



The
ENEMY

and

MISS
INNES

MARTIA KEYES

The
ENEMY
and
MISS
INNES



MARTHA KEYES

OceanofPDF.com

CONTENTS

[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](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Chapter 35](#)
[Chapter 36](#)
[Chapter 37](#)
[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Other titles by Martha Keyes](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

OceanofPDF.com

The Enemy and Miss Innes © 2021 by Martha Keyes. All Rights Reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

<http://www.marthakeyes.com>

OceanofPDF.com

Fort William, August 1762

The thud of the gavel echoed throughout the courthouse, followed swiftly by unintelligible chatter. Elizabeth Innes stared in disbelief as Angus MacKinnon rose from the dais he had testified behind, a tranquil but satisfied expression on his face, as though he had known he never stood any chance of being convicted of the charges brought against him.

The former Dunverlockie groom, Mr. Kemp, and the innkeeper of Glengour Inn, Mr. Gibson, were escorted from the room, sentenced to transportation to the Colonies—two scapegoats willingly sacrificed by the man behind their crimes. Elizabeth felt no compassion for them—they deserved their punishment—but she would have given anything to spare them if it meant Angus himself was brought to justice.

“Coward,” Elizabeth said loudly as Angus passed nearby.

He glanced at her and inclined his head with a maddeningly polite smile then continued on his way.

Elizabeth’s sister, Christina, took hold of her arm, hushing her and pulling her up from her seat. “It is time to go.”

Christina’s husband, Lachlan, nodded, but his brows were deeply knit as he took his wife’s arm and led the way out of the courtroom. Christina never released her hold on Elizabeth, forcing her to trail behind the couple at the quick pace they had adopted. Behind Elizabeth were Glenna Douglas and young Colum Turner, both of whom had given their testimony against Angus and the other two convicted men. Like Christina, they had been victims of the abduction two months ago, nearly sold into indentured servitude in the same Colonies the two men would soon sail for.

People were filing out of the courtroom and into the main hall, shaking hands with Angus and the two kinsmen beside him. They were nothing better than guard dogs for a monster.

Elizabeth clenched her fists, but they shook in spite of it. Angus’s gaze flitted toward her, and he excused himself to the man he was speaking with, making his leisurely way toward her group.

“Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Kincaid,” he said, still flanked by his cronies.

Lachlan and Christina slowed, and Christina’s hold on Elizabeth’s arm tightened considerably, as though she feared her sister might lunge at Angus. It had certainly crossed Elizabeth’s mind.

He inclined his head at Elizabeth and the others. "I am so relieved," he said in a silky voice, directing his gaze at Christina, "that those responsible for the unhappy events you recently suffered have been apprehended."

Lachlan gave a forced smile. "If ye'll excuse us, Angus."

Christina pulled on Elizabeth's arm, but she resisted.

"Tell us, Angus," Elizabeth said. "How *does* it feel to send two men to the slaughter to save yourself?"

"They're bein' transported, no' slaughtered," said one of the men beside Angus. Malcolm MacKinnon's dark features and frowning brows gave him a surly appearance. He was slightly taller than Angus but much broader in the shoulders, though not so broad as was Gregory on Angus's left.

Elizabeth smiled at Malcolm. "You cannot imagine how glad I am to know you view their fate in such a positive light. Now I needn't feel any compassion for *you* when your turn as Angus's sacrificial lamb inevitably arrives." She looked to Angus. "You can only dispose of so many pawns before you open yourself up to checkmate, you know. And I intend to be there when that happens."

Angus's mouth pulled up at the side in a sneer, as it so often did when he was in her presence. It gave her satisfaction to know that her words were hitting their mark.

Christina pulled on her arm insistently, and Elizabeth let her gaze linger on Angus as she allowed herself to be ushered out of the building. She would be scolded by her sister for her decision to speak to him, but someone needed to let him know that he couldn't continue getting away with his threats and crimes.

Christina said nothing, though, as they made their way to the carriage, which would take them back to Dunverlockie Castle thirty miles away. The four of them climbed into the carriage—a gift from Lachlan to Christina not long after their marriage—while Colum rode with the driver, Bannerman, at the front.

Silence reigned inside as the carriage pulled forward and Bannerman navigated the traffic in the town. Christina's and Lachlan's hands were clasped together, resting on Christina's lap just beside her rounding stomach. The sight of it reconfirmed in Elizabeth what she had said to Angus. He saw the baby she carried as a threat to his right to Dunverlockie Castle, and now that he had escaped the consequences of his attempts to remove the obstacles in his path, he was unlikely to suddenly give up the fight.

“You mean to appeal the ruling, of course,” Elizabeth finally said.

Lachlan and Christina shared a glance, and Christina shook her head. “We do not.”

Elizabeth stared, speechless for a moment. “You cannot be serious! You mean to let Angus run free? After everything?”

Her sister said nothing.

“Good heavens, Christina! If he’d had his way, both you and Glenna would be indentured in the Colonies right now—or dead!”

Christina’s prior maid, Glenna, shifted uncomfortably beside her, and Elizabeth looked to Lachlan. “I am surprised to find *you* so silent on the matter, Lachlan. You mustn’t pretend you do not hate Angus just as much as I do.”

Lachlan’s jaw shifted from side to side, and he looked down at the hand he held in his. “I have no likin’ for Angus, ‘tis true. And I had certainly hoped for a different outcome today. ‘Tis a miscarriage of justice, and I dinna like it one bit.” He looked at his wife. “But we dinna wish ta stir up more trouble. We promised ta abide by today’s verdict.”

Christina smiled up at him then looked at Elizabeth. “We want peace.”

Elizabeth looked back and forth between them. “And you believe you shall find peace with Angus at large? Surely you are not so naïve.”

“‘Tis no’ naïve ta refuse ta give him control of our lives and emotions,” Lachlan said. “I only wish ta protect my wife and bairn—I dinna care ta spend any more time on a man so undeservin’ of it.”

Elizabeth kept her eyes on Lachlan. She heard his words, but she could see by the tightness of his jaw that they were not easy for him to say. It was not in his nature, either, to ignore a threat.

“The way to protect them is to see Angus punished for his crimes,” Elizabeth said. “That is the *only* way to ensure they are safe. Am I wrong, Glenna?” She turned to Glenna, whose eyes widened.

“‘Tis no’ my place ta say,” she said hurriedly.

Elizabeth raised her brows at her sister and brother-in-law. “By which she quite obviously means that she is in agreement with me.”

“I will keep yer sister safe, Elizabeth,” Lachlan said. “I swear it. Angus would no’ dare come on Dunverlockie land with the retribution he would face now. And more of my kinsmen are ta come.”

Elizabeth’s lips pinched together. Lachlan had sworn before that he would keep Christina safe, and it was only shortly after he had done so that

she had been captured and forced aboard a skiff. Elizabeth would never forget how it had felt to watch the boat carrying her sister as it disappeared into the fog and rain—to fear she would never see her sister again. It was not that Elizabeth doubted Lachlan’s intentions; she merely thought he underestimated Angus’s wiles.

“I know you are angry, Elizabeth.” Christina reached for her sister’s hand. “It is out of concern for me, and do not think I do not appreciate that. It is not in your nature to mildly accept what has happened today—and I certainly do not blame you. But I ask you to try to accept the outcome of the trial, all the same. Let us leave things be. If there is to be trouble between Dunverlockie and Benleith, it will not be provoked by us.”

Elizabeth’s jaw tightened, and she directed her gaze to the window, hoping it might turn her thoughts to a different avenue and keep her from pursuing the subject as she wished to do.

If Angus MacKinnon could manage to evade conviction after all the evidence presented against him today, he could manage almost anything, and Elizabeth couldn’t sit back and wait to see what schemes he next devised to hurt her family.

Malcolm MacKinnon paused before tugging the door of the small, stone house closed behind him, allowing his bloodhound just enough space to slip outside with him. It was August, but the day was gray, muting the greens and purples of the full trees and summer flowers near the home of his mother and siblings.

With his characteristic limp, the dog hurried in the direction of their normal walking route—a small, overgrown path where they were left to themselves—then stopped, waiting for Malcolm to follow.

Malcolm shook his head at the hound, whose loose skin pushed down around his eyes, making wrinkles that gave him the appearance of worry.

“Come, Fergus.” They wouldn’t return to that path until Malcolm was certain it was free of traps. It had been a narrow miss that morning.

He walked purposefully in the direction of Benleith, and Fergus followed loyally by his side until they passed the last of the thatched houses, at which point the hound halted.

Malcolm stopped and turned around to face the dog. “Come,” he said with authority.

The hound didn’t move.

“Come, Fergus.”

No response.

Malcolm sighed. Fergus had begun refusing to follow him to Benleith. Malcolm couldn’t blame him—Angus treated him abominably—but he wished things were different. He missed Fergus’s company there, particularly at night. For a long time, the hound had slept at Malcolm’s feet. Now, he kept

Malcolm's mother and siblings company in the fermtoun. Perhaps that was for the best, though. Fergus would protect them at need.

Malcolm would have liked to protect them himself—to sleep in the same house as his family—but Angus required the kin he relied on most to stay at Benleith, so Malcolm had to settle for daily visits to his mother and siblings.

“Verra well, then,” he said resignedly. He walked Fergus back to the house, letting him through the door. Malcolm's seventeen-year-old brother, Dugan, was inside, preparing to go back to work in the fields. He was dark in coloring, just as most of Malcolm's siblings were, but where Malcolm's jaw was sharp and hard like his father's had been, Dugan had a more romantic appearance and a kinder eye, though it was rarely Malcolm's fortune to see it nowadays.

“He willna go with ye?” Dugan asked as he pulled on his gloves.

Malcolm shook his head.

Dugan rubbed Fergus's ears. “I dinna blame him. He can stay wi' me in the fields.”

“Dinna let him roam about. There are animal traps nearby, and I need ta speak with Angus about havin' 'em found and removed.” The dog was already obliged to deal with one lame foot, he didn't need another.

When Malcolm reached Benleith ten minutes later, he found Angus in the library, a large and imposing room. Angus wasn't one for reading, but he took pride in having a well-stocked library. He sat at a large, mahogany desk with papers scattered across it, and he looked up when Malcolm entered.

“Where have you been?” Angus asked as his quill scratched across a paper, mild displeasure written on his brow. “I sent a servant some time ago.”

Malcolm closed the door behind him. “My apologies. I paid a visit ta my family.”

Angus glanced at him, his frown deepening. “It is on that very subject I wished to speak with you.”

Malcolm's muscles tensed, but he sat down in the chair across from his laird and cousin, waiting for him to continue. All these years, Malcolm had managed to hide his dislike of Angus well enough to be kept close, but it was getting more and more difficult to conceal his feelings. He had looked up to Angus during his childhood, and after the death of Malcolm's father nine years ago, Malcolm had viewed him somewhat like a savior—someone to protect him against the consequences of the horrible events of that day. How naïve he had been.

“I have heard reports,” Angus said.

Malcolm held his gaze, staying silent. It was usually the best course of action.

“I thought we had agreed you would see that meetings between Dugan and the MacMorran girl ceased.”

Malcolm stared. “I thought I had seen ta it.” He had warned Dugan in no uncertain terms what would come of his association with Bridget MacMorran. Her father, Sir Andrew, would never countenance a connection with someone with so few prospects, and Angus would show no mercy to anyone who became an obstacle to his aims with the MacMorran laird, whose influence in the Highlands continued to grow.

“You failed in your attempt, then,” Angus said, not mincing matters. “They were seen together just this morning.”

Malcolm shut his eyes and clenched his jaw. “I’ll speak with him again.”

Angus straightened the stack of papers in front of him. “You know my thoughts on *speaking*, Malcolm—it is the least effective way to get a message across.” He tapped a finger on the desk, his eyes fixed on Malcolm.

Malcolm tried to quell the panic growing inside on his brother’s behalf—on his family’s behalf—as Angus stared at him, letting the silence drag on. What, exactly, did Angus mean to do?

“I will leave the matter in your hands once more,” Angus finally said, “but if you are unsuccessful, Dugan *will* be made to understand, and I will ensure that there is no room for misinterpretation of my wishes and expectations.”

Malcolm did the only thing he could do, nodding curtly. Everything in him revolted at the heavy hand controlling his life and his family, but he was powerless to stop it. His livelihood as a tacksman was entirely dependent upon Angus’s goodwill, and Angus had the power—and the evidence—to ruin him at a moment’s notice and make his family into outcasts, subjected to the deepest poverty. At least he was giving Malcolm another chance before taking things into his own hands.

“On to other matters, then,” Angus said.

“I did have somethin’ I wanted ta discuss with ye,” Malcolm said.

Angus raised his brows, and it was unclear whether the gesture was meant to invite Malcolm to continue or to display what Angus thought of Malcolm’s presumption.

“This mornin’ on my walk with Fergus, I discovered a number of animal

traps set along our path. Fergus would have stepped in one if I hadna seen it just in time. I dinna ken who placed them there, but I hoped you might order their removal.”

The hint of a mocking smile played at the corner of Angus’s mouth. “You still have the mongrel, then? When I no longer saw him at your heels here all the time, I admit I hoped you had put the beast out of its misery.”

Malcolm clenched his jaw. Fergus was far from miserable. But Angus still saw him as the small, feeble puppy he had been after birth, forever tripping on the uneven stone floors of the castle and falling behind his siblings due to his lame leg. It was Angus who had ordered he be put down, but Malcolm had asked that he be spared, offering to take care of the whelp himself. And while Fergus’s left forepaw would always be weak, he was otherwise thriving—and a surprisingly good hunting dog.

“It was I who ordered the traps be set, but I will have them put elsewhere,” Angus said after receiving no response. “Have you thought any more on our discussion?”

Malcolm blew out a breath, well aware that Angus was referring to what they had talked about on the journey back to Benleith. “I have, but I dinna see a way forward. The outcome of the trial may have been as ye hoped, but the fact is, it has drawn attention ta ye in a way that binds your hands, I think.”

The Kincaids had become an obsession of sorts with Angus, but Malcolm did not share his laird’s passion for causing harm to their neighbors to the north. He had enough of his own problems to deal with. A part of him had hoped to see Angus convicted of his crimes, but he had to be grateful the MacKinnon laird had come away from the trial unscathed, for he wouldn’t have hesitated to drag Malcolm along with him.

Angus’s fingers were interlocked on the desk, fidgeting. “I believe you are right. Lamentable as it may be, for the time being, at least, my conduct toward the Kincaids must be unimpeachable. Which puts me in a very unfortunate position.”

“How do ye mean?”

Angus glanced at him, searching his face for a moment. “You are aware that my departure from Dunverlockie was unexpected.”

Malcolm nodded. After the death of their cousin, Gordon, Angus had harbored high hopes of Dunverlockie becoming his, whether by marriage to Gordon’s widow, Christina, who had inherited the castle, or by arranging for her demise. Christina’s abrupt marriage to Lachlan Kincaid had meant that

Angus was suddenly unwelcome in the castle that had belonged to his kin only weeks before.

“Because of that, I was unable to retrieve some...possessions of mine.”

“What sort of possessions?”

Angus’s brow went dark with displeasure. “The charter chest.”

Malcolm tried to conceal his surprise—and his interest. Angus traveled with the small, wooden chest nearly wherever he went. He had a strange and obsessive attachment to the documents inside. Having come into his inheritance at the tender age of two, there had been plenty of people eager to take over for Angus until he was of a more fitting age, so he had learned to prize the physical proof of his rightful place—as well as any information he could hold over people’s head to ensure they played by his rules. That jealous guarding, Malcolm had concluded, had paved the way for the callousness of character he now displayed.

Malcolm was not at all surprised to see how displeased Angus was that the chest was at Dunverlockie—he was only surprised he had let it remain there for so long. It contained all of the papers Angus valued most highly, including, Malcolm suspected, the one paper Malcolm was most interested in, the one that put his future—his very life—in Angus’s hands. It had to be somewhere in there, mixed up amongst official clan documents and enough acquired correspondence to make many men’s lives miserable if it all came to light.

“Can ye no’ have one of the servants there bring the chest ta ye?” Malcolm asked. “One of the ones Gordon hired?”

Angus shook his head. “Kincaid was quick to turn off any servant he felt was loyal to Gordon or the MacKinnons. There are none left there now.”

“Is it no’ likely, then, that the chest is in full possession of the Kincaids?” It had been nearly two months since Angus’s departure from Dunverlockie, after all.

Angus shook his head. “They would certainly have used the contents in the trial if that were the case. Fortunately, I had the foresight to put the chest in a place I felt confident no one would find it.” His mouth pulled into a sneer. “It seemed the only reasonable option when I was living under the same roof as a vixen like Elizabeth Innes.”

Malcolm grunted in agreement. He could remember the first time he had seen Miss Innes, how struck by her beauty he had been. But that had been before she had opened her mouth and unleashed the stinging power of her wit

on him. The encounter with her in Fort William two days ago had been no different. As was usually the case, her words had been all the more provoking for the kernel of truth within them. Angus *did* view those around him as pawns—disposable objects meant to serve him at his pleasure—and Malcolm was no different to him. If ever Angus felt he had outlived his usefulness, he would have no compunction in sending Malcolm to the devil, just as he had done to Mr. Kemp and Mr. Gibson.

And Malcolm suspected the devil was just where he belonged after all he had done for the laird since signing over his loyalty to him almost a decade ago. It was for his family's sake, not his own, that he continued to play by Angus's rules. If he'd only had himself to worry about, he would have left Benleith long ago, embracing the life of a nameless nomad.

But his family was relying on him, and he would do anything for his family.

"You see now the position I am in," Angus said. "I cannot alert the Kincaids to the presence of the charter chest—not when they are so eager to take justice into their own hands after the result of the trial." His jaw shifted. "I must bide my time for now."

Malcolm declined to stay at Benleith for dinner. He needed to have a conversation with Dugan sooner than later if his brother was to be spared the wrath of Angus.

The ghost of a smile crept onto Malcolm's lips as he approached his family's thatched stone house. Fergus's barks could be heard from within, accompanied by his scratching on the door and the hushing of one of Malcolm's siblings. He knew Malcolm was nearby.

As Malcolm opened the door, Fergus nearly bowled him over, jumping up and putting his paws on Malcolm's gray coat then licking his face feverishly. For the smallest of his litter, the hound's size now was surprising, but Malcolm had taken pains to see he was well cared for.

"Down, boy," he said in an authoritative voice that elicited immediate obedience from Fergus.

Malcolm's mother, Flora, stood just inside the door, her skirts covered in evidence of the cooking she had been doing. She looked much older than her

38 years, and Malcolm's heart ached even as his blood boiled at the state of her. Life had not been kind to Flora MacKinnon, and even Malcolm's intervention nine years ago had not changed that as much as he had hoped. The thought of what had happened still made Malcolm sick, but when he saw his mother smile as she was now, it brought him a bit of peace. She might be neglected and poor, she might live in a cramped house and live by the sweat of her brow, but at least she was free of her husband.

"I thought ye'd be dinin' at Benleith," she said as Malcolm entered with Fergus behind him.

"I decided ta come here instead." He kissed her on the cheek and glanced around the room, his gaze taking in Marion, Keith, and Winifred. "Where's Dugan?" He removed his cocked hat and ran a hand through his hair.

"Workin' in the fields. He'll return soon, though." She searched his face, and he avoided her gaze. She was always more perceptive than he liked.

Malcolm nodded, hoping Dugan was indeed working and not meeting Bridget MacMorran somewhere.

His mother's brow knit as she looked at him.

"What is it?" he asked, unable to ignore such a pointed and concerned look.

She swallowed, and when she spoke it was soft enough that only Malcolm could hear. "I worry for ye, Malcolm."

Malcolm looked down, not wanting to meet her eye. "I'm well, Mother."

Her grip on his shoulders tightened. "Ye're no', though." She rubbed at the wrinkles on his brow to smooth them. "I see it in yer countenance. He's changin' ye—more with every passin' day."

Malcolm had no trouble identifying Angus as the *he* she referred to, and he couldn't in good conscience counter what she said. He was not the same person he had been before Angus's pleasure had become his primary objective in life. "I only wish ta keep our family safe."

"And what of you? Is our safety worth yer verra soul? I think anythin' would be preferable to seein' the darkness consume ye."

Malcolm didn't respond right away. He didn't know how to. He had been wrestling with such questions for years now. With every unholy task he carried out for Angus, he felt a part of his soul shrivel, but the alternative seemed no less desirable. If Angus made known the contents of the document he possessed, Malcolm would be hanged. His family was barely making ends meet as things stood, and Angus would never allow them to stay on Benleith

lands once Malcolm was gone. Then where would they go? They hadn't heard from his mother's family in years—didn't even know where they were.

Malcolm pulled away from her reach, setting his hat on the peg by the door behind him. "My soul is past saving, *a mháthair*. It has been for a long time now."

Tears brimming in her eyes, she shook her head and pulled him into her arms. "'Twas an accident, my love," she whispered in his ear, holding the back of his head with her hand. "You were only keepin' me safe."

Malcolm swallowed down his emotion. He had relived those moments thousands of times, and he still didn't know just what he had intended when he had struck his father. He had felt such a rage within him, such a pressing need to put a stop to his mother's pain, but he'd never thought himself capable of the force needed to truly harm someone, to say nothing of killing them. But even if he hadn't meant to kill his father, he couldn't regret that the man was gone.

He wasn't truly free of him, though. In the confession he had signed, his father lived on.

Malcolm sighed and pulled back from his mother's embrace. "No letters?"

She shook her head with a sympathetic grimace. "They dinna wish for the connection anymore, my love."

Malcolm nodded. He needed to accept that he never *would* hear back from his mother's family. Whether his letters were being ignored or had never reached his uncle, he didn't know. He wasn't even certain the information he had uncovered regarding his Uncle Mungo's whereabouts was correct. The Forbes family had stopped responding to his mother's letters not long after her wedding, so the hope had always been a small one.

But even a small hope could light the dark, and Malcolm had persisted in believing that, if only he knew their situation, his uncle might take them in and give them an escape from the misery of living at Benleith, far enough away that Angus wouldn't pursue them.

That hope was finally dying. In every way that mattered, their only kin were MacKinnons.

The door opened, and Malcolm and his mother hurried to move out of the way. Dugan entered, slowing as he saw his mother wipe at a tear. He looked to Malcolm, a question in his eyes—a question with a hint of accusation.

"When will dinner be ready?" Malcolm asked his mother, ignoring the

explanation Dugan's gaze demanded.

His mother looked to Marion, who was tending to the pot that hung over the fire. "Is it nearly ready, Marion?"

Marion looked up and nodded. She was a beautiful young woman of fourteen years, with dark, striking features and the same kindness in her eyes that characterized Dugan in his better moments. She was already beginning to attract the attention of some of the MacKinnon men—yet another burden which hung oppressively over Malcolm. He would rather die than see her with any one of them.

"Five or ten more minutes should suffice," she said.

Malcolm gripped Dugan's shoulder. "Then, Dugan, I need a word with ye."

A wary light crept into Dugan's eyes, but he nodded, and the two of them stepped outside. Fergus whined as the door shut on him.

A few of the people in the fermtoun were still going about their duties, taking advantage of the light available in the late summer. Malcolm led the way to the side of the house where they could be private, not relishing the duty before him.

"I saw Angus," Malcolm said.

Dugan watched him carefully but said nothing.

"Ye were seen with Bridget today."

Dugan looked away, his lips pinching together. "How can he ken that?"

"He makes it his business ta ken everything that happens on Benleith land, Dugan. I thought we were in agreement." Malcolm tried to keep his voice gentle. He had no desire to raise Dugan's hackles if he could avoid it.

Dugan let out a breath of frustration. "We were. But"—his shoulders rose as he pulled in a breath—"she sought me out today, and I...."

Malcolm nodded. It pained him to ask such a sacrifice of his brother. He had seen the added joy in Dugan's face since his connection to Bridget had begun. But he was still young—only seventeen. "I would never ask ye this of meself, Dugan. Surely ye ken that. But what ye're doin' interferes with Angus's aims, and ye ken him. He doesna allow *anyone* ta interfere."

Dugan's jaw hardened. "And will no one stand up ta him?" There was blame in his eyes again, and it stung Malcolm. "Ye may have freed us from Father, but we only traded one tyrant for another—and ye're the only one no' sufferin' under his hand."

The words gripped Malcolm's heart and conscience, convicting him of

the exact worries that plagued him so continually. He had tried and failed to protect his family—and they thought the worst of him for it.

“Ye think ‘tis all pleasure for me, do ye?” Malcolm said with ill-concealed frustration. “This is no’ what I wanted, either, Dugan. But there’s nothin’ ta be done about it. Angus told me I could speak with ye again meself, but”—he grimaced—“if he hears word that ye’ve gone against him again, I willna be able to save ye from the consequences. He means ta be understood and obeyed.”

Dugan let his head fall back, shutting his eyes against a sky tinged with pinks and reds on the edges. “And what if Bridget willna accept Angus’s wishes?” He brought his head back down, leveling a challenging gaze on Malcolm.

Malcolm felt his patience running thin. “Then ye’ll suffer. As will Mother and the others. And ye’ll no’ have me ta blame for it.”

“And you?” Dugan said with resentment. “Ye’ll continue to lie in your fine bed at Benleith, baskin’ in Angus’s good graces.” He shot one last disgusted look at Malcolm and turned away, making for the house while Malcolm stood in place with a heavy frown and an even heavier heart.

Elizabeth hurried down the stairs to the entry hall of Dunverlockie, setting the piece of black and gray tartan in the pocket of her riding coat. It was the only piece of evidence remaining of who was responsible for the fire that had nearly taken both hers and Christina's lives. She had hoped she wouldn't need to pursue the clue—that Angus would have been brought to justice without it, for she had no doubt he was behind it all. But that hope had not materialized, and she was eager to see where the small piece of fabric might lead her. She was eager to protect her family.

“Elizabeth?”

She slowed reluctantly and looked up to where Christina stood at the top of the stairs, her gaze flitting to Elizabeth's clothing.

“You are going for a ride?”

Elizabeth nodded, preparing herself for the inevitable.

“You will take a servant, will you not?”

Elizabeth's shoulders dropped in frustration with the predictable question. She had certainly *not* intended to take a servant with her. “But it is so unnecessary.”

“It is *not*. What would happen if, heaven forbid, you were thrown from your horse?”

Elizabeth cocked her head to the side. “Well, I shan't be. I am not so poor a rider as that.”

Christina looked unamused. “No one goes out for a ride intending to be hurt.” Her eyes pleaded with Elizabeth. “It would ease my mind if you took Bannerman with you.”

“I could take Colum,” Elizabeth suggested.

Christina’s lips pursed together, the hint of an aggravated smile visible through her censoring look.

Colum was only ten years old. He would hardly be of much use if something were to happen, unlikely as it might be. And, to be frank, as much as Elizabeth liked the boy, she had no desire to be prattled at the entirety of the ride.

“Very well,” Elizabeth said. “Bannerman it shall be. But only because you insist upon it.”

Christina had certainly had enough to worry about ever since coming to Dunverlockie, and despite her significantly improved situation, she still worried as only expecting mothers could.

Thanks to her daily rides, she knew the Dunverlockie lands well enough that the likelihood of injury due to being unfamiliar with the lay of the land was negligible. She craved more freedom, though, and if she had managed to sneak out without Christina’s awareness, she would certainly have ridden alone. But she didn’t wish to worry her sister. Lachlan would have had something to say to Elizabeth on the subject if he found his wife fretting over her safety.

Caesar, a tall and glossy bay, was already saddled and ready in the stables, and Bannerman, the new groom, hurried to ready a second horse—one to match his larger stature—in order to accompany Elizabeth. She ruffled Colum’s hair as he held her horse next to the mounting block. His eagerness to please was as endearing as his love for Cook’s bannocks and his loose tongue.

“Mind the horses,” said Bannerman to Colum, who nodded quickly.

Elizabeth nudged Caesar along and out of the stables, choosing to head southwest toward the coast—Bannerman was new enough to Dunverlockie that his knowledge of the estate boundaries along the coast was likely less definite than in the parts nearer to the castle.

He had come along with her enough to know that he was expected to stay well behind, affording her at least the illusion of solitude. Elizabeth urged Caesar forward as she reached an even stretch of coastline, passing the cluster of stone houses that made up Kildonnan and continuing parallel to the water.

The air here was thicker, more humid, and the smell of salt invigorated her as Caesar’s hooves thundered over the grass.

She pulled up on the reins as she reached what she believed to be the

border of Kincaid lands and the beginning of those belonging to the MacKinnons of Benleith. To the east sat the hill that concealed Glengour Inn. Her heart pattered more quickly as she reached for her pocket, assuring herself that the piece of plaid was still there. She wouldn't show Bannerman any evidence of the nerves she felt. She was seeking a bit of information. That was all.

Up ahead in the dispersing mists, she could see the form of more thatched houses. She had only crossed onto Benleith lands once or twice—always out of ignorance—but she knew the castle itself was further inland. She wouldn't be seen by anyone there, and she would plead ignorance if anyone took issue with her presence.

A man appeared from the door of one of the thatched houses, leading a small coo by a rope. The glance he sent her way was tired and apathetic and his clothing dirty and torn. She had difficulty guessing his age—the wrinkles on his face spoke of many decades on the earth, but his hair was untouched by gray or white.

She greeted him, and he blinked in surprise at being addressed by her. Knowing that Bannerman would soon catch up with her, she hurried to pull the tartan out of her pocket.

“Do you recognize this pattern, sir?” she asked, holding it out in her hand.

He squinted at it, causing the appearance of even more wrinkles on his nose and brow, then shook his head. “Never seen it afore.”

“Thank you,” she said despite her disappointment.

The man nodded and continued on with a tug on the rope.

Elizabeth signaled her horse before Bannerman could catch up to her, but as she moved forward, her eyes widened at the sight ahead. In the dirt path that led between the scattered thatched houses, a young man stood on a small platform with his arms and head in the pillory. He shifted his body, as if trying to get more comfortable—an impossible task given the way he was forced to bend. Perhaps it shouldn't have surprised Elizabeth to know Angus still used a punishment like the pillory, but they were rarely utilized these days.

Beside the young man stood a tall bloodhound, covered generously in mud, nudging at one of the hands that hung from the holes and whining softly.

A young woman, vaguely familiar to Elizabeth, stood nearby, a hand covering her mouth, distress evident in the wrinkle of her brow and the sheen

in her eyes. She was dressed in fine clothing, unlike everyone else in sight. Leaning against the house behind her stood a stocky man with a ring of keys in hand, apparently supervising the punishment.

Elizabeth unhooked her leg from the pommel and slid down from the horse, straightening her habit and petticoats.

“Miss Innes,” said Bannerman, catching up and hurrying to dismount as well. “I dinna think it wise—”

Elizabeth put up a hand to stop him and walked over to the young woman.

Apparently taking issue with her presence, the large hound ambled over with an uneven gait, letting out a number of resounding barks, which Elizabeth ignored.

“What happened here? How long has he been in these?”

The young woman let her hand down from her mouth. “I cannot rightly say. It feels like hours.”

The hound continued to bark madly, keeping its distance from Elizabeth, though his eyes were fixed on her.

“Fergus!” A small boy emerged from behind her and took the dog by the neck, pulling it away.

Elizabeth turned back toward the young woman. “And what is his crime?”

The young woman’s face crumpled, and a tear spilled forth. “I am.”

Elizabeth’s brows shot up, and her gaze shot unintentionally to the girl’s stomach.

The girl shook her head quickly. “No, no. Nothing like that. Dugan would never disrespect me in such a way.”

Elizabeth glanced at the young man again. Dugan, apparently. He was wincing as he flexed his wrists. The holes for his hands were small and the wood splintered so that a few slivers stuck out from his skin.

“Are you a MacKinnon?” Elizabeth asked the girl.

“A MacMorran, miss,” she replied. “Bridget MacMorran.”

Recognition dawned on Elizabeth. She had seen the girl at church before in the company of her father, Sir Andrew. “And what does your father say of this punishment?”

“He does not know of it.”

Elizabeth hesitated for a moment, casting an evaluative eye over the MacMorran girl’s tear-stained cheeks, then turned to the man who held the

keys. "Release this young man. He has been punished long enough."

The man hesitated, clearly unsure how to respond to such authority when it contradicted his other orders, but he shifted his weight then raised his chin. "Nay, miss. I canna do that."

"Now," Elizabeth said in a voice that brooked no disobedience.

"Nay, miss. Have my orders from the laird."

She didn't doubt it. "What is your name?" Elizabeth asked.

"Cormack," he said, looking wary, as if he didn't know what she intended to do with such information.

"Well, Cormack," she said, "I am certain Sir Andrew would love to know the name of the person responsible for causing his daughter such distress. If you are unfamiliar with *Sir Andrew MacMorran*, I can tell you that he is not someone to ignore such an offense." Elizabeth was only familiar with Sir Andrew by reputation and was by no means certain that what she said was true, but as Bridget did not contradict her, she had no intention of admitting such a thing. The only way Cormack would release the boy Dugan was if he feared reprisal from someone more powerful than Angus.

He swallowed nervously then fumbled with his keys as he hurriedly walked over to the pillory.

A door opened nearby, and a middle-aged woman and two children stepped outside. The woman's worried eyes flitted around the scene, taking stock of what was occurring.

The grating of the key in the pillory lock sounded, and Bridget hurried over to pull up the unlocked end of the pillory, releasing the young man, who winced as he straightened and received the girl in his arms.

"Angus willna be happy with it, miss," said Cormack darkly as he shut the pillory again.

Elizabeth knew it, and she tried to dismiss the niggling doubt she felt inside at what she had done. She never missed an opportunity to cross swords with the MacKinnon laird, but she had never done so on his land. It had always been at Dunverlockie or, more recently, in the company of Lachlan. Surely Lachlan would not have stood by at such cruelty, though.

"What's this?"

Elizabeth turned toward the displeased voice and found herself facing a black-browed Malcolm MacKinnon.

"'Twas the young woman, sir," said Cormack, eager to absolve himself. "She did insist I let 'im free."

Elizabeth lifted her chin, forcing herself to meet Malcolm MacKinnon's gaze. She hadn't known a man's expression could look so dark and foreboding.

"And since when do ye obey her commands?"

"Fascinating," said Elizabeth, unwilling to betray her growing unease now that Angus's closest kinsman had appeared. "You *can* speak, then, though evidently only when not in the presence of your overlord."

His jaw tightened and his nostrils flared, but he turned toward Cormack. "Put him back in the pillory. He's no' finished with his punishment."

Elizabeth let out a scoff. "His punishment for what?"

Malcolm pulled Dugan away from Bridget, but Dugan wrested away his wrist, rubbing at it and sending a wrathful look at Malcolm. Malcolm's eyes bored into the young man threateningly. "Do ye wish Angus ta come?"

"Oh, yes, by all means," Elizabeth interrupted. "Send for him. For what can a mere pawn like you do without the fortifying presence of his king?"

Malcolm whipped around toward her, anger gleaming in his dark eyes. "Ye dinna ken what ye're meddlin' in. Ye should go. Now."

Elizabeth held his gaze, ready for battle.

"Come, miss." Bannerman's soft voice pleaded with her. "Please, come."

Malcolm stared at her for a moment then turned and took Dugan by the arm, pulling him toward the pillory again, while Bridget cried softly.

"Malcolm, please," said the middle-aged woman, whose arms were wrapped around her children, as though to protect them from the same fate the young man faced.

"Dinna interfere, Mother," Malcolm said. "'Tis the only way."

Elizabeth's eyes widened, and she looked to the woman, whose clothes were dirty and tattered, just as were those of her children.

Elizabeth had seen enough of Malcolm at Dunverlockie after Gordon's death to know that Angus was rarely found without him, and yet, his mother and siblings were relegated to this small, battered stone house, far from the comforts of the castle where he ate and slept? Was there no depths to which the MacKinnon men would stoop in their selfishness and disregard for others?

But what could Elizabeth do? This was not her land. These were not her kin. She had no authority here.

Dugan let out a moan as the pillory was closed over his red wrists again.

Elizabeth clenched her teeth. "If Angus insists on punishing a harmless

dalliance between two young people, perhaps he should consider investing in a new pillory—though I imagine he will struggle to find anyone willing to make him something so primeval.”

Malcolm’s jaw tightened, but he gave no other indication he had heard her.

“I should get ye home, miss,” Bannerman said from just behind her.

Elizabeth’s chest rose and fell quickly at the injustice of everything she was witnessing and at her powerlessness to stop it. But she turned to her horse, allowing Bannerman to assist her in mounting.

She took the reins in hand and turned to the cluster of people who had gathered over the past few minutes. “Angus MacKinnon is not the only laird in the region, you know. There are those who truly care for the well-being of their people.”

And with that, she gave Caesar a kick, eager to put distance between herself and a situation she had no power to change.

“Go on, then,” Malcolm said to the people congregated around the pillory. “There’s work ta do.”

With reluctance, they dispersed, with the exception of his own family and Bridget.

Malcolm’s stomach roiled at the sight of his brother’s wrists, red and stuck with splinters. This pillory must have been more than a hundred years old, left out in the elements—saturated by rain, frozen with snow, dried by the sun until the wood splintered in every direction, making it a more effective torture device than it was ever designed to be. Miss Innes hadn’t been wrong to suggest its replacement.

At the thought of her, his jaw tightened in anger and annoyance. She had no right to meddle in things here, and her words had smarted more than Malcolm cared to admit. It was yet another instance of people attributing Angus’s brutality to him. He shouldn’t care about the words of a woman with such a sharp tongue and aggressive manner, but they spoke to the things he worried about every night as he tried to fall asleep.

He glanced to make sure the onlookers were all out of sight before crouching down next to his brother. He couldn’t afford to show any weakness to the people, even if he felt overwhelmed by it.

“I’m sorry, Dugan,” Malcolm said softly. “‘Twas the pillory or ten lashin’s.”

Dugan turned his head away as much as the hole for his neck would allow. “And what? Ye wish for me ta thank ye?”

Malcolm frowned. “Nay. But I did warn ye.”

“Leave me be, Malcolm. Ye’ve done Angus’s biddin’. Ye can return ta the castle now—where ye belong.”

Malcolm bit back the words that came to his tongue. He had no love for Benleith, and he certainly didn’t belong there. How could he make Dugan understand the position he was in? If he had countered Angus to save Dugan from any punishment at all, Angus would only have insisted upon a harsher one. He would have seen it as an important moment to assert his power and authority—and to remind Malcolm that his loyalty was to him, not to Dugan. So, when Angus had insisted upon ten lashings, Malcolm had suggested the pillory instead, claiming that Dugan would benefit more from it. He only hoped word of Miss Innes’s interference wouldn’t reach Angus, confound her.

Dugan didn’t say a word to Malcolm when the time came for him to be released. He merely went to Bridget and took her hands in his. Malcolm tried not to show how hurt and frustrated he was by his brother’s animus and selfishness. Malcolm had sacrificed all of his desires and wishes for years now for his family’s sake, but Dugan couldn’t seem to sacrifice this one thing. How did he not see the danger he was putting all of them in? Angus would break Dugan if that was what it took to ensure he understood to whom he answered.

Malcolm walked over to his mother, who looked at him with what he could only describe as pity.

“I’m sorry,” he said as she took his hand in her own. Her rough, leathery skin brought a lump into his throat.

“He put ye in a difficult position,” she said, but he knew from her red eyes that it had not been easy for her to see Dugan’s punishment.

Malcolm sighed. “Would ye speak with him? Help him see reason? He willna listen ta me.”

She was watching the young lovers, her brow troubled. “I’ll try, Malcolm. But I dinna think he’ll hear me—love rings too loudly in his ears.”

He felt a sting of jealousy as he watched Bridget touch a soft, gloved hand to Dugan’s wrists and look up at him with such caring.

Malcolm looked away. That sort of affection was not meant for him. He was unworthy of it, and he could think of no woman who deserved to be loved by the monster he had become—a monster he had never wanted to be. The difference between him and his father was not so large after all, and that thought haunted Malcolm every day.

But what was done was done.

Perhaps he *did* belong at the castle with Angus and the other MacKinnons after all.

OceanofPDF.com

Elizabeth slipped into the servant entrance once she and Bannerman reached Dunverlockie. Some time to compose herself before meeting Christina or Lachlan was in order, for her blood still boiled every time she thought back on the young man in the pillory.

She took the servant staircase and paused, listening to ensure there was no one in the corridor before hurrying to her bedchamber. Once inside, she took the tartan cloth from her pocket and stared at it. She was certain it was the key to discovering the identity of the person who had started the fire in Christina's room at Glengour Inn two months ago.

She placed it in the drawer of the small escritoire by the window just as the maid Janet arrived to help her change her clothing.

"I believe Mistress Kincaid wishes ta see ye, miss," Janet said. "She was waitin' for ye but didna hear yer return."

"No," Elizabeth said softly, "she wouldn't have. Where will I find her?"

"In her bedchamber, miss."

When Elizabeth opened the door to Christina's bedchamber, her gaze went immediately to Lachlan, who sat on the edge of the bed just beside his wife. He was the kindest of men, but just now, he looked anything but pleased, his brow furrowed deeply and his mouth set in a frown. Christina, too, looked perturbed, and Elizabeth resigned herself to an uncomfortable encounter.

"Bannerman was just in here," Christina said.

Elizabeth's lips pinched together as she came up behind a wooden chair. She gripped the back of it, bracing herself. She couldn't blame Bannerman

for reporting what had happened. He had done his best to prevent her, and he bore no blame at all. But she wished he had held his tongue, all the same.

“What were you thinking?” Christina asked. Her tone wasn’t angry—only disappointed. “Why were you even on Benleith lands?”

Elizabeth took a moment before responding. She knew what Christina would do if she gave the real reason she had ventured there. Lachlan might be more understanding of her need to seek justice, but he seemed determined to stifle his own need for it.

“I lost track of where I was,” she said evasively.

Lachlan’s expression told her he believed her not at all. “Ye canna help but challenge Angus whenever the opportunity presents itself, can ye?”

“Can you blame me?”

“Aye, Elizabeth,” he said. “I can when ye gave yer word ye’d respect our wishes.”

“I did not give my word,” she said. And it was true. She had simply not responded. But saying as much felt juvenile. “I assure you I did not go meaning to stir up trouble. I believe *you* would have done the same thing I did if you had witnessed the scene.”

Lachlan shook his head. “Ye canna interfere with the MacKinnons, Elizabeth, and certainly no’ on *their* lands. It doesna matter how much reason ye have.”

She dropped her fingers from the chair back and stood straight. “You mean I am to stand by while Angus inflicts cruelty upon people for the most spurious of reasons?”

Lachlan’s jaw tightened, and Elizabeth knew she had hit her mark. He was not the sort of man to stand by while injustices occurred.

“Angus MacKinnon is not your only neighbor to consider, Lachlan,” Elizabeth said. “Sir Andrew is, as well, and his daughter was distressed in a way I can only think would have seriously displeased him if he had seen it. I myself was distressed. That is why I interfered—out of humanity. Not out of a desire to anger Angus.”

“But he willna see it that way,” Lachlan said. “Ye challenged his authority on his own lands, Elizabeth. ‘Tis no small thing.”

She wanted to respond that *someone* should challenge his authority. But she kept silent for once, hesitant to pursue a conversation that would upset Christina.

“I ken how ye feel, Elizabeth,” Lachlan said. “I do. But I canna put my

own kin and the people who rely on me in danger, and 'tis what will happen if we interfere with Angus. I willna give him any more excuse ta wish ill upon us—and I canna allow *you* ta do so either.”

Elizabeth glanced at her sister and saw sympathy in her eyes, mixed with worry and sadness.

"Does helping with things at Glengour still interest you?" Christina asked. "Glenna would be glad of your help. We are still searching for someone to replace Mr. Gibson, and the burden of running things has been a heavy one on her and her family."

Elizabeth took in a deep breath. She knew what her sister was doing, trying to occupy her to keep her out of trouble, and she tried not to show how it hurt her to know that life would be easier at Dunverlockie without her there. Her purpose in coming to Dunverlockie months ago had been to relieve her sister's burdens, not add to them. Christina had finally found contentment, and Elizabeth had become a thorn in the flesh with her unruly tongue and stubbornness.

She nodded. "Yes. It does still interest me." She went over to the bed and knelt before her sister. "Forgive me for worrying you. I have been very selfish."

Christina shook her head. "There is not a selfish bone in your body, Elizabeth. You only wanted to help, I know."

She *had* wanted to help. She simply did not harbor the same confidence Christina and Lachlan exhibited that Angus would leave them be if left alone. There was too much for him to gain in targeting the inhabitants of Dunverlockie, neither was he the type of person to simply leave things be.

But going on Benleith lands had been unwise, even if her intentions had been good. She could see that now.

"I think my desire to help will do less damage at Glengour," she said with a wry smile. "Perhaps I will go see how I can be most helpful."

"I wish I could be of more help meself," he said, "but I'm afraid 'tis no' possible with everythin' that needs seein' to here. And I dinna wish ta leave Christina." He glanced at his wife, and she smiled up at him, a hand on her stomach. Her sickness seemed to be abating, but they never knew from day to day how she would be feeling.

Elizabeth tried for a smile. "You are needed here. But I will go immediately." She was clearly not wanted at Dunverlockie, but though the knowledge hurt her, she wouldn't show it.

OceanofPDF.com

The moment he stepped into the library, Malcolm knew that Angus had been informed of what had happened with Dugan. For someone as familiar with Angus as Malcolm was, there was a steeliness to his jaw and gaze that betrayed his anger. No doubt Cormack had wished to ensure his laird knew that he was not responsible for the deviation from his orders. Malcolm could hardly blame the man—he could only hope that Angus’s anger was not directed at Dugan.

“So,” Angus said, dismissing a servant with a careless flick of his wrist. He gestured for Malcolm to be seated. “Your brother was saved by a good Samaritan.”

“I wouldna put it that way,” Malcolm said with a hint of annoyance.

“Was Cormack correct that it was Miss Innes who insisted Dugan be removed from the pillory?”

Malcolm hesitated for a fraction of a second before nodding. As much as he disliked the woman, he was always reluctant to give Angus encouragement in his hatred, for it was not the passive kind of hatred some men harbored but never acted upon.

Angus smiled. As usual, it held the hint of a sneer. “She has thrown down the gauntlet, then. And her challenge will not go unanswered.”

The hairs on Malcolm’s neck prickled.

“I have been considering how to respond,” Angus continued, “and I have hit upon an idea that I find very satisfactory—a way to achieve numerous aims with a single approach. For you, it means an errand of sorts.”

Malcolm frowned. He was always wary when Angus phrased things in

such a way. He had a knack for making things sound much more agreeable than they ever proved to be. Even as a twenty-year-old, he had possessed that skill. It was what had allowed him to convince thirteen-year-old Malcolm to sign the confession and promise he guarded in his possession. Malcolm had been so horrified at himself, so terrified of the consequences of what he had just done that he had trusted his cousin. He had needed an ally, a protector, and Angus had given him to think that he had all of them in him.

The truth had turned out to be quite the reverse. Slowly but unmistakably, it had become clear that Angus meant to bend Malcolm to his will with the power he now held.

“The errand concerns Dunverlockie,” Angus said.

Malcolm narrowed his eyes. “Surely ‘tis best ta leave things be after the result of the trial—it wouldna be wise to draw undue attention ta yerself—”

Angus’s expression stopped Malcolm mid-sentence. He knew when he was treading on dangerous ground, even if he was only speaking sense.

“That is precisely why it will be *you* who fulfills the errand. It will be an especially valuable opportunity for you to prove your loyalty to the clan.”

Malcolm couldn’t manage a response. He had done nothing but prove his loyalty to the MacKinnon clan for the past nine years, but whenever Malcolm hinted at that fact, Angus used Malcolm’s past to cast doubt upon it. Proving his loyalty to the MacKinnons was an elusive goal that Malcolm had long since begun to doubt would ever be achieved. What would he ever be able to do that would overshadow his crime against the clan when he had killed his father?

“What *is* the task?” Malcolm asked, bracing himself.

Angus looked at him another moment before responding. “There are, in fact, two parts to the errand, though they are interconnected. I spoke to you before about the documents that were left at Dunverlockie.”

Malcolm nodded.

“You will retrieve them.”

Malcolm blinked. “What?”

Angus smiled and nodded. Was this his way of getting rid of Malcolm? Of having him killed? Though they never spoke of the fact, Malcolm was the heir presumptive to Benleith and the man who would be responsible for the Benleith MacKinnons if Angus died with no heir. But surely there were easier ways to ensure Malcolm didn’t inherit than sending him on a fool’s errand like sneaking into Dunverlockie. Angus could simply marry and have

children of his own. Killing Malcolm would only mean Dugan took his place in the line of succession.

“And how do ye propose *I* manage to fetch them?” Malcolm asked. “Dunverlockie is full of Kincaids now.”

“That brings me to the second part of the errand.” Angus’s eyes held something ineffable—an unsettling glint—and Malcolm raised his brows expectantly, though unease filled him. What more could the man possibly want from him than to breach the defenses of Dunverlockie?

“You are right to point out the strength of the Kincaid defenses,” Angus said. “I am not so unreasonable as to expect you to march into the castle without an invitation. You will need to be welcomed, of course.”

Malcolm’s brows contracted.

Angus leaned back in his chair, and the corner of his mouth pulled up into a self-satisfied smile. “I thought we might—what is the saying—kill two birds with one stone.”

“I dinna follow.”

Angus reached for the decanter of whisky sitting on his desk, pouring two glasses and offering one to Malcolm, who felt his impatience growing at the laird’s slowness to offer enlightenment. The man enjoyed making his power known in subtle ways.

Angus swallowed a mouthful of whisky before responding. “Christina Kincaid is out of reach for the time being. I have accepted that. But there are other ways to make Dunverlockie feel the power of their neighbors to the south. I want the Kincaids to know just how far my reach extends.” He stared at the liquid in his glass.

Resigning himself to the fact that it would be some time before the second part of his errand was revealed, Malcolm brought the whisky to his lips.

“I want you to befriend Miss Innes.” Angus’s gaze flitted to Malcolm. “And then, I want you to make her fall in love with you.”

Malcolm stilled with the cold glass on his lips. “*What?*”

Angus’s mouth stretched into a smile, showing his satisfaction with the plan he had concocted. “*She* is your way into Dunverlockie.” He tossed off the remainder of his whisky

It took Malcolm some time to find a suitable response. “Angus,” he said, blinking and shaking his head in bafflement. “Ye jest.”

“I assure you I do not.”

“I would have better luck befriending the devil himself. Ye were there, Angus. Ye were there when she said she wouldna let me touch her if I was the last man on earth.” He shifted uncomfortably at the memory. It had been more humiliating than he cared to admit.

Angus nodded. “It is precisely why I have chosen her. I intend for her to eat those words.”

Malcolm set down his glass of whisky, the liquid still untouched. If he hadn’t known Angus better, he would have assumed the man was drunk. He was speaking nonsense. “It doesna make any sense, Angus. Let us leave aside what ye’ve said about makin’ her fall in love with me.” Even the words were bewildering. “If I even attempted ta speak with her, she would assume the worst of my intentions—she’s no’ simpleminded. And ta think she would ever invite me inta Dunverlockie?” He raised his brows and shook his head slowly. He should not have to explain any of this to Angus.

Angus was nodding, though. “She would spit in your face at the mere suggestion. Which is why you must have a strategy in place.”

“Would it no’ be easier for me to befriend one of the servants?”

“Easier? Certainly. And perhaps you will find that necessary in the end. But it does not serve my other objectives—the humiliation of Miss Innes and sending a message to the Kincaids.”

Malcolm said nothing. He could see the plan’s appeal to Angus. He could not, however, see how it would be accomplished.

“What is it?” Angus asked.

Malcolm shrugged. “I dinna see how it can be done.”

“Ah,” Angus said, pouring himself another glass. “Perhaps you lack the proper motivation.”

Malcolm stilled. Would Angus allow Dugan to court Bridget in exchange for Malcolm accomplishing this madcap scheme?

“Consider this the final demonstration of your loyalty,” Angus said.

Malcolm’s mouth opened wordlessly. Could he mean...?

Angus nodded. “Make Miss Innes fall in love with you, retrieve the documents from Dunverlockie. In return, I will destroy the...*evidence*.”

Malcolm swallowed, his heart thudding, his breath coming more quickly. Angus was offering him *freedom*. Freedom for him, freedom for his family—things he had despaired of ever achieving. It was worth any price.

“But, Angus,” he said, “I...I...” He had never been in love—he had never allowed himself more than brief, shallow interactions with women or to hope

for more. How could he make a woman fall in love with him when he had made it a point to avoid just such a thing in the past? Particularly when the target was a woman who hated him?

“I trust in your powers of ingenuity, Malcolm.”

Malcolm wasn't nearly so certain. He had seen the disgust with which Miss Innes had looked at him today. She thought him weak, repulsive. Those were not the foundations of affection—and certainly not of love. How in the world was he supposed to generate such emotions in a woman like Elizabeth Innes. From all he could tell, she was incapable of saying a kind word. It sounded like a form of torture for both of them. Perhaps that was Angus's goal—torture both of them while setting before Malcolm an impossible task, one he would fail at, giving Angus further reason to subjugate him and make his family suffer.

“And if I do, ye'll destroy the...” He had never known how to refer to that cursed piece of paper. How did one refer to the thing that had the power to end one's life and sink one's family into the direst poverty?

“Yes,” Angus said.

In Malcolm's mind, he saw the house he would build his mother, far from Benleith, far from Angus's reach. He saw the years fall away from her face as her worries melted and her smile settled back onto her lips and cheeks. He would work tirelessly for her support, for the support of his siblings. And he would be free to do so.

His jaw hardened. “I will do it.”

Angus inclined his head. Of course he had never doubted Malcolm would do his will. He always did.

“How am I ta befriend her, then?” Malcolm asked. “Where am I ta meet her?”

Angus raised his brows. “That I leave up to you. I am certain you will find a way. I suggest you apply yourself to that problem without delay. You may use whatever means necessary to achieve your goals.”

Malcolm swallowed, overwhelmed at the task before him. Suddenly, finding a way to recapture the documents in Dunverlockie seemed the easier part of the plan. How could he befriend Miss Innes, to say nothing of making her fall in love with him?

“Here.” Angus took a small key from beside him, extending it toward Malcolm.

Malcolm took it and looked at him, waiting for an explanation.

“That will open the door of the room the chest is in.”

“And which room is that?”

“It is in the servant quarters, at the end of the corridor with the wine cellar. I found the key amongst Gordon’s things and had Gregory discover what door it belonged to. I believe it is the only key in existence. You must use it with care, for the lock has rusted from disuse.”

Malcolm gave a curt nod. “I’ll take care, sir.” He couldn’t imagine when he would even have the chance to do so—to put this key in the lock of a Dunverlockie door. But he had to find a way.

“I wish you good fortune,” Angus said.

Malcolm put the key in his pocket and, with a short bow, turned to leave.

“Oh, and Malcolm.”

Malcolm stopped at the door and turned toward his laird, whose eyes were fixed on him.

“If you have any of your own plans in mind regarding the documents I mentioned—or any one *particular* document—I beg you will restrain yourself. Naturally, I keep a copy of it. It will be destroyed when—and only when—you have accomplished both parts of the plan.”

Malcolm tried to conceal his chagrin. He should have known Angus would not provide him the means to free himself. “I understand, my laird.”

He was determined.

And he was even more terrified of failing.

Elizabeth's curiosity reached a pinnacle, and she stepped out of the sitting room at Dunverlockie, peering into the large entry hall from which the echoing voices had reached her.

Lachlan was there, giving a hearty embrace to a man Elizabeth had never before seen—no doubt one of the Kincaid kinsmen, responding to Lachlan's call. They had been coming from far and wide since the news of Lachlan's accession to Dunverlockie had been made known. On their return from Fort William two days ago, they'd found yet another kinsman had arrived, all the way from Lairg.

"I didna think ta see ye ever again," Lachlan said to the man.

He smiled broadly. "Nor I. But they're sendin' men home in droves now—anticipatin' a treaty."

"What of Innes, then?"

The man nodded. "On the same vessel as I was. But he had plans ta go ta his estate first. I reckon ye'll hear from him soon."

"Alistair?" Elizabeth couldn't stop herself, stepping out into the hall, anxious for more information. Had she understood correctly? Her brother was in Scotland! Safe.

Lachlan turned to her, clearly not having been aware of her presence. "Aye, Alistair has returned from the war." He nodded for her to come over. "Come, Elizabeth. Let me introduce ye ta my friend"—he gripped the man's shoulder with a large smile—"a man I consider ta be a brother. Hamish Campbell."

She gave a curtsy, and he bowed.

“This is my wife’s sister, Miss Elizabeth Innes. Come. We can all sit down and talk.”

Elizabeth peppered Mr. Campbell with questions as Lachlan led them to the drawing room and called for a servant to fetch Christina. Once Elizabeth was satisfied that Alistair was indeed on Scottish soil and that they could expect to see him in a matter of weeks, she allowed the conversation to turn to other avenues.

Christina was every bit as anxious as Elizabeth for information about Alistair, every bit as relieved and overjoyed to know of his safety. He had survived the war.

“I am sorry for the inquisition,” Elizabeth said as Christina finished asking her questions, “but you know Alistair is the worst correspondent in the world. What would we have done if you had not appeared to apprise us of his whereabouts?”

Lachlan smiled, pouring a glass of whisky for Mr. Campbell. “No doubt he would simply arrive at Dunverlockie unexpectedly, as Hamish has done.” He handed his friend the glass, frowning. “Ye’ll no’ hear me complain of yer presence, but what *does* bring ye here, Hamish?”

Mr. Campbell’s lips pressed together. “I had no plans at all when I stepped off the ship with Innes—no family and no home ta speak of, as ye ken. I was of half a mind ta go with Innes ta Melmuir. But when he told me ye were here at Dunverlockie, I changed my mind. I ken a man—a McCabe—who doesna live too far. He’s a Writer ta the Signet, and I hope I can convince him ta advise me on a few matters. He means ta pass through sometime in the next few weeks.”

“Well, ye’re welcome here as long as ye wish ta stay, of course,” Lachlan said, and Christina nodded in agreement. Lachlan looked at Elizabeth. “Hamish’s estate was attainted and auctioned off after the ‘45, just like Dunverlockie.”

“Nay,” Mr. Campbell said. “‘Twas given over ta the Crown.”

Lachlan’s brows rose.

“‘Tis MacMorran who has charge of it now.”

Elizabeth tilted her head to the side. “You mean Sir Andrew MacMorran? Of Glenlochan?”

He nodded. “‘Tis a foolish hope, I dinna doubt it, but I have come ta see if I can persuade the Crown ta sell it back ta me.”

“Have ye the money for such a thing?” Lachlan asked.

Mr. Campbell shook his head. “No’ yet. I have *some*. But no’ enough. I intend ta find work while I’m here—and hope they’ll allow me ta make payments on the debts.”

“What sort of work do ye seek?” Lachlan asked.

Mr. Campbell shrugged. “Whatever I can find.”

“We need a new innkeeper,” Elizabeth offered. That fact had become apparent to her during her time at Glengour the day before. Glenna was running herself into the ground trying to keep up with everything.

“I do not think that is the sort of thing Mr. Campbell is referring to,” Christina said with a laugh.

But Mr. Campbell sat up straighter, clearly interested. “Nay, I’m no’ particular. Though I canna say I have any experience with such a thing.”

“You could hardly be worse than the previous innkeeper,” Elizabeth said dryly.

“‘Tis true,” Lachlan said. He narrowed his eyes at Mr. Campbell. “Would ye truly consider it? We could put ye ta use, even if ‘twas only temporary.”

“Consider it?” Mr. Campbell said with a laugh. “Och, I’d be grateful ta ye. But only if ‘tis in yer best interests, Kincaid. I’ve no desire for charity.”

Lachlan chuckled. “‘Twould no’ be charity. Believe me. The inn is in dire need of repair. Christina and I have been discussin’ our desire ta improve it—make it somethin’ above the ordinary. Perhaps we could make a visit there before ye commit ta anythin’—see if ‘tis truly what ye wish for.”

Mr. Campbell gave a quick nod. “Aye, of course. I’d be glad ta see it.”

The four of them made the short journey to Glengour Inn a short while later, introducing Mr. Campbell to Glenna and showing him over the property—the stables, the small plot of farming land, and the inn itself. Mr. Campbell seemed taken with the place, despite its decaying state. Lachlan and Christina explained some of their ideas for improvements, and Elizabeth chimed in with her own thoughts on the matter, picturing everything that could be done to the room they were in to make it a more welcoming place. As it stood, it was about as welcoming as a cell in the Fort William gaol.

Christina smiled at Elizabeth’s vision, apparently happy to encourage her in it. “We have plenty of things at Dunverlockie you might use—bedcovers and such from the MacKinnons. They’ve all been stored away, for we didn’t wish to use them in the castle, but it would be a shame to waste them. And everything else could be ordered from Fort William—or even Glasgow if need be.” She turned toward Glenna. “You do not mind having her help, do

you?”

Glenna smiled and shook her head. “Mind it? ‘Tis be a pleasure! I’ve been stewartin’ and worryin’ over how ta see ta everythin’ that needs doin’. And the more hands we have, the quicker ‘twill get done.”

“We can get started right away,” Elizabeth said.

“Let us give Hamish a bit of time ta accustom himself ta things here before ye drive him away with yer intensity,” Lachlan said with an amused half-smile. “Glenna can show ye the way of things, Hamish. Then, when ye’re ready, ye can begin repairs—I reckon the room where the fire occurred will need ta be seen to first.”

Elizabeth’s jaw tightened at the reference. Perhaps spending more time at the inn would give her the opportunity to pursue the identity of the person responsible for the fire. She still had every intention of seeing to whom it led. If she found success, she could demonstrate to Lachlan and Christina how near to justice they were, and then they might feel differently about seeking it.

Elizabeth walked to the next room down the corridor at Glengour Inn, an inkpot in one hand, a quill and paper in the other. For the past two days, she had been taking inventory at the inn, deciding what needed replacing, what needed refreshing, and what should be discarded altogether. It was no small task, for the inn was in a sad state.

After Mr. Gibson's arrest, Glenna had been responsible for nearly everything. It was a busy time of year, with plenty of passing travelers looking for a drink, a meal, or a place to sleep before they continued their journey. It was far too much for one person to take on, to say nothing of that person being a young, unwed woman, and her family had been obliged to step in to help, along with some of Lachlan's kin, from time to time.

Christina and Lachlan wanted to make something more of the inn—to make it a place travelers couldn't resist stopping for the night because it was so much better than anything else they met with on their journey.

After looking over the room, Elizabeth set the ink pot down on the bedside table so she could open it, dip the quill, and scratch down a few words. It was similar enough to the others she had already inspected more thoroughly that she needn't spend more than a minute or two inside it. Two of the rooms were occupied by guests, so she would have to finish looking over them later.

A quick glance through the warped window pane told her that Glenna was occupied with harvesting the crops in the small piece of farming land attached to the inn. She had been out there most of the day, and she likely would be on the morrow as well.

Elizabeth stepped out of the room and continued to the next one, her heart constricting as she reached it. She took a breath and pushed open the creaky door.

The room was very much as it had been when she had last seen it—charred floorboards and walls, a single bed, even the same candlestick with a half-used candle standing atop the bedside table. She remembered the utter panic she had felt when she had woken to the scent of smoke and the sound of crackling and had rushed out of her room, only to see the glow of fire beneath Christina’s door. It was a feeling she never hoped to experience again.

No, it was a feeling she was *determined* never to experience again. She stepped into the room and set the paper and inkpot down then reached into her pocket. It was that night, after the flames were extinguished, that she had found this piece of cloth on the floor in the corridor. Of course, it was possible that it had been there before the fire, but she didn’t truly believe that. It would have been noticed.

She felt in her heart of hearts that this piece of cloth belonged to the person responsible for setting the fire. Would the culprit return to the scene of the crime? She had heard they often did, as if drawn to their own darkness. Had the man noticed the piece of cloth he had left behind? Or was it simply a scrap—nothing more than a rag? It was too small to be a rag of any real use, though.

Either way, she would have better opportunities to discover more about the tartan pattern here at the inn. Surely some passing traveler would recognize it and be able to tell her who might have made such a pattern, dull and dreary as it was. So far, though, that had not been the case. The few people she had managed to ask about it in the past two days had frowned and shaken their heads upon seeing it.

“How is it comin’ along, Miss Innes?”

She whirled around to face Hamish, who stood in the doorway, and smiled. “Well enough, I think. This room quite obviously will need the most work. The floorboards need replacing and the walls will require a hard scrubbing—possibly whitewashing. All of the rooms should have hangings. I cannot do my part, though, in making it shine until the other tasks are done.”

“Aye.” Hamish scrubbed a hand over his chin. “I’ve been searchin’ for men ta start the work, but I canna find anyone ta do it. Lachlan gave me a list of names, but it hasna helped. With the women and children gone to the

shielin's for the summer, 'tis all the men can do ta stay on top of the work in the fields. But I canna wait any longer. The days are beginnin' ta shorten already. If I can find one or two men, even if they dinna have much experience, I reckon we can manage ta do what needs doin'."

Elizabeth gave a sympathetic grimace. "What about some of Lachlan's kinsmen?"

Hamish shook his head. "I thought of that, too, but he's put 'em ta work, seein' ta the tenants and makin' some changes ta the way farmin' is done in hopes of a better yield for everyone. But I'll keep searchin'." He turned to leave the room.

"Hamish," Elizabeth said suddenly.

He stopped and turned back toward her, a question in his eyes.

She pulled the piece of plaid from her pocket. "Do you recognize this tartan?"

He took it from her and held it closer to his eyes, which narrowed thoughtfully.

Elizabeth held her breath as she waited, but he shook his head. "Nay. I dinna think I've ever seen it." He extended it toward her, and she took it from him with a disappointed smile, setting it back in her pocket.

"What is it?" he asked curiously.

"Just something I found in the inn," she said evasively.

He nodded and turned again to leave.

Glenna hadn't recognized it, either, and Elizabeth was losing hope that she would ever find the answer the scrap presented. Tartan wasn't made these days—indeed, it was contrary to the law to wear it. And yet, the person who had set the fire had been carrying a piece of it in his pocket. She would have expected it to be similar to the tartans commonly produced in the area before the Dress Act had prohibited such attire. If it had any connection to Angus, surely someone in the area would have recognized it. But so far, no one had.

Perhaps she was wrong. Perhaps she was simply wasting her time.

The wheels of the cart Malcolm drove rumbled over the wet ground, and he slowed, guiding the horse to the side of the road to avoid a large puddle. The last thing he needed was for the cart to tip and all the wood to spill into the muddy water. It had rained during the night, and Malcolm had considered waiting until later in the morning to make the journey to Glengour, but he had been too anxious to wait.

The far wheel of the cart brushed up against the thick, summer foliage, and some of the branches caught on Malcolm's coat. He cursed and pulled on the reins even more as he tried to unsnag his sleeve.

Thinking their reduced speed was a sign they were already at their destination, Fergus jumped down from the cart, heavily laden with wood, and right into the puddle.

"Fergus!" Malcolm said in frustration, but the hound seemed not to mind the mud that splashed all over his own rich, brown coat and flung specks onto Malcolm's as well. Malcolm frowned and glanced up ahead. They were less than a quarter of a mile from Glengour. Fergus would just have to run alongside the cart for the remainder of the journey.

Malcolm urged the horses forward, and they passed the hazard without further incident. Within a few short minutes, they had reached the inn, and Malcolm's eyes searched the property for any sign of Miss Innes, his heart pattering more quickly. It had taken him time to discover how he might manage to spend any time *at all* in her company, and he knew a worry that even the plan he had come up with might not suffice.

He owed a debt of gratitude to Hamish Campbell for even entertaining his

offer to help with the work at the inn. Malcolm was fairly certain Hamish wasn't aware of Malcolm's place at Benleith and how unwelcome his assistance would likely be on Kincaid lands by those who *were* aware of his identity.

He had been nearly certain he would be turned away, so when Hamish agreed to hire him on and asked if he knew where they could find wood for repairs, Malcolm had been quick to answer in the affirmative—and then spend the entire afternoon scrambling around Craiglinne in search of what he had promised. It seemed proper, though, that he be the one to find the materials for and repair the damage he had caused.

Only the greatest of good fortune—and the money Angus had given him when informed of the development—had led to his success in finding a kind but disgruntled man who was selling off wood for a project he could no longer afford to complete.

Miss Innes was nowhere in sight—a fact which relieved Malcolm. He had little doubt she would manage to turn him away from the inn if she saw him before he had the chance to show his usefulness there.

Hamish emerged from the inn door just as Malcolm hopped down from the cart, and he chuckled at the sight of Fergus, who seemed not at all to mind the spectacle he presented, splattered so generously with mud. He barked enthusiastically and with no ill-will toward Hamish, who crouched down to receive him and smiled at Malcolm.

“Ye've come ta save the day, have ye?” Hamish said, wiping his hands on the plaid he wore. Malcolm knew a flash of jealousy. Only soldiers in His Majesty's Royal Army were permitted to wear tartan, and it was rare that Malcolm saw such a thing in the area. Angus insisted on adherence to the Dress Act, but Malcolm knew the laird kept his own trunk full of plaids, relics of the men who had ruled Benleith before him.

“Where do ye want the wood?” Malcolm asked.

“Most of it will go in the room up the stairs—'twas burned in a fire earlier this summer.”

Malcolm tried to look surprised. “Burned?”

“Aye. 'Tis fortunate the entire inn didna burn along with it.”

“Fortunate indeed,” Malcolm responded.

For the next ten minutes, he and Hamish carried armfuls of wood to the room upstairs, leaving it in the narrow corridor. Malcolm tried not to dwell on the picture the room presented, but his conscience twisted and writhed all

the same. It had taken longer for the fire to be extinguished than he had anticipated. But no one had been hurt, and that was what mattered most.

He liked Hamish. He seemed a kind, hard-working man, and Malcolm knew an added guilt for having taken advantage of the man's naïveté.

Once the wood had all been brought inside and away from the wet, Malcolm set to work in the burned room, removing the charred floorboards to make way for new ones. The room still smelled of fire, and the scent reminded him of the events of that night.

There had been no arguing with Angus—he had been set on the plan, and, as usual, he had chosen Malcolm to do the work. Malcolm had stood in the trees behind the inn for half an hour, unable to bring himself to accomplish his assignment. He had done many things he regretted on Angus's behalf, but this was the first time Angus had asked him to kill, and he found himself unequal to the task. He had expelled the contents of his stomach there in the trees, paralyzed by the knowledge that he had to choose his own family's well-being or that of Christina MacKinnon and whoever else happened to be sleeping in the inn that night.

It was only when he had seen the light in one of the upstairs windows that Malcolm had known any hope.

So, he had done what was required of him, but he had also made certain that whoever was still awake was alerted to his presence. It had nearly cost him his life, for it was Lachlan Kincaid who had come after him. Only the realization that there was a fire blazing inside the inn had kept him from apprehending Malcolm.

Fergus lay on the planks in the corner of the room. The dirt on his coat had dried by now, providing a sort of transition between the reddish hues in his coat and the black ones. He perked up, though, at the sound of horse hooves on the dirt outside and remained that way until the door of the inn opened, at which point he rose to his feet.

"Stay, Fergus," Malcolm said, feeling the nervous energy of his hound increase his own anxiety. The dog remained in place, but Malcolm knew he would have been gone in a flash if not for the tone Malcolm had used.

He could hear the voice of Hamish below, followed by that of a woman—Miss Innes. Malcolm swallowed nervously. How in the world was he to make her *fall in love with him*? The idea had always seemed lunacy, but now more than ever, he felt himself out of his depth.

"Aye," came Hamish's muffled voice from down the stairs. "I found a

man ta help with the floorboards.”

“Ah,” she said. “How wonderful!”

It was strange to hear her speak so normally, without a hint of malice. Malcolm didn’t know whether to feel encouraged by the show of amiability or wary of it. He would have to start small with his own goals. Before he could even think of love or friendship, he would have to see if she could speak to him without shooting daggers with her eyes and tongue—and whether he could hide his own dislike of her.

“With any luck,” said Hamish, “‘twill be but a week or so afore ye’re able ta begin makin’ it feel cozy.”

Miss Innes laughed, and Malcolm stilled at the pleasant sound. He had never considered that she laughed. It seemed out of character from what he knew of her. But what *did* he know? Precious little. Of course, only a seriously unpleasant woman would speak to everyone as she had spoken to him and Angus. It made sense that there were some people she would show kindness toward. Malcolm simply wasn’t one of them.

Seeing his master’s distraction and determining to take advantage of it, Fergus took off with an uneven pattering of feet through the door and down the stairs. Mad barking ensued, and Malcolm cursed as he rose, hurrying to the door. He paused, though, as he heard Miss Innes’s voice over the barking.

“Well, hello there,” she said loudly.

Fergus’s barking stopped, and he growled.

Malcolm couldn’t help a smile, and he leaned against the wall, keeping himself concealed from the view of anyone downstairs. This was an opportunity to learn more of Miss Innes before the inevitable storm broke when she saw him. Besides, if anyone deserved such a reaction, it was Miss Innes—a bit of her own medicine. Fergus wouldn’t bite her, but he seemed not to have taken to her at all.

“Ye ken the dog?” Hamish asked Miss Innes as Malcolm continued to listen.

“I recognize the limp. I saw him at Benleith the other day. What is he doing here?”

“He belongs ta the man I hired on ta help.”

“I see. Crabbit, are you?” Miss Innes said, clearly speaking to the dog now. “Come. I won’t hurt you, you know.”

Fergus growled again, and the shuffling sound told Malcolm he was retreating.

“Apparently he does not care for people,” Miss Innes said.

“Or he doesna care for *you*,” Hamish said in an amused voice. “He came boundin’ up ta *me* the moment he arrived.”

“Hmph,” Miss Innes said. “He may not care for me now, but I am determined that he shall in time. He is very beautiful, isn’t he?”

“Aye, under all the dirt. In truth, I didna think ye’d take ta the creature.”

“Oh, I do love dogs,” she said. “Come now, Fergus. You needn’t fear me.”

Malcolm’s brows furrowed. He hadn’t told Angus he was bringing Fergus with him to the inn. The laird would have undoubtedly advised him against it, believing the dog would be no help with his goals. But apparently, Malcolm had been wise to bring the hound. The knowledge that Miss Innes had an affection for dogs was unexpected, and it gave Malcolm satisfaction to know that Fergus had recognized an enemy when he saw her.

“Fergus!” Malcolm called.

The dog bounded obediently up the stairs and into the room, demonstrating a degree of obedience that pleased him. He hoped it rankled just a bit with Miss Innes, and he wished he could ask Fergus what it was that he disliked about her.

Malcolm knelt to receive the dog, and Fergus licked his face, leaving a trail of slobber on his cheek.

“Och,” he said with a chuckle, wiping it away as he stood. “That’s enough. Come now.”

The hound followed him into the room, and Malcolm knelt back down on the floor. Fergus sat on his hind legs, leaning his body against Malcolm as he was wont to do—as if he couldn’t be certain Malcolm was truly there without his constant touch.

Steps on the stairs sounded, and Malcolm made a conscious effort to loosen his muscles, despite the dog leaning against him, and to focus on prying the next floorboard loose rather than on the fact that the woman approaching was one who would determine the fate of both him and his family.

Elizabeth held up her petticoats as she ascended the narrow stairs. They brushed against the walls, making her grateful she had worn older clothing, as it was bound to become dirtied while she worked at the inn. In time, and with effort on her own part and the part of others, she hoped that would no longer be the case. She meant Glengour Inn to be something above the ordinary.

She had a view of the man inside the burned room before she reached it, as the door was ajar. He was kneeling on the floor, and she watched as he pried at one of the floorboards. His shirtsleeves were rolled up, showcasing powerful forearms, and his hair was tied back in an unruly queue of dark, wavy hair. Where had Hamish found him? The fact that he was the owner of the dog told her that he was from Benleith lands.

She stepped into the doorway and smiled, her eyes trained on the dog, which sat so close it almost looked as though he was leaning on the man. “I am afraid I have not made a favorable impression upon your dog.”

On cue, the hound gave a little bark, and the man turned toward her.

She stilled, eyes widening and heart stopping momentarily. It was Malcolm MacKinnon.

“*You*,” she said. It was all she could manage.

His eyes watched her with mixed wariness and curiosity.

“What are you doing here?”

He looked at the floorboards to his side, many of them charred and split, sitting on a growing pile of ash. “Takin’ up the floorboards.”

“Yes, I can see that,” she said impatiently. “But what are you *truly* doing

here?” She folded her arms and took a step into the room.

The dog stood on all fours and began barking, but she held her ground.

“Fergus.” He said it sternly, and the dog went quiet.

He turned back to his work and continued prying at the board. “I dinna understand what ye mean.” The strength of the arms she had admired just a moment ago now merely seemed like evidence of brutality, for that was surely what they had been used for.

“Spare me the playacting, Mr. MacKinnon,” she said biting. “We both know that you do nothing without the order of Angus, and I do not believe for a second that you are here out of the goodness of your heart, whatever you managed to convince Hamish of.”

The floorboard gave a great creak and came loose, and Malcolm wiped at the sweat on his brow then set the floorboard amongst the others. “I’m here ta do a job, Miss Innes.”

She gave a caustic laugh. “That is precisely what I am afraid of! I know what sort of *jobs* Angus wishes to be done on Dunverlockie land—this room is perfect evidence of that.”

He didn’t look up at her, only seeing to the next floorboard.

“Fine,” she said. “I shall speak with Hamish about it, then.”

He gave no evidence of caring or even having heard, and she gritted her teeth.

“You might consider giving your dog a bath,” she said as she turned away.

She hurried down the stairs, seeking out Hamish. He was occupied in the coffee room, scrubbing one of the tables.

“What do you mean by hiring that man, Hamish?” she asked.

He turned toward her, frowning. “What do ye mean?”

She gave a little, humorless laugh. “You do not know who he is?”

“Malcolm?”

She gave him a significant look. “Malcolm *MacKinnon*. He is Angus MacKinnon’s righthand man.”

Hamish shrugged. “I didna ask ‘im for the names of his kin when I hired ‘im. I needed the help, and he seems ta ken what he’s doin’. He’s a hard worker, too.”

Elizabeth’s lips pinched together. It was true that the man was making quick progress upstairs—she was surprised at what he had managed to accomplish before she had even arrived for the day—but she didn’t trust him

for a second. What was Angus MacKinnon's closest kinsman doing at Glengour Inn performing such labor? Though, if the state of his family's house was any indication, they were in great need of extra work.

The door to the inn opened, and Glenna walked in, balancing a basket full of harvested grains on her hip.

"Glenna," Elizabeth said, going over to her. "You surely understand. Were you aware that Hamish hired on Malcolm MacKinnon to assist with the renovations?"

Glenna's face was streaked with dirt and sweat, and she was breathing hard. "Nay, I didna ken."

Hamish inclined his head in confirmation. "Aye, and I willna turn 'im off now. We need 'im too much."

"He must have been sent here," Elizabeth said, rubbing a thoughtful finger on her lip. "And I have no confidence in him whatsoever."

"What exactly do ye suspect 'im of, Miss Innes?" Hamish asked with a little smile.

"You are new here," she said, "or else you would not find it so amusing. Angus has tried more than once to kill my sister, Hamish. Glenna, too, has been a victim of his crimes. I imagine Malcolm MacKinnon's presence here makes her very uneasy." She looked to Glenna.

She looked thoughtful. "I'm no' afeared of him. Angus would be a fool ta try anythin' so soon after the trial. And I dinna believe Hamish would put us in danger or allow anythin' ta befall us."

"Of course no'," Hamish said.

Elizabeth scoffed lightly. "I seem to be the only one not to believe Angus has had a sudden change of heart."

"I didna hire Angus," Hamish pointed out. "And yer sister is safe at Dunverlockie. What could the man do from here?"

Elizabeth hesitated, unable to find a satisfactory response. "I cannot say." She rushed to continue before she could be interrupted. "But that does not mean that his motives are pure."

Hamish turned back to scrubbing. "If ye're that worried, ye can supervise him yerself."

Elizabeth lifted her chin. "Perhaps I will."

Glenna chuckled just as Malcolm appeared at the bottom of the stairs, a pile of wood in hand and his dog at his heels. He sent a glance at the three of them, and Elizabeth wondered for a moment whether he had perhaps

overheard their conversation.

“I think some of the wood might be salvaged, if only for firewood,” Malcolm said to Hamish. “Where do ye want it?”

“Ye can set it over here,” Hamish replied, indicating a spot near the fireplace.

As though attached by an invisible string to his master’s heels, Fergus followed Malcolm, sniffing Glenna curiously as they walked by. She gave the dog a playful rub on the head, and Elizabeth took the opportunity to attempt the same. The dog bore its teeth, though, and only when she retracted her hand did he continue on toward the fireplace.

Elizabeth let out a sound of disbelief. “He must have poisoned the dog against me,” she muttered.

“And how would he do such a thing?” Glenna asked with a laugh.

“How should I know? The poor dog has been raised among the MacKinnons—indoctrinated to believe good evil and evil good. It is confused and needs saving.”

Glenna laughed again. “Perhaps, though it seems ye’re the only person the beast is confused about.”

“No,” Elizabeth replied. “It is obviously confused about Mr. MacKinnon as well. By all rights, the dog should be reacting to *him* the way he has reacted to me. I can only think he has been bullied into submission.”

Glenna tilted her head to the side, thoughtfully regarding the two subjects of their conversation. Fergus sniffed the wood Malcolm was laying down, looking up every now and then, his long, pink tongue hanging out between sagging cheeks, still covered in dried mud. He looked at Malcolm with adoration in his droopy eyes, and, as Malcolm leaned over to resettle a piece of wood, Fergus took the opportunity to lick his face.

Malcolm smiled and wiped his cheek with the back of his wrist before rubbing Fergus’s head indulgently. It was the first time Elizabeth had seen anything but a frown on the man’s face, and she was aware of a slightly unsettled feeling the interaction brought about, as though she had put together an apparatus but was now left with a piece that didn’t fit.

“Aye, the dog looks terribly oppressed.” Glenna shot her a sidelong glance with one brow raised.

Elizabeth didn’t deign to respond to Glenna’s provocation, nor did Glenna give her the chance, as she sent another smile at Elizabeth and made her way to the kitchen, basket on her hip.

Having set down his burden, Malcolm rose to a stand, pushing back his sleeves, which were streaked with ash, just as his forearms were. He might have been a handsome man if not for the brooding look he generally wore—and the fact that he worked for a man with no soul. He had no right to be here, and while Hamish might not feel prepared to send him packing, Elizabeth had no intention of letting him carry out whatever unsavory business Angus had sent him to perform. If she supervised his work, as Hamish had jokingly said, perhaps he would realize that it was a futile endeavor—whatever that endeavor was.

He glanced at her as he passed by, and she sent him a smile full of faux-sweetness. Fergus didn't even look at her, and she reached a hand out toward the back of the dog's head, hoping that her gentle touch might show him that he had misunderstood her, but the moment her fingers touched him, his head whirled around, his lips turned up in a snarl, and he snapped.

She pulled back her hand in a hurry, covering it with the other one impulsively, and Malcolm looked back in surprise, his gaze flitting from her hand to Fergus and back.

His brows contracted. "Did he bite ye?"

She dropped her hand, hoping her reaction to the dog hadn't betrayed any weakness. "You ask as if that would be an unwelcome occurrence to you."

His frown deepened. "It would."

She could find nothing to say to this, and he lingered a moment longer before continuing toward the stairs.

She hesitated then followed after him. Their shoes and Fergus's steps made incongruous shuffling noises on the stone stairs, and Malcolm paused halfway to the top, turning back to look at her while Fergus bounded to the top and waited there.

"Are ye followin' me?" Malcolm asked.

"Yes," she said pleasantly and without even a hint of embarrassment.

"Why?"

"To ensure your work is satisfactory," she said, as though it was obvious.

He looked as if he might say something more, but he turned after a moment, continuing up the stairs and back to the burned room.

Elizabeth stepped inside after him, intending to take a seat on the bed, but Fergus stood beside it, and she stopped just inside the door. The dog's eyes were on her, watchful and challenging, as if he dared her to come near his master. She *would* gain the dog's affection, but now was not the time. She

would not make a spectacle of herself in front of Malcolm MacKinnon to do it.

She walked to the corner of the room, far away from Fergus, leaning against the wall and folding her arms across her chest.

Malcolm glanced up at her but said nothing, taking the flat, metal tool he held and continuing to pry at pieces of wood.

“You’ve missed the corner there,” Elizabeth said, pointing to a place where some charred wood remained.

Malcolm paused then looked up at her. “I’m aware of that, thank ye. I’m merely removin’ the largest pieces at the moment.”

Over the next few minutes, she provided a few more critiques of his work, but he took them in stride, giving no indication that her words were upsetting him. In fact, she could swear there was a little smile playing at the corner of his mouth. Whatever he was feeling, he had more self-control than she had anticipated—the MacKinnons were known for their short tempers.

Finally, though, after she crouched down to inspect some of his work, he set down the metal stick and looked at her with a hint of incredulity. “Do ye truly have nothin’ better ta do?”

She raised her brows. “What? Better than ensuring you do not sabotage the renovations here? My sister and brother-in-law tasked me with doing whatever I could to ensure the success of the project. So, no. I do not have anything better to do. Though, you might save me the trouble by simply leaving of your own accord.”

He shook his head. “I agreed ta this job, and I intend ta finish it.”

“Agreed to a job,” she repeated. “Yes, but a job from whom? That is what concerns me.”

“From Hamish, of course,” he said, grunting as he pried another board loose. Only half of this one had been burned, and he threw it into the growing pile behind him then rose to his feet and brushed off his hands.

“If ye’ll excuse me,” he said as he walked to the pile and began scooping up the pieces of wood in his arms. “I must take this downstairs.” The corner of his mouth quivered slightly as he looked at her.

“What?” she asked, unable to resist discovering the cause for his amusement. It made him look a different creature entirely from his normal frown, bringing a glint into his dark eyes and a good-naturedness to his face that bewildered her.

His eyes flitted to the floor then back to her, and he shook his head.

“Nothin’ at all.” He turned with his load and made his way to the door, stepping carefully from one joist to another where they had been exposed.

A great deal of the floor had been taken up by now, revealing interrupted views of the laundry room which sat beneath this one. Elizabeth’s gaze ran quickly over the floor, her eyes widening. There was no path left for her to leave the room. She was stuck in the corner unless she cared to step from joist to joist and risk falling into the room below.

“Mr. MacKinnon!” she called, but he was already gone. Or perhaps he was only pretending deafness. An unwilling smile rose to her lips. It was quite clear what he had been amused about and what had kept his irritation with her at bay. And she was not so proud that she could not admit she had been bested. She couldn’t help liking him the better for it. A boorish, heavy-handed foe disgusted her; one who could meet her and equal her in a battle of wits commanded respect and admiration, reluctant as she might be to give it.

Fergus stood beside the bed, his eyes on the door through which his master had just disappeared. He whined softly.

“You knew he was doing this, didn’t you?” she said.

The dog stared at her, unblinking. The floorboards along the wall hadn’t been touched, providing a route to the bed, and she took a hesitant step, gaze on the dog.

Fergus stiffened, and a low growl rumbled from him.

Unwilling to risk suffering both a dog bite and a tumble through the joists, Elizabeth accepted defeat—for now, at least. A board creaked, and she whipped her head around to the door, where Malcolm stood, a little smile on his lips.

She felt the heat creep up her neck and into her cheeks. How long had he been standing there?

“I underestimated you,” she admitted.

His brows shot up. “No’ the first time ye’ve said those words ta someone, I reckon.” He nodded his head to indicate Fergus. “It seems ye also underestimated his dislike of ye.”

“You turned him against me.”

He laughed, and she blinked at the unexpected sound coming from his lips.

“And exactly how do ye suppose I managed that?”

She opened her mouth only to close it.

He stepped from joist to joist until he reached the solid floor around the

bed. “I think Fergus senses yer animus toward me.” He put a hand to the dog, and Fergus lifted his head to receive the affection offered.

“How very perceptive of him,” Elizabeth said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “And he means to protect you from me? Much like you protect Angus?”

A flicker of annoyance passed across Malcolm’s face, but it was gone quickly.

“Should I be flattered that Fergus thinks me capable of doing you a harm?” she asked, capitalizing on the hint of emotion she had witnessed. “Or should I pity you for needing a bloodhound to protect you against the threat I apparently pose?”

Malcolm looked at her for a moment then reached out a hand. “Come. If I tell him ta stay, he will let ye near.”

She looked at his outstretched hand, covered in ash and dirt. “Or you will allow him to bite me in the hope of teaching me a lesson. I am not a fool, Mr. MacKinnon.”

He frowned. “I would never do that. And I certainly dinna think ye a fool.” His hand hovered in the air, waiting for her to accept it.

What would it be like to take the hand offered? Would the man extending it perform what he had promised? She nipped the questions in the bud. She wouldn’t take the hand of a MacKinnon. “I have no time to care for the opinion of a dog.”

He dropped his hand, the same ghost of a smile she had seen a number of times today appearing on his lips. “Aye. Because ye’re too occupied criticizin’ my work and keepin’ me from *my* tasks.”

“No,” she said. “Because a dog whose affections are directed toward you and Angus is not one whose good opinion I wish for.”

Malcolm stared at her for a moment, his hand still on Fergus’s head. “He doesna care for Angus.”

Elizabeth’s brows came together. “He does not?”

Malcolm shook his head and looked down at the dog.

Elizabeth had no response, though she had a number of questions she would have gladly pursued. The knowledge that she and Angus shared something in common, even something as insignificant as the disfavor of a dog, made her supremely uncomfortable. What made a hound stick to a man such as Malcolm MacKinnon like flies to honey while it refused to let her or Angus near?

She lifted her chin. It was not her aim to puzzle out such things. She was here to ensure Malcolm MacKinnon knew she would not let him get away with anything at Glengour—that she could see through his flimsy excuses for being there. He should know she had not forgotten his barbarism.

“So, Fergus takes exception to Angus,” she said, “but he does not mind answering to someone who forces a young man into the pillory for doing what young men do—falling in love?”

Malcolm’s hand stopped in its path along Fergus’s head and back. He looked at Elizabeth. “Ye’ll allow me ta be a better judge of what’s best for my brother than you are.”

Elizabeth stilled. “Your brother?”

“Aye.” He left Fergus and took up the metal bar again. “Ye dinna ken the situation, Miss Innes.”

She scoffed lightly. “I know that one does not subject one’s own flesh and blood to such a punishment as *that*.”

“‘Twas no’ I who ordered the punishment.”

“*That* I can believe,” she said, “for you are merely an extension of Angus, seeing his will done, obeying his orders without question.”

His movement with the bar slowed, and his knuckles went white gripping it.

She felt her heart race at the evidence of the effect of her words. “He must reward you very well indeed for you to have abandoned familial affection so entirely.”

He looked up at her, and she drew back slightly, surprised—even a bit frightened—by the anger on his face.

“Abandoned familial affection?” he repeated softly, though his jaw was hard. Fergus seemed to sense his master’s change in mood, for his head came up and his long ears perked up slightly from their droopy position.

Elizabeth knew a desire to retreat, sensing she had crossed a line of sorts, but it was not in her nature to do so. When she spoke, though, she could hear the conviction lacking in her tone. “Surely with you being so very integral a part of Angus’s *court*, your mother should be afforded a situation better than the one she—”

“Stop.” His voice was soft, but it shook, and his brow was thunderously black.

Elizabeth did stop, and for the second time in minutes, she felt heat creep into her skin.

“Ye speak of things ye dinna understand. Whatever ye think ye ken about me or my mother or brother, ye’re wrong.”

Her nostrils flared. “I know enough.”

He rose to his feet, shaking his head. “And just what *do* ye think ye ken about me?”

“I know the man you have pledged your fealty to is more devil than he is human.”

He turned his head, no longer meeting her gaze, but the muscles in his angular jaw were taut.

She continued. “I know that he has tried on more than one occasion to kill my sister—and twice nearly killed me as well. I know you chose to force your own brother back into the pillory rather than stand up to a man who cares for nothing and no one but himself—who masquerades behind a desire for the welfare of his clan to conceal his own selfish desires.”

Malcolm’s head whipped around, and his dark eyes blazed. “Ye think I dinna ken all that? Ye think ye ken the depths of Angus’s corruption better than I? Or that I wanted ta put my brother in the pillory?”

The cold metal in Malcolm's hand shook along with his trembling hand, and his chest heaved. Fergus rose to his feet, and a faint, rumbling growl filled the silence.

For once, Miss Innes looked bereft of speech.

"Excuse me," he said, and he moved toward the door, stepping from joist to joist, eager to put distance between himself and Miss Innes.

His foot slipped, and his hand shot out impulsively, finding purchase in Miss Innes's hand, which she must have stretched out to him without thinking.

Her light brown eyes were wide as they stared at him. There was surprise in them, certainly, but there was more than that—there were questions and a searching look that made him feel vulnerable, as though he had said even more with his words than he was yet aware of. And he had said plenty.

He set his foot firmly on the next joist, letting go of her hand as quickly as he could manage and leaving the room to the sound of Fergus's whining.

Once he reached the stairwell, he stepped down two stairs and paused in the dark, rubbing his hand roughly across his forehead. He had let his anger get the better of him, betraying his true opinion of Angus. And the worst part of it was that he had no one to blame but himself. He had encouraged Miss Innes to speak what she knew of him, but he hadn't been strong enough to withstand her insults, too ruffled by her assumptions to allow her to continue speaking such untruths, saying such slander of him, when she had no idea of the impossible situation he was in.

He needed to rein in his emotions. If he was to spend more time with her,

he would have to find a way to ignore her barbed comments. She always managed to give utterance to the very things he despised most about himself. She assumed the very worst of him, and he could hardly blame her for it. He had little defense for the person he had become and the situation he had forced his family into.

He forced a deep breath, willing his heart rate to slow and his limbs to stop shaking. Perhaps his outburst had not been a mistake. It had certainly taken Miss Innes by surprise, and that was something, was it not? It was very possible that the only way to gain her trust was to distance himself from Angus. After all, if anyone could match her hatred of Angus, it was Malcolm. But how could he explain the reason behind his own hate?

He couldn't. It would sabotage the plan and confirm Miss Innes in thinking he and Angus were of the same ilk. He would have to find a way around that truth.

He took another breath then made his way back to the room.

He stopped, blinking, on the threshold. Fergus was on his feet, staring threateningly at Miss Innes, who was stepping from one joist to another with a hand stretched precariously toward the wall to balance her.

Malcolm hurried in. "Quiet, Fergus," he said, stepping onto the joists and putting out a hand to help Miss Innes.

She looked at it for a moment, and he could see the deliberation in her eyes, weighing the need for help against the cost to her pride if she accepted it from him, no doubt. Her gaze moved to the laundry room below, and she shut her eyes quickly. The joist below her gave a creak, and that seemed to decide things, for she took his hand abruptly.

"I am not leaving because of the dog," she said as she did so. "I find I simply do not particularly care to be stuck in a corner for extended periods of time. Imagine that!"

Malcolm glanced over his shoulder to ensure he set his foot back on the solid planks that remained near the door. "Ye only needed ta ask, and I would've helped ye."

She gave a little hop to bridge the final distance between the last joist and the floorboards, but she overestimated the distance, and Malcolm tried to scoot out of the way as her slender form rushed toward him.

Miss Innes seemed even more horrified at her error, for once her feet were on the planks and their shoulders met, she drew back, yet another error of judgment which threw off her balance. Malcolm, who still held one of her

hands in his, pulled her back toward him, setting a steadying hand on her waist.

She regained her balance and quickly stole her hand away from his, stepping aside to put distance between them.

Malcolm gave a smiling scoff.

“What?” she said.

“Ye’re welcome.”

“I did not thank you,” she pointed out.

“Aye,” he said. “I had noticed that. Only, I figured that, after all the unsolicited suggestions ye’ve kindly provided *me* about how I might improve, ye might welcome a bit of advice on manners. Or perhaps ye would have preferred if I’d let ye fall.”

“Do not be ridiculous,” she said as she brushed her petticoats. “I would not have fallen.”

“Do ye wish ta try it again and test that theory?”

She shot him an unamused look, but, just as he had noticed before leaving the room, there was something different in her gaze—less malice and more searching, as though she was trying to understand something about him by merely looking at him.

“Did you mean what you said?” Her frank gaze was fixed on him, her arms folded across her chest.

He knew what she was referring to, but he wouldn’t admit it. “About tryin’ it again? Aye.”

She rolled her eyes in impatience. “Not about that. About Angus.”

Malcolm didn’t answer immediately, for he still wasn’t certain how to answer the questions that would inevitably follow his affirmative response. But Miss Innes was showing the first signs of a softening toward him since his outburst. This was not an opportunity to be taken lightly.

“You did mean it,” she said, and there was wonder in her voice. She frowned, and confusion was written in the delicate lines of her forehead. “Why, then? Why do you obey him?”

“He is my laird,” Malcolm said. If she knew the truth, she would think him every bit as bad and repulsive as Angus. And there would be no friendship after that.

She shook her head, and her eyes narrowed as she stared at him. Her gaze was unnerving, and he turned away from it, afraid that, if she looked long enough, she would discern the truth he needed to conceal from her.

“I know enough about Angus to know that he does not inspire loyalty—he demands it, and one can only demand loyalty by making the alternative unpalatable.”

Malcolm’s heart thudded against his chest. He would never manage to keep all his secrets from this woman for long enough to do what Angus demanded of him. “Ye’re mistaken,” he said, keeping his eyes away from her.

“Perhaps,” she said. “But I rather think not.”

Fergus gave a little whine, and Malcolm looked over, grateful for a distraction. The hound put out his lame paw, apparently intending to cross the joists to join his master.

“Nay, Fergus,” Malcolm said. “Ye’ll have ta wait.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said, “for your master has no care at all for the convenience of anyone but himself.”

Malcolm gave a small laugh and shook his head. “I’ll go fetch some of the wood ta put down.”

Elizabeth’s brows shot up. “Might you not have done as much for me?”

“Aye, I might have. But what for? Ye assured me ye’d no’ have fallen even without ‘em.” He left the room to the view of her begrudging smile, and it elicited one of his own in the dark of the corridor.

It was not the first time she had wrested such a reaction from him that day, either, and it felt strange, as if he was using muscles for the first time. He was known amongst the MacKinnons for his silence and surliness. He kept his tongue strictly bridled for his own sake and for the sake of his family, and there was little enough to smile about at Benleith. When it became apparent that others feared him as a result of his appearance, he accepted their misinterpretation. It served his ends for people to leave him alone, and it certainly served Angus’s aims for his closest kinsmen to inspire fear amongst those he wished to frighten into submission.

But Miss Innes had not accepted Malcolm’s silence, neither had she feared him because of it. She had teased him and provoked him until he could bear it no longer. And while he regretted his rash outburst, it was invigorating to loosen the hold on his tongue, to keep up with her and parry her thrusts.

When Malcolm returned, his arms laden with the wood planks at the end of the corridor, Miss Innes was still in the room, just inside the door.

“I didn’t want him to attempt to go after you,” she said, as though he had demanded an explanation of her. “Though, I cannot think an order from me

would have been obeyed.”

“Nay,” he replied as he set the wood. “I told him ta stay, and he willna disobey me.”

Elizabeth looked at the dog curiously. “Never?”

“Never.” Malcolm thought of the many times Fergus had refused to accompany him to Benleith. “Well, *almost* never.”

She turned to him, curiosity sparkling in her eyes. “Almost. What formidable force *is* it that can cause Fergus to disobey his beloved master?”

Malcolm narrowed his eyes. “Because ye wish ta use it yerself?”

She gave a light shrug of the shoulders. “Or perhaps the same force might cause *you* to disobey *your* master.”

Malcolm reached for a plank and set it down along the joists. “I’m afraid ‘twill no’ serve.”

“And why is that?”

“Because,” he said as he adjusted the wood, “the threat of seein’ Angus is the only time Fergus will go against me.”

“Oh,” she replied with disappointment.

There was silence for a moment.

“I must return to Dunverlockie now,” she finally said.

Malcolm didn’t know whether to be relieved or disappointed. He stood and wiped his arm across his brow. “I’m grateful ye trust me now enough ta leave me.”

She tilted her head to the side, raising one eyebrow. “That is hardly the case, but I cannot spend all my time overseeing you. I am not a nurse or a governess, after all. But I shall return tomorrow, and I *will* discover what has brought you to Glengour, Mr. MacKinnon.”

And with that threat, she was gone.

Elizabeth took the stairs slowly to the ground floor of the inn, deep in thought about the past few hours. She hardly knew what to think of Malcolm MacKinnon—particularly about what he had said about Angus. He *knew* that his laird was more of a beast than a human, and it seemed to bother him to no small degree—though not enough to keep him from doing his will.

Perhaps he was trying to pull the wool over her eyes, but she didn't think so. There had been too much genuine emotion in his reaction to her words—and too much chagrin afterwards. If he *was* acting, he was very accomplished at it. And that might be true. She had certainly underestimated him in other ways.

She had believed Malcolm MacKinnon to be a brute—a man whose saturnine expression hid nothing but the most dull and imbecilic thoughts. But she had clearly been wrong. Of course, he *did* generally look terribly serious and frowning, but she had seen not only his smile a few times but his wit as well. He was much sharper than she had given him credit for, and while that made things more exciting for her, she was no fool, for it made him a much more formidable foe than she had believed herself to be facing.

She would have to be more strategic in her approach.

She reached the bottom of the stairs and glanced at Hamish, who was still in the coffee room. All the tables were set in one corner, some stacked on top of each other, along with the chairs, too. There was a bucket beside him, and he was working with a wet rag at a spot on the floor, but he rose at the sight of Elizabeth.

“I think I shall be going now,” she said.

He smiled and nodded. “And what did ye discover after all yer supervisin’ of Malcolm?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Not yet, at least. But that does not mean there is nothing to discover. I still do not trust him. Why would he give up the comforts of Benleith to spend his time here doing such labor?”

Hamish shrugged. “Perhaps he’s tired of what he does at Benleith. Workin’ with the hands is fulfillin’ for many.” He smiled at her, as though to tease her about the lack of help she had been all day. And he was right. Had she just spent the entire day watching Malcolm MacKinnon work for no reason at all?

She still couldn’t say precisely what it was she suspected him of. What *could* he do at Glengour that would hurt Christina? She didn’t know. She only knew that she couldn’t simply accept his presence there as something benign.

“Besides,” Hamish continued, “there are few people in these parts who canna use a bit more money.”

Glenna’s head peaked out from the kitchen. “Are ye leavin’, miss?”

Elizabeth nodded. “I shall return tomorrow, though, of course. Perhaps I can help you with something then. Until we are ready to begin decorating here, I hope to make myself useful in other ways.”

“Like watchin’ Malcolm MacKinnon?” Glenna said with a little, teasing smile.

“I shall certainly continue watching over him, as no one else seems to think it necessary.”

Glenna gave a quick shrug of the shoulders. “At first, I thought the same as ye did about him. But he’s much nicer than I expected, and a good worker besides.”

Elizabeth pursed her lips. “From what we have seen, yes. And perhaps that is just what he wants us to see. But he cannot hide everything. One need only look at the misery on his face to see what it is like to spend so much time in Angus’s company.”

There was a shuffling sound, and Elizabeth whipped around in time to see Malcolm emerge from the stairs, a bucket in hand and Fergus beside him. Maddeningly, heat rushed into her neck and cheeks. But there was no anger or hurt on Malcolm’s face—or at least the frown there was no different than the one he normally wore—and she knew her reaction unmerited. It was the truth, and she would have said the same thing to him directly, but her

conscience twinged all the same. It was one thing to say something to a man's face—it was quite another to be discovered saying it when one believed he was not present.

Hamish rose to his feet. "I'll saddle yer horse, Miss Innes."

"No," she said. "I can do it myself. You are occupied with more important things."

"I'll do it," Malcolm said. "I'm goin' outside any ways."

Elizabeth shook her head and walked to the door to demonstrate that she truly had no need of assistance. "Not at all necessary."

"'Twould be my pleasure," Malcolm said, and he opened the door. Was there a hint of sarcasm in his voice? Was he again showing her what he thought of her manners? Never had she thought to be taught lessons on such a subject from one of the MacKinnons.

She gritted her teeth and preceded him out of the inn, noting how Fergus watched her carefully, as though she might make a sudden decision to lunge at his master and he needed to be ready to defend him. The dog's mistrust of her smarted for some silly reason, and she brushed aside the ridiculous way its behavior affected her. She simply hated being lumped in with Angus as the only people the dog had taken exception to.

The ground was beginning to dry of the rain they had had overnight, and evidence of the sun's descent in the sky was apparent from the glowing halo that surrounded one of the downy clouds above.

"When do *you* intend to leave for the day?" she asked. It did seem somewhat ineffective for her to supervise him all day, only to give him opportunity in the evening to carry out whatever his intentions were at Glengour.

He gave a little shrug. "No' much longer, I reckon."

"You are nearly done with your work, are you not?"

He glanced at her under his thick, furrowed brows. "Aye."

"You might finish it all tomorrow, I think." She could be at ease again once he finished.

A little smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Aye, and then ye'll no' be able ta use me as an excuse for no' workin' yerself."

She scoffed. "You think I *prefer* spending all my time acting as a sort of governess for an unruly child?"

He shrugged again as they reached the stables. "If ye truly wished for my departure ta come sooner, ye might've helped rather than merely watchin'

and criticizin’.” He scrunched up his nose in an expression of feigned disgust. “But I reckon ye dinna care ta dirty yer precious hands—or perhaps ye prefer no’ ta betray yer incompetence. After all, ‘tis easier ta pass judgment on the work of others than ta do it yerself.”

She stopped just inside the stables, folding her arms across her chest and staring at him in incredulity. Malcolm turned toward her with his eyebrows raised, the picture of innocence.

“What?” he asked.

“You think my criticism of your work to be unjust and unwarranted? That I am using it as a way to shirk my own duties?”

He didn’t respond, merely turning to retrieve the saddle and blanket.

His silence was response enough, and she stepped toward him, wresting the saddle from him in a gesture full of aggravation. “I assure you that I would far rather be working than supervising you. And I am not one to avoid work, even if it *dirtyes my precious hands*, as you say.”

The expression on his face told her he believed her not at all.

She walked over to the stall where her horse stood, aware that she was waddling slightly with her unwieldy load. “Might I remind you,” she said as she stepped to open the stall while holding the saddle, “that I did *not* ask you for your help here in the stables?” Her efforts at opening the stall door while holding her burden were unsuccessful, and Malcolm came over to assist her, relieving her of the saddle. She opened the door so swiftly that he was obliged to sidestep it.

Fergus growled, but Malcolm remained silent and waited, holding the saddle as though it was practically weightless. She was well aware of the subtle but evident twinkle of amusement in his dark eyes, and even though she knew he was enjoying provoking her, she couldn’t help her need to respond to it, and she took the saddle once again, allowing him to set the blanket on Caesar’s back.

“Very well,” she said, elbowing him out of the way to place the saddle. “You shall see tomorrow.” She didn’t even care if he was attempting to lighten his own load by provoking her into helping him with his duties. If it would mean his departure from Glengour sooner, it would certainly be worth it. She hefted the saddle onto the horse’s back, though not without a small grunt. When she looked over to see if he had noticed, he was still watching her.

“I meant it when I said ‘twould be my pleasure ta help ye, Miss Innes.”

“I have no desire for such help,” she said with a bite to her voice, reaching for the bridle. “The last time a MacKinnon involved himself in my means of transportation, my sister and I were nearly killed.” She turned to him. “Which reminds me. . . .No doubt the first thing you shall do upon your return to Benleith is to report to Angus. Perhaps you can deliver a message to him for me.”

He said nothing.

“Whatever his plans, whatever his reason for sending you here, his intention to have Dunverlockie shall come to naught. Christina and Lachlan are not so naïve they would risk allowing the estate to pass into the hands of a MacKinnon ever again.”

Malcolm looked at her more intently, but only for a moment, then reached out a hand toward the bridle she held. “Can I help ye—”

“No,” she said, slipping it onto Caesar’s head. “I have neither need nor desire for your assistance.”

He stepped back, the spark of humor gone from his eyes and face. He looked as he so often had in the past—subdued, brow furrowed. For a moment, she wondered what it was like inside the head of Malcolm MacKinnon. What were his thoughts to make his natural expression so brooding and dark? And if he *did* dislike Angus, what power was it that Angus had over him?

“Verra well,” Malcolm said. “Come, Fergus.” He inclined his head at her and made his way from the stables, Fergus following on his heels with his characteristically uneven gait.

Elizabeth’s gaze stayed on them for a moment, and she stroked Caesar’s neck with a hand. Perhaps she had been overly harsh, but she didn’t know what to think of him, and that made her tongue sharper than usual.

The horse nudged her arm with its muzzle, and she turned to him with a sigh. “See, Caesar? You like me well enough. *You* do not think me like Angus.” She glanced again at Malcolm and Fergus disappearing around the corner of the inn. “Let us go home.”

Once Miss Innes had left, Malcolm only remained long enough to finish a few short tasks. He spent the night at home with his family. Angus knew he was working at Glengour, and Malcolm hoped the laird would assume he had chosen to remain there for the night rather than returning to Benleith. Aside from having no desire to return to the castle, he wasn't entirely sure what he would say to Angus if he did. Should he tell the laird of his outburst or keep things to himself? Angus *had* given him free rein to do what was required to achieve his aims, after all, but Malcolm couldn't be certain how the laird would feel about Malcolm's chosen tactic.

He would wait to report to Angus until there was more to tell.

There was still strain in the way Dugan treated him, and it took all of Malcolm's restraint not to ask his brother whether he had ended things with Bridget MacMorran. Further pressure on the topic was unlikely to change anything, and it might very well make Dugan dig in his heels.

There were no beds in the small house for Malcolm, but with the coos still at the shielings and their half of the house well cleaned for once, he was happy enough to put down some fresh straw, with Fergus at his feet. Physically, it was far less comfortable than Benleith, but in every other way, it was superior. Not being obliged to listen to the drunken and bawdy talk of his kinsmen and the way they often teased him about his sister was something he did not take for granted.

Malcolm woke to the smell of damp dirt and grass. It had rained, and a quick glance at the skies told him that it was likely to do so again. He hurried to gather his things and attach his horse to the cart. He had no desire to spend

the day working in wet clothing, which would already be splattered with mud, given the state of the road.

Sure enough, when he arrived at Glengour, both he and Fergus were well covered in the mud the cart wheels had kicked up on the journey. Miss Innes was nowhere in sight, but Hamish greeted Malcolm warmly.

“Ye’ve made quick work of things upstairs,” he said.

Malcolm gave a nod. “Today, I can nail down the new planks and give ‘em a good scrubbin’. Some of the ones remainin’ still show signs of the fire, even though they were no’ burned themselves. I didna think ye’d wish ta waste them.”

“Ye did right. If scrubbin’ ‘em doesna work, we can replace ‘em. I’ll send Glenna up with a bucket of water when ye’re ready for it.”

Malcolm thanked him and continued up the stairs. It was nice to do honest work for once. It was satisfying in a way that the things Angus required of him could never be. With Angus, he dirtied his hands in a very different way than he was doing at Glengour.

As promised, once the boards had been nailed into place, Glenna brought him a bucket of water with two rags slung over the side.

“I rubbed a bit of soap in the water afore bringin’ it,” she said, looking around the room. “Do ye wish for me ta help ye?”

He shook his head. “‘Tis kind of ye, but I can manage.” He had seen her out working in the field the day before. She would have plenty to do without helping him. And in truth, he was in no hurry to finish his work. He had only agreed to help with this room, and he needed a reason to extend his time once that was finished. It was a delicate balance between doing a good job and lingering as long as he could.

Glenna smiled and left him and Fergus alone in the room. He scrubbed the floors intensely for a time, and Fergus followed him around. So focused was he on his efforts that it wasn’t until he paused to roll his shoulders and tip his neck from side to side that he noticed the paw prints across the freshly scrubbed floor.

“Och, Fergus,” he said, staring down the dog with disfavor.

Fergus looked at him with his droopy eyes, entirely oblivious to his sin, and Malcolm couldn’t help but chuckle. “Away with ye,” he said, cocking his head toward the doorway. Fergus seemed hesitant about his master’s wishes, and Malcolm was obliged to point and say, “Out, Fergus,” before the hound obeyed, a hurt look in his soulful eyes. “I’ll come see ye when I’m done.”

Not long after, he heard horse hooves and then the sound of Miss Innes's voice below stairs. His heart beat more quickly. It was natural that it would, of course. Miss Innes held the key to his future, and she was a formidable foe.

He waited for her to come upstairs, certain she would wish to supervise whatever she thought he intended to do while scrubbing floors. But she did not come. He sat back on his knees, looking at the dirty water that filled the bucket Glenna had brought. He had scrubbed away the more obvious signs of fire, but he might as well scrub the entire floor—and it wouldn't hurt to see to the parts of the wall where char marks remained. For that, he would need new water.

He picked up the bucket by the handle and made his way out of the room and to the stairwell. By the time he had reached the bottom, though, the sound of Miss Innes's voice had disappeared, and there was no sign of anyone in the coffee room or the entryway.

He pushed through the creaky front door and made his way to the side of the inn where he could pour out the water to make way for a fresh bucketful, but he stopped abruptly before rounding the corner.

Miss Innes was there, her back to him. Fergus stood before her, his gaze fixed upon her.

"Come, Fergus," she said. "You and I ought to be friends, surely, for we have a common enemy." Her hand was extended, and Malcolm squinted in an effort to see what she held there. It looked to be a piece of oatcake.

Malcolm smiled. She had said she had no time to care for the opinion of a dog, and those words had fit with what he knew of her. But her behavior now betrayed her.

"Will you trust me more if I do this?" Miss Innes crouched down, and her petticoats rested on the damp dirt.

Fergus took another step back, growling softly.

"If we work together," she said slowly and carefully, extending her hand a bit farther, "perhaps we can achieve something great—you can save your master from Angus, and I can save those I love from him, too. You could be a hero."

Malcolm suddenly felt guilty for eavesdropping, and he stepped back. The water in the bucket sloshed, bringing Fergus's gaze to him. Malcolm grimaced as the dog relaxed his vigilance and ran toward him.

Miss Innes turned, and a subtle flush of consternation appeared in her

expression at the sight of him.

“He didna care for the bannock, I take it?” Malcolm said.

Elizabeth rose to her feet.

“I dinna think he’ll warm ta ye until he’s certain ye mean me no harm.”

“Certain *I* mean *you* no harm?” She scoffed. “Well, that is rich indeed.”

Malcolm walked toward her, and Fergus followed along. He stopped just shy of her, and she watched him warily. “Down, Fergus,” Malcolm said.

Fergus lay down obediently, and Malcolm crouched beside him, keeping a hand on the dog’s neck. “Come,” he said, gesturing to Miss Innes to join him. “He’ll no’ hurt ye with me right here. I swear it.”

Her lips pinched together, but she took a step toward them and slowly bent down.

Fergus stiffened slightly, but Malcolm increased the pressure of his hand on the dog’s neck.

Miss Innes looked up at Malcolm. “You are certain that. . .”

“That he respects me enough ta obey me? Aye, Miss Innes. I’m certain of it. The trick with Fergus is his ears. If ye scratch ‘em in just the right place, he’s powerless ta do anythin’ but love ye. If ye can find a spare piece of chicken, too, ye’ll forever be in his favor.”

Miss Innes set the bannock down beside her and, with slight hesitation, reached a hand toward Fergus. His eyes were fixed on her, and Malcolm could feel the stiffness in the dog’s body. He knew a moment of anxiety. What if Fergus’s dislike of Miss Innes *was* stronger than his loyalty to Malcolm? Or perhaps it was his loyalty to Malcolm that would urge him to protect his master against someone he saw as a threat? His hold on the dog tightened yet again, and he tried to conceal his unease as Miss Innes’s hand drew closer.

He was not the only nervous one. Even without looking directly at her, Malcolm could see the way her chest rose and fell, as if she was controlling her breathing carefully. Finally, her hand made contact with Fergus’s ear. She hesitated then began scratching softly, and the dog relaxed slightly.

“Just behind,” Malcolm said, relief flooding him. If the hound had bitten Miss Innes, she never would have forgiven him. “Right here.” He guided her hand so it was in the exact spot.

She glanced up at him briefly, and he smiled at her.

“Now scratch and observe,” he said.

She followed his instructions, and whatever stiffness remained in

Fergus's body immediately dissolved. He listed to the side for a moment then slumped over onto the grass, closing his eyes.

Miss Innes laughed delightedly and continued scratching. "That is quite a weak spot, Fergus—a veritable Achilles' heel. How did you discover it?" She looked up at Malcolm, and he found himself momentarily breathless. Miss Innes was handsome in her haughtiness; with a smile on her face, she was exquisite.

"Och," he said, pulling his eyes away and putting his hand under the dog's head to reach his other ear. "Fergus and I ken one another verra well. I found this particular secret o' his when he was just a whelp."

"What happened to his front paw?"

All of Fergus's legs were relaxed, but the lame one hung at a different angle than the others.

Malcolm lifted his shoulders. "He was born with it. He was the last of the litter—and the smallest by a fair amount. I've thought that, amongst the other ten, he didna have the room he needed." He sighed, and his smile faded a bit. "In any case, Angus didna wish for him."

"Of course not," Miss Innes said caustically. She left scratching Fergus's ear and touched the paw in question. Fergus's head came up, but after a moment, it slumped back to where it had been, and he let out a grand sigh, which made his lips flap.

Malcolm and Miss Innes both laughed, meeting eyes. Their gazes held for a moment, after which she looked away and rose to her feet. "That is quite enough dawdling, I think. Shall we get to work?"

Malcolm gave a nod. He hadn't been sure she would follow through with her stated intention to work with him. He should have known better. Miss Innes was nothing if not prideful, and he had aimed directly for that pride with his insinuations the day before.

Whether it was because he had lit a fire beneath her or because it was not her nature to do things by halves, Miss Innes proved a hardworking companion. She seemed to have planned for it, as the clothing she wore was sturdy. The only respites she took were to empty and refill the bucket or to scratch Fergus behind the ears for a bit, always with the same appreciative smile when he rolled to his side. Malcolm couldn't help but watch whenever the encounter occurred. It was a peek into an entirely different side of Miss Innes, and it both intrigued and unsettled him.

"I admit," Malcolm said after hammering a nail into place on a

floorboard, “I didna think ye’d last more than half an hour.”

She continued scrubbing a spot on the wall but sent him a glare over her shoulder. The lone curl left hanging from her coiffure dangled against her back. Despite the labor she had been engaged in, the curl was still neat, and it glinted like honey with the light from the window, looking even softer than the skin it sat against. He had the strangest impulse to take the ringlet in his fingers and turn it about to watch how the colors shifted in the light, much like Miss Innes seemed to change when lit by a smile.

He pulled his gaze away and picked up another nail.

“Let that be a lesson to you, Mr. MacKinnon,” she said, “not to underestimate me.”

“I wouldna dare,” he said as he set the next nail in place.

And he meant it. He suspected that Elizabeth Innes might just be a worthy opponent of Angus MacKinnon. She seemed to have every bit as much resolve as he did. She was at a disadvantage, though. For all her sharp-tongued criticisms, she seemed to have a conscience—something Angus lacked. And it was that disadvantage that roused within Malcolm the precise sort of respect that was entirely absent in his feelings about Angus.

“Then, do me a favor by communicating that to Angus when you next speak with him.”

“He wouldna listen,” Malcolm said, striking the nail with the hammer three times.

Miss Innes turned toward him, giving him an evaluative look—the same one that made his skin prickle and gave him the eerie feeling that he was transparent. “Why *do* you answer to Angus?”

Malcolm occupied himself with setting the nail in place. This was exactly what he had been worried about. Miss Innes was giving him the opportunity to connect with her, to agree with her. And the truth was, they *did* agree on this subject. But the truth was exactly what Malcolm had been trying to hide for years, and his own sins had become so tied up in Angus’s sins that it was dangerous to speak of the latter.

Speaking of any of it was a risk, in fact. Angus would not thank Malcolm for providing Miss Innes with evidence against him. But would he rather Malcolm safeguard Angus’s name? Or succeed in making Miss Innes fall in love with him?

Malcolm had been avoiding the thought of what would come next, assuming he even managed to achieve such a thing. When Angus had

conveyed his wishes, Malcolm had only known that, if his family's and his own freedom were an option, he *had* to find a way to accomplish the tasks given him.

Besides, his experience of Miss Innes to that point had been that of a haughty and hostile woman who had humiliated and mocked him at every encounter. Sympathy for her—consideration for what the accomplishment of his tasks might mean for her—hadn't occurred to him.

Now, he was much less certain about his notions of her. She was cutting, to be sure, but that was not all she was. She clearly loved her sister enough to antagonize Angus, and Malcolm envied her. She had the courage to do what he wished he himself could do—what he would have done if his family's safety wasn't at stake.

Whatever Miss Innes was, Malcolm still felt completely incapable of eliciting in her the sort of feelings Angus expected him to. Miss Innes was not a woman to be manipulated.

"It is not the only option," she said when he didn't respond.

"Ye dinna ken that," he replied, adjusting the nail in preparation for striking it. He could feel her eyes on him.

"There is *always* another option."

He frowned and struck the hammer with a blow so hard, the nail sat flush against the board when he raised his arm to strike again. She was right, of course, but the alternative to answering to Angus didn't bear considering. Malcolm had made the conscious choice to trade his soul for his family's safety.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and a young boy appeared in the doorway presently. His brown eyes flitted from Malcolm to Miss Innes and back.

"Malcolm?" he asked.

Malcolm nodded, noting the paper the boy held.

"A message for ye," said the boy. "From Benleith."

Malcolm clenched his teeth and stood to take the note. "Thank ye."

"Do ye wish me ta wait for a reply?" the boy asked.

"Nay." Malcolm reached into his pocket and produced a small coin, which he gave to the boy, who smiled gratefully and left.

Malcolm glanced at Miss Innes, whose eyes were upon him. There was a mocking smile on her face and a steely glint in her eyes.

"Please," she said, nodding at the note, "do not forgo reading it on my

account. We are nearly finished with the work here. Whatever Angus wishes for you to accomplish while you are at Glengour has now become urgent.”

He considered sliding the letter into his coat, which sat on the floor, but that would only serve to increase Miss Innes’s suspicions, so he opened it and read the short note, requesting him to come to Benleith that evening. No doubt Angus wished for a report on Malcolm’s progress.

He suppressed a sigh, folded it up, and set it atop the coat.

“What does *his eminence* have to say?” The good humor in Miss Innes’s face had disappeared entirely, her voice taking on a biting, sarcastic tone. “I cannot think he will be pleased to discover your failure to fulfill whatever commission he gave you. Please assure him that his efforts shall be rewarded with continued failure. Would you like me to hammer those final two nails for you?”

Whatever understanding Malcolm and Miss Innes had achieved for the past few hours, the arrival of the letter seemed to have destroyed it. The very thought of Angus brought out the acerbic side of her, and Malcolm couldn’t even blame her for it. He himself only desired his laird’s success inasmuch as it meant his own family’s well-being.

In another world, he might have joined forces with Miss Innes to seek justice against Angus. As it was, he was forced to play the laird’s games.

Elizabeth was angry. Angry with herself, mostly. She dumped the bucket of grimy water into the stones in front of the inn. In that burnt room in the upstairs of Glengour Inn, she had allowed herself to relax too much in the presence of Malcolm MacKinnon.

She had even begun to doubt her assumptions about him—perhaps he *was* truly working at the inn for reasons unrelated to Angus. He had given no indication at all that he wished her anywhere but where she was, no spurious excuses to leave the room, no impatience to be left alone, even when she had criticized his work.

But then the letter had arrived. She had no doubt at all it was from Angus, and its presence in the room had been a testament to her suspicions. Whatever his feelings toward Angus, Malcolm obeyed his orders strictly. That was a sign of weakness she could not excuse or forgive, and weak men were often the most cruel.

She set the bucket down and set her hands on her hips, looking over Glengour Inn. It needed a great deal of work outside as well as inside if they wanted to make it stand out to passing travelers. Lachlan wanted it to be more like the comforting establishments people found in the Lowlands and in England.

Malcolm's work, though, was done. At least she had prevented him from...well, what *had* she prevented him from doing? Perhaps she had merely wasted two days for no reason at all. At least she was not causing Christina undue stress with her presence at Dunverlockie. That counted for something, surely.

She went back inside and up the stairs, taking care to walk more quietly as she neared the top. Perhaps she would catch Malcolm doing whatever he had been unable to do in her presence. Apart from wishing to thwart Angus, she was genuinely curious what that might be. But it was strangely silent upstairs.

Had he left that part of the inn, taking advantage of her absence? She tiptoed to the room they had been working in and stopped short.

Malcolm was lying on the new floorboards, facing away from her, his head resting on one arm and Fergus right beside him. Malcolm's free hand scratched the dog's ear rhythmically, as the afternoon light from the window spilled across both of them. Elizabeth couldn't stop a smile at the state of the large hound. It was utter relaxation.

Her smile faded slightly. She didn't know what to do with Malcolm MacKinnon. Cruel men did not treat animals the way Malcolm treated Fergus. She knew that, at least. What he had said about Angus was evidence of that. Angus had wanted to get rid of the puppy when it had become clear that it possessed a weakness. It was Malcolm's intervention which had saved it. What, then, was he doing serving Angus MacKinnon's pleasure, bending to his every whim?

If it weren't for Malcolm's impending departure from the inn, she would have set herself to discover just that, for it was a mystery she would love to solve.

She cleared her throat, and both the man and dog jumped at the unexpected sound.

"Lazing about, I see," she said as she stepped into the room. "I would tell Hamish, but there would be no point, as your work is finished."

Malcolm gave a little smile and relaxed back into his prior position. "We were merely enjoyin' the fruits of work well done. And watchin' a wee squirrel eat his dinner."

Elizabeth stepped farther into the room and leaned to the side for a better view through the window. *Squirrel* was the nickname for her brother, Ninian, and the word alone made her feel a bit of homesickness for her siblings.

"Ye'll no' see it from there," Malcolm said. "He's made his way ta the verra top—ta keep the spoils for himself, I reckon, for there's another one yellin' at him from below."

Elizabeth glanced at the bent arm under Malcolm's head and the empty space beside him, opposite Fergus. An image flashed across her mind of her

own head lying perfectly in the crook of his arm and the sunny boards next to him warming her back.

She blinked, shocked at the strange concoction of her mind. Yes, her head might fit on his arm perfectly, but he might just as easily strangle her from such a position.

She walked over to the window and looked up to the highest branches of the tree, where a red squirrel nibbled at a nut. She gave a soft laugh, reminded forcibly of Ninian's way of eating bannocks.

"Och, Fergus," Malcolm said. "She's blocked no' only our view but the warmth, too."

She turned toward him, staying in the same spot so that she cast a shadow over them. Malcolm's sleeves were rolled up and the top of his shirt unbuttoned so that his chest was visible.

Elizabeth forced her eyes up to his face. "I came to bid both of you farewell—and see you on your way." She didn't move, hoping that he was receiving the message that she meant to stay until he was gone.

Seeming to understand that his time basking on the floor had drawn to a close, Malcolm sighed and pushed himself up. He came to a stand just before her, and she had to force herself to stand her ground rather than drawing back.

He looked her in the eye, giving her a close view of his own, which, though dark and deep, reflected the light from the window behind her.

"'Twas a pleasure workin' with ye the past two days, Miss Innes," he said. "I told ye I'd underestimated ye, and I meant it."

She lifted her chin, unable to suppress the beginnings of a smile.

"But," he said, stopping her smile, "ye're mistaken about me, as well. Ye think ye ken me because ye ken Angus." His eyes bored into her, making the skin on her arms prickle. "Ye're wrong." He held her gaze a moment longer then turned. "Come, Fergus."

Malcolm stopped at his mother's house before making his way to Benleith. Fergus would stay there for the night, and Malcolm needed the motivation his family would provide him before he faced Angus.

He had hoped to find a way to continue his work at Glengour, but Miss Innes had made it clear she wouldn't permit such a thing, and he had quickly abandoned his intention to speak with Hamish on the subject of continuing to help. It would have done nothing but solidify Miss Innes in her suspicions. Malcolm felt it probable that, had the letter from Angus not come when it did, she might not have felt so strongly about his immediate departure.

He would have to find another way to accomplish Angus's goal—and he hoped he could help his laird see reason. Retrieving the documents from Dunverlockie was a simpler task than gaining the affections of Miss Innes.

She was feisty and stubborn and aggravating, and she operated, at least toward him, behind an impenetrable wall of distrust.

But Malcolm knew a truly cruel person when he saw one—he had spent much of his life with Angus, after all—and Miss Innes was not one of them. Angus's brutality sprang from selfishness, Miss Innes's from concern for her family. Malcolm suspected that, behind all of the walls Miss Innes built around herself, there was perhaps a woman afraid for herself and her family, just as Malcolm was for himself and his family.

Angus was already eating dinner by the time Malcolm arrived at Benleith, and he was joined at the table by a few of their kinsmen. Malcolm liked none of them, and he certainly didn't wish to speak to Angus about what had transpired over the past two days in front of such an audience.

“Sit,” Angus said, gesturing to one of the empty places at the table. Angus stood out amongst the other MacKinnons, dressed in fine clothing and speaking in English as he nearly always did. Every care had been taken with his education as the only child of the previous MacKinnon laird, who had died less than two years after Angus’s birth. Angus had grown up knowing he led the MacKinnon clan, even though he hadn’t taken over until he had grown older—and even then, it had been a struggle to pry the power away from his uncle. In some ways, it was little wonder Angus guarded his power so jealously.

By contrast, Malcolm’s father had been the third MacKinnon son, and Malcolm had never had any thought of succeeding to any MacKinnon lands or money, other than whatever his father managed to acquire during his lifetime—a lifetime which had been cut short by his death at Malcolm’s own hands.

But things had changed. As it too often did, death had struck down many of the MacKinnon men, and Malcolm was now the next in line to lead the MacKinnons in the event that Angus didn’t marry and have children of his own. It was something never spoken of between Angus and Malcolm. There was little purpose to speaking of it, not when Malcolm had no doubt at all that Angus would soon marry—he had already implied his intention to do so shortly—and, perhaps even more to the point, not when Angus could deprive Malcolm of everything in an instant with the evidence he held against him.

It was just as well. Malcolm had come to hate the MacKinnon name. If things had been different, he would have adopted his mother’s Forbes name instead.

He took his seat, and a servant bustled to see that a place was set for him and food served.

“Tell us, then,” Angus said as his tankard was refilled with whisky, “how things go on at the inn—and with Miss Innes.”

The men around the table chuckled, and the one next to Malcolm sent a teasing elbow into his side.

“Perhaps we can speak of it later,” Malcolm said. “I dinna wish ta bore everyone.”

“Nonsense,” Angus replied. “You have hardly set foot on Benleith lands for the past few days. I assume that can only mean you have made progress.”

Malcolm clenched his jaw. Did Angus truly expect him to make Miss Innes go from hate to love in a matter of days? But there was no avoiding it

—he would have to admit in front of all his kinsmen that he had *not* succeeded in any of the aims given him—and Angus was much quicker to anger when in company.

Malcolm looked around at the men. Most had already finished with their food. If he could draw things out a bit, he might be able to push off the most unwelcome news until he and Angus could be alone.

“I did discover something that I think will interest ye,” Malcolm said as he cut into his meat. Interest was perhaps an ill-chosen word. It was likely to anger Angus. But if it persuaded him to discontinue his quest for Dunverlockie, Malcolm would be glad for it. “Miss Innes made it clear that her sister and Kincaid took steps to ensure Dunverlockie wouldna fall ta ye in the event of Christina’s death.”

Angus’s tankard paused on the way to his mouth, and he stared at Malcolm. The room grew silent, every eye fixed on the two of them. “What sort of steps?”

Malcolm shook his head. “She didna say, but I can only assume they wrote something into the marriage settlement ta specify that Kincaid would inherit the estate if she were ta die without any heirs.”

Angus swore under his breath. “You are certain she wasn’t lying?”

Malcolm wasn’t certain. Not at all. But he wouldn’t encourage Angus in his quest for Dunverlockie anymore. “Aye.”

“It will not stand in court,” Angus said, setting down his tankard with more force than necessary. “Gordon’s will surely takes precedence in this case, and he made it clear that he meant for the estate to go to me in the absence of Christina.”

Malcolm said nothing. He wouldn’t counter Angus, and in truth, he wasn’t sure whether or not Angus was right. He had the power and connections to argue such a case. But how would he do so after he had already been tried so publicly for involvement in the offenses against Mrs. Kincaid? That was much less clear.

“Have you made any progress with Miss Innes?” Angus asked, a harder light in his eyes than before.

Malcolm glanced around at the men. “Some, aye. But I need ta speak with ye about. . .” He grimaced and gathered his courage. “I need ta speak with ye about the methods I’m usin’.”

Angus brushed the comment aside with a hand. “I do not care to be bogged down with the details of your plans.”

“But—”

“Do you need instruction on how to woo a wench, Malcolm?” The mocking tone in Angus’s voice was almost palpable, and laughter rippled around the table. “I am sure one of these men would be willing to provide a demonstration for you.”

Across the table, a man named Gregory showed a smile full of missing teeth, surrounded by a beard full of evidence of his quickly eaten dinner. “Och, aye! I thought yer sister Marion seemed willin’ when I saw her the other night.”

Malcolm shot up from his seat, but a firm hand on his wrist kept him in place. His chest heaved, and he stared at Gregory, bile and hatred making the taste in his mouth bitter.

“I thought as much,” Angus said, and with a tug, he made it clear he expected Malcolm to sit down again.

Malcolm resisted for a moment, but he knew his laird too well to pursue the topic. The more Malcolm made it evident how much he cared for his family’s well-being over that of the clan, the more Angus could use it against him.

He took in a slow, steady breath, eyes ever on Gregory, and sat down. Gregory held his gaze, a challenge in his eyes. For the first time, Malcolm wished that he and Angus weren’t the only ones in the room who knew that he was responsible for his father’s death. Perhaps it would have given Gregory more pause about making jests—which he could only pray they were—about Marion or any of his family.

“What have you learned about Miss Innes in your time at Glengour?” Angus asked.

Malcolm delayed his response by putting a forkful of food in his mouth. He had little enough reason to defend Miss Innes—he certainly was under no misapprehension about whether she would do the same for him—but there was something in him that wished to thwart Angus in any way he could.

“Nothin’ of substance,” Malcolm said, grinding his teeth and looking away from Gregory. “She’s taken a likin’ to Fergus more quickly than she has ta me.” That was harmless enough.

Angus’s eyebrows rose. “Is that right?” He narrowed his eyes in thought. “Now that you mention it, I do think I remember her saying she liked dogs. I did not, however, anticipate she would care much for a deformed mongrel. Weakness attracts weakness.”

Malcolm said nothing, well aware that Angus's slight to Miss Innes was a slight to him as well. He had always disliked Malcolm's love of Fergus.

Angus sat back in his chair and sipped his whisky, putting a booted foot up on the edge of the long, wooden table. Everything about him evidenced his ownership at Benleith. He treated his property with the same possessiveness and disregard that he treated his men. It was all there for his benefit and nothing else. "I hope you have capitalized on this observation."

Malcolm gave a nod. He *had*, in a way. Though, when he had helped Miss Innes bond with Fergus, it hadn't been done with the motivation Angus wished for. Nor would he have the chance to capitalize, as Angus put it, on Miss Innes's liking for Fergus in the future.

The men seemed to have bored of the conversation, and their own chatter and laughter filled the room.

"Are you any closer," Angus asked, "to receiving an invitation to Dunverlockie?"

Malcolm was fairly certain he was just as far as he had ever been from something so extremely improbable, but he gave a nod. He would have to find a way into the castle without an invitation. It was his only hope of finding and destroying the document that had been determining his life for years. "Aye, sir. I've made a bit of progress."

"Good," Angus said, and he turned the conversation to other topics.

How Angus thought Malcolm could manage to gain an invitation to Dunverlockie, sneak away unnoticed for long enough to find the chest, and leave the castle with it in his arms unobserved was a mystery. But he obviously had no desire to be bogged down with such minor details.

Malcolm would simply have to find his own way.

Elizabeth stood in the laird's bedchamber at Dunverlockie to report on the progress being made at Glengour. Christina lay in bed in her shift, the bedcovers pulled up to just shy of her stomach, which one of her hands rested on. Her sickness had been slow to leave and was often at its worst in the mornings. Lachlan sat beside her, dressed for the day, holding her other hand.

"If ye've finished yer inventory," he said to Elizabeth, "we can see that whatever we dinna have here is ordered from Fort William."

Elizabeth nodded. "I have not yet finished, but when I do, I will certainly let you know what is needed."

"Oh dear," Christina said, "are things so bad as that? I thought the inventory would only take a day or two."

Elizabeth forced herself not to fidget. She hadn't yet told her sister or Lachlan about Malcolm MacKinnon's presence at the inn. They had been clear in their desire to let go of the animosity between the neighboring estates and clans, but she suspected they might rethink their offer to have Elizabeth assist in the renovations if they knew it had entailed constant interaction between her and a MacKinnon.

"I have been helping with a few other tasks while Glenna has been taken up with bringing in the crops."

"Ah," Christina said, "I see. It is very kind of you to do so. I imagine Hamish is grateful to have your help. Has he managed to find anyone else to assist with things? I know it must be difficult when most of the men are so occupied with their farms."

“Yes,” Elizabeth said with as much disinterest as she could muster. “It was difficult, I think, but he did manage to find someone.” Guilt made her stomach clench uncomfortably, but Malcolm MacKinnon’s presence at Glengour was a thing of the past now—irrelevant. “I should be going now—hopefully to finish the inventory.”

They smiled and nodded at her, and she made her exit before they could ask any more questions she might be unprepared to answer.

When she arrived at Glengour half an hour later, she was aware of a slight feeling of disappointment. It wasn’t that she minded working with Hamish and Glenna. Hamish was a good, kind man and Glenna always pleasant, but it was certainly not as enlivening as it had been supervising Malcolm in his work. But she went about the inventory, trying to focus on all the ways they might make the inn feel less dark and sparse, and more cozy and warm. It was a good challenge, even if she found herself somewhat bored after an hour and opted to help Glenna in the kitchen with shelling the grain just harvested.

The inn had been fairly quiet for the past two days, with the only visitors a few merchants passing through and needing a drink and a short rest for their horses.

“It willna stay like this,” Glenna said as they whitewashed the kitchen walls. “No’ with the market happenin’ in Fort William soon and the drovers startin’ ta make their way south.”

When Elizabeth spoke with Hamish soon after about his vision for the coffee room, he stood with a pensive hand over his mouth, staring at the short bar where spirits were served.

“‘Tis a strange place for the bar,” Hamish said. “‘Twould make more sense ta have it there.” He pointed to the long wall, at the end of which was the door to the kitchen and larder.

“Do you intend to move it?” Elizabeth asked.

He grimaced. “‘Twould open up the room more—give space for another table or two. Yer sister wants ta hire on a cook. She’s hopin’ ta draw more business by offerin’ better fare than ye generally see on the Highland roads.” He stared at the bar again, narrowing his eyes. “I’ll have ta see if ‘tis possible ta move it.”

She envisioned what Hamish had said, nodding. “I think you are right that it would make more sense there. Whatever you decide, let me know what we stand in need of, and I will add it to the growing list.”

The next morning, she stayed on the road to Glengour only until she could no longer see Dunverlockie, opting to forge her own path that would allow her more time on her horse—a ride without a chaperone. She guided Caesar down the path, overgrown with reeds, which led to the beach, then urged him forward, letting the salty air fill her lungs and the wind tug on her hat.

Once the shoreline narrowed, she slowed Caesar and reached into her pocket, fiddling with the piece of cloth there. If Glenna was right and more travelers would be frequenting the inn, she would have a chance to inquire with them about it. It gave her a bit of hope that she might stop Angus yet.

She should have felt relief at Malcolm's departure from the inn, but she didn't. In some ways, his presence there had made her feel more in tune with Angus's plans, as though he couldn't slip anything past her notice while his closest kinsman was there. But now that Malcolm was gone, she had no way of knowing what, if anything, Angus intended.

Beyond that, though, she could have sworn she had seen in Malcolm someone whose allegiance to Angus was not deep. It was a shame she hadn't taken better advantage of that while she had the chance. With more time, she might have discovered a great deal about the Benleith laird.

She put the tartan back in her pocket and continued on to the inn, noting the empty cart in the stable yard as she slipped down from Caesar and handed him off to Glenna.

"Whose is that?" Elizabeth asked as she smoothed her petticoats.

Glenna glanced at the cart and began leading the horse to the stables. "'Tis Mr. MacKinnon's." But she needn't have answered, for Fergus came bounding around the inn just then, emitting a loud bark that turned from one of alarm to one of excitement as he neared Elizabeth.

"What?" She asked as the hound crowded her petticoats. It gave her more pleasure than she cared to admit that his animus toward her had given way to such a greeting.

Glenna smiled and continued walking, speaking over her shoulder. "Hamish asked him ta return. He needs help in the coffee room." She disappeared into the stables, leaving Elizabeth in the yard with Fergus.

Realizing her mouth was open, she clamped it shut. What was she feeling? Surprise, certainly. But it was more than that—there was an element

of. . . anticipation?

She scratched Fergus's head absently. Was she so bored now that the presence of an enemy was to be looked on with anticipation? At least she could pursue her quest to discover more from Malcolm now. Surely Malcolm had come to learn plenty of incriminating information about Angus in the process of serving him.

"Well, Fergus," she said, walking with the hound toward the front of the inn, "I am glad for *your* return, in any case."

They rounded the corner, and Elizabeth ran straight into Malcolm. They both stumbled, and Malcolm steadied Elizabeth with a firm hand on her elbow, steadying her and sending bumps up and down her arm.

"I thought we were rid of you," she said in a resigned voice.

His face held a deeper frown than she had become used to during his time at Glengour, but at her words, it lightened a bit, and one side of his mouth quirked up. "Sorry ta disappoint ye."

"You do not *look* sorry." She glanced at his hand, still on her arm, and he dropped it, freeing her to continue to the door into the inn.

He and Fergus followed behind her closely enough that she could be certain Malcolm heard when she addressed herself to Hamish, who was kneeling on the floor at the base of the bar.

"I see you have allowed Mr. MacKinnon to slither his way back into your service," Elizabeth said.

Hamish glanced at her, brushing the blond hair from his face and smiling. "Nay, lass. He didna slither. And I certainly wouldna hire a snake, for I need strong arms for the tasks here."

Malcolm sent Elizabeth a look that might have appeared neutral if not for the triumphant glint in his eye.

She held his gaze as he passed her. "Very well, then. Not a snake but a fox."

"Och," Hamish said, glancing at Malcolm as though afraid the man might be taking offense.

"Dinna fash yerself, Hamish," said Malcolm. "Ye're no' accustomed ta Miss Innes's tongue like I am. She prefers ta criticize the work of others rather than doin' anythin' herself."

Elizabeth scoffed. "That is rich indeed, coming from the man whose work I took on, which, I might add, I only did with the understanding that it would hasten his departure."

“It did,” Malcolm replied. He paused a moment, and the hint of a smile quivered on his lips. “And it hastened my return.”

Elizabeth had never known a man to look so amused with such a subtle change in expression. It must be owing to how often he scowled. Relative to such a norm, anything would seem happy.

“Well,” she said. “I gladly cede my supervising responsibilities—”

“Self-appointed,” Hamish added.

Elizabeth ignored the interruption. “—to you, Hamish.” She turned on her heel and left the room, aware that she would have rather helped the two men in the coffee room than continue her inventory. But she would never admit as much.

It was later in the day that she heard the clapping of hooves muffled by the rippled glass of the window pane. Sick to death of her task and aware that she was making no progress in her goal of discovering more from Malcolm, Elizabeth hurried down the stairs to see if help was needed in seeing to the travelers’ needs.

She stopped short on the small landing as three men came through the door, and her eyebrows snapped together.

“Gregory? Ivor?” Malcolm was frowning even more deeply than Elizabeth, standing in the coffee room. Only a bit of hair remained in the queue at his neck, and his face was framed in the escaped, dark waves. “What are ye doin’ here?” Fergus stayed by his master, ever loyal.

Gregory smiled and handed his hat to Elizabeth, who made no move to take it. “We heard ye received some fine whisky from Drumvar, and we’re here ta see if what they say is true.” His hand hovered in the air expectantly, but Elizabeth only raised her brows, glancing at the hat.

“Can Angus not find a more credible excuse than that to send more of his minions?” She stepped into the coffee room to make clear that she had no intention of taking Gregory’s hat. She came up to Malcolm. “This is your solution, is it? Thrust these creatures upon me so that I cannot possibly supervise all of you at once?”

“Nay, lass,” Malcolm said evenly. “I didna ken they were comin’.”

Her lips pinched together at the appellation. How did he manage to sound so sincere, so trustworthy? And why did she feel such anger and . . . disappointment? Perhaps she had harbored a hope that he had been telling the truth about only being at Glengour to help, with no ulterior motive. If that *was* the cause of her disappointment, she had only herself to blame for

deceiving herself so stupidly.

Glenna emerged from the kitchen, eyes darting from person to person, taking stock of the situation. The MacKinnon men walked to one of the tables and sat down, setting their hats on top.

Elizabeth walked over to Hamish. “Do you intend to serve these men?”

He looked her in the eye, and there was sympathetic apology there, which was answer enough.

She blew out a breath of aggravation through her nose.

“They’re customers,” Hamish said in a low voice, “and Lachlan made it clear what he wishes for when it comes ta the MacKinnons. If I refuse ta serve them, ‘twill only anger them and cause problems we dinna wish for.”

He was right, of course. But so was she.

Hamish looked to the MacKinnon men and addressed them. “As ye can see, we’re in the middle of makin’ some changes, so ye’ll have ta forgive the mess. Come, Glenna. I’ll help ye fetch the drinks.”

Glenna nodded, and the two of them disappeared into the kitchen.

Malcolm's jaw was clenched tight as he watched Hamish and Glenna disappear into the kitchen. He had no doubt that Angus was behind the appearance of his kinsmen. Just what he was trying to accomplish with their presence was less clear to him. Had they been sent to spy on him? To try to get a sense for whether Malcolm had been telling the truth about his progress?

Malcolm had been at his wits' end trying to think of a way to spend more time with Miss Innes when he'd received a message from Hamish that morning, asking for his continued help. Otherwise, the MacKinnon men would have arrived at Glengour to find Malcolm absent. That would certainly have raised unpleasant questions with Angus.

Malcolm approached Gregory, aware that Miss Innes's gaze was fixed on him. It was ironic that, without Angus's constant interference, Malcolm would have been making more headway with Miss Innes. As it was, Angus's actions were only confirming her suspicions.

"What are ye doin' here, Gregory?" Malcolm asked in an undervoice.

Gregory showed his wide, crooked grin. "Thought ye might be lonely."

Malcolm grimaced. Gregory was unlikely to tell him the truth. He took great pleasure in angering Malcolm.

"I see we were wrong ta think that, though." Gregory's gaze shifted to Miss Innes, and his smile took on a provocative twist. He let his eyes run up and down her figure, and Malcolm felt his own muscles tighten.

"We might've come for the whisky," Gregory said, "but I reckon we'll stay for the women."

Not for the first time, Malcolm had the impulse to put a fist in Gregory's face, but before he could determine whether that would be wise or not, Miss Innes stepped over, eyes alight the way they often were when her tongue was about to be unleashed.

"I find your optimism admirable, whatever your name is," she said.

"The name is—"

"I did not ask for it," Elizabeth interrupted. She smiled, but there was fire in the expression. "Perhaps I should pay a visit to Angus. I am fascinated by the thought of what he is like when he is not surrounded by his lackeys."

Gregory's eyes narrowed, as did Ivor's, but his smile didn't flicker. Rather, there was a glint in his gaze, as though he saw a challenge before him. "I see now why ye've remained here, Malcolm. A man canna resist keepin' after such elusive prey."

Miss Innes made a noise full of pity. "Not all men find women so elusive, my dear. Perhaps if you stopped looking at them as prey, you might discover that for yourself." She gave a humorless smile and left the room just as Glenna and Hamish emerged from the kitchen with two tankards.

Malcolm sighed, feeling as though whatever progress he had made with Miss Innes had been lost, yet again, in the last ten minutes. And, as much as it bothered him, he was just as frustrated by the fact that she believed he was involved in the arrival of his kinsmen. Why he cared for the opinion of someone who thought so little of him, he didn't know.

Gregory and Ivor took their time drinking the spirits brought to them. Or rather, they drank quickly and lingered before asking for more. Malcolm kept a close eye on them all afternoon, particularly when Glenna came to see to their needs. She was kind, but she also seemed well able to take care of herself. Malcolm didn't want her to have to defend herself against the men, though. She had better things to do.

He and Hamish had managed to detach the bar from the floor, though some of the wood had resisted their efforts and would need replacing. There was still more cleaning to do, as well.

Miss Innes had come down a few minutes ago, her gaze taking in the continued presence of the MacKinnon men with disfavor. She stood, arms

folded across her chest and her lips pinched together, on the threshold of the coffee room.

“If we had a few more hands, we might finish both this and the cleanin’ tomorrow,” Hamish said, indicating the bar. “Then, ye can give us instruction on the next steps, Miss Innes.”

She nodded. “I have finished the inventory, and I will speak with Christina about which of the items we will need to send for. But I cannot think where we are to find more hands. Everyone is so taken up right now.”

Malcolm looked over at the MacKinnon men, red-faced and reeking of liquor. *They* were no use, and he had little hope they would agree to help once sober, even if they were asked—unless perhaps Angus required it of them. But even then, Malcolm had no desire to prolong their time at the inn. “I should be goin’. I’ll bring some help in the mornin’, though.”

“Are ye certain ye dinna wish ta stay here?” Hamish asked. “Surely ‘twould be easier than goin’ back and forth every day.”

Malcolm glanced at Miss Innes then at the MacKinnon men, who were laughing raucously. “Tonight I must return home, but I think I’ll stay until they leave.”

“You mustn’t linger too long,” Miss Innes said with a bite to her tone. “No doubt Angus is waiting for a report, and he is not a patient man.”

“Nay, he’s no’,” Malcolm said. “But I’m no’ goin’ ta Benleith.” He could have told her honestly what his plans were, but he refrained. From his lips, even the truth would be mistrusted by her.

“If ye’re worried for Miss Innes’s safety,” Hamish said, “I’ll make sure she’s kept safe.”

“No, *I* will,” Miss Innes said. “Besides, I am returning to Dunverlockie.”

Malcolm couldn’t help a smile. “Ye trust Hamish ta keep his eye on these men, then?”

She glanced at them, and her lips turned down in disgust. “It is not that. I simply do not believe them capable of doing anything remotely secretive when they can hardly sit straight.”

“Fair enough,” Malcolm said. “I’ll walk ye ta the stables, then.”

He could see her on the verge of resisting, but she surprised him by giving a brusque nod. After bidding good evening to Hamish and Glenna, they left through the front door, followed closely by Fergus.

It was much later than it seemed. The sun hadn’t even reached the horizon yet, but it must have been half-past seven. Summer days stretched

long in the Highlands, as if the sun was apologizing for neglecting them for so long during the cold, short days of winter.

“I swear I didna ken they were comin’,” he said as they neared the stables. He couldn’t stop himself. He wanted her to know.

Miss Innes stopped and turned toward him, folding her arms across her chest again. “Do you deny that Angus had a hand in it?”

He grimaced. “Nay. I suspect he did send ‘em.”

Her lips pinched together. “A distinction without a difference, then.”

“I’m no’ Angus,” he said. It disturbed him that anyone could truly think there was no real difference between him and a man he so despised.

“You are not him, but you bend to his will. You do as he says. That makes you an extension of him at best.”

He turned his head to the side and scrubbed his face with a hand. What was his purpose in pursuing this conversation in the first place? Was he distancing himself from Angus so that Miss Innes would trust him enough to invite him into Dunverlockie? Or did he truly want her good opinion because he had somehow come to care for it?

He shook his head and continued toward the stables.

She caught him by the wrist, and his heart skipped a beat as he turned back to her. She didn’t speak right away, and he could see the debate in her eyes again.

“How?” She bit her lip. It was the first time he had seen her look so . . . what was it? Vulnerable? Her very eyes questioned him. “How can you give your fealty to a man like Angus? How can you keep company with men like *that*?” She tossed her head in the direction of the coffee room.

He shut his eyes and lowered his head. How could he explain? And what did the truth even matter? Malcolm might not be Angus, but, if Miss Innes knew all he had done in the MacKinnon laird’s name, it would make little difference to her—a distinction without a difference, as she had put it.

“Sometimes,” he said, “the choice is between two evils, and ye can only choose the lesser of them.”

That was the best he could give her. He had decided to sell his soul for the good of his family. This was no time to doubt the decision for nothing but the good opinion of a woman who would never believe him anything better than a monster.

She still held his wrist, her eyes searching his. “Good heavens, Malcolm. Being Angus’s serf is the *lesser* evil?”

“Aye,” he said harshly. “It is.” He wouldn’t allow her to cast doubt on the sacrifices he had made for the past nine years.

Would she ask him more questions now? Ask him to put a name to what he faced if he defied Angus? Part of him wanted her to, for then he could show her that he truly *had* made an impossible choice. But what would the cost be of such a revelation? She would know the depths of his depravity, and he didn’t want that, either. “I need ta get home.”

She dropped his wrist. “As do I.”

He turned away from the disappointment in her eyes.

“I’ll saddle up yer horse,” he said, walking into the stables.

“That is not necessary,” she said, following after him with hurried steps.

He ignored her, opening the door of the stall where her horse stood and leading it out.

“I can saddle my own horse,” she said, grabbing the blanket that hung on the wall and coming over.

“Och.” He stepped back as she elbowed her way next to the horse and set the blanket on its back. “Perhaps I should let ye prepare mine as well—and attach it ta the cart, if ye insist on doin’ *everythin’* ye’re capable of.”

“Do not be ridiculous,” she said as she reached for the saddle.

“Aye, *I’m* the ridiculous one.”

“Fine, then,” she said, shoving the saddle toward him.

He accepted the burden and, with a significant look at her, set it on the horse’s back. “I ken ye’re mad at me. Ye dinna understand, and it makes ye angry. But even if I explained it all ta ye, ‘twould make no difference. Ye’d still be angry.” He finished tightening a strap then faced her. “Ye’ve already decided what ye think of me, and persuadin’ a person of somethin’ they’re set against believin’ is a battle lost before it ever begins.”

She stared at him a moment longer, those dark but bright eyes looking at him as if they might see through to his soul if they looked hard enough. He didn’t intend to give her the chance.

She looked around, and her gaze seemed to settle on the mounting block, a dozen feet away.

“I can help ye,” he said, and his voice came out softer than before.

She raised a brow. “And you are so stubborn that you must insist on doing everything *you* are capable of?”

He gave a grudging half-smile. “Fair enough.” He stepped back to make room for her, but she didn’t move, her gaze fixed on him.

He frowned, confused.

“Are you just going to stand there, then?” she asked.

He gave an incredulous chuckle and stepped back toward her. “Ye’re the most confusin’ and aggravatin’ woman I’ve ever met.”

He bent down, interlocking his fingers and setting them in place. She gripped the front of the saddle with one hand and his shoulder with the other, then set her boot in his grip, her petticoats brushing against his face. How did she smell of violets after a day at the inn? He himself was a mess.

She hoisted herself up, and he hurried to rise, setting a hand to her leg to steady her in place. She raised her brows at the contact, and he removed it, shrugging.

“Ye wouldna be the first woman ta fall from such an attempt.”

“Do I look like the sort of woman who would allow such a thing to happen?”

“Aye, with proud words like that, I should think ‘twould only be a matter of time till ye’re humbled.”

She gathered the reins in her hands, an amused smile on her face. “And you should like to be there to witness my humbling, no doubt.”

“I’d rather be there ta catch ye in my arms.” Her eyes widened as they flew to him, but he was just as surprised as she was. But he could think of nothing to say that would alter the meaning of his words and make them less significant.

This was what he was supposed to be doing, he reminded himself. Flirting with her, saying things to make her fall in love with him. He simply hadn’t expected it to come without any effort or intention on his part.

He stepped back and put a hand to the horse’s neck. “Ye’re certain ye need no one ta ride with ye back ta Dunverlockie?”

She shook her head, and the added constraint in her manner was evident to him in the stiffness of the gesture. He suppressed a sigh. This misstep he couldn’t attribute to Angus’s meddling. It lay entirely at his door.

“I am accustomed to riding here on my own,” she said.

He nodded, and she nudged the horse forward. He was glad she had refused his escort. He had a great deal of work ahead of him and precious little light in which to do it. Besides, spending time with Miss Innes was getting more complicated by the minute. He wasn’t entirely sure that his plan hadn’t begun to rebel against him like a turncoat soldier on his own troop.

OceanofPDF.com

Elizabeth's hands were alive with nervous energy as she mounted Caesar the next morning to ride to Glengour. Malcolm's words the evening before had rattled her.

I'd rather be there ta catch ye in my arms.

She might have thought he was provoking her except that he had looked as shocked at the statement as she had. It had been the second curious circumstance of the evening, though, the first being his reaction to the suggestive comments of his kinsmen. She had quickly intervened, but not before she had noticed the anger in his eyes. At the time, she had taken it as evidence of his dislike of his kinsmen. But after the incident in the stables, she couldn't help but wonder whether that was not all it had been.

Either way, she would never have expected Malcolm MacKinnon to come to her defense—and against his own kinsmen, no less.

In truth, she had tossed and turned in bed for some time, reflecting on the entirety of the conversation they'd had on the way to the stables. It troubled her deeply to know that somehow Malcolm felt the price of his allegiance to a man like Angus MacKinnon was worth the cost. And yet, he would not explain to her how he had come to such a conclusion.

She took the same, long route to Glengour she had taken the morning before. The day was cloudy, but she could still see the teal hues of the water, accentuated as they were by the vivid greens of the grass that topped the barnacle-covered mounds on the beach. The tide was low, and she led Caesar down to the place where the water and sand met, savoring the sights and smells there before urging him to a gallop.

Caesar's hooves splashed water onto her petticoats and into her face, and she sucked in a breath at the shock of the cold water. She had worn her most hardy clothing, knowing that the day was likely to be filled with cleaning and other difficult labor, so the knowledge that the damp on her skirts would give way to salty stains didn't bother her.

When she stepped inside the inn, it was to the scene of a bustling hub of activity. Hamish was in the coffee room, brow furrowed in concentration as he hammered a nail into the side of the bar, which had been moved to the long wall opposite the front door.

Fergus came bounding over to her, and she crouched down to pet him, smiling widely. It was undeniably wonderful to receive such a warm welcome. Instinctively, she looked for any sign of the hound's master, but he was nowhere in sight.

She stood and turned at the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs. It was not Malcolm, but Elizabeth had no trouble identifying one of his siblings—a younger brother, likely eleven or twelve years old. They all had the same dark features and tendency to look saturnine when not smiling.

"Fergus," he said in a censoring voice as he hurried over. "Dinna bother the woman."

Elizabeth laughed and put a hand on the hound's head. "Oh, you mustn't take him from me. It took a fair amount of work to persuade him to allow me anywhere near him, you know."

The boy stopped short, looking surprised, then shrugged.

"Are you Malcolm's older brother?" she asked.

The boy let out a laugh, but she thought she noticed his chest puff out a little more. "Nay, miss. Younger. I'm Keith."

More footsteps sounded on the stairs, and Malcolm's mother appeared, trailed by three dark-haired children. It took a moment for Elizabeth to recognize Dugan, tall as he was. Then she remembered she had only ever seen him bent in pain and humiliated. And yet, here he was, helping at the inn with the brother who had ordered him back into the shameful torture device.

It bewildered her. Either the MacKinnon family dynamics were very different than what she was accustomed to—*she* certainly wouldn't have been so quick to forgive such an offense against her—or Malcolm had been speaking truth when he told her she shouldn't interfere in what she didn't understand.

Malcolm's mother looked at Elizabeth curiously, and recognition dawned

in her eyes. “Ye’re the one—the one who helped Dugan.”

Elizabeth smiled, but she couldn’t help looking around once again for any sign of Malcolm. *He* certainly had not seen her intervention as helpful.

“Would ye tell me yer name, miss?” Mrs. MacKinnon asked. “So we ken who ta thank for the kindness ye showed?”

“My name is Elizabeth Innes.”

Mrs. MacKinnon reached behind her for Dugan and pulled him beside her.

He inclined his head at Elizabeth. “‘Twas good of ye, Miss Innes.”

Elizabeth’s discomfort abated somewhat at his gratitude. Malcolm seemed to be the only one who had viewed her help as interference. She would have liked to understand why, though.

“This is Marion.” Mrs. MacKinnon indicated the older of her daughters. She looked to be thirteen or fourteen, and the greeting smile she offered Elizabeth was both kind and demure. “And this is Winifred.” A young girl of about nine years smiled widely at her, a perfect contrast to her older sister’s reserved greeting.

“Ye’ve met Keith, I see, and ye ken Malcolm, of course,” Mrs. MacKinnon said.

“I do,” Elizabeth said, “though I have not seen him yet today.” A pathetic way to enquire about his whereabouts.

“Mayhap he fell asleep somewhere,” Winifred said with a shrug of the shoulders.

Mrs. MacKinnon shot Elizabeth a look of shared amusement.

“Does he often sleep in the middle of the day?” Elizabeth asked, eager for an opportunity to tease him about such a custom.

Winifred shook her head, an almost incensed look on her face, as if the mere suggestion was offensive.

Elizabeth could only laugh, both perplexed and diverted.

Mrs. MacKinnon smiled indulgently at Winifred. “Malcolm was out in the fields until past dark and again before the sun this mornin’—wanted ta be certain we were all free ta come help today.”

Elizabeth stared. *That* was what had Malcolm anxious to leave Glengour last night? Laboring in the fields to enable his family to help at the inn?

Mrs. MacKinnon gestured to her daughters. “Come, lasses. Let’s get back ta work.” She looked to the coffee room. “Malcolm,” she said more loudly.

Elizabeth whipped her head around, searching the coffee room again for

any sign of him. His head appeared from behind the bar, and his gaze landed on her briefly before moving to his mother. He stepped out from the bar, brushing off his hands as he walked over.

“Good mornin’, Miss Innes,” he said with a nod.

Her heart responded strangely, as unsure of how to react to Malcolm as her mind was. While he had worked in the fields last night, had he reflected on their conversation, too?

“I’m leavin’ Dugan and Keith down here with ye,” his mother said.

Malcolm nodded. “We could use their help,” he said. “Come, then, lads. You too, Fergus.”

Elizabeth put a hand out to detain the hound. “He wishes to come upstairs with the women.”

“Does he now?” Malcolm asked.

Elizabeth nodded, leaning slightly to ensure she could scratch Fergus’s ears. He settled against her leg, and his lids fluttered, as though he was suddenly perilously near to falling asleep.

Malcolm laughed and shook his head. “Verra well.” He narrowed his eyes at Fergus. “Traitor,” he whispered without animus.

Elizabeth had spent most of the previous day alone, finishing the inventory. She spent today in the constant company of the MacKinnon women and Glenna, and her surprise at how pleasant it was to do so was only equaled by the guilt she felt at feeling any surprise at all. Her hatred of Angus and his retinue of kinsmen had led her to believe—whether knowingly or not—that all MacKinnons must be unpleasant. That was demonstrably false, she quickly realized after a short time in their company. They were all kind—though Winifred was better described as entertaining, as she was quick to instruct Elizabeth on the incorrectness of her method of cleaning plaster walls.

Meanwhile, Fergus seemed to have taken upon himself the task of supervising both the men in the coffee room and the women cleaning upstairs. Elizabeth would interrupt her duties to pet him for a time, then, when it was clear she no longer intended to pay him any attention, he would move to the next person, and when he had exhausted his options there, he would disappear, ostensibly to repeat the exercise in the coffee room.

After a time, Winifred seemed to bore of the company, too, and she proclaimed her intent to assist the men downstairs. Fergus followed her out of the room, and the four women remaining exchanged indulgent smiles and

turned back to their cleaning.

Once the water was too dirty to continue using, Elizabeth offered to take the bucket outside and refill it. She had only spoken to Malcolm once all day, and after feeling much better acquainted with his sisters and mother, she knew a desire to see him, to fit the greater understanding she had gained of his family with what she knew of him.

The sound of hammering grew as she made her way down the stairs, and a light breeze blew through the open door and toward the upstairs.

“But I dinna want ta watch.” Winifred’s voice reached Elizabeth, and she slowed, stopping just shy of the landing to listen. “I want ta try it meself.”

“Of course ye do,” Malcolm responded wryly. “Verra well. Watch carefully, then. Ye put yer thumb right here.”

Elizabeth peeked around the wall to observe.

Malcolm was on his knees near the outer wall of the coffee room where they had discovered a few loose floorboards, and he was guiding Winifred’s fingers around a nail. “Ye want ta put them low enough that ye dinna hit yer finger when ye strike with the hammer but high enough ta keep a firm hold.” He let go, and the nail wobbled and fell over. He took her hand and set her fingers back in place. “It’s no’ easy, is it?”

Her brow furrowed more heavily in concentration.

Malcolm slowly released her hands then brought the hammer to her, but as she grasped it, the nail in her other hand fell to the floor again.

She let out an exasperated sigh. “I dinna wish ta hold the nail. I wish ta strike with the hammer. *You* hold the nail, Malcolm.”

Elizabeth couldn’t stop a smile. There was no way under the sun Malcolm would let his young sister hammer at a nail while he held it.

His lips pinched together, and he looked at Winifred for a moment. “If ye strike my fingers, Winnie. . .”

“I willna!” she insisted.

He hesitated then, with a resigned sigh, held the nail between his thumb and forefinger. “Now,” he said, as she raised the hammer, the same intense focus on her face. “Ye dinna have ta hold it so—”

The hammer came down, and Elizabeth winced as it hit the edge of the nail and slipped.

Not a sound came from Malcolm, though his face contorted, his eyes shut, and his lips drew into a thin line.

“Did I hit it?” Winnie asked in excitement.

A gush of air came out of Malcolm's clenched teeth, and he made the nail stand straight again. "Aye, Winnie," he said in a strained voice. "Ye did well."

Elizabeth's smile wavered, and she retreated behind the wall again. It took a strong man not to react in anger to what had just happened; it took a kind and gentle one to tell the untruth afterward, amidst such pain.

She took a breath and hurried outside to dump the water from the bucket.

The MacKinnons stayed another hour before it was time to go home and see to the remaining work in the fields. They had accomplished in a day what would have taken another week and more without them.

"I'm sorry we canna stay longer," Mrs. MacKinnon said.

"You have been indispensable," Elizabeth said.

"Shall I walk ye home?" Malcolm asked, kissing his mother on the cheek on the threshold of the coffee room.

"Nay, my love," she replied, smiling fondly at him. "Ye look ta be near finished with things in here. We can see ta the farm."

The five of them went on their way, leaving Elizabeth and Malcolm in the entry to wave at Winnie when she looked over her shoulder at them.

"How is your thumb?" she asked once they had disappeared from view.

His head whipped around. "Did Winnie tell ye?"

She smiled at him. "No. I witnessed it myself. Let me see."

"'Tis nothin'," he said.

"*Let me see,*" she insisted, reaching for his hand. He relented, and she drew it toward her. "Good heavens." Underneath the nail, the thumb was purple.

"Aye," he said with a half-smile. "She gave me somethin' interestin' ta look at, even if she didna help much with the floorboard."

"It *is* quite vibrant," Elizabeth said, running her own thumb gently over his. It was red and would likely be bruised, though hopefully not as badly as the nail itself. "You will be useless for hammering now." She looked up at him and found his eyes to be on her. Her heart pattered, and she let his hand drop.

"Is this yer way of bein' rid of me again?" he asked. "Because I canna use a hammer anymore?"

She laughed. "No. I can do any hammering that Hamish is unable to see to if you will hold the nail."

"Och," he said, grasping his thumb with his other hand. "I think I'll let ye

hold yer own nail.” He frowned and looked up the stairs. “Where is Fergus?”

Elizabeth glanced around. “He was with us upstairs until Winifred came down to help you.”

“*Help* is no’ the word I would choose,” Malcolm said, taking a step toward the office that sat just inside the front door, opposite the coffee room.

“The door was open when I came down to empty the cleaning water,” Elizabeth said. “Do you think he might have gone out on his own?”

“I suppose he might’ve,” Malcolm said, though he sounded doubtful.

“I can help you search the inn,” Elizabeth offered.

They separated, Elizabeth taking both the first and second floor while Malcolm saw to the rooms on the ground floor. The hound was nowhere to be found, though, and Glenna and Hamish had not seen him in some time, nor was he discovered to be in the stables.

“He doesna leave my side verra often,” Malcolm said as he scrubbed his jaw, looking worried.

Elizabeth knew a sting of guilt. She was the one who had insisted on the hound keeping her company upstairs in the first place.

“Will you go look for him?” she asked.

“Aye.”

“Shall I come with you?”

He looked up at her, searching her face. “Nay, ‘tis better ye stay here in case he returns. I willna be gone long.”

She felt a bit of disappointment, but she nodded, and he soon disappeared around the bend in the road. She went back inside and sought out Glenna, who was seeing to some of her neglected duties after spending the day cleaning. She offered Elizabeth a plate of bannocks and a cup of ale.

“Ye’ve no’ eaten all day,” Glenna said.

“Neither have *you*,” Elizabeth pointed out. “Sit down and rest a minute.”

“Nay, mistress,” Glenna said with a thankful smile. “I’ve much yet ta see to.”

“I have asked you more than once to call me Elizabeth, Glenna, but if you insist on calling me *mistress*, you mustn’t contradict me when I tell you to rest.” She shot her a significant look and motioned to the chair beside her. “If you sit with me a minute, I promise to help you with your tasks afterward.”

Glenna hesitated but obeyed, taking a bannock for herself. They enjoyed a few minutes of relaxation together then took a bannock to Hamish, who was surrounded by papers at the small desk in the office.

Glenna excused herself to see to a task in the stables while Elizabeth promised to clean up the small mess they had made while eating. First, though, she stepped outside, glancing around for any sign of Fergus or Malcolm. The sun was making its descent along the western sky. In an hour or so, it would be obscured by the hill that stood behind the inn, but it would still be nearly four hours until the gloaming, when the landscape would be bathed in blue.

She turned away from the door only to still as a rustling of leaves somewhere nearby caught her ear. She whirled back around and stepped outside, looking in the direction the sound was coming from, hoping to see Fergus's face. A dog running off for a time didn't seem anything to be overly concerned about, but she had seen the worry in Malcolm's eyes, and it made her anxious.

It was Malcolm who emerged from a small path surrounded by overgrown brush, his head down and Fergus cradled in his arms. The hound's head rested against Malcolm's chest, his eyes slightly open but heavily lidded.

Elizabeth sucked in a quick breath and hurried toward them. "What happened?"

Malcolm's head came up, and Elizabeth's heart stopped at pain there.

"He stepped in a trap." His voice broke on the last word, and Elizabeth pulled her eyes away from him to look at Fergus's legs. One of his front paws—the lame one—hung limply, covered in blood.

She swallowed and hurried alongside Malcolm, pushing the door farther open to make room for them.

"Let us take him upstairs," she said. "He can lay on one of the beds."

"He's bleedin'," Malcolm said.

"It does not matter. Hamish!" she called into the office. "Send for the farrier in Craiglinne."

Standing behind his desk, Hamish nodded quickly, eyes wide as his gaze landed upon Fergus.

"Miss Innes," Malcolm said softly, and his throat bobbed behind his cravat. "I dinna ken if. . .if. . ."

She shook her head. "Mr. Budge is very good. He will do everything he can."

He nodded and continued up the stairs. Elizabeth watched him for a moment then sprang to action, hoping Mr. Budge would indeed be able to

save Fergus.

OceanofPDF.com

Malcolm set Fergus as gently as possible onto the bed, feeling sick at the hound's whimpers.

"Shh," he said softly, trying to move the injured foot to a more comfortable position.

Fergus's eyes always drooped, but Malcolm had never seen them as listless and pulled as they were now. The dog lifted his head, trying to lick his wound, and Malcolm gently pushed him back down on his side. "I ken, Fergus. But ye canna fix it yerself."

Miss Innes came in, a bucket in hand and rags draped over her arm.

"How is he?" she asked, slowly taking a seat on the bed.

Malcolm grimaced, reaching a hand to Fergus's head and scratching him behind the ear. He didn't react except to inch his head closer to the wound.

"He insists on lickin' it," Malcolm said.

She looked at Fergus, frowning deeply and adding her own hand to his head, which she scratched softly. "I am going to clean your wound, Fergus," she said, "so that Budge can help you more quickly when he arrives." She looked up at Malcolm, apology in her eyes. "I may need you to hold him."

Malcolm clenched his jaw and nodded, scooting nearer to Fergus and lifting the hound's head so that it rested in his lap.

Miss Innes ministered to Fergus with gentle but sure movements for Malcolm knew not how long as she wiped away the blood, revealing the places where the metal trap had clamped through his skin and down to the bone.

Malcolm looked away and shut his eyes a number of times.

He had heard Fergus before he had seen him—whining and whimpering, laying on the ground with the trap around his leg and a dirt-covered piece of chicken beside him. Malcolm had been too taken up with removing the trap from Fergus’s leg to have a mind for anything else, but now. . .now, the urgency was giving way to questions, and the questions to anger.

It was not like Fergus to leave him—there were very few people to whom he would willingly go if Malcolm was nearby. That a piece of chicken had been at the scene of the trap—in the middle of a cluster of bushes, of all places—told Malcolm all he needed to know.

Mr. Budge, a quiet man of middle age, arrived within the hour, and Miss Innes hurried up to receive him at the door of the room. “The hound has met with an accident,” she explained as he entered.

“‘Twas was no accident,” Malcolm said tersely. The trap had been in the precise area Angus had agreed not to set traps in anymore.

Miss Innes’s gaze shot to him, but the farrier seemed not to have heard—he was too focused on Fergus. He began asking a number of questions, which Malcolm answered as well as he could. Thankfully, the inquiries ended as abruptly as they had started.

When Mr. Budge asked for assistance, Miss Innes didn’t hesitate to offer her help, a fact which made Malcolm exceedingly grateful, for it allowed him to continue to hold Fergus steady when the farrier’s dressing of the wounds caused the dog added pain. Malcolm’s brows furrowed more and more as the farrier’s care continued, every flinch and recoiling of the hound adding fuel to the fire inside him. Angus’s words repeated in his head.

I hope you have capitalized on this observation. That was what he had said when Malcolm had mentioned Miss Innes’s affection for Fergus.

This was Angus’s doing, and Malcolm knew it. The laird had used an innocent animal—one which repulsed him for its weakness—to further the relationship between Malcolm and Miss Innes. What could be done in the face of such heartlessness? Such disregard for humanity?

“There,” said the farrier at long last. “I’ve done what I can for the creature. I have hopes that ‘twill mend—he’ll never have full use of the leg, of course—”

“He never has,” Malcolm said blankly.

“—but only time will tell if he’s strong enough ta fight through it.”

“He will,” Miss Innes said, rubbing a hand along Fergus’s back.

The farrier vouchsafed no answer to this apart from a deferential nod. “He

must be watched for fever, and the dressin' should be changed in a few hours. We must hope it doesna turn putrid, for if it does. . . ." He left the sentence unfinished. "Send word if he takes a turn for the worse."

Miss Innes thanked him and ushered him out of the room, with a backward glance at Malcolm, a sympathetic, sad smile on her face.

Malcolm stared after them, scratching Fergus's ear abstractedly and feeling his heart soften slightly. There were Anguses in the world, yes. But there were also Elizabeths—sharp-tongued but soft-hearted, a flash of color against the black world Malcolm had inhabited for so long. He could only regret how well he blended in with the darkness, how far he had let it reach into his soul.

He could hear the sounds of guests downstairs. Hamish and Glenna had come upstairs at one point to check in on things, but they were needed below now.

Miss Innes returned shortly, and she came over to sit on the bed beside Malcolm and Fergus, tilting her head as she ran an eye over the dog.

"He seems more comfortable now, at least," she said.

"Aye, he does." He let out a large sigh, and Fergus turned his head to lick his hand, bringing a lump into Malcolm's throat.

Miss Innes put a hand on Malcolm's, and he glanced up at her.

"He will survive, Malcolm," she said, squeezing his hand lightly. "He is strong."

"Aye." He swallowed. "He *is* strong. I ken he's only a dog, and it must seem foolish ta ye. . . ."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Not in the least. I have seen the sort of friendship you have with him—how he idolizes you." She smiled, and it took on a hint of mischief. "However mistaken he is in doing so."

Malcolm rubbed Fergus's back. "Aye, I have him fooled."

"I begin to think you've had me fooled, as well," Miss Innes said.

He gave as much of a smile as he could muster. "Ye idolized me too, then? Ye managed ta hide it verra well."

"I am not adept at hiding my feelings."

He raised his brows in mock surprise. He tried not to notice that her hand still held his, soft and warm comfort in a room full of heaviness. "Is that so?" he teased.

She shot him an unamused look. "I believed you the devil's spawn. *That* is how you had me fooled."

His own smile faded, and she frowned at him. “Why do you take pains to appear so menacing when you are not?”

He looked away. This was what Angus had wanted—for her to warm to him, to believe better things of him. It was what *he* wanted too. But it felt wrong—wrong because he *was* menacing. If she only knew the things he had done.

“Perhaps yer first impressions of me were no’ so wrong.”

“There you go again,” she said. “Why you wish to portray yourself like Angus, I cannot understand, but two things I *do* know: first, Angus has room in his heart only for himself. And, second, a man who will weep for his dog’s pain has a heart that beats for others, whether they be human or animal. You are not like Angus, Malcolm.”

He held her gaze, his heart beginning to thud against his chest. She was right in many ways. But it terrified him to think that she might believe him better than he truly was. His heart might beat for others, but it was only a shadow of a heart. “Perhaps ye’re right. But I am no’ the only one in this room pretendin’ ta be more menacin’ than I truly am.”

She held his gaze for a moment then turned to look at the dog. “Yes, Fergus turns out to be—”

“I dinna speak of Fergus,” Malcolm said, “and ye ken it well, Miss Innes.”

She looked at him again, her face inscrutable.

“Ye use yer wit and yer tongue like a whip, but ‘tis naught but a farce—a performance. The only thing I dinna yet ken is for whose benefit the performance is—everyone else’s or yer own.”

Their eyes held each other’s for a protracted moment until Miss Innes stood from the bed. “I will bring you a bit of food and drink. You are hungry, I imagine.”

Malcolm considered pursuing the conversation, but he decided against it. He needed time, as well, to compose himself better. With his emotions so raw after Fergus’s injury, he was in no state to maintain control of himself. He couldn’t tell what Miss Innes was feeling, but every moment he spent in her company drew *him* closer to her, and that had never been the intent of his plan.

Fergus's comfort gave way to a degree of agitation while Miss Innes was downstairs, and even amidst his attempts to calm the dog and his fears of fever, Malcolm knew a worry that perhaps the guests downstairs were his MacKinnon kinsmen again. But surely Miss Innes would have said as much after she had seen the farrier out earlier.

Or would she have? Malcolm had seen her try to lighten his burden more than once since Fergus's injury, and if that was her goal, she wouldn't wish to saddle him with yet another concern. Would Gregory and Ivor have the audacity to show themselves here after what they had done to Fergus? For, Malcolm had little doubt that it was them Angus had chosen to carry out the deed.

The light was beginning to fade from the one window the room contained when Fergus finally drifted off to sleep. After feeling the hound's head again for signs of fever, Malcolm carefully slipped out from under Fergus, who roused for a moment only to drop his head back down immediately.

Malcolm left the room, only to find Miss Innes in the corridor with a tray in hand.

"Is something amiss?" she asked.

"Nay." He listened for the sounds of the guests downstairs, but he heard none. "Did the guests leave?"

"Yes, a few minutes ago," she answered quickly, then she offered him the cup and plate she held. Her response was too dismissive, though.

"Was it Gregory again?" he asked.

She met his gaze with the briefest of pauses before responding. "Yes."

He let out a curse in Gaelic. "Did they bother ye?"

"Yes," she said with a half-smile. "How could they not? But if you are asking whether they harassed me, the answer is no. I did not give them the opportunity." She held out the food and drink more insistently, and he took it from her, eyes still narrowed suspiciously. He wasn't certain she would have told him the truth.

"I'll bring the food down with me," he said.

"I can bring a candle here so you can stay with Fergus. I should have thought to do so."

"Nay. He's sleepin'. I think he'll be the better for it, too. I'll check on him in an hour or so." He frowned, realizing how late it must be for the light to be disappearing so quickly. "Do ye intend ta stay here for the night?"

"I would like to be of help with Fergus," she said, "but I am afraid my

sister will worry—no doubt she already is.”

“Ye dinna intend ta ride home alone, surely.”

She lifted a shoulder. “Why not?”

He stared at her. “‘Tis nearly dark.” And the MacKinnon men had only just left. His chest constricted. They had lured a dog into harm’s way only earlier that day. He could only imagine what they might do to Miss Innes if given the chance.

“I suppose it is,” she said, “but I know the road well.”

He shook his head. “Nay, lass. Ye’ll no’ go alone.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “I shall not, shall I?”

“Nay. I’ll escort ye, or ye’ll stay here. A message can be sent ta Dunverlockie.”

She pinched her lips together. “I cannot stay here. I know my sister. We should have Lachlan upon us within the hour.”

“Then ye might as well let me ride with ye home.”

She stared at him. “And what of Fergus?”

“Glenna or Hamish can keep him company if need be, but I reckon he’ll sleep for a good while now. He normally sleeps most of the day, and he hasna slept at all since I found him. He’s exhausted.”

“And what of your uneaten food?”

He shot her a look. “No more flimsy excuses ta keep me here. We should go before the light is gone altogether.”

She let out a resigned sigh and turned back toward the stairs. Was she truly aggravated by his insistence upon accompanying her?

When he informed Hamish and Glenna that he was to escort Miss Innes home, he thought he noticed a curious light in the former’s eyes, but he didn’t have time to dwell on it. The light would be gone in less than half an hour.

They worked in tandem to prepare the horses, and the landscape around Glengour was bathed in increasingly deep blues as they started on their way to Dunverlockie. The road was too uneven and the light too far gone to allow anything more than a gentle trot, which slowed to a walk as the last of the light soon disappeared.

Miss Innes seemed not to mind the slow pace, though, and Malcolm tried to conceal the way his ears perked at every sound or how his eyes strained to see in the increasing darkness. Night took time to fall in the summer, but when it did, it could be oppressive in its blackness.

He reached inside his coat, feeling for the *sgian dubh* that hung from his

waist. After seeing Gregory and the others at Glengour yesterday, he had decided it wisest to bring the knife with him.

He was on edge, and not just because he feared for Miss Innes. They were making their way to Dunverlockie, after all. He was under no illusion that she would invite him inside, but it was the first time he would be in such proximity to the document he wanted—*needed*—to destroy. Could he find a way inside after they parted from one another?

“When the farrier came,” Miss Innes interrupted his thoughts, “you said that what happened to Fergus was not an accident.” She looked over at him, waiting for an answer to the question she hadn’t asked.

He didn’t respond immediately, but he could hardly refute what she was saying. He *had* said it, and the reminder of the circumstances surrounding Fergus’s injury brought a wave of anger over him again. His jaw tightened. “Aye.”

“But you said before it was an animal trap.”

“Aye, it was.”

“Then why say it was not an accident?”

“Because I’m certain ‘twas Angus who ordered the trap be set.”

It was full dark now, but he saw Miss Innes glance at him out of the corner of his eye. “Set it for Fergus?”

He took a moment before answering, conflicted about his motivations for telling Miss Innes the truth of his suspicions. Was he telling her to manipulate her? Or was he telling her because it was a relief to finally be able to speak frankly to someone? He had never felt that he could speak freely about Angus to his family. It made his mother worry, and she had borne so much already. The entire purpose of bending to Angus’s whims was to protect her from her troubles.

But Miss Innes needed no such protecting. She was well-aware of what Angus was capable of.

“Fergus doesna run off without me,” he finally said. “No’ unless the inducement is strong enough, that is.”

“You think someone lured him away?”

“I’m certain of it. The MacKinnons ken Fergus has a strong love of chicken.” He looked at her. “I found a piece of it beside him when I came upon him stuck in the trap.”

The whites of her eyes grew larger. “But why? Why do such a thing?”

This was where it grew more complicated. He could tell Miss Innes of

Angus's depravity, but how could he explain the reason behind this specific instance? To do so, to explain his suspicion that it had been done with an aim to further Malcolm's interests with her, would prejudice her against him forever, and that, in turn, would make the other part of the plan—the recovering of the charter chest—more unlikely than it already was.

All the while, his family's well-being hung in the balance.

"I canna explain it all ta ye."

"You cannot do so? Or you *choose* not to?"

He could hear a hint of displeasure—or was it hurt?—in her voice, and it grated him not to be able to explain everything. He wanted her to understand.

He let out a sigh of frustration. "Let me ask ye somethin'. I dinna ken yer sister verra well, but I've seen ye with her—the way ye protect her. 'Tis almost as if, when ye're near Angus in her presence, ye try ta draw his anger, perhaps ta save yer sister from it."

There was a pause. "What of it?"

"I reckon ye'd go ta great lengths ta protect her."

"I would."

He nodded. "I need ta protect my family, too."

She stared at him, her eyes narrowing. "You mean Angus? And your kinsmen."

"Nay," he said with a frown. "I mean *my family*. The MacKinnons are no' my family."

Elizabeth's eyes strained to see Malcolm in the darkness. His features seemed to blend in with the night, but she could tell he wore his customary somber expression.

What did he mean the MacKinnons weren't his family?

"You don't truly mean that," she said.

"I assure ye I do. I may bear the MacKinnon name, but 'tis a burden, no' a blessin'."

She had no response ready. Was he protecting his mother and siblings from the MacKinnons? She thought on the dilapidated house they inhabited. She had wondered at it then, and she wondered at it now. But it certainly made sense with what Malcolm was saying—or at least with what she was understanding from his words. Was Fergus's injury a warning to him and his family?

It made her sick to think of a person who would use an innocent animal like Fergus for such dastardly intentions. But Angus *was* just such a person.

They came to the final bend in the road that led to Dunverlockie, evident from the slight glow visible through the small gaps between the leaves.

"Whoa," Elizabeth said, pulling back on the reins.

Malcolm followed suit, looking a question at her.

"This is far enough," she said. "I will walk the remainder of the way. The road ahead was damaged with the last rains."

He looked to the remaining distance and back at her. "I told ye I'd escort ye home. I didna mean only part of the way."

She smiled. "I know what you meant. But consider what might happen if

I was seen arriving home in the company of a MacKinnon. People would assume the worst, and”—her smile grew more teasing—“I could not tell them the truth.”

He dismounted. “And why is that?”

“What would happen to my reputation of hating the MacKinnons if they knew the truth?”

He came over to the side of her horse and put out his hands to receive her. She debated arguing with him over the assumption that she needed—or would accept—his help. But something stopped her as she stared down at him.

She set the reins down and, with a tightness in her chest she couldn’t explain, slipped down. Malcolm’s hands welcomed her, holding her firmly about the waist. They were surrounded on both sides by horses, making the space available to them seem small—small enough that, even in the dark, she could see a trace of the light up ahead reflected in his eyes. His fingers on her waist sent tingles up her spine and cascading down her arms.

“And what *is* the truth?” he asked, his gaze fixed on her.

“The truth?” Her eyes ran over his face—the thick, black brows, the full but somber lips, the shadow of stubble on his jaw—searching for the answer there. Or perhaps the answer was in the feeling of his hold on her—and the fact that, even though she knew she should remove his hands, she didn’t want to.

“They say one should keep the enemy close,” she said. And as though the words themselves demanded it, the distance between them grew smaller, and she couldn’t be sure which one of them was responsible for it.

“Am I your enemy?” His hands shifted slightly, moving from her sides to her back. His gaze flitted to her mouth then back to her eyes.

Elizabeth’s heart raced. Somehow there were bare inches between them now, and yet he didn’t pull her closer with the hands on her back. She wanted him to, could feel her body trying to close the gap without his help.

She swallowed and nodded slowly as her own gaze moved to his lips. He *was* the enemy. “I think this is perhaps close enough.” She shut her eyes against the pull she felt, against the impulse to make the distance disappear altogether, but she felt it more than ever. She lifted her chin and leaned in, and his lips were there, as though they had been waiting, an enemy ready to engage.

But the kiss was not the kiss of an enemy. It was the kiss of the man she

had found crying over his dog, the one who so feared for his family's safety that he couldn't tell her what she wished to know above all else: why he served Angus MacKinnon. It was gentle and sincere.

The hold on her back increased in pressure, not pulling her in, but betraying the desire to do so. The small gesture ignited something with her, and she deepened the kiss, putting a hand upon his chest where she felt the heart whose existence she had once doubted hammering just as hers was.

Finally, he pulled her closer against him, and his hand ran up her back, her neck, and into her hair. She had never been held in such a way, never held anyone else in such a way, and she clutched at his shirt, eager to keep him near.

Leaves rustled suddenly, and they broke apart in a hurry, Malcolm whirling around. But it was only Caesar, reaching for the leaves that hung low over the road.

Malcolm shut his eyes and let out a relieved laugh, reaching a hand to the horse.

"Afraid you might be caught fraternizing with the enemy?" Elizabeth teased, but she felt misgiving behind the remaining exhilaration. What had she just allowed—no, what had she just *caused* to happen?

"Nay," he replied, and he reached for her hand, causing her heart to stutter. The edge of his mouth turned up in a smile. "But I dinna think what just happened was what they meant by keepin' yer enemy close."

Elizabeth raised her brows, unsuccessfully trying to suppress a smile. "Did I keep you too close?"

The way he looked at her made her feel suddenly lightheaded. "Nay, lass." He pulled her into his arms again, bringing his lips just shy of hers. "Ye never could."

She shut her eyes and breathed in, but the shifting of Caesar's hooves on the road reminded her that they were not alone. They were on Dunverlockie land, where she might be found there at any moment. Here in the dark, she and Malcolm might pretend whatever it was they were pretending right now, but she was a Capulet, and he was a Montague, and she knew too well how that story had ended.

"I must go," she said, trying to ignore the way his warm breath on her lips begged her to kiss him again.

"Aye. I should get back ta Fergus." But he didn't let her go.

She took in a deep breath and stepped out of his arms. "Goodbye,

Malcolm.”

OceanofPDF.com

Malcolm watched as Miss Innes walked her horse up the lane. His heart ached at the sight. He had made a grave error, and now that she was out of his arms, he felt that reality settle heavily on his shoulders and heart.

In his selfishness, in his desire to not let his past control the present and future for just one short minute, he had done exactly what Angus would have wanted him to do. It was rare that his own desires coincided with Angus's, and he disliked the sensation intensely.

Miss Innes disappeared around the corner, and his heart constricted with worry. He looped his horse's reins over a branch.

"Stay here, Balder," he murmured.

With light footsteps, Malcolm followed after Miss Innes, staying far enough behind that she wouldn't hear him over the sound of her own footsteps and the soft clopping of her horse's hooves on the dirt.

Once her figure came into view again, shrouded as it was in the darkness, he breathed a sigh of relief. Dunverlockie loomed up ahead, and a number of the windows glowed with candlelight, a reminder of how fortified the castle was now. Malcolm couldn't attempt to enter tonight, even if the corridors weren't full of Kincaids—not when Fergus needed him, and not given what had just happened between him and Miss Innes. If he was to enter Dunverlockie, it would have to be another time.

Miss Innes and Caesar disappeared into the stables, and Malcolm shut his eyes, remembering for a moment what it had been like to hold her in his arms, to feel her warmth and passion, to experience a taste of the fire she had inside her in a way he would never have imagined. It had been a weak man's

decision, what he had done. And he *was* weak. She would know that well enough in time.

He waited until he saw her come out of the stables again and enter the castle before turning to leave back to Glengour. He would stay with Fergus all night, and then he would speak with Angus. After what had happened to Fergus, a discussion needed to take place.

When he arrived back at the inn, he found Glenna asleep on the bed beside the hound. Malcolm had seen how hard she worked, and he was of a mind to leave her be, but Fergus had heard him, and his movement woke Glenna.

“He didna wake till now,” Glenna said with eyes that blinked sleepily.

“Thank ye, Glenna,” Malcolm said. “Go get some sleep now. I’ll take care of him.”

Fergus seemed to be doing as well as he could be, though, with no sign of fever. Malcolm spent half an hour changing the bandages on his leg and keeping Fergus from licking at them, then he lay next to the dog, staring up at the uneven but freshly washed ceiling, remembering the hours he had spent cleaning with Miss Innes and wondering how in the world he could extract himself from the impossible situation he was in.

Fergus showed some signs of discomfort throughout the night, waking Malcolm from his hard-fought slumber a few times, but he showed no signs of fever, and when his bandages were changed in the morning again, the wounds looked well enough to Malcolm’s untrained eye. This did little to assuage the anger he felt toward Angus, and it was precisely because of that that he put off going to see the laird until he’d had some time to prepare himself.

It wouldn’t do to rail against Angus as he wished to. He would have to let his cousin know his feelings in a less dangerous way. Malcolm knew what Angus did with his knowledge of people’s weaknesses, and that was precisely how he viewed Malcolm’s affection for his lame dog: an unforgivable weakness.

Miss Innes was later than usual in arriving at Glengour, and Malcolm heard the sound of her horse’s hooves and saw her from the upstairs window

with no small degree of nervousness. Her departure had been so abrupt last night, the shift in her demeanor so sudden that he was certain she had been having the same thoughts as him: their kisses had been a mistake.

As it happened, Miss Innes came to him, and her entrance deprived Malcolm of breath for a moment. She had been dressed for work the past few days, but today, she wore finer clothing. She looked beautiful and refined and unattainable. She was not for a man like Malcolm, rough as he was, but the thought of her with anyone else was unbearable.

As she paused in the doorway, her gaze rested on him for a moment, and he knew immediately that there would be no continuation of last night's interactions.

"How is he?" she asked, coming over to the bed.

Fergus lay curled up, but his head came up at her approach, and he reached it over to sniff her as she sat down. She smiled slightly and set a hand on him.

"He's well enough." Malcolm said. "Takin' advantage of his injury ta sleep all night and day."

Miss Innes scratched Fergus behind the ears. His eyelids fluttered, and he slowly slumped backwards. "There. That is the Fergus I know."

Malcolm's gaze shifted between his dog and Miss Innes, who laughed softly at Fergus's antics. But her smile faded slowly, at which point she looked up.

"I do not know what exactly happened last night," she said, "but I think we are in agreement that it must not reoccur."

Malcolm nodded, swallowing. "Aye." He had been prepared to say the same thing, but it still panged to hear her voice the idea. What had it meant to her, all that had passed on the road to Dunverlockie?

She held his gaze, her eyes full of something he couldn't pinpoint, and then she cleared her throat and rose to her feet, walking to the door.

Malcolm gathered his courage and spoke. "I have ta make a trip ta Benleith today."

She paused with her back to him then looked over her shoulder, lips pressed together.

He tried to ignore the expression of disapproval. It was for the best that they both be reminded of the reality—Malcolm served the pleasure of Angus MacKinnon, and even if the day came when he no longer did, the time that he *had* done so had been enough. "Would ye mind watchin' over Fergus? Just

comin' ta check on him every hour or so? I think the farrier will be returnin' later on, and I intend ta be back before then, but. . . I dinna wish ta leave him without someone he. . . .” He hesitated for a fraction of a second.

“Loves?” she offered, the seriousness of her expression dispelled by a teasing quirk to her lip.

He couldn't suppress a smile of his own. “I was goin' ta say *kens*.”

“But we both know the truth,” she said. She looked to the hound, who had fallen back asleep. “I will watch over him.”

Malcolm opened his mouth to say thank you, but he was cut off.

“By the time you return, I intend for Fergus to have transferred his loyalty to *me*.”

Malcolm laughed and rose from the bed slowly. “By all means”—he came up in front of her in the doorway—“do yer worst.”

She didn't move from her place, despite the challenging way he looked down at her. Of course she didn't. She was Elizabeth Innes. She was never one to back down from a fight.

He passed by his family's home on the way to Benleith. He always needed the strength and motivation they gave him when he was forced to confront Angus or carry out the laird's wishes. That motivation was becoming more and more necessary.

Winnie was outside, gathering flowers. She was taller every time he saw her, growing into a young woman like Marion.

Malcolm glanced down at his thumb. The nail was dark and bruised, and he smiled slightly at it. He was determined Winnie would have a better life than he'd had. He hadn't been much older than she when he'd picked up the closest thing available to him—a fire poker—and struck his father from behind with all his might, saving his mother from his abuse.

Winnie looked up, and her brows rose in surprise. “Malcolm!” She looked around him. “Where is Fergus?”

“He stayed at the inn,” he said. He didn't want Winnie to know of Fergus's pain or the dangers of living with Angus as laird.

“With Miss Innes?”

He frowned a bit. “Aye. And Glenna and Hamish.”

“Aye, but I like Miss Innes the best.”

He did too. “And why is that?”

She shrugged and went back to her work. “I just do.”

He found his mother and spoke with her before making his way to Benleith, but the conversation was less helpful than he had hoped in giving him strength, for she made no secret of her liking for Miss Innes, either.

Malcolm was relieved to find the laird alone in the library at Benleith. He took in a deep breath before stepping into the room. Angus sat at the desk, a deep frown on his brow as his quill scratched over a piece of paper. Did he find his work difficult since he lacked the ammunition against his enemies that now sat in the chest at Dunverlockie?

Malcolm sat down, knowing better than to interrupt the laird while he was occupied. This was the man who had harmed Fergus for no other reason that Malcolm could tell but that it might possibly be of use in his quest to harm Miss Innes and the Kincaids.

“That letter,” Angus said as he set the quill in the stand, “was a nuisance to write.”

“Sorry ta hear that, my laird,” said Malcolm, perjuring himself. He had little patience for Angus’s supposed travails, particularly right now.

“Are you?” Angus sat back and looked at him, clasping his hands in front of him and resting his elbows on the arms of the wide chair he sat in.

Malcolm stilled, worried his insincerity had come through so easily.

“Your brother has made things with Sir Andrew much more difficult—and after all the trouble I have gone to to get in the man’s favor. He is not easily won over, as you know.”

Malcolm had been so occupied at Glengour, he hadn’t been keeping up on what had happened with Dugan and Bridget MacMorran. “Do ye intend ta take Ava MacMorran ta wife, then?”

“I do. I think I may yet manage to persuade Sir Andrew that the match is in his best interests, if only Dugan does not spoil things. Sir Andrew has precisely the sort of influence I am in need of if I wish to grow my own. And as for Ava, she is well enough to look at—a suitable mistress for Benleith, I think. Her mother gave Sir Andrew five sons. I hope Ava will be so obliging.” Angus fixed his gaze on Malcolm. Any heir Angus produced put Malcolm farther from the possibility of inheriting Benleith, not that Malcolm had ever anticipated or wished for such a thing.

So, Malcolm said nothing. He knew little of Ava MacMorran, but he

knew enough of Angus to be certain she did not deserve the fate of being married to him. Even aside from his disagreeableness and calculating nature, Angus was not one to hide his predilection for the society of women. He was not known for treating them particularly well, but they seemed to be appeased well enough by the money and gifts he offered.

“Speaking of the *gentler* sex,” Angus said with an amused sneer, “how do you fare with Miss Innes?”

An image of her, eyes closed, lips within inches of his own, flashed across Malcolm’s mind. Angus would be thrilled to know of what had happened. He would *not* be thrilled to know Malcolm had no intention of making any effort whatsoever to secure Miss Innes’s love. “I have made a great deal of progress.”

“I am pleased to hear that. Gregory and the others brought back encouraging reports the other night.”

Malcolm’s jaw clenched. “Is that why ye sent them? Ta see if I needed help?”

Angus inclined his head. “I find that an outside eye is sometimes helpful in such situations.”

“What sort of situation do ye mean?” Malcolm asked.

“Situations where the heart is involved.” The slight smile on his face made Malcolm wonder if he was referring to Miss Innes’s heart or Malcolm’s—or both. “I admit, I was disappointed to find that you did not utilize the two of them more.”

Malcolm’s brows drew together.

Angus gave a shrug. “Gregory offered you provocation you might have used to gain the gratitude and appreciation of Miss Innes by standing up for her. Perhaps you will still have the chance.”

Malcolm gritted his teeth together but forced himself not to show any physical signs of anger. “I appreciate yer efforts, but I had it in hand on my own. The arrival of Gregory and Ivor was a setback in my progress, no’ a help.”

Angus frowned slightly and tilted his head to the side. “Hm. And what of Fergus? Was Miss Innes as susceptible to his injury as I anticipated she would be?”

Malcolm’s hands clenched at his legs until his fingernails dug into his skin. “As I said, ‘twas no’ necessary.” He felt himself losing rein on his temper more and more with every sentence Angus spoke.

Angus directed a hard stare at him. “You should be grateful for my help.”

“And ye should have consulted with me afore interferin’ with things—and afore hurtin’ Fergus. Ye said ye’d leave things ta me.”

“Your regard for the mongrel is becoming a bore, Malcolm. I am beginning to think you set more store by the beast’s life than you do by your duty to this clan. My generosity to your family has its bounds, you know.”

Bile filled Malcolm’s mouth, and he made an effort to swallow it back down. He would have liked to throw the ink in the stand on Angus’s desk into his face. But he couldn’t put his family’s well-being at risk, not even for Fergus, and certainly not for his own pride.

Angus’s hard stare was still fixed on him. “Perhaps due to the favors I have bestowed upon you and the place you inhabit here at Benleith, you forget that your mother and siblings are allowed to remain here out of the goodness of my heart and nothing more. The circumstances of your father’s death—I imagine you remember what those were—were more than enough to justify cutting all ties with you—or allowing justice to take its course. And yet, I promised to help you, to save your family from ruin.” He raised his eyebrows, clearly expecting an acknowledgement of what he was saying.

Malcolm nodded stiffly.

“There are plenty of families who would gladly accept the home your family is currently inhabiting if you have decided you no longer wish for my protection.”

The threat in the words was palpable, and Malcolm felt the familiar tentacles of obligation and captivity wrap around his chest.

“Nay, Angus. I’m grateful ta ye.” Somehow he had choked the words out, swearing to himself that he would be free of the man before him if it was the last thing he did.

So far, his efforts to discover the whereabouts of the copy Angus had mentioned had met with no success. But Malcolm *would* find both the document and the copy, and he would destroy them when he did. And then he and his family would escape, eking out an existence far from the reach of the MacKinnons.

It had become expected that, at breakfast, Elizabeth would give Christina and Lachlan a report of the progress being made at Glengour. It was always somewhat uncomfortable for her, as she had yet to identify to them who had been helping there, allowing them to make more rapid progress than would otherwise have been possible.

At first, she had avoided telling them to save them the worry they would have inevitably felt over allowing her to work in close proximity to one of Angus's men. She *continued* to avoid telling them for fear of the questions they might ask and the way she might betray her inner turmoil and her feelings for Malcolm.

That she had let such feelings develop was a matter of deep confusion and regret for Elizabeth. But even then, she could see the irony and humor in it. It was very much like the universe to make her eat her unapologetic and outspoken words about the MacKinnons.

Bannerman and Colum helped her attach a bag to Caesar's saddle. The candles and candlesticks she had taken yesterday had been used to furnish the rooms, and with today's items, she hoped to try a few different fabrics for bedclothes and hangings in the bedrooms.

Yesterday's ride had been spent convincing herself of the need and wisdom of telling Malcolm that their interaction could never be repeated. She had been very successful at convincing herself of this—she could be very persuasive, after all—but when she had entered the room where Malcolm sat beside Fergus, her determination had suffered a severe setback.

Somehow, Malcolm had looked completely different in that moment,

transformed from the saturnine brute she had thought him to a battered but kind soul, somehow trapped in Angus's grasp. Whether that grasp was as strong as Malcolm had implied or whether he simply lacked the courage to fight it, she wasn't sure.

It reminded her how much about him she *didn't* know, and it was that which had given her the courage to say what she had come to say, even if her heart had balked as she did so.

She trusted it would become less difficult with every interaction as she accustomed herself to the sort of relationship they ought to have rather than the one her heart might wish for.

She adopted toward him what she hoped was an attitude of nonchalant benevolence, and he seemed to respond with his own version of it, though his brooding expression and the care he took with his words could not truly be considered either benevolent or nonchalant.

More of the work was falling to the two of them, though, now that traffic on the road was increasing and drovers passing by on their journey south. Those who had been to Glengour before looked around with curious eyes at the changes being implemented, a fact which motivated Elizabeth even more to be quick about adding the warm touches she had planned.

It was the late afternoon, and Glengour was at its busiest, with Glenna scurrying about to serve those coming and going, and Hamish occupied speaking to the guests and keeping the more tidy records Christina and Lachlan had requested as part of the changes at the inn.

Having used up the entirety of the supplies brought so far from Dunverlockie, Elizabeth was helping see to a newly arrived group of tired drovers, hoping to relieve Glenna of some of her burden, when the MacKinnon men arrived. Malcolm was upstairs, seeing that Fergus was fed and his bandages changed; Hamish was engaged in providing water for the cattle; and Glenna was in the kitchen, making Elizabeth the only one available to greet the MacKinnons.

After seating the drovers, she excused herself and walked over to the MacKinnons, well-aware that the last time they had come, Fergus's injury had followed shortly thereafter.

She pasted a smile on her face. "I am afraid you find us very much occupied. I am not certain we have the capacity required to serve you."

Ivor MacKinnon looked to the coffee room on his left. "There's a table right there."

She didn't bother following his gaze. She was already aware of the vacant seats.

"We're willin' ta wait if it means the likes of *your* services," Gregory MacKinnon said with a provocative smile.

Elizabeth met his gaze, taking a moment to respond. "You may take your seats. I hope you will be patient if it takes some time to attend to your needs." She gave a nod and turned back to the drovers.

Glenna entered from the kitchen, clearing the cups of two men who were getting up to leave and glancing at the MacKinnons.

"I will see to them," Elizabeth said, "if you can see to these kind men." She smiled at the drovers.

Glenna looked at her warily but said nothing, turning to the drovers to greet them.

Rather than returning to see to the MacKinnons, Elizabeth picked up the rug in the entryway and the nearby broom and went outside, a small smile on her face. It wouldn't do for a dirty rug to be the first impression any potential travelers might have of Glengour.

She went to the side of the inn, draped the rug over an obliging post, and hit it with the end of the broom. A cloud of dust flew around, and she watched in satisfaction as the rug rippled and grew still again. It was gratifying to strike something, and this time, she hit the rug harder. Again and again, she beat the rug, until there was no trace of dust in the air around and until her own frustrations seemed to dissipate with it.

She set down the broom and leaned against the uneven stone wall of the inn to catch her breath. She couldn't keep the MacKinnon men waiting forever, especially knowing how strongly Hamish felt about the inn's reputation for service.

She let out a sigh and turned, stopping short at the sight of Gregory MacKinnon. How long he had been watching her, she didn't know, but she knew the look in his eyes.

"Ye said 'twas too crowded inside." He took a few steps toward her, and his eyes ran along her face and down to her chest, which was still rising and falling more rapidly, both from her recent exertion and the surprise of seeing him. "I thought ye might find it easier ta see ta my *needs* outside." He raised a brow suggestively, and she clenched her jaw.

Her eyes were on him, ever-vigilant, but she was keenly aware of the broom that rested against the wall, just out of her reach. She shifted her

weight in order to bring herself closer to it. “Yes, we do house all the beasts outside,” she said, shifting again. But he noticed, and his eyes went to the broom.

He gave a devilish grin and stepped toward it, taking it in hand and raising it in the air. “Were ye lookin’ for this?”

She smiled, praying it didn’t waver or betray the terror building inside her, and reached for the broom, letting her eyes roam about for any sign of Hamish. But there was no one but Gregory in sight.

He pulled the broom away, shaking his head. “Ye think I dinna ken what ye meant ta do with it?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t ever assume you knew anything,” she said.

His smile grew more menacing. Why could she never control her tongue? It did not serve her well in this situation. In a battle of wits, she could depend upon her own strength, but Gregory MacKinnon was not the sort of person to engage in such a battle, and she was no match for him physically.

He tossed the broom behind him and stepped toward her, forcing her to retreat against the wall to avoid him. “Now,” he said, “back to what you said about seeing to my needs.”

“Do not touch me with so much as a finger.” Elizabeth considered her options, clenching her fists to stop her hands from shaking. She could strike him with her hands or feet, but she had little hope it would stun him long enough to make a difference. In all likelihood, it would only make him more angry. The only other avenue open to her was to scream, and though it went against her to admit weakness and defeat in such a way, it was the only logical option.

As if he knew her mind, Gregory thrust a hand over her mouth, and her scream was heard only as a muffled cry.

He took her by the wrist and leaned in so that she could feel his breath on her ear. “Perhaps we should go in the barn. With the other beasts, ye ken?”

Without screaming available to her, Elizabeth’s fighting instincts took over, and with as much strength as she could muster, she stomped on Gregory’s foot. He let out a curse, and his hands released both her mouth and her wrist as he stumbled backwards.

Elizabeth blinked rapidly, stunned at the unexpected and delayed reaction. It quickly became apparent that she was not the cause of it, though. Malcolm was wrestling with Gregory, pulling him away from the inn wall. The two of them broke apart, and Malcolm thrust a fist into Gregory’s face,

who fell back, blinking, but returned more quickly than Elizabeth would have thought possible to strike back.

The hit to Malcolm's cheek jolted her from her place as an observer, and she hurried to pick up the discarded broom. Malcolm recovered enough to strike Gregory again, this time in the stomach, causing him to double over. But Gregory was a stocky man, and he didn't stay bent over for long.

Before he had time to retaliate, Elizabeth pulled the broomstick back and swung it toward him. It made contact with the side of his head with a strange *thunk*, and he hovered for a moment before falling to the ground, still.

Elizabeth dropped the broom, staring at him before looking at Malcolm. The side of his lip was bleeding, and he was breathless, but he hurried over to her, taking her shoulders in his hands and searching her face.

"Did he hurt ye?"

Elizabeth swallowed. "No." Her whole body was trembling, and she knew Malcolm could feel it with the hold he had on her shoulders.

His eyes shut in relief, and he pulled her into his arms. She knew she ought to resist, but she didn't—she couldn't.

"I kept hearin' a noise and came ta the window ta see what it was. Ye were beatin' the rug. And then Gregory came, and. . . I'm sorry, lass." He sighed, and the breath ruffled the whisps of hair by her ear. Gregory's breath had done the same just minutes ago, eliciting a visceral reaction from her, whereas with Malcolm. . . .

She pulled away, far enough that he could no longer reach her. He looked at her for a moment then nodded, as if to acknowledge the correctness of her decision. She hated that it was correct. She felt vulnerable and weak again out of his arms.

Gregory was coming to, and, after a glance at him, Malcolm took Elizabeth by the arm and guided her toward the front of the inn, through the door, and straight upstairs.

"I think it was him," she said when they entered the room where Fergus lay.

Malcolm's brow furrowed. "Ye think what was him?"

"Gregory. He was the one who came into my bedchamber—the one who attacked me."

"*What?*"

She set her jaw, brushing away the memory of that night and the subsequent escape with Christina to Glengour. It had largely been pushed

from her mind with the events that had followed—the fire, the marriage of Christina and Lachlan, the abduction.

“It was two or three months ago. I escaped with the help of Christina.” She frowned, holding his gaze. “You were not aware?” She asked the question, but she could see the answer in the fury in his expression.

“Nay.”

“But you were at Dunverlockie that night—for dinner, at least. My sister had been discovered by Angus in Gordon’s bedchamber earlier. I am surprised you do not remember the tenseness at the—”

“I remember,” he said flatly.

She frowned at his tone. There was something besides anger in his face. Was it hurt? Whatever it was, he concealed it quickly.

“You remember what?”

“I remember the dinner. Ye said ye’d no’ let a MacKinnon touch ye if he was the last man on earth.”

Elizabeth had forgotten her words that night until now. “I mentioned you in particular, didn’t I?”

“Aye.”

Guilt gnawed at her. Had her words hurt his feelings at the time? Or had they merely confirmed to him that she was a hateful vixen? She wasn’t sure that the latter was untrue. She’d had plenty of opportunity over the years to reflect on the damage done by her ill-considered words, and yet, time and again, she found herself uttering more of them.

“Well,” she said, “now you can boast that you proved me wrong.”

“I wouldna do such a thing. No’ ever.”

She held his gaze. She was not one to give her trust easily, but she believed him. He had proven himself her friend rather than her foe, surely, despite all her provocations, all her attempts to prove otherwise.

A thought came to her, and she reached into her pocket, pulling out the crumpled tartan fabric.

She held it out toward him. “Do you recognize this?”

Malcolm's every muscle went stiff as he stared at the piece of plaid Miss Innes held in her hand. She knew. She knew what he had done.

"I have asked a number of people in the area, including passing travelers, but to no avail. No one has recognized it yet."

He glanced up at her, gaze fixing on her intently, but she was staring down at the fabric, her brow wrinkled. She *didn't* know.

"Where did ye get it?" he asked with effort, though he knew the answer to the question. He hadn't seen the piece of cloth in almost two months—since the night of the fire. When he had realized the plaid was missing from his sporran where he always kept it, it had taken him less than a minute, with a sinking heart, to realize he must have dropped it somewhere at Glengour. He had hoped it had been consumed in the fire or lost in his run through the woods.

She finally looked up at him. "I found it the night of the fire, over there." She pointed to the area by the door. "Do you recognize it?"

He swallowed and put out a hand to take it from her on the pretext of inspecting it more closely. As if he needed to. This worn piece of fabric had become a symbol of hope to him over the years—hope that someday, he would be able to leave the name MacKinnon behind and rejoin his mother's kin. It was a piece of his grandfather's plaid and unlike any tartan he had ever seen.

That Miss Innes was asking him whether he recognized it told him two things: she didn't suspect him, and she trusted him enough to ask him directly. The trust of a woman like Elizabeth Innes was no small thing, and

he couldn't bear to see it shatter before her eyes. But the truth would break her trust as much as a lie.

She wouldn't understand if he told her it belonged to him—she wouldn't understand the position he had been in the night of the fire. And if she used the truth to seek justice against the MacKinnons, Angus wouldn't hesitate to lay the blame at Malcolm's door and deny knowledge of the event. He had already done so at the trial when the fire had been mentioned.

"Nay," Malcolm said, his heart heavy and his stomach sick.

She sighed and took a closer look at the cloth in his hands. "It seems very old. Perhaps the pattern has passed out of memory. Or perhaps it was only ever a rag." She put out a hand to take it back.

He hesitated for a fraction of a second, reluctant to give it back to her for more than one reason. But in the end, he surrendered it.

Whatever her disappointment at his response regarding the tartan, Elizabeth seemed not to be weighed down by it. She had taken her commission to beautify the inn seriously, and when she arrived the next day, it was with a great deal of fabric she meant to cut and sew for use as table coverings.

"People will think they've been transported to England with all these touches of yers," Hamish said to her with a teasing smile.

"Will they, now?" Miss Innes pulled the fabric from her bag. All of it was tartan. She looked at Malcolm. "I had the idea when we spoke yesterday. These plaids have been gathering dust for the last fifteen years, I think. We cannot wear them, but I do not think the law mentions anything about the dressing of tables."

Fergus limped over to sniff the fabric. Malcolm had carried him downstairs after listening to a fair amount of whining from the hound. He was using only three of his legs, while the fourth hovered above the ground, still bandaged. Malcolm watched the bloodhound with a keen sense of how fortunate he was—how fortunate both of them were. Things might have easily ended much worse, and it was no thanks to Angus that they hadn't.

He spent the day helping Hamish in the stables. They were full of splitting wood and an accumulation of equipment which needed sorting

through. Malcolm admired Hamish. He was hardworking, kind, and had a keen sense of humor under his sometimes quiet demeanor.

“I mean ta pay ye soon,” Hamish said after they had been working a few hours. “I’m ta speak with Lachlan soon ta give him an account of all the expenditures we’ve made, and I’ll have yer money then.”

Malcolm waved aside Hamish’s words, even though it was something he had thought about more than once. When he had begun his work there, it had been the means to Angus’s ends. But he had continued helping because he wanted to and because he knew his help was needed.

But the truth was, his family could use the money. If Malcolm could manage to execute his plan, they would need all the money they could get to afford their escape and the beginnings of the life they would be obliged to create. That his mother’s kin had never responded to his letters was still a source of grief to Malcolm. The knowledge that they had no kin to receive them and support them was a significant barrier.

“Nay,” Hamish said firmly. “I wasna askin’ yer permission ta pay ye. I was merely tellin’ ye when ta expect it.”

Miss Innes appeared in the stable entrance. “The tables are covered—with Glenna’s help, we managed it much more quickly than I had anticipated—and I should like to begin with the hangings and bedclothes now, but I need more items from Dunverlockie.”

Hamish stood, arms akimbo. “Verra well.”

“Significantly more items. More than I can put on a horse.”

“I see,” he said.

Malcolm’s heart beat more quickly. Was this his chance? To enter Dunverlockie? Almost without thinking, he put a hand to his pocket, where the key Angus had given him sat. “I can take ye in the wagon.”

Miss Innes looked at him for a moment then nodded. “Glenna will be coming as well.” She held his gaze for a moment. Did she mean it as a reminder to him that they would not be repeating what happened the last time they had gone to Dunverlockie?

“That is,” she continued, looking to Hamish, “as long as you are able to manage things alone and keep watch over Fergus for a time?”

“Should I take offense that I’m no’ invited ta join the party?” Hamish feigned offense, but his mouth broke into a smile, and he jerked his head to the side. “Go on with ye, then.”

Malcolm’s heart raced the entire way to Dunverlockie as he debated what

he would do if given the opportunity to enter the castle and go in search of the charter chest. Even if the possibility of finding the charter chest awaited him, the best he would be able to do would be to hide it somewhere on the grounds of the castle for retrieval later, and even that would be no small feat. The thought of using Miss Innes's trust as an opportunity for himself grated against whatever shreds of a conscience he still retained after all these years working for Angus.

As he pulled on the reins and the cart came to a stop in front of the castle, he shut his eyes and breathed in deeply, picturing Winnie and his mother. His only hope of ensuring their safety was to find that document and the copy and destroy them.

He helped both women down, Miss Innes from the seat beside him and Glenna from the back of the cart, then looked to the castle, trying to remember where Angus had said he would find the charter chest.

Miss Innes brushed at her petticoats with her hands. "We will make our way to the east door. I believe all we need is being stored in the laundry."

Malcolm nodded, trying not to betray his relief—or the nerves that accompanied it. If the things Miss Innes needed had been located somewhere in the main area of the castle or upstairs, there would be little hope of managing to go where the locked room was. It would be much more feasible to go in search of the charter chest when they were already in the general vicinity of the room that contained it. But that was only one obstacle of many.

They made their way to the servant entrance on the east end of the castle. Miss Innes glanced up frequently, as though she worried about being seen. Was it due to his presence there? It made sense, of course, but Malcolm couldn't help but be affected by the realization of how reluctant she was to be seen in his company. It was a reminder of how incompatible they were.

Malcolm tried to take note of his surroundings once they were inside. He had spent a great deal of time at Dunverlockie after Gordon's death, but he had never ventured into the servant quarters. The castle was never terribly bright or cheerful, but the narrow, stone corridors of the basement were particularly dark and gloomy.

As Miss Innes led them, Malcolm took note of the corridors which led off from the main one. With squinting eyes and a thudding heart, he thought he could make out the door at the end—the one Angus had spoken of. His future and the future of his family were inside that door.

They stopped for Miss Innes to talk to one of the servants, and Malcolm was grateful for the feeble lighting which made it less likely that he would be recognized. This servant, at least, wouldn't know him for a MacKinnon. She must have been one of the new maids taken on after Angus's departure. She left with instructions to bring more help, and Miss Innes led the way to a room just two doors away from the one preoccupying Malcolm.

With every step closer to the end of the corridor, his heart beat faster, as if it was aware how near it was to what had been burdening it for so long. Two maids joined them shortly, and one by one, Miss Innes instructed the lot of them on which items to take—more candlesticks, a number of chamber pots, and an abundance of linens and fabrics.

“And where exactly do ye intend ta fit all of this at the inn?” Malcolm asked as he stacked a pile of linens in Glenna's arms.

“It will not all *remain* at the inn,” Miss Innes replied. “But you may be underestimating what is required to run the sort of establishment we hope to make Glengour into.”

Glenna stepped out of the room, leaving Malcolm and Miss Innes alone. If Miss Innes didn't load his arms as high as she'd had him do for Glenna, he might be able to hurry to the door at the end of the corridor, search for the chest, and conceal it beneath the linens. He had done more nerve-wracking things in the past, surely, but somehow this felt more significant. Everything was at stake now, and he didn't know when or whether he would have another opportunity like this.

Miss Innes set a short stack of white linens on his waiting arms.

He raised his brows. “Is that all? Ye might have spread out the loads more evenly.”

She smiled. “Or perhaps this is all I believe you capable of carrying.”

He chuckled and walked from the room, nudging the door behind him so that it closed most of the way. Heart hammering, he glanced down the corridor both ways. It was only a matter of time before one of the maids came back from the wagon. He would have to make it to the door and inside before that happened, and then he would have to wait until there was no one else in the corridor to see him exiting. It was a risk.

But what was the risk if he *didn't* make the attempt? He couldn't continue to live the way he had been. He clenched his jaw and turned down the corridor toward the door.

“Malcolm?”

He stopped in his tracks, eyes widening, then turned toward Miss Innes.

Her brow was wrinkled, and she wore an amused smile. “Where are you going?”

Malcolm looked around himself and forced out a laugh. “Och, ‘tis that way, isn’t it? Got turned around.”

She laughed, and he walked toward her, resisting the urge to glance back at the lost opportunity. The corridor was hardly large enough to fit the two of them abreast, but she walked beside him despite that.

“When I first came to Dunverlockie, I became lost many times,” she said, “though I never admitted as much.”

“I can believe *that*,” he said, and she elbowed him in the ribs.

“Whereas *you* are always ready to admit your mistakes and weaknesses?”

His smile faded slightly. “Nay. But gettin’ lost is no’ a weakness.”

“True, but refusing help surely counts as one, and that is a weakness I have in spades.”

He cast a sidelong glance at her. He was not one to ask for or accept help, either. It was a lonely way to live, and he wondered, just for a brief moment, what would happen if he asked her to help *him*. “I understand. ‘Tis the same way with me.”

She met his gaze thoughtfully. “But you *offer* your help quite willingly, I think.”

“As do you.”

She looked ahead at the door they were approaching, slowing as they came to it. “What is the merit in offering help when it so often does more damage than good? For, that is the case with me, certainly.”

“I dinna believe that.”

“What, then, of the day I came upon your brother in the pillory?”

Malcolm grimaced as he stopped before the door. “Ye meant well. I ken that now. At the time, I thought ye were merely meddlin’ ta teach Angus a lesson.”

She smiled wryly. “I cannot pretend that did not factor into my thoughts at the time, even if it wasn’t the primary reason for intervening. But tell me truly: did I do more harm than good?”

Her eyes were difficult to see in the dim corridor, but he could sense her sincerity and concern. He let out a small sigh, debating how honest to be with her. She deserved the truth, though, whenever he could give it to her.

“I ken ‘twas appreciated by Dugan and my mother—and by Bridget, of

course. But the reason Dugan was there in the first place was ta appease Angus—ta keep him from executin’ a worse punishment than the pillory on Dugan.”

Miss Innes lifted her shoulders. “But why?”

“Angus wishes verra particularly for Sir Andrew’s goodwill, so Dugan and Bridget’s connection is an unwelcome obstacle. He’s afraid ‘twill make Sir Andrew angry—the man has high hopes for all his children, and Dugan isna the sort of man he has in mind for Bridget.”

Miss Innes didn’t respond, but he could see she was thinking deeply. Finally, she looked up at him. “You have been reluctant to tell me what it is that keeps you by Angus’s side, and I will not press you anymore to tell me. But”—she took in a deep breath and released it slowly—“from what I know of Angus, he will not surrender his hold on something until he has squeezed every last ounce of utility from it. It was so with Gibson and Kemp, certainly.” She shook her head, staring Malcolm in the eye. “He must be stood up to, or he will continue to do as he has done in the past.”

He shut his eyes and looked down at the stone floor. How could he explain to her that standing up to Angus would be the *end* of his freedom, not the beginning of it? He couldn’t. Not without telling her his darkest secrets—secrets that would give her power over him. Her sense of justice was strong—stronger than in anyone else he knew—and she was determined to bring the person who had lit the fire at Glengour to justice.

The door opened, and they were obliged to step out of the way. Glenna and the two maids appeared in the bright light of the outdoors that shone through the open door.

“Is there more ta take?” Glenna asked.

“No,” Miss Innes said, breaking her gaze away from Malcolm. “I think we have everything we need. And more. We can make our way back.”

Malcolm glanced one last time down the corridor and, with a resigned breath, left with Glenna and Miss Innes back to the cart.

As Elizabeth climbed onto the seat of the wagon with Malcolm's help, she couldn't help sending frequent glances up at the windows of the castle. She had been hesitant to let Malcolm come along with them to Dunverlockie, afraid he would be recognized, which would lead to any number of questions she didn't care to answer.

But a moment of reflection calmed her fears. Perhaps it would be for the best if Christina or Lachlan saw him with her and Glenna. It might convince them that Elizabeth *was* capable of working with a MacKinnon without causing an all-out war between the clans. Of course, Malcolm was the only one she had been obliged to work with so far, but he wasn't just any MacKinnon. She had never even seen him outside the company of Angus before meeting him at Glengour.

When they reached the inn, the work of making the beds with the linens began. It took the better part of the afternoon, after which Elizabeth returned to Dunverlockie. No mention was made by anyone there of Malcolm.

She didn't wait for breakfast the next morning before making her way to Glengour. Now that things were truly starting to come together there, she felt an impatience to finish the work. She had plenty to do, selecting which fabrics would go on the windows in each room and seeing that they were hemmed and hung properly. Malcolm assisted her with hanging them as Glenna finished sewing the pairs between helping passing travelers. Today, they would see to the windows in the rooms not housing guests. Tomorrow, they would ensure any new guests were put in the rooms already containing hangings so that they could work on the others.

“In the summer,” Elizabeth said as she admired the freshly hung curtains in the room where the fire had occurred, “these will allow people to sleep *before* the sun goes down and *after* it has come up; in the winter, they will keep out the cold.”

Malcolm tilted his head to the side, standing beside her with his arms folded across his chest. Fergus lay in the corner, watching them lazily. “Aye. And I confess, I had my doubts when ye told me yer intentions. But ‘tis amazin’ what a difference they make ta the room.”

She smiled, more grateful than she cared to let on for the compliment. “We may never be like The George in London, but we can certainly be more than a bothy.” She let out a satisfied sigh and looked at Malcolm.

Whether it was because she had come to know him better or because he was simply happier at Glengour, there was a noticeable difference in his face. He had admired the way the curtains changed the room; she could have said the same thing about the way a pleasant expression changed his aspect. His thick brows and dark features would always give him an appearance of sternness, but no longer did he look angry or miserable or whatever word she had used to describe him when he had first come to the inn.

She was glad he had come. With Hamish and Glenna taken up with all the other duties required to run an inn, Elizabeth didn’t know what she would have done without Malcolm’s help.

It was more than that, though. She had come to look forward to his company, and if being near him was also often accompanied by flashes of memory of that dark night on the road to Dunverlockie, she was quick to brush them away.

Never until that night had she considered kissing Malcolm, but suddenly, it had been all she could think of, all she wanted. And, before she’d had the opportunity to consider what it meant for her to embrace a man like Malcolm MacKinnon, she had surrendered to the impulse—and it had felt natural and good.

She had been fighting off the memories of that night ever since, but however hard her mind fought, her heart seemed to fight back with equal force, and what had initially taken her by surprise began to make more sense as she continued spending time in Malcolm’s presence.

Her gaze flitted down to his lips, and she felt an increase in affection for him at the sight of the wound he had sustained while fighting Gregory off. His thumb, too, was still healing from the encounter with Winnie and the

hammer—yet more evidence of the soft heart behind a somewhat rough exterior.

“What?” Malcolm was looking at her with a curious frown.

She blinked, wondering how long she had been looking at him, and turned her head away. “Nothing. Perhaps we should take a respite for a while.”

He continued to look at her for a moment then nodded. “Aye. I need ta change Fergus’s bandages, and I told Hamish I’d help him with a task in the field. Come, Fergus.” He made room for her to pass through the door as Fergus made the effort required to stand then hobbled over to them.

“I can change Fergus’s bandages,” Elizabeth said.

“Nay, ye dinna need ta do that.”

She preceded him and Fergus down the narrow staircase. It seemed a bit less narrow since it had been whitewashed. “I know I do not *need* to. But I would be happy to—it would be a welcome change from what we have been doing.”

They stopped at the base of the stairs, and he gave a nod. “Verra well, then. The bandages and salve are in the kitchen.” He looked down at the bloodhound and put a hand on his head, rubbing it affectionately. “Miss Innes will change yer bandages, Fergus. I hope for yer sake that her hands are softer than her tongue.” He sent a teasing smile at Elizabeth and left through the door before she could retort.

Fergus followed her into the kitchen, sniffing the salve that sat on the large wooden table with a cloth draped over it to keep it from drying out.

“Come,” she said to him. “Let us do this in a place with more fresh air—and less temptation for you.”

She led him out of doors and to the side of the inn, where one of the old tables removed from the coffee room had been set. The day was gray, and the clouds in the distance dark and threatening. Her journey back to Dunverlockie was likely to be a muddy one if she delayed it much longer.

Fergus was an obedient dog—thanks to Malcolm’s training, she supposed—but he took a great curiosity in all of her doings, and she was obliged to nudge his head away from the wounds on several occasions as he attempted to sniff and lick his wounds and the salve.

“You can sniff it as much as you like once I have finished,” she said on what must have been the twentieth instance of pushing him away. She wound the strip of cloth around his leg a final time and tied off the end as gently as

she could, reminded of Malcolm's teasing words about hoping her hands were softer than her tongue. She sighed softly. It was no one's fault but her own that she had the reputation for being too sharp and hard.

"There," she said. "That was not so bad, was it?"

Fergus sniffed the bandage and tried licking it, eliciting a little laugh from Elizabeth. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a piece of oatcake, which he took gladly.

"Your leg is looking much better, you know. You have had good care taken of you." Malcolm had been religious in his tending to Fergus, and his careful attention showed. There was no sign of infection, and the wounds had decreased in size significantly in the past few days.

"What do you say we try walking on it a bit, hm? Up, Fergus."

She helped him to his feet and looked at the newly bandaged one, hovering over the ground.

A slow, soft clap sounded, and she whirled around.

Angus was there, with Gregory and Ivor at his side. He wore an amused expression. "Your dedication to the mongrel is inspiring, Miss Innes. Have you managed to cure him of his weakness yet?"

Fergus hobbled backward with a little whine, and she remembered what Malcolm had said about the dog being afraid of Angus. Anger made her blood simmer under her skin. "Do you always refer to it as a weakness when you have injured an innocent creature?"

Angus let out a scoff. "I assure you that misbegotten animal was *born* weak."

"You must be able to relate very easily, then. And little wonder you insist on distancing yourself from him."

His smile took on more of a sneering quality, and she knew a sense of victory. It was always satisfying to know she had hit Angus in a tender spot.

She couldn't help but press her advantage. "Weak men cannot stand to see weakness in others, for it reminds them of what they most hate about themselves."

He laughed without humor. "A lecture on weakness coming from *you*. How delightfully ironic."

She gave a mock curtsy. "I am pleased to provide you so much entertainment, Angus. How very dull your life at Benleith must be for you to venture here for no reason at all. Tell me, is it your boredom or your cruelty that inspires you to put someone in the pillory for the crime of being young

and in love?”

His jaw hardened. “I am aware of your efforts to save Dugan, Miss Innes.” His lip curled up in a mocking smile again. She wasn’t even certain he *could* smile genuinely. “You cannot resist intervening on behalf of the wounded and weak, can you? Does it make you feel brave?”

“She wasna so brave the other day when I saw her,” said Gregory with a malevolent grin.

Elizabeth’s nostrils flared, and her lips turned up in disgust. “Forgive me, but I have little desire to conform to *your* definition of bravery.” She looked to Angus again. “That is the trouble with surrounding one brute with other brutes. There is always the threat of mutiny.”

“Oh, I have no fear at all of that.”

“No?” She reached into her pocket and pulled out the tartan. “Not even knowing I have this?”

His brows knit as he looked at it through narrowed eyes.

“I assure you,” she said, “I will find its connection to you, and I will prove it was you who ordered the fire here.”

His mouth drew up into a smile. “I wish you every success in that venture. I think the answers you find may surprise you.”

“I highly doubt that. Come, Fergus.”

Fergus stumbled along, leaning against the side of her leg, which hid him somewhat from Angus and his men, who chuckled at the sight. She swallowed the bile that rose in her throat, determined to do everything she could to see the end of Angus MacKinnon and certain that the fabric in her hand held the key to doing it.

Malcolm stopped short on his way to the front door of the inn. Angus, Gregory, and Ivor were approaching it, and they turned at the sound of his footsteps on the dirt.

“Ah, Malcolm,” Angus said. “We stopped by for a drink. Gregory informed me how improved conditions are here, and I could not resist seeing for myself. Come, join us.”

Malcolm’s every muscle was taut. What was Angus’s true intention in coming here? “I canna, I’m afraid. I told Miss Innes I’d help her after I’d finished outside.”

Angus smiled. “I see. Well, perhaps you will do me the honor of joining me for dinner tonight at Benleith. I would like to speak with you.”

Malcolm gave a nod, though a sense of foreboding filled him as the men disappeared into the inn behind Angus. He waited a moment before following after them, heading straight up the stairs and looking into each room for Miss Innes. Did she know of Angus’s presence?

He found her and Fergus in one of the rooms that did not yet have curtains. She sat on the bed with the hound curled up at her feet on the floor. She was staring at the window, but in her hand, she held the piece of tartan.

She looked over at Malcolm, blinking and putting the fabric back in her pocket as she smiled slightly. There was something missing in the smile, though, and Malcolm felt instantaneous fear that she knew. Had Angus told her?

No, he couldn’t have. He wouldn’t have. Angus *wanted* her to fall in love with Malcolm, and telling her the truth about that piece of fabric would

ensure the very opposite of that.

He walked over to the bed and sat down beside her.

“Are ye well?” he asked.

She nodded. “I saw Angus outside.”

“I’m sorry,” Malcolm said, frowning.

Her fingers fiddled in her lap. “The hatred I feel toward him increases every time I see him. It consumes me for hours afterward.”

“‘Tis what ye’re feelin’ now, then. . . .”

“Yes.” She looked up at him. “Why do I feel this way? Why can I not leave such feelings behind, as Lachlan and Christina have? Or set them aside as you do? I do not wish to be controlled or consumed by them, but I cannot seem to help it.”

Malcolm resisted the urge to take her hand, clenching his in a fist. “Ye’re no’ alone, Elizabeth.”

She looked over at him and swallowed.

“Just because I dinna show it doesna mean I dinna feel it. Everythin’ ye’re describin’, I’ve felt for the last ten years of my life, too. It *does* control me; it *does* consume me. And I hate it, same as you. I want nothin’ more than ta be free of it—ta be free of *him*.”

She turned toward him and reached for his hands, looking at him intently. “Surely you have the power to do that, though? You know him as no one else does! You know things that could ruin him, I imagine. Why not use those things against him?”

He glanced down at her hands holding his, feeling the way they warmed him and pleaded with him. His heart raced as he replied, “‘Tis no’ that simple.”

“It *must* be.”

He shook his head. “I’ve done things that could spell my own end as well, and Angus kens it. And, if it came to it, whose word do ye reckon would be trusted more between the two of us?”

She seemed to take his point, for she didn’t respond.

A floorboard creaked, and their heads both snapped up. Miss Innes quickly pulled her hands away.

Angus was in the doorway, looking at them with a strange glint in his eyes. Was it victory? Curiosity? Malcolm couldn’t tell, but he hoped to heaven Angus had only just gotten there. Fergus rose to his feet and shrank toward Malcolm, who put a steadying hand on the dog’s back.

“You *have* done a great deal to the inn,” Angus said, stepping into the room and looking around.

“Yes, well,” Elizabeth said, pushing herself to her feet, “as you well know, there is much to do to make up for the neglect and misuse things suffered under the past laird. My sister and Lachlan have a wonderful vision for Kildonnan and Glengour. They hope to attract a great deal of business and to counteract some of the particularly *pernicious* influences in the area.”

There was no doubt of what she meant, and Malcolm was simultaneously awed and frustrated with her unabashed blows at Angus and the MacKinnons.

“Your sister,” Angus said in a musing voice. “How does she fare these days? She is getting nearer to her confinement.”

“We expect she shall be delivered of a beautiful son or daughter in January.”

Angus smiled in the way so particular to him that somehow conveyed more malice than good humor. “Ah, yes, we must hope that she encounters no complications. How very tragic that would be.”

Malcolm tried to keep his calm. He was used to hearing Angus make threats, used to the constricting feeling he had right now, but it hit him with a new force when it was Elizabeth and her loved ones being threatened.

“A veiled threat from Angus MacKinnon,” she said, her eyes ablaze. “How very unexpected and original. It must be difficult for you, being obliged to resort to force and violence where other men succeed with charm and ease of manner. Is that why you punished Dugan? Out of jealousy? Because he managed to do what you will never achieve in your life—win the heart of a woman?”

Malcolm knew his cousin well enough to see the rage building inside him, and he hurried to stand. “Ye said ye wanted me ta dine with ye tonight, did ye no’? Perhaps we should make our way ta Benleith. The clouds dinna look like they’ll hold much longer.”

Angus’s eyes were fixed on Elizabeth, and Malcolm readied himself to intervene if the laird’s hold on his temper broke, as it sometimes did. If he was forced to choose between protecting Elizabeth and obeying Angus, there was no question in his mind what he would do, but it would put him and his family in a difficult position.

But after a moment, Angus gave an ironic bow of the head and turned from the room.

Malcolm sent a glance at Elizabeth as he followed Angus, and when she met his gaze, he saw there what he had felt numberless times over the past decade when Angus had made threats against his own family: the determination to stop Angus from carrying his threats out, no matter the cost.

OceanofPDF.com

Malcolm did not dine alone with Angus. They were joined by Gregory and Ivor, a fact which made Malcolm grind his teeth together in frustration.

“I thought to ask what sort of progress you have made on things,” Angus said as they began eating. One of his eyebrows rose as he looked at Malcolm. “After my time at Glengour today, though, I think I have a very clear picture.”

Malcolm frowned, unsure what to take from Angus’s words. He had seen Malcolm and Elizabeth holding hands, but what he had made of it, Malcolm didn’t know. Hopefully, he took it as evidence of Malcolm’s progress.

“Gregory was kind enough to tell me the story of that scab on your lip,” Angus continued. “You have taken on the part I gave you to play with inspiring alacrity, have you not?”

Angus should be pleased, but Malcolm sensed that that was not the only emotion behind the laird’s words.

“I’ve tried ta do what I thought best, my laird,” Malcolm said.

Angus gave a nod. “And how close are you to finding your way into Dunverlockie?”

Malcolm thought of the opportunity he’d had to find the documents in question. “Angus, I dinna think what ye’ve asked is possible. Dunverlockie is full of Kincaids now, and more servants than Gordon ever employed. I tried the other day, but I couldna do what ye’d asked without ruinin’ everythin’ ye’ve asked me ta work toward with Miss Innes.”

Angus stared at him, his expression unreadable. He took his time before

responding. “I find this disappointing. Perhaps I was unclear about the prioritization of the tasks given to you. I think we can agree you have accomplished the part of the task relating to Miss Innes—we might even say you have gone above and beyond what was required, if what Gregory and I witnessed is any indication.”

Malcolm ignored the latter half of Angus’s words. “But, Angus, ye wanted her ta fall in love with me so she’d invite me into the castle. She *did* allow me in, and I’m tellin’ ye—‘tis no’ enough.”

Angus shook his head. “That was *part* of the purpose of her falling in love with you.”

Malcolm searched Angus’s eyes. “I dinna understand.”

The ghost of a smile played across Angus’s lips. “It is time for the next step, Malcolm. And I believe it can be accomplished simultaneously with retrieving my charter chest.”

Malcolm braced himself. “What next step?”

Angus held his gaze, his jaw hardening. “I want you to humiliate her.”

Malcolm stilled.

Angus’s eyes remained fixed on him, but he seemed to be looking through Malcolm rather than at him. “I want her to want you more than anything, and then I want her to realize that she was only ever a means to an end.” He sat back in his chair and took a drink from his glass. “Find your way back into Dunverlockie, Malcolm. And this time, do not let yourself be swayed by any concern for what conclusions Miss Innes may draw from your behavior. Indeed, the more shocked she is, the better.”

Malcolm stared at Angus, his vision flickering as he tried to take in the laird’s words. He wanted Malcolm to betray Elizabeth, and he wanted him to make it clear that the betrayal had been planned all along, that her affection was not required.

Agreeing to what Angus had asked of him had never been easy for Malcolm, even before he had harbored any feelings for Elizabeth Innes. But he’d had agreed to it, consoling himself at least with the knowledge that it was in his own and his family’s best interests to lay his hands on the documents at Dunverlockie. He could swallow his pride and obey Angus in his desire to have his documents back, but this? This he couldn’t agree to. It was cruelty of the worst kind—cruelty for the sake of cruelty.

Suddenly Elizabeth’s words hit Malcolm. What *had* ever made him believe Angus would grant him his freedom once he delivered the chest of

documents to him? When had he ever seen Angus relinquish power over a person?

Angus had always managed to find reasons to doubt Malcolm's loyalty to the clan in the past. He would always do so, and Malcolm and his family would always be at the mercy of a man for whom cruelty was a favorite pastime.

He set his jaw and looked at the laird. "Nay, Angus."

Angus's brows contracted briefly. "What?"

Malcolm shook his head. He still needed to tread carefully. It wouldn't do to ignite the laird's anger more than necessary. "I told ye I dinna think it possible for me ta retrieve the chest the way ye want me to."

Angus's gaze was fixed on him, unwavering. "Malcolm, I begin to worry that you have become a victim of your own lie. Is your reluctance a result of your affection for Miss Innes?"

Gregory chuckled, and Malcolm ignored him. He knew Angus, and he knew how Angus used people's attachments against them. How he reacted to such a suggestion was of paramount importance if he wished to keep Elizabeth and his family safe.

He tried not to betray the fear he felt at what Angus might do to Elizabeth if he suspected the truth. "Nay, Angus. I dinna believe I can find a way ta the documents without bein' noticed—or even killed. Either way, 'twould alert the Kincaids ta the presence of the chest, and where would ye be then?"

Angus rocked his glass from side to side so that the liquid swirled. "I see. I had hoped you would be able to find a way to accomplish what I asked of you, Malcolm. I made it clear what the reward would be if you did, did I not?"

"Aye," Malcolm replied through clenched teeth. Angus was only proving him right. At the first opportunity, he was casting doubt upon Malcolm's loyalty and hanging the heaviness of the past over him as an implied threat.

"And I made it clear that this would be an undeniable show of fealty from you, did I not?"

"Aye."

"Perhaps your loyalty to the clan is not what I had thought it was. The fickleness seems to be shared by your family. I am still hearing reports of Dugan and Bridget."

Malcolm tried to calm himself—to hide his fear and anger. "I believe the attachment between them will wane if we dinna provide resistance to it."

“I, on the other hand, prefer not to take such a passive approach, leaving things to chance.” He nodded at Gregory and Ivor, who immediately rose from their seats.

Panic started to bloom inside of Malcolm. Were they going to search out Dugan? He shot up from his seat. Meanwhile, Angus sat forward and began cutting the piece of meat in front of him.

“The problem, as I understand it, is that you need more time in Dunverlockie. A short visit when you are surrounded by Kincaids or hovered around by Miss Innes will not be sufficient. You need an indefinite invitation.”

Gregory and Ivor came around the table toward Malcolm.

“You have not applied yourself to solving this problem, but no matter. I have helped you before, and I will do so again.”

Gregory and Ivor each took one of Malcolm’s arms and pulled him away from the table.

He wrestled somewhat against their holds, but it was no use. He could handle Gregory on his own, but not both Ivor and Gregory—and not when they were eager to please Angus. Gregory in particular would be eager to repay Malcolm for their scuffle at Glengour.

“I am giving you a final chance, Malcolm,” Angus said as he set down his knife, “to prove your loyalty.”

“I’ve done nothin’ but prove my loyalty, Angus,” Malcolm said. “And ‘twould no’ be in the interests of the MacKinnons for me ta poke a sleepin’ beast by doin’ what ye want me ta do.”

Angus didn’t even look up. “It is my job to decide what is in the best interests of this clan. And I am giving you this opportunity to show your worth to us.” He gave another nod as he placed a piece of meat in his mouth.

Gregory released Malcolm’s arm, while Ivor’s hold tightened. Suddenly, Gregory cocked back an arm and thrust it forward. It made contact with Malcolm’s jaw, and he staggered backward, held up by Ivor’s tight grip.

Eyes stinging and jaw throbbing, he put his free hand to his chin.

“I owed ye that one,” Gregory said.

Malcolm looked to Angus, blinking away the water in his eyes that made it difficult to see.

Angus was not even looking at him, though. He was wiping his mouth with a napkin. “Miss Innes has shown her weakness for. . .injured creatures, shall we say? We will take advantage of that knowledge and her regard for

you. With the help of Gregory and Ivor, you will be well on your way to accomplishing your goal, Malcolm. You will quite literally be dropped in Miss Innes's path—close enough to Dunverlockie that it will be the only logical place to take you." He set down his napkin and looked at Malcolm. "Do not disappoint me—do not let me down. If you cannot do that when I am all but handing it to you on a platter, I am afraid I will have to make use of my. . . *knowledge*." He held Malcolm's gaze in a way that made his meaning clear. "You made clear a decade ago what harm you are capable of doing to the MacKinnons. You have yet to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt to what lengths you are willing to go in our service. Benleith's resources are precious, and I cannot allow them to be used by you and your family when your loyalties are in such grave doubt. I suggest you take advantage of this opportunity, for it may be your last."

He gave another nod, and soon, everything turned black.

OceanofPDF.com

Elizabeth slid her stomacher into place with a cursory glance through the window in her bedchamber. It was still early—not even nine o’clock—and the day was gray again. The ground was still wet from last night’s storm. She looked away from the scene, only to swiftly return her gaze, narrowing her eyes and stepping closer to the casement for a better view of the man making for the stables.

It was Hamish.

She hurried out of her room and down the stairs. If Hamish had been speaking with Lachlan, it was likely that Malcolm’s role in the renovations at Glengour would now be known. There would be questions, certainly.

“Hamish,” she said breathlessly as he emerged from the stables on his horse.

He looked surprised to see her, but he pulled up on the reins.

“What are you doing here so early?”

“Lachlan wanted ta speak, and I thought it best ta come before things become more busy at the inn.”

“So, you spoke with him?” she asked.

He nodded, and his expression turned into something like a grimace. “I’m sorry. I couldna keep Malcolm’s part in everythin’ from him. I didna ken ‘twas a secret, in truth.”

Elizabeth brushed it aside. “It was only a matter of time.”

Hamish was studying her face. “Why *did* ye keep it a secret?”

Elizabeth sighed, unsure how to explain, but Hamish smiled wryly. “I think I ken why.”

Elizabeth's eyes widened, and she opened her mouth to respond, but he urged his horse forward and winked at her. "Yer secret's safe with me."

She watched him disappear into the canopy of trees that covered the road toward Glengour, wishing she had been able to find the words to counter what he had implied. But even she didn't truly know what it was she felt for Malcolm MacKinnon, so what would she have said?

She hurried back inside, only to be met with Janet at the foot of the stairs. "The lady and laird wish ta see ye, miss. In the library."

Elizabeth managed a smile. "Thank you. I will go see them. Will you instruct that Caesar be readied? I will be leaving shortly."

Janet nodded obediently and left down the stairs toward the servant quarters and kitchen.

Elizabeth pulled in a deep breath. Explaining why she had chosen not to make Malcolm's assistance known when she had been so strident and vocal in the past against the MacKinnons would not be easy. And concealing the feelings she had developed for him in the meantime?

She exhaled loudly. She would simply have to hope that her sister and brother-in-law were taken up enough with their own concerns not to notice—or even contemplate—such a thing.

When Elizabeth entered the library, Christina and Lachlan were standing in conversation with one another, speaking in hushed voices which ceased when they noticed her entrance.

"Oh dear," Elizabeth said, trying for a light tone. "Were you speaking of the devil?"

They both turned toward her.

"Hamish was just here," Christina said.

"Yes, I noticed him leaving," Elizabeth replied.

"He came to tell us how things are coming along at the inn. And for money to pay those who have helped with the work." She stared at Elizabeth, apparently waiting for a reaction.

"Very good," Elizabeth said. "I am just on my way there, as you can see."

Christina and Lachlan shared a look that seemed to say, *we will have to be more direct*.

"Elizabeth, why didn't you tell us that Hamish had hired on Malcolm MacKinnon?"

Elizabeth shrugged, hoping it came off as nonchalant as she meant it to. "I admit, I was opposed to it at first, but Hamish pointed out how clear you

had been that the rivalry between the families end. And besides, with so many at the shielings and not enough help on the farms, Hamish was rather limited in whom he could call on to help.”

Christina looked skeptical. “I do not blame Hamish for hiring him—indeed, he has been very complimentary of Malcolm’s work—but I confess I am surprised that you did not think to at least inform us of the decision. You have never kept quiet about anything related to the MacKinnons.”

“I did not wish to worry you,” Elizabeth said. “You both have enough on your plates as it stands.”

Lachlan frowned. “But surely ye thought ta tell us when ye were accosted by Gregory MacKinnon?”

Elizabeth opened her mouth and closed it. Malcolm must have informed Hamish of what had happened, for she surely hadn’t done so. “To what end? Nothing came of it.”

Christina scoffed, looking up at Lachlan as if she could find no response.

“Hamish said Gregory was in a bad way after—had ta be helped back inside.”

“Yes, and that it was Malcolm who intervened?” Christina looked more confused than ever.

Elizabeth needed to tread carefully. She was well-aware that, without Malcolm’s help, things would have ended quite differently. But if she sang his praises, it would only elicit more questions she didn’t care to answer. “He did, but what Hamish is perhaps ignorant of is that it was I who put an end to things—with the help of an obliging broomstick.”

Christina looked sincerely troubled at everything being relayed to her, and Elizabeth stepped over to her, setting a hand on her sister’s arm, which rested on top of the small bump that was her abdomen.

“Can you see now why I did not tell you? Between Hamish, Malcolm, and the various brooms lying about Glengour, I assure you I am safe.”

“But why would Malcolm be the one to protect you? And against his own kinsmen?”

Elizabeth didn’t meet her sister’s or brother-in-law’s eyes, choosing instead to keep them trained on Elizabeth’s belly. “We have come to an agreement of sorts—a peace treaty, if you will.” Her mind flashed back to the kiss on the road to Dunverlockie, and she brushed it away with a little skipping of the heart.

Christina took Elizabeth’s hand and pressed it significantly. “I am

grateful to Malcolm for protecting you, much as it surprises me. But, Elizabeth, I must insist you take someone with you when you ride to Glengour from now on. You are safe here, of course, and we have given Hamish instructions to keep a closer watch on you at Glengour, but the distance between worries me, particularly after this incident and given what Hamish said about their frequenting the inn recently. Bannerman can accompany you today.”

Elizabeth pursed her lips. “I cannot think it necessary to deprive you all of Bannerman for a ride of less than two miles.”

“‘Tis no’ a deprivation when it eases our minds,” Lachlan said, putting an arm around Christina’s shoulders. “Besides, Colum is capable of seein’ ta whatever we need while Bannerman is gone.”

Elizabeth sighed. She wasn’t entirely opposed to it, in truth. On her last ride home, she’d had the sense more than once that she was being watched. “Very well. I will allow him to escort me if it will set you both at ease.” They hadn’t yet said anything about who would accompany her on her return journey to Dunverlockie, but she didn’t care to remind them of that, perhaps because the prospect of having Malcolm accompany her both appealed to her and set her heart racing.

That wouldn’t do. Hamish would have to see to the task. Christina and Lachlan had been surprised enough to find that Malcolm had protected Elizabeth. She shuddered to think how they would react to know that she had kissed him—and that she hadn’t stopped thinking about it since.

Bannerman was quick to saddle a horse in order to accompany Elizabeth to Glengour. She sat atop Caesar as she waited for him, looking up at the clouds, which were growing more and more gloomy.

They took Elizabeth's usual route rather than the main road—Bannerman knew better than to say anything about it—and small raindrops had just begun to sprinkle from the sky when the castle passed out of sight and both Kildonnan and the sea came into view in the distance.

Elizabeth's eyes roved over the scene, at the frothy, dark waves which came so near to some of the houses that, from such a distance, it almost looked as though they would wash over the thatched roofs and consume them.

Her eyes settled on something on the grass up ahead, and she squinted. It almost looked like a rock, but as they drew nearer, it became apparent that it was not. She squinted harder, and her eyes suddenly widened. She urged Caesar on, pulling up on the reins as she came upon the figure, slumped on its side—a man, based on the clothing, which was growing damp from the beginnings of rain.

She slid down from her horse as Bannerman slowed and followed suit.

“Who is it?” he asked.

Elizabeth didn't answer, hurrying around the person and crouching down.

She inhaled quickly, her heart stopping at the sight of Malcolm's almost unrecognizable face. It was swollen and bruised, with trails of blood leading from his nose and his lip—in the same place as after his scuffle with Gregory.

“Malcolm!” she breathed.

He moaned softly, and his eyelids fluttered, one struggling more than the other, puffy as it was. She swallowed down the emotion in her throat as Bannerman knelt beside her. Malcolm was still straining to open his eyes, a task made no easier for the raindrops falling from the sky with more and more rapidity.

“We must get him back to the castle,” she said. “And call for the surgeon.”

Bannerman nodded. “D’ye think he can ride?”

Malcolm’s eyes were open slightly, blinking as they tried to focus on Elizabeth. The sight of him made her eyes sting as she shook her head. “Not without help.”

Bannerman grimaced and looked back to the horses, both of which were grazing, entirely oblivious to the gravity of the situation. His square jaw shifted from side to side. “They canna support the weight of two grown men.” He turned his head to Elizabeth, giving her an evaluative look. “If I help him up, can ye ride behind him and try ta hold him? ‘Twill no’ be for long.”

“I can do it,” Elizabeth said decidedly. She *had* to.

Together, they helped Malcolm to his feet. He let out a groan whenever his left arm was touched, forcing Bannerman to get creative in how he assisted him. They made their way to the horses, only to discover the next difficulty. Elizabeth couldn’t climb into the sidesaddle without help, but Bannerman was taken up supporting Malcolm and unable to provide the required assistance.

After an evaluative glance at the saddle on Bannerman’s horse and a quick moment of reflection, Elizabeth went toward it, setting her left foot in the stirrup and hoisting her right leg over the saddle. Her petticoats were full enough to maintain propriety, even if the lower half of her stockings were visible. She shifted back behind the back of the saddle, allowing her feet to slip out of the stirrups, which she wouldn’t be able to reach anymore. They would be obliged to ride very slowly, or she would slip off.

Malcolm seemed somewhat more coherent, but his face was twisted in pain as Bannerman helped him settle into the saddle. Elizabeth kept the reins in her far hand, while she wrapped the other arm around Malcolm’s chest, trying to be conscious of the fact that his injuries could be anywhere.

The effort of getting up into the saddle seemed to have worn him out, and he settled against Elizabeth, his head hanging to the side against his shoulder.

The higher pommel on Bannerman's saddle helped ensure he wouldn't fall forward, but it meant that Elizabeth was required to lean into Malcolm to counter his weight pressing against her in her already precarious position.

Bannerman looked at her with obvious apprehension. "Are ye certain that ___"

"I am certain," she said, gripping the back of the saddle with her free hand. "Let us get on our way."

Bannerman nodded and turned toward Caesar. If the situation had been less somber and urgent, Elizabeth might have been inclined to laugh at the prospect of the large groom heaving himself up onto the sidesaddle, but as it was, she was merely impatient for him to do so, and she urged her horse forward, using her arms as blockades to keep Malcolm from shifting to one side or the other.

Malcolm mumbled something, but his words were unintelligible, couched as they were in groaning.

"Shh," she said softly. "All will be well. You are safe now." She resisted the urge to pull him closer to her, knowing it would only hurt him, and settled for letting the back of his head rest against her cheek and listening for his breathing amidst the intensifying patter of rain on the damp grass and dirt.

The ride back to the castle, while short, was the most uncomfortable one of Elizabeth's life. It was all she could do to stay on the horse and see the path over Malcolm's shoulder, but she kept him upright, and that was all that mattered. He had kept her safe from Gregory; she would keep him safe now.

Her muscles were screaming at her by the time they reached Dunverlockie and Bannerman helped Malcolm down, and once she was finally able to release her hold on him, she found her arms to be trembling from the effort she had exerted.

"Colum!" Bannerman called toward the stables. "Colum!"

Colum soon emerged, running over to them with all the spryness of a ten-year-old boy.

Elizabeth slipped down from Bannerman's horse, and her knees wobbled, nearly giving out. Bannerman reached for her even as he supported Malcolm, but she managed to stay upright on her own and gave a weak, little laugh. "I am not as strong as I had thought."

"See ta the horses," Bannerman kept his eyes on her as he spoke to Colum, who nodded and took both sets of reins, leading the horses to the stables.

Together, Elizabeth and Bannerman helped Malcolm to the front door of the castle, which Bannerman opened with effort. One of the maids was descending the stairs, and her eyes widened at the sight of them, wet with rain and on either side of a man resting most of his weight on them.

“Send for the surgeon,” Elizabeth instructed her.

The maid nodded and hurried down the stairs that led to the servant quarters.

“Where should we take him?” Bannerman asked.

Elizabeth debated for a moment. “To the drawing room.”

Once inside, they laid him on the chaise longue by the fire, which was not lit. Elizabeth took a pillow from the nearby couch to cushion the wooden arm Malcolm’s head rested upon. Every time she saw his face, she felt a rush of emotion. Who would do such a thing? Only one person came to mind, but what would have motivated Angus to do it, she didn’t know. She hurried over to pull the bell then returned to Malcolm’s side.

His hair was wet and his coat, too. “Should we remove his coat?” she asked Bannerman. “I do not wish for him to take a chill.”

Bannerman frowned as he looked at Malcolm. “Perhaps we should wait for the surgeon. If his arms are injured, we might make it worse while attemptin’.”

She swallowed and nodded, feeling helpless at the sight of his bruised and bloody face. Malcolm had always been quieter than most men, but seeing him entirely silent except for a soft moan every now and then upset her deeply.

One of the footmen entered shortly, and Elizabeth instructed that the fire be lit and plenty of candles brought. Dunverlockie was never particularly bright inside, but on a gloomy day like today, it was dim indeed. Instructing Bannerman to stay with Malcolm, Elizabeth followed the footman out of the room and down the stairs. She could at least tend to the injuries on his face with some supplies from the kitchen.

One of the maids worked to prepare a poultice, and Elizabeth gathered a few rags and a bowl of water, which she took back to the drawing room with her. She excused Bannerman to see to his duties. There was nothing he could do now.

Elizabeth used one of the rags to soak up some of the moisture in Malcolm’s dark hair then took a new rag, dipping it in the water and gently wiping the blood and dirt from his face. The rain had already done some of

the work for her, leaving streaks of brown and pink on his cheeks, which were covered with stubble.

His eyelashes were dark and thick like his brows, and they fluttered every now and then as he tried to open them.

“Rest,” she said softly. “The surgeon will be here soon.”

The door opened, and Christina rushed in, followed by Lachlan.

“What happened?” Christina asked as she came over.

Elizabeth hurried up to her feet and shook her head. “I do not know. We found him on our way to Glengour.”

Christina looked at Malcolm. “Who is he?”

Elizabeth stared at her sister, her eyebrows knitting. “It is Malcolm MacKinnon, Christina.”

Christina’s brows shot up. “I hardly recognize him.”

Elizabeth didn’t blame her. She had become much more intimately familiar with Malcolm’s face in the past few weeks or else she might have struggled to recognize him as well.

Malcolm shifted on the couch, letting out a groan as he did so as one of his hands went to his side.

Elizabeth sank back down to her knees beside him and took the hand that rested on the cushion of the chaise longue. “What is it?” Realizing that Christina’s and Lachlan’s gaze were upon her, she released his hand again, careful to do it gently. The extent of his injuries was still unknown.

“Where am I?” he asked in a raspy voice Elizabeth had to strain to hear.

“At Dunverlockie. The surgeon will be here soon, I hope. Where is the pain?”

One edge of his mouth curled up slightly in wry amusement. “Everywhere.”

“What a stupid question,” she said.

The door opened, but it was only Janet, carrying the poultice she had prepared.

“Elizabeth, may I speak with you?” Christina asked.

Elizabeth kept her eyes on Malcolm a moment longer, reluctant to leave him. But Janet was a capable caregiver, and she was waiting for Elizabeth to make room for her.

Elizabeth nodded. “I will be back,” she said to Malcolm.

He gave an infinitesimal nod, and she preceded Christina and Lachlan out of the drawing room. The door shut behind them, and Elizabeth turned to face

her sister, preparing herself for the inevitable questions.

“Who did this?” Christina asked.

Elizabeth lifted her shoulders. “As you saw, he is not in a state to carry on conversation, and I do not wish to do anything which might give him further pain. But I have my guesses.” She felt a surge of anger.

Christina and Lachlan looked at her, waiting for her to go on.

“Who else? I imagine it was Angus or one of his brutes.”

They both frowned and looked at one another. “Why would ye think that?” Lachlan asked.

Elizabeth folded her arms across her chest and primmed her lips. The only way to explain would be to betray more information than she cared to provide them with. “Angus is capable of anything.”

Lachlan was looking at Elizabeth through narrowed eyes. “But even Angus doesn’t do things without reason.”

Elizabeth didn’t respond.

“Elizabeth,” Christina said in a wary voice, “you know more than you are letting on. What have you involved yourself in? There is clearly something between you and Malcolm MacKinnon—more than just a peace treaty.”

Elizabeth scoffed, but her heartbeat accelerated. Had she and Malcolm not agreed that hiding her feelings was not a strength she possessed? “First, you warn me to dampen my dislike for the MacKinnons, and now you are accusing me of—what?”

Christina opened her mouth to respond, but Lachlan put up a hand to request silence. “If ye’re right and Angus is responsible, Malcolm MacKinnon canna stay here.”

Elizabeth stared. “What? Of course he *must* stay here. Where else should he go? And in such a state?”

“I dinna ken,” Lachlan replied, a heavy frown on his brow, “but I wish for no trouble with Angus.”

Elizabeth’s jaw fell open, and she blinked. “You would turn Malcolm out?”

“The surgeon will see ta him, but then he must leave.”

Elizabeth looked at Christina, who bit her lip and looked up at Lachlan. “Surely we will not force him to leave if he cannot do so without further injury. We cannot forget the aid that he rendered Elizabeth. I think we owe him something.”

Lachlan scrubbed his jaw with a hand. “I dinna trust him.”

Elizabeth suppressed another scoff. “Just what do you think he could possibly do? He cannot even speak!”

Lachlan’s frown deepened. “Have ye forgotten everythin’ that happened ta yer sister? He is Angus’s righthand man.”

“And not by choice, from what I understand!”

“From what he *wants* ye ta understand.”

Elizabeth bristled. “You think I would encourage you to keep him here if I had any fear at all of what he might do to Christina? You know me better than that, surely. Have a little courage, Lachlan. You want peace between you and the MacKinnons, but how high a price are you willing to pay for it? Does your humanity not require something of you in this situation?”

Lachlan’s gaze went to the drawing room door. Elizabeth could see the battle in his eyes—the need to protect Christina and the baby at war with his desire to help someone in need.

“Verra well,” he said with a tight jaw. “He can stay here till he’s mended enough ta leave. *But*”—he put up a finger to stop Elizabeth’s response—“he will stay belowstairs.” He looked down at Christina. “I dinna want him anywhere near ye.”

There was a clacking—the sound of the large knocker on the front door.

“That will be the surgeon,” said Elizabeth. The thought of Malcolm in the servant quarters was ridiculous to her when there were empty bedchambers upstairs, but she knew better than to press her point. Lachlan was an eminently reasonable man in her experience—except when it came to protecting his wife and unborn child.

She could hardly blame him. She felt the same protectiveness, and both of them had reason for it. But Malcolm wasn’t a threat to Christina. Elizabeth felt certain of that.

Malcolm gritted his teeth as the maid kneeling by his side adjusted the bandaged covering the poultice on his eye. As he thought back on the last few hours—or however long it had been—he found that his memories jumped around, jolting from one moment to the next without him being able to pinpoint how he had arrived at one point from the last. Gregory’s fist before it made contact with his face, the key being stuffed into his pocket, lying on splintering wood and crying out with each jolt of the cart he was in, the smell of dirt and grass as the first few drops of rain fell on his face, the scent of violets and the feel of Elizabeth’s arms around him as she whispered to him that he was safe.

His body ached all over, and he had stopped trying to open his left eye, for it pained him to make the attempt, and now that it was bandaged, he couldn’t see out of it at all. At first, he had refrained from speaking because he was simply too exhausted and the words came out as nothing more than moans. Once they had reached Dunverlockie, though, keeping silent had been more of a choice—a choice because he didn’t know what to say.

How could he explain what had happened? To speak was to make a choice about whose well-being to prioritize—Elizabeth’s or his family’s—and it was not a decision he was prepared to make just yet. His brain was too foggy.

The door opened, and a bustle of footsteps sounded.

The maid stepped away, and Malcolm blinked his uninjured eye as the form of Elizabeth hovered over him.

“Mr. Kerr is here to see you, Malcolm,” she said. “Once he has done so,

we will help you to a bed where you can rest and eat.”

The surgeon’s poking and prodding served to reanimate Malcom somewhat. Mr. Kerr removed the bandage and wiped away some of the fresh poultice to better inspect Malcolm’s eye, frowning heavily as he did so. He looked particularly stern as he examined Malcolm’s side.

“Nothin’ life-threatening,” the surgeon said, “but if ye want ta heal, ye’ll keep ta yer bed for the next few days. Ye’ve broken a couple o’ ribs, and I dinna like the look of that wound.” He nodded to indicate Malcolm’s side.

Malcolm winced slightly as he remembered Gregory’s boot making contact with the same spot a number of times.

“I’ll leave one or two things ta help with the pain and the bruisin’, and if whoever made this”—he gestured to the poultice—“can make a great deal more of it, ‘twill be best ta put some on yer injuries three or four times a day for an hour or so at a time.”

The surgeon left him shortly, and it was silent for a time in the drawing room. The respite was welcome for Malcolm. Questions would be forthcoming, and Elizabeth had always been too perceptive to be easily deceived. If he had been obliged to win over her affections by pretending to a regard for her he didn’t feel, she would have seen through him with facility, he imagined. It was only because his feelings for her were sincere that she had warmed to him at all.

Elizabeth entered presently, followed by Lachlan and Christina Kincaid. It was the first time Malcolm had seen either of them since the trial. Marriage to Lachlan clearly agreed with Christina much more than marriage to Gordon had—and no wonder. On the occasions where he had seen her while Gordon was still alive, Malcolm had worried for her. She had seemed to withdraw after the wedding, growing thinner and paler, reminding him of his own mother before his father’s death. Not so, now. She looked healthy.

“Lachlan and I will be helping you to a bed,” Elizabeth said. She stood away from the chaise longue, looking somewhat stiff, her hands clasped at her waist.

Lachlan stepped forward and away from his wife. “Nay. I can do it meself, Elizabeth. Perhaps ye can go tell Cook what ta make for him in the meantime.”

Elizabeth waited a moment then nodded, but her lips were pressed together as though she was suppressing a different response. She glanced at Malcolm with a troubled gaze then left the room.

Lachlan came over to help Malcolm up and, despite being a man obviously built for the war he had served in, he was slow and steady in his support, minimizing Malcolm's pain, which was still significant enough to escape in the form of a few vocalizations that simply would not be suppressed.

Carefully, and with Malcolm's arm draped over Lachlan's shoulder, the two of them made their way to the staircase. But instead of taking the ones that led to the family bedchambers, Lachlan guided him down the set that led to the servant quarters.

Surprise and relief filled Malcolm, even in the midst of his pain. He still couldn't fathom trying to make his way to the door at the end of the corridor on his own, much less carrying the chest away from it, but he would have to find a way if he wanted to save himself and his family. There was no other option. If he failed, Angus had assured him his past would be made known and his family left to suffer.

"Ye'll be stayin' in here," Lachlan said as they reached one of various doors in the dark corridor they walked. It was not the corridor with the door Malcolm cared about—at least not from what he could tell in the dim light and with one eye bandaged.

Lachlan helped him to the small, wooden bed inside the equally small room. There was a small window near the ceiling on the far wall, but even the little light it let through was hindered by the thick iron bars that covered it.

"Thank ye," Malcolm said with effort as he tried to sit. His ribs protested vehemently, and he had to lean back to appease them once he was settled on the bed.

Lachlan leaned forward and moved the pillow so that Malcolm could rest his back against the wall more comfortably. "Ye owe yer thanks ta my sister-in-law, no' ta me. 'Tis she who insisted we keep ye here." He stepped back from the bed and folded his arms across his chest. "I dinna trust ye, Malcolm. 'Tis why ye'll stay down here while ye recover a bit. And 'tis why I intend ta lock this room. I'll no' turn away a man in need, but neither will I let him roam about my home when he's given me no reason ta trust him."

Malcolm met Lachlan's gaze, aware that he must look a spectacle. He had yet to see a mirror, but given how strange his face felt—tight and sore—and that he had little memory of last night, he could only imagine the image he presented. "I understand." His voice came out raspy and weak, and he cleared his throat.

He didn't like to deceive a man like Lachlan Kincaid—everything about him commanded respect. In another life, Malcolm thought they might have been friends, but that option was not open to him now. By some means as yet unknown to him, Malcolm had to find a way to Angus's chest—to roam about the house, as Lachlan had said.

“I wish no ill on the MacKinnons,” Lachlan said. “I only wish ta be left in peace. But I give ye my word, if ye try ta hurt my wife or Elizabeth, the injuries ye now have willna compare ta what I'll do ta ye.”

Malcolm shook his head. Such an idea was completely opposed to the truth of Malcolm's wishes and feelings. “I've no wish ta hurt either of them,” he rasped. “I swear it.”

Lachlan kept his eyes on him for a moment longer then nodded. “I'll see that yer food is brought—and a bell ye can ring if ye need anythin'.” And then he left, locking the door behind him.

Malcolm pushed out a painful breath and let his head fall back slowly against the wall behind him. Much as he disliked it, there was really no choice to make between crossing Lachlan Kincaid or Angus MacKinnon. Kincaid was a man bound by honor, and Malcolm believed him when he said he would not sit idly by while his wife or sister-in-law were put in danger. But at least Malcolm could trust his revenge would be limited—he needn't fear that his family would be hurt.

Not so with Angus.

Malcolm couldn't see his path clearly. He needed the chest. He would far rather *not* hand it over to Angus, for the contents gave him much of his power back—power he would willingly wield over people to ensure their compliance with his will, just as he was doing now to Malcolm. Malcolm might have been able to take the one document he himself wanted, leaving the others at Dunverlockie, but as long as the copy existed, he was still in Angus's power. The only chance of destroying both copies was to cede the charter chest, with all of its contents, to Angus.

But how could he do so without help? He was fairly certain that Gregory had caused him more injury than Angus had intended, for Malcolm could vaguely remember Ivor imploring him to stop as he kicked Malcolm on the ground, again and again. Likely, Angus would be angry to know how compromised Malcolm's strength was, but Ivor and Gregory would never admit to it. They would let Malcolm take the blame if he failed at his task.

The only person sympathetic to him in this castle was Elizabeth, but that

sympathy would crumble once she knew the truth about him: he was a murderer of his own flesh and blood and had nearly killed both her and her sister. She would not help him.

He was on his own.

OceanofPDF.com

Elizabeth took advantage of Christina's attention being occupied by her conversation with one of the servants to slip out of the room as quietly as possible.

She let out a sigh of aggravation after closing the door behind her. She wasn't fooled by all of Christina's efforts to keep her occupied, writing letters to their siblings and helping her make further plans for Glengour. Christina was trying to keep Elizabeth from Malcolm, and she had managed to do so for many hours since Elizabeth knew that any demand on her part that she be allowed to see him would only reinforce her sister's suspicions. Lachlan had reassured her that the invalid was being tended to with care.

She took the servant staircase all the way down to the servant quarters. She didn't know which room Lachlan had taken Malcolm to, but it didn't take long to discover, as she intercepted Janet holding a bowl of some of the poultice. Strips of fabric hung over her arm, making it clear that she was on her way to tend to him.

"I can take that, Janet," Elizabeth said, putting out her hands for the bowl.

Janet looked at her strangely for a moment before ceding possession of it.

"Which room is he in?" Elizabeth asked.

"That one there, miss," the maid said with a nod at a door as she transferred the fabric to Elizabeth's arm. "But you'll need the key."

Elizabeth stared as the maid reached into her pocket and pulled out a small, iron key, handing it to her with a smile. Elizabeth recognized it, for it was distinctive, with an ornate, rusted handle. She had seen it on the key ring Lachlan kept in his room.

“The dinner tray is still there,” Janet said hesitantly. “I will—”

“I will retrieve it,” Elizabeth managed to say through a tight jaw. Lachlan was keeping Malcolm locked inside the room like a common criminal rather than the injured man he was.

Malcolm was reclined on the bed, his eyes closed and his head resting against the stone wall behind him, but he turned his head slowly upon her entrance.

Elizabeth’s lips pinched together. The bruising around his left eye had only worsened since she last saw him.

The room was small and sparsely furnished, much like the rooms at Glengour had been. It was lit by two candles, which illuminated a small desk in the corner, the discarded dinner tray on top, an inkwell, and a quill. There was no chair nor any paper.

Malcolm began to turn, as if he meant to get up.

“No, no,” she said, setting the bowl down on the narrow bedside table and the fabric beside it. “Stay as you are. I did not come to disturb your rest, only to see that you are taken care of, which”—she looked to the rusty metal key in her hand—“I do not see that you are.”

“I’m well enough.”

“Are you our guest or our prisoner? Lachlan insisted you be brought to the servant quarters, but I did not know he meant to keep you locked in a room. I believe this to be the *only* room that even possesses a lock in the servant quarters.”

“I canna blame him,” Malcolm said. “What reason does he have ta trust me?”

Elizabeth blew out a breath of disbelief. “The fact that you are incapacitated is a good start, I rather think.”

Malcolm chuckled a bit, which quickly turned into wincing as he put a hand to his injured side.

Elizabeth clenched her teeth and moved to the bed, sitting down slowly. The mattress was thin, and there was barely room for her. Malcolm deserved better than this.

He took in a breath and laid back again. “Trust is when ye ken a person willna betray ye even if they *can*, no’ simply because they canna.”

“I suppose you are right, but this still seems entirely unnecessary.”

He shifted again, and the frown lines so often found on his brow wrinkled differently, betraying just how much pain he was in.

She reached for the bowl. "I brought more poultice." She looked at the protuberance above his eye and the colorful reds and purples around it. "It seems you could use more."

He gave a half-smile. "Look that attractive, do I?"

She managed a smile. While the injuries pained her to look at, they only drew her heart closer to him. She wanted to hold him, and only the knowledge that it would cause him pain kept her from doing so. "You look irresistible," she said, "which will simply not do. And that is why I brought this." She scooped a spoonful of the green, herb-filled cataplasm from the bowl.

He frowned. "Ye've done enough, Elizabeth, just campaignin' for me ta stay here. Ye dinna need ta—"

"Nonsense." She scooted closer. "By the time I am done with you, you will look as though you just emerged from Loch Morar, and I can imagine nothing better to do with my time. You will need to lay your head back more than that, though."

He sighed and obeyed.

She emptied some of the poultice paste back into the bowl, leaving a small amount on the spoon, which she brought to his eye.

In the moment before he closed both eyes fully, she had a view of just how red the injured one was. The white of his eye was completely covered in a mask of angry veins. Her lips pinched together, and she used her free hand to gently distribute the concoction across the worst of the bruising and inflammation.

"Malcolm," she said in a troubled voice, "what happened?"

His brows contracted more, and his lips turned down at the sides, drawing Elizabeth's eye to the injury at the side of his mouth, which was much larger now than it had been after his clash with Gregory at Glengour.

He didn't respond, and she was conscious of some of the frustration and hurt she had previously felt at his reticence to be fully open with her. "This is Angus's doing, isn't it?"

"'Twas Gregory and Ivor," Malcolm said.

Elizabeth's hand paused on its way back to the bowl. "As retaliation for what happened at the inn?"

"Nay," he hurried to say. "Well, I do think 'twas in Gregory's mind when he did it, but. . . ."

"It was Angus who gave the orders," Elizabeth said.

“Aye.”

“But why?”

He grimaced, seeming to struggle before answering. “I refused ta do somethin’ he wished for me ta do.”

She stared at him, but he refused to meet her gaze. He had stood up to Angus, just as she had told him to do. And here was the result.

She felt sick inside, and even more so at his reluctance to provide more detail. These were not the emotions she had thought to feel upon discovering Malcolm had stood up to Angus. Any pleasure she felt was drowned by the sight of his pain and the knowledge that she held some responsibility for his injuries.

Why would he not explain things to her? Was he protecting Angus? That seemed unlikely. But what, then?

“And you will not explain to me what it was you refused to do?”

“If ‘twas only my own safety at risk, I think I could find the courage ta tell ye everythin’. But”—his lips turned down in a frown—“I canna. I fear too greatly for my family, especially now, when I’m no’ in a state ta protect them.” He swallowed and turned his head away, and Elizabeth’s heart ached as she pushed away her selfish need to know everything.

She put a hand to his cheek, guiding it back to face her. “I would never wish for you to endanger your family, Malcolm.” His frown didn’t disappear, and she felt more guilt. She had not meant for her visit to weigh him down as it seemed to be doing.

She set the spoon back in the bowl. “Mr. Kerr said you received severe injuries to your ribs, which should also be poulticed.”

He opened his uninjured eye, and Elizabeth couldn’t stop a rueful smile at the picture he presented. “Come,” she said. “Let us see what we can do for these ribs.”

He frowned and pulled up his shirt, wincing.

Elizabeth sucked in a breath as the shirt came up enough to reveal the injury. His side was every bit as bad as his eye and worse. The purples and blues were punctuated by places where the skin had broken, revealing crimson wounds and dark red scabs just beginning to form.

She shut her eyes. “Angus is a monster.”

“‘Twas no’ Angus.”

“You defend him? Even now? Just because it was not his hands that caused this?” She took a scoop of paste from the bowl. “A monster who

employs other monsters to do his bidding is the worst kind.” It was little wonder Malcolm worried for his family with such cruelty as he had seen. She only wished she understood *why* the threat hung over them at all. She had always assumed that at least Angus’s closest kinsmen would be protected from his cruelty. She had clearly been wrong.

As gently as she could, she spread the poultice over the large area of swelling and bruising, watching out of the corner of her eye as Malcolm’s face screwed up in pain. She returned to the bowl for more paste, and Malcolm let his head fall back with a breath of relief at the respite. Once she had finished, she reached for the fabric the maid had provided, aware that Malcolm’s gaze was upon her.

“I ken what it means that ye’ve brought me here, Elizabeth. ‘Tis no small thing ye’ve done.”

She untangled the fabric strips. “Nonsense.”

He caught her hand with his, gently holding it, and her gaze flew to his. “Nay. I ken yer sister and brother-in-law are worried what trouble ‘twill cause, and I dinna blame them. But I want ye ta ken how grateful I am.”

“Consider it repayment for helping me evade Gregory at the inn.” She didn’t want him to know that she, too, worried what might come of her decision to bring him to Dunverlockie, what the repercussions might be from taking in someone in Angus’s black books.

But she could never have left Malcolm as he was. Especially not when her own persistent words encouraging him to stand up to Angus were partially to blame for the state he found himself in.

“I dinna want repayment,” he said, frowning.

She raised her brows. “Never?”

“Nay.”

“Not for anything?”

He frowned at her, clearly not understanding.

She dipped a finger in the bowl and swiped it gently, methodically onto his uninjured cheek.

He let out an exasperated breath. “What was that for?”

She shrugged. “I just wanted to see if what you said was true.”

He raised a finger to his cheek only to wince and put a hand to his side, and Elizabeth watched with guilt.

He pulled his hand away from his side, still cringing. Suddenly, though, he made a quick movement, swiping a finger across her forehead, leaving a

trail of poultice there.

Her jaw dropped open, and she stared at him, blinking.

“I guess it depends on the situation,” he said, gaze fixed on the line of paste across her forehead, and a soft chuckle passed through his lips. He winced again, this time in earnest, and Elizabeth set a hand on his back as he hunched over.

“I should not be making you laugh,” she said. “It is selfish of me. Only, I do not like to see you this way, in so much pain.”

He came up gradually, taking in a slow breath. “Seein’ ye smile and laugh yerself is a price worth payin’.”

She held his gaze. It was getting more and more difficult to find a balance with Malcolm. They had been clear with one another that anything more than friendship was not an option, that there could be no repetition of what had happened between them before. But the more Elizabeth told herself such things, the more her heart revolted.

She wanted more. She wanted to be his and for him to be hers.

How had she managed to fall in love with the one person she had vowed she would never let so much as touch her?

That it was indeed love she felt for him settled upon her suddenly and emphatically. Against all odds, her heart had chosen the man before her. Not so long ago, he was everything she hated, and now she wanted nothing more than to spend every moment with him, even if it was in this cold, dark room.

“I should leave you to rest,” she said suddenly, rising from the bed and taking the bowl with her.

She saw the bit of regret in Malcolm’s eyes. Did he feel the same thing she did? Did he wish for more than what they had promised they would allow themselves? Did he sometimes wonder if perhaps all their reasons for staying apart were inconsequential when compared with the love they might share?

She paused after opening the door. The key was in her pocket, but it felt wrong to lock him in the room. It was one thing for Lachlan to do it and quite another thing to turn the key herself.

“Shall I lock you in?”

“I think ye’d better,” he said. “I dinna wish ta cause any problems. Besides”—he reached for a small bell Elizabeth hadn’t noticed before, cringing as he did it—“I need only ring this wee bell if I need anythin’.”

“Living like a king, in fact,” she said dryly.

“Aye.”

“Somehow I doubt the king is locked in his bedchamber—or that his bedchamber is this size. Perhaps I will conspire to free you—let you stretch your legs a bit.”

“Nay, lass. I dinna wish ta cause trouble between ye and Lachlan.”

“If he did not know, though. . . .” She gave a teasing smile, leaving the sentence unfinished.

He set the bell down and his brow furrowed as he looked up at her. “Would ye mind sendin’ a note ta my mother in the mornin’? I imagine she’ll assume I’ve decided ta spend the night at Glengour or Benleith, but. . . I dinna wish for her ta worry.”

She raised a brow. “To worry, for instance, that you had been beaten within an inch of your life and imprisoned in a dungeon?”

“Aye, I suppose so. But she’ll no’ worry if she kens I’m with you. She took a likin’ ta ye.”

Elizabeth searched his face. “She did?”

“Aye. Said ye were verra patient with Winnie—no’ an easy task.”

Elizabeth couldn’t stop a smile as she remembered Winifred’s criticisms of her work. “She made what might have been a dull task much more entertaining. I will gladly write to your mother, though, first thing in the morning, if that is what you wish.”

He nodded. “Thank ye.”

She forced herself to turn away rather than give into the desire she felt to stay with him. Shutting the door behind her, she set the key in the lock and reluctantly turned it until it clicked.

Malcolm struggled to get the rest Elizabeth had intended for him when she left the room.

Beyond the discomfort he felt with the hard bed pressing against his injuries, his mind wouldn't rest long enough for him to sleep. He was locked in a room at Dunverlockie, within reach of his freedom but without the means to get to the chest that held it. And, even if he were able, what guarantee did he have that Angus would surrender the copy of the document to him? His efforts to find it at Benleith had been a failure.

In no scenario his mind could concoct could he find a way to resolve everything satisfactorily. That was not new, of course. Nothing about his life had been satisfactory for many years now. But somehow, the appearance of Elizabeth on the scene had intensified his awareness of the gap between what life might have been and what it was.

Malcolm couldn't be certain how much time had passed since Elizabeth's departure when footsteps sounded outside the door followed by the grating of a key in the lock. His heart couldn't help but hope it was her again, but after the lock clicked, there was silence for a moment then footsteps drawing father away.

He frowned. Had someone just begun to unlock the door and then changed their mind? Or. . . .

He suppressed a groan as he pushed his legs from the bed and then to the floor. His side throbbed as he raised himself to his feet and took the required steps to the door, limping on one leg that resisted any weight. A small paper at the base of the door caught his eye, and he bent slowly at the knees to pick

it up rather than bowing at the waist, where most of his pain was concentrated.

He opened the folded paper and brought it closer to his face to read what was written there.

Your Majesty tonight. Prisoner again in the morning.

A little smile stole across his swollen lips, and he lifted the latch, pulling the door open, which it did without protest. He peered into the corridor, but, dark as it was, he saw no one.

His heart beat more quickly as he considered the opportunity before him. He could hardly walk, though. How in the world would he manage to find his way to the chest and carry it all the way back to this room? He might be able to manage the feat, but there was also a distinct possibility he would collapse in the corridor. The surgeon had warned him to rest if he wished for his injuries to heal.

Perhaps more importantly, how could he use the freedom Elizabeth had given him to do such a thing? She was giving him back a piece of his dignity, and the display of trust was not something to be used lightly.

He had done nothing at all to deserve it, either. Whatever his feelings had become after knowing her better, he had started out his acquaintance with her with the intention of manipulating her.

He suppressed the desire to cry out with frustration. Why was he letting the need for Elizabeth's approval and affection—something that could never *truly* exist—get in the way of saving his family? They were from different worlds, and while Elizabeth strived to give the appearance of being a shrew, her sharp tongue masked a soft heart. Malcolm, on the other hand, was every bit the monster Elizabeth had first thought him. How could she ever love the monster the piece of tartan cloth belonged to?

He clenched his jaw and stepped out into the corridor, keeping a hand to his side to brace himself, but even that contact throbbed. With halting steps, he made his way down the corridor, pausing where it intersected with another. He had no idea how small or vast the underbelly of Dunverlockie was, so when he recognized the corridor he was searching for, he breathed a sigh of relief.

He pulled back and out of sight as a maid and a footman came into view. They were laughing softly, and when Malcolm ventured to peek around the stone wall, the footman wrapped an arm around the maid. They both held candles in one hand, which lit them from behind, forming a silhouette—two

figures molding into one as their lips came together. The sight produced a pang in Malcolm which had nothing to do with his injuries. He could still remember how it had felt to hold Elizabeth, to be pulled close by her. It had haunted his dreams ever since and intruded on his thoughts when they were together.

The maid and footman broke apart, but their noses still touched for a moment before they turned away from one another and into their respective rooms, their hands the last things to reluctantly break apart.

Malcolm dismissed the image from his mind and waited for any sign of other servants still going about their duties. It must have been late, though, for the corridor was quiet except for the muted noises of servants readying themselves for bed. One by one, the soft candlelight that glowed beneath a few of the doors disappeared, leaving the corridor an abyss of darkness.

Malcolm waited for his uncovered eye to adjust to the darkness as much as it could and then, with a hand on each wall to guide him, walked as quietly and smoothly as he could to the door at the end. He pulled the key from his pocket and set it in the lock. It resisted his efforts, but with a bit of fiddling, it finally gave way. He cringed as he pushed the door open quickly. A door so long in disuse was bound to produce an ear-splitting creaking if given the chance.

Malcolm had thought the corridor dark, but the room he peered into was darker still. He hesitated for a moment then stretched out one leg, sweeping it around the area in front of him and clenching his teeth as his ribs protested against the gesture. In such a manner, he slowly made his way into the small, damp room. It seemed to be largely empty, for his foot met nothing but the stones in the floor and walls.

Finally, his boot hit something solid. He bent slowly at the knees, bracing himself with one hand on the wall, while the other explored the object. His fingers met with smooth wood then cold metal—a lock.

He swore softly. This was the charter chest. The chest that contained everything of importance to Angus—titles, incriminating correspondence, decrees, marriage contracts, and Malcolm's own admission to the crime he had committed so many years ago. In this chest was the means to destroy the lives of many people.

And it was locked.

Malcolm reached out his other arm, trying to ignore the way his ribs protested as he attempted to slip his fingers under the bottom of the chest to

pick it up. He lifted the bottom, but it was much heavier than he had anticipated, and an involuntary groan of pain escaped him.

He grasped at his side as tears of agony sprang to his eyes, burning more than usual as the salt entered the open wound at the side of his injured eye. There was no way on earth he would be able to carry the chest all the way back to his room—or even pick it up. The only other option was to try to move it with his foot, making enough noise to rouse the servants and perhaps those sleeping two floors above as well.

Tears of pain became tears of frustration, and he gave a kick at the chest then turned away and made the long and painful retreat to his room.

Lachlan's copy of the key bumped against her leg with each step Elizabeth took toward Malcolm's door. So far, Lachlan had not seemed to notice it missing from the ring since she had taken it the night before.

The decision to take the key and unlock Malcolm's door had been somewhat impulsive—a desire to let him know that he was not alone in the castle, that she did not think of him as a criminal. She was his ally, as much as she could be. His injury had brought home to her how fragile life was and how close he had likely come to losing his. She was beginning to think that the regret of stifling her affection for him would be more painful than facing whatever resistance others provided to it.

Unlocking the door had been her way of telling Malcolm that she was prepared to face those consequences. She couldn't tell, though, whether *he* was.

When she had sat down to write a letter to his mother earlier, she had stared at the blank paper for some time, until the ink dripped onto it from the quill she held. She had replaced the quill in its holder, set the cap on the ink well, and stood.

A letter to Malcolm's mother might ease her worry over him, but Elizabeth sensed it would do little to ease *his* concern for her or his siblings. For reasons she didn't fully understand, he feared for them—feared what Angus would do to them.

Malcolm was one of the few people with the power and the knowledge to stop his cousin, but he would never feel he could do so when his family's safety was at risk. And while it frustrated Elizabeth that he would not take her

into his confidence, her admiration and love for him couldn't help but grow to see how he treasured his family.

She couldn't force him to tell her why he harbored such a fear, but could she not help allay it somehow?

She knocked softly, but there was no answer. Unease crept into her, making her stomach feel tight. Had he used his freedom to leave?

She lifted the latch and pushed the door open, stilling. Malcolm was in bed, fast asleep. She sucked in a breath at the sight of his marred face. She had seen it just last night, but the bruising had changed even since then, providing a forceful reminder of just how high the stakes were and what Angus was willing to do to those nearest to him if given reason, whatever that reason was.

She stayed in place, watching Malcolm's even breathing, his smooth brow, free of the brooding frown that had so often been there in the past. At least he wasn't in pain for the time being. But when he woke, all his cares would return. She hoped to do something, at least, to allay them.

She pulled the door closed and turned the key in the lock, listening for a moment for any sign that the noise had wakened him, but it remained silent.

Two hours later, Elizabeth stood in one of the rooms at Glengour with Flora MacKinnon, Malcolm's mother. Fergus's initial excitement at seeing her had abated enough that he lay on the floor by the fireplace. His injured leg was still wrapped—Glenna had been seeing to him in the absence of Elizabeth and Malcolm—but he had begun to set a bit of weight on it since Elizabeth had last seen him.

"I believe you will be the first guests to sleep in this room," Elizabeth said to Mrs. MacKinnon, adjusting one of the curtains on the window.

With the bright, patterned fabric on the windows and fresh linens on the bed, it was a cheery space, if somewhat smaller than Elizabeth could have hoped. There was no remaining evidence at all that the floors had been charred and the walls covered in ash just a few short weeks ago.

A flash of memory came to her—emerging from the bedchamber beside this one to the sight of smoke and flames coming from Christina's room. Elizabeth had never felt so frantic in her life, so prepared to do anything to

save her sister from harm, even if it meant running through fire herself to do so.

She blinked, brushing away the unpleasant memory. Christina was safe at Dunverlockie, and Hamish would ensure Malcolm's family was also kept safe at the inn. Angus wouldn't dare set fire to Glengour twice in the space of three months.

"I canna feel right about it, Miss Innes," Mrs. MacKinnon said.

Elizabeth turned toward her. In the woman's worried brow, Elizabeth could easily see traces of her son. She had demurred when Elizabeth first suggested the family stay at the inn, reluctant to trouble them or deprive other guests of a place to sleep. Her protests had weakened when Elizabeth made it clear that they would in fact be doing a service by agreeing to provide an evaluation of Glengour's new and improved accommodations.

Only then had Mrs. MacKinnon's children climbed into the wagon Bannerman had driven Elizabeth in—the only means of transportation capable of carrying them all.

"Your son will rest—and heal—much easier, knowing you are safe here on Kincaid lands."

Mrs. MacKinnon offered a grateful smile, taking Elizabeth's hands in hers. "Thank ye for takin' care of him. I ken he's in good hands with ye—I've seen the way he's changed since spendin' time here." She looked around the room then back to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth was fairly certain she was blushing, which embarrassed her every bit as much as Mrs. MacKinnon's words. She had not been implying that Elizabeth's influence was responsible for what she had seen, but Elizabeth's heart couldn't help but interpret it that way. "He does good work," she said, "and I do think he enjoys it."

"Enjoys the work and the company," Mrs. MacKinnon replied, patting Elizabeth's hand. "Over the last few weeks, I've noticed pieces of the lad he used to be—somethin' I never thought ta see again."

"What was he like as a boy?" Elizabeth asked, too curious to resist. She simply couldn't imagine Malcolm as a child. "Has he always worn such a frown?"

A little sad smile crossed Mrs. MacKinnon's face, and she shook her head. "Nay. He had the most charmin' wee smile I've ever seen. Full of life and spirit, he was."

Elizabeth waited, hoping she would go on and explain what had changed

him into the brooding man Elizabeth knew.

But Mrs. MacKinnon only sighed, looking more tired than ever.

“Do you have everything you need?” Elizabeth changed the subject before she surrendered to the desire to pursue it further. If Malcolm had wanted her to know, he would have told her, and it felt wrong to try to wrestle the information from his mother. “You needn’t hesitate to ask Glenna or Hamish if you discover anything is amiss.”

Mrs. MacKinnon shook her head. “‘Tis more than we have at home. God bless ye, Miss Innes.”

For some reason, Elizabeth felt her eyes stinging, and she blinked hurriedly. “Would you mind if I took Fergus with me? I thought Malcolm might like his company.”

“Och, what a bonnie idea,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “‘Twould mean the world ta Malcolm. He has a special love for that dog.”

“Are you certain? I wouldn’t wish to deprive you of his company, of course.”

She waved a hand. “I’ll no’ be alone. Winnie will climb inta bed with me before the clock strikes midnight.” She gave a rueful smile. “She’s still my wee bairn, and I canna refuse her anythin’.”

“I am not sure how *anyone* could refuse her. She is very persuasive. Come along, Fergus.”

The hound hurried up from his position on the floor, ambling over to her.

“I shall come see you soon,” Elizabeth said, “with good news of Malcolm, I am sure.”

When Malcolm woke in the morning, the muscles in his stomach ached fiercely. He could open his left eye a bit more than the day before, but there was pressure all around it, and the skin was tight and sore to the touch.

When he tried the door, he found it locked again. He must have been asleep when Elizabeth returned. That was for the best, perhaps. Amidst the frustration and helplessness that had followed his attempt the night before, he had been feeling guilt, and he wasn't certain how to face Elizabeth now. She might never know what he had done with the freedom she had given him, but Malcolm would always know, and his conscience convicted him, knowing she had defended him to Lachlan when Lachlan had been right not to trust him.

When a key finally sounded in the grate, it was a maid bringing him a tray of food and freshly prepared poultice, which he insisted he could apply to his wounds himself. He was still wearing the fabric and poultice from last night, which had dried to his skin in some places. He would remove it and give the wound time to breathe before applying more.

With no small amount of pain and discomfort, he managed to pull one arm out of his shirt. He let the sleeve drape over his shoulder, knowing that removing the entire shirt would cause an inordinate amount of pain and be entirely unnecessary. The bruising on his side was significant, which was obvious even in the dim light of his room, provided by the small window on the exterior wall.

The poultice paste stuck in the open wound, and he winced as he tried to

wipe it away.

Footsteps were a constant in the corridor now that the servants were about their duties, so Malcolm was caught off guard when the familiar grating of the key in the lock sounded, and the door opened to reveal Elizabeth.

He paused with his hand on his side as Elizabeth stood in the doorway, her gaze flitting from his face down to his exposed chest and stomach and quickly back up again.

“Pardon me,” Elizabeth said, attempting to close the door again, but she was prevented from doing so by Fergus, who slipped through the opening and hurried over to Malcolm.

“Fergus!” Malcolm cried in surprise.

The hound pranced around excitedly on his three stable feet, sniffing Malcolm frantically and licking him.

“Och,” Malcolm said laughingly as he pushed Fergus away from his attempts to sniff the poultice. “Aye, lad. I’m happy ta see ye, too.”

Elizabeth stepped into the room, reaching for the dog. “I underestimated how eager he would be to see you. I can bring him back later.”

“Nay,” Malcolm said, receiving Fergus’s affectionate nudges with a combination of smiles and wincing. “He’ll calm down soon enough.”

He was right. Fergus soon settled into a less frenzied state, eventually lying down at Malcolm’s feet.

Malcolm looked at Elizabeth, who still stood by the door.

She seemed to realize his eyes were on her, for she met his gaze. “I thought you might like one of your royal subjects to keep you company.”

Malcolm raised his brows. “Do ye refer ta yerself?”

She shot him an unamused look, but it was tempered by the hint of a smile at the corner of her mouth. “I meant Fergus.”

Malcolm chuckled. “He’s no’ a verra obedient subject, is he?” He gave the hound a playful nudge with his foot, but Fergus didn’t stir. He was content where he was. “‘Twas kind of ye, Elizabeth. I hope ye didna trouble yerself, though.”

“Oh, no. He was very well-behaved on the wagon ride from Glengour, and your mother assured me she would rather have him here with you. Though, I am tempted to keep him myself.”

He frowned. “My mother? Ye spoke with her?”

Elizabeth stepped forward and crouched down, reaching for Fergus’s ears. Predictably, he slumped over onto his back, closing his eyes. “Yes. I

wish I could have brought them all to Dunverlockie.” She rose to her feet, brushing her hands down her petticoats. “Hamish and Glenna assured me they would take good care of them.”

“I dinna understand,” Malcolm said. “Do ye mean my family is at Glengour?”

“Yes. Winnie was particularly excited at the prospect of sleeping in her own bed. I put her in the Red Room, but your mother assured me Winnie will make her way into her bed before long come nightfall.”

Malcolm let out a laugh that shot pain through his ribs. “Aye,” he said in a strained voice. “My mother is a saint. Winnie is a terror ta sleep with, I can tell ye that much. Kicks and flings her arms all over the place.”

Elizabeth smiled, but it faded as her gaze went back to his exposed body.

Malcolm grimaced. “Aye, I’ve decided I dinna wish ta look in a mirror for another week or two. And I’m glad ye didna bring my family, ta tell ye the truth. I dinna want them ta see me like this. ‘Twould give Winnie a fright.” He gave a rueful smile. “I’m afeared ‘tis too late for you, though. Ye’ve seen the worst of me.”

The moment he said the words, he regretted them. She had seen anything but the worst of him. His mother was right—Elizabeth brought out all of the best things in him and made him feel a happiness and normalcy he had thought lost to him forever. But the past cast a long shadow.

She came and sat beside him on the bed, an unexpected action which made Malcolm’s heart stammer.

“Your mother said something at Glengour,” she said, “and I cannot stop thinking about it.”

Malcolm felt his muscles tighten, and more pain shot across his stomach. He forced a smile despite it. “Told ye embarrassin’ things about me, did she?” What *had* his mother told her?

“Nothing like that, though perhaps we might come back to that later. But no, she told me that, of late, she has seen bits and pieces of the boy you used to be.”

Malcolm’s smile faltered slightly.

“What happened?” she asked. “What happened to the little boy your mother spoke of? With a smile more charming than any she’d ever known?”

Malcolm looked away. That felt like a lifetime ago.

“You do not wish to speak of it,” Elizabeth said softly. He thought he heard a bit of hurt in her voice.

He swallowed. What could he say? “When a man’s soul goes dark, it shows in his face.”

“You do not have a dark soul, Malcolm. Angus may have convinced you of that, but it is untrue.”

He shook his head. “Nay, Elizabeth. I’ve done things for Angus I’m no’ proud of, but the first thing I ever did—the worst thing I ever did—‘twas my own choice. My soul was dark afore I ever answered ta Angus.” His heart beat loudly enough to fill the small room they were in, and he knew what it was trying to tell him with every thud against his chest. He didn’t dare look at her. He might be brave enough to tell her the truth, but he wasn’t brave enough to watch her love turn to disgust.

“I killed my own father.”

He felt it—felt her stiffen beside him as his heart thundered against his chest. But he had said it, and there was no unsaying it. All he could do now was try to explain.

“I was thirteen.” He shook his head. “Ye ken Angus, and ye kend Gordon for a time. My father was cut from the same cloth. He was a brute—ta me, ta my brothers and sisters, but most of all, ta my mother. I watched him hurt her time and again—until I couldna stand by any longer. I just wanted it ta stop—ta give my mother a chance ta get away.”

The silence in the room was deafening, and he kept his eyes on Fergus.

“When I realized what I’d done, I couldna move for horror. I dinna ken how long I’d been starin’ at the body when Angus found me. I was terrified I’d be taken and hung—right then. But Angus assured me he wouldna let such a thing happen—that he would protect me.”

He didn’t dare look at Elizabeth, though every impulse in his mind and heart urged him to do so. He focused on the colors of Fergus’s fur, trying not to focus on the fact that he had just given Elizabeth all the information she needed to send him to the gallows.

The silence continued until Malcolm didn’t know how he could bear it any longer.

But it was Elizabeth who spoke. “Do you know one of the first things I ever said to Lachlan?”

Malcolm shook his head, afraid to hope at such a calm response to his confession.

“I told him I would have killed Gordon myself if illness hadn’t carried him off first. And then I threatened Lachlan if he failed to treat Christina

well.”

Unable to stop himself, Malcolm looked up at her.

She was smiling mournfully with her gaze on him. “I meant every word. There is nothing I would not do to protect my family.”

“Ye say that, but ‘tis a different thing ta *do* it.”

“The only difference between the person willing to do something and the person who actually *does* it is circumstance, is it not?”

He didn’t respond. How could he make her understand how different the two of them were, how deep Malcolm’s darkness went?

She looked down to her hands in her lap, and her fingers fiddled there. “If you have a dark soul, I must necessarily have one, too. That is the only answer I can find for what I feel.” She swallowed. “I think I have fallen in love with you, Malcolm.”

His breath caught and his eyes widened, but she didn’t look at him.

“No.” She shook her head slightly. “I *know* I have. I have fallen in love with the man I swore would never touch me, and now all I can think about is having his arms around me again.” Her eyes came up slowly.

A medley of emotions filled Malcolm, expanded him like the air in his lungs. Had she truly understood what he had said? That he had killed his own father? Was it possible she could love him despite that—despite all he had done in the service of Angus MacKinnon?

Thoughts of the fire flashed across his mind, of the tartan Elizabeth carried in her pocket, of the lie he had told her, and pain pierced him, both ribs and heart. “I’m no’ worthy of yer love, Elizabeth.” He looked down and tried to breathe evenly.

There was a pause before she responded. “Is that your way of telling me that my feelings are not reciprocated?”

He clenched his eyes shut and shook his head. “Nay. I wish more than anythin’,”—he checked himself, feeling emotion rise in his throat with the words on the tip of his tongue. It would do no good to express sentiments that could not be pursued. It would only hurt all the more. He had chosen his path, had knowingly sacrificed the truth and his honor to protect himself and his family. “‘Tis the truth—‘tis all that matters.”

“It is what you have come to believe, but that does not make it the truth. And what of me? Do I have no say in deciding whether or not you are *worthy of my love*?”

“No’ when ye dinna ken me well enough ta make such a decision. I’ve

done too many things, Elizabeth. Terrible things.”

She gave a laugh, and he shot her a baffled glance at the unexpected response.

“Forgive me,” she said, and her expression became more somber, “but you have been Angus’s closest kinsmen. If I did not infer from that that you had done terrible things, I would be very obtuse.”

Malcolm’s pain and hope multiplied in tandem. To hear her convincing him that she would look past his history, saying the words he most wanted to hear. . . .But he couldn’t allow himself to believe them. She dismissed his dark deeds in the abstract—without truly knowing them and the people they had affected. There had been nothing abstract about the heat of the fire he had lit at Glengour, or the way he had scrambled into the trees, only to stop once Lachlan ceased to pursue him, watching to ensure the fire he had started didn’t grow to an inferno and do what Angus intended it to do.

Elizabeth might believe herself capable of doing the things he had done, but he knew her heart too well to believe it.

“Ye dinna ken what ye’re sayin’.” His heart writhed inside him, begging him on the one hand to tell her everything—to confess—and on the other hand forbidding him to do so, afraid to see her precious love and regard for him crumble before his eyes.

She shifted so her body faced him more directly. “Look at me.”

He turned his head slowly, reluctant to look into the eyes of the woman whose love he couldn’t allow himself to accept. He kept his body facing forward and his hands holding the wooden edge of the bed as if it and it alone could ground him.

Her eyes searched his. “Do you love me?”

He wanted to say *no*. Surely that would be much easier than convincing her that the man she thought she loved did not exist. But as he looked into her eyes, he saw not the confident, witty Elizabeth who took pleasure in angering Angus. He saw a woman who feared rejection and needed to be loved, just as he did.

And in that moment, he could no more have told her he didn’t love her than he could have carried the charter chest all the way to Benleith.

“Aye,” he choked out, looking down and tightening his grip on the edge of the bed to keep himself from wrapping his arms around her, for if he did that, he felt certain that his resolve would shatter into a million pieces.

She put a hand to his uninjured cheek and gently urged it toward her so

that he faced her. “Then let us forget everything else.”

The joy and hope in her expression nearly undid him. *Could* he forget? Could such things ever be forgotten? Even for a moment?

She reached for his hand that gripped the bed, white-knuckled. “Let it go, Malcolm. Let all of it go.” She interlaced her own fingers in the spaces between his, and he loosened his grip on the bed, feeling his willpower weaken with her touch.

He turned toward her. “‘Twas all ta protect them,” he said, suddenly feeling a need for her to understand the confession he hadn’t yet made.

She squeezed his hand. “And I could never blame you for such a thing, not when I, too, would do anything for the ones I love.”

Anything. She said she would do *anything*. It was a word expansive enough to cover Malcolm’s crimes, and he wanted to believe that she meant it, that he was still worthy of love, that there was a woman in this world as vibrant and wonderful as Elizabeth Innes who would love him for all of the best things about him and help him to forget all of the worst things.

Her fingers released his hand, running up his arm and over to his bare back. Shivers erupted all over his skin, and she leaned her forehead against his.

“I love you, Malcolm,” she said softly.

He breathed in her words slowly, letting them fill the holes inside him, trying to let go of everything, just as she had told him to.

Her lips brushed against his, and everything in the room, everything in the world melted away except for the woman before him. He reached a hand to her cheek, and the velvety skin warmed him as he lifted his chin to kiss her back, heedless of the pain it caused. He felt he could manage any pain if he could only hold her again.

Imminent footsteps sounded outside the door, which opened suddenly.

The two of them broke apart to see Lachlan standing in the doorway, wide-eyed and motionless. His brows came together as his gaze took in the scene, and Fergus, who had been sleeping on the floor, brought up his head to see who the intruder was.

Malcolm blinked, keenly aware of his own state of disarray—his unkempt hair, his shirt half-removed, with the sleeve still hanging over his shoulder—and what it must look like to Lachlan.

“Elizabeth,” Lachlan said, his quiet words at odds with the sinister expression on his face as his eyes stayed trained on Malcolm. “Yer sister

wishes ta speak with ye.”

Malcolm stole a glance at Elizabeth. Her color was heightened, but she showed no other signs of embarrassment. Indeed, her chin was raised in a subtle show of defiance.

“Can it wait?” she asked. “Mr. Kerr gave instructions for Malcolm’s wounds to be poulticed, which, as you can see, they are in great need of.”

Lachlan’s gaze took in the bruising on Malcolm’s face and side. “One of the footmen can see ta that.” He moved to make room for her in the doorway, making it clear that he had no intention of leaving her there with Malcolm.

Elizabeth stared at Lachlan for a moment then rose from the bed.

“I promised your mother I would send her word of how you are faring. I will return later.” She looked at Lachlan, as if inviting him to challenge her intention.

Malcolm could only nod with a failed attempt at a smile. The spell was broken, and he could feel the impending reckoning.

Elizabeth stepped through the door, but Lachlan stopped her, putting out a hand expectantly.

Her nostrils flared, but she reached into her pocket and handed him the key then stalked away.

Elizabeth’s departing footsteps grew more faint, and still Lachlan stood in the doorway, watching after her with the key in hand. Finally, he turned to Malcolm, frowning deeply.

“Ye’ll leave tomorrow,” Lachlan said, “even if I have ta carry ye ta the carriage meself.” He glanced at Malcolm’s side again. “I’ll send a servant ta tend ta yer wounds.”

He closed the door, and the grinding of the key in the lock followed swiftly.

Malcolm shut his eyes then dropped his head in his hands, wincing when his palm made contact with his swollen brow.

What had he done?

He had given his word to Lachlan that he meant no harm to Elizabeth or Christina. And he had meant it. But there was no way to avoid hurting Elizabeth at this point. Twice now, he had allowed himself to be carried away in her presence on a wave of false hope.

If he loved her, he could never keep things from her—and certainly not the information she had been seeking for so long. Whatever she had said about letting go and forgetting, she could not truly love him without knowing

all of him.

The only possibility of freedom, of his family's well-being, and of love lay in telling her the truth. She had accepted his role in his father's death far more easily and mercifully than he had expected. But surely it was easier to forgive that than to forgive his crimes against her own family—the family she said she would do anything to protect.

Fergus nudged him with his nose, and Malcolm stared at the dog's soulful eyes. If the truth was too terrible for Elizabeth to accept, so be it. He could no longer live in the shadows, defined by his worst moments. To step fully into the light required that he first claim and acknowledge his own darkness.

His mother's words rang in his ears. *I would rather live as poor outcasts than see the darkness consume ye.*

Perhaps he would live out his last days in the darkness of a prison cell, but at least he would do so knowing he was free of all other chains—that he had chosen the light of the truth. And he hoped that, even if Elizabeth couldn't love him, even if she could not keep his secrets, she could find it in her heart to see his family was cared for.

Elizabeth wasn't one to run away from confrontation, but she had no desire to speak with Lachlan. It had felt so simple and right to love Malcolm when they were alone. But explaining everything to Lachlan and Christina would be another matter entirely. How would they feel to know she had fallen in love with a MacKinnon—and a murderer?

The revelation had surprised her. It had also explained what had changed him from the joyful child Flora had described. But Elizabeth knew enough of the MacKinnons to believe what Malcolm had said about his father, was familiar enough with the rage she had felt toward Gordon to understand what Malcolm had done in an attempt to protect his mother.

But not everyone would.

Lachlan wanted peace between the families, certainly, but did he want *this*? A love-match forever connecting him to a man he despised?

“Elizabeth.”

She slowed her rush up the stairs leading to her bedchamber, shut her eyes, and turned toward Lachlan, waiting for him to say what he had come to say.

But he didn't say anything right away. He seemed to be searching for words. “What. . . *what are ye doin'?*”

She felt the heat seep into her cheeks again, a mixture of anger and embarrassment. “Perhaps it escaped your notice, Lachlan, but Malcolm needs caring for—he does *not* need to be locked up.”

“Is that a fact?”

She raised her brows. “It is.”

“And ye think what I saw ye doin’ is the sort of care he needs?”

Her cheeks flamed at the reference to their kiss, but he spoke before she could find a defense, a retort—anything.

“Ye dinna ken him, Elizabeth.”

“I know him better than you do—or whatever you *think* you know of him.”

Lachlan scoffed, setting one leg on the next stair and a hand on his hip. “I ken that, until ye brought him here, I’d never seen him out of the company of Angus. And I ken what I’ve heard from yer own lips about him—I’ve watched ye call him a dog.”

“Yes, and I was wrong, just as you are.”

“Elizabeth?” Christina appeared at the top of the staircase. Her gaze took in the situation, and concern grew in her eyes. “What is wrong?”

Elizabeth looked to Lachlan, who seemed to hesitate again. No doubt he worried about how it might affect Christina to know what he had witnessed. But he was not one to keep the truth from his wife.

He looked at Elizabeth as he spoke to Christina. “Yer sister seems ta have fallen in love with Malcolm MacKinnon.”

Christina didn’t react, though she looked at Elizabeth. “I see,” she said softly.

“Ye dinna seem surprised.”

“No,” Christina replied as she came down the stairs, one hand on her growing belly and the other on the wall. “I cannot say that I am.”

Elizabeth’s brows knit, and she searched her sister’s face.

“She canna marry a MacKinnon,” Lachlan said.

“Can she not?” Christina asked. “I admit, I did not like the thought at first. I do not know him, after all—have hardly heard him say a word, which makes it difficult to trust him. But”—she looked to Elizabeth—“Elizabeth is not one to be easily taken in. She would not let go of her animosity toward one of Angus’s kinsmen without good reason, nor would she consider marrying anyone but the most decent of men.”

Elizabeth met her sister’s gaze with the sensation of burning at the back of her eyes. She had never expected such words from Christina. Always, Elizabeth had been the unreasonable sister, the volatile one. To hear Christina express her trust in Elizabeth’s judgment was. . .well, it was something Elizabeth hadn’t even been aware she needed to hear.

Christina offered her a small smile and turned back to Lachlan. “If we

wish for peace between us and the MacKinnons, what better way to achieve it than to unite our families with such a match? With so much animosity between us all, I had never considered it, but”—she lifted her shoulders—“if the two of them wish for it. . . .”

Lachlan frowned. “Perhaps I could come ta trust Malcolm MacKinnon were it no’ for Angus. But, nay. I canna trust Angus, Christina. No’ ever. And I dinna want ye goin’ down there again, Elizabeth.”

“Well,” Elizabeth said, trying unsuccessfully to keep the irritation from her voice, “when the two of you have come to a decision about all the things I am and am not allowed to do, please do inform me. I am going to Glengour. And yes, Christina—I will take Bannerman with me.”

She didn’t wait for a response from them, hurrying up to her bedchamber to change for the ride. By the time she was done, Lachlan and Christina were gone from the staircase—something Elizabeth was grateful for, as she had no desire to listen to them debating whether Malcolm was worthy of consideration as a husband for her.

She wasn’t even certain that was what Malcolm wished for, in truth. He seemed so persuaded of his unsuitability. Apparently, Angus had managed to convince him he was good for nothing more than obeying orders under threat to his family. That was the sort of monster Angus was—the kind that forced man to do terrible things and then hung them over his head.

When Elizabeth arrived at Glengour, Winnie was outside with her brother, Keith, who was chasing her past the paved area in front of the inn, where grass crept up through the cracks between the stones. Elizabeth smiled at the sight of Winnie’s frantic running—she was no match for her older brother’s speed, and her screams were evidence that she knew it.

The two of them didn’t even seem to notice Elizabeth as she made her way inside and as Bannerman took the horses to the stables. Mrs. MacKinnon, Dugan, and Marion were all in the coffee room, sitting around a table with cups in front of them. Hamish was seated at the table nearest the fire across from a bespectacled man Elizabeth did not recognize, but Hamish stood at her entrance. “Good day, Miss Innes,” he said with a smile. “Would ye care for a cup of coffee?”

“I would, thank you.”

He turned toward the man. “I’ll be back in a moment, Mr. McCabe.”

Elizabeth walked over to the MacKinnons and removed her coat as Hamish disappeared back into the kitchen. “May I join you?” she asked them.

“Och, of course ye may,” Mrs. MacKinnon said, pulling out the chair beside her.

Elizabeth slipped her coat over the back of it and sat down with a smile.

“How is Malcolm?” Marion asked.

If only Lachlan and Christina could see the concern in Marion’s eyes, surely they would have been more apt to believe that he was a man well-loved by his family.

“He seems to be doing well,” Elizabeth said. “You are welcome to visit him if you wish. You only need go to the door on the east side of the castle and tell them I sent you.”

“‘Tis kind of ye,” Mrs. MacKinnon said. “Was he happy ta see Fergus?”

“Oh, yes,” Elizabeth said, smiling at the memory.

“And Fergus ta see him, I reckon,” Dugan said.

“Yes, I nearly had to bring him back here because of it. Has he always had such an affection for Malcolm?”

“Aye,” said Dugan.

But his mother looked at him with a frown. “Nay, then, Dugan. Do ye no’ remember what a wee, shakin’ thing Fergus was when Malcolm first brought him home? He hid in the corner, terrified if any of us approached him.”

“Aye,” said Dugan, “but that was only the first night. After that, Malcolm took his blankets to sleep nearby, and by mornin’, Fergus was curled up at his feet.”

Mrs. MacKinnon smiled nostalgically, and Elizabeth sat back, content to listen to any stories they might care to share about Malcolm. Her riding coat slipped into a heap on the ground, and she reached for it.

The piece of plaid had been partially dislodged from the pocket, and Elizabeth pulled the coat onto her lap. The cloth had been sitting in that pocket, undisturbed for days now. She had all but given up on following the clue. Perhaps it was time to abandon her search. Had she not just encouraged Malcolm to let go of everything?

“Where did ye get that?”

Elizabeth looked up and found Mrs. MacKinnon’s eyes fixed on the tartan cloth.

“Do you recognize it?” She watched Mrs. MacKinnon intently.

“Recognize it? Aye.” She gave a little laugh, but her eyes shone as she put a finger to the fabric. “‘Tis from my father’s plaid, God rest his soul. Malcolm lost it a while back—always kept it in his sporran, he did. Verra

distraught he was when he realized it. He'll be that glad ta see it again."

Elizabeth could hardly hear, her heart was pounding so loudly in her ears. The piece of plaid was Malcolm's.

I've done too many things. . . .Terrible things.

Those had been Malcolm's words—words she had brushed off.

She looked at the fabric again—the question she had been searching for the answer to for months now. She had even asked Malcolm, and he had denied knowledge of it.

"Excuse me," she said in an unstable voice. "I must go." Her chair screeched as she pushed it out from the table, carrying the coat and tartan with her. She hurried from the room with the eyes of the MacKinnons and Mr. McCabe upon her as Hamish emerged from the kitchen, a cup of coffee in hand.

She rushed to the stables, taking Bannerman and the new groom, Mark, by surprise.

"Please ready my horse," she said. It was difficult to speak, and her words came out breathless and strange-sounding.

The two men shared a look then sprang to action, saddling up the horses. Elizabeth used the mounting block and left before Bannerman had tightened the straps on his own horse.

For once, she took the road straight to Dunverlockie. She could hear Bannerman calling after her, asking her to slow down, but she ignored his voice, urging Caesar on all the faster.

Her mind was aflutter, assuming the worst one moment, searching for explanations the next—any shred of hope that things were not as they seemed.

She wanted to scream—at Malcolm, at herself, at the world. How had she ever allowed herself to believe a MacKinnon? And not just to believe him, but to *fall in love* with him? And to admit as much to him when he had lied to her—lied about the fact that he had nearly killed her and her sister. She could look past what he had done to his father. What he had tried to do to her family, though? The way he had used her and lied to her for so long? That was a different matter.

Anger and humiliation set her veins on fire and made tears spring to her eyes, and she leaned forward, giving Caesar another nudge to go faster—as if he could. A man who could set fire to Glengour with Elizabeth and Christina inside it and then behave the way he had behaved toward Elizabeth was a

kinsman more fit for Angus than she had ever known.

By the time she reached the Dunverlockie stables, she had a better rein on her temper and emotions, but a curt greeting to Colum was all she could manage when he took the reins as she slipped down from her horse.

She took deep breaths in an attempt to quiet her pounding heart as she walked toward the entrance to the castle. She could only hope she didn't see Lachlan. The embarrassment of having vouchsafed for Malcolm's trustworthiness made her feel almost ill. Lachlan had been right to lock him in that room, and what had Elizabeth done? She had set him free—and at night, when Dunverlockie's defenses were at their weakest.

Mortification at her decisions, at her stupidity washed over her again.

Had she been a complete fool to believe the best of him? She would never have been able to forgive herself if he had hurt Christina somehow while at Dunverlockie.

Perhaps he had changed since the night of the fire, perhaps she had been right to think him sincere in his affection for her and in his hatred of Angus, but the fact that he had kept his involvement in the fire from her, knowing how important it was to her—it did not point to such a change.

She hurried through the entry hall, hoping to avoid anyone who might be about, and lifted her petticoats as she descended the stairs, forcing herself to take slower steps. It wouldn't do to arrive at Malcolm's room breathless. She would be cool, collected, and composed. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing the hurt and mortification she felt beneath her anger.

She asked among the servants until she discovered who had the key, but when she asked Janet for it, the maid looked dismayed.

"The master said no' ta give it ta ye," she said apologetically, betraying the key's location by the hand she put to her pocket.

Elizabeth felt her control over her temper unravel. "I do not care what Lachlan said. Give the key to me, Janet." She *would* see Malcolm, even if she had to wrest the key from her.

Janet's eyes widened. "The surgeon only just left, miss, and he gave instructions ta let Mr. MacKinnon rest."

"He can rest once I have had the chance to speak with him. I promised I would bring him news of his family, and I have come to do so. Now, *give me the key.*"

Janet swallowed nervously and put a hand in her pocket.

Even amidst her anger, Elizabeth felt a twinge of guilt for putting the

maid in such a difficult position. “You may tell Lachlan I gave you no choice in the matter. He knows me well enough to believe it.” She took the key and made her way toward the small room at the end of the corridor, slowing as she came closer. A dozen feet shy of the room, she came to a full stop and shut her eyes to compose herself.

No doubt Malcolm would have plenty of excuses to offer her, and she was eager to hear them, for what excuse could possibly justify what he had done? It was no thanks to him Elizabeth was even alive to confront him. If not for Lachlan, they might all be dead and Glengour nothing but a pile of ashes.

Reaching a hand into her pocket, she pulled out the piece of tartan, staring at it, remembering what it had been like to see it lying on the floor of the inn amongst the steam and smoke. She forced a long, deep breath, clenching the fabric in her fist and taking the remaining steps to the door.

Elizabeth turned the key in the lock and opened the door, full again of fire and determination.

Malcolm was sitting on the cold, stone floor of the small room, a hand running along Fergus's back. The hound's head rested on Malcolm's lap, but he lumbered up to his feet, tail wagging, and went over to greet Elizabeth. She received him with a distracted glance but didn't pet him. She couldn't afford to show any weakness right now.

With his right arm, Malcolm used the bed to push himself up to his feet, looking surprised amidst his cringing from pain. "Ye've returned already."

"Yes," she said curtly, and by Malcolm's reaction, she could tell that the response surprised him. "I merely came to return something to you." She had no intention of giving it back to him.

Malcolm frowned, and she unfurled her fingers, extending the piece of plaid in her palm so that he could see it.

He stilled, and she waited for his eyes, swollen and bruised as one was, to meet her gaze again. She clasped her hand shut and retracted it, aware that it was shaking from anger. She didn't know how long she would be able to hide what she was feeling. Being in the same room as Malcolm intensified her emotions, and she hated that.

"I've wanted ta tell ye," he said, "ta explain ta ye, but—"

"But you are a coward."

He swallowed then nodded. "Aye. I was a coward. I was afraid ta lose yer respect, yer friendship—ta lose yer love."

She shook her head hurriedly at the last word, feeling suddenly nauseated.

“When I told ye I didna deserve yer love, I meant it. And I kend I couldna keep what happened from ye any longer. Can I explain ta ye?” He nodded at her hand which concealed the plaid. “‘Tis no’ what it seems.”

She let out a disbelieving scoff. “Not what it seems? You mean to say that it was *not* you who set fire to Glengour? Who attempted to *murder* my sister in her sleep—and might have murdered the rest of us there as well? Lachlan? Glenna? Me?”

He shut his eyes. If she didn’t know better, she might have believed him to be truly penitent.

“Aye, ‘twas I who set the fire, but—”

She turned toward the door, eager to ensure he could not see how the admission affected her. She had known it, but the confession still hurt.

She whirled back around. “Were you involved in my sister’s abduction, as well? And the carriage accident we met with?”

His eyes widened. “Nay, Elizabeth. I didna ken what Angus had planned, I swear.” He reached for her hand, stopping mid-gesture as his face crumpled in pain.

Elizabeth was torn between the impulse to help him and the way her pride demanded that she keep away from him, this man she had thought she knew.

When he spoke, it was in a strained voice, and his eyes still clenched shut when he spoke. “I’d never have let anyone come ta harm. I alerted Lachlan ta the fire and I stayed till I was certain ‘twas safe.”

She scoffed. “We should be thanking you, I suppose!”

“Nay, I—”

“Did it not occur to you that there was a better way to ensure no one was hurt? By simply *not* setting fire to a building with half a dozen people inside!”

He reached out a hand for hers, but she retracted it, and he dropped his own with a frown. “I *had* ta do it if I wished ta keep Angus’s good favor. He questions my loyalty ta the clan at every turn, makin’ veiled threats against my family if I dinna prove it again and again. I had no choice!”

“There is *always* a choice.”

He stared at her for a moment before responding. “Aye, Elizabeth. Ye’re right. And my choice that night was between settin’ a fire while ensurin’ no one came ta harm or consignin’ meself ta death and my own family ta the devil. I canna regret that choice. Ye’d have done the same thing in my place.”

All of her plans to face him in a cool and collected way, to show a façade

of disinterest, were crumbling, and she felt the mortifying stinging beginning in the back of her eyes. “Because you know me so well, do you? And what do I know of you, Malcolm? Nothing but lies.”

“Nay, Elizabeth. I *did* lie ta ye, and I *was* a coward. But ‘twas the only thing I kept from ye. I swear ta ye, everythin’ between us is real.”

“There is *nothing* between us.”

He was silent, staring at her with hurt in his eyes. He nodded. “I never expected ye ta love me once ye kend everythin’. I spoke truth when I told ye my soul was dark and ye deserve better.”

He *had* told her that. And she had not believed him. Even now, looking at him, being near him, she struggled to believe it. She clenched the tartan cloth in her hand more tightly, holding onto the evidence, willing it to ground her. “You threatened the lives of everyone in the inn, Malcolm. And for what? For the favor of Angus MacKinnon?” She spat the name, as it deserved.

“Nay, Elizabeth,” he said. “I dinna care for the good opinion of Angus. Surely ye ken that by now. No one despises him more than I—no’ even *you*. I have regretted nothin’ in my life more than signin’ that document.” He sat down on the bed and scrubbed a hand over the side of his face which wasn’t bruised and swollen.

She didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of asking, but she couldn’t help herself. “What document?”

He shook his head. “Angus didna offer his protection of me and my family without a price.”

“I do not understand.”

Malcolm grimaced as he met her gaze. “He had me sign a paper, confessin’ ta what I’d done and swearin’ that, in exchange for his protection, I’d give him my loyalty. Bein’ desperate, young, and foolish as I was, I didna hesitate ta do it—ta trust him.”

Elizabeth stared at him. It was beginning to make sense now, Malcolm’s apparent but unfathomable loyalty to Angus. Angus had the means to ruin him.

“I ken ye owe me nothin’, Elizabeth, and I willna blame ye for hatin’ me, but”—his shoulders lifted helplessly—“I need yer help. My family needs yer help.”

“My help?” She could hardly believe what she was hearing, the audacity of it.

“Aye.” He edged forward on the bed, his gaze becoming all at once

apologetic and imploring. “I swear I wouldna ask it of ye if there was another way.”

She didn’t know what to say. Her anger at him and her invincible façade were cracking. But how dared he ask her for help at such a time?

“The document I spoke of. . . ‘tis here. At Dunverlockie.”

“What?”

He gave a somber nod. “When yer sister and Lachlan married so suddenly, Angus didna have the chance ta remove his charter chest before returnin’ ta Benleith.”

Her eyes widened. “His charter chest? Here? All this time? Why did he not send for it?”

“He thought if ye kend ‘twas here, ye’d have used it against him—refused ta return it. It contains every piece of paper he holds dear—decades of information and correspondence he’s collected. Enough ta send a dozen men ta the gallows—including himself, I reckon. ‘Twas that he sent me for.”

Elizabeth’s eyes fixed on him more intently. “Sent you for? What do you mean *sent you*?”

“He’s obsessed, Elizabeth. Obsessed with humiliatin’ ye and the Kincaids. ‘Twas the task he gave me—he wanted me ta find a way into Dunverlockie, and he wanted *you* ta be the one ta let me in.”

She swallowed the lump that rose in her throat. “So, you used me.”

He shook his head quickly. “Nay. That is, ‘twas my intent at first—before I kend ye”—he lifted his shoulders—“before I loved ye. But I only cared ta find the document—ta destroy it. And when I refused ta do what Angus wished for me ta do. . . .” He sighed and reached his fingers to his swollen eye.

Elizabeth’s mind was spinning. She didn’t know what to believe. “And now you want me to help you find the chest.”

“Nay,” he hurried to say. “I ken where it is.” He reached for the coat that sat on the edge of the bed, wincing as he did so, and retrieved something from the pocket: a key. He gave it to her, and she felt his eyes watching, as though unsure that his choice to allow it into her hands was the wisest course.

“‘Tis in the locked room at the end of the corridor with the laundry. But I canna carry it. No’ in this condition.”

She held the rusted key in her hand, and a memory flashed across her mind of Malcolm holding a stack of linens, heading the wrong direction in the corridors of Dunverlockie’s underbelly—toward the very door he had just

spoken of. She had heard of the door without a key downstairs. Everyone had assumed the key would be found in a forgotten drawer or some such place. All this time, though, it had been with Angus. With Malcolm.

And she had been played for a fool all the while. She clenched her jaw, pushing away the thoughts of the way her kindness had been taken advantage of. “You deserve that I should hand the chest over to the authorities—you and Angus both.”

He put up a hand, a pleading look coming into his eyes. “Ye can hate me, Elizabeth—I deserve that ye should, and I dinna expect ye ta have a care for my life or my fate. But please. *Please*. Dinna make my family suffer for what I’ve done.”

“What precisely are you asking of me, Malcolm? To destroy the documents for you?”

“I wish that was possible. But, nay. The chest must go ta Angus. For my family’s safety.”

She stared at him incredulously. “And you wish for me to carry the chest to him myself?”

“Nay. I only ask that ye let me take it once I’m healed enough ta carry it on my own.”

She struggled to speak. “You intend to return those documents to him? Are you mad?”

“If I dinna do so, he promised he’ll make use of the paper I signed.”

“Where you admit to murdering your father?”

“Aye,” he said softly. “He has a copy of it, and he’ll only give it ta me once I return the chest.”

She stared at him. “And you wish for *me* to aid you in this? After all the lies you have told? After *using* me all this time?”

His hand shot out toward her again, only to retract instantly, as though it had been done instinctually. “At the beginning of it all, aye, Angus ordered me ta befriend ye. All I kend of ye was the insults and mockin’ ye’d treated me to. Ye humiliated me in front of my kinsmen more than once. But before I kend what was happenin’, I was fallin’ in love with ye”—his shoulders came up—“and then, I thought if ye kend the truth, I’d lose ye. I was afeared yer hatred of Angus—yer hatred of me—would overpower everythin’ else, and my family would be left with nothin’.”

She swallowed, forcing down the emotion his words elicited. What *would* she have done if he had told her everything when he had first arrived at

Glengour? She wouldn't have hesitated to use the documents in the chest to convict Angus, and if Malcolm had been ruined with him, she would have merely thought it good riddance.

But what was she to do now? How could she possibly trust what he was saying? He had used her, and even now, with the key she held in her hand, he was asking to use her again. It was evidence he had not changed. Or was it proof of his trust? She didn't know what to think.

He seemed to follow her train of thought at least somewhat, for he was watching her when she looked up. "When I refused ta follow Angus's orders, he had Gregory and Ivor beat me and leave me on yer path. He told me 'twas my last chance ta prove my loyalty ta the clan."

"And what reason have I to believe anything you are saying now?"

"I ken ye dinna have reason ta do so, and I reckon ye're doubtin' every word I've ever said. It kills me ta see it." He met her gaze, his own full of softness, apology, sincerity. "I *do* love ye, Elizabeth. More than I can say. And I never meant ta hurt ye."

Before she knew what was happening, tears were welling in her eyes. She couldn't stay here like this, listening to his explanations. She had known he would offer up excuses, but she had not anticipated it would be so difficult to reject those explanations. Her heart still urged her to believe him, and that, she simply couldn't allow.

She shook her head and moved to the door, determined to escape before her emotions could slip from her tenuous grasp. Fergus followed her there, and it was his droopy, fervent eyes she last saw as she shut the door.

She slipped the key in the lock with blurred vision, but it would not turn, and she pulled it back out, realizing she was using the wrong key. Exchanging it with the one in her pocket, she turned the correct one in the lock, and with an impatient hand and a deep breath, she turned and made her way down the corridor toward the locked room.

It took a great deal of fiddling before the lock surrendered to the key, and Elizabeth opened the door slowly, wincing at the loud creaking noise it made. The light from the nearest candle in the corridor illuminated the otherwise dark room, and her eyes strained at the oppressive darkness, finally falling on the sole object inside. She pushed the door open wider and stepped toward the corner. It was indeed a chest, perhaps a foot and a half wide and a foot deep. If Malcolm was telling the truth, this chest contained enough to convict Angus of a number of crimes.

Never had she thought to have such power in her hands—or to feel so unsure about using it.

A lock hung from the lid of the chest. Angus undoubtedly had the key, but Elizabeth wouldn't let that stop her. Knowing it was a fruitless endeavor, she tried the lock with the key she held. Meeting with expected failure, she slipped it back into her pocket, and it clanged softly against the other one. She bent over and hefted the chest which, though small, required a great deal of strength.

When she left the room with the chest in her arms, she nearly ran into a footman in the corridor. He looked at the load she carried with confusion and surprise.

“Can I help ye, miss?” he asked.

“No, thank you.” She hesitated. “That is, yes. I need to open this chest, but the key has been lost. Would you be able to break it open?”

He reached for the lock, looking at it with a thoughtful expression. “Aye, miss. I reckon so. If ye'll only wait a moment.”

He disappeared back toward the kitchens, and Elizabeth stared down at the chest in her arms, which felt heavier by the minute. Little wonder Malcolm had said he would not be able to carry it in his condition.

She brushed aside the thought of him. Once she had an idea of just what was in the chest, she could set her mind to the dilemma of what to do with it all. One thing at a time.

When the footman returned, it was with a thick hammer.

“If ye’ll set it on the ground, miss,” he said, “I can try ta break the lock.”

Elizabeth obediently lowered the chest to the stone floor.

“Ye’ll want ta step back,” he said as he raised the hammer above his head.

Elizabeth took a few steps back and watched as he struck the hammer on the lock, sending sparks flying. After nearly ten strikes, she began to despair of the lock breaking, but there was a clanging as it suddenly fell to the floor.

The footman breathed heavily, letting the hammer hang at his side as he wiped his brow. “There ye go, miss. Do ye wish for me ta put it somewhere for ye?”

“No, thank you,” she replied.

“Are ye certain? It looks heavy.”

“I am certain, thank you. But I *shall* give you this.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out the key to Malcolm’s room. She gladly surrendered the responsibility for him along with it.

The footman took the key and bowed before leaving.

Elizabeth bent down and picked up the chest again, eager to take it to her bedchamber where she could look through its contents in peace. Only then would she know what to do.

When she reached the top of the first flight of stairs, there were three of the Kincaid kinsmen in the entry hall. She smiled and continued on, hoping not to arouse interest or chivalry amongst them, but she was breathless by the time she reached her bedchamber and set the chest down atop the trunk at the base of her bed. The sun was out for once, and it shone through the half-open curtains, throwing a column of light across the bed.

Taking in a deep breath, she opened the heavy lid of the charter chest, revealing a tall stack of papers, some folded, some not. She picked up a few of them, rifling through correspondence, estate documents, and letters of debt. She recognized a number of the names she saw. A few of the documents were signed by influential political figures and Members of

Parliament.

She glanced over some documents and read others in detail, her eyes widening at times and her brows drawing together at others. Malcolm had been right—there was enough here to ruin a number of men—and ample evidence of Angus’s conniving. Many of the documents did not even belong to Angus—correspondence between third parties he had obtained by unknown means. How much of the information he was currently using and how much he was simply keeping in case its use became necessary, she didn’t know.

She set each group of papers to her side as she familiarized herself with their content and drew nearer to the end of the stack. Still there was no sign of the document Malcolm had mentioned.

Something at the bottom of the chest glinted in the light, and she reached for it. Her fingers took hold of a sapphire ring, set in an ornate, knotted design. It had a feminine quality to it, and Elizabeth wondered if Angus was perhaps saving this heirloom for whatever pitied soul had the misfortune of becoming his wife.

She set it back down and picked up the last few papers. Based on the way they were creased, most of them were correspondence, and she set them aside. The bottom paper, though, was well-preserved and never folded, from the looks of it. It was dated 1753, and Elizabeth glanced at the signature near the bottom, swallowing.

Malcolm MacKinnon was written in a juvenile, shaky script, as if he had only recently learned to write—or perhaps had been trembling as he had signed—and it made her eyes sting and her confused emotions rise to the surface again. She pictured the young, joyful boy Mrs. MacKinnon had spoken of, standing before this document with an older Angus behind him, encouraging him to put quill to paper, to sign away his freedom.

Beneath Malcolm’s name was Angus’s more practiced and confident signature. Elizabeth gritted her teeth at the sight of it—evidence of the imbalance of power between the two men.

She read through the language of the document, recognizing the same masculine script she had seen throughout other papers in the chest—Angus’s handwriting.

Be it kenned that I, Malcolm MacKinnon, did purposefully and willfully this day strike my father, Cameron MacKinnon, to his death.

After such a barbaric act, and to prove my loyalty, I, Malcolm

MacKinnon, do this day pledge my fealty to Angus MacKinnon of Benleith, Captain and Chief of Clan MacKinnon, and to his heirs in all and sundry their actions, causes, quarrels, debates. . . .

Every friend to him shall be friend to me, every foe of his a foe of my own.

...

In return, Angus MacKinnon of Benleith, does agree to protect me and my family, so long as I shall abide by the terms of this bond. . . .

Had Malcolm even known what he was signing?

A youth, fresh from the upheaval of realizing he had killed his own father, might well have overlooked what, in his desperation to avoid the gallows, was clear now to Elizabeth: the obvious exploitation of his situation, the turning of it to Angus's benefit. Angus himself could not have been much more than twenty at the time the document was drawn up, for she knew him to be nearing thirty.

Never before had Elizabeth truly considered the closeness of kinship between Angus and Malcolm. The MacKinnons had a reputation for rashness and a tendency to drink too much. Gordon had been a prime example of that. And, from what Elizabeth had understood, a number of the MacKinnon men had met early demises as a result—whether direct or indirect—of an inability to moderate their consumption of strong drink. She had witnessed enough of the brute Gordon became under the influence of whisky to believe that Malcolm's father might well have had the same trait.

With both Gordon and his father gone, though, Benleith and the MacKinnon lairdship would fall to Malcolm if anything were to happen to Angus. Elizabeth had no trouble imagining that Angus had seen in Malcolm's situation an opportunity to wield control over a potential challenger to his authority.

So, Angus had hung this document over Malcolm's head for the past decade.

So many thoughts and emotions swirled around inside Elizabeth that she shut her eyes in an attempt to focus. Whether or not Malcolm had been justified in killing his father, it was not his only violent act. *He* had lit the fire in Christina's room, not Angus; *he* had precipitated a night of panic—one that had haunted Elizabeth ever since.

She believed it had been done under Angus's orders, but she did not know how much that should count for. Did it absolve Malcolm of responsibility? And what of his claims that he had taken measures to ensure

no one was hurt?

Ye'd have done the same thing in my place. That was what he had said. Was it true? To what lengths would she be willing to go if it meant saving her sister or her other siblings?

It was the decision she faced even now, sitting beside a pile of documents which could bring down Angus MacKinnon. He was a man who deserved to be stopped, surely, and fate had given her the means to do it. But, just as she had warned Malcolm after the trial, she knew Angus wouldn't hesitate to shift whatever blame he could from himself, bringing down Malcolm in the process. Malcolm *and* his family.

It was too much for her to puzzle through on her own, too much responsibility and power to take on for a mind and heart as confused as hers.

She gripped the document more tightly in her hands and stood, heart pattering more quickly. Christina had kept things from Elizabeth for a time after Gordon's death, and Elizabeth had made her promise not to do so anymore. Now, it was Elizabeth's secrets putting distance between them. Whatever she did, Elizabeth couldn't feel confident in a course of action without Christina's knowledge and approval. Elizabeth's judgment, after all, had proven to be wrong.

Lachlan's thick brows were knit together as he looked over the document he held in his hand. He looked up at Elizabeth. Christina sat beside her on the bed, an arm around Elizabeth's shoulders.

"It reads very much like a bond of manrent, does it not?" Elizabeth asked.

He nodded and handed it back to her. "I reckon 'tis no' legal."

"I suspected as much," Elizabeth said. "But it hardly matters, does it? If Angus was to publish the contents of it, it would ruin Malcolm, and we, of all people, know that Angus would never be punished for it."

Lachlan's head tipped from side to side. "Perhaps no'. Only an advocate or Writer ta the Signet would ken for certain what might happen."

Elizabeth sighed and looked down at the paper. "And all of them are in Angus's pocket."

Lachlan tipped his head from side to side. "Why do ye no' ask Mr. McCabe? I doubt Angus's reach has extended ta him."

Elizabeth looked up. "Who?"

"Mr. McCabe. He's at Glengour for a night or two. 'Tis the man Hamish told us of when he first arrived. He's been waitin' ta speak with him for weeks now. Perhaps he would cast a glance over that for ye and tell ye what he makes of it."

Elizabeth stood quickly, and Christina's arm dropped from her shoulders. "Truly?"

"Aye," he said. "But what will ye do with what ye learn?"

She bit her lip. "I wish to know what the options are first."

Christina pushed herself up from the bed, and Lachlan hurried over to help her. "And if it comes to choosing between justice for Angus or mercy for Malcolm and his family?"

Elizabeth took in a deep breath and stared at the signatures on the document again. That was not a decision she felt capable of making just yet.

Mr. McCabe was a middle-aged man with a set of thin, wiry glasses perched on his nose and hair covered by a wig of neat gray. Elizabeth had paid him no mind when she had seen him at Glengour before, but her attention was rapt as she waited for his reaction to the document in his hands.

Sitting beside Mr. McCabe was Hamish, whose gaze shifted between the Writer, the document, and Miss Innes. He wore a somber expression and had done since Elizabeth acquainted him with enough of the facts to help him understand her desire to speak with the man. More than anything, he had seemed troubled and sad at what she had told him.

Elizabeth had been nervous about seeing Malcolm's family again, conflicted as she was feeling, but they were helping Glenna in the fields, and the inn was relatively quiet.

Bannerman sat at a table nearby, sipping from a cup of ale. Christina's pleas for Elizabeth to take him along hadn't been necessary. Elizabeth knew the value of the document she held, and she would never be able to forgive herself if she were accosted and the document wrested from her. Bannerman's presence set her more at ease.

Mr. McCabe cleared his throat and set the document on the table in front of him, a look of distaste on his face. "Certainly not legal. And, in my

experience, the Crown has little patience for such documents. They are a relic of a past they have no desire to return to—a time when they found it impossible to compete with the power and influence of clan chieftains. I am fairly confident that, if such a case were to be tried in court, I could obtain a favorable outcome against this”—he picked up the document and glanced at it again—“Angus MacKinnon.”

“And what of the incriminating information against Malcolm MacKinnon?” she asked, feeling a rush of nerves at what Mr. McCabe’s response might be. “Would trying such a case not bring about his conviction?”

“If he did indeed murder his father, yes.”

Elizabeth’s heart dropped. Whatever Malcolm’s crimes, whatever anger and hurt he had caused her, she couldn’t subject him to hanging for the sake of what would in all likelihood amount to a slap on the wrist for Angus.

She gave a polite smile to Mr. McCabe and picked up the document. “Thank you very much for your help, sir. I shan’t keep you any longer.” She rose from the table and, suppressing a disappointed sigh, made her way to the door. Bannerman took a last gulp of ale and stood to follow her.

“Miss Innes,” Hamish said, hurrying over.

She turned to him, raising expectant eyebrows. “Yes?” She didn’t want him to see how disappointed she was. She faced the exact dilemma Christina had mentioned: a choice between justice for Angus and mercy for Malcolm’s family.

Hamish’s forehead wrinkled, and his lips turned down at the sides. “I dinna wish ta tell ye what ta do, but. . . I believe meself a fair judge of character, Miss Innes, and if Malcolm were ta go ta trial tomorrow, I’d provide testimony of his character.”

Elizabeth’s stomach clenched, but she could find no response.

He lifted his shoulders. “I’ve spent a great deal of time with him over the past wee while, and I admire the man. I ken ye do as well.”

She swallowed, more than ever lacking words. Even if she’d had them, they wouldn’t have made it past the lump in her throat.

Hamish put a hand on her shoulder, and she saw sympathy in his eyes. “Malcolm is easy prey for a man like Angus. A man who only cares for his own power and pleasure canna be easily controlled. He has nothin’ ta lose. But a man who cares more for others than for himself has a chink in his armor.” He held her gaze. “I dinna doubt Malcolm has made his fair share of

mistakes—we all do. Just be certain *yer* mistake is no' punishin' him a second time for havin' the heart and courage ta love his family in such a way. Angus has done a good enough job of that already, I reckon." He dropped the hand from her shoulder. "He loves ye. I ken that. I've seen it. And he trusted ye enough ta put his family's future in yer hands. That says a great deal about his character."

He gave her a sympathetic grimace and turned away, leaving her with tears in her eyes and the document trembling in her hand.

OceanofPDF.com

Malcolm had been pacing around the small room since Elizabeth's departure. Fergus had joined him for a time then settled into the corner to watch him, no doubt confused why his master insisted upon walking the same four steps it took to span the length of the room, only to turn around and walk it again.

Malcolm's broken rib throbbed beneath the poultice the footman had applied an hour ago. The young man had tried his best, but his hands had fumbled a great deal. They simply weren't as soft and gentle as Elizabeth's.

He stopped at the far wall of the bedchamber, setting a hand on the cold stone and letting his forehead drop against it just below the small window that let in the only natural light in the room. The coolness of the rock wall sent a chill through him, and he let out a sigh. Thoughts of Elizabeth were, in many ways, more painful than his ribs.

He had hurt her. He had seen the evidence of it in her eyes, much as she had tried to hide it. It was that hurt which had prompted her to leave the room when she did.

In some ways, Malcolm felt free, unburdened. He had told her the truth, and that had relieved the weight hanging over him for some time now. If nothing else, he had been able to tell her he loved her. Whether she believed him or not, they were the last words he had spoken to her, for he did not anticipate she would return to see him. He hoped she knew him well enough to feel their veracity and his sincerity.

What would she do now? That, he couldn't say for certain. Elizabeth Innes was a woman with a strong sense of justice and a motivation just as

strong to see Angus MacKinnon receive his comeuppance. If he tried to see things from her point of view, the only way to protect her sister from Angus might appear to be using the contents of the charter chest against him.

And what was Malcolm to do? Sit in this room and wait to see what his fate was? To see whether her sense of justice or mercy would win out? Whether he would be convicted and his family turned out of their home, with no kin to take them in and no means to sustain themselves?

He could have borne the consequences of his own actions, but he could not leave his family's well-being in the balance. It was not an option. He had allowed Angus control over his life for long enough—this was not the time to place fate in anyone's hands but his own, much as he loved Elizabeth and hoped his fears were misplaced.

He needed a way to escape, but the only way he could see to do so was to capitalize upon the opportunity provided by the entrance of the next servant.

He grimaced. It was footmen who had been coming most of the time, and aside from his reluctance to use violence, Malcolm was extremely limited in the amount of force available to him with his ribs injured and his vision impaired.

As if on cue, the scraping of a key in the lock sounded, and Malcolm whirled around to see who it might be. Fergus limped over to his master's side as if he, too, was wary.

It was one of the maids, and she looked at Malcolm with a small smile. He had been kind enough to all of the servants that they showed him respect. What they knew of him, he wasn't sure.

“Ye've a visitor, Mr. MacKinnon,” said the maid.

His brows shot up as his brother appeared in the doorway. “Dugan.”

Dugan looked just as surprised as Malcolm as his eyes roamed over Malcolm's face.

“Dinna fash yerself,” Malcolm said before Dugan could say anything.

“Nay, then. I was only about ta say that I didna ken ye could look any uglier than ye did before, but. . . .” He let out a chuckle, and Malcolm felt his heart lighten a bit. It had been some time since Dugan had treated him with anything but resentment.

“I'll leave ye ta one another, then,” said the maid, and she shut the door.

Malcolm listened for the sound of the lock, but it never came, and his heart raced. This was his opportunity.

“What're ye doin' here?” Malcolm asked.

“I had ta return ta the house earlier, and I saw somethin’ under the door.”

Malcolm put a finger to his lips as footsteps sounded in the corridor, but they passed and faded.

“Come,” Malcolm whispered, pulling Dugan’s arm. “We must go.”

Dugan resisted and dug into the pocket of his waistcoat, pulling out a letter. “I reckon ye’ll wish ta read this afore ye do anythin’ else.”

Malcolm stilled, staring at his brother for a moment. Was it from Elizabeth? It couldn’t be. She wouldn’t have sent it to the house.

Dugan handed him the paper, and with a swallow, Malcolm glanced at the script on the front. It was not one he recognized—certainly not Elizabeth’s—and the letter was dirty, as though it had been handled by a number of people with soiled hands.

He flipped it around and broke the wafer, unfolding the page and glancing down at the signature at the bottom. He took in a sharp breath. Mungo Forbes.

He looked up at Dugan, eyes wide. “‘Tis from Uncle Mungo.”

Dugan peered at it, nodding his head. “Just as Mother suspected. I didna believe her.”

Malcolm’s eyes sped over the contents of the short letter. Relief such as he hadn’t felt in years washed over him, and he felt a lump in his throat. “He didna ken of our whereabouts. He stopped writin’ when his letters kept goin’ unanswered.” He swallowed. “He’ll take us in gladly.”

“Take us in where?” Dugan asked with brows knit together. “What do ye mean?”

“Kildrummy.” Malcolm looked at his brother, dropping the letter to his side. “We canna stay at Benleith, Dugan. No’ anymore. It’s no’ safe. We start the journey ta Kildrummy today. It canna wait.”

“Journey ta Kildrummy?” Dugan said, blinking in surprise. “That must take a fortnight.”

“Aye,” Malcolm said grimly. He didn’t relish the prospect of it.

“And just how do ye intend ta get there?”

“I’ve a wee bit of money set aside—in case it ever came ta this, but ‘twill be a rough journey. We’ll go ta Glengour—I reckon Hamish and Glenna will give us some food and drink—then take the wagon ta Fort William and find our way from there.”

Malcolm couldn’t allow himself to think of what they would be leaving behind. They couldn’t even risk going to their home. They had little enough

of value there, but it was still the only home his family had known for years.

Dugan was silent, and Malcolm guessed his mind was on Bridget MacMorran.

“Is it Bridget?” Malcolm asked. “I ken what I’m askin’ of ye, Dugan. And I wish I didna have ta do it.”

Dugan’s mouth turned down in a frown, and he shook his head. “Ye’ve been right all along. There was never any hope for me and Bridget—her father would never allow it. I told her as much, and she agreed.”

Malcolm swallowed and put a hand on Dugan’s shoulder, saying nothing. He knew the pain of loss in his brother’s eyes. He felt it in every inch of his own body. At least they could nurse their wounds together.

“Come,” Malcolm said with a determined set to his jaw. “Afore the maid returns.” He didn’t know if Lachlan would have them pursued—the laird’s concern was Malcolm’s presence *inside* Dunverlockie, after all—but he wasn’t willing to risk it, not when he couldn’t be certain what Elizabeth would do with the power she now had.

This was their chance to leave everything behind—Angus, the MacKinnons, the past.

And Elizabeth. Someday, she, too, would be just a painful memory.

He glanced at Fergus and then at the small table in the corner. “Just one more thing.”

Elizabeth tried to control her breathing, but it was difficult with so many sets of Kincaid eyes fixed upon her. The large men seemed to fill the library of Dunverlockie. In front of her feet sat the charter chest, open for all to see. She looked at Christina, hoping she might more easily gauge her reaction than she could in the gazes of men she was less familiar with.

Christina stood beside Lachlan, her brown eyes calm as she held Elizabeth's gaze. She gave a subtle nod—a gesture of support. She, at least, understood and agreed with Elizabeth's plan, though it had required a great deal of explaining and persuasion to arrive at that point.

“And that has been sittin’ in Dunverlockie for months?” Roddy Kincaid asked, nodding to indicate the chest.

“Yes,” Elizabeth said. “Angus was too afraid of what we might do with it to alert us to its presence.”

“And ye wish for us ta come with ye ta return it ta him?” Roddy's brows were drawn together, evidence of what he thought of such a plan.

“Yes. And no,” Elizabeth replied. “I wish to return *some* of it to him—on one condition.”

“What condition?” Lachlan asked. His brow was just as deeply furrowed as she had expected it to be. She was asking a great deal of him, and she knew it, but she hoped he would be able to see that her idea was the least unpalatable choice before them.

She tipped her head from side to side. “Two conditions, really. The first, that he cease his use of threats to obtain his purposes, and second, that he surrender another document in his possession.”

Roddy narrowed his eyes at her. “What document?”

“A copy,” she said. “A copy of a document he has been using to control Malcolm MacKinnon and his family for the last decade. An illegal one.” She looked back to her brother-in-law’s grim face. “What do you say, Lachlan?”

If she couldn’t gain Lachlan’s support, there was no use having all the other Kincaid men in the room, but she had hoped having them there would prove to her advantage—to remind Lachlan of the strength they had together. Normally, she would have simply consigned them all to the devil and gone herself, but she was less of a hotheaded fool than many chose to think her, and she knew Angus well enough to anticipate what he would do to her if she were to approach him without any support.

“Lachlan,” she said, a hint of pleading in her voice. “I know you wish for peace between Dunverlockie and Benleith, but men like Angus do not understand or desire peace. They only understand force. If you do this, you will have enough evidence in your possession to ensure compliance. Angus will be forced to play by *your* rules, and *then* you may set the precedent for peace between the families.”

“Doin’ ta him the verra thing he’s done ta Malcolm MacKinnon and all these other men.” He gestured to the chest. “I dinna like it, Elizabeth.”

She shook her head. “There is a great deal of difference between what you will be doing and what Angus has done. You seek peace—and the well-being of both his people and yours. He seeks power—and only for himself.”

Lachlan scrubbed a hand over his short beard. “We’ll go with ye. We’ll return the documents that rightly belong ta him—the ones he canna use ta hurt anyone.”

Elizabeth sucked in a breath, smiling for the first time.

“But”—Lachlan put up a hand—“I willna keep the other ones. We’ll burn them—right here.” He indicated the fire grate, which contained only the dark remnants of last night’s fire. “And we’ll tell him we’ve done so.”

Elizabeth’s short-lived relief evaporated, and her shoulders sank. She looked to Christina, who gave her a sympathetic grimace.

Lachlan didn’t miss the exchange. “I’ll no’ stoop ta Angus MacKinnon’s level. I’ll no’ give him reason ta come here again—or send anyone in his place—as I’m certain he would do if he believed I held these papers he finds so valuable.”

Elizabeth clenched her jaw. She respected her brother-in-law immensely for his principled stance, but she couldn’t help fearing he might come to

regret it.

“Very well,” she said. “But he must agree—in writing—not to gather more of the sort of documents we have burned.” At least Angus would see that the Kincaids did not intend to let him ride over his people rough-shod—and that they were aware of his dealings.

Lachlan nodded and dropped his hands, taking on a more decisive stance. “You and Christina can sort through the documents—give us the ones to be burned. And then we leave. I want to be done with it all.” He looked around at his kinsmen, who gave nods of assent.

Christina came over to Elizabeth as the room began to fill with chatter. “It is not entirely what you wanted, I know.”

“No,” Elizabeth agreed, “but I hope it will be enough.”

“It cannot be easy,” Christina said, taking her arm, “letting Angus go free when you have the means to do otherwise. Did not Mr. McCabe tell you he would take on the manrent document?”

“He did,” Elizabeth said, “but it would do more injury to Malcolm and his family than it would to Angus. I would rather see Angus walk free than an innocent family condemned.” She took in a deep breath. It had not been an easy decision to come to, for it meant that Angus would likely have more victims in the future. And if he did, she would be waiting. “A man like Angus cannot stop himself from contravening the law. In time, justice will be served.” She had to believe that.

She didn’t know if what she was doing was right. But she believed there was less regret in erring on the side of mercy. She hoped it.

“What of you and Malcolm?” Christina asked.

Her gaze searched Elizabeth’s face intently, and Elizabeth took in a deep breath. “I do not know.”

It was the truth. Too much had happened since learning about the tartan for her to understand what she wanted or what she felt. At times, she wanted nothing more than to march down to Malcolm’s room and rail at him for using her so ill. At other times, she saw the shaky signature of the young boy who had killed his father in an attempt to protect his mother, and she wanted only to wrap him in her arms for all he had gone through.

Only with time would it become clear which sentiment would win out.

For now, she could at least save him and his family—and the many others appearing in the chest’s contents—from Angus’s grip. She hoped the answers to her questions and unsurety would be found after.

For so long, Malcolm had had this document hanging over his head. Only when he was free of it would Elizabeth be able to know what to believe of him—and whether to believe him. Were his mistakes and crimes truly borne of love for his family, or had Angus’s corruption reached his very soul? Did he truly love her, or was she merely a means to an end?

Those were questions she couldn’t dwell on now, for they filled her with too many conflicting emotions: anxiety, hope, despair, impatience.

All she could do was make her own choice, act her part. And that was just what she intended to do.

The carriage wheels rumbled over the uneven dirt road, but Elizabeth could still hear the thundering hoofbeats of the Kincaid men who rode before and behind her. It was an entourage fit for a queen, and a sadness crept over her at the thought.

Your Majesty tonight. Prisoner again in the morning.

Malcolm was still locked inside his room like a prisoner. She hoped it would only be a matter of an hour or two before she could give him the true key to his freedom, do with it what he would.

The charter chest sat between her feet on the floor of the carriage, much lighter than it had been an hour ago. They had burned well over forty documents. Malcolm’s was not one of them. That honor should go to him, so it sat beside her in the carriage where she could keep it safe. Christina had agreed to stay at Dunverlockie with a few of the Kincaid men—the less she saw of Angus and the less he saw of her, the better, after all his threats against her.

Elizabeth looked through the carriage window as they passed Glengour. The commotion their group made traveling on the road had brought everyone outside to witness what was happening. With the exception of Malcolm and Dugan, Flora MacKinnon was surrounded by her children, and Elizabeth’s heart rose into her throat at the sight of them there. What would they do once free of their bonds? It seemed unlikely they would wish to remain at Benleith with Angus.

Perhaps Lachlan would take them on as tenants. But Elizabeth had asked enough of her brother-in-law for one day. At the least, they might help the

MacKinnons find a suitable situation somewhere away from Angus's influence.

Winifred's eyes lit up at the sight of Elizabeth, and she waved exuberantly. Elizabeth waved back and smiled, feeling encouragement for what they were doing. Winifred deserved freedom. She deserved a chance at life without the fear of Angus.

Fifteen minutes later, Benleith Castle came into view. Elizabeth looked with curiosity at the building looming before her as she stepped down from the carriage. It was much darker than Dunverlockie, and larger, too—made of cold, gray stone with half a dozen conical turrets rising up into the cloudy sky.

Roddy slipped behind Elizabeth and into the carriage, emerging with the charter chest in his arms and an unlit torch and flint box atop it.

He put down the chest and set to lighting the torch, despite the fact that it was still daylight outside, just as Elizabeth had instructed.

The last of the Kincaid men dismounted as the door to Benleith opened and a servant emerged. Elizabeth had once said that Malcolm's brooding expression was evidence of how miserable it must be to spend one's days in Angus's company, and the expression of the servant whose gaze traveled over the lot of them supported her in such a notion.

"What's this?" he asked.

"We are here to speak with Angus," Lachlan said, taking off his cocked hat and walking up to meet the servant. "My name is Kincaid. Of Dunverlockie."

The servant gave him a measuring look before responding. "I'll see if he's available ta speak with ye."

Lachlan thanked him, and the man disappeared with a backward glance at the group of intimidating men assembled on his master's property.

Elizabeth took in a steadying breath and walked up beside Lachlan. There was no reason to be frightened with a dozen Kincaid men surrounding her, but she was still nervous. Could Angus be so cold-blooded that he would refuse to hand over the copy of the bond of manrent? She couldn't imagine Lachlan would agree to engage in any sort of combat with him or use physical force.

That was why they had the torch.

The door opened a few minutes later, and Angus emerged with Gregory and Ivor on either side of him. Angus's brow was wrinkled slightly, but he

gave no other indication that he was alarmed by the appearance of so many brawny Kincaid men at his estate.

His gaze ran over the lot of them, pausing on Elizabeth for a brief moment before continuing on to the others. Elizabeth glanced behind her, looking for the charter chest. She spotted it on the ground at Roddy's feet. The man beside him—one of the Kincaid kinsmen only more recently come—held the torch.

“What an unexpected surprise,” Angus said placidly, but Elizabeth could see the wariness in his eyes. “To what do I owe this pleasure, Kincaid?”

“We've come ta speak with ye, Angus.”

“Speak?” He said with a raising of the brows. “I had assumed otherwise given the number of you here. The torch, too, had me a bit confused. Am I to welcome you all in for dinner?”

“Nay,” Lachlan said. “We willna take much of yer time. We have somethin' which belongs ta ye.” He looked back and gave a nod to Roddy, who picked up the charter chest and stepped forward, coming abreast of Elizabeth and Lachlan. Elizabeth met gazes with the man holding the torch and gave him a speaking look. He followed Roddy forward.

Satisfied, Elizabeth turned back to Angus, keeping her eyes firmly upon him. She knew a great deal of satisfaction as she saw his eyes widen slightly and his body stiffen at the sight of the chest. But the evidence of his surprise was short-lived, and his expression quickly became neutral again. “How thoughtful of you.” He stepped down as if intending to take it, but Lachlan put up a hand.

“Nay, Angus. We must speak first.”

Angus paused in place, but his jaw tightened in annoyance, and his eyes flicked to the chest again. Elizabeth was certain she witnessed the exact moment he became aware of the lack of lock.

“By all means,” he said tightly.

Elizabeth nudged Lachlan, and he looked down at her. She looked a question at him, and he gave a nod.

“Before we return this chest to you,” Elizabeth said, “we need two things.”

Angus's lip curled up at the edge as he looked at her, just as it always did. “And what two things might those be, Miss Innes?” He said her name as if it was an insult.

“When the chest was discovered,” she said, “you can imagine how

perplexed we were, not being familiar with it. We were obliged to break it open, I'm afraid." She gave him a feigned look of sympathy. "An unfortunate oversight had led to the presence of a number of documents which did not belong to you. We have taken the liberty of removing—and destroying—those."

His nostrils flared, and the muscles in his jaw became more rigid. "Have you now?"

"Yes," she replied as genially as she could. "It will be much easier for you to find the documents you truly care about now that it is not littered with those belonging to other people."

His lips turned up in an angry sneer, and Elizabeth guessed he would have made for her throat if she had not been surrounded by Kincaid men.

"If you did as you say you have done," he said, "what could you possibly need from me?"

"First, a promise that you will cease collecting the sort of documents discovered in this chest and using them against people." She held his gaze firmly. "No more blackmail."

Angus seemed less than perturbed by this request, and he gave a nod. "Very well."

Elizabeth held his gaze. Did he think she would simply trust him at his word? It was little wonder he gave his agreement so easily. "Since you seem to be in such favor of documenting things, we have made up our own agreement for you to sign, formalizing your assent to this term." She looked to Roddy, and from the charter chest, he retrieved the paper set atop all the others. Elizabeth took it in hand and looked to Angus. "Do you have a quill?"

His jaw was hard as steel, but he looked to the servant behind him. The man disappeared, and Elizabeth and the Kincaids waited.

"What is the second thing you require?" Angus asked.

"Let us take one thing at a time," Elizabeth said with a smile.

Angus didn't respond.

The servant returned shortly, and Elizabeth walked up the steps to provide the document for signing. Angus looked over it, and she watched his expression as he did so—the flared nostrils, the muscles working in his jaw, the black brow.

Finally, he put the quill to the paper, scratching a signature much like the one on Malcolm's document.

She gave an approving nod and took the paper back, ceding it to Lachlan

before addressing herself to Angus again.

“Now for the second matter. You have in your possession a copy of one of the documents that was in this chest. In order to aid you in your journey to become a proper, law-abiding laird, we require the copy to be surrendered to us for destroying.”

“And what document might that be?” he asked, but something in his gaze told Elizabeth that he suspected the truth.

“A bond of manrent,” she said, “between you and Malcolm MacKinnon.”

“I have no idea to what you refer.”

Elizabeth raised her brows, undeterred. “If you are so unfamiliar with the documents contained in the chest, no doubt you will not miss any of them.” She reached in and took two papers out. One of them contained the official seal of the Lord Lyon and the MacKinnon coat of arms. She turned toward the torch and extended the documents toward the flame.

“Stop!” Angus cried out, lunging toward her, only to stop short as Kincaid men closed in around her, some of their hands stealing to their sides, where each concealed a *sgian dubh*.

Elizabeth drew the papers back from the flame, fixing her gaze on Angus.

Little spasms of anger rippled across his face as he looked from her to the papers in her hand. “There is no copy.”

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes, pausing a moment. “I do not believe you.” She reached the papers back toward the torch, and the edge of one touched the flame.

“No!” Angus said, his eyes feverish with panic and his hands extended, pleading for her to stop. “I swear it! There is no copy!”

She had never seen him in such a vulnerable state, so agitated and unhinged. Only a man obsessed with power and position would react in such a way to seeing the written evidence of his authority at risk of being burned to ashes.

“Then why claim otherwise?” she asked.

“I feared Malcolm would destroy the original document if he had the chance.” Angus’s eyes remained fixed on the glowing document as the words tumbled over one another.

The subtle smell of burning paper filled the air as the corners of the two documents singed.

“I swear it!” Angus cried out.

Elizabeth pulled the papers back toward her and watched as the orange

glow at the corner of the papers faded to black, the fire's progress stopped.

Angus's chest was rising and falling under his neat waistcoat and bright white cravat, his eyes still wide with wary horror, watching Elizabeth as though she might order the torch be put to the entire chest at any given moment.

She kept her gaze fixed on him. She was inclined to believe he was telling the truth, but she looked to Lachlan, who was watching Angus under a frowning brow. He glanced at Elizabeth and nodded. He believed him, too.

She stared at Angus, suddenly hesitating. To give Angus the chest Roddy held was to cede all power over him, and it went against everything inside her. What good was the word of Angus MacKinnon, after all, even if written in ink?

But she had agreed to surrender the chest to him, and she knew Lachlan too well to believe he would let her do otherwise. He might well violate his agreement with them, but at least they had deprived him of the documents he had already collected.

She dropped the papers into the chest and shut the lid before she could doubt her decision, nodding curtly at Roddy to give Angus the chest. He received it with a breath of relief.

"If we find you have gone against our agreement," Elizabeth said, "you can rest assured we will see you brought before the court. And even *you* can only hide from justice for so long. We hope, though, that this is instead the beginning of a long and peaceful period between Benleith and Dunverlockie and all their tenants."

Elizabeth's heart beat erratically as the carriage arrived back at Dunverlockie. She held two documents in her hand. The one Angus had signed, she would entrust to Lachlan and make him swear to guard it with his life. The other she would give to Malcolm to destroy. She had read it ten times over, and each time, she grew more sick at what Angus had done, at the way he had manipulated a boy in his darkest moment.

Part of her wished to keep the paper intact, to retain the only piece of evidence she still possessed of Angus's willingness to contravene the law when it served his interests. But she couldn't do so without putting Malcolm

and his family at risk. Malcolm would never be able to rest until the document was destroyed.

She glanced at the signature for what seemed like the hundredth time and imagined her own brother, Ross. He had the same fiery temper as she did—and a protective streak when it came to their younger sister, Charlotte, even though they fought like cats most days.

Ross was older now than Malcolm would have been at the time he had signed this document, and Elizabeth knew how easy it would be to take advantage of his innocence.

She gripped the document more tightly and set her jaw determinedly. The boy who had signed this document deserved to be free of the past, and his family certainly deserved to be free of it, too. Malcolm should know what life was like without having to dirty his hands to keep his family safe from conniving men.

She glanced through the window in time to catch a glimpse of Glengour, smiling softly as she thought on the happy news Flora MacKinnon and her children would have tomorrow.

With the tinder box in one hand and the documents in the other, she descended from the carriage and hurried into the castle, while the men continued to the stables with their horses.

She took the stairs down to the servant quarters, and her fingers began to shake at the thought of seeing Malcolm. She would tell him that there was no copy in existence, and she would give him the means to destroy the document himself. That way, he would never doubt whether it had been done.

And then, she would leave him. And perhaps he would leave, too, now that his task had been fulfilled. She had to prepare herself for that possibility.

She brushed away the feeling of despair and hurt such a prospect brought upon her and took in a deep if somewhat shaky breath, slowing as she approached the room.

The door was partially open, and she hurried over to it.

Janet was inside, and she whirled around toward Elizabeth, a key in one hand and a folded paper in the other. Fergus limped over to Elizabeth, nudging her hand with his large snout.

“He’s gone, miss,” said Janet, her eyes wide.

“Gone?” Elizabeth asked.

“Aye,” said the maid. “He had a visitor—his brother, I think—and I left them together, no’ wishin’ ta encroach on their privacy. ‘Twas only a few

minutes, I swear. I didna think. . . .”

Elizabeth’s stomach clenched, but she shook her head, setting down the document and tinderbox so she could take the note in hand. “How long has he been gone?” He would never leave Fergus.

Janet gave an apologetic shrug. “Two hours, perhaps?”

Elizabeth’s heart sank. “Search the castle,” she said, but she knew he would not be found.

Janet nodded and quickly slipped out of the room.

Elizabeth looked down at the note she held, her heart hammering against her chest. There was writing on both sides, and her hands fumbled to open the paper. It was addressed to Malcolm, followed by a dozen or so lines of writing and signed at the bottom by a Mungo Forbes. Forbes. That was his mother’s family.

She flipped the letter over, and her heart stuttered at the sight of her own name. The handwriting was shaky and uneven, much like that of the young Malcolm who had signed a bond of manrent. Writing with his broken ribs must have been painful.

Elizabeth,

I only write ta say goodbye. I wish I could have done so in person, but perhaps ‘tis for the best. We go ta my mother’s kin, far from Angus and the MacKinnon name I’ve always hated.

I leave Fergus with ye. I hope he can protect ye and bring ye joy. I ken ye’ll take good care of him and that he’ll be content with ye.

I leave my heart as well, though I ken it means little to ye after all I’ve done. I never deserved ye, but I could never persuade my heart of that, so with ye it remains.

I’m sorry for everythin’—for bringin’ ye nothin’ but pain. If ye believe nothin’ else, believe that ‘twas all done in love.

Yours—always,

Malcolm

Elizabeth’s eyes fluttered as she looked at the signature at the bottom. Eyes losing focus, she slumped down on the bed as Fergus came up to her legs, resting his head on her lap.

He was gone. Malcolm was gone.

Aberdeenshire, September 1762

Malcolm slicked the sweat from his brow and set down the axe next to the stump he had been using to chop wood on. Summer had drawn to a close, and the cool air of the approaching evening sent a chill through him, despite how hard he was working.

It had been almost a month since their arrival at Kildrummy, and they were finally feeling settled in. There was a deep satisfaction for Malcolm in laboring with his hands again—in being his own man, determining his own fate, no longer answering to Angus. He didn't regret coming to Mungo's. At least, not most of the time. His family was happy. They were free—or as free as they could be.

He felt confident that, in time, he would be able to provide his family their own home. Mungo had already given him permission to build on a plot of land nearby, and Malcolm had drawn up plans for the home he hoped to build when that time came.

Every now and then, though, he felt unease—the unease of not knowing how far Angus might go to pursue him or wondering what Elizabeth had done with the charter chest and everything inside.

“Malcolm!”

He stepped out of the small grove. “What is it, Winnie?”

“A letter!” she said, running up to him with her hand extended. She said it as though she was bringing him correspondence from the King himself, but she pulled back the letter just as he reached for it, giving him a serious look. “Will ye read it ta me? By the fire?”

He couldn't blame her for her excitement. They hadn't received any letters since their arrival at Kildrummy. No one knew of their presence here, save Elizabeth—and whoever she might have told.

The thought increased his uneasiness. What if this was a summons to stand trial for his father's murder? It had perhaps been unwise to write his last message to her on the back of his letter from Mungo, but he'd had no other option, and part of him hadn't wanted to leave her with no idea where he might be found.

“Aye, Winnie,” he said, trying not to betray his impatience and fear. “But let me read it first.”

“Ye promise ye'll read it ta me?”

He hesitated. What if it *was* a court summons? Or a threat from Angus?
“If I think ‘twill interest ye, I promise I’ll read it ta ye.”

She pursed her lips but surrendered the letter.

He read his name and address on it with hungry eyes. The script was feminine, and his heart leapt. He stifled the emotion as swiftly as he could. He had no reason to look on the arrival of a letter from Elizabeth Innes with hope. Who could guess what she might have to say to him? She had not left him on good terms. Each time he missed her or wished to hold her, he had to remind himself of that fact.

“Go on, then, Winnie.” He didn’t want to consume the letter’s contents with an audience.

Reluctantly, Winnie turned and walked back to the house, though not without looking over her shoulder and saying, “I’ll be waitin’ by the fire.”

Malcolm stepped back into the privacy of the grove of trees and sat on the stump as he broke the wafer and unfolded the letter, trying to calm the thundering of his heart. He blinked in confusion as something fell from the letter and floated to the ground. He scrambled to catch at the fragments, only managing to reach one before it hit the ground.

He frowned at the ripped piece of paper. It was only the size of his fingertip, and he brought it closer to his face for a better view. All he could make out was a few letters. In the folds of the note in his lap, there were a few other scraps like it, along with the piece of tartan cloth he’d dropped at Glengour the night of the fire.

His heart skittered. What did it mean that she was returning it to him?

He swallowed and picked up the cloth, rubbing it between his fingers. It had been his link for so long to the hope of a life beyond Benleith, and now he was living that life. He set it in his pocket and looked to the words on the page, which shook along with his hands.

Dear Malcolm,

I hope this letter finds you well. Indeed, I hope it finds you at all, but I was assured that Walrick is a trustworthy vessel for such an important piece of correspondence—and one traveling so far. Did we not once agree that it was wise to keep the enemy close? I suppose it is fitting that you are so far away now, then.

I debated sending you the enclosed document in its original state, for it is certainly yours to destroy, but I feared too greatly that it might come into unfriendly hands, so I did what I believed the next most desirable thing: I

burned it myself and am sending it to you.

I do not include the entire contents of it here, for I fear if it were lost, you could never believe it was truly destroyed. Rest assured, the remainder of it is here with me in pieces like the ones you now possess. I shall hold it in safekeeping until I can be certain you have received this letter. If I do not receive communication from you in the next few weeks to inform me of its receipt, I will send a bit more with my next letter, hoping for better luck—and a different messenger. If you would like me to send the remaining contents, you need only say so. I do not include the copy, for it never existed. It was merely a fabrication of Angus's, meant to keep you from destroying the original.

I imagine you wish to hear news of Fergus. He has taken a liking to Colum in the stables, but he pines for you, particularly at night. Your family told me once that Fergus had become accustomed to sleeping at your feet. I offered him just such a place in my own bedchamber, only to find him lying by the door in the morning, apparently dissatisfied with his sleeping arrangements and looking for your return, as he so often does. You said in your note that you had left your heart behind. I have been too afraid to believe that. If true, though, it was an unfair exchange, for you took with you both Fergus's heart and my own. Whether your heart remains or ever truly was here, I do not know, but I hope the contents of this letter bring you the freedom you have been seeking for so long. I hope it allows you to breathe freely and deeply.

Walrick will be passing through Kildrummy on his return journey, so if there is anything you should wish to send with him, he will ensure its safe receipt here at Dunverlockie. I hope.

Please give my love to your family—to Winnie in particular.

Yours—always,

Elizabeth

Malcolm could hardly breathe as he picked up the largest of the fragments still sitting in the crease at the bottom of the letter. He could see the first part of his youthful signature, and he swallowed down the emotion that threatened to choke him.

Was this truly the end of the cloud that had hung over him for an eternity? A tear slipped from his eye, and he brushed it away.

“Does this mean ye'll no' read it ta me?” Winnie emerged from behind a tree, looking disappointed.

Malcolm let out a shaky laugh. It was a strange sound, and it *felt* even more strange. It was the first time he had laughed in nearly ten years without the oppressive threat of a piece of paper ready to stamp out his joy.

So, he did what Elizabeth had told him to do. He sucked in a deep breath, feeling it expand his lungs with fresh air, full of the scent of damp earth and green trees, and then he let it out in a long, slow exhale, eyes closed as he savored the feeling.

He was free.

Winnie gave a little *hmph*, and Malcolm opened his eyes, laughing as he stood and walked over to her. He wrapped an arm about her shoulders and planted a kiss on her hair.

“I’ll read it ta ye, Winnie.”

Well, maybe not all of it.

OceanofPDF.com

Dunverlockie Castle, October 1762

Elizabeth held up the edge of her coat as she took a look inside the drawing room at Dunverlockie, her gaze moving to the hearth. Her mouth turned down in a frown upon finding it vacant.

“Are you looking for Fergus?”

Elizabeth turned to her sister. Christina was just three short months away from her confinement, and the way her petticoats draped down from her round stomach was a reminder that the corridors of Dunverlockie would soon echo with baby cries. Elizabeth would welcome the distraction.

She shut the drawing room door. “Searching for Fergus seems to be all I do these days.” The bloodhound had developed a few favorite haunts at the castle. One was the spot on the drawing room hearth, another was with Colum, whether in the stables or in the kitchen.

His leg had healed fully—or as much as it ever could—and he had grown strong enough to accompany Elizabeth on her daily rides, as long as she kept a sedate pace.

“I saw him a few minutes ago, going down the staircase.”

Elizabeth’s lips drew into a thin line. “Thank you.” With a sigh, she walked to the stairs and made her way down. If it had been up to her, she would have avoided the servant quarters entirely, but Fergus would never allow it.

She took in a steadying breath as she approached the door in question and looked inside. As she had expected, the bloodhound was within, sniffing the bed. He lingered there and then, with a pattering of paws, moved to the spot on the stone floor he always sought on his clandestine visits to the room—generally, at least once a day. Always, he made a full inspection of the room, as if he could still smell his master and expected him to return any day now.

“Fergus,” Elizabeth said in a reprimanding voice.

His head came up, and he looked at her, his sagging eyes full of guilt.

“He is not here,” she said.

He gazed at her soulfully, expressing everything she felt inside at her own words.

It had been almost two months since she had sent the letter—plenty of time for it to arrive at Kildrummy and plenty of time for Malcolm to send a response. Whether he had never received it or simply chosen not to respond,

she didn't know. She was trying her best to come to terms with her feelings for Malcolm MacKinnon, to accept them for what they were—and what they would never be.

Sometimes, she believed she had succeeded, until she was obliged to come to this room to seek out Fergus or pay a visit to Glengour. The inn was full of Malcolm for her, from the nails in the floorboards he and Winnie had hammered to the place outside where she had seen Fergus in his arms.

She sighed. She would have to send another letter, as promised. Perhaps this time, she would forgo the confession she had made in the last letter. Her cheeks warmed at the realization that her admission of love had suffered one of two fates, both undesirable. Either a complete stranger was in possession of her heartfelt sentiments, or Malcolm had received them and not thought it worth responding.

Fergus pattered over to her, and with a sigh, she crouched down in front of him. "I know. I miss him, too." She ran her hand along his back, looking into his deep brown eyes, then stood. "I think a ride is in order." Anything to divert her attention from this room, once full of kisses and tenderness and promise, now full of unfulfilled hopes and a future that would never be.

Fergus sniffed the same spot on the floor a final time then followed her reluctantly from the room.

"Where shall we ride today?" she asked the hound.

She had been obliged to change the route she took along the coast, for whenever she skirted Benleith lands, Fergus was wont to abandon her and run toward the stone house Malcolm and his family had lived in, as if he thought he might find his master there. He brought new meaning to the phrase by Pope, "Hope springs eternal," and, to say truth, Elizabeth felt it, too. She wished she didn't, for the disappointment never seemed to ease, no matter how many times Fergus's searches ended without success.

They met Janet on the staircase, and she held out a paper toward Elizabeth. "A letter for ye from the inn, miss."

"Thank you, Janet." Elizabeth tried to mask her misgiving. She had been called upon a number of times to give her opinion on some change or another at Glengour, and even though she had great affection for both Glenna and Hamish, she tried to keep her visits as short as possible. Perhaps in time, the inn would no longer carry Malcolm's scent.

She broke the seal on the note and unfolded it while Fergus sniffed it from below.

Sure enough, it was from Hamish, asking her to come at her earliest convenience to provide them direction on a matter.

She sighed and looked to the hound. “Apparently, we are riding to Glengour.”

Fergus hobbled beside her to the stables, and, for his sake, she took a sedate pace to the inn on the main road. The weather had grown chilly, and they were likely to have their first snow any day now.

Elizabeth dismounted and handed off Caesar to the inn’s groom, calling for a panting Fergus to come along with her and find some water for him inside. They had begun keeping a dish for him in the kitchen.

The inn was warm, and Elizabeth felt a degree of satisfaction in the cozy atmosphere. It was much improved from what it had been under the care of Mr. Gibson, and a number of people sat at the tables and bar in the coffee room, providing a soft but constant buzz of conversation.

As usual, Fergus took to a meticulous sniffing of the floor, and Hamish appeared from the office just to the right of the front door.

“Ah, ye came,” he said with a smile. “Good day, Fergus.”

Fergus took no heed of Hamish, though, continuing his all-consuming inspection of the premises.

Elizabeth removed her hat, holding it in one hand while the other smoothed her hair. “Is there water in his bowl? He seems to have forgotten it in the excitement of the new smells here, but he is quite thirsty.”

“Aye,” Hamish replied. “Of course. I’ll fetch it.”

“Thank you, Hamish.”

He smiled and glanced upstairs. “Perhaps ye can see ta the issue with the floorboards while I go.”

“Very well.” She lifted her petticoats and set a foot on the next step. She was not averse to taking care of the task quickly, for it meant she would leave all the sooner. Fergus was already following the trail of a scent up the stairs. “Which room?”

“The Blue Room.”

Elizabeth nodded curtly, recognizing the new name for the room where the fire had occurred. Naturally, that would be where the problem lay. “I will have a look.”

“I’ll be up in naught but a moment,” Hamish said.

The room had always been a source of troubling emotion for her—at first, because of the terror from the night the fire had occurred. Now, it reminded

her of Malcolm—of the time they had spent there together and of her harshness when confronting him about his role in the fire—her refusal to listen to and understand the difficulty of his situation.

She had since spoken with Lachlan about the night of the fire. He had confirmed that he had been alerted to the presence of someone in the inn by a loud noise downstairs, and only then had he noticed the fire in Christina's room. The more Elizabeth had reflected on Malcolm's situation, the more her emotion had given way to reason. She could understand why he had done what he had done, and she couldn't help but admit that he had been right when he had claimed she would have done the same thing in his position. He had found a way to protect his family *and* those in the inn.

"Fergus," she said as she ascended the first few steps. He was already halfway up the stairs. "Go with Hamish."

But Fergus was not listening. He went still suddenly and then, all of a sudden, dashed up the remaining stairs with a loud bark.

Elizabeth glanced back at Hamish with a long-suffering look of commiseration and hurried up the stairs, hoping Fergus wouldn't disturb any of the guests. Just as he insisted upon visiting the room in the servant quarters of Dunverlockie each day, every time they came to Glengour, he came to the Blue Room.

Fergus stood before the shut door, and his loud, sonorous bark filled the cramped corridor, ringing in Elizabeth's ears.

"Fergus!" she said between a yell and a whisper as she walked over to him. "Stop it."

Fergus's tail was wagging, and he sniffed the floor where there was a gap between it and the door.

Elizabeth felt suddenly and inexplicably frustrated. "Stop, Fergus. He is not in there. How many times must I show you before you understand?" She pushed the door open, impatient for the painfully hopeful sniffing to stop.

She stopped abruptly, finding that the room was not vacant, as she had anticipated it would be. Embarrassed, she hurried to pull the door shut, but Fergus brushed past her legs and through the gap, pushing Elizabeth into the door jamb.

She hardly noticed, though, for she was staring at the man standing within—at Malcolm—and he was staring back at her. She blinked a few times in succession, wondering if all of Fergus's insistent wishing and hoping—and her own—had somehow conjured the form of Malcolm in her mind.

Fergus pranced in front of Malcolm, nudging the hand that hung down at his side with excited impatience, until finally Malcolm relented and crouched down, smiling.

“Och,” he said with a laugh as Fergus licked his face. “‘Tis good ta see ye, too, Fergus.”

There was no sign of the injuries that had marred his face the last time Elizabeth had seen him. A few days’ worth of stubble lined his jaw, and his clothes were dirty from travel. All Elizabeth could do was stare at the man she had never thought to see again—the man she had worried she would never even *hear* from again.

“Down, Fergus,” Malcolm finally said, and Fergus obediently lowered himself to the ground, though his head stayed upturned and his gaze fixed on Malcolm, as though he feared Malcolm might disappear if he took his eyes from him.

Elizabeth blinked, realizing that she, too, had been staring and that the thundering bark that had been ringing in her ears before opening the door had been replaced by the pounding of her heart.

“What are you doing?” she blurted out.

Malcolm’s brows rose, then his mouth curled up in a half-smile. “I think I prefer Fergus’s welcome.” He looked amused, but there was a hint of uncertainty in his eyes as he held her gaze.

“Have you come for the rest of the document?” she asked in a feeble attempt to stifle the hope she felt. “I told you I would have sent you the rest if you only wrote that you wished for it.” She could hear a hint of bitterness creep through her tone at not having received any response from him, at living with the uncertainty for what felt like a lifetime.

“I didna trust a letter ta find its way here—nor ta convey everythin’ I wished ta say.”

Elizabeth swallowed. If he was here to thank her for destroying the document, she didn’t know if she could bear it. She didn’t want his thanks. She couldn’t bear them.

“Did ye mean it?” Malcolm asked. Since calming Fergus, his eyes had yet to waiver from her. “What ye wrote.”

Elizabeth was too afraid to assume he was asking what her heart assumed he was asking. She looked to the hound. “Fergus has indeed been missing you.”

Malcolm laughed softly, and he stepped over the dog, who had found a

place next to his mud-caked boots. “Ye’re a stubborn lass, Elizabeth. And I’ve missed that stubbornness from the moment I last saw ye.”

Her breath caught in her throat as he came in front of her.

“Tell me now, for I canna wait another moment,” he said, looking at her intently. “Can ye ever forgive me? I willna blame ye if the answer is no, but yer letter gave me hope I had no right ta feel.”

She turned her head away. “The hope you felt upon reading my letter was no doubt a result of your relief at the document being destroyed, and—”

“Nay.” He took her hand in his and pulled her nearer, forcing her to meet his eye. “When I read ye’d destroyed it, I felt a burden lifted from my shoulders, from my soul—a burden I thought ta take ta my grave. And I’ll be forever grateful ta ye for what ye did.” He reached his other hand to her face, brushing his thumb along her cheekbone. “But I loved ye well before that, Elizabeth. And I will always love ye, no matter what ye feel for me now—whether ‘tis hatred or indifference or—”

“I do hate you,” she said.

His hand on her face stopped, and his eyes stared back at her with hurt and chagrin.

“I hate you for ever leaving me.” She pressed her lips to his, putting one insistent hand behind his head to pull him closer, while the other remained in his hand at their sides. He seemed momentarily stunned, but his lips soon returned her embrace, and his hand tightened its hold on hers.

The first time they had kissed, it had been in the shadows, a forbidden attachment, full of what could never be. Now, with the failing light of a chilly October day streaming through the curtains they had hung together, they kissed with the passion of promise and possibility, with months of unfed hope on their lips.

Elizabeth broke away and rested her head against his, putting a hand to his cheek and letting her thumb slide over the stubble, evidence of the journey he had made for her

“So,” she said, with a smile creeping across her mouth, “enemies again?”

He chuckled softly, pulling her even closer with the hand at the small of her back. “If this is how ye treat yer enemies, I forbid ye from ever havin’ another.”

“Is that right?” With the smile growing on her lips, she sought his again, and he welcomed her again, wrapping her in his arms and holding her to him with the hand on her back.

When they pulled apart, he looked at her with a gaze that put to rest every shred of doubt she had felt for the past two months, then took her hand and led her to sit on the bed beside him.

Fergus rearranged himself so that his body lay across their feet, and they shared an amused glance.

“He doesna intend ta be left again,” Malcolm said.

“Nor do I.”

He looked at her. “I willna leave ye, Elizabeth. No’ ever. No’ if ye truly want me.”

“I do. I want you more than I’ve wanted anything in my life.”

He tightened his hold on her hand, bringing it to his lips. “I want ye ta come with me ta Kildrummy. And I want ta marry ye. Before ye can change yer mind.”

She laughed, but her smile faded as she noted the lack of his. “You think I would? Change my mind?”

He grimaced. “It seems too good ta be true, yer lovin’ me, and after all I’ve done.”

She brought his hand to her cheek, closing her eyes as she felt the rough skin there. “I have not been the picture of kindness or decency to *you*, either, have I?”

He sighed. “I should have trusted ye sooner.”

She shook her head. “I gave you little reason to. And perhaps it was for the best. I needed time to sort through everything I was feeling.”

He turned his body toward her more fully and pulled her hands into his. “I dinna have much—no’ as much as ye’re used ta havin’. And I canna change my past. But I swear ta ye, I’ll take care of ye and love ye like no one else could.” He searched her eyes. “Will ye marry me? Will ye come with me?”

“I will marry you anywhere you wish and as soon as you wish it. And I will come to Kildrummy.” She saw her own joy reflected in his eyes. “But I cannot leave Dunverlockie before the birth of Christina’s baby.”

He nodded. “I ken, and I wouldna ask it of ye. I came prepared ta stay the winter.” He indicated the knapsack at his side. “The roads will be impassable before long.”

She looked at him with an incredulous smile. “How very confident you were in my response to your unexpected arrival. What would you do if I had rejected you?”

He chuckled, reaching a hand to the nape of her neck and pulling her

toward him for a kiss. “I’d have pretended I came for Fergus—and then begged Hamish ta keep me here a while.”

Elizabeth looked down at the sleeping dog on their feet. “It pains me to admit it, but Fergus would have gladly abandoned me for you. And as for Hamish, he may well try to persuade you to stay here. His good opinion of you knows no bounds—he has even managed to persuade Lachlan in your favor.”

“Och,” Malcolm said in surprise, “so Lachlan willna lock me up again at Dunverlockie, then?”

“I make no promises,” she said, kissing him through her smile. “Your Majesty tonight, prisoner again in the morning.”

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE

OceanofPDF.com

Dunverlockie Castle, January 1763

Small drops of condensation had begun to collect on the drawing room windows of Dunverlockie Castle, making it look as though it had rained, though the skies were dry for now. The fire blazing in the hearth combined with the peaceful scene in the room to warm everyone within, including the sleeping babe wrapped in a blanket in Christina Kincaid's arms.

Malcolm glanced at his wife, who stood at her sister's shoulder, peering down at the infant with a smile on her lips. Elizabeth was somehow even easier to admire now that she was his wife, and he knew a desire to have her beside him. He had thought that his seemingly insatiable desire for her company would dissipate after the wedding, but so far, after two months, that was not the case. He resisted the urge to go join her. They would have plenty of time with one another on the journey to Kildrummy.

Lachlan sat balanced on the arm of the chair his wife sat in, an arm wrapped around her shoulders and a softness in his eyes Malcolm had never before seen. He treated Sorcha—named after his mother—as if she was his own, and Malcolm liked him the better for it.

"She is a beauty, Christina." Elizabeth said. A twinkle came into her eye. "Have I already said that?"

"Perhaps once or twice." Christina gazed at her daughter with all the adoration of a tired but contented mother then glanced up at Elizabeth. "Would you like to hold her one last time?"

Elizabeth nodded and scooped the baby into her arms, glancing at Malcolm then coming to sit beside him on the couch. Fergus, who was lying at Malcolm's feet, shifted to make room for her, laying his chin on her boot afterward. There were a few small scars on his lame foot, the only remaining evidence of the incident with the trap.

Elizabeth settled in beside Malcolm, who wrapped his arm about her shoulders as she rearranged Sorcha's blanket. For a woman Malcolm had once thought coarse and aggressive, she looked very much at home with a baby in her arms.

Over the course of his life, Malcolm had come to know many people who were the worse for deeper acquaintance. Elizabeth was the opposite. The more he came to know her, the more he found to admire in her, and the more grateful he was she had chosen him. Everything she did, she did with her

whole heart. She was fiercely loyal, indomitable, clever, and a loving but vivacious wife. When they welcomed their own children—sooner than later, Malcolm hoped—he could be at peace knowing his daughters would be raised strong and kind, his sons imbued with respect and admiration for women, for Elizabeth would command it.

Malcolm tightened his hold about her. “Does it grieve ye ta leave her?” he asked softly. They would be departing for Kildrummy in less than an hour.

Elizabeth looked at him, and he was relieved to see no sadness in her eyes. “A bit, of course. But we shall return soon enough. I have had a great deal of time to hold her, which is just as well, for when Alistair arrives, he will monopolize her abominably. If he ever *does* arrive, that is.”

“He will,” Christina said, “once he has seen to everything at Melmuir. It is not easy to find new tenants, and there were matters to see to after the state the house was left in by the previous ones. I imagine we will see him here within the next two months.”

“When he does arrive,” Elizabeth said, “you must send him on to Kildrummy so that I may wring his neck for making me wait so long to see him.”

“I would prefer if you returned here to carry out your threats,” Christina said teasingly.

“I shall not complain if it means seeing more of Sorcha.”

Both she and Malcolm set to admiring the baby again.

“A bonnie wee gift she is,” Malcolm said.

“A gift to all of us—and an affliction to Angus.” She touched a gentle finger to Sorcha’s cap. “In a word, she is perfect.”

Malcolm glanced at Christina and Lachlan, who, based on the look of suppressed amusement they were sharing, had heard Elizabeth’s quip.

“Havin’ a bairn of his own may soften Angus,” Lachlan said. “I understand he’s ta become engaged ta Ava MacMorran.”

Elizabeth’s head snapped up, her eyes wide. “Perhaps we *should* stay, Malcolm. Make it our mission to save that poor girl.” She sent a mischievous glance at her sister and Lachlan, whose eyes had grown wide in dismay.

“Dinna listen ta her,” Malcolm said. “She only means ta torture ye.”

Elizabeth’s mouth broke into a smile as she rocked Sorcha lightly to calm her fussing. “I *would* like to save Ava MacMorran, but I am not acquainted with her enough to know if she *wishes* to be saved. Perhaps Angus suits her, though I cannot conceive of such an impossibility.” Sorcha settled, and

Elizabeth stopped her rocking. “If she does need saving, someone else will have to take up the task.”

Malcolm pulled his wife closer, planting a kiss on her temple. She was learning to pick her battles.

The door opened, and Hamish appeared, but he stilled on the threshold of the drawing room. “I’m sorry. I didna realize I was interruptin’ a family affair.”

Lachlan rose from the arm of the chair and ushered Hamish in with a hand. “Nay, Hamish. Ye ken we think of ye as family.”

Hamish smiled gratefully and stepped in, closing the door behind him.

“How are things at Glengour?” Lachlan asked. “I hope ye can forgive me for no’ bein’ more help there.”

Hamish chuckled. “Aye, ye’ve been fritterin’ away yer time here, no doubt, with nothin’ at all ta occupy ye.” His eyes went to Sorcha, and he walked over to take a look at her. “She’s a bonnie thing.” He continued to admire her for a few moments then sighed and turned to speak to Lachlan. “We’re busy as ever at Glengour—havna seen much of a decline despite it bein’ winter.” He looked to Elizabeth and Malcolm. “All yer work has paid off. Between the travelers passin’ through and the tounspeople comin’ for food and drink, we can barely keep up. Which is why I’ve come.” He nodded at Lachlan. “I’ve had an answer ta the advertisement. We should have a cook in less than a fortnight.”

Lachlan nodded. “I’m glad ta hear it. Ye deserve a break from all ye’ve been doin’, you, Glenna, and Mark.”

“Have you had any word from Sir Andrew about your family’s estate?” Christina asked.

Hamish shook his head with a slight frown. “No’ yet, but I hope ta hear back soon. It’s been less than a fortnight since I wrote ta him.”

Elizabeth shot him a significant look. “No doubt Sir Andrew’s time is being monopolized by Angus as they arrange for his marriage to Sir Andrew’s daughter.” She slipped Sorcha into Malcolm’s arms, and he hurried to support the baby. She wasn’t even large enough to fill his arms, but somehow the warmth of her small body enveloped him entirely.

She was perfect, with her dainty lips, her smattering of dark lashes, and the tuft of hair that hung on her forehead beneath her cap. A perfect package of new life, something this world had never before seen, full of unexplored potential.

He tried to let all of it seep into him as he held her, hardly aware of where the conversation turned as he thought on the potential that lay before him and Elizabeth—and how it felt to face the future together. It was so much more than he had ever dared hope for.

“Are you ready, my love?” Elizabeth asked gently after some time had passed.

Malcolm looked up at her and took his time to study the face he knew better than any other. For him, Elizabeth was new life. She had taken him when he was broken, when he had given up, when he had hated himself, and she had chosen him. She had loved what he had condemned as unlovable, forgiven the unforgivable; she had freed him, mind, body, and soul, from his bonds. Every day with her, the darkness he had fought through for so long gave way to more light.

He leaned in and kissed her softly, tenderly.

“Aye,” he said, pulling away and smiling at her. “I’m ready.”

THE END

Read the next book in the series, [The Innkeeper and the Fugitive](#), to find out what happens next.

OceanofPDF.com

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The middle of the 18th century was an incredibly tumultuous time in the Scottish Highlands. The influence and the balance of power was shifting away from the clan system, which had held both for so long, to the Crown in London, which was trying valiantly to make order out of what it viewed as the chaos and fractured loyalties in the rugged Highlands.

The state of language in mid-1700s Scotland was complex. Depending upon location and social class, a person might speak English, Scots, Gaelic, or a combination of the three. After debating on the subject, I attempted to give a flavor to the dialogue to help ground it in the Highlands while avoiding anything I thought might detract from the story too much for readers. I have used that “flavor” to help demonstrate the background of characters.

The practice of manrent was common in Scotland from the 15th century to the 17th century. It was generally an exchange between a strong laird or clan and a weaker person or clan, with the latter promising service in exchange for the former's protection. Most forms of manrent were made illegal in 1457, but the practice was continued despite that. The government's tolerance for it would have been very low at the point in history of this story, as there was little patience for the clan system and the way it undermined allegiance to the Crown.

I have done my best to be true to the history of the time period, but I have undoubtedly made errors, which I hope do not detract from your enjoyment of the story.

Thank you for reading *The Enemy and Miss Innes!* I hope you enjoyed

Elizabeth and Malcolm's story and will continue on to read *The Innkeeper and the Fugitive*.

OceanofPDF.com

OTHER TITLES BY MARTHA KEYES

If you enjoyed this book, make sure to check out my other books:

Tales from the Highlands

[The Widow and the Highlander](#) (Book One)

[The Enemy and Miss Innes](#) (Book Two)

[The Innkeeper and the Fugitive](#) (Book Three)

Families of Dorset

[Wyndcross: A Regency Romance](#) (Book One)

[Isabel: A Regency Romance](#) (Book Two)

[Cecilia: A Regency Romance](#) (Book Three)

[Hazelhurst: A Regency Romance](#) (Book Four)

[Phoebe: A Regency Romance](#) (Series Novelette)

Regency Shakespeare

[A Foolish Heart](#) (Book One)

[My Wild Heart](#) (Book Two)

[True of Heart](#) (Book Three)

Other Titles

[Of Lands High and Low](#)

[The Highwayman's Letter](#) (Sons of Somerset Book 5)

[A Seaside Summer](#) (Timeless Regency Romance Book 17)

[The Christmas Foundling](#) (Belles of Christmas: Frost Fair Book Five)

[Goodwill for the Gentleman](#) (Belles of Christmas Book Two)

[The Road through Rushbury](#) (Seasons of Change Book One)

[Eleanor: A Regency Romance](#)

[Join my Newsletter](#) at www.marthaeyes.com to keep in touch and learn more about British history! I try to keep it fun and interesting.

OR follow me on [BookBub](#) to see my recommendations and get alerts about my new releases.

OceanofPDF.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are always so many people to thank with any given book! First and foremost, my husband deserves those thanks. He makes everything possible and never complains about the strangeness that is life married to an author.

Thank you to my critique group partners and dear friends, Kasey, Deborah, and Jess. I count myself so fortunate to associate with you and to receive your input every week.

Thanks to my editor, Jenny, and to all those who provided needed beta feedback.

Thank you to Nancy Mayer for her willingness to share her wealth of knowledge and to point me to valuable resources.

Thank you to my mom, who cheers me on every step of the way and drops everything to read my first drafts.

This book wouldn't be here without any of these people and many others.

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Martha Keyes was born, raised, and educated in Utah—a home she loves dearly but also dearly loves to escape whenever she can travel the world. She received a BA in French Studies and a Master of Public Health, both from Brigham Young University.

Word crafting has always fascinated and motivated her, but it wasn't until a few years ago that she considered writing her own stories. When she isn't writing, she is honing her photography skills, looking for travel deals, and spending time with her husband and children. She lives with her husband and twin boys in Vineyard, Utah.



[OceanofPDF.com](https://www.oceanofpdf.com)