



A Wild Night with the Highlander

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Category: Romance, Historical

Description: "Do ye even ken who he is, Astrid? He is the young Laird MacKie. The very man who kidnapped and killed our brother."

Laird Flynn has a reputation with the ladies. Sharing one kiss with a beautiful woman should not be the end of the world, but it is for him...For the woman he kissed is none other than his worst enemy's daughter.

And now, one year later, he has to marry her.

Marrying her brother's alleged killer is Astrid's worst nightmare. Her husband is equal parts insufferable and charming, and Astrid titters on the edge of duty to her family...or succumbing to his kisses.

Total Pages (Source): 60

CHAPTER1

The feast was in full swing. Guests dressed in various colors, moving to the beat of the drums stretched as far as the eye could see, but Astrid Wright was tired of trying to avoid bumping into every drunken Scot around her.

“Keira, I cannae dance anymore. I am going to stand at the side for some time,” she called out to her sister, who was dancing right alongside her.

“Why nae? Ye ken Faither never allows us to visit ceilidhs anyway. Stay here and dance till he comes looking for us,” Keira reasoned, and Astrid couldn’t help but smile at the bitterness in her young sister’s voice.

She understood Keira’s sentiments perfectly well, since she too had to face the restrictions their father put on them. Despite being the daughters of the Laird of O’Donnelly, the two girls did not have much freedom. Astrid knew the reason behind her father’s harsh restrictions, even if it did not make much sense to her. Despite that, it was not in her heart to go against him. Hence, both she and Astrid had no choice but to listen.

“We still have ample time before Faither asks us to return home. I am sure I can stand at the corner for a few minutes.” Astrid smiled, holding her sister’s hand.

“If that is what ye want! Although, even while standing at the corner, ye will have enough eyes on ye as being the bonniest girl at the entire ceilidh,” Keira said, her words having a flattering ring to them.

“Ye dinnae have to flatter me like this when we both ken it is true,” Astrid joked before dancing out of the circle and waving at her sister.

She finally breathed a little as she stood at one end of the large hall, her back resting against the wall. She hadn’t attended such a feast for about a few months now and hence was having a grand time. Despite that, a hint of sadness had been lurking just underneath the surface.

She could not pinpoint the exact reason behind feeling this way, but it could simply be the fact that she knew this moment would soon be over.

Although, she knew this was not the right place to be thinking these thoughts. She was still slightly upset when her attentions turned elsewhere. For about an hour now, she had been feeling eyes on her. It felt as if someone in the hall was watching her very closely.

The unnerving feeling of the hair at the back of her neck standing up returned, and she once again knew that she was being watched. Her brown eyes scanned the entire room before they landed quite easily on a pair of green ones. Just as she had thought, whoever the man was, he didn’t flinch or break eye contact. Astrid could see he was not the least bit embarrassed at being caught. It was as if he had wanted her to find him.

She continued looking as he smiled at her. The man was not only tall but also well-built and muscular. His dark hair gave him a dangerous gleam that made Astrid wish to find out more about who he was. He could be someone dangerous, her mind told her, but Astrid decided to not let her inhibitions get the best of her.

So, she didn’t think twice before smiling back at him. That was encouragement enough for him, since as soon as she smiled, he shuffled in place as if contemplating for two seconds before walking across the hall to stand right in front of her.

He is extremely handsome.

The stranger smiled at her, and Astrid had to crane her neck to take a better look at him.

And so tall.

“Flynn,” he said in the way of introduction.

“Astrid,” she replied, not knowing what else to say. They were standing two feet apart in order to make sure they heard one another well over the loud beat of the drums.

“Why is such a bonnie lass standin’ all by herself?” he asked, and Astrid couldn’t help but blush softly at the compliment.

“Ye took too long to come and greet me. What is a lass supposed to do?” Astrid joked, throwing the blame entirely on him.

He caught the hint of playfulness in her tone and stepped even closer. His scent permeated her nose and almost made her swoon. Clean and a little bit manly.

“I had been tryin’ to make ye look at me for so long. I came over the moment I saw ye wanted me here.”

“Who said I wanted ye here? Ye walked here all by yerself, uninvited.”

“Astrid, please,” Flynn said, his voice deepening as he maintained eye contact, “I think we both are aware that ye wanted to talk to me as much as I wanted to talk to ye. Or is that not so?”

Astrid blushed at the question, knowing perfectly well he already knew the answer to it, but she still decided to play coy. “Yer much taller than everyone else here. I was merely wondering how it must feel to be the odd one out.”

“The odd one out, ye say?” Flynn laughed, making her smile as she noticed he laughed beautifully. “I could ask ye the same thing, since yer the most beautiful woman out here tonight. How does it feel to be this beautiful?”

She could not understand if she was flattered or flustered. A man this handsome stood too close to her and was calling her beautiful, which was rather confusing. She was a confident woman and knew that she possessed some sort of beauty, but despite that, she had never been involved in flirtatious banter with a man.

“Now ye think I am beautiful?”

“I do think so, yes,” he replied with a smile.

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“Ye have been flattering me constantly,” Astrid remarked, wondering if she could really let her guard down and consider the man harmless.

“Anything to win yer heart.” He winked playfully at her, making her even more flustered.

Astrid felt awkward. She was never flirted with during ceilidhs, that was her sister. She would usually stand on the sidelines or dance with her sister. Men generally talked to her for all of two seconds before she said something awkward or tried to joke, and they left.

“Are ye about to ask me to marry ye now?” Astrid joked, wincing internally at her words.

What would this handsome man think when she talked about marriage two minutes into the conversation? She didn’t mean it that way, obviously. Astrid did not want to marry.

“If I do, will ye say yes?” His eyes held a mischievous glint, and his mouth turned up to a half-smirk that melted her insides. For some reason, he was the only person who understood her joke for what it was: a joke.

“I am sure nae one can say nae to ye either. Right, Flynn?” Astrid questioned, uttering his name softly. He sucked in a sharp breath as he heard those words from her mouth.

“Many times, I’ve been told nay. Ye can just say the word, and I’ll be gone, and nae

bother ye again.” His deepening voice simply accelerated Astrid’s heartbeat. He was doing this on purpose.

“I dinnae want ye to leave,” she said, blushing deeply.

Flynn’s smile widened. “Will ye go outside into the castle courtyard with me for a walk?”

Astrid smiled at the request and knew she should deny this. She was a lady, the daughter of a very high-esteemed laird, and she had to keep up certain appearances. But she was tired of living under her father’s constant watchful eyes and his restrictions. She wanted to live a little. Also, the noise inside the hall was loud enough to give her a headache, and she certainly needed a break. She knew these were just excuses she said to herself to reason between her mind and her heart, but she ventured to simply ignore everything else and go with what she truly wanted.

She nodded her head as Flynn took her hand in his, marching towards the open doors. As they stepped outside in the cold, night air, Astrid breathed a little easier. She had failed to realize how positively humid it was inside the hall. The cold air on her sweat-dampened skin felt refreshing, and she sighed happily.

“Feelin’ better already?” Flynn asked, noticing the smile on her face.

“I had been inside too long,” she answered honestly as he nodded. His face was slightly obscured in the lack of light outside, but the moonlight was still ample enough to allow her to marvel at how handsome he was.

* * *

Flynn knew they were still within earshot of several people roaming around the courtyard and hence decided to walk in silence until they finally rounded the corner

that led them into the castle gardens. It was not the first time he had seen a beautiful woman at a feast and had brought her outside with him.

Although, she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and he could sense something about her was different. There was a primal urge inside him to get to her, touch her lips with his own. He had never felt such a need to get close to a woman before. Hence, this had him even more intrigued.

The only thing that puzzled him was why he had never seen her before. He knew that if he had ever seen her at a ceilidh before today, he would have recognized her. No man would ever forget a face as beautiful as hers.

“How come yer silent now?” he asked as soon as he was certain that they had left most people behind and were largely alone in the gardens.

“Well, dinnae tell me that ye were nae also waiting until we were completely alone to speak.” Astrid rolled her eyes playfully, and his eyes widened.

People did not usually roll their eyes at him. Being a laird comes with certain perks, and one of those was that he commanded respect everywhere he went. But this tiny woman in front of him seemed to completely disregard his authority.

He liked that.

“It is evident now that yer more intelligent than most,” Flynn commented, a smile on his face.

“Were ye doubting me intelligence earlier?” she questioned laughingly. She skipped ahead and walked a little further as he followed after her.

“Nay, but how could I judge yer intelligence if I hadn’t talked to ye? I could only

judge yer appearance, and yer the bonniest. I think I have never seen a more beautiful woman,” he casually said, once again closing the distance between them, making sure only a few inches were left.

She smelled of lilies, and the scent was slightly intoxicating for him. He noticed her color rise at his compliment, and her shy nature attracted him even more. It felt as if she did not even know how truly beautiful she was.

“Ye sound like a man in love.” She raised an eyebrow, overcoming the shyness that had overtaken her a few seconds ago.

“Nay yet, darling. Maybe I will be in love with ye when I ken what ye taste like,” he replied, his voice growing huskier with desire. He couldn’t understand why her proximity was having such an effect on him, but he knew he was attracted to her.

“So, what are ye waiting for?” Astrid asked, a sharp breath escaping from her lips as Flynn closed the distance between them after placing her back against the garden wall.

“This means ye do want me to taste ye. Is that right, Astrid?” he questioned yet again, his hands snaking their way in her hair and around her waist.

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Her chest was flush against his, and he could feel how erratic her heartbeat was. He placed a soft kiss right below her ear and softly trailed downwards, enjoying as her pulse accelerated with each kiss.

“Would I be here outside if I didn’t?” she questioned back, her words coming out breathier than usual. Flynn knew he was having an effect on her, and he was enjoying it, since she was having a similar effect on him too.

“That leaves no other choice,” Flynn whispered as he finally brushed his lips against hers, invading them with a perfect kiss. He lost all control as her taste intoxicated him entirely, and the kiss grew increasingly passionate.

He could not completely comprehend the foreign feelings that were invading his mind as he held her in his arms. He was a grown man of thirty, yet a simple kiss with a woman he did not even know was affecting him. He knew he wanted her, perhaps more than he had ever wanted any other woman in his life.

“Flynn,” she whispered his name, her voice sending shivers down his spine as she held his face with both her hands.

Before he could comprehend much else, a loud noise behind them forced them apart. Flynn turned around to look, and his eyes landed on a young woman standing behind them, a surprised expression on her face. The surprise soon turned to anger as she looked between Flynn and Astrid, and Flynn could not understand what was happening. Just then, Astrid detangled herself from his arms and took a few steps towards the other woman.

“Keira, what are ye doing here?” Astrid questioned as Flynn stared between them with a confused expression on his face.

“What am I doing here?” Keira shouted. “What are ye doing here? That too with him?”

“We were...” Astrid trailed off, her skin turning a beautiful shade of crimson.

“Never mind, as if it isn’t evident what ye were doing. Do ye even ken who he is, Astrid? He is the young Laird MacKie. The very man who kidnapped and killed our brother,” Keira almost spat at him, and things finally began making sense.

The resemblance between the two sisters made it apparent that they were siblings, and the fact that they were blaming him for kidnapping their brother could only mean they were none other than the daughters of Laird O’Donnely.

His worst enemy.

“That can’t be true. His name is Flynn,” Astrid said, turning to look at Flynn. “Is she right? Are ye Laird MacKie?”

“I am.”

Flynn watched patiently as Astrid’s gaze turned blood red, and she walked towards him with fire raging in her eyes. “Ye mean to tell me that I just kissed the man who is responsible for me brother’s death?”

“And I just kissed the woman whose family has placed baseless accusations on my clan and has attacked us more times than we can remember!” Flynn shot back, refusing to stand down. He knew they had not kidnapped the heir of the O’Donnely clan, and he would certainly not take the blame for it.

“I didnae ken who ye were. Ye lured me out here and kissed me!” Astrid shouted as Flynn stared at her incredulously after hearing the ridiculous accusation.

“Ye came out here with me yerself. I didnae force ye or even knew who ye were. Had I known yer identity, I wouldnae even have given ye the time of the day,” Flynn spat back, even though he knew it was a lie. He would kiss her again if she would let him.

“Stay away from me, me family, and me clan. We hate ye.”

Flynn knew she was going to throw more colorful words at him, but just then, approaching footsteps forced her to turn around.

“Keira, did ye find her?”

Astrid’s eyes widened, and Flynn was certain it was none other than Laird O’Donnelly himself. She hastily turned towards Flynn and pushed him to hide as he tumbled behind the bush. Despite that, he could see what was happening beyond. Hence, he stayed there, adamant about hiding because, despite everything Astrid had shot at him, he had no desire to get her in trouble.

He watched as she met her father with a forced smile and told him she was out for a walk in the fresh air. As he watched the three O’Donnelys exit, all he hoped was to never run into them again. Especially since he wanted nothing more than to kiss Astrid and make her his.

CHAPTER2

One year later

“Never in melife would I have thought I would ever see this day,” Billy murmured under his breath for what Flynn was certain was the hundredth time.

Flynn knew his man at arms was extremely furious about stepping inside the O'Donnely castle, but he had already offered to let him stay behind and was ready to go alone.

However, Billy's sense of loyalty and his protective instinct towards Flynn did not allow him to let his laird go alone into the enemy's castle. If it were up to Flynn, he would never step foot inside the place. These were the very people who had accused his father, the late Laird MacKie, of abducting their heir and apparently murdering him.

His father had explained over and over that the proof against him, which was a scroll with his father's stamp found in the hands of a soldier, was false and that he was being framed. Shortly before, his father's stamp had gone missing and was possibly stolen.

Despite this, the O'Donnely clan had refused to believe a word they had said and had launched attack after attack. This enmity had been ongoing for the past ten years and had resulted in his father's death, for the stress of constant warfare along with old age had been too much for him.

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Once Flynn had become the Laird, he had gone to the King and arranged a ceasefire between the clans in order to stop the fighting. The MacKie and O'Donnely clans were two of the biggest and richest clans in all of Scotland, and they could not have afforded to be constantly at war with one another. Hence, it had seemed like the right decision to Flynn.

Although now, the King had thrown yet another problem towards them, and Flynn had no choice but to march right into the enemy's house and find a solution.

"Do ye think I am enjoying this, Billy?" Flynn asked, dismounting his horse as he eyed the large garden and the even larger castle. It was evident the O'Donnelys were wealthy, although Flynn knew his clan was richer and stronger.

"I ken yer not, Me Laird. Although, what choice do we have?" Billy observed, and Flynn nodded silently. He needed to meet the Laird O'Donnely and be out of this castle as soon as he possibly could.

He could notice how the servants in the castle were staring at him and Billy with disgust evident on their faces. Flynn had never wished for this to happen, although now, after ten years, he did not know what to do. Even if he wished to solve this, it would be impossible for him. The enmity had started with the kidnapping of Aiden Wright, but now, it felt as if the clans were used to feeling this way. Even if Flynn wanted, he would never be able to do much in that regard.

"Laird MacKie," a tall man, who was possibly the man at arms for Laird O'Donnely, greeted Flynn just as he entered through the open doors of the castle.

“Aye.”

“I will take ye to the Laird’s study. He is waiting for ye,” the man announced, and Flynn silently followed behind him till he was met with large wooden double doors which directly led into the old Laird’s study.

As Flynn entered inside alongside Billy, he noticed the study was nothing exceptional. It was lavishly decorated and well suited to the tastes of any man. His eyes travelled directly to the man sitting behind the giant table, and he recognized him from when he had seen him a year ago.

It had been a year since he had seen Astrid Wright, the only woman whose kiss he hadn’t yet forgotten, whose name was still seared into his memory. Flynn had first seen the Laird when he had come looking for Astrid, and now, he was seeing him again. The man looked older, frailer but immensely angry still.

“Laird O’Donnely,” Flynn greeted him respectfully as the Laird motioned towards the armchair. He went ahead and sat down as Billy stood behind him.

The Laird walked in front of him and sat down, extending a glass of brandy in his direction. “I willnae waste time in asking how ye are ‘cause frankly, I couldnae care less about it,” he began rather rudely. “We both ken we are here because of the missive that the King has sent to both ye and I, and that matter needs to be solved.”

“I am nae here to waste time either, Laird O’Donnely,” Flynn said, making sure his words were soft and uttered carefully. “I am angered by the missive as much as ye are. The King thinks he can order us around and force me to marry yer daughter, but I have nae desire to do that at all. I am as much against this match as ye are. Now, all we need to do is find a way to escape this without angering the King.”

“Why would the King even pass such an order!” Laird O’Donnely said furiously. “He

knows darn well how we are sworn enemies and would never agree to this. Why would I ask me daughter to marry the man who abducted and killed my son, my heir—”

Flynn was trying his best to keep his anger under control, even if Laird O'Donnely was making it increasingly difficult, but he couldn't keep quiet any longer. “With all due respect, Laird O'Donnely, if yer so confident we killed yer son, what makes ye think we can't do that to ye or yer daughters? We have already explained to ye how the MacKie clan was not involved in any such affair, yet, if it is so difficult for ye to believe, just remember me clan is bigger and stronger than yers, and if we could do it to yer heir, we can do it to ye.”

“Are ye threatening me, lad?”

“Nay, Me Laird. I am simply stating facts, which I am certain ye both agree with and understand, since ye brought them up. Now, let's deal with the problem at hand. The King wants a betrothal between Astrid and me, and later on, a marriage to make sure the clans come together and our enmity ends. I have nae desire to marry yer daughter, and I am certain she would share similar sentiments. What do ye suggest we do?” Flynn asked, maintaining his calm demeanor.

“We dinnae have much choice in the matter. We cannae deny the King, hence we will need to think of something else,” Laird O'Donnely said, the anger in his voice dying down a little.

“I suggest Astrid and I get betrothed,” Flynn said but raised his hand as the Laird began to get angry again. “Let me finish first, Laird O'Donnely.”

“My daughter isnae getting betrothed to ye.”

“It will only be a betrothal in name, something to show the King and nothing else.

Astrid can come live at me castle for a few weeks until we make up an excuse about how she and I cannae get married and end the betrothal. The King will be pleased we at least tried to be civilized, and till then, we will have ample time to think about an excuse. What do ye say?" Flynn suggested, knowing they had no other option.

He had already analyzed the situation entirely and knew this was the only way out. The King needed to be appeased with time, and the only way of bringing that about was a betrothal between himself and Astrid.

"I will have to talk to Astrid about this, but I ken she will agree. Both ye and her dinnae have much choice," the Laird announced, standing up. Flynn followed suit and stood up as well, not wishing to overstay his welcome.

"I will return in two days' time to take Astrid with me."

CHAPTER3

If someone had told Flynn a year ago that he would be visiting the O'Donnely castle twice in one week, he would have never believed it.

He could never forget the fights, the constant battle between these two clans. He had fought on many an occasion, had both killed and been almost killed, but he could not be happier now that it was over. It felt as if a terrible phase was finally over, even if for the next few weeks, Astrid would be his supposed betrothed.

"I swear to God, Me Laird," began Billy, who had once again refused to let Flynn go alone, "if I have to come here one more time, I will not be able to tolerate it."

"We willnae have to come here again, Billy," Flynn reassured his man at arms. "We just need to take Astrid with us today, and then we can be in peace for a while until we find a way to break off this betrothal. Also remember, no one but extremely close

people on either side know that the betrothal is fake, hence, never say something about it out loud.”

“No one knows except ye, me, yer grandmother, and...” Billy trailed off, and Flynn turned to look at him as they finally entered the castle and headed straight for the library.

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“Daphne,” Billy finished, almost in a whisper, and Flynn breathed a sigh of relief.

Daphne was Billy’s wife and a woman who could be trusted completely. She was almost family, since both she and Billy lived in the castle. Flynn would have been surprised if she had not known about this.

“Of course, ye told yer wife about this, Billy. Ye dinnae need to hide that from me,” Flynn reassured the larger man as he knocked on the study door and entered.

The castle was rather empty today, and no servants had greeted them anywhere on the way. Flynn wondered if it was yet another way of showing him disrespect, but he did not care enough to worry. His mind was entirely focused on Astrid and the kiss he had shared with her at the feast a year ago.

It was true the two of them had not seen each other since, but the kiss was still etched into his memory as if it was yesterday. He still remembered the desire he had felt for her in that one interaction alone before the two of them had discovered one another’s identity and the age-old enmity between their families.

And now, despite all of this, his desire was intact, and his wish to see her hadn’t diminished one bit but had grown in the past year. He was certain she was still just as beautiful and must still completely dislike him or perhaps might even hate him. None of that mattered to him now, since she had no choice but to be his betrothed, even if it was a fake betrothal.

His gaze returned to the study and landed on Laird O’Donnely, who had gotten up from behind his large desk and was swiftly making his way towards him. Flynn

noticed Laird O'Donnely did not look pleased about the circumstances, and he could understand why. The old Laird was sending away his eldest daughter with a man who was, in his eyes, the kidnapper and murderer of his son.

"Laird MacKie, yer right on time," the old man greeted him.

"I always am."

"Astrid must be ready by now. Let's go," Laird O'Donnely said and began to make his way towards the door of the study as Flynn and Billy followed after him.

Flynn could not believe he was eagerly anticipating his first meeting with the woman who probably despised his very existence, but the kiss had refused to leave his mind. No woman had ever affected him the way Astrid had. There was something about her. Something that had burnt into his memory and would never leave.

They walked into the hallway and followed the old Laird as he turned around into a corridor that led straight into a giant hall. The room was decorated rather subtly and was flooded with the sunlight streaming through the windows. Flynn's eyes fell on Keira, who was sitting there, an expression of complete hatred evident on her face. He knew she would never speak a word about knowing him or meeting him earlier in front of her father, since that was a forbidden meeting and could never be exposed in front of Laird O'Donnely.

"Where is Astrid?" Laird O'Donnely asked Keira.

"She is not ready yet. She will be here shortly."

"What is there to be ready for? She just has to pack her stuff," Laird O'Donnely said, clearly wishing to be over with this as soon as possible. He did not enjoy having Flynn in his castle, and Flynn did not enjoy being there.

Flynn stepped ahead and addressed Keira directly. "I am in no hurry, and she can take as much time as she needs." With that, he turned around and sat down on an armchair as Billy stood at one end.

Flynn was quite at leisure in the castle, his mind only focused on meeting Astrid. She could take all the time she needed, but she would eventually have to go with him. She was delaying it purposefully, and that made the chase even more interesting.

Laird O'Donnely sat down as well, and an uncomfortable silence descended on the hall. Flynn wondered what the other two people could be thinking, and he was certain all thoughts must be centered on setting up his murder and posing it as an accident. If it weren't for the King's insane need to bring the two clans together, he wouldn't even be here right now. He had no choice.

Just then, he heard a soft meow as a pure white cat entered the hall and looked at everyone suspiciously. Flynn was a little surprised to see the cat, since it was evident she was a pet, and he couldn't understand who would be keeping her. His answer came just a few seconds later as he heard footsteps nearing the hall and Astrid entered with about a dozen maids, all holding her luggage.

"I am here, Faither," Astrid announced loudly, without noticing that Flynn too was seated in the hall. "Is he here yet?"

She flicked her long blonde waves from one shoulder to the other, her long hands being accentuated in the process as her gaze finally landed on Flynn, and her entire expression changed. It altered from embarrassment to hatred in a matter of a few seconds, and Flynn wished to laugh out loud from amusement.

"I am here," Flynn replied before Laird O'Donnely could say anything.

He, on the other hand, could simply not remove his gaze from her. She looked like a

vision still, and he was quite glad to see that a year had only added to her beauty. She looked more radiant than ever, and her hair was longer, almost reaching her waist. Her figure seemed fuller than before, and her eyes were still just as playful and wild. Flynn knew she would be a force, and he couldn't wait to have her in his castle.

"Good, I had no desire to wait," she returned.

"Well, I did not mind waiting. And now that yer here, I would suggest ye say yer goodbyes, so we can be on our way," Flynn stated in a sterner voice than he would have liked.

"And who do ye think ye are, ordering me about, might I ask?" she questioned defiantly, walking towards him and looking straight into his eyes.

Her proximity once again reminded him of that night, and the flicker of passion he sensed in her gaze was enough to tell him that she had thought about it too, even if for just that one moment.

"Because I am yer betrothed, me dear," he replied softly. To his surprise, she simply rolled her eyes and walked towards her sister.

The two sisters hugged and talked in whispers for a few minutes. Flynn tried to make out what they were saying, but they had purposefully softened their tones in a way that no one else could hear. She then greeted her father, who simply told her to be strong and patient, and that he would come for her soon.

Flynn knew what Laird O'Donnely meant by that, but the man couldn't have expressed it more plainly in front of the maids present. He watched as Astrid picked up the cat, who was resting just by her feet, and he waited to see how she would say goodbye to her. To his surprise, she did not. Instead, she placed a kiss on the cat's head and made her way back to him.

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“I am ready to leave.”

“With the cat?” Flynn questioned, clearly confused.

“Her name is Bannock, and since she is me cat, she will be going with me,” Astrid replied rather firmly, leaving no room for discussion.

“I am not letting ye bring a pet to me castle,” Flynn countered, simply for the sake of going against her. He did not actually have much of an issue with the cat, but there was something about Astrid that made him question all of her actions.

“If I go, Bannock goes with me. There is no question about it,” she insisted, surety in her tone.

“Just make sure I never have to see her face again,” Flynn replied, giving in. He knew there was no arguing with her.

“I am sure yer castle is big enough to house a cat and for ye to remain away from her at the same time.”

“Just go,” Flynn huffed with a scowl.

His eyes went to the trunks she had, and he inwardly laughed to himself. He had already expected her to come with carriage loads of things and had arranged for it in advance. He asked Billy to get everything settled, and Billy guided the servants out of the hall while he turned one last time towards Laird O'Donnely.

“We will be leaving now, Laird O’Donnely. I promise ye, I will take care of yer daughter and protect her from all harms, thus ye dinnae have to worry about it. I am certain ye dinnae fully trust me about it, but I can assure ye, she would never be harmed,” Flynn assured the old man, who nodded in reply.

“Touch her, and I will kill ye with me own bare hands,” Laird O’Donnely threatened, and Flynn wished he could tell him how he had not only already touched his daughter but had even kissed her.

“I am sure ye will,” Flynn replied, smiling, before turning around and exiting the hall. He knew Astrid was following behind him, since her cat was meowing constantly, probably because she must have never left the castle before today.

Once they were out, he helped Astrid inside the carriage waiting for her. He wished he could sit with her for the journey, but they would be back at his castle soon enough.

Then, he would have her all to himself.

CHAPTER4

They reached the MacKie lands only after half a day of travel, since the two castles were not very far from one another. Astrid was quite happy about that, since it meant her father and sister were still close to her even if they were not completely together. She could not deny that she had been looking forward to seeing Flynn after what had happened last year. She might have hated the man, but he was still her first kiss, the only man who had ever touched her intimately at all.

He had grown even more handsome, which was something she had not expected. Once the betrothal had been announced and she had known she had no choice but to listen to the orders of the King, she had asked some people around her to find out

whatever they could about Flynn and his character.

Apparently, everyone in his clan loved him. He was a most patient laird but extremely brave as well. He never backed away from what was right and was kind when there was a need for it. He was both patient and smart, and she had no doubt about him being popular with the women. His handsome looks and well-built body would make him look appealing to everyone. Astrid had even overheard a few of the maids in her castle talking about him.

“Did ye see him the first time he was here? How handsome he looks!” the maid had told her friend while Astrid hid behind a pillar to hear more.

“Aye, Miss Astrid is a lucky lass. Did ye ken he was the one to call for a ceasefire between the clans? If it wasnae for him, me husband would still be going to battles...” Astrid hadn’t heard more as the women left the room, continuing their chores.

She was jolted out of her thoughts as she felt the carriage draw to a stop, and she looked out to see the MacKie castle before her at some distance. She finally stepped out and was pleased to see the lush green scenery surrounding the castle.

The castle was built rather fabulously, and Astrid could sense that she might not hate living here as much as she had thought. The entire place looked calm, almost serene, and she knew no one would disturb her. Bannock jumped out of her arms and raced towards the castle, finally free from being wound up in a carriage for so long.

Before Astrid could run after her cat, she felt a familiar presence behind her and turned to see Flynn standing right there.

“We are home,” he said, a smile on his face.

“Yer home, nae mine,” she countered, all the while admiring his smile. She wondered if he smiled often and why she had never heard him laugh. She was certain he would have a beautiful laugh.

“Yer home too, as long as yer me betrothed,” he whispered, “even a fake one. Let’s go.”

Astrid could not completely understand why hearing the wordfakefrom Flynn’s mouth seemed slightly hurtful. It wasn’t as if she did not know the intricacies behind the betrothal. She knew them too well. She knew that it was all to show the King and would be over soon enough, although the entire idea seemed callous to her. She shook her head and forced herself to stop thinking about it.

“Just for a little while,” Astrid replied as they made their way towards the castle after Bannock.

She turned to look at her trunks and watched a few servants bringing them in behind her. Flynn must have noticed her movements, since he immediately followed her gaze.

“Yer things will reach yer chambers safely. Dinnae worry about it,” he assured her, and she nodded, not knowing why she always trusted everything he told her.

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They made their way inside the castle, and Astrid picked up Bannock in her arms again, since her cat had been waiting for her at the entrance, unsure about going inside alone. She walked beside Flynn as they entered, and she noticed how the interior of the castle was just as immaculate as the exterior. She could not understand what it was about the place, but it almost felt warm.

She did not for one second feel as if she had entered a strange castle, and even more so the castle that belonged to her clan's worst enemy. Despite that, she knew she needed to keep her guard up. She was in a place she wasn't meant to be, and there were ample people around who might hate her. If Astrid had learnt anything, it was practicing safety at all costs and never letting your guard down, and she would do just that.

Her eyes immediately roamed over the servants that were lined up around the castle. The men and women both were dressed in simple leines, while the women wore kirtles underneath the plain brown fabric. The men wore checkered kilts in the MacKie clan's official colors. Astrid could not ignore the expressions of utter dislike on their faces, but she knew it was something to be expected. These people had been taught to hate her.

Flynn guided her inside a hall, where she was surprised to see two women waiting for her. As she entered, they stood up with huge smiles on their faces.

"Astrid," Flynn introduced the older woman just as they stood before her, "this is my grandmother."

Astrid turned to look at the old woman, who was also dressed rather simply in a kilt

made from dyed fabric that peaked a little from underneath her leine. Her choice of varying degrees of black in her attire was enough to indicate that she was a widow and was one of those women who were forever mourning their husbands. Despite her solemn appearance, her expression was one of extreme openness, and her smile seemed kind.

“Nice to meet ye, me dear. We are happy to welcome ye in our home.” Lady MacKie smiled at her widely.

“Oh, how good to meet ye.” Astrid smiled back, surprised at the warmth the older woman was showing her. Lady MacKie softly patted Bannock, who did not shy away from her touch, and Astrid was surprised to see that. Her cat was extremely selective about the people she allowed to touch her. “I think she likes ye.”

“I hope ye will too,” the older woman said, and Astrid smiled at her quick-wittedness. It was evident that this was a family of sharp people, even if the family only included Flynn and his grandmother.

“What should I call ye?” Astrid asked.

“I am named Laila. Ye can call me that,” the older woman offered, and Astrid smiled at the simplicity of it. She was glad Flynn’s grandmother did not expect to be addressed with any terms of endearment or affection, since they hardly knew each other.

“I will do that,” Astrid replied and looked at Flynn to make the second introduction.

“And, of course,” he added, turning to the other woman. Astrid noticed she was much younger and was most probably just a few years older than her and was extremely beautiful. The woman too was dressed in the colors of the clan, and just like Flynn’s grandmother, she seemed to be truly warm towards Astrid. “This is Billy’s wife,

Daphne. Billy is me man at arms. Ye must have seen him with me.”

“I did,” Astrid confirmed before turning to Daphne once again. “I am so pleased to meet ye. Do ye live in the castle too?”

“Both Billy and I and our children live here,” Daphne replied with a smile on her face.

“Children?” Astrid exclaimed joyfully. She had always quite enjoyed the company of children and was ecstatic over the prospect of having some in the castle. “How many do ye have, and how old?”

“I have three. Sam is my oldest, he is six, followed by Tiara, who is four, and Crane, who is three. Ye will see them playing around the castle more often than not,” Daphne replied.

“I would love to meet them sometime,” Astrid said truthfully.

She realized how forward she had been acting in just their first meeting and suddenly felt the need to distance herself. She knew she needed to keep her guard up and try not to mesh too well with the family. She needed to keep reminding herself that this was temporary and that she would return back home soon enough. This would all be over in just a matter of a few weeks.

“If ye all will excuse me, I should like to rest for a little while.” She looked at them all, and both Daphne and Laila nodded.

“I will show ye to yer chambers,” Flynn offered, and Astrid nodded gratefully. She couldn’t wait to be by herself for a little while.

* * *

“Flynn? Are ye even listening to me?” Lady MacKie asked, sounding angrier with every passing minute.

Flynn had heard her just fine the first time but simply had no desire to act on what she was asking him to do, or more appropriately suggesting he do, in the guise of an order.

“I am sure she is fine, Grandmother. Do we really need to interfere in her life?” Flynn asked, trying his best to make sure his grandmother left him alone on the subject.

“Aye, we do. She is yer betrothed, even if it isnae a real betrothal. Moreover, she is our guest and has been locked up in her room for the past three days now. This is completely wrong,” his grandmother insisted yet again, truly sounding upset about the situation.

“She isnae locked up, Grandmother. She can come out whenever she wishes, and if she disnae wish to come out at all, who are we to force her to?” he observed, still sticking to his point.

“We willnae be forcing her but simply asking her. She has been locked in there since she arrived with her cat and her books. The maids have been taking her food, and I dinnae blame her. It was yer job to make her feel welcome in yer castle, and ye have clearly failed to do so. If ye were doing yer job right, we would have seen her out and about. Even Daphne is worried for her wellbeing.”

Flynn knew his grandmother was right to some extent, but he could not believe she would label this as his fault.

“It most certainly isnae me fault, Grandmother. I never made her feel unwelcome in any way at all. She kens she is not a prisoner here, and it is completely her choice if she wished to meet us or nae.”

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“This is enough, Flynn. Ye can consider it as an order now.”

Flynn wanted to laugh at that. As the Laird, no one could order him around, but he didn't dare to defy old Laila, for her wrath could be formidable. He loved his grandmother, but her temper was something to look out for at all times.

“I willnae let ye leave yer future wife alone this way.”

“She isnae me future wife,” Flynn interjected, knowing that his grandmother knew this as well.

“I dinnae care. Yer going to her right now, and that is final. Do ye understand?”

“Yes, Grandmother,” Flynn muttered, knowing perfectly well he would never be able to say no to the old woman. She had ways of getting things done, and she always succeeded.

* * *

Astrid was extremely absorbed in her reading when there was a sudden knock at her door. She looked up in confusion, knowing that there was still a considerable amount of time left before dinner, and no one should be visiting her at this hour. She had been left practically alone and undisturbed for the past three days, and even though it had been a little lonely, she had imagined this was what her days would be like here.

Despite the confusion, she stood up and walked towards the door to unlatch it. Just as the large, wooden frame creaked open, her brown eyes met with a very familiar pair

of green eyes, and she was surprised to see Flynn standing there. He looked just as handsome as he always did, dressed simply in his clan's colors.

"Flynn, do ye need somethin'?" she asked, wondering the reason for his sudden, uncalled-for visit.

"Ye willnae even invite me inside?" he asked, and Astrid immediately stepped aside to allow him to enter. He smiled and walked in as she once again closed the door behind him.

She belatedly realized that the condition of her bedchamber was unsuitable for entertaining. Astrid had never in her life been organized when it came to her bedchamber. It was her nature to throw things from one end to the other and never return something she picked from one place to its correct position.

Luckily enough, she had never faced trouble in this regard, since she had had Keira to take care of it for her. Her sister, unlike her, was extremely organized and made sure Astrid's chambers remained in perfect condition too. Astrid knew the maids would have done it for her, but she hadn't allowed anyone inside in the past three days. It had been just her and Bannock.

She walked to stand beside Flynn, who, just as she had expected, was staring at the mess with mock horror in his eyes. Astrid recognized the expression, since it was exactly how Keira had stared at the mess she had made back home. She suddenly felt a pang of sadness, since she realized she was missing her sister, but it disappeared as soon as Flynn turned to stare at her.

"Are ye sure this is yer bedchamber and not somewhere people dump trash?" he asked, his expression absurdly serious.

"I am certain this is me bedchamber," Astrid replied just as seriously, mirroring his

tone.

“How can ye live like this? Amidst such chaos?” he questioned yet again and began picking anything he could find and putting things in their right positions.

Astrid watched him carefully and smiled before replying, “I usually have people like ye around me to make sure the mess is cleaned up eventually. I dinnae have much to worry about in that regard.”

“Nae human should live like this. I cannae imagine stepping into a place or sleeping in a place that looks as if someone has ransacked it.”

Astrid couldn't help but laugh at this exaggeration. “Calm down, Flynn. Ye cannae be this scandalized over a slightly chaotic room. I am used to living this way.”

“Ye mean living like a deranged lunatic who has no sense of place or manners?”

Astrid knew she should have been offended by the insult, but she also knew he did not truly mean it. His manner had been teasing, and it was justified, since he had already had an aneurysm as he had looked at the room.

“Precisely. That is my new goal of living life,” Astrid replied, agreeing with his description of her.

She silently watched as he assembled all the books she had thrown about in the room into one pile and neatly placed them on the shelf that was just beside the looking glass. Astrid waited, knowing that Flynn had failed to notice how Bannock was sitting right there. Just as he backed away, Bannock hissed at him loudly, and he unconsciously stumbled backwards, almost falling to the ground.

Astrid broke into laughter at the scene but immediately stopped when Flynn turned to

look at her with a murderous gleam in his eyes. She knew he had never wanted her to bring her cat to his castle, but she couldn't have come without her. They had been together for the past sixteen years, and she hadn't ever spent a day without Bannock.

"I told ye, I didnae want to see that thing," Flynn complained, raising an eyebrow.

"Ye came to my chamber yerself, I didnae ask ye to. Bannock only hissed at ye, since ye were invading her private space. Otherwise, she means nay harm," Astrid explained as he walked towards her. She could not understand what had shifted in his mood and tone, but he suddenly appeared different. More intimidating.

"I willnae stand here and argue with both ye and yer cat, Astrid. I think yer just enough to tire me out anyway."

Astrid smiled at his words, considering it a personal victory that she had such an effect on him.

"Good decision."

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“Now, get dressed, and I want ye downstairs in the next ten or so minutes. Yer having dinner with me and me family,” he commanded, turning around to walk out of her bedchamber without giving her time to reply.

Astrid’s brow furrowed as she registered how he had just ordered her to do what he wanted. She was confused about the entire thing and even wondered about the fact that he wished to have dinner with her.

Just as he exited her bedchamber, she called out his name to stop him. “Flynn!”

“Yes?” He turned around.

“Yer supposed to ask someone if they are willing to have dinner with ye and yer family, not order them.”

“Ten minutes, Astrid,” he said and walked out of her bedchamber, leaving her both confused and awestruck.

She knew she was supposed to hate his guts and self-assured attitude, but for some reason, she liked that side of him. He was almost... intimidating. Dangerous.

Would he be that way in bed?

She quickly shook herself out of such thoughts.

Instead, her mind immediately went straight to what she should wear for dinner. Astrid knew it was wrong, considering the MacKie clan was accused of killing her

brother, but she still wished for Flynn to find her attractive.

She did not know if he even remembered their kiss, which had happened a year ago, or ever thought about it at all. She, on the other hand, had thought about it more times than she could remember. It could simply be because he had been her first kiss and such a thing was special for most women. It was rather funny to her, since she could never have imagined her enemy would turn into her first kiss and a year later that enemy would turn into her betrothed, even if it was a fake betrothal. Time and fate worked in mysterious ways, and sometimes, one could simply neither understand nor comprehend what had happened.

Although, whatever the reason, she knew she would get dressed for dinner. It was finally time to spend some time with Flynn and the others now that she was certain he himself truly wanted her around.

Astrid couldn't wait for dinner.

CHAPTER5

About twenty minutes later, Astrid was finally satisfied with how she looked in a rather simple blue gown. She had decided to not wear the house colors of the MacKie clan so soon because she knew if her father found out that his own daughter wore the colors of the enemy, he would throw a fit.

She was already quite late, since Flynn had only given her ten minutes, but she did not care much. She wanted to go against his orders, to defy him, though she did feel bad for leaving the rest of the people waiting for her. She quickly half-tied her long, blonde waves and finally stepped downstairs and headed straight to the dining room.

To her surprise, the table was full, and everyone was seated at it. She could see Laila and Daphne and even Flynn's man at arms, Billy, at the table, as they ate together

every day. She had quietly noticed the wood furnishings in the dining room and marvelled at how excellent the library was there.

“I am so glad that ye decided to join us today, Astrid,” Laila commented upon Astrid’s arrival. She was dressed in her usual black tones, and Astrid smiled back at her. “We had been missing ye at the table for about three days now, when ye being here will simply make us all happy. Right, Flynn?”

“Of course,” Flynn replied simply before taking his seat at the table. Astrid could sense the tension in his shoulders. She could not entirely understand if it was the result of her presence or if he was generally worried about something.

“I am happy to be here too, Laila,” Astrid replied, making sure to give the old lady enough warmth.

She sat down beside Flynn as a few servants came inside with dinner. She patiently watched them serve her, and she dug in, not realizing how famished she had been, for she had missed lunch today. She had been too preoccupied with a book she had been reading and had refused the maid’s tray. It was not as if she had been extremely careful about eating meals on time when she had been at home, but since she had arrived here, the maids had been bringing her food and baths timely and daily, and it felt as if she was settling into a routine.

“I am nae sure who cooks this food every day, but I believe there hasnae been a single day when I have nae thoroughly enjoyed eating it,” she commented as everyone smiled at her except Flynn.

“Joel is the main cook in the kitchen and usually cooks the food himself, or it is cooked under his supervision. The old man is a real nuisance when it comes to cooking right and takes his job very seriously,” Billy replied, surprising Astrid with his detailed answer.

She was not sure whether Billy even liked her or not. Every minute he had spent in her castle when he and Flynn had come to get her, he had had a scowl on his face. Astrid did not know if she could simply interact with him the way she could with Laila and Daphne, who had been kind to her since the beginning. However, she knew she should not let go of the chance of making a friend at any cost, and if Billy was offering her a kind word, she should say one in return.

“I think I will need to go down to the kitchen and thank Joel myself,” she said laughingly.

“Donae do that, lass,” Laila burst out. “Joel already thinks mighty high of himself and believes we are this happy because he makes us excellent food. If ye go down and start giving him compliments, it will go straight to his head, I tell ye.”

Astrid laughed at the evident horror in Laila’s tone, which was the perfect depiction of a woman who had been tolerating Joel and his antics for a very long time now.

“I will make sure to tell Joel that ye also complimented his food and claimed nay one can make better food than him,” Astrid joked, and Daphne burst out laughing when Laila began to shake her head.

“He will never let me live after that, Astrid. He already seeks praise from me constantly,” Laila replied, shaking her head with a smile on her face that softened her expression.

Astrid noticed that Laila, even though naturally a rather soft woman, had a face that had been hardened with time. It was evident that she had seen too much and lived too long. Astrid couldn’t imagine what the wars between the two clans would have done to her, and she suddenly felt responsible for it all.

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“Why did ye get so quiet, Astrid?” Daphne asked, and Astrid looked up at the question, realizing that the smile was wiped away from her face. “Are ye all right?”

Astrid once again plastered a smile on her face. “Oh, yes, I was just thinking how ye have such a beautiful castle here, and I still have nae seen most of it.”

“Well, me dear lass, it is because ye didnae give us a chance to show it to ye. I promise ye, I will show it to ye meself, or Flynn will,” Laila replied, pointing towards the silent man, who was seated beside Astrid.

Astrid had been so involved in her dinner and conversing with the rest of the family that she had completely forgotten that Flynn was there too. It was not as if he was making his presence known, though. He was more silent than she had ever seen him, but perhaps it was simply because they were with his family, and he certainly could not argue with her before them. She did not entirely mind the dynamics of their relationship, but she wondered if they would ever be able to have a cordial relationship with one another.

“I am sure Flynn will show it to me,” she said, turning to look at her betrothed, even if their betrothal was just for a little while.

Her heart jumped as she noticed how handsome he was even when dressed simply in his leine and kilt, which were made from a dyed fabric of his house colors. She wondered if he always dressed this simply. For some reason, she was certain he did. The man had no semblance of flamboyance attached to him, and this made him even more appealing in her eyes.

“If I get the time, I will,” he replied gruffly, his words sterner than Astrid had expected them to be. He must have realized his tone too, for he immediately softened. “Or else, Daphne or Grandmother can show it to ye. There isnae much to see, anyway.”

Astrid cut the meat on her plate and put it in her mouth as she chewed slowly, unsure if Flynn’s words granted a reply. It was strange how she knew nothing about the man and his nature and had only ever interacted with him a few times, and each time they had been at odds with one another. Except for that one night in that ceilidh...

She wished she could kiss him again.

She did not know what he was thinking, but she certainly wished to find out. She wished to know him well enough to know what was going through his head just by looking at his face. However, she knew it was impossible. The relationship between them was nothing more than a façade, and it would remain that way.

“Dinnae be such a rude host, Flynn. She is yer betrothed after all, and it is yer duty to make sure she has seen the home she is living in,” Laila scolded Flynn, and Astrid wondered if this was a usual occurrence.

The Flynn she had come to know emanated strength and masculine energy. He was a leader in the very sense of the word, and his staying quiet while someone scolded him was something Astrid simply could not have imagined.

Although, when he stayed quiet and did not reply to his grandmother, it was enough indication for Astrid to know that she had been right. If there was someone in the world whom Flynn would listen to, it was Laila. This warmed Astrid’s heart even more, for it showed her a more human, almost soft side of Flynn which he shared with his family.

Astrid wondered if he would ever share it with her, but she felt as if she already knew the answer to that.

“I am sure Flynn is very busy,” she said shortly, not wishing for the discussion to propel forward.

She did not know if he was acting cold towards her purposefully, but she knew that seeking his time and attention was something she would never lower herself to. She was his equal in all respects and was perfectly capable of looking after herself, especially when everyone else at the castle was being kind and courteous towards her.

“He will learn to make time eventually. I will make sure of that meself,” Laila said, her words stressed.

Astrid smiled to herself, knowing that Flynn’s grandmother had her ways of making sure that the people around her listened to her in all regards.

“But, Astrid, Flynn is right. There is more to see in the lands of the clan than at the castle. The scenery here is quite beautiful,” Billy added, turning the direction of the conversation to favor Flynn.

“Really?” Astrid asked. She had always been much closer to nature than those around her and enjoyed her time walking about her lands. For the past three days, being trapped in her chambers had been rather depressing for her, since she missed her daily walks at night with Bannock. “I am counting on ye to take me on a walk to see that, Billy. Perhaps Daphne and yer children will be available for that as well?”

“It will be our pleasure,” the large man replied with a grin, looking to his wife, who nodded and smiled softly at him.

This reminded Astrid of how different his nature was from his looks. Billy was the

perfect representation of a strong man being soft at heart, and she could understand what Daphne must have seen in him.

The rest of dinner passed similarly, with Laila and Daphne telling Astrid about everything she might find interesting in the castle or outside. Astrid could not have ever imagined that in just a matter of a few days, she would begin to feel at home at Flynn's castle. It was evident how everyone was trying their best to make her feel at ease and give her a sense of comfort that she had been certain would not exist before she had come here.

Flynn was the only one who was refusing to interact with her directly, and the tension in his shoulders was enough to tell her that he was worried about something or was perhaps simply worried about her getting closer to his family. After all, it was still a fake betrothal, and Astrid was not here to form lasting bonds. Despite that, she knew the people who were making genuine efforts for her to be comfortable around them deserved genuine efforts from her end too.

"Daphne, are ye going to yer kids now?" Laila asked as soon as dinner was over and servants began to clear away the plates.

"I believe so. Will ye come with me, Billy?" Daphne asked her husband, a sweet smile on her face.

Astrid wondered if she would ever share a relationship based on such pure love with anyone. She knew it was rather impossible, but hope was all she had.

"Do ye need me for something, Me Laird, or should I go?" Billy asked Flynn, standing up from his chair.

"Flynn is going to have a glass of whiskey with me, Billy. I am certain he needs ye for nothing at this late hour," Laila replied for Flynn, and Astrid once again turned to

look at the Laird.

“Ye can go, Billy. I will meet with ye in the morning.” Flynn nodded, standing up too.

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Astrid knew this was her cue to leave as well, even though she was certainly not looking forward to being alone again. Although now that she was out of her chamber, she could probably go out for a walk with Bannock. She did not know where Bannock even was, which meant she would need to look for her in the castle.

She stood up from her chair when Laila suddenly called out to her, stopping her mid-air. “Astrid, me lass, are ye going somewhere?”

“I was thinking of going out for a walk in the gardens,” Astrid replied, hoping that no one would object to the idea. She truly needed fresh air.

“Why don’t ye have a glass of whiskey with me and Flynn first? We can sit in the front parlor in front of the fireplace. I do need some warmth in my old bones,” Laila said, wrapping her shawl a little tighter around her arms.

Astrid wondered if she had the choice of saying no but decided against it anyway. She could not afford to offend Laila or appear ungrateful for the invitation. Besides, she was seeking company herself.

“I would love to.”

Laila stood up with a pleased smile on her face and walked towards Flynn, who stood right beside Astrid. “Lead the way, me dear,” she said.

Astrid watched as Flynn offered his arm to her, and she softly put her hand in the crook of his elbow while Laila walked beside them. As they headed towards the parlor, Astrid wondered if it was wise for her to get this close to the MacKie family.

After all, they were on borrowed time.

CHAPTER 6

The parlor was lit up with the faint orange light of the flames burning high in the fireplace. This room was much hotter than the dining room.

She will feel much better here.

Flynn had noticed that Astrid had shivered lightly in the dining room. Despite his sour mood and the fact that he did not want her here, he did not want Astrid to be uncomfortable. He scowled even more at his mind for caring about her well-being.

When he went to get her in her bedchamber, he had been momentarily distracted by the chaos that spread around the entire place, but he could certainly not forget the faint scent of lilies, which only grew stronger as she walked closer to him. It took him back directly to one year ago when he still had her in his arms and could afford to stay intoxicated by her and her scent.

He walked both his grandmother and Astrid towards the armchairs while he himself remained standing. “Ye two should sit. I will get the whisky.”

“Oh, Flynn!” his grandmother cried out as if in pain, and he turned to look at her. She was rubbing her hand all over her arms and neck as if something was bothering her while Astrid moved closer to her and began to check if she was all right.

“What’s wrong, Grandmother?” Flynn asked, walking quickly towards Laila.

“I suddenly feel very hot as if something is burning in my chest,” she said, her voice beginning to get whispery.

“Is it something ye ate?” he questioned worriedly.

“I dinnae think so. I think I just ate too much, and my body is demanding rest. I must lay down,” Laila said, her words taking on a desperate tone that sounded almost dramatic and unreal.

Flynn looked into her eyes for a few seconds, trying to detect the emotion lurking in them. Just as he had expected, it was evident that she had nothing burning up in her chest and she felt just fine. He understood his grandmother enough to know what was wrong with her, and he knew that right now, she was simply acting.

He could not truly grasp why she would do such a thing, but as he turned to look at Astrid’s worried expression, he suddenly realized his grandmother’s scheme. She had simply designed the entire plan to force him and Astrid to be together in a private setting, and she was going to be successful at it.

“I will come with ye. Let me take ye to yer bedchamber,” Astrid offered, sitting on her knees in front of Laila and taking both her hands in hers.

“Oh, no, dear. There is nay need for that. I am a strong woman, and I can walk on my own. Ye stay here and have a glass of whiskey with Flynn for my sake. I dinnae wish to leave him all alone, but I need nae be worried now that yer here,” Laila said, landing her arrow right at the target.

“But I dinnae wish to leave ye alone right now. Yer clearly unwell, Laila,” Astrid insisted.

“Ye absolutely must listen to me, me dear lass. I will be just fine,” Laila said while Flynn silently watched her complete her entire act. “Flynn will keep ye company while I go rest.”

“Are ye sure, Grandmother?” Flynn questioned as she stood up, making sure to look her straight in the eye and convey with his expression that he knew what she was up to.

His grandmother, being the smart woman that she was, smirked up at him but otherwise ignored him entirely and continued her act of playing the sick, old woman.

“I am, Flynn. Ye stay here with Astrid.” With that, Laila turned around and walked slowly out of the parlor while Astrid and Flynn stared at her disappearing form.

Flynn knew Astrid was still worrying while he was simply just applauding his grandmother’s scheming mind.

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“Is she going to be all right?” Astrid asked, turning to look at him.

“Yes, she will be just fine.”

He walked towards the decanter on the side table and filled two glasses of whiskey for him and Astrid. As he turned around and walked back towards her, he noticed that even though she was seated, her posture had tension written all over it. It was evident she was not comfortable, and he hated himself for making her feel this way. He had never wished for her to be uncomfortable in his presence. He knew, if he tried hard enough, he could perhaps help her feel better.

As he sat down beside her, his gaze dropped to her hands, which she constantly wrung in her lap.

“Here,” he said, handing her the glass of whiskey, which she held firmly before taking a sip. He was certain the alcohol would help her get calmer.

He took a sip out of his glass as well, wondering what he was supposed to talk about with her. It wasn't as if he knew her well enough to know her interests, likes, or dislikes. He was completely unaware of what her life was and what she enjoyed doing. Even though he wished to find out each of these things about her, he wondered if it would seem inappropriate to ask such questions. For all he knew, Astrid disliked him and did not desire any association with his person. Hence, the two of them sat in uncomfortable silence for a few minutes before he could no longer take it.

“Ye do realize that Grandmother left us here alone so we could talk in private?” Flynn asked, the ploy pulled by his grandmother still running afresh in his mind.

“What do ye mean?” Astrid demanded, her brows turning up in confusion. She turned slightly so her posture and face were directed towards him entirely.

“I mean, she wasnae really sick. She was pretending,” Flynn answered honestly, knowing that Astrid liked his grandmother enough already to not put this against her.

To his surprise, a smile broke out on her face, and she laughed softly. As the melodic sound filled his ears, he once again wondered what he felt towards Astrid, for he knew it was not hate. He could never hate someone like her.

“I did have the slight inkling that it could have been staged, but I dinnae ken her well enough to ken for sure. Although, since she is yer grandmother and ye ken her, I am certain yer right,” she replied rationally. “She must want us to spend time with one another.”

“I wonder why,” Flynn muttered shortly, and Astrid turned to face him completely, her eyebrows rising in confusion.

“What do ye mean why?”

“There is no point in ye and me spending time together.”

“Well, I am sure she wants us to get along and be cordial towards one another or at least get to ken each other,” Astrid said calmly.

“And what will that lead to?” he asked, sipping whiskey as he turned his body to face her entirely as well. They were seated on the two armchairs, both of them facing the other as the fire warmed their skin.

“A simple understanding perhaps, or maybe harmony between us and the clans?” Astrid suggested, shrugging her shoulders nonchalantly.

“She must ken that an understandin’ between us is impossible.”

Astrid raised an eyebrow. “I think she might not because she disnae ken that her grandson is entirely unreasonable and impossible to converse with.”

“I could say the same for ye.”

“But that wouldnae be true,” she countered quickly, her cheeks flushing with exasperation.

Though it wasn’t what he had intended, he was making her angry. He was simply trying to tease her, for this was always something that existed between them, and he knew she was comfortable this way.

“It is true, Astrid.” He whispered her name, and her eyes widened. “Ye have done nothing but fight with me since the day I met ye a year ago, and I am certain ye will do it every other day too.”

“Yer the one who always starts the fight, Flynn.” She whispered his name the way he had whispered hers and inched closer. “I am completely innocent in the matter.”

“Innocent? Ye?”

“Ye just dinnae ken me that well yet, Me Laird.” She smiled at him, and his heart melted at the sight.

He did not know what it was about her, but she was extremely charming when she wished to be. A simple smile from her was enough to accelerate his heartbeat, and he wondered if he had a similar effect on her.

Flynn softly tucked away a loose strand of hair that had fallen out behind her ear, and

her eyes widened in surprise as a faint blush tainted her cheeks crimson. He did now know if it was the effect of his proximity or the argument they had been having, but no matter the reason, he could see it made her extremely attractive.

“I wish to ken ye that well, Me Lady,” he said, addressing her with the title of his wife. He wondered how she would react to such a thing, for the two of them had constantly been restating the falsity behind the betrothal.

“What did ye just call me?”

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“Me Lady. Do ye have a problem with that?” Flynn questioned, moving even closer so their knees were almost touching.

“I dinnae have a problem with it, but I think we both ken that I am nae and never will beyerlady.”

“Does it matter?”

“What do ye mean?”

“Astrid, does it matter if this betrothal is real or not? We are betrothed anyway, and I think I am allowed to address ye as Me Lady if I wish to. Am I nae?”

He watched as her pupils slightly dilated, the wheels in her brain whirring, as she thought over his words. “Ye are.”

“Are ye certain?”

“Absolutely,” she whispered, and Flynn wished for nothing more but to kiss her at that moment.

He noticed how her gaze momentarily landed on his lips. Despite that, he knew he should not kiss her. Not unless he was completely sure she wanted this too.

“Now, tell me,” he said instead, shifting her focus from his lips to his eyes.

He had failed to realize when and how they had moved so close to one another that

they were almost touching, but he had no intention of creating distance between them again. He was enjoying the heady scent of lilies that had once again turned intoxicating for him. Almost unreal.

“Tell ye what?” she asked, her mind slightly hazy still.

Flynn laughed softly before answering, “I wish to get to ken ye well. So tell me about yerself.”

“What would ye like to ken?”

“Everything.” He traced his finger along her cheek, her smooth skin warm under his touch.

She sucked in a sharp breath at the contact but did not flinch or shy away from it. That was encouragement enough.

“I can certainly nae condense my life in a few words for ye, Me Laird.”

“When did I ask ye to condense it?” he asked. “We have all night. I can listen to ye speak endlessly.”

Astrid laughed at his words before beginning. “I had a great childhood. It was fulfilling and beautiful, and I had parents who loved me and cared for me. It’s true that Faither was mostly occupied with affairs of the clan or clashes or simply tending to the people, but I had a mother who was there for me. I had Bannock too and Keira. I think if it were up to me, I would remain a little girl. Life was easier back then.”

Flynn hadn’t failed to notice how Astrid hadn’t mentioned her brother even once. He was certain she did so in order to make sure that he did not feel uncomfortable and for the old feud between the clans to remain at bay. His heart warmed at her effort,

for it made it evident that she wished to keep things light between them.

“Life is nay longer easy for ye?” he asked, wondering why she sounded so pessimistic.

“I dinnae mean to sound ungrateful because me life is good. It always has been. Although now that I am older, it feels as if I have lived a very sheltered existence, one that I had nae control over and perhaps never will. This is somethin’ that breaks me heart sometimes.”

“Why do ye think ye dinnae have control over it?” Flynn asked, sounding genuinely worried.

He took her hands in his to stop her from constantly wringing them and held them tightly in his lap. He loved the feel of her small hands in his.

He imagined these hands touching him, and he started becoming excited at the thought, which would be dangerous. Her hands were extremely close to his groin, and he did not wish for her to see him as a pervert. He shook the image from his mind, but his desire could not be kept at bay.

“Look at the situation now for instance. We must adhere to the orders of the King and be betrothed against our wishes. Is that truly all right? Do we have nay say?”

“We are his subjects, me dear. He holds power over us. I am the laird of my clan, and I still have to listen to what he says,” Flynn tried to reason with her, but he knew it was futile. She was upset, and she would remain that way.

“I understand that, but I hope ye understand what I mean,” she whispered, breaking eye contact and looking down at their joined hands.

Flynn instinctively moved his index finger under her chin as he slowly pushed her face upwards until she was looking into his eyes again. “Can I ask ye something, Astrid?”

“Aye,” she whispered, her skin turning scarlet again.

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“Is it really such a bad thing to be betrothed to me? Do ye really dislike me that much?”

She breathed deeply, her cheeks becoming even more crimson, the color traveling down her throat, dipping below the collar of her shirt. How he wished to tear that dress she wore and see how far the redness would go.

“That isnae what I meant.”

“Then, what did ye mean?”

“I simply meant that it feels like an order,” she said. “Otherwise—”

“Otherwise what?” he interjected.

“It wouldnae be such a bad thing at all.”

Flynn did not know if he had been expecting such an answer or not, but his heartbeat quickened at her reply.

He moved closer, his finger still under her chin as they continued staring into one another’s eyes. Her gaze darted towards his lips momentarily, and he knew she wanted him to kiss her just as much as he wanted to relive that moment that had been invading his memories since a year ago.

The wood crackling in the fireplace suddenly spat fire a little louder than usual, just as Flynn’s lips almost touched Astrid’s. They both immediately jerked away as the

parlor door burst open, followed by running footsteps that could have only belonged to children.

Flynn cursed under his breath as he turned to look and found Sam walking in followed by Tiara and Crane. In their arms, they held a meowing Bannock, who leapt out and ran towards her mistress as soon as she saw her.

“We found the lady’s cat on the second floor. She looked lost and was trying to find her way, so we brought her here,” Sam said as a way of introduction.

“Oh, Bannock.” Astrid grinned as the cat licked her hands, clearly ecstatic to be reunited with her mistress.

“Mother told us the cat was yers,” Tiara explained, smiling at Astrid shyly.

“Thank ye so much, ye all. I was wondering where Bannock was meself,” Astrid said, placing a caressing hand on Tiara’s head. She turned towards Flynn. “I think I must get some sleep now.”

“Have a good night, Astrid,” he replied swiftly, knowing it was the best thing to do. Asking her to stay was not a wise idea.

Flynn watched as she stood up and exited the parlor, Bannock still in her arms. He could not take his eyes off her until she disappeared entirely, his mind lingering on the almost kiss that could have happened between them. He wondered what it was about them and almost kisses and interruptions. The more he wished to be closer to her, the more distance was brought between them.

“Me Laird?” Sam’s whisper forced Flynn to tear his eyes away from the door and look at the three children, who were staring at him worriedly.

“Yes?” Flynn asked, making sure he sounded calm.

He loved the three of them immensely and had known them since they had been babies. He could not strangle them because they had ruined the kiss with the woman of his dreams. Or at least he tried to tell himself so.

“Did we do something wrong by bringin’ the cat ‘ere?” Sam asked, the spokesperson for the three children, since he was the oldest.

Flynn laughed, wondering why they would think they did something wrong. He knew they were too innocent to understand almost kisses, but his angry expression when they had first entered must have brought them to this conclusion. Although, now that he was able to once again think rationally, he knew kissing Astrid was not the best course of action. At least not yet.

“Nay, I think ye did more good than harm by coming here,” Flynn said honestly as their expressions turned to that of relief.

He couldn’t help wondering how long he would be able to keep his distance because he knew he had no control when it came to Astrid Wright.

CHAPTER7

As Flynn walkedinside the dining room, early morning the next day, his eyes immediately landed on Astrid. She was seated at the large table beside his grandmother, her face lit up with a beautiful smile as she laughed her heart out at whatever story Crane, Billy’s youngest son, was telling her. The proud father sat right beside him while Flynn’s grandmother shook her head as she too laughed at whatever was being said.

Flynn ignored everyone else and trained his gaze on Astrid as he assumed his seat at

the head of the table. As everyone's eyes met his, the laughter quietened for a few seconds before Astrid turned the full force of her smile towards him. She was wearing a simple red tunic and kirtle and wasn't as lavishly dressed as she had been last night for dinner. Although, he couldn't help but wonder how she managed to look so effortlessly beautiful even in such a simple fashion. There was something about her.

"What are ye all laughing about?" Flynn asked, finally sitting down. He had asked everyone the question, but his gaze was still directed towards his betrothed, who didn't seem the least bit perturbed by it.

"Crane was telling us a story. I believe he has a unique gift for narration and storytelling," Astrid said, smiling warmly.

"Crane has always been talented, isn't that right?" Flynn said, turning to the little boy, who was beaming at the praise.

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“Thank ye, Me Laird,” Crane replied in a small voice before resuming his breakfast.

Astrid busied herself with breakfast too while Flynn ate in silence as he heard those around him conversing about everyday things. He knew he could have contributed a word or two, but his mind was solely occupied with thoughts of the woman who was sitting right beside him. He knew he wished to kiss her again, even more so after last night. Although, he had bigger issues at hand. One thing he wished for was to make sure Astrid felt at home at the MacKie castle.

He had promised Laird O'Donnely that he would take care of his daughter, and while Astrid did look quite at ease here, he needed to make sure she had everything she wished for. He wanted her to be content and happy.

The very feelings were rather strange for Flynn, since he had never experienced such intense passion for anyone in the past. What he felt towards Astrid was both intriguing and confusing for him, but he refused to shy away from it.

“Billy?” Flynn turned towards his man at arms, who was almost done with breakfast too.

“Yes, Me Laird?”

“I need a word with ye after this,” Flynn said, knowing he sounded serious.

“Is everythin’ all right?” Laila asked, worry creeping into her tone.

“Everythin’ is excellent, Grandmother. Ye need nae worry. How do ye feel now?”

After last night?" Flynn asked, sneaking a look at Astrid, who was smiling playfully.

His grandmother's expression turned to confusion for a few seconds before she finally realized he was referring to the charade she had pulled last night. "Oh, yes, I rested the entire night, so I feel much better."

"What happened?" Billy asked, looking up and staring at Laila.

"Oh, nothing. I just ate too much and had a heavy chest, I think. I am much better now," Laila replied quickly, making sure no one made a big deal out of it.

"I am glad. Ye must rest today as well," Flynn said, making sure he sounded concerned.

"Nay, nay resting for us today. I promised Astrid I would show her the castle, since ye apparently are too busy to do so. Hence, the responsibility falls on my shoulders," she said, making sure to point out to Flynn how he had refused to show Astrid the castle.

Laila quite enjoyed scolding him for the tiniest of things, but Flynn knew she did it all out of love.

"I hope ye enjoy yer day then," he said as he shifted his gaze to look at Astrid, "ye and Astrid both."

"I am certain we will," Astrid replied softly.

Flynn nodded at her before standing up from his chair and nodding at Billy, who followed after him. The two men walked straight towards Flynn's study, which was a room no one else had access to. The Laird valued his private space immensely and was rather particular about who was allowed to enter.

Darkness greeted him as he walked inside the study, but soon enough, his gaze became accustomed to the dim light. He quickly moved towards the windows and pulled away the curtains to allow sunlight to enter the dark room. The massive desk at the center of the room shone as sunlight filtered inside and fell all over it, illuminating it grandly.

The place was simple and sparsely furnished except for a thick carpet, a table, chairs, sofas and shelves lined with books.

“So, is something the matter, Me Laird?” Billy asked as soon as Flynn took his position behind the table.

“Naething is wrong, Billy. I just want ye to make sure Astrid is safe at all times,” Flynn began, wondering what it was that he truly wanted,

“I can do that,” Billy assured him, but Flynn knew it wasn’t enough.

“I also wish for ye to take care of all of Astrid’s needs. Make sure she must want for nothing, and do everything she asks. If she wants a tour of the castle, give it. If she wants to look at the clan grounds or the mountains around, make sure it is arranged. I need her to be comfortable and well taken care of at all times.”

Flynn knew it might have sounded absurd to Billy, for he had never before made such a request on anyone’s behalf.

Although, he did not care. He knew if there was someone who would never question his moves, it was Billy. The man knew Flynn inside out, and they had no secrets between them.

“It will be done, Me Laird. Anything else?”

“Nay,” Flynn replied, just as he remembered something and stopped Billy again.

“Billy, wait.”

“Yes?”

“Did ye think of something? As I asked ye?”

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“About finding a way to end the betrothal without angering the King?” Billy asked seriously, and Flynn nodded.

The prospect of ending the betrothal seemed dim to the Laird, as he realized how some part of him did not want it to end at all. Although, he quickly shook his head to rid himself of such thoughts.

“Yes.”

“I have been thinking, Me Laird, but doing anything too soon would be an indication that it was all stage since the start, and I think we should wait for a little while before progressing with it.”

Flynn knew Billy was right.

“Just keep thinking. I know Astrid’s father will be after me life to make sure the betrothal ends as soon as possible, and I dinnae want to argue with him over this. The sooner we get done with this, the sooner we will have peace again.”

“Ye dinnae have peace right now?” Billy asked, and Flynn was shocked for a second at the question. He couldn’t deny that he was rather at peace and quite happy with Astrid’s presence at the castle, but she was not here to stay, and he needed to keep reminding himself of that.

“I have always had peace, Billy,” Flynn replied offhandedly. “It’s about having peace in the clan as well.”

“Understood, Me Laird.”

Flynn watched as Billy stood there for a few seconds and finally turned around to leave, knowing he had been dismissed. Although, just as Billy had taken two steps back, he turned around to look at Flynn again and walked closer to the desk before sitting down in one of the chairs.

“What is the matter?” Flynn asked, “Do ye have to say something?”

“Aye.”

“I am listening.”

“Are ye developing feelings for her?” Billy asked hesitantly, and Flynn knew he should have expected such a question.

“I dinnae ken,” Flynn answered honestly, wishing he knew the answer to this.

“I think ye are,” Billy commented, and Flynn suddenly felt as if he did not know anything. He knew he needed to simply stick to the fact that the betrothal was fake and that he was not supposed to develop real feelings towards Astrid.

“Is that such a bad thing?” Flynn asked instead, not denying Billy’s observation.

“It could be, but I pray it works for ye. Although, I would suggest ye be careful, Me Laird. That’s it.”

* * *

The lush green trees looked much brighter as the sun shone over them directly, illuminating the entire garden. Astrid smiled as she walked barefoot on the slightly

dewy grass, since it was still rather early in the morning. When Laila had asked her what she wished to see first for her tour of the castle, she had chosen to see the gardens, for nature always fascinated her.

As she walked under the crimson shade of the castle, the flowers spread around in vines all over the castle made everything seem more magical. It felt as if she was walking inside a fairytale right in the heart of Eden. Astrid knew she would be taking walks out here every day, since it was both beautiful and calming.

“Do ye like the gardens?” Laila asked her, and Astrid turned to look at the old woman, dressed in black, beside her.

“I do. I think they are the most beautiful thing about the castle,” Astrid replied honestly as Laila laughed.

“Ye haven’t even seen all of what’s inside yet,” the old woman said, and Astrid knew she was right.

“It is true. But, who cares? I have always been a lover of nature.”

Laila simply shook her head with a smile but did not reply as they continued walking. As Astrid looked at her, she wondered what was going on inside Laila’s head and what she must have been thinking when she had left Astrid and Flynn alone last night. Astrid had the distinct feeling that Laila wished for these two to somehow get closer in romantic aspects, despite knowing that the betrothal was fake.

Astrid did not know if she could even blame Laila or if it was something she herself did not wish for. Every moment she had spent with Flynn was a moment she came to cherish later. Even last night, when the two of them had been almost about to kiss, Astrid knew a part of her had wished for nothing more than to feel his lips on hers again. Although, she knew it might have complicated things between them, which

was something she did not wish for. Despite that, it did not end the confusion in her mind.

“Astrid, are ye lost?” Laila’s voice kicked her out of her reverie and forced her to return to the present.

“I am right here,” Astrid said quickly, not wishing to appear dimwitted or lost.

“Should we go inside now?” Laila asked, pointing towards the castle gates.

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“Yes, I am ready to see the inside,” Astrid replied quickly, surprised to find herself actually excited about a tour of the castle.

As they walked inside, she kept thinking how these very walls and halls were the places where Flynn had spent his childhood. He grew up in the protection of this place and turned into the man he was today.

Whenever Astrid looked at him, she couldn’t help but sense the multiple facets of his personality. Where at one end he was masculine and powerful, at another he was a young boy who listened to everything his grandmother said.

The stark differences between how he interacted with those around him made Astrid wonder who he really was. And she wished to find out herself. She had watched him being soft with Billy’s children and listening to them or praising them while she had also seen him unaffectedly assume the position of a laird and pass orders as if it was something he did all day.

She did not know or understand how he even managed to assume such different roles this easily, but she wanted nothing more than to become a simple part of each one of them and to be beside him at every instant.

“Are ye looking for someone?” Laila asked, and Astrid realized how her gaze had been roaming all over the castle in search of Flynn.

“Oh, no,” Astrid stuttered, knowing she needed to be careful around Laila since, Flynn’s grandmother sensed everything, “I was just admiring how beautiful the castle is.”

“Well, let me tell ye, all the floors are similar. Bedchambers on each one of them. Ye already ken where the kitchen is and where the library is. Have ye been to the library?”

“Daphne did tell me about the library being rather well stocked during dinner yesterday, but I still haven’t gotten a chance to see it. I will go some other time and take a look,” Astrid replied honestly, and Laila nodded, looking pleased.

They walked upstairs, and Astrid’s gaze immediately went towards the closed door of the room right beside the library. Laila had not told her what it was, but if Astrid had any experience with castles and how they were built, she was certain it would be Flynn’s study.

“Is that his study?” she asked Laila, pointing towards the closed door.

Laila followed Astrid’s gaze before nodding. “Yes, it is. He is rather particular about the room and allows nay one else to enter. Apparently, he likes to keep it private and solely to himself.”

Astrid shook her head and ignored the urge to go knock on his door and see the room for herself, and instead went upstairs with Laila. She waited patiently as Flynn’s grandmother showed her the roof, which indeed offered the most remarkable view of the lands. Astrid wondered what it must look like at night when darkness spread all over it.

The castle indeed was as beautiful inside as it was outside, and she was surprised to find herself quite at home here. Nothing felt unfamiliar or unapproachable, and with Laila being so warm towards her, she knew everything would work out just fine.

Astrid did not know how much time she was supposed to spend here at the MacKie castle, but she knew that no matter how long a stretch of time it was, she would be

fine.

It was true, she missed her father and sister and the comfort of knowing she was in a much safer place than the castle of her enemy, but no one here had made her feel like an outsider. In just a few days, she felt as if she belonged here and had been residing in the castle for a long time.

“I am sure ye won’t get lost here now,” Laila said as they made their way back downstairs towards the front parlor.

“I won’t,” Astrid assured her, even though her mind was elsewhere. “Laila, can I ask ye something?”

“Of course,” Laila replied while entering the parlor.

Last night came running back to Astrid at the sight of Flynn, but she kept thoughts of him at bay.

“Do ye think if our clans were not one another’s enemies, I could have really been betrothed to Flynn?”

“I think ye can really be betrothed to Flynn even now,” Laila replied with a smile as Astrid sat down beside her.

“He would never want that. I am the daughter of the man who waged war on his clan for ten years for a crime that remains unsolved to this day, and my brother remains lost. I dinnae ken whom to blame here and whom to not, but all I ken is that we are enemies and nothin’ can change that,” Astrid said truthfully.

It was true that some part of her did not wish to believe that these were the people who had apparently murdered her brother, even though she had grown up hearing

about their crimes, and she could not forget all about it in just a few days.

“Do ye really believe Flynn kidnapped yer brother?” Laila asked, getting serious.

“I dinnae ken what to believe and what nae to believe, Laila. All I ken is that this is what I have been told all me life, and even after knowing ye all personally, I cannae just forget the past ten years. It is true ye all seem like good people, and I dinnae wish to hold ye accountable for somethin’ ye might have not even done, but I dinnae ken how to change my mind entirely.”

“If I had a way to prove it, Astrid, I would. Although, I have no proof or evidence that would tell ye or yer father that the MacKie clan is innocent of such a heinous crime. I am sorry about what happened to yer brother, and I am glad some part of ye believes it might nae have been us, because it really wasnae.”

Astrid did not know what to say, but the emotion in Laila’s eyes once again forced her to consider that perhaps it really was not the MacKie clan, after all. Although if it was not them, who was it? Who could have kidnapped her brother and blamed Flynn’s father for the entire episode? It had been ten years, and up until now, there has been no answer. No sign.

Astrid turned as she heard a soft meowing sound from behind. Bannock entered the parlor, walking straight towards the sofa where Astrid was seated with Laila. Astrid smiled at the sight of her cat, who jumped between her and Laila and snuggled in front of the fireplace. Even Bannock was at home in what was supposed to be the castle of their sworn enemy.

CHAPTER8

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:50 am

Flynn sat in his study wondering why his mind kept returning to Astrid. It had been two days since they had almost kissed that night, and every time he had seen her since, things had been perfectly fine between them.

It felt as if she was purposefully trying very hard to make sure that things remained platonic. He understood and respected her boundaries for not stepping into a romantic attachment with him, considering the betrothal was fake, but he knew he was still just as attracted to her, and it was apparent she felt the same way.

“Oh, damn it,” he whispered to himself, standing up from his chair.

He knew he needed to step out for some air. He had been cooped up in one position for too long and was probably tired. Hence, his thoughts kept returning to Astrid, which was something he did not wish for.

Flynn stood up and walked out of his study before quickly stepping downstairs when his eyes caught a sudden movement of familiar blonde waves. He watched as Astrid disappeared in the corridor that led to the kitchens, and he wondered if she had given in to the urge and was finally going to meet Joel. Only last night she had begun to compliment Joel’s cooking again, and his grandmother had reminded her to never tell this directly to the old man or else it will go straight to his head.

Although, knowing Astrid, Flynn knew she would tell Joel sooner or later. This was an interaction he wished to see, thus he quickly followed after her towards the kitchens but stopped mid-way when he saw her upturned head facing slightly away from the kitchen doors.

From his vantage point, he could see her and listen to what was happening inside the kitchen. The silence of the room was enough to tell him that it was empty or perhaps hardly anyone was inside.

What is she listening to, then?

Flynn inched closer in order to make sure Astrid did not see him. She had Bannock in her arms, but the cat was extremely quiet too.

“Of course, she isnae fit for the Laird. Have ye even seen her? She has nay beauty, nae at all.” Flynn scrunched his eyebrows as the voice of a woman, who was definitely a maid of his household, reached his ears.

He immediately understood what was happening. It was apparent that Astrid had heard these women talking about her and did not feel right walking inside.

He noticed how her expression was completely unreadable, but her lower lip slightly quivered as she heard the maids talk. Flynn wished for nothing more but to interrupt them right there and then, but he needed to hear a little more to be certain about what the maids were really talking about.

“I believe beauty comes secondary to character anyway. The things I have heard about that lass are extremely scandalous,” another voice added.

“What do ye mean? What have ye heard?”

“We cannae really blame her for this because we all ken how every lass in the O’Donnely clan is just the same. They are all what ye can call loose women.”

“What is it that ye have heard about her, though?”

“She used to go out with several men and would be attending a feast or going to the pub every night to meet them. It is also said that if it were nae for the King’s orders, she loved another man and was planning to run away from her house to marry him, since he wasnae of noble blood.”

“Me goodness, really?”

“Yes! Laird O’Donnely is rather strict when it comes to his daughters, which has turned both of them into these women who are not fit to marry at all.”

“Our laird could have married a good, sweet girl from the clan or from some other noble family. He deserves better,” the first voice said.

“He most certainly does! Having to marry the daughter of yer worst enemy, the man who waged war against yer clan, cannae be easy.”

“Could have been easier if the lass was pretty at least.” The other maid laughed.

“Or cared for him or loved him.”

“Yer absolutely right, she is so cold towards him. Laird MacKie will be the perfect husband for whoever he gets to marry, but look at his sad luck. Having to marry such a useless chit.”

Flynn dug his nails in his palms to keep from lashing out. If it were two men who were gossiping this way about Astrid, he would have made sure they suffered the physical brunt of his anger for saying such unceremoniously unkind things about the woman who was going to be their lady.

Although, since it was two maids, he knew this was not an option. Despite that, every word they had said simply angered him all the more, and he knew he needed to say or

do something. He could not stand quietly as anyone abused Astrid in front of him and over clearly false and baseless rumors. He looked at her face once again and could sense she was trying very hard to stay calm and keep her head high.

He couldn't even imagine what it must feel like to her. She must have never been subjected to such insults. Here he was, trying to make sure that she felt at home in his castle, but his own people disliked her so.

Flynn finally decided he had waited long enough and could not stand to listen to these maids abuse his betrothed any longer. He walked quickly towards the kitchen, and Astrid looked up as his footsteps reached her ears. Her eyes widened at the angry expression on his face, which must have been indication enough to her that he had heard everything.

"Flynn, don't," she whispered as he reached the door and stood right in front of her. But instead, he ignored her and walked straight into the kitchen.

"And do ye ken—" The maid stopped mid-sentence as her wide gaze landed on Flynn, and she motioned to her partner to look in the direction of the door.

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Flynn was satisfied to see both guilt and fear in their expressions, for he was determined to tell them that what they had just said was enough to make him dismiss them from his employment.

“My Laird, do ye need something?” one of the maids asked. Flynn noticed that she was wearing a leine of the usual house colors and that her stature was short but chubby. She could not meet Flynn’s eyes because of the obvious guilt over spreading false rumors.

“Ye two can pack yer bags and leave the castle right now. I am dismissing ye,” he said simply, not wishing to yell at them or teach them how to respect his betrothed.

“Me Laird, we are sorry!” the other maid, who was taller and slimmer, cried.

He heard footsteps behind him and watched as Astrid finally entered the kitchen, her gaze falling on the two maids. She came to stand beside Flynn, Bannock still in her arms.

“Please, dinnae do this. I will forever feel guilty if ye take away their jobs because of me,” she whispered, trying to convince Flynn.

“I am nae dismissing them because of you,” Flynn replied, making sure they heard each word he said. “I am dismissing them because they enjoy spreading false rumors while at work and talk absurdly about me betrothed, me future wife, and the future lady of this house. If they dinnae ken how to respect those around me, I dinnae need them in me castle.”

“They made a mistake, Flynn. I am sure they willnae do it again,” Astrid reasoned, and Flynn couldn’t help but wonder how and why her heart was so pure. If it were someone else in her place, she would have delighted in the fact that Flynn dismissed the two maids.

“Yes, Me Laird, it was a mistake. Please forgive us,” the taller maid said.

“We will apologize to the lady too. It really was our fault, and we should have known better than talking this way about the future lady of the house,” the other maid added.

“It is just what has been going around the village, and everyone is repeating such rumors,” the taller maid said again before turning towards Astrid. “Me Lady, please forgive us. It is true we dinnae ken ye as a person, and we simply just assumed and repeated things being said by others. We never meant to hurt ye.”

“Ye will never hear such words from us again, Me Lady. Please forgive us this one time, and it shall never happen again,” the other maid pleaded.

“I forgive ye. Stop apologizing now,” Astrid replied calmly, assuming her higher position and exercising her authority as not only a noblewoman but as Flynn’s betrothed.

Despite that, Flynn felt even angrier at this knowledge, knowing that these maids were not the only ones who disliked Astrid so. The people of his entire clan disliked her and were making up false rumors simply for the sake of entertainment. Although, it did not mean he was going to entertain them.

“I dinnae care where ye heard it from. All I care about is the fact that I shouldnae hear it again from either of ye, or it willnae take me one second to dismiss ye!” Flynn yelled, trying to keep his anger under check. “I am only leaving ye this time because Astrid has forgiven ye. And ye should ken that I am not a very forgiving man and nor

do I give second chances.”

“It will never happen again, Me Laird,” the taller maid said before curtsying and leaving the kitchen through the back door.

Once both maids had left, Flynn turned towards the woman beside him, who looked as beautiful as she ever did. He wondered what it was about her that made her seem beautiful in the simplest of attire but could not find an answer to that.

“Ye didnae have to get so angry. I already ken the people of the clan hate me, just like the people of me clan hate ye,” Astrid reasoned, and Flynn knew she was right.

“I dinnae care if they hate ye or love ye. As long as yer me future wife and residing under me protection, it’s me duty to make sure that yer respected and loved by those around ye. I want ye to feel safe Astrid, and I will do anything for that.”

Flynn watched as her expression softened at his words, and she moved closer towards him with a smile. He knew she could not understand why he said these things, but he wished to tell her that he meant every single word. He truly wanted her to be respected by all, and as her betrothed, it was his responsibility to make that happen.

“Ye really dinnae need to take such good care of me,” she whispered, a smile on her face.

His heart calmed as he watched her smile and return to her old self. It was evident that listening to the maids talk this way about her had really saddened her, and he couldn’t see her in such a position.

“Aye, I do, Astrid,” he said honestly. “Yer me responsibility, and I never shy away from my responsibilities.”

Astrid laughed at his words and lovingly stroked Bannock's fur as the cat meowed softly. Flynn turned to look at her cat, whose gaze was trained on him, and he wondered if Bannock liked him or not. He had heard Astrid say how her cat was very selective about people and only allowed the people she trusted and loved to touch her.

"I am glad ye think that way," she finally replied, still stroking Bannock unconsciously.

"Can I pet her?" Flynn asked, and Astrid looked at him confusedly.

"I thought ye hated Bannock."

"Nay! I never said that. It is true I dinnae like pets in general, but I dinnae hate them either," Flynn said.

"Well, in that case, ye can give it a try. Although I am not certain if she likes ye or nae."

"All we can do is try," Flynn replied before moving his hand forward, inching it closer to Bannock.

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Just as he was finally about to touch her fur, the cat hissed at him and raised her paw to push away his hand. Flynn's eyes widened at the obvious rejection while Astrid burst out laughing. If he hadn't heard Astrid's melodic laughter right after, he would have been offended by Bannock's clear rejection. But as he watched her laugh, he felt it was worth it all. Astrid looked even more beautiful laughing.

He could not believe that the two maids, who had seen Astrid themselves, would question her beauty when she was clearly the most beautiful woman in the entire castle. There was something effortlessly flawless about her.

"She hates ye, Flynn," Astrid said once she had stopped laughing.

"I can make her love me," he shot back, looking straight into Astrid's eyes. He knew his words had seemed directed elsewhere, and he wondered if they really were.

Astrid suddenly got quiet and licked her lips as she awkwardly looked around, wondering what to say.

"I think we have yet to see that," she finally said, a soft smile on her face.

"We have," Flynn replied as an idea struck his mind. "Can I ask ye for something, Astrid?"

"Of course," she replied almost immediately. "But before that, can I say something?"

"Please do."

“I just wanted to say...” She stopped for a second before shaking her head and beginning again. “I wanted to thank ye for all that ye just did for me. Ye could have ignored it entirely or nae have said anything to the maids. The fact that ye care about me enough to stand up for me in such a manner is truly flattering.”

“Astrid,” Flynn said, moving closer, his finger caressing her cheek softly, “I will always stand up for ye in front of anyone that might say something unbecoming.”

She looked up into his eyes, giving in to his touch. “Anyone?”

“Anyone.”

“Even the King of Scotland?” Astrid joked, a glint in her eyes.

“Especially the King of Scotland,” Flynn joked back.

“Thank ye,” she said earnestly, and Flynn could sense the honesty in her words. “Now, ye were saying something.”

“Will ye have dinner with me?” he finally asked after waiting for a few seconds. He did not know if she would agree, but he knew it was worth a shot. He wished to spend time with her while no one else was around them.

Astrid looked confused for a second. “We have dinner together every day.”

“I mean, just ye and I,” Flynn clarified, wondering if she would even agree. “A few hours for simply us, where nay one will disturb us, and we will set aside all our differences, hatred, and problems for one another and simply have a good time.”

“Why would ye want that?” she asked.

“Why not? I wish to spend some time with ye,” he said honestly. “I think we are both capable enough to put aside our differences for a few hours and stop hating each other so we can just sit together and have a conversation. Can we nae do that, Astrid?”

“We can,” she agreed, and Flynn felt relief flood through his chest. He knew it wouldn’t have meant anything even if Astrid had denied his offer, but her simple agreement made his day starkly better.

“Tonight?”

“Yes, Me Laird. Tonight it is.”

CHAPTER9

Astrid stared at her reflection in the looking glass, wondering if Flynn would find her as beautiful as she looked right now. She was dressed elaborately in a red, silk gown. When he had asked her to have dinner with him earlier today, she didn’t know if agreeing was the best option. The two of them were always at odds with one another whenever caught alone, and she believed it was wise if they stayed apart.

Although, a part of her still wished to agree, and she simply could not say no to him. She looked at her blonde waves framing her small face and the red silk hugging her figure perfectly. Whenever she wore red back home, everyone told her that it was her color, and she looked particularly beautiful in it. Although, she had never been able to see the appeal for herself.

Despite that, she couldn’t wish for anything else but for Flynn to find her beautiful too. Astrid did not know why she wished for a man such as Flynn, the Laird of the clan who had kidnapped her brother and her father’s sworn enemy, to find her beautiful. She wanted nothing more than to somehow justify this feeling in her mind,

but she couldn't come up with a good enough reason.

"Bannock?" Astrid called out to her cat to tell the furry creature that she was going out of the chamber for dinner, but Bannock was nowhere in sight. "Bannock?"

She shook her head, knowing perfectly well that her cat had gotten used to her new surroundings and was always busy exploring the castle rather than staying inside Astrid's bedchamber. The cat had also gotten close to Billy and Daphne's children and could often be seen with them. Astrid had initially been worried about how Bannock would adjust to the new castle, but she couldn't deny that her cat was fitting in far better than she was.

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“I must get going. Flynn will be waiting for me,” she whispered to herself as she stepped out of the bedchamber and into the dimly lit hallway.

She could not understand if it was just her imagination or if the castle seemed emptier today, as if everyone had suddenly left or somehow vanished. She wondered if Flynn had asked the servants to retire early to give some semblance of privacy to the two of them.

She shook aside all such thoughts and advanced towards the courtyard, which was just a few paces from her room. Flynn had sent her a note some time ago asking her to meet him in the courtyard, and Astrid had been rather happy about his place of choice.

It was one of her favorite places in the castle, and she loved spending time there. The small space was crawling with vines that sported some of the most beautiful flowers all year round. It faced the gardens, and the view was spectacular. She knew tonight was a full moon, and she couldn't wait to sit under the silvery halo of the moon. The entire scene turned ten times better in her head as she imagined it with Flynn beside her.

Just as she neared the large metallic door which opened from the hallway into the courtyard, she could hear voices. As she walked closer, she knew that it was Flynn conversing with somebody, but she did not know who it was until she heard a familiar hissing sound.

What is Flynn doing with Bannock?

Astrid hid herself behind the wall to peek outside.

“Bannock, come here. I have a treat for ye.”

Her eyes widened, and a smile immediately stretched her lips as she saw Flynn sitting down on his knees in front of Bannock, who stayed a considerable distance away from him. Astrid could see him holding a piece of meat in his hand, which he was using to bribe Bannock into coming closer to him. However, she knew perfectly well that Bannock would never get closer to him unless she truly liked him, and up until now, her cat rather disliked her betrothed.

“Come here, Bannock,” he urged again, crawling hesitantly a little further.

Astrid laughed to herself as Bannock stepped out of his reach just as he extended his hand to pet her. It was clear that her cat did not wish to be touched. She was still there to somehow get the piece of chicken that Flynn was teasingly dangling in front of her.

Astrid remained hidden for a few minutes, her heart warming at Flynn’s futile attempt to somehow coax her cat to love him or at least get closer to him. When she realized it was not going to work, she decided it was time to step in and stop this little charade unfolding in front of her.

“Looks like Bannock brought a laird to his knees,” she joked, and Flynn immediately looked up at her.

She waited for him to reply in his usual witty manner, but his gaze became dazed for a few seconds as he noticed her appearance and ogled her from head to toe. The smile on her face vanished at his expression as she suddenly felt heat growing into her face from just one look.

“I think Bannock’s owner can bring me to me knees as well,” he replied, finally

standing up. He looked at the piece of meat in his hand, which he tossed a little up ahead, and Bannock immediately ran towards it.

“Is that so?” Astrid asked, shifting slightly as she watched the powerful man in front of her striding leisurely towards where she stood. He was dressed simply in a white shirt, which was tucked inside his breeches, his hair flying dramatically in the late night breeze.

“It is,” he whispered, standing right in front of her. “Ye look beautiful.”

Astrid smiled at the unexpected compliment. “So do ye.”

“Do I?” he asked, cocking an eyebrow at her as he stepped back and twirled as if giving her a show.

“Ye do,” she agreed honestly, and Flynn laughed.

Astrid was finally able to breathe again as he moved a little away from her and walked further into the courtyard, her eyes finally taking in the whole scene.

Just as she had imagined, the dark space was illuminated by the moonlight, giving it a faint glow that only worked to make it appear more romantic than it already was. She noticed that Flynn had set up candles all around the courtyard, and a small table was set up on the floor with cushions and flowers. She smiled when she saw that their dinner was already waiting for them, and she suddenly felt hungry.

“Do ye like it?” Flynn asked, as he must have noticed her taking in the dimly lit setting.

“I love it,” Astrid replied honestly before walking ahead and joining him.

They sat down on the cushions around the table, facing one another. When he had asked for her dinner, she hadn't imagined such an elaborate setup done just for her, but she felt flattered that Flynn had gone to such lengths on her account. She did not know what it meant or what it was that he was trying to show her, but she was simply focused on enjoying her time.

She silently watched as he removed the lids from the plates in front of them, and the inviting scent of meat and vegetables hit her nostrils. She still hadn't gotten a chance to go compliment Joel's cooking.

Earlier today when she had gone to the kitchen, she had encountered the gossiping maids, and her mood had been ruined. Although, she suddenly remembered how Flynn had swooped in and stood by her side to protect her. The memory once again made her feel warm, and she looked at the handsome man in front of her with newfound respect.

In the time she had known Flynn and his family, she had only seen positivity surrounding them. Flynn was kind and courteous towards her. She didn't ever doubt his power and authority as the laird of his clan, but he was just and firm and had protected her.

His grandmother had been nothing but welcoming to her, and so were Belly and Daphne. Astrid knew she had grown up to hate this family and the clan since they had kidnapped her brother, but now that she was here, she couldn't help but doubt the allegations.

She did not know if it was fair to accuse them of a crime that still remained unproven. The part of her mind which had been constantly telling her that her father was wrong to blame the MacKie clan for her brother, Aiden's kidnapping was beginning to dominate. Although, she could not allow herself to entirely believe it yet or even mention such a thing in front of her father. She needed to find proof or simply live in

a reality where she was torn about what was the truth.

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“Astrid?” Flynn’s voice brought her back to the present, and she noticed he had slid closer to her and was staring straight into her eyes.

“Aye?” she asked, her voice breathy.

“What are ye thinking?”

“Me mind just went elsewhere for a while. Did ye say something?” she asked, shaking her head.

“I didnae. I only asked ye to eat yer food. Ye must be hungry.”

“Starving!” she exclaimed and immediately began to eat.

The food was as delicious as it always was, and the two of them ate in silence for quite some time. Astrid was slightly on edge, since Flynn was sitting too close to her and her body could sense his proximity.

A few minutes later, he swept aside his plate and turned entirely to face her, still maintaining a few feet between them. As his gaze landed on her, she knew it would be impossible for her to stay focused on her food.

She did not know what it was about him tonight, but his presence was making her slightly nervous. She had always known he could be intimidating and powerful whenever he wished to be, but tonight, there was something different in his manner. He was not being intimidating towards her the way he had been in the past but simply attentive.

His attention was making her feel things.

“Why are ye starin’ at me that way, may I ask?” she questioned, stealing a glance at him. Her heart rate accelerated as their gazes met, and she couldn’t help but once again marvel at how handsome he looked. There was just something in his aura.

“Can I nae?” he questioned back, still not taking his eyes off her. At this point, Astrid finally gave up and put away her plate as well. Although, she still couldn’t turn to look at him and stare into his eyes.

“Ye can. But there must be a reason for it.”

“There is a reason,” he replied as he slid even closer to her. A spicy scent of cinnamon and sandalwood reached her nostrils, and she inhaled, unable to resist how divine he smelled.

“What is the reason?” she whispered, twisting her body to look at him but still not entirely facing him.

Astrid squealed as he unexpectedly took her by the arms and turned her around completely in such a way that she was right in front of him, her legs touching his, as there was hardly any distance between them. Her breathing became erratic but quickly calmed down as they remained silent for several heartbeats, each just staring at the other. She could not comprehend what she was feeling, but whatever it was, it made her feel butterflies in her stomach.

“The reason, me darling, is simply that ye look too bonnie to be real, and I need to ken if yer real or nae,” Flynn whispered back, his face just inches away from hers. She would only need to move her face slightly to kiss him. As much as she wanted to give in, she held back.

“So, do ye ken now?”

“Ken what?”

“If I am real or nae?”

“I will have to touch ye to ken that,” Flynn said, his fingers trailing across her cheek as she closed her eyes at his touch.

“Yer touching me now,” she breathed, his touch forcing her to think of the kiss they had shared a year ago, a kiss that was seared into her memory and refusing to ever leave.

“I still dinnae ken. Ye could be a selkie bewitching me with her beauty and then...” he whispered back, and Astrid chuckled at his words.

“I would have already found another way to kill ye, Flynn.”

He smiled at her reply and continued to caress her cheek. Astrid settled into his touch, knowing he would not hurt her. A certain sense of comfort surrounded her whenever she was around him. It was the assurance that he would be there for her, no matter what. This trust sprung out of the time they had spent together, and she hoped he felt the same way about her.

“Can I tell ye something?” he asked.

“Anything.”

“I never forgot the kiss we shared a year ago. During all this time, I found meself thinkin’ about it more often than I am proud of, but ye always stayed in me mind. I wanted nothing more but to share that with ye again.”

Astrid's eyes widened at the confession, as she couldn't believe he was thinking about the kiss too. It was extremely surprising for her to know that he had thought about it more than once in the past year because she was certain that a man like Flynn had probably kissed a lot of women, and he would forget her just as he forgot the rest of those women. She, on the other hand, had remembered and cherished that moment since it had happened.

“Can I tell ye somethin’ too?”

“Tell me.”

“Ye were me first and only kiss, and I have found meself thinkin’ about ye quite often too,” she confessed and watched as his gaze widened at the revelation, displaying his shock.

She didn’t know what he thought about it, but she felt significantly lighter after sharing that information. It felt as if she had bared a rather vulnerable part of her soul by telling him that he was the only man she had ever kissed. Although, she did not mind one bit.

* * *

Flynn waited for a few seconds, unable to believe what Astrid had just said. He did not know how he had gotten so lucky. The woman sitting in front of him was more beautiful than any woman he had ever seen, and she had just told him that he was the only man she had ever kissed. The only man who had ever touched her.

A sudden sense of possessiveness and pride overtook him, as he was ecstatic about the fact that his betrothed had only ever kissed him. He had never been the kind of man who would judge a woman based on the number of men she had been intimate with, and he knew if the case was otherwise, he would have still wanted Astrid just as much.

Although now that he knew the truth, he couldn’t deny that he wished for it to remain that way. For him to always be the only man who knew what she tasted like or smelled like. The only man who was close enough to touch her. Despite the fact that

this betrothal between them was fake and would reach an end soon, he still couldn't suppress the unfamiliar burst of possession that had overtaken him.

"Are ye serious?" he finally asked, still unable to believe it.

"Serious about what?"

"About me being the only man ye had ever kissed?"

"Aye. I think that is another reason I have never been able to forget about ye. Ye were me first kiss, the first man who came so close to me," she whispered, her smooth skin turning crimson at the reply.

He smiled at her obvious shyness, which was enough indication that she was indeed telling the truth.

"Will ye let me kiss ye again, Astrid?"

She looked up at his question, surprise and want evident in her eyes. He knew she wanted to kiss him just as much as he wanted it himself.

"Please," she whispered.

Flynn immediately closed the distance between their lips, meshing into her soft, pink fullness. She immediately began to kiss him back as if it was just what she had been fantasizing about doing for some time now. He slowly bit her bottom lip, and she opened her mouth as his tongue swooped inside her mouth. A soft moan escaped her lips, making Flynn even more aroused than he already was.

He easily picked her up and placed her on his lap, her long legs going on either side of him as she sat down comfortably, their lips still attached to one another. She did

not resist one bit but only continued to kiss him faster and harder, making him want her even more than he already did.

Flynn could not remember wanting anyone as much as he wanted Astrid. There had always been an attraction between them, but he could not think straight as soon as they touched. There was something about her.

“Astrid,” he whispered as he snaked his hands around her small waist, softly bunching her long, blonde hair in his hands and pulling softly at it until their lips parted and her long, slender neck was right in front of his gaze.

She sighed softly just as his lips touched the sensitive skin under her ear. “Oh, Flynn.”

“Yes, darling,” he replied as he continued placing kisses all over her neck.

Her sighs were enough to tell him that she wanted him immeasurably, and Flynn’s arousal was just enough indication for her that he wanted her too. He released her hair and once again brought her lips to his, and she eagerly kissed him again.

Just as Flynn bit her lower lip softly, she suddenly placed both her hands on his chest and pushed him away. He did not understand what had just happened as she backed away just a bit, enough to get off his lap and get back to her feet. Her breathing was erratic. She was still close enough to kiss, but he stayed away, wondering what was going on in her mind.

“We cannae do this,” she finally said, and Flynn was not surprised. He already knew she had stopped for a reason.

“Why not?” he asked, tucking a few strands of her hair behind her ear.

“This betrothal is fake, Flynn. We cannae forget that,” she said in a low voice. “Yer still me enemy, and we are never going to get married. I have already given ye me first kiss, I cannae give ye all of me as well. Please.”

“Do ye really mean it, Astrid? Ye really dinnae want me?”

“I mean it, aye,” she whispered, but he could see the hesitation in her eyes.

He knew she was only pushing him away to protect herself, to protect her heart from breaking because this betrothal was going to end sooner or later. Marriage could never happen between them.

“Yer right,” he finally said, and Astrid nodded, heartbreak written all over her face.

He stepped back, giving her room, and he watched as she finally stood up and walked out of the courtyard, her red dress disappearing into the darkness of the hallway.

CHAPTER10

“What do ye mean?” Astrid asked Daphne as the two of them sat in Daphne’s bedchamber, absorbed in conversation.

“I only told ye what I have been noticing, Me Lady. I think ye have been avoiding Me Laird for the past two weeks now,” Daphne repeated, and Astrid wished she could deny it.

She knew Daphne was right. Since the dinner at the courtyard, Astrid had been trying her best to avoid Flynn as much as she could.

It wasn’t as if she was upset with him or embarrassed about anything that had happened that night. It was simply because she was immensely attracted to him still and whenever she looked at him, the memory of the kiss returned to her. She knew that she had done the right thing by stopping him that night. Astrid was aware that the position between the two families was unclear still, even if the fighting between the clans had ceased.

Flynn had already taken too much from her. She had feelings for him, both romantic and sexual, and she could not act on either of them. The betrothal was fake, and they were still enemies. Even if her heart was not almost convinced that the MacKie clan could have ever kidnapped or murdered her brother, she had no proof to support her belief.

It was simply based on her gut. Despite that all, Flynn had been her first kiss, and that had been enough for her to remember him up till now. If she had given him her virginity, she would have handed her heart to him, and she knew that would not have been the right thing to do. She needed to protect herself.

“I am doing no such thing, Daphne. Why would I avoid Flynn?”

“I have a theory or two,” Daphne replied playfully.

“Really?” Astrid asked, cocking an eyebrow. “Care to enlighten me?”

“I think ye have developed feelings for him,” Daphne said, sitting up on the bed. “And now, yer scared that if ye spend any more time with him, ye will fall in love.”

Astrid laughed outwardly even though she knew that Daphne was entirely right. “That is an absurd theory. One thing I can assure you, Flynn is unlovable.”

“That is not true, Astrid,” Daphne countered, turning to face her.

The two of them had become very good friends, and their friendship had only gotten stronger since Astrid had been spending all her time with Daphne and Laila. She had grown close to both of them and enjoyed every minute she spent in their company. They made living in this castle easier for her and helped her stay away from Flynn.

“I ken ye would never accept it, but what is true is true, Me Lady.” Daphne once again laughed, and Astrid smacked her arm jokingly. She had no desire to discuss Flynn and the possibilities of liking him, which Astrid knew were high already. The man had somehow wormed his way into her heart.

She knew he must have noticed her distant attitude as well, but he hadn’t said anything about it to her. It felt good to see that he was respecting her wishes and

actively staying away from her. If he had somehow tried to talk to her regarding what had happened on that night or had questioned her distant attitude, she would have never been able to answer him satisfactorily.

“I dinnae ken what yer talking about,” Astrid said finally, completely removing all related thoughts from her mind. She needed to think about something else entirely, since thoughts of Flynn were already invading her mind.

She would often find him secretly trying to pet Bannock or offer her a treat, but the cat stood in solidarity beside her and was staying away from Flynn as well. Astrid did now know why he was trying so hard to befriend her cat, since he had clearly mentioned to her that he disliked her cat in the very beginning. Although now, she was surprised at his growing affection towards the creature. She couldn’t deny the man was too hard to truly grasp and understand, and at this point, she had even stopped trying.

She simply needed to wait and stay in the MacKie castle until her father and Flynn found a way to end the betrothal, which Astrid knew would be soon enough. Her father was already angered by this arrangement and entirely against sending her to live here, and he would do anything in his power to make sure she returned home as soon as possible.

“Yer lost in yer thoughts again,” Daphne commented, and Astrid slowly nodded before looking at her friend with a guilty smile.

“I was just thinking about how this will all be over soon.”

“What do ye mean?” Daphne asked, sitting up straighter.

“The betrothal. I am certain my father and Flynn will soon come up with a plan to end this thing just as we had decided earlier. Ye already ken it was all fake.” Astrid’s

heart suddenly hurt as she said this, and she realized that she did not want this to end, now or ever.

She couldn't deny that the betrothal had felt real, and her feelings towards Flynn, despite all the differences between them, were real too. Still, this could never go on, and she knew that.

“Do ye want it to end?”

Astrid looked up at Daphne's question, not sure how to answer it. This was something she had been constantly asking herself too for the past week.

“It disnae matter what I want or dinnae want. The betrothal has to end, and I am expected to return home. There are nay other questions in the matter.”

“Yer right. Can I ask ye something?”

“Of course.” Astrid nodded.

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“Has yer mind changed even slightly? Do ye still believe that the MacKie clan kidnapped yer brother?”

Astrid smiled, since just less than two weeks ago, Laila had asked her a similar question. “I dinnae ken, Daphne. From what I see and from how much I have come to ken ye all, I believe the MacKie clan didnae do it, but I cannae just forget something I have been taught to believe since I was a young lass. It is rather difficult.”

“Ye ken the Laird was also very young when all of it began. Billy and I weren’t married then, and I lived with me parents, but we all knew him, and we all saw him leading every fight that was waged between the two clans. He was always there for his people, and he was always ready to go to any lengths to protect us.”

“He still is that person. He cares about the clan and the people he loves immensely,” Astrid agreed, smiling as the image of a young Flynn came to her mind. He must have been young and energetic, ready to kill anyone who stood in the way of his clan.

“I still remember when the clan was accused of kidnapping the sole heir of the O’Donnely clan. The late Laird didnae address any of us, but Me Laird came forward and called all of us to explain that the accusation wasnae true and that someone had framed us.

“He promised us that the MacKie clan would never stoop so low, and the people of the clan should defend their honor proudly ’cause we were nae at fault,” Daphne said, a far-off look in her eyes.

Astrid could see Daphne was visualizing the scene still as if it was happening right in

front of her eyes.

She smiled at the memory, and her heart fluttered as she saw yet another side of the man she was quickly developing feelings for. He had been a leader for his people and a beacon of hope, even before he had become the Laird. It was apparent his people loved him, and now, Astrid knew he deserved the love and respect. There really was no one like him. There couldn't be.

Her eyes filled up as she remembered her brother, Aiden, and thought about how he might have been a similar laird for his people if his life had not been snatched from him. She knew the people of the O'Donnely clan would have loved and respected Aiden, but now, he was only a memory.

"Are ye all right?" Daphne asked as she noticed tears in Astrid's eyes.

Astrid quickly wiped the tears away. "Yes, I am all right. All this talk just reminded me of Aiden," she replied honestly.

"Yer brother?"

"Yes."

"Were ye close?"

"Inseparable," Astrid said in a heartbeat. "We were very young, and I was just a child, but I remember loving me brother. I remember being lost for days after he was taken away from us. Sometimes, there are days I feel lost still. Life would have been much different if he was still here."

"It would have been. Perhaps this betrothal wouldnae have to be fake, then," Daphne said, and Astrid couldn't help but laugh softly.

“Disnae matter, Daphne. Aiden is gone, and me father would never allow this betrothal to be real. We all simply need to do what we are asked to do,” Astrid said bitterly.

“And what is it yer asked to do?”

The two of them had failed to notice a shuffling of footsteps as the door to Daphne’s bedchamber opened and Laila walked in. Astrid looked up to stare at the frail woman, who sat down on the bed in front of them, her questioning eyes directed at both of them.

“Laila!” Daphne exclaimed in greeting.

“What is it yer asked to do, Astrid?” Laila asked again, refusing to let it go.

“Listen to me father and abide by the rules of me clan,” Astrid replied, smiling softly.

She no longer felt bitter, just upset. She herself had never wanted this betrothal to be real in the first place and simply adhered to it for the sake of the clan and the King.

“And then, when ye get married, listen to yer husband and abide by the rules of yer new clan,” Laila scoffed.

Astrid smiled at the disdain in the old woman’s tone. Laila, too, was the daughter of a laird and knew the limitations and barricades that surrounded their lives hence she understood Astrid and her troubles.

“What can we do about it?” Astrid asked.

“I am afraid that is all we can do,” Laila said solemnly before brightening up.

“Although, make sure ye rebel once in a while and do somethin’ yer clan would never

approve of. That keeps things interesting.”

Astrid laughed at the advice, quite certain that Laila herself must have abided by it. The old woman still had a rebellious air around her, and Astrid could only imagine how heightened it must have been when Laila had been a young woman.

“I do try to do that sometimes.” Astrid laughed, patting Laila’s wrinkled hand with her smooth one.

Astrid had never had a grandparent, thus she had never known how warm such a relation could be. Laila made her feel loved in the most motherly way possible, and Astrid couldn’t have asked for anything better. As much as she had been dreading living here in the MacKie castle, the reality had been surprising in the best possible way. She did not know it was even possible to feel any more whole than she already did, but there was something about the people here, who had accepted her wholeheartedly.

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“Now, when are ye rebelling against yer father into forcing ye to end this betrothal?” Laila asked.

“This is somethin’ I can never rebel against, Laila,” Astrid said honestly.

“Why nae?”

“It will hurt him immensely,” Astrid replied after a few seconds. “He lost a son, his heir, and he thinks it was done by the people of this clan. I cannae blame him if it is impossible for him to forgive and forget. If I say I wish to marry Flynn, it would break his heart, and I love me father too much to cause him such pain.”

“Ye can still try. Following yer heart is the hardest thing to do.”

“And how do ye ken it would be following me heart?” Astrid asked, wondering why everyone suddenly believed she wished to keep this betrothal. “Moreover, Flynn would wish to put an end to it as well.”

“Did he say that?” Laila asked, looking at both Astrid and Daphne.

“I dinnae think he did,” Daphne chimed in, a teasing smile on her face.

“He didnae say otherwise either, and if he truly wished to keep it, he would have said something,” Astrid replied finally. “It has already been decided. I am sure we will come up with a way soon enough, and I will return home.”

“If ye hadn’t been avoiding Flynn for the past two weeks, ye would ken what he has

been saying with his eyes. His expression says it all.”

Astrid sucked in a sharp breath at Laila’s words, wondering if she was right. She knew Flynn was attracted to her, but she knew he was not dimwitted enough to keep this betrothal and marry her on the basis of attraction alone.

Does he really wish to marry me?

“Can we talk about somethin’ else?” Astrid asked, shaking her head to rid herself of all thoughts pertaining to marriage and Flynn. She knew she would be thinking about him again eventually, but right now, she needed to occupy her mind elsewhere.

Laila began to discuss the progress of her vegetable garden with Daphne, and Astrid sighed in relief as the discussion went elsewhere. This entire conversation with Daphne and Laila had exhausted her. She lay down in bed as she heard the two women talk, but her mind was still on the man that dominated her thoughts entirely—Flynn.

She closed her eyes, and all she could picture was a young man dressed proudly in his kilt, sword in hand. A young man passionate and driven about the affairs of his clan. A young man who believed that he and his people had done no wrong.

She could see the young man standing before her, heart in hand, asking her to believe him that he was indeed not at fault, and if she truly wished to, she could love him.

But could she?

CHAPTER 11

Flynn could not remember the last time he had been out on a visit to all of his clan’s villages and crops. The past ten years had been turbulent for the entire clan, and he

himself had hardly ever found time to make these visits. Now that the battles between the O'Donnely and MacKie clans had ceased, he finally had the time to make the rounds.

He had needed this semblance of peace in order to focus on the work that needed to be done for his people. In the last decade, they had simply been involved in battles and wars, and Flynn, himself, had been busy with them. Now, he had finally found the time for what needed to be done.

“Me Laird, only the villages at the northern border of our clan are left to visit now.”

Flynn turned around to look at his man at arms. The two of them had been touring on horseback for the past two days, and he was mostly satisfied with how his clan was working. All things seemed to be in order.

“We are already close,” Flynn observed, beginning to quicken the pace of his horse. “I think we will be done by tonight.”

“Yer right,” Billy replied, and the two of them sped off further towards the north, where the villages on the border were located.

Just as they reached there, Flynn suddenly felt as if something was amiss. The villages were present, but the people were not dressed in the colors of his clan. Instead, they wore the colors of the Gallagher clan, which was extremely surprising for him. He knew perfectly well that this land was his and had always been a part of the MacKie clan, but the scene in front of him was bewildering.

“What happened here, Billy?” Flynn questioned, dismounting his horse.

“I dinnae understand myself, Me Laird. I will go make some inquiries,” Billy replied before speeding off on his horse.

The Gallagher clan was both weak and poor and did not have much land to its name. The Laird, Myles Park, was a sly old man, and Flynn had never liked him. The man was too cunning for his own good and an opportunist, and Flynn already knew what had happened here.

Myles had somehow taken advantage of Flynn's ignorance and had slowly captured the villages. Flynn knew he could never let such a matter go because the amount of land Myles had captured was huge and rightfully belonged to the MacKie clan. If there was something Flynn was never going to compromise on, it was his people and his clan.

The blood in his veins was boiling as anger coursed through him, but he remained as calm as he possibly could. He knew such matters could not be handled by sheer strength or anger alone, and he would need to have a conversation with Myles to make sure things were sorted. Soon enough, he saw Billy coming back.

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“The people say that the Gallagher clan took over a few years ago, very quietly. They tried to resist but couldnae, and the clan leaders were busy fighting a war at the time, thus they couldnae even reach us,” Billy explained, and Flynn nodded, already expecting such an answer.

Myles had clearly taken advantage of the situation, and now, he would have to pay for it.

“Are the people happy under the Gallagher rule?” Flynn asked, once again thinking about the needs of his people first.

“Nay!” Billy exclaimed. “They say Myles is a corrupt man and takes a greater amount of crop than he should. He is both unjust and unfair, and they wish for nothing more than to be part of the MacKie clan again.”

“I think we will need to pay a visit to Myles Park. I cannae let such a thing go unpunished.”

* * *

“Flynn Dawson, I didnae expect to ever see ye again in my lifetime,” Myles said, his words dripping with unfathomable sweetness.

Flynn had never felt more hatred towards a man than he did for Myles right now. It was surprising, since he hadn’t felt such contempt even for Laird O’Donnely, and he was the one who had waged war against Flynn’s clan. There was something about Myles that forced Flynn to dislike him as soon as he laid eyes on him.

“I never wished to see ye either, Myles, but necessity drove me here,” Flynn replied, turning to take a look at the old man’s study. The room was as claustrophobic and dark as the Gallagher castle, and Flynn wished for nothing more than to leave as soon as he could.

“Necessity? Is something the matter?” Myles asked, acting innocent.

Flynn could not help but notice how he drew out each word as if testing it on his tongue before saying it. It almost felt as if Myles was nothing more than a stupid, old man, but Flynn knew better. Behind his façade of simple-mindedness, Flynn could sense a rather cunning mind, and he was never wrong about people.

“Ye should tell me that, Myles. What would bring me here?” he asked, pacing left to right in the study, unable to sit still due to the anger that was still coursing through him.

“If I had known, I wouldnae ask ye.”

“Well, since ye dinnae ken, I will tell ye,” Flynn replied, closing the distance between them and slightly lowering to hover over the man, effectively trapping him in his chair.

He noticed how Myles’s eyes widened, and it was evident he was scared. Flynn was glad to see the terror in the old man’s eyes, since he could kill him with one hand alone.

“Wh—what is it?” Myles stammered.

“I went to visit me villages at the northern border today and noticed they nay longer were under the MacKie clan but rather were under the Gallagher clan. Care to explain?”

“What are ye saying? This makes nay sense to me,” Myles replied.

Flynn slapped his hand loudly against the handle of Myles’ chair, causing the man to flinch at the noise. “Dinnae lie to me, Myles. I hate liars.”

“I think yer mistaken, Flynn. How can lands that belong to yer clan become a part of my clan? That is simply not possible. I think ye need to get some rest to make sure yer mind is fresh enough to work again, and ye won’t make such nonsensical claims again.”

“We both ken I am nae making any nonsensical claims. Ye cannae escape this situation by lying, and nae, I won’t sympathize with ye just ‘cause yer old. So, tell me the truth now,” Flynn insisted, making sure he sounded firm and aggressive.

“I am telling ye, Flynn, yer mistaken,” Myles repeated, continuing to lie.

“I am mistaken?” Flynn asked softly, a smile on his face.

“Yes.”

Flynn grabbed the old man’s neck angrily, applying just enough pressure to stop him from breathing but not enough to kill him. He had already known the man would certainly not tell him the truth this easily. This was a rather sensitive matter, after all.

“Flynn, sto—st—stop, ple—please,” Myles stammered once again, and Flynn’s hands left his neck, effectively moving away to give the man room to breathe.

“Now, I will ask again, Myles. How are me lands and villages and crops suddenly a part of yer clan now?”

“I cannae believe such a thing, Flynn. I am telling ye it seems to me as if yer

mistaken indeed. I would never betray ye or the MacKie clan. We are neighbors, after all.”

“Explain to me this, Myles,” Flynn said, his words deliberately soft. “If I am so mistaken pertaining to the entire matter, why did the people of those villages tell me that ye took over them a few years ago and forcefully made them a part of yer clan?”

“They said that?” Myles asked, surprise registering in his expression, but Flynn could see it was all fake. The old man was simply trying to distract him and somehow make him believe that he was not lying.

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“Exactly as I told ye. I bet they are lying too? Everyone is lying except for ye, right?” Flynn asked, sarcasm dripping from his tone.

“That isnae what I said. I just think everyone is somewhat mistaken here, and such matters can easily be solved sitting down. Ye dinnae need to be so angry over it,” Myles added.

“Ye can continue lying for all I care, Myles. Ye can keep telling me yerself that somehow everyone else is mistaken, but I will tell ye this the first and the last time today. I need ye out of me lands and villages and return them silently to the MacKie clan. I wouldnae hear any excuses. It should be done within the week.”

Flynn knew he would need to act aggressively to get things done by Myles, or else the old man would never listen. He was still trying his best to come up with further lies or explanations and justify his explanation of the misunderstanding, but Flynn was no longer in the mood to hear such absurd notions anymore. He needed to get out of the Gallagher castle, as Myles was beginning to get on his nerves.

“Ye cannae scare or terrify me into giving ye the land that belongs to me clan!” Myles growled, standing up from his chair.

Flynn stopped walking and turned around. “Yer land ye say?” he asked casually, walking closer to the man.

“Yes.”

“Myles, it is none of me business if yer delusional or have just lost yer mind. I have

made meself perfectly clear that I want me lands back within the week or else ye would be responsible for what happens to ye and yer clan. I hope yer not forgetting that I am the Laird of the MacKie clan, and if I wish, I can quite easily run ye and yer clan into the ground. Dinnae test me patience.”

“Are ye threatening me?” Myles boomed, sounding angry, but Flynn could still sense a hint of fear in his words.

“I am. Can ye do somethin’ about it?” Flynn asked casually, once again turning around to leave.

“I willnae be terrorized by a man such as ye, Flynn. Yer a powerful laird, but so am I, and I willnae give up me lands to ye just because ye cannae remember the parameters of yer own land!”

“I dinnae wish to do this the hard way, Myles. Although, if ye refuse to listen, I will have to. It’s up to ye now.”

With that, Flynn turned around at last and walked out of Myles’s study. He had acted generally calm in front of the old man, but inside, he was bursting with rage. He could not allow a man such as Myles to walk all over him or somehow force him into agreeing to his insane idea of him being mistaken.

Although, Flynn wasn’t very worried. Everyone knew that the Gallagher clan had little money or land, and Myles would never be able to stand against Flynn or his army. This was a lost bet for Myles, and Flynn was content with the idea of it. He walked out of the Gallagher castle to where Billy was already waiting for him.

“What happened?” Billy asked as soon as Flynn was close enough.

“Myles tried to tell me how I was mistaken about the whole thing, and the lands have

always been part of the Gallagher clan.”

“Ye ken he is lying, right?” Billy asked.

“Aye, I ken. I told him as much and warned him to leave the lands as soon as possible, or else he would be responsible for whatever happens further.”

“What did he say?”

“Still refused to believe.”

“Stupid man,” Billy muttered, before getting on his horse again.

Flynn laughed at Billy’s comment, knowing that he was right. Myles Park was a stupid man indeed, or a very smart man who was working his way to the top. Flynn knew he would have to wait and find out.

CHAPTER12

Flynn looked around the candle-lit hallways of his castle, wondering why the place looked so empty. He had already had a rather long day that had turned sour with the discovery of Myles capturing his lands, and he was looking forward to some semblance of peace.

“Where is everyone?” he questioned Billy, who was right behind him.

“Nay idea. But the place looks emptier than usual,” Billy replied, agreeing with Flynn.

The two of them could hear faint noises through the drawing room and immediately walked towards it. Flynn did not know what it was about the castle, but he felt on

edge. It could simply be a reaction to the events of today, but he couldn't help but feel as if danger was near. Billy must have discerned something similar through Flynn's body language, since he too immediately went into action as they followed the voices.

Flynn slowly poked his head through the door to check who was inside, and the tension in his shoulders only increased even when he knew they were all safe. He turned to look at Billy, who was standing on guard waiting for instructions from his laird, and Flynn motioned him to put down his sword.

"It's all safe."

"Who is inside?" Billy asked, his tall frame relaxing significantly. He too had a tiring day, touring the lands with Flynn.

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“Someone ye definitely dinnae like but cannae kill,” Flynn replied with a shrug, since he shared similar sentiments towards the man seated inside.

“Who?”

“Laird O’Donnely.”

Billy’s eyebrows furrowed at the revelation, since neither of them had been expecting this uninvited guest.

“What is he doing here?” Billy asked, and Flynn shook his head.

“If I only knew, me friend. We will simply have to go inside and ask for ourselves.”

Without waiting for a reply, Flynn turned and walked straight ahead inside the drawing room, his strides as sure and proud as ever. He knew he was the Laird, and he knew how to act like one, which was something immensely necessary in front of Laird O’Donnely. Flynn knew the old man was Astrid’s father, and she did love him, but that relationship could not erase the ten years of enmity between the clans.

His gaze roamed over everyone in the drawing room, and he was rather surprised to see both his grandmother and Daphne present there as well. Astrid was seated at one end with her sister Keira, who was someone Flynn remembered perfectly, since the young girl got all the credit for being the reason Astrid had broken their kiss and then called him a name a year ago. He finally looked at Laird O’Donnely and found the man already staring at him.

“Laird O’Donnely,” Flynn greeted, walking towards the man.

It was customary for Flynn to greet Laird O’Donnely, since he was a guest at the MacKie castle, even though the old Laird had his own clan and was much older than Flynn. The two were also bound through Astrid, even if it was all fake. Despite that, Flynn would never shy away from propriety.

Laird O’Donnely stood up from his seat and extended a hand to Flynn, which Flynn shook gratefully. Flynn noticed how he did not feel similar contempt towards Laird O’Donnely as he had felt earlier towards Laird Gallagher. With Astrid’s father, it was simply coldness that sprung out between them because of the enmity they had harbored over the last decade.

“Laird MacKie,” Laird O’Donnely greeted back.

“Dinnae embarrass me by being formal, Laird O’Donnely. Ye should call me Flynn,” Flynn offered, wishing for things to go ahead smoothly between them. He was the one who had asked the King to initiate the ceasefire between the two clans and had always wanted this fight to end. Now, he would make sure that it remained that way, and he would do anything to keep the peace.

“I apologize for comin’ here all of a sudden uninvited, that is,” Laird O’Donnely said. “I should have written to either ye or Astrid before me arrival.”

“Ye can come anytime ye wish to come. Yer daughter resides here, and it is only natural that ye would wish to see her.”

Flynn could see the surprise on Laird O’Donnely’s face, since the man must not have been expecting such amiable behavior from him. The two had never before met on good terms, and Flynn had only ever been civil to him. Today, however, he was being welcoming towards the man and treating him like family, which was something he

could have never seen himself do before.

“That is why we are here, to check up on Astrid,” Laird O’Donnely replied, a smirk on his face.

The smile on Flynn’s face vanished at the Laird’s words, and he wondered what the man meant by checking upon Astrid. However, he did not allow a single emotion to show on his face.

“Check up on Astrid? What is that supposed to mean?”

“Ye ken, to make sure she is being treated right here. I cannae help but be concerned about her well-being, considering she is staying here with the MacKies.”

Flynn’s blood began to boil at what the old Laird said, and he felt anger coursing through his veins. He could not believe Laird O’Donnely would dare to step into his castle and berate him on the treatment of his daughter when he had been courteous to the man.

“Are ye saying Astrid isnae safe here with me?” Flynn asked, his tone dangerously low but his words expressionless.

“Ye clearly are delusional if ye believe I would consider me daughter to be safe around ye, now or ever.”

Before Flynn could utter a word, he felt a soft hand touch his arm, and he turned to look at Astrid coming to stand beside him. Her touch somehow magically worked to lessen the anger he had felt mere moments ago as his attention shifted entirely towards her. He knew she must have somehow understood his anger and had immediately walked into the scene to stop him from lashing out.

Laird O'Donnely's eyes also immediately went towards Astrid's hand, which was possessively resting on Flynn's arm as if it was completely natural for her to touch him this way. The gesture had been surprising for Flynn himself, since his betrothed had not even talked to him in the past weeks. She had been extremely distant, and Flynn had respected her wishes. His main aim still was to make sure that Astrid was comfortable and felt at home in his castle, and from her interactions with his grandmother and Daphne, it was apparent she was happy. Despite that, her obvious support of him felt heartwarming, and he waited for Laird O'Donnely to make a sly comment about it, but the man remained silent.

"I think after seeing me and talking to me, ye ken that I am more than safe and happy here," she interjected, firmly stating her case. "The entire MacKie family has not only been welcoming but also extremely kind towards me, Faither."

"Ye have indeed told me that, but I think I must stay here for a few days to make sure of it and see it with me own eyes," Laird O'Donnely replied before turning to look at Flynn. "Will that be all right with you, Flynn?"

"Stay as long as ye wish to, Laird O'Donnely. Ye will only see the MacKie hospitality."

* * *

Astrid finally breathed a sigh of relief once her father had retired to his bedchamber, and she could finally be alone for some time. It was not as if his presence was unwelcome, but his surprise visit to see her had proved to be rather stressful. She had expected him to act maturely like a grateful guest, but he had been nothing but condescending, especially towards Flynn.

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She couldn't deny that she was both surprised and flattered at how charmingly kind Flynn had been towards her father. He had been understanding and open and had not said one harsh word, while her father had gone on to criticize him. If she hadn't swooped in and taken over, she knew Flynn would have blown over and might have shed the restraint he was practicing. The matter had been handled without sparring or bloodshed, and she was truly thankful for it.

It was just a few more days, she reminded herself, since she knew her father would not stay here any longer than that. He had only come due to his concern about her, and he would leave once he was satisfied. Astrid could not blame him either, since he was just looking after her, but she knew that she needed to keep him and Flynn apart.

"I need to talk to him," she whispered to herself as she stood in front of Flynn's study.

She had been standing there for a few minutes now, knowing that she needed to thank him for what he had done and apologize to him for the way he had been treated by her father, but she did not know how to do it. The two of them had not talked since that night two weeks ago, and now, Astrid could not help but be unsure of Flynn's reaction towards anything she would say.

Before she could even knock on the heavy, wooden door, the door opened itself, and Flynn stood there staring at her, confusion evident in his expression.

"Astrid?"

"I—I was just coming to talk to ye," she stammered, still embarrassed that she had

been caught red-handed.

“About what?”

“Can we talk inside?” she asked, gesturing towards the study, and he immediately backed away from the door to invite her inside.

“Of course.”

Astrid walked inside slowly, adjusting to the unfamiliar surroundings. Laila had told her how Flynn was rather particular about his study and how he hardly allowed anyone inside. The fact that he hadn't resisted and had let her enter for even a second was extremely heartwarming for her, and she wondered what it meant.

He motioned towards the sofa, and Astrid sat down, unsure as to why she felt this awkward. The two of them had had important, serious conversations before, but this was the first time she was there to apologize for something. She waited until he sat down across from her and finally found the courage to begin.

“I came here to thank ye,” she said softly.

“What for, may I ask?”

“For being both kind and hospitable to my faither. I noticed ye were very welcoming towards him,” she replied with a smile and waited for a retort from his end.

She was certain he would comment on how her father had not returned the sentiments and had been openly hostile towards him, but she was surprised when he mentioned no such thing.

“It was the least I could do.”

Astrid nodded. "I also wished to apologize."

"Why?" Flynn asked, leaning forward on his seat as if genuinely curious and confused. Astrid did not believe that the man would not know what she was apologizing for, but she replied anyway.

"For my faither's behavior towards ye. I ken he could have been kinder and more grateful for yer permission to let him stay in the castle, but he was rather rude towards ye. He shouldnae have done that."

"And ye shouldnae be sitting here in front of me apologizing for mistakes made by yer faither. I willnae hear it," he stressed and stood up.

Astrid followed suit and stood up as well, slowly walking towards him.

"He could have acted maturely, I ken, but I implore ye to see reason here. I agree he was rude, but he was doing the best he could do," she insisted, wishing to take her father's side in the situation as well.

"Was he, now?" Flynn asked, a rather comical expression on his face.

Astrid wondered what was going through his head, but she remained quiet and continued with what she needed to say.

"He was," she answered. "The man has been grieving the kidnapping or death of his only son, his sole heir, for the past ten years now. And all the evidence that was gathered was against the MacKie clan. It is a grieving faither's heart that forces him to be this way, or else I can assure ye, he is a better person."

Flynn breathed in deeply as if unsure of what to say, "Yer right, Astrid. I cannae even begin to feel what he must have been going through for the past ten years, and his

hate towards us although unjustified is not nonsensical. He is simply trusting the evidence he saw without seeing reason in the matter. If he did see reason, he would ken that it wasnae us.”

“Reason? What reason?” Astrid asked, suddenly growing curious. A part of her heart had already forced her to believe that the MacKie clan was innocent, but she had never seen the reasoning for the situation herself.

“The MacKie clan is one of the richest clans in all of Scotland, even richer than the O’Donnely clan. We never had any motive to kidnap or murder Aiden. Yer faither thinks we did it to show power, but if it were an act of power, we would have admitted that we killed Aiden rather than denying the kidnapping allegations.”

Astrid stared at him with wide eyes, his words making sense. “Ye really had nae motive at all.”

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“Moreover, Laird O’Donnely truly believes that me faither was so dimwitted that he would send mercenaries to kidnap Aiden with a missive that clearly mentioned our name. If we wished to kill him, we would have done it cleanly and in a way where nae one finds out. Moreover, me faither’s stamp had gone missing just a few days prior to the kidnapping, but Laird O’Donnely refused to believe our word when we told him this.”

“Oh me,” Astrid whispered, her faith in the MacKie clan getting stronger.

She already knew the entire kidnapping of Aiden just did not sit right, and now, with Flynn’s reasoning, she was almost certain that it was not done by the MacKies. Although, if not them, who could have done it, and why? A million questions rose in her head, but she ignored them all, knowing that this was not the right time to be thinking about them.

“I wish I could sit with me faither and make him understand, but ye and I both ken it would be a fruitless effort.” She smiled sadly at him, and he smiled back.

“I dinnae care any longer, Astrid,” he whispered before moving towards her and taking her hand in his. “Will ye tell me what ye believe?”

“About me brother’s kidnapping?”

“Yes.”

“I dinnae think yer clan did it. I still wish to find out what happened and how it happened, but I cannae see ye or the people of the MacKie clan participating in such

a heinous affair.”

Flynn was taken aback by her reply, and a genuine smile grazed his lips. “Ye have truly come to believe our innocence?”

“To some extent, aye. I always believed in it a little, but now that I have gotten to ken ye and the family and have heard about the tales of the past decade, I think ye didnae do it.”

Flynn raised her hand to his lips and placed a small kiss on her knuckles. The merest brush of his lips against her skin was enough to send shivers down her spine. Her entire body tingled at the touch.

“Are ye certain?”

“I am, Flynn,” she whispered softly, her heart warming towards the handsome man standing in front of her.

She knew she had vowed to stay away, but something about him always drew her in. She did not know what it was, but she just could not resist.

“That is all that matters to me, Astrid. Yer faith.”

“Ye will always have that.”

She did not know what it was that compelled her to be this loyal towards a man she wasn’t really betrothed to, but she could no longer shy away from her feelings towards him. It was true she had not liked him when she had first found out who he was. But now that she truly knew him inside out, she could no longer resist or deny his good heart.

She could no longer believe that this man, who was both just and kind, would ever commit such a huge crime against a whole clan. Flynn was simply not cut for it, and Astrid would do anything in her power to make sure that one day the entire O'Donnely clan knew of it.

CHAPTER 13

“Where did ye disappear off to last night?” Keira asked Astrid as they lounged comfortably in the parlor while the early morning sun filtered in.

One thing Astrid was truly ecstatic about was reuniting with her sister. Nothing and no one in the MacKie castle could ever fill in for Keira, and Astrid had missed having her around.

“I needed to talk to Flynn about something,” Astrid replied honestly, knowing there were no secrets between her and her sister.

“About what?”

Astrid waited for a few seconds before replying, wondering how Keira would respond to the revelation. “I wished to apologize to him.”

Keira raised an eyebrow and sat up straighter. “Whatever for?”

“For what Faither did.”

Astrid knew her sister had never been a supporter of Flynn or the MacKie clan, and she could not blame her, since the two of them had grown up knowing that this was the clan that was responsible for Aiden's disappearance. Astrid had begun to think differently only because she had come to know Flynn and the MacKies personally, but Keira did not have such a privilege.

“Ye did the right thing,” Keira replied, surprising Astrid. “Faither was rather rude to Flynn, when he was nothing but polite.”

“Precisely!” Astrid exclaimed, glad that Keira agreed with her. “I needed to make sure Flynn didnae feel bad about Faither.”

“What did he say?” Keira asked curiously.

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“That I needed to stop apologizing for my faither’s mistakes, and that he wasnae angry, anyway.”

“He is right, Astrid,” Keira said. “Ye have always done that.”

“Done what?” Astrid asked, unable to understand what her sister was pointing out.

“Ye have always taken up responsibility for anythin’ that went wrong around ye pertaining to our family, and ye have always stepped ahead to mend things. If I did somethin’ wrong, ye would be the one apologizing on me behalf. Whenever Faither did something wrong or unbecoming, just as he did yesterday, ye swooped in and took matters into yer own hands to soothe both parties. This is just what ye do.”

Astrid realized that Keira was indeed right about it all. She could remember assuming the role of the mediator or problem solver since she had been a very little girl. Her role had only gotten bigger after her brother’s disappearance, since that led to their father being completely out of control and making some of the most irrational decisions of his life. Astrid had always been there to clean up his messes, which was what she had done last night with Flynn as well.

“Yer right,” she finally agreed with Keira. “But it is something I cannae stop now. I am just used to it.”

“I ken, Sister.” Keira smiled, taking Astrid’s hands in hers. “Although, I am glad that Flynn was smart enough to recognize it and even stop ye from doing it any further. I simply hope ye listened to him and didnae do it any further.”

“I think that would have been pointless, since I had already apologized and explained to him the reasons behind Faither acting the way he did.”

“Of course!” Keira rolled her eyes. “The reasons must have been that he is grieving the loss of his only son and is supposed to be bitter in life, especially to the people who are the alleged kidnappers.”

“Exactly what I said.” Astrid laughed at Keira’s sarcastic tone. She had always thought that her sister supported their father in their collective hatred towards the MacKie clan, but Keira’s comments regarding the matter made her think otherwise.

“Are ye favoring Flynn here?” Astrid asked, confusedly looking at Keira.

“I am nae favoring Flynn. I am only stating the truth. What happened with Aiden was a decade ago, and the wars between the two clans have already destroyed half of us. I cannae sit silently for the next ten years and watch them all kill one another again. Flynn is the reason we have peace today, and I do respect him for that.”

Astrid nodded, knowing her sister was right. “If it weren’t for Flynn and his will to ensure a ceasefire, we truly would be still fighting today. Faither never wanted to stop.”

“Precisely. Besides that, have ye seen him? The man is as handsome as yer bonnie, and if one sits down to stare at him, they wouldnae want to stop.”

Astrid began to laugh at Keira’s comment, but she was used to hearing such statements from her sister. Keira was wild in the most absurd sense of the word and never backed away from saying anything and everything that came to her mind. Astrid loved this trait about her sister, since it was the direct reflection of her pure soul.

“I have seen him, aye,” Astrid finally replied, “and he is quite handsome.”

“I dinnae blame ye for kissing him that night at the ceilidh a year ago. I would have done the same if I were in yer place and a man like him was staring at me—”

“Can ye be any louder?!” Astrid whispered furiously, turning to look left and right and wondering if anyone could have heard Keira’s comment.

“Calm down, Sister. Nay one is listening to our conversation.”

“Ye dinnae ken that. Anyone could be listening for all we ken, and I dinnae think it is wise for anyone to find out about the kiss Flynn and I shared that night,” Astrid whispered again, and Keira nodded, finally succumbing to the panic in her sister’s voice.

“I will be quiet,” Keira agreed. “But tell me more. What did Flynn say when ye apologized to him on Faither’s behalf.”

“The conversation went in a slightly different direction, I am afraid,” Astrid replied thoughtfully, wondering if it was wise to tell Keira about her views on the kidnapping of their brother.

“What direction?” Keira probed.

“Flynn said our faither was both mistaken and blind to believe that the MacKie clan would ever gain anythin’ by kidnapping Aiden, and if we discussed the logical reasoning of the events, the MacKies are clearly innocent and were framed.”

“Do ye believe in that?” Keira asked, once again forcing Astrid to think if she should discuss her feelings with her sister openly.

Astrid did not know how Keira would react, but she had no desire to lie.

“A part of me does, aye.”

“Really? Ye do think that the MacKies couldnae have done it? Is it because yer beginning to have feelings for Flynn or due to the fact that ye have come to ken these people personally?”

Astrid sighed deeply at Keira’s question, knowing it was pointless to deny the allegation of having feelings for Flynn. She was no longer denying it herself and was certain that everyone in the castle could see them except for Flynn himself. Or perhaps he was just kind enough to not blatantly point it out and embarrass her.

“Since when do ye think I have feelings for Flynn?”

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“Ye had feelings for him since a year ago when he turned into yer first ever kiss. Dinnae try to lie to me about it. I am yer sister, and I have witnessed the way ye look at him and he looks at ye. It cannae be nothing,” Keira replied.

Astrid knew it was pointless to claim otherwise. Her crimson face at the mere mention of Flynn’s name was enough indication for anyone to know how she felt about him, and she no longer wished to even hide it. She knew the possibility of them being together was impossible, and her father would never agree to the match, thus she needed to make sure even the possibility of it remained out of her mind.

“My feelings towards Flynn have nothing to do with it,” she confessed honestly.

“Did ye find some proof?” Keira suddenly asked, sitting up straighter, her shoulders taut with tension.

Astrid shook her head before replying, “I dinnae need proof, and I dinnae think at this point, after ten years, we can even have it.”

“I often forget how long it really has been,” Keira murmured with a sad smile, thinking of Aiden.

“A really long time, indeed.”

Astrid stood up and began to pace left and right in the parlor, her mind still on the discussion.

“But, Astrid, ye ken that Faither will never ever believe it. The only thing he has is

this hatred, and he would die rather than give it up. The MacKies are his criminals, and he would never see it otherwise until he is proven wrong.”

Astrid nodded, knowing that Keira was right. “Yer right, Keira. After the time I have spent here with the family, I can see that they couldnae have kidnapped Aiden. They had nay motive, nay motivation, nay reason to do such a thing. I wish Faither could see it this way.”

“Faither could see what?”

Both Astrid and Keira turned around abruptly as they heard their father’s voice from behind them. The two of them had failed to notice his footsteps and had not realized exactly when he had entered the parlor and was listening in to their conversation. Astrid’s color paled as she thought about what might happen if her father had really heard everything she had said, but the question he had asked told her otherwise.

“Nothing, Faither. We were just discussin’ our childhood stories,” Keira replied, lying convincingly, but Laird O’Donnely was impossible to fool.

“Is that why Astrid’s face is devoid of color after seeing me?” he asked, and Astrid realized she had stopped breathing. She forced herself to calm down and appear normal as her father walked further inside and sat down, his gaze trained on her.

“I am fine, Faither. Yer imagining it,” Astrid lied, although she knew she had never been a good liar and had often been caught easily.

“What is it that I need to ken, Astrid?” Lord O’Donnely asked again, his face expressionless.

Astrid suddenly felt the urge to finally tell him the truth. She knew she had hidden it from him long enough, and it might be entirely pointless to even discuss it with him,

but she wished to do it. She wished to express her feelings in front of him no matter what he felt about them.

“That the MacKie clan didnae kidnap Aiden,” she blurted out and was met with a surprised look on her father’s face. He was certainly not expecting such an outburst.

“She didnae mean that, Faither. She has probably hit her head somewhere,” Keira threw in, trying to solve the matter before it escalated and got out of hand.

“I think she meant every word,” her father said, standing up and walking towards Astrid. “Ye think yer precious betrothed and his faither didnae kidnap Aiden?”

“It wasnae them, Faither. They are innocent, and I can vouch for it.” Astrid stood by her words, refusing to back down under the staggering gaze of her father, who looked about ready to burst.

“Ye can vouch for it?” he repeated softly before shouting furiously at both her and Keira, “She can vouch for it?”

“Calm down, Faither!” Keira shouted, matching his tone, but her words had no effect on him.

“I leave ye here alone for a few weeks, only ’cause of a fake betrothal, and they brainwash ye enough for ye to forget about the atrocities they committed against yer brother, yer flesh and blood, and ye favor Flynn? The MacKie clan? Yer my daughter, Astrid, and it is yer duty to me, yer brother, and the clan to stand by us.”

“I will stand by ye every single time, yer right, Faither,” Astrid replied, tears welling up in her eyes at her father’s tone. “I willnae back down from me words when I ken that me clan needs me. Although here, I ken that yer mistaken. These people had no reason to kidnap Aiden, and they dinnae have the temperaments of people who are

capable of evil. Ye need to see reason here.”

“See reason?” her father scoffed, unperturbed by her tears. “Ye want me to see reason when me son was kidnapped by these people? It is evident that this betrothal seems real to ye, and yer too influenced by the entire family and that Flynn. Ye should ken that I am trying every day to find a reason to end this and bring ye back home so ye could be safe again. Yet, yer so ungrateful that ye dare to stand here in front of me and support the MacKies against yer own faither!”

“Faither, that isnae the case,” Astrid said, still crying. She softly touched her father’s hand with hers, but he jerked his hand away, making her feel more hurt. “I only meant that if we still hope to find Aiden, we need to let go of the hatred and find the people who have really kidnapped him. The MacKies are nae those people.”

“I have heard enough, Astrid,” he said, backing away from her. “Yer a gullible little fool who gets manipulated by anything and anyone, and it was me biggest mistake to agree to this betrothal and send ye here. Ye have shamed me, Astrid. Ye have disappointed me more than anyone ever had before.”

“Faither, please try to understand—” she sobbed, but her father cut her off.

“Get out of me sight, Astrid. Get—”

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“Ye willnae talk to her like that in me presence, under me roof. I willnae allow it for one more second.”

Astrid looked up to see Flynn enter, his face seething with rage as he strode in gallantly and came to stand right beside her. She did not know how this would look to her father, but she knew that if the situation was unsalvageable before, it was completely out of hand now. There was no hope anymore.

CHAPTER14

Flynn could not believe his ears. He could never have imagined a father, any father, scolding his daughter in such a way that she had tears in her eyes. Laird O'Donnely had made Astrid cry, and Flynn knew he could not stand to hear it. He had only been passing by the parlor when he had heard sudden shouting, and he had entered just in time to hear Laird O'Donnely telling Astrid she was gullible and asking her to get out of his sight.

His heart broke when he saw her sweet, beautiful face flooded with tears, and he knew he would have to intervene. There was no way he could stand to see such injustice done to his betrothed, a woman he cared about immensely. He could not see her hurt.

“Ye willnae talk to her like that in me presence, under me roof. I willnae allow it for one more second.”

Flynn walked inside and noticed how all three people in the room turned to look at him with surprise while he stared at the old Laird with anger in his eyes.

He went to stand directly beside Astrid and possessively took her hand in his to make sure Laird O'Donnely could see she was not alone. The old man would not stand there and abuse her, thinking she was powerless. Flynn would always be beside her, and anyone who wished to say even a word to her would have to go through him first.

“Are ye tellin’ me how to talk to me own daughter?” Laird O'Donnely asked angrily.

“As long as yer under me roof in me castle where I am the Laird, I can tell ye whatever I wish to, and ye will listen to me. I willnae stand silently as ye talk to Astrid this way. She isnae only yer daughter but me betrothed, and I will never tolerate any disrespect towards her even if it is done by her own faither.”

Flynn could see surprise registering on the old Laird's face, since this was the last thing the man must have expected from Flynn. Astrid's grip on his hand tightened, and he turned to stare at her tear-streaked face.

“Yer misjudging the situation, Flynn. Faither and I just had a slight misunderstanding pertaining to something,” she explained, and Flynn knew she was just trying to protect her family.

“I dinnae care if it was a misunderstanding or nae, Astrid. All I care about is ye, and I cannae sit silently while someone talks to ye this way or berates ye,” he said, softly wiping the tears from her face.

“Get away from me daughter!”

Flynn turned to look at Laird O'Donnely again and simply cocked an eyebrow. “Or else?” he asked dismissively, knowing the old Laird could never hurt him.

“I willnae tolerate this behavior, Flynn!” Laird O'Donnely exclaimed furiously, and Flynn sighed.

“And I willnae tolerate ye disrespecting Astrid ever again. If ye cannae respect yer daughter, ye will have to respect my betrothed, and I willnae repeat meself,” Flynn stressed, his tone dangerously low. “Moreover, if Astrid wished for me to move away from her, I wouldnae ever touch her. Since it is evident that she has nay problem with it, yer nae one to tell me what to do and what nae to do.”

“Flynn, stop. He is me faither,” Astrid pleaded, her voice weak.

“I am sorry if ye were hurt, Astrid,” Flynn apologized immediately. “Let me take ye to yer bedchamber.”

Astrid nodded before turning to Keira, who was standing right there, a small smile on her lips. “Come see me after.”

“I will,” Keira replied.

Flynn took Astrid’s hand and led her out of the parlor and straight towards her empty bedchamber, where Bannock was waiting for her. He smiled as he watched her greet her cat by placing kisses on her small head, and he stood at one end simply enjoying the show.

Once Astrid was done, she finally realized that he was still there and belatedly turned to face him. “Thank ye,” she whispered, walking towards him as he stood leaning against the wall.

“What for?”

“For standing up for me.”

“Why was he talking to ye like that? What did ye say to him?” Flynn asked, completely ignoring her gratitude, knowing that it was unnecessary.

He would stand up in front of anyone for Astrid without a second thought, and he had already told her that before. He only wished for her to really believe it and stop acting surprised every single time.

“That isnae important,” she replied, dodging the question.

“I wouldnae pry into ye and yer family problems, Astrid, and I am sorry if ye think I shouldnae have talked to yer faither this way, but I couldnae just stand there and watch ye cry as the man scolded ye for something extremely invalid, I am certain. Yer too precious for that.”

Astrid instinctively looked up at his words, and he could see warmth brewing in her gaze.

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“I am precious to ye?” she asked, standing just a few inches away.

Flynn could no longer resist, and he simply reached out to hold her in his arms. Her chest was flush against his, and in the quietened bedchamber, he could almost hear her heartbeat.

“Yer way more than just precious to me, me dear,” he promised, placing a soft kiss on her forehead as she closed her eyes with a smile.

“Yer precious to me too,” she said shyly, and Flynn smiled at her.

“Are ye all right?”

“I am fine. I am sorry ye had to witness that scene downstairs, but I can assure ye that Faither was just upset about somethin’ and isnae actually this way—”

He cut her off by placing his index finger on her lips.

“Yer doing it again.”

“Doing what?” she asked against his finger.

“Defending yer faither and apologizing for him. I already told ye that ye have nay need to apologize for the man.”

“I was simply explaining what had happened,” she said with a nod.

Flynn tucked a few stray strands of hair behind her ear, and she smiled at him just as he pulled her closer for a hug. He did not know how long the two of them remained this way, but he knew he had never wished to kiss her more. He simply wanted to bend down and capture her lips in his as if there was no tomorrow for them.

As she moved out of his embrace—but still remained in his arms—Flynn continued to stare at her, knowing perfectly well that he would end up kissing her at last. There was no way that he would be able to resist.

“Flynn,” she whispered his name, and he immediately bent down to capture her lips in a kiss.

But before he could kiss her, a soft meow suddenly sounded between them with the crashing noise of something falling and breaking. Astrid immediately moved out of his arms as both of them turned to stare at the culprit.

Bannock was sitting by the looking glass, a large glass vial on the floor beside her. She meowed again, and Flynn did not even realize how the tension between them dissipated as both of them began to laugh uncontrollably.

He did not remember the last time he had laughed this freely and openly, but neither he nor Astrid could seem to stop. He did not know how it was even possible to go from being on the verge to kiss one second to standing in the middle of the bedchamber and laughing in the next. He could not imagine doing such a thing with anyone else. Astrid brought out a part of him that he did not even know existed.

“All right, we must stop now,” Astrid said between bouts of laughter, trying to compose herself.

“Aye, aye,” Flynn agreed, finally beginning to calm down. “I believe we must thank Bannock.”

“For destroying our almost kiss?” Astrid raised an eyebrow at him as her lips turned up into a smirk. She turned around and walked towards Bannock without waiting for a reply, and Flynn followed her dutifully.

“That and for making us laugh like neither of us has in a long time,” he replied.

He watched as she sat down in front of Bannock, then he rushed towards her and grabbed her shoulders to keep her still.

“What happened?”

“Dinnae hurt yerself with the glass,” he warned, pointing towards the broken vial.

“I will be careful. Come here, sit by me.” Astrid patted the ground beside her as she extended her hand to pet Bannock.

“It is pointless. Yer cat has sworn to hate me forever.”

Astrid rolled her eyes at the exaggeration. “She is only returning the sentiments. Ye were the one who hated her initially. Now, it isnae her fault that ye suddenly wish to gain her favor through rubs and treats. Cats are sensitive animals.”

Flynn scoffed sarcastically, trying his best to maintain an image. He did not know Astrid had seen him bribe Bannock with treats to come closer to her, but the stubborn cat had always refused. Still, he could simply not accept such a thing openly, since Astrid was right. He was the one who had expressed his sentiments of hatred towards the cat initially, and he could not back down now.

“I have done nay such thing!”

“I dinnae wish to question yer masculinity, Me Laird, so I will just remain quiet about

it,” Astrid joked. “Now, come, sit by me.”

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Flynn decided to listen to his beautiful betrothed this time and went to sit beside her on the floor. Her familiar scent of lilies encircled her still and reminded him of every single time he had been close enough to smell her. She was beautiful, inside out. He waited patiently as she took his hand in hers and slowly, almost hesitantly, extended it towards Bannock as if she herself was scared the moody cat would reject him.

“Be gentle,” she whispered, stealing a glance at him. Flynn had already been looking at her, unable to tear away his gaze from her face, which was focused on his hand and Bannock. “Just pet her carefully now, all right. I am certain she will accept ye this time.”

“Let’s see,” Flynn murmured, before finally taking his hand further and lightly grazing Bannock’s soft fur.

His eyes widened in amazement as the cat did not shy away or jerk away from his hand. Instead, she leaned into his chest and turned her small head sideways, purring softly.

Flynn felt tears come into his eyes as he realized what had just happened, and he confidently moved closer, petting Bannock with both hands. It was evident she was enjoying the attention as her eyes closed, and she continued to purr.

He dropped lower and kissed her head, and the cat did not mind at all. It was both jarring and unbelievable for him, since he never could have expected this from Bannock. He had come to believe the fact that the cat would always dislike him no matter what, but it felt as if the furry creature finally had a change of heart.

“Astrid, can ye see this too, or am I just imagining it?” he asked, turning to look at Astrid as she sat beside him with happy tears in her eyes.

“It is real, I am afraid. Bannock loves ye now,” Astrid confirmed, and Flynn wanted to shout his victory.

He couldn’t remember feeling as elated after winning a battle as he did after earning the love of a cat. It seemed as if he had not only gained Bannock’s love and trust but also Astrid’s, and this victory was what truly mattered to him.

He sucked in a sharp breath as the cat came closer to him and settled comfortably in his lap as if she had been doing that for days now. Both he and Astrid knew it was the first time Bannock had trodden this close to him, and his awestruck expression was proof of how he felt.

“I am slightly jealous now,” Astrid whispered, moving closer to him and placing her head on his shoulder as she petted her cat with one hand.

“And I am the happiest man in the world,” he returned, truly feeling like a man who had it all.

With Bannock resting in his lap and Astrid resting her head on his shoulder, Flynn was certain he would want nothing more. It was as if nothing else even mattered at that moment.

* * *

Flynn looked up as a knock sounded at the door to his study, quite early in the morning. He had woken up earlier than usual and resumed work since he had not been able to get much done in the past few days due to his touring of the clan lands. His mind was still rather caught up with what had happened with Myles and the

villages located at the borders, and he wasn't certain how to move forward with that business. He knew that he needed to solve the matter immediately before Myles tried to trick him some other way.

"Come in," he called out, wondering who had come to him at this hour. He knew Billy would still be asleep, and he had not asked for anything to be brought to him.

The door opened, and he was slightly surprised to see Laird O'Donnely walk in. The old Laird looked rather hesitant, and Flynn could not blame him after what had happened last night with Astrid. If Laird O'Donnely was embarrassed, he should have been. He had not treated Astrid the right way.

"Do ye have a moment?" the old Laird asked.

Flynn nodded, immediately standing up out of respect. He walked out from behind his desk and motioned for Laird O'Donnely to sit down on the sofa. Once both of them were seated, Flynn looked at him expectantly, still wondering what the man could want now. He was certain Murray was not here to apologize for his conduct.

"What is it, Laird O'Donnely?" he asked, breaking the silence that had descended upon them.

"I just came to tell ye that I am about to leave. I must return back home, but Keira will be staying a little longer with Astrid," Laird O'Donnely explained, and Flynn nodded, carefully concealing the relief he felt upon hearing this. "Will that be all right?"

"Keira is more than welcome to stay as long as she wishes to. Ye were too, but I understand that the clan needs ye," Flynn replied.

"Yer right. There is much work to be done back home," Murray said, turning to look

at Flynn's desk. "Ye seem quite occupied yerself."

"I am stuck with an unusual problem. Just need to make sure it is sorted out sooner rather than later," Flynn explained, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"What problem?"

Flynn looked up at the old Laird and wondered if it would be wise to share the issue with him. He knew the O'Donnely and Gallagher clans had never been close, and Myles and Murray were not long-lost friends. The two men had always been at odds with one another, since Myles had a rather peculiar nature that did not allow anyone to get close to him. Hence, Flynn could assume that telling the old Laird would not be harmful to him in any regard. It might be helpful, since Murray had greater experience and had lived longer. He might know of a solution.

"I recently discovered that Myles Park, the Laird of the Gallagher clan, had captured some of our villages located at the northern border. I went to talk to him about it and threatened him to get him to return my lands, but the man refused, saying that I am apparently mistaken and he did nay such thing. I ken he is lying, but I need to somehow get my lands back without sending an army to do it."

"Myles Park. I have never liked that man," Murray said, a scowl on his face. "This situation is rather unusual, though. Why would he do such a thing, knowing that yer clan is far bigger and stronger than his and that ye can easily crush him if ye wish to? This disnae sound right to me."

"I dinnae ken his motivations behind the act, but I ken it has been done, and I won't sit still until I have me villages back. That's it," Flynn stressed, once again feeling angry.

"If ye wish to do it without a battle, ye will only need to keep threatening Myles. He

is a poor excuse of a man and will give in sooner or later. He cannae stand against ye for very long.”

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“Yer right,” Flynn agreed, standing up as Murray stood up too. “Thank ye for coming to visit, Laird O’Donnely. I was more than flattered to have ye as my guest, even if it was for a very short time.”

“I am leaving both my daughters here, Flynn, and I believe in ye to take care of them,” Murray said, surprising Flynn. “However, I am working constantly to devise a plan that will effectively end this betrothal, and I am sure, between the two of us, we will come up with somethin’ soon.”

Flynn suddenly felt annoyed at the mention of ending the betrothal, but he knew he could not say anything. “I am sure.”

“Goodbye. If I can be of any help in the Myles matter, let me ken. I will be here for ye.”

Flynn was once again pleasantly surprised at Murray’s support, since it was the last thing he had been expecting.

He watched Murray leave and wondered if the man could ever change his ways or lessen his hatred towards him and his clan. He knew it sounded absurd to even consider such a thing, because how could a man who had lost his only son forgive the people he believed were responsible?

CHAPTER15

“What doye mean Bannock likes Flynn now?” Keira asked excitedly, and Astrid laughed at her sister’s absurd question.

“I mean that last night when Flynn and I were in me bedchamber, she not only allowed him to pet her but even settled on his lap quite comfortably,” Astrid explained to the three bewildered women who were staring at her.

Keira already knew about Bannock’s picky nature, and Laila and Daphne had come to know of it in the time that Astrid had been staying at the MacKie castle. They all knew the cat only allowed certain people to touch her or pet her, and Flynn had never been one of those people. Hence, this news surprised each one of them, and Astrid laughed at their reactions.

“Well, I believe Laird MacKie is finally worming his way into the hearts of everyone in the family,” Keira commented, relaxing comfortably on Laila’s bed.

Since Laird O’Donnely was now gone, Keira knew she could finally be at peace and stay here with Astrid as long as she wished. The sisters had never been apart for more than a day, and this distance between them had been rather disturbing for Keira.

“Everyone except yer faither.” Laila laughed, and Astrid knew she was right. What had happened last night was an indication that if there was someone who could never stop hating the MacKies, it was Laird O’Donnely.

“I can never see Faither warming up to Flynn. My mind refuses to believe such a thing is possible,” Astrid added.

“Ye cannae blame him for it,” Daphne chimed in. “He lost a son to what he believes was the MacKie clan. If the truth disnae come out, hatred in his heart will always prevail.”

Astrid knew Daphne was right, and this was the only reason she could never be unkind towards her father or hold something against him for what he had said to her yesterday. His anger had been justified.

Astrid had knowingly taken the side of Flynn in front of her father, who was still grieving Aiden, and she should have been more considerate of his feelings. She knew her father was in the wrong, but there was no way she could change his view or make him see otherwise without evidence backing her up. Since she did not have that, she could not say anything to him that would make him believe otherwise.

“What is important here is that Laird MacKie has made a place in Astrid’s heart,” Keira teased, and Astrid’s eyes widened at the comment.

It was different when she and Keira were alone, but in front of Laila and Daphne, Astrid turned scarlet from embarrassment at such a comment. She could never openly talk about her feelings for Flynn, knowing that it was pointless.

The fact that the betrothal was fake was something she refused to forget. Especially after last night when her father had crudely reminded her of it again and had told her how he was still thinking of ways to end it. Whenever Astrid was with Flynn, she felt as if she was in a bubble, and the betrothal did not seem fake to her. It felt as if she was here to stay.

“Keira, dinnae tease the poor girl that way. Can ye nae see she had already turned red?” Laila said laughingly, making Astrid blush even more.

Daphne joined in the laughter, and Astrid felt as if the three of them had joined hands against her, but she knew they were simply having fun. It was not too difficult to see that she indeed had opened her heart for Flynn, and the two of them were still only resisting and staying away from one another due to the impossibility of the match.

“I think I should leave ye all alone to discuss the conditions of my heart, since ye seem far more versed in it than me,” Astrid said at last, standing up from the bed. She smiled to make sure that they knew she was not offended, just embarrassed.

“Oh, come on, Sister. Stay! Yer nay fun,” Keira called out from behind her.

Keira watched her sister leave, laughter still on her lips at Astrid’s reaction. Whenever she said something even remotely similar or anything particularly linked to Flynn, Astrid would wish to change the subject, since she simply could not converse about him with a straight face. If Keira were to guess, she could even believe that Astrid might have already been in love with Flynn, but she knew her sister would take some time before admitting such a thing.

However, Keira had already made up her mind to meddle in the matter. When she had seen Flynn standing up for Astrid last night in front of their father, she knew there was no one better for her sister. She knew that she did not always have the most agreeable opinion of Flynn or the MacKies, but if there was something Keira did, it was trust her sister’s judgment and intuition, and if Astrid believed these people were as pure as they appeared, Keira knew her sister could not be wrong.

Moreover, her respect for Flynn had only increased after last night, since it was not easy to stand up against their father. It was true Flynn himself was a laird and immensely powerful, but it still took a certain amount of courage to defend a daughter from her own father. Flynn cared for Astrid more than anyone else could, and from what Keira could sense, he had similar feelings towards Astrid as she had towards him. However, the two of them were constantly ignoring one another, and this was entirely unacceptable for Keira.

Once Keira was certain that Astrid had left, she turned towards Laila, who was the one person she was sure wished for the same thing. “Laila, I have something to ask from ye.”

“Anything, dear,” the old woman replied seriously.

Keira had already been feeling close to both Laila and Daphne, and she could see

Astrid shared similar sentiments towards the women. They were both understanding and calm.

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“I need to somehow make sure that Astrid and Flynn spend time together, because I can see they avoid each other whenever they can. How are they supposed to fall in love this way?”

She was surprised to see the glee in Laila’s expression at her question, which was quite similar to the happiness on a child’s face. This was indication enough for her that Laila did indeed want the same thing.

“The moment I saw ye, I knew ye were going to be of great help, Keira. This is somethin’ I have been trying to do for a while now, and now that yer here, I am sure we can do it together!” Laila exclaimed.

“Ye two really think ye need to play matchmaker here?” Daphne asked, shaking her head.

“It is apparent they have feelings for one another. But what good are those feelings if they won’t act upon them?” Laila asked her, and Keira nodded in agreement.

“We are merely facilitators, I would say, in the grand scheme of things,” Keira added playfully.

“I think together we can make sure the two of them dinnae spend even a minute apart.”

Keira smiled at Laila’s comment and the thoughtful expression on her face. She knew that nothing would be able to keep Astrid and Flynn apart anymore, since it was already evident that they were meant to be together for good.

Anybody with eyes and a mind that was open to seeing and believing in love would refer to them as soulmates. Now, all she needed to do was make sure that her sister was not deprived of this match due to an enmity that had gone on for too long.

* * *

Flynn walked inside his study, his gaze dropping to the unfamiliar letter on the table in front of him. If Laird O'Donnely's sudden visit had been surprising for him, a letter from him right after was entirely unexpected. He could not think of anything Murray would have to say to him, and this alone was intriguing enough.

He picked up the letter, knowing the only way to find out what it was about was to read it, and he tore open the envelope.

Flynn,

I ken that ye were not expecting a letter from me, but I am writing ye in all urgency today. After I returned home yesterday, I couldnae stop thinking about what Myles had done to yer villages at the border. I realized that I, myself, hadnae taken a tour of the lands in quite some time.

Hence, just to make sure, I did the same thing, and Myles has done to me exactly what he had done to ye. The O'Donnely clan's southern border connects with the Gallagher clan, and that cheating excuse of a man has captured several of our villages from that end, which measures up to a significant amount of land and crops.

Me people talked to the villagers, and we found out that this was done a few years ago, during the war. The people are nae happy with the Gallagher rule, since we both ken that Myles is a sorry excuse of a laird and is being positively brutal towards the people by taking in an immense amount of money in the form of crops. I will not sit and watch this happen to me lands, so ye and I must act as one to find a solution to

this problem.

Myles cannae stand in front of our combined power, and we have quite a good chance of winning here and claiming back our villages, lands, crops, and people. I am furious right now, and I am certain ye are too. We need to act immediately.

Moreover, as per the matter of the betrothal, I am unable to come up with any smart ideas that might effectively end it, so I believe the easiest way to go about this would be if ye cheat on Astrid by being with someone else or making sure that the news of ye being in love with someone else reaches the King somehow. Astrid would be able to claim that she cannae come in the way of yer true love, which would end the betrothal immediately.

I am hoping to hear back from ye pertaining to both these matters, as we must seek solutions to each of these soon.

Murray Wright, Laird O'Donnely.

A multitude of emotions coursed through Flynn as he read and then re-read the letter sent by Murray. He did not know what to believe or what had even happened.

The fact that Myles had not only taken lands from the MacKie clan but also from the O'Donnely clan around the same time and during the same war did not seem like a coincidence to him. He did not know what it was or if he was simply overthinking the matter, but he knew for certain that Myles was the kind of man who did nothing thoughtlessly or without a plan.

It was evident he had taken advantage of the war for his benefit by wrongly capturing and stealing the villages and lands, which did not belong to him. But, could it be simple luck?

It did not sit right with Flynn. The Gallagher clan could not simply be lucky to land directly in between the O'Donnely and MacKie clan and have a war spring out between them and last an entire decade. It surely had to be something else, but Flynn did not understand what it could be.

At least, now that he knew that Murray was suffering as well and had been just as wronged, he knew he had support in the matter and was no longer alone. He could have handled Myles by himself, but he knew Murray was far angrier than he was and would be rather effective in dealing with Myles to get back their lands. Although, Flynn still needed to figure out the situation. He could not simply sit back and believe that Myles had just played his cards at the right time and taken up an opportunity.

“God damn,” Flynn whispered, his head beginning to ache again. He had been worrying too much about this situation besides already being worried about his relationship with Astrid.

He laughed scornfully at the fact that Murray had casually suggested that he cheat on Astrid as if it was the easiest thing to do. If Flynn even considered such a thing, he would lose the King's favor, and his clan would undoubtedly suffer alongside his reputation. This was entirely out of the question, but clearly, Murray did not care enough. He simply wanted this betrothal to end as quickly as possible.

Flynn threw the letter back on the table, eyeing it skeptically still. “This just means Murray will continue pestering me about ending the betrothal and I will have to think of a way to do it myself. Excellent!”

I need a glass of whiskey.

He quickly made his way towards the door, ready to head to the parlor. It was already evening, and the sun had set. Flynn knew he could simply retire for the night and not invest any more time thinking about the concerns circumambulating his head. Just as

he opened the door, though, he noticed a maid already standing there as if ready to knock.

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“Yes?” Flynn asked her, raising an eyebrow. He hadn’t asked for anything, and he could not see what she wanted from him at this hour.

“Me Laird, yer grandmother,” the maid stammered, and Flynn suddenly grew worried at her anxious tone.

“What happened to Grandma?” he demanded. “Quick, tell me.”

“She disnae feel so well and is asking for ye immediately,” the maid replied, and Flynn felt as if his world had shifted.

The only person he had in his life was his grandmother, and no one else loved him more than she did. He could not tolerate anything happening to her.

“Where is she?” he asked, trying to remain as calm as he possibly could under the stress that was accumulating on his shoulders.

“In the library.”

Flynn immediately turned and ran the short distance towards the library, silently praying for his grandmother to be all right.

When he entered the almost dark room, since only a few candles were lit there, he could see no one. He walked past the front shelves to where the sofas were placed, and there was no one present. He turned around to ask the maid where his grandmother was but noticed that the door had been locked.

Confusion clouded his mind as he became increasingly anxious and tried to open the door but found it locked instead.

“Flynn? What are ye doing here?”

Astrid’s voice surprised him, and he found her inside the library upon turning around. He hadn’t seen her earlier, which meant she must have been at the back.

“A maid told me Grandmother wasnae feeling well and was in here, but now, the maid is gone, and the door is locked,” Flynn explained. Astrid’s eyes widened at the news, and she immediately ran towards the door and tried opening it, but to no avail. “What are ye doing here?”

“Keira asked me to meet her here, and I was just waiting for her,” Astrid replied, and Flynn relaxed as the realization of what had happened dawned on him.

“We have been trapped.”

“What do ye mean?”

“I was lied to in the name of my grandmother and ye were lied to by yer sister. These two must have planned to lock us here together,” Flynn explained, and Astrid scowled as she took in his words.

“This is absurd,” she soffered and began to knock on the door loudly, but Flynn grabbed her wrists before she hurt herself.

“Calm down, will ye,” he whispered, making sure she was all right. “They willnae open the door until they want to. We have nay choice but to spend time here.”

“Ye cannae be serious. Yer going to let them win?”

“I think ye can spend some time with me, Astrid. I promise I won’t kill ye,” he said jokingly, and Astrid smiled.

Just then, she looked down at her hands, which Flynn was still holding, and he immediately dropped them, not wishing for her to feel uncomfortable at all.

“Ye promise?”

“I promise. For it seems like there is nay going out of here, at least for a little while.”

Flynn did not know why the simple news made him feel elated. It seemed like the perfect end to an awful day.

CHAPTER 16

Astrid still could not believe that Laila and Keira would resort to such methods in order to bring her closer to Flynn, although she knew if there was anyone who was capable of such a thing, it was those two. They were quite alike in their wildness of nature and impulsiveness, and Astrid could see them talking and plotting.

Despite that, she knew that the benefits of being inside a library were that she would not have to converse with Flynn and could simply sit and read a book.

She turned and noticed him thumbing through the shelves of history and could sense he sported a similar idea.

Without wasting another second, Astrid picked up a novel she had been meaning to read for quite some time now and sat down on the sofa. Shortly after, Flynn sat down at a little distance from her and began reading his book, even though it was evident that he was as distracted as she was.

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Both of them would look up every few minutes and gaze around the length of the library and then steal a glance at each other. There was just something about being trapped inside a room together that was distracting enough already.

They both knew they needed to either get up and leave or would eventually have to succumb to their fate and converse with one another. Astrid, for sure, knew she could not continue reading the novel, since she was already bored out of her mind and had not even read two complete pages.

“In order to read, ye will need to look at the book and nae me.” Flynn’s voice suddenly shook her out of her trance, and she realized she had been looking straight at him while being lost in thought, which made it seem as if she had been staring at him all along.

“I wasnae looking at ye,” she replied hastily, a blush creeping across her neck and face.

“Certainly, I completely believe ye,” he drawled and shut the heavy volume in his lap as if he too had no desire to continue reading.

“Dinnae be absurd, Flynn,” she said with a shrug, determined to act nonchalant as if being caught staring at him was indeed a mistake, and she resumed reading.

The words on the page blurred in comparison to the man sitting less than three feet away from her, and she knew that trying to read was no longer going to work.

She finally closed the novel and set it to one side, now actually turning to look at the

man she was betrothed to. A mischievous smile appeared on his face as if he had already been expecting her to do that.

Astrid watched as he followed suit and closed the book in his hand as well before standing up and coming to sit right beside her. She moved back slightly to create some distance between them as they sat together on the small sofa.

“Was I really being absurd, Astrid?”

She smiled and shook her head before answering, “I am just upset about being locked up in here and cannae focus on reading, otherwise I would have been reading.”

He shook his head as he laughed softly, and Astrid could not help but marvel once again at how handsome he was. His features up close were even more pronounced and beautiful, and he truly looked as if he had been sculpted out separate from the rest.

She had the insane urge to touch his face softly, but she knew that touching him would only ever lead to one thing between them.

“Well, I dinnae ken about ye, but I am bored,” he said, leaning back into the sofa and settling his large form on it comfortably.

“What do ye suggest we do about it?”

“Play a game of cards perhaps?” he suggested, and Astrid was immediately intrigued.

“What kind of a game?” she asked suspiciously, knowing perfectly well that Flynn would never play a simple card game with her.

The glint in his eyes said otherwise as well, and it was evident that he definitely

meant something more wicked.

“A simple card game with a rule or two different,” he explained.

Astrid shook her head knowingly, and she was surprised at how well she had come to know him. “What will those rules be?”

“We will play a hand. If I lose, I will remove an item of clothing, and if ye lose—”

“I am nae removing me clothes in front of ye, Flynn,” she interjected.

“Will ye at least listen to me first before speaking?” He cocked an eyebrow as he assumed his domineering tone.

“Continue,” she said softly, smiling beautifully to pacify him.

“Every time ye lose, ye will kiss me.”

“Kiss ye where?” Astrid asked, her eyes widening at the rules he had just announced.

It was not as if she had never kissed him before, or as if she did not wish to kiss him at all, but she knew that kissing him had never ended in a good way for her, since the two of them always ended up wanting more. She did not know if it was the right thing to do or even the right game to play.

“On the lips,” he replied easily, and Astrid was intrigued once again.

She did wish to kiss him right about now. His proximity did things to her that no one else ever could, and whenever he was nearby, she wanted him even closer. Even now, despite the distance between them on the sofa, she was immensely attracted to him and felt a certain pull, a pull she could not justify.

“All right then, let’s play,” she found herself agreeing, even though the rational part of her mind was completely against it.

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She needed to keep reminding herself that Flynn was not her real betrothed and that this was a fake relationship, but telling herself this was beginning to get more difficult with every passing day.

Flynn nodded and immediately got up from the sofa to bring the stack of cards. She watched him move stealthily towards the table and open a drawer where the cards must have been kept. Her mind constantly reminded her how she still needed to maintain certain boundaries with Flynn, but as he sat down in front of her, leisurely shuffling the deck, all such thoughts flew out of her mind. He was an extremely handsome man, and she had no desire to deny herself his company.

“Shall we begin, Me Lady?”

“We shall,” she answered, mimicking his tone of grand formality.

He dealt the first hand, and Astrid noticed how perfectly he had mastered the poker face. As he looked at his cards, his expressions did not for one moment betray anything at all, and she wondered what he could have gotten. The two continued to play as she realized she had been dealt quite a good hand, and there was a high chance of her winning.

The knowledge that if she won Flynn would have to remove an item of clothing made her even more competitive. Whenever she had the pleasure of running her hands across his chest and arms, she had noticed that her betrothed was nothing but plain, hard muscle under skin. The mere thought of staring at the smooth planes of his chest made her wish to win.

“I am winning this one, Flynn,” she said, and he simply cocked an eyebrow, exposing all his cards in front of her.

“Are you?” he asked.

Astrid could understand his confidence, since he had really great cards, but she maintained her poker face despite knowing she had better cards. After waiting for a few seconds, she revealed her cards in front of him, and he was stunned at the unexpectedness of it.

“I think I have won,” she whispered with a smug smile while Flynn only laughed.

He stood up wordlessly and easily removed both of his shoes. Even such a simple, innocent action from him had her heart racing as she wondered what would follow if he lost again. He was dressed very simply in just his shoes, kilt, and a leine.

“Happy?”

Astrid nodded at his question, hoping for her heartbeat to calm down a little as he resumed his position in front of her.

“Now, we play again. I can assure ye that ye will lose this time.”

“We will see about that,” Astrid replied confidently, and he laughed.

He dealt the cards again, and the game continued, each of them making sure to hide their expressions as best as they could. Astrid had been playing poker with Keira and her father since she had been a young girl and had mastered the game quite early on, thus she knew she was not easily beatable. It was true that Flynn must be just as good at it, which was the sole reason he had suggested the game.

As they revealed their cards for the second time, Astrid broke down into peals of laughter, as she had won once again. Flynn looked stupidly at her as if something akin to this had never happened to him before.

“How are ye cheating?” he asked, and Astrid’s gaze widened at the accusation.

“I am nae cheating!” she all but shouted, and he only shook his head as if he did not believe her.

“Lie to someone else. I cannae lose like that two times in a row,” he replied, standing up once again.

Astrid forgot what she was about to say as she watched him slowly reach for the bottom hem of his leine. He slowly raised it over his chest, revealing each hard line on his lower abdomen one at a time. She knew she should have looked away the very instant he pulled the garment off his head, but his gaze immediately landed on her.

Astrid knew her eyes must be dilated at the sight. He was as handsome as she had imagined him to be.

A thin patch of hair ran down to the very edge of his stomach, right where his kilt hid everything underneath. He was built on muscle alone, and she was certain she had never seen a more handsome man in front of her. Flynn was unparalleled.

“Astrid?” he called out, and she finally tore away her gaze from his naked abdomen and looked into his eyes.

A familiar, knowing smug smile stretched his lips as if he knew exactly what Astrid was thinking.

“Yes?”

“Did ye enjoy the show?” he questioned, coming back to sit down on the sofa.

Astrid laughed nervously at the question. She knew she couldn’t have made it any more obvious that she was clearly enjoying every second of it, but she could not admit that in front of him.

“I wasnae even looking.”

“Damn right ye were nae. I had only imagined ye staring,” he replied sarcastically, and she knew lying to him was pointless. Instead, she decided to remain quiet and silently continue the game.

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Despite wishing to win the next round as well, her focus was no longer on the game, since Flynn was sitting only a few steps away from her in nothing but his kilt. She knew if she wanted to, she would just need to move slightly towards him, and he would gladly pull her into his lap and she would be able to kiss him.

Kiss him.

That reminded her that if she lost this round, she would have to kiss him as per the rules, and with him looking undeniably attractive, she did not trust herself to stop at just kissing. Simply staring at him was doing unimaginable things to her insides, which only meant kissing him would be her undoing.

He dealt the next card, and Astrid's gaze widened as she realized that she had lost the hand upon revelation. She turned her head up to look at Flynn, who had an unnerving grin on his face as he cocked an eyebrow at her.

She knew what that expression meant. He had followed through with his end of the bargain, and now, it was her turn to do the same.

"Fine," she whispered, putting aside the cards spread in between them.

She looked into his eyes as she crept closer until there was no space left between them.

She could have just kissed him from there, but he must have realized her intentions, as he pulled her into his lap. Her chest collided with his bare skin as they continued to look at one another, with passion brewing in their gazes.

The kiss from a year ago came back to her and then the kiss she had shared with him a few days ago. Both of them had been passionate and full of love, and Astrid knew this one would be no different but only better.

She trailed soft kisses over his forehead and eyes and crept lower until she had finally reached his lips. A low moan escaped from his mouth when she did not move forward immediately to kiss his lips, and she smiled at the pure guttural sound. It was as if it had come straight from Flynn's heart.

She placed an innocent peck on his lips, knowing it would never end at just that. But before she could pull away, his hand dug through her hair as he grabbed the nape of her neck and did not allow her to move off his lap. She moaned into his mouth as he bit her lower lip, seeking entry inside her mouth. Her own tongue entered his mouth, and she moaned at the taste of him, the kiss making her feel intoxicated.

"Flynn," she whispered his name as they reluctantly pulled away to catch their breath.

"Astrid," he whispered back before crashing his lips on hers once again.

All resistance had evaporated from Astrid's body already, and she knew she needed him, but she was still not ready to give away her virginity to a man she would never be able to marry.

"We need to stop," she said, pulling back once again as he finally opened his eyes to look at her.

His gaze was clouded with unconcealed passion, and it was evident how much he wanted her. She wanted him just as much, and she knew he could feel her desire through the rapidly growing wetness between her legs, as she was sitting in his lap.

"Do ye think I can stop?"

“I ken ye dinnae want to, and I dinnae want to either, but ye already ken my feelings about this, Flynn,” she replied, reminding him of the discussion they had had already.

“What if ye allow me to pleasure ye? Yer virginity will remain intact, and ye will enjoy it immensely, I promise,” Flynn suggested, his deep voice only making her even more ready for him.

She knew what he meant, but the proposition made no sense to her, since this way, he would receive no pleasure. She knew she couldn’t be this selfish and ask him to only do this for her, so she shook her head no.

“It will not satisfy ye, Flynn,” she whispered, running her hand through his hair as they continued to look at each other.

Flynn was still trailing his large hands across the small of her back, making her feel tingles. There was something about him that drove her to the edge, and she never wished to return from there.

“Giving ye pleasure will be pleasurable enough for me,” he whispered back, and Astrid’s eyes widened at his husky tone.

She knew she would not be able to resist his attempts and simply nodded her head, not knowing what else to say.

That was encouragement enough for Flynn, for he immediately brought his lips back to Astrid’s and moved his hips under her. The sudden thrust she felt against the wetness between her legs was too much for her, and she could no longer control the moan that was threatening to escape already.

Flynn picked her up from his lap as if she weighed nothing and put her down on the sofa, turning her sideways so her legs were still over his thighs. Astrid waited

breathlessly as he did not break eye contact with her even once but instead simply bent down effortlessly, pulling her skirts over her thighs and baring her legs entirely.

As his fingers touched the sensitive skin near her womanhood, she moaned yet again, no longer wanting to control herself. She knew she needed him to touch her, to hold her close as he gave her just what she wanted from him.

“Do ye want me, Astrid?” he questioned, and she nodded immediately, her hands snaking forward to guide his hands towards the wetness between her legs.

“Flynn, please,” she whispered as a smile came to his face.

She loudly called out his name as he slid one then two fingers inside her, caressing her in a way that she could have never imagined. The pleasure she felt at his touch was indescribable, and all she knew was that she needed more of him. All of him.

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“Flynn, more, give me more,” she pleaded, looking him straight in the eye as her breathing grew erratic with the pace of his increasing strokes.

“Ye want more of me, darling?” he asked.

Before she knew it, he bent down, placing his head right between her legs.

“Flynn!” she cried but was immediately silenced when his tongue swooped down and slid inside her core, giving her additional pleasure.

Astrid continued moaning as loud as she ever had, unable to explain the sudden surge of pleasure that was building up in her core, waiting to bring her to climax.

“Yes, Flynn, please, keep going,” she whispered, thrusting her hips forward for his fingers and tongue to gain deeper access.

As he continued pleasuring her, she knew she was extremely close to climax, and her hands wound their way into his hair as if willing his face to stay right there.

Before she knew it, her orgasm was coursing through her body in an unimaginably delightful way, and her legs continued to shake as wave after wave of pleasure ran through her. She was dangling at the very end of the line, and as her climax faded, she felt as if Flynn had taken her beyond to the other world and then brought her back.

She opened her eyes and found him staring at her, a visible grin on his face. She could see the faint glimmers of her wetness on his lips and nose, and she turned

crimson at the realization of what they had just done and where his mouth had been. He bent down and kissed her once again, and she blushed, as she could taste herself on his lips.

“How do ye feel, princess?” he asked, pulling her dress back down as he picked her up and placed her on his lap.

“Like I just went to heaven and returned,” she replied with a smile.

Flynn laughed at her reply, love radiating from his gaze, and she wondered what he could be thinking. He tucked her hair behind her ear and then lay down on the sofa, hugging her to his side. She had never been in a more comfortable position before, and the scent of cinnamon and spice that always swirled around Flynn was continually intoxicating her.

“We should sleep now,” he whispered.

“Flynn,” she called out his name in reply.

“Yes, darling?”

“Thank ye.”

She did not know what she was thanking him for. She knew it was not for the pleasure he had given her, but instead, she felt as if she was thanking him for who he was and how he acted with her. For the first time in a long time, a man had made her feel special and loved in a way no one else ever could.

“There is nothing to thank me for. Now sleep,” he murmured.

Astrid looked up to stare at him, but his eyes were already closed. A few minutes

later, his breathing grew heavier and calmer, and she knew he had fallen asleep.

She smiled as she noticed how handsome he looked even when asleep, and she tucked herself deeper into his side, laying her head on his chest.

She could not have asked for a better night.

CHAPTER 17

Flynn looked out the window in his study, which opened directly into the gardens below, trying to find Astrid. It had been a few days since they had been locked together in the library, and to his surprise, they had only gotten closer ever since. It felt as if they were truly betrothed, and the relationship was not fake.

He had become used to looking for Astrid every morning in the gardens, since she went for a walk at this time only. He did not know what it was about her that drew him to her, but he could never let her go from his mind. She was there every second of every day.

“Are ye listening to me?” Billy’s voice from behind him forced him to turn around and look at the large man.

“I am,” Flynn lied with a straight face.

His attention had entirely been focused on looking for Astrid. She was becoming increasingly distracting for him, and he was enjoying all the attention he had been getting from her for the past few days. The two of them were almost inseparable, and Flynn knew everyone in the castle had noticed these changes.

“What was I saying?” Billy questioned suspiciously while Flynn pinned him with a look.

Flynn glanced at the letter in Billy's hands. "Ye were telling me about that letter."

"I was." Billy nodded. "It is from Murray."

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Flynn grew serious at the mention of Murray, the problem they were having with Myles returning to him. “What is he saying?”

“He has asked ye to meet him at Myles’s castle in two days’ time, so the two of ye can meet the old Laird together and force him to return yer lands and his. He is very insistent about it.”

Flynn knew that Murray was right. They both needed their lands back from Myles, and the easiest way to do it would be by scaring Myles into returning them. He knew that Murray was an excellent ally, since he was both ferocious and determined and would never let Myles live until he agreed to return those lands. Hence, the best way to go about the situation was to follow Murray’s plan.

“Write him back and tell him I will meet him there at the desired time,” Flynn replied as Billy nodded.

Just then, a soft melodic laugh reached Flynn’s ears, and as if on instinct, he knew that it was Astrid’s. He returned to the window, and just as he had expected, Astrid was walking there beside Keira.

He suddenly wished to see her and asked Billy to follow after him as he went downstairs and out into the gardens. Billy followed him wordlessly, except for occasionally mentioning something related to the clan.

“Murray wrote something else in his letter too,” Billy added, which forced Flynn to slow down his speed and turn to look at his man at arms.

“What else?”

“He was asking if ye had come up with any ideas to end the betrothal, or if yer going to follow through with what he proposed earlier.”

Flynn scoffed, unable to believe the nerve of this man. He knew Murray was impatient to have his daughter back home and for this betrothal to end as soon as it possibly could, but the way he was pressuring Flynn into doing something this quickly was entirely absurd.

“I cannae believe this,” Flynn replied angrily. “Murray keeps pestering me to find ways to end this betrothal without angering the King, when I have clearly been very quiet on the subject. He suggested we pretend as if I loved someone else or cheated on Astrid, and Astrid does not wish to come between me and me one true love, and hence, she ended the betrothal mutually. The old bastard wants the King to dislike me while he can escape the situation unscathed.”

Billy laughed at Flynn’s anger. “Me Laird, can I ask ye something?”

“Aye,” Flynn replied as they continued walking through the gardens. He did not know where Astrid had disappeared, but the faint scent of lilies all around him was enough to tell him that she was somewhere around.

“Do ye even wish to end this betrothal?”

Billy’s question made him stop walking, and he turned to face his man at arms, a thoughtful expression on his face.

Flynn knew the answer to this question in his heart and was aware of the fact that everyone else in the castle could sense it too. Despite that, he had never voiced it out loud, but he also knew there was no longer any point in hiding it. He had the feeling

that Astrid felt similarly about him and their betrothal, and that was all he wished for.

“I definitely dinnae wish for the betrothal to end, Billy. Unless it ends in marriage, that is,” Flynn replied truthfully.

“Why do ye nae tell this to Laird O’Donnely flatly and be done with it?” Billy asked.

Flynn wished it was that simple.

“Murray would dislike me immensely for it, since he still believes that I kidnapped and apparently killed Aiden. He would never wish for Astrid to marry me, and ye ken that Billy.”

Before Billy could say anything else, there was a sudden crunching of leaves behind them, and Flynn turned to watch Astrid marching towards them, a large smile on her face. He smiled back at her, his heart feeling lighter as he gazed at her.

“There she is, the best part of my day,” he said loud enough for both Astrid and Billy to hear.

Keira, who was beside Astrid, must have heard this too, as she broke into giggles at Flynn’s declaration while Astrid herself turned crimson.

Flynn could not take his eyes off his betrothed as he realized how beautiful she looked in the maroon gown she had donned this morning. He had never seen a more beautiful woman, someone who made his heart feel as full as she always did.

“The best part of yer day, eh?” Astrid asked mischievously.

“Absolutely, me dear,” he replied.

“I came here to ask ye the reason behind stealing Bannock from my room last night.” She cocked an eyebrow at him as he laughed.

“That is an accusation, Me Lady. I didnae such thing,” he vehemently said. Although, he had done exactly what she had accused him of.

He simply needed a reason to sneak inside Astrid’s bedchamber at night to watch her sleeping peacefully, and he had been missing her furry pet as well. Thus, he had gone to her chambers under the guise of getting Bannock, placed a kiss on her forehead, and left noiselessly.

“Aye, ye did, Me Laird. There truly is nay point in lying to me, I ken what yer up to anyway. Nay one would ever steal Bannock from me but ye!” she exclaimed, stressing her point.

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“Well, if that is the case, I am afraid I am guilty,” he conceded with a formal bow, and Astrid shook her head laughingly.

“Now, how must I punish ye?”

“However ye wish.”

“Ye will have to take me to Edinburgh today and let me buy as many dresses and books as I desire. I think that will be punishment enough for ye.”

Flynn laughed at her demand but was quite happy to hear it. It only meant he would get to spend some more time with her without anyone else around them. This was all he had wished for. Astrid’s company.

“I accept my punishment, Me Lady. Should we leave in an hour?”

“Yer goin’ to agree just like that?” she asked, appearing surprised.

“Of course. I did a wrong thing and must pay for me mistake.” He bowed as if he was really truly apologetic about it.

“Well, in that case, an hour it is.”

She grinned at Keira, clearly excited at the prospect of going to Edinburgh with him. At that moment, Flynn realized that he had gotten to the point where he would do anything for Astrid’s happiness, even if it was going to Edinburgh with her. She was slowly becoming the center of his world, and he did not dislike the idea at all.

* * *

“Astrid, fifteen books! Ye have bought fifteen books in one go, and now, ye want more?” Flynn exclaimed as he watched his betrothed walk towards yet another stall selling books.

What made the entire situation even funnier was the fact that the MacKie library had every book a person could ever wish for, yet Astrid still went through Edinburgh buying books.

“It was yer punishment, Me Laird,” she replied with a smile. “It is yer duty to buy me anything I wish to buy.”

“By that, I meant dresses and jewelry, perhaps accessories for yer hair or a tinted rouge for yer cheeks, nae books,” Flynn said, walking beside her.

She had handed him everything she had bought up till now, and he certainly did not look like the Laird of one of the most powerful clans in Scotland but simply a man moving around at the whims of the woman he was engaged to marry.

“Ye certainly ken a lot about women and what things they require,” she said suspiciously, and it was his turn to smile cheekily at her.

“Me reputation with women had always been quite marvelous, Me Lady,” he explained, and Astrid stopped entirely and turned sideways to face him, folding her arms across her chest.

He could see an emotion akin to jealousy on her face, and he wondered if he was right.

“Truly?”

“Truly,” he replied seriously, “women have always been quite fond of me.”

“And that is why ye ken all about their needs and dresses and what they use and nae use?”

“Precisely.”

“So, ye must have gone out this way with several women before me, I presume?” she asked, her voice entirely emotionless as if she was trying her best to sound as nonchalant as she possibly could.

Flynn could have lied to her in order to fuel her jealousy and said he had gone out this way with several women in the past, even though he had done no such thing. His relations with women had purely been based on physical needs and nothing beyond that.

There had been no woman before Astrid with whom Flynn had wished to spend more time or go out and do things. Astrid was the first, and he hoped to God for her to be the last.

The expression he saw on her face already appeared rather serious, as if she did not wish to look hurt or vulnerable. Flynn knew he would not be able to stand there and make her suffer this way, so he decided to go with the truth.

“Nay, Astrid, I have never been out with another woman this way. Ever.” He leaned into her as he said the last word, purposefully lowering his voice to make sure she understood he was not lying and meant every single word he said. “I never wished to do it with anyone else but ye.”

Astrid’s eyes widened at the declaration, and she blushed beautifully, which only made Flynn’s heartbeat accelerate. “That is a very kind thing to say, Me Laird.”

“I would never want to be anything but kind to ye, Astrid.”

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She smiled at him before proceeding to buy some more books, but she stopped after he told her he would not be carrying any more books. She then proceeded to buy some dresses, and his heart warmed as he noticed she sought his approval before buying anything, as if her sole purpose with the venture was somehow buying things that pleased him.

The simple action was so minor and subtle, but it made Flynn feel as if Astrid had finally allowed him inside. As if she had accepted their betrothal wholeheartedly, and just as he did, she wished for it to continue, too.

Although, he knew it was too soon to have this conversation with her. He would need to wait a little longer and solve the problem with Myles first to know where the relationship between him and Murray stood. Even if Astrid agreed, convincing Murray would be almost impossible, but Flynn knew the old Laird would not be able to do anything against the King.

“Where are ye lost?”

Astrid’s voice brought him back to the present, and he turned to look at the beautiful woman beside him. A woman he wished to marry.

“I am right here,” he replied. “I was just thinking about something,” he added as they walked through the street.

He knew they must have painted the picture of a loving couple with him holding her things as she walked beside him, continuing to shop. He saw several people who knew who he was, and they stopped to nod respectfully, but he did not care how he

appeared. His betrothal was known to all, and he was not ashamed to be seen with Astrid.

“Ye must stop thinkin’ about work while yer with me,” she ordered.

“Yer becoming extremely demanding with every passin’ day, Astrid,” he joked, although he had found this new trait of hers even more intriguing. She was a determined woman who knew what she wanted and how to achieve it.

“Do ye not want me to be?”

“Ye can be whatever ye want, and I will still admire ye,” he replied, stopping himself from saying the word love.

Even if he did wish to say the word to her, he knew it was too soon. He needed to give her some time. It was more than necessary, especially when he himself was uncertain about the future.

“Ye admire me?” she asked as if surprised.

“Of course, I do, darling.” He smiled. “Why won’t I?” he asked, and Astrid blushed again.

She looked even more beautiful at that moment, and he wished to kiss her then and there.

As they walked along, talking, Flynn only knew one thing: whatever the future held for them was still unknown to him, but whatever it was, nothing could take Astrid away from him ever again.

CHAPTER 18

Myles stared at the two men standing in front of him, looming like dark shadows in his study. He had not expected them to show up at his castle together. From what he knew, Laird O'Donnely and Laird MacKie were still sworn enemies. He had never known they would find out about him stealing lands from their clans and adding them to the lands of his own clan. Moreover, they had found out about it together and had come to force him to return those lands.

These men were the lairds of the two most powerful clans in the kingdom, and Myles knew he could not stand against them. He knew he would have to give in eventually. They were never going back down until he returned their lands, and he was not powerful enough to fight them over it.

"I still think ye two are mistaken," Myles replied, his voice sounding sickly sweet even to his own ears. He knew he could not continue pretending much longer, since both Murray and Flynn looked angry enough already.

"We are nae mistaken, Myles, and ye ken it, too," Murray said sternly as if he had taken enough of Myles's lies. "I dinnae wish to be curt with ye or exercise my power. Return the lands immediately, or the outcome willnae be in yer favor."

"Do as he says, Myles," Flynn added, leaning casually against the wall while Myles and Murray remained seated. "Yer a smart man, and ye ken very well what happens when ye become the enemy of the MacKie and the O'Donnely clans. Dinnae invite a worse fate for yerself. This is the second time I have been here, and if I have to come once again, things willnae be in yer favor."

Myles knew he was left with no choice, since it was evident both Flynn and Murray would refuse to leave his castle until he agreed. They had come without any armies, but it did not mean Myles could attack them, for it would bring the rest of Scotland on his neck for breach of safety. He needed to agree to their demands, or else they would take him down.

“Fine,” he replied at last, “I will return yer lands back to ye if that is what ye wish for. Although, it will take me some time, since I will have to go visit those villages and verify if the claims are true or nae.”

He knew he needed to buy time to plot a better plan than the one he had right now. The MacKie and O’Donnely clans had ended their ten-year war and were on peaceful terms now that Flynn was betrothed to Astrid. Myles had never expected the King to do that, and the ceasefire had only brought problems for him.

He had quite easily captured those villages while the war was going on between the two clans and neither of them was focused on their borders. Unfortunately, now their focus had returned back to their clans, which had resulted in problems for Myles.

He had gone through a lot in order to capture those villages and gain greater territory. He had no desire to give it all up so easily. Myles knew he was a smart man and would think of a better plan, but right now, all he needed was time, some time to make sure the villages remained his indefinitely and the two problems he had in the form of Laird MacKie and Laird O’Donnely were removed for good.

“One week, Myles. One week is enough for ye to make yer inspections and to ken that they indeed are our villages. Ye and yer army illegally captured them while our focus was elsewhere. I will not give ye any more time than that,” Flynn warned.

Myles knew the young Laird meant every word he said and would prove to be even more callous than Murray. “One week is enough time for me,” he agreed.

He watched as Flynn moved away from the wall and slowly made his way towards him, his expression as nonchalant as ever. It seemed as if the entire conversation that had just occurred meant nothing at all to Flynn, but Myles knew he was just using his poker face and trying to intimidate him.

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Flynn leaned in, making sure Myles did not break eye contact even for a second as he whispered in a very low voice, “Dinnae make me come back here, Myles. And I mean it. If I have to come back here to ask ye to return my lands to me, I will make sure yer entire clan is destroyed and dusted into the ground. It will only take me one single day. Remember that.”

Myles felt the hair on his spine rise in fear of Flynn’s threat, especially since he knew the MacKie clan was quite capable of following through with it. It would not be difficult for Flynn to swallow the Gallagher clan as a whole on his own, and his weakness along with the weakness of his clan angered Myles immensely.

The one reason he had captured those villages was to gain more territory for his clan and to eventually build them up to become a stronger clan that was as powerful as the others. But now, it seemed impossible.

“I think we should go, Flynn,” Murray suggested when Myles did not respond.

Flynn straightened back up, turned to look at Murray, and nodded, indicating his agreement. Myles breathed a sigh of relief and stood up. He needed the two of them to be out of here so he could finally think. He needed to think of a way to escape this situation.

As he watched Flynn and Murray leave together, he knew that there was no way the two clans would be at war again, since the King himself had arranged the ceasefire. Which meant he would need to think of something far bigger than profiting from the misery of others.

He would need to think of a clever plan to bring both Murray and Flynn to their knees in front of him. His blood was boiling at the treatment he had been subjected to by these two inside his very own castle, and he knew he needed revenge. He needed to keep those villages and think of something, anything, that would remind these two great lairds that eventheycould be pushed down to the ground like they were used to pushing down others.

* * *

Myles threw open the large metal doors of the dungeons, which were located at the far left wing of his castle. These dungeons were visited by no one but himself and a few of his trusted servants. He could not allow just anyone in there because these walls hid a secret, which, if it came out, would destroy everything he had worked towards. It would destroy the very hard work he had put in to make things better for the Gallagher clan, and he could not afford that.

He could not afford for all of his efforts, which had stretched over the last ten years and longer, to go to waste just like that. He knew better than that and was smart enough to make sure things worked. He walked inside the horridly cold and almost empty dungeon until he reached the far end of it, where just one prisoner was held.

Myles's eyes went to the familiar blonde hair that he had been staring at for the past ten years now. When he had first brought the prisoner in, his hair had been short, styled in a buzz cut, but now, the hair had grown longer with time and was tied loosely in a ponytail.

Myles smiled as he looked at Aiden Wright, his prisoner for the last ten years. "Aiden," he called out, making sure to keep his tone soft as he addressed the young man.

When Aiden had first been kidnapped by Myles, he had only been a boy and had

been scared of him. Now, after ten years, he was no longer scared.

He had hardened into a young man with immense power who knew that the crime he had been punished for was unfair. He knew Myles had snatched away the past ten years of his life, and it had turned him into a both depressed and unforgiving man, so he had stopped even being scared of death for a very long time.

Every time Myles had tortured him, he had only asked for more. Eventually, Myles had stopped resorting to such methods. He knew it was all pointless, since life no longer meant much to Aiden. The young man had lost hope, and it showed starkly in his eyes.

“What do ye want now? Are ye finally ready to kill me?” Aiden asked, staring at Myles coldly. He was sitting in one corner of his cell, not even bothering to stand up.

“Nay, I am nae here to kill ye. I just met yer father,” Myles said, hoping for a reaction from Aiden at this news.

Aiden never reacted to anything Myles told him, but this news garnered Laird Gallagher a reaction indeed. It was small, very faint. Aiden had simply looked up to stare at him, a small gleam in his eyes which had faded almost immediately.

“So?”

“He was quite angry with me and came with Flynn to ask me to do something,” Myles elaborated, not knowing why he had come to Aiden to relay the tale. It was not as if Aiden could do anything regarding the matter.

“And why are ye tellin’ it to me?”

Myles was asking himself the same question but decided to ignore it and went forth

with the tale.

“Ye see, there was a reason I kidnapped ye all those years ago,” Myles began, knowing that Aiden already knew these things for the most part but never in detail. “I wanted to start a fight between the two major clans in Scotland so I could gain their lands while they were involved in battle. That was why I kidnapped ye and blamed it on the MacKie clan.”

“I already ken that, Myles. If ye dinnae have somethin’ new to say to me, get out. I was trying to sleep,” Aiden replied rudely.

Myles laughed. He knew if he decided to continue telling the story, Aiden would have no choice but to hear it anyway.

“As ye ken, the fight between the two clans has now ended since the King arranged a ceasefire, and yer sister is now betrothed to Flynn,” Myles said, waiting for a reaction from Aiden once again.

This was the first time Myles had mentioned Astrid in front of Aiden.

“Astrid?” Aiden asked, finally looking up for more than two seconds.

“Aye, aye, the darling, beautiful Astrid. She is now engaged to Flynn by the King’s orders, and the ceasefire has been arranged,” Myles replied, but Aiden remained adamantly silent and continued looking down at the floor. “Unfortunately, this ceasefire brought the attention of both Murray and Flynn back to their lands, and now, they ken I have captured their villages and want them back.”

“It had to happen sooner or later. They are nae dumb men and willnae keep falling for yer tricks constantly. Ye can do better, Myles,” Aiden scoffed as if laughing at him.

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Myles wished for nothing more but to torture the rude man for his behavior, but he knew how pointless it all was.

“And that is why I need a new plan.”

“What will ye do now? Kidnap Flynn and start another war?”

“Nay, I have a much better plan. Do ye want to ken?” Myles teased, knowing perfectly well that Aiden must be concerned about the well-being of his family.

“I dinnae want to ken. Leave me alone,” Aiden replied, disappointing Myles.

But the old Laird was not going to let his spirits down simply because Aiden was trying to ignore him. Aiden would listen if Myles told him, and that was all that mattered.

“Ye ken if this plan works in my favor, ye might finally be free,” Myles threw in, but apparently, it was not enough to capture Aiden’s attention.

“Oh, really?” Aiden scoffed, as if freedom no longer meant anything to him.

“Yes. I will tell Murray that I have had ye kidnapped and alive with me for the past ten years. If he loves ye enough and wants ye back, he will need to give me half of his lands and villages.”

Aiden finally looked up, rage evident in his eyes. “So, now that keeping me prisoner is nay longer going to benefit ye, ye will try to ransom me?”

“Aye, but dinnae worry, nae just yet. I will be kidnapping yer dear sister Astrid as well so I can hold similar leverage over Flynn and ask him for half of his lands too.”

“Ye willnae dare touch my sister, Myles! Dinnae even think about it!” Aiden barked, sounding angry for the first time in a long time.

Myles laughed at Aiden’s obvious worry. “I have already thought about it of course, and now, all I need to do is put me plan into action. Once I have these lands, I will be the strongest laird in the area, far stronger than both Murray and Flynn. It is the only thing I ever wanted anyway.”

“They willnae be dumb enough to fall for it. If ye think ye can blackmail them into giving ye their lands, yer mistaken. Neither of them will do so.”

“I think yer wrong this time, Aiden,” Myles said, a satisfied grin on his face. “Yer faither loves ye enough to still be in mourning for yer sake, and I am sure Flynn loves Astrid too. When I threaten to kill both of ye, Flynn and Murray will give me anything I want and ask for. Ye will see.”

“Nay, Myles,yewill see. Ye will see when this plan will entirely fail and backfire on ye, and ye will end up suffering,” Aiden threatened, but Myles knew better than to pay heed to what he said.

“If yer faither and yer sister’s betrothed fail to give me what I want, I will send the two of them yer heads. If they do give me what I want, I will send them ye two alive. I believe both Murray and Flynn are smart men and would ken what to do in such a situation. Hence, I ken for a fact that me plan will not only survive but will be successful, Aiden. Ye will see for yerself very soon.”

“I would rather die than watch me faither give in to a lowlife like ye. A man who disnae have the courage to fight openly on the battlefield but hides behind plots and

plans to make up for everything he disnae have,” Aiden spat out, making Myles angrier with every passing second.

But Myles kept his cool, knowing perfectly well that being angry was not the solution to this problem, and he could not let Aiden and his words affect him. Soon enough, he would be successful and would no longer be doubted by anyone.

“Ye can say and believe whatever ye wish, Aiden, but if I can keep ye here for ten years without a single soul knowing about it, I can do anything,” Myles replied with a smile, making sure that Aiden saw how unaffected he was by it all.

“I promise ye, Myles. Soon enough, ye will choke on yer own tears as ye die, and this clan yer working so hard to build will be broken down entirely. Cowards like ye are not born to be lairds, and God will set things straight,” Aiden threatened yet again.

The conviction Myles saw in Aiden’s words made him slightly uncomfortable, but he ignored it and simply focused on putting his plan into action.

“We will see who is right, Aiden. One thing I ken for sure is that I have spent ten years with ye, and it is finally time to get rid of ye one way or the other. Now, it depends on yer faither if ye leave this dungeon dead or alive.”

“I will pray night and day to leave here dead rather than see the people of me clan suffering under yer rule,” Aiden spat at Myles’s feet.

Myles stepped back and controlled his temper. He had bigger things to worry about than Aiden.

The plan was already set and made up in his mind, and nothing or no one could come between him and this plan. Myles knew what he was doing, and he was ready to follow through with it no matter what. All he needed now was to find a way to kidnap

Astrid.

He already knew she was at Flynn's castle and must be under extreme protection, thus kidnapping her will not be easy. Despite that, he had extreme confidence in his abilities. He kept reminding himself that if he could pull off such a thing with Aiden, he could do it with Astrid too. Once she was in his control, no one would be able to stop the Gallagher clan from becoming the richest, most powerful clan in the country, and all of his dreams would finally come true.

He turned around and exited the dungeons, leaving a furious Aiden behind him. Myles had a lot of planning to do, and he had no other options left.

CHAPTER19

Flynn returned to his castle, his mind running in several different directions at once. He knew Murray and he had threatened Myles enough to make sure he did return their lands, but something about the way Myles had been acting did not seem right to him. It almost felt as if he was hiding something, and Flynn wished to find out what it was. He knew he needed to get back those lands, and he was ready to go to any lengths to see things set right.

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Besides that, Flynn had been constantly thinking about Astrid. He was no longer denying the fact that he did indeed love her, and when he had met with Murray today, he had wished to ask him for Astrid's hand in marriage in truth this time.

While Murray would have vehemently declined such a request, Flynn was still hopeful. Most of his hopes were simply based on the fact that Astrid did wish to marry him. Despite everything that had happened in the past days, he still needed to confirm this from her, or else there was a possibility that he had been mistaking her affection for nothing.

"Could I be mistaken?" he whispered to himself, continuing to pace back and forth in his study.

Although, his heart told him otherwise. She had been immensely affectionate towards him since the day in the library and would often, even during the day, come into his study while he was absorbed in work and ask him to kiss her.

He had been enjoying the attention she had been giving him and the growing closeness between them. He would go wish good night to her and Bannock every night and would often just sneak in the middle of the night to take away Bannock and watch Astrid sleep. He knew that she was aware of what he had been doing and had never once objected. Instead, the smile on her face every time he was around was enough to tell him that she was enjoying it all.

"Nay, I cannae be mistaken about this. It isnae possible," he consoled himself, knowing that he needed to do something about it. "I need to ask Astrid to marry me immediately. If she says yes and agrees to it, I will go talk to Murray and convince

him.”

As the idea settled into his mind, he knew the only person who could help him through it was Keira.

Flynn quickly stepped out of his study and rushed towards Keira’s bedchamber, hoping she was there alone. As he knocked on the door softly, he waited patiently and continued to silently pray that Astrid would say yes.

“Flynn?” Keira looked at him with a confused expression as she opened the door.

“Are ye alone?” He knew his question must have sounded suspicious because she raised an eyebrow at him and folded both her arms across her chest.

“Why are ye asking?” she questioned defensively as if she would attack him if he said one inappropriate word.

He knew how protective Keira was of Astrid and vice versa. The love between these sisters was unlike anything he had ever seen.

“I needed to talk to ye about somethin’ related to Astrid,” he assured her and watched as her body relaxed, and she finally smiled at him.

“I am alone. Ye can come in,” she replied, allowing him inside.

He walked inside the bedchamber and noticed how everything was clean and kept in perfect order, completely unlike Astrid’s bedchamber. He laughed to himself as he remembered the first time he had entered her bedchamber and found it in chaos. Now, whenever he went there, he was no longer surprised and simply went about cleaning it himself. It was evident Keira was the more organized of the two and must have kept Astrid’s chambers in order as well when they had been back home.

“Well?” Keira asked him, sounding impatient.

“I wish to marry yer sister,” he said plainly, not planning to talk in riddles.

He knew he did not have much time, since it would be quite difficult to convince Murray about it already. He needed to go about it as soon as possible before Murray thought of a clever idea to break the betrothal.

“Ye mean, ye wish to marry her for real? Nay longer a fake betrothal?” Keira asked, her eyes widening in excitement as her lips turned up into an infectious grin. It was apparent she was ecstatic about the news, and Flynn was glad to see someone was on his side.

“Precisely. I have realized I am in love with her and need to ask her to marry me in reality,” he explained, and Keira jumped up and down, acting as if she was five. Her giddiness certainly worked to make Flynn feel more confident about his decision, and he felt positive about Astrid accepting his proposal.

“About time, Flynn. Laila and I have been hoping for this day to come for such a long time now,” she said, and Flynn rolled his eyes at the mention of his grandmother.

He knew Laila too had been hoping for just this for quite some time now, and the fact that Keira and her shared similar sentiments was no surprise to him after the incident in the library.

“Now, I will need yer help,” he told her, holding both her arms to make sure she was calm.

“Of course, anythin’ for me future brother-in-law.” She beamed. “What do ye need me to do?” she asked, immediately straightening up.

“Well, first of all, I need ye to tell me if ye have any idea how Astrid feels. Do ye think she will agree?” he asked hopefully, not knowing what to expect.

“From how much I ken my sister, I think she is just as equally in love with ye as yer in love with her, and she will never deny ye,” Keira assured him, increasing his hope.

“Well, in that case, the only problem will be yer faither,” Flynn said, and Keira nodded immediately.

“I still dinnae ken how are ye going to convince Faither, but if someone can do it, it is ye.” Her confidence in him was certainly comforting, and Flynn smiled at her.

“Thank ye, Keira,” he replied, swallowing. “Now, all I want ye to do is somehow find a stray kitten and attach a note onto it saying ‘take me to the courtyard’ and place it in front of Astrid wherever she might be. I will handle the rest of it.”

“Where am I supposed to find a kitten?”

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“Now that, dear sister-in-law, is yer problem. I have enough problems of my own to deal with already. Make sure the kitten is waiting for Astrid tomorrow morning, because that is when I will propose to her,” Flynn replied, squeezing Keira’s arms in excitement.

He still could not believe he was following through with it and had finally decided to marry the only woman who had ever stolen his mind and heart.

“Yer putting me in an impossible position, Flynn,” Keira complained as he quickly made his way towards the door.

“I ken, dear, but if someone can do it, it is ye,” he said, throwing her words back at her.

As he left her bedchamber, her sudden laughter met his ears, which made him feel better. He knew he could do it. He loved Astrid, and she loved him back, and nothing or no one could keep them apart any longer.

* * *

“Meow, meow.”

Astrid stopped on her way to the dining room for breakfast and looked around in concern. She was certain she had heard a cat meowing and was even more certain that the voice had not been that of Bannock. The meow was extremely shrill, much like a young kitten’s, and she looked around worriedly. She knew a kitten was around there somewhere.

The cat meowed again, and Astrid sensed the voice was coming from the end of the hallway, so she immediately ran in that direction. She had always been extremely sensitive towards cats. She had found Bannock on the verge of death when she had been only a kitten, and had nursed her to health before adopting her.

Astrid could never leave a cat who needed her, and this kitten certainly sounded lost.

As she made her way to the corridor, her gaze finally landed on a small kitten who, just as she had expected, was sitting all alone. She noticed that it was a male kitten with beautiful striped grey fur. Astrid immediately picked him up in her arms, softly cradling him.

Just then, her gaze landed on a small note which was attached to the back of the kitten, and she confusedly snatched it away from the ribbon it had been tied to.

She opened the note and read, "Take me to the courtyard."

Astrid did not know what was happening, but she knew for certain that something was going on. It was evident someone had placed the kitten with a note out here and had most certainly hoped for her to find him.

"Who could it be," she wondered aloud but decided to follow the instructions and take the kitten to the courtyard. She was certain it would do no harm and was certainly curious to find out who had planned something this elaborate for her.

"Well, hello, little prince," she said to the kitten, placing soft kisses on his head. The poor thing was love-starved, as he immediately settled into her touch and rubbed his head against her. Her heart melted as she stared into his uniquely large hazel eyes. "Let's take ye to the courtyard, shall we?"

The kitten meowed in response, and Astrid walked with him in her arms towards the

courtyard as per the instructions in the note.

She quickly made her way downstairs and went towards the back of the house, where the courtyard was located. It was a large piece of land that had been beautifully surrounded with crimson brick, and much like the rest of the castle, it had creeping plants and vines along all its walls. Even during the day, it was mostly sheltered except for a few spaces that sunlight could filter through, but otherwise, it appeared like somewhere in the middle of a dark, abandoned cave where habitation had continued to grow.

She was surprised to notice that the courtyard was entirely empty, but just then, her eyes landed on Bannock, who sat comfortably at the one spot on which the sun was shining. She walked towards her cat and pet her as Bannock immediately became alert to the presence of another cat around her.

Astrid noticed a note on Bannock's paw as well and tore it loose to read it. The mystery was continually becoming more and more complicated, and she could not deny that she was enjoying exploring it.

She opened the note and was even more confused as the note read, "I've lived long enough to finally see you married."

Astrid could not discern what the note was supposed to mean and looked around, still with a confused expression on her face.

"Astrid?" an extremely familiar voice called out from behind, and she turned around with a smile to find the man she had been betrothed to sitting on one knee right behind her.

Suddenly, it all made sense as the note on Bannock came back to her. It had all been written by Flynn. Her heart rate accelerated as she realized what was about to happen,

and she did not know how to react to it.

“Flynn,” she called his name in reply, walking closer towards him.

Her smile was hesitant and nervous, but it remained intact on her face. The mere fact that Flynn, the man she had undeniably fallen in love with over the course of the past few days, was sitting on his knees in front of her was enough to make her blush.

“Astrid,” he began again once she was close enough. “I have been meaning to tell ye something. May I?”

“Ye may,” she whispered softly, knowing he could hear her, nonetheless. She cared about nothing or no one else at that moment, besides him.

“I dinnae ken when, where, or how exactly I fell in love with ye, but all I ken is I did. I fell in deep, deep love with ye, and I dinnae ken how to live without ye any longer. In the past few days, I have come to realize that I never wished to break this betrothal since the beginning because I was intrigued by ye since the moment we met a year ago. When I found out I was to be betrothed to ye, I was quite happy. When ye came to live here, I wished to protect ye and keep ye happy, and as we grew closer, I fell in love with ye.

“Astrid, I hope for nothing more than for ye to feel the same way about me, and hence, this is how I wished ye to find out. I ken this betrothal was supposed to be fake, and yer faither is still finding ways to somehow break it, but I truly wish to marry ye and spend a lifetime in yer company. I wish to share all me happiness with ye alone, right beside me. Will ye allow me to do that, Astrid? Will ye love me enough for an entire lifetime to agree to marry me? To become me bride? For real this time?”

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Astrid closed her eyes at his question as tears of joy rolled down her cheeks. She had never expected Flynn to announce his love for her this way. She had always thought he was a man of a few words, but today, he had expressed his love for her so perfectly, that he had left her speechless.

“Flynn, I dinnae ken what to say,” she told him honestly, hastily wiping away the tears from her face as she sat down in front of him on her knees as well. “I, too, dinnae ken when I fell in love with ye or how, but I believe it happened when I finally realized that ye were so much more than what ye seemed. Ye were not just another laird of a clan, but ye were a well-loved laird. Ye were loved because of yer kindness and charm, because of how ye care about yer people. I admired everythin’ about ye since the beginning and enjoyed every time we fought.

“I think as time passes, I will only fall a little more in love with ye every day, and that will make our relationship stronger. I fell in love with ye despite the enmity between our families and clans and despite knowing that even right now, we dinnae ken if we will be able to take this forward. But nothing would give me greater happiness than marrying ye.”

“Ye will marry me?” he asked disbelievingly as if he had been expecting another answer.

“Yes,” she sobbed yet again and extended her hand to him.

He slowly pushed the ring he had held in his hand onto her finger as the two of them stood back up again. Before she could say another word, Flynn pulled her in for another kiss, his lips colliding against hers in a hungry kiss.

Astrid did not know what it was about his kisses, but they always made her feel incomplete in a way that she could only ever be whole again with him beside her. When she was not with him, she felt as if half of her heart was missing and craved nothing more than to have his presence around her. Flynn was a man who had taken her heart and kept it for himself, and she had gladly given it to him.

“I cannae believe ye agreed to marry me,” Flynn said, pulling away from the kiss, and Astrid could not help but break out into laughter.

“I think ye already knew I was in love with ye. Every time I was around ye, I had nothing but stars in me eyes for ye. I have displayed me love for ye at every moment, me dear,” she pointed out, and Flynn nodded.

“I do not deny that, darling. I did have the feeling that I wasnae alone in this feeling, but a man can never be too sure,” he told her truthfully, and she nodded.

“I dinnae think ye have asked Faither yet?” she questioned, looking at his face with concern.

She was certain he could not have asked her father yet, since there was no chance at all for the old Laird to agree to this. As far as her father was concerned, this marriage would never happen.

“I have nae.”

“When are ye plannin’ to?”

“I think I will go to him right now,” he replied impatiently, and Astrid nodded.

She knew her father would be the biggest hurdle to this marriage coming to life, for he would never agree to it. There was no chance of him ever allowing it to happen,

and this worried her. Flynn must have seen the worry on her face, for he immediately stroked her face lovingly.

“Are ye all right?” he asked.

“I am worried,” she admitted.

“Astrid, I dinnae ken how yer faither will react at the news, but the one thing I ken for certain is that ye love me, and I love ye, and I will never let anything or anyone in the world push us apart. Yer made for me, me dear, and we will never be separated.”

“I believe you, Flynn.”

As the words escaped her mouth, she knew she did believe him indeed. He was there for her, and he would always be there for her. Of that, she had no doubts.

CHAPTER20

“Me Laird,Marco has just sent word. Laird MacKie has left his castle for some work.”

Myles turned around as one of his men came to inform him of the news. As soon as he had thought about kidnapping Astrid, he had sent some of his men to Flynn’s castle to keep an eye on his whereabouts.

This was exactly the moment he had been waiting for. He knew the castle would still be well guarded, but it would be far easier to kidnap Astrid from the MacKie castle in Flynn’s absence. If Flynn was still present there, he would find out about her disappearance almost immediately, and Myles would never be able to put his plan into motion.

“Send word back. Tell them to do it while he is gone,” Myles replied, a cruel smile on his face.

He could not believe his plan was finally coming together. With both Aiden and Astrid kidnapped, he would easily be able to ransom them and threaten Murray and Flynn into doing everything he wished for them to do. Nothing could stop him from becoming the most powerful laird in all of Scotland, he was certain of that.

“Yes, Me Laird.”

“Once she is brought in, throw her in the dungeon with her brother. The two of them deserve a small reunion after ten years, don’t ye think?” Myles ordered, laughing, thinking about the note he would send Murray as soon as Astrid was under his possession.

He would leave the task of informing Flynn about it to Murray alone, since he, himself, was slightly terrified of sending such a note to Flynn.

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The man nodded and left, and now all Myles had to do was sit and wait patiently as he watched his plan succeed.

* * *

Astrid walked along the garden wall, her hand trailing along the vines that met her on the way. Flynn had left for the O'Donnely castle in the morning after she had tried her best to take him to her bedchamber. She had been missing his kisses for days now and wished for nothing more than to sit on his lap and feel all of him as she kissed him the way they had passionately kissed when locked in the library.

Flynn had promised her that as much as he wanted just that, he would still not take her virginity before their wedding. He was not certain about her father's agreement and did not wish for any problems to arise between them. Hence, even though she had continued kissing him, he had eventually broken away from her and left.

"I miss him," she whispered to herself, unable to believe that she had fallen so deeply in love that now she missed him when he was not here. The idea was absurd to her but very real as well, since she could see that he loved her just as much if not more.

As she continued walking, she thought she saw a rabbit move a little up ahead of her and wondered where it could have come from. Since Flynn had surprised her with a kitten today, she smiled, wondering if this could be yet another surprise from him. Without thinking much further, she chased after it until she had climbed over the garden wall and was out of the castle with no one in sight near her.

She looked around but could see nothing at all, and she realized that she must have

been mistaken. “I should head back,” she said to herself before quickly making her way back towards the garden wall.

Just as Astrid was about to climb back inside the castle, she heard quick, hasty footsteps behind her, and a cloth was pulled over her head. Her gaze was plunged into total darkness, and she felt a string go around her neck, constricting her airways. She did not know what was happening at all, but she tried to shout, belatedly realizing her voice had been muffled by a hand over her mouth.

“Help,” she shouted through the cloth, knowing it was pointless, as someone held her hands and feet, completely restricting all movement, making it impossible for her to break free.

Before she could have thought of anything else to do, a faint noise cutting through the air reached her ears just as she felt a throbbing pain in her skull. Something had hit her head.

The pain exploded in her head, making her feel as if she had lost all ability to breathe, think, or keep her eyes open. As she struggled through the haze quickly overtaking her, she only knew one thing for certain: she had been kidnapped, and if it was done by the very person who had taken her brother, she had no chance of being found.

* * *

“Astrid, please wake up, me dear.”

She could hear someone calling out her name as her mind finally woke up, much faster than her eyes had. Her vision was still clouded in complete darkness as she wondered to whom this unfamiliar voice belonged. Who was this person, and how did he know her name?

As she slowly opened her eyes, the bright light in the room was enough to blind her, and she immediately placed a hand over her eyes, wishing for her vision to return to normal. Everything was blurred, and all she could feel was cold, hard stone under her.

Where am I?

Her thoughts had returned to her, and she knew she had been kidnapped. The unfamiliarity of the sounds and scents around her was enough to tell her she was not home. Despite that, she felt safe. The stranger calling out to her felt familiar.

Several minutes passed before she finally opened her eyes again, the scent of decay and staleness flooding her nostrils. She had never been to a place that smelled this rotten before. Astrid did not know who had kidnapped her, but she knew for certain that she was kidnapped.

“Astrid,” the familiar voice called out to her again, and she quickly rubbed her eyes, blinking several times to see as clearly as possible.

As she opened her eyes, bright golden hair met her gaze, hair much similar to her own and eyes that looked familiar. The only difference was the fact that the man sporting the golden hair and those familiar eyes had left her life as a young boy and had now reentered as a man. An extremely handsome young man who had ten hard years written over every inch of his face.

Astrid stood up from her position on the ground, realizing she was no longer tied down but free to move, then sat down. She watched the man who looked more like her than anyone else ever had, and tears she had not even realized she had begun rolling down her cheeks.

Aiden was sitting in front of her. Her brother. A brother she had lost ten years ago and had lost all hope of ever finding or meeting again. A brother she had mourned all

these years. A brother who had been so much more than that to her and had left a heart-shaped hole in her body when he had exited their lives unwillingly.

“Aiden,” she whispered, unable to stop the tears.

She did not even care about them anymore. All she knew was that there was a man in front of her, a man who was none other than her big brother.

“Ye recognize me?” Aiden asked disbelievingly, as if he had not hoped that Astrid would ever recognize him.

She realized he might have never seen his face in a mirror before and did not even know that the two of them looked extremely similar.

“If ye dinnae ken what ye look like, I can assure ye me face is the perfect reflection of yers. Even now, ye and I look the same. Yer just a more masculine version of me,” she whispered through the tears, raising her hands to touch his face.

As soon as she touched him, she could no longer control herself and broke down into sobs, crying uncontrollably in front of him. She was not embarrassed one bit when he gathered her up in his arms and hugged her small frame against his, the two crashing into one another as only two siblings who have not seen each other in the last ten years would.

“Astrid, I cannae believe it is ye in front of me. I had lost all hope of ever meeting ye again,” Aiden sobbed, and they did not separate from one another.

“I had lost all hope too, Brother. We had all lost hope. Faither mourned for ye every day, and so did I, and so did Keira. We fought ten years for ye, Aiden, ten years, without even realizing when the wars had ceased to be about ye and became about general enmity with the MacKie clan. We missed ye every day and hoped that ye

would return, but as days turned into months and months into years, all hope faded from me body. I didnae ken what to believe anymore.”

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“I have been here all this time, Astrid. All these past ten years. I too lost hope and track of time. I wished for death to come for me every day. I hoped and prayed for death, but it never came. I think now that I have met ye, I can finally die a happy man,” he cried, and Astrid pulled away from him at his words.

“Die? Yer nae going to die, Aiden. Neither of us will die. We will find a way out of here,” she replied, wiping away the tears from her face. She still did not know how she had come here or who had brought her in.

“There is nay way out of here, Astrid,” he told her hopelessly. “I warned Myles to nae kidnap ye when he told me he was planning to do just that. I told him he would suffer, but the old bastard didnae listen to me.”

Astrid was immensely confused at the mention of Myles. “Who is Myles?”

“Laird Gallagher,” he explained, and her eyes widened in recognition.

She knew who Myles was, but her confusion still persisted, for she did not know why he had kidnapped both her and Aiden.

“It was Myles who kidnapped ye ten years ago? And not the MacKie clan?”

“Nae!” Aiden replied. “It was always Myles since the first day. This was all his plan to begin a war between the two clans, and during the war, he continued to capture villages from both our clan and Laird MacKie’s clan. He didnae expect them to ever find out, but they did find out and met with him together to threaten him to return their villages. This didnae sit right with him, and he kidnapped us to offer us for

ransom in order to receive half of the O'Donnely lands and half of the MacKie lands, so he can become the most powerful man in the country.”

Astrid listened quietly to everything Aiden was telling her, unaware of everything that had been happening around her. Had her father only known it was Myles who had Aiden kidnapped, her brother would have been found ages ago. She could not believe Myles would go to such lengths just to make sure he got some villages to add to his territory.

“He will force Faither to give him his lands by ransoming ye and me, but he cannae do that with Flynn,” Astrid said, knowing Myles could never blackmail Flynn into doing such a thing.

“He has kidnapped ye to force Flynn, since ye two are betrothed now,” her brother explained, and Astrid once again realized how smart Myles was.

Flynn would do anything for her, and she knew that, but despite it all, she also knew he was smart enough to never fall for this trap.

“What should we do? Is there really no way to escape?”

“None,” Aiden replied, having tried everything he possibly could think of to get out of this dungeon.

“We will wait, then.”

“For whom?”

“I ken for a fact that Flynn will come to save both me and ye. He isnae dumb enough to fall for the trap Myles is laying out for them and would never give that cruel man his lands and his people,” Astrid assured her brother, having complete faith in the

man she loved.

“I truly hope that is the case, Astrid.”

CHAPTER 21

Flynn stood outside the O'Donnely castle beside Billy, wondering what he would say to Murray when they met. He knew he needed to ask his permission to marry Astrid, but the vehement denial that was waiting for him at the other end of this castle door was well known to him.

Murray would never agree, and Flynn was not certain where that would lead him and Astrid. If only he was concerned, he couldn't care less about Murray's agreement or disagreement, but he knew for a fact that it mattered to Astrid.

As a daughter, she would wish for her father to be present for her at her wedding and to have his complete blessing and support throughout. If she agreed to marry Flynn without her father's permission, it would take away both those things from her, which was the last thing Flynn wanted or wished for. He was praying and hoping that whatever happened turned out to be in her best interest.

“Flynn!” Billy called out his name exasperatedly, just as he had been doing for the past half hour. “This is the first time I am lookin' forward to going inside the O'Donnely castle, and this time yer takin' too long. Ye should get it over with, Me Laird. Yer thinkin' too much about it.”

“Yer right,” Flynn agreed, straightening up. He was the Laird of his own clan, and a very powerful clan at that. He could look Murray straight in the eyes and tell him he loved his daughter. “Let's go inside.”

The two of them finally walked inside the castle, and the butler, although shocked to

see them, did not stop them. Instead, just as always, he led them straight towards Murray's study.

Flynn knocked on the old man's door.

"Come in," Murray barked, and Flynn entered, his gaze momentarily adjusting to the darkness inside the stuffy room before settling on Murray, who stood by his desk, a sealed envelope in his hand.

Flynn could not help but wonder who the letter was from, but he was here for entirely different purposes.

"Murray," he greeted the old Laird, whose eyebrows furrowed as he gazed at Flynn and Billy.

"What are ye doing here? Have ye received a letter from Myles as well?" Murray asked, glancing towards the letter in his hands.

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Flynn was immediately intrigued to know the contents of the letter once Murray mentioned it was from Myles. As far as he knew, no such letter had come for him before he had left his castle, although he was not sure if something of such nature had arrived now.

“I have nae received a letter. I came for somethin’ else,” Flynn explained. “But the letter seems important. Ye should read it first. It might be him finally informing us that he is returning our villages.”

Flynn did not know what it was about the letter that did not sit right with him. He suddenly felt restless, as if something terrible had happened. He needed to know what the letter said as soon as possible in order to know for certain, or else he would never be able to have the conversation with Murray.

“Yer right. Let me read it,” Murray replied and tore open the seal.

Flynn waited with bated breath as he watched Murray read line after line of the letter, the old man’s face paling in color with every passing word. It was clear the letter was delivering bad news, and Flynn was certain of it when Murray suddenly dropped the letter to the ground and turned to look at up him, his gaze turning emotionless as tears pooled in his eyes.

“I cannae believe this,” Murray whispered, and Flynn, who was already worried, rushed forward and picked the letter up.

He began to read.

Laird O'Donnely,

The purpose of this letter is simple. I need to tell ye something. Yer son, Aiden Wright, is safe and alive, and with me. I was the one who kidnapped him ten years ago, and I have held him with me all this time. Moreover, I want both ye and Flynn to ken that yer daughter and his betrothed, Astrid Wright, has also been kidnapped by me and is being kept with her brother.

I never expected for ye and Flynn to find out about the lands I was stealing from yer clans, but now that ye have, I have to resort to such methods to save meself and me clan. I willnae be returning the lands I already have, and if both of ye wish to see Astrid and Aiden alive and healthy and back with ye again, I want half of the lands of both of yer clans under my possession, which would effectively turn me into the most powerful laird in Scotland.

If ye fail to do so, both or at least one of them will die. If I see any of yer soldiers on my lands or near my castle, Aiden and Astrid will die. If ye try to be cunning about it rather than simply doing as I am asking ye to do, Aiden and Astrid will die. Hence the choice is simple. Do as I say, or lose yer son and daughter. I am not writing a separate letter to Flynn and am hoping that ye will convey my message. Yer lands in exchange for these two lives is all I ask for.

Moreover, although I couldnae care less, I think I must apologize for being the reason behind the misunderstandings between the MacKie and O'Donnely clans. I simply framed the MacKies after kidnapping Aiden meself.

I will wait for an affirmative response from yer end.

Myles.

Aiden's hand shook as he finished reading the letter, anger coursing through him in

waves. Myles had dared to kidnap Astrid, the love of his life. Just before coming to meet Murray, Flynn had promised her that nothing could separate them, and this sorry excuse of a man had gone and kidnapped her. Flynn had never been angrier before.

“I will kill him,” he whispered and finally realized that Murray was still there. The old man was seated in his chair now, clearly still absorbing the shock of the letter.

“He had Aiden for the last ten years, and now, he has Astrid. He will kill both my children,” Murray whispered.

“I will kill him before he even touches either of them. How dare he kidnap me wife!” Flynn thundered, belatedly realizing what he had said.

Murray stared at him quizzically, wondering what he meant, but Flynn was glad when the man chose not to comment on it. Flynn had bigger problems to worry about now. He needed to figure out a way to save Astrid.

“We cannae save them. Ye read what he said. He will kill both of them if he sees any of our soldiers on his lands,” Murray reminded him, and Flynn nodded knowingly. He already knew everything Myles had written, and he already knew how to save Astrid and Aiden.

“There is nay way I will give my lands and people to that man or let ye do it. I dinnae require soldiers to save Astrid and Aiden. Billy and I can easily sneak inside the castle and get them out alone. Once Aiden and Astrid are out and safe, I will make sure Myles suffers the most painful death ever known to man.”

“Flynn, yer thinking too brashly about all of this. Please dinnae forget that Myles is a smart man and cannae be fooled too easily,” Murray reminded.

Flynn knew Murray was right, but he knew that they had no other choice. They would either need to save Astrid and Aiden by sneaking into the castle or allow their deaths at the hands of Myles.

“We have nay other choice, Murray,” he replied as Murray stood up and began to pace the length of his study. The old Laird was clearly exasperated, and so was Flynn.

“We will have both our soldiers wait in the nearby forests on our lands while yer there,” Murray suggested. “Will that be all right?”

“Yes,” Flynn agreed. “As soon as Astrid and Aiden are out of there, we will attack Myles and his castle immediately before he has the chance to run away.”

“The plan runs on huge risk, Flynn. Think again,” Murray warned.

Flynn nodded knowingly. He already had calculated every risk in his head, but he turned to look at Billy, who was equally adept at such things.

“The plan indeed is risky, Laird O’Donnely,” Billy said, “but I can assure ye that both Laird MacKie and I are skilled enough to pull it off. Moreover, we would never let a coward like Myles win in this situation by holding ye to ransom. Our lands and people deserve better.”

“I had already lost all hope of finding Aiden ever,” Murray began, his words sounding extremely sorrowful. “I cannae afford to have this hope back again then once again lose me son and me daughter too this time. I would never be able to live with meself knowing that I could have saved them, and yet I chose to nae do it.”

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Flynn sat in front of Murray, looking the man straight in the eye. He could see the concern of a father shining in his eyes, and he could not blame him. If it were his own daughter and son's lives on the line, he might have acted similarly. Although right now, he was being rushed by the rage of a young lover, and he would never let Astrid suffer.

Flynn had enough faith in himself to know that he could and would save her.

"Murray, I ken what ye feel, but the only way to go about this is trust. Ye will need to trust me before I leave," he said, looking Laird O'Donnely straight in the eye.

"I do trust ye, Flynn," Murray replied, and Flynn immediately felt lighter. "And I wish to apologize to ye."

"What for?" Flynn asked, his brows furrowed in confusion.

"For all these years of hatred against ye, yer faither, and yer clan, when it was clearly not ye who had Aiden kidnapped. I should have known better and should have trusted yer faither's word before starting the wars."

Flynn accepted Murray's apology easily, since he was a staunch believer that the past should remain in the past. "Ye dinnae need to apologize to me, Murray. Yer trust in me now is compensation enough for all that happened these many years ago."

"I still needed to apologize for my own peace of mind," Murray said. "I am an old man now and cannae continue living unapologetically with my mistakes. Things would have been far different between our clans and our lives if I had only trusted yer

word at that time. Perhaps we could have worked together to find Aiden earlier—”

“If ye keep torturing yerself with the what ifs and imagining everything that could have happened in the past, ye will never be able to live with yerself and yer choices, Murray. Dinnae do this to yerself,” Flynn interjected, placing a hand on Murray’s shoulder as if to soothe him.

“Flynn, we must hurry.” Billy’s voice reminded Flynn that they were indeed short on time and needed to decide what needed to be done as soon as possible.

“Now that I have yer faith in me, Murray, I will be leaving. Send yer soldiers to the lands around the castle, and I will do the same. Astrid and Aiden will come home, I promise.”

Murray nodded.

Flynn immediately turned around and left the O’Donnely castle with Billy. He did not know how Astrid was doing, and the fact that she had been kidnapped while she had been at the MacKie castle was even more insulting for him. He had failed to protect her earlier, but he will not fail to save her now.

If there was something Flynn despised most in the world, it was coward men like Myles who fought from behind your back. Men who were weak enough to never be out in the open but always ready to attack from behind.

Myles had done exactly that by kidnapping Aiden first and then Astrid. Flynn knew he would make sure Laird Gallagher suffered, and if there was one thing he did well, it was following through on his promises.

CHAPTER22

“Flynn, it is confirmed.”

Billy walked towards Flynn as the two of them stood just at the back of the Gallagher castle waiting to get in. Billy had asked some of his people to find out about Astrid and Aiden’s location inside the castle, and one of his informers had just arrived with news.

“What is confirmed?”

“They are not in the main dungeons where Myles keeps everyone else. They are somewhere else,” Billy said.

Flynn nodded. He had already expected this to be the case. Myles was a smart man and would have never kept Aiden in a place where he could be seen by others and make friends who might help him out of the dungeons.

“Where are the other dungeons in the castle?” Flynn asked.

“Right in the basement of the main castle. They have been empty for years now and remain unused. It could be the only place he would have kept them in,” Billy replied.

Flynn knew this made their task of sneaking into the dungeons slightly more difficult, but he was prepared for anything.

He was not going to leave the Gallagher castle without Astrid and Aiden by his side, and he had vowed the same thing to Murray as well. Hence, he already knew he would go to any lengths to make sure he found them, and they walked out of there safely.

“Well, now, we must sneak into the castle,” Flynn commented, already knowing the easiest way to do so would be by entering through the underground tunnels.

The Gallagher castle had been built rather differently and was quite adapted to war. Hence, several open spaces had been left to allow the residents of the castle to escape if necessary, which made them equally accessible for entering. His grandfather had taught him everything about this long before he had passed away.

Flynn knew Myles had sealed all such spaces, but the underground tunnels were the easiest to break through, since they were only filled with mud and opened directly into the basement, which would lead them directly to the dungeons.

Billy nodded at him as they wordlessly walked towards the tunnels, unseen by anyone around them. The castle was not well manned, since Myles had a small army and most of his soldiers were stationed at the borders to protect the villages that he had captured from the O'Donnely and MacKie clans.

This was beneficial for both Billy and Flynn, as they quickly used the sticks they were carrying to navigate through the tunnels and dig through the mud as quickly as they could. Flynn knew they did not have enough time and rushed. Billy, following suit, did the same. The tunnels were not extremely long, and before they even knew it, they had already entered the basement, which was as empty and damp, as Flynn had expected it to be.

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“The dungeons must be at the far end,” Flynn whispered, speaking purely from instinct. He understood castles and how they had been built quite well, and since he had visited the Gallagher castle before, it was easier for him to make such guesses.

They soundlessly made their way towards the far end of the basement, making sure that they remained in the shadows in order to stay hidden from any men that might be lurking around the place. While the silence of the place made it appear that not a soul was there, they still could not be too careful. Being caught was completely out of the question, especially before Aiden and Astrid were beside them.

Flynn’s gaze landed on the large metal gates which were tainted with rust but locked shut. They made their way towards the gate, then Billy asked Flynn to step back as he pulled out his sword.

Flynn watched as Billy quickly and cleanly struck hard at the large lock, breaking it open in one go, and then opened the doors as soundlessly as he possibly could. The two of them crept inside and noticed the dungeons were entirely empty.

“Could they be here?” Flynn whispered.

Billy nodded. “There is nay other place where they could be. It is here or nowhere,” he whispered back.

The place was just as Flynn had thought, extremely old and frail with decay. Mold was growing on the walls, and it felt as if no human had even entered it in ages. Despite that, Flynn was almost certain that this was exactly where Aiden had spent the last ten years of his life and Astrid the past few hours. The mere knowledge

boiled his blood as they continued to walk further down the darkened hallways, trying to look for the two prisoners.

Flynn could not believe Myles's arrogance about the matter. The fact that he had no men surveying the place and no guards around was enough indication that the man was certain no one could ever break inside. Flynn wished for nothing more but to crush Myles's skull with his bare hands and watch his expressions change while at it.

"Flynn." Billy's whisper brought him back to the present, and he shook off all thoughts of revenge coursing through him.

Flynn turned to look at where Billy was pointing, and his gaze landed on a small gate that opened into another room.

Flynn climbed through the gate, Billy following after him, and he noticed another set of prison cells lining the walls. Although, this time, Flynn was certain he could hear some voices from somewhere towards the end. Both he and Billy looked at one another before rushing through the long hallway to reach the end, and just as he had expected, two heads with blonde hair turned to look at them from inside a cell.

"Flynn!" Astrid exclaimed, standing up and walking towards the bars between them as he motioned for her to be silent.

She understood and remained quiet but extended her hand towards him, and he held them unhesitatingly. His gaze travelled to the tall man beside her, who could be no one else but Aiden Wright. He was the spitting image of Astrid, just far more masculine, and he looked far different than Flynn had expected him to look.

The tall man was dressed simply but built well, and his long hair was tied in a ponytail behind him. Looking at him, no one would be able to tell that he had been imprisoned for the past ten years of his life, but his emotionless eyes were a clear

indication of his captivity.

Flynn turned towards Billy, who already had his sword out.

As he stepped back, Billy broke through the lock effortlessly and opened the gates of the cell. Astrid jumped into Flynn's arms the moment she stepped out, and he quickly looked her over from head to toe to make sure she was not hurt.

"Are ye all right?" he asked, and she nodded immediately.

"I am just fine. I knew ye would come. I cannae explain to ye how relieved I am to see ye," she whispered, and Flynn smiled at the woman he loved.

The tear streaks on her face angered him, but he knew that she was safe now and with him, and nothing could harm her anymore.

"Ye must be Aiden," Flynn said, turning towards the man standing beside Astrid.

Aiden gazed at Flynn suspiciously, and Flynn realized that he must be scowling at him, since Astrid was attached to him in a way that seemed as if they were inseparable.

"I am," Aiden replied, his voice low. "Astrid did say ye would come to save us. I think I should have believed her."

"Ye didnae believe me already?" Astrid cocked an eyebrow at her brother.

"I have lost my ability to believe and trust in the last ten years, Sister. It will take me some time." Aiden smiled ruefully at her.

"We must leave immediately before someone sees or hears us," Billy chimed in, and

Flynn nodded.

They all made their way outside the metal gate of the dungeon and began to rush towards the tunnels at the end when they suddenly heard footsteps behind them. All four of them looked at one another and stopped breathing, wondering who could have come.

Flynn motioned for Astrid to crawl through the tunnel, and she went ahead as he turned around and noticed a guard staring at them, surprise and horror in his eyes. This was the last thing he must have been expecting when he came here, and Flynn could not blame the man for being terrified. If he was the one who was supposed to look after Aiden and Astrid, Myles would kill him the moment he found out they had escaped.

“Aiden, go,” Flynn hissed as he effortlessly made his way towards the guard.

“Help, down there!” the guard shouted as loud as he could. “Prisoners escaping!”

Flynn knew there was no way the middle-aged man could have gone unheard, but he did not care. Aiden and Astrid would be out of there before the alarm would be raised, and once they were out, the MacKie and O’Donnely armies would attack the Gallagher castle.

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Billy moved with Flynn as together they dropped the large man to the ground before Billy knocked him out.

Before anyone else could come into the basement, Billy and Flynn crawled out of the prison as well, their gaze falling on Aiden and Astrid, who were already running away towards safety. Flynn and Billy followed after them until they were on safe ground, where the armies of both clans were waiting for them. Flynn knew the alarm must have been raised in the Gallagher castle by now, and Myles must know what had happened.

“Aiden, Astrid, ye two should immediately return to the castle right now. I will send guards with ye,” Flynn said to them, motioning to some soldiers to take them safely home.

“What do ye mean? What are ye going to do?” Astrid asked worriedly, clearly not anticipating what was about to happen.

“We will be attacking the Gallagher castle, me darling,” Flynn told her softly. “Ye need nae worry, I will be home right beside ye in very little time.”

“Ye promise?” she asked, concern shining in her eyes.

“I promise,” Flynn assured her, placing a kiss on her forehead.

He needed her to be safe and sound before the attack began.

“Flynn, should we go ahead?” Billy asked as soon as Astrid and Aiden had left, and

Flynn nodded, giving the army the signal. He knew it was time.

The combined armies of both clans quickly marched towards the Gallagher castle and launched an attack, with Flynn leading them. The Gallagher soldiers were entirely unprepared for the attack, but Flynn could not care at all. He was simply there for Myles, and he searched the castle, looking for the man.

“Where are ye, Myles?” he shouted as he burst through the study door.

Just as he had imagined, he found Myles pacing from left to right worriedly. The old Laird’s gaze widened as it landed on Flynn, who walked inside fearlessly.

“Here ye are,” Flynn said sweetly, making sure he sounded angry enough for Myles to know that he had done a terrible terrible thing by kidnapping Astrid.

“Flynn, I am sure we can sit and solve this matter,” Myles argued, and Flynn nodded as if in agreement.

“Yer right. Sit!” Flynn growled, pointing towards the chair placed in front of him. Myles must have taken it as a good sign, since he immediately sat down, and Flynn remained standing. “Do ye remember what I told ye the last time I was here, Myles?”

“What?” the old man croaked, clearly terrified.

That was the thing about cowards. Whenever things did not go as planned, they got scared.

“That if ye forced me to come here again, it would not end well for ye,” Flynn replied.

Myles nodded. “I didnae force ye to come out here,” he said, and Flynn laughed at

the man's audacity.

"Ye kidnapped the woman I love and am about to marry, Myles. Ye sent her faither a letter saying that ye would kill her if we didnae give our lands to ye. What do ye think I would have done? Sat at home and waited till ye brought her back yerself?"

"I made a mistake, Flynn. I apologize for that," Myles croaked. "Yer known by all to be forgiving. Ye can let this go."

"I could have let go almost anything, Myles, but yer too big of a sinner to let this go. I am afraid I cannae do that," Flynn replied.

He knew he did not wish to kill Myles, but he wanted to throw him in a dungeon for the rest of his life and make him suffer the way he had done to Aiden. However, Myles stood up and ran outside the study, and Flynn had to follow after him.

Just as Myles ran out, he came in the way of two soldiers fighting, and the sword of one struck him square in the stomach. Flynn gasped at the sight of blood gushing out of Myles's body. The old Laird fell to the ground, the blow clearly being fatal.

Flynn could not believe that had just happened, but he knew that it meant he could get out of the Gallagher castle and return home to Astrid. The only person he had meant to deal with here was Myles, but the man was already lying dead on the floor.

With that, Flynn turned around and stepped out of the castle, motioning to Billy that he was leaving.

He knew it would not be difficult for the two combined armies to take over the castle and the clan, especially since Laird Gallagher was dead, but he also knew for certain that Astrid needed him right now. He needed to be with her.

CHAPTER23

“Thank goodness, yer back!”Laila’s voice reached Flynn’s ears as soon as he stepped foot inside the drawing room of his castle, where surprisingly enough, everyone was present.

Astrid, Aiden, Murray and Keira were there too along with Daphne. Flynn smiled at the sight, since it was evident that each of them was just as worried.

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“Flynn!” Astrid called out and immediately ran towards him to pull him into a hug.

It was apparent she no longer cared about what her father thought pertaining to their betrothal, and Flynn could not care either. He hugged her back, the fear of losing her coming back to him.

“Ye have nay idea how difficult it was for me to spend even one moment knowing that ye were trapped somewhere due to Myles,” Flynn whispered in her ear, refusing to let her go. He never wanted to let her go.

“It was just as hard for me now knowing that ye were in the thick of battle while I was here,” she replied, and Flynn laughed at her words.

He understood her sentiments entirely and knew that Daphne must be feeling the same way, and it was his job to let her know that Billy was all right.

Flynn separated himself from Astrid and took her hand in his as they approached Daphne. “Billy is all right, Daphne. Ye need nae worry, he will be home soon, I am sure.”

“I am sure too, Me Laird. Thank ye,” Daphne replied with a strained smile.

“Myles? What happened to Myles?” Murray finally asked, standing up from beside his son, who sat on the sofa.

“He is dead,” Flynn announced flatly.

“Myles is dead? How?” Aiden questioned, standing up finally and walking towards them.

“He ran away from me and accidentally walked in the thick of the battle where a soldier put his sword through his stomach. He was killed instantly,” Flynn answered emotionlessly.

He knew no one deserved such an unexpected, painful death, but Myles had done too many wrongs to everyone for Flynn to ever have any sympathy for him at all.

“That is fitting,” Aiden whispered.

“I am sorry I couldnae bring him here alive, Aiden,” Flynn added. “I truly wanted to do that and give him a lifetime of suffering for what he did to ye, our clans, and Astrid, and I would have done just that if he hadn’t been killed.”

“I wished to kill him meself, but I cannae deny that I am glad he is dead. I will never have to see his face ever again,” Aiden replied, walking closer to Flynn.

“I still am sorry,” Flynn said.

“I need to thank ye for what ye did for me, Flynn.”

Flynn knew he did not deserve the thank you. He had only done it for Astrid, who was the main reason that they had even found out about Aiden being alive.

“I had been in there ten years without anyone ever coming to save me, which I knew was mainly because nay one even knew where I was. But ye came today and saved both me and Astrid, and I am indebted to ye for life.”

Flynn blinked at the seriousness of Aiden’s words, not knowing how to respond.

“There is nothing to thank me for, Aiden. Had I known ye were there earlier, I would have done the exact same thing even then. It is the duty of a brother to protect a brother.”

“Just ken that I owe ye me life and would give it up for ye in a heartbeat,” Aiden said.

“Dinnae be ridiculous, Aiden. Ye have just gotten yer life back after ten years. Dinnae go around giving it up for people! As far as Flynn is concerned, I am here beside him to make sure he and everyone around him remain alive,” Astrid chimed in, and Flynn couldn’t help but laugh at her words. Aiden too had a smile on his face.

“Astrid, have ye told Faither yet?” Keira walked towards them, a mischievous smile on her face.

“Are we talking about what I think we are talking about?” Laila asked, and Flynn immediately knew what the two of them meant.

He did not think he was ready to have this conversation with Murray already, but there was no better time.

“What is there to tell me?” Murray asked, appearing confused.

“This is what I came to talk to ye about earlier at the castle when we were distracted by the letter that Myles sent,” Flynn explained to the old man, who was looking around at all of them.

“And what was that?” Murray asked again.

“Faither, forget what everyone is saying and just listen to me. I will explain everything to ye,” Astrid said, walking away from Flynn towards her father instead. She held his hand and took him towards the sofa, where she made him sit down, and

sat down on her knees in front of him.

“What is it, dear?” Laird O’Donnely asked.

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“I simply needed to tell ye that Flynn and I wish to marry each other, and we are seeking yer blessing for it,” Astrid explained.

Flynn waited with bated breath for an answer from Murray.

Before Murray could say anything, Aiden jumped into the conversation. “Aren’t ye two already betrothed by order of the King?”

Keira burst into laughter at her brother’s question, knowing perfectly well how it must all appear to Aiden. Flynn, too, could sense the man’s exasperation, since he needed nothing but rest right now but was being forced to stay here until the battle at the Gallagher castle was over.

“Brother,” Keira began, walking towards Aiden. “The King did indeed order this betrothal to end the war between our clans, but it was only a fake betrothal from our sides, and both Faither and Flynn were working to find ways to put an end to it without angering our king. However, Flynn and Astrid truly fell in love, and now, they wish to be married for real.”

Aiden shook his head at the explanation, still evidently confused. “There is nay such thing as a fake betrothal. Ye two could have gotten married without asking for anyone’s approval or permission as long as the King was beside ye.”

“I didnae want Astrid to feel as if she had gone against her faither by marrying me against his will,” Flynn explained, and Aiden finally nodded in understanding.

“Now, if all of ye are done speaking and giving in yer two cents of knowledge on the

matter, can I ask for Faither's approval?" Astrid questioned.

"Of course," Laila replied, sitting down beside Aiden.

"Astrid," Murray began. "I have nay issues with ye marrying Flynn, especially now that I ken that I had been wrong all along, and the MacKies were not the ones who kidnapped Aiden. Although, even if this knowledge hadnae come to light, I ken I would have objected to this marriage due to my ego alone, since I ken there could be nay one better for ye than Flynn."

"Really, Faither?" Astrid asked softly, and Flynn was shocked that Murray had just given him such a huge compliment.

"I had seen how protective he was of ye when I came here earlier, and it was evident that he loves ye above all else. I could see the emotion in his eyes, and it scared me. Perhaps this was the reason I was so rude to ye when ye decided to defend the MacKie clan in front of me. Although now, I can assure ye I have no objections against this match, and I will be delighted to give ye away to a man like Flynn."

"Thank ye, Faither," Astrid replied and stood up to hug her father, who hugged her back.

Flynn smiled as he witnessed the emotional moment between the families, knowing that he could have never imagined anything better. Astrid walked towards him shyly, and he extended his hand towards her so she could hold it as they stood side by side. Just then, he turned around as footsteps approached the drawing room, and a tired Billy entered the room.

"Billy?" Flynn asked his man at arms.

"The castle has been taken, Me Laird. The Gallagher clan is ours too," Billy

announced, and a cheer erupted amongst the people present.

Flynn could have never wished for things to settle better into place. Aiden was back home, and the war between the MacKie and O'Donnely clans was over for good. The most beautiful and kind woman he had ever met in his life loved him more than anything else in the world, and he was about to marry her.

If a few years ago, someone had told him that he would end up marrying the O'Donnely daughter, he would have laughed at them. Now, as he saw his drawing room filled with the O'Donnely family alongside his own and Astrid standing beside him, he knew he could not have asked for better.

He finally had everything he could have dreamed of.

EPILOGUE

Astrid walked inside Flynn's bedchamber once everyone had retired for the night. The battle was over, and she had convinced her father to stay the night at the MacKie castle, since it was evident how tired he truly was after the onslaught of this entire day.

The Gallagher clan had been taken by the MacKies and the O'Donnelys, and it had been decided that the lands will be divided between the two clans, since Myles did not have an heir. The way she felt today made her realize that she had never been at peace before.

"Flynn," she called out, no longer worried about anything. Their previously fake betrothal was no longer fake, and her father had agreed to the match as well, which made her feel even better.

"Yer here at last. I was waiting for ye," Flynn said from behind her, and she turned

around to find him already sitting on the sofa.

He patted the seat next to him, and Astrid walked towards him.

“I was just making sure everyone else was all right,” she murmured.

“Is this what our life is going to look like? Me waiting for ye while ye make sure everyone else is doing all right?” Flynn questioned teasingly, and Astrid rolled her eyes as she snuggled into his side. His cinnamon scent made her breathe deeply once again, and it felt as if she was home.

“Nay, Me Laird. Our life will be centered on ye showering me with love and care and everything else in the world,” she replied, her tone mimicking his.

“Really?” he asked, picking her up in his arms effortlessly and placing her on his lap. She squealed softly as he settled her down, and she could not help but smile at him.

“Really.” Flynn’s hands snaked around her waist as he drew her closer.

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“Have I ever told ye that ye smell like lilies?” he asked, and Astrid looked at him confusedly.

“Ye have never.”

“Well, ye do. It was the first thing I noticed about ye when we met at the feast and then when we met again. Every time I needed to find ye, I would just track the scent of lilies that trails after ye everywhere ye go.”

Astrid laughed at his explanation, now knowing he had noticed her this well. She did not know what it was about the declaration, but it warmed her heart immensely, and she knew Flynn had loved her since the beginning. He had always been caring and attentive towards her.

“Can I kiss ye?” she asked him softly.

“Should ye even ask me that?”

Astrid bent down immediately and captured his lips with hers, the way he had done countless times before. She knew she wanted all of him, with no barriers between them. Her hands snaked under his tunic as she trailed her fingers over the muscles on his abdomen, feeling them harden underneath her touch as a moan escaped his lips.

She leaned away slightly, but he pulled her back and immediately began kissing her again, his hands running under her dress as he rubbed them over her bare back, making her moan uncontrollably.

Before she could say another word, his lips left her mouth and instead travelled to her neck as he continued kissing her ear and the soft skin at the side of her neck.

“Flynn,” she moaned, feeling wetness gather between her legs as his touch grew more fervent and urgent as if he wanted nothing but her.

“Astrid,” he whispered as he picked her up in his arms and carried her to the bed.

Astrid had never been inside his bedchamber before, but she was glad to finally be here, knowing that it would soon be hers too.

“Do ye want me?” Flynn asked her, and she nodded immediately, raising her arms to allow him to take her dress off.

Now, she was naked. As he stared at her in all her glory, she could sense his pupils dilating at the view, and she knew he wanted her just as much as she wanted him.

In a swift motion, he took off his leine, and Astrid could not help but once again admire the solid planes of his chest, which only worked to make her desire him even more than she already did. He bent down back towards her, his arms encircling her head as his mouth rained kisses all over her chest before it finally clasped tightly over one hardened nipple.

“Oh, God,” she moaned uncaringly, pleasure coursing through her as nothing else ever had.

His touch felt erotic, and she wished for nothing more. He sucked lightly as she arched her back, his hand running upwards to slowly rub her other nipple too. She needed him all over her, and the desire on her face was complete proof of that.

“Astrid,” Flynn called out, and she looked at him.

“Yes, me love?”

“I love ye,” he said softly, almost faintly, and Astrid gasped at the words.

“I love ye too,” she replied as a blush crept across her skin.

There was something about the words that made her feel vulnerable in front of him, and she loved feeling that way. It was as if there were no longer any secrets between them, as if they were no longer two people but one person alone.

She gasped as she felt his length through his kilt, which he took off within seconds, and he settled himself against her entrance. Astrid knew she was already waiting for him, willing him to make her feel whole in a way nothing else ever could. A soft moan escaped her lips as he finally entered her, his gaze steady as the two of them continued to look at one another.

“Flynn,” she moaned loudly as his pace increased, and she felt as if her climax would rip through her, breaking her apart. She continued heaving breathily as she finally climaxed.

Flynn, too, moaned her name as he climaxed inside her, filling her with his seed. The two of them stayed connected for several moments after, heaving and panting, far closer than they ever had been before.

At that moment, Astrid knew she was truly in love.

The End?