

KILTY  PLEASURES

KILTY

BY

Association

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USA TODAY
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LEE

KILTY BY ASSOCIATION



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ABOUT THIS BOOK

He's the only man she can trust...but should she?

Craig Oliphant is known for his brawn, not his brains, but he is proud of who he is and what he's accomplished. Leaving his years working the smithy behind, he's finally passed the tests to become a trusted member of the King's Hunters and assigned a mission which can bring him cartloads of glory.

Or drive him mad—one of the two.

Lady Elspeth Sinclair is in dire need of a bodyguard: not for her, but for her children. Her husband's death left her nine-year-old son not just the next Laird Sinclair, but also the Earl of Dungotit...and someone wants him dead. The huge Hunter assigned to her family might be able to keep them safe, but no one warned her that after years of horror in the marriage bed, Craig might be the one to rekindle surprising feelings. But should a widow engage in such goings-on with her bodyguard, especially since they come from such different worlds?

Obviously.

Warning: *So many shenanigans!* Get ready for some super-hot, laugh-out-loud adventures in this third addition to the *Kilty Pleasures* series!

PROLOGUE



THE TAVERN SMELLED of piss and ale, and Craig Oliphant couldn't decide which was worse.

Normally, he was quite fond of ale, but this stuff all tasted of piss. But on the other hand, the piss smelled of ale, so that likely evened things out. Did the tavern keeper do it on purpose? To confuse drunken customers?

Ye're doing it again, getting distracted by stupid shite.

Aye, well, he was good at that.

Scowling, Craig shifted so that one of his elbows was atop the sticky table and his back rested against the wall behind him. He cupped a flagon in his hand and made a show of drinking from it, although it took effort to keep his nose from wrinkling.

If he had to wait much longer, he was going to finish the damned thing and have to order another, and *then* he'd have to piss and risk missing his quarry.

Dinnae fash over stupid things. Drummond said that to him all the time.

And Drum was counting on him tonight.

'Twas said that Barthold the Bald favored this tavern, and Craig was determined to meet the bandit.

He'd done everything right:

Spread enough coin, along with the rumor he was looking for a new band of cutthroats to join.

Picked a few fights in public places with the toughest of Scone's mercenaries.

Even left his sword back in his rooms tonight so Barthold would focus on his height and breadth and hopefully see the advantages of hiring Craig.

"Ye'll have to pretend to be stupid, lad," Drum had instructed when they'd brainstormed this trap. "Barthold recognized me the last time he slipped through my net, so it has to be ye. To get him to trust ye, he cannae be suspicious ye're aught more than a bunch of muscles."

Aye, well...Craig was good at being stupid.

Back home, back before he'd become a King's Hunter and settled into life here, making Scotland a safer place, the Oliphants had teased him for his size and lack of brains. It wasn't his fault he'd been born twice the size of anyone else!

But tonight, it would be useful.

Three months of planning, and tonight was the night he'd finally meet with Barthold and set the trap to catch the wicked villain!

When the bastard *did* appear, all Craig had to do was entice him to attack a certain caravan at a certain point—and Drum and the other Hunters would be waiting.

Aye, this would go perfectly...assuming Craig didn't do anything as dumb as start *thinking*.

The door to the tavern stood open, the spring air making a vain attempt to clear out the smells of unwashed bodies, piss and—*Aye, ye've been through this already, remember?* Every time a figure stepped inside, Craig studied him from the corner of his eyes, wondering if this was the man he was supposed to meet.

But now, a *woman* slipped through the opening, and Craig wasn't the only one in the tavern who eyed her admiringly. She was slender, with a dark cloak drawn around her head and shoulders, hiding her features. She clutched it closed in front of her, but when she moved, he caught a glimpse of silk—the color of the sunset.

Not the gown of a tavern wench, then.

Despite his intent to watch for Barthold, Craig found his attention slipping back to the mystery lady. A smart man like Drummond would likely be able to ignore her, but Craig had never had that problem.

The lady hovered just inside the door to the tavern, clutching her cloak, looking out of place but...determined somehow. Mayhap 'twas the tilt of her chin – all he could see of her when her gaze swept the room.

She was likely here for an assignation. Away from the prying eyes of her family or husband, wanting to mix with the scum of the city. Or mayhap she was looking for one lowlife in particular?

Craig wasn't the only one watching her, and at that realization, something unfamiliar shot down his spine. It was a surge of anger, of protectiveness he'd only ever felt around his friends and cousins. Not that someone he cared about was in danger, exactly, but more like the reminder he didn't want any trouble to come to them.

Why would he react that way about this woman?

Best not think too hard on it, ye might strain something.

Aye, the woman would find who she was looking for and go about her business, and he could get back to waiting for Barthold. It wouldn't do to become distracted by her, after all.

Aye, 'twas a good plan, a decent plan.

And it might've worked.

Had the mystery lady not floated across the tavern and stopped in front of his table.

Craig couldn't help but tip his head back to gape up at her. She had delicate features which matched her build, wideset eyes the same dark brown as her hair, perfectly arched brows, and a pert little nose.

But it was her mouth which held his attention.

God's Blood, her *mouth!*

It was wide, the lips full, and Craig felt himself stir beneath his kilt at the thought of *tasting* that mouth. At the thought of what that mouth could do.

Fook.

Barthold the Bald could sneak up and cut his throat right now and he wouldn't notice.

Aye, ye might. What with all the blood?

Nay. Nay, he wouldn't notice.

Because all he was noticing right now was this woman. And her lips.

Which parted slightly, widening into a hesitant smile.

“Ye are called Craig?”

She'd come here looking for *him*?

When he'd spread the word of his prowess, hoping to draw the attention of Barthold and his bandits, Craig hadn't used his clan name, but merely “*Craig*”. Drum had said it would be for the best, so he couldn't get confused or forgetful.

Is that where the lady had heard of him?

She was still staring down at him, her fingertips now resting on the tabletop, leaning forward slightly.

As if his answer mattered.

So, he nodded, once, quickly.

She exhaled, those lips widening. “I need ye.”

CHAPTER 1



THE MAN—THE criminal?—looked vaguely shocked as Elspeth exhaled and lowered herself to the stool across from him.

Vaguely? Nay, more like *entirely shocked*. *Utterly surprised*.

His flabbers were aghast, so to speak.

“Look, milady—”

“I’m nae lady,” she was quick to assure him. “What makes ye think I’m a lady? I’m no’.” She was wearing one of her maid’s gowns, after all.

The giant across the table didn’t seem convinced. “Och, well, lady or no’, ye cannae be here.”

“I cannae?” Elspeth looked around, pretending surprise. “’Tis a public tavern, aye? Mayhap I was in the mood for some ale.”

The man slid the mug across the table. “Take mine. Tastes of piss. Just leave.”

Hospitable, these bandits were, aye?

Cautiously, Elspeth wrapped her hands around the mug and lifted, not caring that the movement pushed the cloak from her shoulders, but careful to keep her face hidden from the rest of the tavern.

She sipped and her nose wrinkled. “There *are* strong flavors of—what is that? Ammonia?”

“’Tis piss,” the giant repeated bluntly, still watching her.

“Nay, I think the brew wife was going for...notes of oak, mayhap, but the honey’s gone sour.”

“’Tis impossible for honey to sour,” he shot back. “But there’s a hint of elderberry, aye? Faint notes of privilege and pretention?”

Elsbeth was on a serious mission, and possibly a dangerous one too. Which is why it was entirely inappropriate to burst into laughter at the stranger’s dry commentary.

But she did anyway and tried not to notice the way his gaze settled on her mouth.

He was large—Brigit would say *too* large—but he had a surprisingly gentle face. An *open* face, which was an odd thing to say about a bandit.

He looked like the type of man who smiled easily, and Elspeth had always had a weakness for laughing men. This Craig—this criminal she’d come to hire—had red hair which bordered on orange, a sprinkling of dots across his nose, and a jaw hidden by a thick beard several shades darker than the hair on his head.

He wore a shirt of rough homespun, and his kilt was so dirty she couldn’t tell the colors. When he spoke, his teeth—even and straight—flashed, and she had to admit she’d been watching *his* mouth too.

This man is a bandit. A dangerous man. That is why ye’ve sought him out. Ye cannae be attracted to him!

Even now, she could hear Brigit’s haranguing in her mind. But her maid had firm ideas about Right and Wrong, and Elspeth had been trying so hard to follow that Right path since she’d come to Scone with the children.

Perhaps, just once, it would be fun to be Wrong.

What? Nay! Ye’re here because ye need a man who can fight, who can kill. That is no’ the kind of man—bandit—ye think about kissing!

Och, aye? Then why was there a strange throbbing between her thighs? One she would’ve thought birthing

children had put a stop to?

She took a deep breath and lowered the offending ale.

“I am Elspeth,” she announced. “And I need yer help, Craig.”

Did he growl as he reached across the table to tug the mug from her grasp? It was hard to say, because his eyes hadn’t left hers.

“How do ye ken my name?”

“When I came to Scone from the Highlands, I was assigned a maid by His Maj—” She bit down on her words, realizing they’d do naught to convince this bandit she wasn’t a lady. On the other hand, if he took the position she offered, he’d discover her identity soon enough.

On the *other* other hand, if he truly was as terrible a bandit as Brigit thought, then what was stopping him from demanding ransom for *her*, if he found out who she was before he accepted the job?

She swallowed and forced a carefree smile. “I *mean*, I have a friend, Brigit, who is quite skilled at finding out information. I described the kind of man I wanted to hire for a particular job, and she spent a sennight following rumors. Apparently ye’ve recently arrived in town and have made a name for yerself as the strongest fighter, deadly with yer hands.”

She’d added that last bit as an attempt at flattery, really. She’d expected the man to preen at the compliment.

Instead, he just watched her. Did he seem a bit...wary? Or was that confusion?

“Ye want...to hire me, milady?”

“No’ a lady, remember?” she blurted, then softened it with a smile, because he seemed to enjoy looking at her lips. “But aye, I need a bodyguard.”

Her words seemed to startle him, and he shook himself, then took a deep breath and raised the mug.

“Look elsewhere,” he barked. “I’ll no’ protect ye.”

The words sounded...false somehow. Elspeth cocked her head, studying him. “’Tis no’ for myself I ask, but for—” Again, she bit off the words. Brigit would warn her against announcing her nine-year-old son was the Earl of Dungotit. “For Robbie. I—I love him, and I worry.”

To her surprise, the man’s expression eased into a scowl. “And yer lover cannae hire his own bodyguard? What kind of man sends a *lass* to do his dirty work for him?”

“Nay, ye dinnae understand, he’s too young—”

“That’s no’ any better, milady. If ye think yer lover is too young to hire a guard—”

Oh, blessed virgin, she was going to have to explain a bit of the truth. “He’s my son!” she blurted. “Please. I need...to ensure he’s safe.”

“Oh.” The lines around Craig’s eyes slackened, and his eyes—a light brown—studied her. “How auld is the lad?” he finally asked.

For the first time, Elspeth allowed her gaze to drop to her hands, which were clasped on the table in front of her. Her fingers were uncalloused, a sign of her status—worthy only of being a wife and mother to an Earl. But she would claw those fingers to the bone if that’s what it took to protect Robbie.

“He is nine,” she whispered. “And he’s verra precious. To me.”

And to the Sinclairs. Her uncle was the current laird, but Robbie would be the next Laird Sinclair, assuming he lived to adulthood.

The thought he might not had made her physically ill more than once.

The lassies—Katharine and Mary—could not become heirs, not for the Sinclairs or the Earldom of Dungotit. And John had been fond of pointing out Elspeth’s failure to bear another live son, despite several additional pregnancies.

Aye, Robbie was precious, but not just because of his role. He was precious because of who he *was*, and if the guards at Scone couldn't keep him safe, she'd hire a criminal to do so.

After all, surely bandits understood one another?

“So, *No'-Lady* Elspeth, ye've found yer way into one of the most dangerous taverns in the city in order to hire a bodyguard for yer son, and ye've chosen me because yer friend says I'm the best? I've never guarded a lad afore.”

“Nay, I imagine ye havenae.” She forced herself to meet his gaze again. “But his life is in danger, and I need someone who is strong enough to protect him.” Her voice had dropped to a whisper, and she hated how it wavered.

Hated how weak she sounded.

For a moment, she thought he would agree. His eyes were full of pity, his lips parted. She was *certain* he would ask for more details, agree to her price.

But then he blinked and looked away, his expression hardening once more. His gaze locked on something across the room, and he shifted on his bench.

“Look somewhere else, lass,” he growled. “I'm no' looking for a job as a bodyguard.”

“But ye *are* looking for a job?” she blurted, then winced at the artlessness of the statement. “I mean, Brigit learned ye were hoping to be hired—”

“By a bandit leader, no' by a lady.”

At this point, it was likely foolish to keep pretending she wasn't a lady.

“I'll pay you better than he would!”

Another wince. Brigit would chide her for announcing something like that so loudly in such a place. But then, her maid had always seemed more worldly than Elspeth. Perhaps it had something to do with living in Scone all her life?

But to her surprise, Craig wasn't swayed by the offer. He didn't even *glance* at her. His jaw tightened, and his gaze

swept the tavern as if looking for danger.

“Dinnae say such things,” he finally growled. “Or I’ll end up having to protect *ye* instead of yer son. A lass isnae safe in a place like this.”

Oh.

Oh, *my*.

Elspeth’s fingers—still clasped—rose to her lips to smother her gasp. Of surprise, aye, but also of...*longing?*

How long had it been since a man offered to protect *her*? Cared enough to worry about *her*, instead of just what she could bring him?

Even her uncle, whom she loved, had used her as a bargaining chip to align the clan with a powerful Earldom.

But this stranger, this *bandit*, had suggested he’d protect her just because she was a lass. Because she was *her*.

Oh, for goodness’ sake, ye’re acting loopy. Ye only just met the man, and he looks like he subscribes to the annual-baths-are-good-for-ye-health method of hygiene. He’s a bandit. Stop going all gooey over a bandit!

The pep talk didn’t help the throbbing between her thighs.

Why was she responding to Craig this way? Was it possible she missed intercourse? It had been three years since she’d last lain with her husband; once she’d become pregnant again, he’d left her alone, and since his death and then Mary’s birth, she’d been uninterested in repeating the experience.

It wasn’t as if sex meant anything besides pain. Brigit liked to joke about the pleasures a man could bring a willing lass, but Elspeth’s experience had been something very different.

“Look, milady, I cannae take yer job because...” With a soft growl, Craig scrubbed his hand over his face, tugging at his beard even as his fingers tightened around the mug. “Fook, I’m bad at this subterfuge thing.”

Her smile was weak. “If it’s any consolation, so am I.” Slowly, Elspeth lowered her hands. “I much prefer to be

upfront and outright.”

“Aye, well...” He wasn’t looking at her. “I wish I could be. I’m no’ for hire.”

“No’ by me, or no’ by anyone?”

Pale eyes darted toward her—were they hazel?—and then away once more.

“No’ by ye.”

She sighed. This was getting her nowhere. Why was she still here debating with this man? Surely there were others in the tavern who would be amenable to working for her and guarding Robbie?

None of them approved by Brigit.

There was that.

So, she took a deep breath. “Ye’re unwilling to be hired by me because ye’re waiting to be hired by a bandit?”

His large hand released the mug and smacked against the table. She found her gaze drawn to his fingers—thick and callused, with a sprinkling of hair across the knuckles. His nails were neatly trimmed, though, at odds with the coarse clothing he wore.

“No’ just any bandit, lass. *Barthold the Bald.*” The way he announced the name made the man sound like some kind of wonder. “He’s the leader of the largest bandit band between here and the borders. He and his men have attacked two monasteries and are responsible for at least a dozen deaths.”

His eyes...there was something in his eyes. Not admiration, not fear, but...anger? Toward what?

Elsbeth shuddered. “He sounds horrible.”

“He is,” Craig growled.

“So why...” She swallowed, thinking of the pain and suffering such a man had caused. “Why do ye want to be hired by him?”

Craig's mouth opened but no sound emerged. Instead, he dropped his chin to his chest and flushed.

When a man as large as he, with hair that color, *flushed*... well, he stayed flushed.

She felt a smile tug at the corners of her lips. "Craig," she prompted, realizing how much she sounded as if she was trying to coax Robbie into confessing a sin. "Do ye admire this Barthold the Bald?"

"Nay, I—" He glanced up, looking around the tavern. "I mean *aye*, of course I do." Was it her imagination, or was he flustered? Adorably so? "Barthold is a legend!"

"One you admire?"

"Absolutely!" he declared, lifting his chin and meeting her gaze defiantly.

It was so patently a lie that she struggled to contain her chuckles.

Instead, she reached across the table and patted his hand, which was still spread beside the mug.

"I think ye're a good man, Craig."

He was correct; subterfuge was *not* one of his skills. Shock flicked across his face, which made her chuckles fight to emerge.

"I'm bad," he croaked.

Patting the back of his hand, Elspeth raised her brow in challenge. "Are ye?"

"Verra bad." He sounded as if he were strangling. "So bad."

"I dinnae believe ye," Elspeth announced with a smile. "I think ye might be quite good."

And in that moment, she realized something: she was having *fun*.

She was sitting in a hellhole of a tavern, likely in copious danger, bantering with a possibly-not-a-criminal, and was

enjoying herself. What would John have to say about that? What would Brigit?

Try to remember ye are a mother. Ye need to be a model for yer children.

Nay, that wasn't something her maid would say. It sounded more like something the Queen might say, although Elspeth didn't know Her Majesty well.

Mayhap 'twas her own mind, spouting advice? Aye, she *should* be a role model for her children. But did that mean no fun? No laughter?

Mayhap ye can have the fun without the personal danger next time?

Aye, she was definitely in danger of laughing, which was completely inappropriate at a moment like this.

"Oh *fook*," Craig muttered suddenly.

She gasped when he flipped her hand over, pinning it beneath his and twining her fingers through his. Elspeth looked up from their joined hands to see a panicked expression on his face.

"What—"

"I need ye," he hissed. "Get over here now."

The command was followed by a not-too-gentle tug on her hand, urging her around the table. Not understanding what was happening, Elspeth allowed herself to be pulled over to his bench.

"Craig, what are ye—"

"Pretend ye like me, lass," he murmured, low and intense, as he arranged her on the bench. Nay, not on the bench; when he was through, she was all-but-draped across his lap. He was turned so his back and shoulder faced the tavern, while she—curled around him—could see the room.

"Craig!" She kept her voice low, but firm, as she did when scolding Katharine. "What is going on?"

Instead of answering, he arranged her arms around his shoulders. To a casual observer, they might appear to be embracing, but his bulk held her against the wall and she noticed her arms and cloak hid most of his features.

Worried now, she scanned the tavern, and saw the newcomers. They wore the regalia of the palace guards, although 'twas impossible to tell if they were there on duty. Their gazes swept the room, and Craig wasn't the only one who was doing his best to hide his face from them.

Was he a wanted man, then? What other reason could there be for him trying so hard to not be recognized by the guards? Her heart was hammering against her ribs, and for the first time since stepping up to his table, Elspeth felt truly concerned.

“Craig?” she whispered, hating how wobbly her voice sounded.

His nose was only inches from hers, and she saw his eyes widen in understanding. His features softened, as did his hold on her.

“Och, lass, I am a sorry bastard, eh? I was thinking only of myself.” One hand remained on her hip, but the other rose to brush a stray hair away from her brow, tucking it beneath the cloak. “I’m the sort of arsehole ye need protecting from.”

His voice was so gentle, so at odds with his actions of a moment ago...

“’Tis my son who needs protecting.”

His gaze dropped to her lips. “Is he, now?” he murmured. “Are ye married, Elspeth?”

Swallowing, she tried to tamp down the shiver of *heat* which had caressed her spine at the way her name sounded on his lips. “N-nay. I’m widowed, almost two years now.”

His fingertips still rested against her jaw. “Two years is a long time,” he whispered huskily.

She couldn't seem to look away from those gentle hazel eyes. “Aye,” she admitted softly. “I’m beginning to think so.”

His gaze darted over his shoulder. “Oh, shite, they’re coming over here.”

Elsbeth began to turn, so she could confirm ‘twas the guards he was speaking of, but his hand slid from her jaw to the side of her neck, his fingers cupping the back of her head, and her gaze went right back to his.

“Lass,” he announced in a low, serious tone. “I need ye to kiss me.”

“Me?” she squeaked.

He leaned closer. “I’ll be kissing ye, but if ye wouldnae mind kissing me back, ‘twould be helpful. ‘Tis a matter of national security.”

National security? The surprised laughter bubbled up from her chest in the same moment he captured her lips with his, and the *freedom* she felt caused her to tighten her hold on Craig’s shoulders and pull herself closer.

Because, this kiss? This kiss was like nothing she’d experienced before.

Aye, it might have been subterfuge—turned out there *were* some parts he was good at!—but it felt more real than anything had in her life in a long while.

His beard tickled her skin, and his lips were rough—and soft all at once. They moved across hers gently, coaxing, playing, tugging. When his parted, she gasped, and he swallowed down the sound with a groan.

Then his teeth nipped at her lower lip, which startled her, causing her to jerk forward against him. Chuckling, he spread his large hand across her lower back, under the cloak, and held her steady as his tongue stroked her upper lip. Softly, gently... as if teaching her.

She was no stranger to kissing, but her husband had never touched her this carefully. Had never treated a kiss as anything other than a prelude to swift unpleasantness where her pleasure had been an afterthought. If considered at all.

In that moment, Elspeth knew that Craig *would* care about her pleasure. Would bring her pleasure she'd never imagined.

What are ye doing? Planning to go to bed with a criminal because he's a good kisser? Ye shouldnae be in his lap, much less tasting his lips!

But she was. Because of "national security."

The whole situation was so preposterous, so bizarre, she felt the laughter building in her chest again. This was nervous laughter, desperate laughter. Laughing because she didn't understand what was going on, and it was easier than crying.

With a gasp, she wrenched away from Craig.

'Twas difficult, because in that moment, she suspected she might happily spend the rest of her life in his arms. *A forever.*

And he was a *criminal*. Not suited to be a consort of the mother of the Earl of Dungotit. Not suited even to be her lover.

Nay, there's more to Craig.

Wait, hadn't her subconscious just been arguing against the man?

So what? I'm complex. Like an onion.

Onions were *not* complex.

They have layers.

Well, so did bogs.

Did ye just compare yer mind to a peat bog?

She was trying to keep from giggling with madness.

"Elspeth." Craig's low tone cut through her panic. "Lass, look at me."

His bright eyes slowly resolved before hers, relief in them.

"Aye, that's it. Breathe, lass." After his command, he took a deep breath, and she found herself mimicking, exhaling when he did. "Good, again."

She felt calmer, thank the saints, her bones loose, her emotions a jumble. Her chest was tight from her panic, but

there was a wetness between her thighs she hadn't expected to experience with a man...

"I'm sorry, Elspeth." There was sorrow in his expression, and he held her close to him. "I should no' have kissed ye. I should no' have forced..."

"Nay," she managed, then took another deep breath, held it, and admitted, "I liked it. At first. I liked it verra much."

"I..." His lips curled up on one side, ruefully. "I liked it too."

"Too much," she whispered.

And he seemed to understand.

There was no future for them.

"Aye," he breathed, moving his hand so he could brush her hair aside once more. His touch was gentle, as if he were taking care of her.

She liked it—liked his touch, liked *him*—more than she should.

Craig cleared his throat and twisted to study the room. "They're gone, and I doubt Bertold's coming tonight, if the guards are patrolling. Come on." With no effort, he slid her off his lap, holding her upright while her knees adjusted. "I'll take ye home."

She was glad to hold onto his arm when he offered it. As a gentleman would.

"Home?"

His grin was lopsided as he peered down at her. "I'll no' allow a lass—lady or nay—to come to harm under my watch." He glanced around the tavern once. "Although I've nae notion what being seen with ye will do to my reputation," he finished in a low voice.

And she found she was able to tease him again. "You mean, what Barthold will do when he finds out?"

Craig met her gaze, and after a moment, smiled ruefully. "Aye. Come, let's get ye back to yer son."

Robbie.

Aye, the reason she was doing this.

She needed to remember.

CHAPTER 2



“YE’RE LATE.”

Drummond Kennedy snapped out the reprimand without looking up from his desk, and Craig frowned as he closed the door behind him.

“Nay, I’m no’.” He lowered himself gently into the chair across from his leader, always mindful at how much heavier he was than other men, and knowing he’d broken his share of benches and stools over the years. “I’m right on time.”

“Aye, but everything else was early, and ye missed it.” Drum finished affixing the seal of the King’s Hunters to the scroll he was reading then looked up. “Truthfully, I didnae expect ye to check in at all today.”

Craig heard the unspoken words: *I expected ye to be with Barthold’s band by now.* He winced.

“I’m sorry, Drum. Barthold never came to the tavern last night. Or the night afore that.”

“I ken.”

His leader’s words were enough to startle Craig into sitting upright. “What? What do ye mean, ye ken?”

Drum waved the document he was now re-rolling. “Barthold the Bald obliged the world by turning up dead. He cheated the hangman, but I suppose I should be grateful he willnae be a problem any longer.”

Craig had already leaned forward, one hand braced against the desk. “How? When?”

“Early this morning two fishermen pulled a body from the loch.” The other man stood and crossed to the window where he rested his palm against the sill and stared out, unseeing. “Obvious foul play—his hands were still tied and his neck broken—so the sheriff sent word here.”

“And ye happened to be on duty?”

Drum glanced over his shoulder at the small cot in the corner, his normally dour expression a little rueful. “I was up late with His Majesty, planning another mission.”

Craig shook his head. “Ye need to rest sometime.”

“Nay.” The Hunters’ leader turned back to the view, his words harsh. “I can sleep when I’m dead. There’s too much to be done.”

Craig hadn’t been a member of the King’s Hunters as long as some of the men, but he knew a bit of Drummond Kennedy’s history. He understood why the man felt driven to hunt criminals and fight injustice.

He also understood why the man had an inherent distrust of women.

Craig opted *not* to explain where he’d been last night.

After that—frankly—mind-numbing kiss, he’d escorted Elspeth home. Or at least, he’d tried to. The woman’s scent, and the feel of her lips under his—hellfire, the feel of *her* in his lap, rubbing in all the best ways!—had made it difficult to walk. His cock had complained for a good fifteen minutes after they left the tavern.

By that point, they were near the palace, and Craig had *finally* figured out that meant *she* lived there as well. He had a bed in the Hunters’ barracks, but she must’ve been a lady indeed, to warrant an apartment near the King and Queen.

Unfortunately, right around the time he turned to ask her this, Elspeth had disappeared.

He’d searched everywhere for her, but the lass was good at hiding. For a while he was afraid she’d been snatched, but saw no evidence of it. Eventually—when he found her delicate

tracks in the mud of one alley—he had to conclude that she'd returned to her home, and just hadn't wanted him to know where that was.

Makes sense. She thought ye were a bandit, after all. That kiss changed naught.

Mayhap it changed naught for her. It had changed *everything* for him. If Craig had been free, he would've immediately offered his sword to her as a guard, for however long she needed.

But he was a Hunter, and he had been in the middle of a mission.

One which was apparently over.

His hand rose to scratch at his overgrown beard, glad he no longer needed the disguise. "I guess I can start shaving again," he mused. "Any ideas who killed Barthold?"

Drum stirred. "Nay." Slowly, he turned, folding his arms across his chest and propping one hip against the sill. "Whoever did it performed a favor for the people of Scotland, *unless* they're *more* dangerous. This could be as simple as a robbery gone wrong, or revenge from a victim...or it could be as complex as a complete reorganization of Barthold's gang under a new, more vicious leadership."

Craig winced at the idea as his friend sighed and dropped his head back against the stone of the wall.

"Either way, Craig, it'll be my problem, no' yers. Ye have a new assignment."

His brows rose in surprise. "The one ye just planned with the King? Ye should take that one. Unless...ye dinnae trust me with the bandits?"

Aye, that was likely it. If Drum suspected this was actually a coup from within the criminal band, then he'd not want a dobber like Craig to muck it up.

But Drum sighed and scrubbed his hand down his face. "'Tis no' like that, Craig. His Majesty has requested ye be given this new assignment. Or rather, I got the impression the

Queen wants ye on it, although I dinnae ken why, so dinnae ask.”

Well, if Drum was confused—and obviously irritated at that—then Craig was even more so.

“What’s the mission?” Mayhap it involved lifting large barrels full of-of-of...something very heavy? Or—oh! “Is it blacksmithing? They need something smithed?”

Drum pushed away from the wall. “I thought ye didnae miss smithing? Ye told me ye were glad to have given it up to join the Hunters?”

Since his leader’s tone meant it was a serious question, Craig didn’t brush it off. But he did shrug and stare down at the vellum spread across the desk so he didn’t have to meet Drum’s gaze.

“I became a smith because it was the easiest. My grandda was the clan’s Commander, and my da after him. But da said I didnae have the brains to lead, and we already had a brilliant Commander. So, I became the blacksmith because I didnae mind horses and heavy shite.”

“Ye’re happy as a Hunter?” Drum asked quietly.

Surprised, Craig glanced up to see his leader studying him seriously. “Aye, of course!”

“Are ye?” Drum pressed.

And Craig hesitated.

In the last year, two of his closest friends, men he’d worked beside as Hunters, on missions from the King, had fallen in love and married. Barclay was the new Laird McDonald, and Payton MacIntyre and his new wife had retired to the small tower house he oversaw. It was tradition for a Hunter to retire when he married, assuming he had a place to go.

Craig had once had a forge and a small cottage on Oliphant land, in the heart of the village. He’d given that up, and now another smith lived there. He’d chosen the life of a Hunter and was proud of it.

Besides, it wasn't as if anyone would ever look to *him* to lead, aye? He was meant to support the leaders, he knew; a ready smile, a big heart, and a strong arm. That's what he was good for.

"I *am* happy," he stated again, more firmly. "I wanted this."

Drum was still studying him. "Mayhap. But there are times ye miss what ye left behind?"

With an awkward shrug, Craig shifted carefully on the chair. "Not necessarily. But..." Gah, this would be difficult to explain to Drum, who saw no value in marriage or family. "It might be nice to one day have something more."

"More?"

Wincing again at his leader's sharp question, Craig tried not to piss off the man. "A family, Drum. 'Twould be nice to one day be in charge of protecting those dear to me, no' just Scotland."

The other man hummed quietly, then crossed back to the desk and picked up the scroll without meeting Craig's eyes. "Well then, His Majesty *did* choose the right man for this mission."

That didn't make sense. "What do ye mean?"

"Yer new role is as a bodyguard to the Earl of Dungotit, Craig. Indefinitely."

Craig's brows rose, even as he reached for the scroll. "Bodyguard? I'm no' a bodyguard. I told her—I mean, I've nae experience..."

Drum snorted softly and propped his arse on the desk, refolding his arms. "Ye've protected the King more than once, and ye've protected me and the other lads. Ye're *good* at protecting. Ye'll do fine."

Ye're good at protecting.

Craig stared, long enough for the other man to shift and scowl.

“What?” he barked.

“I think that’s the nicest thing anyone has said to me.”

Drum shook his head. “If I was trying to be nice, I’d say: Craig Oliphant, ye’re more than ye think. Ye’re no’ as dumb as ye suspect, and ye have a good heart. Trust yer heart, trust yer mind, trust yerself, and ye’ll go far in life.” A small smile tugged at his lips. “But I’m *no*’ trying to be nice, so I’ll just say: ye’re good at protecting, and the Earl will be safe with yer sword at his side.”

It was...

Craig swallowed, looking down at the scroll in his hands, desperate to remember Drum’s words, determined not to forget any of them. He didn’t think anyone would ever say anything so nice, so beautiful to him again.

Ye’re more than ye think.

So, he was grinning when he unrolled the scroll to see a bunch of spidery handwriting scrawled across it, and Drum’s seal at the bottom.

Whereas...in regards...verily. Groaning, he dropped the vellum.

“I dinnae suppose ye could just summarize?”

Drum shook his head with an exasperated sigh, but Craig noticed the other man’s lips curled upward as he moved to slide into his chair. “Aye, ‘tis a sad case. The Earl is young, only in the position a few years. He and his family moved to Scone after his father’s death, and he accepted the role—”

“Why?” Craig asked, shifting forward, all business now to learn about his new mission. “It would make more sense to stay at Dungotit, aye? And learn the new role?”

Drum shrugged. “He’s young. There were two attempts against his life at Dungotit immediately after his father’s death, and there have been three more in the two years he’s been in Scone.”

Craig had sucked in a breath at this news. “*That’s* why he needs a bodyguard. What happened?”

“I dinnae ken all the details.” The man sounded...irritated. “One was questionable, whether ‘twas an accident or an attempt against the Earl. Then one was an assassin with a poisoned arrow, one was a brigand with a knife masquerading as one of the Earl’s servants. An agent from Their Majesties foiled both attempts.”

Ah.

No wonder Drum was irritated.

Craig hid his smile. The leader of the King’s Hunters believed *himself* to be the ultimate repository of knowledge when it came to those working for His Majesty, especially in a clandestine manner. If there were others he didn’t know about—other *agents*—then of course he’d be pissed off.

Deeming it prudent to change the subject, Craig cleared his throat. “Are there any suspects?”

“No’ officially. That’s part of yer mission, to uncover the bastard who’s doing this. I’d wager on his uncle, his father’s younger brother. The man lives at Dungotit with his wife—his own son is grown—and likely wants the power for himself.”

Craig had to nod, agreeing with that assessment. “’Tis most likely, aye. So, the Earl has requested a bodyguard?”

“Officially.” Was that a bit of an eyeroll from Drum? *Hmm.* “But considering how the Queen was involved, I’m assuming ‘tis the Earl’s mother who did the requesting. The family and retinue are heading north to Dungotit tomorrow, and he’ll need protecting on the road.”

“Tomorrow?” Craig blurted, thinking how little time that gave him to prepare to leave his life here in Scone, then another thought caught up. “Why return to Dungotit *now*? Where is this place?”

Craig was busy tidying up the piles on his desk. “Up near Sinclair land.”

Sinclair land. The image that conjured—wild mountains, peaceful glens, fierce winters, and joyful summers—surprised Craig. ‘Twas near his home with the Oliphants, and until that moment, he hadn’t realized how much he’d missed it.

But Drum was still explaining. “The Earl is actually in line to be the next Sinclair laird, although they’ll no’ accept him unless he’s grown a bit more. As for the timing, the mother feels ‘tis time the lad learns his land and his people, and considering there’s been just as many attacks against him here as at home, why no’ return?”

Craig frowned, trying to tie together the thread he hadn’t noticed before. *Grown a bit...the lad...mother?*

“Drum...” he began carefully. “Just how auld *is* the lad?”

The other man’s brow wrinkled in thought for just a moment. “I dinnae recall. Auld enough to be trained as an earl, no’ yet a man? He’ll need training with the blade in a few years. Ten years auld, mayhap.”

A terrible, wonderful suspicion had lodged in Craig’s mind. “Nine?”

Drummond shrugged. “Aye, likely. His mother is a friend of the Queen’s—related distantly, I believe. When her husband died, she was carrying another bairn, and Her Majesty offered her and the new Earl and the other bairns a place at Scone, especially after the attempts on the lad’s life.”

Aye. “And the mother’s name...” Craig realized he was holding his breath. “This is Lady Elspeth?”

“Elspeth Sinclair, aye. Ye ken her? I though ye didnae associate with the ladies—nay, I’m thinking of Payton.” Drum shrugged. “Well, good for her, finding some pleasure after—”

“Nay!” Craig wasn’t certain why it was important, but he couldn’t allow Drum to think he and Elspeth had been... *finding pleasure*. Even if that’s what happened last night. “I just—I’ve seen her around.”

“Really? My reconnaissance says she avoids court, preferring to spend her time in her chambers with the children, or in the gardens. An unusual lady.”

Craig’s throat felt dry. “Aye, that’s where I must’ve seen her, the gardens.”

No' in the seediest tavern possible. No' with her in my lap. No' with her arms around my neck as she returned my kiss. Definitely the gardens.

Drum's lips twitched again. "Ye lie like shite, Craig." He glanced at the window again, and Craig realized he was checking the sun's location. "If ye ken the lady, this assignment will either be awkward as hellfire for ye, or pleasurable indeed. Christ, I hate it when a mission involves a woman."

"I dinnae ken her," Craig growled out, telling himself he was protecting her reputation. "If she's reclusive, she'll no' appreciate ye tying her name to someone like *me*."

"What's wrong with ye? I've seen the way the ladies eye yer shoulders."

"My shoulders, aye, but that's as far as it goes." He kenned he wasn't good enough for those fancy ladies. "I'm just a blacksmith."

"Ye're a King's Hunter," Drum snapped. "'Tis a prestigious rank, a respected warrior, and ye'll no' diminish it by insulting yerself. Any of them would be proud to fook—"

"Drummond!" Craig knew he was blushing. Out of embarrassment, aye, but also at the thought of *Elspeth* with her legs wrapped around his waist, her head thrown back in ecstasy... "I'm no' fooking her. Or anyone."

His leader studied him for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, ye should be. If I were ye, I'd find a woman tonight, my friend. Because tomorrow ye're departing on an indefinite mission—ye're stuck with Lady Elspeth until ye can determine who is trying to kill her son and bring the bastard to justice. Remember, ye cannae trust any woman to do what's logical, and ye cannae trust her."

Knowing Drummond's history, 'twas no wonder he still felt that way. No wonder he hated missions involving women. But...

"I dinnae think Lady Elspeth is untrustworthy," Craig said stiffly. "She only wants what's best for her son, the Earl." He

remembered how passionately she'd spoken last night, how she'd begged for Craig's help to protect the lad, even when she'd thought he was a criminal. "But she must no' have known of the King's plan."

"Och, aye? Why no'?"

Craig winced, realizing he'd almost revealed her whereabouts last night. And uncertain why he was hiding them. "I just mean, if the King only told ye late last night about this mission, he must've only just decided to send one of the Hunters, which means she wouldn't be aware."

"Ye're right, the puir woman must be worried about the Earl's safety on their journey." Drum shrugged. "But she'll be here soon, and I can explain it to her."

Well, that explained why he kept glancing at the sun. As if conjured, there was a knock at the door of the small room the Hunters used as headquarters.

Craig stood as Drum pushed away from the desk and moved toward the door. He grasped the handle and pulled it open. "Milady, thank ye for joining us."

From this angle, Craig could only see part of her gown and one elbow, but he suspected he'd recognize that elbow anywhere.

"Sir Kennedy," she began, in that low tone that seemed to shoot right to his groin. "What is this about? I received a note from Her Majesty I was expected here, but ye can imagine I have much to oversee before tomorrow's departure. I still need to hire some sort of protection for—"

"Allow me to set yer mind at ease, milady. Their Majesties have assigned ye a King's Hunter to oversee the Earl's safety—and yers as well."

With that announcement, Drummond swung the door open further, revealing all of Elspeth to Craig. Her hands were clasped in front of her and she looked anxious—as anxious as she had last night, searching out known bandits in desperation.

But when her gaze settled on his, those warm brown eyes widened, and he knew whatever chance he had of going

unrecognized was moot. So, he bowed and offered a mumbled little, “Lady Elspeth.”

Drummond offered his arm. “Milady, this is one of my finest men. He’s strong and he’ll take orders well, although ye can trust him to choose the best, safest path for yer son. His name is—”

“Craig,” she breathed, standing as still as a statue, eyes still wide, obviously in shock at learning his true identity.

Craig winced again, just as Drum snorted.

“Ye *are* shite at lying, Craig. Good luck, ye bastard.”

CHAPTER 3



BEING AN ADULT, at times, was *exhausting*.

Katharine was five and had little to do besides ask endless questions and earn praise for defecating in the garderobe and spooning her own porridge. Even Robbie, at nine, had freedom and excuses if he wanted to throw a tantrum or sleep late or eat sweets. And of course, wee Mary was practically useless, although adorable.

But Elspeth?

Elspeth, as not only an adult, but a *mother*, had an absolute metric shite-ton—whatever that was—of things to do to prepare her family to leave their home of almost two years. Overseeing the packing, making polite calls upon the correct people, arranging for the luggage train and outriders, and of course, soothing her children.

She'd been working non-stop for days, which is why, she told herself, it had been easy to succumb to a stranger's kiss that night in the tavern.

Only he's no' a stranger any longer, aye?

Absentmindedly, Elspeth patted the bairn's rear end as she stared out the window of the coach. Nay, Craig Oliphant was no longer a stranger. He was her son's bodyguard now, and, as a King's Hunter, in charge of this journey.

She couldn't lie; it had been a bit of a relief to hand the reins to someone else and not have to worry about every small aspect... But his arrival had also meant more difficulties.

How was she supposed to ride to Dungotit beside him without remembering the way his hand had felt at her back, his lips upon hers?

That's why ye've hidden in the carriage these last days.

Aye. And it had worked, almost.

She and the children had little contact with the rest of the retinue—the servants and the guards. They'd stayed in inns and royal residences thus far, but the farther north they traveled, the more sparse these comforts would become. She was going to have to face him sooner or later.

“Ye're going to have to go out there sooner or later.”

Elspeth started, jerking upright and wrenching a whimper from the bairn on her shoulder. “What did ye say?”

Her maid, Brigit, was an impish, curvy redhead, who seemed to always be wearing a secret smile at something only she knew. Now, her nimble fingers were re-braiding Katharine's hair yet again, ignoring the lassie's instructions, and sending a smirk to Elspeth.

“Merely pointing out, *milady*, that it has been days since we left Scone. These wee ones will of course ride in here with me, but ye've allowed Robbie the freedom to ride his horse.”

Unbidden, Elspeth's gaze sought out her son again. His dark head was bent, his shoulders slumped. The lad was riding beside Craig, and although they'd spoken at the beginning of the journey, now Robbie was silent. The huge Hunter seemed alert enough, but 'twas hard to tell from this distance. A heavy sword lay slung across his back and a steel helmet hung from a slim leather strap on his saddle, two stark reminders of what Craig was and the power he wielded as the king's emissary.

The King's Hunters normally wore their imposing helms when going about the King's business. 'Twas said that it made their jobs easier if they were faceless symbols of Royal power. She supposed he hadn't bothered donning it on this mission because she'd already seen his face, kissed his lips.

'Twas impossible to forget that she'd crawled into the lap of a man capable of such cold calculation, such violence.

With a faint shudder, she sought reassurance of the man she admired and trusted. She tilted her head, noticing he'd trimmed his beard and his hair, but couldn't tell much else.

"Robbie looks tired," she whispered.

"Aye, travel can be difficult on all parties, for various reasons." When Elspeth glanced at her, Brigit shrugged. "Ye're going mad, confined in the carriage when ye want to be riding."

"I want to ride!" declared wee Katharine.

"Hush, love," Elspeth scolded. "Yer pony is waiting for ye at Dungotit." It was one of the many bribes she'd had to offer her headstrong daughter in the last sennight. "Only a few more days"—*A lie*—"and ye can ride him."

"I want a *girl* pony!" she declared fiercely, bouncing up and down on Brigit's lap. "A girl pony with ribbons in her hair and I also want a battleax and I want a fruit tart!"

"Ribbons in her hair is a definite possibility, love,"—*Even if it's a boy pony*—"and I'm certain the cook will make a magnificent feast for us." Although it had been almost two years since she was the mistress of Dungotit, *surely* the servants remembered her and her family?

"My battleax is going to be blue!"

Damnation. Elspeth had hoped, by ignoring that particular demand, Katharine would forget it. She should have known better.

"I think the battleax will have to wait, lassie. A nice doll, mayhap?"

Brigit snorted at the same time Katharine yanked herself out of the maid-slash-nurse's hold. "I want a *battleax!* Robbie got a sword."

Elspeth knew better than to use the *That's because he's a lad* argument. Instead, she just said, "Aye, when he was seven. Mayhap when ye are seven."

The little girl pushed herself off Brigit's lap, her wee boots hitting the floor. "I want a *battleax!*" she screeched, loud

enough to wake the bairn in Elspeth's arms.

As Mary began to fuss, Elspeth stifled her sigh. Mary wasn't a newborn—she'd marked her one-year celebration the month before—but rarely took naps anyplace besides her mother's arms. Even Brigit couldn't get the fussy bairn to sleep.

And now Katharine had woken her sister.

“Nae battleax,” she snapped, too harshly, judging from the way Mary whimpered, chewing on her fist. “Ye must learn restraint first, young lady, *then* ye can be taught other things.”

“Like battleaxing?” the five-year-old asked suspiciously. “The whole *point* of battleaxing is ye dinnae need restraint.”

Chuckling, Brigit turned the lassie back toward herself. “Ye're thinking of *berserking*. And aye, yer mother is right. Ye need to learn restraint, so ye can learn *balance*, before ye learn how to hold a weapon. Any warrior kens this.”

Katharine didn't look convinced. “How do ye ken?”

“Och, I'm a veritable treasure trove of knowledge. Ye'd be surprised. Do ye want to learn how to disembowel yer enemy?”

Katharine lit up at the same moment wee Mary burst into fussy tears, and Elspeth thought she might pull her hair out.

See? Exhausting. She likely needed a nap as badly as Robbie did.

Brigit seemed to understand. “For now, let us give yer mam a break, eh? I'll tell ye all about finding yer way through a man's ribcage while we feed yer little sister her mash.” Her eyes twinkled as she met Elspeth's. “While yer mam makes her escape.”

“Nay, I can—” Elspeth began weakly, but Brigit was already reaching for the bairn.

“Go! Send Robbie back here with us for a little rest. Ye ride his horse, feel the sun on yer cheeks and the fresh air in yer lungs.”

Elspeth might've objected more, had that not sounded so... so...*wonderful*. "Aye," she sighed dreamily. "That sounds... lovely."

"Aye, I ken it."

Glancing sharply at the maid, Elspeth tried to restrain her fussy bairn. "Do *ye* want to ride—?"

"Go!" Brigit commanded with a laugh, already bouncing Mary. "I dinnae love the outdoors as much as ye do, and besides, ye pay me to keep watch over these little angels, aye?"

Since the "angels" were currently screaming with hunger and demanding instruction on disembowelment, Elspeth chose not to answer. Instead, she stuck her head out the door and demanded the carriage slow.

When it did, she climbed down, and dear lord in heaven, she hadn't realized how stiff her legs and back were until she tried to walk. Laughing at herself, she hobbled toward where Robbie was swinging down from his horse.

"Everything well, Mother?"

She wanted to hug him. She wanted to press him to her chest the way she'd just been holding Mary, and remind herself that he was her precious little lad and would always be safe. But he was also poised on the cusp of growth and leadership; in a few years he'd have complete control over the men who rode with them, and she would do naught to harm his reputation in their eyes.

So, she limited herself to placing her hand on his shoulder briefly. "Aye, Robbie. I just needed some air and to stretch my back." How to send him to rest in the carriage without causing him to bristle with defensiveness? "Would ye mind if I rode yer horse for a bit? Yer sisters have been asking for ye."

A few white lies, but hopefully Brigit would keep him entertained with her made-up stories about disembowelments.

For certes, they must be made-up, aye? How would a castle maid ken aught about such violent matters?

Her son, meanwhile, had handed her the reins and stifled a yawn. She again had to resist the urge to kiss his forehead. Mayhap later when his men weren't looking.

“Thank you, honeybear.”

Perhaps the endearment was a bit much, judging from his eyeroll, but he still offered her a small smile as he trudged toward the carriage.

She turned to his horse and was eyeing the stirrup when she felt a presence behind her.

“May I help, Lady Elspeth?”

The low rumble sent a shiver down her spine, and she didn't need to turn to guess the speaker.

“Thank ye,” she blurted a bit too brightly. “I was going to lead the gelding to that rock to mount but—”

Her words bit off with a squeak when massive hands closed around her waist, lifting her. Craig held her as if she weighed naught at all, and time seemed to slow. She was flying, free and gentle, in a way she hadn't felt since she'd been a young lass, galloping across the Sinclair valleys.

When she was finally settled into the saddle, she realized she hadn't inhaled in a while. Craig's hands were still on her waist, waiting for her to settle, and her hands were on his wrists. She should be doing something with her hands, shouldn't she? But all she could manage was to stare down at him, amazed at the sensation of being in his arms once more.

“Milady,” he began softly, and she found herself leaning forward to hear what he'd say. Something lovely? Something about the kiss they'd shared? He was just watching her expectantly.

“Yes?” she breathed.

“Milady, 'tis customary, if ye want to ride, to reach for the reins.”

Elspeth burst into laughter.

HER LAUGHTER WARMED HIM. He liked the way she didn't blush or stammer or worry about what people thought—'twas the same instinct which sent her into that tavern to find a man to help her. 'Twas the same instinct which meant she'd do whatever was needed to protect her children.

When she finally reached for the reins, Craig pulled his hands from her waist, fairly certain his wrists were branded from where she'd held him.

As he swung into the saddle of his own horse, he realized he was going to have to apologize. Not for helping her atop her horse, but the way he kissed her the night before last. He'd kissed her as if she'd been some common wench, not the mother of an Earl.

At his signal, their train started up again, and he was surprised—and impressed—by how well Lady Elspeth handled her son's horse. She rode as if she were used to it, and he began to suspect the Earl's horse might actually be hers.

She surprised him over and over again, didn't she? She wasn't like the other ladies at court. Mayhap 'twas why she held herself apart from them?

They rode in silence for a while, and he couldn't help watching her from the corner of his eye. He was trying to be watchful and alert for danger, but she kept calling his attention.

The way she smiled at the pair of songbirds flitting from tree to tree beside the road.

The way she tipped her head back when the sun came out from behind the clouds, as if reveling in the feel of its warmth.

The way she threw her arms out to her sides and inhaled as the breeze ruffled the stray hairs at her temples.

Aye, he could watch her forever if he wasn't careful. Everything about Lady Elspeth Sinclair called to him.

But he was her guard and he needed to focus on that. On keeping her and her children safe. He needed to be professional, and to do that, he needed to start by apologizing.

So, after they'd been riding for a bit, he cleared his throat. "Milady?"

They were more or less alone; the carriage was in front of them with a pair of guards ahead of it, and four men he'd personally chosen rode some distance behind. Craig had wanted to be closer to the Earl in case of danger.

She shot him a teasing grin. "I thought I told ye I was nae lady."

He couldn't help his snort. "Ye're the mother of an Earl. The wife of another."

"Widow," she sharply corrected, and he dropped his chin in acknowledgement.

"Ye're a lady, is my point," he finally said.

He took a deep breath, prepared to launch into an apology...but she surprised him yet again by cocking her head to one side and studying him with what could only be called an impish smile. So, he held his tongue, and was glad when she spoke.

"Elsbeth, then." Her smile grew as she straightened. "Ye call me Elspeth and I'll call ye Craig."

Immediately, he shook his head. "Ye *are* a lady, and I am no'." At her burst of bright laughter, he found himself grinning as well, not at all embarrassed. "I mean, I'm no' a lord. I'm just a Hunter."

She pointed to the helm dangling from his saddle. "A *King's* Hunter, a member of an elite cadre of respected and skilled warriors the King himself trusts. Hardly a *just*, Craig," she teased. "Meanwhile, I'm just an orphaned lass from the Highlands who is used to roaming free, having adventures, and getting her feet dirty."

Unconsciously, his gaze dropped to her feet, encased in delicate little boots. He saw them twitch, as if she was suddenly aware of them, and she huffed a little laugh.

"Well, I mean, no' *now*. Now, I'm pretending to be a lady."

His gaze sought hers once more, and of course she was smiling. “Ye’re verra good at it. Pretending to be a lady, I mean.”

Her laughter bubbled up again and he found himself smiling in response. “Aye, I’ve fooled them all. None of them—no’ even my distant cousin, the Queen—ken the reason I spend so much time in the gardens is because I’m secretly pulling weeds. Or that I go for long walks through the palace at night, just to feel the burn in my muscles. Or that I snuck out to a dangerous tavern to hire a bodyguard.”

Bringing them back to his original point. He cleared his throat again, ready to apologize...only for her smile to turn rueful.

“And there is something I must say to ye, Craig. I am sorry if I made ye uncomfortable that night.”

His brows shot up, his words dying in his throat. “I—what?”

She winced. “I pressed myself on ye. I should have listened when ye said ye werenae interested in working for me. Instead, I ended up in yer lap. And ye ended up guarding my son, despite yer objections.”

He stared, flabbergasted, uncertain how to explain.

“And so, I do hope ye’ll forgive me. If I’d kened ‘twould be ye assigned to Robbie, I would’ve asked Their Majesties to reconsider, kenning yer dislike of the position. Now ye’re stuck with me—”

“Milady,” he interrupted.

For the first time, she blushed slightly, her gaze dropping to her hands on the reins. “Elspeth. Please?”

He surrendered, knowing he’d been lost since the beginning. “Aye, Elspeth, but only when nae one is about. I’ll no’ have these men—or even yer children—thinking I respect ye less than ye are due.”

Her lips formed a little “oh” of surprise, but no sound emerged. She was watching him from under lowered lids, and

he liked that he'd surprised *her* for a change.

“Second of all, Elspeth, I said nay to ye that night because I was on a mission. As a Hunter.”

Now her brows rose, and that combined with the surprise on her lips made her look positively adorable. He found himself grinning, despite his attempts to stay serious. “And *fourthly*—wait, what number was I on?” He waved a hand. “It doesnae matter. I was going to apologize to *ye*. For kissing ye without yer permission.”

“’Twas for a mission?” she breathed, eyes twinkling. “That’s what ye meant when ye said ‘twas a matter of national security?”

Chuckling, he realized there was no reason not to explain the whole thing to her. “Aye. I’d spent a fortnight spreading the word that I was a cutthroat, looking to be hired by Barthold the Bald. We—the Hunters, no’ me, I couldnae come up with a plan to save my life—had a plan in place to trap him.”

“So ye were pretending to be like him, in order to trap him!” Her grin grew, and to his surprise, she leaned sideways in her saddle to smack his arm. He hadn’t realized they were riding so close. “I *kenned* it! I *kenned* ye didnae admire the man!”

Craig made a show of rubbing his arm, which drew a chuckle from her.

“I couldnae have agreed to yer terms, Elspeth, even if I was for hire, truly. I swore an oath to the King.”

“Aye, I ken that *now*. Imagine my surprise to see ye with the other Hunter.”

He snorted. “Imagine my surprise learning who *ye* were.”

She sent him a rueful smile, which soon faded into excitement. “Yer mission was a success? Ye caught Barthold?”

Wincing, Craig shook his head. “Someone else did. The morning I was assigned to yer son, the bastard was found dead. The whole mess is Drummond’s problem now—he’s in charge of the Hunters and is far smarter than I am.”

She was studying him, and now shrugged. “I dinnae ken about that. But I’m glad ye were available to be assigned to Robbie. I trust ye’ll protect him. I trusted ye that night, although I had nae reason to. I was right.”

“Again, I am sorry—”

“Dinnae apologize for kissing me, Craig. I dinnae regret it.” Her warm gaze turned wicked once more. “And I was doing it for national security, remember.”

He chuckled. “A pair of the palace guards came in, and they’d definitely recognize me. All I could think was that if they hailed me, then all of my work to ingratiate myself with the criminal scum would be for naught, so I panicked.”

This time, she leaned sideways and patted his arm. Actually *patted* it, as if he was one of her children, or a pet which had performed a trick. And while he should be appalled, instead, a warmth rather like *pride* climbed up his limb.

He was glad the others were far enough away not to notice.

“I think ‘twas a fine plan, Craig. It meant ye werenae recognized, even if ‘twas for naught later. Have faith in yerself.”

‘Twas what Drum had told him.

Craig felt himself sitting a little higher, grinning a little broader.

“And it all worked out, aye?” Elspeth was saying. “That is, assuming ye dinnae mind being with us, guarding Robbie. I ken Sinclair land is remote—”

“I dinnae mind,” he was quick to assure her. “I grew up there. The Oliphants and Sinclairs are neighbors, and I love the land. And yer bairns are good company.”

She laughed then, without a trace of self-consciousness, and he found himself grinning along.

“Ye dinnae ken them. They can be handfuls.”

He shrugged. “I look forward to kenning them.”

“Ye do?” Elspeth was peering at him, obviously surprised, laughter missing from her expression now.

“Aye, of course. Robbie is a good lad—I spent some time this morning talking with him. I noticed he was flagging, but couldnae figure out how to suggest he go rest. Yer move was brilliant.”

Now her chuckle returned, although it seemed less exuberant. “The privileges of parenthood, I suppose.” Then she sighed, suddenly looking pensive. “He *is* a good lad. I just hope I can raise him to be a good Earl of Dungotit. He learned much while at court, but there is no replacement for being with his people.”

“That is why we are returning now?”

She shrugged. “If there were attempts against his life in both places, I’d rather him be at home. *I’d* rather be in the Highlands. And now that we have a Hunter to guard us...”

When she sent him a shy glance, Craig felt himself flushing again. In pride?

“I’ll keep him safe, milady. I swear it.”

“Elspeth,” she corrected softly.

“Elspeth.”

CHAPTER 4



AFTER THAT FIRST AFTERNOON, the journey settled into an easy routine, which was—frankly—delightful. Rather, the routine itself was delightful, of course, but just *having* a routine was helpful.

Ye're blathering.

Elsbeth grinned at herself and nudged Mary's head a bit so she plopped against her forearm. The further north they'd traveled, the wilder the land—and the roads—became, so they'd abandoned the carriage yesterday, and now rode instead.

Mary had never been the best of nappers, but now she was only snoozing for a few minutes at a time, when she became bored with chewing on the reins and kicking happily at the sight of a hawk in the sky.

"Ye're doing that more often these days." The quiet rumble came from beside her.

The only time Craig wasn't beside her was when Robbie needed protecting, and she appreciated that. Now she raised a brow. "Doing what?"

"Smiling." He nodded to the bairn asleep in her lap. "Is it because she's finally asleep?"

And aye, her smile grew. "'Tis because I'm almost home. The land here *feels* different, aye? Dangerous and wild and dramatic. 'Tis my favorite." She glanced down at Mary. "I hope it becomes my children's favorite as well."

“For certes it will. With their mother speaking so beautifully about it.”

She lifted her gaze to see him staring at her lips, and her breath caught. Was he...was he talking about *her*?

Oh.

Perhaps her expression changed. Somehow, Craig became aware of the charged air between them and cleared his throat, sitting higher in the saddle. He faced forward once more, attention on everything but her, but she had no doubt he was watching her.

He really *was* the perfect protector.

“I love this land, too,” he admitted. “I’ve missed it. The King hasnae sent me to the Highlands as often as I’d like, since becoming a Hunter.”

“Really? Have ye visited home?” She remembered him saying he’d been raised with the Oliphants.

“Aye, a few times. My cousins are all there.” As he spoke, she noticed him relaxing, sitting more naturally. “My great-grandda was Laird Oliphant, ye ken.”

“I didnae.” She’d nudged her horse closer so she could hear his low voice, and appreciated he was trying not to wake the baby, although she’d wake soon enough on her own. “So ye have noble blood?”

He glanced at her, a small smile on his lips. The beard he’d trimmed and shaved at the beginning of their journey had grown back until ‘twas almost as full that night he’d kissed her, but she thought it just made him look...*softer*, somehow.

“My great-grandda had seven illegitimate sons, and my grandda was one of the eldest. Want to hear the story?”

“I do!” called Robbie, trotting closer. When Elspeth raised both brows, he lowered his voice. “Sorry. I mean, *I do*,” he whispered, then turned to look over his shoulder at Brigit, who rode with his sister. “I cannae stand to hear Kat’s plans for catapults anymore.”

Elspeth had to chuckle. In an attempt to keep the five-year-old appeased, Brigit had designed a miniature trebuchet, which one of the guards—likely besotted with the saucy maid—had built.

“She’s still planning on protecting Dungotit?”

Robbie snorted, sitting easy in the saddle, the reins draped over his thighs. “Her plans involve tossing rotten produce, Mary and I when we annoy her, and possibly her pony. She doesnae even remember the place.”

And he did? He’d been seven when she’d fled to safety, terrified of what faceless danger awaited him. He had so much ahead of him, and she prayed Craig could keep him safe until the villain was discovered.

So, she just prompted gently, “Would ye like to hear Craig—Sir Hunter’s story?”

It had been difficult to remember her promise to be formal in front of others, but her son didn’t mind.

“Aye, Craig, tell us!” He clearly had no trouble being informal with the man responsible for protecting him.

Mayhap Elspeth should follow his example.

“My great-grandda raised six illegitimate sons. Three sets of twins, all of them born the same year. He then went on to marry—puirly—to have one daughter. Then, after he’d married his true love, another son of his showed up. There were quite a few cousins floating about when I was growing up—‘twas difficult to marry on Oliphant land, because ye might be related to the person!”

Robbie and he both chortled at the joke, although her son’s involved more disgusted squealing.

“My grandda was one of the first six. He didnae have a happy childhood until he went to live with his father. I got my size from him, but his twin brother was a scrawny thing, to hear him tell it. Uncle Malcom was brilliant, though, while my grandda, Rocque...” Craig smiled self-deprecatingly. “Well, let’s just say I got my brains from him, too.”

“I think ye’re smart,” Robbie offered. “Although Malcom sounds smarter.”

“He was! He invented all sorts of things. Each of the brothers had a talent. My grandda was the Oliphant Commander, the one who led the men. His father told them whoever married and produced a grandson could become the next laird. My uncle missed being the first grandson by only a few minutes! So Grandda’s brother became laird, and truthfully, I think Grandda was happier. He and Grandmam Merewyn raised four children, but I was their biggest grandson. The youngest, too.”

“They sound like a lovely family,” Elspeth offered. “I would’ve liked to meet them.”

He shot her a speculative glance. “I think Grandmam would like to have met you, too. None of that generation is left now, although Oliphant Castle is famous for our ghosts. Mad Laird Oliphant is my second cousin or something, but he just recently stepped back and turned the clan over to his auldest daughter, Coira, and her husband, the Oliphant Commander. She’s smarter than all of us and has been running things for years anyhow.”

A female laird? Nay, the way he described it, ‘twas a couple who shared the responsibility. How...novel. Suddenly, Elspeth was very curious indeed about this clan.

Apparently so was her son. “Ghosts! Mother, did ye hear that? Their castle is haunted! Can we visit?”

Before she could think of a diplomatic way to respond, Craig cleared his throat. “Actually, I’ve been meaning to suggest we stop there. ‘Twould be a welcome reprieve, for the little ones, at least”—he nodded to the bairn in her lap, who was beginning to stir—“and mayhap for ye?”

By her calculations, they were still several days from Dungotit, but stopping at Oliphant Castle would allow word of their imminent arrival to speed ahead, and the keep might be ready for them.

Or the danger would ready itself.

One of the two.

Still, the thought of a few days' rest—for all of them!—was too lovely to deny, so she nodded. “That would be nice.”

Her words seemed to rouse Mary, and the little one jerked upright, letting out a startled squawk that drew Elspeth's attention.

But not before she saw Craig's excited smile.

“Hush, little one. We still have miles to go before ye can crawl about.” The bairn hadn't begun walking yet, but she loved to scoot around, and being confined angered her.

So much for yer hopes for a demure, quiet daughter. Ye got another Katharine.

Smiling ruefully, Elspeth shifted her hold, trying to lift her daughter so she could stand. But Mary jerked sideways at the last moment, and almost slithered out of her grip. She cursed and caught the bairn, before realizing what she'd said.

As Robbie tittered, Elspeth felt her cheeks heating. “Mary, love, calm down—”

“Here.” Craig was suddenly beside her, reaching for the bairn. And Elspeth, uncertain what to do, released her daughter.

The large man easily lifted Mary under her arms. He'd tucked the reins against his thigh, and now lifted the bairn until they were face-to-face. She'd stopped fussing immediately and now watched him, her blue eyes studying him as she chewed on her fingers.

“There now,” he rumbled, offering the little one a smile. “There's nae need to worry yer mother. Especially when she's such a tiny thing and ye arenae. Ye should stay here with me.”

Mary removed her fingers from her mouth with an audible *pop*, still staring at Craig. Her little lips opened...

“Da!”

Craig sucked in a startled breath as she babbled.

“Da dadada *da* DA dada.”

Panicked hazel eyes shot toward Elspeth, and then he was addressing the bairn again. “Nay, lassie, I’m no’ yer da, I’m just—”

“Da?”

“I’m *Craig*. Can ye say *Craig*?”

As Elspeth hid her snicker, her daughter’s face lit up happily. “Da! Da da!”

“Sweet, nay, I’m no’ *da*, I’m—”

“She calls everything *da*,” Robbie interrupted blandly from Craig’s other side. “Yesterday she called my horse *da*. And her nappy. And a spoon.”

Craig gaped. “A spoon?”

Robbie nodded. “She used to call *me* ‘da’.”

“Bee!” Mary blurted, her name for her big brother.

“See?” Elspeth grinned at Craig’s expression, slowly fading from terror to humor. “Ye’re in good company. A *spoon*.”

“Bee!”

Elspeth nodded. “That’s her word for *Robbie*. Katharine is *Kaka*, Brigit is *Jit*. I’m *Mama*.”

“And everything else is *da*,” Robbie finished.

But Craig was still looking a little speculative as he readjusted his hold on her daughter. He tucked Mary against one large shoulder so he could grab the reins once more, but Mary twisted.

She reached for his beard, grabbing the red hairs in both hands and tugging happily. “*Dadada*.”

“Aye,” he murmured, trying to detangle her fingers. “Mayhap only one hand, sweet?”

“Da?”

Elspeth could see the grin beneath his bush of a beard.

“Aye, wee one. Da, if ye’d like. Go back to sleep, hmm?”

And to their surprise—at least, Robbie was surprised, judging from the expression on his face—Mary did. With one hand in her mouth and the fingers of the other curled through his beard, Elspeth's youngest daughter laid her head against Craig's shoulder, her eyelids heavy.

It was...

Well, presumably there were some people in the world who didn't care for children, who thought them noisy and annoying. *They* might look at the sweet scene and *not* think "Oh how precious."

But everyone else would be impressed.

And Elspeth...? Something inside her chest flared to life in that moment.

This large, dangerous man was cradling her bairn so softly, so gently. His hand—which had once spread across *her* back, holding her steady as his lips awakened magic in her—now held wee Mary safe. He hadn't minded the beard tugging or the drool, and, in fact, was still smiling faintly.

Oh, be still, my heart.

"Mother?" Robbie's call jerked her from her besotted staring, and she swung around to him.

"What? I'm no' dream—I wasnae— What?"

Her son was grinning at her blathering. "I was just going to ask, if we're stopping at Oliphant Castle, do we still have time to stop to stretch our legs? Craig promised we might when we reached the valley."

While it was sweet he'd asked *her*, Elspeth didn't know the distances. So, she raised a brow in question to Craig.

The big man cocked his head, which pressed his temple against Mary's downy hair—Elspeth's heart gave a little lurch in response—and considered. Finally, in a low rumble, he said, "Aye, we have plenty of time this afternoon. Why no' ride ahead, Robbie, and tell the men and Brigit we'll stop for an hour?"

With a whoop—which caused the bairn to startle—Robbie kicked his horse forward. And Elspeth and Craig shared an indulgent smile.

It felt...as if they were partners, in some way. Mayhap just in the effort to safely escort her children to Dungotit, or mayhap something more.

It felt...*Right*.

BY THE TIME he made the order to call for a rest, Craig could tell everyone in his care needed it. He watched carefully from atop his horse as first the men, then the others, began to dismount and stretch their legs.

The maid, Brigit, hopped down easily enough, as if she were used to riding, but her young charge—Elspeth's daughter Katharine—threw herself onto the grass and spread her arms and legs as if trying to burrow her arse into the grass. Robbie's knees buckled when he climbed out of the saddle, although Craig didn't think anyone else noticed.

And Elspeth...

Lord love her, the woman looked exhausted. So exhausted, he didn't think she could climb out of the saddle on her own.

So, Craig trotted over to where one of the other servants was stretching her legs and handed the wee bairn over. Mary had woken on their careful journey down to the valley but hadn't fussed. Instead, she'd looked around with bright, curious eyes as Craig spoke to her as he'd seen her mother do, pointing out sights and explaining the world around him.

Even Elspeth had commented how calm her daughter had been with him, and he felt a fierce sort of pride that he'd been able to commune so well with Mary. Even now, as a nurse took the bairn, a spike of disappointment shot through him.

But Mary needed to be fed—not something he was willing to try yet—and her mother needed his help. So, he swung out of his saddle, nodded to both the guards and Robbie as he passed, and crossed to stand beside Elspeth.

The poor woman looked utterly wrung out. She just sat in her saddle, her shoulders slumped, and her fingers curled around the reins.

“Come now,” he urged softly, coaxing her down. “Ye need to work the kinks out of yer back, aye?”

“I...dinnae think I can,” she finally admitted.

“Of course ye can.” He lifted his hands, an unconscious movement. “Trust me. I’ll keep ye safe, Elspeth.”

He hadn’t meant the vow to emerge sounding quite so... somber. Her warm eyes held his for a long moment, and then she just sort of...toppled sideways. Into his arms.

His muscles tensed as he grabbed her, but when he lifted her, she was giggling, and his heart eased.

“Ye frightened me, lass,” he grumbled, rearranging her in his arms so she could place her feet on the dirt.

But when she did, her legs gave out, and had he not been holding her, she might’ve fallen.

“I love riding,” she groaned, clutching his arm, “but I’m just so *tired*.”

“Aye,” he chuckled, switching his hold on her so he could turn her away from the others. “Ye havenae been sleeping well since we’ve begun camping—tossing and turning.”

It had been three nights since they’d last slept in a real bed, and he was looking forward to taking her and her family to Oliphant Castle for some rest. But she was looking at him strangely.

“Ye watched me sleep?”

It didn’t *sound* accusatory, but Craig hesitated. “’Tis my job to keep watch. I see the way ye fuss over yer lassies, and —”

“Katharine could sleep through the Apocalypse, I believe.”

He smiled as he began to walk, his arm around her waist so she could lean on him. “I noticed. Ye just like to fuss then?”

“I’m...worried about them.”

Her head was inches from his. How hard would it be to bend slightly and brush a kiss across her forehead? Even though he’d at first felt exposed at his decision to not wear his fierce helmet – everyone here knew him already, anyway – he’d discovered he rather enjoyed the feeling of freedom that came from leaving the reminder of his duty dangling from his saddle. But at this exact moment, he wasn’t sure if wearing it – and using it as a barrier between himself and temptation in the form of Lady Sinclair – wouldn’t be a better plan.

“Dinnae fash.” His throat was suddenly thick with emotion he couldn’t name. “’Tis *my* job to worry about them. *Ye* just rest.”

She was already walking more steadily, but made no move to pull away as they strolled further away from the stream where the others had stopped. “I’m their mother. I cannae just...*cease* worrying.”

“I suppose that makes sense.” His fingers spread, until they were molded against her side, offering her support but also comfort and...well, his thumb was brushing against the outside of her breast, and he couldn’t make himself pull away. *Mayhap a helm to deter impulsive kisses wasn’t what he needed; mayhap thick gloves to separate the touch of their skin would be better.* “But...I would help share the burden, at least.”

When she glanced up at him, something he couldn’t identify lit her gaze, and his steps faltered. How far were they from the group? Enough that they wouldn’t be seen if he were to do something *completely* inappropriate?

Damn the helm, and damn the gloves. He’d far rather no barriers came between them.

“Share the burden?” she asked in a small whisper.

“The bairns.” He caught himself, then swallowed. “I mean, I’m to protect ye, aye? Ye dinnae have to do it all yerself.”

She stood watching him for a long moment, her gaze flicking across his features as if looking for the lie. Then,

“Craig...are ye saying this only because ye’ve been assigned to protect us?”

“Nay!” The word burst from his lips before he could stop it, and he winced at how desperate he’d sounded. “I mean...”

Fook. He lifted his head, glancing about.

They were far enough away that the party wouldn’t hear them, and Robbie was surrounded by loyal guards. Craig slid his hand down Elspeth’s side until he could grab her hand, and then, in two long strides, tugged her behind a thicket of brambles.

It wasn’t comfortable and it *definitely* wasn’t romantic, but they were hidden from the others.

“Craig?” she asked, watching him carefully.

His hand settled on her hip again, and the fingertips of the other were resting against her jaw before he realized how closely he was holding her.

“Elspeth, I’ve tried...” He hadn’t meant to say that in such a tortured voice. He swallowed. “The last fortnight, while we’ve ridden together and laughed together and shared stories...I’ve tried to forget how good ye tasted. I’ve tried to forget how perfectly we fit together.”

Her smile bloomed. “I thought we were talking about the bairns?”

“I thought we were talking about being partners.”

Her gaze was on his lips. “*Ah.*” ‘Twas her turn to swallow. “I...’Tis been a long while since I had someone I could rely on.”

“Yer husband—”

“Wasnae a cruel man, but saw nae reason for us to have any kind of partnership.”

That took Craig aback. “But...ye were married?” In his family—in his world—marriage was about love and commitment and sharing the burdens of life. “Surely ye loved him.”

Her smile turned sad, and then her hands pressed against his chest, fingers curling around a fold of his shirt. “Our marriage was a political alliance, and I rarely saw him outside of when he came to my bed.”

The way her muscles tensed at those words—Craig doubted she even realized what she was doing. His fingertips trailed over her skin until he could cup the side of her head, his thumb stroking her cheek.

“Ye didnae enjoy those times?” he guessed.

And then cursed himself for asking such an intimate question when her expression shuttered.

“Ye dinnae have to—” he began, but she interrupted.

“I never wanted to be a mother,” she blurted, then her eyes fluttered closed on a wince. “I mean, I kenned I was unusual. But when other lassies were playing with dolls and pretending to set up house, I was riding across the fields, or playing barefoot in the streams.”

She opened her eyes, focusing on his chin. “I loved that feeling of freedom, and the day my uncle told me I was to be married to secure an alliance with one of his distant cousins, I felt as if my world was ending.”

Craig didn’t know what to say. This was...*way* outside his realm of knowledge. If the King’s Hunters had a handbook, this wouldn’t even be in one of the appendices.

But he would rather cut off his arm than cease this conversation, not if Elspeth needed him. So, he offered, “Ye’re a good mother, Elspeth.”

Brown eyes flicked to his, then away. “Thank ye,” she whispered. “When I came to terms with my lot in life, I decided I’d be the best lady of Dungotit, the best mother I could be.”

His hold tightened. “Ye are.”

“Then why...” ‘Twas as if the words had slipped from her lips, and Elspeth uttered a little groan and dropped her gaze once more.

“Why what?” he whispered, stroking her cheek. “Elsbeth, talk to me.”

Her tongue flicked across her lower lip, and he felt her take a deep breath. “I dinnae *feel* like a good mother. Sometimes I resent them.”

“I think that’s natural, especially considering the freedom ye used to have.”

“They changed my body.”

He felt himself smiling. “Yer body has naught to be concerned about, milady.” To prove the point, he shifted his palm away from her hip and around to her back.

She didn’t smile, but she didn’t pull away either. “Sometimes...” Her tone was that of a penitent at confession. “Sometimes, I dinnae think of them at all.”

For all he knew, ‘twas a perfectly natural thing for mothers. But he said, “Och, aye?”

“Aye.” Her gaze slowly lifted until ‘twas locked on his lips. “Like now. Right now, I’m no’ thinking of them at all.”

Craig’s heart began to beat faster, and he felt a stirring beneath his kilt. “N-now? What are ye thinking of instead?”

Her voice was a mere whisper, but he felt it in his soul. “Kissing ye.” Her gaze rose to meet his. “Is that horrible? I havenae felt this urge, this *desire*, in so long, I dinnae ken—”

Craig *likely* should’ve continued talking to her. Likely should’ve heard her feelings and her fears and her concerns. Likely should’ve assured her this was normal and natural, and he would never do aught she didn’t want. Likely should have shoved the helm atop his head and walked away.

But he could be an idiot at times, and instead, he kissed her.

He pressed her against him, tipped her head back with his hold, and claimed her lips as his own.

Again.

And something deep inside him, something primitive and primal, howled in satisfaction when she made a little whimpery noise and wrapped her arms around his neck to return the kiss.

This wasn't as frantic as the kiss they'd shared in that tavern. Nay, this was gentler, as if they were both exploring. Tongues teased, and Craig found himself smiling when Elspeth took his lower lip between hers and tugged.

His hand stroked her neck, then lower, and when he cupped her breast through the plain traveling gown she wore, she arched into his hold with a pleased gasp. He shifted, trying to hide his growing erection, but Elspeth's movement stilled him. Her pelvis rocked forward, her warmth capturing him.

And then she began to rub against him, and Craig heard his *own* groan.

Elspeth was the one to pull away with a gasp, her fingers tight in the overgrown hair at the back of his neck.

"Craig," she murmured, breathing hard.

"I'm sorry, milady." But he didn't drop his hand. In fact, he shifted his hand so that her breast fit more snugly in his hold and brushed his thumb across her nipple.

He saw a spark jump in her brown gaze, saw her nostrils flare, saw her lips curl a moment before she dragged him back down to meet her lips once more.

And aye, he smiled throughout this kiss as well.

They were both breathing hard when they heard the small voice calling.

"Mama? Mama, where are ye?"

Craig broke away from Elspeth, stepping to the side in time to see wee Katharine go trotting by. She wasn't looking their way, but was in fact heading straight for the brambles. He released Elspeth and lunged for her daughter, scooping the mischievous little imp in his arms as she squealed.

"Put me down, ye brigand!"

“Brigand, aye?” he rumbled, settling her atop his shoulders. “Ye’ve been listening to Brigit’s stories.”

“And Gorm’s!” the little girl announced. “Do ye ken he can belch the Lord’s Prayer?”

“An accomplishment indeed, lassie.” Craig turned back to her mother. “What are ye doing out here without Brigit?”

“Looking for ye. Brigit sent me to interrupt ye, whatever ye were doing. What *are* ye doing.”

Elspeth had recovered, but she was still discreetly setting herself to rights. Now she smiled at her daughter, sitting so high.

“My legs were verra tired, and Sir Hunter was helping me stretch them. *Ye* seem to have nae problems.”

Katharine patted him on his head. “Put me down, ye great giant. I need to run and stretch my legs, Brigit says.”

As Craig did as she commanded, Elspeth shook her head. He smiled at her. “Precocious little one, is she no’?”

Elspeth watched her daughter scamper off and hid her yawn behind her hand. “She was speaking in full sentences by the time she was Mary’s age. I worry for my sanity. I cannae imagine what kind of woman she’ll grow to be.”

And Craig had to stop himself from taking her in his arms again, from assuring her Katharine would be a wonderful human being.

They’re no’ yers to make such promises.

Aye, but...he was starting to realize that he wished they were.

“Come along,” he coaxed, beginning to walk back to the horses. “Ye’re riding with me.”

“Dinnae be—” Another yawn interrupted her. “I have to take care of the bairns.”

“When was the last time ye allowed someone to take care of *ye*?” he asked gently, and she had no response.

When they mounted once more, heading for Oliphant Castle, the nurse rode with Katharine, Brigit carried Mary, and Elspeth sat curled in Craig's lap. Her cheek was pillowed against his chest, his strong arm supported her back...

She was asleep before the last man left their little haven beside the stream.

As he listened to the sound of her soft, even breathing, Craig's heart ached that he couldn't hold her like this forever.

CHAPTER 5



DINNER AT OLIPHANT CASTLE was a raucous affair, and Elspeth didn't think she was the only one to become a bit dazed.

There were just *so many people*, and they all seemed content to yell over one another to make their points. Even Brigit, who normally seemed so cheerful and easy-going, was on edge, her gaze darting from one person to the next.

Of course, she was sitting at one of the lower tables, while Elspeth, her children, and Craig himself were sitting with the family. Craig had seemed surprised—and awkward—when Lady Oliphant invited him to join them.

“I'm just a blacksmith,” he'd stammered.

But Coira Oliphant, a redhead with strong features and a quick grin, merely shook her head. “Ye're a Hunter now, remember? And a cousin. Ye deserve to be honored, so get yer arse up there.”

Wee Katharine had taken his hand then and declared, “Ye have to sit beside me Craig, and cut my chicken.”

“We're having mutton, sweet. Can ye no' smell it?”

The five-year-old shook her head. “I dinnae like mutton. I like chicken. Go tell the cook.”

Before Elspeth could correct her daughter's manners, Coira snorted and bent at her waist to meet Katharine's eyes. “*First* of all, the *cook* is my sister, Lady Fen, and her husband, who used to be a Hunter.”

“Like Craig!” Katharine piped up.

“Aye,” Craig agreed, scooping her up to sit on his hip. “Fen is shy, and likely willnae come abovestairs tonight, but I can introduce ye tomorrow.”

“Brodie is foul-tempered,” Coira warned, “and doesnae like to be told what to make.”

“Ye mean, if I tell him to make me chicken instead of mutton, he’ll run me through with his meat spit?” Katharine gasped in delight.

Chuckling, Coira sent a glance Elspeth’s way. “I dinnae envy ye this one, milady.”

“Katharine is a gem,” Elspeth corrected, attempting for a haughty tone. “A gem who understands manners, but has no use for them, and also is turning *remarkably* bloodthirsty and refuses to brush her teeth. And if you refuse her demands, she threatens to chop you in half with her battleax.”

“Aye,” Craig intoned, nodding solemnly. “A gem.”

“Sounds like me,” Coira quipped.

Craig grinned. “Aye, she does!”

“Yay!” Katharine bounced on Craig’s hip. “I wanna be a laird too!”

Elspeth was already shaking her head when Coira tugged one of her daughter’s braids. “Nay, ‘tis mostly paperwork and letters and boring disputes and schedules. Do ye ken anything about sheep herding or wheat farming?”

The girl frowned. “That sounds terrible.”

“‘Tis. Ye best stick with battleaxing.”

“I *kenned* that was a verb!” Katharine announced.

And Elspeth had to turn away to hide the roll of her eyes.

The meal was delicious—Coira’s sister was gifted in the kitchens, indeed—but chaotic. She sat with Robbie on one side of her and Doughall, Coira’s husband, on the other. Craig sat on Robbie’s other side—although he assured her the lad

needed no protection here in Oliphant Castle—with Katharine beside him, chattering up a storm.

Doughall was the Oliphant Commander, but more than that, he was married to Coira, and thus was the Lady's consort. He made it clear he wasn't the laird of the Oliphants—his wife was capable and strong. And Elspeth thought that was just wonderful of him. 'Twas clear he loved his wife, and from the amused looks she occasionally shot him, Coira loved him deeply as well.

He shared the story of how Coira's father had decided to choose the next laird from among his sons-in-law, but none of the six daughters had liked that idea, although they all married quickly after that decree. Since the decision rested on whoever had the first grandson, they all had done their best to keep from having children...

Until Coira had *finally* been able to prove to her father that, as the eldest, who had handled clan business for years, she was most fit to lead the Oliphants after him. He'd retired, and he and his wife spent their time in peaceful pursuits now.

"Which doesnae always include dining with this rowdy bunch," he murmured, a hint of a smile on his lips.

Doughall kept up a running commentary for her, introducing the others, as well as his own daughter, Bess, a pretty girl mayhap five years older than Robbie. "Be warned, milady," Doughall intoned, "Bess will try to give ye an animal."

As Elspeth raised her brows, Bess scoffed. "No' *any* animal! I love my pets, and I love to share them with good homes. I have three ducklings right now, milady, that need good—"

"Nay," Elspeth was quick to deny, but tried to soften it with a shake of her head. "Forgive me, but when we reach Dungotit, 'twill be difficult enough to find our footing after so long away." She chose not to mention her worries about Robbie. "Having three children is enough for me, thank you."

"Do *they* want ducklings?" the lass asked.

“Bess, she said *nay*,” growled her father.

“I’ll take them!” called out a wee girl from down the table, who was sitting across from Katharine. When everyone stopped talking to turn and stare at her, she smiled. “I like ducks.”

The slender man at her side, who had his hair braided into dozens of little plaits, shook his head. “She doesn’t speak for ages, and then *this* is what I get?”

“I like ducks,” the angelic lass repeated.

Katharine piped up. “I dinnae like ducks. Do you know the boy ducks have a penis with *barbs* on it? And when they try to have baby ducks, if the mama duck doesn’t want to have babies, she fights the daddy duck?”

The other little girl was wide-eyed. “I dinnae like ducks any longer, Da.”

Elsbeth had dropped her forehead to her hand, embarrassment heating her cheeks as Robbie leaned around Craig to frown at his sister.

“Penises are no’ a polite dinner conversation topic.”

“Why no’?” she shot back at him. “Boys talk about their penises all the time!”

Elsbeth peeked out to see Craig shrug in agreement as the man across the table nodded, grinning.

The redheaded woman sitting on the man’s other side frowned thoughtfully. “As long as ‘tis done with scientific inquiry, I see nae reason *ought* could be considered inappropriate.”

As Coira called out something which made the other laugh, Doughall leaned closer to Elspeth.

“That is Lady Wynda, the fourth—nay, third—och, I forget their ages. She’s one of Coira’s younger sisters. She’s married to Pherson, the Oliphant falconer.”

He used his eating knife to point to the slender man with the braids. “That’s his daughter, Wren, a sweet thing. She

didn't speak for the longest time—or walk either, to be fair. Wynda helped with both concerns, and now the wee one can run and play with the other bairns, and sometimes doesnae *stop* talking.”

Elsbeth raised a brow. The lassie across the table looked about eight, and completely normal.

Doughall nodded. “Pherson was here hiding from trouble, but it found them, and brought Wynda into his life. She’s brilliant, and the one to ask about Oliphant history.”

Conversation swirled around them, but Doughall continued to tell her about the rest of the Oliphant sisters.

“The next-auldest to Coira is Nicola, who is now Lady McIlvain. She was our healer until she trained a replacement, and she met her husband—who was a King’s Hunter who went missing—when she was called to heal him. He’d taken a blow to the head and couldnae recall his name.”

“I remember that,” Elspeth gasped. “The story was all over court. His father stepped down and he’s the new laird now.”

“Aye, and as part of their adventure, they’ve adopted a bairn—he’s a bit aulder than yer youngest. Although Nicola writes that they have their hands full with all Ramsay’s younger siblings.”

Elsbeth swallowed a bite of the excellent mutton. “I can imagine. I remember hearing ‘twas a large family. And the next sister?”

“Ah, that would be Robena.” Doughall shot his daughter a glance, then lowered his voice when he explained to Elspeth. “She cut her hair, chased after her lover, and competed in the Highland Piping competition dressed as a lad. I dinnae ken the whole story—and ‘tis glad I am for it!—but the clot-heid had been promised to marry another lass, and the King allowed him to marry Robena instead.”

“Oh, my goodness, the Oliphants dinnae do marriage simply, do they?”

“No’ at all,” Doughall snorted. “My courtship with Coira was almost *normal* compared to the rest of them. Lady Fenella

is married to Brodie, who arrived with Laird McClure—both of them were Hunters. Brodie is standoffish—”

“I heard,” Elspeth said drily.

“And Fen is shy, so it took a cooking competition to get the two of them to work together. Laird McClure, meanwhile, fell in love with Leanna, Coira’s youngest sister, after an adventure which included finding a skeleton in the secret passages.”

“Secret passages?” Elspeth blurted, mayhap a little too loud, because everyone turned to look at her. She dipped her chin and lowered her voice. “Oliphant Castle has secret passages?”

Beside her, Robbie jumped in his seat. “Secret passages? Where?” he asked, looking around.

From across the table, Wynda chuckled. “There’s a few in this verra room. They snake throughout the castle.”

“Are they dangerous?” Robbie breathed.

“We used to have a donkey who roamed through them, and he’d find all the dangerous parts so we could block those off.”

Craig, who held a piece of bread in one hand, nodded. “Ye’d be surprised how much noise a trapped donkey can make. I got called in a few times to help free the puir beastie.”

Shaking her head, Elspeth managed not to laugh, certain this was a joke. “Does anyone *else* use the secret passages?”

“Och, aye,” Wynda agreed. “I live down in the village now with my family, but I’m certain Craig could give ye a tour of some of them, if ye’d like.”

The part of Elspeth which remembered the joy of riding bareback, or balancing atop the battlements barefooted, turned excited eyes to Craig. “I’d like that.”

“Me too!” piped up Robbie, and her hand found his under the table, glad to be able to share this.

“Me too!” bellowed Katharine, and Elspeth winced.

But it was the little girl across the table who dissuaded her daughter. “If ye go, ye might see the ghosts,” she whispered.

Katharine’s blue eyes went round. “Ghosts?”

Wren nodded. “My mama can see ghosts. There’s dozens.”

Dozens?

Elsbeth turned a skeptical look toward Lady Wynda, who shrugged ruefully. “Every generation or so, there’s an Oliphant lass *lucky* enough to see the Oliphant ghosts. This time ‘tis me. I have to put up with their complaints and occasionally...their demands.”

This last part was said with a meaningful smile at her husband, over their daughter’s head. From Pherson’s smirk, Elspeth knew there was a story there.

“What do the ghosts want?” Robbie asked, a little hesitant.

The falconer took up the story. “Some of them just want to share their story. Some just want to cause trouble.”

“Be annoying,” Wren corrected, poking her potatoes.

“And some,” Wynda began, eyes sparkling with excitement, “are sending messages. The Ghostly Drummer of Oliphant Castle has been heard for generations by those *doooomed*...to fall in love!”

Robbie had shrunk down in his chair at the word *doooom*, but now glanced at Elspeth. Beneath the table, she squeezed his hand. Partly telling him ghosts didn’t exist, and partly telling him she would protect him, if they did.

It was Katharine who scoffed. “Fall in love? That’s stupid. I don’t wanna fall in love!”

With a straight face, Wynda nodded as she picked up her wine glass. “Then ye had best stay snug in yer bed in the nursery tonight, and no’ venture out.” She lowered her voice mysteriously. “Who kens what might be waiting to jump out and fall in love with ye?”

Elsbeth hid her smile as her daughter made gagging noises. Doughall was correct; Lady Wynda Oliphant *was* brilliant.

That evening, Craig escorted them up the stairs. “This is the nursery,” he told the children. “Mary is already asleep in there, along with yer nurse, so there’s to be nae sneaking out to explore the passages, aye?”

Since this last command was directed to Katharine, her lower lip plumped out. “But I wanna see them!”

“I’ll take ye exploring tomorrow, I vow it.” To everyone’s surprise, the large man lowered himself to one knee in front of Elspeth’s tiny daughter. “’Tis my job to protect ye, sweet, and there’s many dangers in the passages. Ye must promise me ye’ll no’ venture into them without me.”

Katharine was eying him warily. “If I promise to wait until ye take me, can we go tomorrow?”

“Right after we break our fast,” Craig swore, pressing his palm to his chest.

“And can I wear yer helm?”

Craig’s eyebrows jerked upward like two startled caterpillars.

“Why?”

“I want to look scary.”

Craig shot Elspeth a worried look. She widened her eyes in a noncommittal way. He was on his own for this one.

He cleared his throat. “Er, nay. ‘Tis no’ something a bairn should wear.”

Katharine’s own brows snapped together in a gesture of displeasure Elspeth knew only too well. The bargaining was about to begin.

“Then can I have a sword?”

Elspeth watched as Craig’s shoulders tensed, obviously uncertain how to answer this request. Robbie, whose hand Elspeth still held, glanced up at her with a smirk.

Finally, the Hunter cleared his throat and promised, “A knife. A small one.”

Somberly, Katharine stuck out her hand. “Ye have a deal.”

When he shook her hand, it looked as if Craig was worried about breaking it. But after, Katharine threw herself into his arms with a big smile and planted a kiss on his cheek.

He looked dazed when she straightened. “Goodnight, Craig. Love ye. Love ye, Mama. No’ ye, Robbie, ye’re annoying.”

“Love ye too, Keke,” her son intoned dryly.

Elsbeth was smiling as she kissed both her children goodnight, reminding them of their promises to stay in bed all night.

When she emerged into the hallway, Craig was standing there, staring at naught, his fingers resting against his cheek where Katharine had kissed him. Elspeth studied him for a moment. When they’d arrived this afternoon, he’d shaved again and trimmed his beard, and now he seemed more... civilized, mayhap?

She liked the way he looked like this.

But on the other hand, she liked the way he’d looked that first night in the tavern, all wild and bushy. The same way he’d looked today when he’d kissed her behind the thicket.

Finally, he roused himself to offer his arm. “They’ll be safe, Elspeth, I swear it. Nae one here at Oliphant Castle will hurt them, and the defenses are second-to-none. Most of the passages have been blocked off.”

As they strolled down the corridor, he explained the castle’s defenses until she was certain no one would be able to sneak in to hurt Robbie the way the attackers had done in Scone.

She grew bolder. “Does this mean ye’ll be able to seek yer own bed?” she asked boldly. “Rather than keeping watch all night?”

He seemed...embarrassed, suddenly. At the bottom of the stairs, Craig rubbed the back of his neck, not meeting her eyes. “Aye, I thought...well, there’s a small chamber just there—”

he nodded to a door. “’Twas used for servants, but it became a guest chamber in my great-grandda’s time, because he had so many children. If I stayed there, I could hear anyone coming...”

Her hand closed around his forearm, pulling it down, as she smiled softly. “And ye might finally have a good night’s sleep on a real bed. I understand, Craig. Ye deserve it. My bairns are safe here.”

He nodded mutely, his gaze on her lips.

Which parted, remembering the way he’d kissed her earlier that day. Remembering the throbbing *need* between her legs, the way she’d pressed against him, desperation making her even bolder.

“Elsbeth...” he whispered hoarsely, and she leaned in.

When their lips met, that desperation returned. She surged up on her toes, her arms snaking around his middle, trying to hold him in place. He wrapped himself around her, and for the first time in—in *ever*, Elspeth felt truly protected.

Truly cared for.

When was the last time ye allowed someone to take care of ye?

He’d asked her that.

In his arms, she knew she *was* cared for.

She wanted this. She wanted *him*.

As a widow, Elspeth had the freedom to take a lover, but had never seen a need. Even in court, where such things were common, she had avoided such entanglements...mainly for the sake of her son. She knew anyone who approached *her* was likely looking for power through Robbie.

But with this man...with Craig, she knew that wasn’t the case. Craig was simple, aye, but not stupid. He *did* care for her, and for her children. Mayhap ‘twas just because she was an assignment from the King, like any other...but that, more than aught else, made her trust him more.

Craig wouldn't hurt her. Wouldn't hurt Robbie or the lassies. If he wanted her, 'twas because of *her*...and she knew he could give her pleasure.

Pleasure had never been a concern in her marriage to John, but with Craig... She wanted this.

She wanted *him*.

"Craig," she gasped when they came up for air. He pressed his forehead against hers, and she was content to just *breathe*. "Come to my room."

His response wasn't nearly as immediate as she'd like. When she opened her eyes, 'twas to see him watching her, a rueful grimace on his face.

"What?" she prompted. She expected him to ask if she was certain, if she truly knew her own mind.

But instead, he merely said, "Brigit will be there."

Her first response was *Then I'll send her away*, but...but the reminder was a good one. Brigit *would* be there, and while the woman had become something of a friend over the last two years since being assigned to Elspeth, she still represented the court, and intrigue, and the sorts of things which brought danger to Robbie.

Elspeth slowly straightened, her arms dropping away from Craig.

"I understand," she murmured, already backing away. He couldn't come to her room, of course not.

His hand rose, reaching for her, and she saw the way his kilt tented in the front. "Elspeth."

But she turned and hurried toward her chambers.

When she reached the large set of rooms given to her—and her maid—she found Brigit waiting with a smile and a rolled piece of parchment.

"What's that?" Elspeth asked as her maid pulled the pins from her hair and fussed over the orange gown she'd worn to dinner that night.

“Oh that?” When Brigit grinned, ‘twas almost wicked. “I found the map of the secret passages. See?” She rolled it out and anchored it atop the dressing table. “This is yer room. The door is behind the tapestry of the deer hunt.”

Elspeth followed her pointing finger, then bent her head to study the map once more. “And...and Craig’s room?”

There was no judgment from Brigit, and no hesitation either. Her finger stabbed a point on the map. “Ye press the doors to open them, from either side. So ye’d go through the door in this chamber, turn right, then yer second left. His door would be the first on yer right.”

Brigit had known. Just like in Scone, when she’d searched until she’d found Craig, the man who could protect her son, she’d known. She’d already searched out a map and knew the path between Elspeth and Craig.

Right, second left, first door on right. ‘Tis that easy.

Slowly, Elspeth raised her gaze to the door once more, and what it represented.

As if from a distance came her maid’s voice. “So, I suppose, milady, the question is...what do ye want?”

CHAPTER 6



CRAIG WAS glad he'd taken the time to visit the loch and bathe this afternoon. He'd felt more like himself at dinner...right up until that kiss.

Kissing Elspeth had made him feel...itchy all over.

'Tis a terrible thing to say.

It was the truth.

Ye're comparing the woman ye love to a rash?

Nay, he wasn't, he was just—*wait*. The woman he loved?

Craig cursed himself as he pulled his shirt over his head. He didn't love Elspeth, he was just...*attracted* to her. Lust and love were two different things. He *couldn't* love her; she was the mother of an earl, and he was her bodyguard.

But ye can fantasize about her, aye?

It wouldn't be right. He respected her too much to stroke his cock while thinking of her lips on his skin, or the way she'd feel when he slid into her wetness...

With a groan, Craig dragged his fingers through his hair. Mayhap he needed to visit the loch again.

A glance out the window told him the sun had long since set. He unbuckled his belt and tossed his kilt over the chair. He couldn't go to the loch—he *needed* to go to sleep. He'd been looking forward to a real bed, and a full night's sleep since they left Scone.

So why did he still feel so...*itchy*?

“Fook,” he muttered, then dropped to the floor, arms braced.

After fifty push-ups, his muscles burned, so he pushed for another fifty. The burn was good—*right*. That was the sort of thing he needed. A reminder of who he was, and what his role was.

Rolling his shoulders, he climbed to his feet once more, finishing his evening ablutions. When he couldn’t avoid it any further, he blew out the candle and climbed into the bed. ‘Twas smaller than he was used to, but would do.

Sighing in pleasure, he stacked his hands behind his head, closed his eyes...

And laid there, wide awake.

Damnation. Mayhap he *should* stroke himself.

Just to help ye sleep.

Aye, just for that.

His eyes opened, staring sightlessly through the darkness, as one hand crept beneath the blanket he’d tossed over his hips. His cock was thickening in excitement, and when he wrapped his hand around it, a breath hissed from between his lips.

A few tugs, and he couldn’t help the way he groaned.

“*Elspeth*.”

That’s when he heard it: a scratching sound coming from the walls. Craig froze, senses on alert.

Faintly there came the sound of a door opening. He could hear the hinges, then the faint inhalation as whoever was behind it came in contact with the tapestry in front of it. He knew what that meant; someone had used the secret passage to enter his room.

“Who’s there?” he barked, wishing he’d taken his sword to bed instead of his hard-on. “Who are ye?”

No answer, but the soft sounds of bare feet on the floor. He pushed himself upright, and now swung with one arm. “What

are ye doing, ye bastard?”

The bed dipped, and he was already reaching for that spot, when a voice he recognized whispered, “I needed ye.”

And he froze.

Elsbeth needed him, and he couldn't *not* go to her, help her. Lay down his life for her. For her safety, for her happiness.

“What do ye need, love?” he rasped, arm still frozen in the act of reaching for her.

“Ye,” she murmured, crawling atop the mattress, so he had to fall back against the pillows until she loomed over him—or would've, had there been enough light to see her do it.

Och. Well, aye, he could do this for her, as well.

'Twas as if he'd conjured her with his naughty fantasies. She was *here*. She'd come to *him*.

Craig grinned up at her. “What do ye have in mind, love?”

“*This.*”

He felt her throw one long leg over his thighs, then her palms were on his shoulders and she was straddling him. He froze when the junction of her thighs came into contact with his hardness which had jutted from beneath the blanket.

“Elsbeth,” he rasped, his hands settling on her thighs. “Are ye—ye're wearing a chemise?”

“Aye,” she drawled.

“*Just* a chemise?”

There was the rustle of linen above him, and he felt the material pull from under his hands. In a heartbeat, his palms rested against the smoothness of her thighs. Her *skin*. Naught stood between them.

“No' anymore,” she whispered impishly, and Craig felt a chuckle crawling up his chest.

Not at her words, necessarily, but because she was here. Because she'd come to him.

He slid his hands up her thighs to her hips, then up her sides. He halted just beneath her tits. “Elspeth,” he groaned.

Then her hands were on his, drawing them upward, cupping them around her breasts, and they both sucked in a gasp at the contact.

Elspeth was slender, even after her pregnancies, and her tits were small, more pliable, less firm than those belonging to a younger woman. Craig had no opinion on this fact, he was just delighted to finally—finally!—be holding them.

His thumbs brushed against her nipples, and she whimpered, falling forward once more to brace herself over him, and he wished he could see her.

Well, he could still *taste*, aye?

With her tits at the perfect level, Craig had merely to lift his head and—

“Blessed virgin!” she gasped, jerking backward. Before he could apologize, Elspeth surged toward him, and he felt her arching into his touch. “That felt *naught* like a bairn!”

Chuckling, he took her nipple in his mouth once more, teasing with his tongue and teeth. Above him, Elspeth panted, rocking back and forth, dragging herself closer to his hardness.

Nay, he realized—she was attempting to find pleasure by rubbing against him! Well, that was easy to solve. He reached down with one hand and readjusted her, until her curls rested against the underside of his stiff cock.

When she rocked forward now, her wetness—*damnation, but she was so wet already!*—coated him, and they both groaned.

He could cum like this, spilling across his belly, her tits in his mouth.

‘Twas impossible to believe she was really here. She’d come to *him*.

He’d do everything he could to bring her pleasure.

ELSPETH KNEW she'd died and gone to Heaven.

Never, *ever*—not even when she'd been a young lass, experimenting on her own body with her fingers—had she *ever* felt something this remarkable. The sensation of his hardness sliding along her cleft was enough to send shudders down her spine, but the way he was worshipping her nipples?

Well, all she could say was *thank goodness* Mary was no longer nursing, because this could *seriously* fook up her feeding routine.

“Craig!” she gasped, feeling a little guilty as she slid along him again, making certain the tip of his member caressed the little spot at the top of her cleft she was trying to reach. “I want...”

Her words ended in a sort of gasping moan as he rolled one nipple between his thumb and forefinger and lifted his mouth from the other.

“Aye, love,” he growled in between the kisses he was planting across her skin. “Tell me.”

Pleasure built between her legs, and the *shock* of it was almost more remarkable than the pleasure itself. In her experience, sex with a man had been deeply unfulfilling. But she was ready to find ecstasy just from using his member as a toy...

That, and his mouth.

Who knew a man's mouth could be so *hot*? And so ticklish. Craig had trimmed his beard, but the bristles still brushed against her sensitive skin in the most wonderful way.

One of his hands loosed her breast and skimmed down her side. “Ye need me *here*?” he murmured, pressing one thumb against the little pearl hidden by its hood. Startled by the sudden flood of sensations, Elspeth jerked against him, sliding forward.

And positioning his cock at her entrance.

His hands had stilled. “Elspeth, we dinnae—”

That was as far as he got. When she sank down atop him, the rest of his words—objections?—were cut off by a groan. They both froze as his callused fingers dug into her hip.

She should've guessed he'd be *big* all over. He filled her in a way her husband never had, even had he cared to make her as wet as Elspeth was right now.

“Elspeth.”

Her name was a faint whisper from his lips, floating about her skin, caressing her beautifully.

Slowly—so slowly!—his other hand moved from her breast, down her side, to her hip. Now he was holding her... and she felt him exhale. He exhaled, and his fingers loosened, until his fingertips were just resting atop her skin.

He was giving her control.

Swallowing, Elspeth shifted forward to touch his chest, and in doing so, set off white-hot sparks behind her eyelids.

“Ye—” he began, his voice little more than a rasp. She heard him swallow, and then, “Ye can take what ye need, lass. Rock yer hips forward.”

She hadn't intended this, but now she was in this position, she couldn't *not* follow his command. She rocked her hips forward quickly with a gasp, then eased them back once more.

“Does that feel good, Elspeth?” came his growl in the darkness. “Ye like that?”

“Please. Oh—God *please!*” She couldn't form coherent thoughts. She was too focused on the pleasure which threatened her just from sliding his cock in and out of her minutely.

She did it again, and again, feeling his body go rock-hard under her, his muscles locked as he held himself still. Soon, she tipped forward, bracing her hands against his chest, so she could pull almost entirely off his member, then sink back down again.

The rhythm was wrong. This was merely *teasing* her, playing with her. She wanted...she wanted...

“Craig,” she finally moaned, dropping her head forward, knowing her hair was getting in his face. “I dinnae ken—what is...”

His fingers tightened around her thighs. “Ye can do it, lass.”

“Nay!” she gasped. “I need—I want *ye*. Please, Craig. Please, I need...”

She didn’t know what she needed.

But he did.

His hands rose to cover hers, and he shifted her until her weight was on her knees. She felt him pull his legs up so his thighs brushed against her arse, and assumed he was planting his feet. But the whole time, he was touching her, gentle caresses which were slowly driving her mad.

“Ye’re certain, Elspeth?”

She could feel his breath on her skin, and knew she wanted to kiss him. She gasped, “Aye!”

He began to move. Slowly at first, thrusting up into her body, each movement a tease. But the thrusts grew faster, deeper...stronger. Until she was having trouble breathing and could focus on naught else besides the building pleasure. She chased it desperately, yearning for completion.

“Come for me, lass,” Craig growled, and reached between them.

He touched her.

He touched her pearl, the place he’d teased earlier, the place which had made her so wet. *No* one had ever touched her there, and the sensation, combined with his thick cock so deep inside her, sent Elspeth careening over the edge of eternity.

Her last conscious thought was to grope for him, to find his neck, to pull herself down and plant her lips upon his. Dimly she felt one strong arm wrap around her back, holding her in place as he kissed her, but she could concentrate on naught beside the pleasure pulsing through her veins.

Her inner muscles throbbed around him, *achingly* beautiful, while he made a noise which could only be called a whimper, but held himself still.

Elsbeth almost certainly stopped breathing at some point, because when she *finally* inhaled, it felt as if she'd died and been resurrected.

Holy blessed virgin.

She'd *never* imagined it could feel so good with a man!

Slowly, her muscles—*all* of her muscles—began to relax, and she settled against him.

Under her lips, he made a muffled little sound again, and this time she had enough self-awareness to pull back a bit. After all, surely 'twas considered bad manners to suffocate her lover?

As she did, she heard a “*Thank fook,*” and then he was shifting beneath her. She felt his member slide from her wetness, felt him reach around to grasp himself. He made two quick jerking motions against the cleft of her arse and then...

And then, with a grunt, he came, spilling his hot seed across the globes of her arse.

Elsbeth shuddered, feeling some of the liquid dripping down through her core, and knowing he'd controlled himself for *her*.

How many men could manage that? How many men would've taken their pleasure, even as she had?

But Craig had thought of her. He'd wanted her to come, and he'd allowed it without marring it with *his* pleasure.

A part of her was sad, wishing she'd had a chance to feel him spill inside her. But a greater part—the part which had been pregnant seven times and delivered five children—appreciated his thoughtfulness.

Ye're likely too auld to become pregnant again.

Nay, she was not. She just...

Dinnae want to be impregnated by a blacksmith-turned-bodyguard?

Nay!

Nay, the idea of carrying Craig's son or daughter was... well, it *shouldn't* make her heart tighten in wanting.

'Twould make things infinitely more complicated right now, that was for certes.

"Elsbeth..." His whisper floated around her, caressing her skin, even as his fingers spread across her back, tucking her impossibly closer. "Thank ye."

She felt herself smiling but didn't lift her head. 'Twas too dark to see anything, anyhow. Might as well just focus on the *feel* of his heat, the taste of his skin. The sound of his heart beating beneath her palm.

"I should be thanking ye."

"Nay," he rumbled, drawing his other hand up her back to cup her head. "I never expected someone like ye could look at *me...*"

"Ye are magnificent." She kissed his chest. "Ye *were* magnificent. *Thank ye*, Craig, for such pleasure. Nae one has ever cared about me enough to concern themselves with my pleasure."

He was quiet for a long moment, then exhaled hard enough she could feel it tickle the small hairs near her ear. "Then thank ye for allowing me to take care of ye, love."

Love.

The endearment made her smile again. 'Twas likely said without thinking, the way he called her daughters *sweet*. But here and now, she could pretend it meant something more.

His beard tickled her, but she was too comfortable to move. So, she snaked her fingers up between them and pushed aside the bristles, feeling a bit like Mary, who'd fallen asleep in his arms earlier—dear God in Heaven, had it only been that morning?

Had her world been altered so beautifully in only a day?

But...

Craig was a King's Hunter, assigned to protect her son. He would travel with them to Dungotit and solve the mystery of who was endangering them, and then...and then? And then he'd return to Scone. Being a Hunter wasn't a hobby, something he could simply *cease*.

Nay, this was an enjoyable interlude, but there was no future for the two of them, no matter how delightful it might be to imagine being safe in his arms forever.

Under her ear, his heart beat strongly, reminding her he wouldn't let her down. He'd protect Robbie as he'd vowed.

Craig was slowly stroking her skin, and she found herself quite cozy. The adventures of the day were finally catching up with her. Here in the dark, surrounded by his warmth and his heartbeat, she felt her eyelids growing heavy.

Beneath her, he suddenly stiffened.

Confused, Elspeth lifted her head...

And realized the beating she'd been hearing wasn't his heartbeat. "What is that?" she breathed as the pounding slowly faded.

She couldn't be certain, but in the darkness she *thought* she saw the gleam of his smile, right before he pulled her down and tucked her beneath his chin once more.

Despite how messy they both were, he wrapped his arms around her, seeming content to hold her. Her husband had always left her bed immediately after the act, but Craig... Craig was *cherishing* her, wasn't he?

"Unless I'm verra much mistaken," came his amused whisper near her hair as she was falling asleep, "That, love, was the Ghostly Drummer of Oliphant Castle, telling me I'm doomed."

CHAPTER 7



CRAIG *KNEW* he shouldn't be thinking about his heart this morning. What happened last night—his *heart* shouldn't have been involved at all. 'Twas just two people, coming together for mutual satisfaction, aye?

So why did he feel so...*light* today? Why was there a bounce in his step? Even wee Katharine had remarked upon it when he'd gone to fetch her and Robbie from the nursery.

"Ye're happy this morning. I'm no'." She'd tried to kick him in the shin. "Nurse dinnae let me put honey on my porridge."

Robbie smirked at Craig. "Because she tried to rub it in Mary's hair last time."

Katharine aimed a kick at Robbie, and would've connected, had Craig not scooped her up and marched them all off to the nearest entrance to the secret passages.

Aye, waking up with Elspeth in his arms had made him smile today, even if she'd been flustered and ducked back through the passages to her room, with only a quick kiss to tide him over. He would've enjoyed another round of pleasure this morning, but honestly, the comfort of her in his arms had been wonderful.

But spending today with her children had been fairly wonderful itself.

He'd always enjoyed the little ones—at one point, he would've said 'twas because he thought like them, but Drum's

command to have faith in himself discouraged those sorts of insults.

He was realizing, despite no' having children of his own, there'd always been so many wee ones around Oliphant Castle that he'd become used to teaching them. He *enjoyed* helping to mold their young minds to become the adults who'd make the clan a better place, and he'd missed that in his time as a Hunter.

Being around Robbie reminded him of that.

Somewhere along the way, the lad had ceased to be merely an assignment and had become...well, something more. Someone Craig enjoyed being around.

Now that their tour of the secret passages was done, Craig had offered to take Robbie and his sister down to the village and show them around. The bakery had been a favorite so far, because they'd each received a sample of the sweet bread, and Katharine had seemed excited about the smithy.

Mainly because Craig had talked his cousin into allowing the wee sprite the chance to hit a piece of molten metal with the smallest hammer. "Careful," he'd warned. "'Tis hot enough to burn ye."

The five-year-old had given him a look which clearly said she *knew* that, then whaled away on what was supposed to be a nail.

"I dinnae realize nails were so flat," whispered Robbie dryly.

Craig stifled his chuckle. "Mayhap she can use it as a— nay, 'tis too flat for even that. If she sharpens one side, 'twould be a fine knife."

"Och, aye, just what Mother wants her to have, more weapons."

That time, Craig hadn't bothered to hide his snort of laughter. "That's thin enough, Kat."

The little girl, red-faced and flushed, had beamed when he'd showed her how to plunge her "nail" into water to cool it,

and now she held it in her pocket while she skipped ahead as they continued their tour of the village, taking it out to wave at random Oliphants and declaring she wanted to be a blacksmith when she was grown.

“I’m no’ certain ‘tis any better than a battle-axer,” Robbie admitted, “which is what she still calls a berserking warrior.”

Craig shrugged, one hand on the hilt of his sword and the other hooked into his belt as they strolled. “My great-grand uncle, Duncan Oliphant, worked right in that verra forge as a talented goldsmith. His true father was the laird, but the man who married his mother was the village smith, and taught Duncan about the blacksmithing trade. ‘Twas a woman, however, who taught Duncan what he needed to ken about being a goldsmith, and he started a school teaching others—men and women—nearby.”

Robbie hummed thoughtfully, and when Craig glanced down at him—keeping one eye on Katharine, who’d stopped to chatter at Bess and a shaggy Highland Coo—he saw the lad stood with one hand on his miniature sword, the other hooked in his belt.

As if he was mimicking Craig.

The thought made him *proud*, although he had no right to be.

“Did yer father teach ye smithing?” Robbie asked without looking up at Craig. There was something in his voice which told the man there was more to the question, so he was careful how he answered.

“Nay, my da was the Oliphant Commander, just as his father afore him. I learned from a cousin, descended from Duncan Oliphant, the goldsmith.”

Robbie hummed again, his attention also on his younger sister. Or *seemingly* so.

“My father didn’t teach me aught either,” he finally admitted. “Mayhap he would’ve, once I grew.”

‘Twas dangerous ground, speaking to a child about death. “Aye, likely. I kened he was proud of ye.”

But the lad snorted. “Then why did he want another son so badly? My mother had two bairns after me—before Katharine—who didnae breathe. My father blamed her.”

Craig winced, his chest tightening not just for this lad who thought ‘twas evidence his father disapproved of *him*, but for what Elspeth had gone through.

She’d come to his bed last night, trusting him. Trusting him to not only bring her pleasure, but to not put her through that horror again.

Thank fook ye remembered to pull out in time, aye?

Despite spilling against her arse, last night had been the most pleasure he’d ever experienced with a woman, and it had naught to do with how experienced she was or how long it had been since he’d been with another...it had been *her*.

His heart was light, his body at ease, because ‘twas *Elspeth*.

But that wasn’t what Robbie needed to hear, of course not. So, Craig cleared his throat. “Yer father...he sounds like a hard man. Likely a good earl, though.”

“Aye.” The lad sounded bitter. “I dinnae want to be like him, though.”

Robbie needed someone to teach him to rule with compassion and grace, and Elspeth would do that for him.

“Ye dinnae have to,” Craig assured him. “Although I ken returning to yer home will be difficult.”

“I dinnae remember it.” There was that bite of bitterness in the lad’s tone again. “My father died almost two years ago, and that night I almost died from poison in my supper, and the next day Mother began making plans to move us to Scone.”

Shite. The lad had been only seven years auld!

“That fast?” Craig shook his head, knowing he couldn’t fault her reasoning. But he hadn’t realized the first attack had come so quickly. “How did yer father die, laddie?”

Robbie glanced up at him, then away. “He was out riding with his men, and the horse saw a snake and threw him. ‘Twas an accident, they said.”

Aye. His men *would* say that, wouldn’t they?

Shite shite shite.

Men died from being thrown by horses all the time; ‘twas a perfectly un-suspicious death. What made it suspicious was the fact that there was an attempt on the man’s heir that night.

Why had Drummond not told him this? Mayhap he didn’t know.

Cursing quietly, Craig pinched the bridge of his nose and settled one hand on Robbie’s shoulder. Hearing this, there was more than a small chance that the lad’s father was murdered, which made this mission even more interesting.

And a lot more dangerous.

Robbie shifted under his hold, and when he opened his eyes, he realized the lad was looking up at him, trust in those dark eyes so like Elspeth’s. He trusted Craig, the same as his mother did, and Craig *wasn’t* going to let them down.

“Ye ken what I miss the most?” the lad whispered.

Craig didn’t ask, but squeezed the small shoulder.

Robbie’s gaze was focused on Craig’s chin. “I miss having—having someone like ye. Someone who will talk to me like my opinion matters.”

That tightening in his chest? Craig swallowed. *Now* it felt as if he’d been stabbed, right in the heart. Was it possible to bleed out from *feelings*? Because if so, he was in danger.

“Yer mother—”

“My mother is a good mother.” Robbie lifted his gaze. “But she’s no’ a man.”

Craig squeezed the lad’s shoulder again. “Nay,” he managed hoarsely. “She’s no’.”

“Ye are. Ye listen to me like I matter.”

Oh fook.

With a noise that *absolutely wasn't him trying to hold in tears, no' at all*, Craig pulled the lad closer, wrapping both arms around him. Robbie buried his face in Craig's chest and wrapped his arms around his middle, and also wasn't crying, if anyone asked, *thank ye verra much*.

"Ye matter, Robbie," Craig muttered against the lad's hair. "Ye matter verra much."

"To my mother?" The words were muffled.

"Aye, to her. And to yer sisters. And to the people of Dungotit, eventually." Craig swallowed hard and whispered his next words.

"And to me."

ELSPETH'S STEPS hastened when she saw Craig's red head bent over her son's. What had happened? Was Robbie hurt?

She hefted Mary higher on her hip and wished her other arm wasn't burdened with the basket of food so she might gather up her skirts and run. But before she'd crossed the square, Craig straightened and stepped back from Robbie, and Elspeth could see her son's brave smile, so she slowed.

Trying to get her heart under control, she watched the man move his hands to Robbie's shoulders, watched him speak intently. Her son nodded a few times and even replied.

When Craig dropped his hands, Robbie seemed to stand taller.

By the time she arrived, both stood in mirrored poses, and she had to admit...her son looked very much like the man he would someday become.

Wisely, she chose not to mention the evidence of tears on his cheeks. Tears which had threatened her own cheeks when she'd realized Craig was comforting her lad. Robbie needed a man like—

Nay, dinnae think it. 'Twill only hurt more when Craig returns to Scone.

So, plastering a bright smile on her face, she held up the basket. “Coira told me the meadow on the north side of the castle is empty, and Fen packed us some luncheon. I thought we might enjoy a picnic—*Where is Katharine?*”

Her sudden registering of her daughter’s absence immediately made her picture all sorts of trouble she might be into. Her attempts to whirl about to look for the girl were stopped when a chuckling Craig lifted Mary from her arms and settled her against his shoulder.

“Hello, sweet one. Kat is dallying with yonder coo.”

“Coo? What coo—*oh,*” Elspeth breathed in relief, having seen her daughter talking to the shaggy beast.

Robbie stepped up to take the basket. “Ye thought we lost her, did ye no’? *Ooof,* did Lady Fen pack us rock cakes?”

Craig scooped the basket as well, without any of the trouble Elspeth had juggling both loads. “Laddie, go fetch yer sister. We’ll have her wash her hands at the well afore we reach the meadow.”

And Elspeth had to admit she was impressed he’d remembered the hand-washing.

The meadow really was lovely, parts of it planted, parts of it growing wild with heather and wildflowers...and the part nearest the castle, where they settled, was shorn by a peaceful herd of sheep making their leisurely way eastward.

“’Tis a popular gathering place,” Craig explained, laying out the blanket Fen had helpfully included. He sent her a wink. “Popular for trysting, as well.”

Before Elspeth could decide how to respond to that, Katharine bellowed, “I’m no’ hungry, I’m going to play with the sheep!”

Craig lunged for her, scooping her around the waist and throwing her over his shoulder before she could disappear. Elspeth had to smile.

“Ye will eat first, *then* ye may play. Lady Fen is a celebrated cook, as is her husband.”

Katharine was kicking, so Craig pretended to drop her, and her complaints turned to screams of excitement. Hurrying to lay out the food before her daughter lost interest, Elspeth marveled at how well Craig seemed to understand her children.

That was, until she looked up to see him whirling Katharine around by her ankles, her skirts up around her ears and her bare arse on display.

“*What* are ye doing?”

“Having fun.” Robbie sighed wistfully and Elspeth realized he was likely jealous.

“Da! Dadadada!” Mary was standing, clapping her hands and bouncing in that way bairns did as she watched the excitement. And Elspeth sighed, knowing she couldn’t stop the fun.

Besides, Craig stopped soon enough, dropping a dizzy Katharine on her bottom on the blanket. Noticing how Robbie was looking at him, he smiled at the lad. “Ready for a turn?”

Robbie lit up.

There was no other word for it; he lit up as if someone had offered him the Crown Jewels.

Craig was large enough to lift the lad and whirl him without any issue, and Elspeth’s hand went to her throat as she watched her son laughing like a normal lad. He had such little *fun* in his life, and when he returned to Dungotit, his responsibilities would commence in earnest.

And what could she offer? More lessons? The occasional snuggle when he’d allow it?

Craig offered him *trust. Companionship.*

Fun.

Elspeth’s eyes closed to hold in her tears. When Craig left, she was beginning to suspect he’d break her heart. But her

children would also be devastated.

“I changed my mind, Mama, I *am* hungry.”

As always, there was little time to be maudlin when Elspeth had to care for her children. She forced a smile for Katharine. “Fen fries her chicken, did ye ken? Try this. And a berry tart.”

The five-year-old was easy enough to satisfy, so she turned her attention to keeping the bairn out of the sticky food. She was occupied by tearing off pieces of bread to pass to Mary when the two males flopped down on the blanket, breathing hard from laughter.

This time her smile was genuine as she doled out the food.

The meal was messy and informal and *fun*, and Elspeth realized it had been ages since she’d felt this way. Mayhap it had been since she’d been a lassie herself, barefoot and carefree. For certes, she couldn’t recall a time in her adult life—especially not with her children—when they’d been without responsibility long enough to relax and enjoy themselves so thoroughly.

After the meal was eaten and Katharine and Robbie had run off to play with—or rather, harass—the sheep, Elspeth said as much to Craig.

“Thank ye for this. This has been...”

“Fun,” he supplied, passing a berry to Mary, whose face was already stained with the juices. “Ye have a beautiful family, Elspeth.”

“Thank ye,” she whispered automatically, but his praise really did warm her. “They care for ye.”

“Aye, and I care for them.” His answer was immediate, and she was impressed. “’Tis maddening to think someone might wish them—wish ye—ill.”

He’d been thinking about the attempts on Robbie’s life? Well, *that* soured her mood. Still, she was grateful Craig took his responsibility so seriously.

And a good reminder why he’s here.

She busied herself by cleaning the bairn's face, then helping her stand.

"I'm sorry, Elspeth," Craig began softly. "I dinnae mean to ruin the day. 'Tis just...Robbie only just told me how yer husband died."

Elspeth shot him a quick look of confusion and he shrugged.

"It might've been an accident, aye, but the fact the first attempt on the lad was made that verra day?"

"I always assumed..." She swallowed, her fingers tightening around Mary's as the bairn bounced happily, practicing her steps while holding on. "Whoever 'twas just took advantage of the timing."

"Aye, 'tis possible." Craig watched them a few minutes, then spoke gently once more. "*Whoever 'twas*. Ye dinnae have any guesses who might wish Robbie ill."

"Who might wish him *dead*?" Blessed Virgin, 'twas difficult to speak of such things! Her throat threatened to close off as she kept her focus on her youngest. "I suppose ye ken there is an obvious suspect."

Craig blew out a breath. "I'm told yer husband had a younger brother, with his own son."

Elspeth nodded as she shifted Mary about so the bairn faced Craig, and moved her hold from her wee hands to her soft waist, holding her upright. "Roger is his name. My brother-in-law. He is married to Agnes, and their son Simon is almost twenty now, fostering with a laird in the Lowlands. But Roger..."

When she shook her head, her attention on Mary's curls, Craig prompted, "What is it, love?"

Elspeth thought of her brother-in-law, a man she towered over who hunched near his books and always had a ready smile for someone who'd listen to him talk about his history.

"Roger does no' *seem* the kind who could do such terrible things. When ye meet him, ye'll understand. He *could* be play-

acting all these years—”

“Some people are *good* at seeming, Elspeth.”

The sound of her name on his lips always sent a happy little shiver through her, but now she just smiled sadly as she sat back, allowing her daughter to balance on her own.

“Who is in charge of Dungotit?” he asked quietly.

And Elspeth bowed her head, knowing what he’d guessed. “Roger. He was raised there, of course, and after he married, he refused to leave his collection of precious books. He and Agnes traveled between Dungotit and her father’s home in the time I was married to John.”

“But now ‘tis time for ye to return, and for Robbie to take his rightful place as Earl. Do ye think Roger will object?”

‘Twas difficult to imagine the good-natured scholar objecting to *aught*, but Elspeth shrugged helplessly as she looked up. “I suppose we’ll find out.”

If Roger was behind the attempts on Robbie’s life, she’d be leading her son right into the viper’s nest. ‘Twas up to Craig to keep him—to keep them *all* safe.

And she believed he would.

Although right now, his attention wasn’t on her at all, but on her daughter. The large man, sprawled on the blanket across from her, was wagging another berry, and the bairn was fascinated. His lovely lips curled upward.

“Ye want this, wee one? Ye’ll have to come and get it.”

“*Dadadada.*”

“Aye, but I’m no’ handing it to ye. Ye’ve waited long enough to walk, and I see nae reason ye could no’ be running over there with the sheep, giving yer mother and me some alone time.”

As Craig smiled enticingly, Mary made a little noise of frustration. Instinctively, Elspeth reached for her, but at the last moment curled her fingers to keep from grabbing her daughter.

And watched, in amazement, as Mary finally—*finally!*—took a step. Then another, then a third. Elspeth was holding her breath, her chest tight with amazement, until after Mary’s fourth step, the bairn plopped herself down on her padded arse and snatched the berry from Craig’s hand.

Of course, she didn’t stay on her arse very long, because a laughing Craig scooped her up and lifted her in his arms as he rolled onto his back, suspending her in the air. “Ye did it, wee one! Ye walked! Ye’re such a big lassie, aye? Ye did that!” He lowered her just enough to plant a wet, loud kiss on her cheek, which caused Mary to chortle happily, then lifted her again to repeat the process.

And through it all, Mary kicked happily and burred, “*Da! Da! Dadadada!*”

Elspeth’s eyes ached from the tears she wasn’t shedding as she pressed her palm to her heart and watched this special moment. Her bairn had *walked*. She’d taken her first steps for Craig, a man whom she clearly adored.

Really, could he *be* any more attractive?

Years from now, when she thought of this magical moment, this magical day, Craig Oliphant would be part of the memory.

And it would be only that: a memory.

Because to him, her family was just an assignment from the King. He’d return to Scone for his next assignment, while Elspeth did her best to raise her children with this memory of *fun*.

There could be no future for them.

The tears finally fell.

CHAPTER 8



DUNGOTIT CASTLE WAS... Craig found himself frowning thoughtfully as they approached.

“What’s wrong?” Elspeth was riding beside him, with Robbie on his other side.

Shaking his head, Craig tried for a smile in response to her quiet question. “Naught’s wrong. Are ye excited to be almost home?”

But she wouldn’t let him leave it alone. “Why are ye frowning?”

Och, she was going to make him say it? “I’m no’ blessed in the vocabulary department, and I was trying to think of something...what’s the opposite of imposing?”

“Unimposing?” Robbie offered from his other side.

Craig shook his head, his gaze going back to the castle, growing larger. The walls were built from a pale stone, and, aye, there was a moat. Since the castle didnae sit on the shores of a loch or on a bluff to protect parts of it, someone had designed it atop a man-made hill.

But instead of looming over the landscape, the castle seemed almost welcoming, with the way the walls were surrounded by fields of grain, and the sheep wandered across the meadows in the distance, and the cheerful village straddled the road leading up to the main portcullis.

“Nay,” he finally said. “That’s no’ right either. It looks...”

Elspeth burst into laughter. “The castle? Ye’re speaking of Dungotit? ‘Tisnae cozy, that’s for certes!”

“Welcoming,” Robbie said quietly.

Craig glanced at the lad. “Aye, welcoming,” he agreed in an equally soft voice. When the lad looked up at him, he asked, “Are ye happy to be coming home?”

His young charge took a deep breath and switched his attention to the castle, then the village. Then he took a moment to sweep his gaze across the fields and the meadow and the forests on the mountain sides.

After a long moment, Robbie nodded. “I dinnae remember much, but...aye. Aye, I think I am. I’m ready to be the best earl I can be.”

On his other side, Elspeth made a sound halfway between a gasp and a sob, and without looking, Craig offered her his hand. He felt her grip it like a lifeline, as he smiled down at her son.

“I think ye’ll be the most remarkable earl Dungotit has seen.”

When Robbie looked up at him, his eyes shining with hope—and something else—Craig felt his heart squeeze. He’d meant those words, because he *did* think Robbie was a remarkable lad, and he’d grow to rule these lands with the strength and compassion needed.

Mayhap ye can help.

Aye. Craig *knew* he was strong, knew his skills with a blade were adequate. But he considered himself compassionate as well, much to Drummond’s irritation, and he’d help Robbie grow into—

Wait.

Wait, hold.

He wasn’t going to help Robbie grow. He wasn’t going to *be* here. Aye, when wee Mary called him *Da* and walked to him, or when Katharine demanded he carry her about on his shoulders, he felt a part of their lives. He loved them.

But that wasn't enough.

He wasn't part of the Earl of Dungotit's life any more than he could be a part of Lady Elspeth's life.

He was their bodyguard, naught else.

Then why is she holding on to ye as if ye mean something to her? Why does the thought of going to her bedchambers tonight—as she came to yers—make ye hard?

There was no future for them.

But...

As they rode through the village and heard the Sinclairs celebrating the return of their earl...as they passed into the bailey and saw the servants lined up to excitedly welcome the family home...as Craig tipped his head back and admired the fortifications and the welcoming flags...

Well, for the first time in a long while, Craig realized he *wanted* a future someplace. Dungotit Castle could be home, if given the chance.

But he also understood that the castle wasn't what made this place a home.

'Twas Elspeth and Robbie and Katharine and even the bairn, Mary.

Since he saw no threats, he turned his focus on the woman at his side. She grinned at him and squeezed his hand once before dropping it.

And he told himself 'twas as it should be. He was her guard, *not* her comfort. 'Twas right and good that she distance herself from him now they were at Dungotit. 'Twould make it easier to slide into the shadows and protect Robbie from whatever threat was coming.

Aye, dinnae forget yerself, Craig. Ye're a blacksmith-turned-bodyguard. Ye dinnae belong in a place like this, nor with a lady like her.

But once he'd swung out of the saddle, Elspeth sent him a smile and held out her arms, asking for help down.

He *knew* her capable of climbing on and off a horse. But... she'd become used to him helping her. And Craig, God help him, adored the chance to put his hands on her.

So instead of distancing himself, as was smart, he lifted her down. And with her boots firmly planted on the hard-packed dirt of the courtyard, Elspeth placed her arm atop his, offering him the honor of escorting the lady of the castle home once more.

He suspected he was the only one who could tell she was trembling.

"All will be well, Elspeth," he murmured under his breath. "I vow it."

She didn't look at him, but at his words, he saw her raise her chin, saw her sweep an imperious gaze around the great hall.

And he couldn't be prouder.

The following hours were hectic, and Craig was content to stand with one hand on his sword's hilt in the shadows, watching his charges. Watching the way Elspeth turned into Lady Sinclair, commanding servants with a gracious smile and becoming used to her home once more.

He followed her to the nursery to ensure Katharine and Mary would be comfortable, and when the lass chosen to be the girls' nurse tried to flirt with him, he merely smiled good-naturedly and bid her farewell.

There was another lass who held his heart.

He was *proud* of her. Proud of the way she insisted Robbie take the largest bedchamber; the one his father used to claim. 'Twas the most comfortable, and no one would blame Elspeth for claiming it, but she wanted the people of Dungotit to recognize Robbie as Earl, and this was a reminder.

After Craig had examined the chambers from top to bottom, he declared them safe enough for the lad to move in. Then he accompanied Elspeth to the room *she* had chosen, and examined that one as well.

The bed was...quite large. And Craig knew he wasn't the only one who avoided looking at it while in her presence; he could practically *hear* her breath hitch each time he glanced her way.

Would she invite him here?

Not tonight. Tonight was her first night back at Dungotit. If word got out that she was bedding her bodyguard, her power would be doubted. Of course, were she a man, she would think naught of demanding a servant warm her—*Nay, wait, in that case, she'd be a he, aye?* What had he been saying? Och, aye, were she a man, she could take a servant to bed without worrying what her people would think.

'Twas unfair.

By the evening meal, Craig had sunk into a dark melancholy, knowing now they were here at Dungotit, his time with Elspeth was at an end. He'd only enjoyed her company in bed a few times at Oliphant Castle, but he suspected she'd ruined him for any other woman.

This lass held his heart. And his mind. And his cock.

Ye're pathetic.

Nay, he was in love.

Not just with Elspeth, but with her bairns.

Then keep them safe. Even if that's all ye can manage, do it well, aye?

Aye. He would.

As Elspeth graciously received the welcoming cheers from her people and introduced Robbie as their lord—to even greater cheers—Craig stood in the shadows, watching for threats.

Now they were home, he expected the villain—likely the lad's uncle—to make his move.

After all, 'twas too much of a coincidence that the first attempt on Robbie's life had been made the very same day his father had died. The longer Craig had thought on it—and

granted, thinking wasn't his strong suit—the more he decided that Elspeth's husband had been murdered.

With the Earl murdered, the next step would be for the villain to murder the heir. And who had the most to gain? The previous Earl's younger brother, Roger.

No matter if he didn't *seem* the type prone to murder.

Craig vowed to taste every dish of tonight's meal afore Robbie could eat.

A fanfare at the bottom of the stairs caused Craig to straighten. The couple sweeping toward the raised dais must be Roger and his wife, Agnes. They moved as if they owned the castle...

And he had to admit, Elspeth was right.

At first glance, Roger didn't *seem* like the type who could murder anyone, even his brother.

The man was significantly shorter than his wife—not too much taller than Robbie, in fact—and carried a book. Not a scroll or a folio, but a genuine *book*...and he appeared to be reading it.

Aye, the book was open and he was peering at it, bent closer, his nose almost to the papers as he read. But when he saw Elspeth, what appeared to be genuine *joy* split his face into a grin, and he greeted her like a long-lost child.

His grin widened enthusiastically as he pumped Robbie's hand, although he had to tuck the book under one arm to do so.

His wife, on the other hand, was tall and regal, and looked every inch the powerful lady. She sneered down her nose at everything and everyone, including Elspeth.

But the woman Craig loved didn't allow that to stop her. Instead, and to Craig's surprise, she turned to gesture to him, inviting him into the conversation.

“Roger, Agnes, allow me to introduce ye to Craig Oliphant, one of the King's Hunters His Majesty assigned to protect us.”

He was certain, from the way her sister-in-law scowled, he wasn't the only one to hear the admiration in Elspeth's tone.

"Milord," he offered with a bow. "Milady."

"That is *Laird Sinclair*," Agnes snapped.

Craig couldn't let that pass, so he raised a good-natured brow. "Ye're in charge of a clan?" he asked the little man, who was flipping through his book again.

"No' yet," his wife snapped, before Roger could even look up. "But my husband is a great man, and his worth will be recognized."

Craig could practically *hear* Drummond's voice in his head. *Ask questions. Learn more about them. They will let something slip.*

So, he rocked back on his heels, seeming at ease, even as he sent Robbie a reassuring grin. "I have nae doubt of that, milord." He nodded to the man's book. "And ye've brought yer book to dine, I see. Can I ask what topic is so fascinating?"

It was the correct question. Roger Sinclair beamed in excitement, snapping the rare object shut. "'Tis one of Isadore of Seville's editions of his *Etymologies!* Are ye an academic man, Sir Hunter? Ye must sit beside me at dinner and we can discuss."

Craig chuckled. "Nay, but thank ye milord. I must watch over my charges." He was merely the bodyguard. "I just wondered if ye have more books, and where ye keep them."

"Oh, when we're here at Dungotit, my books stay in the solar, arranged out of danger. When we travel to my wife's home, they are in special trunks—"

"Ye travel with yer books?" Craig interrupted.

The other man burst into delighted laughter. "Of course! Books are the most important thing in the world! Would ye like to hear how this one was made? I paid quite a lot for it."

Good Lord in Heaven. Either Roger Sinclair was very, *very* good at seeming, or he really was one of the least likely

suspects Craig had come across. Even his wife was rolling her eyes at how intent the little man was on his books.

So, Craig turned to her, sharing a sympathetic smile. “I’m certain he didnae mean books are more important than *ye*, milady.”

“And I am certain he *did*,” she sniffed. “Although why I’m bothering conversing with a mere bodyguard, I dinnae ken. Ye may call me *Lady Agnes*. My father was Laird MacBeth.”

Craig felt his lips twitch. “I’m sorry, ye mean to say ye’re *Lady MacBeth*?”

“Aye,” she sniffed haughtily again. If she looked any further down her nose at him, she’d tip over backward. “Why?”

His grin grew. “Och, nae reason. And ye’re conversing with a mere bodyguard, *Lady Agnes*, because dinner hasnae been served.”

Before the woman could respond, Elspeth slid up beside him. He could see her smile was false, but he doubted the others could. “Ye’re speaking with him, Agnes, because he is a King’s Hunter, a representative of His Majesty, and worthy of respect.”

“Is he?” the tall woman sneered. “He seems rather more muscles than brain.”

Craig, thinking how Drum would encourage this, jumped at the chance to burst into idiotic laughter. “That’s right, Lady Agatha, nae worries about me talking books with yer husband, eh?”

She muttered, “Agatha? Ha! The dobber likely cannae even read,” as she turned away.

When Elspeth sent Craig a confused look, he *willed* her to understand. Better these people underestimated him than think him a real threat.

Luckily, after studying his expression for a few moments, her own cleared, and she cleared her throat before turning back to her brother-in-law.

“Roger, dear, please do join us for dinner. Craig, ye’ll sit beside the Earl, of course.”

It took a moment for Craig to remember Robbie was “the Earl,” and right about the time that settled in—and the fact she was *inviting him to dine with the family*—Agnes screeched.

Well, she didn’t exactly *screech*—that was too simplistic of a description. Had Craig been forced to identify the sound the tall woman made, he would’ve said she sounded like a barn owl who’d just swooped down to lift a terrified little mouse, only to discover what he’d picked up was in fact a pissed-off ermine with a glandular problem and rabies.

Craig had to fight to keep from guffawing.

“Aye, Agnes?” Elspeth asked evenly. “Is aught amiss?”

“Ye expect me to dine with this—this *idiot*?”

Elspeth didn’t blink. “Och, nay. Craig is invited to dine with myself and the Earl of Dungotit. Ye and yer husband are welcome to join us.”

Her smile was smooth and knowing, and Craig was so fooking proud of her he thought he might burst.

Agnes grabbed for her husband, who wasn’t paying attention. Nay, his nose was once more buried in his book. “*Roger* has been running Dungotit in the years ye thought it appropriate to run off to Scone. *He* has been acting as the Earl, as his father was, and has been training Simon!”

That’s right, Agnes and Roger had a son, didn’t they? He was fostering elsewhere, but interesting that Roger had been training the lad to become the Earl of Dungotit.

Elspeth’s smile turned chilly as she placed her hand on Robbie’s shoulder. “Then we owe Roger our thanks. He will be a valuable resource when it comes to teaching the *rightful* Earl how to care for Dungotit.”

With that, she turned and steered Robbie toward his chair at the head of the table.

And Craig had to resist the urge to applaud.

Instead, he took the stool she'd indicated and began tasting the dishes served to the lad, while keeping one eye on his dinner companions and one eye on the proceedings. This should have made him appear cross-eyed, but no one pointed it out.

'Tis an honor to be invited to dine with her family.

Nay, nay. He was only here because she wanted to irritate Agnes.

Elsbeth introduced ye as if ye were part of her family.

Nay—really? Had she?

Craig stole a glance at Elspeth, who seemed so regal now she was here at Dungotit. Where was the vivacious, teasing woman he'd fallen in love with?

She's still there, ye dobber. She's just play-acting for the sake of her in-laws.

Did the people of Dungotit know how wonderful she was?

He hoped so.

Elsbeth Sinclair was a remarkable woman, the same as her children, and the world deserved to know her.

The way he did.

CHAPTER 9



ELSPETH HAD NEVER LOVED SCONE. She'd never loved the court intrigue or the haughtiness or the constantly having to think about her appearance. She'd spent two years looking forward to getting back to the less formal Highlands.

And now that she was here, she missed...well, she didn't miss Scone. She missed...the journey here. She missed how informal things had been. She missed riding with Craig and the children, pointing out the beauty around her, listening to their conversations.

Dungotit had *always* been more formal than her upbringing, but she hadn't been surprised by that. In her years here, before John's death—his *murder?*—she'd worked to make it a home. Worked to make it feel cozy and comfortable.

But in two years away, it seemed that Agnes had changed that.

Elspeth hadn't realized that by running to the safety of Scone, she was leaving Dungotit in the wrong hands. She'd had confidence in Roger's ability to manage the day-to-day business of running a small earldom—but the castle itself?

'Twas a different place these days.

The servants kept their heads bowed as they went about their duties. They didn't speak above a whisper. The entire place felt...*hushed*, as if waiting for the next catastrophe. Brigit had frowned thoughtfully when she'd seen the way the servants had acted, and Elspeth had assured her this was *not* normal.

Except...mayhap 'twas. This is what Agnes had wanted, and Elspeth had left her as the Lady of Dungotit, to her shame.

Elspeth hated it.

“Then change it back,” Brigit had said nonchalantly, as if 'twould take no effort.

Elspeth winced at the suggestion as she was readying herself for bed. “’Tis no’ so simple.”

“Nay, but ye’ve done it once, aye?” When Elspeth raised her brow, her maid shrugged. “When ye were married, Dungotit wasnae the home ye wanted, but ye made it one. Scone wasnae the home ye wanted either. Well, ye’re back here now, and Agnes is going to have to take a hike.”

“A hike?” Elspeth teased as she climbed between the blankets atop the huge mattress. She couldn’t help but think how well Craig would fit here with her. “Where would she hike?”

“*Anywhere* away from here, milady,” her maid finished cheekily. “She’s a bit of a pain in the arse, aye?”

“A bit,” Elspeth agreed sleepily.

“So do it, milady,” Brigit urged, blowing out the candle. “Change Dungotit into the home ye want. The home ye remember.”

The welcoming home Craig had seen.

Craig.

Now they were in Dungotit, he was taking his role as Robbie’s bodyguard seriously. She rarely saw him, and when she did, they didn’t exchange secret smiles or flirtatious glances, as they had on the journey.

’Tis because this is why he’s here. Ye want him focused on Robbie. Dallying with ye was merely a distraction.

Aye, and she was honest enough to know that Craig had been a distraction for her as well.

But still, 'twould be nice to be able to join him in bed at the end of each day, to tell him about her struggles and listen

to him update her on how well Robbie was fitting into his new role.

But he doesnae want that. He's given ye nae indication. He's here because the King gave him a mission, no' because he cares for ye.

The way she cared for him.

Aye, she knew 'twas for the best, but that didn't stop the ache in her heart each time she saw him lift Katharine atop his wide shoulders, each time he leaned a bit to be able to have a serious conversation with Robbie, each time Mary gleefully toddled to his outstretched arms.

All of her ached for him. Ached for what might have been had they been different people.

Best to focus on what ye can change.

On her third day at Dungotit, Elspeth visited the village. 'Twas good to see the Sinclairs once more—to visit the baker, the chandler—and receive their welcomes and smiles. She was there with a specific purpose; to bribe the old cook into returning to Dungotit kitchens. He'd quit in anger after Agnes had treated him particularly poorly, and the food wasn't nearly as good anymore.

It took all afternoon—and quite a lot of friendly conversation—to convince him to return because things would be different these days. Then she hurried to the scullery to mediate a disagreement between two of the Sinclair women.

'Twas...well, 'twas good to be home. She still had some time ahead of her, setting things to rights, but 'twas good to have a goal, something to work toward to distract her from the emptiness in her chest and the pit of her stomach.

Robbie was settling in and was safe. She should be happy.

But after a sennight of butting heads with Agnes and trying to reverse the changes the other woman had made, thinking herself Lady of Dungotit, Elspeth had had enough. She needed fresh air. She needed to *fly*.

That evening, she mentioned at dinner her desire to go riding the following day. Robbie perked up. “May I go as well, Mother?”

Elspeth’s face split into a grin. “I would *love* that, Robbie. Would ye tell me everything ye’ve been learning from yer uncle?”

Her son nodded eagerly. “And I’ll race ye to the loch.”

She laughed in joy, already imagining it. A chance to ride, a chance to *race*? And a chance to spend time with her beloved son? She couldn’t wait.

Agnes, of course, sniffed disapprovingly. “Ignoring yer responsibilities for a frivolity? I *kenned* yer family would make terrible stewards of Dungotit.”

Not for the first time, Elspeth vowed that as soon as Robbie learned all he could from his Uncle Roger, she’d do everything in her power to convince the man to take his horrible wife back to her father’s home and live *there*.

‘Twas Craig who came to Robbie’s defense, to her surprise. He leaned forward just enough to block Agnes’s view of the lad, and rumbled, “A growing boy needs exercise. ‘Tis no’ healthy to spend all day indoors peering at books.” He glanced at Roger. “Nae offense, milord.”

Agnes sneered at her husband, clearly hoping the man *would* take offense, but Roger didn’t look up from his scroll as he absentmindedly lifted his goblet to his lips.

Elspeth’s grin grew. “Tomorrow then,” she announced happily. “Ye’ll join us, Sir Hunter?”

Craig met her eyes, and *something* in his gaze burned fiercely. “Aye, milady,” he rumbled, and Elspeth wondered if anyone else could hear the promise in his tone.

He’s just coming along to protect Robbie, remember?

But that didn’t stop her heart from squeezing happily in anticipation.

The next morning, she was awake before the sun, unable to contain her excitement. She dressed in her most comfortable

gown—one Agnes would sneer at for its simplicity—and smallest slippers. She'd be removing them, after all, as soon as she climbed into the saddle; there was naught quite so freeing as feeling her toes curl around the stirrups as she rode.

In the stables, she was delighted to be greeted as an old friend.

“Lady Dungotit! ‘Tis good to have ye back. Ye’re taking yer mare out today, we’ve heard?”

News must travel fast through the castle. Unable to help her excited grin, Elspeth happily accepted help in preparing her mount. She gossiped and chatted with the stable hands, catching up on almost two years’ history.

In her old life, she’d ridden almost daily, and had people she considered friends here in the stable. ‘Twas good to think things hadn’t changed so much in this area of her world.

“Will ye be coming back more often now ye’re home?” the grizzled stable master asked.

“I shall be trying, Jock,” she assured him. “I need to spend a few fortnights getting things back to normal here at Dungotit, but after that...” After that, after she’d rebuilt a welcoming home for herself and her children, she’d be able to enjoy things she missed. Which included daily rides.

The old man scowled. “Och, well, things willnae be *normal* as long as Roger and his wife are running things, milady, if ye’ll excuse my forwardness.”

Elspeth stopped brushing her mare’s mane and looked over the animal’s neck at the older man. “What do you mean?”

“I *mean*, they’ve moved in and taken what rightfully belongs to the young master. They’re scheming to have Dungotit for their own, mark my words.”

Her brows rose. She’d had the same thought a few times, but ‘twas interesting to hear someone else say it. “Do ye have proof of this?”

He spat. “Nay, I cannae read, and I am no’ welcome in the great hall because I’ve made nae secret of my feelings about

them. But they can do naught to me, so I've been safe."

"Many have lost their positions in the castle because they spoke out against Roger?" Or more accurately, *Agnes*. Elspeth's mood turned grim.

The stable master shrugged. "Aye, but I dinnae care. They're scheming, mark my words. Ye keep a careful watch over the new Earl, aye? Having ye and Robbie and the bairns back means the world to us. Ye're offering us hope."

Elspeth felt her throat closing up with emotion. Gratitude, love, and aye, hope for the future. She offered Jock her hand, and as his callused fingers closed around hers, she gave him a brilliant smile.

"Here's to the future."

"Aye, milady. And thank ye."

She was still grinning when Robbie and Craig joined her. The large man said little to her, but she couldn't tell why he was distracted. Mayhap he just didn't want to speak to her.

But the day was beautiful, the air was brisk, the sun was warm, and she was atop a horse again. A horse which could *run*.

"Race ye, Mother?" Robbie prompted as they reached the path to the loch. He didn't give her a chance to respond, but whooped and kicked his horse's sides, and was off like a shot.

Laughing with joy, Elspeth followed, with Craig thundering behind.

The three of them spent an enjoyable hour at the loch while their horses munched on grass, walking along the shore and practicing skipping rocks.

Well, not *three*.

Elspeth and Robbie did those things while Craig watched from a distance, his large arms folded across his chest. She found herself glancing at him, wishing she could invite him to join in the easy peace she and her son had found.

But he didn't, and she forced herself to focus on Robbie, knowing as the years passed, there'd be fewer chances for this sort of fun.

All too soon, 'twas time to return to the castle, and, at her son's urging, she promised—happily—to do this again soon. It might have been her imagination, but she thought she saw a smile under Craig's beard.

The ride back to the castle was more subdued.

She rode beside Robbie, neither of them saying much, but enjoying the day. They came to the point where the path narrowed and she took the lead, so her son was directly behind her, with Craig behind. Their horses wound between the trees, most of them little more than scrub, except for the large oak directly ahead of them.

Elspeth crossed beneath the oak without thinking. It wasn't until she'd passed that she heard a little noise. She wasn't certain which noise she heard—the *thud*, or the *hiss*, or the first terrified inhalation of the horse—but she was already turning in her saddle, her heart in her throat, when she understood what had happened.

Another snake on the ground.

Another rearing horse.

'Twas just the way John had died.

And just like John, her precious son—terror in his eyes—was lunging for the horse's mane in a desperate attempt to stay upright.

But he wasn't experienced and had no hope of maintaining his seat as the horse bucked and reared to get out of the way of the striking reptile. She reached for him, horror in her heart, knowing there was no way she'd be able to reach him before he fell, before he hit his head.

Before he died, the same way John did.

“*Robbie!*”

CRAIG HAD KNOWN today would be difficult, but he hadn't realized *how* difficult.

To see Elspeth's joy and not be able to participate. To see her interact with Robbie and not be there beside them the way he'd been on their journey to the Highlands.

Until he'd experienced that, he hadn't realized how much he wanted to be a part of something like that. Something his friends had found.

He wanted a family.

Nay, he wanted *this* family.

But now they were at Dungotit, he was merely a servant, a bodyguard. If Elspeth had wanted more, she would've invited it, would she not?

Nay, here he was merely a King's Hunter, a protector.

On the ride back to the castle, he found himself thinking about this mission. He'd been sent to keep the Earl of Dungotit safe, but 'twas killing him to be here and have to keep himself apart, now that he'd learned how much he loved this family.

He wouldn't be able to return to Scone, to start trying to forget how happy he'd once been, until the threat against Robbie was eliminated. How to do that?

Now he'd met Roger, 'twas clear the man had a real reason for wanting Robbie dead so he might become the Earl—a role in which he'd clearly settled nicely during Robbie's absence. But the man really *did* seem too wrapped up in his studies to notice or care about losing the position.

How to tempt Roger to make a move, without putting Robbie in danger? Craig wanted this threat finished, so he could...

So he could move on with his life, and do the best he could to forget the joy which had once been his.

The joy of Mary calling him *Da*.

The joy of Katharine treating him like her own personal playmate.

The joy of Robbie trusting him, valuing him.

The joy of having Elspeth in his arms.

Fooking hell, lad, ye're never going to forget this.

But 'twas what Elspeth wanted, so he'd do his best to try.

Craig's chin was sunk to his chest, his thoughts dire and his attention not on his surroundings where it should be, as they entered the little grove of trees. Elspeth took the lead, winding them along the path, and Craig shook himself from his melancholy, peering left and right, his hand on his sword, looking for threats.

He should've been looking *up*.

When the snake fell from the large oak, he didn't have time to look for the villain who'd thrown it. Instead, he watched, horrified, as Robbie's horse reared in response to the danger-noodle, tossing the lad backward.

In slow motion, Craig watched the boy he'd come to love as his own throw his hands up in a futile attempt to maintain his balance and his seat. Robbie's feet slipped from the stirrups and he fell backward.

Craig's own mount smelled the fear—and the snake—and he couldn't wrench the damned animal close enough to grab Robbie in time.

As Elspeth's terrified scream cut through the air —“*Robbie!*”—he did the only thing he could.

Craig lifted his feet from the stirrups, braced one against the flank of his horse, and threw himself sideways from the saddle, praying he would have enough strength to make the distance.

Praying that he'd protect Robbie.

His horse was shoved away by his leap, but Craig made it. He reached Robbie just as the lad fell backward, wrapping his arms around the lad's torso and tucking his head under his chin, turning in midair.

When they both hit the ground—*hard*—Robbie’s forehead smacked into his chin, and Craig could taste the blood. But the lad made no sound, and despite the pain in his side and back—thank the Lord he hadn’t hit his own head!—Craig frantically turned the boy over.

“Robbie? Robbie lad?”

“Craig?” the small voice sounded dazed. “Ye...saved...”

There were tears in those dark eyes which reminded Craig so much of Elspeth, and despite the ignominy of being sprawled across the ground, legs tangled and bruised, Craig crushed the lad to him, pressing a kiss to the crown of his head.

“Robbie, lad,” he rasped. “I thought...” Christ Almighty, for one horrifying moment, he thought he’d failed Robbie. Thought he’d lost him.

“*Robbie!*” Elspeth had also flung herself from her saddle, and as Craig lifted his head, she landed in the dirt beside them. “Oh, my bairn, are you—God protect him!”

Craig loosened his hold and tried to sit up. “He’s safe, Elspeth. He’s safe.”

But she didn’t stop her frantic patting, as if checking the lad for injuries. ‘Twas *Craig* who’d taken the brunt of the fall, but he merely set Robbie upright so she could see the dazed lad was whole.

Thank the saints.

From the corner of his eye, Craig saw movement, and twisted in time to see the snake slithering into the underbrush. The horses were milling a distance away, and the birdsong...

There was no birdsong.

He should’ve noticed that afore.

Adders didn’t often climb trees.

“Elspeth,” he said in a low voice. “Take Robbie and get to the horses.”

“He shouldnae move, nae after a shock like—”

“Now.”

There must’ve been something in his tone. Or the way he was watching the trees around them. Because she slowly held out her hand to her son.

“Come, Robbie,” she murmured, her own gaze darting around the path. “We can check ye over at home.”

They stood, and once unencumbered, Craig rolled to his feet, skin prickling in awareness. Someone had tried to kill Robbie here today, and ‘twas likely the same people who’d killed the lad’s father, the old Earl.

As much as he wanted to fight whoever they were, as much as he wanted to call them cowards and demand they face him, Craig had a duty to Robbie and his mother. He needed to ensure they were safe.

But he wasn’t going to get the chance.

Because as he herded his charges toward the horses, a sound made him turn.

There, under the tree, where the snake had fallen, crouched a man. A dirty, ragged man, covered in a stained tunic, his beard scraggly. Another, looking similar, dropped out of the tree even as the first man slowly straightened.

When the bastard grinned, Craig could *see* the evil in the man’s eyes.

He shifted to place his bulk between Robbie and Elspeth and this threat, praying they had the sense to hurry to the horses.

But instead, he heard Elspeth ask, “Who are ye? What do ye want?”

The second man grinned, and Craig decided they looked enough alike to be brothers. “We’ve been paid gold, milady, to ensure ye dinnae make it back to the castle.”

Fook.

“Elspeth,” he commanded in a low voice, “get Robbie to the horses. Get him home.” He’d face these two.

A low, keening sound came from behind him, and he realized Robbie was terrified. His mother's hushed tones were comforting, and Craig resisted the urge to raise his voice, to scream at them to get to safety.

He didn't have the chance to debate long, because the first man had drawn a wickedly long knife, longer than Craig's forearm, and threw himself forward, his brother not far behind.

In his time with the Hunters, Craig had trained against multiple opponents. Usually, Payton and Barclay would oblige by attacking him simultaneously, swords slicing through the air.

None of that practice helped if his opponents carried knives instead.

These two had obviously trained together, and, blades whirling, they moved in tandem, one circling behind Craig. He couldn't afford to let them reach Robbie and Elspeth, so Craig spun, slashing with his blade and hoping it would be enough.

As he did, the first man moved forward. Craig couldn't see the blade, but knew he had to be there. As Elspeth gasped behind him, he lunged to one side, and felt the knife whistle past him.

"Who sent ye?" he growled, whirling back to the first man, slashing wide enough to send him darting back, then twisting to stay out of the way of the other's attack. He needed to keep one alive, in order to question him.

"We're bandits," the first taunted, dancing from foot to foot. "We often ambush unwary travelers like ye."

"And the lad," his brother offered, laughter in his tone even as Craig growled and attacked. He merely dodged the blow, rolling to get up inside Craig's defenses.

Stumbling back, Craig heard Elspeth blurt, "And my husband? Ye dropped the snake that killed the last Earl, aye?"

"Damnation, Elspeth," Craig growled, attention on the attackers. *Stop drawing their attention.*

“Nay, milady,” one taunted, his attention on Craig’s defenses. “The rock beneath his head killed him. The snake caused his horse to rear, though. He was a puir horseman.”

‘Twas a confession. “Ye killed the auld Earl.” Craig held his sword in both hands, the hilt low, as he slowly circled, waiting for an opening. “Were ye paid to kill him too?”

Both brothers grinned equally evilly, revealing missing teeth and stained gums. “Aye,” they said in tandem.

Remember ye’re a Hunter. Trust yerself.

Drummond’s words whispered across Craig’s memory. Aye, he *was* a Hunter. A representative of the King, tasked with dispensing justice and protecting the innocent.

“In that case...” He stopped circling, raising himself to his full height. “I judge ye guilty of murder. Step forward and receive yer punishment.”

The brothers glanced at each other, and as he’d hoped, attacked together, facing him at the same time. Craig didn’t hesitate.

He stepped toward them, slashing down across the thigh of one, then twisting and sending his sword into the stomach of the second. A sickening gurgle came from the throat of that one, as Craig whirled back to the first and jerked his blade onto the man’s shoulder, nearly severing it from his torso.

Craig had the wounded man pinned to the ground with his sword before his brother had finished toppling.

There was still no birdsong.

The silence stretched, his breathing unnaturally loud. When he stepped toward the man, his booted feet crunched on old oak leaves which cushioned the bandit’s body. Blood flowed from the man and pooled beneath him.

He would die here today, as his brother had.

But there was no fear in his gaze. Nay, instead, the man grinned mockingly. He truly *was* evil.

“Who paid ye to kill the boy?” Craig asked again, quieter, as his sword came to rest against the man’s throat.

“Or what?” A laugh, which turned to a cough, and blood flecked the spittle around his lips. “Ye’ll kill me?”

“Tell me yer name.”

“Osburn,” the man gasped. “Used to be three of us.”

Craig nodded knowingly, as if he’d heard of them. “The Osburn brothers, aye. Yer fame has stretched to Scone.”

As he’d hoped, the bandit’s eyes widened at this news. He tried to speak, but no sound emerged.

Craig nodded. “Aye, ye’re so villainous, the King himself sent me after ye. The stories of yer terror holding the countryside hostage have worried him.”

“The King...” the man whispered, features slowly slackening.

Craig moved his sword aside and crouched down. “I’ll tell him of yer cunning, yer wickedness, if ye tell me who hired ye. ‘Twas the same person, who paid ye gold to kill the lad and his father?”

Osburn’s nod was enough for Craig. “Who was it? ‘Twas a Sinclair, aye? Lord Sinclair, the auld Earl’s brother?”

The bandit’s life was slipping away, but his grin still sent shivers down Craig’s spine. “Nay. *Lady* Sinclair.”

As Osburn breathed his last, Craig whirled to see Elspeth standing with her arms around her son, looking as terrified as the lad was. When she met his eyes, though, there was merely anger there.

Together, they spat the name like a curse.

“*Agnes.*”

CHAPTER 10



CRAIG PUSHED OPEN the doors to the great hall and bellowed Agnes's name. Elspeth, hurrying behind him, unable to release her son, winced at the way the servants all stopped to stare.

“*Agnes!*”

She wasn't in the great hall; Elspeth could tell that from just glancing around. Surely, he didn't expect the woman to come running?

“Craig, she's likely in the women's solar.”

In the sennight they'd been home, Elspeth noticed her sister-in-law spent many hours relaxing in that room, while she herself ran about like a chicken with its head cut off trying to fix two years of fook-ups.

As Craig strode toward the stairs, Robbie squirmed in her grip. “Mother, I—”

“I'm sorry, honeybear, I cannae let ye go, no' yet.” God's Blood, he'd almost *died* today! “I need to ken ye're safe.”

“I'm—Mother...” His wee face was turning red.

She peered down at him. “Love, I promise once everyone kens what happened today, nae one will begrudge me holding ye.”

“I'm no'—”

“Nay, dinnae object, I love ye, and—”

“Mother!” he gasped. “Ye can keep holding me, but no' as tightly, eh?”

Elspeth paused, realized her son's face was turning purple due to lack of air, not anger, and relaxed her hold on him.

“Oh. Terribly sorry.”

He grinned and wrapped one arm around her waist. “I dinnae mind. I was scared today.”

It took everything in her not to squeeze him tightly again. “No’ as scared as I was, I’ll wager,” she murmured, turning them both toward the stairs where Craig had disappeared.

Before they reached them, however, Brigit appeared, seemingly out of nowhere—had Elspeth really been that distracted?—one hand shoved up the sleeve of the opposite arm, looking calm and composed, but frowning.

“What happened?” she snapped. “Are ye hurt?”

Elspeth, taken aback, shook her head. “We were attacked while out riding, but Craig saved Robbie and killed the men who tried to hurt us.”

“*Fook*,” she hissed, her frown turning into a scowl. “I *kenned* I should’ve gone with ye today.”

Brows raising, Elspeth tried to make a joke. “Why? I didnae need my hair fixed, and I managed to dress on my own.”

But the slight maid ignored the jest and turned to the stairs, her hands falling to her sides, now clenched into fists. “Craig is looking for Lady Agnes?”

“The bandits confessed she’s the one who paid them to kill Robbie. And—and my husband.”

John’s death was no accident. He’d been murdered. Although their marriage hadn’t been particularly happy, she’d finally come to terms with it, and had been content on most levels. She’d never wished him dead, and learning someone else had still made her reel.

“Mother?” Robbie’s hand dug into her side. “Aunt Agnes...”

“*Agnes* was the villain all this time?” Brigit seemed incredulous. “We didnae see that coming!”

“Well, I mean...” Elspeth smiled sickly. “*I* did. She’s quite the bitch, is she no’?”

“*Fook*,” Brigit hissed again, and Elspeth realized she’d never heard her little maid use such language. On the other hand, she had no idea the other woman cared so much about the situation here at Dungotit. “Our intelligence was totally wrong!”

Our?

Before Elspeth could ask, though, the woman swung back to her. “She’s no’ in the women’s solar, I was just there.”

From above, they could hear Craig bellowing Agnes’s name.

Bridgit gave a nod. “I’ll check the laird’s solar.”

“’Tis where Uncle Roger spends his time,” Robbie offered.

Before Elspeth could respond, Brigit had already begun to jog up the stone steps. Unwilling to be left out, Elspeth hurried after her, and, since she couldn’t seem to let go of Robbie, he, of course, followed.

On the third landing, Craig barreled into them, catching himself at the last moment and clamping his hands down on her shoulders. Well, one on one of Elspeth’s shoulders, the other on Robbie’s. He shook them both together.

“Have ye found her?” Elspeth opened her mouth, but he shook them again. “She’s no’ in the women’s solar.” Another shake, another attempt to speak. “I cannae allow her to escape.”

This time when he shook them, Elspeth bit her tongue.

’Twas Robbie who got through Craig’s panic by kicking him in the shin. The large man blinked, glanced down at his leg, then back to Robbie.

“What was that for?”

“To get ye to calm down,” the boy said, breathing hard. “We’re going to see if Aunt Agnes is with Uncle Roger.”

“The laird’s solar,” Brigit blurted, already on her way up the steps.

“The laird’s solar!” Craig repeated in a near-gleeful shout, dropping his hand to his sword’s hilt and thundering after her, nudging the maid out of the way so he could go first.

Panting hard, Elspeth and Robbie followed.

“Why...do ye think...” she managed, legs weak, “the solar...is...so high...up?”

Robbie was sucking in tight breaths as well. “Likely...to catch...the best...sun.”

Brigit glanced over her shoulder, not even winded. “Narrative causality, I imagine.”

“Ah. Narrative...causality,” Elspeth panted.

Robbie was beginning to stumble, and she reflected that mayhap they shouldnae have run *all* the way from the stables as well. “What’s...narrative...causmaligy?”

“’Tis when...actually...I dinnae...exactly...ken...”

“Nae one does!” Brigit announced cheerfully, reaching the landing behind Craig. “’Tis what makes it a perfect excuse.”

All four of them burst into the solar to see Roger bent over the desk, muttering to himself as he added up columns on a slate, the cool breeze blowing through the open window lending an air of tranquility to the whole scene.

Less tranquil when Craig drew his sword and bellowed, “*Where’s yer wife, ye bastard?*”

Blinking in confusion, Roger lifted his head. “My—who?”

“Yer wife!” Craig stepped forward, the sword pointed at Roger’s nose. “The bitch who paid to have yer brother killed. Who’s been trying to kill Robbie all this time! Are ye involved?”

Roger was going cross-eyed, staring down the blade. “I-I-I-I...”

“To be fair,” Brigit pointed out, her hands up her sleeves once more, “we have nae proof Agnes has been behind more than just today’s attempt.”

“I’ll have her confession,” Craig growled.

“Agnes?” Roger squeaked. “Why would she try...” He began to shake his head, then thought better of it. “She loves Dungotit.”

“Loves it a bit too much,” Elspeth muttered, pulling her son protectively against her once more.

“Mother,” he gasped, tapping her forearm, and she loosened her hold enough for him to breathe, demanding boy.

Craig’s blade now hovered dangerously close to Roger’s nostril. “’Tis no’ so difficult to understand—even I can see her reasoning! She wants *ye* to be the Earl!”

Roger’s eyes widened, and again, either he was the Highland’s best thespian, or he was truly surprised.

“Me? The Earl of Dungotit?” This time he did lean back far enough to shake his head. “Why would *I* want to be Earl?” His hands fumbled across the desk, pulling vellum and books to him. “’Tis bad enough I have to waste hours on business for the estate when I could be reading. Who would want to do this *all* the time?”

He seemed...sincere.

“Craig,” Elspeth said softly. When the man she loved turned to her, she tried for a small smile. “*Agnes* clearly had plans.”

The door swung open, and there she stood.

“Aye! Plans!” Agnes screeched, holding a knife above her head. “Ones ye’ve ruined!”

This seemed a bit too...convenient. Craig swung around, his sword now pointing at Agnes, as Elspeth backed herself

and Robbie toward the opposite wall, thinking to protect him and Brigit—behind her now—with her body.

“Agnes MacBeth Sinclair,” intoned Craig in an ominous rumble, as if he were wearing the distinctive helmet which would’ve normally marked such a somber occasion. “As a King’s Hunter I carry the full authority of His Majesty, and I ask ye now, how many attempts ye’ve made on Robbie Sinclair’s life?”

“All of them!” She hadn’t lowered the knife, but stepped into the room, her expression pulled into a horrible rictus. “All of them! The poisoned food! The bandits! The assassins I paid in Scone! He’s a *lad*, for Christ’s sake! Why the hell could he no’ just do the simple thing and *die* already, so my useless husband, and eventually my son, could be Earl?”

Elsbeth was shaking from anger and fear, at the thought of her sister-in-law trying so casually to kill her bairn. She wrapped both arms around Robbie now, shielding him.

“Ye’ve admitted to attempted assassination?” Craig rumbled.

“’Twas *me!*” the other woman screamed. “I’m the only one smart enough, with enough ballocks, to see it through!”

Robbie spoke up. “What about the time I almost choked on that chicken bone?”

Agnes paused, lowering her knife a bit. “What? Nay, I didnae plan that.”

“Or the time I fell out of that tree?”

She scowled. “How would I have arranged that, ye little twerp?”

Robbie wasn’t done. “Or the time I nearly stabbed myself with my training sword—”

Agnes lifted the knife once more. “Look, ye worm, I’m no’ responsible for *every* time ye nearly died. Just the times *I* tried to kill ye!”

Obviously deciding that was enough of a confession, Craig stepped forward. “Agnes MacBeth Sinclair, I charge ye with

attempted nephew-cide—”

“Nepoticide,” Roger offered helpfully.

Craig continued smoothly, “—nepoticide, and intend to bring ye to Scone to face trial. As a woman, the daughter of a laird, I willnae execute ye here, but—”

Mayhap that was all Agnes needed to hear. With another ungodly screech, she darted forward, that knife poised to plunge into Robbie. Craig was too far away to stop her, but Elspeth twisted, putting herself between her son and the madwoman.

But she was still able to see when a knife flew from over her shoulder to pierce Agnes in the middle of her chest. The other woman stopped cold, her own knife falling from her fingers.

Elspeth glanced over her shoulder to see Brigit grinning wickedly as she slid her hand into her opposite sleeve and came out with another dagger, held at the ready.

“Ow.”

Elspeth turned again to see Agnes’s incredulous glare as she frowned at the hilt of the knife in her chest.

“Ow! That *really* hurt!”

She lifted her glare to Elspeth, then Brigit. “I mean, that *really* hurts. What the hell?” Her words became more vague as she stumbled to the side. “That might almost stop me, if I wasnae stronger than pain.”

Elspeth wasn’t the only one watching in fascination as the other woman pulled a smaller blade from behind her.

“Luckily, I always carry a spare.”

Craig, whose sword tip had fallen a bit as he watched Agnes’s response to being stabbed in the chest, now came to attention once more.

He needn’t have bothered, because another dagger flew from Brigit’s corner to knock the blade from Agnes’s hand.

“*Ow!* What in God’s name are ye *doing?*” She stumbled back again, until her shoulder hit the wall, then she sort of rolled to one side, supporting herself on the window’s sill. “Ye’re no’ being fair! Just let me get a little stabbing in, aye?”

“Do ye have a third blade?” Craig asked, his tone only mild curious.

“I might.” Agnes began patting her hips, then her waist, as if looking for a pocket with a hidden knife.

Elspeth and Robbie watched in horrified fascination as the other woman’s fingers found the hilt of the dagger in her chest.

“Oh, fook,” muttered Brigit from behind them. “Well, I’m out of ideas.”

Agnes, face pale but determined, closed her hands around the hilt of the blade. “This will do!” she declared forcefully, yanking hard. “*Ow! Fooking hell, ow!*”

She stared down at the dagger in her hands, then at the blood now pumping freely from her chest wound, muttered a faint, “Oh, dear,” and toppled backward.

Out the window.

Robbie was the first to move, squirming out of Elspeth’s hold and darting toward the window. He braced his hands and leaned out, peering straight down.

“She’s dead.”

Craig exhaled. “Ye’re certain?”

Elspeth’s son hummed. “I dinnae think humans are meant to bend that way. Her head is twisted backward—*cool!*”

“Cool?” Elspeth murmured weakly, feeling herself sway as the events of the last few hours finally caught up. “Cool? What does that mean?”

Her son sent an unrepentant grin over his shoulder at her, then grinned. “’Tis the opposite of hot.”

“Come away from that window,” she managed, as Brigit placed a hand on her back and murmured, “Milady?”

Everything had gone all blurry. “I dinnae feel...”

Brigit shoved a glass of water into her hand and Elspeth drank, the cool water refreshing her.

And then Craig was there, scooping her into his arms. “Elspeth! Elspeth, love, look at me. Ye’re all white.”

Swallowing, Elspeth forced her attention on the man watching her with such worry.

“Craig?”

“Robbie’s safe, love.” His voice was raspy, as if he were having difficulty speaking. “Ye’re safe. I’ve got ye.”

Her hand rose to cup his cheek. “Craig,” she repeated, as if she could make herself understand what was going on by focusing on his presence.

“I’m so fooking proud of ye, Elspeth.”

“Robbie?” His arms cradled her so gently, she thought she might fall asleep right here and now.

“He’s safe. Lad, get away from that window!”

“I’m aright, Mother.” A small, warm presence at her side told Elspeth he was back, but she couldn’t tear her gaze away from Craig.

“Thank ye,” she whispered, her thumb caressing the place where his beard gave way to skin. “Ye saved him.”

His grin was a little lop-sided. “I was going to take her back to Scone.”

Suddenly, Roger’s voice broke through her daze. “Agnes is *dead*?”

Craig turned to the desk, taking Elspeth with him, so they could all stare at the little man, who was standing now behind the desk, shaking his head as he collected scrolls. The Hunter cleared his throat.

“Milord, yer wife murdered yer brother and attempted to murder yer nephew, the rightful Earl of Dungotit.”

Roger was stacking the scrolls in his opposite arm now. “Horrible. Just horrible. If only she’d *asked* me, I would’ve said I didnae want the responsibility! Think of the *paperwork!*”

Elspeth pushed herself upright, already feeling better for the cool water and Craig’s support.

“Women will do aught for their children, Roger. Mayhap she did it for Simon, no’ ye.”

“Simon?” Roger’s chin jerked up and he blinked as if trying to remember who Simon was. “Simon? Simon doesnae want to be Earl of Dungotit either!”

“Are ye certain, milord?” Brigit asked in a surprisingly gentle tone.

“Certain? Of course I’m certain! We’ve spread the rumor the lad’s fostering in the Lowlands, but actually, he’s a mummer!”

“A...mummer?” Elspeth murmured.

“A member of a traveling troupe of players,” Roger explained, in case his audience didn’t know what a mummer was. “His juggling talents are really quite remarkable!”

“A mummer,” Craig repeated doubtfully.

Roger clucked his tongue and straightened, holding an armful of scrolls. “I skim some profits from Dungotit here and there to send to them—the Earl is one of their best patrons.” He nodded regally to Robbie, who was looking bemused. “Simon is doing what he loves.”

“Juggling,” repeated Craig doubtfully.

Apparently, Elspeth was the only one to see the humor in the situation. Fighting a smile, she took a deep breath. “Well, mayhap we could invite the troupe to winter at Dungotit one year and amuse us through the darker months.”

Roger beamed. “That would be nice. If ye’ll excuse me, I’ll write to him.”

He bustled off, and the rest of them watched bemusedly.

“So...should someone do something about Aunt Agnes?” Robbie asked.

Elsbeth’s hand found his shoulder again, although her head was tipped back to look at Craig. “I suppose so.”

“No’ now.” His tone was harsh, but his touch gentle as he cupped the back of her head. “Och, Elspeth, ye need to be in bed.”

Feeling almost giddy, she winked. “Only if ye come with me.”

There was a noise from Brigit which could have been a muffled laugh, but Craig’s expression turned torturous.

“Elspeth...”

And she knew what he was going to say.

Disappointment spiked through her, and she cursed herself for opening that opportunity. “Nay,” she ground out, shaking her head. “Dinnae say it, I understand.”

“Understand what?” he asked.

She forced her legs to hold her weight and pushed out of his arms, ignoring how much that hurt. Robbie moved beside her, trying to help support her, bless him.

“I understand,” she repeated. “We were just a mission to ye. I’m sorry I forced my company on ye, but I hope ye’ll forgive me for wanting the memory of a little pleasure to hold me through the coming years.”

At her side, Robbie muttered, “*Eeeew*, Mother.”

Ignoring him and Craig’s incredulous expression, she forced her chin upright and continued. “Ye were sent here by the King, but now that yer mission is complete, ye are to return to Scone, aye? Go then, with my apologies.”

“Apologies?” Craig rasped, and she realized his expression had turned disbelieving. “Ye think ye *forced* yer company on me? Ye think ye were *just* a mission to me?”

She swallowed, not allowing her eyes to tear. “What else would we be? That is why ye’ve been avoiding me since we

returned to Dungotit, aye?”

“Elsbeth...” He shook his head, dragging his hand through his hair, then turned back to her, those hazel eyes shining brightly. “Ye were *never* just a mission to me. Since that kiss in Scone, ye’ve held my heart. I’ve no’ been avoiding ye this last sennight—I was doing what I thought ye wanted, now ye were home and had to be formal again.”

Ye’ve held my heart.

“I...Dungotit...” She couldn’t seem to form words. *Ye’ve held my heart heart heart heart* was pounding through her mind. “I’m no’ formal...”

“Nay, of course no’.” His grin was a little lopsided. “’Tis one of the reasons I love ye.”

“Ye...love me?” she repeated weakly, swaying slightly.

“Mother, do I have to hear this?” Robbie groaned, but she was afraid if her son left, she’d fall over.

Craig stepped closer but didn’t touch her. “How can ye doubt it, Elspeth?” he whispered. “I love yer bravery and daring and humor. I love how ye’re true to yerself, even when ‘twould be easier to be like everyone else.”

As if that little speech hadn’t left her reeling, he turned to Robbie. “And ye, laddie. I’ve gone and fallen in love with ye and yer sisters, as well. I love Mary’s wee babbles and trust. I love Katharine’s insistence at doing things her own way—”

Despite still staring, flabbergasted at Craig, Elspeth *heard* her son roll his eyes.

“She’s a bit much sometimes.”

“Aye,” Craig chuckled. “But I love her. And I love ye as well.”

’Twas difficult to drag her gaze to Robbie, but vital, Elspeth knew. If Craig’s declaration had floored *her*, how must her son feel?

Robbie’s expression was serious. “Mother’s the only one who’s ever said that to me.”

He remembered that? She winced, hating that his father had seen no need to speak of feelings, not even with his heir.

Craig, however, was nodding sadly. “Then I’m sorry, because ye are verra much worth loving. Ye’re growing into a fine young man.”

Robbie swallowed. “Thanks to—to ye and Mother.”

“I wish I could take credit.” Craig offered his hand, accepting Robbie’s small palm. “Never forget that yer family is special. *Wonderful*. I’d give aught to be a part of it.”

“*What?*” bleated Elspeth, and aye, ‘twas indeed a bleat.

Craig turned a sad smile her way. “Love, if ye werenae an Earl’s mother, and I wasnae a mere blacksmith, I’d offer ye marriage in a heartbeat. Och, well, I suppose I’d ask this laddie for permission first,” he said as he finished the handshake.

“Ye’d have it,” Robbie intoned solemnly.

Elspeth, still uncertain exactly what was going on, with her brain stuck on *marriage* and *I love ye*, drew herself up. “Ye are a *King’s Hunter*, Craig. There’s naught *mere* about ye! Ye are strong and kind and compassionate, and I—*any* woman would be lucky to have ye as a husband!”

His expression was unreadable—nay, that wasn’t the truth. There was just too much to be read in his expression. Sorrow warred with hope warred with disappointment.

“Ye’re a lady, Elspeth. Too far above me. I’m bound to the King—”

“*Who endorses this marriage.*”

It took a moment for the new voice to register, and ‘twas only because Craig’s eyes widened that Elspeth realized the words hadn’t come from either of them.

They both swung around to stare at a very smug-looking Brigit. She rolled her eyes, huffed, and planted her hands on her hips.

“Well, why do you think Their Majesties chose Craig for this mission? The Queen was worried about the safety of Elspeth and her bairns up here in the wilds.”

Elspeth gaped. “But...a bodyguard...”

“Aye, they trusted Craig to find and eliminate the threat. But all it would take was one unscrupulous man who could force ye into marriage, Elspeth, and suddenly the Earl of Dungotit would be under the control of an evil man. Her Majesty knew ye needed to marry a *good* man to help raise the Earl correctly, and to protect ye all.”

Craig’s mouth dropped open. “I...*what?*”

Brigit shrugged. “The Queen kens ye’re a good man, Craig Oliphant. She chose ye for Elspeth.”

“I’m...the King is...”

The little maid—*was* she a maid?—shrugged cheekily. “The King mostly listens to his wife’s suggestions.”

Elspeth’s mouth still gaped. “Ye’re saying the Queen chose me a husband?”

“A husband *and* a protector!” Brigit corrected, one finger jabbing toward Craig. “And she wasnae wrong, was she? Ye’ve fallen in love with yer Hunter, aye?”

But Elspeth couldn’t seem to get past the original point. Her maid was in the Queen’s confidences?

Well, Her Majesty was the one to assign ye Brigit when ye arrived in Scone, if ye recall.

Aye, but...as a *maid*. Someone to fetch and carry things, someone to help lace Elspeth into gowns.

She’s shite at styling hair though, ye must admit.

Well, yes. And she apparently carried knives in her sleeves, which she could throw.

‘Tis likely she saved Robbie’s life today.

That was true. She was more than a maidservant, wasn’t she?

“Who *are* ye?” Elspeth finally managed.

Brigit burst into laughter, then darted forward to pull Robbie from her grasp. “Come along, laddie. Let’s go check to see if there’s any buns leftover from breakfast. Then we can go poke a corpse.”

Her son, rather than being disgusted, brightened. “*Cool!*” he blurted, as Brigit led him out into the corridor.

“I dinnae think that means what ye think that means,” came the other woman’s words drifting back to the solar.

And then Elspeth was alone with Craig, who was staring down at her, eyes uncertain.

She stepped closer. “What is it?”

He blew out a breath as one hand settled hesitantly on her hip, as if he wasn’t sure how she’d respond. “Elspeth... I dinnae understand what yer maid was saying. Why is she here?”

“It seems she was sent by Their Majesties to ensure I fall in love with a good man.”

Something flashed across his expression, too quickly to identify. “And have ye?”

Both her hands rose to cup his cheeks. “I love *ye*, Craig Oliphant.” As he sucked in a breath and his eyes went wide, she felt her smile grow. “I love yer strength and yer compassion and yer heart. I love how seriously ye protect us, because we mean something to ye.”

His other hand snaked around her, his large fingers spreading to cover her back, making her feel warm and cherished. “Ye mean the world to me, Elspeth,” he growled.

“Ye once gave up everything ye kenned—yer talents, yer family, yer home—to become a Hunter.”

“I believed ‘twas the right thing to do.”

His gaze was so tortured, as if he didn’t understand what she meant. Well, she could help with that. “Would ye consider

doing it again? Giving up yer role as the King's Hunter, in order to become *my* Hunter? A husband? A father?"

Was it her imagination, or had his eyes become a bit watery? "I'd like naught better," he rasped.

She tugged him down, while stretching up on her toes. "We've been ordered to marry, Craig, by the King himself."

"Well..." His lips were inches from hers. "I am the King's loyal Hunter."

When he finally—*finally*—claimed her as his own, Elspeth felt the laugh burbling up in her chest. They were safe, thanks to Craig, and he loved her as much as she loved him.

Aye, the future was looking beautiful.

EPILOGUE



CRAIG PACED in front of the chapel, his stomach a roil of nerves.

As the groom, it had been his job to welcome the guests—as few as there were—and the priest. But now they were in there, waiting for the wedding, and he was out here...just waiting.

Waiting for his life to begin, it felt like.

He was nervous, aye, but not about what he was ready to do. He was nervous because, in spite of everything, in spite of Elspeth's assurances, he still couldn't believe someone as wonderful, as regal, as full of life as *her* was willing to tie herself to someone like him.

Craig knew he was no genius, but she never made him feel less than perfect, which was remarkable.

Trust yerself. Drummond had told him that.

Well...Craig stopped and forced himself to take a deep breath. Well, he *did*.

Within the sennight, the leader of the King's Hunters should receive Craig's account of what happened here at Dungotit, and the news of Lady Agnes's death. He'd also receive notice of Craig's retirement, and deep appreciation for everything he'd done for Craig.

Beaming, Craig remembered how Elspeth had written the letters for him, sitting at the laird's desk, her back straight and

that one tempting curl falling over her forehead. He was marrying a brilliant woman.

If she ever showed up.

The bride's supposed to be late. And she's no' even late. Ye're just early. Calm down. Try those breathing exercises Drum taught ye.

He wished Drum—or Barclay or Payton—had been able to attend. But his friends were busy with their new wives, and Drum was busy in Scone, likely scrambling to fill the spots in the Hunters' ranks that had recently been emptied.

'Twas traditional, when a Hunter married, that he retire. This suited Craig just fine; he was looking forward to settling into a life of helping to raise the Earl of Dungotit to be a good man. But Drummond Kennedy would likely be pissed off at him for a while, retiring without notice.

Craig was glad 'twas Brigit giving Drum the notice, not him.

After Agnes's death—and the announcement of Craig's betrothal to Elspeth—the little maid had nodded happily and demanded he write out his report so she could deliver it. They'd all been surprised at her intention to ride to Scone immediately, but in retrospect, this little maid of Elspeth's was turning out to be surprising indeed.

Once he'd considered it with a Hunter's mind, Craig remembered the earlier signs; Brigit knew weaponry and battles, she rode as well as Elspeth, and seemed to be an expert at ferreting out information. Hadn't she been the one to tell Elspeth about the want-to-be bandit named Craig who was drinking in the tavern that night?

Had Brigit known he was a King's Hunter, even then? Had even that night been part of the plan to connect Craig and Elspeth and help them down the path toward love?

Shaking his head ruefully, Craig dragged his hand through his hair.

Dungotit was a long way from Scone, but he hoped one day he'd be able to learn who Brigit really *was*, and how she

knew so much about such things.

Drummond was going to have his work cut out with that one, for certes.

The sound of laughter jerked his attention to the here-and-now, and he smiled when he saw the group of ladies escorting Elspeth and her children. She was beaming, and Craig's heart—and stomach—immediately felt lighter.

Good. Yer wedding day isnae the time for spewing yer stomach all over yer boots. Or someone else's.

The group crowded around him, everyone talking at once, but he had eyes only for his bride. She was lovely, far lovelier than he deserved. But 'twas her smile which warmed him, which made him anxious for the wedding night.

"Hush, hush now," she scolded, laughing. She took Mary from one of the ladies, then made shooing motions. "Go on now, find yer seats. We'll be along."

Laughing, the ladies followed her command, and then Elspeth was turning to him, beaming.

"Here," she announced, thrusting Mary into his arms. "Ye'll carry her, aye?"

"And *me!*" declared Katharine.

Elspeth, who had tugged Robbie to her side, merely *tsked*. "We didnae spend an hour choosing yer gown and fixing yer hair, just so ye can be carried into the wedding."

The whining began. "But my *legs hurt!*"

When the adults exchanged a glance, Craig could tell Elspeth was reaching the end of her patience. This was what parenting was about, then, aye? This give-and-take, this shared responsibility...until he could get her alone.

So, still holding Mary, Craig sank down to his haunches in front of Katharine. "Sweet, will ye do me the honor of walking into the wedding at my side? There's too many of us to walk together, and Robbie is escorting yer mother."

Katharine rolled her eyes. “*Fine*. But only because I’m the *only* one who could possibly do it.”

“Aye,” he agreed solemnly. “And if ye cease arguing with yer mother, I’ll teach ye a new attack with yer wooden sword tomorrow.”

The little girl’s expression lit up. “Agreed!”

She spat on her hand and held it out as if to shake. At the noise of exasperation Elspeth made, Katharine shrugged, and went to wipe her hand on her new gown.

Managing not to laugh, Craig grasped her wrist and wiped her hand on his plaid, reasoning ‘twas easier to hide the dirt.

“Ready?” he asked, smiling.

As he stood, Mary smacked him in the jaw with a gooey fist, and—his grin growing—he captured her arm gently. “Seems I’m to be moist at my wedding.”

“Da! Dada!”

His heart swelled, and he nuzzled her sweet-smelling hair. “Aye, sweet. I’m yer da. Or I will be soon.”

He felt Elspeth slip her arm around his waist and rest her head on his shoulder, squishing Mary between them. “Mary’s never kenned another *Da*, Craig. Ye’ll always be her father.”

The thought made his throat tight, and unconsciously he glanced at Robbie, who stood with his hands behind his back, his expression screwed into a look of uncertainty.

“Lad?”

Robbie swallowed, then met his eyes. “If I got to choose which father I wanted, I’d...” His gaze dropped to Craig’s chest. “I’d choose ye.”

Holy Mother of God.

Craig realized there were tears pricking at his eyes. “If I had to—to choose a son, Robbie...” He swallowed. “I’d choose ye. I love ye, lad.”

When Robbie looked back up, his eyes were bright with tears, but he was smiling. “I love ye too, Da.”

Da.

He’d called Craig *Da*.

It shouldn’t be possible for Craig’s heart to swell further, but it did.

Possibly some sort of medical condition.

“Da!” burred Mary, hitting him with a spit-covered fist again. “Da!”

At his side, Katharine sniffed haughtily. “Well, *I’m* calling him Craig.”

Without missing a beat, Craig shrugged, causing Mary to giggle. “Fair enough. I’ll call ye *honeybear*.”

The lassie made a gagging sound. “Uuurrrgh. Fine. If ye call me Kat, I’ll call ye Da.”

To avoid another hand-spitting deal, Craig just nodded. “Aright, Kat.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine, *Da*.”

“Dadada!” Mary laughed, then smacked Elspeth with the same fist. “Mamamama!”

“Aye, sweet,” Craig agreed, laughing. “Da and Mama and Robbie and Kat and Mary.”

“A family,” Elspeth whispered, beaming up at him.

Craig gathered them all close. “Well, family? Shall we go start our forever?”

And, laughing, they did.

ELSPETH FELT as if she’d been waiting for this moment forever.

Or at least since they’d left Oliphant Castle.

Her veins thrumming with need, she pulled her new husband into her chambers and slammed the door shut. Before

Craig had fully turned to face her, she'd thrown herself forward, wrapped her arms around his neck, and pulled his lips to hers.

The little noise of surrender he made was *quite* satisfying.

His beard—which he'd newly trimmed—tickled the skin of her cheeks, and she dug her fingers into the hair at the back of his head, trying to drag him closer. His enthusiastic response told her he was as desperate as she was.

Mayhap his lips—his tongue—had missed her as much as she'd missed them.

It took a moment to realize the rumbling she was feeling was him chuckling. His lips moved to her jawline, and he kissed her there.

“So desperate for me, love?”

Since he was already exploring, she used her hold on him to push his lips lower, to her throat. This meant she had to arch her back, but did so gladly, to give him better access.

“Mmmm... Dinnae lie and tell me ye havenae missed me.”

“I've missed ye horribly.” His tone was suddenly somber, and she straightened enough to meet his eyes. “Elsbeth, I told myself all the reasons ye and I couldnae have a future together, and then I went and fell in love with ye anyhow.”

She moved her hands to his cheeks, cupping them in her palms. “I did the exact same thing. I was certain, when we arrived at Dungotit, that ye'd realized I was only a mission to ye, a mere distraction on the journey.”

His snort was accompanied by that wry grin creeping back. “Aye, well...ye *were* a mission to me.” He leaned down and kissed her nose, then the sensitive spot beneath her ear. “Ye still are a mission to me. Ye'll be a mission to me for the rest of our lives, *wife*.”

“A-a mission?” she managed, breathless again, distracted by his lips.

“A mission to satisfy ye.” His kisses moved to the base of her neck, until he was almost bent double and she was arched,

offering herself to him. “A mission to bring ye pleasure and joy.”

“*Oooh*,” she murmured, as he began to unlace her gown. “I think...”

His lips found the skin at the top of her breasts and all thought left her.

“Aye, wife? Ye think what?”

“Uh...”

He chuckled again, tugging her gown free. When he straightened, she was surprised to discover she was wearing only her chemise. Craig’s fingers went to her hair where he began to pluck the pins from it, one by one, until her braid fell down her back.

“What are ye...” she began, but was distracted to see him reach for her braid.

“Since yer lady’s maid decided she was some sort of secret agent, I’m forced to undress my wife all by myself.”

By this point, he’d unplaited her hair and was resting it around her shoulders which were covered only in the thin linen. Elspeth felt herself smirking.

“’Tis a burden, I ken.”

“A heavy one,” he agreed drily. “I’m the only one allowed to see her thusly.”

“Thusly?” Elspeth gestured down her body. “’Tis no’ much to see.”

“Och, ye’re right,” he said with a frown, stepping back to study her body.

But before she could decide whether to pretend outrage or not, he’d reached for the hem of her chemise and pulled it over her head. Sputtering, Elspeth emerged from the material to feel him lift her by the waist.

As always, she marveled at his strength.

And then her bare arse hit the writing desk in her chambers, the one against the wall near the window.

“Craig?” she asked, uncertain what he had planned, but he hushed her with a kiss.

A kiss...and more.

This was the first time their love-making had the luxury of time. With her sitting atop the desk like this, Elspeth felt on display, but it wasn't a bad feeling. Rather, she loved the way Craig made her feel...

Desirable.

Worthy.

Loved.

His hands were callused, first from his work in the smithy, then his time holding a sword. A lady might've shuddered to feel him touch her this way, but to Elspeth, his calluses, his scars made him more delicious.

The only shuddering she was doing was in pleasure as his palms skimmed across her shoulders or his fingers caressed her back.

“Christ's Blood, lass, ye're beautiful,” he murmured against the skin of her neck.

“Lass now, instead of wife?” she teased.

“*Wife.* Ye're beautiful.”

“And ye...” Her fingers plucked at the linen of his shirt. “Are still too dressed.”

“Dinnae move,” he commanded, straightening to pull his shirt from his torso, and unbuckle his plaid. His boots had already gone missing somewhere...

When he was standing nude before her, he planted his hands on his hips and allowed her to look her fill. “Satisfied?” he growled.

She grinned wickedly. “No' hardly.”

Chuckling, he stepped forward. But instead of moving into her arms where she beckoned him, Craig dropped to his knees in front of her.

“Craig, what—”

“I’ve wanted to taste ye since that first night.” His fingers teased her inner thighs until she opened wider for him.

Part of her was embarrassed by how wet she knew she must be already, but she’d wanted him for so long. In an attempt to distract herself, she gasped, “The night I came through the secret passages?”

“Nay.” He paused to send her a smirk. “The night ye sat on my lap and kissed me.”

“’Twas a matter of national securi—*oh*.”

Elspeth was certain whatever she’d been about to say would’ve been witty and intelligent. But at that moment, Craig’s lips found her cleft, and the first touch of his tongue on that sensitive space made her gasp, her hands falling to his head.

He seemed to understand this was a first for her and went slowly. His touches were gentle, coaxing, and his tongue equally languid. Slowly, she relaxed, her head dropping back to stare at the bed hangings as her focus centered on what he was doing.

As the pleasure built, her fingers tightened in his hair, and she felt him *hum* against her. His tongue dipped into her, twice, thrice, until she realized she was squirming against him, becoming desperate.

His fingers weren’t still either, teasing and caressing, and Elspeth wasn’t certain how much longer she could stand this gentle torture.

“Craig!”

He hummed again, seeming to understand. His tongue dipped into her one last time, and then was replaced by a finger—nay, two fingers, while a third stroked lower. He curled the fingers inside her, so long, so rough...and she felt

them brush against the secret spot inside her which caused her to gasp and buck against his hold.

And then his mouth closed around the little bud of pleasure at the top of her cleft, his tongue flicking languidly...and she exploded.

His name jerked from her lips in a keening sort of cry.

“*Craaaaaaiig...*” She arched into him, unconscious of the way she used her hold on his hair to grind his mouth against her.

After a long moment, the tremors of her inner muscles eased and she realized how tightly she was holding him. When she relaxed, Craig pulled away, only far enough to tip his head back to meet her eyes.

He was grinning, and his mouth and chin were covered in her wetness.

How primitive.

How messy.

How erotic.

Elspeth wanted to smile but didn't think she was capable of it at that moment. She just placed her hands on his shoulders and tried to lift him, which caused him to chuckle as he rose.

Still breathing heavily, she clasped her hands to his cheeks, capturing him. “Craig...that...”

His grin grew. “Acceptable?”

“Acceptable,” she agreed.

That was when she glanced down. She was still wearing her stockings, although one slipper had fallen off. Craig was stroking her hip and one thigh almost absent-mindedly. She squirmed beneath his touch, her heartbeat speeding slightly when she saw his cock, jutting proudly toward her.

Without thinking, her hand dropped to it, curling around it until he hissed. She met his eyes.

“We should do something about this, husband?”

His, “Aye,” was choked, and he shifted forward, until he was standing between her legs and the tip of him—still in her hand—was poised above her entrance. “Do ye ken,” he rasped, “that’s the first time ye’ve called me *husband*.”

Her grin was a bit lopsided as she shifted on the desk, moving her arse closer to the edge so she could take him more comfortably. “Mayhap I’m still getting used to the idea.”

“Well, *wife*...” His hands tightened on her hips and he eased into her. “Ye have a lifetime to get used to it. To *us*. To me.”

Smiling fully now—feeling delightfully stretched, and marveling at the sensation—she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“I love ye, Craig.”

Thanks to his earlier efforts, her core welcomed him. Her inner muscles were still tight and sensitive, so his member felt even thicker. Although ‘twas obvious how much he needed relief, she loved that he was patient, sliding in and out of her gently, slowly, building her own enjoyment once more.

Between his soft words, his gentle kisses—on her shoulders, her neck—and his caresses, she was soon squirming with need once more. Elspeth tightened her hold on his neck and gasped, “Husband! Make me yers!”

Craig needed no urging. With a low growl, he wrapped her, safe and protected, in his arms, and his pace increased. He slid in and out of her wetness, each plunge accompanied by a grunt from him or a gasp from her, or both.

Soon, one heartbeat faded into the next; she wasn’t sure where she existed, separate from Craig. All she knew was that they were *one*.

One.

Her pleasure gathered, building again. She could feel it in the desperate way she arched her hips, trying to pull him deeper.

Elspeth lifted her legs, wrapping them around his thighs and pulling him closer. His pace faltered, but only long enough to pull one arm free and reach between them. She couldn't imagine what he was doing and then—

And then—

His callused thumb brushed against her clitoris, and that was all she needed.

Her ecstasy burst over her, setting off white-hot explosions behind her eyelids. She squeezed her legs tighter around him even as her core gripped him.

Suddenly, Craig roared, jerking against her in sublime teasing. Warmth flooded her, and Elspeth's eyes widened in wonder.

She'd *felt* it. She'd felt Craig make her his.

And instead of fear or worry, all she felt was *joy*.

This was her husband, and he'd spilled his seed in her.

And if she was still able to bear children, well then, she might be blessed enough to bear *his* children. But if she didn't, she knew he'd love Robbie and Katharine and Mary as if they were his own bairns.

And no matter what, he'd love *her*.

This beautiful man, this compassionate giant, leaned down to bury his face in the crook of her neck.

“I love ye, Elspeth.”

Smiling softly, she stroked his back, knowing she'd finally—*finally*—found her home.

“And I love ye, my Hunter.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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On historical accuracy

Yay! Here we are, almost done with the *Kilty as Sin* series. I think you can figure out our couple for the next book (if not, be sure to check out the sneak peek below!) and I think it's going to be hilarious to match Drum up with a lady as strong as he is. Can you guess who?

Gosh, Caroline, what's going on with Brigit?

Well, I don't know, I haven't written the damn book yet, give me a break!

Usually, I wait until the end of the author's note to talk about the next book in the series, but in this case I had to start with it because I have to talk about Brigit.

Not historically—well, I mean, I suppose *yes* historically, but not in terms of *history*-history.

What I'm trying to say is that long-time readers of my series might recognize her.

That's right, Brigit appeared in several books of *The Highland Angels* series, which is basically a retelling of *Charlie's Angels* set in the court of Robert the Bruce. That series was *very* tied to history (if you are okay missing out on some of the humor but love history, check it out!) and has a specific date, whereas my comedies very deliberately are *not* dated.

But the point is, I'd developed this fun character I didn't want to go to waste; a cheeky, intelligent—but not at all proper—maid who could go where she wanted and knew all sorts of interesting things. So, Brigit reprised her role (she originally appeared in *The Laird's Angel*, but you should probably read in order) and she's going to *finally* get her own Happily Ever After.

And for those of you who *have* read The Highland Angels books, you probably are already nodding along, knowing exactly *why* Brigit is so well-connected.

So, I had to speak about *that* to speak about *this*.

Good Lord, Caroline, you're certainly using a lot of italics in this Author's Note.

Yes. Yes, I am.

Okay, so anyhow:

The reason I wanted to bring up *The Highland Angels* (look, there I go again with the italics) is that the Author's Note of *The Thief's Angel* talks a lot about Manuscript Culture, which was definitely something I wanted to mention in this Author's Note in regard to Roger's obsession with books.

Yes, okay, I *did* use Roger's book obsession to make him appear nerdy and non-threatening, but what I was going for was the kind of absent-minded uncle who really cares about nothing but his books.

Meanwhile, the Lady MacBeth he married is over here murdering and pillaging in an attempt to gain power.

But yeah, Roger was busy reading books. Which, despite the ignorant thinking of the "Dark Ages" as a time when people were chipping pictographs into stone, was actually *A Thing*.

Why?

Manuscript Culture is just a fancy way to talk about the evolution of how we, as humans, share knowledge. Originally,

we shared knowledge orally, then through handwritten sources, then printed, and now it's electronic.

During the medieval period (which, PS, when I dictate that, always comes out as “medieval .” *Hahahaha!*), books were becoming more accessible to more people. Thanks to movies, we picture monasteries with monks hunched over a calligraphed Bible page, but... Well, actually, that image is probably fairly accurate.

But! But those monks weren't *just* copying the Bible, or only religious texts! In the medieval period (there it goes again), those monks were also copying books about how to use certain plants, or what kinds of animals live in Africa, or travel accounts from far-off lands, or allegorical stories and epic poems.

For instance, “The Etymologies” by Isidore of Seville, also known as *Etymologiae*, is an early medieval encyclopedia written in the early 7th century. It is spread over twenty volumes, with each one focusing on a particular subject, discussing it comprehensively. Isidore's approach to categorizing and explaining the world around him was instrumental in the educational framework of the time.

But what's cool is that it wasn't just monks doing the copying and sharing of written knowledge! In the larger cities, students and booksellers were also involved. In Paris, for instance, the wealthy elite could have their own library hand-copied for a fee.

And I *love* the idea that Roger, as the younger son of an earl, was like “Yep, *that's* how I'm going to spend my inheritance! Jacques! Louis! Filip! Copy these books for me, *s'il vous plait!*”

To which I imagine they would respond, “*But monsieur, we are speaking Old French, and we are mere shepherds.*”

And Roger, being oblivious, would wave happily. “*Point me toward Paris, s'il vous plait, I need a new library!*”

And then after he went trotting off on his little donkey, Jacques would shake his head sadly and say to Louis and Filip,

“Kids these days are spending all their time on their books. They need to get out and touch grass more often.”

And Louis and Filip would nod sadly and murmur, “*Oi!*”—which is Old French for “yes”, just FYI, in case it comes up at your next cocktail party—and the sheep would moo or whatever it is sheep do.

THE POINT IS.

During this time period (whichever time period that may be because the author is infuriatingly vague), books and learning weren’t just limited to the monks. Hell, the University of Bologna and University of Oxford were started in the 1000s (and the oldest university in the world—University of al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco—was founded in 859 *by a woman*).

We used to call this period “the Dark Ages” because we thought there wasn’t any learning or growth going on in Europe at the time, but we (meaning historians) have proven that’s bullshit. Information was being spread in all sorts of ways, including precious books, among all sorts of people. It wasn’t just monks who were educated, as more and more people realized how big the world really was.

Except for Roger, who didn’t bother coming out of his books to look around and realize his wife was busy murdering his brother and nephew.

Oh good Lord, I’ve just managed a thousand words on the history of *books*. Which was like a super-minor plot point. Sheesh.

Alright, moving on.

One of the more major plot points of this book is the freedom of medieval widows, and I just want to tell you that I mostly got it wrong.

I mean, it was on purpose, but still.

In our Regency historical romances, we’re used to hearing how widows have all sorts of freedoms and rights they never had before, and they’d be foolish to give it all up to marry again, unless they need money or whatever.

Well, things weren't quite that way in the medieval period, *especially* if the widow in question was the mother of a son who hadn't yet reached his majority and still held the family title.

Like Robbie, in this book.

Honestly, it's far more likely that the King (who shall remain nameless) would say "Look, Elspeth, I know you're thrilled to finally be free of old what's-his-name, but we just can't afford to have the powerful earldom of Dungotit defended by a woman and a nine-year-old. So we're marrying you off posthaste to one of my cronies. Or my nephew or something. Good luck."

Or he would have, had Dungotit not been completely made up.

See, medieval widows, especially mothers of powerful lords, were a commodity. And as a mother of a young lord—*and thus a possible regent*—she'd have to be kept under control. We can't have her going around willy-nilly influencing her son!

You know what a regent is, right? (If not, may I suggest an entire book about one? *The Mackenzie Regent* is book two in *The Sinclair Jewels* and features a talented artist heroine and a recovering alcoholic hero.) It's the person who rules in the name of the lord (and very, very occasionally, the lady) who is still too young to take control on his own.

As you can imagine, a regent has a *lot* of power, especially when the young lord in question has a position like *King*. And similarly, having the *wrong* regent can lead to said young lord...disappearing.

One famous regent in Scotland is Mary of Guelders, the wife of King James II. Mary had six living children when her husband was killed by an exploding cannon (yes) at the siege of Roxburgh Castle in 1460 (ironically, he was a big fan of the modern artillery, and had dragged a bunch of the cannon with his army).

Her eldest son, James III, was only about eight when he became King of Scotland, and Mary said “Fook that, I’m his regent.” Yep; this badass was the regent of Scotland for the next three years until she died mysteriously at the age of thirty*, rebuffing all attempts to take away that power, and even having several affairs along the way.

*I mean, she *probably* didn’t die mysteriously, but I can’t find out much beyond historians guessing it was a result of an illness. *But* she was engaged in a political battle with the Kennedys over who was going to be the regent for her son, and as soon as she died, they swept in.

So I’d count that as mysterious, huh?

Well, let’s see, what else...

I suppose I should give a shout-out to the [*Bad in Plaid*](#) series. As you probably guessed from Elspeth and Craig’s visit to Oliphant Castle, Craig is a character from the earlier series. The sisters described by Doughall appear in the books in *Bad in Plaid*, while the story of Craig’s family history is right out of *The Hots for Scots*.

If you haven’t read those, start with [*A Scot Mess*](#). Things get even more ridiculous, more sexy, and more hilarious as you go.

So you’re ready to find out what’s going on with Drummond and Brigit? Check out [*Kilty Until Proven Innocent!*](#) Keep reading for an excerpt. First though, I want to invite you to join my [**reader group**](#) (where readers often help me name characters or see covers first) or sign up for my [**newsletter**](#). To say thanks for signing up, I’ll send you a few free books, one of which isn’t available anywhere else!

SNEAK PEEK

From *Kilty Until Proven Innocent*

Drummond Kennedy wondered if he was getting drunk.

‘Twas possible. It had been a long time since he’d been truly drunk—he hated the thought of allowing his guard down like that. But now...what did it matter?

Sitting alone in the small room he’d used for years to manage the King’s Hunter business, he scowled down at the cup of whisky, surrounded by a clear desk.

All of his missions, complete.

All of his duties, done.

And the King had given him no new ones.

His three best Hunters had married off—one, two, three, right after each other—this year. Did His Majesty blame him? There were other Hunters, spread throughout Scotland on assignment. Drum could bring them back in, give them new missions.

Except there are no new missions.

Was it because the King thought the Hunters were no longer useful? Or was it about Drum himself?

Bah. Likely for the best there’s nae new missions. Naught for yer snoop to find.

He lifted the cup to his lips, glad to see his hands were still steady. He wasn’t drunk.

Yet.

Thrice in the last month, since Craig had left for the Sinclairs, Drum had noticed things *off* in this room, or in the small chamber he occupied here in the palace. Someone had searched through his things, searched through the scrolls and records of the Hunters' missions.

The snoop.

And a dozen times or more, he'd felt someone's eyes on him. At court, while stalking the streets, eating supper—*someone* was watching him, and it was utterly galling that he couldn't determine *who*.

Were they enemies of the crown? If so, he'd lay down his life to protect the King and Queen.

But...

But as the weeks went by and fewer missions came from His Majesty, Drum began to suspect something else.

Christ, this whisky is tasting better. That's how ye ken ye've had enough, aye?

Scowling, Drum took another sip, just to say *fook ye* to his subconscious. He wished he hadn't finished off the last of his bottle.

Was it possible... He hated to consider it, but 'twas time to admit the possibility that the King no longer trusted him. Was it possible the unknown watcher, whoever had searched through his space, was sent...

Sent by *the crown*?

Did His Majesty have other agents, agents unknown to the leader of his Hunters? A few months ago, Drum would've laughed at the thought, but now... He'd thought the King told him everything, trusted him implicitly.

But mayhap he'd been wrong.

Mayhap he'd been wrong about *everything*.

He'd devoted his life to the King and to the idea of justice in Scotland. If he was no longer trusted by the crown, then

what was he left with?

Worse. Ye ken too much to no' be trusted.

Aye. The emptiness in his gut had naught to do with the whisky and lack of food. 'Twas dread.

He and the King had worked closely for years. If His Majesty no longer trusted him, then Drum couldn't be left alive.

Ye should run.

He scoffed, this time *gulping* the whisky and ignoring the burn. Run? Run where? Besides, *why* would he run? He'd lost everything once before, built it back into a reputation he was proud of.

If he ran, he'd be no better than Rebecca.

Well, shite. If we've reached the stage of drinking where ye're thinking of her, then ye must be drunk.

She was the reason he'd almost lost his good name once before, and he'd be damned afore he allowed it to happen again. If the King had lost trust with him, then Drum would face the consequences with his chin held high.

And if that meant an execution, aye, he'd face that. If that meant an assassin in the night with a knife for his heart, then... Well, he wasn't going to face *that* quietly, not without knowing 'twas His Majesty's command.

Oh God, his stomach was roiling. Mayhap 'twas because of the whole *heavy drinking on an empty stomach*. He should find food.

But where was safe?

Och, ye're becoming paranoid.

He needed to speak to the King, but the King had refused to meet with him for the last sennight. Proof Drum was no longer trusted, if he needed it.

"Fook it," he muttered. Sitting here alone, drinking, wasn't going to solve anything.

He planted his hands on the desk and pushed himself to his feet. The room spun only *slightly*, which was good news. He could likely manage to drag himself to the kitchens in one piece.

Just as he'd made the decision, the door swung open. He cursed, fumbling for his sword, but before he could manage to draw it—*Damn his hide for being drunk!*—he recognized the backside coming through the door.

His own arse plopped back down in the chair. “Brigit?”

“Hello lover.” As always, the sight of her impish grin made his chest warm. “I brought ye supper.”

Sure enough, she was holding a tray on which she balanced a bowl of something steaming and fragrant, as well as a jug of something. Drum's attention, however, seemed stuck on the way her bodice was laced just a little too tight, pushing her breasts halfway to her chin.

“Are ye hungry?” she asked, edging around the desk to plop the tray in front of him.

“No' anymore,” he mumbled, reaching for her and burying his face in her tits.

The little maid giggled and batted at the back of his head. “None of that, Drummond. Ye've been in here moping, aye?”

His response was muffled. “Nay.”

She only chuckled harder. “Ye *have* been. I ken ye, and the whole place smells of whisky. Come now, my lad, ye need to eat.”

Sighing in defeat, Drum acknowledged she was right, and straightened. “I *am* hungry. Is that whisky?”

For a moment, something like sorrow flashed across her freckled visage, and he hated the thought his misfortune was so well-known even the palace maids were pitying him. But her smile was back soon enough, and she reached for a cup and the jug.

“This is cool, clean water, love, exactly what ye need.” She plonked it in front of him. “And this is a chicken stew. I snuck

an extra loaf of bread for ye.” Nudging the tray with her hip, Brigit drew his attention to the food again.

And Drum had to admit, the stew and thick bread *was* what he needed.

She was still holding out the water, so he sighed again and took it. “Thank ye.”

Her fingers came to rest on his head, softly smoothing the hair near his ears. Her, “Of course, love,” was so quiet he almost didn’t hear it.

There *was* pity in her tone, and he hated it. Hated himself.

Brigit was...well, she was a bit of fun. More than a bit, he had to admit. She’d come to his bed—here, and in his chambers—more than a few times in the last year, and her cheer almost made his heart lighter.

Just the fact she was here today, caring for him... *Och*, a man didn’t need a pity fook. Or a pity stew-and-bread.

She kept her hand on him as he ate. “Ye have nae more missions?” she asked, nonchalantly.

When he glanced up at her in question, she smiled. “Usually this desk is strewn with yer planning.”

He supposed that was true. She’d been here more than a few times. There was naught suspicious about her question, she was just curious.

So he nodded, albeit cautiously.

“I’m...in between missions right now.” *Christ*, the whisky made thinking hard, did it not? “Why?”

Brigit’s smile was brilliant, although it struck him as just a little false. “Just wondering.” And before he could ask further questions, she nudged the tray out of the way and shimmied her arse up onto the desk. “So ye have nae current responsibilities? Nae where to be?”

Och, *now* her questions made sense. She was grinning as her hands played across his shoulders and traveled under his shirt. The lass wanted a tumble?

Well...naught else was going right in his life, he could oblige her this.

Drum took one last bite of the bread as his other hand slid up her leg, pushing her skirts aside.

“Nae where to be, lass,” he repeated, his voice surprisingly harsh. “Nae responsibilities.”

Brigit pulled him closer, brushing wee kisses across his forehead and cheeks. “Tell me about it, love.”

Nay, he couldn't do that. He still owed the King his allegiance, until His Majesty cut him free. 'Twas the *not knowing* which was eating him up inside. The same as it had been with Rebecca.

Was he trusted? Was he being watched? Was he in danger?

And...if he'd lost his good name, did it matter?

Drum forced a smile, his fingers curling around Brigit's thigh.

“I can think of better things to do with my tongue, lass.”

This time her smile was real, and a hint of a flush climbed her cheeks. Embarrassment or excitement? Either way, he could put it to good use.

When his lips touched her skin, Brigit gasped, then sighed.

Aye, he might not know what the future would bring, but here and now...he could do some good.

Ooooh, a King's Hunter and a Queen's Angel? They're going to get along like a house on fire, aren't they? Find out in ***Kilty. Until Proven Innocent!***