the entrance to the garden, another man at his side. Her heart sank as she became conscious of her dishevelled state, her muddy hands, grubby kirtle and messy braids. Her forehead was stinging and she was afraid she may have scratched it when she fell, bringing further disharmony to her appearance.

She gripped Blaine’s sleeve. “What is it? Please tell me what’s going on. Who is that man and why is he looking at me like that? Are we in danger?”

The man had stepped forward, taking his place beside Errol and was now standing in the sunlight where she could observe

him fully. He was tall, possibly around Blaine's age, with well-coiffed dark hair and blue eyes.

Blaine made the introduction. "May I present my sister Hannah?" The man nodded in Hannah's direction, favouring her with a haughty smile, his eyes mocking her.

"This is a dear friend of mine, Duncan Buchanan."

Taking an instant dislike to him, despite his handsome profile and fine clothes, Hannah bobbed a curtsy and offered the man her most dazzling smile.

"I am so very pleased tae make yer acquaintance, my laird," she responded as graciously as possible.

Inwardly she was heaping a mountain of curses on Blaine for putting her in such an unenviable position with a stranger. And why had her brother, the Laird, seen fit to bring this strange man to invade this private space?

"Would ye excuse me, sir, tae have a few words with me brother?"

The man nodded politely, turned on his heel and walked off with Errol.

Hannah turned to Blaine, her brows drawn in a frown.

“I dinna like yer Duncan Buchanan,” she hissed once the two men were out of earshot.

Blaine sighed. “Ye dinna understand, Hannah.”

Glaring, she placed her hands on her hips defiantly. “Well, then, brother, please do go ahead and explain what all this is about.”

“Ye’ve told us often enough of yer longing tae find a husband and be wed,” he began.

She huffed impatiently. “Yes. I’ve envied my brothers their happiness. Ye know I wish for nothing more than tae find a man tae love and tae have me own family. Like ye with Ivy, and Errol with Edina.” Her eyes misted as memories came flooding in. “After our parents died, ye two were everything to me, ye were me entire family.” She gazed up at him, trying to gauge his reaction to her words. Would he understand how much this meant? “But now ye have families of yer own, and I’m a little lost. It’s as if I dinna belong anywhere, nowadays.”

Blaine nodded, reaching a hand to squeeze her arm gently. “Well, yer brother and I have talked with the Council of Chiefs. Ye’re nineteen, old enough tae wed. It’s been decided we dae our best tae grant yer wish.”

Hannah’s blue eyes lit up. “Blaine, ye mean... ye’ve agreed tae allow me tae wed?”

He laughed softly. “Aye lass. It’s what ye want.” His eyes grew serious. “I want tae know ye’ve a man tae protect ye

when the battles come again, and I cannae keep ye close forever, nae matter how much I'd love tae have ye in me sight."

She frowned up at him. "Do ye think the English will attack?"

He shook his head. "I dinna ken, luv. All I ken is that a war is raging, that the traitor Taveon is still abroad with our battle plans, and sooner or later it will come tae our doorstep. And when it does, I want ye safe and – Heaven forbid, should something happen tae me and Errol – under the protection of a powerful family."

She clutched his sleeve again. "If battle's where yer thoughts take ye, I must tell ye this my dear brother. The man I'll wed must be a true Scot. One who's nay traitor tae the rightful king. Never a man the likes of that traitor Macdonell Edina helped escape from yer dungeon."

"Aye. we have all forgiven Edina for the heartache she caused. I ken why she took such a great risk and almost broke Errol's heart. Tae keep her sisters safe. I'd have done the same if I had been her." Her eyes flashed. "But I'll nae forgive Macdonell for his wicked treachery."

Blaine smiled fondly at her determination and loyalty. "Never fear, sweet lass, the man ye wed will be one who takes an oath of allegiance to our Liege Lord, King Robert." He gave her a wry smile. "Someone like Duncan Buchanan, the next Laird of the Buchanans."

Hannah gasped, raising a hand to her mouth. "Och, my dear Lord. Are ye telling me that man is me suitor?"

Again, Blaine chuckled. “Dinna worry, lass, he’s nae the only one. Ye’ll be kept busy all through the summer. There are lads lining up tae ask for yer hand. Buchanan is only the first.”

Beaming, she glanced up at him.

“Methinks he’s the first, but by nay means will he be the last.”

“The first of many,” Blaine said, pulling her into his arms for a great bear-hug. “Ye’ll be wed before winter is upon us, wee sister.”

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## CHAPTER THREE

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*A*rdtun, Isle of Mull

*Midsummer, 1304*

The heavily-laden woodsman's cart rattled its way up to the castle gate.

"Whoah," said the cloaked figure, pulling on the reins. The strong cart-horse came to a standstill as the two guards nodded toward the woodsman.

"It's Euan, bringing another load for the castle fires," the guard called. Moments later the gate into the keep was slowly raised, allowing the cart's entry. The man on the cart gave a brief salute as the cart rumbled through the gate and across the cobblestones.

He circled around the back of the castle and pulled up beside the servants' quarters near the kitchen, where he tethered the horse and set about unloading the timber logs and kindling.

Some of the heaviest wood he carried on his shoulders, muscles straining, to stack on the covered wood-pile beyond the kitchen while several servants filled baskets from his smaller choppings to be used in the great kitchen fires.

He filled a basket and carried it through to the great hall where he was relieved of the weight by the serving-man, whose sole job it was to ensure there was sufficient fuel for the roaring fires that warmed the castle.

The man they called Euan had been carrying out these tasks for the past weeks, coming and going through the castle's iron gates with nary a glance from the guards, all the while taking care to keep his cloak wrapped securely and his hood shadowing his face.

Taveon hated his disguise almost as much as he hated being here. His memories of the dungeon were still fresh enough in his mind to make him shudder, even though it had been months since he'd found his freedom. Yet, it had been simple enough to find a way to enter the castle. He'd paid a handsome bounty to borrow Euan's cart with its load of wood and take his place three times a week when he took the timber load to Castle Ardtun.

In his woodsman's guise, Taveon had been able to make his way through the castle unhampered. On the rare occasions he'd been questioned, he'd simply shown his basket of trimmed logs and been waved on.

Now that his plan was coming to fruition, he had high hopes he'd be able to overwhelm the laird's sister unnoticed. He'd capture her swiftly, putting miles between the two of them and the MacKinnons, before her disappearance was discovered and



the alarm was raised. If his luck held, her absence would not be noticed until morning.

In the weeks he'd been surveilling the castle, he'd become aware of the small garden frequented by the women. The first time he'd been there he'd been casting his eyes around, taking in his surroundings, when a young woman and two little girls burst through the entry way. Before they could catch sight of him, he'd quickly crouched in the hedge, finding a space there where he could observe them.

The wee girls' innocent play put him in mind of his sister Arya when she was a bairn. That memory was like a knife between his ribs.

He heard them call "Hannah," and his heart jumped.

She was beautiful. Tall, slender, her golden hair falling in waves to her slim waistline. He hadn't counted on her loveliness, or on the feelings that stirred inside him as he observed her – hair flying, skirts tucked up, long legs on display. He watched, enthralled, as she laughed with the wee girls, playing catch-me-if-you can and skipping a rope. The ache in his groin and the urge to seize her and bury his face in that glorious mane of hair, to hold her soft curves against him, to crush her lips to his was, suddenly, almost unbearable.

It had been many years since a lass had made his heart beat faster. He'd been leading a monk's life for too long.

He was suddenly assailed with doubt. This lovely creature did not deserve the fate that lay in store for her. The MacKinnons had treated him well while he was their captive. They'd given

him good food and ale and despite knowing him as a traitor who threatened the lives of their clansmen, he'd not known cruelty at their hands.

To inflict the pain he knew was in store for them went against everything he believed was right in the world.

Conscious that such feelings were dangerous, threatening the cold-heart required for his mission, he steeled himself with the knowledge of the fate awaiting his own kin should he not succeed.

On several further occasions, when the weather was good, he'd snuck into the garden, observing the women chatting and laughing at their needlework or frolicking with the bairns.

Hannah spent more time there than the others. More often than not she was alone, sitting quietly, sometimes with her eyes closed, peacefully breathing in the perfumed air. He knew it was only a matter of time before he came upon her when there was no one around to come to her aid.

Tonight, after carrying out his usual duties with the firewood, Taveon slipped away from watchful eyes, making his way, unseen, to the little garden. The cart was empty, save for a sack containing his tools, and he'd drawn it as close as he could to the doorway near the kitchen. At this time of the evening, he could count on the servants being too busy serving the laird and his family to be coming and going through the door.

The evening was still warm in the long twilight, and Taveon had high hopes Hannah would come here, as she did so

frequently, to take in the air before retiring to her bedchamber.

Once he reached the empty garden, he found his way to the space in the hedge where he could observe whatever was taking place there. His heart was pounding and the blood thundering in his veins. If he was caught now there'd be no mercy, hanging or beheading would be his certain fate.

As minutes turned into hours of waiting, his legs stiffened and he rubbed his calves, keeping them pliant, aware that any stumbling misstep could be his last.

His mind meandered idly over thoughts of Hannah, imagining her looking at him with glowing eyes, her lips opening tenderly...

He froze, straining his ears at the sudden intrusion of voices, groaning inwardly. One of the voices was Hannah's, but the other voice belonged to a man.

*God's teeth!*



Hannah flew out of the great hall, aware that Hendrie was following on her heels.

“Hannah, wait,” he said plaintively. “I have something I want tae say tae ye.” He was like a young puppy; all sad eyes, floppy hair and gangly legs. She didn't lessen her stride, heading straight for the Ladies' Garden. Surely the boy wouldn't be so foolish as to follow her to that private spot.

No. He had no time for such niceties. Entering the garden, he scooted alongside her and clutched her hand. Ugh. His hand was limp and sweaty.

*Oh dear! What was Blaine thinking?*

All smiles this afternoon, he'd presented her with young Hendrie Davidson, the son of one of his oldest friends. In the space of two months, Hendrie was the eleventh offering her brother had trotted out for her approval as a prospective suitor. *Eleventh.*

But, by all the saints in Christendom, this lad was scarcely out of the nursery. Still wet behind the ears. He was sweet enough, eager to please, but not yet bearded, with aught but peach-fuzz on his chin. She'd wager he was not a day over seventeen. Why, she stood at least a head taller than him, for goodness' sake!

Was this Blaine's plot to force her to agree to marry the next man that actually *looked* like a full-grown man? At least one with a beard.

Hendrie was clinging to her hand like a limpet. She plonked her bottom on the bench at the far end of the garden, spreading her skirts in the faint hope he'd realize there was no space for him to sit beside her.

Not in the least deterred, he flung himself on one knee on the grass in front of her.

“Fair lady, please let me recite the poem I’ve written for ye,” he begged.

She huffed indignantly.

*Blaine must secretly hate me. Otherwise, he’d never keep beleaguering me with unsuitable, unappealing, impossible lads.*

“All right. I’ll listen tae yer poem. But, afterwards, ye must promise tae take yer leave. I wish tae enjoy the evening air *by meself*,” she said sternly.

Hendrie took a deep breath, issuing a sigh. “I shall, melady. I shall leave ye once ye’ve heard me out.” He took a parchment from the pocket in his britches and unfolded it.

After clearing his throat, he began. “Fairest Jennifer,” he read.

“My name’s Hannah” she said, her lips quirking in a smile. Why, this buffoon had not written the poem for her at all.

“Oh...” he gasped.

“Methinks ye should stand, Hendrie. I’ve changed me mind. I nay longer wish tae hear yer verses.” She reached a hand to help him up.

Suddenly, he switched his eyes from her face, to the small creature that was climbing on the bench beside her. A spotted,

brown, scaly creature.

“Ye gods. A monster,” he shrieked, losing his balance and, hands flailing, landing bottom-first on the grass.

In fright, Hannah heaped to her feet, her skirt tangling her feet, bringing her down to land beside him.

Pointing with a shaking finger, his ashen face washed of all color, he squeaked, “There. It’s a deadly, poisonous, serpent”

Scrambling to her feet, Hannah looked around.

“Hendrie. Get up.” She snapped. “While there are some shy snakes here on Mull that are poisonous, that’s nae snake. It’s a wee *lizard*. They are common here and that one visits me often in the garden.”

She savagely brushed at her skirt with one hand, fluffing grass and leaves out of her hair with the other.

“Now,” Her voice was unusually sharp. “I believe it’s time ye left me.” She lifted her chin in haughty dismissal. The boy stumbled to his feet, swiveled without a word, and hastily made his departure, leaving Hannah alone in the gathering twilight.

“At last,” she breathed aloud.

Leaning over the lizard, she whispered her thanks.

“Mr. Lizard.” She said, breathlessly. “I do so appreciate yer help in chasing that boy away. I was beginning tae fear he’d never go.” She laughed.

Then came a whispered voice in response, “Happy to be of service melady. I could see he was nae the man for ye. Ye deserve a strong, handsome fellow tae set ye tae rights.”

For one fleeting second it seemed as if the lizard was speaking to her, and she giggled. But then it dawned.

*Someone was there, unseen, beside her in the garden.*

She drew in a breath, filling her lungs, ready to scream bloody murder.

But, before she had a chance to let out an awe-inspiring shriek, a tall figure leaped from the shadow of the hedges and clamped a ruthless hand over her mouth.

Struggling furiously, she raked the hand with her nails, kicking out as best she could, although hampered by her long skirts. She heard a rough swear word as she tore at the man’s hand, but his other hand clamped her waist and she was hauled unceremoniously into the hedge, landing a hundred tiny scratches on her face and bare arms.

Before any further ado, a heavy cloth was wrapped around her mouth and fastened, her hands were seized in a strong grip and tied tightly behind her back with string. Throwing her head back she tried to butt against the man’s chin, but he was too

quick for her. He dodged sideways, grabbing her hair, twisting it painfully around his hand.

“Dinna try anything, lass. It’ll go badly for ye if ye dae,” he breathed into her ear. “Stop struggling and ye’ll nae be hurt.”

Then the world went dark as a sack was thrown over her head and pulled down over her body to her feet. She felt the man fastening a binding like a belt at her waist, securing the rough hessian sack, and another binding her ankles.

Bound hand and foot, her mouth gagged so that her screams were stifled, she felt herself being hoisted over the man’s shoulder as if she was nothing more than a sack of chaff.

“If ye make a sound, if ye try and wriggle, I’ll run ye through with my dirk,” he said in a low, gravelly voice that shot terror straight to her heart.



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## CHAPTER FOUR

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This was the moment of peril.

Taveon's heart was pounding, the blood rushing in his veins. He pressed his dirk hard against the lass he had slung over his shoulder. His life depended on her keeping quiet and still as he made his way back to the cart. He passed like a shadow through the castle passages, seeing no one. Hearing the babble of voices and the clatter of pans he crept on tiptoe down the narrow passage alongside the kitchen, holding his breath. At last, he reached the servants' door near to where the cart waited with the patient horse.

After checking that he was alone, he ventured outside and lowered the anonymous bundle containing Hannah MacKinnon onto the cart's tray, next to the similar-looking bundle that held the woodcutter's axe and saws.

He slowly exhaled. So far so good. Now it was only the guards on the gate he had to pass by.

"Keep silent lass, if ye dinna want tae feel the steel of me dirk pierce yer neck," he hissed.

The response was a muffled grunt, but there was no hint of movement from the sack as he mounted the cart, swinging the horse around so it could retrace its deliberately slow progress toward the gate.

It was dusk now, the shadows splayed over the keep were long, and the guards were at the end of their shift. As the cart approached, they paid no heed to it, or to the hooded figure holding the reins. No doubt they were eager to make the exchange and head to their cosy homes after the long hours on duty, and the lowly woodcutter's journey was of no interest to them.

They hauled up the gate, waiting with bored expressions as the cart lumbered through.

In minutes the gate had been lowered behind them and Taveon felt a flood of relief surge through his gut. He could breathe again. The most difficult part of his mission had been completed. Now he could only pray the lass's disappearance would go unnoticed until he'd widened a lengthy gap between the two of them and Castle Ardtun.

There was still no movement from the sack, and he wondered if she was aware they had passed out of the castle and there was not a soul about who could come to her aid.

He glanced over his shoulder at the castle growing smaller in the distance, his mind flashing back to the night he'd made his escape from the MacKinnons' dungeon. It had been a tortuous departure. He was weak and desperate, with no plan. On foot, determined to escape capture, he'd scrambled through the nearby woods terrified by the sound of men, horses and dogs hunting him like a wild animal.

But he'd prevailed. He'd travelled northwest while his pursuers had followed a false trail southeast. After weeks, with only the aid of kindhearted villagers who were unaware of who he was, and fisherfolk who'd helped him reach another island, he'd finally made it back to the mainland.

Tonight, he'd arranged for good, fast horses to be waiting. They'd travel some distance to the little cove where they'd meet with a man who would sail them across in his cog to the closest point on the mainland. There Taveon would take fresh horses again, and accompanied by Sir William's men, he'd ride with Hannah to meet with de Coughran at Lochnell Castle.

Then, damn their eyes, he'd part ways with de Coughran. This hateful mission would be done with. He'd hand over Hannah to the waiting men and be on his way to Carlisle to deliver the Scots' battle plans to the English.

He pulled on the reins to turn the horse into the woodland track where he had pledged to meet old Euan the woodcutter. As he did so, he became aware of a surge of pain in his hand. Looking down he was startled to see blood flowing freely from a large tear where that bastard Macintyre had pierced his hand. In the struggle with Hannah, she must have ripped his wound, opening it and tearing it deeper.

He reached into his satchel under the seat and pulled out a cloth to bind his hand and staunch the bleeding. He huffed, wincing against the pain. *By God, the girl was a wild one.* He gave a soft admiring laugh thinking how strongly she'd struggled before he'd managed to subdue her. One scream would have brought guards and her menfolk running to her aid.

He issued up a silent prayer of thanks for the luck that had been with him, enabling his escape.

It was tempting to let her know she had nothing to fear from him. But he quashed that moment of madness. It was necessary she fear him. They had a long journey ahead and he needed her meek and submissive.

They progressed along the narrow track for half a mile or so before they came to the clearing where Euan awaited them. Taveon's horses were tethered nearby and once he'd handed over the cart and the old woodcutter was out of sight; he and Hannah would be on their way.

He was aware that he'd need to unbind her so she could mount the horse, but he was counting on the isolation of their surroundings to prevent her attempting to escape.

"Thank ye lad," Euan said, as Taveon jumped down and handed over the reins. He was used to Taveon's thrice weekly comings and goings, believing he was visiting his sweetheart, one of the serving-maids who lived in the castle. He had no inkling of Taveon's real purpose. When it came to a search for the missing lass, if suspicions regarding Hannah's disappearance should fall on the woodsman, his ignorance would be his savior.

Taveon grunted, hefting his bundle out of the cart and laying Hannah on the ground. The old man scarcely glanced in the direction of Taveon's load, no doubt assuming it was just a package of his belongings and tools.

“Aye. I’ll be on me way, Euan.” Taveon muttered as the cart jolted off. He’d paid Euan handsomely for the use of his cart, and for his silence, and the woodsman had no idea this would be the last time he’d set eyes on Taveon.

He waited until Euan was certain to be out of earshot before carrying Hannah over to a stout tree and propping her against its trunk.

First, he undid the belts from around her ankles and waist and raised the sack. He pulled it slowly over her head. She glared at him, her chest heaving indignantly.

He reached a reluctant hand to unfasten the binding around her mouth.

Instantly, she let fly with the screams that had, no doubt, been building inside her all this time. She was drawing breath to let go another ear-splitting howl, when Taveon pressed a hand to her mouth.

“Silence, lass. Ye’re wasting yer precious breath. There’s none nearby tae hear ye.”

He took his hand away from her mouth and she bellowed loudly.

“All right,” he said, almost laughing at her determination. “If ye want tae frighten the birds and the badgers, go right ahead. Yer yelling is lost on me.”

“Ye sniveling bastard,” she spat the words. “My brothers will gut ye like a fish when they catch up with ye. Dinna think ye’ll get away with this... this... whatever it is ye’re planning tae dae with me.”

Her eyes filled with angry tears and she shook her head vigorously from side to side.

“Take me back tae the castle this minute,” she demanded imperiously, stamping her foot. “Ye’ve nae right tae take me from me home.”

He responded with a soft laugh. “Nay lass. I didnae risk my skin just tae return ye straight away tae yer lodgings.”

Her blue eyes narrowed. Changing her approach, she spoke more softly. “Please, take me home. Me brother is the laird, he’ll pay ye well for me return. If ye’re being paid by one of me stupid suitors tae abduct me, me brother, will pay ye twice as much. I promise ye.”

Taveon laughed. “Nay lass. There’s nae suitor so mad for ye that he’d pay someone like me tae bring ye tae him. Ye’ve been spending too much time listening tae the old stories of besotted lads driven mad for love.”

She huffed again. “Why ye swine, what would the likes of ye ken of love?”

“Well, lass, there’s one thing I can say for sure. Ye’ll nae be finding out what I ken about love. Although, I venture tae say I ken a mite more about it than ye dae.” He laughed again. “If

that wee dandy who was down on one knee before ye is anything tae go by.”

Infuriated, she kicked out, landing a glancing blow on his shin. Her fine brows were drawn, her eyes blazing with dark flames, her cheeks reddened. She tossed her head and a cloud of yellow hair floated over her shoulders.

Taveon was enchanted. He'd never seen anyone so beautiful. Too bad this talk of love would take him nowhere. He was so close he could smell her wildflower scent and feel the warmth of her breath on his cheek. A sudden urge washed him with lust and he pictured himself rolling naked with her on the forest floor, wild and mad with passion.

He blinked twice, reluctantly shutting down this beguiling fantasy. They'd best be on their way without further delay. There was no telling how soon her disappearance would bring down the hounds of the MacKinnons on his head. He well knew what that was like.

Gripping her arm, he half dragged her to where he'd tethered the horses. She dug her heels in, resisting vainly, but, as his was the greater strength by far, he succeeded in wrestling her to stand beside the horse. Gritting his teeth, keeping her in his grip, he looked her up and down.

“Ye'll come with me, lass. Resisting willnae aid ye. Ye're in me power and ye'd best day as I say.”

She glanced at the horses. “Ye're expecting me tae ride with ye?”

“Aye, we’ll ride tae the coast this night and be on the mainland in the morning.”

She gasped. “Nae. Ye cannae dae this. It’s a wicked thing tae steal me away.”

“It may be so, melody. But there’s nay way out for either of us.”

“Where are you taking me? What will happen tae me?” Her voice quavered and, for the first time since he’d taken her prisoner, he registered her fear. “My brother will pay ye well if ye return me tae the castle.”

He shook his head. “I cannae answer ye. All I can promise is that nae harm will come tae ye. I’ve made a vow that I’ll see ye safe.”

She took a deep breath and lifted her chin. “Well, if that is so, ye’d best untie me hands. For I’ll nae be able tae ride with me hands behind me back.”

He sighed. She spoke sense. They’d be riding fast, and the lass would never be able to stay on the horse without her hands tae steady her.

He stepped over, holding his dirk. “I’ll tie yer hands in front of ye, then,” he said, slicing through the rough twine binding her.

Her hands came free and, in a trice, she’d raised them and given him an almighty shove backwards. He lost his footing



and went down. In the moments it took for him to scramble to his feet she'd seized the saddle, thrust her foot into the stirrup and heaved herself up. She was already swinging her second leg over the horse's back when he managed to grab her skirts.

She kicked out, still scrabbling to mount the horse.

“Och, nay ye dinna,” he yelled as she pushed at his face, her nails sharp against his cheek. It took all his strength to drag her from the saddle, grunting and hurling curses at him, and bring her down. She plunged from the horse, arms akimbo, with Taveon still hanging on grimly to her leg. They went down together in a heap, him on his back, her on top of him, struggling and flailing her arms mightily, landing a flurry of blows to his head.

He grunted, every scrap of air violently expelled from his lungs, as they rolled together on the ground. He clutched her, holding on tight, while she beat hard against his chest, pushing him, fiercely bringing her knee up between his thighs. Her elbows and hands flew at him as he gasped in a breath. Gripping her shoulders, he managed to hold her at arm's length, keeping his distance from her fists.

Making an effort to roll on top of her, he tried to pin her under him, squirming and wriggling, desperate to free herself.

The delicate silk of her dress gave way and, for an instant, his hands were on her bare skin. But this was the farthest thing from the wild passion he'd pictured only minutes ago. Instead, it was a do-or-die effort by Hannah, determined not to allow him to abduct her, at least not without an almighty struggle.

“Ow, ow,” she shrieked suddenly. “Somethin’ is stinging me.”

A second later he felt the same stinging on his hands and face. God’s blood. They were rolling in a vast bed of nettles.

Now, each faced with an even greater foe, they ended their struggle in a flash. Taveon hauled himself to his feet, keeping a tight grip on Hannah’s arm, helping her to scramble up, a series of red welts clearly visible on her neck and chest. The bare skin at her waist was already marked with tiny blisters.

“Aargh!” she moaned, rubbing herself frantically with her free hand. “Let me go, I cannae stand this stinging and burning feeling. It’s horrible.” She danced from foot to foot, her face scrunched in anguish.

Taveon was also feeling the flaming effect of the nettles, it was as if a thousand tiny fires were burning on his skin and all he wanted to do was to rub the pain away. Instead, he seized the reins of the two horses.

“Lass, calm yerself and come with me. We’re near enough tae the shores of Loch Scridain. We can walk down tae the water, dip our burning bodies there and soothe away the pain of the nettles.”

“Aye, aye,” she cried, eagerly. “Anything to stop this feeling.”

He took a length of rope that was wound to the saddle of the first horse, and tied it around Hannah’s waist. “This will keep ye close,” he said with a chuckle. “Just in case ye were entertaining the idea of escaping.”

She glared at him, saying nothing.

Retaining his grip on her arm, Taveon led the way down the rocky path, holding the reins in his other hand so the horses could follow. Although the sun had set, in the long summer twilight he could see his way clearly. Within minutes they had arrived at the shore where small waves lapped enticingly. The water was crisp and cold. He could hardly wait to disrobe and let the icy balm spread across his skin.

“Come lass. Strip off yer clothes. If ye want tae soothe yer blistering skin ye’ll have tae share the loch with me.”

She turned away dismissively. “Ye cannae command me. I’m the MacKinnon’s sister. Ye may be holding me captive but I’ll nae disrobe ‘afore ye. Turn away. I’ll swim in the loch on me own.”

Taveon huffed with impatience. “Nay. I’m as keen as ye tae enter the water. I’ll nae wait while ye take yer time. If ye’re too proud tae disrobe ye can stay here and itch tae yer foolish heart’s content.” He took the end of the rope, tethering her to the same tree he’d tied the horses to. “Ye can bide here with our mounts while I dip mesel’ in the cool waters.”

He pulled off his cloak and tossed it over a tree branch, untied the fastenings on his shirt and shrugged it off and was starting on the ties around his braies when she finally found her tongue to speak.

“Nay. I’ll do as ye say. I cannae stand this any longer. If it means bathing beside ye then it’s a price I’m prepared tae

pay.”

“Sensible lass,” he said, giving the ties a final tug. He was about to slide the braies down but glanced up to see she was standing stock still, staring at him.

“Have ye nae seen a naked man?” he said, not unkindly and watched a bright pink flush rise on her cheeks, almost as red as the welts the damned nettles had left.

She shook her head. “I’ve nae seen a man naked, as ye say. Except me brothers as lads when we’d all swim together in the loch.” She brushed a hand across her cheeks at the memory. “It’s just that...”

“Aye lass. What’s bothering ye now?”

She gestured at herself. “I cannae undae my stays. I have a maid who helps me dress and undress.”

Despite the fiery itching he managed a laugh. “So, ye want me tae act the part of yer maid?”

She glanced down at her once fine silk gown, now stained and torn. “I was dressed today tae meet wee Hendrie, the lad ye saw in the garden. My brother insists I dress like a laird’s sister whenever a suitor comes calling.”

He took in her gown, which was altogether too revealing and, as her chest heaved, he was treated to a tantalizing glimpse of smooth, pale skin, and the rising of two small but firm breasts.

His groin twitched at the tasty sight. But now was not the time to be thinking lusty thoughts. First, he'd have to rid himself of the cursed stinging itch that was driving him crazy.

He dropped his britches, aware that he was growing hard.

“Turn yer head lass, and I’ll unfasten yer dress for ye,” he said, his voice nothing more than a low growl.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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*H*annah turned her back so that Taveon could gain access to the fastening on her corset. Now her cheeks were burning almost as fiercely as the marks where the nettles had stung her. She released her arms from the sleeves and let the tattered remnants of her gown and chemise slip to her waist.

“Ye willnae look at me whilst I am undressed, will ye?” she said in a small voice.

“Ye realize ye have way too many conditions for a lass who has been abducted, arenae ye?” He chuckled softly. “Nae lass. I’ll nae peep at ye.”

She felt his fingers fumbling with the laces for a few minutes, then her stays came loose. Holding them in place she turned to face him, a horrified gasp passing her lips as her eyes took in the tall length of him without a stitch on to cover him.

“Close yer eyes lass, if ye cannae bear the sight of me. I dinna want yer gaze on me, but I’ll nae let ye free all the same. If ye want tae ease the nettles from yer skin, ye best stay behind me where ye’ll nae have tae see me manhood.”

He waited, eyes turned toward the loch, while she slipped her skirt and petticoats down her legs and stepped out of them.

“I’m ready now,” she whispered, naked as the day she was born, following close on his heels, marvelling at the muscles rippling in his back, the width of his shoulders, and the glorious tightness of his well-formed derriere.

Not that she had expertise in such matters, but to her eyes he was a fine figure of a man.

He dove into the water, disappearing momentarily into the depths, before surfacing a few feet away at the furthest extension of the rope. With his back to her, he tugged on the knot at her waist, and she slid into the icy water with a gasp, submerging up to her chin.

*Ah, the blessed relief.*

Smiling, she closed her eyes and sucked in a long slow breath as the soothing balm quenched the fire blazing across her skin.

When she opened her eyes, she saw with a start that his gaze was fixed on her. Looking down she realized that, although her chest and shoulders were below the surface, the water was crystal clear, and the pale outlines of her rounded breasts with their pink nipples were rather visible.

Flinging her arms across her chest she let out a little squeal. “Ye lied. Ye said ye’d nae peep at me.”

He grinned, turning his gaze to the sky. “I’m nae looking at ye lass.”

She swept a hand across the water’s surface and splashed him, the way she’d did when frolicking in the loch with the twins. “Keep yer eyes tae yerself.”

It was impossible not to laugh at the sight of him, water gurgling over his head, pouring down his face, dripping from his hair. He spluttered, spurting a mouthful of water.

“Why, ye little vixen...” he proclaimed, sending a tidal wave in her direction.

Now it was her turn to splutter as her hair was drenched through.

They splashed back and forth for a few minutes, laughing. Forgetting for those few short seconds that she was this man’s captive, Hannah was having fun. As the game went on, they drew closer, until they were almost standing nose to nose. She looked into his eyes and studied his laughing face. He was more handsome than any of the suitors Blaine had paraded before her over the past months. As their gazes locked, a feeling both divine and luscious darted through her, leaving her body indescribably sensitive.

Her awareness of another kind of red-hot sensation starting up between her thighs brought their game to an abrupt end and she hugged her arms around herself.



“I’m cold,” she mumbled, for want of something to say. “I need tae leave the water and find me clothes.”

The sudden overriding need to have his hands touching her, gliding over her breasts to stroke her rosy nubs, and to somehow relieve this new aching at her core, seemed to aggravate her neediness. She moaned inwardly. It was a mysterious feeling in the depths of her body she’d never experienced before. It was delicious, but scary at the same time.

When he turned to her again and she saw his green eyes darken, her breath rose high in her chest, hitching in her throat. He leaned in, stroking strands of hair back from her face and for one wild instant it seemed he might kiss her on the lips.

“Ye’re lovely, Hannah McKinnon,” he said, before turning abruptly away, leaving her bereft and strangely lonely.

Emerging from the icy, healing waters of the loch, they headed up the rock-strewn path to the place where they’d abandoned their clothing, near the tethered horses. Walking close behind him, averting her eyes from his nakedness as he strode ahead of her, she struggled to make sense of her body’s mysterious reactions to him.

She could make no sense of it at all. Recalling Ivy long ago revealing what occurred between a man and a woman once they were wed, and that it was pleasurable, she wondered if the feelings she’d experienced for her captor were, in some way, connected. But surely, that could not be possible?

After pulling her chemise over her head, she fumbled with the knotted rope at her waist.

“If I’m tae don my clothes again, ye’ll need tae release this confounded rope from my waist.”

Now clad in his britches, his chest bare, he reached around her, standing close enough for her to feel his breath in her hair as he undid the knot. Again, she felt the strange sensation – a swift hot dart in her belly – and the even more puzzling sense that she wanted his kiss.

Half closing her eyes, without thinking she raised her face to his. Their eyes met for a long moment before he slowly pulled himself away.

She gave her head a sound shaking.

*What madness was this? The man is a ruffian, a villain. He doesn’t have seduction on his mind.*

Her cheeks flushing pink at her own wayward thinking, she scrambled into her clothes, tossing aside the offending stays. Her torn dress was shameful, and she pulled her chemise down over her waist hoping to hide the exposed bare skin the damage revealed.

Observing her, her captor chuckled. “Lass, ye were naked only minutes ago and now ye’re embarrassed by a wee square of yer belly on display.”

She tossed her head. “Ye’re a rude, crude man tae speak tae me that way.”

He laughed all the harder. “Dinna fash. The horse willnae peep, and I’ve seen all of ye already so a patch of yer skin is of nay moment tae me.”

She huffed at him, but couldn’t help a smile quirking her lips.

“Ye should put on yer shirt then lad, ye’re nae fit tae be in the presence of a lady as ye are, half naked.” Her eyes roamed across his flexing muscles, the broad width of his chest and his slim waist. Oh yes, he was a handsome one all right. But she’d keep her head on her shoulders and not allow herself to succumb to his good looks.

He grabbed his shirt and pulled it over his head. “I dinna wish tae offend, melady, I’ve done enough tae enrage ye already,” he teased, grinning cheekily.

“Well...” Searching for a name to call him by, she pulled up short. Who in Christendom was this man? “I dinna ken how tae address ye. I dinna ken yer name.”

His grin faded. “Mayhap it’s best ye dinna ken who I am.”

“Whoever ye are, tell me why it is that ye cannae take me back tae my home? If it’s money ye’re tae gain from making me yer prisoner, my brother will pay ye more. It’s obvious ye dinna wish tae harm me or ye would have done so already.”

“I’ve already said. It’s nae money I want. I’m discharging my obligations tae... someone... whose name must remain unsaid between us.”

“But if ye take me back tae Ardtun, my brother can help ye with this obligation ye have.”

He shook his head. “Believe me, melady, I wish nothing more than tae never see the face of yer brother again.”

She studied him thoughtfully. “Ye speak as if ye ken my brother. Were ye once his friend?”

He gave a wry laugh. “I’ve made his acquaintance. But we’re the opposite of friends.”

“Ye’re my brother’s enemy?”

Pulling on his boots he paused, meeting her gaze. “Aye. Fate has placed us on opposing sides.”

Mulling his words, she recalled Edina telling her about the prisoner whose freedom she’d granted. Something about an obligation to *his* family that was similar to the obligation she bore to her sisters. A dark and terrifying thought flashed into her head.

“Are ye the traitor? The man my brother’s wife helped escape from the MacKinnon dungeon?”

He sucked in a breath, turning his head away, his jaw clenching. She held her breath, a river of ice replacing the blood in her veins.

Could this be the man she'd come to regard as the devil himself. Was he taking his revenge on the MacKinnons by making her his captive?

Her words hung in the air between them, stretching into a long silence, until, at last, he turned his gaze back to her.

"Aye lass," he muttered avoiding her eyes.

She gulped. "Ye're Taveon Macdonell?" Her heart hammered against her ribcage. She'd long hated the very sound of this man's name. Now, dear God, here she was. His captive. Worse still, only moments ago she'd contemplated what it would be like to feel his lips on hers in a passionate kiss.

Escaping had suddenly become even more urgent.

She lifted her head haughtily. "If ye've nae intention of returning me tae me home then *Taveon Macdonell*, we'd best be on our way tae the destination. I cannae wait until I've tae spend nae more time in yer company."

Taveon took the horses reins and led them up the path toward to track they'd been following. She trailed in their wake.

It was now almost dark and, as they regained the track, she made out the glow of a campfire in the woods not all that far

away. Her belly lurched. *Someone was there.* Someone who might come to her rescue her and help her to get back home.

It was her one chance to escape.

While Taveon's attention was momentarily distracted by the horses, she called to him "I need tae relieve myself. I'll go intae the woods." This would buy her time enough to make good with her escape before he came looking for her.

"Aye, lass," he said absently, tightening the saddle girth without looking up. "It's nae like ye have anywhere tae escape if I have the steeds."

She crossed the main track and entered the woods. The instant she was out of Taveon's sight, she scooped up her skirts above her knees in one hand and darted into the thicket of trees, heading towards the glow of firelight as fast as her legs could carry her.

"Hannah." She heard Taveon's distant voice. "Dinna venture too far from me, lass. It's nae safe. Ye may come tae harm."

Deaf to his words of warning, she flung herself headlong through the trees and bushes in the direction of the firelight.

It was minutes before she heard him calling her name again, followed some moments later by the faint sounds of his footsteps crackling through the woods behind her. She had a good lead, and if she could only keep running ahead as she was, her chances of escape were good.

Somehow, she found more speed, lifting her pace in a mad flight toward the distant murmuring of voices and the plume of smoke rising into the air.

As the small clearing finally came into view beyond the trees, she could just make out a group of coarse-looking men seated on the ground before a campfire. She screamed for someone, anyone, to come to her aid. Alas, she'd misjudged the distance. They were further away than she'd calculated and her voice was lost among the trees, the men paying her not a sliver of attention.

Her foot caught on a protruding rock, tripping her, making her stumble, and she went down on one knee with a crack. Scrambling hastily to her feet the sound of Taveon growing closer drove her onward, her dress catching on sharp twigs as she ran, tearing her skirt. She pulled free, leaving a square of silk attached to the low hanging branch.

Taveon was still a way off, and she kept going, despite the pain in her knee, hobbling, desperate to get close enough to the fire for the men to be able to hear her cries. She was certain that once she told them she'd escaped from a kidnapper and that he was now in close pursuit, they would rush to her aid.

She'd be safe. She'd promise the men a reward for her return to Castle Ardtun and they'd take her home without delay. Her side was aching and she could scarcely draw breath by the time she finally broke out of the woods into the clearing. Despite the lack of air in her lungs she was able to scream out the word "Help."

Bending double, she staggered forward clutching her sides, gasping air into her searing lungs. She was hardly aware of the men jumping up from the fire and running toward her. A rush

of jubilation swept through her as the first of the men reached her and hoisted her into his arms.

Laughing, he called to his companions. “A beautiful young lass.”

The other men gathered around as the first man carried Hannah back to the campfire, one of them offering her a drinking gourd filled with ale.

“Ye’re a bonny lass,” the man said, holding the vessel to her lips, while she drank greedily.

“Thank heavens I’ve found ye,” she said gratefully.

The man laughed, his hand shooting under her skirt. “Aye lass. Ye’ve something that we’ll all have fun with.”

She squirmed. “What? Nay, stop that,” she yelled, feeling his calloused hands on her bare thighs. “Take yer hand away, nay! Please!”

He guffawed, pulling up her skirt. “Nae lass. Ye’ll do for us, now that ye’ve stumbled intae our camp. We’ve nae had fun with a woman for weeks. And ye’re a juicy one.”

One of the others pawed at her top, roughly pulling her dress down from her shoulders.



The man carrying her flung her roughly to the ground at their feet, where she lay, momentarily stunned. What she felt now was a far worse terror than she'd experienced only hours before in her garden at the castle, when Taveon had seized her.

The men were burly ruffians, their big hands all over her body, one hauling up her skirts, another ripping her already-torn dress, exposing her breasts. Harsh fingers pinched a nipple between finger and thumb. It was nothing like Taveon. Yes, he did kidnap her but he was not so rude or hadn't scared her for even a minute once he had revealed himself. She didn't know if it was because of his orders or because of the kind of man he was, but he wouldn't hurt her in any way. Yet, these men...

She frantically clutched her tattered dress around herself and kicked out with all her might, trying to dislodge the hands that were grabbing her legs.

The sound of their rough laughter was her worst nightmare.

"I'll have her first," said the man who had picked her up at the edge of the clearing, already untying the strings of his britches.

She struggled into a sitting position. "Nay, nay," she shrieked in horror, batting away a pair of encroaching hands. "Take yer hands off me. I'll have aught tae dae with ye."

"Hold her down lads," the man bellowed. "I like me lassies tae keep still while I'm rogering them"

Strong and able as she was, Hannah was no match for the four burly brigands, and within moments two of them had grabbed

her knees and spread her legs, holding her tight while the third man grasped her arms and held them above her head.

At last able to gasp in enough air, Hanna filled her lungs and screamed loud and long with everything she had, praying that Taveon would be able to find her.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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Jaevon had watched Hannah walking away, his heart torn at the sight of her slender figure disappearing among the trees. His instinct was to accompany her, to keep her under his surveillance where she couldn't escape, but he couldn't find it in himself to deny her the requested moment of privacy without being under his watchful gaze.

The moments they'd spent in the loch had taken him back to the time before his father's murder, when he and his brother had had few cares. His moments with Hannah had been bittersweet, taking him back to a happier time that was lost to him forever. His body had reacted to Hannah's naked beauty in a way that he'd also believed was lost to him.

Now, with the blood still hammering in his veins, he couldn't tear his mind away from his need to hold her again, to gaze upon her beauty and be close enough to her to feel the warmth of her breath and the touch of her hair on his cheek.

He scrubbed his hand through his hair and looked at it in dismay. It was stained brown. Had he, without thinking, washed the walnut-dye from his hair? Dammit. Much as he despised his disguise, until he was well clear of Castle Ardtun, his fair hair could lead to him being recognised. He frowned, irritated by his own thoughtlessness.

They must make every effort to be on the road without further delay.

Minutes had slipped by since Hannah had left him, and he began to sense something was not right. She'd been gone for too long. Hell. He groaned. Surely, she wasn't attempting to escape in the middle of nowhere without a horse? He quickly slipped the horses' reins over a small branch, and took off, jogging in the direction she'd taken. Hurrying through the dense forest he cast around for a glimpse of her.

*Where in hell had she disappeared to?*

He paused, listening for the crunch of footsteps. It was then that he saw the distant plume of smoke rising above the forest. Seconds later he caught the faint sound of her shrieks.

*God's bones!*

His heart leaped as the realization of danger dawned on him. She must have blundered on a party of brigands, the lawless ruffians with nothing but mayhem on their minds who camped in the forest, waiting for unwary travellers to ambush and rob.

Heart thumping, he took off, racing in the direction of Hannah's screams. He offered a silent prayer that he'd be in time to save her from harm.

As the trees thinned out, he saw he was approaching a clearing, but the sounds falling on his ears froze his blood.

Alongside Hannah's terrified screams he heard the sound of men's loud voices and cruel laughter.

He drew his sword from its scabbard and crept forward.

A horrifying scene met his eyes. In the centre of the clearing, close to a blazing campfire, he saw Hannah being roughly manhandled by a group of four cutthroats. Their laughter enraged him, their blatant amusement at her terrified cries of distress filling him with a murderous rage.

He flung himself out of the woods, quickly sizing up the situation. The men were simple brutes who would kill without a thought, but despite their number they would be no match for the skills of a trained warrior. The sight of them abusing Hannah, violating her with their rough hands, brought a red mist down over his eyes. He felt the rising tide of rage washing over him.

*They deserve tae die.*

Brandishing his sword he tore across the clearing, descending with a roar on the man who was preparing to ravish Hannah MacKinnon.

At the sound of Taveon's wild roar, the man turned to face him, and pulling a long dirk from his boot, he raised his arm, his brutish features twisted in a snarl. But Taveon granted him no more time on this earth. He raised the sword and the man's life ended before he had time to bring down his blade, or utter so much as a scream.

One of the men who'd been kneeling, laughing as he grasped Hannah's knee, ducked to his feet, knife in hand, charging at Taveon even as his comrade dropped lifeless at his feet.

Taveon turned, lightning fast, and landed a savage kick with a sickening thud under the man's chin throwing the man's head back. Grunting, half stunned, the brigand dropped his knife, rolling backwards. He landed in the campfire, screaming as the scorching flames leapt onto his clothing. In seconds, his clothes and hair were alight and burning fiercely as he fought to put out the blaze.

"Get behind me," Taveon gritted, as a stricken Hannah struggled to her feet, grappling with one of the men who was attempting to use her as a shield against Taveon's force.

With one move he ran his sword through the man's shoulder. The man screamed in pain, the hand that was gripping Hannah slipped away and he dropped to the ground, moaning, blood spurting from his shoulder.

Taveon swept his arm around Hannah's waist, positioning her at his back as he turned to face the remaining man.

The man took one look at the bold warrior confronting him and yelled for mercy.

He went down on one knee. "Nay, nay, dinna kill me, master," he begged, holding out hands steepled in prayer.

Taveon took a contemptuous look at the terror in the man's eyes, his trembling chin. "Get out of me sight," he snarled.

The man turned in a flash and began running without looking back.

“I’ll nae waste me time on such a craven coward,” he said, turning to Hannah who still clung to him, tears tumbling down her cheeks.

He steadied his breathing, all his attention now on Hannah. Holding her close he soothed her, stroking her hair. “Ye’re safe with me now lass,” he said, his conscience biting him hard as he held her trembling body against him. “Dinna be afeared. I’ll nae let harm come tae ye.”

But it was *his* fault she’d ended up in this situation. If he hadn’t kidnapped her in the first place she would never have been in the forest, nor would she have needed to approach the men’s camp seeking help.

He sighed, deeply troubled, fearing she was neither altogether safe with his plan to deliver her to de Coughran. He consoled himself, recalling John Sykes’s promise that she’d not be harmed but would rather be returned to her brother as soon as the ransom was paid. Although it was difficult to trust his enemy, he *was* prepared to believe this. Villains though they were, they had nothing to gain by harming Hannah.

Stepping over the prone body of the man he had killed, now laying in a pool of his own blood where he’d fallen, Taveon scooped a sobbing Hannah into his arms pressing on through the forest until they reached the place where he’d left the tethered horses.

“I should have warned ye lass.” He said, tenderly placing her on her feet to stand beside the horse. “These woods are well-kent as being a dangerous place. The brigands lie in wait for passing travellers, ambushing them, robbing them and more often than nae injuring or even leaving them for dead.”

She leaned into him; her eyes downcast. “I tried tae escape. I didnae heed yer warning.”

He clasped her to him, drying her tears. “I’ll nae blame ye for trying tae escape, but from now on ye’ll ride on my horse, in front of me on the saddle, so I can keep ye safe. I have nae choice but tae do what I have tae dae and I cannae risk ye running off.”

Looking into his eyes, she shook her hair despairingly. “If ye had even a mite of concern for my wellbeing ye would take me back tae me home, Taveon.” When he didn’t respond to her pleading, she continued. “Ye could take me as far as the village without risking capture yeself. I’ll be safe there. I ken the villagers. They are good people who would keep me safe and escort me back tae the castle in the morn’.”

“Nay lass,” he muttered, his voice sharp with regret. “I cannae dae what ye ask. My mission is nae my own. I’ve others’ lives depending on me. I understand how much ye want tae be back in yer home, but yer fate is with me now.”

He took the reins of the other horse, tying them to his saddle. After rummaging through his saddle bag, he withdrew a roughly woven cloak which he wrapped around her shoulders, then he offered his flagon of water and she drank before passing it back to him. He took her hand and helped her up.



“I cannae let ye out me my sight,” he said, although a small part of him that he was loath to acknowledge, relished the thought of her body pressed against his as they rode through the night.

He put his foot in the stirrup and rose into the saddle holding tight to now her rigid form, sensing that whatever sweetness there’d been between them and however grateful she might be for him coming to rescue her from the brigands, she still believed him to be her enemy.

They rode through the night, putting miles between them and Castle Ardtun, exactly as Taveon intended. But he was aware that Hannah’s eyes kept closing and her skin was alarmingly cold. He feared the aftermath of the brigands’ ferocious assault on her may have taken too great a toll.

His heart went out to her. Despite her unwavering defiance and her fervent struggles against him, in the end she was but a lass, and no match for his superior male strength. The final straw was the cruel assault inflicted on her by the brigands. Although she had no visible injuries, save for a surfeit of bruises that would mark her fair skin for days to come, he knew the terror she had endured and the violent assault had inflicted a serious blow to her spirits.

He cradled her in his arms as she dozed and wakened with a jolt only minutes later.

He brought the horses to a halt. Hannah lifted her head and looked around blearily. “Where are we? This isnae the sea. There’s nae boat waiting tae take us tae the mainland.”

“Nay lass. But it’s time we rested. Ye’ve been shaken and bruised, and ye need a peaceful sleep for a few hours before we travel further.”

She looked up at him, her eyes shining with gratitude. “Oh, thank God. I’m nae certain I could go on without taking some rest now.”

“It’s fine. We’ll bide here until first light. We’ve nae great distance tae ride before we reach the water and my man will wait for us there.”

“Dae we have far tae go, Macdonell? I’m nae certain I can bear a long day in the saddle tomorrow.”

He gave a faint laugh. “I understand. Once we cross tae the mainland it’s mayhap half a day’s ride. We’ll rest again if ye need tae.”

He gathered some bracken to make a warm cushion for her and she slumped down, leaning her back against the boulder, keeping her eyes on him as he built a small fire and lit it.

“I ken ye’re used tae being a fugitive,” she said. “Ye ken how tae live wild like this. But I’ve never spent a night away from a warm bed in me life.”

He shrugged. “Mayhap tomorrow night ye’ll sleep between soft sheets with a warming pan at yer feet and yer belly filled with fine feasting.” Unwrapping a small package, he offered her a piece of cheese. “Until then, ye’ll need tae make do with the food of simple folk such as meself”.

She looked him up and down. “I ken ye are nae simple folk, Macdonell. All the same, ye may keep yer cheese. I’m nae hungry.”

He put down the package and took out another parcel containing a circle of sausage. “Will ye nae try some of this sausage. It’s good. There’s a wee wifey in the village of Ardtun makes it. They say it’s the best in all Scotland.”

Putting out her hand she pushed the meat away. “Leave me be. I’ve said I’m nae hungry. Have ye nae ears on ye Macdonell?” She sounded irritated.

“Ye must eat, lass.”

Turning away, she pulled the cloak tighter, hunching her shoulders, pressing her lips together.

He scoffed at her feeble act of defiance. “Ye’re acting like a sulky wean who’s refusing her supper. Ye’ll nae be able tae keep going without food in yer belly.”

“I dinna care tae keep going. Ye’re taking me from me home. Why should I eat tae give me the strength tae keep goin’?”

“It will be me head that rolls if my prisoner is too weak tae travel, lass,” he said, half-joking.

Hannah shrugged. “Why should I care if ye lose yer head?”

Now, he laughed. “Why, indeed. But I’m afraid I shall have tae insist ye take some nourishment.”

She turned away again without another word, dismissing him with silence.

He reached an arm around her shoulders and turned her back to face him. “Nay, melady, ye’ll dae as I tell ye,” he said as he pulled his dirk from his belt and pressed it against her chin so that she could feel the sharp point of it. “Take the piece and place it in yer mouth. I’m trying tae be good tae ye Hannah, but I’m yer abductor and ye willnae behave like a spoiled brat with me.”

She gasped, raising a hand to pull his arm away but he tensed his muscles and her tugging made no more impact on him than an ant would on the boulder beside her.

“Now, Hannah MacKinnon, ye’ll partake of yer supper without another word.”

Glaring at him, she picked up the sausage and nibbled it. He kept his dirk close, waiting until both sausage and cheese had been consumed before he returned it to its sheath.

“Ye win, this time, Macdonell,” she said, but a tiny grin was quirking the edge of her lips. “Just wait. I’ll bide me time.”

Pleased that she’d finally eaten, he slanted her a cheeky grin. “Ah lass, once ye finally come tae learn the lesson that I’ll protect ye from harm, ye’re obedience tae me will grow.”

She huffed. "I'll nae obey ye. The only man I'll give my obedience tae will be my lawful husband." She looked up at him through her long-lashed green eyes, melting his fierce heart, robbing his breath. "And I'll nae be wed tae the likes of ye, Macdonell."

Something like regret stabbed him and he took a deep breath. He had no right to regret. No right to allow himself so much as a fanciful moment picturing Hannah MacKinnon in his arms. No right to imagine her sweet lips crushed beneath his mouth, his hands roaming her perfect body. No right at all to imagine her beside him like this for the rest of his days.

He was an outlaw. A traitor. Hateful to Hannah and all her clan. To all Scots in fact.

For all that, those forbidden images still came to him, whether he allowed space for them or not.

He ignored her comment, refusing to fall into her baited trap.

"It's time ye slept. We've few enough hours before morning." He injected ice into his tone. No way would she ever know how deeply her words had cut him.

Clenching his jaw, he leaned over her, retying the rope that still loosely bound them together. One end of the rope was fastened to his waist and he pulled in the slack. They would sleep close enough so that he'd feel her move if she made any attempt to escape.

As he fumbled with the knots, he was near enough to feel her warmth and inhale her delicate scent. His lips hovered over hers, and the temptation to claim her mouth was almost more than he could bear. She lifted her chin, bringing them closer.

She sighed and he felt her soft breath on his cheek and was lost.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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*H*annah closed her eyes. Taveon was so close, there was only a finger's breadth between them. If she leaned a tiny bit closer, those perfect lips of his would meet with hers. She inclined her head slightly and heard him suck in a startled breath.

She didn't pull away as their lips touched but instinctively opened her mouth slightly. She wanted the feel of his arms around her, holding her tight, just as he'd done when they rode on the horse together.

If he'd only deepen the kiss...

Instead, he groaned softly and pulled away.

Oh, dear saints in heaven, what had she been thinking? Had she given him the idea she'd *wanted* him to kiss her? Of course not. That could never be. This was the man she'd been hating ever since she had heard Blaine was holding a traitor prisoner in the Castle Ardtun dungeon. He had *abducted* her. Yet, he had also saved her from the men who almost took her against her will. *God's teeth!*

In a fluster, she gave a tiny whimper, jolting her head away. “How dare ye!” she wailed, landing a slap on his cheek.

He reeled back, holding his cheek with his hand, a surprised expression in his green eyes. Immediately she regretted what she’d done, but it was too late. He pulled away from her, his eyes narrowed.

She was horrified by the awareness that she’d wanted his kiss. In fact, if she was honest with herself, she couldn’t wait to taste him and feel his lips on hers. But how could she be so stupid? This was Taveon Macdonell, not one of the tame suitors her brother had trotted out for her to assess as if they were prize cattle.

She’d seen him kill a man with scarcely a thought. The memory of what had occurred in the clearing this afternoon made her shudder. He was dangerous. He was her captor, and she had no idea where he was taking her. She was completely in his power.

“Apologies melady,” he muttered. “I forgot meself for an instant. Yer beauty overcame me, catching me off guard. I promise ye I’ll nae let such a grave error occur again.”

He flung a blanket over her and threw himself down on the bracken, his back turned toward her. “It’s time for us tae sleep.”

Lying beside him her head buzzed with all that had happened. Although her limbs were aching with tiredness, her swirling thoughts kept sleep at bay.



*He'd called her beautiful. He had wanted to kiss her, just as she'd wanted him.*

After a while, Taveon's breathing grew slow and even, and he slept. He shifted briefly without waking, turning his face toward her, lit by a shaft of moonlight streaming between the trees where they were camped. She gazed at him, marveling at the planes of his broad forehead, the long lashes revealed by his closed eyelids, the perfectly sculpted cheek bones, the strong, chiseled, outline of his jaw and the perfectly formed lips that had so nearly claimed hers.

It was strange the way she'd come to imagine the prisoner she'd heard the men discussing over the months he'd been incarcerated at the castle. To her mind, such a man, a traitor, could be no more than half-human. She'd pictured a huge ogre-ish creature, with swollen, twisted features, his skin pock-marked, his hair like hay, his teeth rotten. And stinking to high heaven. He wouldn't speak, merely grunt and slobber, incapable of making any sense.

But the real flesh-and-blood Taveon was nothing like she'd pictured. He was as tall and as broad as her brother Errol, his fine hair just touching his shoulders in such a way that tempted her fingers to feel its silkiness and tousle it playfully. His rare smiles displayed white even teeth, and she could gaze forever into his sea-green eyes.

And despite kidnapping her and making her his prisoner, he hadn't hesitated to risk his life by coming to her rescue. He'd treated her with kindness. She hugged the blanket he'd spread across her, leaving himself without a warm covering.

She shook herself, scrunching her eyes shut. There was no point in admiring him. He was Taveon Macdonell, the last

man on earth that Blaine or the clan chiefs would ever approve of as a suitor for her hand.



It seemed as if no time had passed but, when she opened her eyes, she saw the sun was well on its way across the sky and Taveon was shaking her awake.

“We cannae bide here any longer lass, we must reach Lochnell Castle before dusk this night.”

*Lochnell Castle.* So, that was their destination. She recalled this was the seat of the powerful Clan Cochran and the home of their Laird, Sir William de Coughran. If she remembered right, he was a well-known English sympathizer, and that made him an enemy of the MacKinnons.

*Was it Sir William who was commanding Taveon?*

With a stern warning that she was not to wander or delay, he untied the rope from her waist and she took a few quiet moments out of sight in the forest, to relieve herself. When she returned, Taveon was kicking dirt onto the last embers of the fire that had warmed them through the night. Without any argument, she accepted the cheese and oatcakes he insisted she eat, and took a draught of water from the flask he offered. Wetting her kerchief, she cleaned her face and wiped the sleep from her eyes.

Taveon said little. There was nothing of the sweet camaraderie they'd shared last night and she guessed he regretted their almost-kiss as much as she did. Save for occasionally issuing a

brief instruction, he maintained a cool distance as she helped bundle their things into the saddle bags.

Once they were ready to depart, he gently assisted her onto his horse, to sit sideways in the saddle while he mounted behind her. They took off, riding at a steady pace on a picturesque track in view of the sea. She smiled to herself at the way he'd treated her. As if he was afraid she could harm herself just by climbing onto the horse.

Because she'd lost her parents when she was but a child and had been raised by two fearless older brothers, she could ride astride Blaine's fastest horses without a care. Many a time, when she was younger, she'd galloped through the Ardtun forest, joining with them to hunt through the mighty Glen. But today she thought it prudent to maintain the pretense she was a maid who could only perch uneasily aside a horse for the sake of propriety.

Despite all her resolve, however, being held so close as the horse jogged on its way, lulled her again into strange longings and a restless need to succumb to the warmth of his body and his strong arms. She straightened and, with a sigh, felt him do the same. The intimacy building between them was instantly severed.

"We've nay distance between us and the coast, lass." He gave a short laugh. "I didnae think tae ask if ye can swim?"

She huffed. "Why, are ye saying ye'll be asking me tae swim all the way across tae Oban?"

“Mayhap. It’s nae unknown for the sails on a cog tae tip its passengers intae the water and make them swim for the shore.”

“Is that how ye managed tae escape from Ardtun? Did ye swim tae safety?”

“Nay. A kindly fisherman took me first across tae Ulva, and I made me way from there, while yer brother’s men were searching in the opposite direction.”

Hannah grew thoughtful, her mind picturing the months Taveon had spent as a fugitive.

“It’s a marvel that ye made yer way back tae Castle Ardtun again. Were ye nae afear’d of me brother’s men? There’s still a watch being kept for ye.”

“The very last place I wanted tae travel tae. But, needs must.”

“Ye said it wasnae money that ye’re seeking, Macdonell? What brought ye tae risk yer neck tae kidnap me? Was yer hatred of the MacKinnons so great?”

Her question was greeted with silence and she glanced at him, her gaze roaming over his features as she tried to glean some understanding of who he was behind this cold exterior. She’d seen enough to know there was more to him.

His eyes were fixed ahead, but she detected a tic in his jaw that made her think the question had struck a nerve. This made her all the more curious. Whatever had driven him to make

such a desperate move? Even though she'd been in his company for less than a day, his manners and his gentle treatment of her were at odds with the picture of the cruel-hearted, ruthless traitor she'd believed him to be.

Within moments the path opened out and in front of them was a small, sandy cove where a cog was bobbing at anchor, close to the shore. Two men who'd been huddled over a small fire in the sand rose to their feet as Taveon and Hannah appeared through the trees.

"Whoa," Taveon pulled the horses to a halt and the men came forward to greet him. One man took the reins while Taveon untied his bags from the saddle. He held out his hand to assist Hannah as she alighted.

"Ye took yer time Macdonell," said the other man, a craggy fellow, wearing the rough-hewn garb of a fisherman, "We were about tae give ye up as lost."

"We met some trouble on the way that caused a delay." Taveon muttered by way of explanation and the man grunted an acknowledgement.

The man turned to Hannah and gave a slight bow. "Davie Curran at yer service melady. It's me wee boat that will take ye across tae the mainland."

She glanced at Taveon who was busy with the other man at the horse. "Do ye ken who I am?" she asked. Perhaps if this man understood her plight, he'd refuse to take her against her will.

Davie nodded. "Aye lass. I ken ye're the laird's sister."

Her heart sank. He knew who she was but he clearly had no remorse or hesitation in providing aid to Taveon. "Are ye nae afeared of helping the man who's taking me from me home?"

"Sure, lass. I'm afeared of the laird, but I'm more afeared of de Coughran's men and the English. Yer brother is kent as a fair man, but there's nae hope for any man who crosses de Coughran."

Observing the man's bleak expression, she nodded reluctantly. "I understand ye cannae help me." She lowered her voice. "If me brothers should come searching for me, will ye let them ken I'm bound for Lochnell Castle?"

"Aye lass, that I will," he muttered giving her a nod, as Taveon approached.

Davie hitched up his trousers. "If ye like, I'll carry the lass out tae the cog."

Taveon laughed. "Nae, thank ye for the offer, but I'll take melady." Taveon handed the bulging leather bags to Davie and turned to her.

"Ye'd best keep yer skirts high lass if ye dinna wish tae be drenched." He paused for a moment, giving her time to hitch up her bedraggled skirt and petticoat and wind the cloak about her shoulders. Then he hoisted her in his arms as if she weighed nae more than a bird.

He splashed through the waves for the few yards out to the boat, holding her above the water. Registering the strength of his arms, a tiny thrill rippled through her. He passed her over the bow to David who helped her to her feet and settled her on the plank that served as a seat, while Taveon hauled himself on board.

Although the sun was still shining in a blue sky, there was a stiff breeze coming across the water, whipping up waves, bringing with it a faintly fishy, salty tang. Gulls wheeled noisily overhead until they were well clear of the shore. Hannah shivered and wrapped herself tighter in the cloak, wishing with all her heart that she could change her human form into that of a seagull and fly back to Ardtun, never to face up to whatever lay in store for her once they reached Castle Lochnell.

But the sails of the little craft caught the breeze and, under Davie's skilled hands, they skimmed over the waves with a speed that took Hannah's breath away. Before long, he was guiding them into another hidden cove, this one on the mainland, where a party of a dozen or so men and horses were waiting.

Hannah gasped. The men were warriors. Wearing hauberks, they were all well-armed, some carrying war-axes along with their swords, "Who are those men? Surely they mean us harm."

Taveon placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Nae, Hannah. Nae harm will come tae us from those men. They are Sir William de Coughran's men come tae escort us safely tae Castle Lochnell."

Hannah snorted in disgust. “I dinna trust them, they are my enemies, supporters of the English.” She widened her eyes, “Why, many may, themselves, be the cursed English.”

She clung to his arm as Davie brought the cog into the shallows and when Taveon took her in his arms and carried her ashore she didn't protest.

One of the men rode forward, leading two horses, one horse clearly meant for her as it bore a saddle that would enable her to sit with both her legs to the side. After Taveon helped her up, he took hold of the reins of her horse and mounted his own steed. Although she was no longer seated on the saddle in front of Taveon, she had no control of the horse she rode, and could only follow helplessly where he led.

Curling her small hands into fists, she kept her murderous thoughts to herself. If only she had a sword and a horse, she could break free of these strangers.

After stopping briefly for the men to relieve themselves and to partake of a small meal, washed down by a flask of ale, they were on their way again.

“It's nae distance from here tae Lochnell.” Taveon told her. “There ye'll be well looked after. Sir William's men swore tae me that nae harm would come tae ye. Once yer brother pays the ransom, ye'll be swiftly returned tae Ardtun.”

Was that a wistful note she heard in Taveon's voice. Did he think of her with kindness after all?



She looked up, her heart sinking at the sight of the vast castle in the distance.

What did it matter if he cared or not?

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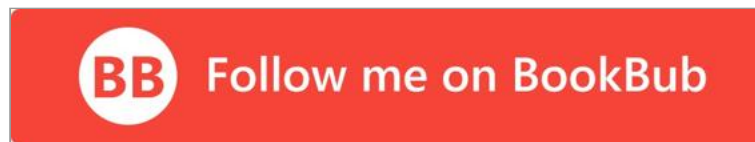
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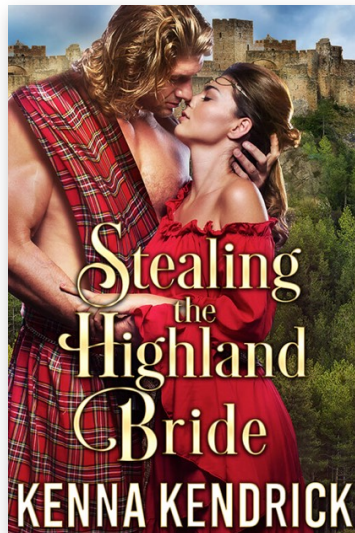
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Kenna Kendrick is an American based author of Historical Scottish Romance living in Austin Texas with her husband and three children. Her more than 25-year-old experience as an English Teacher has brought her close to the literary world, growing her love for fictional stories.

Her love for literature was also strong because of her father John who used to write crime-stories. While she tried following on her father's footsteps, a trip to Scotland sealed the deal for as she fell in love with the Celtic myths and the bleak Highlands.



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