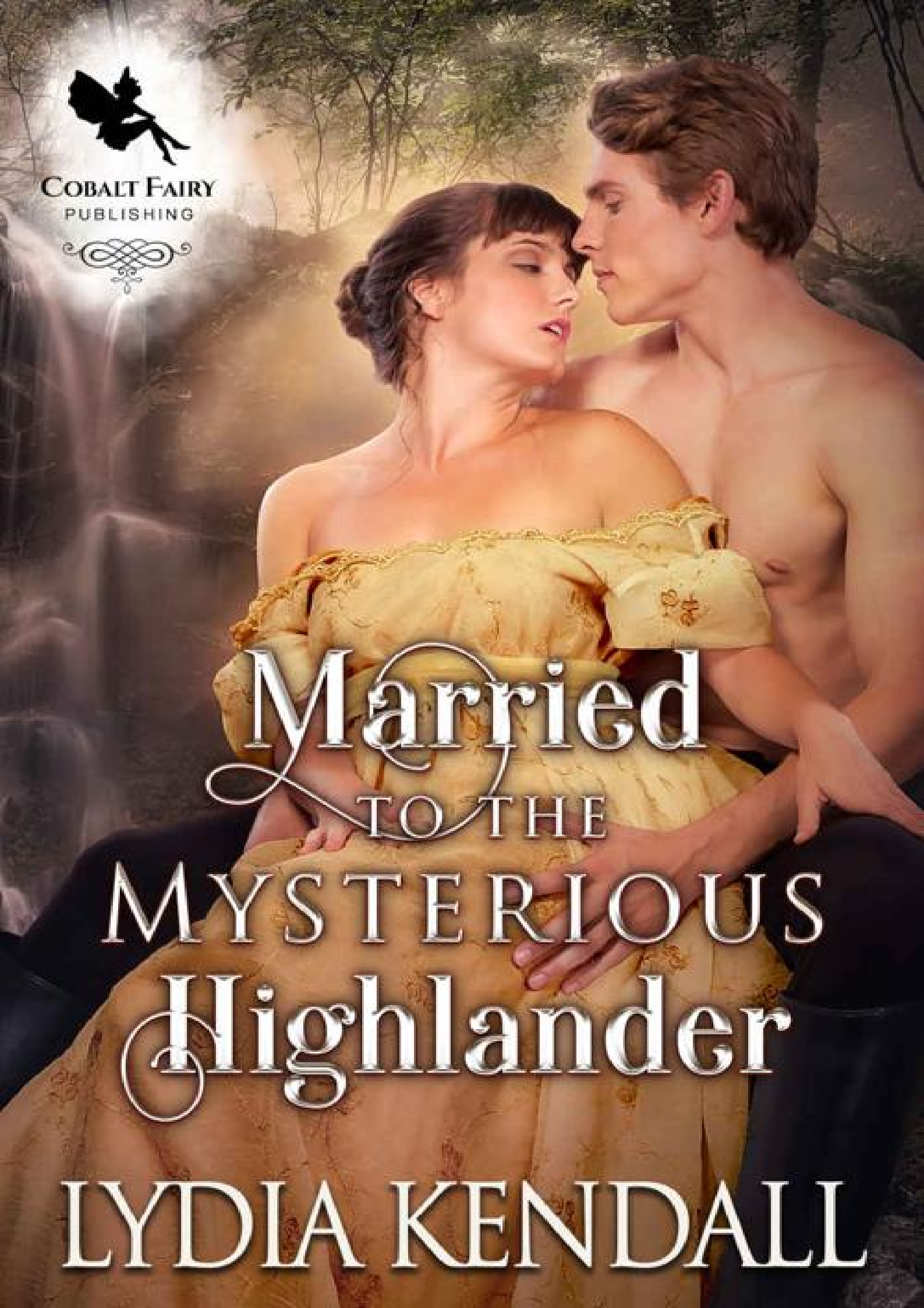




COBALT FAIRY  
PUBLISHING



Married  
TO THE  
MYSTERIOUS  
Highlander

LYDIA KENDALL

MARRIED TO THE  
MYSTERIOUS  
HIGHLANDER

A MEDIEVAL HISTORICAL ROMANCE NOVEL



LYDIA KENDALL

Edited by  
**ERIS HYRKAS**



# CONTENTS

[A Little Gift for You](#)

[Scottish Brogue Glossary](#)

[Before You Start Reading...](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[Preview: The Highlander's Weakness](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Also by Lydia Kendall](#)

[Loved this book?](#)

[About the Author](#)

## A LITTLE GIFT FOR YOU

Thanks a lot for purchasing my book. It really means a lot to me, because this is the best way to show me your love.

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



Once more, thanks a lot for your love and support.

Lydia Kendall

# SCOTTISH BROGUE GLOSSARY

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

about - about

ach - oh

afore - before

an' - and

anythin - anything

a'side - beside

askin' - asking

a'tween - between

auld - old

aye - yes

bampot - a jerk

bare bannock- a type of biscuit

bearin' - bearing

beddin' - bedding or sleeping with

bellend - a vulgar slang word

blethering - blabbing

blootered - drunk

bonnie - beautiful or pretty



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

greetin' - dying

hae - have

hald - hold

haven'ae - haven't

heed - head

heedstart - head start

hid - had

hoovered - gobbled

intoxicated - drunk

kip - rest

lass - young girl

leavin - leaving

legless - drunk

me - my

nae - not

no' - not

noo - now

nothin' - nothing,

oan - on

o' - of

Och - an Olympian spirit who rules the sun

oot- out

packin- packing

pished - drunk

scooby - clue

scrans - food

shite - shit

sittin' - sitting

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

# BEFORE YOU START READING...

Did you know that there's a special place where you can chat with me *and* with thousands of like-minded bookworms all over the globe?!

Join [Cobalt Fairy's facebook group of voracious readers](#) and I guarantee you, you'd wish you had joined us sooner!

Let's connect, right NOW!



*Just click on the image above! ↑*

## ABOUT THE BOOK

*“Was this what love was supposed to feel like? Was it supposed to burn like this?”*

Ridiculed for her lack of prospects, Lady Summer puts a stop to it: by creating a false betrothal to a non-existent Scottish Laird. But one day, he shows up drenched and demanding his bride.

His clan is in ruins, but Laird Oskar is plagued by the mysterious lass who keeps sending him cryptic letters. And when her father offers her hand in marriage to avoid scandal, he can't refuse her sweet face.

Their marriage is nothing but an inconvenience for the both of them. Yet, while his new bride is sweet, and probably hates him, Oskar cannot hold his desires back...

# CHAPTER 1



*London, 1792*

SUMMER TOOK a sip of the punch, struggling not to wrinkle her nose. She liked sweet things, but this was far too much. It tasted like stale sugar and fruit powder, overlaid with the acrid bitterness of cheap alcohol.

Still, it wouldn't do to turn up her nose at it. All the other girls seemed to be drinking it with relish, and Summer didn't want to look like a child.

That's what they'd say, after all. Summer Murray is too silly to enjoy a party like everyone else. She could almost hear the malicious whispers – usually in the voice of Florence Swinbank – laughing at her.

*“Who on Earth brought silly little Summer to Lady Christine's coming-out party? She looks entirely lost.”*

*“What is she wearing?”*

*“I bet nobody asks her to dance.”*

That one stung, because Summer's dance card, dangling from her wrist, was as empty as you like. There was one name down for a particularly slow, old-fashioned dance, but Summer was more embarrassed to have it there than otherwise.

She was so busy wallowing in her own discomfort that she didn't see Florence and her cronies approaching until it was too late.

"Well, well, I see Summer is here at last!" Florence said to the usual polite giggles. She made jokes like that just about every time she saw Summer, and they weren't getting any funnier.

Summer pursed her lips, wondering if it would be rude to flee for her life.

"Greetings, Florence. Are you enjoying the party?"

"More than you, it seems." Florence handed off her glass of punch to one of her friends, and gave Summer a long, slow inspection.

Florence Swinbank was considered one of the most beautiful girls of the Season. Not the Diamond, but close. She had pale yellow hair, very straight, and a perfect bow-shaped pink mouth. She was very thin, meaning that she could use a corset to cinch in her waist as tight as she liked.

Summer had never been a spindly sort of girl. At first, when she started to grow curves, she'd been delighted – this was what women were supposed to look like, wasn't it?

She was quickly disabused of that notion, mostly by Florence, who could almost get her hands around her narrow waist and was very proud of it.

“You look very tired tonight, Summer,” Florence said brightly. “I see your curlpapers didn’t work. Not so much as a kink in that drab brown hair.”

Summer flushed, lifting up a hand to touch her hair, but quickly snatching it away. “Straight hair is hardly a crime.”

Florence tittered. “I’ve been watching you, Summer. You’ve just crept around for hours, hardly talking to anyone. You seem very sad and lonely.” She stuck out her lower lip in a pretence of sympathy, tipping her head to one side. “Is it because you don’t have any friends?”

Summer’s fingers tightened around her glass of disgusting punch. She imagined throwing it straight at Florence’s smirking, beautiful face. The punch was red, and it would stain her pretty, pale-pink dress perfectly.

It would be a mistake. Florence would probably throw herself at her, clawing with her long, sharp nails at Summer’s face. Summer was plain enough, thank you.

And, of course, her Papa would be disappointed if Summer caused a scene like that. Speaking of which, Summer remembered what her father had told her to say, when people like Florence said things like this.

“I prefer to people watch.” Summer said, lifting her chin.



Florence snorted. “People watch? Why on Earth would you do that?”

Summer shrugged. “You’d be surprised what people get up to when they think nobody is looking. It’s very interesting. Very interesting, indeed.”

She remembered her father saying that most people didn’t like it when you said things like that, and apparently, he was right. Florence flushed an ugly mottled red, any traces of a smile dropping off her face. Summer found herself torn between delight that she’d scored one over on her enemy, and apprehensive about what Florence would say or do next.

“Are you dancing with anyone, Summer?” Florence asked, the good humor suddenly back.

“Yes,” Summer answered warily, wishing she wasn’t already backed up against the wall so that she could move away further. “Not that it’s any business of yours.”

Like lightning, Florence’s hand flashed forward, grabbing at the dance card tied around Summer’s wrist and tearing it away. Summer automatically reached out to stop her, but Florence was taller and faster. She glanced down at the dance card and let out a screech of laughter.

“Oh! Oh, *Lord!* It’s empty except for one name. Vincent Murray... her papa! Nobody wants to dance with Summer except her papa! Oh, poor Summer, nobody loves you. Well, you’d have to be blind *and* stupid to want to court fat little Summer Murray!”

The other girls burst out laughing too, and Summer flushed red.

“Well, at least my papa likes me, and doesn’t spend his days wishing I were a boy instead!”

That barb hit home. Florence stopped laughing, anger clouding her eyes.

“How dare you, you little—” She took a step closer, her long-nailed hands curling into fists.

Suddenly panicked, Summer tried to push past, but Florence moved to block her. The girls jostled, and Summer wasn’t entirely sure how it happened – or that anything had happened at all, until Florence leaped back with a shriek. Summer found herself holding an empty cup of punch, and a red, watery stain like blood was spreading down the front of Florence’s very expensive ballgown.

Silence fell around them. Florence had gone white and her cronies had fallen silent, but of course they’d attracted the attention of other guests. Gradually, the whole ballroom went quiet, with people craning their necks to see what was going on.

“She... she... you ruined my gown!” Florence cried, pointing at Summer. The dance card, now quite forgotten, slipped from Florence’s fingers, floating gently down to the ground and landing in a pool of red punch.

Summer wanted to cry with relief when she saw her father elbowing his way through the crowd.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” he kept saying, eyeing the mess. He took Summer’s arm and began steering her away from the chaos. “I think it’s time to go, Summer.”

## CHAPTER 2



“IT WAS JUST AN ACCIDENT, SUMMER,” Vincent said. “Surely everyone will know that. We’ll pay for Florence’s dress—”

“I’d rather die.”

Vincent glanced at Summer over his small round spectacles. “It’s really not a discussion, my dear. The Swinbanks will expect a gesture and paying for her dress is the least we can do. I’m sure it wasn’t deliberate.”

“No, but I thought about doing it deliberately.” Summer muttered.

“Summer!”

“I thought about throwing it right in her face.”

Vincent sighed. “That is not ladylike, Summer.”

“I don’t care. Acting ladylike has never gotten me anywhere.”

They were in the carriage, heading home. It was dark, but not as late as most people usually left balls and parties. Usually, midnight was the absolute earliest a person would leave a ball like this one, with the early hours of the morning being more usual. Some of the more popular ladies and gentlemen could be found rattling home as the sun rose, tired from dancing all night.

Summer had never left later than midnight and would soon have the added humiliation of being home and safe by ten o'clock. The servants wouldn't even be in bed yet.

It was at times like this she missed her mother the most.

Or rather, the mother that Summer's imagination had conjured up. The Marchioness of Bridgeville, Vincent's wife and Summer's mother, had died when Summer was only six. She had some fleeting memories, but that was all. No doubt the mother of Summer's imagination would be kind, clever, and wise, knowing exactly what to say to Florence Swinbank, and her loathsome parents. Maybe she'd be cool and icily polite and make them feel uncomfortable.

But there was no kindly, wise mother to guide Summer, only poor Vincent who was trying his best.

"I know this Florence girl makes life difficult for you." Vincent said suddenly. "But perhaps she's jealous of you. Or maybe you just need to laugh along with her jokes. You know, take a few jokes on the chin?"

Summer didn't bother to say that she'd taken so many jokes on the chin she had no face left.

"I'm four-and-twenty years old," Summer said miserably. "This is my fourth Season, Papa. My *fourth* Season, and I started late in any case. I have no prospects, no suitors, and no real friends."

"But you had friends, my dear, I remember them. There was that red-headed girl, and that very tall, thin girl."

"Jessie Mutkins, and Lady Anna Sparks. Jessie got married in our first Season, Anna in our second. I haven't seen either of them for years. They've got houses and children to manage, and all I ever get is an occasional letter."

"Ah." Vincent winced. "Well, there must be some young man you like."

Summer shook her head. "There's nobody I like, and nobody who likes me."

"Getting married doesn't matter so much, though, does it?"

Summer gave a bark of laughter. "No? Florence makes fun of me every time I see her because I'm short and plain, and I'm too tubby to be fashionable, and nobody ever asks me to dance. I always thought I'd fall in love, but—" she paused, biting her lip. "That feels too silly for words now."

She hadn't meant to say so much. Vincent tried his best to console her at times like this, but he really wasn't very good at it. He contented himself with clearing his throat, leaning forward and patting her hand, and telling her it would all be "All right in the end".

Summer smiled weakly and wished they could get home sooner.



As soon as they got home, Summer went racing upstairs. She undressed herself, telling her maid that she didn't need help, even though she struggled to get the back of her dress unlaced.

A part of Summer was sure that somebody would come up to see her. Her father, surely, or perhaps her maid.

Well, nobody did. She lay there for an hour, then two, in the dark, watching footsteps pass her doorway without stopping. The light coming from underneath her door faded away almost entirely. The staff had gone to bed, and only a few candles in the hallway would be saving them from complete darkness. They'd left her alone, all of them.

The truth was that this incident with Florence was just the straw that broke the camel's back. This was Florence's second Season, and apparently, she intended to spend it the same way she'd spent the first one – persecuting Summer. Summer had *tried* to stand up for herself, but Florence's smug confidence was unassailable. She had her cronies backing her up, whereas Summer had no one. Summer found herself stuttering and floundering, which of course Florence laughed at even more.

Summer didn't know what it was about Florence that left her tongue tied and miserable, but there it was. And after the dress incident of tonight, the bullying would only get worse.

*They wouldn't bully me if I had a suitor, Summer realized miserably. Not if there was some man who might call them to account. Not if I had prospects.*

Too bad she didn't have one. Although Florence knew so little about Summer's life she could probably just pretend.

Then Summer sat bolt upright, sucking in a breath.

*This is a bad idea, a very bad idea.*

*Yes, yes, but it's an excellent idea, don't you agree?*

*I concur.*

She swung her legs out of bed, shivering at the cool air outside of her warm bed, and slipped her feet into slippers. Summer wrapped a robe around herself, picking up a candle and peered out of her chamber.

If this was going to work, not a soul could know what she intended to do.

Summer padded downstairs, as quietly as she could, all the way to the library. The Manor was dark and silent – everyone was asleep. Perfect.



The library seemed forbidding and ominous in the dark, and Summer tried not to let her imagination run wild over what could be lurking in the shadows. She passed by the familiar old shelves of novels and books of travels, heading toward the dusty old tomes at the back.

She set the candlestick down on a small table and squinted up at the rows of books. These were histories of old English, Irish, Welsh, and Scottish families. She could pick any one she liked and spin her tale from there. Not English, of course. That would make it too easy to discover her lie.

Summer selected a book entitled “Clans of Scotland: Volume 4” and took it down to read. It didn’t matter who she chose, of course, but Summer still found herself flicking through page after page.

It was a dull, dusty old book, with a few dry paragraphs attached to every clan name, and the occasional sketch of the Clan’s location. Still, Summer found herself being drawn in. She loved to read, and history was one of her favorite subjects. She could imagine the landscape, hear the howling wind bringing in a heavy fog from the sea. She imagined herself on a cliff, tasting the sea salt spray on her lips. A man stood beside her – faceless, of course, as it didn’t particularly matter who he was – his cloak of an indeterminate clan tartan, matching the one Summer held around her shoulders, billowing in the wind.

Were they holding hands, or were they just standing side by side, looking broodingly out at sea? Summer couldn’t decide.

She sighed. Just imagination, as always. She turned another page and paused.

*“Clan McLeod,”* she murmured under her breath. *“A small and oft overlooked clan, once powerful, has been reduced to nothing over the generations. Set deep in the wilds of the North of Scotland, Clan McLeod was once the most fearsome clan in the North. However, it is now almost forgotten and seldom heard of. Now that their clan leader, Laird McLeod, is dead, the Clan may well disappear altogether.”*

Now, wasn't that just perfect? An obscure clan that nobody had ever heard of, with its location neatly recorded in an old book that nobody would ever read, and the laird already dead, poor fellow.

She'd found her target.

Tucking the heavy book under her arm, Summer hurried over to the writing desk. Keeping the book propped open, she took out a sheet of their special, embossed writing paper, and began to compose a letter. She didn't feel tired or miserable anymore – she felt invigorated. All it would take would be a few letters, and Florence would have nothing to say.

*To Laird McLeod, My Dearest Betrothed,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. I have been thinking of you incessantly for the past days, hoping I would get another letter from you soon. I should have known better than to doubt you – you always write promptly. I hope you are safe – you mentioned in your last letter that the weather was bad, and*

*your soldiers struggled to cope. I have been praying for you all and thinking of you.*

*How is the war progressing? I sometimes think that it will never end, that it will keep us apart forever. I have frequent nightmares about you dying in battle, leaving me a widow in all but name. I beseech you to be careful, not to put yourself in harm's way. I know you're a heroic man by nature, and you long to lead your soldiers to victory, but please, please think of me.*

*Life here is very dull, lots of parties and balls and so on. I spilled punch on a lady's gown at the last one and made a terrible spectacle of myself.*

Summer paused. Why had she said that? It was hardly an important detail. Still, no matter. It wasn't as if anyone was actually going to read it. She continued writing. She was nearly done in any case.

*I know you don't care for dancing, but I hope when you next come to visit you and I can stand up for at least one set. Maybe even the waltz if you don't think it too scandalous. Some of my friends – no, not friends, acquaintances – call me plain, but I know that you think otherwise, and that gives me strength. I think of you every day, and I hope you think of me, too.*

*Write back soon, my dear. If you wanted, you could write to my papa too – you know how nervous he is about my courting someone so far away. He'll miss me when I go. Very much, I should think. I'll miss him too, but it will be worth it to start a life with you. I shall wait breathlessly for the post until I get your next letter.*

*All My Love,*

*Your Bride-To-Be,*

*Summer Murray*

Summer signed off with a triumphant flourish. As love letters went, it was a bit dry and far too flowery, but that didn't exactly matter. It wasn't going to be *read*, after all. She studied the letter for a minute or two, wondering what to do with this one. Somehow, this letter seemed important for the fantasy to take root in her head. The ladies were going to ask questions, and she'd better have the answers. Of course, they would be more interested in the replies than in drafts of Summer's letters.

No matter, she could disguise her handwriting, and make the language rough but loving. Summer slipped the letter into an envelope and addressed it to one Laird McLeod, using the address given in the book.

One of the footman took out the outgoing post every morning, and he was nosy enough to notice the unfamiliar address. However, the butler doled out the incoming post to the family, and he was not nosy. So, the footman wouldn't be able to spot letters coming in. Of course, Summer could always post them to herself if she wanted to do things properly.

By the time the sun was coming up, Summer had three letters besides the first one to send away, and she could slip them gradually into the post, and a full six letters from her

“betrothed”. Her hand ached horribly, and she was exhausted, but triumphant.

Summer slipped the first of the letters into the pile of letters in the hall and tiptoed up the stairs just as the scullery maids were coming out. She hadn't dared take the heavy book upstairs with her – her father would notice that it was gone. With a sacrilegious feeling, she'd torn out the Clan McLeod page and taken it upstairs with her.

There were no pictures on the page except the sketch of some hills and a loch. If you squinted, however, you could pretend that the broken tree on the tip of one hill was a person. A man, of course, probably with a beard and piercing blue eyes. Summer smiled to herself, settling down in bed to sleep.

“It looks like we're betrothed, Laird McLeod,” she murmured. “Not for long, though. Once everyone knows that we're betrothed, you're going to die in battle. It's a terrible tragedy, and I'll never quite recover. But now that everyone knows about my – *our* – grand love story, they won't expect me to recover anytime soon. I'm sorry I have to end things this way, but it's for the best. I hope you don't mind. For what it's worth, the war will end shortly after your death – no more bloodshed.” She thought for a moment. “I should probably give the war a name, don't you think?”

But that was question for tomorrow. Tucking the piece of paper under her pillow, Summer leaned over and blew out the candle. She was asleep in minutes.



*The Following Morning*

The next part was going to be tricky. Once the story was out, Summer could just sit back and let it do its work, but she had to get it out first, and it had to seem accidental. She couldn't go barging up to Florence and blurt out the whole story and end it with a triumphant *So there!* Thankfully, Summer had a plan.

Her father's study door opened as Summer walked past, and Vincent himself peered out.

"Where are you going, Summer? You don't normally go out around this time."

Summer wondered if it was embarrassing that her routine was so set and unchanging that her father knew it by heart.

"I'm going to Hyde Park, Papa."

Vincent blinked behind his thick spectacles. "What for?"

"What for? Why do people usually go to Hyde Park, Papa? To promenade, of course." Summer pulled on her gloves, doing her best impression of a young lady casually preparing for an outing. Her heart was hammering fit to burst. What if it went wrong? If she thought her life wasn't worth living before, it would be a hundred – no, a *thousand* – times worse if Florence discovered the truth.

Vincent chewed his lip. "Do you want me to come with you? I can finish my work later. I don't want you to go for a walk alone."

Summer swallowed hard. *Stay calm, Summer.*

“Oh, no thank you, Papa. It’s very kind of you, but I think I’d enjoy some solitary reflection today. If you don’t mind. I’m taking a maid.”

“Oh. Right. Well, just let me know if you change your mind, Summer.”

“Of course.” Summer answered, smiling in relief. She hurried past and down the hall, but her heart didn’t stop hammering until she was down the street and within sight of Hyde Park.



The Park was busy at this time of day, and Summer had to make two circuits until she found a spare bench on the most popular route. She knew that Florence and her cronies were here – she really ought to learn those girls’ names – because she’d seen them earlier. Now, to wait.

After about fifteen minutes, Florence appeared at the end of the path, and began walking toward her. Summer carefully angled herself so that she faced a little away from Florence, all the better to pretend that she didn’t see her coming. She took out a letter and began to read.

It was one of the letters she’d written to herself from Laird McLeod. Reading it over again, Summer had to congratulate herself on her fine writing. She could almost see the imagined laird in her head, tall and strong and imposing, with his face tactfully blurred out. She hadn’t been *too* flowery – that hadn’t suited the character she’d created in her head – but no matter, it was still something pleasant to read.

She could hear Florence getting closer, deliberately trying to step softly so as to sneak up on her. It went against the grain to sit there and pretend to be unaware, but Summer forced herself to sit still and bear it. When Florence was almost on her, she started, turning around with wide eyes as if just realizing that somebody was near.

Florence already had her hand out to snatch up the letter, and Summer leaped up, trying to cram the letter back into her reticule. With a fumble – which she'd practised at home, in her chamber – the letter bounced out of her grip and sank gracefully to the ground.

Both women lunged for it, but Florence got there first. Of course she had – Summer had been very careful to let her get there first.

“Well, well, well,” Florence said, her face twisting into a malicious grin. “What do we have here, then?”

Summer let just a flash of fear show on her face. She hadn't spent hours practising in front of the mirror for nothing. Florence's smile widened, like a shark scenting blood.

“It's nothing, Florence. Give it back, please.”

There was no chance of that, of course. Florence ostentatiously straightened out the letter, the corners of her mouth twitching, ready to smile.



“Ah, it’s a letter from a—” Florence frowned, just a little.  
“Laird McLeod. Who is that?”

“Nobody.” Summer made a half-hearted grab for the letter.

She’d expected Florence to read it aloud, but she read in silence, her lips moving along with the words, and her frown getting deeper. It didn’t matter, because her cronies were peering over her shoulder, reading along with her.

Summer was secretly quite proud of what she’d achieved. The letter read like a classic, manly letter, not too flowery, and not shocking enough to give Florence any real ammunition. Still, it was decidedly a love letter, and Summer had let her imagination run wild. A light flush spread over Florence’s cheeks as she read.

“Who’s Laird McLeod?” one of the cronies piped up, who clearly could read faster than Florence. Somewhere in the back of Summer’s mind, she identified her as Lily Perkins, daughter of Sir Thomas Perkins.

Summer sighed. “Nobody was supposed to know. It’s a secret.”

Another girl, one with dark skin and curly black hair, pushed forward eagerly. Summer thought her name was Alana something-or-other. “Is he your beau?”

Moment of truth time, then. Summer bit her lip, half turning away.

“We’re betrothed,” she confessed.

A flurry of excitement broke out. A few girls surged forward, peppering her with questions. Summer didn’t know which to answer first.

“How long?” she echoed. “We’ve been betrothed for a year and a half.”

This elicited further gasps.

“Why so long? And why haven’t we met him?” Florence demanded. She did not seem happy that her joke at Summer’s expense had turned into something quite different.

Summer glanced around at eager, curious faces, and realized that for the first time this Season – possibly the first time ever – she was at the center of attention. Summer had something interesting to say, and everyone wanted to hear it.

It was a wonderful feeling.

“I met him in Edinburgh,” Summer said, dredging up the well-memorized story without even thinking. “He’s not a man for Society, you see. We were visiting family in Scotland, and he was invited to the same soiree as us.”

“Was it love at first sight?” Alana asked eagerly.

“More or less. I was little afraid of him at first, to be honest. But he’s so kind and sweet, even though he looks like a real warrior. He asked me to marry him just before we left. I was concerned about the distance, of course, but he assured me that we would write every day and get married in only a few months.”

“So, what happened? If it isn’t too private to ask,” Lily added.

She’d done it. She’d hooked them. Summer had to fight not to grin in triumph, remembering that she was about to describe a tragedy.

“Well, the war, of course.”

There was an expected chorus of *war? What war?*

“The war between the Northern clans, of course. I’m sure you’ve all heard of it,” Summer added, and a few of the girls nodded intelligently. Summer wasn’t sure how they *could* have heard of it, considering she’d just made it up, but no matter.

“He has to wait until the war’s over to marry you!” Alana exclaimed, with the air of someone figuring out a puzzle at last.

Summer nodded sorrowfully. “It started right after I left. He was so sure it would only last a few months. And now... well, I’m starting to think it will never end.”

There was no shortage of sympathy to go around, and Summer found herself awash with fellow feeling.

She had to describe Laird McLeod several times, and all of the girls wanted to read the letter.

“He truly loves you; I can tell by the way he writes,” one girl said, nodding knowledgeably.

“Wouldn’t you want to marry him despite the war?” Alana asked.

“I would, but he won’t hear of it. He says it’s too dangerous, and just begs me to wait for him. Once, he said that he would understand if I ended the engagement and married someone else, but of course I said no.”

This was met with general approval. If Florence, now at the back of the crowd, muttered something along the lines of “Well, no one else would have her anyway”, then nobody heard it.

“I can’t believe you kept your Scottish Laird a secret for – what, a year and a half?” Lily laughed. “You sly thing. Mama always says to keep an eye on the quiet ones, and you, Summer Murray, have surprised us all.”

“You must get married in London,” Alana put in eagerly. “I am quite desperate to meet him. I’m already half in love with him myself.”

“Have a care, he’s mine!” Summer said, laughing, and the girls laughed along with her.

She cast one triumphant look in Florence’s direction. Spite was a cruel motivator, Summer knew that, but good heavens, it felt good to see Florence pushed aside and forgotten for once.

## CHAPTER 3



THE NEXT TWO months were the most enjoyable days Summer had spent during a London Season. There wasn't a great change – she hadn't shot to popularity overnight and hadn't suddenly blossomed into a beauty.

Word quickly went around about the surprising Miss Murray and her mysterious Scottish Laird. It was frankly shocking how much better she was treated when people thought she had a man on her arm, even an absent one.

Florence was as snide and petty as always, but without the strength of her obedient group of cronies behind her, Summer really could not have cared less.

Summer was almost starting to regret the day when she'd have to tearfully tell her newfound friends that Laird McLeod had been killed in battle. They'd be heartbroken, of course.

Still, that would mean that the story was over. She'd get a few months' sympathy, and nobody would expect very much of her for a while.

There was no need to hurry it along, though, was there? Laird McLeod was an old man, long dead, and nobody was receiving the letters Summer was sending, any more than they were writing them back. She had nothing to worry about.



They'd attended a soiree thrown by Mrs. Perkins, Lily's mother. Summer had never been invited to one of the Perkins' gatherings, but Lily insisted she be invited.

They left shortly after midnight, and she was too caught up in her own happy memories and plans for the next letter – her friends waited eagerly for every installment – to notice that her father was very quiet.

“Who is Laird McLeod, Summer?” Vincent asked, when they were around halfway home. There was a tone in his voice that indicated that he already knew who Laird McLeod was – or rather, who he was not.

Summer's good mood melted away like spring frost before the sun.

“I... what do you mean, Papa?”

“Mrs. Perkins was talking about how sad she was over your betrothal stretching on so long. She mentioned that her daughter was quite taken with your Laird McLeod already and was keen to meet him.”

Summer swallowed hard, her throat clenching. “And what did you tell her?”

If Vincent had said that he didn't know of any Laird McLeod, and his daughter was certainly not betrothed, that could cause trouble for Summer. She could claim that it was a secret, of course, but it would already be too late. Once doubts were sown, the whole thing was over.

"I said something vague and excused myself. Who is he, Summer?"

She sighed. "No one."

"Don't you dare play games with me, Summer," Vincent snapped; his voice harder than Summer had ever heard it. She flinched, not entirely sure what to do with her father's tone. He wasn't an angry man, and Summer had no idea how she would react if her father got really, truly angry with her.

"No, I mean he really is nobody. He doesn't exist, Papa."

Vincent passed a hand over his face. "What are you talking about?"

Summer drew in a deep breath. "I was tired of the other ladies making fun of me. I wanted to get back at Florence."

"So, this Laird McLeod truly doesn't exist?"

"He did, but he's dead. I've just been sending letters and writing letters that I say are from him. It's entirely harmless, Papa."



“Harmless? You’re creating quite a complicated web of deceit here, Summer,” Vincent said, pressing his lips into a thin line. “And what will your newfound friends say when your betrothed never appears?”

“I’m going to tell them he’s dead in a few months. There’s a war, you see.”

Vincent groaned. “Of course there is. And these letters you write to him, do you really send them off? Why not just pretend that you’ve written?”

“I thought of that, but then our servants will gradually realize that I’m not actually writing to anyone. This way, they can see that I am writing to a Laird McLeod. They don’t know that nobody’s on the other end of the letters.”

“And neither do you,” Vincent said crisply. “You have no idea where your letters are going, no doubt giving some Scottish family a good laugh at our expense.”

“I didn’t put my address on it, Papa. I’m not a fool.”

“Well, that’s something. I would tell you to stop at once, but you’re in far too deep.”

Summer cringed a little at her father’s disgusted tone. He was angry with her, that much was plain.

“It’s just to make everyone like me a little bit more, Papa.”

“Under false pretences. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll end this now.”

“Not just yet.” Summer said at once and flushed. “I’m not ready to let it go yet.”

“Oh, for God’s sake. I am not happy about this, Summer.”

“Are you going to tell people he’s not real?” Summer asked in a small voice.

“What, and have them call you deranged? Certainly not. I’ll just have to hope that you come to your senses soon enough.”

They rode the rest of the way home in silence, Summer fighting back tears. She loved her father and hated to think that he thought poorly of her. Still, she admitted to herself that she wasn’t ready to let her fictional laird go just yet.

Just a little while longer, Summer told herself.



“You look deep in thought,” Alana commented, linking her arm through Summer’s.

The two ladies were promenading in the Park, and Summer still felt a flutter of happiness and excitement that somebody actually *wanted* to promenade with her. She had a good friend, at long last, and Alana really did seem to be a good friend.

She was a little more forward than Summer and had managed to carve out a niche for herself in Society. Most of that was due to hanging on Florence's skirts and laughing at her cruel jokes. Summer flattered herself that she saw the *real* Alana.

Or so she hoped. It turned out that inventing something interesting about yourself to make people notice you didn't actually make you any better at navigating Society.

But it was a learned skill, wasn't it? Why shouldn't Summer learn as well as anyone else? She wished she'd had the sense to invent a tragic love story for herself when she was twenty.

"Hm, what? Oh, I was just thinking how blue the sky looks today." Summer said.

Alana chuckled, and as always, Summer wasn't sure whether her friend was laughing at her or with her.

It was probably the last one, surely.

"It is a fine day. It's going to rain later, though. Mama didn't want me to go out at all. I asked Lily to come, but some gentleman is paying her a visit today. She wouldn't say why. I do love a good mystery, don't you? I love unraveling them, digging all of the secrets out of the ground like truffles."

Summer laughed nervously. "I'm no good at puzzles, Alana, you know that. Nowhere near as good as you."

Alana tossed back her cloud of jet-black hair. “I know *that*. I beat you at chess every time.”

“I’ll beat you one day.”

“I’m sure. So, do you have any new letters from *you-know-who*?” Alana asked, wiggling her eyebrows significantly. She always referred to Laird McLeod as *you-know-who*, even though it seemed like everyone in Society knew exactly who he was.

“I do, actually.” Summer answered, pausing to pull a letter out of her sleeve. “Do you want to read it?”

Alana had snatched it out of her hand almost before she’d finished speaking. They walked on in silence, Alana avidly reading the letter. Summer felt a little awkward about all this. Many of her friends seemed rather too eager to read the letters. Surely it wasn’t normal for ladies to read all of their friends’ love letters. Or perhaps it was normal, and Summer just didn’t realize it.

She was pleased with what she’d written, but perhaps it was better than she thought, judging by the growing crowd of girls who requested to read the letters.

Alana folded up the letter with a sigh. “You must miss him a lot.”

“Every day,” Summer lied smoothly. She reached out to take the letter back. Lily would want to read it after Alana, as well

as another three girls, one of who would certainly pass the news on to Florence.

“I must say, your beau has quite the turn of phrase. His accounts of the battles have me quite breathless.”

“Yes, he is a clever writer,” Summer said, secretly taking the praise and treasuring it up for herself. “I look forward to his letters.”

“So does half of Society at the moment. I was meaning to ask you, Summer, what does Laird McLeod look like?”

“Why do you ask? I’ve told you before.”

“No, actually you haven’t,” Alana said, laughing. “You said that he was tall and strong and had a beard. You talk about the things he’s done and said, and about the Clan all the time, but I don’t think you’ve ever properly described him.”

“I... I’m sure I must have done,” Summer said, trying to sound light and unconcerned, even though panic was rising in her throat.

“You definitely haven’t. Come on, tell me. Oh, do you have a miniature of him? A lock of hair, perhaps?”

“No, I don’t, sorry.” Summer was beginning to feel a little dizzy. Alana had slid her arm through hers again, and her grip was beginning to feel quite tight. Summer didn’t think she could pull away if Alana had a mind not to let her go.

Alana pouted. “That’s disappointing. Come on, give me a description. What color is his hair? And his eyes?”

Summer was struggling to breathe. She’d been able to concoct a detailed backstory for Laird McLeod, including his family, friends, and who he’d lost so far in the terrible clan wars, which she had also invented.

Somehow, however, she hadn’t been able to give him a face. He was tall and strong, she knew that much, and imagined that he was reasonably handsome. Whenever she imagined him, however, his face was a blur. It was as if she’d wasted all of her creativity on his letters and his life and had none left for the man himself.

“Summer?” Alana said, slowing. She frowned, bending down to look into Summer’s face. “What’s wrong? Why won’t you tell me? Are you hiding something?”

“I don’t know what he looks like,” Summer burst out, and promptly exploded into tears.

Alana sucked in a breath. She grabbed Summer by the arm and steered her behind a clump of trees.

“There, there, don’t cry. Here, use my handkerchief.”

Summer sniffled miserably, dabbing her wet cheeks with the fine silk handkerchief. She went to hand it back, but Alana wrinkled her nose and shook her head.

“I’m sorry.” Summer said, her voice trembling. “I... I don’t know how it came to this. I never meant—”

“It’s all right, Summer. I understand.” Alana soothed. “Truly, I do.”

Summer’s eyes snapped up to her friend’s face. Alana was smiling and looked as kind as anyone would want. For a moment, Summer felt like a weight had been lifted off her chest. Alana *understood*.

“It’s been a year and a half since you’ve seen him. Of course you can hardly remember his face.”

Summer’s heart sank again. Oh. Of course. Alana thought that Summer just meant that she’d forgotten. Of course she would naturally think that, and not that her newfound friend had invented an entire romance simply to get good attention and avoid bad attention.

Still, she had a façade to keep up. A rotting façade, getting heavier and more difficult to maintain by the minute.

“I’m sure I’ll remember soon,” Summer managed.

Alana nodded. “Of course you will. And when he finally comes to London to claim you, you’ll remember him at once. I daresay you’ll wonder how you could ever have forgotten him at all.”

Summer smiled weakly. “I daresay.”

Overhead, thunder rumbled, and the girls flinched. Summer glanced up to find that the perfect sky was heavy with clouds. She could feel rain in the air. The first drops would fall at any minute.

“Oh, no. We’re going to get soaked if we don’t leave now. Let’s go home, Summer,” Alana said, extending her hand with a smile. Only a month ago, such a gesture of friendship would have made Summer’s day. She’d always imagined a friend like Alana, but somehow this felt like cheating. Summer took it, wondering why she felt so hollow.



The heavens opened before Summer got home. She’d walked Alana home first, and Alana hadn’t offered the family carriage. Summer had barely reached the end of Alana’s street before the rain started to fall in earnest, soaking through her thin shawl and plastering her hair to her head.

She stood in the hallway, water pooling around her feet, when the library door creaked open and Vincent appeared. He blinked at his dripping wet daughter.

“Oh. Is it raining?”

“Yes, Papa. Very heavily. Vesta is bringing me a towel, then I’ll change for dinner.”

Vincent nodded, taking a few steps forward. “Sir Rupert was talking to me about your... *betrothed* at the club today.”



Prickles ran down Summer's spine. "What did he say?"

"Nothing much, just asking questions about the wedding, and whether he can meet up with the gentleman when he next visits Scotland, if we'd like to come with him, that sort of thing."

"Oh."

"*Oh*, indeed, Summer. I made it clear that I wanted nothing to do with your scheme, and I've just spent an hour or so lying to a good friend of mine. This has to stop, Summer."

Summer bit her lip and nodded. "You're right, Papa. I wanted it to last longer, but there's no point, is there? It doesn't matter how long I make it last, it'll never be real, will it?"

Vincent looked a little miserable. "I'm sorry, darling."

"It's all right, Papa. I'm sorry you were put in that position with Sir Rupert. I'll tell Alana that when I came back today, there was another letter waiting for me, telling me he was dead."

"It's for the best."

Summer tried to smile. "I know."

It shouldn't feel as though she was *really* going through a bereavement. It was just the end to a child's game of pretend, for goodness' sake. She would just have to hope that Lily and Alana continued to be her friend, and that Florence wouldn't seize the chance for revenge.

Vincent awkwardly patted her damp cheek. "That's my girl. Now, you'd better go and change out of those wet things."



Summer didn't immediately go downstairs once she was changed. Dinner wasn't for a few hours, so she sat in her chamber, perched on the window seat, and watched the sky grow dark. There was nothing like a gray, miserable day to make night time come all the sooner. The rain was falling harder than ever, turning the gardens into soggy mires and the pavements and roads into lakes of dirty water.

Summer wondered whether she should send one last letter, saying goodbye to her imaginary Laird McLeod. No, that was silly. It would look strange, too – why send a letter to her betrothed right after she discovered he was dead?

She'd have to give him a suitably heroic death. Everyone would want to know what had happened. Summer didn't think she have to fake sadness – she was already feeling quite emotional. It was her only close friends who would expect to see tears, and that was Alana and Lily.

It seemed ridiculous that it had come to this. Perhaps her father was right.

*No perhaps about it, Summer thought grimly. This has gone far enough, whether I like it or not.*

A pounding on the door broke into her thoughts. She flinched, sitting upright. Who was that? They weren't expecting guests. More to the point, who was out on a night like tonight?

Summer got up, curiously slipping out onto the landing. From here, she could see down into the hall. Vesta was opening the door a crack, shaking his head. Whoever it was, he wasn't keen on letting them in.

“For God’s sake, man, let me in! It’s fair pelting it down out here.”

Summer blinked. The man was Scottish, his accent rough and uncultured. There was something of a scuffle, and then the man himself was standing in the hall. He was soaked to the skin. Water streamed off him, pooling around his feet.

He had fair hair, although it was hard to tell now that the rain had darkened it and flattened it to his head and had a neatly trimmed blond beard. Even from here, Summer could see that he was tall and strongly built, he towered over Vesta and looked at least twice as broad. He must be in his mid-to-late twenties.

Summer had never seen him before in her life. He wasn't a Society regular, and he didn't look like anyone's servant, either. He dressed simply, in drab traveling clothes, now wet and smelling of damp, and had a rough knapsack thrown over his shoulder. But he held himself with dignity, as if he belonged here as well as anywhere else.

“I must insist that you leave, Sir!” Vesta hissed, clearly disconcerted.

“I want to speak to the Marquess of Bridgeville,” the man replied simply. “I’ll nae leave until I’ve seen him. It’s important.”

Vincent, hearing the commotion, appeared from along the hall. He approached the stranger warily.

“I am the Marquess. Who are you, and what do you want?”

The man smiled tightly. “Me name is Oskar Lawson, and I’m Laird of Clan McLeod.”

There was a long silence. Summer’s hands tightened on the railings.

Oh no. No, no, no.

“And what do you want with us?” Vincent said, his voice sounding squeaky and nervous. Oskar’s eyes narrowed.

“I’m here, *yer Lordship*, to meet my betrothed. Ye cannae begrudge a man that, can ye? Meeting the woman who keeps saying we’re going to be married?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Vincent said. Upstairs, Summer prayed for her father to stay strong. She

leaned forward, keen to get a better look at what was going on downstairs, and the banister creaked loudly.

It was too much to hope that they hadn't heard it. In a flash, the man – Oskar – was standing at the bottom of the stairs, staring up at her.

Their eyes met, and Summer cringed. He wasn't some doddering old laird. He was a young man, probably with a family already. He had a strong, handsome face, a little worn from hard living and hard work. He had blue eyes too, ridiculously bright and blue, honing in on Summer like an arrow. She wanted to run back into her chamber and hide under her bed forever, until this humiliation faded away.

He had muscles rippling even under his heavy, damp clothes, and Summer struggled to keep her eyes on his face. She didn't think she'd ever seen a gentleman with such a handsome figure. It was making her feel odd, prickly and hot in her stomach. She wasn't sure she liked the feeling, especially since she had no control over it at all.

But she was frozen in place, her hands gripping the banister as if they'd never let go, her feet rooted to the spot.

Oskar pointed at her. “Her. That's the one. That's the lass that's been sending me letters. She's sent me letters for two bloody months now. We're betrothed, apparently.”

Summer opened her mouth to defend herself, but there really wasn't much to say. So, she did the next best thing to speaking out for herself.

She fainted.

## CHAPTER 4



*Two Months Earlier,  
McLeod Castle,  
Scottish Highlands*

OSKAR KEPT REREADING the letter as if reading it again would make it make sense. So far, it wasn't working.

It didn't matter how he looked at the letter – it was still the same deranged scribblings of a strange woman he'd never met or heard of in his life.

A woman who, if this letter was to be believed, he was betrothed to.

Eleanor, his mother, hung over his shoulder, her quick eyes reading faster than he could, and her eyes crinkled with amusement. Rhys had gone rushing to fetch her as soon as he knew what the letter was about, and was currently rolling around on the floor, laughing. Oskar hoped he laughed until he was sick. Whoever said younger brothers were a joy had clearly never met Rhys.

“Could it be a secret message?” Oskar ventured.

Eleanor gave him a Look. “A secret message? From who? And why?”

“I daenaie ken. It’s the only way any of this can make sense. Who is this woman, and why does she think she’s betrothed to me?”

“Maybe she was betrothed to Uncle,” Rhys suggested.

“Nay. Yer late Uncle was nae betrothed. There was nay woman, I’m sure of that.” A voice came from the shadow of the doorway, stepping into the room. Oskar couldn’t help but feel relieved. Callum Lamb had served his uncle faithfully for years, and it was a relief to have such an experienced councilor at his side. Running a clan was never going to be easy, and especially not one as run down and problematic as Clan McLeod. Going forward, he’d need Callum at his side.

“Aye, and somehow I doubt that Uncle was writing to some young English lass,” Oskar commented, handing the letter to Callum. “Tell me what ye make of that.”

Overall, it was a well-written letter. It was a woman writing to the man she loved, talking about previous letters, plans they’d made for the future, times they’d already shared, concerns, anxieties, and so on. All very well and good, but it was all addressed to *him* and he *did not know who she was*.

If he was some sort of foolhardy rake, he might assume he’d gotten drunk and frisky with a woman, and now she thought they were betrothed.



But that wasn't so, and Oskar knew that. He'd never been one for womanizing, even before the responsibility of leading his uncle's clan had landed squarely on his shoulders.

"It seems to be a case of mistaken identity to me," Eleanor said. "She writes as if she knows ye."

"Aye, Maither, but it's addressed to me. Me name, me title, our land. I daenae understand it."

Eleanor pursed her lips, thinking. Oskar trusted her advice every bit as much as he trusted Callum's, which was going to be a recipe for disaster when they inevitably gave him differing advice one day.

She'd just turned fifty, and her black hair was gray at the temples. She had the same wide, blue eyes that she'd bequeathed to her two sons, and a set, powerful face. Their hair, fair as straw, was inherited from their father. Oskar didn't miss him, not one bit, although he thought that Rhys was young enough to still have rose-tinted memories of their dear, departed father.

Rhys was three-and-twenty, five years younger than Oskar himself, but he might as well have been ten years younger. When he was three-and-twenty, Oskar had been supporting his mother and younger brother, fighting off greedy landlords who were keen to force them off their land. There was no resemblance between him at that age and Rhys now. Maybe they'd made things too easy for him. Maybe he'd been spoiled.

Either way, too late now.

“Get up, Rhys. Daenae roll around on the floor like a child,” Oskar said sharply. It was a little unkind, but the letter was making him nervous.

Rhys’ face darkened, but he got obediently to his feet.

“I still think it’s a letter from an old flame of Uncle’s.”

“Callum said there wasnae anyone,” Oskar replied.

“Well, maybe Callum just didnae know about it.”

“Enough,” Callum snapped. “There was nay one, Rhys. Stop talking about this.”

Rhys flinched, looking to Oskar as if he expected Oskar to do something. When there was nothing but silence, he pressed his lips together.

“Fine, sort it out yourselves,” he growled, turning on his heel and storming out.

He didn’t slam the door, he left it open, which was actually worse. Oskar had arrived at his uncle’s old Castle and found it ramshackle and in great need of repair. Drafts whistled through the building like wind, and the place was impossible to heat. Even with the door open for only a minute, Oskar

could feel the fire's heat being sucked out. He sighed. Typical of Rhys to be petty.

"I'll go and talk to him," Eleanor murmured, sweeping out of the room after her son. She closed the door softly behind her, leaving Callum and Oskar alone.

"Well?" Oskar asked quietly.

"I doubt it's mistaken identity, although that is the most logical answer," Callum said, handing back the letter. "There could be any number of explanations as to why ye're getting this letter."

"Such as?"

Callum sighed, leaning back against the desk and folding his arms. He was close to forty, Oskar thought, and the years hadn't been kind to him. He was tall and thin, rather too thin, and he had dark hair and dark eyes. He had a wolfish kind of look about him, and if Oskar hadn't known how faithfully Callum had served his uncle, he'd have distrusted him.

"Let me set out a scene for ye. A silly young Scot befriends a young lady. They get a little too friendly – I'm sure ye ken what I mean. The lady panics and starts to talk about marriage. The young man has nay intention of marrying her, but he daesnae want her to be upset, so he spins a fine yarn. He tells her he's a clan laird, saying the first name that pops into his head, and mumbles something about a war. She goes home, looks up the name he gave her, and of course finds ye. She never doubts his story for a moment, and dashes off a loving letter for ye."

Oskar scratched his head. “That’s a wee bit far-fetched.”

Callum shrugged. “Ye got any other ideas?”

“Nay. What should I do about it? She’s nae put her address on it.”

“Well, she doesnae want ye to write back, then. Whatever the purpose of this letter, I’d wager it’s nae about ye at all.”

“Or it could be some madwoman who could turn up at the Castle at any minute,” Oskar said flatly.

“So what if it is?”

He sighed. “Callum, ye of all people should know that running a clan is as much about image as it about leadership. Supposing some mad English woman comes rampaging around saying that we’re betrothed. I’ll be a laughingstock, and nobody will take me seriously. Uncle Lawson didnae leave this clan in a good way, and my position here is tenuous to say the least. They’ll nae laugh with me; they’ll laugh at me. Who wants a ridiculous laird?”

Callum nodded slowly, chewing his lip. “I see what ye mean. Still, it’s unlikely she’ll turn up here.”

“Why nae? She clearly kens where I live, and all I ken about her is her name. Uh... Summer Murray. There’s a crest on the paper, I daena recognize it. I suppose if she’s a rich woman, I

could make her marry me after all and use her dowry to fix up the Castle.”

Callum chuckled. “My advice is to ignore it. I doubt we’ll hear from this madwoman again.” Callum repeated his advice when the second letter came. When the third letter came, he admitted that perhaps this was going to be more of a problem than they’d anticipated. After two months, Oskar had had enough. It wasn’t hard to figure out whose crest was on the letters.

He was going to England to sort this out once and for all.



### *Present Day*

Oskar didn’t know what he’d expected from Summer Murray. He was too busy feeling grateful that he’d gotten the right house and the right girl, and not made a fool of himself accusing innocent girls of pretending to be betrothed to him.

He hadn’t quite been prepared for the pale-faced young woman at the top of the stairs, her brown hair frizzy and untamed, staring down at him with the greenest eyes he’d ever seen and a look of pure, unadulterated horror on her face.

He hadn’t meant to accuse her quite so dramatically. He’d imagined their meeting to be more dignified and serious than it was. He certainly hadn’t imagined himself, soaking wet and freezing cold, standing in an English Marquess’ hallway and throwing accusations at the man’s daughter. He shifted from foot to foot, feeling his soaked boots squelch. Maybe he should have packed something a little fancier. Even the butler

– was it a butler? Oskar thought so – was dressed better than him.

Oskar was waiting for the girl to reply when a strange look came over her face. He'd seen people's faces right before they fainted enough times to recognize that look.

He acted without thinking about it, and his foot was probably on the bottom stair before she even knew she was going to faint. He raced up the stairs two at a time, vaguely aware of the father and the butler squawking at him in the background.

She was a graceful fainter, at least, and that gave him a bit more time to catch her than if she'd simply face planted into their very nice hallway carpet.

Oskar caught the fainting woman neatly in his arms, scooping her up against his chest. It was an automatic movement, and probably a bad idea. His wet clothes were almost certainly soaking into hers.

The butler and the father were puffing up the stairs after him, and Oskar stood there, waiting for them, trying to ignore the fact he was dripping on their nice carpet.

The girl was a heavy, warm weight against his chest. She weighed more than those flimsy Society belles seemed to, and he liked that. He liked to see proper men and women, not Beauties and Dandies laced into corsets so tight they couldn't even breathe.

Oskar noticed, to his surprise, that the girl's hair was wet. Had she been out in the rain before he arrived?

The father puffed his way onto the landing, eyes popping in outrage.

“What is the meaning of this?” he gasped. “Who are you? What are you doing?”

“I just told ye who I am,” Oskar snapped. “And according to the letters yer daughter sent, we're betrothed.”

Something flickered across the father's face.

*He kens something about this,* Oskar thought, but didn't press the issue.

“Well, I can't have you saying this sort of thing all over town. Look at how it's affected my poor girl!”

Oskar rolled his eyes. “I've got the letters. Daenae keep denying it, ye're making a fool of yerself. I want to get to the bottom of this just as much as you do, so let's work together for a while and get this sorted, eh?”

The father – Oskar should probably find out his name – pressed his lips together in a thin line.

“Very well. Can I see to my daughter first?”

“Yes. Where’s her chamber?”

“I *beg* your pardon?”

“Her chamber,” Oskar repeated, louder. “So, I can put her down and she can rest. Do ye want me to carry her in my arms all evening?”

“You can’t possibly take her to her chamber. Give her to me.”

Oskar eyed the frail-looking older man and the spindly butler.

“It’s fine. I’ve got her. Just tell me where to go.”

The father looked as though he wanted to argue but didn’t seem as if he had the courage.

“Very well, but no one can know. Do you hear, Vesta? No one can know.”

Oskar snorted. “What on Earth do ye think I’m going to do with her with yer man and yerself there?”

The father flushed hotly. “Do be quiet. Follow me.”

Oskar followed the father down a thickly carpeted hall, the butler – Vesta – following behind, no doubt eyeing him with great suspicion. Oskar half expected the man to try and brain him with a candlestick.



Not that it would work. The little man probably couldn't even reach that high.

The father opened a door to a large, bright chamber, almost certainly the daughter's chamber.

"Put her down on the bed and get out at once. Go wait in the parlor," the father snapped.

"I'll want to change first."

"I haven't any clothes that will fit you."

Oskar rolled his eyes. Of course not. He'd barely get the father's breeches over one leg. He'd be lucky to get a single arm into one of his waistcoats.

"I have my own clothes."

"Right. Well. I'll sure we'll find somewhere for you to change."

Oskar moved over to the bed intending to set the girl down and back away. Bang on cue, as he leaned over to deposit her down on the mattress, her eyes flew open and widened in fear.

She gave a little shriek, and her father and Vesta were at her side in an instant. Not that Oskar could blame her. She woke

up on a bed with a strange man leaning over her. He'd have shrieked, too.

"Darling, darling, everything is all right!" the father soothed, taking her hand and patting it. Oskar straightened, backing away a little. The girl's eyes followed him. Judging by the resigned expression on her face, she knew who he was.

So this was Summer Murray, the author of those infernal letters.

"I think ye owe me an explanation." Oskar drawled. "A good one."

Color rushed to her cheeks. "I have an explanation, but I wouldn't say it's a good one."

"Any explanation will do, really. Just something to explain away the letters I've been receiving several times a week over the past few months, from a woman claiming to be my betrothed." Oskar knew his voice was hard and unfriendly and saw her cringe back against the headboard. He felt a little guilty, but then he shifted uncomfortably in his damp, chafing clothes and felt the soreness from his long journey, and suddenly his sympathy for Miss Murray evaporated.

"I'll tell you, but can I have a little time to recover first?" Miss Murray said, sounding a little pleading. She was looking at him, waiting for him to decide.

Oskar sighed. He'd come all this way for an explanation, he could wait a little longer now.

“All right. I need to change out of these wet things, anyway. I’ll nae leave the house, though. The second I step out of that door I ken what will happen. Ye’ll bolt it against me and I’ll nae get back in again.”

“Too right,” Vesta muttered. Oskar shot him a glare, and while the small man shifted uncomfortably, he didn’t drop his gaze.

“You will be shown to a guest chamber to change,” the father said. “Vesta, make sure it’s as far away from Summer’s chamber as possible. You may address me as Lord Bridgeville, by the way. I am the Marquess of Bridgeville, you see.”

Oskar raised an eyebrow. “I thought your name was Vincent Murray.”

“It is, but my title—”

“I daenae care for titles. I’ll call ye Murray. Ye can call me Lawson. Or Oskar, I daenae care. I’m nae sure I want to hear either of ye say *Laird McLeod*, after the amount of times I had to read it in one of those letters.”

Color flooded Summer’s cheeks at the mention of the letters. Suddenly feeling uncomfortable, Oskar cleared his throat and edged out of the chamber after Vesta. The door was slammed shut behind him, nearly catching him on the back of the head, and he heard a key turn in the lock.

Oh, it was just typical that after all that had happened, *they* didn’t trust *him*.

## CHAPTER 5



SUMMER PUT off going downstairs for as long as she could. There was no way, no way at all that this meeting could end in anything other than humiliation for her. She was going to have to stand there and face that stern, unyielding, and annoyingly handsome man and tell him that she made up a betrothal between them to tell her friends a good story.

No, it was worse than that. She made it up to *get* friends in the first place.

Oh, he was going to think so badly of her.

Summer smoothed her skirts with shaking hands, eyeing herself in the mirror. She was too pale, and her hair was still a little damp and frizzy after the rain. She looked a sight. Part of her wanted to change dresses, but then he'd *see* that she changed dresses and wonder why.

*What if he thinks you want to marry him? What if he thinks that's what this is all about – some sort of trick or trap?*

Summer shivered. Oh, that would be too mortifying for words. At least now he'd seen her and the Manor, he'd probably guess

that she wasn't looking for money. They were reasonably well off, and she had no reason to go chasing after some remote clan laird.

Still, the Laird McLeod of her imagination matched up nicely with the real laird. She could picture his face now, of course, and somehow the blond good looks seemed *right* on Oskar Lawson. He wasn't wearing a kilt or any sort of tartan, just worn old traveling clothes, but she could just picture him in a kilt and tartan.

Not that she should picture him in anything other than what he was wearing now, of course. No doubt he was here for an apology and a promise that it wouldn't happen again.

*I can do that, Summer thought with relief. I'll be very apologetic, and he'll just think I'm a silly girl and leave.*

She drew in a deep breath, giving her reflection one last look over, as if that would make any difference to her overall appearance. No doubt Oskar Lawson thought she was very plain. He was a handsome man, with a strong, attractive sort of face that drew one's eye. No doubt he had plenty of pretty girls fawning over him back home.

*But you're not here to fawn, Summer reminded herself sternly. You're here to apologize for acting like a madwoman and sending love letters to a man who didn't even know of your existence. You're going to explain why, for what little good that will do, and then you will promise never to contact him again. Then he'll leave, and this will all just be a horribly embarrassing memory.*

She gave herself a stern nod and walked out of the safe haven of her chamber before she could lose her nerve.



They were in the parlor. That was a more formal setting than the drawing room, and only served to remind Summer how serious all of this was. She swallowed hard, stopping to take one deep breath before going inside.

Oskar Lawson stood near the fire, leaning against the mantelpiece and staring into the flames. He'd changed into more non-descript traveling clothes, the sort of thing that marked you out as a gentleman but not anyone of note, and his wet hair was combed back. He wore it rather long, Summer noticed. It gathered around his nape, as if he'd recently had it tied back in a ponytail or queue and suddenly cut it off one day.

Vincent sat in his usual chair, as far away from Oskar as he could get. His face was set and grim, and he was completely silent.

They both glanced up as she came in.

“Miss Murray,” Oskar said, icily polite, and bowed. “Sorry if I scared you earlier.”

“It’s me who should apologize, Mr. Lawson.” Summer said, secretly pleased at how gracious and sincere she sounded. “I can’t begin to convey how sorry I am at what happened. I don’t know what I was thinking, and I certainly don’t know how I can set things right. In fact, I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forgive mys—”

“For God’s sake, Lass, they’re just letters,” Oskar interrupted, giving a hoarse chuckle. Vincent sucked in an angry breath.

“There you are, then, Mr. Lawson. You have your apology. Now go.”

“I didn’t come for an apology. As I said, they’re just letters. They did no real harm. I’d rather have answers if that’s all the same to you.”

Summer glanced over at her father, and quickly glanced away. He was purple with anger, and his hands clenched and unclenched on the arms of the chair. She was suddenly very afraid that her father was going to do something foolish. It was apparent that Oskar wasn’t afraid of either of them. Why should he be afraid? Neither Summer nor Vincent was much of a threat.

“Of course,” Summer spoke quickly. “Why don’t you sit down, Mr. Lawson?”

“I prefer to stand. I’ve sat in various stagecoaches from the wilds of Scotland to here, and I’ve been jolted half to death. I’d like to stretch my legs, just to make sure they’re working.”

“Right. Very well. The thing is – and I can’t imagine this will surprise you, Mr. Lawson – I am not much of a success in Society.”

Summer paused for realization and pity to cross Oskar’s face, but he only blinked impassively back at her.

“I have absolutely no idea what you mean, Lass.”

“Miss Murray,” Vincent corrected under his breath.

“Oh. Right. Well, a success in Society is a very beautiful, accomplished, charming young lady that everyone likes. You know, the sort of girl that gets invited to all the parties, and lots of gentlemen like, and there’s lots of talk about her – mostly good talk, of course – and she ultimately makes a good marriage. You know the type?”

“Aye, I do. I wouldn’t call them successes, though. Insufferable snobs, maybe.”

Summer was tempted to agree. Judging by the slow, knowing smile that spread over Oskar’s face, she guessed that he read her agreement in her face.

She cleared her throat. “Anyway, as I was saying, I wasn’t very popular. I’d rather stay at home with Papa, and I’ve never had... never had the knack of making people like me, you know? I never say the right things, I don’t look the right way, I don’t have the right instincts. Every social occasion is a battle, and one I was definitely losing. It was so unfair, you know? Have you ever tried so hard, worked so hard at something that you needed to be good at, or wanted to be good at, and just found yourself slipping backward all the time?”

Summer broke off, aware that she was talking too much. This wasn’t the cool, detached apology she was hoped for. What made it worse was that Oskar was so intently *listening* to her. Summer was use to the glazed, disinterested expressions of



gentlemen when she talked. She was use to people subtly starting up conversations with those around them, until the babble of muted conversations finally overrode whatever Summer was trying to say.

It wasn't a nice feeling, suddenly realizing that you were talking and not a single person was listening, or even acknowledged that you were speaking.

Oskar's eyes, so piercingly blue that Summer could scarcely stand to look at them, were boring into her. He was watching her, and his attention sent shivers down her spine. She didn't know what it could be – perhaps a combination of her own breathless love letters and the good-looking man beside her – but Summer was conscious of an ache inside her, coiling and sizzling, forming a tangible knot in her stomach.

It was like anxiety, but nowhere near as awful. It was something exciting, something that made Summer want to *do* something, she just didn't know what.

It wasn't like anything of those pallid, boring Society gentlemen had inspired.

One thing Summer knew for sure, and that was that Oskar had brought all those words out of her.

*What else could he bring out of me?*

*No, no, Summer! Focus!*

Pressing her clammy palms together to distract herself from her spiralling thoughts, Summer prayed she wasn't blushing and continued,

“In short, Mr. Lawson, I thought I could make myself seem more interesting if I invented an intriguing betrothal. I thought I'd fabricate some letters from a non-existent Scottish laird and show them to my friends. Or rather, the people I wanted to be my friends. I found your name in a book, but it said that you were dead.”

“That wasnae me name.” Oskar said bluntly. “It was me uncle's. He's been dead a full two years. He left the Lairdship to me, but it took them a year to track me and me family down. I've been there ever since. I am Laird McLeod now, but if ye used the address from the book, I daresay ye were thinking of me uncle.”

Summer's cheeks burned. “Anyway, I never expected anyone to be on the other end of my letters. I am sorry for all the trouble I caused you.”

“Let me get this straight,” Oskar said, crossing brawny arms across his broad chest. The movement made his muscles swell and stand out across his upper body. He was wearing a thin, white linen shirt, not at all suitable for any proper events in Society, and the shirt emphasized his chest more than was probably proper.

Summer swallowed, her throat and mouth suddenly bone dry. She tried to fix her eyes on Oskar's face, not his chest.

“Ye created an entire story between me and ye to impress people who, by the sounds of it, werenae treatin’ ye very well?”

Summer flushed. “Yes, I know. It sounds awfully stupid.”

“It sounds sad.”

Summer flinched at that. She twisted her fingers together, looking away. “I’m aware of that,” she said sharply.

“They’re nae really yer friends.”

“I know.”

“So, what have ye gained?”

“Just—” Summer took a single, abortive step toward him. She didn’t know what she’d do when she got to him. Hammer her fists ineffectually on his broad chest? Stand up on her tiptoes and hope to slap him? She’d probably break her hand. “Just please accept my apology,” she finished lamely.

Oskar was eyeing her closely, and she guessed that he already knew everything she was thinking.

“All right,” he said suddenly. “Yer story is so ridiculous ye cannae be making it up. Also, ye and yer Faither are terrible, *terrible* liars. I’d have seen it on yer face if ye werenae being truthful. So, I suppose that brings us to the crux of the matter.”

Summer glanced up at him. “You’re leaving?”

“Ha... ha. Nay. Do ye want to get married, Miss Murray?”

There was a moment of silence. “I beg your pardon?” Summer managed; sure that she must have heard incorrectly.

“Do ye want to get married?” Oskar repeated patiently. “I’m nae married, I’m nae betrothed, and ye obviously aren’t. Ye’ve told everyone we’re betrothed already, so we’re halfway there. I take it ye have a dowry, aye?”

“Yes, but—”

“Well, I’ll marry ye,” he said roughly, raising his golden eyebrows. “What do ye say?”

Summer laughed awkwardly. “Oh, Mr. Lawson, I am so sorry if I gave you the wrong impression.”

“And what impression would that be? Ye writing to me and telling me how much ye loved me and that ye wanted to marry me as soon as possible? Do ye really think I’ll let ye get away with not fulfilling your promise?”

“That wasn’t *real*.”

“Aye, but now I’m makin’ it real.”

“Well, I’m afraid I can’t–”

“Summer, can I have a word with you?” the Marquess spoke suddenly.

Summer blinked, feeling a little out of sorts. She was still half convinced that she’d imagined an actual *marriage proposal* from this man.

“Of... of course, Papa.”

Her father hadn’t spoken through the whole exchange. He’d simply sat there, saying nothing and staring into space.

He got up, leading the way out, and Summer followed him. She’d expected to go to her father’s study, or perhaps the library, but he simply closed the parlor door and then rounded on her.

“You’ll marry him, Summer.”

Summer sucked in a breath. This could not be real. There was no way that any of this was happening.

“What? Papa, you can’t mean it.”

It was gloomy in the hallway, the few lit candles doing little to dispel the darkness. Summer was sure that her father’s face was twisted in anguish, but it was hard to tell.

“I do mean it, Summer. You have to marry that man, or you’re ruined.”

“I... I’m not *ruined*, Papa, whatever gave you that idea? I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“It’s not about what you’ve done or haven’t done. It’s about what people *think* you’ve done.” her father snapped. Summer was suddenly aware that they were standing close to the parlor door, and there was every chance that Oskar could hear them on the other side of the door. That sent a flush of humiliation flooding through her.

“Why would people *think* I’ve done anything wrong?” Summer tried again.

“That man visited our Manor at this hour. He made those accusations – which are entirely true, by the way – scooped you up in his arms and took you to your chamber.”

“For a *moment*! You and Vesta were there! Besides, Vesta is the only one who saw it. He won’t gossip.”

“No, Vesta will not. But do you truly believe, Summer, that in a Manor like this, nobody besides Vesta has worked out what is going on? A man went into your chamber, Summer. A man you are betrothed to – by your own admission. And if the story about your lies gets out... well, I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you what will happen next.”

Despite the cool of the hallway, Summer felt hot, flushed with fear and misery. It felt as though her final friend – her beloved father – had turned against her.

“Papa, I don’t know anything about him,” she whispered. “I chose his name from a book. I just... just wanted a good story to tell my friends.”

“Oh, don’t be silly, Summer. Mr. Lawson is right – they aren’t your friends. They never were, and you didn’t have the sense to see it. Do you think they’ll stand by you when the gossip about you starts leaking out? They’ll be the first to turn on you.”

“I never thought you’d turn on me, Papa.”

There was a moment of silence. Then Lord Bridgeville sighed, passing his hand over his face.

“I’m sorry, Summer. This is all my fault. I was never as firm as a father ought to be. I let you roam too freely and too far, and now you’re in trouble.”

“You were the best father in the world,” Summer insisted.

“Then why are you friendless and unmarried at four-and-twenty, with a fictional betrothal to a man you’ve never met?”

That hurt. Summer flinched back, tears starting to sting her eyes. Vincent reached out for her, but she stepped back. He let his hand drop to his side.

“I’m sorry for this, Summer. But you must marry Mr. Lawson, otherwise you’ll be ruined when all of this comes out. Do you agree to marry him?”

If her own father sided against her, there was nowhere else for Summer to go.

“Yes,” she said numbly, “I’ll marry him.”



## CHAPTER 6



THE BUTLER, Vesta, showed Oskar to what was probably considered the worst guest chamber in the Manor, but to Oskar was nothing short of a castle after sleeping in public stagecoaches. He received a curt goodnight and that was all.

Oskar dropped his knapsack off his shoulder, eyeing his sleeping chamber for the night.

He'd tried his best not to listen in on the father and daughter's conversation in the hallway, but the walls were thin. Or perhaps he was just used to foot-thick walls in the Castle. He heard words like *ruined*, *what people think you've done*, and *you don't need me to tell you what happens next*.

Oskar hadn't been entirely sure whether his proposal would be accepted or not, but as soon as Murray and his daughter came back into the room, he could see at once that they'd take him up on it.

Since a marriage probably couldn't be organized overnight, chances were that he'd be spending at least a few nights in this chamber, then.

He hoped he'd get a better welcome than he'd received tonight, but he wouldn't count on it.

As if to highlight their lacking hospitality, Oskar's stomach rumbled loudly. There was a velvet bell pull in the corner, probably to summon servants. Well, he didn't like that. He'd wait until people were asleep and help himself to something in the kitchen. He didn't want the sour-faced Vesta hovering over him while he ate, or to be handed a stale heel of bread and old cheese by some harried cook. No, he'd do things on his own terms. Oskar was sure that a house like this had some good ale. Wine, probably. Maybe port or whiskey. He'd have a look, see what they had.

Not yet, though.

Oskar glanced around the chamber, taking it all in. It was a lower-ceiling chamber than the rest of the place, whitewashed and heavy with brocade and red velvet décor. It was a small chamber, with a chipped porcelain bowl set in the corner for washing, a dusty chamber pot under the bed, and a few old, battered pieces of furniture scattered around, probably too old and sentimental to be made into firewood, but not nice enough to put in the good guest chambers.

The fine, four-poster bed was what attracted his attention the most. He'd spent the past few days sleeping on a public stagecoach wherever he could, wishing he'd ridden his own horse there, and remembering that he'd probably end up sleeping under a hedge if he'd done that.

There were inns, of course, but Oskar wasn't willing to waste money on a flea-ridden bed for the night when the people of his clan were starving and poverty stricken. And now he was

here, and he'd gone ahead and offered to marry a half-mad Englishwoman with a good dowry.

He knew she had a good dowry because he'd stopped by a public library and learned everything he could about the Marquess of Bridgeville and his family.

He'd seen her looking at him, too. Oskar knew he was reasonably attractive – he didn't have Rhys' boyish good looks, but he had a certain kind of charm that people responded to. He was used to feeling eyes crawl over him, lingering on his chest and his arms. It wasn't always a welcome feeling – who liked being eyed up and appraised like a piece of meat, after all? – but it was nice, seeing Miss Murray look at him all wide eyed and flustered. She seemed nice, if entirely insane.

She was pretty, too, with the sort of curves he liked to see on a woman. Not that women should care what he thought, of course. It was like seeing lots of different paintings side by side. They were all beautiful, weren't they, but some you liked more.

Or that was how Oskar justified it in his head, anyway. Skinny ladies reminded him of his mother and brother during those difficult years. Collarbones sharp enough to cut, cheekbones jutting out from hollow cheeks, eyes sunken in, haunted by hunger. His mother pushing her paltry bowl of gruel – more water than oats – toward him and saying that she wasn't hungry. Oskar knew it was a lie, how could he *not* know, but he was so hungry he ate it anyway.

It reminded Oskar of going to be so starving hungry you knew you wouldn't sleep, of feeling as though you were going to vomit out your guts even though there was *nothing* in your

stomach. He thought of sour berries that would probably make you ill, but you crammed them in your mouth anyway because you were hungry, so, *so* hungry.

Oskar swallowed hard, closing his eyes until the gray tinge of hungry memories and fear melted away. Those days were behind him, and he'd never go back.

He just... just didn't like to see skinny women.

He pushed his knapsack under the bed and lay back on the mattress, staring up at the ceiling until the sounds of the house died down. By the time he pushed open the door and peered out into the hallway, the whole house was dark and silent. Everyone was in bed. Good, he could roam freely now. So long as he didn't stray into Miss Murray's wing of the house and give her a fright again, he should be fine.

Oskar slipped off his boots in the hopes of being quieter and padded in his stockinged feet down the carpeted hallways, down the stairs, and down toward the dark kitchen.

It was cold down here, he could feel the cool air wafting up the stairs, making him shiver. The stone floor would be as cold as ice, and he had no boots to protect him.

*I'll just grab what I need and go,* Oskar told himself. The kitchen was mostly dark, but there was a faint glow of light just around the corner, where the pantry must be. That was a relief. Oskar didn't particularly want to wake the whole household by smashing a jar of jam or something.

He rounded the corner into the pantry and came face to face with Summer Murray.

They stared at each other in mutual horror.

“What are *you* doing down here?” they both asked, at exactly the same time. In another setting, it might have been comical. Right now, Oskar was awkwardly aware of how inappropriate their meeting was.

Not that there was anything inherently wrong with a man and a woman raiding a pantry together, but this was English Society, and there were a thousand stupid things you could do that would get you shunned and *ruined*, as Murray had so nicely put it. Ridiculous.

She was drinking milk, Oskar noted with amusement. She’d crept down like a child – just like he was doing right now – and poured herself a big, creamy mug of milk. She had a foamy little milk moustache too, which she wiped away with the back of her hand, defiance in her eyes.

“Why did you ask me to marry you?” she asked.

Well, out of all the things Oskar had been waiting for her to say, he hadn’t expected *that*. He blinked, rocking back on his heels.

“Why did ye say aye?” he countered.

“Because I had no choice.”

“Then neither did I.”

Summer rolled her eyes. “Don’t act like you don’t have control over your life. A man like you? A Scottish laird? Please.”

Oskar narrowed his eyes, taking a step toward her. She didn’t scuttle away, only raised her chin and met his eyes. She had green eyes, he noticed with surprise. Proper green. It was rare you saw that; the green was always mixed with blue or gray, or hazel.

“Ye have nay idea what me life is like, Lass. Aye, I’m the Laird, and it means if me people starve and their houses rot away over their heads, it’s me fault. I have to help them till their fields and get them food when there’s famine. I have to protect them from whatever comes their way, and let me tell ye, there’s worse things than pestilence and hunger.”

“Like what?”

“Like other people. There’s naything so vicious as an ambitious man, Miss Murray. It’s harder than ye think, keeping them all safe.”

“Well, I’m sorry for it,” Summer said, still defiant. “But what does that have to do with me?”

He shrugged. “Yer dowry. I have to marry someone, and it might as well be ye. Besides, it’s nae every day ye get a letter from a stranger talking about getting married. I’m intrigued.”

“So you’re just interested in my money,” Summer spat. “Oh, how could I have been so *stupid*?”

“I’m just tryin’ to change what I can to make me life better. Nae unlike what ye did if I’m nae mistaken.”

“We are *not* the same.”

Oskar grinned wolfishly. “You sure about that?”

He was closer to her now, close enough to make her tip her head back to look at him, and he had to look down. Too close by far. Oskar could see her eyes darken and her cheeks flush.

What was worse, he could feel himself responding to her now. Her chest heaved under her thin nightgown. He wouldn’t even have to reach out to touch her breasts underneath. They’d be warm and soft, and he had been a *while* since he—

Oskar cleared his throat and stepped back.

“I’ll make ye a good husband, Summer.”

“Oh, really?” she said, a trifle breathless. She was still flushed, and Oskar knew fine well that simply stepping away wouldn’t do anything to cool whatever she was feeling.

“Aye, really. I’m a good man, and I daenae mean that in a ‘doesnae beat his wife when he’s drunk’. I ken what it’s like to

have a drunken, vicious monster in the house, and I ken how me mother suffered. She raised me better, much better.” He sidled a little closer, watching Summer draw her lower lip between her teeth, hardly seeming to realize what she was doing.

“Think about it,” Oskar continued, as persuasively as he could. “Ye said yerself ye arenae a *success* here. Now, while I couldnae imagine anything less appealing than being considered successful by these people, it’s clearly important to ye. Ye’ve told them all that ye’re betrothed to a mysterious Scottish laird – me, in fact – so, the natural next step is to marry him, aye? How else did ye plan to finish this story?”

“You were going to die,” Summer admitted. “In battle. It was going to be very tragic. I was going to be heartbroken, and then I wouldn’t really be expected to find someone else for a while.”

Oskar bit his lip, desperate not to laugh. It was funny, but he knew that his mother – superstition was Lady Eleanor’s one weakness – would be horrified at the omen. Planning to kill him to end a story? Well, that was basically tempting Fate.

Oskar pointedly put that thought away. There were plenty of things that could kill him, and it probably wouldn’t be due to Summer’s innocent story.

“So, daena ye think marryin’ me would make ye even more interesting?” he suggested. “And when ye come home with me—”



“To Scotland? To your clan?” Summer said, horror in her face. “It’s so far away!”

“Aye, aye, it *is*, but think of how ye’ll be treated. I’m the Laird of the Clan, ye’ll be the Lady. Ye’ll be *the* Lady of the Clan, Lady McLeod. Ye’ll be all but a queen in our little kingdom.”

Summer glanced up, piercing green eyes taking his breath away in a way Oskar wasn’t used to and didn’t like.

“Why are you working so hard to convince me? I already agreed to marry you.”

“Yer Da pushed ye into it.”

“He can’t push me into anything. I’m four-and-twenty.”

“Exactly. So, I want yer agreement. Nae yer father’s. Ye have to agree to marry me.” The truth was, Oskar didn’t know why exactly he needed so desperately to hear her say yes to his proposal, but he longed to hear that one word.

“You’ll get my money,” Summer said, and he heard a tinge of fear in her voice.

“Aye, I will. But ye’ll also get everything I have. A house – a castle, really – land, a clan. A hell of a lot of responsibility, I willnae lie to ye. But I think we can do it. Together.”

“Do what?”

“Fix what’s wrong with the Clan. Rebuild it again. Come on, ye read about what Clan McLeod was like in that book of yers. There’s a lot of work to do. If ye’re unhappy, ye can go back and live with yer faither. Ye can tell yer friends there’s another war, and I sent ye back to keep ye safe. I’ll keep yer secret this time. Ye willnae be trapped, I swear it.”

Summer drew in a deep breath and nodded. “All right. All right, I’ll do it.”

“Excellent,” Oskar said grinning.

“One last thing.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“How did you find me? I didn’t put my address.”

Oskar rolled his eyes. “Ye have yer family crest or whatever it is on all of yer notepaper. It wasnae hard.”

Summer looked rather silly. “Oh. I never thought of that. Well, how did you know that *I* was the one who sent the letters?”

“Ah, that was blind luck. I could tell that I was about to get thrown out of yer house, and I saw ye up there and just hoped that Murray dinnae have more than one daughter.”

Summer snorted. “Blind luck. You weren’t exaggerating.”

They'd gotten close again. It was Summer sidling close this time, Oskar thought. He took the final step, standing close enough to feel her warm breath fan out against his chest, gooseflesh through his thin shirt.

"I rarely exaggerate," he murmured. "Ye'll find that about me."

"Do you have hidden depths, then?" Summer said, and he realized with amusement that she was trying to flirt with him. Maybe she didn't know what she was doing, herself. He felt an uncomfortable arousal creeping through him, addling his mind and making the cold kitchen seem too warm all of a sudden.

"Oh, you'd be surprised," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. He started leaning his head down, closer to her flushed face—

Then there was a shuffling sound, and a glow of light appeared in one of the narrow stone corridors that opened into the kitchen.

Summer leaped back, eyes wide and panicked.

"I can't be here!" she hissed and darted away toward the stairs.

She'd just disappeared when a sleepy servant carrying a candle stepped into the kitchen. It was Vesta, of course it was. He jumped a mile when he saw Oskar, fear fading into recognition and then annoyance.

“Mr. Lawson,” Vesta said, disapproval palpable in his voice.

Oskar flashed a close-lipped smile. “Evening.”

“Couldn’t sleep, could you? You decided to help yourself to some food, did you?”

“Somethin’ like that.”

Vesta’s eyes dropped to the half-full mug of milk on the table. Oskar picked it up and met Vesta’s eyes as he drank back the whole thing in one swallow.

“I was thirsty,” he said mildly.

“You could have had water,” Vesta snapped. “We only get so much milk a day. Milk is expensive, you know, and water is free.”

*Aye, and if your water is hauled from the Thames, it would probably kill me if I so much as sniffed it,* Oskar thought. He was already missing the crystal-clear Highland springs.

“Sorry.”

Vesta sighed, rubbing his eyes. “What can I get for you, Mr. Lawson?”

*I thought ye'd never ask.*

“I'd like a bottle of yer strongest wine, please.”

## CHAPTER 7



LAIRD MCLEOD WAS GONE, and the man he'd left behind in the Castle, in charge of his responsibilities, was thrilled. He couldn't stir a step these days without Oskar on his heels, watching him, waiting for him to make a mistake. It was suffocating.

The man strode down the halls of McLeod Castle, nodding graciously to servants and councilors as he passed. With Oskar gone, it was easy to pretend that the Castle and the Lairdship was his, as it should have been. He'd stood in Oskar's shadow for too long and endured far too many little slights and snubs. The old laird hadn't even really *known* Oskar. Had he seen him in the past decade? No, probably not. All he knew about Oskar was that he was his nephew, and the oldest.

That didn't make Oskar a better fit for the Lairdship, did it? No, it didn't. As always, Oskar got what he wanted because he was handsome, strong, tall, charismatic. Even his mother liked him best, which was unfair beyond belief. Eleanor was a good woman, but prone to faults.

Oskar's fault was that he couldn't see his mother's faults.

*Well, I can see them,* the man thought with a rush of spite. *I can see everything.*

People underestimated him. Especially when he was beside Oskar, so confident and charming. Well, they were wrong. He could see it all laid out like a map in front of him, what other people were thinking and how he could manipulate them into thinking what he wanted. It was easy to make people think differently of you. You could be a calm, wise old advisor, or a spoiled, petulant boy who should just be shooed off or ignored. Yes, he was a master of disguise, in a way.

The crux of the problem, as it had always been, was Oskar. Oskar was in his way. Oskar was too likeable. Oskar was too strong, bigger than him, more popular than him. Oskar needed to be removed, but how?

Of course, he could always put a dagger in Oskar's neck while he slept, but that plan lacked finesse. If the Laird was murdered, suspicion immediately fell on the councilors and the family, especially a family with another son. If he wasn't careful, he wouldn't be able to manipulate the situation. A mob was a powerful tool, but one that could turn back and rip out your throat as easy as winking.

No, he needed to be careful. He needed to approach this properly and take his time.

Well, patience was something he was good at. It would take time to dismantle Oskar's reputation, to turn the people's slavish love into discontent, then anger, then hate. The masses were so changeable, after all. Oskar wouldn't even know what hit him. One moment, he would be the adored clan chief, determined to bring prosperity to the people, the next he would be deposed, possibly kicked to death by an angry crowd.

A brutal ending, but a necessary one. You couldn't eat an egg without breaking the shell, after all.

The man paused at a window, leaning his hands on the rough stone, looking out at the land. This should be *his* land. The old laird had been delirious at the end, so his choosing Oskar didn't mean anything. He could have chosen anyone. The woman who swilled out the chamber pots, perhaps.

A cold breeze was getting up. In the South of England, where Oskar had gone, spring would be getting its hooks into the country, all warm and welcoming, bringing in new life and a sense of renewal.

Up here, the wind still howled over barren cliffs, and only the hardiest of plants and trees clung to life on the windswept slopes. They would have snow as late as May, although it wouldn't quite have the bite and death-dealing potential of snow in the dead of winter. There was no warmth in the breeze, just the taste of peat and a dampness in the air. He shivered, pulling his cloak around him.

Maybe Oskar would come home softened from his days in the warm, lazy London city. That would be good. It would make deposing him that much easier.

The man became aware that he was muttering to himself and made a point of pressing his lips closed. That was a bad, bad habit. Talking to yourself during the day meant that you might talk to yourself at night, in your sleep. Either way, you could be overheard and pay the price for it.



He was under no illusions about the game he was playing. It was dangerous, and if he lost, he'd likely die. He couldn't play his hand just yet. The snake didn't bite until the foot was almost on top of it. If it snapped too soon, it would get its head lopped off with the tip of a broadsword.

The man smiled wryly to himself, wishing he could share his ever-colorful metaphors with someone else. But McLeod Castle was a lonely place, and friends were few.

"I thought it was you."

The man flinched at the familiar voice, turning around and hoping to seem the picture of innocence.

"You gave me a shock."

Eleanor smiled at him. "I came to see if you'd heard any news of Oskar."

He shook his head. "Not yet. I wouldn't have thought we'd hear for another few days. Besides, he's more likely to write to you."

Eleanor smiled wryly. "You think he'll tell his mother the whole truth? No, you're more likely to hear it than me. I love Oskar, but he still thinks I need protecting. He's a sweet boy, but—" Eleanor bit her lip. "I sometimes wish we'd never come here."

The man nibbled his lip, looking down. He wished she would go away. Eleanor saw through him, her gaze slicing through him like a knife.

“If he doesn’t write soon, did he leave an address behind him?” Eleanor asked, clearing her throat and composing herself. She wasn’t willing to show him her weakness, then. Fine.

“I don’t think so. There’s no guarantee he’d be there, in any case. And it would take a few days for the letter to reach him,” the man pointed out, and Eleanor sighed, shaking his head.

“Well, if he does write to you for any reason, try and give him the best advice you can.” She smiled weakly at him. “He trusts you.”

The man nodded, and Eleanor retreated, her boot heels ringing out on the harsh stone. He knew she would turn and look at him, a curious, nervous expression on her face. She knew something was up but didn’t know what. She didn’t know whether to trust him, even though she knew that she *should* trust him.

If Oskar had Eleanor’s instincts, the man was sure he wouldn’t be allowed anywhere near McLeod Castle.

Not that it mattered. He *was* here, he was in charge for now, and – Eleanor had said herself – Oskar trusted him.

The man grinned triumphantly. For now, Oskar had no idea of how much danger he was in. Perfect. He didn’t even know the

identity of the man scheming his downfall and ultimate death.

It was a pity that Oskar had to die, really. But it had to be done, and in the end, he was just a useless brute, all brawn and no muscle. The fact he'd gone running to the other end of the country to confront some lunatic Englishwoman who was sending him strange letters was a perfect example.

The man knew exactly what he would have done – tossed the letters in the fire without ever opening them and forgotten all about it. Either the letters would have stopped on their own, or the woman herself would have turned up, in which case she could have been dealt with.

But no, Oskar had to go and demand an explanation. In the man's opinion, Oskar had spent entirely too long poring over those letters, reading them again and again as if they were real love letters sent to him by goodness only knew who. Perhaps he was lonely. Perhaps the past year of isolation had gotten to him, and he realized just how lonely and miserable being Laird McLeod would be.

If only he knew that one of his closest allies coveted his position with a passion, and he could simply hand it over.

He wouldn't hand it over, though. His uncle had bequeathed him this position, his clan, and Oskar would rather die than give up his responsibilities. The man sighed, moving away from the window.

There was some irony. Oskar would rather die than give up being Laird McLeod.

Just as well, really. If the man who was supposed to be Oskar's friend had his way, Oskar would certainly die in order to give it up.

## CHAPTER 8



“THREE DAYS,” Vincent said finally. “It’ll take three days to get the license. Once we have the license, we can always take a few more weeks to get the wedding set up, invitations sent out—”

“No,” Oskar said bluntly. “I have to get back to me clan as soon as possible. I want to be married as soon as the license comes through.”

Vincent pressed his lips together. Summer glanced between the two of them, wondering if she would actually get any input into her own wedding.

Probably not, by the looks of things.

“I want a proper wedding, Papa,” Summer spoke up.

Oskar rolled his eyes. “Ach, come on, Lass. A wedding is just a formality. A waste o’ money and time. All we need is a priest and a few witnesses, and then we can leave. I cannae wait to get out of England.”

“Well, we aren’t all so keen to leave,” Summer snapped. Vincent sucked in a shocked breath at her sharp tone, but Oskar barely batted an eye.

“Those are my terms, Lass,” he said, flashing her a tight smile. “I leave in three days, with or without ye, is that clear?”

Summer sat back in her seat, folding her arms tightly across her chest.

“Fine,” she muttered.

“Come now, ye don’t have to be so gracious about it.”

Oskar rose to his feet, seemingly tired of the conversation.

“Where are you going?” Vincent asked, frowning. “There’s a lot of work to be done for the wedding.”

“I’d like to stretch me legs if that’s all right with ye? Got any recommendations for a good walk?”

“Oh, we could promenade.” Summer suggesting, brightening.

Oskar stared at her. “I... *promenade*? What in God’s name is that?”

“It means we walk around the park together. Hyde Park, that is. If we leave now, we’ll get there in time for the fashionable

hour.”

Oskar raked a hand through his hair. It was annoying Summer that he managed to look so handsome, despite being disheveled and clearly having done nothing besides wash and get dressed for the day. He was more handsome than a man had a right to be, especially someone so annoying as Oskar Lawson.

“I know ye think ye are making sense,” he said finally. “But I have nay idea what ye mean.”

Summer had already leaped to her feet, slinging her shawl around her shoulders.

“We’re betrothed, aren’t we?”

“Aye.”

“Well, we have to be seen as an betrothed couple. That means walking around together in the Park.”

“Are we going to have to talk to your wretched friends?” Oskar asked, looking absolutely horrified.

“Probably. Come on, let’s go.”

Oskar wavered for a moment, as if considering bolting for the door. Then he sighed, broad shoulders sagging.

“Fine. But just this once, aye?”

Summer beamed. “Just this once.”



With a maid in tow, Summer and her brand-new betrothed set out toward the Park. Oskar had chosen to wear a kilt – Summer couldn’t help wondering whether his knees were cold – and what looked like proper Scottish dress. The tartan pattern was like nothing she’d ever seen before, and she commented on it, more to find something to say to break the silence than from any real curiosity.

Oskar’s mouth quirked up at the corner. “It’s the McLeod tartan. Once we’re married, ye will be entitled to wear it yourself, if ye like.”

It sounded like an honor, Summer thought. To be allowed to wear a clan tartan. She glanced up from her perusal of his kilt – it *wasn’t* a skirt, she knew that, but it was still odd to see a man’s legs like that. He had very muscular legs, not at all like the pigeon-thin legs of other dandies and fashionable gentlemen – to find Oskar looking down at her. He had an odd expression on his face.

“Would ye like to wear the Clan tartan? I can have a cloak made for ye when we return.”

“Yes, I think I would. It looks awfully warm.”

Oskar chuckled; Summer wasn’t entirely sure at what. “Oh, aye. It is. Very toasty.”



Then they were entering the Park, and Summer was immediately on the alert. Oskar had offered her his arm when they left the Manor – a surprisingly gentleman-like gesture that she really hadn't expected – and with the way he was dressed, it was quite likely that any of her acquaintances would immediately recognize him.

She wasn't sure if she wanted them to or not.

Either way, her question was quickly answered.

“Summer! *Summer!*”

A familiar voice called after them, and Summer and Oskar halted, turning around.

It was Alana and Lily, hurrying after them with their maids in tow, eyes wide.

They skidded to a halt at a respectful distance, eyeing Oskar up and down as if he were a rare animal in a zoo.

“Is this him?” Lily whispered. “Your betrothed?”

Summer drew in a breath. “Yes, this is Laird McLeod. He stopped by to surprise me. Oskar, these are my friends, Miss Lily Perkins and Miss Alana Moreno.”

“Is the war over?” Alana demanded.

Summer tensed, opening her mouth to reply before Oskar could say something damning, like “*What war?*”

“Aye, it’s all done with now,” Oskar spoke up instead, much to Summer’s surprise. “So, here I am. It’s a pleasure to meet ye both.”

He made a neat, shallow bow, and the girls exchanged glances and dropped a curtsy each. They were impressed, Summer was sure of it. She knew she shouldn’t let her friends’ opinions of Oskar color how she saw him, but it did make her see him through fresh eyes.

Oskar was tall and handsome, and although he was hardly dressed like the average English gentleman, his clothes fit him well and were clearly well made and expensive. And now, of course, he was being as courteous and pleasant as anyone would want.

“I’m glad you’re here, Laird McLeod,” Alana said impulsively, throwing a knowing glance at Summer. “Your fiancée has missed you terribly. Sometimes you were all she could talk about!”

Summer cringed inwardly.

“Oh, aye? Well, I’m glad I was so missed, but I’m sorry she was so miserable. At least she had her friends to comfort her.”

“Yes, we only became good friends with Summer recently,” Lily said, smiling at Summer. “I’m glad we did. She’s a real

catch, you know.”

“Aye, I know.”

Summer cleared her throat. “Alana, Lily, it looks as though the wedding will be moved up a lot sooner than I expected.”

“How much sooner?”

Summer drew in a breath. “Three days’ time.”

There was a stunned silence, then the girls broke out in a clamor.

“*Three days?*”

“Good heavens, Summer, that’s not enough time to organize anything!”

A few other ladies were heading their way. Summer recognized some of them, but others were just members of the *ton*, craning their necks and trying to catch a glimpse of the strange Scottish man arm in arm with a Society lady.

Summer spied Florence pushing her way through the crowd, and her heart sank. Now she was going to have to manage Florence along with everything else.

Sure enough Florence elbowed her way to the front of the crowd, eyeing Oskar up and down with blatant surprise.

“Summer, where are your manners?” she asked loudly, twirling a strand of hair around her finger. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?”

Summer swallowed hard. She was determined to stand up to Florence, but there was something about her that made Summer want to cringe away and just avoid any trouble. She was determined not to be a coward, though.

“Fiancé,” she corrected gently. “Laird McLeod, this is Miss Florence Swinbank.”

She pointedly didn’t introduce Florence as a *friend* and hoped that Oskar would understand what she meant.

Florence simpered and dropped a curtsy, and Oskar bowed again. He’d done a lot of bowing lately.

“It’s a pleasure,” he said crisply.

“I have to say, Laird McLeod, you’re so much younger and handsomer than we expected!” Florence said, and Summer realized with a sinking heart that she was flirting. “Summer could never quite give a proper description of you, so we all assumed that you were old and ugly!”

Summer flushed, glancing up at Oskar. She was mortified and beginning to wish that she’d never come here.

Oskar still had that placid, polite smile on his face.

“Perhaps Summer thought that it was none of yer business.”

Florence faltered. That was obviously not the response she’d been expecting.

“Well, Summer does tend to exaggerate. I’m sure you’ve noticed her proclivity for storytelling.”

Oskar’s arm tightened and flexed around Summer’s hand.

“Nay,” he said curtly, “I havenae.”

A girl in the crowd tittered, and Florence shot her a glare that immediately quietened the giggling. So, it seemed that Florence hadn’t quite lost her influence over the young ladies of Society. She tossed back her curls, lifting her chin, and it was clear that she wasn’t willing to back down now.

“So, when is the wedding, Laird McLeod?”

If Oskar thought it was odd that Florence directed all of her questions and remarks to him while all but pretending Summer didn’t exist, he said nothing of it.

“Three days’ time.”

“Goodness! How soon. I wonder—” Florence broke off, daintily biting her lip. It was a movement that was probably calculated to draw attention to her well-shaped mouth. “I wonder if you aren’t rushing into things, Laird McLeod?” she dropped her voice, but obviously not enough to prevent the other ladies and Summer herself from hearing it.

Oskar raised sandy-blond eyebrows. “What on Earth do ye mean, Miss... I’m so sorry, what was ye name? I cannae quite remember.”

Florence flushed at that but pressed on regardless. “Florence Swinbank,” she said, flashing another smile. “I mean that you’ve only been here for – what, a day? Two days? And you plan to be married and gone by the end of the week, yes? Well, you aren’t taking the opportunity to see what else Society could offer.”

“I see,” Oskar said. His polite smile was fading, his expression turning grim and cold. “And what can Society offer me, Miss Swinbank?”

“Parties, and dances, and good society. Pretty ladies, and that sort of thing. You might find yourself a real catch, Laird McLeod.”

The other girls were glancing at each other, in mingled amusement and horror. Summer felt as though she were rooted to the spot. How dare Florence try and steal her fiancé out from under her very nose? She wanted to say something but found that no words were coming out.

There was a tense moment of silence, then Oskar began to laugh.

It wasn't a polite titter, or a melodious, carefully modulated Society laugh. No, this was a real belly laugh, loud and deep, and had every lady and gentleman within earshot turning to look at who had the *audacity* to be so loud in the Park during the fashionable hour.

Some of the girls, including Florence, giggled nervously, glancing at Florence, then at Summer, then at Oskar, then back to Florence.

“I beg yer pardon, Lass,” Oskar said, finally composing himself. Florence bristled at being called *Lass* but said nothing. “I just found that a wee bit funny. I daenae care for parties and dancing, and in my experience, English Society has very little to offer anyone. Besides frustration and a host o’ rules to memorize, of course. As to *finding myself a catch*... well, I daenae ken what ye mean. I already have a catch. I’ve nae seen a single woman to match Summer for beauty and intellect, so I certainly could nae do better. In fact, I wager I’d do significantly worse if I tried to pick out a wife from Society. Daenae ye think?”

He looked Florence straight in the eyes as he spoke, and she flushed, looking away. Oskar’s point was clearly made, and Florence now looked embarrassed, trying to edge away.

Oskar drew in a breath, glancing down at Summer. “I came out to stretch me legs. Shall we walk on? Excuse us, ladies.”

There was a murmuring of goodbyes, and Oskar steered Summer away from the group and further down the path. Summer risked a glance back only once, and saw them all staring after her and Oskar, and Florence's face was scarlet.

Oskar glanced down at her. "I'm sorry if I was rude to ye friend."

Summer snorted. "She is *not* my friend. And I don't mind."

Oskar smiled. "I'm glad to hear that."

Summer beamed up at him. "Did you see her *face*?"



## CHAPTER 9



THE WHOLE BUSINESS WITH *PROMENADING* – who had ever heard of such a thing? – was only the beginning.

They walked around the park a couple of times, long enough for some color to return to Summer's face and for Oskar's anger to fade away. It was hard not to attribute that woman's attitude – her entitlement, her snobbishness, her *meanness* – to English Society in general. Most of the other ladies had been fine, but something about little Miss Florence Swinbank really got his hackles up.

It was good to know that she wasn't Summer's friend. His wife-to-be had more sense than to befriend such a weasel, at least.

Wife-to-be. Betrothed. Fiancée. These words were getting thrown about like nobody's business, and Oskar just couldn't get used to it. He felt wrong footed every time someone reminded him that he was betrothed. Betrothed to be *married*. He was getting *married*.

Truthfully, it all somehow felt like a vivid, surreal dream. Oskar half expected to wake up in his own bed, with his

family and faithful Callum just outside, with Summer and her strange letters nothing more than a distant memory.

Oskar wasn't sure how he'd feel about that. Relieved? Disappointed?

At the moment, he was lying on his bed in the guest chamber, debating whether he wanted to go down to dinner. There was always so much *food*. It was wasteful, that was what it was. Oskar couldn't help but think of what he could do in his Castle with all that food. It would feed the household, for sure, and probably provide a good meal for some of the beggars or badly-off tenants.

There was a knock on the door, and Oskar flinched, hauling himself upright. He had a wild idea that it might be Summer. Of course, her coming to his chamber – even just to the door – was completely inappropriate. But then, of course, Summer seemed entirely happy to do lots of inappropriate things.

“Who is it?” Oskar asked cautiously.

“It's me, Lord Bridgeville. I hoped we could talk, and Vesta said you were in your chamber.”

Oskar cursed to himself. There were eyes everywhere in this place. He and Summer had separated immediately after the walk, and he didn't remember seeing the butler at all. That didn't matter, though, because clearly Vesta had seen *him*.

“Aye, come in.”

The door opened and Vincent stepped in uncertainly, glancing around as if he were afraid that something terrible might happen. What, did he think that Oskar would balance a bucket of water on top of the door?

*Actually, now I think about it... that's nae a bad idea, eh?*

“What can I do for ye, Lord Bridgeville?”

Vincent looked vaguely scandalized to see Oskar stretched out on his bed, for some reason. Maybe he thought that gentlemen should always be standing to attention, or at the very least sitting stiff backed in a suitable chair.

“I thought I should let you know that there'll be an engagement party for you and Summer. It's expected, you see, and it's likely that there won't be many people at the wedding.”

Oskar raised his eyebrows. “We're leaving in three days, Lord Bridgeville. When do ye expect us to have this party?”

Vincent tilted up his chin, defiant. “The day before you leave. Don't worry yourself about it, it will all be arranged. All you have to do is turn up.”

Oskar was ready to argue, but he made himself pause. The last thing he wanted to do was to turn up at an awful party and deal with the impertinent poking and prodding of so-called *High Society*, but what if it was what Summer wanted?

He was fairly sure she'd enjoy showing him off to her friends and rubbing him in the faces of her enemies.

But it would be the last night in her own country. In England. Oskar couldn't wait to leave, of course – he was already longing for the rolling hills and crisp winds of the Highlands – but no doubt Summer wasn't quite so eager. Maybe she'd miss her country and her home like he missed his right now, and she wasn't leaving for a few days or weeks. It would be permanent.

The least he could do was go along with her last requests.

*Don't say last requests, you fool*, Oskar scolded himself. *She's getting married, not dying.*

Vincent cleared his throat, glancing anxiously at him, and Oskar realized that he'd just been sitting in silence, not replying.

“You... you will come, won't you?” Vincent asked nervously.

Oskar forced a smile. “Oh, aye, of course. I'll be there. Where will it be?”

“Here, in the dining room and ballroom downstairs. Just mingle, everyone will want to meet you. There'll be food, too,” Vincent added the last part as if it was an especial treat that would lure Oskar in. Oskar fought not to roll his eyes.

“Aye, I'll be there. Daenae worry about it.”

Oskar flopped back on his bed, staring up at the ceiling, and after a minute or two the door closed.

He wasn't sure how long he lay there. He could hear voices drifting up from downstairs – he thought the drawing room was directly below him, and Vincent and Summer must be sitting there.

Oskar felt a pang of homesickness. If he were at home now, he'd be sitting in a warm parlor with his mother and his brother, probably with Callum badgering him to sign some document or visit some tenant.

Instead, he was lying alone in some Englishman's worst guest bed, counting the days until he could go home.



Oskar missed dinner, of course. When the Manor was dark and silent, he tiptoed downstairs to the kitchen. He would never admit it, not even to himself, but he was hoping that Summer would be there again.

She wasn't, of course. She'd be a fool to put herself in that position again, and perhaps it was for the best. Oskar remembered the prickling, powerful feeling of arousal he'd felt and he knew she'd shared. That could be a dangerous combination. It wasn't as if they were marrying for anything other than the most mercenary of motivations. He didn't dare let himself think about what might have happened if they'd been alone in a dark room again.

There was, however, a covered plate of food sitting out on the otherwise bare kitchen table. There was half a bottle of wine, cold chicken, vegetables, roast potatoes, and a few other goodies, including a hefty slice of cake, and a mug of milk. A note was left in front of the food.

*For Mr. Lawson*

*Do enjoy your midnight feast.*

*Regards, Vesta*

Oskar had to grin at that. It was the prim and proper butler. Perhaps he wasn't so bad after all.



Despite Vincent's broad hints that Oskar should wear more suitable evening clothes, Oskar had worn his kilt, a crisp white dress shirt and one of his nicer jackets. He eyed himself in the mirror, wondering how many prim and proper English people would faint at the sight of him. No less than five, he hoped.

Part of Oskar wanted to hide in his chamber until he couldn't hide anymore, but then he'd have to go down and face a room full of people.

No, it was much better to go down now, and make himself comfortable in a little corner somewhere. So, Oskar pulled a face at himself in the mirror, and turned to leave.

Downstairs was a hive of activity. Servants were dashing here and there, making last-minute adjustments. The footmen were huddled in a corner, checking that each other's livery was perfect, the brass buttons glowing. There were so many fresh flowers downstairs that Oskar could smell the scent of flowers

from the top of the stairs. The dining room had been set up to cram dozens and dozens of people around the table, and the ballroom – which Oskar hadn't even seen yet – was thrown open. He spotted a few musicians setting up.

So, there'd be dancing. Of course, there would. And it wouldn't be cheerful, carefree Scottish dancing. This wasn't a ceilidh. It would be that dull, stately sort of dancing that the English loved, complicated and tiresome.

“Oh, there you are!”

Oskar turned at Summer's voice. He turned to see her hurrying over to him, beaming.

She'd smiled at him like that after he'd put that wretched Florence in her place, and it had made Oskar's heart clench just like this.

She was wearing a pale-blue dress, almost like ice, with lace around the collar and sleeves. It was a short-sleeved dress, and the neckline bared her collarbone and the tips of her shoulders. It was probably considered quite daring, and Oskar could see why.

He imagined himself reaching down to press a kiss to that smooth, creamy skin. His whiskers would scratch and tickle, and he imagined her giggling and squirming, not wanting him to stop at all. He imagined circling his hands around her waist, firmly pinched in by the bodice, hands running up over her ribs—

Oskar cleared his throat.

“Hello, Summer. Or should it be Miss Murray?”

Summer giggled. “Well, we’re betrothed, so Summer should be fine. I don’t think anyone will dare speak rudely to you tonight. You look quite fearsome.”

“I do?” Oskar repeated, a little flabbergasted. How could he look fearsome? He wasn’t even wearing a sword.

“Yes. You look angry, and you’re so tall and broad. I wonder if Florence will turn up tonight. I hope not, because she’s awful, but I finally thought of a good put down for her. You know how it is. You always think of clever things to say after the conversation is over.”

She slipped her hand through Oskar’s arm, almost without thinking twice. It gave him an odd sort of start. He was very aware of her hand, just resting lightly on his arm. It tingled, almost, and Oskar wanted to laugh at the strangeness of it all.

Him, dressed in his Sunday best, attending his own engagement party at a stuck-up English aristocrat’s home, his English fiancée (who he’d only known for a couple of days) on his arm. He knew very well that most of the guests tonight weren’t really interested in whether he married Summer Murray or not. He was a novelty, something interesting – a handsome Scottish laird, turning up out of nowhere like a knight in a fairy tale.



It was ridiculous. He'd only ever exist for them here, in their own perception. They didn't know or care about his life back home, about the Clan's struggles, about the problems springing up between Oskar and Rhys.

In fact, they might actively not *want* to know. That sort of thing ruined the illusion.

"You won't have to say much, you know," Summer said, glancing anxiously up at him. "And if you feel that it's all getting too much, you can go and sit in the library. That's off limits to guests tonight."

Oskar raised an eyebrow. "Ye think I cannae handle a boring party?"

"Well, I wouldn't call it *boring*."

"Really? I would. Look, Summer, I appreciate ye worrying about me, but I'll be fine. I promise. Just direct me away from people ye don't want me to offend, and everything will be fine."

Summer bit her lip. "All right. Here goes nothing, I suppose."

The doorbell rang, and she flinched, glancing automatically in that direction. Oskar kept looking at her.

She'd done up her dark hair beautifully, with little glass flowers cunningly placed. They were green, he noticed, not blue. Green to match her eyes.

It was a pretty hairdo, and one that must have taken a maid or two quite a while to fix up. Oskar found himself wondering what she'd do with her hair in Scotland. He could find her a maid easy enough, but the harsh winds wouldn't let her do her hair like that very often.

It was a pity. It suited her.

The first guest through the door was Alana Moreno, flanked by a man and woman who resembled her enough for Oskar to assume that they were her parents.

Alana came forward to greet her friend, and Summer met her halfway, releasing Oskar's arm.

He missed it, and then he was annoyed at himself for missing it.

*Don't forget what all this is about,* Oskar reminded himself. Then he took a deep breath and went forward to do his duty.

## CHAPTER 10



PEOPLE JUST KEPT COMING and *coming*, until Oskar thought for sure the butler would have to start stopping them at the door, and informing them there wasn't any more room, and they'd have to just go home.

He didn't. He kept ushering them in, announcing to the room Lord This and Lady That, and Summer and Oskar would have to fight through the crowds to greet the newcomers. Oskar was more relieved than ever that he was taller than most people – he could see over the crowd quite easily. Nobody here was taller than him, and broad shoulders were good for pushing through a crowd.

The ballroom was full, even covering over the area cleared for the dancing later. The dining room was full, and people crowded into the hallways, seeming completely unfazed by the crush. It was getting unbearably hot in here, too, and Oskar was already sweating and chafing in his woollen layers. He didn't know how the English gentlemen were faring, with their high collars and tight waistcoats, or the ladies with their endless layers of skirts and petticoats.

The musicians had started up, a gentle, relaxing melody that was completely drowned out and wasted by the endless chatter and laughter of the guests. That was something else Oskar

hadn't anticipated – the *noise*. He could barely hear himself think, let alone hear what the pale, rabbit-faced, weak-chinned guests had to say to him.

And they *all* wanted to talk to him. Not with him, exactly, but at him. Over him. They'd talk to Vincent or Summer about Oskar, even though he was right there. They admired him like you would a particularly unusual animal, or a fine racehorse. It grated on Oskar's nerves, but he kept a polite smile on his face, reminding himself that this was the least he could do for his betrothed before they set off to Scotland together.

He was just thinking about how long he'd have to stay – they hadn't even had supper yet – when Summer put a hand on his arm and steered him toward a mercifully quiet corner.

“The dancing is starting in a moment,” Summer said.

Oskar's heart sank. He just couldn't handle dancing as well as all of this nonsense.

“I'm nae dancing.”

She blinked up at him. “You have to dance.”

“Oh, is that right? I had no idea I'd *have to* dance.”

Summer pressed her lips together. “It's your engagement party.”

“Which I didnae want.”

“People will expect it!”

“Tell them I twisted me ankle.”

“Oh, Oskar, come on.”

“Nay. I mean it, Summer. I’ll be pleasant to yer awful friends and be as polite as ye like, but I’m not prancing around like a fool to some tinny English song. I daena even know any o’ these dances.”

“Just the first one?” Summer pleaded.

“Nay. Sorry, Summer, but I’m drawin’ the line here.”

Summer wasn’t happy, he could see that much.

Well, tough.

“Fine,” she said, glancing around with a thin, sickly smile, as if to assure the people around them that they weren’t dancing. “But I’ll dance with other people. Papa wants to dance with me.”

Oskar shrugged. “Fine. Ye can dance wi’ whoever ye like, just daena ask me to dance.”

She looked disappointed, genuinely disappointed. When Summer turned away, Oskar impulsively reached out and grabbed her arm.

“One dance, then.”

Her face lit up. “Really? You will dance with me?”

“Just one, I said. When we get home, I’ll teach ye proper dancing. Ceilidh dancing. I’ll dance with ye a lot more then.”

Something flickered across Summer’s face, unreadable and hastily tucked away.

“I’ll hold you to that. Our dance is the first one,” she said simply, and disappeared into the crowds.

People seemed less inclined to approach Oskar without the buffer of his fiancée and future father-in-law. That was good, although it didn’t stop them staring, ogling his face and his clothes, taking in his height and passing loud comments about his beard.

Oskar ignored them all, pushing through the crowds to get to the refreshment table. He poured himself a large glass of wine and drank it down in one swallow, to the absolute horror of the footman and the guests around him. Undeterred, Oskar held out his glass for another, and the footman nervously filled up his glass.

Feeling a little better with the buzz of alcohol moving through his system – Vincent served good wine, which was kind of him – Oskar made his way toward the dance floor. He had no real interest in dancing, unless he was dancing himself, but there wasn't much else to do here.

Other than chat, of course, and Oskar didn't think he could handle much more inane conversation. There was talk of card tables being set up later, whatever that meant, but he was willing to guess it wasn't the same sort of bawdy games they played at alehouses back home, with the cards all tattered and greasy, with bones and pebbles as the stakes.

He didn't know whether he hoped that Summer would forget about their dance, but of course she didn't. She came and took his hand, leading him to the dance floor. It was a mercifully simple dance, and Oskar didn't entirely disgrace himself. He knew that plenty of young ladies (and older ladies who still had an eye for a handsome man) were eyeing him, and pointedly kept his eyes fixed on Summer.

Something inside Oskar told him to stay with Summer, to dance with her again and again until she was dizzy and happy, but he let go of her hand and walked away into the crowd. His duty was done, so why did he feel so miserable?

The musicians were getting ready for the second dance of the evening, and Oskar found himself a quiet corner to lean against and settled down to watch.

As she'd promised, Summer was dancing with her father. There was at least a dozen or so couples on the dance floor, packed closely enough that a single wrong step would send one person cannoning into another. They curtsied and bowed to each other, and then the dance began in earnest.

As Oskar had predicted, it was a complex, fast-paced dance, with lots of intricate steps and a rhythm that Oskar couldn't quite make out.

Summer was a good dancer, though. Vincent moved a little more slowly than her, and Oskar guessed that he didn't dance very often. Summer was graceful, moving lithely and confidently around the dance floor, never missing a step. It was a pleasure to watch her, and Oskar just knew that she'd enjoy the ceilidh dances back home.

*I'm already thinking of her as living in the Castle, Oskar realized. She's already my wife in my head.*

The first dance ended, and then there was another one, and another. Summer disappeared for a dance or two, then reappeared with a young man who Oskar didn't recognize. He narrowed his eyes. Summer had warned him that she would dance with other men, and while Oskar hadn't intended for her to sit down like a sad old matron for the whole evening, he hadn't expected *this*.

*This* in question was the way Summer kept glancing up at the man, laughing at something he said. He was tall, but not as tall as Oskar, and had a similar shade of straw-colored hair. No beard, of course. Beards weren't fashionable, as far as Oskar could tell.

He kept glancing at Summer, in an appraising, meaningful way that Oskar knew all too well. Summer seemed a little disconcerted by his attention, at least.



His hackles rose, as it were. What was this young nobody doing, sniffing around *his* fiancée? This whole wretched party was to celebrate *their* engagement!

Oskar stayed calm, waiting for the dance to finish. It seemed to go on forever and judging by the way the young man stepped forward – far closer than he should have been – he was trying to convince Summer to dance again.

He glanced up as Oskar approached and had the grace to pale a little. Oskar gave him a withering stare. The young man knew exactly what he'd been about.

“Summer, can I have a word?” he asked flatly.

Summer blinked up at him. “Yes, of course. This is Sir Andrew T–”

“Aye, nice to meet ye,” Oskar said bluntly and insincerely. “Summer, can we go outside?”

Summer glanced between Oskar and the young man. Sir Andrew, or whatever his name was. Sir Andrew muttered something that sounded like an excuse and scuttled off, disappearing into the crowds.

Oskar led the way to the large French doors that opened onto a terrace. It was blessedly cool and quiet out there. He closed the doors behind them, to better shut out the noise and laughter from inside.

“We aren’t supposed to be out here,” Summer said flatly. “It’s improper.”

Oskar snorted. “What’s improper is ye flirtin’ with that man.”

Summer sucked in a breath, rounding on him. “*Flirting?* How dare you!”

“Oh, aye, ye try and deny it now. I saw ye, Summer. I don’t know how things are done in England, but in Scotland, when a lady agrees to marry a man, she agrees to be faithful to him.”

“You are calling me unfaithful because I danced with another man?” Summer spluttered. “I *told* you I was going to dance with other men!”

“I mean with the flirtin’! I’ll be fair, it was him coming on to ye, but still—”

“I don’t know how you dare. Are you going to say that you’ll never dance with a pretty young woman once we return to Scotland?”

“Nay!” Oskar shot back. “I willnae!”

They’d stepped closer to each other while they argued, almost without thinking, and Oskar was suddenly aware that Summer was close enough to touch. He could see the smooth skin of her shoulders and neck coming out in gooseflesh due to the cold, and had a sudden urge to pull her close, to put his arms around her, wrap his cloak around her and keep her warm.

He did no such thing, of course.

Summer blinked, as if surprised by his admission. “Well, I did nothing wrong,” she insisted. “I can’t help it if he flirts with me. I didn’t flirt with him, and that’s the main thing. We may not be getting married for love, but I’m nothing if not loyal. Besides, you can’t possibly believe I would be interested in Sir Andrew. He’s a notorious fortune hunter.”

Oskar wasn’t entirely sure what a fortune hunter was, but the name seemed self-explanatory. He took another step closer to Summer, sure that he was making a mistake but unable to resist it anyway.

“I need yer word that ye will be loyal to me,” Oskar said, his voice low and heavy. “I cannae go home with a woman who’ll stray whenever I turn my back.”

Summer narrowed her eyes and set her jaw. “I’m offended that you would even ask. But, yes, if you must have assurance, I won’t *stray* as you so nicely put it.”

She’d come closer too, Oskar was sure of it. He’d moved a few steps forward, but already they were almost nose to nose. Her green eyes looked dark in the moonlight, dark and unreadable.

Oskar never knew just how it had happened. Did he move first, or did Summer? Either way, he suddenly had his hands around her waist, crushing her close against him, and their lips came crashing together.

It wasn't really a very good kiss, but it was a determined one. Summer tasted of wine, the good wine her father had paid for, and smelled of some sweet, delicate perfume that Oskar had never encountered before. Her arms, soft and bare, wound around Oskar's neck, her fingers winding through his hair.

He could feel her breasts pressing into him, a soft, gentle pressure that was driving him wild. He could feel his arousal throbbing between his legs, insistently reminding him that it had been a *very* long time since he'd had a woman, least of all one that drove him as wild as Summer seemed able to do.

He placed one hand on her back, pressing her closer to him, if that was possible. He could feel her warmth seeping into him, hear the bitten-off moans she was making. His hands slid up her ribs, sliding up over the curve of her breasts. She didn't pull away, didn't gasp in shock. Her fingers skittered along the side of his neck, a light and tantalising touch that made his hair stand up with arousal.

Then Summer was pushing him away, backing off.

Oskar's immediate response was to move forward and take her in her arms again, but she'd pushed him away, so he stayed where he was. He was out of breath now. When had he gotten out of breath?

Summer was breathing heavily too, blinking wide eyes, shocked and breathless.

“Summer—”

“We shouldn’t have done that,” Summer said with finality. She glanced over at the French doors, and it occurred to Oskar then that they could have been easily spotted. Of course, it was dark out here and bright in there, meaning that most people would only see their reflection, but still. It had been a foolhardy thing to do.

“Aye, that was a bad idea,” Oskar agreed. He could still feel phantom tingles where her fingers had touched his neck, face, and scalp, and he could feel the warmth of her body against his chest, the imprint of her small breasts against him.

The ridiculous engagement party was not yet over, and Oskar was uncomfortably aware that he would need to *not* think about Summer’s mouth or Summer’s breasts for the remainder of the evening.

The flush was dying down in Summer’s cheeks, and she fidgeted with her hair, tucking back curls that must have come unraveled, and pushing the odd glass flower further into her hair.

“Yes, it was a bad idea,” Summer said quietly, almost as if she was speaking to herself. “I don’t think you understand just how dangerous that was.”

“We’re betrothed.”

“It’s doesn’t matter. I’m not going to leave with my reputation in shreds. A kiss like that... it doesn’t matter. We should go inside at once. I’ll go first, you come in five minutes later.”

She didn't wait for Oskar to agree, simply turned to the doors and let herself in, never once looking back. Oskar turned to lean on the stone wall around the terrace, looking out over the dark garden. Five minutes passed, then ten, and then fifteen. He decided to stay out here for a while. It was better out here.

It wasn't as if he'd be missed.

## CHAPTER 11



LAST NIGHT HAD BEEN... confusing, to say the least.

Summer's mind had been in a whirl for the rest of the night, full of Oskar and that kiss. She went over the scene again and again in her head, the way he'd looked, the flare of anger and *something else* that was dark and powerful and nameless in the pit of her stomach, something that wasn't unpleasant and sour like anger, but rich and breathless instead.

It reminded her of what she'd felt in the kitchen that night, the thing that drew her to him like magnetism. It made Summer feel strange, made her stomach twist and ache, but not in a painful sort of way. It felt good. Too good, perhaps.

Summer had been careful not to go down to the kitchen at that time of night again in case she ran into him again. The trouble was that Summer *wanted* to run into Oskar again, and that seemed like the most dangerous thing of all.

Her engagement party went past in a blur of color and dancing and champagne. Once Oskar's novelty wore off, people only seemed to care about enjoying the party. She knew she shouldn't blame them, but nobody seemed to even notice that Oskar had gone.

A few people commented on the fact he didn't dance, and Summer just told them all that he really had twisted his ankle. They seemed to accept that easily enough.

*I am a good storyteller,* Summer thought.

And now the party was over, it was the next day, and Summer was getting married.

It was really happening. She was getting married. The thought made Summer's stomach clench with mingled excitement and fear.

She'd gotten up early and dressed in the gown she'd chosen for her wedding. There hadn't really been time for her to have a proper dress made, and this was an old ivory one that her maid had done up with sequins and sewn-on pearls.

Summer hesitated over the ice-blue dress still hanging in her wardrobe. She'd thought about bringing it to Scotland, but it seemed too flimsy and silly. Where would she even wear it? So, she closed her wardrobe on the dress and concentrated on getting ready.



There was hardly anyone at the church, which Summer had expected. There hadn't been time for a proper wedding breakfast and invitations, so they were simply going to get married at the church, using the special license, then return to Summer and Vincent's home to pack their things into the carriage and go.



Anxiety twisted Summer's stomach. She wished her friends were here, that she was about to walk into a crowded church instead of an empty one, with a smiling groom at the altar and a wedding breakfast to look forward to afterward.

Instead, it was just Summer and Vincent, with a grim-faced Oskar waiting with the priest.

"Are you ready, darling?" Vincent asked. He was nervous too; she just knew it. He nibbled his lip and his eyes darted around. Summer wondered if her father would let her come home if she broke down and admitted that she didn't want to marry Oskar.

Did she want to marry Oskar? Summer didn't know anymore.

She couldn't stop thinking about the kiss, about the way he'd touched her. She could still feel the phantom trails of his fingers on her body, burning through her clothes. The kiss had made her feel strange enough, hot and almost itchy, as if something inside of her was building to something but couldn't quite get there. It was infuriating, and Summer was almost a little afraid to think about it.

None of the other gentlemen in Society had inspired these sorts of feelings in her, even the handsome ones. Summer didn't feel equipped to deal with it at all.

"Quite ready, Papa," Summer said, instead of the words bubbling up in her throat and fighting to spill out from behind her teeth. "We'd better get on."

“Yes, of course. We don’t want to keep the priest waiting.”

The doors were thrown open, and Summer began her trip down the aisle.

Lily and Alana were there, waving at her from the third row. Summer smiled at them, feeling a little better to see her friends. She hadn’t been friends with the two girls for long, but they’d been good to her. She’d write to them once she arrived in Scotland.

There were a handful of other people, and that was all. The church was big and empty. Nobody had come to see Summer get married, except for her two friends.

*I wish my mother was here.*

Oskar wasn’t smiling, but he wasn’t frowning, exactly. He had an odd look on his face, and Summer wondered if he was thinking of their kiss last night, too. She felt herself flushing crimson at that.

Then they were standing side by side at the altar, and Vincent had taken a seat in the front row, and the priest was clearing his throat.

Summer swallowed hard, a lump suddenly rising in her throat and almost choking her.

“Ye look very nice,” Oskar murmured quietly, his voice so low she almost didn’t hear it.

“Thank you,” Summer whispered, and earned herself a glare from the priest.

“We are gathered here today—” the priest began, his voice a monotonous drone. Summer tried to listen, because surely this would be something important, something she needed to know for married life.

*Am I making a mistake?*

The priest called for them to face each other, and Summer finally had to look Oskar in the eye. He was handsome, she had to admit that. Would he have looked twice at her if he was a regular Society gentleman, with an earldom and a fortune at his back?

Oskar said “I do” in a deep, confident voice, and Summer echoed him nervously. When the moment came for the exchange of rings, Summer’s heart skipped a beat.

The rings. She’d forgotten about the rings. She met Oskar’s eyes, horrified, and found him with a twinkle in his eye. He withdrew a pouch from his jacket and withdrew two rings. Summer’s heart lifted in relief.

There was a large, brass ring with a green gemstone in it, big enough to fit on Oskar’s large finger. The other was a small, silver ring, carved with vines twisting round and round the

finger, with red gemstones peeking out from behind the leaves. It was like nothing Summer had ever seen.

Oskar slipped it onto her finger, and Summer flexed her hand, surprised at how well it fitted.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride,” the priest said, with the air of someone who really could not have cared less about any of this.

Summer stared up at Oskar. Was he really going to kiss her? After *last night*?

He was. His gaze dropped to her lips, and he leaned forward. Summer stood like a statue, remembering at the last minute to tilt up her chin to meet him – not halfway, exactly, but she tried.

Their lips met in a soft, chaste copy of last night, but Summer barely had time to register the scratch of his beard on her skin before he was pulling back, and there was sparse applause.

*This is it. We're married. I'm married. We're going to Scotland,* Summer thought, entirely bewildered. How had it come to this?



Summer stood in the hallway, watching the footmen carry her bags and boxes out to the carriage. It was her father's carriage, since Oskar didn't have one.

“How much stuff do ye need?” Oskar asked, lounging in a doorway and watching the footmen work. “There’ll be things for ye at home, ye know.”

Summer bristled. “I want to take my things, Oskar. I don’t think that’s unreasonable.”

He lifted his hands, palms out. “I didnae mean to offend ye. Are ye ready to leave as soon as they finish packing?”

Summer flinched. “Aren’t we staying for luncheon with Papa?”

“Nay, we’ll eat on the road. There’s nay time to waste – we’ve already lost the morning and traveling through the night is always dangerous. I had yer lovely butler order us up some food to take. We’ll change horses as we go, but we willnae stop. It’ll a long journey to Scotland, and I’m keen to get home.”

Summer swallowed hard. She’d imagined a few hours to say a long, tearful goodbye to her father, maybe even to entertain a few guests and then say farewell. Now she was going to have to say a quick goodbye to her father and leap into a coach and off to her new life without having the chance to take a breath.

“I want to say goodbye to my father,” Summer said quietly.

“Nay time. Ye can write when we get—”

“I want to say to goodbye!”

Summer had raised her voice, loud enough for a few of the servants to glance their way. Oskar looked at her, and for a moment, Summer held her breath. Men didn't like when their wives shouted at them. What sort of man would Oskar turn out to be?

He nodded slowly. "Of course, of course. I shouldnae have rushed ye like that. Look, we dinnae have time to stay for luncheon, but ye can take as long as ye want to say goodbye. I'll wait in the carriage, give ye some privacy, eh?"

Summer sagged in relief and nodded. "Yes, thank you."



Summer hadn't dared take too long over her goodbyes. An hour after the carriage was packed and ready to go, she climbed into the carriage. Vincent stood on the steps, gray faced and miserable, and waved to them.

Oskar was sprawled out in the opposite corner of the carriage, long legs taking up most of the space. He banged on the roof of the carriage, and they were off. Summer leaned forward, peering out of the window to get a last glimpse of her father and her home. When they were out of sight, she sat back with a sigh, and looked properly at her new husband.

Oskar was watching her with amusement.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

“Not really. How long do you think the trip will take?”

He shrugged. “Depends on the road. Two and a half days, I’d say, if we’re lucky. More likely to be anywhere between three and five, though.”

Summer blanched. “That sounds awful.”

He grinned. “I hope ye like sleeping in a carriage.”

They sat in silence for a few hours after that. It wasn’t an uncomfortable silence, but Summer found that she was very aware of Oskar’s presence. Was that normal? Every now and then, she’d be quite sure that he was looking at her, watching her as she stared out of the window, but whenever she turned back, he would be looking away.

Day melted into night, and Summer began to realize what Oskar had meant about traveling in the dark being dangerous. She shrank back inside the carriage, not comfortable enough to sleep, and too wary to let down her guard. Who only knew what was lurking in the thick dark undergrowth on either side of the road?

The next thing she knew, the sun was rising, and Summer had fallen asleep after all. They breakfasted on food wrapped in brown paper, and the day wore on.

Still, they hardly talked to each other. Oskar slept for most of the time and read a tattered paperback.

“We’ve crossed the Scottish border,” he said at one point, and Summer leaned out of the window, eager to see the new scenery. It didn’t look much different than the old scenery, and Oskar must have noticed, because he chuckled.

“We’re nae quite in the Highlands yet. These are the lowlands. Ye’ll have to wait a bit longer to see the really beautiful scenery.”

“I see,” Summer said. She paused, biting her lip. “What will happen when we get there? To me, I mean.”

Oskar looked at her for a long moment. “Well, everyone will want to meet ye. My maither, my brother – their names are Eleanor and Rhys – will want to meet ye the most. They daenae even know I got married,” he added, with a short laugh. “And the council will want to meet ye, too.”

“Council?”

“Oh, aye. Ye are Lady McLeod now, ye have a say in what goes on in yer territory. Didnae I promise ye that ye would be all but a queen here?”

He had, and Summer found the idea of it all overwhelming, but exciting. She fell back against her seat, her mind whirling. It was getting dark when Oskar leaned forward, gesturing for her to look out of the window.

“It’s a few hours to go, but if ye look out now, ye can see McLeod Castle over there, on the hill. We’re almost home.”



Summer nodded, leaning back. She stretched out her legs, and her ankle brushed against one of Oskar's long legs. She jolted, pulling back. He had *such* long legs, didn't he? Long and muscular. Summer found her gaze pulled up to his thighs, taut and muscular. His kilt had pulled up a little above the knee, revealing corded muscles and smooth flesh. He had soft golden hair on his legs, and Summer found herself wondering whether it went *all* over his body.

His large hand came down, pointedly tugging down the hem of his kilt to cover his knees. Color rushed into Summer's face. She caught a look of amusement on Oskar's face before she turned back to the window, mortified to have been caught staring.

For the rest of the journey, Oskar kept crossing and recrossing his legs, stretching them out and propping them on the opposite seat, and Summer wallowed in her own private world of embarrassment and curiosity.

## CHAPTER 12



SUMMER SAT UP, leaning forward to peer out of the carriage window. At some point, the flat greenery around them had been replaced by craggy, rolling hills, dappled with purple heather and scrubby brush. The hills soared high, silhouetted against an angry gray sky. The wind blew harder here; Summer could see the trees and undergrowth around them straining against the wind. The temperature had dropped in the carriage, too, and Summer noticed it for the first time and shivered.

“I’ll fetch ye some warmer clothes when we arrive,” Oskar said. “The gowns ye have are all very pretty, but they willnae do much to keep out the cold.”

Summer thought regretfully of the ice-blue dress she’d left hanging in the wardrobe, and dolefully conceded that she’d made the right choice.

With no warning, the road turned a corner and emerged in the middle of a bustling town, previously hidden between the hills.

At least, it was a bustling town by Highland standards, not by London standards. There were huts and farmhouses and little croft houses all packed together, some with small, fenced-off

gardens and others perched back on the hills. They were going along the main street of the town, as far as Summer could tell. People were going about their business, shopping, working, and sitting out in their gardens. They all paused and stared at the carriage as it rolled by. They passed a blacksmith's shop, and the man in the forge paused, hammer lifted for another blow, and tracked the carriage with his eyes.

Oskar leaned out of the window and waved.

"I'm back!" he bellowed.

This was met by cheers and excited murmuring, and a few people began to follow the carriage.

Summer could see the road they were taking now, snaking up out of the town and high into the hills, all the way up to the Castle sitting on the tallest hill. Young children ran alongside the carriage, looking inquisitively up at Summer, then fell back to break the news, no doubt telling their parents that there was a lady in the carriage with the Laird.

"They've seen ye," Oskar whispered. "Go on. Give them a wave."

Feeling strangely nervous, Summer poked her head out of the window, and waved tentatively at the children. This was met with a ragged cheer too, and the children started running alongside the carriage again.

On impulse, Summer turned her hand so the crowd could see her wedding ring. Would they be shocked? Disinterested?

They were excited, hastily passing the news between themselves. There were shouted words of congratulations, and Summer saw an old woman give a child a posy of flowers and point at the carriage. The child came racing up to the carriage, offering the flowers to Summer. Summer took them, and there was a spattering of applause. She beamed at the child, who grinned back.

Summer fell back in her seat as the carriage finally left the crowd and the town behind and laid the posy in her lap. It was just wildflowers, tied with a piece of twine, but she'd never seen wildflowers as large and fragrant as these.

Summer glanced up to find Oskar looking at her, a faint smile on his face.

“Nearly there,” he said brusquely.

The Castle loomed up ahead of them. It was large and forbidding, like something out of a fairy story, and Summer felt a shiver run through her as she watched it.

To her, it looked like any old castle you might see in a picture-book – lots of narrow slit windows, and a few larger, more modern windowpanes on the upper floors. There was a huge set of double doors, open, in the front of the Castle. There were, of course, turrets and walkways on top of the Castle, with the mandatory tall, thin spire of a tower in the center, called the Keep. Summer found herself wondering how the elements hadn't weathered away that thin spire.

As they got closer, she could see that the gray stone was weathered and pitted, greenish with moss. People milled around in front of the Castle, coming in and out of the various outbuildings, turning to stare at the approaching carriage. Summer spotted a lone woman standing at the top of the stone steps, leading up to the large doors. She waited patiently, the wind blowing her hair and snatching at her dress, which was long, green, and woollen, and infinitely better suited to the weather than Summer's dress.

The carriage stopped in front of the stone stairs. Summer had been traveling in the carriage for so long, with only short breaks to change horses and answer calls of nature, she felt dizzy, as if the Earth was still moving and rattling beneath her.

“Out ye get,” Oskar said with a grin. “We're here. There's no footman to open yer carriage door now.”

Summer flushed, annoyed that he would think she was sitting there like a princess, waiting to be handed down, when in fact she was simply trying not to throw up the last meal she'd had, which was probably travel-hardened cheese and stale bread.

Summer flung open the door and stumbled down to the ground. It was cracked old cobbles, packed with old dirt and with weeds growing up around them. The cold was what she noticed first. It was icy and biting and took her breath away. She glanced up and realized that since she'd exited on the door facing the stairs, the woman at the top of the stairs was staring at her, horrified and shocked all at once.

She began to descend, slowly, and Oskar appeared from the other side of the carriage.

“Maither,” Oskar said, stepping forward with a grin. “I’m home.”

The woman – Eleanor – Summer recalled, descended the last few steps, still eyeing Summer warily. She let Oskar kiss her on both cheeks, still staring at Summer.

“I’m glad ye are home safe, Son. Who is this?”

Oskar drew in a breath, and Summer found herself wondering if he was nervous to break the news to his mother.

“This is Summer Murray, daughter of the Marquess of Bridgeville. This is me wife, Maither.”

There was a long, pregnant pause. Summer shifted from foot to foot, sure that her toes were freezing solid inside her thin slippers and wished with all her heart that they could have this awkward conversation safely inside.

“Yer wife?” Eleanor echoed. “Is this not the lass who sent all those letters? Why did she send them?”

Summer opened her mouth, flushing. For the first time, she realized that she was going to have to explain to everyone who knew about the letters why she’d sent them. And that was not an explanation that made her look good, or even moderately sane.

“Just as we thought, Maither. A case o’ mistaken identity,” Oskar said, before Summer could respond. “She thought I was

someone else. It was quickly cleared up, dinnae ye fret.”

Summer looked softly at him. Why had he lied like that? To save her from embarrassment? Either way, Summer was relieved. Eleanor glanced between them, her expression sharp and unreadable.

“I see,” she said, although it wasn’t very convincing. “And how did this come to a marriage?”

Oskar dropped his gaze. “She has a dowry. A handsome one. She wants a husband and home, and her money will go a long way to helping us.”

Eleanor’s expression hardened. “That’s nay a reason to wed.”

“I agreed to it,” Summer spoke up. Her voice sounded very thin and frail in the howling gale. Her teeth were starting to chatter now, and Oskar seemed to finally notice.

“Let’s get inside, Maither. Summer is getting cold.”

Eleanor’s gaze flicked between the two of them, and for a horrible moment, Summer thought that she was going to say that she, Summer, could not come inside.

But of course she didn’t. Eleanor – or should it be Lady Eleanor, or Lady McLeod? – sighed, and turned, leading the way back up the steps. She walked briskly, and Oskar followed, both of them far outstripping Summer. Summer’s legs felt like jelly, her feet numb from the cold and her head

still spinning after the long carriage drive. She stumbled along, trying to ignore the incredulous looks shot her way by passersby.

She stepped inside the Grand Hall, and it wasn't much warmer than outside. The wind was shut out, at least. Torches and candles were set along the wall, none of them providing quite enough light to illuminate the huge space. There were no polished marble floors here, only rough-hewn stone, worn smooth by centuries of feet.

Oskar turned back to her, flashing that twisted grin again.

“Hurry up, there'll be a grand fire waiting for us in the parlor. It'll be warm there, I promise. My men will unload yer things, and ye can choose your own chamber later. Quickly, now.”

The prospect of warmth sped Summer along. She clattered along the huge hallway, feeling very small and silly, and followed Oskar and her new mother-in-law through a huge, arched doorway into a room lit with a pleasant orange glow.

She felt the heat wash over her as soon as she stepped inside, like a warm hug. Summer sighed in relief, hobbling over to the fire.

It was a smaller room than she'd expected, with much lower ceilings than the Hall. There were plenty of rugs and animal skins laid over the cold stone floor, as well as chairs and sofas that looked passably comfortable. And, of course, there was a huge open fire crackling merrily in the hearth.



Summer already stood in front of the fire by the time she noticed a young man lounging in an armchair, long legs draped over the arm of the chair. He blinked up at her, nonplussed.

“Who’s this? Maither? Oskar?”

He looked just enough like a younger version of Oskar for Summer to put the pieces together.

“This is Summer Murray, and she is me wife,” Oskar said shortly. “Summer, this is Rhys, me brother.”

Rhys spluttered. “Yer *wife*? Ye must be jesting. Ye must be. Is he, Maither?”

“I havenae demanded to see the marriage certificate, Rhys, but I’m sure we can assume yer brother is tellin’ the truth,” Eleanor said loftily, taking a seat. “This is yer new sister-in-law, so show some respect.”

Rhys bounced to his feet, glaring at Summer. “He’s been gone, what, a week? If that? That’s nay enough time to *marry*.”

“It is if ye get a special license,” Oskar replied, and his tone was tense. He turned to a servant, lingering wide eyed by the door. “Go fetch one of me cloaks, any old one will do. Yer new Lady McLeod is cold.”

Summer flashed a grateful smile at him. She *was* cold. Since it seemed that nobody was going to invite her to take a seat, she

sat down anyway. Rhys stayed standing, looking around as if he expected someone to start laughing and assure him it was all a joke after all.

“A *special license*?” he repeated. “Can I take it she’s wi’ child, then?”

Oskar rounded on him. “How dare ye!”

“Watch yer tongue!” Eleanor snarled at the same moment. Rhys directed a venomous glare at Summer, who shrank back into her seat. She’d realized that Oskar’s family wouldn’t be thrilled with him marrying a stranger, but somehow, she hadn’t properly understood how awkward it would be.

Oskar took a step toward his brother. Rhys held his ground, but his fists clenched by his side and his eyes widened. He wasn’t as fearless as he wanted others to think.

“If I hear any such rumors about me wife and the new Lady McLeod, I’ll ken where they came from,” Oskar snapped. “Don’t talk about her that way.”

“Ye cannae be in love with her.”

“That’s nay the point.”

Rhys rolled his eyes. “There it is.”

“Summer will be living with us here, in the Castle,” Eleanor said flatly. “She’s part o’ the family, and she’s the new Lady of the Clan. Ye had better show some respect to her, Rhys. I mean it. She’d a long way from home, and she needs to be welcomed by her new family, nae treated like this.”

Summer shot a grateful glance at Eleanor, and the woman’s expression softened a little. Eleanor got to her feet.

“Come on – Summer, is it? I’ll show ye the Castle, and ye can pick yer chamber.”

“Wait, she has to meet Callum first,” Oskar said. “Where is he?”

“I imagine he’s coming,” Eleanor answered.

Rhys snorted, and elbowed his way past his brother, storming out of the door and slamming it behind him.

At least, he tried to slam it. An older man stepped through the door next, looking bewildered.

“What’s the matter, Oskar? I heard ye were back, and people have been saying—” he broke off when his gaze landed on Summer. “So it’s true, then. Ye brought back a bride.”

“Aye, I did. Summer, this is Callum Lamb. He’s me most trusted advisor, and he was my uncle’s right-hand man too.”

Summer got to her feet, stiff but keen not to neglect her manners.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Lamb,” she said, making a curtsy.

Callum bowed. “The pleasure is all mine, Lady McLeod. I hope ye will find McLeod Castle a welcoming place. Can I offer ye a tour later?”

“Thank you, but I was already offered a tour by Lady...” Summer paused, glancing at Eleanor, “Lady Eleanor? What should I call you?”

Eleanor chuckled. “Let’s start with *Eleanor*, eh?”

“Isn’t that disrespectful?”

“Only if I thought it was. And I daenae.”

Summer smiled, feeling as though Eleanor was quickly warming up to her. That was good – she wanted to make friends in this place.

“Well, this is a surprise,” Callum admitted, “But a pleasant one. News is going around fast, Oskar, and nae everyone is thrilled about it. Marrying an English lass is... unusual. The councilors are assembling, and they want to see ye.”

Oskar breathed in. “O’ course they do. They cannae let me rest, can they?”

Callum shrugged. “This is what it’s like, being Laird McLeod. Will Lady McLeod come too? They’d like to meet her.”

Oskar glanced at Summer. Summer deliberately kept silent – she’d probably have to meet these councilors sooner or later. But the truth was that the idea made her feel sick. She was tired – no, exhausted – and her life had turned upside down in the space of a week. Facing what she imagined to be a long table full of grim-faced old men who already hated her was not an appealing thought.

But shouldn’t she stand by her husband? If Oskar thought that she should meet the councilors, she wouldn’t complain.

She glanced up and met Oskar’s eyes squarely. He tucked away a smile.

“I think not. Lady McLeod is very tired, and very cold, I think. Maither, will ye see if ye can get her some warm clothes? The gowns she’s brought from England won’t be thick enough.”

“Of course I will,” Eleanor smiled at Summer. “I’ll fetch her some food, too – I daresay ye need it after that trip.”

Summer was so giddy with relief she thought she might crumple to the floor there and then.

“That sounds wonderful, thank you.”

Oskar gave a short nod. “It’s settled, then. Lead on, Callum. Let’s nae keep the councilors waiting.”

## CHAPTER 13



OSKAR HATED the meeting room with a passion.

Apparently, his uncle had been the first Laird McLeod to think of having a dedicated meeting room for council meetings, rather than just clustering around the feasting table during one of his endless banquets. This inspired idea had stuck with his councilors, and they wouldn't think of changing a thing about the meeting room that old Laird McLeod had designed.

That was a pity, was the current Laird McLeod hated everything about the meeting room.

It was a large, circular room that had once been used to store weapons. It had an odd, musty smell about it, which was only enhanced by the countless stuffed animals hanging around.

They were testaments to the old Laird's hunting days – overstuffed wolves with filling spilling out of them, their dusty muzzles wrinkled in a permanent snarl, their teeth wonky and yellowed. There were countless foxes, their once-beautiful coats dull and faded, rabbits, partridges, pheasants, deer, stags, and more.

The stuffed animals were impossible to clean and filled the air with dust. Some of them had been improperly stuffed and smelled awful. Aside from that, Oskar hated their glassy, dead eyes, and thought the poor things should just be laid to rest once and for all.

Still, even Callum sided with the rest of the council on keeping the meeting room the same, so Oskar decided to let the matter rest. This was not the hill he wanted to die on.

He was careful to keep his shoulders back and his head high when he entered the meeting room. For all the meeting room was an awful place, all the dead animals reminded him of one thing – the councilors could sense blood. Like a wolf, they'd pounce if they sensed weakness. Lairds had been overthrown by ambitious councilors before, and they likely would again.

Perhaps that was why his uncle had insisted on filling the meeting room with dead animals. It reminded him of the stakes.

“Evening, councilors,” Oskar greeted them all, striding purposefully into the meeting room. There was a large circular table to match the room, and the councilors sat spaced out around it. There was room for at least thirty or forty people at that table, but there were only six councilors, including Callum. Callum did not sit at the table – he never had. As the laird's steward, he sided with him as a matter of course.

The oldest of the councilors was Jacob Remy, a white-haired old man with a long beard, who was almost entirely deaf but pretended not to be. He didn't have much to add these days but was generally considered a fair-minded man and could offer occasional words of wisdom. He sat beside his son, Simon Remy. Now, Simon had excellent hearing and was much more



of a threat. Oskar had heard a rumor that one of the councilors had thought to succeed the old Laird, and he guessed that it was Simon. As the youngest councilor, he would have been an obvious choice. He did not like Oskar, not one bit.

Next came Timothy Black. Timothy was a good-humored, middle-aged man, who had a large family and cared very much about the poor and vulnerable members of their clan. Oskar liked, him, but did not trust him. Timothy was a good man, and like most self-proclaimed good men, was capable of terrible things if he felt his moral compass pointed that way.

Next came Malcolm Burgess and Wallace Tubbs. They were so similar as to almost be brothers, and often presented a united front against Oskar. They had a mutual hatred of anyone they saw as an outsider, as well as young people who didn't seem to know their place.

Oskar, of course, was both.

He sometimes saw them as a pair of jackals, hanging back, not ready to go dashing in for the kill and risk their necks, but keen to join in as soon as an opportunity presented itself. He didn't trust either of them as far as he could throw them.

Callum drew out the high-backed chair at the table, the only indication that its occupant was the Laird and not a councilor, and Oskar sat in it, throwing his cloak over the back. A way of marking his territory, he supposed.

“So,” Oskar said, without preamble – there was never any call for pleasantries here, “I guess ye have all heard.”

“Heard what?” poor old Jacob quavered.

His son ignored him, leaning forward across the table.

“Ye have come back with a woman, I hear,” Simon grated.  
“Without consulting any of us.”

“If by *woman* ye mean the new Lady McLeod, then aye,” Oskar responded smartly. “Her name is Summer Murray, and she is English. I might as well tell ye all that now.”

“An English girl? What’s wrong wi’ a good Scottish lass?” Wallace said.

“None of that matters if he cares for her,” Timothy said sharply. “I didn’t marry me wife because she was Scottish. I married her because I loved her.”

Malcolm made a loud, fake vomiting noise. “A Scottish laird ought to marry a Scottish lass.”

“Ye will be hard pressed to find a Scottish lass with a dowry like Summer’s,” Oskar said, before the conversation could descend any further in chaos. He didn’t actually want to be here all night.

That sobered them up.

“Dowry?” Callum said quietly, from behind Oskar’s chair. “Ye said nothing of a dowry.”

“Eight thousand pounds,” Oskar said, relishing the way the color drained from the men’s faces and their jaws dropped. “Plus, another few thousand a year from the money her maither left her. Oh, aye, Miss Murray’s a rich lass. That money is mine now, and I daresay we can all think of things we can do wi’ it, especially wi’ winter coming on.”

“Did ye say eight thousand?” Jacob whispered loudly.

“Aye, Jacob, I did.”

Malcolm leaned forward. “And what would a fine English lass want with marrying ye, then? Did ye get her up the duff?”

Oskar got to his feet abruptly, his chair scraping back against the stone floor, a sound that set one’s teeth on edge. The room went quiet.

“This ye Lady McLeod ye are talking about,” Oskar grated out. “The next man who makes a comment like that will be eating his words along wi’ his teeth. Got it?”

There was a general murmuring and shuffling.

Callum stepped forward. “I can answer for it that Lady McLeod is nae pregnant, men,” he said, calm and cool as always.

“I’ll explain this once, and only once,” Oskar continued. “She married me because she wanted a home and a husband. Not to

sound vain and full o' maself, but I'm a better choice than most of those gangly English gents. So, she decided to take a chance on me. She knew her money would go to helping our clan. It's all above board and fair."

There were a few nods. At least this was something all of them could agree on – a Scottish man was a better choice than an English one.

Oskar sat down again. Jacob seemed to have got the gist of the conversation, and was sitting up in his chair, a clear hint that he wanted to say something.

"Marrying an English lass is not good for morale," he said. "Even if she is rich. The people won't like it."

Oskar pursed his lips. Jacob had a point, and it was something that Oskar had considered since he first made his offer to Summer.

"True, but starving over winter isnae good for morale either, is it?" he pointed out. "Aye, she's English. That'll take some getting over. But they all like a pretty lass. She likes people, she's charming but not oily, and she's got nice manners. She's no snob, and she's humble enough to care about common people. They'll take to her, I'm sure of it."

Timothy nodded enthusiastically. No doubt the romantic in him liked the whole idea. Jacob looked unconvinced – it wasn't entirely certain that he'd heard what Oskar had said – while Simon, Malcolm, and Wallace looked mulish.

“Give her a chance, men,” Oskar continued briskly. “Either way, it’s done. We’re wed, and that’s that. I think she will be the saving o’ our clan – or rather, her money will – and we ought to be grateful for the opportunity.”

That was probably the wrong thing to say. Oskar was uncomfortably aware that he was no eloquent, silver-tongued laird. Apparently, his uncle had had a way with words, and was a dangerous man to argue with. Oskar was much happier on the back of a horse, leaving Callum to do the arguing.

But that wasn’t what a laird did. He was less blunt than when he’d first started, of course, but he was still conscious of the fact that he wasn’t persuading his councilors as much as pushing them along.

Men like that didn’t let themselves be pushed along forever. Sooner or later, something was going to happen. Something bad.

But for now, Oskar pushed it to the back of his mind, and focused on the here and now. Namely, the fact that there were five councilors staring at him, most of them hostile, and he was bone tired and hungry.

Oh, and he had a new wife around the Castle somewhere, not that she would want to see him.

Or would she? There’d been no discussion about sharing a bed, of course, but–

Oskar firmly put that thought out of his mind. He had to concentrate.

“So,” he said, clapping his hands together and making the councilors jump, “was there anything else?”

There was an awkward silence, and Oskar raised an eyebrow.

“What, did ye all summon me here at this time o’ the evening just to discuss ma choice o’ wife?”

“It’s a weighty matter,” Simon insisted, going a little red in the face. He was a balding man with gingery hair, so he blushed very powerfully. It was almost funny.

Oskar shrugged. “I suppose, but it’s also a personal one, wouldn’t ye say? Like I said, marrying Miss Murray – that’s Lady McLeod to ye all now, o’ course – will do a lot o’ good for the Clan. I’m sure they’ll like her, just like I’m sure ye will all present a united front tae the people and support ye new lady, eh?”

Of course, Oskar was sure of no such thing. But it wouldn’t hurt to remind them all of their duty and make it clear that what was done was done.

He rose to his feet, determined to get away before they could conjure up some new matter to keep him longer. Oskar wanted his bed – he’d been dreaming of his warm, comfortable bed with its piles of quilts since the moment he’d left home.

“If that’s all, I’ll be off. I’m tired, and there’s much work tae be done in the morning.”

There were a few disgruntled mutters, but most people – Timothy especially – seemed just as keen to end the meeting and go home.

Relieved to have escaped so quickly, Oskar left, careful not to hurry away. Nobody wanted to see the Laird’s retreating back more than necessary. He’d made it all the way to the hall outside before he remembered that he’d left his cloak. Oskar paused, wondering if he should just retrieve it in the morning. But it had been his father’s old cloak, and he didn’t like the idea of it sitting in that musty meeting room all night.

He turned, just in time to see Malcolm and Wallace walking away in the opposite direction, muttering angrily to each other. Timothy was supporting Jacob on his arm, walking slowly so the old man wouldn’t stumble. Good, that meant that most of them had probably left the meeting room.

Oskar pushed open the door and paused. The meeting room was empty, except for Simon and Callum.

They stood close together, heads bent, and they were whispering urgently. At the sound of the door opening, their heads snapped around, and Callum took a casual step back.

“Forgot ma cloak,” Oskar said briefly, picking it up and slinging it around his shoulders.

“I’ll walk ye out,” Callum said easily, falling into step beside him. They left Simon standing beside the table and moved out into the hall.

“What’s wrong wi’ him?” Oskar asked. “Ye two looked deep in conversation.”

Callum grimaced. “He’s not happy wi’ the marriage. Says ye shouldn’t have married an English lass at all and should o’ asked us first. Something about making an alliance wi’ another clan.”

Oskar sighed. “What clan did he have in mind?”

“He didn’t say.”

“There ye go, then. He just wants tae pick fault.”

“Maybe, but it can be dangerous. Jacob doesn’t agree wi’ ye marrying an English girl, and Malcolm and Wallace would be eager to stick the knife in. If he can get Timothy to side wi’ him—”

“He won’t. Timothy thinks it’s a great love story.”

Callum pursed his lips. “Timothy is more practical than ye think, Oskar.”

“Well, what can I do about it? I married her now, and I still think it’s the best choice. Ye didn’t see the people waving and



cheering for her when we came here. They were givin' her flowers and posies and everything."

"Did she speak?"

"What?"

"Did she speak? Did she show them she was English?"

"No."

Callum clicked his tongue. "Never mind, it'll go around. Look, I've tried to calm Simon down, but we need to tread carefully, eh?"

"I know, I know."

"Do ye? Oskar, the councilors are right. Ye shouldnae have made such a big decision without asking us. Do ye think lairds just marry whoever they choose? Princes and kings don't marry for love, they marry the person who can bring them the most benefit. For us, this could have been a lass from a neighbouring clan, but that opportunity is gone now."

It was something of a shock to hear Callum disapproving of his choice. Oskar shot him a hurt glance.

"Her money will save us from ruin, Callum. I thought ye would have approved of that."

“The businessman in me does, Oskar. But the councilor in me sees other problems. Look, don’t worry about it now. We’ll sort it out. Just make sure the people like her as much as ye say they will.”

“They’ll like her,” Oskar said firmly, although he was feeling less and less sure. What if Summer froze up in front of the people, and came across as rude or haughty? That reputation would be difficult to shake. What if they *couldn’t* get around the fact that she was English? He chewed his lip, glad that Summer hadn’t accompanied him. She’d have to meet the councilors sooner or later, but not yet. She’d had a rough few days as it was.

“One more thing,” Callum added casually, as they paused at the foot of the stairs leading up to the chambers. “Keep an eye on Rhys.”

Oskar frowned. “What do ye mean?”

“It’s probably nothing, but... well, he wasn’t thrilled ye were coming home. Not like a brother should be. He kept trying to take on more responsibility, spending time wi’ the councilors... I don’t know. Maybe he was just trying to help while ye were gone, but... just keep an eye on him, eh?”

Oskar swallowed hard, trying to dislodge the lump that sprang up in his throat.

“I will. Thanks, Callum.”

Suddenly, he wasn’t tired anymore.

Fear could do that to a person.

## CHAPTER 14



THE CASTLE WAS FREEZING. It didn't matter where you went, an icy draft whistled around one's ankles, and the air was cold and still. In small rooms with large fires, there was plenty of warmth, but most rooms were too large for the fires to really do much.

Eleanor had meant it when she had offered a tour. They'd walked extensively around the lower floors of the Castle, with Eleanor showing her room after room, all large and cold and mostly dark. It was easy to tell which rooms and halls were used most frequently, because they were reasonably well lit. There were plenty of narrow side corridors that were almost pitch black, that Summer vowed never to enter. Never in the dark, at least.

The place was much larger than she could have imagined, and they didn't even bother with the kitchens, servants' quarters, and attics. Eleanor seemed to know a lot about the history of the Castle and was keen to relate all of the information to Summer.

At this point, Summer only really wanted to sit down and rest somewhere warm, preferably in more comfortable shoes and with nobody giving her odd looks out of the corners of their eyes. Nobody else here had an English accent. Summer had

never thought much about her accent until hers stood as much as it did now.

“And as I’m sure ye already ken, Oskar inherited the Laird’s position from his uncle,” Eleanor was saying. “We were surprised, we didn’t know him much. I’m not sure it did much for Oskar and Rhys – Rhys was already a wee bit envious of his big brother. Still, I’m sure they’ll patch it up.”

“Oskar didn’t tell me much about you and Rhys. There wasn’t time, you know. But he seems very fond of you,” Summer said, scurrying to keep up with Eleanor. She wasn’t a tall woman, but she walked quickly. The cold didn’t seem to bother her. Perhaps after a few years in the Highlands, it wouldn’t bother Summer, either.

Although *a few years* of cold didn’t particularly appeal to her. Finally, *finally*, Eleanor was heading toward the stairs, and Summer breathed a sigh of relief. Any minute now and she would see her new chamber, and there might be the food Eleanor had promised.

“There’s not much here,” Eleanor said over her shoulder, “Just chambers and a few workrooms. Oh, we must get ye fitted for new dresses. I’m sure ye English dresses are very pretty, but probably not warm enough. Besides, the people would like to see ye in Scottish clothes.”

“You had me at *warm enough*,” Summer said, and Eleanor chuckled.

“I dinnae blame ye. I came from the lowlands to marry Oskar’s father, and I struggled wi’ the cold. Ye get used to it.

Now, as tae ye chamber,” she hesitated, glancing over her shoulder. “Lairds and Ladies often officially have separate chambers, just like English nobility, but they share a bed, more often than not. Do ye want ye own chamber, or to share wi’ Oskar?”

“My own chamber, please,” Summer said, a little quicker than she should have done. Eleanor was too polite to let her face show any emotion at all, and only gave a quick nod and turned away. She led the way along a corridor, pausing by a door seemingly at random, and opened it.

“This is the former Lady McLeod’s chamber,” Eleanor said, gesturing for Summer to go ahead of her. “The old Laird was widowed for decades, so it’s not been used for a while. We’ve had it aired out and refreshed, but I think it still smells a little musty. Do ye want to sleep somewhere else?”

Summer stepped into the chamber and found that her breath was snatched away.

The chamber was *beautiful*.

There were no dull browns and reds in here; it was all greens and blues, with velvet curtains around a large four-poster bed. The furniture in here looked newer than the rest of the Castle. There was a tall wardrobe, a chest of drawers, an intricately carved trunk at the bottom of the bed, and other bits and pieces. It was a big chamber, but not huge. It wouldn’t swallow up Summer and her things.

Her bags were already here, but not unpacked. No doubt she’d have to do her own unpacking.

*Well, it won't hurt me,* Summer thought.

There was no fire in the hearth, but Summer had the feeling that soon as the fire was lit, the chill in the air would dissipate and it would be a cosy chamber.

“Over here is the door between the Laird and Lady’s chambers,” Eleanor said, moving over to a discreet, narrow door tucked away in the corner of the chamber.

“There’s a connecting door?” Summer asked, a little surprised. She probably shouldn’t have been so surprised. They were, after all, the chambers for the Lord and Lady of the Castle. They’d want to visit each other at night, of course, but without having to creep through the halls going there and back.

Heat simmered in Summer’s stomach at the thought of Oskar creeping through the door in the middle of the night, slipping into bed beside her. She remembered the way his muscles had moved and flexed against her when they kissed on the terrace, the way his large, warm hands had moved over her body, their heat seeping through the material of her dress.

She gave a little shiver that had nothing to do with the coolness of the chamber.

“Ye can lock the door from this side, o’ course,” Eleanor said, carefully turning away from Summer. “If ye would like.”

Summer swallowed, hoping that Eleanor hadn’t seen her shiver and mistaken it for revulsion. No mother wanted to

think of a woman being repulsed by her beloved son.

Perhaps she'd think that Summer was spoiled, and perhaps a little soft in the head – who *wouldn't* want to have someone like Oskar in their bed? Perhaps she'd think that she was going to be a cold, cruel wife, and make Oskar unhappy.

Summer needed allies here, and she didn't want to upset her only friend so far.

“I'm sure I won't need to lock it,” Summer said casually. “There'll be no danger here, I'm sure.”

Eleanor smiled a little at that. “Not from that door, at least. I would lock ye chamber door at night, though.”

Just like that, the chamber got colder.

“What do you mean?” Summer asked, trying to keep her voice light.

Eleanor shrugged. “Scottish Lairds lead more dangerous lives than their English counterparts. Oskar is a new laird, and that's a tricky position to be in.”

“Are you saying that we might get assassinated?”

“O' course not, but this is a big Castle, and lots of people live here. Ye never ken who might be stalking the halls at night,” Eleanor glanced over at Summer's pale face, and burst out



laughing. “Oh, Lass, I didnae mean to scare ye. Still, ye will sleep better with a locked door, I can tell ye that.”

“Thank... thank you for telling me,” Summer managed.

A servant appeared the door, not betraying himself by so much as a creaky floorboard or a warning cough, and Summer gave a little start and squeak of surprise. She smothered her squeak, slapping her hand over her mouth, but not before she saw the servant suppress a smile. He glanced between her and Eleanor, as if not sure who to address.

“Laird McLeod sent me, My Lady,” he said uncertainly. “He... he said for Lady McLeod to meet him in the private feasting room.”

Eleanor turned to Summer and raised an eyebrow. “That’ll be ye, then.”

“What does Oskar want?”

“Only one way to find out. Get yersel’ down there, and I’ll unpack for ye. I’ll have a nice fire going for ye when ye get back.”

There was nothing for it. Summer sucked in a breath and turned, smiling, to the servant.

“Thank you. Could you show me the way, please?”

The servant seemed a little surprised at being addressed so politely.

“O’ course. This way, My Lady.”

“Wait!” Eleanor said sharply. “She needs to change first.”



The servant led Summer back downstairs, to a small door tucked away behind a heavy velvet curtain. He opened it, and Summer went through. She’d expected the servant to follow her, but he closed the door behind her, leaving her alone.

Not quite alone, of course.

It was a smaller room than Summer had expected – but then, this was the *private* feasting room. There was a fire burning in the hearth and velvet curtains at the window and at the door, blocking out the worst of the drafts. The room was large enough for a decent-sized table, half a dozen padded velvet chairs, and what looked like a deerskin by the fire.

She was surprised to see a small bookcase and two armchairs set out near the fire, although the armchairs were unoccupied at the moment. Oskar was sitting at the head of the table, which was laid with a delicious looking meal. Summer’s mouth watered – cold chicken, beef, and pork, with a bowl of roast vegetables, fresh bread, butter and jam. There was a jug of wine, and two goblets set out.

“It’s no exactly a feast – not like we had at your home,” Oskar said, leaning back in his chair. “But it’s good food. Ye will feel

better after ye eat, I'm sure."

"This looks delicious, I'm starving," Summer said, pulling out the next chair along, directly on Oskar's left. "I never liked having all of those courses, anyway. It felt like such a waste."

Her eye fell on a vase of flowers in the center of the table. They were wildflowers, similar to the posy the old woman had given her and looked freshly picked.

"Ye seemed to like the other flowers, so I thought these would cheer ye up," Oskar said, following her gaze.

*Did he pick these himself?* Summer thought. She couldn't imagine any gentleman picking flowers to *cheer up* a lady, not without an ulterior motive.

"They're beautiful," Summer said honestly. She fidgeted a little in her new dress. Eleanor had given her a selection of dresses to choose from, and she'd picked a lavender-colored wool dress with a tight bodice and a daringly low-cut neckline.

Summer had always wanted to wear dresses that showed a few scandalous inches of skin at her collarbone, but Vincent had always firmly said no. That beautiful ice-blue dress she'd worn at her engagement was the riskiest thing Vincent had ever let her wear.

Not that this dress was *extremely* shocking – it showed the curve of her bosom and that was all, and she pinned up her hair to curl down the back of her neck, showing off her pale

throat. Summer thought she looked pretty, but worried that it wasn't Lady McLeod-ish enough for the people.

But then, she wasn't going to meet the people, by the looks of it. This was a dinner for her and Oskar.

Butterflies exploded in Summer's stomach again, and she didn't know why. The heat that she'd felt in her chamber earlier, with the idea of Oskar creeping through the dark, bending over her and sliding into bed beside her, came flooding back, and Summer shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

She wasn't sure she wanted to be feeling like this in a man's presence. Especially not a man who made the feeling worse.

"Are ye all right?" Oskar asked, his voice low and warm. It did *not* help the butterflies. In fact, it encouraged them. She glanced at him and found that he was looking at her with a sort of hunger.

Not a worrying kind, the way some particularly leery old gentlemen eyed Summer during parties. It was a hot look, his gaze dropping over her exposed skin, his throat working as he swallowed.

The heat built in Summer's core, prickling and itchy. She wanted something – or rather, her body did – but Summer wasn't entirely sure what it was. It felt like the sort of thing ladies – nice ladies, at least – weren't supposed to know about, certainly not *feel*.

“Fine,” Summer said, her voice coming out high and squeaky. “I’m just hungry.”

Maybe that was it. Maybe she was just dizzy and light headed from lack of food and stress, and that was what was making her feel strange. She glanced around, desperate for some topic of conversation that would distract her from this worryingly pleasant feeling and Oskar’s steady gaze. She spotted the books, and inspiration struck.

“Are those your books?”

Oskar sat back in his seat, and Summer felt as though the spell was broken. Rather than feeling relieved, she felt disappointed.

“My mother’s. I thought ye might like to read them. We’ve got a decent library here, so of course ye should borrow whatever ye like.”

“Thank you.”

“Anyway, dig in.”

There were no servants here, so apparently, they were going to serve themselves. Summer reached forward, dishing out some vegetables and meat onto her plate. She chose a chicken leg, and immediately regretted it. Chicken was always a tricky meat – getting it off the bone was no easy task. Summer’s mouth watered for a taste of the chicken, but she was struggling to get a good forkful.

She heard a snort of laughter and glanced up to see Oskar with a chicken leg hanging from his fingers, a smudge of grease across his lips. Far from being repulsive, it made his lips shine red, and Summer found herself wondering what it would be like to lick the grease off his lower lip.

She hastily directed her gaze back to her plate, trying to reject that scandalous thought.

“What? What are you laughing at?”

“I’m laughing at ye, silly lass. Why bother wi’ a knife and fork? Just pick it up and eat it.”

“It’s not proper,” Summer said primly. “What would your people say if they saw their new Lady McLeod with grease all over her mouth and fingers?”

Oskar took a large mouthful of chicken. “I think,” he said, his mouth full of chicken, “they’d be impressed at a lady who could put away the amount of food I know ye can. Oh, aye, I’ve seen ye eat at home, Lass. Dainty eating or not, ye have an appetite.”

“And is that a crime?”

“O’ course not. But it’s just ye and me here, ye can eat how ye like.”

“I’ll stick to my manners, thank you. You have a piece of chicken in your beard.”

Without breaking eye contact, Oskar pulled the piece of chicken out of his beard and popped it in his mouth, cackling when Summer wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“Maybe I was saving it for later.”

Summer picked up a bread roll and threw it at him. She didn't know what had prompted her to do that, but it only made Oskar laugh harder. She grabbed a second roll. He'd slumped down in his seat to avoid her missiles, holding his stomach and laughing as if he'd never stop. Summer, realizing that she was on her feet with a bread roll poised to fly through the air, felt a bubble of laughter welling up inside her.

She began to laugh, letting the bread roll drop.

“I have married a brute,” she said, half joking.

Oskar snorted. “And I've married a delicate English lady who won't use the utensils God gave her to eat with.”

“What on Earth do you mean?”

Oskar wiggled his fingers at her. “Fingers, Lass.”

Summer glanced down at the tempting chicken on her plate and felt her will break. She sat down with a thump, picking up the chicken, and stuffed it into her mouth.

## CHAPTER 15



OSKAR WAS RIGHT. After finishing a hearty meal, Summer felt much, much better. There was plenty of food, but not an overwhelming amount. She sat back in her seat with a sigh, dabbing her mouth and wiping off her fingers. There was a bowl of fresh water at the end of the table, specifically for cleaning the grease off once one had finished eating.

Oskar looked as clean and appealing as ever, with all trace of the grease thoroughly washed away. He sat back in his seat, a half-full goblet of wine on the table before him.

“Better?” he asked, grinning.

“Better,” Summer confirmed.

“Are ye settled? In ye chamber, I mean. Where did Mother put ye?”

“The Lady’s Chamber, she said.”

Oskar stilled. “Oh. I didnae mean for ye to have that chamber. I thought ye would be uncomfortable, with the connecting



door and whatnot. Ours is a marriage of convenience, after all.”

Summer stared down into the amber liquid of her wine. She’d drunk two full goblets already and was starting to feel it go to her head. The buzz had pleasantly elevated the odd, hot feelings that Oskar seemed to inspire, but his recent comment – about how their marriage was a convenient thing and therefore not a real marriage at all – had cooled those feelings quite nicely.

“Oh,” she managed, a small, sad sound.

Oskar shifted in his seat. “I dinnae want ye to feel uncomfortable.”

Summer drew in a breath. “Well, we ought to talk about it, don’t you think? About... about heirs and so on.”

She kept her gaze leveled at Oskar’s hand, curled around his goblet, not daring to lift it higher. It was the wine that had emboldened her to talk this way, and at this moment in time, it seemed like a perfect valid subject of conversation.

But Oskar was shifting his weight in his seat, lips pressed together, looking as if he could not get comfortable. He had his gaze trained on his goblet too, not directing it in Summer’s direction.

“I dinnae want ye to be in an uncomfortable position, Summer. Ye hardly know me, I hardly know ye, and ye have a lot to get

used to. Being Lady McLeod isn't all furs and jewels, ye know."

"I know," Summer said, insulted. "I know there'll be work to do. Eleanor will help me, though. She said so."

Oskar nodded a little too vigorously. "Well, let's leave it there, eh? Ye and me are different, Summer. Let's not pretend ye would have chosen me if ye had been left to ye own devices."

"Well, neither would you have chosen *me*."

Oskar laughed aloud. "Ye think not? Ye have such a low opinion o' yourself?"

"It's hard not to when everyone around you keeps reminding you of how inferior you are."

There was a short silence, and Summer bit her lip. She wished she hadn't said anything.

"Are ye talking about that whey-faced lass we met in that park? The one that tried tae chat me up?" Oskar said, after a moment or two.

"Florence. And yes, her. Among others."

Oskar snorted. "I'd nae give them the time o' day. Maither always says nae to take criticism from anyone ye wouldn't go

to for advice. Don't listen tae anyone ye wouldn't want to be like."

Summer bit her lip harder. She had the strangest desire to cry and drowned that desire by picking up her goblet and drinking down several mouthfuls of wine. It stung her throat more than it should, and she coughed. The goblet was barely back on the table before Oskar reached out, taking it from her.

"That's enough o' that," he said gently. "Alcohol's nae something ye want when ye are feeling down."

"I'm not feeling down."

"Really? Because ye just married a stranger, left yer home country, and landed somewhere new where not everyone likes ye. I think I'd feel down."

Summer hiccupped. "Yes, but you aren't a woman. You're a whole person, good enough as you are, without getting married. Men get to marry women and bring them home like a possession, and women only hope that they marry a man nice enough not to beat them."

Summer hadn't meant to say all that. She wondered whether Oskar would be angry, or shocked, or just a little uncomfortable.

He sighed, heavily.

"Aye, I know."

“You *know*?”

He shrugged. “I’m nae blind. I know that the world is skewed in favor o’ men. I’ve seen plenty of women marry bad men and suffer for it, with nobody to stand up for them. I’ve seen women – cousins, friends, ye name it – married to men who saw them as nothing more than servants and cooks, something to pop out babies every year and do their bidding. It’s not fair, I know. My maither raised me better, though. Ye are Lady McLeod, Summer. Never forget that. Ye are the First Lady in this clan, bar none. My father always treated my mother like a queen, and I intend to follow in his footsteps. I’ll be a good husband, Summer. Didn’t I promise ye that?”

Summer smiled weakly. “Yes, you did. And... and you’ve been good to your word so far.”

“Steady on. It’s only the first day home.”

Summer had to chuckle at that, but her smile soon faded away. She couldn’t stop thinking about something, something that had popped into her head as soon as Oskar had reminded her that theirs was a marriage of convenience – something dutiful, with benefits on both sides, neither of those benefits being friendship, love, or even really affection.

“I always wanted children,” Summer said quietly. Oskar went very still, but said nothing, so she continued, “I’m not... not *very* fond of children, but I always wanted children of my own. A few of them, you know. I have no brothers or sisters, and I always thought I’d have liked some. I imagined maybe three or four. Not as large as some families, but... but comfortable, I suppose.”

Oskar shifted in his seat again. "I cannae promise ye children," he said finally.

"I know, I know," Summer said quickly. "I understand the terms of our marriage," she passed a hand over her face, suddenly feeling silly and small and very tired. "I've just drunk too much, I suppose. Pay no attention to me."

Oskar nodded. "Ye will think differently in the morning, I promise ye. Ye'll nae want a Scottish baby in ye then."

Summer's cheeks colored, and Oskar winced, probably at his own crude remark. He cleared his throat, tossing back the last of his wine.

"You know, for someone who keeps saying that he's no gentleman, you're really quite chivalrous," Summer said, suddenly eager to lighten the mood.

Oskar lifted one sandy eyebrow. "Oh, aye?"

"Yes, *aye*. Look at you, being so gentlemanly with a drunk woman."

"I've seen many drunk lasses, and ye are not one of them. Topsy, maybe, but that's all. Ye cannae fool me, Lass."

Summer snorted, a very unladylike gesture. "I disagree. You, Oskar Lawson, are a secret gentleman, just as fine and restrained as the grandest English aristocrat."

Oskar leaped to his feet. “Ye insult me in me own home?”

It was playful, and the tension of earlier was broken. Summer got to her feet, giggling, and backed away.

“You cannot deny it, Oskar. You are a *gentleman*.”

“How *dare* ye?”

He dived for her, faster than she had expected, and scooped her up into his arms as if she weighed nothing. Summer gave a squeal of surprise, finding herself hoisted into the air and spun around, feet dangling in thin air.

She found her chest pressed against Oskar’s, her cheek against his temple. He spun her round once, twice, and then stopped, seeming to realize for the first time that he had Summer in his arms.

They were close, even closer than they had been on the terrace before their kiss. Summer was aware of her heart hammering, that coiling heat returning with a vengeance. His strong arms were wrapped around her, and it occurred to Summer that she’d never even considered the possibility that he would let her fall.

She had her hands on his shoulders, and they were close enough for Summer to see just how long his golden eyelashes were, and the faint spray of freckles across his nose.

Oskar was looking at her, too, and for the first time, Summer was sure she saw her own hungry feelings reflected in his eyes. His gaze dropped downward to her lips. Impulsively, Summer leaned forward and fit her lips to his.

At first, the kiss was as chaste and sweet as their wedding day kiss, but it quickly deepened. His beard scratched against her cheeks and lips, but it wasn't an unpleasant sort of chafe. He smelled good, and there was only a faint undercurrent of chicken on his lips.

After all, there were worse things to taste of, surely. It took her breath away, literally and metaphorically. They broke apart to breathe, and Oskar muttered a curse.

The next thing Summer knew, she was on her back on the table, on an area fortunately cleared of food and dishes, and Oskar was leaning over her. He had his hands planted either side of her head, muscles standing out in his arms, and he had a strange look on his face.

Hungry, certainly, but also a little worried. Summer reached up impulsively, fingertips sliding through the bristles of his beard. He bent down to kiss her again, pressing his body against hers. He didn't let his full weight fall against Summer, as that would certainly have knocked all of the breath out of her body, but it was enough to create a pleasant pressure.

His lips moved from hers to the side of her neck, and that was a new, dizzying pleasure.

“Tell me if ye want me tae stop,” Oskar muttered, his voice low and hoarse in her ear. Summer barely had time to ask him

what, exactly, would she want to stop before he'd lifted her skirt up above her knees. Summer flinched – she couldn't remember the last time she'd bared her calves in public, but it had certainly been when she was still a child – but said nothing.

Oskar's hand, warm, firm, and rough, curled around her knee. The touch sent tingles up Summer's body, the heat pulsing insistently. His hand slid higher and higher until it touched the join of her legs, and Summer's jaw went slack.

The heat had centered *there*, and it was all she could think of. Oskar's thick fingers pressed against her, rubbing in circles, and Summer's mind went blank. He was still kissing her, murmuring things in her ear, and Summer was vaguely aware of something hot and hard pressing against her thigh, and she knew quite well it belonged to Oskar.

His movements sped up, and Summer had time to wonder where on Earth he'd learned to do *this* before a blinding climax hit her, making her arch her back and gasp aloud.

She spiraled down, slowly, from her high. Oskar had his face in the crook of her neck, and she couldn't see his face. Suddenly, the table was hard and cold at her back, Oskar was heavy, and his beard prickled at her skin. She could feel the hot, hard thing against her thigh still, and when she moved her leg, Oskar's breath hitched in his throat.

Should she do something about it? It seemed only fair. Summer was just working up the courage to mention it when there was a tentative knock on the door.



Oskar shot upright, and Summer tumbled off the table in her eagerness to make herself presentable. She looked at him properly for the first time since he'd done *that* to her, and saw that his face was red, and he was surreptitiously wiping his hand on a napkin.

He glanced at her, not quite meeting her eyes, and Summer self-consciously smoothed her dress and patted her hair.

“What is it?” Oskar asked, his voice a little harsh.

“The steward sent me tae clear the table,” came a tentative voice that Summer didn't recognize. “Everyone else is in bed.”

Summer glanced up at Oskar, and once again his eyes slid away from her. She frowned. What had she done wrong? That had been... well, Summer wasn't ready to properly think about it yet, but he was her husband after all, so it couldn't possibly be wrong.

“We should get tae bed,” Oskar said finally. “Ye go up, get yourself settled. I'll sort this out.”

It was a dismissal if she'd ever heard one. Summer bit her lip.

“All right. Goodnight, Oskar.”

“Goodnight, Summer.”



Summer didn't sleep for a while. Her new bed was comfortable, and the chamber was warm, as the fire that Eleanor had promised her burned happily in the grate, but Summer was buzzing with energy. She climbed into bed but lay awake, watching her single candle burn down to nothing.

She couldn't stop thinking about what Oskar had done. Was that why women were so keen to get married? Because they could do *that*? It was certainly a tempting argument for marriage. But then, Oskar had been so strange about it. Should he not have done it? Should Summer had offered to do something?

*It's not my fault if he didn't tell me what he wanted,* Summer thought, a little annoyed. *I'm hardly experienced. I'd have given it a go.*

She heard heavy footsteps past her chamber door – locked, as Eleanor had advised – and was sure that it was Oskar. She wondered if he'd knock on her chamber door. Perhaps he'd expected her to go to his bed.

The more Summer thought of that, the more appealing the idea seemed to be. Her large bed wasn't warming up quickly, and perhaps she could go next door and climb into bed with Oskar.

Her heart pounded at the thought. Summer hadn't really had the chance to touch Oskar. Neither of them had taken off their clothes, and it had all happened so quickly. It was if he'd known exactly what to do and had done it as quickly as possible to make her reach her climax.

What would have happened if the wretched servant hadn't knocked? Summer thought uncharitably that she would have liked to kill the man.

She climbed out of bed, determined to make her move before the candle went out. The fire was just embers now, and the chamber was cold, the floor icy beneath her bare feet. Shivering in her nightgown, Summer tiptoed over to the door. Her side was unlocked, and that had been a deliberate choice. She trusted Oskar. If he wanted to sneak into her chamber at night, Summer was sure he wouldn't hurt her.

Taking in a deep breath, Summer reached out and twisted the doorknob.

The door didn't open. It was locked, but not from her side.

Oskar had locked his side of the door.

## CHAPTER 16



OSKAR WOKE WITH A HEADACHE.

He didn't often get headaches but going to bed drunk or miserably hard was a sure-fire recipe for one.

He'd lingered downstairs in the feasting room until he was sure Summer would be in bed and tried to fight down any remaining feelings of guilt.

She was a lonely girl in a strange country, with no friends yet, and she'd drunk too much wine. He should never have taken advantage of her like that.

*She liked it, though,* he thought, and then forcibly told himself not to be so disgusting.

Summer wasn't in love with him. She didn't even really like him. She'd married him because her father told her to, and because she'd sort of backed herself into a corner with the whole marriage issue. He had married Summer because she had enough money to save the Clan, and because it was the right thing to do.

It was hardly a recipe for marital bliss.

Oskar had finally staggered up the stairs, after finishing the rest of the wine, and wobbled past the closed door to Lady McLeod's chamber, which was, of course, now Summer's chamber. He stumbled into his own chamber, reminding himself to lock the door – you never knew who wandered the halls of the Castle at night – and undressed clumsily.

He intended to go straight to bed but found himself staring at the adjoining door to her chamber instead. She wasn't asleep. He could see the light flickering under the door.

*Perhaps she's gone to sleep with the candle burning. Who'd want to go to sleep in the pitch black in a strange place?*

Oskar had a wild vision of himself slipping through the door, crossing the chamber and climbing into the bed beside Summer. He wouldn't touch her; he'd just hold her in his arms.

*Ye wouldn't be able to resist touching her. Ye can never resist a pretty lass. Ye are a... what would they call ye in England? A rake, that's it. A good-for-nothing rake.*

Oskar groaned aloud. He reached out, turning the lock on his side of the door, and resolutely went over to the bed. He had a long day tomorrow.

*Today. It's today. Ye stayed up so late it's already the next day.*

Oskar collapsed onto his bed, rolling himself inside the quilts and falling asleep.

He'd woken the next morning to somebody flinging open the curtains, letting bright sunlight stream in. Oskar groaned, pressing his face into the pillows.

“Whoever ye are, get lost.”

“That’s no way to talk to yer maither,” Eleanor said.

Oskar opened one bleary eye. There she was, standing by the window with her arms crossed.

“Go away, Maither.”

Eleanor paid no attention. She gestured to someone in the doorway, and a servant came trotting forward with a tray of food. Nothing spectacular, just bread, butter, and some porridge, along with watered ale. The servant set it down on the bedside table and scurried back out again.

“I’m nae hungry,” Oskar murmured. It was quite true. He’d drunk too much wine last night, and he felt sick.

What was more, the events of last night came flooding back. Summer twisting under him on the table, arching her back to press her body against his, the warm softness of her thighs under his hands.

Oskar shifted uncomfortably. The memory was making him harden again, and he did *not* want to feel this way in front of his mother.

“Summer is still in bed, and I thought she would need it after her travels,” Eleanor said, arms still tightly folded. “Ye, however, have work to do. Council meetings and whatnot.”

Oskar swallowed hard. His mouth felt like sandpaper, his tongue heavy in his mouth. He’d gotten overheated during the night – probably due to his dreams, which had all featured a certain wide-eyed English lass – and now he felt sticky and sweaty.

“I dinnae feel well.”

Eleanor sighed. She moved over to the bed, perching on the edge of it.

“And I dinnae think ye are telling me the full story about ye and Summer.”

Oskar sat up stiffly, wincing at the pull on his sore muscles. The days spent cramped in a carriage had finally caught up with him. Today and tomorrow would be long, painful days, at least until his muscles healed and stretched out again.

“What are ye talking about, Maither?”

Eleanor raised her eyebrows. “I can tell when ye are lying to me.”

Oskar sighed. “She thought Laird McLeod was dead. She was writing letters to impress her friends, making out she had a handsome Scottish laird as a fiancé.”

Eleanor blinked. “Really?”

“Really. Ye should have seen her face when I turned up,” Oskar chuckled, reaching for the watered ale. “She was horrified. Mortified, really.”

“Ye didnae have to marry her, then.”

“Nay, but I thought it was the solution to our problems. Wi’ the land, and the money, and all that.”

Eleanor pursed her lips. “I didnae want ye to marry for money or duty.”

Oskar shrugged. “I like her well enough.”

Eleanor’s gaze narrowed, and Oskar had to avert his eyes. Last night weighed on his conscience. He might be a grown man and the laird of a clan, but if his mother found out he’d taken advantage of a tipsy girl who trusted him... well. None of the councilors scared him as much as Eleanor.

Not that he *had* taken advantage of her. Summer hadn’t been drunk, not really. A little buzzed from the wine, but no more buzzed than he was. He’d seen lust flare in her eyes, and she’d kissed him first.



But that didn't change the fact that Summer was sweet, innocent, and trusting, and Oskar had had plenty of women in his bed before. She deserved someone a little purer, preferably who hadn't married her for her money.

He'd taken that chance away from her, hadn't he?

Guilt stabbed at Oskar, in perfect unison with his headache.

"I like her too," Eleanor said suddenly, and Oskar glanced up in surprise.

"Ye do?"

"Aye. She's a sweet lass, but cleverer than ye would think. She's kind and polite – ye should have seen her thanking the servants, desperately trying tae remember everyone's names. She's nervous, aye, but excited too, I think."

"I think she'll be happier here than in England," Oskar said, without thinking. "She had all these so-called friends, people who put her down and treated her badly, and she didnae know any better."

Eleanor tutted. "Good people always get taken advantage of."

Oskar flinched. "Like I did."

"What? What do ye mean, Oskar?"

He raked a hand through his hair and sighed. “I married her for her money, Maither. How could I have done that? How is that fair? She doesnae love me, she just—”

“Ye said that ye liked her well enough.”

“I do, but—”

“I think she likes ye well enough. That’s enough to be going on with, eh?” Eleanor got to her feet. “Ye are too hard on yourself, Son.”

“Oh, aye, let’s all coddle Oskar, shall we?”

They flinched at the voice from the open doorway, and Oskar turned to see Rhys standing there, his arms folded tightly across his chest. He had a distinctly surly expression on his face, and Oskar couldn’t help but remember Callum’s warning from last night. He’d meant to talk to Eleanor about it, but he couldn’t do that now, when Rhys was here.

“Morning, Rhys,” Oskar said, trying for a smile. Rhys didn’t smile back.

“Yer new wife is up, by the way. I caught her wandering around downstairs. She was looking for breakfast, I think.”

“And did ye get her some breakfast?” Eleanor asked tartly.

“Nay, I didnae. I’m no servant. She’s no my wife.”

Eleanor sighed impatiently. “Rhys, where is ye fellow feeling? The lass is a long way from home, alone, and in a strange place. She needs friends, not surliness. How would ye feel if it were ye?”

“What, if I’d married a stranger on a whim and wound up in another country? Aye, I suppose I’d feel bad. Why are ye not yellin’ at Oskar, then? He’s the one that married her,” Rhys retorted, eyes flashing. “Oh, no, I forgot. Oskar can do no wrong. Oskar is Laird McLeod. He’s the golden boy.”

“That’s *enough*,” Eleanor snapped. Rhys fell silent, pressing his lips together. He’d gone too far, and he seemed to realize it.

Oskar climbed out of bed, feeling awkward lounging in bed while his brother and mother argued. At times like this, Oskar could see the resemblance between Eleanor and Rhys so clearly it almost stung. He knew he was more like his father than his mother, and Rhys was just like Eleanor – sharp, clever, a little ruthless. That was possibly why they didn’t get on, or why Eleanor preferred Oskar.

Not that she had favorites, of course. Oskar was always reminding himself of that. When they were younger, Rhys had laughed at that, and said that of course he didn’t think that Eleanor had favorites, because he, Oskar, *was* her favorite.

“Let’s not argue,” Oskar said, glancing pleadingly between them. “Look, the council isn’t happy with my marrying Summer.”

“I’m ae surprised. Ye have only been laird for a year, and already ye have run off and married a strange English lass wi’ out so much as a *by your leave*,” Rhys mumbled. “O’ course they’re not happy. What did ye expect?”

“I know, I know, but it’s done now. We like Summer, daena we? Maither? Rhys?”

“I like her,” Eleanor announced.

Rhys shrugged. “There’s naught wrong wi’ her, I suppose.”

“Then I need ye both to stand by me and help me convince the people that Summer is the right Lady McLeod. Once the people are convinced, the council will come to terms wi’ it.”

Rhys snorted. “Ye hope.”

“Aye, I hope. Callum will have plans to keep us safe, I’m sure, but I want both of ye on my side. Please?”

He watched Rhys closely. His younger brother seemed much the same as always – sulky, like a spoiled child, but with no real malice. He sighed, rolling his eyes but unfolding his arms.

“Fine. Fine, I’ll help ye stand up tae the council. Are ye at least going to produce some nephews and nieces for me to play with?”

“Rhys!” Eleanor scolded, but there was no real bite in her voice.

Oskar snorted. “If ye want to cuddle a baby, Rhys, ye will have tae get married yourself. Me and Summer will have bigger things to worry about than babies.”

Rhys chuckled. “Ye are Laird McLeod. There’s nothing bigger to worry about than an heir. And no, I’ll not be getting married anytime soon. No, thank ye.”

“That is because ye haven’t met the right lass. In fact, I saw a lass just the other day—” Eleanor began, following Rhys out of the room. Oskar grinned, closing the door behind them.

Eleanor had just walked right in, so obviously his door hadn’t been locked last night, and that sent a shiver down Oskar’s spine. He remembered *thinking* about locking the door, but obviously it hadn’t *been* locked. Eleanor would probably scold him about that later.

Oskar dressed quickly, reviewing the day’s tasks in his head. He would ask Eleanor to take Summer around the Castle properly today. They could introduce her to some of the servants and pray that she made a good impression. That would start the gossip flowing, and hopefully it would be good gossip.

No doubt half of the Clan already knew that Laird McLeod was married – to a strange English girl, no less – and the other half would know in a day or two. Everyone would want to see her. Oskar wondered whether Summer would mind being a novelty, just like he was in England, in high society.

Here, of course, she'd have real status – she was Lady McLeod, and it was up to him, Eleanor, and Summer herself to remind people of that. Kindly, of course. She had to seem sweet and approachable, and not stuck up.

Gods, no, they didn't want her to seem stuck up.

Oskar pulled on his boots last of all and groaned aloud. This was not going to be an easy task. And on top of it, he had to fight his desire to pick Summer up and kiss her to within an inch of her life. Again.

## CHAPTER 17



SUMMER WOKE that morning with a jolt, and it took a few moments to remember where she was and why.

The bed was comfortable but unfamiliar, and there was a strange sense of satisfaction within her. Something that came from more than just a good night's sleep. Still, once she was awake, she didn't feel comfortable lying in her bed, wasting the morning away. Nobody came in to wake her up, and she had the uncomfortable feeling that she'd overslept.

*It's hardly my fault if I did, Summer told herself. I've had a long journey.*

Come to think of it, her muscles were tense and sore, and Summer winced in pain as she climbed out of her bed. She happened to glance over at the locked door between her chamber and—

Summer sucked in a breath, remembering the events of last night. She remembered Oskar pushing her down on the table, the feeling of rough, warm fingers on her thighs, on the soft, delicate skin in between her legs. Summer shivered, pressing her thighs together. She was trying to make the feeling go away but wasn't entirely sure that she *wanted* it to go away.

That was probably scandalous. Nice ladies weren't supposed to *like* rough, immoral things like that. Although, it hadn't been particularly rough, and Summer found that she didn't mind the *immoral* side of it as much as she'd thought.

*We're married, after all*, Summer told herself. She bounced to her feet and dressed quickly. This was her first day as Lady McLeod, and she had absolutely no idea what she was supposed to do.

Once she was dressed and washed, Summer's rumbling stomach impelled her to go searching for food. She saw Oskar's brother, Rhys, across a large, empty feasting hall, but he only stared at her and turned away. Summer wasn't quite desperate enough to go racing after him to admit she was hungry and couldn't find any food.

There was no sign of Oskar, and Summer didn't know what to think of that. After last night, she'd been sure that he would come and find her. Perhaps they'd kiss again, or perhaps he'd smile down at her and say, in that husky, deep voice of his, that perhaps they should share a bed like a proper laird and lady?

Summer gave a little shiver at her own heated imaginings.

The truth was much more upsetting. Oskar might simply have drunk too much. He was probably tired and giddy with relief to be home again. He'd probably done that to lots of girls.

That thought sent a cold chill down Summer's spine, like an icy bucket of water dumped over her head. She didn't like to



think of Oskar doing that – or anything of that nature – with other women.

“Ah, there ye are! Lady McLeod herself.”

Summer flinched at hearing her name called. She wasn't sure she'd get used to being called *Lady McLeod* anytime soon. She turned to see Eleanor advancing on her, flanked by a short, mousy young girl, about Summer's age.

“Lady Eleanor,” Summer said, dropping an awkward curtsy. It felt like the right thing to do, but Eleanor burst into laughter. It wasn't the polite, dainty laughter of Society, oh no. Eleanor's laugh was a rich belly laugh, sincere and hearty. It echoed around the room, and Summer had the oddest feeling that Eleanor was laughing *with* her instead of *at* her, which was more than could be said for the average polite Society laugh.

“Eleanor will do just fine, Lass. We're family now. Oh, and ye are the First Lady o' the Clan now, so you don't bow or curtsy anyone. Except maybe yer husband, and o' course Oskar won't want that.”

“Of course, I am sorry,” Summer said, and Eleanor chuckled again.

“And no apologies either. Now, I'm all for apologizing when there's a need for it but saying sorry over every wee misstep or just as a matter o' course makes ye look weak. Hold your head up, Lass. Never apologize for taking up space.”

Summer swallowed hard, smiling in relief. “We never heard that sort of thing in London. It’s... it’s refreshing.”

Eleanor smiled. “Refreshing like a dip in the North Sea, eh? Now, this here is Alice. Alice, come forward and meet yer new mistress.”

Alice, the mousy girl, stepped daintily forward and sank into a wobbly curtsy. She had gray eyes and hair of an indeterminate color, along with an unfortunate overbite that made her look a bit like a rabbit. She smiled shyly up at Summer, and Summer instantly felt endeared to her.

Maybe she’d make friends here more quickly than she’d hoped.

“Hello, Alice,” Summer said. “Please, get up. I don’t want people curtsying and bowing to me all the time. It seems very inconvenient.”

She’d half expected Eleanor to insist that bows and curtsies were the proper thing to do, but Eleanor only nodded approvingly.

“That’s good, Lass. I’ll pass the word round. Ye can be treated wi’ the proper respect without resorting tae bowing and scraping. No one likes a snobby Laird and Lady.”

“I hope they won’t consider me snobbish.”

Eleanor studied her closely. “Well, that remains tae be seen. Anyway, I dinnae ken how many maids ye were used to back home, but most clan ladies only have one.”

“Oh, I only had one maid at home.”

“Good. In that case, I reckon Alice will do ye just fine. She’s a skilled maid and dresser, and not bad company either.”

“I’m sure Alice and I will be good friends soon enough,” Summer said, smiling at her new maid. Alice blushed with pleasure.

Eleanor gestured to Alice, and the maid obediently scuttled off.

“She’ll sort out ye clothes and whatnot. Ye will need a fitting soon enough, for proper winter clothes. Now, I think we should start wi’ a tour o’ the Castle. What do ye say?”

Summer smiled. “I would love that. I got lost looking for breakfast this morning.”

Eleanor snorted. “I heard that. Well, let’s start by getting ye some breakfast, shall we? It’s a good opportunity for ye to meet the kitchen staff. They’re the heart blood of any castle, let me tell ye.”



The kitchens were more or less what Summer might have expected. Large, far too hot, and packed with people. She felt

more than a little nervous as they descended the stone steps – there was clearly a worried flurry of excitement as news that their new Lady was coming down to see them – and Summer hoped that she would seem calm and composed.

Nobody wanted to see a sweaty, visibly nervous new Lady.

When Summer stepped into the kitchen after Eleanor, the kitchen staff were all lined up in front of her. It was hard to tell who was who – there were no rigid uniforms, except for the woman in black who was probably the housekeeper, and a pudgy woman in a floury apron who was probably the head cook. She assumed that the household of a Scottish Castle was arranged in much the same way as an English one – cooks, undercooks, kitchen maids, scullery maids, and so on.

They all gathered in the great, wide space between the tables and counters and the huge fireplace, where the meat would be roasted. The fire had already been set, but it didn't seem to be hot enough. There were piles of raw meat on one table near to the fireplace, but there was nothing on any of the spits.

Even so, the kitchen was horribly hot. Summer felt sweat break out on her temples and forehead, beading on her upper lip. They weren't even that close to the fire. How did the workers bear it?

“All of ye, pay attention,” Eleanor's firm voice rang out, as if they didn't already have their eyes and ears fixed fully on her. “This is yer new Lady McLeod. This is Summer, but ye all should address her as Lady McLeod.”

“Lady Summer will do,” Summer found herself saying, and Eleanor shot her a sharp look. It was almost certainly an improper form of address, but Summer couldn’t stand the idea of herself as a distant, haughty lady, completely disconnected from her people.

Summer had no intention of being that sort of person.

It seemed to go down well among the staff. There was a few disapproving, suspicious stares, but plenty of smiles, too.

Good enough to be going on with.

Eleanor gestured to the tall, thin woman dressed in black, and she glided forward obediently. She had gray hair scraped back into a tight bun, and an austere, lined face.

“This is Mrs. Whitton, our housekeeper. She’s very competent and has been with the Castle many years. I appointed her myself, and she has always been very trustworthy,” Eleanor said, and Mrs. Whitton sank into a deep curtsy.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Whitton,” Summer said, inclining her head. “Thank you for all the hard work you have done so far. I can see the Castle is immaculately run.”

It could have been her imagination, but Summer thought that she’d seen Mrs. Whitton’s thin mouth twitch up in a tiny smile at the compliment.

“I do my best, Lady McLeod,” Mrs. Whitton said smoothly, and stepped back.

The pudgy woman came forward next, grinning and dusting excess flour from her hands.

“This is Mrs. Robins, the head cook,” Eleanor explained. “Her daughter, Alice, has just been appointed as ye maid.”

“Oh, of course!” Summer smiled at Mrs. Robins. “Alice seems a dear girl, and I look forward to spending more time with her.”

“Ye won’t regret it, Lady Summer!” Mrs. Robins said, beaming. “She’s a sweet lass, and such a hard worker! She’s terribly excited tae take up her new position.”

“I hope she won’t find me too boring a mistress,” Summer laughed.

Eleanor glanced between them, smiling approvingly.

They moved down the line of servants, obviously descending in importance. Eleanor introduced everyone, even the serving wenches and scullery maids, and Summer tried her best to remember their names. Some servants seemed to disapprove of her – probably because she was English – but most of them warmed up under Summer’s compliments.

*All of those deportment and propriety lessons weren’t wasted, then,* Summer thought to herself.

She was grateful when everyone was introduced, and Eleanor decided that it was time to leave the kitchen. As they made their way back up the steep stairs, Summer could hear them whispering about her.

“Such a pretty lass!”

“Did ye hear her accent? Beautiful, even if it is English, ha... ha!”

“Lady Summer, eh? I wonder how long that’ll last.”

“I like her.”

Summer beamed up at Eleanor. “How did I do?” she whispered.

Eleanor suppressed a smile. “Ladies don’t ask others how they’re doing, Summer. They just know that they are doing well.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“What did I just say about apologizing?”

“I’m so—” Summer pressed her lips together in case she made any more mistakes, and Eleanor’s laugh rang out again.



“Last but certainly not least, this is the walkway on top o’ the Castle. There are all sorts of paths up here among the turrets, and it’s mostly just a sentry’s walk,” Eleanor said, leading the way up a final flight of stairs. They stepped out onto the top of the Castle. Walkways and guard posts spread out almost as far as Summer could see, all over the roof of the Castle.

What really grabbed her attention, however, was the cold and wind. It seemed as if it were perpetually blowing a gale up here, and Summer shivered in the sudden cold. She was overheated and tired from hours of walking around and up and down stairs, meeting stewards and servants and various lords and ladies of the Castle. She was sure she wouldn’t be able to remember half of the names.

“Come here,” Eleanor said, leading the way to the wall. “Take a look at that view.”

Summer glanced down over the top of the wall, and instantly regretted it. The Castle must have been five or six stories high at the very least, and the walls dropped sharply away to a cobbled courtyard far, far below. Tiny people moved around, looking like insects, and Summer suddenly felt very dizzy.

“Don’t look down, ye silly goose,” Eleanor said companionably. “Look *out*.”

Summer obeyed and sucked in a breath.



McLeod Castle had clearly been chosen for its strategic position, and that meant it afforded tremendous views of the surrounding land. Summer could see hills and fields rolling away, fading into a purplish mist. The land looked wild and windswept, and not at all like the lush, green scenery she was used to.

“Beautiful,” Summer breathed. She glanced to her side and caught Eleanor looking at her with obvious approval.

“Ye did well today, Lass,” Eleanor said. “I was afraid ye would be a snob, unwilling tae take advice and unwilling to mingle with yer inferiors. I think we all thought that. But ye have impressed the servants and ye have impressed me. I won’t lie, I wasn’t happy when Oskar brought back a strange English lass as his wife, but I think ye will do as well as any other. Better, perhaps.”

Summer blushed at the compliment. “Thank you. I... I hope I’ll do well as Lady McLeod. I want to be helpful; you know. I want to make real changes, not be some distant, uncaring lady.”

Eleanor nodded approvingly. “Good. That’s good. Ye have a lot tae learn, mind ye. I’ll offer ye advice, if ye are minded tae take it.”

“I’d like that very much. I feel... I do feel a little out of my depth here.”

Eleanor chuckled and patted her on the shoulder. “If ye didnae feel out o’ ye depth, I’d worry ye were overconfident. Pride goeth before destruction, or a fall, as the good book says.”

“I don’t want to fall,” Summer muttered, finding herself staring down at the long drop beyond the walls again. “Eleanor, I was just thinking about Oskar’s brother, Rhys. I saw him this morning, and he looked daggers at me. Have I offended him somehow?”

“Not unless ye count having the audacity to marry his brother, no. Rhys is...” Eleanor swallowed, considering, “Rhys is going through a difficult time at the moment. The way he sees it, he’s gotten nothing out o’ this business. He’s not laird, and he likely never will be. He can be a wee bit spoiled and tends to hold onto resentments. Grudges are like poison, but I cannae make him see that.”

Summer nodded. “I’d like to make a friend of him if I can. He’s my brother-in-law, after all.”

Eleanor considered this for a minute. “Ye can try,” she said eventually. “I make no promises. But it’s worth a try, I’d say. Come, I’ll help ye find him.”

## CHAPTER 18



RHYS GLANCED up at the sound of approaching footsteps and scowled when he saw that it was Summer.

He was lounging in a small alcove in the library, set deep into the Castle's thick walls. Eleanor had assured Summer that the stone walls kept out the cold in winter and kept out the heat in summer, but so far Summer thought that they were only making sure the place was as cold as possible. The walls were so thick that there was room for a wide window seat, a small table, and a little set of bookshelves inside the nook, with a curtain to draw across, separating the nook from the rest of the library.

It was a cosy, private spot, and Rhys didn't look at all happy to be disturbed in his solitude.

“Can I help ye, Lady McLeod?” he said icily. “Or should I call ye Lady Summer? I hear that you've been asking even the lowliest servant tae call ye by yer first name.”

Summer blinked, a little taken aback at his venom. She'd expected to encounter dislike, but he seemed even more angry at her than he had been the first night she'd arrived. Perhaps he'd had time to think about it and decide to be angrier.

“Why don’t you like me?” Summer said. She’d intended to start off subtly, with small talk and chitchat, and gradually work the conversation around to the subject.

But it didn’t seem as if Rhys was open to small talk, so Summer found herself diving right in. Rhys blinked, clearly a little taken aback at her bluntness.

*Good. Maybe that’ll startle him into honesty.*

“Who said I dislike ye?” Rhys evaded.

Summer snorted. “Oh, please. It’s quite obvious that you don’t like me, and since you, Eleanor, and Oskar are my new family, I’m keen to make amends. Have I done something to offend you, or is it just my Englishness?”

Rhys reddened, glancing down at the book which hung forgotten from his fingers.

“Oskar had no right tae marry without consulting the councilors,” Rhys muttered. “Or me.”

Now they were getting somewhere.

“Oskar didn’t intend to marry me when he left home. But, once he was there, he saw an opportunity and took it,” Summer said gently. “I suppose he thought that if he went home and discussed it, he would never end up marrying me, and you wouldn’t have my dowry to help the Clan.”

Rhys glanced up at her. “Do ye no mind that?”

“Mind what?”

“That he’s marrying ye for yer dowry. I’d nae stand to wed someone who only saw my money. Not that I have any, o’ course.”

Summer smiled wryly. “Most people marry for money in London. Money and status, those are the key selling points. Most ladies spend their entire Seasons fighting away fortune hunters, keen to charm a man into matrimony and therefore charm his money out of his pockets.”

Rhys wrinkled his nose in disgust. “And my brother is nae better than any o’ them.”

“I don’t think you’re being fair. Oskar is a good man, chivalrous and kind. He’s more gentleman-like than any man I met in London, for all his rough ways.”

“That’s nae the point,” Rhys snapped, suddenly angry again. “Oskar dragged us all here, away from our homes, tae live in this drafty old Castle with scheming councilors and gossiping servants at every turn. None of us have gained anything from this, except Oskar. The least he could do is discuss his marriage wi’ us, his family. After all, we’re all to be affected by his choice of lady, but nobody’s had a say in it. He just marries whatever lass takes his fancy, but the rest of us have to wait on his leisure, leaving the ones we love behind. Does that seem right tae ye?”

Color had risen to Rhys' cheeks, and his eyes blazed. There was more to this than Oskar marrying without permission, and Summer didn't have to think hard to work out what was behind it all.

"Oh, Rhys," she said softly.

He leaped to his feet; his hands clenched at his side. "Ye can drop that pitying tone right now, *Lady McLeod*."

Summer held out her hands, palms out, in a placating gesture.

"I'm sorry, Rhys, I didn't mean to be condescending. Tell me, who did you leave behind?"

Rhys blinked at her, taking a long time before he responded.

"Who... who said I left anyone behind?"

Summer raised an eyebrow, and despite himself, Rhys almost smiled. Almost.

"It was a girl, wasn't it?" she asked, probing gently to get Rhys to start on his own story.

Rhys pressed his lips together, looking away. For a moment, Summer thought he was going to shoulder past her and storm away. To her surprise, he sagged, sitting heavily down on the window seat again.

“Her name was Daisy,” Rhys said, his voice barely louder than a whisper. “Oskar didn’t like her. He said she was free wi’ her favors, and she’d not make a faithful wife. I told him he was a hypocrite and ignored him. Anyway, when I learned that old Uncle Lawson had died and named Oskar as Laird, I wanted to stay at home. It wasn’t much, our home, but I was happy there.”

“They wouldn’t let you stay,” Summer said, realization dawning.

Rhys nodded. “Oskar said it was too dangerous, that a Laird’s family were targets. He said if I stayed in our home alone, I could be murdered or kidnapped, held to ransom. I asked tae marry Daisy, and Oskar and Maither said no. They wouldn’t give their blessing, and that hurt. I could have taken care o’ myself, but both Maither and Oskar insisted. Oskar said he’d have me dragged tae the Castle if I didn’t come o’ my own free will, and I believe he would have done it.” Rhys sighed, raking a hand through his unkempt hair. “I went to Daisy and told her the whole story. I wanted tae run away wi’ her. We’d go tae some far off town, where nobody knew us, and we’d get married. Then Daisy could come and live wi’ all of us in the Castle. I didn’t plan to leave them all behind, ye ken.”

Summer swallowed hard, a lump rising to her throat. Rhys spoke flatly, almost emotionlessly, but she could tell how much the retelling of the story hurt him. Had he been able to talk to anyone about it until now?

“She said no, didn’t she?” Summer murmured.

Rhys nodded. “Her Ma was ill, ye see. She wouldn’t leave her. I said we’d come back, told her that we’d go to the Castle and take her parents with her. She said that if Oskar had said we couldnae marry, he wouldnae let them live there. She said that she had to care for her parents, and I had nothing to offer. Nay money, nay influence, nothing. She said that she was sorry, but she needed to think of her parents.”

There was a brief silence.

“That must have been so awful to hear,” Summer murmured.

Rhys gave a short bark of laughter. “Aye, it was. Oskar found out what I’d done – I daena know how; I just hope that Daisy wasn’t the one who told him – and he was furious. We left that night,” he shifted, as if waking up from a bad dream. “So, I suppose ye can see how I’d be a little angry that Oskar has the audacity tae go off and marry the lass of his choice, without bothering to talk to any of us about it.”

Summer nodded. That awful word rang in her ears.

*Hypocrite.*

So, if Rhys had called Oskar a hypocrite for accusing Daisy of being “free with her favors”, that meant that he, Oskar, had been free with his favors before. What he’d done with Summer the first night they came here wasn’t anything new. He’d probably done it with lots of women before.

That wasn’t a pleasant idea. Summer shifted in her seat, clearing her throat, and forced herself to focus on Rhys. He



drooped miserably beside Summer on the window seat, lost in unpleasant memories.

“Do you still want to marry Daisy?” Summer asked quietly.  
“We could invite her to the Castle. She might come.”

Rhys nodded, then paused, then shook his head. “I daenae know. Maither says that I should forget her, and Oskar says that she was never good enough in the first place. I don’t know what tae think. Part of me wants to forgive her, and another part of me is furious at her. I don’t know, I just don’t know. Oskar would never let me see her again, anyway.”

Summer bit her lip. “I could try and help convince him, if you like.”

Rhys looked sharply at her. “What?”

Summer shrugged. “I don’t know how much influence I have with Oskar, but I think you ought to be able to choose your own bride.”

“Ye would do that for me?”

“Of course I would.”

Rhys eyed her suspiciously. “What’s in it for ye?”

Summer grinned, nudging him companionably. “Well, you might think a little favorably of me. Besides, I’ve never had

any real power or influence over anyone until now – I might as well use it for good.”

Rhys stared at her and opened his mouth to speak.

Whatever he was going to say was cut off by the door opening and someone striding in. They both glanced up to see Oskar heading their way. He glanced between them, raising his eyebrows curiously.

“Ah, there ye are, Summer. Come, the council wants to meet ye.”

Summer’s initial heart flutter at seeing Oskar was dampened at that terrible summons. The council. Wonderful.

Beside her, Rhys grimaced, and got to his feet.

“Come on, Sister,” he said, offering Summer his arm. “Let’s get it over with, eh?”



The meeting room was large and intimidating, and Summer felt herself shrinking back as they entered.

Swift introductions were made, and Summer tried valiantly to remember the councilors’ names – Jacob Remy, Simon Remy, Timothy Black, Malcolm Burgess, and Wallace Tubbs. The kindly older man, Callum Lamb, was apparently a councilor too – the head steward.

Summer inclined her head as gracefully as she could, trying not to be put off by the sea of grim, disapproving faces.

Jacob appeared to doze off, while Simon, Malcolm, and Wallace glowered balefully at her. Timothy was the only one who smiled and offered congratulations.

“It’s a pleasure tae meet ye, Lady McLeod. I’m glad tae see our Laird finding a suitable wife so soon in his reign,” Timothy said. Before anyone else could speak, Simon gave a harsh bark of laughter.

“Congratulations are hardly in order, Timothy. Who is this lass, for a start?”

“She is ye new Lady, so mind ye manners,” Oskar snapped.

Simon rolled his eyes. “She’s only our Lady because ye married her in a terrible rush. She has a dowry, aye, but there are other rich lasses ye could have married. Lasses the council would have approved of.”

“Simon, please,” Timothy muttered. “What’s done is done.”

“There’s to be no consequences, then?” Malcolm spoke up. “The Laird is answerable to his people, aye? And his councilors, of course. So is that how we’re doing this, eh? He does what he wants, and we don’t bother tae do anything about that, because it’s done and can’t be undone?”

Those words rolled into the room like cannonballs, heavy and accusing.

“What’s ye point?” Callum said, his voice smooth and deceptively light. “That the marriage can be undone? It can’t.”

Wallace gave a nasty chuckle. He kept eyeing Summer in a way she didn’t like at all, appraising her like a tasty bit of meat or a head of cattle he was considering buying. She shifted, feeling uncomfortable in her skin.

“I think marrying an English lass is unforgiveable, regardless of how big her dowry,” Wallace said, his eyes fixed firmly on Summer’s chest. “What will the people say? They’ll lose all faith in her – and us.”

“I intend tae take Summer out to the villages today,” Oskar snapped. “I’ll introduce her tae the locals.”

“And how do ye know that’ll go down well?”

Oskar flashed a tight-lipped smile. “Because the Castle staff already love her.”

The councilors – barring Timothy – all rolled their eyes at that.

“And do ye think they are telling ye the truth?” Simon said sweetly. “Ye are the Laird. Of course they’ll say that they like ye choice of bride. Don’t tell me, they said she was pretty? Empty praise, indeed.”

“Actually,” Rhys spoke up, “That isn’t what they said. I know because I overheard them.”

All eyes turned toward him, including Summer’s. She felt embarrassingly close to tears, being appraised and upbraided by the merciless table of grim old men. She was desperate to say something in her own defense, but her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth and she found herself speechless.

Rhys, who’d been lounging in a corner until now, came swaggering forward, all cool confidence and infuriating smugness.

“They said that she had no airs or affectations,” Rhys said. “They called her pretty, aye, but also said that she was a lovely surprise. The nicest English lass they’d ever met, and not too fine or high and mighty to smile and laugh wi’ the servants. They say that she seems clever, and they love that she told them to call her Lady Summer. It makes them feel closer tae her, they said. They love her, councilors. It seems that the only people who don’t like our new Lady McLeod are ye gentlemen.”

There was a silence after that. Summer glanced from face to livid face. Rhys had scored a point in her behalf, and no mistake, but he’d also gotten their backs up.

Oskar stepped forward. “I didnae present my wife tae ye all for yer blessing, or for yer permission. I presented her as yer new Lady McLeod, to be honored and respected as befits the First Lady o’ the Clan. Any disrespect or talk of unseating her is treason, men, just as it would be if it were aimed toward me. So, let’s try this again, shall we?”

The anger was rapidly mixing with humiliation. Summer could feel fury emanating from Oskar. Part of her thrilled to know that was standing up for her, defending her from would-be attackers, but the small, rational part of Summer's brain told her that these were men who'd hold a grudge. Even Timothy, who'd supported her at the beginning, was fidgeting in his seat under Oskar's angry glare.

She reached out, not entirely knowing what she was doing, and touched Oskar's arm.

"I'm sure they meant no disrespect," she murmured. "They're only concerned about you, Oskar."

Oskar subsided a little, but he still fixed the troublesome three with a stare.

"Very well. Let's go, Summer. We have tenants to meet."

He offered her his hand, and she took it. The three of them turned for the doorway, leaving Callum to calm down the angry councilors. Summer glanced over her shoulder and saw him bending down to whisper in Simon's ear.

"Thank you for standing up for me," Summer whispered to Rhys. "Why the change of heart?"

Rhys flashed a crooked grin. "Well, ye are family now, aren't ye? Whether I like it or not. An insult to one is an insult to all. I'll do whatever it takes to stop my sister being dishonored, especially by balding old men like that."

Summer giggled. “Well, thank you.”

## CHAPTER 19



RHYS DISAPPEARED SOMEWHERE between the meeting room and the stables. Oskar glanced around and saw that he was gone. Summer was trotting along behind him, slightly out of breath. Feeling guilty, Oskar slowed down a little. He tended to forget about his long stride.

“So,” Oskar said, feeling a little awkward, “ye and Rhys seem to be good friends.”

It had just occurred to him that this was the first time he and Summer had been alone since *The Incident*. That was what he was calling the hot, breathless few minutes they’d snatched in his private dining room. No doubt Summer was regretting their intimacy, and it would be unfair for Oskar to put her in that sort of situation again. After all, he’d promised her status and power. There wasn’t supposed to be an amorous husband attached to any of that.

“Oh, yes,” Summer said, brightening. “He told me about his home. Well, your home, too.”

Oskar snorted. “It was never home. Rhys was happy there, but he didnae know any different.”



Summer nodded, and Oskar just knew that she wasn't saying something or other. Rhys had probably told her a sob story about Daisy. In Oskar's opinion, Daisy had never cared so much for Rhys as he had about her. Rhys was in love, or at least certainly fancied himself so.

Daisy, on the other hand, was focused on survival. Looking back, Oskar didn't think he had the right to fault her for that. Weren't they all focused on survival?

Daisy's unforgiveable mistake, though, was to break Rhys' heart. Oskar really couldn't let that go. He'd rather die than see Rhys marry Daisy now.

"Rhys is a decent man," Oskar said cautiously, "But ye should take what he says wi' a pinch o' salt."

"Oh, I know," Summer said easily. "Everyone has their own view of truth, don't they? But I think Rhys is warming up to me now."

Oskar chuckled. "Well, hold onto that thought, because ye will need all ye charm to win over the villagers. We're going to Sam Hill – it's a small hamlet near the border. About three hours' ride, I'd say. They've been targeted by bandits a lot recently, and I think they need a bit o' extra faith in their Laird and Lady. What do ye say? Are ye up for it?"

Summer smiled up at him, dimples appearing in her cheeks. Oskar was suddenly staggered by a desire to scoop her up in his arms and kiss her, right here in the hallway, in front of anyone who wanted to come by and see.

He didn't, of course. The people needed to see a strong Laird and Lady, a united, mature team – not a couple of love-struck moon-birds kissing and cuddling like a maid and a manservant in the hallway. They had to show a certain dignity, and that meant restraining themselves in public.

Also, he ought to back off from Summer. This wasn't part of the deal. Oskar set his back teeth against the desire bubbling in his gut and began to walk faster again.



“We’ll take Noble today,” Oskar said, gesturing to a huge black stallion, tossing its head in a paddock. He nodded to a stable boy loitering nearby. “Take the horse to the stable and saddle him up. We’re leaving right now.”

Summer eyed the massive horse warily. “He looks... big.”

“He is big,” Oskar answered, patting the horse’s glossy neck. “Are ye all right to ride along wi’ me, or would ye like ye own horse?”

Summer bit her lip. “It’s a three-hour ride, isn’t it? That seems like a long way to go.”

“Aye, and the terrain is tough. No real paths or trails, and what there is tends tae be rocky and difficult.”

Summer nodded. “I’ll ride with you, then.”

Callum appeared; no doubt having smoothed out the prickliest tempers in the meeting room. He glanced between Summer and Oskar.

“What’s going on?” he said, in that soft, unassuming way of his. “Are ye going out for a ride?”

“We’re going tae Sam Hill,” Oskar explained. “I thought they’d want tae meet their new Lady McLeod.”

Callum didn’t agree with it, Oskar could tell, but he only sighed.

“Very well. I’ll fetch my horse.”

“We’ll go alone, Callum. No need for ye to make the ride.”

Callum frowned. “Alone? Well, I don’t like that. Bring some soldiers. I’d say at least a dozen.”

Oskar was about to agree, simply for the sake of peace, when Summer spoke up.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

Oskar and Callum turned to look at her, and Callum’s expression darkened.

“What do ye mean, Lady McLeod?” he asked, deceptively quiet. Oskar winced, wishing he’d told her not to contradict Callum in public. He was a clever, experienced man, and didn’t like to look silly.

Summer fidgeted, looking a little embarrassed.

“Well, these people seem dissatisfied with Oskar at the moment, aren’t they? That’s why we’re going to see them – to show them that we care, and that we want to make them as safe and cared for as possible. We want them to trust us.”

“Aye, what about it?” Callum asked sharply.

Summer shrugged. “Well, turning up with a host of armed men doesn’t seem very trustworthy. It seems as though we’re telling them that they’d better like us – or else.”

Oskar paused, turning this idea over in his mind. He turned to Callum.

“It makes sense,” he said, a trifle sheepishly. “Ye know how prickly the people of Sam’s Hill can be. It’s all in the name, after all.”

Callum pressed his lips together in a thin line. “At least take two soldiers as an escort.”

“Very well,” Oskar conceded. “Oh and fetch a cloak in our tartan for Summer to wear. We want to make a good impression, eh?”

Callum gave a curt nod. "I'll do that at once, Laird McLeod."

Oskar watched him go. Callum was offended at having his advice rejected, but Summer had been right, Oskar was sure of it. Today was all about appearances, and he couldn't afford to make any mistakes.

Speaking of mistakes, Oskar realized he'd made a serious one when he pulled Summer up to sit in front of him on the saddle. She gave a squeak, clutching at his wrists, obviously a little nervous about being so high up, and pressed back against his chest.

*Mistake!* Oskar's body screamed. He was still tense and wound up from the previous night, and his treacherous body began to respond, egged on by the warm pressure from Summer's body pressed against his. Oskar shifted in his saddle, desperately hoping that he wouldn't spend the next three hours with an erection pressed against Summer's hip. She was innocent and oblivious, but not *that* oblivious.

There was no real way of adjusting themselves so that they didn't press against each other. Horse saddles weren't the roomiest of seats.

In desperation, Oskar scooped up the loose folds of Summer's new, long cloak, under the pretence of lifting it from hanging down, and pushed the fabric in between her back and his groin.

That was helpful. Still unaware of what was going on behind her, Summer leaned back against his chest, her hands resting

lightly on his forearms to steady herself. She was bracketed in by Oskar's arms, unavoidably brushing against him as he reached past to grab the reins.

Now to get through the next three hours.

*I should have just put her on her own horse*, Oskar thought miserably. He tapped Noble's flank, and the horse obediently lurched forward, trotting neatly out of the open stable door

"What did you mean, when you said, 'It's in the name'?" Summer asked suddenly.

"Eh?"

"About Sam's Hill. You said something about the name?"

"Ah, that. It's an old story. It was once a bigger village, but often neglected by my uncle, the old Laird McLeod. Well, the villagers decided they'd had enough. A man called Sam led a rebellion. That wasn't his real name, and I don't think it was just one man. Or woman, for that matter. Sam can work for both, eh? Anyway, there was a big battle, and the villagers lost. Not by much, though. It was a close-run thing. They renamed it Sam's Hill, and the rest is history. They lost, but they won, in a way. The laird realized that he needed to care for them more, and things did improve. Sam's Hill served as a reminder of what the people can do. A warning, if ye like."

Summer was quiet for a moment, absorbing this.

“I see,” she answered. “And these are the people we need to impress?”

“Aye, and their descendants,” Oskar grinned down at her, as she twisted to look up at him. “Nervous?”

“A little,” Summer confessed.

“Ye will be fine. Just be yourself.”

Summer snorted. “That’s terrible advice.”

The horse slowed to a crawl on the final, steepest hill. Sam’s Hill might be a symbolic name, but the “Hill” part certainly wasn’t. Oskar spotted a few crofts and huts on the slope just ahead, with people moving around in fields and paddocks, watching them approach. He drew in a breath, determined not to let his nerves take hold. He’d been here once, shortly after he first became Laird, and was greeted by stony, unimpressed faces.

But Oskar was a different man now. What was more, he had Summer by his side. It was hard to pinpoint exactly what it was about Summer that made him feel so strong, but he certainly felt better knowing that she was there.

The hill abruptly leveled out into a wide, hard-packed square, the remnants a huge fire in the center of the square. People were appearing from huts, crofts, and gardens, and from the dense woodland that crowded around the slopes of the hill. The trees and shrubs stopped abruptly just as the slope started to level out, like an old man’s bald spot.

There must have been fifty or a hundred people there, and for the first time, Oskar wished he'd listened to Callum and brought along more soldiers.

A man and woman, both with long, iron-gray hair and faded tartan robes, stepped forward to greet them.

Oskar slid down from the saddle, legs aching after the long ride, and held up his arms to help Summer down. Hand in hand, they turned to face the chief couple of Sam's Hill.

"Welcome," the woman said, her voice hoarse and croaky, and Oskar noticed a curved scar across the front of her throat, as if someone had tried to cut her throat. The man said nothing, his eyes moving constantly between them, missing nothing.

Oskar gave a nod, and beside him, Summer sank into a curtsy. The woman watched, her graying eyebrows lifting.

"Ye curtsy to me, Lady McLeod?" she asked.

Summer smiled. "Lords and Ladies serve their people, don't they? Call me Lady Summer. It feels less formal."

The woman eyed the man beside her. "This is the first time a Lady McLeod has visited us. Can we offer ye food and water?"

"Yes, please. I should like that," Summer said, before Oskar could speak.



It was the right answer. Oskar saw the woman's mouth quirk up, just a little, then she turned and spoke in heavily accented Gaelic to the crowd.

Stools were provided, four of them, along with a small pail of water and a ladle. Cups appeared from somewhere, and the woman gestured for them to sit.

Oskar and Summer obeyed. None of the crowd sat down. They stayed standing, looking at them with unabashed curiosity. A little girl in the crowd caught Summer's eye, smiling shyly. Summer smiled and lifted her hand in a small wave. Encouraged, the little girl – no older than five or six – came forward, proffering a small handful of bluish-white flowers. Summer accepted them with a smile.

“Thank you, they're beautiful!”

The child mumbled something unintelligible in Gaelic and shrank back into the crowd. Oskar saw the woman watching Summer closely. Summer was looking down at the tiny bunch of flowers in her hand, smiling softly to herself.

“We call those flowers Moon's Tears,” the woman said. “They're considered to be good luck. It's a happy omen for your marriage.”

“Thank you,” Summer repeated, glancing up at the woman. “I'll keep them fresh for as long as I can, and I'll press them when they start to die, to keep them for longer.”

The woman nodded approvingly. “We usually trade for those.”

Summer bit her lip, then reached up into her hair. She’d tied her hair back in a simple style, with a yellow ribbon at the end of a braid. She undid the ribbon, letting her hair fall down. Smoothing out the ribbon, Summer turned to spot the little girl. She held out the ribbon with a smile, and the little girl came forward to take it, beaming.

“Let me put it in your hair,” Summer said, and the little girl turned around happily. She had a long, thick mane of black curls, and Summer managed to twist it into a long rope that hung down the little girl’s back. She tied the end with the ribbon. “There. What do you think?”

More unintelligible Gaelic.

“She finds it beautiful,” the woman said. She was smiling openly now. It wasn’t a wide smile, but it was a curve of the lips, nonetheless. “Say thank ye, Moraine.”

*“Tha mi a ‘toirt taing dhut,”* the little girl whispered, and dived back into the crowd.

The atmosphere was changing. Oskar still felt tense, but he felt as though they’d passed some hidden test. The man still didn’t speak.

“He is mute,” the woman said, and Oskar glanced away from her silent companion to find the woman looking at him.

Oskar felt a little ashamed and dropped his gaze.

They were served cups of cold, clear water, flavored with lavender, and given a small cake of what seemed to be bread. It was still hot, and soft and sweet in a way Oskar hadn't experienced before. The woman ate too, and the three of them finished their food in silence. It was a strange experience, and Oskar thought that it must be some sort of ritual.

There was no idle chitchat, no small talk. Oskar had the strangest feeling that to speak would be to break some hidden rule, so he kept quiet. Summer didn't say anything either. When they'd eaten their bread and drank their water, the atmosphere changed again – it was time to go. Oskar rose to his feet, and the woman and man rose too.

“Thank ye for your hospitality,” Oskar said, reaching out to take Summer's hand. “We are glad to meet ye.”

The woman inclined her head. “We're glad ye came. My blessings on yer marriage. Ye have a fine wife, Laird McLeod. And ye, Lady Summer, ye have a good husband. I hope ye will be happy.”

Summer dimpled again, and the woman favored her with a small smile.

“What are your names?” Summer asked impulsively. The woman hesitated, catching her companion's eye.

“We have many names,” the woman admitted. “But ye can call me Sam.”

A chill ran down Oskar's spine. There was complete silence as they mounted Noble again – and there was definitely no traitorous arousal on Oskar's part this time.

Still, he felt as though they'd passed a test, and it was a huge relief.

## CHAPTER 20



“YER GODS, WOMAN, YE WERE AMAZING!” Oskar whispered in Summer’s ear. “I’ve never known anyone to win over the people of Sam’s Hill like that.”

Summer giggled. “All I did was to be as courteous as I could. It really wasn’t that hard.”

“Well, they liked ye. That’s good – we can tell the council that the people of Sam’s Hill are all right wi’ an English Lady McLeod. One less thing to worry about, eh?”

Summer smiled again, and Oskar found himself looking at her, taking in her disarranged hair and the color in her cheeks from the cold, brisk wind. The Highlands suited her, it seemed. She was born to be here.

“What time is it?” Summer asked suddenly, jolting Oskar out of his daydreams.

“I’m not sure. We should get back before dark, which is a good thing.”

Summer leaned back against his chest with a satisfied sigh, and it made warmth curdle in Oskar's gut again. He glanced over at the two soldiers riding on either side of them, reminding himself that they weren't alone, and he ought to keep control of himself.

"Didn't I tell ye that ye would suit a Highland tartan?" Oskar murmured in Summer's ear. "That cloak looks good on ye."

"Thank you," Summer answered, smoothing out the fabric of the cloak. "I like it very much. I'd like a dress like Eleanor's one day if I can. A different pattern though, and maybe just a little difference in the cut."

Oskar wasn't sure he was thrilled about Summer and his mother wearing similar dresses. The two women inspired *very* different feelings in him. Still, if Summer wanted it – and she did say the dresses wouldn't be the same – Oskar didn't have the heart to say no.

"Aye, if ye like. I'll fetch a seamstress tae measure ye up for a new wardrobe soon. Oh, how would ye like a fur-lined cloak?"

Summer brightened. "That sounds warm."

"Oh, it will be."

"What sort of fur?"

They chatted companionably as the miles fell away under Noble's tireless hooves. The air grew colder and the sun went

down, a light sprinkle of glittering frost forming over the fields and hills. The scenery was familiar to Oskar. As long as he could remember being able to admire a pretty view, he'd admired the hills and valleys of his home.

But to Summer, it was something different. She sat up straighter and sucked in her breath at the views, falling quiet in the middle of a sentence to admire a particularly breath-taking spectacle. Oskar found himself looking at the scenery as if he was seeing it for the first time. It really was beautiful. Someone used to the picturesque, too-green fields of the English countryside and the dirty gray streets of London would certainly find the wild beauty of the Highlands to be haunting and spectacular.

By the time McLeod Castle came into view, a silvery twilight had fallen over the landscape, and it was too cold for comfort. Oskar was glad to be home.



The two soldiers disappeared, obviously glad that their long, boring ride was over. Summer and Oskar dismounted, and Oskar led Noble into the stables, his huge hooves clopping tiredly on the cobbles. Summer followed him, instead of going straight into the Castle, even though he knew she must be tired and hungry.

The oddly flavored cake bread that Sam and her villagers had given them seemed hours ago, but the taste still lingered in Oskar's mouth, not unpleasantly. He wondered if it was those bluish-white flowers that they used to create that flavor. He'd never seen flowers like that before.

“I should practice my riding,” Summer said suddenly. She stood next to Oskar, watching him undo the saddle and bridle, smoothing Noble’s sweaty side.

“Aye, that’s a good idea. Horseback is the quickest and easiest way tae travel around here. A carriage can’t go everywhere.”

Summer raised a hand, absently passing her palm over Noble’s thick, muscular neck.

“He’s such a beautiful horse. I wish I had a horse of my own at home, I could have brought it up here.”

“Ye want a horse? Lass, ye had only tae say. Ye can raise ye own colt, if ye like. There’ll be a few born soon enough,” Oskar promised, and was rewarded with a wide, happy smile.

As always, Summer’s smile made his heart leap.

*Get ahold o’ yourself, man, Oskar told himself sternly. Do ye want tae be friends wi’ ye wife, or do ye want her to hate ye?*

He cleared his throat, turning his attention to Noble’s glossy flank. He picked up the brush and began to work. Of course, there were a horde of stable boys ready and eager to care for a horse as fine as Noble, but Oskar never let them. This was his horse, his companion.

“How old is Noble?” Summer asked.



“Old enough,” Oskar replied with a grin. “He was mine long before I ever dreamed o’ being Laird McLeod. I paid a small fortune for him, and it was worth every brass farthing.”

“He’s a beautiful horse,” Summer said, smoothing out Noble’s mane. Pleased by all the extra attention, Noble whickered softly. Oskar’s brushing hand stilled softly. Summer was right beside him now, her shoulder almost rubbing against his, and it was all he could think of.

He ought to concentrate, ought to make himself busy – he’d taken off an entire day on one errand, and there was no time to spare for galloping around the countryside with his wife. But Oskar couldn’t make himself obey. Summer shifted her position and their sides pressed together, and Oskar could feel the contact burning, unable to focus on anything else.

His gaze dropped sideways as if drawn by a magnet, and he caught Summer looking right back up at him. She had an odd expression on her face, breathless and a little bemused, as if she was feeling something very new and strong and wasn’t quite sure what to think about it.

“One of the mares is pregnant with Noble’s foal,” Oskar found himself saying. “Ye can have that horse. It’ll be as beautiful as its sire, I’m sure. A beautiful horse for a beautiful lass.”

Color flared in Summer’s cheek, and Oskar found himself smiling. Even in the blood-thinning cold of the Highlands, Summer could still blush like a schoolgirl. It was so endearing, he thought.

“You think I’m beautiful?” she murmured.

Oskar frowned. “How could I think otherwise?”

Summer swallowed. “I’m not considered much of a beauty back in London. They call me *pretty enough*, which is better than *plain*, but I’m not sure it’s a real compliment.”

“Well, they’re blind and dumb, then. All of them.”

Summer chuckled, but there was a sad edge to her smile now. “I know that looks aren’t everything, but beauty gets you a long way in London Society.”

Oskar reached out, curling a finger under chin. He lifted her chin and turned it to face him. Her lips were parted, and her eyes wide. The pupils were blown with lust, and her gaze flickered between Oskar’s eyes and his lips. She turned her body to face him, and the horse brush hung, neglected and forgotten, from Oskar’s hand.

“This is not London,” Oskar said firmly. “This is the Highlands, and ye are Lady McLeod, the finest woman in the land. And, for what it’s worth, ye are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

Summer opened her mouth, possibly to argue with him, but Oskar found himself diving down to kiss her. He didn’t remember when he decided to kiss her, or even much of the journey to meet her lips. All he knew was that her soft lips were pressed against him, and her small hand fisted itself in his shirt, pulling him closer. She slid her other arm around his neck, the rough material of her cloak scratching at his neck.

Her lips tasted faintly of the odd cakes the Sam had given them, and her warm body pressed against Oskar's.

Arousal pooled in his gut again, twice as strong as before, and Oskar slid an arm around her waist, crushing her closer. Summer gave a tiny moan, but not a moan of pain or discomfort. She was pressing closer too, almost rubbing herself against him. Oskar ran his tongue along her lower lip, and Summer slackened her jaw, allowing him inside.

It was intoxicating, heady, almost like being drunk. Oskar expected them to pull apart and for him to feel the familiar, sickening dizziness of having drunk too much too quickly. They didn't pull apart, even though Oskar was feeling breathless and lightheaded. He felt as though if they stopped kissed, if they moved apart, the cold air would rush in between them and the moment would be over.

He didn't want the moment to be over. Oskar saw the scene in his private dining room flickering behind his eyelids; Summer's moans, her body arching, the soft, warm skin of her thighs, the expression on her face when she'd reached her climax. He wanted to see her look like that over and over again, wanted to—

“Laird McLeod?”

They shot apart as if a fire had exploded between them. Oskar whirled around in the direction of the voice, his subconscious already knowing who had spoken before his eyes caught up with his brain.

Callum stood there, silhouetted in the twilight doorway, looking shocked and vaguely scandalized.

“Laird McLeod, the council wish tae speak tae ye,” Callum said, disapproval seeping out from behind every word. “I will wait for ye outside.”

He didn’t bother waiting for a reply, only turned on his heel and left.

Oskar turned to look at Summer. She was red faced and disheveled, her lips reddened and swollen. Her hair was already a mess, after she’d taken out the ribbon earlier that day. She looked like any other girl in the world, having gone out for an invigorating ride with her lover. She was blowsy and windswept, color blazing in her cheeks and a smile playing on her lips.

Oskar imagined he looked just the same, possibly a little worse.

Summer bit her lip, pressing her hand to her mouth to hide her smile.

“Oh, dear,” she whispered. The two of them burst into giggles, Oskar feeling like a naughty schoolboy again.

“I’d better go,” Oskar said, with something like regret. “I’m sure I won’t be long. Ye can find ye way around, can’t ye?”

Summer rolled her eyes. “I’m not *entirely* helpless, Oskar.”

He grinned, arousal and exhilaration still fizzing in his gut. No doubt a dull council meeting would change all of that. He ran his fingers through his hair, straightened the creases in his shirt, and walked out of the warm stables into the cold evening air.

Callum was waiting for Oskar, his arms folded tightly. He hadn't gone far – he was only just outside the doorway, out of the eyeline of Oskar and Summer within, but not out of earshot. He'd probably heard Oskar and Summer's conversation after he left.

“Did ye have a good ride?” Callum asked, tight lipped. Just like that, Oskar's good mood began to fade.

“What's the matter?”

“What's the matter? What's the *matter*? How can ye ask me that, Oskar? Without so much as a by-your-leave, ye ride off into the sunrise with ye new bride and no more than *two* soldiers. Ye are gone all day, and for what? Tae waste time earning the goodwill of a bunch of inbred villagers?”

Oskar forced himself to take a few breaths, fighting down the automatic anger he felt. He had to remind himself that Callum was older and wiser than he and had never steered him wrong before. Callum was trustworthy, and while he spoke more openly to his laird than other men would venture to do, that only made him *more* trustworthy, not less.

“Sam's Hill is part of our land,” Oskar said, as calmly as he could. “Earning their goodwill is never a waste o' time.”

“Depends how much time,” Callum countered. “Ye spent *all day*. Do ye know how much work we could have accomplished in that time? And don’t lie tae me, Oskar – ye spent a lot of time with that bride of yours on the way there and back.”

Oskar stopped walking.

“I’ve been married for a handful o’ days, Callum. Do ye really begrudge me a few hours wi’ my new wife?”

“It’s more than a few hours, though, isn’t it?” Callum sighed, rubbing his temples. “If ye had married some hearty Scottish lass, then there’d be more sympathy. But ye married an English lass that nobody knows. People are watching ye, Oskar. Ye should know by now that ye are not just another young man, with the ability to come and go as ye choose. Ye do not live to please yourself. Now that she’s ye wife, neither does Lady McLeod. Ye need to teach her that because nobody else will do so.”

The heady, almost-drunk feeling was all but gone now, along with the pleasantly insistent arousal that Oskar had been dealing with for most of the day. A cold, nasty feeling was curling in the pit of his stomach.

“What are ye not telling me, Callum?” Oskar said, finally. “What’s this council meeting really about?”

Callum sighed again, more heavily this time. “They’re not happy wi’ your choice o’ wife. There’s going to be a discussion.”

“I cannot unmarry her.”

“No,” Callum conceded, “but all o’ your councilors believe they should have a say in how ye go about ye married life.”

“I’ll tell them to go f—”

“No, ye will not,” Callum interrupted sharply. “This is serious, Oskar. Like it or not, your decisions, her decisions, and the decisions o’ your children are the business of everyone in that meeting room. That’s the life o’ a laird. Constant scrutiny.”

Oskar swore under his breath. He was getting a headache, and he felt sick and dizzy again. It was probably hunger. He considered asking Callum to fetch him some food but guessed that Callum would insist on the meeting first. Oskar briefly considered eating during the meeting, but quickly rejected it. Those meetings were something akin to a holy ritual, and Oskar did not want to be the Laird McLeod who ruined it.

He shifted, feeling panic claw its way up his throat.

“What am I going tae do, Callum? Why do they hate her so much?”

Callum stepped forward, laying a warm, comforting hand on Oskar’s shoulder. “They’ll warm up tae her, Oskar, I know it. It’ll just take time. In the meantime, we need tae tread carefully, aye? No more running off for a full day. No more ignoring my advice. Ye need to listen to me now more than ever before, do ye understand, Oskar?”

Oskar nodded, relieved that his most trusted steward wasn't going to abandon him in his time of need.

“Ye are coming in with me to meeting room, aren't ye, Callum? I need ye there at my back.”

Callum smiled reassuringly, and Oskar couldn't help but feel that everything was going to be all right.

“Ah, ye know me, Oskar. I wouldn't miss it for the world.”



## CHAPTER 21



OSKAR REMINDED himself to puff up his chest, stand straight, shoulders back, chin up. He was a laird, not a skulking boy summoned to be reprimanded by his elders.

He let Callum precede him into the meeting room and heard muted chatter inside stop immediately. No doubt none of them trusted Callum, knowing how close he was to Oskar. Callum bore it well, and Oskar was lucky to have him.

He reminded himself of that as often as he could. He was lucky. Lucky to have been given an opportunity to rule, lucky to have such a faithful steward, lucky to have his family around him, lucky to marry a woman like Summer.

His luck would have to run out sooner or later, and Oskar could only hope that it wasn't now.

As always, Oskar was greeted by a row of unfriendly faces. Callum had whispered to him about each one of them, pouring their secrets into his master's eager, waiting ear. Oskar had often thought about how Callum saw him. Did he see Oskar as a dumb brute, or an easily led boy? Oskar knew how he *wanted* Callum to see him – a proud man, a warrior, a leader-in-the-making. The Callum of Oskar's imagination looking on

him with fatherly pride and care, but Oskar wasn't stupid enough to imagine that it was reality.

The more you cling to people, the more they pull away, and Oskar was careful not to smother Callum. That man wasn't really his father, after all. He dreaded the day when Callum decided to retire. He wouldn't end up like Jacob Remy, a deaf old man who had nothing better to do than sit at meeting tables and watch his awful son stir up trouble for everyone else.

Then Oskar was taking his seat, and he had to put aside all distracting thoughts and focus.

“So, what is it?” Oskar asked bluntly. He'd learned early on that being a laird had little to do with diplomacy and smooth words. It was all about strength. If you didn't have any strength, you pretended. If you weren't clever enough to pretend – well, you wouldn't last long.

Simon Remy drew in a sharp breath, and Oskar knew there and then that he was the one behind it. Jacob was too old, Timothy too kind, and Malcolm and Wallace were too stupid.

“I hear ye visited the people of Sam's Hill today, Laird McLeod,” Simon said heavily, “wi' ye new bride.”

“Aye, I did. I made no secret of it.”

“Some people might consider it a waste o' time.”

Oskar leaned forward, resting his elbows on the heavy wood table until it creaked. “People like ye, Simon Remy?”

Simon flushed, glancing around at his fellow councilors as if for support.

“I’m only saying what we’re all thinking. We should have a frank discussion about Lady McLeod’s place in the Castle.”

“I’m not sure her place is up for discussion.”

Timothy drew in a breath. “We’ve not had a Lady McLeod for decades,” he said apologetically. “Jacob is the only one who remembers the last Lady McLeod, and as far as I can tell, she just spent her days sewing and reading in her chambers with her ladies. This new Lady McLeod seems...” he paused, searching for the right word, “overly active,” he settled on eventually. “We need tae discuss what authority she’ll have, and how she’ll interact wi’ the rest of us. Since she’s an English lass, we need tae get it right, ye understand?”

Oskar smiled thinly. “And ye decided that we’d have this discussion without Lady McLeod herself, did ye?”

“It’s none of her business,” Wallace grated.

A muscle jumped in Oskar’s jaw. He could almost *feel* Callum hovering behind him, willing him to stay calm.

“And how do ye reckon that then, Wallace?”

Wallace shrugged. “All her power – if she’s to have any – comes from ye. Us, rather. She is what we decide she will be.”

Clearly unhappy with Oskar’s heated glare, Wallace leaned forward, his eyes narrowing.

“It’ll no be the first time that councilors have plucked a laird from his throne, nor the last.”

There was a general intake of breath. Callum laid a steady hand on Oskar’s shoulder, and the others glanced nervously around. Wallace had gone too far. Much too far. He leaned back in his seat, swallowing.

Oskar sighed. “I’ll pretend ye did not say that, Wallace.”

Wallace set his jaw, probably relieved that he wasn’t about to be executed for treason. Oskar knew that Callum would urge him to be harsher with his councilors, but perhaps it would make Wallace mind his tongue in future, or even think kindlier of his laird.

“Lady McLeod intends to concentrate on the people o’ the Clan,” Oskar said, addressing everyone at the table. “We’ve not discussed it in depth, but I don’t believe she’s interested in politics or money. She wants tae do what she can to help the poor and improve the lives o’ our tenants and the people who rely on us. It means that I can focus on our soldiers, on politics, and on protecting our land. It seems tae me to be a good division o’ labor, wouldn’t ye say?”

“A woman’s position is tenuous,” Jacob spoke suddenly. People started, obviously thinking that he was asleep, his own son included. Jacob blinked drowsy, rheumy eyes, and staring unseeingly around at them all. “Men hate a powerful woman, a clever woman. They even hate a pretty woman if they cannot possess her.”

Oskar cleared his throat. “Right. Well, thanks for ye input, Jacob. But no one is possessing Lady McLeod here.”

“Ye are her husband,” Simon snapped. “Her behavior reflects on ye – on all of us.”

“And what’s so bad about her behavior? Why does it matter?” Oskar argued. He was feeling more and more irritated. They seemed to be going around in circles, and this whole ridiculous meeting was a waste of time. He was just about to ask Callum to fetch Summer when Jacob spoke again.

“Who remembers the laird before Oskar’s uncle?” he said. Simon turned to him, frowning.

“Father, hush.”

Jacob waved a weak, trembling hand. “His name was Firth Lawson, I think. Old Laird McLeod’s older brother. I was only a child, o’ course, but I remember him. Firth married a woman from another clan, I forget her name. There were lots of nicknames for her, o’ course, but somehow her real name has been lost. Strange, eh? Anyway, she was determined tae rule in her own right. Her husband loved her, and she loved him, in her way. She did what she wanted and ignored the men who told her tae behave differently. Men have ideas as tae how

women should behave, ye know. Right or wrong, there are consequences for ignoring them. The people turned against her, and therefore turned against him.”

“What happened then?” Oskar asked, drawn into the story despite himself. He knew it wouldn’t end well. He knew how men – weak, spineless, prideful men – reacted to powerful and confident women. He’d seen men quail before Eleanor, glaring at her through hate-filled eyes. He’s heard the rumors about his mother, the names they called her. It made him murderously angry, but that was the way the world was.

Jacob sighed. “A war, o’ course. Not the rebellion o’ Sam’s Hill. Actually, I think they stayed out o’ it. Sensible folk. The old Laird – he wasn’t laird then, o’ course – sided against the people. Firth was killed in battle, and his bloodied body displayed for all to see. The Laird himself dragged his sister-in-law out o’ sanctuary and killed her in front of a baying crowd.”

Jacob fell silent, and there was a long, pregnant pause.

Oskar felt sick. There was a sour taste in his mouth, and he found himself missing the flavor of those odd bread cakes that Sam had given them.

“Uncle wouldn’t have done that,” Oskar managed.

Jacob shrugged. He fell backward in his seat, seemingly exhausted.

“It’s written down in one o’ the books. Ye can check, if ye don’t believe me.”

Timothy cleared his throat. He was obviously shaken by Jacob’s tale, but it didn’t seem entirely new to him. Perhaps the story was a well-known one.

“I think what Jacob is trying to say is that any mistakes here could jeopardize your position, Laird McLeod,” Timothy said tactfully. “And it may be a good idea to put Lady McLeod in her proper place now.”

“Starting with ye not following her around like a child!” Malcolm cut in. “Going off on these stupid rides and so on. I’ve never heard the like of it.”

Oskar fought down another flare of anger. “A man spending time wi’ his wife is childish now, is it?”

“Lady McLeod’s first and most important duty is to provide an heir,” Jacob spoke again. He’d gotten involved more in this single meeting that Oskar had ever known before.

Oskar rolled his eyes. “Oh, please.”

“I have it on good authority that ye haven’t even bedded the girl,” Simon said, flashing a leering smile around at the others. “I’m surprised. She’s pretty enough. Not to yer taste, eh?”

Oskar curled his fingers around the arm of the chair, squeezing until the wood creaked alarmingly.

“And what *good authority* is this?” he asked softly. Something about his voice wiped the smile off Simon’s face.

“I only mean to say that—”

“At the risk o’ sounding defensive, Simon, but that’s none o’ your business. Maybe ye should concentrate on not bedding every servant that comes your way and maybe pay your wife some attention. Or is your wife tired of ye, too? I don’t blame her.”

Color rushed into Simon’s cheeks. “Ye can’t talk to me like that.”

“Gentlemen, we’re getting off topic,” Callum said sharply, stepping forward. The others quietened down, giving Oskar a chance to settle back in his seat and calm down. He was surprised to realize how angry he was. Oh, the councilors could enrage him at the best of times, but this time they were directing their venom toward Summer, and Oskar simply would not stand for that. He was thinking about wrapping his fingers around Simon’s throat, or Wallace or Malcolm.

He wasn’t sure what to make of old Jacob’s story. Was it true? Was it exaggerated? Oskar feared rebellion, of course – even the best leaders had enemies, and a laird struggled to make the right decisions at times. But people could be unforgiving. He didn’t like the idea of the people coming to hate Summer, but he had to admit that it was a possibility. She was English, and a stranger – a dangerous combination. What if they decided she was no good, or she was their enemy? What then? How could he protect Summer from the people *he* was supposed to protect?



Oskar cleared his throat, sitting up a little straighter in his seat.

“Well, ye have all said your piece. I won’t apologize for today – we needed tae visit the people of Sam’s Hill, and it was a worthwhile trip. However, I understand that as Laird McLeod, I can’t simply get up and go for a whole day without advance notice. I won’t apologize for spending time with Summer. A Laird and Lady ought to be a team, and that is what we intend to be. As for the rest of it, we’ll discuss it and let ye know what we have decided.”

“*We?*” Simon echoed, his voice disapproving.

Oskar looked him right in the eye. “Me and Lady McLeod, of course. Ye can entertain yourself with unwilling servant lasses if ye like, but if one more complaint about ye reaches my ears, Simon Remy, ye will be sorry, so mind ye manners, eh?”

Simon pressed his lips together, and it occurred to Oskar that he’d made a dangerous enemy. It was hardly his fault, though. Simon had hated him since the day Oskar arrived, and this argument was only an excuse.

“We’ll vote,” Simon said, his voice hard.

“Excuse me?” Oskar echoed, frowning.

Simon sneered. “The councilors can vote about something. If we have a majority, the action must be carried through. I propose that Lady Summer Lawson be excluded from all council meetings and forbidden to travel without a full escort.

She'll have no authority beyond commanding the servants and won't intervene in any affairs regarding the Clan."

There was a general whispering among the councilors, and Simon looked distinctly smug.

"Ye cannot do that," Oskar snapped, whipping around to look at Callum. "Can he do that?"

Callum's face spoke volumes.

Oskar leaped to his feet, his chair tipping over and crashing to the ground with a thunderous noise. He leaned forward, almost coming nose to nose with Simon Remy.

"Ye will be sorry ye have crossed me," Oskar hissed.

Simon sneered again. "I think it will be ye who's sorry, Laird McLeod."

Oskar turned on his heel, storming out. Callum scuttled behind him, and the door to the meeting room closed on a clamor within.

"Can he do that?" Oskar whispered.

Callum nodded. "Not *that*, specifically, but the vote... the councilors tend not to do it, as a laird can accuse a man of treason and have him executed. If he doesn't get votes, it won't look good for him, but—"

“But they don’t want Summer involved,” Oskar groaned, passing his hand over his face. “Callum, that story Jacob told—”

Callum’s expression hardened and he turned away. “Oskar, don’t. Don’t pull at this thread.”

“I have to know. Did Uncle really turn against his brother? Was my father there? Did he kill his sister-in-law?”

Callum sighed. “I believe your father was already gone, and Eleanor had the foresight to keep ye away. But yes, I’m afraid it is true. All of it.”

Oskar felt sick again. “My uncle isn’t who I thought he was.”

“He was Laird McLeod. He did what he had to.”

Oskar shook his head. “He was a killer. I have to live with the knowledge that my legacy is built on... on *that*. On blood. I hope Summer doesn’t find out.”

Callum didn’t say anything. He glanced over at the closed door of the meeting room. “Ye would be wise to go along with what they want, Oskar.”

“And cut Summer out o’ my life? They’d have me only seeing her to get her with child, and possibly at mealtimes.”

Callum shrugged. "Lairds and Ladies don't live regular lives."

"I don't want my marriage to be like that, Callum. I want..." Oskar paused, glancing around, "I want something *real*. Is that such a crime?"

"No," Callum conceded, "but ye may not get a choice. The decision may be made for ye." He eyed Oskar for a long moment. "Shall I fetch Lady McLeod?"

Oskar shook his head. "No, leave her be. She's had a long day. Have ye seen Rhys, by the way? I've had an awful day and I want to go and get drunk."

"Ye should be working, Oskar," Callum reprimanded gently.

Oskar chuckled. "Aye, I should. But I'm going to go and get drunk instead, so have the servants bring me as much ale and wine as they can carry and take it to my private feasting room."

Callum sighed, shaking his head in disapproval, but Oskar knew he'd do it. He was lucky to have such a faithful steward at his side.

## CHAPTER 22



IT HAD BEEN A LONG DAY, and no mistake. Summer was dressing for bed, putting on one of the unfamiliar, thin nightgown provided. Her own nightgowns had, for once, seemed more suited for the harsh, cold nights. Once the fire was gone, her chamber's temperature plummeted, and sticking so much as toe outside of the covers had felt like dunking it into ice water.

However, the piles of furs and quilts on her bed soon meant that Summer started to sweat in her thick, frilled nightgown. If she peeled back the covers, she froze. If she huddled under them, she boiled. To her chagrin, the thin, flimsy nightgowns stopped her from sweating so badly in bed. True, they weren't particularly warm when she moved around her chamber, but she could always throw on a robe.

The fire was dying now, the heat slowly leeching out of the chamber. The flickering firelight was fading away, casting long shadows. Summer was feeling more comfortable in the Castle now, but night times were still a trial. Eleanor's warning about locking her door rang in her ears, and she'd already checked and double checked her door. It was definitely locked, but Summer still didn't feel entirely safe.

What was more, her candle was burned down to a stub. She'd meant to ask for another one – heaven only knew that the Castle was full of candles – but she'd forgotten, and now it was too late. The idea of wandering around the dark, silent Castle at night with her single, flickering candle, looking for a replacement, made Summer want to shudder.

To distract herself, she pulled back the layers of furs and blankets and slipped into bed. The sheets were cold, ice cold, and she forced herself to lie still while they warmed up. Like a child, Summer felt safe when she was in bed, huddled under the blankets. The bed started to warm up, and her eyes were already getting heavy.

She reviewed the day's activities. She'd met with the fearsome council, and while that hadn't been a pleasant experience at all, at least she'd gotten it over with. She'd made progress with Rhys, Eleanor seemed to like her very much, and she'd won over the people of Sam's Hill. All in all, a very successful day.

She couldn't hear anything from the adjoining chamber. Perhaps Oskar was already asleep. She hadn't noticed light coming from under his door when she'd passed by earlier. Or perhaps he was still up, working. She'd tried the handle of the door between their chambers, and it was still locked. Even after their kiss earlier – with started off spirals of fizzing, delicious heat in her stomach and chest again – Oskar was still keeping her at arm's length.

Summer sighed. Perhaps he just needed time. Or perhaps this was all he ever really wanted – a reliable Lady McLeod to manage the Castle and earn the people's love.

*That should be enough, Summer told herself. No need to feel disappointed.*

She yawned, stretching out her limbs on the now-warm sheets. She closed her eyes, ready for the peaceful oblivion of sleep.

Then somebody banged on her chamber door.

Summer sat bolt upright with a squeak of fright, flinging back the covers and let the trapped heat from the bed leech out into the cold chamber. She stared at the door, ears straining. Could it have been some sort of dream? Had she already started to fall asleep? Sleep walking and talking weren't the only night-time problems you had to worry about – people saw and heard all sorts of strange things, and had odd waking dreams sometimes, Summer knew that.

Then the banging came again, so hard her whole door shook.

“Oskar, no!” somebody hissed, very clearly, on the other side of the door. “Come along now. This isn't your chamber door.”

Summer recognized Callum Lamb's voice and got gingerly out of bed.

“Who is it?” she called.

There was an intake of breath on the other side of the door.

“Nothing tae worry about, Lady McLeod,” Callum replied. There was a muffled giggle, and a *thump* which sounded worryingly like someone landing heavily against the door and sliding down to the ground.

Summer snatched up her robe and tied it around herself and moved toward the door. She unlocked the door and opened it gently.

Almost immediately, somebody sitting on the floor fell inward, as if they'd been leaning back against the door. It was, of course, Oskar.

He lay on his back, looking up at her, red faced and giggling.

Summer blinked, glancing up at the second man in the hallway.

Callum's face was red with anger, and he had his hands clenched into fists at his sides. As soon as he noticed that Summer was looking at him, his expression smoothed itself out.

"I'm sorry tae bother ye, Lady McLeod," he said politely. "As ye can see, our Laird drank too much tonight. I was trying to get him back to bed, but he's no wanting tae go. Give me a moment, I'll get him up."

"No, I am fine here," Oskar mumbled, rolling on his back like an upended beetle. He looked funny, and Summer had to press her hand to her mouth to hide her smile.

She crouched down beside Oskar, and he flashed her a cheery, upside-down smile.



“Can I no spend some time wi’ my wife, Callum?” he demanded, Summer glanced up at Callum and saw that his lips were getting tighter and tighter. He really was not happy.

“Thank you so much for bringing him up here, Callum,” Summer said, as kindly as she could. “I am grateful. But I don’t want to trespass on your kindness any further. I’ll take care of him from here.”

“There’s no need for that, Lady McLeod. I am the steward, and it is my responsibility tae see him safe in his bed. I willnae hear of ye being bothered any further.”

On the floor, Oskar blew a raspberry. This time, Summer couldn’t hold back a giggle.

Callum didn’t smile. He took a step closer – a little too close, Summer could smell his stale breath – and lowered his voice.

“This is not proper behavior for our Laird, Madam,” he murmured. “I understand that ye are new here, and still settling in. A man needs his wife tae be a calm, stabilizing influence. She doesn’t stop him from doing what he wants – a wife should never try and control her husband – but she tries tae reward him for the right behavior. It is important that ye show the right attitude, Lady McLeod. A man can be forgiven much, but a lady walks a fine line.”

Summer’s smile faded. There was something about Callum that seemed off, somehow. He’d never voiced any of these opinions before – in which a woman was responsible for her husband’s behavior but wasn’t allowed to have any sort of

influence over him – and they didn't seem to fit in with the benevolent, kindly persona he put on in public.

Summer found herself stepping back a pace or two, then instantly wished that she hadn't. Backing off was weakness, wasn't it? Callum's face gave nothing away – it was that same smooth, polite mask that she'd seen so often before.

She glanced down at Oskar, who was still unsuccessfully trying to get up from the floor. Clearly assuming that the conversation was over, Callum bent down and grasped Oskar's wrists, clearly intending to haul him up from the ground.

*You are Lady McLeod*, Summer reminded herself. *What you say goes.*

“Stop,” she said, as firmly and commandingly as she could manage.

Callum glanced up at her, his expression darkening.

“Lady McLeod?”

“I will take care of him.”

“I really couldn't allow—”

“Allow?” Summer let the word linger in the air for a minute or two. Then she smiled. “Thank you for your care and

consideration, Callum, but I'll take it from here. You can go to bed now – I'm sure you're quite tired by now."

Callum sighed, shifting from foot to foot. "Lady McLeod, I really must–"

"That will be all, Callum. Thank you."

There was a moment's silence between them. Something flashed in Callum's eyes, sharp and ugly, but it was gone the next instant.

He smiled, tight lipped and insincere.

"Very well, Lady McLeod. I only wanted tae save ye the trouble. Dealing with drunk men is no picnic, let me assure ye."

"I know," Summer said, even though she knew nothing of the sort. She'd never encountered a drunk man before. Gentlemen never let ladies see them in their cups, and she didn't have a brother who would get drunk and wobble around. Her father had never been one to drink to excess, and if he had, Summer had never seen it.

Callum didn't need to know that, though.

The man in question stepped back, still smiling that insincere smile, and made a neat bow. Then he melted away into the dark hall, footsteps soft as a cat's.

Summer shivered. She had a feeling that she and Callum Lamb were not going to be good friends. The dark hallway outside her own door yawned, and Summer was suddenly very eager to get the door closed and the darkness shut out. She kicked Oskar's legs out of the way, closing the door and turning the key.

With the door closed, Summer could breathe again.

Now that the confrontation was over, she was uncomfortably aware that she had no idea what to do with her drunken husband. What if he was sick? She'd heard that drunk people could vomit.

How was she going to get him into his own chamber? The door connecting their chambers was still locked. No doubt Oskar had the key to his chamber door on his person, but that would mean venturing out into the cold, dark hallway, where Callum could be lurking.

Summer shivered. She didn't like that idea at all. She sighed, turning around to face her drunken husband, and found that he'd finally managed to right himself. He stumbled toward the bed, kicking off his boots as he went, and flopped heavily on the rumpled blankets.

"Oh, no, Oskar, that's my bed—" Summer began fruitlessly, watching Oskar wrap himself in the sheets, settling down with a happy sigh.

There was a moment of silence.

Oskar looked like a man settling in for the night, eyes closed, head on the pillows. Summer shifted from foot to foot, the cold stone of the chamber floor seeping into her bare feet, numbing them. The fire was almost out, and there was barely an inch of candle left.

Sighing in resignation, Summer gave up, and plodded back to her bed. It was a fine, wide bed, so there was plenty of room for them both. Oskar rolled over docilely enough when she climbed in beside him. He was very warm, and the sheets were delightfully toasty. Summer pulled the blankets over herself too, and lay there, on her back, staring up at the ceiling.

It was the oddest thing, sharing a bed with someone else. She knew that sisters often shared a bed, but Summer had no sisters, so she'd always slept alone. It was warmer, for sure, and strangely comforting to hear someone else's breathing beside her.

She hoped he didn't snore.

"I don't know why they don't like ye."

Summer stiffened at the low voice. She glanced over, but Oskar still had his back to her. He lay curled up on his side, broad shoulders jutting up from the bed.

"Oskar? I thought you were asleep."

"The council say that I shouldn't have married an English girl," Oskar continued. Was he sleep talking? Did he know

what he was saying? Summer rolled over to face his back, propping herself up on one elbow.

“We’ll convince them, though, won’t we?” she tried. “I’ll be a good Lady McLeod.”

“It isn’t fair,” Oskar said, a tinge of bitterness in his voice. He hiccupped. “They’re putting it tae a vote, ye know.”

“Putting what to a vote?” Summer pressed, a feeling of dread starting to settle in her chest.

“They want ye to be kept in yer chambers, to read books and do sewing while ye wait to have children. They’re trying to keep ye out o’ the running o’ the Castle, away from the politics. It seems odd tae me. It’s like they don’t want ye to see something.”

Summer swallowed hard, suddenly panicked at the picture Oskar was painting for her. He’d promised her freedom as Lady McLeod, but at the end of the day, Summer was a woman. Her freedom was dependent on those around her, predominantly the men.

“But you won’t let them do that, will you, Oskar?” she tried, hating how pleading her voice sounded.

Oskar curled up tighter. “I don’t know if I can stop them. It’s not... it’s not a dictatorship here, ye know. I need the council on my side. They hate me, and I don’t know why. There’s something else here, somebody who’s making things difficult for me. I just don’t know who it is.”

Summer swallowed hard past the lump in her throat. She shuffled closer, close enough to rest her chin on his shoulder. Oskar shifted to look up at her, and she saw that his eyes were red rimmed and unfocused. She wondered whether he'd remember any of this in the morning. Or would he have a headache?

A wave of affection washed over Summer, and she reached down to stroke his cheek, feeling the bristles of his beard against her fingers.

“Don't worry, Oskar,” Summer whispered. “I'll take care of it.”

He sniffed. “I'm supposed tae be taking care o' ye.”

She shrugged. “Well, marriage is all about teamwork, isn't it? We take care of each other. Don't worry, Oskar, I have a plan.”

He blinked blearily up at her. “A plan? What sort o' plan?”

“Never you mind. We'll talk about it in the morning, but for now, it's late, and you need your sleep. You have a big day tomorrow.”

Oskar's eyes widened childishly. “I *do*?”

“Yes,” Summer assured. She had no idea what he had to do tomorrow, she just assumed that a laird's work was never done.

It seemed to satisfy Oskar. His eyes grew heavy, and within a few minutes, his head fell back to the pillow and he was sound asleep.

Summer lay awake a little while longer, listening to Oskar's rough, regular breathing. He didn't snore, so that was nice. Summer, on the other hand, had too much to think about. She wasn't going to sleep any time soon.

So, the councilors didn't like her. Well, that wasn't a surprise. But to think that they were plotting to hobble her so soon was a bit of a shock. She'd assumed that Oskar could stop that in his tracks, but it made sense that he would have to answer to his council. That was sensible, but now it meant that Summer was vulnerable.

Her plan was a half-formed one and hung on a lot of "ifs" or "maybes". Still, it was all she could think of for now.

By the time Summer finally drifted off to sleep, the fire was nothing more than glowing embers.



## CHAPTER 23



OSKAR WOKE up to a pounding headache. His mouth tasted and felt as though it were lined with wool, and he felt sick and hungry at the same time. The last thing he remembered was landing on the floor of his personal feasting room, the stone cold and hard, pressing through the thin material of his shirt. He'd lost his cloak somewhere along the way, and he was simultaneously too hot and too cold. He'd gone to bed fully dressed, too, although at least he'd had the good sense to take off his boots first.

At least he'd made it to bed safely. He remembered Callum holding out a pot for him to vomit in and hauling him to his feet none too gently.

Oskar shifted, frowning as a memory suddenly popped to the forefront of his mind. Callum's expression had been strange, and it had taken Oskar's drunken mind a few minutes to work out what he was seeing.

Hate.

Callum had looked at him and despised him.

Oskar swallowed, an uncomfortable feeling sizzling in his chest. Surely it was his imagination. Callum didn't *hate* him. Why would he? Rhys had a reason to hate Oskar, and that had worried him for a while. But not Callum. No, it was probably natural disgust at seeing the Laird rolling around drunk and throwing up in a clean chamber pot.

He'd have to apologize, and make sure it didn't happen again. Oskar didn't often get drunk like that, and it was *always* a mistake. It left you vulnerable, and it was hardly something you'd expect from a laird.

Oskar yawned, rolling onto his back, and found himself looking up at a blue velvet canopy.

His yawn died in his throat.

*This isn't my bed.*

Now that he was fully awake, Oskar realized that this was the wrong side of the bed, and these were not his familiar old blankets. In fact, the thick fur lying at the foot of the bed was something he'd instructed to be placed on a different bed, on—

“Oh, good morning. You're awake, I see.”

Oskar froze, glancing sideways at his wife.

Summer was sitting up in bed, reading a book.

The events of last night came flooding back in one long, embarrassing rush. Oskar wondered if it was possible to die of mortification.

He'd turned up at Summer's door, drunk as a coot, and gone tumbling inside, incoherent and out of place. No doubt she'd tried to move him, but he was of course far too heavy, and dead drunk. As stupid and pathetic as any other drunkard.

Oskar drew in a deep breath, pushing himself up in bed.

"I think..." he began hesitantly, "I owe ye an apology."

Summer chuckled. "What for?"

"For barging in on ye like that last night. It wasn't gentlemanly."

Summer glanced at him, raising an eyebrow. "I thought you were boasting about how you *weren't* a gentleman only a few days ago."

Oskar immediately remembered that incident, which had started with a meal and a few arch comments and had ended with his hand underneath Summer's skirt and her back arching in pleasure. He remembered every detail of that night, like something stolen and forbidden and therefore all the sweeter.

It shouldn't *be* stolen and forbidden – Summer was his wife, wasn't she? But of course, they both knew that the marriage

was nothing more than a formality, a ceremony. It didn't feel real, somehow.

Their marriage might not feel real, but the feelings Summer had inspired – and kept inspiring – certainly felt real enough. A twinge of arousal reared its head in Oskar's gut, interested, and slid determinedly downward. Oskar shifted his thighs under the blankets, glad for the layers of quilts and furs to hide his embarrassing hardness.

Summer hadn't noticed, thankfully. She turned a page in her book, marking her place and setting it aside with a sigh.

“Do you remember what happened last night?”

Oskar eyed her nervously. Had he done something terrible? With a sickening feeling of nausea that killed his newfound hardness, he tried to remember if he'd done something truly unforgivable, like try to force himself on her.

No, it couldn't have been that. Eleanor always said that drunk men didn't become different men – it just brought out who they were on the inside. Oskar knew that he was not that sort of man. Besides, Summer would likely have fled, or hit him, or at the very least not slept beside him in the bed all night. She wouldn't be sitting here beside him, calm and expectant. She'd be angry, he knew that much.

“I don't remember it all,” Oskar said carefully. “Did I throw up on ye feet or something?”

Summer smiled. “No, but you did tell me that the council are trying to have me excluded from everything to do with the running of the Castle. That they want to have me barricaded in my chamber to sew quietly and have children.”

Oskar grimaced. “Ah. Aye, I do remember that, actually. It was a mistake, I never meant tae tell ye that.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t want tae bother ye. I thought I’d sort it out alone, and that would be that.”

Summer nodded. “I appreciate you trying to keep me safe, but don’t you think that was something I should know about?”

Oskar bit his lip and nodded. “Aye, I suppose so. I hope ye aren’t offended, Summer. I’m just used tae handling all of this by myself. It feels strange tae have someone else here, ready to help wi’ the burden. Maither tries her best, but as my mother, she has very little authority here. Besides, she’s not getting any younger, and she has Rhys tae worry about.”

Summer nodded. She reached out, tentatively, taking Oskar’s hand where it lay on top of the blankets.

“I want to help, Oskar. I really do,” she said softly, and it warmed Oskar’s heart. He was struck by a desire to sweep her into his arms, pull her close, and for the two of them to dive back under the warm blankets. They could hide from the chill of the chamber outside the bed and the responsibility waiting

just out in the hall, and it would just be the two of them, lost in whirlwind of dizzy pleasure.

“I don’t want ye tae become a target,” Oskar found himself whispering. “Ye don’t know what it’s like, being a laird here. I didn’t know, either. Everyone is against ye. Everyone. It’s like ye have a target on yer back. Honestly, I thought it was going tae be like a fairy tale. Finally, I thought, I’ll be able to support my family, to keep us all safe. I’ve taken us out o’ poverty, sure enough, but that’s all. I’ve opened us tae a hundred different dangers.”

Oskar looked away, shuddering. He kept a tight grip on Summer’s hand, though.

“Well, I’m your wife,” Summer said, her voice no louder than a whisper. “We’re a team, aren’t we? I’ll face all of these dangers with you, I promise.”

He glanced back at her, emotion threatening to clog up his throat.

“Thank ye,” Oskar said honestly, “that means a lot.”

Color spread over Summer’s face, and she glanced away.

“I’m glad I’m married to you, Oskar. I know we haven’t been married long, but... well, I don’t regret it. Not one minute of it.”

Oskar looked properly at her then. He saw the flush on her face, spreading down her neck. He found his gaze drawn to her breasts, pushing against the thin white material of her nightgown. He swallowed hard, feeling as though someone was choking him just a little. Desire flared up in him, no matter how hard he tried to stamp it down.

Was it his imagination – a bit of wishful thinking – or did he see the same feelings in Summer's face? Her breath was coming in hard little puffs, her eyes dark and blown, and she kept glancing down at his lips. As he watched, Summer sucked her full lower lip into her mouth, delicate white teeth nibbling down on it.

Oskar's nerve broke.

Of course it did, he was only human.

He dived forward, and Summer met his halfway. Their lips crashed against each other, a little too hard, teeth pressing against the inside of lips. He felt Summer's hands on his face, fingertips raking through his beard, nails scraping just a tiny bit, and he shuddered.

He slid his hands under the blankets, feeling for her waist. It was soft and warm through the thin layer of her nightgown, and she gave the tiniest, most adorable little squeaking noise, shuffling closer to him. Their legs tangled up, both of them trying to get purchase to push against each other.

Oskar bore down, gently pushing her back into the pillows and mattress. Summer went willingly, wrapping her arms around his neck. He slid one hand down her thigh, gripping the flesh,

maneuvering her legs apart. He hooked one thigh over her leg, carelessly rocking himself against her. It was a half-hearted movement, as his whole focus was on Summer.

He was hard as a rock now, and she must feel it pressing against her.

They broke apart to breathe, Oskar staring down and Summer staring up. There were a few seconds of silence, broken only by their laborious breathing.

Summer spoke first.

“This is much more comfortable than the table,” she said, and broke into a grin. Oskar chuckled, and the tense, wary moment was over. He leaned forward to kiss her again, tilting his head to press his lips against her neck. His beard rasped at her skin, but Summer seemed to like it, shuddering and arching.

Oskar’s other hand slid up her ribcage, pausing at the curve of her breast.

“Yes,” Summer breathed into his hair. That was the only word he needed to hear. Oskar pushed his hand higher, cupping her small breast through the fabric, rubbing at the hard bud, and heard her breath hitch in her throat.

The neckline of the nightgown was a high one, but there was lace at the collar. Oskar fumbled blindly for the ties, loosening them and pulled down the neckline, exposing both of her breasts. They immediately peaked in the cold air, and Oskar quickly pulled up the blankets up. It meant that he couldn’t



admire her the way he wanted, but it was a small sacrifice to keep them both warm.

Curse the frigid Scottish weather.

He cupped and stroked her breasts, ducking his head under the covers to put his lips to them. Summer liked that, her breath getting heavier and her back arching. Oskar hadn't put his hand between her legs but he knew she'd be wet and ready there.

He felt giddy with pleasure and anticipation. This was really going to happen; they were really going to—

Someone knocked on the door.

Both Summer and Oskar froze, their breathing seeming very loud and unseemly in the quiet chamber.

Summer cleared her throat.

“Who is it?” she asked, her voice only trembling a little bit.

“It's me, Lady McLeod. Callum Lamb. I'm searching for Laird McLeod. I knocked on his door but there is no reply. Did he remain in there wi' ye last night?”

Oskar poked his head out from under the blankets, feeling like a tortoise emerging from its shell. Callum's voice had done a very nice job of dampening his ardor. He felt like someone had

dumped a pail of cold water on his head, and he had a feeling that Summer felt exactly the same.

“I just woke up, Callum,” he called, feeling that he really should say something. “What is it?”

Callum gave a heavy, long-suffering sigh.

“There’s work tae be done, Oskar. It’s nearly six o’ clock in the morning, and ye cannot lay about all day. I know that ye had a difficult day yesterday, and no doubt a bad night’s sleep, but ye must get up now. There’s a lot to be done – all of the councilors are up already. I’ll wait here.”

Oskar’s heart sank. There was no way that he and Summer would be able to finish what they had begun now. It was probably a bad idea in any case – he’d go about the rest of day feeling dreamy and satisfied, and that wasn’t ideal for a laird who had to make difficult decisions.

“All right, Callum, I’ll be out in a moment,” he called back, wishing that Callum would take a least a few steps back from the door. He glanced back down at Summer, who looked more than a little disappointed.

“This isn’t over, Lady McLeod,” Oskar murmured. “I’ll be back tae finish what I started.”

Summer smiled, tilting her head coyly to one side. “Promise?”

He bent down to give her one last kiss. “I promise.”

Oskar hastily pulled on the boots he'd taken off last night, and Summer sat up drowsily in bed, watching him.

"I have a plan, Oskar," she said suddenly. "I'm going to talk to the councilors individually and see if I can convince them not to vote against me."

Oskar paused, biting his lip. "Are ye sure that's a good idea?"

She shrugged. "It's worth a try. Besides, I managed to win over other people that way. Maybe they'll see that I'm not a power-hungry harpy or an empty-headed English girl, and that I just want to help, truly."

Oskar nodded slowly. "Aye, it might work. Do what ye can, just... just try not to make thing worse, eh? Don't make any enemies."

Summer chuckled. "I'm sure I won't."

Oskar dived forward to give her one last, quick kiss, then he unlocked the door and hurried out, before he could change his mind.

Callum was waiting right outside, leaning back against the wall. His eyebrows shot up at Oskar's ruffled clothes and uncombed hair.

"Did ye sleep well, then?" Callum asked, just a hint of sarcasm in his voice. "People are waiting tae make their petitions in the

Great Hall.”

Oskar winced. “Not so loud, Callum. I think I owe ye an apology, too.”

“For what?”

“For dragging me up to bed when ye should have just left me on the bare stone to reap the consequences of my own actions.”

Callum snorted, shaking his head. “Consequences of ye own actions? That’s very Old Testament o’ ye.”

“Well, ye bring out the Old Testament in me, Callum. Truly, I mean it. I’m sorry. I should never have put ye in that position, and I’m lucky tae have ye, Callum.”

Oskar reached out, clapping the older man on the shoulder. He searched Callum’s face for any signs of the hatred and contempt he’d seen last night but saw nothing of the sort. Callum was only smiling serenely and benevolently, like a particularly kind father or guardian.

“Think no more of it, Oskar. I mean it. Still, I don’t like the influence that lass has on ye. Ye would never have done this before.”

Oskar shrugged, grinning. “Don’t worry, today’s headache will be a reminder of what happens when ye overindulge in ale and wine, so ye can save your lectures.”

“That’s a pity. I had some good lectures. But ye are acting differently, Oskar.”

Oskar shrugged, grinning. “Maybe I’m in love, Callum.”

Humming to himself, he turned and made his way down the hallway, humming as he went.

## CHAPTER 24



THE MAN who was supposed to be Oskar's friend watched the Laird make his way down the hallway, humming and whistling and all but jumping in the air and clicking his heels.

*"Maybe I'm in love, Callum."*

Callum snorted in disgust. *Love*. A pathetic, weak word for pathetic, weak people. People often talked about how much he, Callum, had loved the old Laird, how diligently he'd cared for him – as dutiful as a son, they said – and it had made him feel sick.

They truly thought he loved his old master? The stupidity was amazing. The doddering old fool couldn't even get to the commode in time by the end, let alone run his clan. Callum had been doing everything by then. He'd been the laird in all but name, and he was prepared to be patient and wait for nature to take its course, and then he'd have the name of Laird McLeod, too.

Callum Lamb was a patient man, but not in the way that most people understood patience. Far too many people considered patience to be bland inactivity, waiting for things to come to you. Being resigned was not the same as being patient.

Callum simply understood that grand ambitions weren't fulfilled overnight, and that was all there was to it. For example, Callum had worked his way up in the Castle, becoming an assistant to the previous McLeod steward. He'd been there for three years when the man had his tragic accident – falling down a flight of stairs and breaking his neck – and that left the way clear for Callum, the bright young man with no family hanging around his neck like a millstone, to take over.

Now, if the accident had occurred shortly after Callum had first arrived, would he have had that opportunity? No, and they might have hanged him. Timings were everything. Callum's opportunity came at the right time, and he settled down to wait on the already aged Laird McLeod.

He'd decided to let nature take its course. Laird McLeod's health had been bad, and he had no children and no obvious heir. Callum wasn't to know that the old man would hang onto life for decades, but he patiently waited it out. Death by natural causes was the thing here, and he couldn't let himself get impatient. Callum had carefully kept Laird McLeod away from women who fancied themselves as the next Lady McLeod and were young enough to still bear children. It was unlikely that a man as old as the Laird would sire children, even with a young and healthy woman, but it wasn't a risk Callum wanted to take.

He'd made a mistake when it came to Oskar and Rhys. After the Laird had killed his older brother and his sister-in-law, Eleanor had sensibly fled with her two boys, and Callum had mistakenly assumed that was that. He hadn't been the steward when all of that happened and assumed that the boys had either died in some hole in the countryside, or else left the

country and gone missing. He never expected Laird McLeod to give a damn about the boys or the succession.

It had been a horrible shock when the old Laird confessed, on his deathbed, that he'd left provision, secretly, for his nephew to take over, and that the boy was on his way now. Callum felt a terrible rage and was tempted to take up the pillow and press it over the old man's face until he stopped moving.

He didn't, of course. There was no point. The old laird was dying anyway, and he was now useless to Callum. So, he left the sickroom, even though Laird McLeod pleaded not to be left alone in the end. He closed the door, saying that the Laird had asked for privacy in the end. A few hours later, he was dead. Callum wondered, briefly, if Laird McLeod felt betrayed.

Not that it mattered, of course. Callum's ambition had always been to become Laird McLeod one day, right from the moment he'd looked up at the Castle and felt a tingling, awe-filled sensation that started at the top of his head and raced down to his toes. That was his destiny.

*How old had I been? Eleven? Twelve? Father had finally drunk himself into the grave, and he'd beaten Mother to death a few years ago.*

There were brothers and sisters, too, Callum remembered with a wrench of memory, all scattered. Since the tender age of twelve, McLeod Castle had been his life. He'd die here, and if he had his way, he'd die on the throne as Laird McLeod. It was nothing like his pain-filled, tumultuous childhood, all of them crammed into one tiny croft house.



Callum strode down the halls, nodding absently to servants as he passed. He'd woken up the old memories now, and he blamed Oskar.

He remembered the rush of relief when he saw Oskar – the new Laird McLeod – for the first time. He was a grown man, a hulking warrior, but fear was written all over his face. Eleanor hadn't raised her boys with the expectation of their being rulers one day. She clutched her younger son's hand, her face tight and her lips in a thin line.

Getting Oskar to trust him had been ridiculously easy. Anyone with decently smooth court manners could have deceived him. Oskar was an honest man, a country bumpkin, and it was barely a few hours before Oskar was all but begging him to keep on the position that Callum had never intended to give up in the first place. The Steward of McLeod Castle.

He'd had to reassess, of course. Oskar would have to go. Callum was too old to try outliving anyone else – the old Laird had eaten up too many years. Still, there was no need to get rid of Oskar straightaway. Let him settle in, make a mess of things, and then he could be disposed of safely. Rhys would need to be dealt with, preferably at the same time.

In the meantime, Callum just needed to stop Oskar from getting married. He'd naturally failed, and now there was the possibility of a child to deal with, not to mention the fact that Summer was gradually stealing Oskar's trust away from Callum.

There'd be no child anytime soon, though. Callum's contact among the servant girls assured him that she'd changed the sheets in both their beds, and they clearly hadn't lain together. That was a relief, and Callum had casually spread that

information around, to assure the councilors that there'd be no heir anytime soon. Still, he needed to act quickly.

He found the man he was looking for in the hunting room, inspecting a long, finely crafted blade.

Timothy glanced up as Callum approached and nodded in greeting.

“Callum, how are ye?”

“Ah, fine. A great sword, eh? A good choice.”

Timothy chuckled. “It's no for me, it's for my eldest son. I can barely swing a blade like this anymore. Where's Laird McLeod? I rarely see ye by yourself, ye are always trailing around wi' him.”

Callum choked down a rush of anger at that comment and smiled instead.

“He's hearing petitions in the Great Hall.”

Timothy nodded approvingly. “Good. The people like that. It makes them feel heard, and it can alert us tae problems in the lands before they become real problems.”

Callum, who privately thought every minute spent with the unwashed, ungrateful masses, was a waste of time, nodded.

“I couldn’t agree more.”

Timothy shot him a knowing glance. “Really? Because I heard that ye advised the Laird against it. I always wondered why.”

Callum wondered if he could get away with picking up the nearest blade and ramming it through Timothy’s stomach. Timothy had always been something of an unknown quantity, and he didn’t respond to Callum’s charm. He had a firm moral compass, but it was never clear where exactly it pointed.

He smiled instead of stabbing him. There’d be too much blood, and it would cause more problems than it solved.

“Oh, I only thought that Laird McLeod wouldn’t have the time. He was insistent, though – the man thinks for himself.”

Timothy nodded. “He does at that. His wife is a decent lass, too.”

“A very sweet girl,” Callum said noncommittally. “I worry that she might get involved in clan business, however. Wi’ the best of intentions, o’ course, but still.”

Timothy pursed his lips. “Ye want me to cast my vote against her, don’t ye?”

“Aye, it might be for the best,” Callum said, carefully apologetic. He needed them to think that he liked the new Lady McLeod, that he simply worried for the good of the Clan.

The truth was, Summer was taking Oskar's attention away from the business at hand. She was clever, and she was winning the peoples' hearts at a dangerous rate. No, she needed to be muzzled, and quickly.

Why was Timothy smiling? Callum pasted a polite smile on his face and waited, eyebrows raised and expectant, for an explanation.

Timothy made a few wobbly passes with the sword then laid it down again.

"Ye don't know, then," he said, and Callum clenched his hands into fists at his sides.

"Know what?" he asked, keeping his voice light and calm.

"Lady Summer has been talking to the councilors," Timothy said shortly. "Convincing them that she's fit tae rule at her husband's side. He must have told her about what they're planning. She was mighty convincing. I'd already decided to vote in her favor – I don't think a husband and wife ought tae be separated like that – but I heard her out anyway."

Icy fear closed its long fingers around Callum's heart. He swallowed, trying to seem as composed as possible.

"Oh?" he said, lightly. "Well, I'm glad she is taking the initiative."

Timothy shot a knowing glance at him, and Callum fought down a tide of anger.

He wasn't an angry man, in general. His father had been an angry man even when he wasn't drinking, but when he was drunk, he was like a demon. That was why Callum avoided alcohol, or at least drinking to excess. He didn't like who he became when he was drunk. He became violent, angry. Just like his father.

He'd watched Oskar wobbling and giggling, drunk as you like, and thought how strange it was that Oskar was never aggressive when he was drunk. What was the difference between one man and another, after all?

Callum cleared his throat.

"Well, thank ye for telling me, Timothy, I'd best get on." He turned, not waiting for Timothy to respond.

He responded anyway.

"There's a new King o' the Castle, eh, Callum?" Timothy called after him. "And a Queen, too."



Callum walked as quickly as he dared down the hallways. He never ran. It wasn't dignified.

He turned a sharp corner and almost ran into Simon. The man was several inches shorter than Callum and was never quite as

bold when he wasn't safely behind the councilors' table. He backed up, flushing a little.

“Ah, Callum. I was just coming tae find ye.”

Callum narrowed his eyes. He had an odd feeling, dread and foreboding mingling in his stomach to create a hard rock. He had the strangest idea that his world was crumbling around him, that the wretched lass had upset plans that had been years in the making.

*Calm yourself, Callum, he told himself. Simon hasn't even said anything yet.*

“Oh, aye?” he said aloud. “What is it?”

Simon swallowed. “The scheming lass visited Father this morning.”

“Lady McLeod,” Callum corrected harshly. “Let's not find ourselves accused of disrespect, eh?”

Simon blushed redder, nodding and looking away.

“Well, she sat wi' him for a while, talking. I sat in, o' course, but there wasn't much I can do.”

“What are ye telling me, Simon?”

“She’s convinced him tae vote in her favor.”

Callum sucked in a breath. “I see. Well, that’s not good, but we still have a majority.”

Simon dropped his eyes, and Callum knew then and there what he was going to say.

“I’ll not go against my Father, Callum,” he mumbled. “Father said we’ll vote for her. Give her a chance, he said. I’ll not defy him.”

“For God’s sake, ye are a grown man!” Callum said desperately, letting his voice rise. He swallowed, trying to calm himself. Timothy would vote for Summer, and with Jacob and Simon, that would make a majority, even if she didn’t convince Wallace and Malcolm. Callum could, of course, throw his voice in with the other two, but that would only split the councilors and then Oskar would have the deciding vote.

It would do no good, and he would only betray his real plan to Oskar. No, it was time to take the next step.

“Ye are a useless wretch,” Callum snapped, shouldering past Simon. Simon called after him, but Callum barely heard it. He walked fast, head down, mind whirling.

The beauty of a Castle this size was that you would walk and pace as much as you liked. Following all of the passages and circling all the rooms was probably several miles’ worth of walking at least.

Callum had to kill them. His plans were unraveling. Summer was going to get a foothold. Callum hadn't spent all those years clawing his way up the ranks of the Castle staff, waiting on a senile, vicious old man only to give up his ambition to a clueless country bumpkin and his scheming little English wife.

Now that it came to it, Callum felt a twinge of affection for Oskar. The man trusted him so much – far too much, really. He was so easily won. He was happy to give Callum whatever salary he wanted, whatever land, whatever power. But he wouldn't always be so malleable, especially if his wife got her claws in. If Callum had chosen a different path – a wife and children, rather than anything real and profitable – he might have had a son around Oskar's age. Maybe it would have been easier to control his own child.

But Callum had chosen differently. He didn't want a son to steal his glory and sap his energy. Men didn't realize their ambitions by wasting time with distractions. Oskar was always going to have to die, and so would Rhys, and probably Eleanor. She was the type of woman who'd seek revenge for a lost son.

It would be easier to kill them than it would be to kill Oskar. Callum knew that Oskar looked on him as a father – his own father having been a waste of space that had probably died in a ditch long ago – and it was difficult not to be moved by that. An ordinary man might have loved Oskar like a son.

But Callum wasn't an ordinary man. He was a man who got what he wanted and removed whatever obstacle he needed to remove in order to get it.



Right now, the obstacle was Summer. He couldn't just push her down a flight of stairs – he'd need to be more clever this time.

A plan was already forming.

## CHAPTER 25



SUMMER FELT GIDDY. She wanted to dance and sing, skipping around the Castle like a girl in love.

Well, maybe she *was* a girl in love.

Tingles ran through Summer's body as she remembered the events of earlier that morning. They'd almost... almost *done it*.

That was how most girls of her age whispered in corners about *that thing* that men and women did together, that unmentionable thing that carried so much anticipation and mystery and sometimes resulted in a baby and sometimes didn't.

Summer had heard whispers about such things, between the servants and even between some of her friends. Some women reckoned that it was horribly painful the first time, and just boring and undignified after that. Something to suffer through, something that husbands always wanted to do. If you fell pregnant, they'd leave you alone until after the baby was born.

Other women thought that it was nice, even *wonderful* at times. Summer had never known who to believe, but after her interactions with Oskar, she thought that it was probably the latter. She could still feel where his hands had drifted over her body, could still feel the firm, taut muscles shifting under his skin.

She'd thought, briefly, about finishing what she and Oskar had started. She remembered where he'd touched before, and she was still wet and sensitive there.

It felt as if it would be disappointing, somehow. Without Oskar, that is. Sighing, Summer sat up in bed, ignoring the insistent throbbing between her legs. Perhaps she and Oskar would be able to finish what they'd started later tonight. Maybe they'd even be able to snatch a little time together during the day. Summer shivered at that thought, her gut churning in excitement. After all, he was her husband. It was entirely right and proper that they should do what a husband and wife did together in bed.

The morning had passed by quickly, with Summer completing what she'd wanted to do. She'd spoken to each of the council members, and while some were openly gruff and unfriendly, she'd stuck to her well-rehearsed script. Namely, how her dowry had helped the Clan, how she was a novelty – a friendly, pretty English girl that was winning favor with the people – and how she was prepared to work hard and make the Clan thrive. Summer had also delicately pointed out that she could be carrying the Clan's future in her belly at that very moment. This was met with expressions of disbelief, but she knew that her point had been taken home.

In short, Summer was pleased with herself. She was no politician – but then, neither was Oskar, and one of them had

to get used to scheming and sneaking. Perhaps Summer could be more helpful to him than she'd thought.

*Next time Oskar hears the people's concerns, Summer thought, I shall ask if I can join him. That will show that I'm interested, that I care about them. Besides, I like the idea of being able to help people in need. That's what we're here for, isn't it?*

Summer was so lost in thought she didn't notice Alice scurrying along after her along the hallway until Alice called out.

"Lady Summer, wait!"

Summer stopped short, guiltily aware that she'd been walking at full speed along the hallway, not noticing poor Alice hurrying along in her wake.

"Oh, sorry, Alice. What is it?"

Alice paused, a little out of breath. Her eyes darted around nervously, and Summer wondered what had happened to rattle her so badly.

"Ye have a visitor, Lady Summer," she gasped. "The... the *visitor* is waiting for ye in the Great Hall. Everyone saw her coming, it's all anyone could talk about. Ye had better hurry."

"A visitor? *Her*? Who is it?" Summer asked, frowning.

Alice fingered the amulet hung around her neck. A lot of the servants wore various jewels and amulets, designed to bring luck and ward off evil. Alice's was a knot of dried moss tied up into a little parcel with a red thread, knotted at the front of the parcel like a little red jewel. It hung from a plain string of twine. She usually kept it tucked under her chemise, but now it was hanging out in plain view, as if Alice had been touching and tugging at it a lot lately.

"Just come and see, Lady Summer," Alice said quietly.



Whoever was waiting for her in the Great Hall, Summer knew that she would hear her coming long before she saw her. Summer's heels rang out on the stone floor, echoing around the cavernous rooms.

The moment she saw the lone figure standing in the center of the hall, ragged hem six inches deep in mud and her long gray braid hanging down her back, Summer knew exactly who it was that had come to visit.

"Sam," Summer breathed.

Sam didn't move at the sound of her name. Although of course everyone knew it wasn't really her name. It was more of a title, really.

Sam didn't turn around or acknowledge Summer's presence in any way until Summer stopped only a few feet away. Then she turned, slowly, as regal and dignified as if she were Lady McLeod, and Summer the nervous supplicant.

“It’s customary tae bow tae ye Lady McLeod, Madam,” Alice said frostily. Sam turned pale eyes on her, and Alice shrank back.

“There’s no need for that, Alice,” Summer said, smoothly intervening. “Sam is my guest. A new Lady McLeod has to earn her people’s respect, isn’t that so?”

Alice bit her lip and said nothing, looking as if she rather wished she hadn’t spoken. Sam had that effect on people. She had a chilling gaze, and of course the curved scar across her throat spoke volumes, without ever needing to say a word. Summer wasn’t sure whether to be pleased that Alice had stood up for her, or annoyed that she’d nearly offended the prickly Sam. It felt almost like hosting a fellow Lady in her halls.

Well, maybe that was exactly what she *was* doing.

“Let me fetch some refreshments before we speak, Sam,” Summer said hurriedly, getting the feeling that awkward silence could spread out between them if she didn’t say anything.

Sam shook her head. “I cannot eat or drink until I return. I hope ye understand. Did ye press those Moon’s Tears flowers, as ye said?”

“I did! They aren’t ready yet, but they’re already so beautiful. Would you like to see?”

“No, thank ye. I came a long way tae speak to ye, Lady Summer. Can we speak in private?” Sam gestured to Alice and the guards, posted at intervals along the walls of the Great Hall. Alice sucked in a breath, and the guards within earshot exchanged brief, worried glances.

Summer knew what they were thinking – that the strange Sam of Sam’s Hill had come to murder their new Lady McLeod, right here in the heart of the Castle. Summer was vaguely aware of the guards tightening their grips on their pikes. This situation could south very quickly, very badly.

“Of course,” she said aloud. “We’ll talk in the Reading Room, just over there.”

The Reading Room – or at least, one of their seldom-used Reading Rooms – was a small room branching off the Great Hall. There was only one way in or out, and the window was far too small to squeeze out of. There were no guards in there, but there was also no way for Sam to escape if she did, in fact, intend to assassinate Summer.

Sam inclined her head, a glint in her eye hinting that she knew more about Summer’s thinking than she was letting on. Summer didn’t truly believe that Sam would hurt her, but after all, she’d only met the woman once before, and that meeting had been strange, to say the least.

Maybe everyone else’s paranoia was starting to get to her.

Summer led the way toward the discreet little doorway, and Alice tried to follow.

“You wait outside, Alice,” Summer said, polite but firm, and Alice’s face fell.

“Do ye no trust me, Lady Summer?”

“It’s not that. Sam wants a private audience, and I think I ought to oblige her. We won’t be long, will we, Sam?”

Sam, who’d gone ahead of Summer and was currently eyeing the dog-eared books crammed into the bookshelf, barely glanced her way.

“That remains tae be seen, Lady Summer. We have a lot tae discuss.”

Summer chewed her lip. “Should I fetch Lord McLeod? Oskar may want to hear what you have to say.”

“Oh, I have no doubt that he will. But that will be your responsibility to share with him, if ye choose. Shut the door.”

Well, that was that, then. Summer smiled apologetically at Alice and closed the door in her face. She didn’t lock it, and Sam didn’t ask her to.

Sam had her back to her again, staring at the books. She seemed to be wearing exactly the same clothes as she’d worn the first time Summer had met her, with a tall, gnarled branch, worn smooth with use, serving as a walking stick. Cold seemed to roll off her like mist, and there was a strange, sweet,



peaty smell around her. It wasn't unpleasant – wasn't dirty, just strange.

“Odd things, books,” Sam said thoughtfully. “A way o’ making words live forever. Cannae be twisted and forgotten, like speech can. Still, I find that written words cannae quite have the power of a spoken word. Not if the words are spoken right. Ye can burn a book, but ye cannae kill an idea.”

A shiver rolled down Summer’s spine, and she couldn’t have said why.

“What do you mean, Sam?”

Sam turned to face her.

“There’s talk going around about ye in the villages.”

Summer swallowed hard. “What sort of talk?”

“Bad talk. The talk that topples kings and queens.”

Summer glanced back at the closed door, hoping that Alice couldn’t hear any of this.

“Sam, please. Tell me what you have heard.”

Sam sighed, taking a seat in a fur-covered seat next to the empty fireplace. She indicated that Summer should take the

seat opposite, for all the world as if she were Lady McLeod and Summer the visiting head of a small village. Summer found herself obeying, too. The fur spread over the chair was cold, chilled by the room. It was odd, having dead fur underneath her and feeling it cold and stiff. Fur should always be warm. Cold fur felt like an omen of something terrible.

“There is a rumor going around that ye lied about ye dowry,” Sam said bluntly. “That it’s nothing much, and what ye did bring is already eaten up by ye wild spending habits.”

Color rushed into Summer’s face. “Wild spending habits? That’s... that’s ludicrous! And I brought plenty of money here. You can ask anyone.”

Sam shrugged. “Villagers are no goin’ tae visit an English bank tae find out if ye really are an heiress. There’s talk that money is missing from the treasury.”

“Well, I don’t even go into the treasury. I haven’t spent a penny of your money – or mine! – since I arrived,” Summer blustered.

Sam glanced into the empty grate, for all the world as if she could see flames flickering there.

“I am no accusing ye, Lady Summer. I don’t know where the rumors came from. I don’t think anyone does, in fact. But my point is that an idea is hard tae kill. People are starting tae feel irritated, asking themselves why their Lady McLeod is wasting gold coins on new gowns, jewels, and lavish entertainments when they don’t have the money to feed their bairns.”

“But I’m *not* doing any of that!” Summer protested.

“I *know*. I told ye, Lady Summer, that ideas are hard tae kill. These rumors are only just starting, but once they take root, they’ll be hard tae defeat. Ye need tae do something about it now. I couldnae stand by and hear these things said about ye, so I decided tae come and tell ye in person. To give ye advice, if ye will hear it.”

Summer bounced to her feet, nerves jangling. The mellow, happy feeling from this morning’s intimacy with Oskar and the triumph she’d had with the councilors had entirely melted away.

She’d thought that the people liked her, but now it seemed that the tide of public opinion was turning.

“What should I do, Sam?” Summer asked, trying not to sound too pathetic or desperate. Her initial impulse was to run to Oskar, to find him and beg him to help her.

But wouldn’t he be more impressed if she could deal with this herself? Wasn’t that what a proper Lady McLeod would do – *deal with it* without bothering her husband?

Sam narrowed her eyes, staring into space.

“Ye need tae find out where these rumors are coming from.”

“How on Earth am I going to do that?” Summer cried. She winced at the volume of her voice, glancing nervously at the

door. “These rumors could have come from anywhere.”

“Well, that isn’t exactly true. There were only good stories going around about ye and your husband, then all of a sudden, there’s tales of ye stripping the treasury bare and acting like a haughty English lass. Now, think about it. Use yer head, eh?”

That wasn’t exactly respectful, but Summer swallowed down any annoyance and focused.

“I’m listening.”

“Which of us are going tae listen to the woman who’s lived in the same village all her life and is currently washing her husband’s draws beside ye at the river? Eh? Ye ken fine well that she doesn’t know any more about what goes on inside the Castle than ye do.”

“Yes, that makes sense.”

“No, suppose she says, ‘Ah, but I heard it from someone who works in the Castle.’ She taps her nose when ye ask who, but that’s plausible, isn’t it? Someone in the Castle would know, wouldn’t they?”

Summer swallowed hard. Her breath seemed to be getting stuck in her throat, and her chest was tight.

“I suppose so.”

“So, this rumor is being started by someone inside the Castle. Gossip always has a grain of truth – even if the grain here is just that money is going missing from the Treasury. Even the worst gossips don’t make stories up out o’ thin air. Someone wants the people to dislike ye. It’s in ye best interests to work out who.”

“How am I going to do that?” Summer asked desperately.

Sam got to her feet, and Summer had a feeling their audience was over.

“Start wi’ the why,” Sam instructed. “Have ye offended anyone here?”

“Not that I can think of. I don’t know even a third of the people in the Castle, where on Earth can I start?”

Sam rummaged in one of her skirt’s deep pockets and came out with a handmade necklace. The necklace itself was simple braided twine, and the pendant was a smooth stone, almost as smooth and fine as glass, an unusual purplish gray, and carved with what looked like a Moon’s Tears flower.

“Take this,” Sam said. “It’ll help ye find the words when ye need tae speak.”

Summer frowned. “What does that mean?”

Sam shrugged. “Damned if I know. Do ye want it, or not?”

“Yes, please,” Summer said meekly, bending her head to let Sam place the necklace around her neck.

Sam’s eyes glazed over, fixed on something in the middle distance.

“My guess would be that it’s someone close tae ye. These rumors smack of malice. Whoever started them wants something – something ye have. Power, maybe. Watch yourself, Lady Summer. Ye are not safe here. None of ye are safe here.”

## CHAPTER 26



SAM SLIPPED OUT of the room, closing the door softly behind her. There was something that sounded like a scuffle, and then Alice burst into the room, red faced and out of breath.

“Oh, Lady Summer, ye are all right,” she said, visibly sagging in relief.

“Hm? Oh, yes, I’m fine, thank you, Alice. Wait, bring Sam back. I want to talk to her again.”

Summer pushed past her maid and ran out into the hallway.

The Great Hall was empty. She had no idea how Sam could have disappeared so quickly, but there was no sign of her in either direction. Summer thought about asking the guards but had the strangest idea that they wouldn’t know where she’d gone, either.

How odd.

With Sam gone, Summer slumped back into the room. Alice stood there, wringing her hands together.

“What did she say to ye, Lady Summer? Did she curse ye? Oh, say she didnae curse ye! Ye know she’s a witch, don’t ye?”

Alice tugged on the little amulet at her neck until Summer thought that the string would snap. She reached out absently, curling her fingers around Alice’s tugging hand.

“Careful, you’ll break it. Sam is not a witch, Alice. She’s just wise, I suppose.”

“My Pa says that all clever women are witches,” Alice insisted. She paused, thinking it over for a minute. “Although, my Pa is a pretty bad man. Quite a stupid one, too.”

“Yes, he sounds it. Alice, have I ever done something to offend you? Maybe something I didn’t intend to be offensive, or something I did by accident?”

Alice frowned. “No, never. Ye are a good mistress. Everyone likes ye here. Ye aren’t demanding, aren’t spoiled. Ye didn’t even complain when I had to spend all that time brushing tats out o’ your hair after ye spent the whole day riding around the hills with Laird McLeod. It must have hurt, too.”

Summer winced. Her scalp stung just to remember that evening.

“Yes, I remember. It did hurt. Are you sure, though? I know that sometimes disgruntled servants can start rumors or gossip without thinking. I’m not accusing anyone, I just... just want to know.”



Alice raised an eyebrow. "I've never heard of anyone ye offended, Lady Summer, and ye have never offended me. I might say, though, suggesting that annoyed servants go straight to gossiping could be a wee bit offensive."

Summer winced. "Sorry."

"What's the matter, Lady Summer? Ye are right shaken. Look, sit down, I'll get the fire going. You're fair chilled."

Summer allowed herself to be placed firmly in the armchair she'd just vacated, and Alice set about building up the fire. She was quick and efficient, and soon there was a nice blaze crackling in the grate. The fire warmed Sumer nicely, but didn't seem to quite touch the nasty, cold feeling of fear inside.

Had she gotten in over her head? Had she made some serious mistake along the way?

"Right. Now, Lady Summer, please. Tell me what's goin' on. I'm getting worried now," Alice said, with a half-hearted laugh.

Summer took a deep breath. "Sam warned me that there's rumors going around the village that I'm wasteful, spending all of the treasury's money while people starve. That I'm a spoiled, awful brat, and I don't care about anyone but myself. She said that people are starting to get annoyed, blaming me for things."

Alice blinked, surprised. This was clearly news to her.

“Well, I’ve never heard anything like that. Everyone knows that ye are a decent woman, Lady Summer. We know ye aren’t wasteful or spoiled or anything like that. Didn’t ye give all of ye dowry to help the Clan?”

“That’s just it,” Summer groaned. “They’re saying that my dowry wasn’t as much as I said it was. People are starting to say that I’m no good as Lady McLeod, and that’s a dangerous reputation to get. Sam said that the rumor was starting from inside the Castle, but I don’t know where to *start* looking. I don’t know who I would have offended, and I don’t know how to make it right.”

Alice, still kneeling on the hearth, rocked back on her heels, chewing her lip. “Well, I cannae think o’ anyone who’s been offended by ye, Lady Summer. Look, are ye no sure that this Sam isn’t just a warmonger? Maybe she wants tae start trouble, make ye not trust around ye. Ye have to think about these things, Lady Summer.”

Summer swallowed hard. “I don’t know, but I think she’s telling the truth. I don’t want to tell Oskar because he’s got enough to worry about. I just want to sort this out by myself. I mean, the thing is, if I *had* upset one of the servants, none of you would tell me, would you? You’d be afraid of getting punished or sacked. You’d just stay angry. So, if I was being a brat, I might never know. I might think I was being perfectly rational because no one would tell me otherwise.”

Alice hesitated before answering. “If ye were behaving badly, Lady Summer, aye, I would not tell ye. It’s no my place, ye see. But ye know who would tell ye? Laird McLeod. We see the way ye two look at each other, and it’s fair heart-warming. We’ve known Laird McLeod for a year or two now, and he’s

earned our love. Seeing how ye love him makes us love ye more.”

Summer blushed. “You... you can tell that I have feelings for him? Just by the way I look at him?”

Alice laughed at that, clapping her hands together. “Ye are very sweet, Lady Summer! Aye, o’ course we can tell! Ye look at him like ye want tae eat him all up, like ye want tae pounce him right then and there at the feasting table, meat and bread be damned.”

“I do not!”

“Oh, ye do so!” Chuckling, Alice leaned forward to poke at the fire. “See, I would never joke like this if I thought ye were a cruel mistress, would I? A spoiled brat o’ a mistress wouldn’t allow it, would she? Yet here ye are, laughing at me and my impertinence. We all like ye here, Lady Summer. Ye have made as good an impression as ye could hope. Lord McLeod likes ye, and so does Lady Eleanor and Lord Rhys. That goes a long way, ye see?”

Summer nodded slowly, chewing her lip. “What about the rumors, though?”

Alice thought for a moment. “Well, I’m no politician. Maybe talk tae someone who knows a little more. Are ye sure ye willnae talk to Laird McLeod about it?”

Summer shook her head. “I want to sort this out myself. I want him to see that I *can* be useful, that I won’t just be a pretty

Lady McLeod to have children and sit quietly next to him at feasts.”

Alice nodded. “I understand. Who, then?”

Inspiration struck. “Callum, of course!” Summer leaned back in her armchair, laughing a little in relief. Callum was the obvious choice. She felt a little silly for not considering him before. Callum was clever and experienced, and he’d been the Laird’s Steward for longer than anyone else in the history of lairds and stewards. He’d been Steward to two lairds, in fact. He was wise, he was patient, and Oskar spoke so highly of him.

Summer wasn’t entirely sure whether Callum would agree to keep this news secret from Oskar. She understood, of course – Oskar often said how grateful he was to have a Steward as loyal as Callum. Still, she hoped that Callum would understand. At the very least, she’d have someone in her corner who was ready and willing to help her. That *meant* something, didn’t it?

“I have an idea,” Summer said. “I’m going to go and talk to Callum Lamb.”

“Aye, he’s a man who knows things,” Alice agreed. “What he doesn’t know about running a Clan and a Castle isn’t worth knowing. He’d make a fair Laird himself, I daresay.”

“Yes, probably,” Summer said absently. “Where do you think he’d be?”

“He has an office near the Counting Rooms and the Treasury. It’s near tae the Meeting Room. Go tae the Meeting Room and keep going, ye cannae miss it. Do ye want me tae come wi ye?”

“No, thank you, Alice. I think I’d better go by myself. Thank you, by the way. For everything.”

Alice got to her feet, grinning.

“All in a day’s work, Lady Summer. And please, don’t give too much credit to the witch’s gossip.”

“She’s not a witch, Alice.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Alice said quietly, tugging at her amulet again. “I just have the sense that there’s something evil in the Castle. What is it, if not her?”

A shiver went down Summer’s spine again, cold and prickling. She rolled her shoulders, trying to get rid of it.

“Perhaps it’s just your imagination,” she suggested.

Alice pursed her lips. “Perhaps,” she said, neutrally.



Summer started to wish she’d brought Alice. Apparently, it was impossible to get lost between the meeting room and

Callum's office, but by the time Summer found herself approaching the Treasury, she realized that she'd gone too far.

There were two guards posted outside the door at all times. They were deep in conversation as Summer approached, and she caught snatches of what they were saying.

"Came out wi' a great big bag o' money, all for her," one man was saying, his voice carefully low, barely louder than a whisper.

The other man was shaking his head. "Another one? What does she spend it on? And my Ma and Pa fair starving tae death at home."

"He said she disnae want anyone tae know."

"Oh, aye, I bet she disnae. It's disgusting, is what it is."

They abruptly broke off their conversation as Summer approached, and she was aware that there was an Atmosphere. Were they annoyed that she'd interrupted their conversation?

"I cannae let ye in, Lady McLeod," the taller of the two men said, lips pressed tightly together. "Ye must ask Master Lamb or Laird McLeod if ye want tae go in."

With a start, Summer realized that this man did not like her. Not one bit. They were both staring at her as if she'd stepped in something awful and walked it all over their nice, clean floors.

“Oh, I don’t want to go in,” Summer said, laughing self-consciously. “I’m looking for Callum, in fact.”

The men exchanged glances.

“Ye can find him in his office, I think. Just back along the hall and tae ye left. Ye cannae miss it,” one man said crisply.

“Thank you,” Summer said, suddenly eager to get away from this uncomfortable atmosphere, keen to let the men get back to whatever they were gossiping about.

“Oh, and I think Master Lamb has what ye were asking for,” the other man said suddenly. The first man shot him a glare and elbowed him sharply in the ribs. Summer smiled nervously, not entirely sure what he meant, and hurried away. She found herself reaching for the smooth stone around her neck, rubbing her fingers over the carved flower in the center.

This time she found Callum’s office immediately. She knocked and waited, but there was no answer. She pushed gently on the door, and it opened. She stepped inside, feeling a little rude as she did so.

Perhaps she could wait for him here. If she went running around the Castle chasing Callum, she’d waste all day.

Callum’s office was neat and well kept, with books, papers, and so on all piled neatly in their places. He had a long, well-polished desk, a pen and inkwell sitting at an angle, ready to be used. The place was thick with dust, and Summer wondered

why the servants never swept or dusted in here. There was a fire burning in the grate, and the place seemed warm and pleasant enough.

There was a large, heavy-looking velvet pouch sitting on the center of the desk, and Summer wandered over to it, more out of boredom than any real curiosity. There was a yellowed piece of parchment attached to the neck of the pouch, and she wanted to read it. She poked the pouch and was a little surprised to feel coins clinking inside. Goodness only knew how much money was stuffed in there. The pouch was full to bursting.

*Do Not Remove From Treasury Without Permission Of the Laird*, read the note hanging from the pouch.

Summer frowned. Why did Callum have such a big bag of money in here? Her brow cleared at once. No doubt this money was for something extremely important.

She heard voices along the corridor, making her jump.

“I have told ye many times, don’t disturb me over such triflin’ matters! Ye have been told, Angus! Now, get lost. I have work tae do.”

That was unmistakably Callum’s voice, tinged with irritation.

Suddenly guilty at having come rifling through Callum’s office, Summer scuttled outside, managing to be standing innocently out in the corridor by the time Callum rounded the corner. He stopped dead when he saw her.



“Lady McLeod,” Callum said, frowning. “What is it?”

Summer opened her mouth but found that nothing came out. Color rushed to her cheeks, but nothing came to mind. Callum’s frown deepened.

“Lady McLeod, I am very busy.”

“The soldiers outside the treasury said that ye have something for me. Something I’d asked for,” Summer blurted out.

Callum’s expression hardened. “I have no idea what they meant. Perhaps they mistook me for someone else.”

Summer swallowed hard, feeling like a silly child.

“Was there anything else, Lady McLeod?”

“No,” Summer found herself saying. “Nothing at all.”

“Good. If ye will excuse me, Lady McLeod.”

Summer nodded silently, letting Callum push past her. He pushed the door to shut it, but the heavy door didn’t close entirely, leaving it open a crack.

Knowing that she was violating the poor man's privacy, Summer held her breath and peered through the crack.

Callum was standing in his office, glancing around with a scowl. He grabbed up the pouch of money from the desk, tearing off the note around the mouth. She had expected him to put the money safely in some locked drawer, but to her amazement, Callum moved over to the narrow wooden window seat, pulling off the furs that lay across it. He lifted a loose wooden board, revealing that the seat was hollow.

There were dozens of velvet pouches in there.

Summer could see gold coins glittering where some of the pouches had sagged open. He placed the pouch in with the others, and carefully replaced the board and the furs. He crumpled up the little note and tossed it unceremoniously onto the fire.

He glanced up, obviously noticing that the door was ajar, and marched toward it, tutting. Summer fled, praying that he hadn't noticed her.

## CHAPTER 27



OSKAR EYED THE LEDGERS DISCONSOLATELY. He knew that running the Castle – running the Clan – was expensive, but this? They were already making a dent in Summer’s dowry money, and there’d be no more money after that. He couldn’t marry another heiress.

There was column after column of numbers, jaw-dropping figures of bills that had to be paid, repairs that needed to be done, wages that were back owed.

They were bleeding money, and Oskar didn’t know how. Before he’d gone to London, some of the accountants had explained how the money was managed, and it had seemed so simple. Much cheaper than the totals flashing up before his horrified eyes. When he’d tried to repeat what the accountants had said to Callum, Callum only laughed dismissively.

“Those foolish young men tend tae over simplify things, I’m afraid,” Callum had explained, clapping a hand on Oskar’s shoulder. “Let’s just focus on the ledgers, shall we? As ye can see, our outgoings are quickly outstripping our incomings.”

“What are we going tae do about it?” Oskar asked desperately.

It was late in the day by now, and he hadn't had a chance to make time to see Summer at all, like he'd wanted to. The sun was going down, and Oskar was heartily tired. There was so much work to do, and he wasn't sure it was going to get done.

Thank goodness for Callum, at least. He managed the accounts and the treasury, which was a great weight off Oskar's workload. He was lucky to have him. Callum was eyeing the ledgers with narrowed eyes, chewing his lip.

"So, what are we going to do here?" Oskar prompted desperately.

Callum considered for a moment. "We'll have to manage your time more wisely, as well as our finances. First, we'll cut right down on the time you spend wi' the supplicants. I'm afraid the people will have tae solve their own problems. Ye won't be offering money or resources tae help them out, either."

"I don't want tae do that, Callum. It means a lot tae the people, and tae me."

"I understand," Callum said quietly, "But ye see yourself how bad it is. We'll need to dismiss people from the Castle, too. Close up some o' the rooms, perhaps. And here, I have another idea," Callum slid a piece of parchment toward Oskar, along with a pen. He tapped a space at the bottom of the document where Oskar was clearly meant to sign, but Oskar leaned forward, reading the document first.

"This is a request for a loan," he said, frowning. "From a moneylender? I've heard o' this man. He's little more than a criminal. Why would we want tae borrow money from him?"

Callum leaned down so that he was on eye level with the sitting Oskar.

“Because he has money, Oskar. He has it, and we don’t. It’s no complicated. Ye are something o’ a famous client, so I’m sure he’ll be fair and respectful. He can take a few things from the Castle as security, and we can have the money in a few days if ye sign now.”

Oskar chewed his lip, eyeing the short, formal document. He didn’t even know how much they would be asking for, or how much the interest would be. Every instinct screamed at him to throw away the pen and tear the document in two, but it was *Callum* who was suggesting it.

How bad an idea could it be?

Oskar placed the nib of the pen to the paper.

On cue, there was a knock at the door.

Callum muffled a curse, straightening up and whipping around to glower at the door, as if his glare could burn through the closed door and deter whoever had the audacity to knock.

“Who is it?” he snapped.

The door creaked open, and Summer peered nervously around the frame. She flinched when she saw Callum, perhaps realizing that she’d interrupted an official work meeting.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, I just came to see Oskar,” Summer said, in a small voice.

Oskar was a little shocked at how his heart leaped when he saw Summer. It had only been a day – if that, he’d seen her this morning – and already he missed her so much.

Was this what love was supposed to feel like? Was it supposed to *burn* like this, tingling in his stomach?

It was like having indigestion, except he didn’t have a great slab of undigested meat sitting neatly in his stomach. Maybe that wasn’t the most romantic ways of looking at it, but Oskar had never been very good at metaphors.

“No, she can come in,” Oskar said eagerly. “Maybe we could get Summer tae look over the loan?”

“Loan?” Summer echoed, and Callum shot him an annoyed glance.

“I think the documents ought tae be kept private,” he said, pleasantly. “We don’t want the council tae think that Lady Summer is getting too busy in our affairs again, do we?”

Oskar frowned. Summer’s face fell at that comment, and she glanced nervously down at her feet, as if debating whether she should leave.

*No, Oskar thought firmly. I don’t want ye to leave.*

Callum rather pointedly pushed the document a little further along the desk toward him.

“If ye could just sign, Oskar, that would be good,” he said, and for the first time, Oskar felt a pang of annoyance at Callum. He was starting to overreach a little now. Didn’t he already have his own way in most of the running of the Castle? Why make Summer feel out of place?

“I’ll not sign it now, I think,” Oskar said, replacing the pen in the inkwell. “Take it away, Callum.”

Callum’s face closed up like a shutter.

“Very well, Oskar,” he said, pleasantly enough, and rolled up the parchment, securing it with a piece of red ribbon. He bowed curtly, first to Oskar and then to Summer, then he swept out, closing the door softly behind him.

With Callum gone, Oskar felt as though he could breathe again.

“What a day I’ve had, Summer,” he groaned, tipping back his head to rest against the back of his chair. “I’m exhausted, and it’s not even supper time.”

“I know what you mean,” Summer said, sidling over. There were no other chairs in here – this was the little cupboard room that Oskar and Callum went into when they had private matters to discuss, there was only room for a desk and a single

chair, the rest of the space was taken up with piles of papers and books. She perched on the edge of the desk, facing Oskar.

“Sam visited today.”

Oskar leaned forward. “Sam? As in, Sam of Sam’s hill? That woman, I assume?”

She nodded. “Yes, it was strange. She was kind to me, though. Gave me this,” Summer pulled a necklace out from under the neck of the gown. Oskar leaned forward to inspect it.

It was a simple necklace, and he recognized it at once.

“That’s a worry-stone necklace. People call them quiet amulets, pillow knots, and all sorts of things. Ye rub at them to soothe your mind when you’re anxious, and they take in your worries. Or so the stories go, o’ course.”

“Oh,” Summer said, sounding surprised. “I just thought it was pretty.”

“It’s an unusual color. I like the flower carved on it, too. Verra pretty.”

“It’s a Moon’s Tears flower, I think.”

“Ah, so it is,” Oskar leaned back in his chair again, grinning at his wife. Now that Summer was here, he could feel the knot of arousal tightening in his gut. He felt as though she’d come



here to talk about something, so he was determined to keep his hands off her, for a while at least. What sort of husband and wife couldn't have a simple conversation without grappling with carnal thoughts?

Oskar cleared his throat. "Did Callum tell ye about our money problems?"

Summer, who'd been fiddling with her worry-stone necklace with a dreamy expression, snapped back to Earth. Her eyes widened.

"Money problems?"

"Aye. We're losing money like nobody's business. I cannae figure out where it's going tae, either. I thought we had more money than that."

Summer looked horrified, and Oskar wished he hadn't said anything. They were barely married, for heaven's sake. Couldn't he just let her settle in and get used to her new life without unloading all of his problems on her?

"Dinnae worry about it, though," Oskar said quickly. "We'll figure it out. Callum's on the job, so we'll get tae the bottom o' all this soon enough."

Summer nodded, smiling. "I'm sure you will. Well, I just came by to see you. It feels like an age since this morning."

Heat leaped up Oskar's chest at the mention of *this morning*. He'd come so close to properly bedding her, so close it almost hurt. It had taken far too long for his arousal to calm itself down, too. He eyed Summer closely, wondering if she felt the same heat. It was always harder to tell in women. Men were almost laughably obvious, but women? You had to be ready to read their little glances, hear their breaths coming faster, watch the way they watched you.

Summer was watching him now. She had her hands twisted together in her lap; her worry-stone hanging forgotten around her neck. She was biting her lip, her gaze darting around. Oskar leaned forward just a little, without even realizing that he'd decided to do it. Summer mirrored the moment, leaning forward too.

She was a little higher up, since she was sitting on the desk. It would be the easiest thing to pull her down from the desk onto his lap, where she'd feel his hardness pressing against her, a very blatant hint.

Summer leaned forward a little further, her gaze flicking down to his lips and back up again. Her little pink tongue darted out to wet her bottom lip, and the last of Oskar's resolve broke.

Well, he was only human, after all.

He grabbed Summer around the waist, pulling her effortlessly down onto his lap. Summer gave a little squeak, but quickly regained her balance, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. She pressed her lips to his, and Oskar tasted the sweet wine she must have had earlier.

It made him giddy. He pulled her closer, almost crushing her into his chest, wanting to be closer and closer and *closer*, but never quite close enough. His tongue delved into her mouth, and Summer made a muffled little noise of pleasure. The noise went straight down through Oskar's chest into his gut, making the sharp feeling of arousal even more intense.

They pulled away for breath, and Oskar hastily scanned Summer's face for signs of discomfort.

He found none. Summer's face was flushed, her lips swollen and red, and her eyes were dark with unmistakable lust. Her fingers wound themselves into his hair, and she was breathing hard and heavy. She *wanted* this. She wanted *him*.

And ye gods, did he want her.

*Why can't I have her?* Oskar thought wildly. *She's my wife. She wants me. If we get a baby started, nobody will have a bad word to say about her. She wants me.*

Oskar found himself thinking of where he could place Summer in the room. It would have to be on the desk, right? Or perhaps he could just pull her up onto her knees here, so she knelt over him. He pulled desperately at her skirts, slipping his hand underneath. His palm had barely touched warm skin when there was a knocking at the door.

It was a loud, heavy knock, the sort of knock that immediately preceded someone just flinging open the door and walking in.

Callum's knock, in short.

Oskar almost jumped out of his skin, nearly tipping Summer off his lap onto the floor. Summer leaped off him, straightening her skirts and managing to return to some semblance of respectability just as the door swung open.

As Oskar had predicted, it was Callum. For the second time today, he felt a stab of annoyance at his faithful steward. Callum didn't seem at all himself lately and didn't seem to care if he annoyed or hurt Oskar. He'd been very impolite to Summer, too.

"Yes?" Oskar rasped, trying not to wince at how hoarse and lust-addled his voice might sound.

As usual, Callum didn't bat an eyelid.

"I came tae fetch ye for the council meeting," Callum raised an eyebrow. "Did ye forget, Oskar? I thought ye might have done. That's why I came back." He glanced pointedly at Summer. "Just as well, eh?"

"I didn't forget," Oskar lied. "Anyway, what are they going tae do, start wi' out me?"

"They have before," Callum retorted. He glanced at Summer again. "Shall I tell them ye will not be coming? Or not coming yet? I can tell them that ye are with Lady McLeod."

That sent a pang of fear through Oskar. They'd come close to Summer being all but banished to her chamber and condemned to do nothing but sew and bear children. He'd learned since

then that the council were changing their minds, but they weren't out of danger just yet. Not by a long shot. The council had stretched their muscles, and he was just starting to learn how powerful they could be.

Best to stay on their good side for now.

“No, no, that's quite all right,” Oskar said hastily, getting to his feet. His arousal had gone down, thankfully. Callum tended to have that sort of effect on a person.

Oskar glanced apologetically at Summer. She looked disappointed, and the flush was dying from her cheeks.

“I'm sorry, Love. I'd better go and see tae this. Callum can stay here with ye, if ye like – he's not sitting in on this meeting.”

Summer looked away. Oskar frowned; there was something in her face when he mentioned Callum, but he hadn't been able to read what it was.

“No, thank you,” she said, polite as you like. That hot, intense look had gone from her eyes, and Oskar wondered if he'd be able to put it back again. “I'll let you get back to work. I wouldn't want to keep you.”

“I'm sorry, Summer,” Oskar said softly, and Summer only smiled, laying a hand on his arm.

“I understand, Oskar,” she murmured. “I really do. Your Clan and your duty have to come first. I’m not going to make you choose.”

Standing up on tiptoe, Summer pressed a kiss to Oskar’s cheek. She smiled up at him, and that warm feeling spread through Oskar’s chest again. It was warmer and more wholesome than the feeling of lust. That had to be the love part of things.

“I’ll see you when I’m finished, then,” Oskar murmured. “All right, Callum. I’m all yours. Lead on.”

Callum, his face unreadable as always, made a neat bow, leading the way out of the room.

## CHAPTER 28



SUMMER STOOD in the crowded little office space, chewing her lip and trying, *trying* to think clearly. It was entirely Oskar's fault that she was so distracted. She kept seeing him in her mind's eye, so deliciously ruffled and *inviting*. He had a warm lap, and it was so delightful to lean against his solid chest.

*If only there weren't so many layers of clothes between us,* Summer thought, and then blushed red at her own daring thoughts.

She could still feel the scratch of his beard against her skin, the warm softness of his lips.

But cutting through the hazy, pleasurable feelings was Callum, his eyes like ice. Summer kept seeing the pouch of coins on his desk, and the little stash of coins under the window seat.

Perhaps Summer would have thought nothing of it, if Oskar hadn't told her about the ledgers seeming all wrong. She knew that Oskar wasn't a clerk. He was no accountant – he relied on his steward. The same steward that would have as much access to the Castle's treasury as he liked.

The guards' conversation made so much more sense to Summer now. If he told them he was taking money for Lady McLeod to buy things, they'd think badly of her. They'd never imagine that neither she nor Oskar knew a thing about it. Why would they when it was the steward who was taking the money? She'd be blamed when there wasn't money to feed their people. The guards changed shift all the time, so Callum would only need to mention to a handful of men about Lady McLeod's spending habits, and word would quickly go around.

Summer felt like a fool. Of course he'd stolen that money. Had she really watched the man hide away a pouch of gold coins from the treasury in a window seat, and assumed that there was a fair and reasonable explanation for it all?

Whether he'd told the guards she wanted the money for an ulterior motive or to cover his own tracks, one thing was clear.

Callum Lamb was stealing from them. And not just a few coins here and there – this was theft on a grand scale. Did he not understand how much it was hurting the Castle and the people in it?

*Perhaps he does, Summer thought grimly, and simply doesn't care.*

What now? She knew that Oskar would be busy with the councilors for a while. Should she wait?

Summer chewed her lip, imagining the conversation between herself and Oskar.



*What if he doesn't believe you?*

She flinched at the thought. Of course he would believe her. Why wouldn't he believe her?

*Because you're accusing one of his oldest, most trusted servant of stealing from him, when other people believe that you are the one who's spending all his money.*

Summer swallowed hard, fidgeting from foot to foot. Well, she had to do something. She couldn't just wait for the problem to resolve itself.

*I'll go and see Callum myself, Summer decided. I suppose he deserves to at least tell his side of the story.*



Summer fidgeted outside of Callum's office door for a few minutes, feeling like a naughty schoolgirl outside her headmistress' office.

She had never, ever had to confront a servant over stealing. Not that Callum was a servant, of course.

Apparently, there had been a maid that stole silverware when Summer was a baby. She was caught, and Vincent had sternly demanded an explanation. The girl had broken down into tears, and the truth was revealed – her mother was ill, and her medicine was expensive.

Having extracted a promise not to steal again – the silverware was of course returned – Vincent had decided to let her keep her position, and quietly paid for the mother’s medicine until she recovered. The maid had worked faithfully for them for about a decade, until she married and started her own family.

Perhaps there was some reason for Callum’s theft. Perhaps he was storing up the money for something further on down the line. Perhaps... Summer sighed, running out of possible excuses.

*Just knock on the door, you little coward, she told herself. Quick, before you lose your nerve.*

Knock, knock, knock.

“Come in,” Callum said sharply. Summer pushed open the door and slipped inside, feeling more out of place than ever. Callum got dutifully to his feet, raising his eyebrows. Papers spilled all over his desk, and Summer noticed the document he’d been trying to get Oskar to sign, lying on the top of a pile. Was that some sort of loan from a moneylender?

A flash of anger went through Summer. Whatever Callum’s reasons for stealing were, he was hurting the Castle, and Oskar in the bargain. Why try and make Oskar agree to a no doubt devastating loan, when Callum had taken a small fortune out of the treasury?

“Lady McLeod?” Callum prompted gently. “Is something the matter?”

Summer cleared her throat. “Yes, Callum, there is. Those guards at the treasury door. They said that you had something for me, something I had asked for.”

Callum raised his eyebrows higher if that was possible. “I believe I said that they were probably mistaken, Lady McLeod. In fact, if they’re the men I’m thinking of, there is a good chance they were drinking at their post. A serious offense, o’ course. I daresay ye smelled the alcohol. Or rather, maybe not – delicate ladies like yourself often don’t notice the smell o’ strong spirits. It was an easy mistake to make.”

*He’s trying to make me defensive, Summer thought. And it’s working. Stay calm, Summer. Just stay calm.*

“They weren’t drunk, Callum,” Summer said shortly. “You had just collected something from the treasury that you told them I had requested. I couldn’t understand what they meant, until I saw that pile of gold coins on your desk.”

Callum’s face didn’t change, but something flashed in his eyes.

“What coins? There’s no money here, Lady McLeod. Are ye tired, My Lady? Perhaps some rest—”

“I know what I saw,” Summer interrupted. She didn’t look over at the window seat. Somehow, she had a feeling that revealing that she knew about his hiding place would be a bad idea. He’d just move it, anyway. “I know that you stole that money.”

Callum sat down heavily, folding his hands over his stomach. It was disrespectful to sit in a Lady's presence without being invited, Summer knew that much, but she wasn't particularly interested in the minutiae of propriety right now.

"So, let me get this straight," Callum said pleasantly. "Ye *think* that ye saw a bag o' coins on my desk, and immediately assumed that I'd stolen them."

"I don't *think* I saw anything. I know I did."

"How do ye knew they were stolen? Perhaps it was my money."

"With a note saying, '*Do not remove from the treasury*'? I doubt it."

Callum's expression hardened further. "Perhaps it was my wages. I do get paid, Lady McLeod, and my wages are not a pittance, like ye pay yer fine London servants."

Summer gave a short laugh. "A huge pouch full of gold coins? There must have been hundreds in there. I know you're paid generously, but not *that* generously."

Callum eyed her for a long moment. Summer forced herself to stand still, keeping her chin up. She wasn't going to let him browbeat her.

"I still maintain that ye are wrong, Lady McLeod," he continued. "Ye said that ye saw a bag o' coins on my desk. I

say otherwise. Nobody else saw coins on my desk – and people have been in and out of this office, including Laird McLeod himself. What makes ye think anyone will listen tae ye?”

“I have evidence,” Summer said, struggling to hold onto her temper. “How dare you, Callum? You were just about to make Oskar sign some ridiculous loan agreement with a... with a *moneylender* when you’re so blatantly stealing from the treasury. How is that fair?”

Callum got slowly to his feet, sighing.

“Ah, ye are a sharp one, and no mistake. Sharper than yer husband, that is for sure. Oskar would never have noticed.”

Summer sucked in a breath. A confession?

“Well, I did notice,” Summer said. Callum walked around the side of the desk, and Summer automatically shrank back. He didn’t come near her, though. Callum didn’t even look at her.

“And what, exactly, did ye have tae gain by confronting me?”

“I wanted to give you a chance to tell your side.”

Callum nodded slowly, pursing his lips. “Well, now, that is very kind o’ ye. So, am I to understand nobody else knows about this?”

Summer's words died in her throat. The full stupidity of her actions suddenly laid out in front of her.

*What was I thinking?* she thought wildly. *What have I done?*

It was only when the door closed softly and the lock clicked that Summer fully understood how stupid she had been.

Callum wasn't a nervy young maid, stealing silverware to buy medicine for his mother. He wasn't dabbing his eyes on the corner of his apron while Vincent and a severe housekeeper lectured him about the evils of theft.

No, he was a grown man, strong, experienced, and powerful. A man who'd probably been doing this for a very long time.

Summer, on the other hand, was a stupid young girl, who had just walked boldly into a criminal's office and threatened to expose him. What was more, she'd walked in alone, with no one nearby to hear a thing.

She spun around just in time to see Callum's fist fly out toward her. She didn't see it land, but she certainly felt it.

The blow landed against her stomach, knocking the breath out of her body and sending a jolt of horrendous pain through her gut. She could have sworn that her feet left the ground at the impact. Summer opened her mouth to scream, to cry out, to beg, to do anything, but nothing came out but a pained whine. She crumpled to the dusty, unswept floor, desperately trying to suck air into her lungs. It was as if her lungs had given up

entirely on air, and her stomach and guts were trying to fight their way out of her body.

Her vision blurred and turned red for a moment, as her body tried to come to terms with the blow it had just been dealt.

*You really do see stars*, she thought dizzily, trying to get her bearings. The world had lurched into double.

She saw Callum's boots and flinched, imagining that he was about to kick her in the face. Instead, a heavy hand came down, seizing her hair and hauling her upward.

The world spun again, and Summer frantically tried to get her rubbery legs underneath her, to take the pressure of the awful, stabbing pain in her scalp. Keen not to be forgotten, the clenching agony in her gut throbbed, and Summer pressed her lips together, terrified that she was going to vomit.

Part of Summer's mind, the small part that stayed calm and wasn't screaming in terror at her own stupidity, pointed out that Callum had punched her in the stomach so that there'd be no visible bruises or cuts. Nothing she could show to the council and point the finger at Callum.

Not that they'd believe her. For such a demure, slim man, Callum had a devilish strength. He'd twisted his hands in her hair, meaning that moving her head even a quarter of an inch sent a searing pain across Summer's scalp. She didn't want to move, anyway. Even moving her eyes made her stomach twist and lurch. It was throbbing, and she could still feel the impact of the punch.

*Am I just weak, or is he just strong?* Summer thought desperately.

She saw Callum's face, as calm and composed as ever, and then something silver flashed in front of her face. A cold, sharp blade pressed against the front of her throat, and Summer went very, very still. The pain in her hair and stomach faded away, and her world narrowed to the blade against her throat.

It didn't take much imagination to work out what a simple flick of Callum's wrist would do. It would slice open Summer's throat. She'd bleed out in seconds. Summer wanted to swallow hard but didn't dare. How sharp was this blade? It was icy cold and might already be cutting into her skin.

"There we are," Callum said, conversationally. "Now you seem calm. Now you're seeing sense. We can have a conversation now, can't we?"

Summer didn't know whether he wanted her to nod or speak. She contented herself with doing nothing at all.

"No one else knows about this, yes?" Callum asked.

She gave a tiny nod. It pulled on her scalp, where Callum still had a wicked grip on her hair.

"Good. Now, if ye know what's good for ye, ye will keep ye mouth shut, aye? If ye breathe a word tae Oskar – and I'll know if ye do, believe me – then I'll cut your lying tongue out o' your mouth before I cut your throat. Got it?"



“You’ll hang,” Summer managed, feeling that she couldn’t possibly just stand here and nod politely. Not that she dared nod. “You’ll hang if you kill me.”

Callum grinned, leaning forward until his nose brushed Summer’s.

“Only if I’m caught, Lass. Besides, what concern will it be o’ yours? Ye will be dead. Do ye think ye are the first nosy lass I’ve taken care of? Now, if ye just do your duty and keep your mouth shut, ye and me won’ have a problem. Otherwise, well...” he chuckled, “ye will wish ye listened tae me. Dinnae say a word about what ye think ye saw, or I’ll spill every drop o’ ye worthless English blood.”

Tears pricked Summer’s eyes. Her stomach clenched, and she knew that she was going to be sick. Her scalp burned, and she was sure she’d leave at least half of her hair behind in Callum’s hand.

“I’ll keep my mouth shut,” she whispered, hating herself as she did so.

“Verra good. Clever lass. Now get out, and don’t let me see ye around here again.”

In an instant, the blade was away from Summer’s throat, and she could breathe again. Then Callum shoved her away from him, toward the door. Stumbling on weak legs that wouldn’t support her, Summer banged her head, hard, on the door. She fumbled desperately at the handle, tugging with an edge of hysteria before she remembered that it was locked. The key

stuck out of the lock, and Summer tore the skin off one of her fingers trying to force it to turn.

The door flew open, and Summer raced out into the corridor, tears streaming down her face. She ran as fast as her rubbery legs would carry her down the hallway, not entirely sure whether Callum's laughter really was following her, or whether it was just her imagination.

## CHAPTER 29



SUMMER MADE it all the way back to her chamber and managed to vomit neatly into the clean chamber pot under her bed. Then she sank onto the rug by her bed and began to sob.

She felt like such a fool. How could she have just walked into Callum's office and expected him to crumble under a single accusation? What if he just explained it all away and everyone believed him? Summer drew in a ragged breath, squeezing her eyes closed. She still felt sick, even though there was nothing in her stomach to throw up. Her belly throbbed, and she just knew there'd be a horrible bruise there. Her scalp stung, and Summer could still feel the phantom pressure of a sharp blade along her throat.

She shuddered, her stomach twisting again.

"Lady Summer? Lady Summer, what on Earth is that matter?"

Summer flinched at the sound of Alice's voice, cringing away. Alice came out of the little washroom tacked onto the chamber, linens in her arms. Her eyes were wide and panicky, and Summer realized with embarrassment that she must have heard her sobbing and vomiting.

Alice tossed away the linens and hurried across the chamber to kneel down beside Summer. She moved away the sour-smelling chamber pot, and smoothed Summer's tangled, sweaty hair away from her forehead. The motion made Summer's damaged scalp hurt again, and Summer ducked her head, wincing.

Alice reared back a little, frowning.

“Lady Summer, what’s wrong? Has someone hurt you?”

“Am I bleeding here?” Summer croaked, tapping her finger against the place on her throat where Callum had held the knife. Her skin felt numb there, and she half expected to feel the trickle of blood running along her skin.

Alice frowned. “No, you’re not. What’s the matter? Why are you being sick? It’s too soon for you to be pregnant. Did you eat something bad?”

Summer could hear the echo of Callum’s pleasant, light voice in her head.

*Dinnae say a word about what ye think ye saw, or I’ll spill every drop o’ ye worthless English blood.*

She shivered. The blood had pounded in her ears all the way here, and now that she was here, it felt as though all of her blood had drained into her legs, leaving her cold and shaking. Alice dragged a blanket off the bed, draping it around her shoulders.

“Come on, Lady Summer,” Alice murmured, slipping an arm around Summer’s shoulders. “Tell me what happened. Ye can trust me. If somebody hurt ye, I’ll knock their teeth down their throat for ye. Then I’ll let Laird McLeod have a go.”

Summer smiled weakly. She reached up to touch the worry stone, rubbing her thumb against the smooth dip in the center. It oddly did make her feel better.

“It was Callum,” Summer whispered, not even sure whether she was saying the words aloud or in her head.

She was saying them aloud, judging by how Alice stiffened.

“Callum Lamb? Laird McLeod’s steward?”

Summer sniffled. “Do you believe me?”

Alice tutted. “What sort o’ question is that? O’ course I believe ye, My Lady. What happened? What did he do?”

“He said that if I told anyone he’d cut my throat. He held a blade to my throat.”

Alice’s gaze sharpened. “Did he force himself on ye?”

“No, nothing like that. I caught him... caught him stealing. I saw him hide some money that he’d taken from the treasury, even though we’re losing so much money. I threatened to tell

Oskar, and he punched me in the stomach and threatened to kill me if I said a word.”

Summer let out a heavy breath. There. It was all said. She'd already thumbed her nose at what Oskar had said.

Now what?

Alice had pressed her lips together tightly. “That’s fair awful, Lady Summer. What are ye going to do about it?”

Summer got uncertainly to her feet, and wobbled over to the washbasin in the corner, peering at herself in the mirror propped above it.

There really was no evidence that Callum had ever hurt her at all. Her hair was disheveled, and her scalp stung whenever she touched it or her hair. You couldn't see that, of course. Summer poked at her stomach and let out a moan of pain, but that couldn't be seen, either. Her eyes were red rimmed, her face blotchy. She tilted back her head, tentatively running a finger along her throat.

There was nothing there. Not a line, not a mark, not a hint that Callum had pressed a sharp blade there. Summer had half expected to see blood flowing down her neck from a gaping wound, although she knew that was just her imagination.

Alice appeared behind her in the mirror, lips pressed together.

“Lady Summer, ye cannot let this go,” she said firmly. “Callum can’t get away wi’ this.”

“I can’t do anything about it,” Summer said brokenly. “They’ll never believe me.”

Alice shrugged. “I hear ye are very persuasive. Convinced a few o’ the council members to change their minds. That’s no easy, ye know.”

“But I’ll need *evidence*.”

Alice paused, thinking. “Well, did ye see what he did wi’ the money?”

“Yes, he put it in—”

“Don’t tell me,” Alice said, holding up a hand. “Don’t tell anyone until the time is right, or he’ll just move it. I mean it, Summer. Ye have tae be careful here. Ye need to speak up, but a man like Callum isn’t to be trifled with. He’s too experienced, and people trust him.”

Summer turned to face her friend. “Thank you for believing me, Alice.”

Alice smiled sadly. “I’m a woman, Lady Summer. I know what it’s like to be ignored and never believed until it’s too late. My advice is to go straight to Laird McLeod. He’s in wi’ the councilors now. Tell them the truth, all o’ it.”

“But Callum—”

“He’s too clever to murder ye after ye accuse him of stealing. He might as well sign his own death warrant. Ye cannot be timid now, Lady Summer. Ye are no a shrinking violet anymore. Ye are Lady McLeod, and ye have a duty tae yourself – tae all of us.”

Summer drew in a breath. Alice was right. She was Lady McLeod.

*Think regal thoughts, Summer.*

“You’re right. Give me a moment to clean myself up, and... and think about what I’m going to say.”



Two guards moved in front of the door, smiling apologetically down at Summer.

“I’m sorry, Lady Summer. They’re in a meeting.”

Summer drew in a breath. Alice was following behind her, and when she glanced back at her, Alice flashed an encouraging smile.

“I know,” Summer said, with as much dignity as she could muster. “Now, let me in.”



The guards exchanged nervous glances.

“Can ye not wait until they are finished, Lady Summer?”

Summer sighed. “No. I can’t. I’m sorry.”

One guard shrugged at the other, and they stepped aside. Trying not to grin in triumph or run away like the devil was at her heels, Summer hadn’t yet decided what she wanted to do, Summer tossed back her newly redone hair and threw open the doors, marching into the Meeting Room.

The councilors were all in their usual seats, with Oskar on his feet, leaning over a selection of papers and maps. They all turned to look up as Summer came storming in.

She saw Callum standing behind Oskar’s chair, and she stopped dead.

*He’s not supposed to be here, she thought wildly. He’s supposed to be sitting this meeting out.*

Well, that made no odds now. No doubt half anticipating her dramatic entrance, Callum had perhaps decided to join the meeting after all.

Summer realized that she was just standing there, staring at them all, saying nothing. The councilors were glancing at each other, frowning, and Summer realized she had to say something now, as soon as possible. Almost without thinking about it, her hand fluttered up to her worry-stone necklace.

“Summer?” Oskar prompted gently. “What is it?”

Summer cleared her throat. “I know why we’re struggling for money. I know where it’s gone.”

That got everyone’s attention. The councilors glanced at each other, sitting forward in their seats. Only Callum did not react, smiling blandly in Summer’s direction.

Oskar’s eyes lit up.

“Ye do? Really? How did ye find out?”

“Callum Lamb has been stealing it,” Summer said bluntly.

There was a split second of silence, then the other councilors burst out laughing.

“Callum? Stealing?” Simon roared. “Ye have wool for brains, Lass. Callum has been serving Laird McLeod and his predecessors since before ye were born.”

Oskar wasn’t smiling. “Why do ye say this, Summer?”

His tone sobered up the laughing councilors. They seemed to realize that their Laird was taking it seriously, and suddenly it wasn’t so funny anymore.

“I saw him take it,” Summer said. She had meant to say where she’d found the money, but somehow the words wouldn’t come. She had no opportunity after that, because Callum stood up, and there was immediate silence.

“This is embarrassing,” Callum said, with an awkward laugh. “The thing is, Lady McLeod asked me for some money shortly after she arrived. A very, very large amount, and begged for my discretion. I thought nothing of it – she is our Lady, after all. The fault is mine – I didn’t realize just how tight our finances were. I asked for the money to place in the treasury, but Lady McLeod claimed that it was gone. The guards at the treasury will say that I mentioned that I was bringing the money to Lady McLeod. She recently asked me for a larger amount, and o’ course I had to say no. She flew into a rage and said she would accuse me o’ stealing it. I didn’t believe she would go ahead wi’ it. I’m sorry tae waste the council’s time.”

A number of the councilors sighed and rolled their eyes, glowering at Summer. Oskar glanced between Summer and Callum, looking like a puppy who didn’t know who to run to. Timothy cleared his throat, leaning forward.

“If it was so very secret, Callum, why mention it to the guards at the treasury?” Timothy asked slowly. “Ye know how gossipy they are.”

Callum’s expression hardened. “Are ye accusing me o’ something?”

Timothy raised his hands, palms out. “These are serious accusations.”

“Aye, very serious,” Jacob spoke up. As always, Jacob earned attention when he spoke. He coughed weakly, leaning forward in his seat. “These accusations must be investigated properly. Do ye consent to this, all o’ ye?”

There was a general murmuring of assent, and Callum gracefully inclined his head. Summer stood where she was, uncomfortably aware that nobody was asking *her* what she thought or whether she agreed. Then Callum turned sharp, cold eyes on her, and Summer felt as though she were pinned to the spot.

“I must ask that Lady McLeod be confined to the *traditional* Lady McLeod’s apartments,” he said coolly, “while the investigation goes on. Perhaps, when my innocence is proved, we can discuss her place in the Castle again. I think Lady McLeod had proved that she ought not to be involved. She has the best of intentions, I’m sure, but she simply cannot run around accusing faithful councilors of stealing simply to solve our financing problems,” Callum paused, glancing around the table. “Why, any one of us could be next.”

Summer cursed him. She could see the councilors withdrawing, looking at her with new and more suspicious eyes. They imagined themselves being accused at random of stealing, lying, of serious accusations like treason.

*They don’t believe me*, she thought, her heart sinking. *They don’t want to believe me.*

Someone took her arm in a tight grip, and Summer flinched back before she realized that it was Oskar.

“Stop wriggling,” he said sharply. “Ye have tae come wi’ me, Summer.”

He escorted her down the hallway, and only stopped when the murmur of the councilors had faded away. Summer wrenched her arm away.

“Let go of me!” she hissed. “Do you think I’m a silly woman too, who doesn’t know what she saw?”

“I don’t know what tae think, Summer,” Oskar said, his voice tight. “This is Callum we’re talking about. I... I don’t know what tae believe. I don’t want tae believe it, but I don’t want tae think that you’re lying, either. I just want tae hope that it’s some sort o’ misunderstanding.”

“You’ve seen it too, haven’t you, Oskar?” Summer whispered. “He’s been acting strangely since I arrived. Pushing you toward that loan, making the accounts so incomprehensible – you must see how strange this is.”

Oskar swallowed hard. “It is odd. And the money... I don’t believe for one minute that ye were taking all that money for yourself.”

“Thank you. That... that means a lot to me. Look, Oskar, I didn’t want to say anything, because I didn’t want him to have the chance to hide them, but I saw where Callum hid the bag of money. And all the other bags of money that he’s taken.”

Oskar’s gaze sharpened. “Tell me, then. I’ll need to collect evidence if ye ever want tae get out o’ Lady McLeod’s

apartments.”

“Haven’t I been staying in Lady McLeod’s apartments?”

Oskar winced. “No.”

“Right. Well, that’s worrying. Listen, there’s a loose wooden board in the window seat in Callum’s office. That’s where he put the bag of money. Go and look, you’ll find it.”

Oskar chewed his lip. “All right. All right, I’ll check.”

Footsteps came behind them, and they turned around to see a blank-faced Callum and a group of soldiers. One of them was pushing Alice away.

“Let me go wi’ her!” Alice shouted. “She’ll need someone to wait on her when she’s in those wretched apartments.”

At a nod from Callum, the soldier shoved Alice aside.

“I think Lady McLeod would benefit from a little solitude and reflection,” Callum said coolly. “Don’t ye think, Oskar? Ye are taking her to the apartments, aren’t ye? Ye do want a fair trial, aye?”

Oskar swallowed. “Aye.”

“What’s all this business about the apartments?” Summer whispered. “What does it mean?”

“They’re almost like fancy prison cells,” Oskar muttered. “They were built a few Laird McLeods ago, when his wife had an affair and got pregnant. The baby died, he said she was mad, and locked her up in a set o’ rooms for the rest o’ her life. They’ve been used a few times whenever a Lady McLeod has misbehaved or embarrassed her husband,” he cleared his throat. “They aren’t verra cheerful.”

Panic clawed at Summer’s throat. She glanced at Callum, who met her gaze squarely. This time, she saw delight and malice dancing in his eyes.

“I hope ye are not going to defy the decision o’ the council, Lady McLeod,” he said gently. “I wouldnae like tae see ye forced into the apartments against yer will.”

Summer lifted her chin. “Of course not. I’m quite capable of walking by myself, thank you.”

Callum looked disappointed.

The little procession escorted Summer to a door hidden behind a thick tapestry. The door was open, and Summer stepped inside before she could be pushed. It was dark inside.

“Everything ye need is already in there, Lady McLeod,” Callum said cheerfully. Summer spun around just in time to see the door slamming closed. A key clicked in the lock.

She was alone.



## CHAPTER 30



THE SLAM of the door seemed to echo around the halls. Oskar stayed where he was, his heart thudding. He felt sick. Had he really just locked his wife – his precious Summer – in poor old Lady McLeod’s apartments? Everyone knew she hadn’t been mad when she went in, but she was mad when she came out.

Callum nodded at the soldiers, and they let the tapestry fall in front of the door. It was as if there was no door at all. You could walk along these corridors a thousand times and never guess that there were a series of apartments behind the walls.

Oskar had been in those apartments once. There was a small washroom, a large sitting room, and a small chamber. That was all. The walls were thick, the windows were small, and covered up with heavy, dark curtains in any case. Horrifying, bloody paintings and tapestries covered the walls, and there a chill in those rooms even in the depths of summer. In the middle of the day, the rooms were still dark. Lady McLeod had lost her mind in there, and other unlucky women had been barred up by their husbands over the centuries, left and forgotten. Misery had seeped into the walls, and the rooms stank of it.

“Come, Oskar,” Callum said quietly, placing a hand on his shoulder. Oskar wanted to shake it off. “The lass is just trying

tae help, but really, ye don't need this now. We need tae focus on strengthening your position. Now, have ye thought any more about that loan? I know that it isn't ideal, but I really do think—”

“I think I need a moment, Callum,” Oskar said, a trifle hoarsely. “It's... been quite a day.”

Callum stared at him for a long moment, then stepped away, nodding.

“Of course, of course. We'll talk at supper, which should be ready any minute now. I'll let you get your thoughts together. Now, shall we put some sentries at the door? Guards! Two men here, if you please.”

Two soldiers dutifully took up their positions at either side of the tapestry, as if Summer would somehow manage to escape.

*I'm going to get her out,* Oskar thought, with a sudden rush of anger. He didn't want to believe that she was right – because that would mean that Callum had betrayed him. But he also didn't want to believe that she was wrong. He didn't think Summer was often wrong.

He turned away from Callum and began to walk back along the hallway. He heard Callum call after him, but Oskar walked quickly and his stride was long, and he soon left any pursuers behind.

Oskar slowed down, hardly taking any notice of where he was going. He came to a stop by a door, which promptly swung

open. An arm reached out, grabbed him, and hauled him inside.

Oskar's fists were up to fight his assailant before he realized who he was.

"Timothy!" Oskar gasped. "Ye scared the living daylights out o' me, man."

Timothy grinned sheepishly. "Sorry, sorry. I just needed to talk in private, away from the other councilors, and away from Callum."

The hair stood up on the back of Oskar's neck.

"Do ye believe what Summer said?" he asked.

"Do *ye* believe her?" Timothy countered.

Oskar bit his lip. "I don't know. She told me where to look tae find the money, so I suppose... I suppose I'll find out."

"The thing is," Timothy said, glancing around nervously, "Callum has been in charge o' the Castle for a long time, since long before the old Laird died. Men don't like tae give up that sort o' power. There's always been a lot o' change on the council board. People who don't agree wi' Callum tend to leave – that's just how it is, aye? That doesn't sit right wi' me. I think we ought tae look into this properly."

Oskar swallowed hard. “All right. We’ll check it out now.”

Timothy smiled at him, placing his hand on his shoulder. “I know this is hard, Oskar, but I think ye are doing the right thing.”

Oskar looked away. “I cannae leave Summer locked in those apartments.”

“Aye, I understand. I couldn’t see my wife there, either. I think maybe that’s Callum’s blind spot – he disnae understand just how far someone will go for a person they love.”



Oskar’s heart pounded. He slipped into Callum’s office, which was mercifully empty, Timothy tiptoeing in behind him. He felt like a child breaking his parents’ rules.

“Stay calm, Oskar,” Timothy instructed. “Ye need a witness, remember.”

The window seat. She’d told him to look in the window seat. Oskar glanced around the room, spotting the little wooden bench built in by the small stone window. Furs and blankets draped over the seat, but there was an odd wrinkle in the top fur, as if it had been dropped carelessly back into place.

*Maybe I’m overthinking it, Oskar thought, and I’m about to make a fool o’ meself in front of Timothy.*

He swept away the rugs and furs and found himself looking down at a perfectly innocuous wooden bench.

But Summer had said that it would be here. She wouldn't have lied to him about this. He had to trust her.

Oskar poked tentatively at the boards, testing for a loose patch.

He didn't have to search for long. One board raised up above the others, just far enough for Oskar to get his fingers into the edge. Then it came up quite easily, revealing the space underneath the window seat.

The first thing Oskar saw was gold.

Gold coins, spilled out of their pouches, glittered in the light. Spiders, disturbed from their perches, skittered away over the dusty velvet bags. There were dozens of bags, each one brimming with gold coins, spilling over, untouched.

Beside him, Timothy drew in a sharp breath.

“Must be hundreds o' coins here,” he murmured. “No, thousands. This can't have gone missing all at once, we'd have noticed. He must have been doing this for years, Oskar.”

Oskar stared down at all the money, the money his friend had stolen from him. Stolen, and then lied about. His throat felt tight, and Oskar felt sick.

“He lied,” Oskar murmured. “He lied tae me.”

“Well, I had tae.”

The two of them spun around.

Callum stood there in the doorway. He’d crept up on them, silently, and now he stood there, smiling. Smiling, as if nothing much had happened.

Oskar gestured to the money. “Ye stole all of this money from me. From us, Callum.”

Callum shrugged. “The way I look at it, I earned it. I worked as a drudge for that old man for years. And then, when he died, he left the position of Laird McLeod tae ye.”

Oskar frowned. “O’ course he did. I was his nephew. Ye didn’t really think ye would get tae be laird, did ye? It’s blood that counts.”

“Blood? *Blood?*” Callum spat. “Aye, it’s blood all right. The blood that men shed on the battlefield. It takes blood tae be a laird – doesn’t matter if it’s ye own blood. And me? I’m happy enough to shed whoever’s blood I need to get where I need tae be,” he paused, glancing down at his exposed hiding place with a chuckle. “It was never about the money. I was just coming tae move it – I had a feeling that big-mouthed bitch had seen where I put it.”

Oskar's hands clenched into fists. "Ye would have had me lock her up for... for how long?"

Callum shrugged. "As long as it took, I suppose. Ye never did know what was good for ye, Oskar."

"Ye would have had me betray my *wife*," Oskar bellowed. "Because o' your *lies*."

Callum sneered. "I would have had ye *die*, Oskar Lawson. Ye were never a good fit for this throne. It was always mine."

Oskar drew in a deep breath. "Aye, but it's not yours, is it? And it never will be. Timothy, fetch the guards."

Callum turned his cold eyes on Timothy, who visibly shrank back.

"Ah, Timmy. Ye know, I should have had ye put off the council years ago. Serves me right, I suppose. No good deed goes unpunished, eh?"

Timothy swallowed hard. "It's over, Callum. We've got enough evidence here to convince the council. Ye might find that ye don't have as many friends as ye thought."

Callum sighed theatrically. Oskar found himself stiffening. This wasn't over. Callum was far too relaxed, as if this was all part of a larger plan. Oskar opened his mouth to warn Timothy, but before he could speak, Callum's fist whipped around, a pair of brass knuckles gleaming. His fist connected with the

side of Timothy's head with a *crack*, and Timothy collapsed to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

Oskar's breath caught in his throat. Callum was standing between him and the exit. With Timothy down, Callum pulled out a knife, and grinned.

"Do ye know, I nearly cut Summer's pretty little throat wi' this knife," Callum said thoughtfully. "I don't know why I hesitated, actually. Aye, it would have been difficult to explain away, but given what happened next, I think it would have been a lot easier on everyone. Don't ye think?"

Oskar growled, balling up his fists. He had a knife in his boot, but if he dived down to get it, he just knew that Callum's knife would embed itself in his neck.

He'd practiced his swordsmanship with this man. He knew how quick and sharp Callum was. He knew how experienced he was.

He knew to be careful.

"I loved ye like a father, Callum," Oskar murmured, trying to keep his voice steady. He wanted to cry. "I trusted ye."

"Aye, and that's what made it so easy," Callum said, teeth gritted. "I wasn't going tae kill ye right away, Lad. If I couldn't convince ye to simply resign, I was going to make it quick and painless. In yer sleep, ye know? Do ye know how many men dream of dying in their sleep? When I fought all those bloody wars for ye cursed uncle, I used to hear whole



battlefields of them, all screaming and begging to go to sleep and just drift away. Few o' them did."

Oskar shivered. "I wasn't going tae be like him."

"I know, Lad," Callum soothed. "But ye are no a fit tae be Laird McLeod. Ye never were. It'll be over soon. I promise. If ye hadn't married that English lass, none o' this would have happened."

"Summer was the best thing that ever happened tae me," Oskar murmured. "I love her."

"Well, it's a pity she'll live out her days in those sad little apartments, then," Callum hissed. "Not that she's got many days tae live. I doubt that she's carrying your child, but better safe than sorry, eh?"

He lunged forward on the last word, his blade glittering through the air. Cursing the lack of space, Oskar threw himself the side. He wasn't quite quick enough, and the tip of the blade sliced through the side of his arm. It was a red-hot pain, searing through his arm, but Oskar set his teeth, determined not to let it distract him. Still no time to retrieve his knife from his boot.

There were voices and footsteps in the distance, and Oskar was sure that help was on the way. But Callum only needed a second or two to slip a knife between his ribs.

He tried to grab Callum's wrist and wrestle the knife away from him, but Callum whipped his other hand around, the one

with the brass knuckles, and brought it crashing into Oskar's cheek.

Oskar staggered backward, black spots dancing in his vision. He saw the light glint off the knife, sailing toward him, and reached blindly up to stop it. He grabbed Callum's wrist and *twisted*. A stronger man would have been able to resist, but Callum's wrist snapped like a twig. He shrieked, dropping the knife into his other hand and trying to stab Oskar in the stomach.

Oskar grabbed his hand, twisting it back and *pushing*.

Callum's own knife stabbed into his own stomach, the gut-churning *squelch* making Oskar shiver. He sucked in a breath, eyes widening.

The two men froze, twisted together, mid-grapple. Callum's jaw had dropped, and his eyes widened. They both glanced down together, where Callum's hand and Oskar's hand gripped the handle of the knife. Blood poured over the handle and over their hands. For the first time, Oskar registered the hot, sticky liquid, and his stomach churned. He let go, staggering backward. He was going to be sick; he was sure of it.

Eyes still wide with surprise, Callum staggered backward, clutching at the knife handle. His legs sagged, and he collapsed to the floor.

"Oh, my God," Timothy gasped, and Oskar turned to find that he'd regained consciousness, and had crawled over to lie near the door, his face gray and horribly bruised.

Oskar crawled forward, reaching out with a shaking hand to touch Callum.

“It’s... it’s all right, Callum,” Oskar gasped. “We’ll get ye a physician.”

“Physician! He tried tae kill ye!” Timothy said.

“Shut up!” Oskar roared. He tried to apply pressure around Callum’s wound, but it was too little, too late. Blood gushed, pooling on the floor around Callum’s body. It would stain, Oskar realized dimly.

Callum watched Oskar’s efforts to stop his lifeblood flowing away, his brow creased. He looked confused, but perhaps that was just the blood loss. He lifted a weak, bloodstained hand, gripping Oskar’s wrist.

“Leave it, Lad,” he rasped hoarsely.

“I’d have forgiven ye the money,” Oskar whispered. “I’d have forgiven ye most things, Callum. Ye were like a father tae me, the father I always wanted.”

“It’s best not to get the things ye want,” Callum said drowsily. “They’re always disappointing. Content yourself wi’ what ye have, that’s my advice.” His eyes were closing, color draining steadily from his face. He didn’t seem to be in any pain, and that made Oskar feel a little better.

“Maybe ye will be a better Laird McLeod than I thought,” Callum murmured.

Those were his last words. His eyes closed, his head lolled back, and the blood started spurting more sluggishly. Oskar sat back on his heels; his arms coated in blood. He was shivering violently.

A hand touched his shoulder, and Oskar flinched away.

“Just me, just me,” Timothy said reassuringly, holding up his hands. “Just me, Oskar. Let’s get ye out o’ here. This rooms stinks o’ death.”

Oskar allowed himself to be pushed to his feet and steered out of the room. He could see a group of soldiers hurrying toward them in the distance, but it all seemed very far away.

“Summer,” he gasped. “She cannae stay in those apartments any longer. We have tae get her out. I need tae go tae her, now.”

“Aye, Lad, and so ye shall. But let’s wash off that blood first, eh? Don’t want her to think she’s seeing a ghost. Bide ye time a little longer, Lad, and ye will see her soon.”

## CHAPTER 31



FOR A FEW MINUTES, Summer stood stock still, terrified. The rooms were freezing cold, and so dark that she'd needed time to adjust. But after a few deep breaths, she began to get her bearings.

She heard footsteps retreating, so it was apparent she wouldn't be released from these haunted apartments anytime soon. She sank to the ground by the door and cried.

And cried, and cried, until she was all out of tears and she was still locked in these hateful apartments. Summer wiped tears from her cheeks and got back to her feet. She might as well make the place feel homey while she was here.

The first thing Summer did was to tear down the thick curtains. That let in a good amount of light. Then she lit as many candles as she dared, stoked up the fire – there was dusty firewood available – searched in vain for food and found only a single withered apple, and then sat down heavily on the rug before the hearth.

*Am I going to die here?* Summer thought dizzily. Callum could come back at any moment and kill her. They could leave her

body here to rot and nobody would know if it wasn't for the smell.

She shivered. And kept shivering. The fire didn't seem to do much to warm up the room, so Summer trudged over to the bed in the other room. The sheets seemed clean, if very dusty and in need of a good airing. If Callum was going to come back and kill her, there wasn't much she could do about it, so she might as well rest.

Summer crawled into bed and fell asleep surprisingly fast.

She woke sometime later – she had no idea how long – to the sound of the door unlocking. In the dead silence of rooms, the noise was very loud indeed. Summer sat bolt upright, her heart pounding. From the bed, she could see into the large sitting room, but couldn't quite glimpse the doorway. She didn't dare move.

*Is this it? Is this how I die? Or is someone bringing me food and water, to remind me that I'm a prisoner and this is my life now?*

*I don't know which one is worse.*

A man's heavy tread echoed across the floor, and Summer began to breathe faster. She wished she'd thought of arming herself before she went to bed. There were some sturdy candlesticks that would have done the job.

Then Oskar stepped into view, and Summer's heart nearly stopped.

She gave a cry, almost stumbling out of bed, and raced toward him.

He looked exhausted. He wore a loose white shirt and plain breeches, which he hadn't worn before, and there was a bandage wrapped around his upper arm. Summer threw herself at him, flinging her arms around his broad shoulders, careful not to bump his injury.

"You're back," she whispered. "I thought I'd never see you again. What happened?"

"Callum is dead," Oskar said, his voice breaking. "Ye were right. He did steal the money, and he's been planning tae kill me since I arrived. I thought so highly o' him, and the whole time he was planning tae take my place as Laird McLeod."

Summer pulled back, cupping Oskar's face in her hands.

"Oh, Oskar. I'm so sorry."

Oskar swallowed hard, nodding. "I think it's time for a change on the council board. But that's a problem for another day. For now, ye are free." He held up the rusty keys, dropping them into Summer's hand. "I daresay ye cannae wait to get out o' here."

Summer paused, glancing around. "There's been a lot of misery in these rooms, but... well, I can't help but think that they could be better. People are the ones who breathe life into rooms, aren't they?"

Oskar cocked his head to one side. “I suppose so. What are ye getting at?”

Summer bit her lip. That familiar arousal was coiling in her stomach again. It was fairly shocking how closely related fear and arousal were. Only five minutes ago, she’d been in dire fear of her life, or of being locked up forever, and now—

Well, now she was feeling something very different. Summer stood on her tiptoes, pressing a chaste kiss to Oskar’s lips.

“Well, I just like the idea of having a private set of apartments like this. Nice and peaceful, you know.”

Some of the miserable, battle-weary expression was lifting from Oskar’s face. He cocked an eyebrow.

“Private, eh?”

Summer chuckled. “You know, I thought you’d pick up on that word.”

Oskar bent down to kiss her without another word. She eagerly pushed herself against him, trying to soothe the ache in her core. It wasn’t *enough*. She could feel Oskar’s hardness pushing against her hip, and when she wriggled experimentally against him, he gave a choked off moan. Summer liked that. She liked the powerful feeling it gave her, to make him feel that way.



*You don't even know what you're doing to make him feel that way*, Summer thought, laughter bubbling up inside her. She pressed harder against him, hoping that Oskar would take the lead now.

Instead, he pulled back, eyeing her closely.

“Are ye sure, Summer?”

She frowned. “Why would I not be sure?”

“Well, it's been a long day. A very traumatic day, and ye might find that... well, ye might not want to bed me for the first time in a set o' apartments said tae be haunted.”

Summer pursed her lips. “We'll give the ghosts a show, then.”

Oskar let out a belly laugh, shaking his head, and bent down, sweeping her off her feet. Summer squealed, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“I love you, Oskar Lawson,” she murmured.

Oskar walked them over to the bed and dropped Summer into the middle of it. It lifted up a cloud of dust, and the two burst out laughing.

“I have tae say,” Oskar choked, waving the dust, “I'm not sure *I love ye*, after ye made me breathe in all that dust.”

He climbed onto the bed, lowering himself over Summer, and kissed her. Summer arched her back, pressing herself against him. They had too many clothes again. She felt Oskar fumbling under her skirt until she felt his warm hand on the bare flesh of her thigh. He wasted no time, searching out the hot, wet core between her legs with his fingers. Summer caught her lower lip between her teeth.

Oskar's hand worked quickly, a familiar motion from their time in the private feasting room, building up a rhythm and working Summer rapidly up toward her climax. She dug her fingers into his bicep, wanting to tell him to slow down or stop or it would be *over*, but there was no time before her peak crashed down on her, and Summer found herself lying limp and boneless on the bed, gasping for breath.

Oskar withdrew his hand with a grin. "Am I finally going to get my turn now?"

Summer opened her mouth to say something, maybe something teasing about how she'd had enough now, but there was something about the hungry, intent expression on Oskar's face that made arousal curl in her stomach all over again. She could feel her own wetness against her thigh and felt her core throb in anticipation.

"I suppose so," she managed, breathlessly, and Oskar chuckled.

"Ye *suppose so*? That's hardly glowing, is it?"

Summer giggled and held out her arms. Oskar bent down to kiss her again, but there was something absent and

preoccupied in his kisses now. His fingers skittered over the swell of her breasts. Summer considered offering to take off her dress, but that would take a long time. Apparently, Oskar was thinking the same thing.

He leaned back, pulling off his shirt in one neat movement. Summer's mouth dried up at the sight of his well-sculpted abdomen, a soft trail of blond hair creating a sort of arrow heading toward the belt of his breeches. He undid his breeches, and hesitated.

“Ye are sure?”

“Yes,” Summer said, suddenly very curious. She propped herself up on her elbows, craning her neck.

Oskar chuckled to himself, then opened up his breeches completely, letting his member spring free.

The first thing that Summer noticed was that the hair down *there* was just as blond as the rest of it. She didn't know why that surprised her. The second thing was a little more worrying.

“Will that fit?” Summer asked in a small voice.

Oskar crawled forward, pressing his lips to hers again.

“Aye, and we'll go slow, I promise. It'll not hurt; I swear.”

“I know,” Summer murmured, wrapping her arms around his neck.

It felt odd when Oskar slipped himself inside her. Full, somehow. But it didn't hurt, just as he'd promised. Oskar began to move slowly, gently, rocking back and forward, letting Summer get used to the movement.

Once she was used to it, any discomfort faded to nothing, and then... then there was something oddly pleasurable in the rocking movement. It felt different to when Oskar had touched her there, but also similar. Summer pulled Oskar close, closing her eyes and listening to his muffled noises of pleasure, and rolled her hips to meet his.

For a split second, the absurdity of the whole situation hit her – they were making love for the first time ever in *this* place, of all places, after Oskar had nearly been murdered and she had almost been locked up to die alone in these very apartments.

Summer didn't have time to giggle, or say anything to Oskar, because he suddenly began to pick up the pace, moving faster, hips snapping forward. Summer's breath was almost knocked out of her, and she clutched onto his shoulders for dear life.

The pleasant feeling that was slowly prodding her back into arousal was suddenly in full bloom. Oskar was breathing heavily, murmuring things under his breath in what sounded like Gaelic. He was close too Summer was sure of it.

Almost before she knew what was happening, Summer's climax stole up on her, washing through her body in hot,

tingling waves. Oskar made a few more thrusts then spilled inside her, gasping for breath.

“Oh, I love ye,” Oskar whispered, lowering himself down again to push his face into Summer’s neck.

Summer could only smile, breathless and dizzy from it all, and pressed a lazy kiss onto his cheek.

They lay like that for a moment or two, catching their breath. After a while, Summer pushed lazily at Oskar’s good arm.

“Get off me, you lout, you’re heavy.”

Oskar rolled off her with a groan, and they lay side by side, staring up at the ceiling.

It occurred to Summer then that neither of them had even had the patience to undress properly. Her skirts were rucked up around her waist, and Oskar’s breeches were tangled around his knees. It suddenly seemed very, very funny, and Summer began to giggle, rolling over to rest her chest on his chest.

“What are ye laughing at, Lass?” Oskar asked, his voice a low, satisfied rumble.

“Oh, nothing. I was thinking that we’ll have time enough to undress properly next time.”

Oskar winced, glancing down at himself. “It’s no very romantic for our first time, eh? And here I was promising myself I’d do better.”

Summer leaned forward to kiss him.

“I think you did quite good enough.”

“Ye liked it?”

Summer rolled her eyes. “You couldn’t tell?”

Oskar chuckled. “Aye, I could, but I didnae want tae be too cocky about it.”

Summer snorted. She lay back down again with a satisfied sigh, listening to Oskar’s heart beat against her cheek. She couldn’t even hear the noise of the Castle outside the walls. For all these apartments might be haunted, they were certainly peaceful.

“We should do it again properly, before we leave,” Summer mumbled tiredly.

“Ye gods, Lass. Let a man breathe. I can’t just go for it again so soon.”

“Why not?”

Oskar groaned. "I think I've met my match in ye, Summer Murray."

Summer cackled. "That's *Lady McLeod* to you."

## EPILOGUE



### *Six Months Later*

THEY HAD NOT MOVED into the “haunted” apartments, despite Summer’s vague suggestions that they do so. Oskar found it funny that locking Summer in those sad apartments had been done to break her spirit, to frighten her into behaving.

Well, it had done the opposite of that.

Oskar woke gently that morning, rather than being knocked out of a deep sleep in the gray dark before dawn, only to be presented with a long list of tasks by Callum. He’d changed the way the Castle was run, and it was for the better. People were happier. *He* was happier, and no longer felt guilty about spending a little time with his wife now and then.

Oskar yawned, stretching his arms above his head, and wondered how much longer he had to lie in bed. Judging by the light streaming in through the window, he had another hour at the most.

Things were better in McLeod Castle. With the money Callum had tried to steal returned, their finances were healthy once again, and Summer was much beloved by their people. Callum himself was buried out in the woods behind the Castle.



Timothy had wanted to burn his body, but Oskar had insisted. He'd loved Callum like a father, even despite the betrayal. Oskar had even visited the grave once or twice. He told Callum that he forgave him. He wasn't sure if anyone was listening, but it made Oskar feel good to say it.

Summer lay beside Oskar, still fast asleep. Her worry-stone necklace sat on the table beside their bed. Summer wore it every day and had taken Sam's promise to heart – that the necklace would help her “find the words”, whatever that meant. Summer always said that she didn't need help to find the right words when she was with Oskar.

Oskar rolled over to look at her, smiling.

She was so beautiful. He congratulated himself every day that he'd married her. Reaching out, Oskar smoothed the pad of his thumb over her cheek, and Summer's eyes fluttered open.

“Morning,” she murmured sleepily. “You look very preoccupied. What are you thinking?”

“I was thinking how glad I was that ye wrote me all those love letters, thinking I was a decrepit old man too senile to reply.”

Summer rolled her eyes. “I didn't think that at all. I thought you were dead, as a matter of fact.”

Oskar snorted, shuffling closer. He ran his hand down the curve of Summer's side, cupping her hip. She'd put on a little weight in the last half-year, which Eleanor proclaimed as a very good sign.

“Sign o’ a happy marriage, that is,” Eleanor insisted. “I hate tae see a skinny lass.”

Oskar let his hand drift back up, sliding up her stomach and up the curve of her breasts. They stood out proudly through the thin material of her nightdress, and he heard Summer’s breath hitch when his fingertip rolled over a nipple. Over the last six months, they’d explored each other’s bodies over and over again, and Oskar could recognize every hitch in her breath, every flash of her eyes. Timothy, Oskar’s new Steward, had once walked in on them making love on the table of the meeting room.

Oskar didn’t think Timothy had ever gotten over that. He was frankly amazed that the man hadn’t put in his notice there and then.

“Oskar, I... I have something to tell you,” Summer said, her voice small. “I’m not entirely sure what to think about it.”

Just like that, Oskar’s early-morning arousal drained away.

“What is it?” he murmured, trying not to think of the worst possible scenarios, like wasting diseases or an estranged husband yet living.

Summer bit her lip, shifting up to sit a little against the pillows. Oskar mirrored her, reaching out to take her hand.

“It’s all right, Summer,” he said quietly. “Whatever it is, I’m here.”

Summer drew in a breath. “I think I’m pregnant, Oskar.”

There was a long pause.

“I... you... pregnant?” Oskar echoed, his voice sounding high and squeaky even to his own ears.

Summer nodded, biting her lip anxiously. “I’m nervous about it.”

A ridiculous feeling of joy surged through Oskar.

“Oh, that’s... I thought ye were going tae say something terrible, like ye were already married or something.”

Summer wrinkled her nose. “*Already married?* Why on Earth did you think that?”

“I don’t know! I was panicking. Oh, Summer, this is excellent news.”

Summer beamed. “So, you’re happy?”

“Of course I’m happy,” Oskar murmured, leaning forward to kiss her. Summer cupped his cheek, deepening the kiss. She’d gotten very forward with things like that over the last few months.

Oskar loved it.

When they pulled away for breath, he moved back, swinging his legs out of bed.

“Where are you going?” Summer asked, frowning. “We don’t have to get up yet. Come back to bed.”

“I can’t. I have tae tell my maither.”

Summer blinked. “About... about the baby?”

“Aye. Ye don’t mind, do ye? Have ye told anyone yet?”

Summer shook her head. “Not yet, just you. I wanted to wait, to be sure.”

Oskar hopped around the chamber, pushing his legs into his breeches, which had been unceremoniously pulled off and dropped on the floor last night. He found one boot standing neatly by the door, and the other had been kicked under the bed. It took him quite a while to find that one. Summer sat in bed, propped up on her elbows, watching him with amusement.

“Are you really going to get Eleanor up at this time of the morning to tell her about our baby? Of course, I’m excited to her to know, but—”

“I promised that I would let her know about a baby as soon as possible. She’s very keen for grandchildren, Summer, and ye know just how bad Rhys is when it comes tae women. He’ll never marry, I warrant.”

Summer pursed her lips. “I don’t know. With the right woman, perhaps—”

“Nay, he’s a lost cause. Let’s focus on our new baby instead of Rhys, our big baby. I’ll be back in a moment, Love.” Oskar darted forward for one last kiss, then ran out of the chamber. He could hear Summer chuckling to herself as he went.



Eleanor was, of course, already awake. Oskar tapped on her chamber door, fairly bursting with excitement.

“Come in,” came the cool reply, and Oskar slipped inside to find Eleanor delicately eating breakfast by the fire. Rhys was sitting in the window seat, one leg dangling. He barely glanced up when Oskar came in. Eleanor raised her eyebrows, eyeing Oskar’s crumpled clothes.

“Dear me,” she said wryly. “Did Summer throw ye out?”

“No, nothing like that. Maither, I’ve got some wonderful news.”

“Oh, aye? Let’s hear it, then. Wait, did ye leave that poor girl all by herself? Oh, that’s not a good thing for a husband tae do, Oskar. Ye ought to *cherish* her.”

“Maither, I cherish her *more* than enough. She gets cherished most nights, in fact.”

Eleanor sighed, and Rhys made a convincing vomiting sound.

“I didnae want tae hear that, Oskar!” Rhys groaned. “Just say what ye came tae say and get on wi’ it.”

Oskar drew in a deep sigh, grinning from ear to ear.

“Well, this may come as a surprise tae ye both, but after a good long while, we’ve got some good news. Not that there hasn’t been plenty o’ good news for us Lawsons lately, but this—”

“Get tae the point, ye daft clod,” Rhys interrupted. “I’m dying o’ old age over here.”

“Aye, you could speed it up a bit, then,” Eleanor acknowledged.

Oskar spared a quick, intense glare for his younger brother, then blurted it out.

“Summer is pregnant. We’re having a baby. We’re having a baby, Maither! Can ye believe it?”

Rhys sat forward, his eyes widening. “Oh, that is good news. Well, congratulations, Oskar. Congratulations tae ye both. I

didnae think ye had it in ye.”

Oskar rolled his eyes, shaking his head.

Eleanor neatly speared a slice of apple.

“Pregnant? Oh aye, I knew that.”

Oskar missed a beat. “What? Ye did not. Did Summer tell ye?”

“What, tell her mother-in-law before her husband? She’d not do that.”

“Then how on Earth could ye possibly have known? Ye are having me on, Maither. Ye didn’t know.”

“A mother has her ways,” Eleanor insisted. “I knew. I’ve known for a few weeks, ye mark my words.”

Oskar groaned. “Maither, just once, I’d like tae tell ye something ye didn’t already know about.”

“Sorry,” Eleanor shrugged. “I can’t help being the sharp one o’ the family. I’ll go along and congratulate her in a wee bit. She’ll be nervous, I daresay. The first one is always a wee bit nerve racking,” she shot a glare at Oskar, as if it was his personal fault that she’d endured a nervous pregnancy.

Oskar sighed. “I give up, Maither. I absolutely give up.”

“If the baby’s a boy,” Rhys said thoughtfully, “I think ye ought tae name him after me. It’s only fair. That’s just what I think.”

“Oh, aye? Well, I think ye can go straight to hell.”

*The End?*



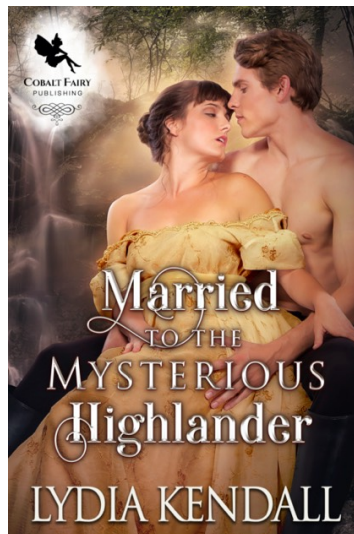
# EXTENDED EPILOGUE



Eager to learn how **Summer and Oskar's** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple.

Simply **TAP HERE to read it now for FREE!** or use this link: **<https://go.lydiakendall.com/vJk47-1p>** directly in your browser.

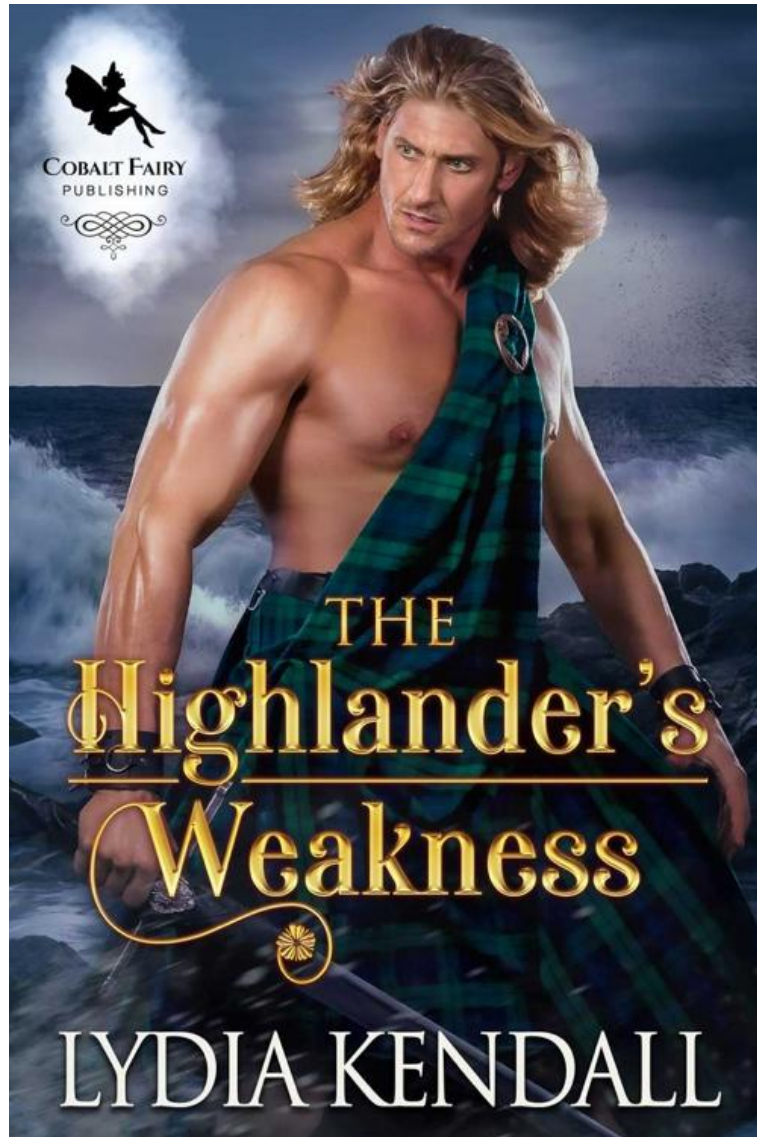
I guarantee you, that you won't be disappointed ♥



But before you go, turn the page for an extra sexy and wild Scottish treat from me...

MORE SEXY HISTORICAL ROMANCE

Turn on to the next page to read the first chapters of *The Highlander's Weakness*, one of my best stories so far!



PREVIEW: THE  
HIGHLANDER'S WEAKNESS



# CHAPTER 1



“ALL WE ASK OF YE, is to bring yer wares down to McGowan. There are scores of people there who would love to buy from ye. I meself will ensure ye have all of the business ye and yer family needs,” Willow began with a smile, talking to a blacksmith across the river. The man looked up at her and shook his head.

“I daenae know how else to tell ye, I cannae pack up and come there. Yer people havenae been the best, and since Sweeney left, things have been up and down. I cannae take that risk,” the blacksmith replied, hammering away at a sword that he was crafting.

Willow turned around to see Freya behind her; the Lady of McGowan looked just as exhausted as she was. Freya and Willow had come all the way from the Clan, traveling all the way across the river and almost to the high plains. They had found a small settlement that was close to the North King’s lands, but too far away to be a part of his rule.

“What did he say?” Freya asked, letting out a heaved breath, exhausted.

“My Lady,” the blacksmith instantly perked up, smiling at her. “I humbly wish to decline yer offer.”

“Why? We have a thriving clan, full of possibilities. I tell ye, if ye come down, ye’re goin’ to have more business than ye could even handle. Ye would be the only blacksmith in all of the Clan, and all around as well.”

The man lifted the axe with a pair of metal tongs wrapped in leather. Freya watched as his muscles glistened in sweat as he walked out of the small hut and made his way to a small wooden pail he had built outside. He gently placed the heated metal inside of it, creating a loud sizzling noise that caused Freya to take a step back.

“When yer uncle was still in power, he was crazy, I’ll tell ye, and he made sure that things were difficult for everyone. He taxed even my faither, old man couldnae even walk, much less work. Yet yer uncle wanted the man to pay for the protection of the castle?” the man laughed, staring at the metal before pulling it out again. “Ye think ye were the only ones to leave the Clan?”

“I ken,” Freya began.

“Nay, ye daenae. Ye and yer sisters were able to find the protection of another laird and stay safe from yer crazy uncle. But while ye were gone, yer people were the ones to suffer his madness. He made things worse for everyone in the Clan, and that is why so many of us left. We had to run, search for places where we could live,” he dropped the leather and walked up to them with a scowl on his face, “So ask anyone who came from McGowan, or anyone who knows about it; they willnae want to head back there.”

Willow reached for her sword, but Freya grabbed her hand instantly, stopping her. They had come to ask for something, not get in a fight. Willow nodded and took a step back, allowing Freya to speak. The blacksmith twitched, almost as though he was ready to fight, his hand reaching for the dagger at his belt.

“I wish things were different, but I want ye to ken that things have changed. I am nae like my uncle. I want the best for my people, and things will be different. But I need people like ye in the Clan to make it better, safer, more prosperous for us all.”

The man smiled and pulled out the dagger, holding it up so Freya could see it clearly. “My faither made two of these. One for my maither, and one for himself. A sign of his love for her. Yer uncle took my maither’s, as tribute. Even if ye offered me

half of yer clan, My Lady, I wouldnae come back to McGowan.”

Freya and Willow watched as the man walked back to the hut, placing the axe in the furnace again and blowing on the fire, starting the process over again. Both women walked away, standing by the side of the path that ran through the village.

“We have been to everyone,” Willow began. “Nae one person wants to come to McGowan. I heard some of our people ran as far as to the sea, just to get away from Uncle Max.”

Freya ran a hand through her hair, knowing that their mission there had failed, and despite all that they had tried, there was nothing they could do to change the minds of all of the people who were hurt by Max Sweeney. Since Freya had come to power as Lady of McGowan and sole ruler of the Clan, she realized just how bad things were.

Markets were empty, and the streams were bare. No one came out to sell their wares. People who had stayed behind were starving and just barely managing to get by. Her home, the once flourishing McGowan Estate, had been reduced to a mad house. Signs of her uncle’s madness were seen all over, with homes burned to the ground in a fit of rage, to families who would no longer trust them, as their father or brothers were killed by Max.

The mad laird had done irreparable damage, just because he wanted to have the sisters back under his control. Now, Freya had the daunting task of rebuilding, and as she had begun, she realized just how impossible it would be. Even a small nameless settlement, such as the one which they were in, refused to move back with them.

“We have to start heading back,” said Willow, looking up at the sun. “If we are to make the inn by nightfall, we have to ride hard.”

Freya smiled at her sister, glad she had come along. Willow had grown so much in the last four years. Her dark curls had grown thicker, but Willow made sure to keep them short, ensuring they would not get in the way. Her freckles had

spaced out more, spreading evenly across her face, making her much prettier than ever.

They got on their horses and began riding, heading back to an inn which fell in Reuben's territory, under the MacDonald Estate. Reuben was the Laird of MacDonald, and the husband of Freya's eldest sister, Kate. He had given shelter to the sisters when their home was in turmoil, and they were hunted down by their uncle, Max Sweeney. MacDonald was a nearby clan, and with Reuben and Kate forming a bond, the Clan had become McGowan's closest and strongest ally.

Freya and Willow had ridden there, stopping and leaving their bags and other things, in the hopes that they would find someone willing to come back with them. But after two days of fruitless searching, they were heading back home. Lightning flashed across the sky as they got closer to the inn, with rain threatening to come.

"Aye, welcome! My Lady, I'll take them for ye!" one of the workers at the inn yelled out to them through the rain, grabbing the reins of the horses and leading them to the shed while Willow and Freya made their way inside.

"Would ye like some hot water?" the innkeeper asked, smiling at them.

"Nay," Freya replied, "We'll be fine. Thank ye."

As she walked away, Willow turned back, whispering, "Aye, we'll take the water."

The sisters headed up to their room where Freya got out of her clothes, tossing them aside angrily. Willow dropped to the bed, still dripping wet. "Yer clothes dinnae do nothin' wrong, Freya."

"Nay, but our uncle did! How can nay person trust us? He hurt so many people, even those who do nae ken who we are."

A knock at the door reached their ears and Freya snapped, staring at it. "Who is there?"

"I brought yer water?" the innkeeper said with a smile, peering around the corner of the door at the women. Freya glared at him and he dropped the large bucket by the door. "If ye want

some drinks and music, there's a little thing happening. Ye can come on down when ye're done. Join us maybe?"

"Aye, thank ye," Willow replied, shutting and locking the door. Freya took a bath first, a little glad that Willow had asked for the hot water. The warm liquid on her body calmed her a bit. She knew that ruling wasn't going to be easy, but she was the logical option and Freya knew it.

"Does it remind ye of our first night in MacDonald?" Willow asked, drawing a sigh from Freya.

"Aye, and the soreness of the ride reminds me of fleeing Uncle Max. That isnae a night I will forget quickly, running through the woods, I felt sick to death," Freya replied.

"It was so cold," Willow looked up at the roof, shaking her head as the memory went through her mind.

A few years ago, her uncle, Max Sweeney had taken the position of Laird, right after the death of her parents. With her eldest sister, Kate, too young to take up the position as the Lady at the time, Max had come into power and brought them up as his own, however despicably. Eventually, he demanded to marry Kate, and when she refused, the sisters were forced to flee.

Kate, Willow, Lily, the youngest, along with Freya, barely escaped McGowan Castle, hunted down by the guards. But they made it to the MacDonald Castle, where they were welcomed with open arms. Kate fell in love with Reuben, the Laird of MacDonald, driving Max further into his maddening rage.

"Ye ever think Kate should be the Lady of McGowan, and nae me?" Freya asked.

"Nay," Willow replied instantly. "I always knew it was going to be ye. Somehow, I knew Kate would at least take ye as her second in command and make ye run the affairs of the state. Nay one does it better than ye, Freya."

"Yet our people suffer," Freya replied, hanging her head low.

"That isnae yer fault, ye hear me?" Willow asked as they decided to head down to the pub. "Ye ready?"



It was packed full with men and women from all around the Clans. The rains had forced people to come in, leaving very little space for people around. Freya and Willow managed to get up to the front table where the innkeeper poured them two pints of ale.

“Ye should really slow down with that,” Freya said to Willow, watching the woman drink over half of the contents with ease.

“Are we nae done for the day? I think I can have all I want.”

“We’re heading home as early as we can,” Freya replied, shaking her head. Willow had always been the maverick. “So I need ye awake early.”

“Sorry, I cannae hear ye over the singing!” Willow said loudly, backing away into the crowd, leaving Freya all alone.

A man walked up to her, leaning against the table. He stared right at Freya, slurping loudly. Freya turned away, seeing he was drunk and was about to make a fool of himself. He pulled the drink away, revealing a thick unkempt beard. He reached for Freya, but she swatted his hand to the side and moved further down the table.

“Aye, Calaan. Stop, ye ken who she is?” the innkeeper yelled at the man.

“I daenae...ken,” the man replied, with his speech slurred. “Aye, lassie. I want to ken ye.”

“I have nay interest in talking to ye,” Freya replied and turned away, trying to find Willow in the crowd.

“Well ye daenae need to, I just like that ye’re pretty,” the man replied.

“Calaen! That is the Lady of McGowan!” the innkeeper grabbed the man’s arm, pulling him away.

The man shoved the innkeeper backward and turned to Freya, now his eyes flashing with anger. “Ye’re the one who thought ye could just come back and pick things up from where yer crazed uncle left off, aye?”

“Max Sweeney and I are nae the same, I am a different and better ruler,” Freya replied.

“Nay, ye cannae be,” the man continued, struggling to stay on his feet. “Ye cannae rule on yer own. Max was a monster, a man who...everyone hated, but he was a man.”

Freya stared at him, “What do ye mean?”

“I mean he was a man! Ye’re just a wee little lassie. Who do ye think will respect ye? Me? Anyone in this room? Ye have nay real power, Freya. Ye’re just a little girl,” he took a step forward and reached for Freya again.

Just before he could touch her, Willow slammed her mug into the side of the man’s face, knocking him backward. The man shook his head, looking for who had struck him, and was surprised to see it was a woman. He laughed, putting down his own mug.

“Ye think I’m scared that ye’re the Lady?” Calaan asked, taking out his axe from his hip.

“Ye should be,” Willow replied, getting between the man and Freya.

“Ye’re nae here with yer guards. Ye have nay one to protect ye. The same way we dinnae have any of ye to protect us from yer uncle. How dare ye come here, and think ye can just sit with us?”

The man swung the axe, and Willow ducked, moving to the side. She grabbed his mug and slammed it into the side of his head again, this time, knocking the man to the ground. The axe clattered to the floor and Willow kicked it away. Freya turned and ran back to the room, a frown across her face.

Willow followed behind her, seeing the lady toss her things off of the table. Freya felt as though she was losing her mind. Even a drunk in the middle of nowhere wanted to give her his judgment. She dropped to the bed, holding her hands in her head.

“I can reach out to Kate, ask Reuben to send some guards down to come to pick him up,” said Willow.

“Nay, what would be the point? He was just speaking his heart. He was a man in pain, a man who ken what we need,

and as much as we daenae want to hear it, he spoke the truth today,” said Freya.

Willow walked over to the bed, resting her head on her sister’s shoulder, “So what do ye want to do now?”

Freya stared dead ahead, knowing exactly what she had to do.

“I have to find a husband.”

## CHAPTER 2



THE SOUND of the men singing and laughing in the tavern filled the air. Some stood around tables, watching strongmen as they battled it out in games of arm wrestling. The room was incredibly humid, with sweat and heat from all of the bodies in the tavern. Fresh ale was constantly in circulation, with men and women pushing the limits of how much they could consume.

A man sat in the corner of the room, in a large throne-like chair that sat a full head above everyone else. In one hand, he held a chalice with fine wine in it. He drank slowly, his eyes scanning the faces of all of the people who had come into the tavern. He knew a few of them, but the majority of them were strangers to him.

His eyes reached a corner where a man danced closer and closer to a woman, who obviously wasn't interested in him. She kept edging away, but the man came closer, and soon, he had blocked her off by the wall.

Darragh waved a finger and one of his men stepped forward, standing right beside him to listen. "My Laird."

"Who is that?" Darragh asked, nodding to the man in the corner.

"I havenae seen him, but I'll find out," the man replied, vanishing into the crowd.

Darragh watched as his guard asked a few questions before turning and heading back to him. He could tell by the expression on the man's face, that he wasn't going to like what

he heard. The guard walked up to him, bowing his head lightly. "He is Modric, a slave runner in the south of the Highlands. We heard he was moving this way, heading back from the ports."

"And he thought to stop here, how nice of him," Darragh said with a smile, watching as Modric grabbed the girl's arm and began leading her toward one of the smaller rooms in the tavern. "The girl?"

"I asked as well," the guard replied. "Unknown traveler, moves alone. I hear she travels with some foreign bounty hunter."

Darragh raised an eyebrow. "And where is the bounty hunter now?"

"He dinnae come in with her. Right now, she is all alone," the guard replied.

"Aye, then we best see what they're up to," Darragh replied and brought his chalice to his lips, drinking all of the wine in one go.

He stared at the cup for a moment and smiled to himself. He saw his own reflection in the shiny silver, despite the dim lighting. His hair hung loosely around his face and traveled down into done braids. His fierce gaze spoke volumes, telling all those who saw him get to his feet, to take several steps backward, and out of his way.

He wasn't just the owner of the tavern.

Darragh McCloughan was the Laird of MacCramhain, and one of the most feared men in all of Scotland. He dropped the wolfskin that he wore across his back and began walking slowly across the room. The singing and music stopped and Darragh smirked to himself.

He made his way to the door of the room before the music and drinking started up again. Darragh tried a gentle shove at first, but the door didn't open. Then, he took a step back and drove a heavy foot into the door, breaking the lock on the other side.

As the Laird stepped in, he saw Modric fighting with the girl, pinning her to the wall and trying to have his way with her,

ripping at her clothes. He turned around and took a glance at Darragh, giving the girl a chance to shake free. He pinned her down and yelled over his shoulder at Darragh.

“Mind yer business or I’ll mind it for ye. Now get out!” said Modric.

“I wouldnae do that if I were ye,” Darragh replied, smiling.

Modric turned and got a good look at the man to whom he was speaking and instantly recognized his armor. A lot of people rarely saw the Laird of MacCramhain, but they heard of his legendary armor. Made of the tough hide of the wild bull, and layered with hard leather and metal. It was impenetrable to most blades, and even a skilled warrior with a spear would have a hard time breaking the armor with one blow.

The girl took her chance, slapping Mordric across the face and running toward the door. Modric barely reacted to the slap, his face transfixed in horror as he realized who he was in the room with. Darragh wasn’t a man to be trifled with, and now Modric knew what he was about to get.

“Ye daenae come to my tavern, and do something like that, Modric,” Darragh began. He nodded to one of his men as they took the girl away. “Get her some decent clothes and keep her safe for me, we’ll find something for ye to do. Are ye alone?”

She shook her head. “Nay, I’m waiting for someone.”

“Then my men will stay with ye until ye’re ready, until then, I will deal with this problem here for ye,” Darragh said to her. “Will that be fine?”

“Thank ye,” the girl cried before spitting at Modric’s foot and then running off.

“Laird MacCramhain—” Modric began, flinching as Darragh raised a hand.

“Please, call me Darragh,” the Laird said with a smile, sitting on the edge of a table in the corner of the room.

“Darragh, aye,” Modric swallowed shakily. “I dinnae mean to disrespect ye. I hadnae checked to see if she was with ye. I

wouldnae be taking a woman who ye already had yer eyes on if I was aware that—”

“Oh, nay. I have nay idea who she is, Modric. I have never met her,” Darragh replied. The Laird reached for an apple in one of the crates beside him, took a loud bite and began chewing noisily.

“Well...why are ye here then, what is this?” Modric asked, standing up straighter, puffing out his chest. Darragh smiled even more, seeing the man decide to put on a tough face. “Can a man nae have some fun around here?”

“She dinnae want to have fun with ye,” Darragh replied. “Is that how ye have fun with women?”

“She was a whore and ye ken it. She would enjoy it just as much as I did, so there isnae putting this on me.” Modric took a step forward. “Ye’re just like all of us, ye have yer own women too! Ye think we daenae ken? We do!”

“Aye, I do have women of my own, women who choose to be with me. Whore or nae, ye were about to hurt that lady, if she dinnae agree to be with ye, and Modric, that makes me very sad.”

Modric staggered backward, seeing the expression on Darragh’s face change. “But...but, ye’re just like us—”

“A liar and a thief? Maybe, but I would only lie and steal from men like ye, men who decide that they have control over everyone else and can choose to take whoever they want as their own.” Darragh began walking toward him, forcing Modric to move backward until he was up against the wall.

“I’m sorry, My Laird,” Modric whimpered, staring at the floor as Darragh got closer.

“Ye’re a slave runner, taking girls like her and selling them off to whoever pays the highest. Ye take people from their homes and from their families, and ye thought it would be best to come in here to take someone from right under my nose.” Darragh turned around for a moment, and Modric took his chance.

Like a cornered animal, he attacked drawing his dagger and going straight for Darragh. The Laird reacted with lightning-fast reflexes, catching the man's wrist and spinning it backward, using the man's own momentum to cause him enough pain to drop the blade. Darragh drove a fist into his gut, sending the man back and against the wall.

"I'll cut off yer hand, as punishment," Darragh continued, without missing a beat. Modric bent over, coughing in the corner as he tried to get his bearing. "Nae because ye attacked me, nay. I'll forgive that, in fact, I commend ye for trying. But what I willnae have, is what ye do to the people ye try to enslave. I will take yer hand, so ye willnae do so, ever again."

"Wait," Modric coughed, standing up straight, "please. Nay, have mercy, Darragh, I will stop as ye have asked, I will. I promise."

"Oh, I ken ye will, but I have to make sure, and punish ye. For those who have suffered previously at yer hand, they deserve something, and yer hand is what I give to them."

Modric jumped backward, but Darragh snapped his fingers and his guards walked in, grabbing the man and setting his hand down. Darragh loved the look of terror on the man's face. He wanted Modric to suffer, to feel the fear that all of the people he had hurt felt when he did the same to them. Darragh knew he wasn't the purest person, but in his little way, he made the world a better and even safer place.

He pulled out his sword and stared down the sharp end of the finely made weapon. "When I take yer hand, I want ye to keep silent about it. If ye tell anyone who did this to ye, or why it was done, I will find ye again, Modric, and I will take yer head. Do ye understand?"

Modric cried out, but as he opened his mouth to yell, a rag was forced into his mouth stopping him from speaking. Darragh walked over so he could stare at his face as he placed the blade over his wrist.

Modric yelled as much as he could, mumbling curses through the rag and doing his best to convey as much as he could through his eyes and gestures, making Darragh pause for a



moment, taking the rag out. Modric tried speaking between breaths but ended up coughing some more.

Darragh patted his back gently. “Take yer time, nay rush. I’ll still take yer hand.”

“Wait,” Modric continued. “Wait, I have...I have something which ye would want to hear, something important.”

“Do ye need yer hand to speak?” Darragh asked, waving his own wrist in the air.

“Nay, I ken I daenae need it to speak. But please, if the news pleases ye, then spare my hand, I beg ye,” Modric begged, shaking on the table where they held him.

Darragh spun the blade and put it to his throat. “If it upsets me, I’ll kill ye straight up. Now speak.”

Modric nodded. “The Lady of McGowan is seeking a husband, and she wishes to get married soon, some way to strengthen the McGowan Clan and bring her people stability.”

Darragh paused as he stared at the man, trying to make sense of what he had said. Darragh had never met the Lady or Laird of McGowan, but he had heard about the power tussle which had happened there. In fact, he had benefitted deeply from the events which unfolded in the McGowan Clan. Darragh had declined several meetings with Max Sweeney, seeing the erratic behavior of the man. Darragh kept his distance, knowing that sooner or later he would burst.

While there were only a handful of villages that separated the McGowan Clan from MacCramhain, Darragh had often imagined what it would be like if he had a chance to rule both clans. He had never thought of attacking Clan McGowan, knowing that the King of the North had made his decree after his father had shared the lands with several lairds and their households.

But it was a dream, nonetheless. Now, an opportunity reared its head, but Darragh realized that it wasn’t one he wanted. Darragh was not looking to get married, especially not to some woman whom he had never met. He heard of how they had run

off to another laird's castle, and how they had managed to take the clan back.

"Is this true?" Darragh asked a guard that stood beside him.

"I daenae ken, My Laird," the man replied. "Modric travels from Edinburgh, he would have word that hasnae reached us yet. I will send out riders to confirm."

"There is nay point!" Modric cried. "I tell ye the truth, my Laird. I give ye the truth. She is looking to marry and this is yer chance to expand yer rule. Ye can take her for all that she has. When ye marry her, ye kill her off, and all of the lands will fall to ye."

Darragh stared at Modric, with the blade still at his neck. "Ye still think as a thief, even with a blade at yer neck, threatening to take yer life. Ye still plan to steal and hurt people. Men like ye daenae have a place on this earth."

The Laird drove the blade forward and Modric had just a moment to yelp before the blade cut through him. The guards let go of the man, and he dropped to the floor, holding himself as fear coursed through him. Darragh had moved the blade at the last second and sliced through his cheek, leaving the man with a cut across his face.

But the move had shocked Modric to his core, leaving the man utterly stunned. Darragh wiped off his sword and put it back in its sheath, seeing that the man had wet himself. He looked at the guards. "Pick him up, strip him of everything he has. Sell it, and use the proceeds to feed the children and the dogs. Throw him in my dungeon, and when I have the time, I will come talk to ye, Modric, and ye will give me the names and locations of everyone ye have ever sold."

Modric hung limply as the guards dragged him off toward MacCramhain Castle. Darragh walked over to a window and stared at his castle in the distance, poking over the hills. He knew that once word reached that the Lady McGowan was looking for a husband, all eyes would fall on him. It was his duty to produce an heir, and as much as he loved women, he was not looking to settle down.

Darragh turned and looked as far as his eyes could see, and smiled. He was the Laird of his Clan, and it was in their best interest.

“Besides,” he said to himself, “how bad could this woman be?”

## CHAPTER 3



FREYA WALKED BACK and forth in her chamber, her mind spinning with all of the possibilities as she tried to tell herself that she had made a good play. It was the right choice to do. Bonding with a stronger, more stable clan would bring stability to her own as well, and she would be able to make her people whole again. But the cost made her head swoon. Freya had seen three of the men who had come to ask her hand from neighboring clans, and she already disliked all of them.

Fiona, a serving girl turned council member, rushed into the room. As she pushed open the door, Freya turned to glare at her, but Fiona wasn't having any of it. Fiona had known Freya since she was just a child, as Fiona's mother had worked as a servant in the castle. The woman had died a few years after Max had come into power, and Fiona decided to continue working in her place, despite the cruelty of Max, not even letting Fiona have a proper funeral for her mother.

Fiona had extensive knowledge which would help in running the affairs of McGowan, but as she grabbed Freya's arm, the Lady knew that Fiona was not looking to do her official duties. She wanted to get Freya out of the room and out to the halls.

"We cannae keep them waiting forever, My Lady. Now let's get going!" Fiona yelled, pulling on Freya.

"All right! I'll go! But they have to pass. Even if they all look like a sack of rotting potatoes, they still have to pass my criteria," Freya spoke as they began walking down the corridors, heading toward the Great Hall where the suitors waited.

“And what are they?” Fiona asked, straightening a part of her dress from behind.

“The things which are best for our people,” Freya answered, pushing open the doors and stepping into the Hall. All eyes turned to face her, and Freya held her head up. She was still getting used to the reverence that her council and her people showed her, and it felt a little odd each time, reminding her that she was the most powerful person in the Clan. She looked around at the faces on the chairs on the sides of the Hall and nodded at them.

Willow stood beside her chair, and Fiona walked toward a chair on the side of the Hall. Willow stared straight ahead but spoke to Freya in hushed tones. “Could ye have taken any longer to brush yer hair?”

“Hush, ye bampot, let them in,” Freya replied in a whisper.

Willow nodded to the guards by the door and the large double doors were opened, with the first of the suitors walking in. Freya rose to her feet as the man and some of his guards walked into the Hall. Freya began to smile, only to instantly be hit by the horrid odor that came from the men.

She held the smile but felt the smell stinging her nostrils. They all smelled like sweat and had their hair clumped to their foreheads in wet strands. Willow coughed silently and then stepped forward, nodding at the laird, who walked closer to Freya.

The smell got even worse, and Willow physically recoiled. “Ahem! Introducing, the Laird Hamish of McSmelly...I mean, McSally.”

The laird turned to Willow for a moment and then turned back to Freya. “It is an honor to be in yer presence today, Freya Sweeney. I have heard tales of yer beauty, and I dinnae believe them. Now that I see ye in person, my heart is struck, and more than anything, I wish to fill the void in yer heart. I ask for yer hand in marriage.”

“Before I consider ye, I have three questions to ask ye,” Freya said, turning around and heading back to her chair, looking to

put some space between herself and the bad odor emanating from the man. A small part of her begged for the first question to be, 'Have ye ever taken a bath?'

"Ask whatever ye may, and I will give ye the answers ye need, My Lady."

"What would yer clan offer me?" Freya asked.

"Offer ye? Well, I'm the one marrying ye, so not much really. Ye get to come over to McSally and see all of the fish we have. We're a seaside clan, and we mightnae have much, but what we do have, we will share. Especially the fish," Hamish answered, drawing nods of approval and a laugh from his men behind him.

Willow leaned in. "Can I kill them?"

"If ye do, will ye be the one to throw out the stench of the bodies?"

"Then ye better kill me, or send this man out of here," Willow whispered before pulling away, staring right ahead.

Freya took in a deep breath, and instantly regretted it. She cleared her throat. "What do ye expect from me, as yer wife?"

"Aye, well that one's easy. I need ye ordering the servants to cook my favorite dishes, ye need to guide them on how to use just the right fish. I need ye taking care of the children from my second wife, bless her soul, and I need ye to give me a great time in the bed!" Hamish finished, turning to his men to draw another burst of excited laughter.

Freya shook her head slightly and Hamish caught the expression looking a little puzzled. Freya continued, "Finally, would we rule together, in all fairness?"

Hamish looked to Willow, seeing that the woman was not impressed with his responses. He scratched the back of his head. "Uh, Aye. We will. What is mine is yours, and yours is mine. We will rule together as one, and ye will have all of the control over anything ye would like."

Hamish turned to the men, but they didn't react to his statement. He turned to Freya and saw her take a seat. Freya

could tell that he had said what he thought she wanted to hear, and even his men were not happy with it. A sign that he would not keep true to his word. Freya looked to Willow and shook her head. Willow smile and turned to Hamish.

“The Lady of McGowan appreciates yer efforts but would have to decline yer offer as ye daenae fit the criteria of a husband that she wants. Thank ye for coming, and I hope this doesnae cause a rift between our clans.”

Hamish got to his feet and turned around without a word, waving a hand for him and his men to leave. As they walked out, Freya let out a breath and turned to Fiona, beckoning her to come over. “My Lady, is there a problem?”

“Aye, there is a big problem. If the next laird comes in right now, they will think this castle smells bad. I need flowers, with the best aromas. Pick and have them brought in before the next laird comes in. Hurry!”

Fiona dashed off, calling on some servants to go with her. Freya rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Ye ken, they may nae all be so bad.”

Willow dropped to the arm of the chair. “Men? Oh come now, ye have too much faith.”

The flowers were brought in, and the next laird came in. Before he made it to the front of the halls, Freya already knew she wanted nothing to do with the man. He was a large burly figure, nearly three times her size, with bulging muscles and a shiny head. His eyes were cold and empty, showing no emotion. From what Freya had heard about him, he was one the laird of one of the few warring clans still left in the Highlands.

They traveled far, taking long voyages across the sea if they had to, just to find a new place to conquer. Freya knew he would crush her in one blow if he decided to take her to bed. She asked the questions and he gave completely honest answers, expecting her to leave her people and travel with him, conquering. He expected her to be a warrior and only when she proved herself in battle, would he consider her to be equal with him.

“Thank ye, but the Lady McGowan declines yer offer,” Willow said.

A third laird came a little while later, and while he had an appealing demeanor, he came from the poorest clan in the Highlands. While Freya’s people didn’t have much, his people were barely getting by, his lands were racked by famines and crop diseases, which made it impossible for his people to get anything. While he was a simple and honest man, it was obvious that he would not be able to offer anything to the McGowan Clan, and would only be an additional burden to the already suffering people.

Freya thanked him herself, but declined his offer. By evening, she had seen two more men who she simply had to decline and mental exhaustion was already setting in from dealing with men who were not up to par, or simply had ridiculous desires from her, or had nothing to offer her and her clan.

“As I said, men, they arenae worth much,” Willow replied, yawning next to her. “Can we take a break?”

“Ye can go, do we have anyone else?” Freya asked.

A guard burst through the doors; his face contorted in horror as he rushed toward Freya. Willow pulled her blade and got between the guard and the Lady, helping to guard to his feet. She stared at him and instantly recognized him, “Finn, what is it?”

“Men approach from the south!”

“Are we being invaded?” Willow asked, shaking his shoulders.

“I daena ken, they say the Laird of MacCramhain has come to ask for the Lady’s hand, but he came with more men than any of the others, and there is nay telling if it is an attack.”

Willow turned to Freya and the Lady felt a chill run down her spine. She knew exactly who the Laird of MacCramhain was. She had never met him, but she had heard the stories. The man who opened his taverns to thieves and looters all over Scotland. A laird who spent more time with the worst of the worst than his fellow lairds.



While he was a neighboring clan, Freya wondered why he had never attacked. While the King of the North would not sanction the act, by the time the man gave an order, McGowan would have fallen, and it would be too late. Freya grabbed the armrests on her seat and turned to the guard.

“Ready the soldiers, hold the front line but daenae attack them. Let only ten men, and the Laird come through, but no more. If they refuse, then daenae let anyone else enter. Tell the Laird I have requested for just him, and ten of his men.”

The guard ran off, heading to gather the rest of the guards and get them to move out to the front of the Castle, making a blockade around the place. Willow held out her sword and the council members sat in place, their hearts pounding in their chests as they waited to see what would happen.

A scream echoed through the halls and Freya flinched. The dull thud of a body dropping to the ground reached their ears, and a moment later, the double doors of the halls were kicked open, with Darragh walking right through them. He stared right at Freya with a striking smile on his lips.

Freya looked behind him, expecting to see his men, but he had come in alone and made his way up to the stairs, getting closer to her chair than anyone else. Willow quickly got in his path, shaking her head. “That’s far enough, Darragh.”

“I am nae here to talk to ye,” Darragh said in an offhanded comment, staring at Freya. “I have come to ask the hand of the most beautiful woman in all of the Highlands.”

“Ye barge into my home like that, march on my castle? That is nay way to make a first impression, Laird MacCramhain.”

“Has anyone else done so?” Darragh asked, dropping on one knee on the floor. Freya knew that the man has never knelt for anyone before, and she was confused at the level of respect he was displaying her. He smiled at her, “Nay? As I thought. So now I ken that no one else has tried that, and that is proof that I have made a lasting impression. Now, I hope it is strong enough for ye to accept my offer, and be my bride.”

Willow leaned in, without bothering to whisper. “Darragh McCloughan is a liar and a thief. He has killed men and hurt people for no reason at all. He spends all of his time with the filthiest of men. He is not the type of man ye should be marrying.”

Freya nodded, waving Willow away. She stared at Darragh for a moment, seeing the smile never leave his face. His dark gray eyes were piercing, and he had a strong jawline and long braided hair. His body seemed to have a nice appearance, although it was hard to tell from the armor and the wolfskin which he had draped over his shoulders. He locked eyes with Freya, and she instantly realized that he was good looking.

Freya shook her head slightly, reminding herself just who he was. “I have nay interest in marrying ye. Out of courtesy, I will ask ye to leave my Castle and Clan, right now. But if ye refuse, I will have my guards throw ye out.”

“Ye barely ken who I am, and yet ye treat me as so,” Darragh replied, shaking his head in a mock expression of sorrow, the smile still present.

“Yer reputation precedes ye, and I willnae take such a risk,” Freya replied, standing her ground. “Leave my Castle, My Laird.”

The man got to his feet, seeing the guards begin walking toward him, their weapons drawn. He turned to the men, raising a hand. “Ye shouldnae attack yer guests, besides, I have come for love. Is this how ye treat all of yer guests?”

Willow took a step forward. “Nay, ye’re just a special exception. Do nae make us ask ye again, Darragh, we will nae use words.”



Darragh heard the men behind him move in on the attack. He knew they were only following the Lady’s orders to throw him out, but he had to try. He couldn’t leave yet. He had to convince Freya to at least consider his proposal. The closest

guard reached to grab him from behind, but Darragh took a long step forward, causing the guard to stagger.

The second guard lunged at him, but Darragh bent low, allowing the momentum of the man to send him over his body and drop to the floor. Darragh quickly kicked away the guard's sword as it fell free. He turned around to see Willow, with her blade at his neck.

"If ye move, ye die," Willow spoke clearly and slowly, allowing the malice in her tone to coat her words. Darragh saw in her eyes just how much she disliked him and for a moment, he wondered if he had ever hurt her. With her blade to his neck, there was a chance that she would kill him if he tried to move away. Even a novice could take life from that point.

"Then I choose to die," Darragh said with a smile and moved forward.

Willow saw him move and quickly pressed backward, so he wouldn't impale himself on the blade. But as she moved back, Darragh kept approaching until she was almost running backward. Willow turned to watch the steps behind her, and at that moment, Darragh slapped the blade from his neck and disarmed Willow, going around her and slamming the hilt of the blade from behind her.

The weapon clattered to the ground and Darragh took a step back, raising his hands in the air and getting to his knees as the guards rushed at him again, grabbing his hands and forcing them behind his back. He stared up at Freya, with a smile on his face.

"Stop," Freya called out, staring at him. "Let him go."

The guards stepped back, but Willow remained, her eyes fixed on her target. She was just a few moments from grabbing the dagger at her hip. Darragh smiled at her. "Ye heard yer sister, let me go."

Willow pulled away and walked beside Freya, leaning in. "What are ye doing?"

"All we have to do is say nay to him, there is nay point to all of this," Freya replied, before turning to him. "If ye wish to be

my spouse, ye must answer three questions.”

“Of course,” Darragh replied, keeping his confidence on the outside. He remained on his knees again, showing his respect to the Lady of a dying clan, wondering what the questions were. He had no idea what to expect and that made him feel a bit leery. If they were questions that he didn’t know the answers to, then she could easily ask him to leave, and that would be the end of it. “I await yer questions, My Lady.”

Freya nodded. “What would yer clan offer me?”

Darragh stared at her for a moment and smiled. “Offer ye? Ye wouldnae be offered anything. If ye chose to marry me, then ye will be the one who serves the Clan. Ye will be the Lady of yer Clan, as well as mine, and just as ye serve yer people, so will ye serve mine. However, my Clan will offer yer Clan the things yer people so desperately need. Stability, progress, food, and wealth.”

Willow rolled her eyes, making Freya bite down a laugh. She felt it too, Darragh was a smooth talker. The lady shook her head. “And myself, what would ye expect from me, as a wife?”

Darragh shook his head. “Aye, is that a trick question?”

“Answer the question,” Willow growled.

Darragh nodded. “I willnae expect any more than yer faither did from yer maither.”

Fiona shot a glance at Freya, and back at Darragh. The Laird had no idea who the woman was and tried piecing it together. He had no idea if he was getting the answers right, and he was doing all that he could to make sure that he was at least, keeping a clean and positive demeanor while he did so. He smiled at Freya.

“Ye said there were three questions?” Darragh asked.

“Aye,” Freya continued. “If I were to choose ye, would we rule together? Fairly and as equals?”

Darragh instantly sat up straight and stared right at her. “Nay.”

“What?” Willow asked, shocked. Of all of the questions which had been asked, that was the one question that everyone seemed to have the same answer, saying what Freya wanted to hear. But Darragh had come and spoken like the braggart he was.

“Nay,” Darragh repeated. “We willnae rule as equals, because there are just two of us. There will be nay equality. But I propose something different.”

“I’m listening,” Freya added, leaning in closer.

“I propose ye have full rule over yer people. I may help out wherever I can, but ye will have the final say on the decisions of yer Clan. Ye ken them better than I do, and ye will do what is best for them, and put yer people first. Am I correct?”

Freya nodded, “Aye, ye are.”

“And all I expect is that ye do the same for me. Ye help out, but I have the final say on my people. We share our resources and pool together when we can, and while we will have both Clans together as one, we will still rule separately.”

Freya paused for a moment, keeping her eyes on him. Darragh knew he had made a logical argument. If they had decided to rule equally, whoever it was that she had chosen could make a decision that would hurt her people. But with her, and only her at the helm of things, she would make certain that her people were fine. However, he couldn’t tell what was going on in her mind.

The Lady beckoned her sister over and they spoke for a moment, leaving Darragh staring, the smile slowly fading from his face as he awaited his fate. Willow turned around, staring at him in shock, before walking back to her position beside Freya, hand on her sword.

“Laird Darragh McCloughan of MacCramhain,” Freya began, getting to her feet. “I accept yer proposal.”

**Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.**

**[My Book](#)**

**Thank you!**

## ALSO BY LYDIA KENDALL

Thank you for reading *Married to the Mysterious Highlander!*

I hope you enjoyed it! If you did, may I ask you to **please write a review HERE?**  
It would mean the world to me. Reviews are very important and allow me to keep  
writing the books that you love to read!

**Some other best sellers of mine:**

***The Highlander's Weakness***

***A Vixen for the Dangerous Highlander***

***Addicted to his Highland Bride***

***The Highlander's Tempting Bride***

***The Iron Highlander***

***A Virgin for the Beastly Highlander***

\*\*\*

Also, if you liked this book, you can also check out my full **Amazon Book Catalogue HERE.**

**Thank you for helping me do what I love!**

**Lydia Kendall**

## LOVED THIS BOOK?

If you loved this novel, click [here](#) to choose from a variety of books like this one by this author!



*Just click on the image above! ↑*

If this wasn't your cup of tea, you can select another trope more to your liking [here](#)!



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Lydia Kendall** has always been passionate about medieval romance. Having traveled to the Scottish Highlands several times as a young girl, she has always been drawn to their unparalleled beauty and history. A history that inspired stories of love and passion, mixed with tradition in the most appealing way for every hopeless romantic - much like herself.

Born in Denver, Colorado, Lydia Kendall has a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing, and over the last decade she has been writing non-stop for several clients - that is until she decided to start publishing her own work. When she isn't writing, Lydia loves spending her time on the beautiful outdoors with her loving husband and baby daughter.

Follow Lydia on this sensational journey of hot highlanders, bonny lassies and fierce passion...and find sheer pleasure in the magnificent world of the Scottish countryside - one that will sweep you off your feet and keep you begging for more!

Lydia is part of **Cobalt Fairy's** team of authors! Visit [cobaltfairy.com](http://cobaltfairy.com) for new, bargain and free deals for every dedicated bookworm there is out there!

