



# Craved By a Highland Beast

**Author:** *Kenna Kendrick*

**Category:** Romance, Adult, Historical

**Description:** "I will tell everyone that ye're keepin' me as a prisoner."  
"Hardly a prisoner when ye're the one who came tae me room."

Bonnie MacLaren never imagined she'd find herself in such predicaments. Boarding a birlinn by mistake and witnessing a near-murder? Check. Being at the mercy of a ruggedly handsome brute? Check. Forced to work with him against her betrothed? Check. Falling for an insufferable devil? Unfortunately... check again.

The last thing Evan MacGregor planned was for Bonnie to become part of his scheme. Yet he has to stop her fiancé from leaking vital information to the English. So, Evan takes a bold step and pretends to be her cousin, forcing her to be his pawn.

Yet, the game he's playing quickly turns into something far more dangerous: fall-for-the-fiancée-of-the-man-you-want-to-kill.

Worse still, Bonnie's fiancé knows more than he lets on. And he won't have his plans thwarted, even if it means losing his bride... for good.

She had promised her hand in marriage, not her heart...

**Total Pages (Source):** 71

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

## BONUS PROLOGUE

One month prior

Castle MacGregor was still quiet so early in the morning, even if Evan's study was anything but. He didn't even know how Padraig had managed to corner him, along with every other member of his council, the moment he had sat down behind his desk, eager to spend a couple of hours of his morning in peace after waking up early that day.

It was all because of Padraig, he knew. Evan had the paranoid thought that Padraig had somehow managed to get him to wake up so early, just so he could torture him first thing in the morning.

"Can we discuss this later?" Evan asked, slumping in his seat. The maids hadn't even brought him breakfast yet and there he was, discussing his future.

"Nay," said Padraig in his usual firm tone that left little room for discussion. "This is important, me laird. We thought we would have more time tae find a suitable bride, but with yer faither gone . . . well, a laird cannae remain unwedded fer too long. We must find ye a suitable match."

The mention of his father forced Evan to grind his teeth, molars protesting as he clenched his jaw to keep himself from flying into a blind rage. It wasn't Padraig's fault, he knew. He didn't deserve his misplaced anger.

This was not the first time his council had brought up the matter of his marriage, nor

was it the first time Evan had tried to avoid it. There were far more important things to be done before he could even begin to think about marrying someone, even if it was for a strong alliance. Clan MacGregor was strong, even after the sudden death of his father. An alliance was not his main concern.

No, his main concern was revenge. His main concern was making sure the English were kept away from his people's lands.

"I dinnae have time fer this noow, Padraig," he said, leaning back on his seat with a weary sigh, arms crossing almost petulantly in front of his chest. "Ye ken this. I must find out more about Graeme Ruthven."

The look Padraig gave him was one of utter exasperation. Pinching the bridge of his nose, the man said, "Even if ye are correct about laird Ruthven?—"

"I am."

"Evenif ye are, it doesnae change the fact that ye must find a wife," Padraig said, ignoring Evan's interruption. "If anythin', if yer correct, it is even more important that we prepare fer the possibility of war. What dae ye think will happen if ye go after him an' reveal he is workin' with Balliol an' the Sassenachs? We will need all the allies we can get."

"We have enough allies." Clan MacGregor had many friends. For generations, his clan had maintained good relationships with the rest of the Highlands, and though perhaps not everyone would rush to his rescue, everyone would surely support him if he stood up to Balliol and the King. Everyone had something to lose if the English maintained control of the Highlands through Balliol—everyone but Ruthven, who would only have something to gain as Balliol's ally.

Padraig turned to the rest of the council, looking at them with a pleading gaze, as if to

silently ask them for help. Clearing his throat, one of the older members of the council, Neacal, stepped forward and addressed Evan with a patient smile.

“Me laird, I implore ye tae consider Padraig’s suggestion,” he said. “We have already found several young women who would be excellent choices fer ye. Ye can pick whoever pleases ye most.”

“But ye should carefully consider the Lady Buchanan,” Padraig said. Next to him, Neacal sighed, running a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair and looking as though he wanted to rip it all out. “The Buchanan Clan is strong an’ wealthy, and the Lady Buchanan is rumored tae be a bonnie lass. They would make excellent allies.”

“The Lady Buchanan is also rumored tae be less than virtuous,” said Neacal. “Many things are said about her.”

“Och?” asked Evan. Perhaps he could use this to his advantage, he thought. If Padraig wanted him to wed the Lady Buchanan but Neacal disagreed with his choice, then it would surely make the process of choosing a wife for him even lengthier. “What, precisely, is said about the Lady?”

“Only rumors, me laird,” said Padraig.

“Rumors must start from somewhere,” said Neacal. “It is said her involvement has been instrumental in some conflicts. She remains in the shadows, but she can manipulate those she must even from there.”

“Is this how she has gathered all this power an’ wealth, then?” Evan asked, now curious to see why Padraig would even consider her. He was not a man who acted without planning first, nor was he a man to tolerate such people around him, which meant that he either didn’t believe the rumors or he was so desperate that he would accept that woman just for the power it would bring their clan.

But we're nae in a dire position. We dinnae need them, as much as Padraig seems tae think we dae.

"Nay," said Padraig sharply, taking another step forward. "The Buchanan Clan has always been a powerful one. An' I have met the Lady meself. She seemed perfectly pleasant, me laird. There was naething tae suggest that she is as bad as Neacal claims."

Evan glanced between the two advisors, weighing his options. "I think the truth perhaps lies somewhere in-between. That said, I still think the matter o' Ruthven an' the King is more important than anything else at this moment. I willnae waste any time courtin' a lass when I have more important things tae dae. Ruthven will be at Laird Hamilton's weddin', correct? Alaric an' I shall meet him there an' try tae find out as much as we can about him."

"That is a dangerous plan," said Padraig.

"It isnae more dangerous than allowin' him tae dae as he wishes," Evan pointed out. "It is imperative that we find out the truth about him. We've had several reports that he is a spy fer Balliol an' the King. What other proof dae we need?"

With a sigh, Padraig turned to the rest of the council, dismissing them. Evan watched them go and only after they were all out of the room did Padraig come closer to him, bracing himself against the desk and speaking quietly, as though he feared someone else would hear him.

"It is a dangerous thing, Evan," he said, and it was the first time since his father's death that Evan had heard Padraig use his given name. "Ye are the laird now. This clan needs ye an' I must admit I feel . . . uneasy when ye an' Alaric are away. I always worried about the two o' ye but noo it seems tae me that ye willnae rest until ye've had yer revenge."

All the fight drained out of Evan then. He knew, of course, that everything Padraig did was because he was concerned—concerned about the clan, concerned about Evan and Alaric, concerned about the future and their people. But he couldn't help but think that he worried too much, to the point where it hindered their progress.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

“An’ yer right,” he said. “We willnae rest until we have avenged our faither. Is that so bad, Padraig? Is it so bad that we wish tae avenge him?”

“What if ye end up like him, Evan?” The mere thought seemed to shake Padraig to his core. “I have already buried a good friend. I dinnae wish tae bury the two lads I love like me own bairns.”

“Padraig . . . Alaric an’ I will be fine,” Evan assured him as he stood from his chair and rounded his desk to pat the other man’s shoulder. “We are nae bairns anymore. We havenae been fer a long time.”

“I ken that,” Padraig said. “But it doesnae change the fact that ye still seem like bairns tae me. Let an old man have his concerns, Evan. This is what we dae best.”

Evan could hardly argue with Padraig when he got like this, and so he didn’t try. Instead, he said, “I’ll consider it, alright? I will consider the Lady Buchanan an’ every other lass ye have found fer me. But I will dae so after the Hamilton weddin’.”

“An’ until then?”

“Until then . . . Alaric an’ I have serious work tae dae an’ we need yer assistance,” said Evan. “We need all the resources we can have.”

Padraig nodded, his own hand coming to rest on Evan’s shoulder. It was the most fatherly gesture he had received since his father’s death, and he had to swallow around the knot in his throat, willing himself to stay grounded instead of losing himself in his grief. There was no time for this. He would only grieve his parents

once he was finished with his revenge.

“Ye shall have them,” Padraig promised. “I only ask that ye remain safe. That ye dinnae take risks.”

“I willnae,” said Evan, even if he knew his promise to be false.

## CHAPTER ONE

Marrying a complete stranger was the fate of many noble girls who wedded their husbands for a strategic alliance. However, Bonnie MacLaren never imagined she would be one of them. Marrying for political gain was one thing; marrying a man she only knew by name, having never met him before, was another.

Then again, she was meant to make his acquaintance soon. Laird Graeme Ruthven was waiting for her on the Isle of Arran, where they would both be attending the wedding of Tavish Hamilton and his bride, Amelia. The council of the MacLaren Clan had made it clear that Bonnie—as the heir should something happen to her brother-in-law and laird of the clan, Macauley Sinclair—was to wed as soon as possible to a man of their choosing, in an attempt to prevent another effort for a hostile takeover.

Bonnie could hardly blame them. After her cousin, Faolan, had attempted to hold onto his role as the laird of the clan by threatening to marry Bonnie against her will, the council was more eager than ever to marry her off to someone just so they wouldn't have to deal with the headache of another suitor with ulterior motives.

The sky was dark, clouds gathering above Bonnie's head as she and her two trusted guards travelled from Castle MacLaren to the shore, where they would take a birlin into the Isle of Arran. So far, the winter had been mostly dry, bringing them less rain than usual, but the cold bit into her skin and seeped into her bones—a chill that turned all



the more humid as they approached the coastline. It was still early in the day, and yet the grey clouds blocked the sun, forcing Bonnie to hold tight onto her cape as the wind whipped her face and hair.

“We’re almost there,” one of the guards, Finlay, called over the whistling of the wind. “Ye willnae have tae endure this much longer.”

“I’ve endured worse,” Bonnie said and then added with a teasing smirk, “like yer company.”

Finlay turned to look at her in mock offence. “If me lady protests me presence, I am more than happy tae return tae the castle an’ relieve ye o’ the burden. Now, whether ye make it tae Arran without me is a different matter.”

“What dae ye think will happen tae me on the way?”

“I can only guess Lachlan will inadvertently kill ye afore yer even on the birlinn,” said Finlay, prompting an unimpressed sigh from the other guard.

Bonnie laughed. In all the years she had known Finlay, the man could never help himself when it came to Lachlan—or anyone else, really. He always had a joke to offer and loved to tease those around him. Being a few years older than her, Bonnie had always thought of him as the big brother she never had. They even resembled each other a little, in their colors if not their features, their eyes and hair a similar shade of deep brown. Where Bonnie was small, though, slender, with a delicate nose and mouth, and a rounded, doll-like face, Finlay was a wall of a man, well-suited to his profession.

Lachlan, on the other hand, could only be described as willowy, Bonnie thought; boyish, even, with his unruly mop of blonde hair and his bright blue eyes. He worked well with Finlay, though, making up for the speed the other lacked when it came to

battle.

“Maybe that would be fer the best,” Bonnie said with a sigh, remembering the reason for her visit to Arran. Part of it was the wedding, of course, but part of it was so she could be paraded in front of Laird Ruthven so that he could decide if she was good enough for him; like a prized mare whose only value came from her appearance and how many children she could bear.

It was never meant tae be like this.

Bonnie had entertained the idea that she would one day marry for love a few times and it sounded idyllic—the kind of thing that had few chances of ever occurring as she was the eldest daughter. But then Cathleen had married Macauley, and he had taken on the mantle of the laird of the clan. Bonnie had held onto the hope that perhaps with a man like him in charge, a man trusted and respected by everyone around him, she would have the chance to find love, after all, and if not love, then at least a husband who would be a good match for her—someone she and her family could get to know slowly, someone they could be certain wouldn’t hurt her or the clan.

And yet all those hopes had now been ruined.

“Dinnae speak like that,” Finlay said, though his gaze was understanding as he looked at her. “Yer only obligation is tae meet him.”

“Fer now,” Bonnie said. “But if he agrees an’ the council agrees, then we all ken me opinion on the matter will be irrelevant.”

There was nothing Finlay could say to that, Bonnie knew, and so he didn’t respond much to her relief. She didn’t want to hear any comforting words, because in the end, they wouldn’t matter. Words couldn’t change what awaited her at the other side of

the sea nor could they bring her any comfort.

It was better to say nothing at all.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

“Well . . . let us make it tae the weddin’ first,” said Lachlan in the best approximation of a cheerful tone that he could muster.

“Aye, the laddie doesnae like the sea,” said Finlay.

“I have a name,” said Lachlan. “An’ I am only two years younger than ye.”

“Ye dinnae look like it.”

Bonnie chuckled as she listened to them bicker, their teasing helping to take her mind off Laird Ruthven at least for a while. Soon, she would have to face the reality of her situation, but as long as she was with Finlay and Lachlan, the three of them leisurely riding down the wide path, then she could still pretend that they were only visiting to attend the wedding.

After a few more hours, the harbor appeared before them and Bonnie gazed at the horizon, where the sea met the sky. It was clearer there, the clouds thinning and allowing some of the sunlight to creep in. She hoped the weather would remain clear and that their trip to Arran would be tolerable, if not entirely pleasant, but there was no telling what the sea would bring. She had travelled a few short distances before and most of the time, the waves had left her nauseous and eager to step once again on solid land.

“Alright . . . me an’ Lachlan will leave the horses here,” said Finlay as they dismounted, pointing to the left of the harbor. “Ye can go ahead tae the birlinnan’ we’ll find ye shortly.”

Bonnie nodded as she handed Finlay the reins to her horse. She adjusted the quiver which held her arrows along with the bow that was strapped to her back, as she had refused to take such a long trip without any weapons, and then headed to where Finlay had gestured. Here, the wind was stronger, mercilessly whipping her skin and pulling strands of her hair out of its updo, but there was nothing she could do other than hurry against it, keeping her eyes half-closed as they watered.

When she reached the edge of the land, she looked up to see that there were two boats there instead of the one she had expected.

Which one are we meant tae take?

Bonnie looked over her shoulder to where she had last seen Lachlan and Finlay but they weren't there. With a heavy sigh, she took a few steps back, looking for them, only to find out that they were nowhere to be seen.

She looked back at the boats. One of them was smaller, bearing nothing but the essentials. The other had a small room built on the deck and was a little larger, but otherwise the same.

Well . . . I can ask the men.

First, she walked to the larger boat, climbing up the plank. From the moment she stepped foot on the deck, she could tell that it was going to be a long, unpleasant trip.

How I hate the waves!

Looking around, it didn't take Bonnie long to notice that there were few men on the boat and no other passengers, which seemed rather strange. She had assumed there would be more people who would be going with them to Arran, but perhaps the council had arranged for the boat to take just her and her two guards.

“Excuse me,” Bonnie called to one of the men who was winding a piece of rope. “Are ye headin’ tae Arran?”

“Och aye,” said the man. “Who are ye, lass?”

“Me name is?—”

Before Bonnie could finish her sentence, she began to feel a strange movement—one that the waves didn’t explain. Wide-eyed, she looked at the shore, which was getting smaller and smaller by the second, while neither Lachlan nor Finlay was there with her.

“Where are ye goin’?” Bonnie asked, panic tinting her tone. Her heart leapt to her throat and her hand shot out to hold onto the nearest thing she could find: the hoop of a barrel that stood near the mast. “We . . . me guards! Ye left me guards behind! We must turn around at once!”

“What guards?” the man asked. “We are nae meant tae bring anyone else. Nae one told me we’re bringin’ a lassie, either.”

Bonnie glanced at the other boat, which was still at the harbor and cursed under her breath. “I’m afraid I am on the wrong boat!”

The man’s gaze followed hers to look at the other boat still at the harbor, before dragging his gaze back to Bonnie. “Well . . . this is certainly a problem.”

“Turn around!” Bonnie begged the man. She was close to falling to her knees, close to tears, close to jumping into the sea and trying her luck as she swam all the way back. “Please!”

“We cannae turn around now,” the man said. “We have our orders from the captain.

We maintain course.”

Bonnie looked helplessly at the man, then at the other boat, then back at the man, but he was already moving on to his next task, seemingly unbothered by the fact that Bonnie was on the boat all alone, while her guards had no idea what happened to her.

Finlay an’ Lachlan will be so worried. What will they dae? Will they ken I got on the wrong birlinn?

As she looked around for anyone who could help her—or at least listen to her—her gaze fell on the small room she had spotted before. It must have been the captain’s quarters, she thought as she approached it, determined to make the man listen to her.

It wouldn’t take them that long to turn around and bring her back to the harbor. They were still close and Bonnie could spare the extra gold they could ask for it. She just had to reason with the captain, she told herself, and then everything would be fine.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

She didn't have the presence of mind to knock. In her panic, she threw the door to the small room open, the words already tumbling past her lips before she even took a good look inside.

"Sir, please, tell yer men that we must turn back," she said, voice thin and reedy and on the verge of hysteria. The longer it took her to explain, the longer it took the man to listen, the more difficult it would be for her to make it back. "I am nae meant tae be here, it was me mistake, but in me defense, I didnae ken that ye would leave right that moment! Me guards, they are back at the harbor an' we were meant tae take the otherbirlinnbut I didnae ken that an'—"

Once again, Bonnie fell silent before she could finish her sentence, upon taking a better look at the dark room. There were no windows there. The only light came from the open door and from a torch that hung from the far wall, which shed a warm orange light on the scene before her eyes.

There was a man tied to a chair, beaten bloody and bruised. His face was smeared in crimson, drops of it dripping from his mouth on the floor below him, and his left eye was swollen shut, the skin colored a deep purple. It seemed that he couldn't even raise his head to look at her, abused as he was.

Next to him stood another man, one who made Bonnie instinctively take a few steps back the moment she laid eyes on him. He was tall and broad, perhaps even more so than Finlay, with a mane of hair as dark as spilled ink. His eyes were just as dark, betraying nothing in the half-light of the room, and the beard that covered the lower half of his face gave him an even more menacing appearance.



What has he done? He is goin' tae kill him if he continues!

Could this be the captain? But why was he torturing that poor man on the chair?

Bonnie didn't know how to ask. In fact, she didn't know if she should ask at all, considering what the man had done. What if she provoked him and he unleashed his fury upon her?

Slowly, she began to backtrack, almost tripping on the hem of her dress as she tried to leave while keeping her eye on the man and reaching behind her for her bow and arrows. She hadn't gotten far, though, before he began to approach her, that predatory gaze now fixed on her.

"Where do ye think ye're going, lass?"

## CHAPTER TWO

Half an hour earlier...

Evan shook his hand and flexed his fingers after a particularly vicious punch to the man in front of him. He didn't know how long he had spent cooped up in that small room with him, trying to beat the truth out of him to no avail, but he was getting tired.

"He's nae speakin'." Evan looked at his brother, Alaric, who stood across from him, leaning against the wall in that awfully casual way of his, while still somehow looking murderous. He had that effect, Evan knew. Though they resembled each other very much in build and features, Alaric sported battle scars and had marked himself with tattoos that gave him the aura of a much more dangerous man.

"I can see that," Alaric said, rather unhelpfully, in his smooth baritone. "If he spoke, he could tell us everythin'."

“But he willnae speak,” Evan pointed out. “How long have we been doin’ this? He’s half-dead. He willnae speak afore we kill him.”

“Dae ye want me tae try?”

Evan gestured widely with his hand as if to say his brother was welcome to try, though he doubted he would bring about any better results. It wasn’t as though he could hit him any harder or threaten him in any way Evan hadn’t already tried.

Alaric didn’t move from where he stood, but instead simply watched the man as he drooled saliva and blood on the floor. “Are ye certain he kens about Ruthven’s plans?”

“O’ course he kens,” said Evan with a scoff. “He’s supposed tae be an informant.”

“Supposed tae be,” Alaric repeated. “But what if our information is inaccurate?”

Evan took a moment to consider that possibility, but then shook his head, discarding it. “Nay . . . nay, we ken who he is. Our information is correct. We simply have tae break him. He kens about Ruthven an’ Balliol, I ken he does.”

Ever since John Balliol’s accession as King of Scots, Evan and Alaric had both been hard at work, trying to bring a quick end to his reign. Evan would rather die than serve a king who was nothing but a pawn to the English. After what they had done to his family, he wanted nothing more than to ruin them—and it all began with Laird Ruthven.

“Ruthven is a fool,” Alaric said, as if that changed anything for Evan. “He is a greedy man. How long dae ye think he has afore Balliol brings him tae ruin, too?”

“I dinnae ken an’ I dinnae care,” Evan said through gritted teeth. Perhaps Alaric was

right. Perhaps in the end, the situation would take care of itself. After all, many were already displeased by Balliol's rule and wanted him gone. Ruthven would get caught up in the conflict, eager as he was to please Balliol just so he could gain more land, more influence, more wealth. But Evan would be a fool, too, if he didn't do his part in order to get Balliol off the throne and maybe, if he worked hard enough and was lucky enough, even get to the Hammer of the Scots—Edward I.

“Perhaps it would be wiser tae try an’ use the bride,” Alaric said. “If this lad willnae speak, she might be able tae help us.”

Evan had heard of the so-called bride of Laird Ruthven, a woman who was supposed to meet him in Arran, at the same wedding Evan and Alaric were going to be attending. He couldn't fathom a way that he could use her, though, not when he didn't even know who the woman was and not without putting her in danger.

As far as he knew, she was innocent in all this. It would be cruel of him to drag an innocent woman into a perilous plan when there were other avenues he could take.

“Nay,” he said, shaking his head. “We shall continue with our plan. We will go tae the weddin’ an’ we will try tae find proof o’ connection between Ruthven an’ Balliol. An’ then . . . well, then we’ll see.”

With a chuckle, Alaric pushed himself off the wall and approached Evan, giving him the kind of scrutinizing look that Evan had never liked to have directed at him. For all his rough and rugged appearance, Alaric was surprisingly insightful and capable of seeing right through him if he wanted.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

“An’ this has naething tae dae with the fact that ye are avoidin’ yer own betrothal,” he said. “I’m sure yer nae tryin’ tae stall, are ye?”

Evan couldn’t help but roll his eyes, though his brother was not far off the mark. The truth was that ever since the council of Clan MacGregor had decided that he, as the laird, needed to have a wife, he had been doing anything in his power to delay that day for as long as he could.

He could only avoid his council that long, of course. The day would come when he would have to pick a woman to wed, but that day wouldn’t come so soon if he had anything to say about it.

“That isnae why I’m doin’ this,” Evan insisted, but then he gave a small shrug, fighting back a chuckle. “But it certainly helps.”

Alaric gave him a knowing look and a pat on the shoulder before he headed towards the door. “Well, I’ll see if we’re ready tae depart. Ye stay here an’ see if ye can get him tae talk.”

Evan nodded, watching his brother leave before he turned to the other man. For a moment, he thought he was unconscious, the pain and the abuse proving too much for his body to handle, but when he stepped closer, the man flinched in fear.

“Pretendin’ willnae help ye,” Evan told him with a weary sigh. “What will help ye is if ye tell me the truth.”

He had tried this before and the man had said nothing. This time, he said nothing as

well, keeping all his secrets to himself. At first, he had insisted he knew nothing, but neither Evan nor Alaric had believed him. They had good informants, people who knew everything they needed to know, and they had assured Evan that this was the man they were looking for—a man working for both Ruthven and Balliol, helping them exchange messages in secret. Evan was more inclined to believe his people than this man when he said he didn't know anything.

“Alright . . . I suppose ye leave me nae choice but tae continue this,” Evan said as he approached the man once more and raised his fist, ready to strike.

And then the door opened, and Evan turned around to see not his brother there, but a woman; a stranger, someone he was certain he had never seen before.

He didn't manage to say a single thing before the woman began to speak, a torrent of words tumbling past her lips. Evan frowned, trying his best to follow the path of her reasoning but quickly failing. She was saying something about turning back, something about guards, something that Evan didn't have time to listen to.

Who is she? How did she get here?

And most importantly, what was he supposed to do now that she had seen him torture a man?

When she finally noticed what was going on, Evan saw the spark of fear in her eyes. Instantly, she began to backtrack, her hands reaching for her bow and an arrow, and Evan couldn't help but wonder what kind of woman travelled with such a weapon.

It wouldn't help her much against him. Arrows were good in long ranges, but he could get to her before she fired it.

“Where do ye think ye're going, lass?” he began but she interrupted him.

“Dinnae even think about layin’ a hand on me,” she said through gritted teeth. “I will kill ye.”

In two large strides, Evan reached her and grabbed her bow, yanking it right out of her hand and tossing it aside. That didn’t seem to faze her much, though, as she gripped the arrow in a tight fist and raised her hand, ready to strike. Evan managed to block the blow at the last moment, his hand grabbing her arm to still it as the other wrestled the arrow out of her palm.

The moment she was left without a weapon, the woman blanched, all the color draining from her face—and what a face it was. Despite her fierce character, she seemed like a delicate thing, bird-boned and soft-featured; a beautiful young woman who, under other circumstances, would have certainly caught his attention.

As it were, Evan had more pressing matters to consider than his sexual desires.

“What will I dae with ye?” he asked her as he kicked the door shut behind him. Though the crew had seen the man he and Alaric had brought on board, though they had heard his screams, Evan still thought it was better to keep him out of sight.

“Ye’ll let me go,” the woman said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Nay,” said Evan. “I dinnae think I will.”

As he spoke, he pulled the woman towards the stern, away from prying eyes and ears. The woman struggled against him, desperately trying to dislodge her arm from his grip, but Evan refused to let her go, even though there wasn’t much she could do. They were in the middle of the sea, after all. There was nowhere for her to go; nowhere for her to hide.

“Yer a brute!” the woman said, kicking him hard in the shin. Evan did almost lose his

grip on her then, but he only grunted in pain and pushed her hard against the rail, crowding her against it. Like that, it was impossible for her to weasel her way out. He stood in front of her like a wall, refusing to budge.

“Who are ye?” he asked. “An’ what are ye doin’ on mebirlinn?”

The woman blinked in surprise a few times, straightening up as she looked at him. “This is yerbirlinn? Yer the captain?”

“I’m nae the captain but I have paid fer a private journey,” Evan said. “An’ I dinnae take kindly tae stowaways.”

“I’m nae a stowaway,” the woman said, trying to pull her arm from his grip once more. This time, Evan allowed it, only because she had no chance of escape. “I am Bonnie MacLaren o’ the MacLaren Clan. Me sister is the Lady Cathleen MacLaren. So, I willnae have ye treat me like this.”

Evan took a better look at the woman, noting the hands that seemed unused to manual labor, the tunic she wore, which was woven from a fine fabric, and the signs of a soft life. She certainly looked and spoke like a noble girl, and had Evan been in a better state of mind, he was certain he would have noticed sooner.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

“I see,” he said. “An’ what, precisely, are ye doin’ here, Miss MacLaren?”

“I told ye,” said Bonnie, crossing her arms over her chest defensively. “I got on the wrong birlinn. I am travellin’ tae attend Laird Hamilton’s weddin’ an’ me guards told me tae board, but our birlinn was next tae yers an’ I was confused.”

She didn’t seem to be lying, Evan thought. He couldn’t even think of a reason why she would, but one could never be too careful. Bonnie had already seen too much; Evan had to keep a close eye on her.

“Well . . . ye ken who I am now,” Bonnie added, pulling him out of his thoughts. “Who are ye?”

“Laird Evan MacGregor,” Evan said, biting back a smirk when he saw the shocked expression on Bonnie’s face. No one expected a laird to do the dirty work, Evan knew, but he didn’t mind getting his hands bloody. Some things had to be done and he could trust no one but himself and his brother to do them. “I am also headin’ tae Arran fer the weddin’. We shall go together.”

It wasn’t a suggestion, but Bonnie seemed to understand it as one and she immediately scoffed, shaking her head. “What makes ye think I will go anywhere with ye?”

“What other choice dae ye think ye have?” Evan asked. “Look where ye are . . . in the middle o’ the sea. An’ after what ye’ve seen, well . . . I cannae simply let ye go.”

He watched as Bonnie looked around her, realizing perhaps for the first time the



severity of the situation and the fact that she truly had no option but to be on that boat with him. Then, her gaze met his again and her bottom lip shook as she spoke.

“What will ye dae tae me?”

“Naething,” Evan said. “As long as ye behave an’ dae as ye are told. Yer me property now, Miss MacLaren. Ye’ll dae as I tell ye.”

Bonnie rolled her eyes at him, much to Evan’s irritation. She tried to sidestep him by ducking under his arm, but Evan was quick to push her back against the rail, tutting softly at her.

“Where dae ye think yer goin’?”

“Anywhere but here,” Bonnie said. “Why? Are ye plannin’ tae tie me down like that poor man ye have in that room?”

“That man is more dangerous than ye ken,” Evan said, pinning Bonnie with a strict gaze. “An’ ye are nae tae approach him. Dae ye understand?”

Bonnie didn’t respond; not until Evan grabbed her arm, giving her a rough shake.

“I said, dae ye understand?”

“Let go o’ me!” Bonnie demanded, trying to once again push Evan away from her.

“What is the matter with ye? Is this how ye treat all ladies?”

“It depends on how foolish they are,” said Evan. Though he didn’t let go of her quite yet, he slackened his grip, giving her some leeway. “Are ye foolish, Miss MacLaren? Are ye goin’ tae be trouble?”

Bonnie didn't need to answer his question for Evan to know that she would very likely be more trouble than she was worth. What could he do, though, now that she had seen everything? He could hardly kill her—truly, she was innocent. Her only mistake had been to get on the wrong boat and then open that door. And besides, she was not some faceless, nameless woman no one would miss. She was the daughter of a great laird, who even in death inspired other leaders. She was the sister-in-law of her clan's laird. If Evan's education on the other clans still served him well, she was also the eldest, though the mantle of the laird had not been passed on to her husband.

Unwedded, then? Was the youngest sister married first?

Perhaps he was confusing the sisters. It had been a long time, after all, since he had last concerned himself with the clans' genealogies.

"If ye value yer life, ye will dae what I tell ye," Evan said, the threat thinly veiled in his words. Even if he wasn't actually going to kill her, Bonnie didn't need to know that. The more afraid she was of him, the better. "Ye will accompany me tae the Hamilton keep. Until then, ye will sit quietly here on the deck an' ye willnae speak tae anyone."

Bonnie glared up at Evan, her eyes narrowing dangerously, but the effect was lost due to him towering over her. Even with her bow, there was little she could do to maim him in such close range, and she seemed to finally accept that as her shoulders fell and she leaned away from him as if disgusted by his mere presence.

"Good," said Evan, finally pulling back. "Yer nae so foolish after all."

As he turned around to head back to the small room and try to extract at least a morsel of information out of the man, he could feel her gaze boring into the back of his skull. The feeling followed him all the way there, and then even once he was inside, behind the confines of the door.

The entire time, a shiver ran down his spine.

### CHAPTER THREE

That man is a lunatic!

There was no other explanation for what Bonnie had seen. The man claimed to be Laird MacGregor but what kind of laird brought others on his boat to torture them? Then again, he didn't really have a reason to lie to her. What could he gain from claiming he was someone else? What could he gain from claiming he was Laird MacGregor, specifically?

It seemed more likely to her that he was who he claimed to be and he had simply lost his mind.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

What will I dae? I am trapped here with him!

They were in the middle of the sea, the two of them, the man he was torturing, and a small crew of men who would barely even look at her, let alone help her. But even if they wished to help her, what was there for them to do? There was nowhere to run. There was no chance of escape as long as they were on the boat.

Perhaps she could make a run for it, Bonnie thought, when they reached the port, though she doubted Laird MacGregor would give her the opportunity to get too far. He had made it clear that he was going to keep her by his side throughout the wedding and Bonnie couldn't easily escape him and his ever-present gaze. The only reason why he had left her unmonitored now was because he knew there was nowhere for her to go.

Turning around to face the horizon, Bonnie stared at the gentle waves as the birlinncut through them, the wind pushing it along towards Arran. The sky above was clear, but the chill seeped into her bones even with her cloak wrapped tightly around her shoulders. Her lips tasted of brine, the sea suffusing everything that touched it with its essence.

She couldn't claim to like the discomfort that came with travelling, though she did enjoy the view. With the blue sea glittering under the sunlight, the foam-tipped waves with their hypnotic movements, and the seemingly infinite blue that stretched from the sea to the sky, it was easy to forget where she was and with whom.

What are Lachlan an' Finlay doin'? Did they stay behind or will they try tae look fer me in Arran?

Even with her two guards there, though, she didn't know if it would be possible to escape Laird MacGregor. They were both supposed to attend the same wedding. There was only that much Bonnie could do when the two of them would be confined in the same castle, attending the same festivities and mingling with the same people.

At least Cathleen and Macauley would be there. With any luck, Bonnie could use them as a buffer between her and Laird MacGregor, so that she would neither have to deal with him nor offend him in front of the other guests. Maybe when Laird MacGregor saw them, he would be dissuaded from doing anything to hurt her.

Should I tell them what I saw?

Bonnie had to. It didn't matter if the man was truly dangerous, as Laird MacGregor claimed. Someone had to know what the laird was doing and who better to inform about this than Cathleen and Macauley? They would know what to do if the situation got out of hand.

Slowly, she turned her back to the rail to rest against it, but the sudden presence of a figure in front of her startled her and tore a yelp out of her. Her hand instinctively flew to her bow and arrows, but there was hardly any space for her to draw either.

"I didnae mean tae scare ye," said the man, raising his hands as if to show he meant no harm. Though Bonnie didn't relax, she let her shoulders drop from her ears, taking a deep, shuddering breath.

She took a moment to observe him—tall and wide, with dark hair and a beard, much like Laird MacGregor. The similarities between them were startling, suggesting a close relation, but no matter how much Bonnie tried to remember if she had ever been taught the family tree of the MacGregor Clan, she couldn't recall a single thing about them.

They seemed close in age; brothers, perhaps, Bonnie thought.

“Evan told me yer Bonnie MacLaren,” the man continued, and from the way he spoke about Laird MacGregor using his given name, Bonnie could only guess she had been correct in her assessment.

“Are ye here tae watch me?” Bonnie asked.

“Is there a reason fer me tae watch ye?” the man asked, gesturing around him as if to say look where you are. “Nay, I’m here tae tell ye tae sit over there, where there is less wind.”

As he spoke, the man pointed at the small room. It was true that its walls would protect her from the wind, Bonnie thought, but she didn’t want to be anywhere near that place. Laird MacGregor had gone right back inside. Though she couldn’t hear anything from where she stood, she feared that if she got any closer, her ears would be assaulted by the man’s agonized screams.

“I’d rather stay here,” she said.

“I truly think it is best if ye dinnae,” the man insisted.

“I am afraid I dinnae care what ye think.”

The man’s eyes, green like the deepest forests of Bonnie’s home lands, narrowed in irritation, but Bonnie didn’t care. Laird MacGregor himself had said that he wouldn’t harm her and though she was still cautious, she was inclined to believe it. What good would it do, hurting the firstborn of Clan MacLaren? Once word of it got out, he would have a war in his hands.

“Fine,” the man said as he turned around to leave. “If ye wish tae freeze tae death,

then who am I tae stop ye?”

Bonnie didn't grace that with an answer. She only stood there, as far away from the small room as she could, and ignored everyone just as they ignored her. She tried to weather the cold and the wind, the splash of chilled water on her face, but eventually, it proved too much. The only thing she could do, though, was to curl up by the rail, knees to her chest in an attempt to preserve as much body heat as she could.

By the time they made it to Arran, Bonnie could have sworn the blood had indeed frozen in her veins. Her body felt rigid, as though the chill had shaped her into a statue, and her movements were stiff, her limbs refusing to cooperate with her. One of the men from the crew—a man she hadn't yet talked to—offered her his hand and Bonnie took it gratefully, pushing herself off the floor.

Before she could run, before she could even rub some life back into her hands, Laird MacGregor appeared by her side. His fingers curled around her arm, tightly enough to stop her from running away but not so much as to be obvious.

“Behave,” he muttered in her ear. “It will be easier if ye dae.”

Easier fer ye perhaps, Bonnie thought but she didn't say it out loud.

Next to the laird stood the man who had spoken to her before. Seeing them so close to each other only reinforced her belief that they were brothers, as they were almost perfect copies of each other.

“Alaric, ye ken what tae dae,” Laird MacGregor said, and Bonnie looked at the two men for any sign that would betray what it was the man—Alaric, she now knew—had to do. Nodding grimly, Alaric patted the laird's shoulder and then stepped off the birlinn ahead of him and Bonnie, disappearing into the crowd of the port.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

“Where is he goin’?” Bonnie asked, but the laird didn’t even spare her a glance before he pulled her off the boat. Reluctantly, Bonnie followed him through the crowd as he tugged her this way and that, weaving through the people. At the edge of the port, he guided her to a small carriage, all but shoving her inside before climbing in.

“Will ye simply stay silent fer the entire weddin’?” Bonnie asked in exasperation. She wanted answers. She wanted anything that would help her make sense of this and if Laird MacGregor refused to give her any, then she would have to find another way.

“What dae ye want me tae say?” he asked.

“Well . . . ye could start by tellin’ me who that other man is.”

“Alaric?” the laird asked. “He’s me brother.”

Bonnie nodded, unsurprised by that. “An’ who is that other man? In the room?”

“That doesnae concern ye.”

Though there was no malice behind his words, Laird MacGregor also left no room for discussion, making it clear in only a few firm words that Bonnie was not to meddle in any of this. She was curious, of course, but insisting could only lead to trouble, and so she said nothing on the matter. Laird MacGregor said nothing, as well, and the two of them spent the rest of their short ride up to the hill where Castle Hamilton stood in silence.



Only a little longer an' I will see me sister an' Macauley.

Once they made it to the castle, though, a young woman in servant's attire rushed to them and stopped them before either Bonnie or the laird could get too far. When she reached them, she bowed deeply, but there was an urgency about her that had Bonnie on edge.

"The weddin' is about tae begin, m'lord, m'lady," the woman said. "Please, follow me."

We arrived at the very last minute! When will I speak tae Cathleen now?

Laird MacGregor seemed pleased with the development, surely because Bonnie had to follow him now if she didn't want to cause a scene. With a weary sigh, she let him drag her along to the chapel at the edge of the castle grounds, where the wedding would be taking place, the two of them led there by the servant. It was a short walk and soon, the rest of the guests appeared before her eyes, all of them dressed in bright tunics and glittering jewels, like a flock of colorful birds in the middle of the woods.

The two of them were the only ones who stood out, dressed as they were in their travelling clothes. Under her cloak, Bonnie wore a simple cyclas and mantle, and the only thing that marked her and Evan as nobles was the fur that lined their clothes to battle against the chill. Bonnie didn't even have any of her jewelry, as they had all travelled among her belongings in her chests.

People will surely talk.

Bonnie's gaze roamed over them all in search of her sister and Macauley, but they were nowhere to be found. She checked once, twice, three times, but there was no sign of them, much to her surprise.

Where are they? Could somethin' have happened tae them?

Heart jumping to her throat at the thought, Bonnie took a step forward with the intention of looking for them, but Laird MacGregor was quick to tighten his grip on her arm. She glared at him over her shoulder and tried to tug herself free as subtly as she could, only for him to stare straight ahead and ignore her completely.

Laird MacGregor's grip didn't loosen up throughout the entire ceremony, and by the time Tavish and Amelia were married, Bonnie was certain his fingers had left a mark on her skin. As the other guests trickled back towards the castle for the feast, Laird MacGregor tugged her along once more and Bonnie couldn't help but feel like a doll that was hauled around by a child, having no agency of her own.

"Will ye let go o' me?" she mumbled through gritted teeth just as they stepped into the entry hall of the castle. "I've had enough!"

"I told ye tae behave," Laird MacGregor said, just as quietly.

"I am behavin'," Bonnie pointed out. "I have yet tae tell anyone that yer keepin' me as a prisoner."

"Hardly a prisoner when yer nae behind bars," said the laird. "Calm down. Ye'll make everyone suspicious."

"As they should be!"

"Me lady!"

The familiar voice startled Bonnie. It seemed to startle Laird MacGregor as well, who immediately released her arm, but didn't stray far from her, his gaze watching her and her two guards like a hawk as they approached. Lachlan and Finlay were both pale,

their foreheads coated in perspiration and their eyes wide upon noticing her, and they all but pushed the crowd of nobles aside in their quest to reach Bonnie.

“Where have ye been?” Finlay asked. “What happened tae ye? I told ye tae wait in thebirlinn.”

“Forgive me, Finlay,” Bonnie said, truly apologetic for all the panic and fear she must have put them through. “I boarded the wrongbirlinnan’ afore I kent what happened, we were already sailin’. I didnae mean tae concern ye, but I am glad yer here. Where is me sister? Where is Macauley?”

With a long-suffering sigh, Finlay rubbed his eyes with a trembling hand, barely keeping himself under control. “It was me own mistake,” he said. “I should have escorted ye tae thebirlinn.”

“Ye did naething wrong, Finlay,” Bonnie assured him. “Tell me, where are they?”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

“We were given this upon arrival,” Finlay said, as he handed her a folded letter addressed to her with Macauley’s wax seal on it. Bonnie took it and tore it open, once again fearing that something had happened to Cathleen and Macauley, her eyes quickly scanning the words.

Over her shoulder, she could feel Laird MacGregor’s breath as he stood too close for comfort, and Bonnie shifted her stance in an effort to hide the letter from him. It was easier said than done, though, when he seemed determined read what the page said and shifted along with her.

From the moment she laid eyes upon the paper, she knew the letter had come from her sister, her handwriting so familiar that it was instantly recognizable. Dread gripped Bonnie as she read that he and Macauley could not make it to the wedding, after all, due to unfavorable weather conditions, and that they were stuck in Clan Drummond after their visit there, unable to go anywhere.

Slowly, she turned to look at Laird MacGregor, wondering how she would escape him now. With Macauley and Cathleen there, she could have managed it, even if it would take some effort. Now that she was alone there, with no one but her guards, any hope of escape seemed futile.

And then, she saw another man approach, one she had never seen before. Much like Laird MacGregor, he was a handsome man, as well as tall and muscular, though upon a first look at him, he didn’t seem nearly as intimidating.

“Good afternoon, me lady,” said the man, bowing to her. “I am Graeme Ruthven, Laird of Clan Ruthven. Ye are Bonnie MacLaren, correct?”

Bonnie froze at the mention of the man's name. He was the one to whom she was supposed to be betrothed. He was the one the council had selected for her.

Now I'm trapped with them both!

## CHAPTER FOUR

Graeme Ruthven.

Evan knew precisely who the man approaching them was the moment he laid eyes upon him. He had thought it would be harder to approach him, but now he was approaching Evan unprompted, and Evan couldn't help but wonder if he had somehow managed to find out about the plan.

But then his eyes were fixed on Bonnie, as though she was his target and not Evan himself. Did they know each other? Could Evan use her to get closer to the man?

When Evan glanced at her, Bonnie gave no signs of recognition and when Ruthven introduced himself, there was a strange shift in the way she held herself—shoulders hunched and head bowed slightly, as though she was trying to make herself appear smaller.

As though she was trying to hide from him, perhaps.

“Laird Ruthven,” said Bonnie as she gave him a bow. “It is a pleasure tae make yer acquaintance.”

There was an edge in Bonnie's tone that betrayed her words were not entirely true, but she delivered them with the practiced politeness of a well-taught noble girl. Someone else may have missed it; Ruthven himself may have missed it, but Evan noticed it immediately, simply because he had trained himself to listen for such subtle

signs. One never knew when one may find an unlikely ally, and Evan couldn't help but think that Bonnie could be one such ally to him now.

If she dislikes Laird Ruthven, perhaps she can be convinced tae help me willingly.

But why did she dislike him? It seemed like it was the first time they had met each other and as much as Evan hated to admit it, Laird Ruthven was a good catch for a noble woman like Bonnie—or for any woman, in fact. Others would surely be trying to get his attention, but he had come straight to her to introduce himself.

It must have been her beauty, Evan thought, which attracted him. She was a difficult woman to resist.

“The pleasure is all mine,” Ruthven said with a wide, charming smile, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners. Evan thought he must have been a little older than his own thirty years, but he wore them well. He seemed like the kind of man who looked better as he aged. “Where are the Laird and Lady MacLaren?”

Before Bonnie could respond, Evan jumped into the conversation, taking his chance. “They couldnae make it due tae the weather,” he said, remembering what he had read on the letter Bonnie had received from them. “Me brother an’ I were instructed tae accompany Miss MacLaren instead.”

From the corner of his eye, Evan saw the shocked expression on Bonnie's face, the way her mouth fell open and her eyes widened in shock. For a moment, he was worried she would refute his claims and tell Ruthven the truth, but then she seemed to think better of it and pressed her lips shut, remaining silent.

She must like him even less than she likes me.

“I dinnae believe I have met ye or yer bother,” Ruthven said, his smile never fading

even as his eyes narrowed slightly.

“Evan MacGregor,” said Evan with a small bow, one that Ruthven quickly returned. “Laird of Clan MacGregor. Miss MacLaren an’ I are . . . cousins.”

It was the first thing that popped to Evan’s mind and it was just as good an excuse as any. Ruthven, at least, seemed to believe it, giving no indication of suspicion.

“Then will ye be the ones accompanyin’ her tae Castle Ruthven?”

Evan froze, glancing at Bonnie from the corner of his eye, but from what he saw, she was just as surprised by that.

“Am I supposed tae come tae Castle Ruthven?” asked Bonnie. “Why?”

It was Ruthven’s turn to be confused. “Well . . . ye are me betrothed. Yer council asked if ye could spend some time in yer new home afore our weddin’.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

Evan could hardly keep up with the flood of new information and how it all affected his own mission. He had heard that Ruthven supposedly had a betrothed, but he could have never guessed it would all work out so well for him. With Bonnie as Ruthven's intended, Evan could easily infiltrate Castle Ruthven and get all the information he and Alaric needed to expose his connection to John Balliol.

It could not have worked any better for him. Bonnie, on the other hand, looked less than thrilled at the prospect of visiting Castle Ruthven.

"I wasnae informed that I would be visitin' yer lands," she said, this time unable to stop her tone from assuming a chilled quality, one that made it clear just how much she didn't approve of the plan. "I thought we would meet here an' then I would return home."

"I think it's best if we acquaint ourselves better with each other, dinnae ye think?" Ruthven asked, and though he phrased it as a question, there was no room for disagreement. "We will be husband an' wife soon. We should ken each other well."

For a few moments, Bonnie remained silent, the muscle in her jaw jumping as she grit her teeth. Then, she gave a forced smile and said, "But without me sister an' her husband tae accompany me, then surely, I cannae come. I dinnae suppose ye would wish fer me tae come stay with ye without a chaperone."

This is it. This is how I will get intae that castle.

"Me brother an' I will chaperone ye," Evan said.



The look Bonnie gave him sent a chill down Evan's spine. For such a small woman, she certainly managed to appear intimidating. "I'm sure ye an' yer brother are busy, cousin. I wouldnae wish tae be a burden."

"Yer nae a burden at all," Evan assured her. "Alaric an' I will be pleased tae accompany ye there as well."

Bonnie stared at Evan in silence and he stared back, daring her to disagree. The way he saw it, this was the best solution for everyone. Evan needed a way into Castle Ruthven and Bonnie offered him just that. Bonnie clearly didn't want to be alone with Ruthven and Evan could be the buffer she wanted between the two. They could be useful to each other. Ruthven wasn't going to take no for an answer, so this was Bonnie's next best option.

Evan could only hope that she would realize that.

"As long as I dinnae inconvenience ye," she said in the end with another tight-lipped smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Let us head inside now. We shouldnae miss the festivities."

Without another glance at either Evan or Graeme Ruthven, Bonnie walked through the main doors of the castle. Evan had to rush after her to make sure that he didn't lose sight of her and when he caught up, he grabbed her arm once more to keep her close.

"Where dae ye think yer goin'?" he asked. "I told ye tae stay close."

With a long-suffering sigh, Bonnie led him to one of the tables, sliding into one of the seats. Evan sat next to her, but no sooner had he settled in the chair than Bonnie yanked her arm out of his grip and pinned him with a glare.

“Why did ye dae that?” she asked. “Why did ye say ye would come with me tae Castle Ruthven? I dinnae even ken ye!”

Evan considered his response for a few short moments, then said, “I have me reasons.”

He hadn’t revealed anything to Bonnie so far and he didn’t think it would be wise to tell her the truth before he knew where her loyalties lay. The fact that there was no love lost between her and Ruthven didn’t mean that she wasn’t sympathetic towards Balliol—then again, few were, if they valued honor over wealth.

“Dae ye truly expect me tae allow ye tae follow me everywhere when ye willnae even tell me anythin’?” Bonnie asked in exasperation. “Why should I trust ye? Why should I dae anythin’ ye say? What if I end up like that man on the birlinn?”

“Keep yer voice down,” Evan hissed as he looked over his shoulder at the people around them to see if anyone had heard Bonnie. Everyone seemed to be absorbed in their conversations, though, and no one was paying them any mind. Still, it didn’t mean there were no people there who observed everyone closely to gather useful information. “I told ye it doesnae concern ye what I dae. Be glad that ye have someone tae accompany ye tae Castle Ruthven. Or would ye rather go alone?”

Before Bonnie could respond, Ruthven appeared in front of them once more. Next to Evan, Bonnie stiffened, sitting straight-backed in her seat as if she was preparing herself to flee the clutches of a predator.

“May I have this dance, Miss MacLaren?”

If laird Ruthven’s presence had displeased Bonnie, then his request brought forth a wave of panic in her, one that was very thinly concealed. Evan was certain Ruthven had noticed, as well—there was no hiding it, no pretending he didn’t know Bonnie

would rather spend the entire night alone than dance with him. And yet Ruthven made no effort to backtrack, only standing there as he looked at Bonnie expectantly, that polite yet insistent smile never fading from his face.

Evan took pity on her. He was the only one who could save her from spending time with Ruthven and besides, he needed to keep a close eye on her.

“I’m afraid Bonnie has already promised me she would be me partner fer the night,” he said, standing as he offered his hand to her. “I have . . . difficulty talkin’ tae lasses I dinnae ken, so she has graciously agreed tae keep me company.”

Ruthven stared at Evan in silence for a few moments, seeing right through his excuse. It wasn’t meant to be a good excuse, though; it was only meant to keep Ruthven away for now.

“Ye may find it difficult tae find a wife, then,” Ruthven said.

“Let us hope I willnae have tae,” said Evan and with that, he and Bonnie left the table, joining the rest of the people who danced near the band just as the next song began.

He and Bonnie took their places in the circle of dancers, their hands joining after a moment’s hesitation from her. Once the jovial tune enveloped the dancers, they all began to move around the circle, cheering and laughing. It was only Bonnie who didn’t seem to be enjoying herself—and Evan, of course, who instead of dancing could be spending his time doing more useful things, such as observing Ruthven and trying to find Alaric.

His brother was somewhere there, he knew. He had caught a glimpse of him at the ceremony, after he was done dealing with their prisoner, but now Evan couldn’t find him as he scanned the crowd.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

“I willnae go with ye tae Castle Ruthven,” Bonnie said, her voice barely audible over the music and the people around them. “I would be insane tae go tae a strange man’s castle with another stranger! I dinnae ken anythin’ about either o’ ye. In fact, all I ken about ye is precisely what makes me wish tae stay away from ye.”

“Ye will dae as yer told,” Evan said. “I need tae get tae Castle Ruthven an’ this is the only way I can dae that.”

“Why?”

Evan’s words brought Bonnie to a sudden halt, but as the people continued to dance, their movement pushed her right into him, before the three people next to her bumped into each other one after the other. Bonnie stumbled, barely keeping her balance along with everyone else, and she scowled as she regained her footing and rhythm to continue the dance.

Evan couldn’t help but laugh, which only served to deepen Bonnie’s frown. “Stop it.”

“Had I kent ye dance like this, I wouldnae have offered,” Evan teased, but regretted it immediately when Bonnie, very clearly on purpose, stepped right onto his foot, drawing a pained grunt out of him.

“Tell me the truth,” she demanded, relentless in her questioning.

She willnae stop askin’. I must tell her somethin’.

“Fine,” he said through gritted teeth. “But nae here. We will discuss this in private.”

There were too many people around and this was not a matter he could discuss in front of them. If Bonnie was to learn the truth about his and Alaric's plans, then it would have to be somewhere where no one else could hear them.

"I willnae go anywhere with ye until ye tell me," Bonnie insisted. "I'm nae afraid o' ye."

There was a slight tremble in Bonnie's voice as she spoke which suggested that she did, in fact, fear him. It wasn't something Evan wanted, though. It would be useful, he supposed; the more Bonnie feared him, the more likely she was to do as he said without putting up a fight. Still, it seemed cruel to keep her in a constant state of fear and panic.

"I willnae hurt ye," Evan said, turning to look Bonnie in the eyes. "I promise ye. I willnae hurt a single hair from yer head an' neither will me brother."

For a while, the two of them simply stared at each other as they danced, exchanging no words. Evan didn't know how else to reassure her, and Bonnie didn't seem to believe him.

"Just like ye didnae hurt that man?" she asked. "Where is he now? Is he still alive?"

Evan refused to speak about this in the middle of the great hall. There was so much he couldn't tell Bonnie, especially when there were people around them. There was so much he had to keep hidden for both of their sakes.

"Ye dinnae have tae believe me," he said in the end instead of answering her question. "But I mean it. I dinnae wish tae hurt ye. Ye'll be safe with me an' Alaric."

From the suspicion in Bonnie's gaze, Evan figured that she didn't believe him at all. Perhaps she would once he explained to her why he had to do everything he

did—why he had to infiltrate Castle Ruthven, why she had found him torturing that man. And if that wasn't enough to convince her, then as much as Evan would dislike it, he could use her fear to get what he wanted.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The night passed by in a blur. In an attempt to keep Laird Ruthven away from her, Bonnie had spent the night by Laird MacGregor's side, which was only marginally preferable, she thought. Out of the two of them, Laird MacGregor seemed to pose the least immediate threat, and so she figured it was better to stay with him and dance the night away than let Ruthven get too close.

It was late at night when Bonnie, too exhausted to continue with the festivities even as those around her still danced and sang merrily, fueled by all the wine and the food, took a seat at one of the tables and let her shoulders sag for a moment, foregoing her usual perfect posture. She let her guard down, too, and when someone slid next to her, for a moment she feared it was none other than Ruthven, but when she dared to look, it was only Laird MacGregor.

"Shall we leave?" he asked.

"Leave?" asked Bonnie with a frown. "Where would we go?"

"There's an inn in the town," said Laird MacGregor. "We have rooms there."

"I am a guest o' Laird Hamilton," Bonnie pointed out. "We both are. Why should we stay at an inn?"

Briefly, Laird MacGregor looked around them before leaning in to whisper sternly in Bonnie's ear. "Because there will be nae one tae listen tae us there. Nae one who cares what we have tae say, at least."

Bonnie pulled back from him, pinning him with a sharp gaze. “Ye may go, then,” she said. “I will stay here. I told ye, I willnae go anywhere with ye.”

“Then I should call Laird Ruthven an’ tell him ye will be stayin’.”

Laird MacGregor had hardly managed to finish his sentence before Bonnie grabbed his arm to stop him from leaving, glaring at him. “Ye will dae nae such thing.”

“If ye stay here, he will find you eventually,” he pointed out. “Is that a risk ye wish tae take?”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

Bonnie considered her options for a moment. If she left with Laird MacGregor and his brother, then for all she knew, she would end up tortured and killed, even if the man had assured her time and time again that he had no desire to harm her. If she stayed in Castle Hamilton, then she would be forced to be closeto Laird Ruthven and she wanted to avoid that as much as she could.

Could he be tellin' the truth? Will he truly nae harm me?

“Ye must choose,” Laird MacGregor said. “I will soon find me brother an’ leave.”

Looking around her helplessly, Bonnie tried to figure out a way to avoid both men. The more she searched for a way out, though, the more she realized there was no better, third option.

“Me guards.”

O’ course! Finlay an’ Lachlan will save me from all this!

As her guards, they had not attended the feast, but they were still in the castle. Bonnie would simply have to rope them into helping her, something that couldn’t prove too difficult for her. Finlay was a good friend and so was Lachlan. They would be more than willing to help her.

“Yer guards are gone.”

Fear crept down Bonnie’s spine, like icy water dripping down her back. She looked at Laird MacGregor with wide, fearful eyes as she tried to move back from him as far as



her seat would allow, her stomach churning at the thought that they had met such a cruel fate.

Bonnie should have warned them about him. She should have told them to be wary, to watch their backs. Now they were gone, all because she had been too focused on her own survival to consider the danger they were facing.

“They’re goin’ back tae the mainland,” Laird MacGregor said with a roll of his eyes. “What did ye think I was sayin’?”

The relief that washed over Bonnie was so intense that she would have collapsed onto the floor had she not been sitting. Finlay and Lachlan were still alive. Their lives were not in danger.

“I thought ye killed them!” she whispered.

“Why would I kill them?” Laird MacGregor whispered back.

“Because ye kill everyone!”

That may have been an exaggeration, Bonnie thought after the words were out of her mouth. Really, she hadn’t even seen the man kill someone, but it was the only logical conclusion she could reach. He was violent, cruel, prone to anger. He had tortured a man half to death without even flinching. Was it truly such a leap to think that he was a bloodthirsty killer?

But if Laird MacGregor hadn’t killed her guards, if they had truly simply returned home, then why had she not been informed?

“Who sent them away?” she demanded. “Was it ye?”

“Nay,” said Laird MacGregor. “But I saw Ruthven speak tae them. I assume he told them their services were nae longer needed, since ye would be accompanied by his guards tae Castle Ruthven.”

Bonnie barely managed to suppress a furious growl, her fingers curling into fists until her nails bit into the meat of her palm, leaving small crescents behind. The audacity of Laird Ruthven to send away her own guards! They were not supposed to take any orders from him.

It wouldn't surprise her, though, if the council was behind all this once again. Surely, they wanted no distractions near her, and since they had no way of knowing that Macauley and Cathleen wouldn't make it to the wedding, they may have thought her guards' presence insignificant.

Now there she was, stuck in Arran with Laird MacGregor and Laird Ruthven, with no one else to turn to.

“Make yer choice, cousin,” said Laird MacGregor and Bonnie didn't appreciate the mocking tone. “We must leave.”

Bonnie glanced across the room to where Laird Ruthven sat, gesturing wildly with his cup of wine until it spilled everywhere. She watched as a servant approached him and tried to refill his cup, only to spill a few drops of wine on him when he moved it again.

The slap that followed echoed all around the great hall. The servant girl's head was wrenched to the side, the force of the blow making her stumble and spill the entire pitcher on herself. Everyone around Laird Ruthven froze, and it was only when he stood, towering over the servant as if the slap hadn't been enough to appease him, that a few men jumped in to diffuse the situation.

Bonnie turned to Laird MacGregor, who was watching, too, a grim expression shadowing his face.

“Let us go,” she said.

Two days.

That was all Bonnie had been afforded before she would have to make an appearance at Castle Ruthven. Two days in that inn with the MacGregor brothers and no one else to speak to.

At least she had her own room there. The two men had booked two, but were forced to share one when Bonnie joined them, and she didn't even have to insist on it. For all their other faults, they seemed to be gentlemen in that regard, at least, and neither of them had tried to creep into her room in the middle of the night or touch her whenever she was near.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

If anything, they had hardly spoken to her, other than to remind her there was nowhere for her to run and that they would go after her and hunt her down if she tried.

Bonnie had some gold on her for emergencies. She had her belongings, too, which her guards had delivered to Arran for her, so she had one jewelry to spare, as well. If she managed to slip away, if she managed to find abirlinn that would take her back to the mainland and then a carriage to take her home?—

But the council would be furious. She would singlehandedly ruin every effort they had made for this alliance, and they would surely punish Bonnie for it, one way or another. Perhaps they would even manage to find someone worse than Laird Ruthven for her to marry.

The room Bonnie had been given was small and modest, with a bed, a basin, and a small table by the window, along with a chair for anyone who cared to sit there. Despite the confined space, she had spent the entire day there, avoiding the MacGregors as much as she could, but now that the sky had darkened, the sun long set in the horizon, she found that she could not battle her hunger anymore. Reluctantly, she stood from the bed and made her way downstairs, eager to ask the innkeeper for some food, but before she could reach the man, she saw the two brothers hunched over a table, talking quietly to each other.

The ground floor of the inn was rather spacious, with several tables strewn about the room. Some of them were occupied by other guests who were enjoying their dinner under the warm orange light of the torches and the warmth of the fire that blazed in the large fireplace. It was a cozy place, decorated modestly but with carpets and

tapestries that gave the place a feeling of home.

Neither brother noticed as she approached, absorbed as they were in their conversation, and so Bonnie took the chance to overhear what they were saying, hoping she could get some information out of them while they were unguarded.

“This is dangerous,” she heard Alaric say, though the prospect of whatever danger he was talking about didn’t seem to rattle him much. It was as though he was merely pointing out a fact. “What if Ruthven thinks she is helpin’ us?”

“She is helpin’ us,” said Laird MacGregor. “Even if she doesnae ken it.”

It didn’t take long for Bonnie to realize they were talking about her. She leaned a little closer, her stomach tying itself into a knot as she listened.

“Even worse,” said Alaric. “If she doesnae ken anythin’, then she willnae be prepared.”

“If she doesnae ken anythin’, she can claim ignorance,” said Laird MacGregor. “All we have tae dae is go intae the castle, stay there fer a while, an’ find somethin’, anythin’ that connects Ruthven tae Balliol.”

Ruthven an’ Balliol? Is Ruthven helpin’ him?

It didn’t sound unlikely to Bonnie. From the little she had heard about Graeme Ruthven, he was an ambitious man and it wouldn’t surprise her if he tried to gain more influence through John Balliol. Then again, she couldn’t understand why the MacGregors would try to find a connection between them—why they would be willing to risk their lives for it, infiltrating Castle Ruthven under false pretenses. Many despised Balliol, but to go to such great lengths spoke of treason.

“What about Ruthven an’ Balliol?”

Both brothers jumped at the sound of her voice, their hands reaching for their weapons on instinct. Bonnie couldn’t help but chuckle at the reaction as she slid into the empty chair at their table, eager to know more.

The two brothers let out identical sighs and exchanged a glance, and it seemed to Bonnie as though they were communicating silently, without needing to use any words.

“How long have ye been standin’ there?” Laird MacGregor asked wearily.

Bonnie shrugged. “Long enough. If ye didnae wish fer me tae hear ye, ye should have been more careful, Laird MacGregor.”

“We’re supposed tae be cousins,” he gritted out, leaning over the table to get closer to Bonnie. “Call me by me name.”

“I dinnae think that’s our biggest issue here,Evan,” Bonnie hissed, leaning closer as well, until their faces were mere inches apart. “What was it that ye were sayin’? Are ye usin’ me tae get tae Laird Ruthven?”

Evan and Alaric glanced at each other once more, as Bonnie pushed back from Evan and settled back in her seat. They seemed to be communicating in silence again, neither of them willing to speak first.

It was Evan who spoke in the end. “We have good reason tae think Ruthven is workin’ with John Balliol,” he said. “An’ we wish tae find proof. Solid proof. We’ve tried but we havenae gotten close enough tae him. With ye in the castle, though, we can finally watch him closely.”

“Why?” Bonnie asked. “What dae ye have tae gain from this?”

“Everythin’,” said Evan. “Surely, ye understand how terrible Balliol is fer us . . . fer all the clans. If we allow him tae rule, he will destroy us all. The Sassenach will come tae our lands an’ have absolute control over us. We cannae allow that tae happen.”

Bonnie hesitated, drawing her bottom lip between her teeth. “Is that why ye were torturin’ the man? Fer information?”

“Aye,” said Alaric. “We dinnae enjoy hurtin’ people, Miss MacLaren, an’ we willnae hurt ye. I can promise ye that. But we need yer help with this, even if it is dangerous.”

So, they arenae the ruthless killers I thought they were.

Both Evan and Alaric were unsettling to look at—Alaric even more so, with his scars and tattoos. Now that Bonnie was speaking to them, though, she saw a different, gentler side of them. They both seemed earnest, eager to make a difference. They both seemed dedicated to their cause, to helping those around them.

Maybe she truly had misunderstood them after all. Alaric seemed so earnest when he said that they wouldn’t hurt her that Bonnie was inclined to believe him despite her fears.

“Alright,” she said, nodding once decisively. “Alright, I will help ye.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

“Ye will?” Alaric asked, surprised by her willingness.

“I will,” Bonnie confirmed. It was for the greater good. If she could help in any way, then she would. “But I wish tae ken more. This is . . . this is treason. Are ye certain ye can dae it? Are ye certain ye wish tae?”

“We dae,” Evan said drily. “We’ve thought about all this afore but this needs tae be done. “I willnae allow the Sassenachstae come here an’ . . . an’ destroy everythin’.”

As he spoke, Evan’s hand that rested on the table curled into a tight fist and his jaw tightened, the words barely coming past his lips. There was more to it than what he claimed, Bonnie knew then. There was something personal against the English, something that drove him to do anything he needed to in order to defeat them.

Gently, Bonnie placed her hand over that fist, looking Evan in the eyes. “What is it? What happened?”

For a moment, both Evan and Alaric froze. Then, Evan snatched his hand back and glared at Bonnie, scoffing.

“It doesnae concern ye,” he said.

“Ye love tae say that,” Bonnie pointed out. “But it willnae help me keep meself safe. How dae ye expect me tae assist ye when ye willnae tell me the whole truth?”

“Ye dinnae need tae ken any o’ it,” Evan insisted. “All ye need tae ken is that we seek information.”



Bonnie stared at him, tight-lipped and narrow-eyed, but Evan wouldn't budge. He stared right back as if daring her to say anything else, knowing that she wouldn't win. She wouldn't get any truth out of him if he didn't want to share it.

"Fine," said Bonnie as she stood, the legs of her chair scraping against the stone floor as she pushed it back. "I will be in me room, then, if ye dinnae wish tae talk."

She stalled for a second, just to see if Evan or Alaric would say something or try to convince her to stay, but neither man spoke. With a huff, she headed back upstairs, any thoughts of dinner long forgotten, her mind trying to process the little she now knew.

Indeed, it sounded like a dangerous task and she couldn't completely trust Evan and Alaric when they refused to reveal the whole truth to her. On the other hand, it could lead to Laird Ruthven's downfall. It was that thought which prompted her to agree to help. With Laird Ruthven gone, Bonnie wouldn't have to marry him and she could give herself at least some time before the council found another husband for her.

Maybe it will even be someone kinder.

If nothing else, it wouldn't be a man who supported John Balliol. Laird Ruthven could only bring ruin to any clan with which he would be associated, and Bonnie would do anything in her power to keep the people she loved from being caught up in the storm.

Evan an' Alaric better be tellin' me some o' the truth, at least. I am riskin' everythin' fer them.

Perhaps it was madness, trusting two people she had only just met, especially when everything they had done up to that point was based on violence and deception, but Bonnie was willing to take her chances. Anything sounded better than marrying a

man like Laird Ruthven.

## CHAPTER SIX

Though Bonnie headed to her room, she soon found that it was impossible for her to sleep. It was still quite early, after all, and she was well-rested even after that harrowing trip, so she soon gave up on sleep and instead pulled on her cloak and grabbed her bow and arrow to head outside. Just by the inn, there was a row of trees where she could practice, a place she had spotted on their way in and which was surely empty, especially at that time of the night.

Evan and Alaric noticed her on her way out, but she didn't spare a single glance, let alone a word. Instead, she headed right out of the door and stood across from one of the trees, far enough to give herself a challenge.

She needed to clear her head. She needed to think better about what she was about to do, and so far, shooting arrows had never failed to help her focus and make the right decisions.

Stringing the first arrow, she let it fly towards the tree, where it lodged precisely where she wanted it. The trunk split as the arrowhead was embedded in it, small pieces of it flying around. It was dark that night, the moon half-hidden by dark clouds, and the area was just illuminated enough for Bonnie to see where she was aiming—and to see a figure that lurked by the trees.

Who is that?

For a moment, she feared it was a brigand or, even worse, one of Ruthven's men who had somehow found out about Evan's and Alaric's plans. Grabbing another arrow, Bonnie waited until the figure was just about to cross one of the trees and then let it fly, aiming just above the head.

The arrow found its mark with absolute precision and the figure came to a halt, turning to look at her as the shaft oscillated above.

“That was an almost perfect shot,” a familiar voice called out and the figure stepped forward. It was none other than Evan, Bonnie saw when he stepped into the light that poured out of one of the windows of the inn, painting his face in a warm orange glow.

In that light, he looked almost approachable, like a man Bonnie could call a friend. From the moment she had first laid eyes on him, she had thought him handsome, but it was difficult to appreciate his looks when all he did was glare at Bonnie or refuse to speak to her.

“Why are ye here?” Bonnie asked instead of pointing out that she shot the arrow precisely where she wanted.

“I dinnae think it’s wise tae leave a lass out here all alone in the middle o’ the night,” Evan said with a small shrug as he approached her. “It can be dangerous, even here. It’s better if someone watches over ye.”

Bonnie couldn’t help but scoff at that, entirely unimpressed. If only Evan knew the danger in which she and her sister had put themselves not so long ago, all so that they could save their clan, then he would understand that Bonnie was perfectly capable of defending herself. She had her bow and her arrows. They didn’t prove so effective in close combat, but she had never been as good with a blade, unlike her sister, so the arrows would have to do.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

“I dinnae need yer help,” Bonnie said. “An’ I dinnae need ye or anyone else tae watch over me. I can take care o’ meself better than anyone can take care o’ me.”

Evan chuckled, though there was no mirth behind the sound. He came to a stop next to Bonnie, looking at her with doubt in his gaze. Now that he was so close, his face partially illuminated by the light, Bonnie could only think of him as infuriatingly handsome with his dark eyes and the sharp, striking features of his face. It didn’t help that he towered over her, making her feel too small when standing next to him.

“I sincerely doubt that,” he said. “Are ye tellin’ me that if a brigand showed up right the now, ye would defeat him with more ease than I would? If ye would defeat him at all?”

“I have me bow an’ me arrows,” said Bonnie with a shrug. She was certain she could easily deal with a brigand from a safe distance, while Evan would have to get close and physically fight him. “I think I could defend meself much better than ye could.”

“Dae ye think yer a better archer than I am?”

Bonnie could hardly believe Evan had even asked such a question. He hadn’t seen her in action, but it was rather presumptuous of him to think that he was better than her with a bow. Bonnie had never been bested in archery ever since she surpassed her teacher—one of her father’s Chieftains who had been kind and patient enough to show her how to use that bow, and whom Bonnie still remembered fondly. She doubted Evan could do any better than her.

“O’ course I dae,” she said.

“Show me, then,” Evan said, gesturing widely with his hand. “Let us have a competition.”

“A competition.” It wasn’t a question. Bonnie gave him a weary look, as Evan was far from the first man to think he could defeat her. “Ye truly wish tae compete against me?”

“Yer the one who claims ye can dae better than me.”

“Nay,” said Bonnie. “Yer the one who claims ye can dae better than me. Ye issued the challenge.”

“Will ye accept it or nae?”

Bonnie considered her options for a moment. She could either give in to this foolishness or she could walk away; but then if she walked away, it was just as good as defeat.

“Fine,” she said. “How shall we judge who is better?”

“Three arrows,” said Evan. “The one who shoots them the closest wins.”

“The challenger is first,” Bonnie said as she handed Evan her bow. She was curious to see if he truly was as good as he said he was or if he simply thought Bonnie was so bad that he could easily win.

Without another word, Evan grabbed an arrow and assumed the shooting position. He fired it at the tree next to the one where Bonnie had been practicing, hitting it close to the center.

I can dae better than this.

At least he knew how to shoot and wasn't simply bragging without having the skills, Bonnie thought, as Evan reached for another arrow. He prepared, drawing in a deep breath, and then released it, the two of them watching as it arced through the air and lodged itself near the first.

Satisfied, Evan turned to smirk smugly at Bonnie, but she gave no indication of acknowledgement. She didn't want to inflate his ego even further and so she remained silent, waiting for him to fire the last arrow. It took Evan a few moments to reach for the last one, as he kept waiting for a reaction, but when he did, he shot it near the other two so that the three of them formed a neat triangle.

Bonnie knew she could do better than this. Her shots were always more accurate, more deliberate, and she had even managed to split an arrow in two several times. Even in the darkness, Evan was no match for her.

Smiling to herself, she grabbed one of the arrows and aimed at an unmarred tree, quickly sending off her first shot. The arrow found its target right in the middle of the trunk—a well-placed shot that set her up for victory. She didn't turn to look at Evan; she didn't need to. She already knew she was better than him.

The second shot was fired with as much ease, the arrow hitting the tree right next to the other one. The distance was so small that from where they stood, it seemed like they were pressed right up against each other.

"Lucky shot," Evan mumbled under his breath. In the quiet of the night, though, Bonnie heard him and she couldn't resist the urge to roll her eyes.

It was far from a lucky shot. It was all skill, but Evan refused to see it.

But perhaps that would be for the best.

She still knew nothing about Evan, she reminded herself. For all their reassurances, he and Alaric could still try to hurt her and the only advantage she had against them was that bow and her arrows. Without them, she would stand no chance.

If Evan kens how well I can fight with an arrow, then he will surely make it so that I dinnae have them when he attacks.

That's what she would do if she were in his shoes. She would make sure her target was defenseless before attacking and she knew it was what Evan would do, as well.

Glancing at him from the corner of her eye, Bonnie adjusted her position just slightly—so slightly that it would be imperceptible to him. Evan would still think she was trying her best, though from what he had already said, he considered her skills pure luck.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

Bonnie fired her last arrow, sending it above the rest. At first, she had considered missing entirely, but then she thought that would be too obvious of a trick, and opted instead for a spot on the tree that would guarantee she would lose, accompanying the shot with the appropriate performance of getting disheartened.

Slowly, she lowered her bow, looking at the tree as though she couldn't quite believe she had missed. Her mouth fell open in shock, her brows knitting together, and she let out a defeated sigh as Evan approached her.

“Dinnae fash,” he said. “Ye fought well. I simply fought better.”

An odd choice of words, Bonnie thought, as she began to walk backwards, trying to avoid letting Evan get too close. He seemed terribly pleased, and the last thing she wanted was to hear him gloat, so she tried to sidestep him and walk back inside—only to stumble in the dark on something large and yielding.

It was a bush, one that thankfully seemed to have no thorns. And yet its branches still scratched Bonnie's arms, her tunic getting caught in them, the twigs groaning under her weight as she sank deeper and deeper. Having fallen rear-first, there was little she could do to stop her fall or push herself back up, her hands unable to reach solid ground.

In all the chaos, Evan's laughter rang through the air, a sound too bright and gentle for such a man. Still, it was nothing but grating in Bonnie's ears, the mocking nature of it angering her even more. It was all because of him. He had been the one to issue the challenge and then he had been the one to approach like that, giving Bonnie no choice but to stumble backwards to get away from him.



“Come,” he said, offering her his hand. For a moment, Bonnie looked at it as though it had personally offended her, but then weighed her options. She could either sit there until she untangled herself or someone else came by to help or she could accept the assistance.

She chose the latter. Evan’s hand was warm around her own, enveloping her palm and fingers entirely in its grasp. Just as he was about to pull, though, he stumbled as well, his free hand shooting out to steady himself only for him to fall right into the bush next to her.

It was Bonnie’s turn to laugh as Evan cursed under his breath. He shook the entire bush as he tried to stand, rustling the leaves, snapping several twigs in the process, and groaning in pain more than once as he grabbed at the rough bark again and again.

“Is this amusin’ tae ye?” he asked, taking a moment to breathe.

“Very much,” said Bonnie without missing a beat.

Evan pinned her with a glare and planted his feet, finally managing to push himself up. Once he was free of the clutches of the bush, he grabbed Bonnie’s arm firmly and pulled her up with ease, as though it was hardly a chore to him. Bonnie guessed that it truly wasn’t.

He must be very strong. Stronger than Finlay, even.

With a huff, she dusted herself off as best as she could in the dark. Before she could walk past him, Evan reached towards her and gently plucked a leaf from her hair, forcing her to freeze for a moment, as if she were nothing more than a startled deer in the face of a hunt.

For what seemed like an eternity, neither of them moved. Bonnie’s treacherous heart

thundered in her chest, so loud and fast that she feared Evan would hear it, as absurd as that thought seemed. Then, a strong breeze blew past them and the spell was gone, leaving Bonnie to rush back inside, pushing her way past Evan.

She didn't spare a single glance back as she headed to her room, all but stomping all the way there. Once she was behind the safety of her door, she leaned against it and drew in a deep, steadying breath, trying to make sense of what had happened between the two of them in that brief moment.

Whatever it was, she was certain she wasn't supposed to like it.

Evan watched as Bonnie headed back inside the inn without another glance at him. In his fingers, he still held the leaf he had plucked from her hair and he looked at it for a brief moment, trying to figure out what it was that had possessed him to do such a thing.

The truth was that he knew precisely what had possessed him. Bonnie was a beautiful woman and despite the less than ideal way they had met, Evan found it difficult to resist that beauty. Bonnie was everything he wanted in a woman. Even her feisty, borderline rude attitude fascinated him much more than it should have, pulling him ever closer into her orbit. He had always had a weakness for girls who posed a challenge for him.

He usually tried to keep his mind off what that said about him.

With a sigh, he dropped the leaf and then picked up Bonnie's bow and quiver, before walking over to the trees to gather all the arrows they had shot. Once he was sure he had collected them all, he too headed back inside to find Alaric precisely where he had left him, still sitting at their table.

Upon seeing him, Alaric raised a curious eyebrow. "What is all that?"

“We had a competition,” Evan said as he slid into the seat across from his brother.

“Did ye win?”

“O’ course I did.”

For all Bonnie had been so certain that she would be the one to win, Evan had easily managed to defeat her. When he saw how close her first two shots were, he had feared his own defeat for a moment, but then his suspicions that it was nothing but a lucky shot were confirmed when she failed to send the third arrow close to the other two.

“She is a good archer, though,” Evan added, as it was the truth. He had no problem recognizing skill in others—and it didn’t hurt that she hadn’t managed to beat him.

“She seemed upset when I saw her just the now,” Alaric said, and the accusation in his tone was merely thinly veiled. “Is it because o’ the contest or did ye dae somethin’ else?”

“I dinnae appreciate the tone, brother,” Evan said with a roll of his eyes. It was just like his brother to think he had done something to offend. “I dinnae ken . . . she is a strange lass.”

Alaric chuckled, giving Evan an unconvinced look. “I doubt she is any more strange than ye are. Either way, ye should be nicer tae her.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

“Is that so?” Evan asked. “An’ why should I dae that?”

“Because we need her. She is our way in.”

That much was true, Evan knew. Without Bonnie, they wouldn’t be able to infiltrate Castle Ruthven, and so they needed to keep her happy—as happy as they could, at least, when she was practically their hostage. Evan would have to make an effort as much as the idea of it sounded like too much of a chore.

“Fine, fine,” said Evan, waving a hand dismissively. “I’ll try tae be nice.”

At the same time, though, he would try to keep his distance. It was one thing, appreciating Bonnie’s beauty from afar, maybe even flirting with her a little, and another losing his head and giving in to his desires. The most important thing to him was his goal: getting to Balliol. Nothing else mattered to him—not even romance.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Once again, the sea spray was cold and unpleasant on Bonnie’s face as she stood on the birlinn, watching the waves flow by. The sky above was dark, stormy clouds gathering over her head, and all she could do was hope that they could outrun the oncoming storm. She couldn’t imagine just how much more unpleasant the sea travels would be if it rained on top of everything else.

She had boarded the boat along with Evan, Alaric, and their crew that morning to head back to the mainland and meet Laird Ruthven, but not before writing a letter to her sister to tell her as much as she knew about the plan and to reassure her that she

was alright. The innkeeper was kind enough to promise her that the letter would be delivered, after she had given him a few pieces of gold to make sure that the correspondence would remain private.

As much as Bonnie tried to keep her mind off the days that would follow, her thoughts kept straying back to Laird Ruthven. If what Evan and Alaric claimed was true, then perhaps there was still a chance for her to escape this marriage. Surely, even her council would be against such a union if they found out Laird Ruthven was allied with John Balliol. They wouldn't want the clan to be associated with anyone who supported Balliol, after all.

Standing there, watching the blue on blue as the horizon stretched before her eyes, Bonnie tried to clear her mind, telling herself that whatever was meant to happen would happen. She couldn't continue to worry so much about all this when she hadn't even reached Castle Ruthven yet and when she didn't know anything about Ruthven or Evan.

It wasn't only her thoughts which bothered her, though. Every time she tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, she felt something there, something she was certain she didn't have before.

What could this be? I wish I had a lookin'-glass.

There was no such thing on the birlinn, though, and Bonnie didn't know what to do, until she spotted Alaric walking on the deck. Could she ask him, she wondered? Out of the two brothers, he seemed like the gentler one, the one who was more open to conversation and so Bonnie would rather ask him than Evan.

Walking over to him with her head hanging low, Bonnie cleared her throat to get his attention. Alaric turned to look at her with a frown, before he schooled his expression into one of absolute neutrality, and Bonnie didn't know if she preferred that over

something that communicated clearly what he thought of her.

“Can I help ye, lass?” Alaric asked in that baritone voice of his which seemed to make the very wood of the boat tremble.

Bonnie felt the heat rush to her face, the tips of her ears burning as she tried to force out the words. “I think . . . I think I may have somethin’ here,” she said, pointing right behind her left ear. “I fell in the bushes last night an’ I fear it may be a thorn.”

It didn’t hurt, though, and that was what baffled her the most. Surely, if it had been a thorn—unlikely as it seemed since she hadn’t felt any other thorns on the bushes—then it would hurt or at least bother her. And yet she felt nothing on her skin. The only reason why she knew there was something there was because she had touched it.

“Let me see,” Alaric said, stepping behind her to get a better look. One of his hands came to rest gently over her shoulder while the other brushed through the hair at her nape just as softly, as though he was afraid to use any more force than a simple brush of his hand.

Bonnie regretted ever asking. She should have dealt with it herself, she thought, or at least waited until another woman could help her.

“Ach,” said Alaric, and Bonnie’s blood ran cold, all the embarrassment suddenly replaced by concern.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I’m afraid it’s a tick, lass.”

“A tick?” Bonnie shouted, her head whipping around to stare at Alaric in fear. “Nay .

. . nay, nay, nay. Take it off me.”

Had the tick been feeding off her all night? Bonnie shuddered at the thought, her stomach churning as she thought about all the blood it must have sucked out of her.

“I will, I will,” Alaric reassured her, pressing that hand firmly on her shoulder to still her. “Just . . . dinnae move.”

“What dae ye think yer doin’?”

Evan’s rough voice startled Bonnie and she jumped, her hand coming up to clutch her chest. Alaric pulled back from her and clasped his hands behind his back, but said nothing even as Evan approached.

For a few moments, the two of them stared at each other in silence in that way that Bonnie had quickly found to be irritating. She couldn’t understand how they managed to communicate without saying anything, and she didn’t like that she couldn’t figure out what it was they were thinking.

“I have a tick,” Bonnie said, breaking the tension between the two brothers. “Here. Alaric was helpin’ me tae remove it.”

Evan looked between her and Alaric, his gaze going back and forth again and again. Then, it settled on Bonnie and he gestured at her to follow him as he turned around and headed towards the small room.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

When he realized Bonnie wasn't following him, he stopped and said, "Well? Will ye come?"

"With ye?" Bonnie asked. "In there?"

"I willnae torture ye," Evan promised. "Come."

Bonnie hesitated for a moment, but then she followed Evan. As she walked behind him, she looked at Alaric over her shoulder, but by then, he had already walked off, heading towards one of the members of the crew. It was only her and Evan then, the two of them stepping into the small room before he closed the door behind them.

Once again, the place was illuminated by nothing but a few torches that hung from the walls, but at least this time, Bonnie saw that the place was clean. The blood had been scrubbed off, not a trace of it remaining on the floor or the walls, though that didn't necessarily mean that the man was alive.

Bonnie sincerely doubted he was.

"Come," said Evan. "Let me see."

Hesitating once more, Bonnie didn't move any closer to him. It was Evan who approached with an impatient huff, stepping behind her to look at the tick. His hands were just as gentle as Alaric's, much to Bonnie's surprise, one of them laying on her shoulder much like his brother's to keep her steady.

"Dinnae move," he warned. "I will pull it out."



Bonnie braced herself for it as Evan grasped the tick carefully between his fingers, before swiftly tugging it out. There was no pain as she had expected. There wasn't even a slight irritation, much to her surprise.

"There," said Evan. "It is done."

"It is?" Bonnie asked, surprised that there was nothing more that needed to be done. She wasn't so quick to be glad about it, though. For all she knew, there were more ticks on her, in places she couldn't see, and the idea of it nauseated her. "Evan . . . dae ye think there are more o' them?"

"Let us hope there are nae more," Evan said, but that wasn't reassuring at all.

Bonnie drew her bottom lip between her teeth. She didn't know how to ask what she wanted to ask him and once again, she began to think that perhaps it would be best for her to wait until a woman could help her, but the mere idea of a tick on her was unbearable. In the end, her fear won over her embarrassment.

"Could ye make sure I have nae more o' them on me back?"

Evan froze for a moment and Bonnie feared that her request had been too much for him, but then he said, "Alright."

Before she knew it, Evan was tugging her tunic off and Bonnie couldn't help the scream that escaped her. Her hands clutched at the hem, holding the tunic down as she turned to look at Evan with wide eyes.

"What dae ye think yer doin'?" she demanded.

"How dae ye think I will see if there is a tick if I cannae see yer back?" Evan asked.

Bonnie supposed that was a fair question. As much as she wanted to keep her modesty, that would be impossible if she also wanted to make sure there were no strange little creatures on her. Reluctantly, she turned around once more and allowed Evan to tug at her tunic and then her undershirt to reveal the top of her back.

Even though Bonnie couldn't see him, she could feel his gaze bore into her, its heat spreading over her skin. Then that heat was followed by the warmth of his hand as it swept over her shoulders, his touch leaving goosebumps behind.

No man had ever touched her like this before and Bonnie's breath caught in her throat, a shudder running through her entire body. His breath, too, was warm as he exhaled softly against her, and Bonnie let her eyes fall shut for a moment, before she remembered who it was that was touching her.

Evan was not the kind of man she wanted near her; she was certain of that. He was a killer, she reminded herself.

It seemed like the perfect moment to ask about the man. Not only would it satisfy her curiosity, but it would also put a stop to that strange fluttering in her stomach that returned every time Evan stood a little too close for her.

"What happened tae the man?" she asked. "Did ye . . . did ye kill him?"

"Nay," said Evan without hesitation. "We released him on Arran. He willnae speak."

It was not what Bonnie had expected to hear and she was certain Evan wasn't lying to her. He had no reason to hide the truth either way, since she doubted he cared what she thought of him. But knowing that they had released the man surprised her, leaving her speechless for a brief moment.

"How can ye be so certain he willnae speak?"

“He is too scared,” said Evan. “An’ we dinnae wish tae stain our hands with blood when it wasnae necessary.”

Once again, Bonnie couldn’t help but think that she had misunderstood Evan after all. If he had spared the man’s life, then perhaps he wasn’t as bad as she had originally thought. So far, he had kept his word and had not hurt her. He had even been respectful, if a little rude and brooding.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

It did nothing to help with the way her heart fluttered in his presence. If anything, it made it even worse. Now that she knew she wasn't as cruel of a man as she had originally thought, it was difficult to resist his good looks and the way he made her feel.

"Yer fine," Evan said, pulling Bonnie back into reality. Just as quickly as he had uncovered her body, he covered it once more, making sure that her tunic lay perfectly over her back and that every part of her was covered. "Nae more ticks."

"Thank ye," Bonnie aid, for lack of anything better to say. A part of her wished that she could talk to him about that attraction just to see if he felt it, too, but she could never find the courage to start such a conversation between them. Instead, she gave him a small, faltering smile and pushed her way past him, exiting the room before the tension between them became unbearable.

Evan didn't follow, at least not at first, and Bonnie was glad for it. Her entire face was on fire and she didn't want him to see the blush on her cheeks.

The moment she stepped out of the room, she saw Alaric bent over the rail, his face pale as he stared at the waves. Concern flooded Bonnie and she rushed to him, leaning over to take a better look at him, only to find that he looked like a ghost.

"What happened?" she asked. "What is the matter?"

"Naething," said Alaric, waving his hand dismissively. "I am simply nauseous. Rough seas today."

It was true. The storm hadn't quite caught up to them but now that Bonnie was out of the room, she could see how choppy the seas were and how dark the sky above them. She could hardly blame Alaric for being sea-sick. If anything, she was surprised that it hadn't affected her yet.

"Come," she urged him, wrapping her hands around his arm to tug him away from the rail. "It will help if ye sit."

Alaric followed her reluctantly, swaying as he walked, and Bonnie had him sit by the small room, where the wind wasn't as strong, but where the air still hit his face to help with the nausea. It was then that Evan came out of the room and glanced at them, a deep frown forming on his face as though the mere sight of Bonnie was enough to anger him.

She couldn't understand it. What was it about her that made him look so murderous when she had done nothing to earn such behavior?

Bonnie didn't ask, as she didn't want to give him the satisfaction of an argument. Instead, she focused on Alaric, rubbing his shoulder gently as he took in deep, calming breaths. When he looked up and saw Evan standing there, though, he shifted, pulling back from Bonnie a little until her hand slipped off his shoulder.

"Thank ye, Bonnie," he said. "I'm feelin' better."

It was a lie. Bonnie could clearly see it in the way he still struggled to breathe, to swallow, the sea affecting him deeply. She couldn't understand him, either. What was it that made him so distant all of a sudden, when he had been more than willing to accept her help before?

Only when Evan walked off did Alaric relax once more, letting his head fall back with a sigh, though Bonnie didn't try to touch him again.

“Why is he like this?” Bonnie asked him.

Alaric gave a small shrug. “He is a strange man.”

A strange man, indeed.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

When they finally reached Castle Ruthven, Evan could have cried with relief. At least now, he thought, he could focus on his plan instead of being confined on a small boat or in a narrow road with Bonnie and allowing himself to be driven crazy by the mere sight of her. He didn’t know what it was that affected him so much, as it could not only be her looks. He had seen plenty of pretty women in his lifetime, and though Bonnie was one of the most beautiful, it didn’t explain why every time he saw her, he felt like all the air rushed right out of his lungs, leaving him gasping for it. It didn’t explain why every time she was near another man, especially Alaric—to whom she seemed to have taken a liking—it soured his mood for the rest of the day.

It certainly didn’t explain the irritation, the constant distraction, and the way his thoughts kept circling back to her no matter how much he tried to think about something else.

The entire situation was becoming alarming and Evan would do anything to put an end to it. He hoped that now that they had reached the castle, it would be easier for him to ignore her, to pretend that they were nothing but reluctant allies.

An’ that is all we are. We hardly ken anythin’ about each other.

His traitorous heart didn’t seem to understand that, though, and it began to beat erratically whenever she was near.

It was late at night when they reached Ruthven Castle, the stars and the moon illuminating their way as they rode down the path. He and Alaric had decided that it wasn't worth it to camp for the night, as they were so close, but by the time they reached the gates, they were all exhausted. Much to his surprise, Ruthven didn't come outside to greet them nor did he invite them to meet him in his study or the great hall. Instead, three servants came to fetch them and took each of them to their chambers—three rooms that stood at the top floor of the castle in a row, one next to the other. Alaric took the far right, Evan the one in the middle, and Bonnie the far left as they were instructed, and once they were all settled in, the servants all disappeared with promises of bringing them dinner to their rooms.

Evan had to admit that he was glad about it. The last thing he wanted was to sit through a formal welcoming dinner after such a long trip, when all he needed was a few good hours of sleep. He was certain Alaric and Bonnie wanted the same. None of them was in the mood for any socializing.

Still, he found it odd that Ruthven didn't welcome them at all. Could it be that he was busy with John Balliol? Or was it simply a way for him to show them that he didn't truly care about their presence in his castle?

Evan supposed they would find out soon enough. Until then, he was going to enjoy the warmth of the fire that burned in his room and the food the servants would bring him.

The chambers he was given were spacious and richly decorated with tapestries in green and golden hues, depicting scenes from a hunt. The bed was more comfortable than anything he had slept on ever since leaving his home and the rest of the place was furnished with ornate pieces made of rich, dark wood.

A lavish display, he thought. The rooms Ruthven had given them were undoubtedly some of the most ostentatious in the castle and Evan was certain it was a purposeful

choice.



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

After the servants brought him dinner and Evan cleaned up for the night, he checked in with Alaric, the two of them going over their plan. Once they were both satisfied with the details, he made his way to Bonnie's room and opened the door without knocking. It was a habit by then, as he and Alaric always entered each other's rooms unannounced, but it didn't take long for him to realize he had made a mistake entering so nonchalantly in Bonnie's room.

She was in the middle of pulling her nightgown on, the thin fabric clinging to her breasts and her hips, highlighting all her curves. Evan could do nothing but stare in silence and he could only imagine Bonnie felt the same shock as she stood there, mouth hanging open, staring right back.

The shock didn't last long. Before he knew it, she stomped towards him and kicked him right in the groin, so hard that Evan instantly collapsed to the floor, groaning in pain as he curled onto his side.

I deserved that.

Even so, he wished it had been a slap instead. His breath was knocked out of him and he struggled to draw air into his lungs, the pain radiating from his groin down his legs and up his stomach, and he closed his eyes firmly as he tried to get himself under control again.

Somewhere above him, Bonnie was yelling, but he couldn't pay any attention to what she was saying. Surely, she was angry that he had barged into her room, and that was enough for him to know.

The pain slowly subsided and Evan rolled onto his back, looking up at her. She stood over him, hands on her hips as she glared down at him, looking at him expectantly as if he was meant to say something.

“What?” he asked.

“I said why are ye here?” Bonnie said, and Evan thought she must have asked him the same question before, when he couldn’t hear her. “An’ why dae ye nae knock? Have ye lost yer mind?”

“I came tae talk tae ye about the plan,” he said, as if it was obvious. “Why else would I be here?”

His question gave Bonnie pause and she snapped her mouth shut, once again glaring at him. Just then, the door opened once more and Evan saw Alaric there, wide-eyed with concern.

“What happened?” he asked, before taking in the scene in front of him and frowning in confusion. “Why are ye on the floor?”

“Bonnie attacked me,” Evan said.

“Ye deserved it,” Bonnie countered.

“I certainly didnae.”

“He came intae the room without even knockin’!”

Alaric’s face contorted strangely as he tried to hold in his laughter, his hand coming up to cover his mouth. Still, Evan could see his laughter clearly in the way his shoulders shook uncontrollably. Without another word to either of them, he slid out

of the room just as quickly as he had come, shaking his head.

“Dinnae fight,” he called over his shoulder. “I’m goin’ tae sleep.”

Evan lay back on the floor with a sigh, before finally pushing himself up, groaning as he stood. Instinctively, he took a step back, putting some distance between himself and Bonnie.

“Ye shouldnae act like this,” he warned. “We’re supposed tae be family,cousin.”

“Bein’ family doesnae give ye the right tae barge intae me chambers,” Bonnie pointed out. “It certainly doesnae give ye the right that we’re pretendin’ tae be family.”

“Nae one will believe we’re family if ye keep attackin’ me,” Evan said. “Sit. I came tae talk tae ye about the plan.”

“The plan?” Bonnie asked, making no move to sit. “I thought I kent the plan.”

“The details o’ the plan,” Evan corrected. “Alaric an’ I need ye tae distract Ruthven while we are tryin’ tae find information an’ look around the castle. Keep him company. Make sure he stays away from us while we look around the castle.”

“So, I’ll have tae spend time with him?” Bonnie asked, sounding less than thrilled by the prospect.

“Naturally,” said Evan. “But if we dae this right, then ye will never have tae see him again.”

It was clearly the right thing to say. Bonnie brightened at that, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “I will remember ye promised me that.”

“As ye should,” said Evan. “We will keep ye safe, as much as we can. Still, ye need tae be careful. Ye need tae be very careful with Ruthven. He is more dangerous than ye ken. Dae ye ken how tae fight?”

Bonnie hesitated for a moment, before she shook her head, just as Evan had expected. What noble girl knew how to fight? Their fathers and mothers thought it better to teach them skills that would make them good wives rather than showing them how to protect themselves, which, in his opinion at least, was far more important. One could never be too careful.

“Alright. I’ll show ye how tae defend yerself, at least,” he said. “It’s alright if ye dinnae dae everythin’ right from the beginnin’. We will work on it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

Bonnie nodded, staying still as Evan approached her and came to a halt a few inches from her. He would have to be especially careful with her, he thought, what with how much smaller than him she was. He was used to fighting men close to his size and compared to them, Bonnie had to be fragile.

“I will try tae grab ye,” he warned her, slowly showing her how he would do so, reaching for her with his hand. “I want ye tae hit me as hard as ye can here,” he said, pointing at the weak spot on his arm, “and then go behind me.”

“Is that all?” Bonnie asked. “It sounds too simple.”

“Fer now,” Evan said. “I dinnae want tae make it too difficult fer ye.”

Bonnie had an odd look on her face, one that Evan couldn’t decipher. He didn’t try too hard, though, as it didn’t really matter. He mainly wanted to gauge her strength and her natural talent for a fight first, and so he did as he warned her, swiftly attacking her.

And then he was on the floor, the breath knocked out of him once more as his back hit the stone, his eyes staring at the ceiling. For a moment, he didn’t know what had happened, but then pain spread over his arm and his leg—right at the weak points.

She kicked me on the knee!

Once again, Bonnie stood over him, staring down at him with a satisfied smile. Not only was she extremely accurate with her attack, but she was also incredibly fast, her size giving her the advantage of speed.

With his guard down, Evan had never had a chance to defend himself, but he didn't think it counted at all. Bonnie had claimed to know nothing about fighting and yet there she was, fighting like someone who was raised with the expectation that one day, she may have to join a scuffle.

"Ye shouldnae underestimate me," she said smugly, grinning down at him. "It is a mistake that may cost you sometime."

Evan couldn't help the chuckle that escaped him, no matter how much he tried. Bonnie was full of surprises and just when he thought he was getting to know her, she revealed a side of herself he had no idea was there. Who was this woman, he wondered? Where had she been all his life?

As he stared at her in the soft light of the fire and the candles, he couldn't help but be entranced. Slowly, he stood and leaned close, only realizing that his intention was to kiss her when he tilted his head to the side, his desire getting the better of him.

There was no resisting her anymore. There was no denying how he felt for her, and so he needed to have her.

## CHAPTER NINE

Evan was so close to Bonnie that she could feel his warm breath on her lips as she looked up at him, his hand ghosting over her side to draw a shiver out of her. She held her breath as he leaned even closer, not knowing what to expect from him.

Was he going to kiss her? Did she want him to kiss her? Bonnie was too conflicted to know her own desires, her attraction to Evan warring against her fear that he was not the kind of man he claimed to be and the knowledge that she didn't know him at all. On top of everything else, they were in Ruthven's castle and though they were alone in the room, she couldn't help but fear that someone would see them—a maid

perhaps, or a servant who would barge into the room just as Evan had.

What would happen then? Ruthven would surely be furious, Evan's and Alaric's mission would be ruined, and the MacLaren council would never forgive her for disgracing the clan. Everyone would find out, as the rumors would spread likewildfire, and she would never have the chance to marry a good, suitable man.

And yet, even with all the doubts that swirled in her mind, Bonnie found it impossible to move away from Evan. His pull on her was irresistible and no matter how much she tried to convince herself to stay away, her traitorous body seemed to have a mind of its own, swaying closer to him against her better judgement.

This is it . . . he will kiss me.

Bonnie's heart beat so fast and with such intensity that she could have sworn she felt her ribs rattle with the force of it. It was odd to think that another person could have such a strong effect on her, that Evan could drive her out of her mind with nothing but a simple approach.

She closed her eyes and waited.

Then she waited some more; and then some more. The kiss never came. Instead, the clatter of an object, followed by a whispered curse, forced her eyes open once more, only for her to see that the edge of her sheet was rapidly catching fire.

"What did ye dae?" she screeched as Evan grabbed a pillow and began to hit the end of the sheet in an attempt to put the flames out. He didn't need to explain what had happened to her, though, as she soon realized one of the candles that stood on the nightstand by her bed had fallen to the ground, the flames spreading to everything they could reach. Alarmed, Bonnie began to stomp onto the flames with her slipper, but Evan was quick to push her aside, turning momentarily to glare at her.

“Stay back,” he commanded, startling her into inaction. Bonnie stood back and watched, quickly realizing that the fire was, in fact, very small and what had made it seem so terrifying at first was simply her panic.

Before long, Evan had managed to put out the flames and he straightened with a huff, patting the pillow he had used to get the ashes off. Some of the bedding was ruined, but the carpet seemed undamaged from where Bonnie stood and so did the bed. The candle, long since extinguished, was still smoking on the floor.

In the silence that followed, she and Evan stared at each other, stunned. Then, an awkward, disbelieving laugh bubbled out of her and she sat on the edge of the bed, burying her face in her hands.

Me first kiss an’ I didnae even have it!

“I should . . . ye should sleep,” Evan said, sounding just as awkward as Bonnie felt. Even in the half-light of the room, when she raised her gaze to look at him, she could see a faint blush on his cheeks. It was little more than a soft wash of pink, but it was enough to crack that tough and impenetrable facade that he had crafted so carefully around him. “Goodnight.”

Before Bonnie could say anything else, Evan was gone, much like a specter. Bonnie could almost be convinced that she had imagined all of it had the evidence of the candle not been right in front of her eyes. It was difficult to believe, after all, that Evan had almost kissed her. To say they had not begun on the best of terms would be an understatement, and Bonnie couldn’t understand her own attraction, let alone his.

Cleaning up the mess as best she could, Bonnie then crawled under the covers, burrowing into the blankets. She missed her home. Most of all, she missed her sister, who would surely have some advice to give her about all this.



If only she had made it here.

But she hadn't. Cathleen was far away and Bonnie was alone in Castle Ruthven. She couldn't talk to Evan or Laird Ruthven, naturally. The only person she could turn to was Alaric, but what would she tell him? The mere thought of discussing these strange feelings with him was mortifying, not only because she hardly knew the man, but also because he was Evan's brother. No, he simply was not an option and the reality Bonnie had to accept was that she had to deal with her feelings alone.

There was no other explanation other than temporary insanity for the way Evan had behaved that night. It weighed on him until the break of dawn as he tossed and turned in his bed, the unfamiliar guest room providing him with no comfort even as lavish and cozy as it was.

How could he think it was a good idea to kiss Bonnie? How could he think even for a moment that entangling himself in that sort of relationship would end well for them both?

He had been lucky to nudge that candle to the floor. Had it not been for the flames, he had no doubt that he would have kissed her and made things awfully complicated for them all. His self-control had vanished in a rare moment of weakness, but he knew better now. He had to keep himself in check.

After a restless night and only a few hours of sleep, Evan prepared for the day and headed down to the great hall after asking several different guards and servants for directions. In the darkness of the precious night, the castle had seemed cavernous in its size and complexity, corridors shooting off towards all directions, and it wasn't

much different in the light of day. The only difference was that now Evan could see all the details of the castle—the carefully stacked stone walls, the colorful tapestries that decorated them, fluttering in the soft breeze, the paintings and precious trinkets that lined the halls. Generations of Ruthven rulers had left their mark upon the place and each of them seemed to be fonder of luxury than the next.

Castle MacGregor was neither small nor penurious and yet Evan and those before him had not felt the need for such obvious luxury. The castle he had inherited was large, well-kept, but the MacGregors preferred to keep their people fed than display their wealth on their walls.

Disgustin' . . . but what shall anyone expect from a man like Ruthven?

His alliance with John Balliol had one goal and that was to gain as much wealth as he could, with no regard to the consequences. He was willing to betray the other clans for gold. He was willing to lead them all to ruin for personal gain.

Evan was already in a sour mood when he stepped foot in the great hall, where Ruthven, Alaric, and Bonnie already sat as the servants served them their breakfast—Ruthven at the head of the table with Bonnie and Alaric to his left and right. Evan walked straight to Alaric's side and took the seat next to him with a curt greeting to them all, trying to ignore Ruthven's cheerful voice as he welcomed him.

It was all an act. Ruthven didn't want them there any more than they wanted to be there.

“I was tellin' Miss MacLaren an' Mister MacGregor that I regret nae welcomin' ye last night,” said Ruthven as Evan took a bite from a piece of dried meat, though his appetite had yet to make an appearance. Simply looking at Ruthven seemed to ruin it entirely. “Unfortunately, I was occupied in clan matters an' I couldnae attend yer welcome. Please, accept me apologies.”

Evan forced a tight smile on his lips, nodding once. “There is nae need fer an apology.”

He couldn’t help but wonder what kind of clan matters kept Ruthven so busy late at night; what else could it be other than something that had to do with John Balliol? Surely, any other matters could be discussed during the day, not needing the secrecy nightfall provided. Ruthven said nothing more on the matter, though. In fact, he said nothing more to Evan once he saw that he was forgiven. Instead, he turned to Bonnie with a sickly sweet smile that had Evan’s stomach churning.

“When yer council sent me yer likin’, the picture they chose didnae capture yer true beauty, Miss MacLaren. They promised me a bonnie wife but I didnae realize ye would be as bonnie as ye are.”

“Thank ye, Laird Ruthven,” said Bonnie with a smile of her own.

Evan gritted his teeth so hard that he feared he would crack a molar. He found Ruthven’s attempts at flattery as infuriating as they were pathetic, nothing but an empty effort to easily gain Bonnie’s favor.

“Is beauty all ye seek in a wife, Laird Ruthven?” Evan asked drily.

From the corner of his eye, Evan caught the murderous look Alaric was giving him, though he couldn’t bring himself to care. Bonnie, too, stared at him, though her look was one of surprise rather than rage.

As for Laird Ruthven, he turned that smile to Evan and responded without missing a beat, as though he had rehearsed every possible scenario of their interaction in his head.

“O’ course it isnae the only thing but it is a quite important one,” he said. “Ye

wouldnae agree, Laird MacGregor? I'm certain beauty matters tae ye just as much."

"What matters tae me is integrity," Evan said, and even he didn't know if they were still talking about wives. "Loyalty. Kindness. That is what is most important tae me."

"Aye, aye," said Laird Ruthven as he laughed good-naturedly, nodding along. "As it is tae everyone. But such things one can strive tae acquire. A beauty like Miss MacLaren's is difficult tae find."

Silence fell over the table for a few moments, not even the sound of cutlery breaking it since all of them had stopped eating. Alaric watched Evan carefully, certainly preparing to interrupt the conversation the moment it went too far, while Bonnie stared at her plate, cheeks tinted a bashful red.

Evan didn't like the way Ruthven spoke about Bonnie. He didn't like the way he looked at her, as though he could hardly restrain himself from touching her, as though he wanted to devour her whole. He recognized the feeling for what it was: jealousy, curling deep in his stomach and urging him to antagonize the other man even when he knew it could be detrimental to his mission. Still, he could hardly stop himself from saying the next words that tumbled past his lips.

"It seems that the rumors regardin' yer . . . appetites are true, then."

The air between them seemed to chill, the moment of silence stretching into an eternity before Ruthven asked, "What dae ye mean?"

"It is said many have crossed the doors o' yer chambers."

The words had hardly left his mouth before Alaric kicked him hard on the shin. Evan swallowed down the pained groan that threatened to escape him and didn't even spare his brother a glance. His gaze was glued to Ruthven, watching him as if he was

challenging him to give him his best attack.

For a while, no one spoke. Finally, Ruthven smiled—though it didn't quite reach his eyes—and said, “Many things are said about many people. There are several rumors about ye, too, Laird MacGregor. Surely, ye must ken that.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

Is he sayin' he kens more about me than he wishes tae reveal?

As far as Evan knew, there were no damaging or false rumors about him, despite what Ruthven claimed. Perhaps he was only trying to rattle him or to make him seem untrustworthy in Bonnie's eyes. Either way, Evan didn't like the insinuation and he was about to respond when Bonnie interrupted him, turning to Ruthven.

"I would love tae see the castle grounds," she said, shifting the tone of the conversation entirely with a few well-spoken words and a warm smile. "Could that be arranged, perhaps?"

It took a few moments for Ruthven to drag his gaze off Evan, but when he did, he seemed to only have eyes for Bonnie. "Consider it done. I will show ye the grounds meself."

Though Bonnie had saved Evan from saying something he could potentially regret, he wished she had said nothing. He was itching for a fight, his hands curling into fists under the table, but he wouldn't get to release all this anger on Ruthven—at least not that day. If anything, his outburst had only served to get Ruthven and Bonnie closer, which was precisely the opposite of what he wanted.

Under the table, Alaric kicked Evan once more, this time preemptively, so that he wouldn't say anything else that could offend Ruthven. Evan could have said a lot more—he could have pointed out there was evidence against Ruthven or made him see that Bonnie didn't truly want to be around him. In the end, he decided it was best to keep his lips sealed for the rest of their brief breakfast, saying not a single word until Bonnie and Ruthven had left the table so he could show her around the castle.

It was then that Alaric turned to him, brows furrowed and hand reaching for his shoulder to catch his attention.

“What was that?” he demanded. “I ken ye are nae as foolish as tae speak tae him like that. What is the matter with ye?”

Evan swallowed drily, trying to push down his rage. His gaze kept drifting to the windows, but he couldn’t get a glimpse of Bonnie and Ruthven.

“It’s naething,” he said. “Let us go.”

Before Alaric could say anything else, Evan stood and stomped out of the great hall, heading back to his chambers. Behind him, Alaric’s footsteps echoed down the entrance hall as he rushed after him, catching up near the stairs.

Neither of them spoke until they were behind closed doors once more. Evan sat on the edge of his bed, but Alaric, too irritated by the situation, paced back and forth in front of him with his hands on his hips.

“Ye cannae claim it was naething,” Alaric said, stopping in front of Evan and throwing his hands up in exasperation. “I despise him as much as ye dae, but we must remember our place here. We must remember why we came. Dinnae allow yerself tae be controlled by yer anger.”

Does he think this is because o’ Ruthven’s alliance with Balliol?

Evan didn’t try to correct his brother. It was better if Alaric thought the source of his anger was Ruthven himself and not that jealousy that clawed at his insides, threatening to rip him apart. He doubted Alaric would understand, after all. Evan didn’t understand it himself, this all-encompassing desire, this unquenchable thirst for a woman he barely knew.

“Evan,” Alaric said, his voice adopting a gentler, mellower tone as he walked over to him. “This must stop or Ruthven will ken there is somethin’ wrong. We have worked too hard fer this. We cannae reveal ourselves now. Ye understand how much is at stake, dae ye nae?”

“O’ course I dae,” said Evan. He did; he truly did. There was nothing more important to him than their mission. Failing could mean the end for many Highland clans and many people had put their faith in him and Alaric. They couldn’t fail them. He couldn’t do anything that would jeopardize their plan.

Includin’ thinkin’ about Bonnie.

He had to cast her out of his mind once and for all. If he could help her avoid this marriage by revealing the truth about Ruthven, then that would only be a nice bonus. But he couldn’t allow himself to get too close.

“It willnae happen again,” Evan promised with all his conviction. “I will . . . I’ll make sure he doesnae suspect.”

“Good,” said Alaric, relieved. His brother never doubted him when Evan made a promise and it only made him want to keep that promise even more. “Good. This will be all over soon an’ then we can return home an’ ye willnae have tae see him again.”

“Aye,” said Evan, though he didn’t sound particularly enthused about it even in his own ears.

Slowly, Alaric came to sit next to him on the bed, pushing his shoulder with his. The wood groaned under their combined weight but thankfully didn’t give in.

“Are ye thinkin’ about the weddin’?” Alaric asked.



Alarmed, Evan's head whipped to the side to look at him, eyes wide. "What weddin'? Bonnie's?"

Alaric frowned in confusion, staying silent for a moment. "What? Nay. Yer weddin'."

In all the chaos, Evan had forgotten all about the fact that there was a very good chance his council would have found him a wife by the time he returned home. It was something he didn't like to consider often, something that had been easy to cast aside as he worried about the plan and fretted over his feelings for Bonnie, but now that Alaric had brought it back to the forefront of his mind, it quickly became yet another concern for him.

"I suppose I am," he said with a shrug. "At least I'm thinkin' about it now that ye reminded me o' it."

Alaric chuckled and gave him a pat on the shoulder before he stood, as if he couldn't keep still, even if Evan was the one out of the two of them who had to be nervous. "It is only a formality."

"Is that what ye would be sayin' if ye were the one who had tae wed?" Evan asked, looking at his brother through his lashes. "Or would ye be doin' anythin' in yer power tae avoid it?"

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:30 am*

Alaric fell silent but that was all the response Evan needed to know the truth. Neither of them wanted to be forced into a marriage, but Alaric wouldn't have to, at least not any time soon. It was only Evan, as the laird of the clan, who had to marry and produce heirs. He understood his duty, he did, but he wanted to choose for himself. If he had to marry, then he wanted it to happen on his own terms.

“Dinnae fash,” said Alaric. “Ye’ll surely have yer pick. The council will give ye plenty o’ options.”

Perhaps that much was true, Evan thought. They were a powerful clan and he had the reputation of being a just man, if a little terrifying to those who didn't know him well. It didn't hurt that many women found him handsome. With any luck, he would have his pick of noble girls.

And yet, even as this thought was supposed to bring him some relief, it did nothing to lift his mood. He could have been thinking about his future, with a beautiful and kind wife, with children he could raise and shape into the next generation of the clan. He could have been thinking about all the great moments he could have with such a family by his side.

And yet the only thing on his mind was Bonnie, the thought of her haunting him in all his waking moments.

## CHAPTER TEN

The moment Bonnie stepped out of the warmth of the castle, she immediately regretted ever suggesting taking a walk. In the heat of the moment, she had said the

first thing that popped to mind just to diffuse the tension between Laird Ruthven and Evan, but now that she was in the gardens with him, the two of them walking side by side as Bonnie desperately held her cloak around her shoulders in an attempt to remain warm, she wished she had never opened her mouth.

Evan could have dealt with the consequences of his actions. He was a grown man and he deserved what he would get, she thought.

And yet the prospect of allowing him to ruin his own plan when it had only just been set in motion was terrifying to Bonnie. Evan and Alaric were the only ones between her and this unwanted marriage, so if she had to suffer walking in the cold, then it was a small price to pay.

“Dae ye like the gardens, Miss MacLaren?” Ruthven asked, drawing her out of her thoughts. “I must admit it is a more pleasant sight in spring, when everythin’ blooms.”

Bonnie looked around at the trees and the bare bushes that were scattered around the gardens, trying to imagine the place in full bloom. There were plants there she recognized from what she knew about healing, plants that would paint the entire place in their vivid colors the moment the weather warmed.

She was certain it would be a majestic sight. Even now, though, all the greenery was enough to suffuse the place with the beauty of nature.

“It is lovely,” she said, giving Ruthven the most genuine smile, she could muster. In the short time she had spent there, she hadn’t seen him treat anyone the way he had treated that servant at the Hamilton feast, and he had been nothing but a gentleman to her, speaking politely and keeping his distance, but making his interest in her known.

Perhaps it had been only a drunken mistake. Perhaps he isnae as violent as I thought.

Bonnie still didn't trust him, though, and she doubted she ever would, especially after Evan's and Alaric's warnings.

Evan . . . why must he act so strangely?

Could it be it was jealousy that drove him to speak such words to Ruthven? No, Bonnie thought, surely it couldn't be anything as petty as that. It was no secret that Evan hated Ruthven. He must have lost his self-control upon seeing him, his anger getting the better of him. That was all it was; she doubted she had anything to do with it.

"What is yer favourite place in the castle, me laird?" Bonnie asked, trying to steer the conversation towards something that could get her information. "Surely, ye must spend a lot o' time in yer study, aye?"

"Och aye," said Ruthven. "Most o' me days are spent there."

The wind blew past Bonnie, pulling her hair out of its updo and stinging her eyes. She had half a mind to tell Ruthven to head back inside, but he was quick to notice her discomfort and placed a hand on her shoulder, steering her so that they were walking with the wind to their backs. He seemed to be in no rush to head back inside, and Bonnie convinced herself it was for the best. She had him all alone. It was the perfect chance to get something out of him, no matter how small.

"It must be lonely," she said.

"It can be," said Ruthven. "But once we wed, I will have ye tae keep me company."

Bonnie forced her smile to remain on her lips, even as it trembled. "O' course," she said. "Though I doubt ye would want me tae sit with ye in yer study. I'm sure ye have plenty tae dae every day."

“I dinnae mind yer presence. Quite the opposite, in fact. I find that I am enjoyin’ it very much,” Ruthven said. “Besides, I am used tae havin’ several people in the study. There are always maids comin’ in an’ out, always some Chieftain who desires somethin’.”

“Maids?” Bonnie asked, remembering what Evan had said about Ruthven being a philanderer. She could see it; Ruthven was a handsome man and it wouldn’t surprise her if the maids who came to his study did more than just serve him food and drink.

“They are . . . curious,” said Ruthven, giving no further explanation. “So much so that I must keep everythin’ important in another room.”

Bonnie stumbled but quickly regained her footing, trying not to show the interest in her expression or her tone when she spoke. “Another room?”

Could this be what she needed? If there was a room where Ruthven kept all his important items, then the documents about him and Balliol would surely be there. She couldn’t show just how much she wanted him to keep talking, though, and so she had to tread carefully, making sure he suspected nothing.

“Aye,” said Ruthven. “I carry the key with me at all times so they cannae enter it. They an’ nae one else either.”

Ruthven offered no more information and Bonnie didn’t know how to ask for it. She couldn’t outright ask him for the location of that room or interrogate him on its contents without appearing suspicious, and so she decided to change the topic entirely. The little she had found out would have to do for now, she thought, and then she would try to gather more information as the days went by.

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

“It must be difficult, bein’ the laird,” she said. “I see it in Macauley . . . it weighs on him, this responsibility fer his clan. An’ it’s the same fer me sister. The Lady o’ the Clan has a heavy burden tae bear.”

Wrapping a gentle hand around Bonnie’s arm, Ruthven said, “Trust me, ye will want fer naething. Dinnae fash. All ye’ll have tae dae is raise our bairns. I will handle the rest.”

So even if he wants me in his study, it isnae tae assist him. It is tae act like another ornament . . . or like a beloved pet.

Bonnie tried her best to keep the disdain from showing in her features and smiled instead, forcing her mouth to contort into the shape. For a while, they continued their walk and Bonnie let Ruthven ramble about their future until she had heard enough. She could excuse herself without appearing too eager to leave or giving him a reason to suspect her.

“Thank ye fer showin’ me the gardens, me laird,” she said. “But I am very tired an’ I wish tae retire fer a while. I hope ye dinnae mind.”

“O’ course,” Ruthven said. “Forgive me fer keepin’ ye fer so long. Ye must be tired after yer travels.”

With that, he led her back to the castle and excused himself to his study the moment they were inside, much to Bonnie’s relief. With him gone, she could find Evan and Alaric and tell them about the room and the key, in the hopes that they could find its location on their own.

Bonnie began to comb the castle methodically, starting from the bottom floor before moving upstairs. For a while, she feared that they were nowhere to be found because they had left, neglecting to inform her of their departure, but then she caught a glimpse of Evan as she passed by one of the corridors, and she rushed to him, finding him there with Alaric.

“I must speak with ye right the now,” she said in a breathless voice, grabbing both their arms to tug them along. “Come.”

At first, they didn’t move and Bonnie walked in place, held there by their combined bulk. When she realized she was going nowhere, she turned to face them expectantly, a rush of breath escaping her lips.

“Well?” she asked. “Come!”

Finally, they followed obediently after her, letting her take them to her rooms. Once she ensured that no one was watching, she pulled them both inside and shut the door, taking a moment to breathe.

“I have information,” she said.

Instantly, Evan and Alaric were upon her, bombarding her with all sorts of questions that she couldn’t hear as they spoke over each other. She waved them both off and pushed them towards the chairs that stood near the fireplace, forcing them to sit, and it was only then that they fell quiet and allowed her to speak.

“There is a room,” she said. “Ruthven said he keeps everythin’ important there because the maids look through his things. He keeps the key on himself at all times.”

Evan and Alaric looked at each other, once again communicating silently between them. Then, they turned to Bonnie, both sporting a look she didn’t like at all.

“Ye must steal the key,” Evan said.

“Steal the key?” Bonnie asked in a hiss, her hand coming up to rub her eyes wearily. How did she always find herself involved in something dangerous? She had gone along with her cousin’s mad plan not so long ago, but at least then she had the excuse that she was under threat by him. What excuse did she have now for her reckless behavior? “Why would I steal the key? Why cannae one o’ ye dae it?”

“Because yer close tae Ruthven,” Alaric pointed out. “He thinks yer tae wed an’ he already wishes tae spend time with ye. Yer the only one who can dae it.”

Bonnie knew it was true, but it didn’t mean that she liked the thought one bit. She had had enough danger to last her a lifetime and she didn’t want to put herself in such a precarious position again.

But what other choice did she have? If she wanted not only to avoid the wedding but to also help her neighboring clans, then she had to do her part. She had to help Evan and Alaric stop Ruthven and Balliol.

Even though she said nothing, Evan and Alaric seemed to sense that she was going to agree. They both smiled at her, those identical, devilish smiles that she had already come to hate.

“Fine,” she said through gritted teeth. “But if anythin’ happens tae me, ye should ken me sister will have her revenge.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Catching Ruthven at a time when he wasn’t busy turned out to be much more of a challenge than Bonnie could have ever anticipated. Days passed with her trying to run into him only to find him locked up in his study along with his advisors from dawn to



dusk, the man rarely ever leaving the room. Had it not been for the necessity of sharing at least one meal with his guests, she wouldn't see him at all.

Is that how it would be were we tae wed? I suppose it wouldnae be so bad if I never saw him.

It was the kind of bargaining she had reached when she realized her council wouldn't let her get away with turning down this marriage proposal. But now she had another choice. Now she could hold onto some hope that Evan and Alaric could bring the truth about Ruthven to light and save her from this loveless pact.

The difficulty Ruthven posed, though, also meant that Bonnie couldn't get him to be alone to extract more information from him no matter how much she tried. She had begun to despair, thinking that all her efforts were in vain, when that morning she stumbled upon Ruthven as he walked out into the courtyard, for once alone.

She didn't waste a moment before she rushed to him, eager to grab her chance now that she had it.

"Good mornin', me laird," she said, bowing her head to him. "I havenae managed tae speak with ye in a while."

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

“Miss MacLaren,” Ruthven said, for a moment taken aback by her sudden appearance, before he smiled warmly at her. “Indeed. I must apologise. Ye came here so we could spend more time together an’ yet I have neglected ye all this time. It truly is terrible o’ me.”

Ruthven sounded truly remorseful, though Bonnie couldn’t be certain that it wasn’t all an act. “It’s alright. Yer a busy man.”

“Aye, so I am,” Ruthven said. “But I have some time now if ye would like tae speak.”

As he spoke, Ruthven offered Bonnie his arm and she beamed as she took it, her heart beating rapidly in her chest. She could finally get what she wanted—perhaps she could even get the key from him if she found the opportunity.

Ruthven must have mistaken her excitement as directed towards himself, but that only made Bonnie’s task easier. As long as he thought that she was fond of him, she was confident she could trick him into many things.

“Shall we take a walk around the grounds?” Bonnie asked. “I enjoyed the gardens very much when ye first showed them tae me.”

Ruthven obliged with a tilt of his head and the two of them headed towards the gardens once more, where there was more privacy than in the open field of the courtyard. It was chilly that morning, too, Bonnie’s breath fogging the air in front of her every time she exhaled, but the sky was clear, bathing the gardens in its golden light.

It was an idyllic scene, so much so that Bonnie could almost forget why she was there and with whom. She would have liked to show the gardens to her sister, she thought; Cathleen would have enjoyed the lush greenery, the way the dappled light illuminated everything around them, the birdsong that echoed from the trees. When Ruthven tightened his grip on her, though, steering her another way, Bonnie was brought back to the present abruptly, reminded of the man next to her.

“Are ye enjoyin’ yer stay here?” Ruthven asked. “It is rather unfortunate yer sister couldnae come. I am concerned ye dinnae have anyone with whom tae spend yer time.”

“I have Evan an’ Alaric,” Bonnie said with a small shrug. In the past few days, she had spent most of her time with them, but always made sure she was never alone with Evan. She even had the suspicion that he was careful, too, keeping his distance and leaving the room whenever Alaric was not around.

Still, she couldn’t claim the time they spent together was unpleasant. The more she got to know the two of them, the more she realized they were not as brutish and violent as she had once thought. It was even entertaining to listen to them, the two of them bickering all the time for the simplest of things and then making up moments later with nothing more than a shared chuckle.

“I see,” said Ruthven, but offered nothing more. The animosity between him and Evan was obvious and for a moment, Bonnie feared that mentioning the two brothers had been unwise, souring Ruthven’s mood, but then he changed the subject as if they had never been mentioned at all. “Perhaps we can write tae yer sister tae visit soon. Surely, the weather must have cleared by now or at least it will soon. An’ I will try tae find more time fer ye, Miss MacLaren. I didnae expect tae be so occupied in clan matters that I couldnae attend tae yer needs.”

“Dinnae fash, please,” said Bonnie, waving a hand dismissively. “It’s perfectly fine.

Like I said, Evan?—”

A blur of movement drew Bonnie’s gaze towards some trees in the distance, the oaks swaying gently in the wind. It was as though speaking his name had summoned him—Evan, hiding there behind one of the tree trunks as he watched her and Ruthven walk around the gardens.

What is he doin’ here? Has he lost his mind?

Bonnie wondered about Evan’s sanity a little too often for her liking. Just when she was starting to think that maybe she had misunderstood him, he did something like this, watching her from the shadows of the trees, and proved to her that he was perhaps not as stable as she had thought.

There was no good reason for him to be trailing after them. Perhaps he worried about her, Bonnie thought, or perhaps he was trying to find out information on his own by watching Ruthven, but either way, he should have left once he saw that she had everything under control. If Ruthven caught him snooping around, then he would certainly have several questions to ask him and his suspicion would be warranted.

“What about Evan?” Ruthven asked, startling Bonnie. There was a brief moment when upon hearing Evan’s name, she thought Ruthven had already spotted him, but then she remembered she had stopped talking in the middle of her sentence.

“Evan . . . Evan an’ Alaric keep me company,” she said with an awkward chuckle as Ruthven looked at her in confusion, his head tilted to the side.

“Is somethin’ the matter?” he asked. “Ye have lost yer color.”

Bonnie cursed silently, chancing a glance back at the trees. She saw no trace of Evan, but she didn’t know if he had left or if he was simply hiding better.

“I’m fine,” she said, forcing a smile on her face. Then, an idea popping into her mind, she said, “Only a little cold, perhaps.”

Ruthven had said he always carried the key to the secret room on him, though he hadn’t specified where, precisely. It was a gamble, but there was no real in risk trying to get his coat, pretending to be cold so he would give it to her.

The key could be in his pocket. If I can find it, then I can give it tae Evan an’ Alaric, an’ we can put an end tae all this madness.

“It is cold, though the weather is surprisingly nice fer the time o’ the year,” Ruthven said, but Bonnie’s complaint didn’t seem to faze him much. They continued their walk around the grounds, Ruthven making no move to give her his coat. “It is often much colder than this here. Is it nae the same in yer lands?”

“Our lands are cold, as well,” Bonnie confirmed, her gaze flitting back and forth as she tried to spot Evan. Soon, she caught another glimpse of him, their eyes locking, and she tried to wave him off as discreetly as she could.

Whether he realized or not, Bonnie didn’t know. Either way, he didn’t move. Instead, he continued to watch them from the shadows and the little cover the trees and the bushes were providing.

When Ruthven came to a halt, Evan swiftly hid behind a tree once more and Bonnie was seconds away from yelling at him in frustration.

“Are ye certain yer alright?” Ruthven asked. “Ye seem . . . worried.”

From the corner of her eye, Bonnie saw Evan’s head popping out from under a bush and she quickly grabbed Ruthven, making sure that he was positioned with his back to Evan.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

“I’m fine!” she said, her voice taking on an almost hysterical tone which surely did nothing to reassure Ruthven. “Truly . . . it is only the cold.”

Ruthven watched her carefully but Bonnie offered no further explanation. Yet again, he continued to walk, pulling her along without offering her his coat, and Bonnie didn’t know how many times she would have to complain before the man got the hint and handed his coat to her.

In the end, she decided that perhaps the best approach would be to ask him directly for it.

“Me laird . . . dae ye think I could have yer coat? I truly am very cold an’ I dinnae wish tae head back inside so soon.”

Ruthven stuttered, eyes opening wide as he realized that Bonnie had been trying to get that coat for a while now. Even his cheeks had a wash of pink over them, his embarrassment apparent as he shrugged off the coat and draped it over Bonnie’s shoulders with an awkward chuckle, shaking his head.

“Forgive me,” he said. “It didnae cross me mind.”

It was a heavy thing, that coat, enveloping Bonnie entirely and almost reaching the ground. The fur on the hem was thick and luxurious, the hide from which it was made sturdy. Bonnie had been so focused on her task that she hadn’t realized just how cold she had truly been until she was nestled in the garment, its warmth seeping into her skin.

Behind Ruthven, in the distance, Evan was glaring daggers at him from behind yet another bush where he had been hiding.

Bonnie quickly dragged her gaze off him and met Ruthven's instead, smiling softly at him. "Thank ye," she said, as she slipped her hand discreetly into one of the pockets only to find it empty. Surely, the coat had more pockets, though, she thought, and so she didn't allow disappointment to wash over her just yet.

As they continued their walk, Bonnie explored all the pockets, always a half-step behind Ruthven so that he wouldn't notice. When she slipped her hand into the interior one, her fingers brushed against something long and made of metal—it certainly had the contours of a key.

Now all she had to do was place it in her own pocket without being detected. Ruthven wouldn't suspect her of stealing it if she did it now, in his presence—or at least so she hoped.

"We could take a ride around the loch one o' these days," Ruthven said. Once again, Bonnie was startled to hear his voice, but she schooled her features into an expression of neutrality quickly, hiding her surprise. "It's a bonnie place. Ye ken how tae ride a horse, dae ye nae?"

"Och aye," said Bonnie. "I never take a carriage. I prefer ridin'."

"It does make one feel free, does it nae?" asked Ruthven. "I prefer it, too. I've been ridin' since I was a bairn."

Bonnie let Ruthven talk about his childhood and riding, only half-listening to him as he spoke about his favorite horse and the fact that he rode the same one for over twenty years. The entire time, she nodded along, keeping him occupied as she carefully plucked the key from the pocket of the coat and quickly stashed it in her

tunic, making sure it was secure.

“What was that?”

Cold sweat drenched Bonnie’s back in an instant, a ripple of fear running down her spine. She had been so careful. Had she been discovered already?

“What, me laird?” she asked, surprised by her own ability to keep her voice steady and well above a whisper.

It took her a few seconds, but soon Bonnie realized Ruthven wasn’t looking at her at all, but rather somewhere in the distance, in a small thicket of bushes, and she barely resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

Evan! That fool!

“I thought I saw somethin’, over there,” Ruithven said, pointing at the bushes. “Stay here . . . I will go an’ see.”

“I’m sure it was naething!” Bonnie said, stepping in front of him to stall him, hopefully long enough for Evan to flee. “Yer castle is secure, o’ course. It must have been a squirrel or a bird.”

Ruthven wasn’t deterred. He placed a strong, warm hand on her shoulder and stilled her, before brushing past her to walk over to the bushes. Bonnie’s breath caught in her throat as she watched him, her heart beating erratically and the blood rushing to her head with fear.

What if Evan was there? What if Ruthven found him hiding among the leaves?

To her horror, Ruthven pulled his sword out of its sheath as he approached. Bonnie



tried to close her eyes, her terror getting the better of her, but it was as though her lids would not cooperate with her. She could only watch, wide-eyed, mouth hanging open, as Ruthven parted the bushes with one decisive move of his hands—and found nothing.

Relief washed over Bonnie when Ruthven turned around after his inspection, satisfied that there was no threat. Her legs could hardly hold her upright, knees shaking uncontrollably, but she couldn't collapse just yet; not in his presence. She would have to wait until she was back in her chambers and could allow the fear to overtake her in peace.

“Ye were right,” he said. “It must have been a squirrel.”

Behind him, far enough that he wouldn't be seen or heard by Ruthven, Evan slipped through the trees and the shadows, heading back to the castle.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“I've got it!”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

The door of Evan's room had hardly closed behind her when Bonnie pulled the key out of her pocket and held it up triumphantly, grinning from ear to ear. She had been waiting all day to get him and Alaric alone, and now that they were done with dinner, she finally had the chance to slip into his chambers unnoticed.

Evan and Alaric both stood from their chairs and approached, Evan plucking the key from Bonnie's hand to take a better look.

"Are ye certain this is it?" he asked.

"How could I ken?" Bonnie said with a roll of her eyes. "He said he always has it on him an' that was the only key he had on him . . . in his coat, at least. It isnae as if I could ask him if it's the right one!"

As she spoke, Bonnie snatched the key back from Evan, holding it behind her back. For a moment, he stared at her and when he lunged for the key, Bonnie was ready for it, taking a swift step back, much to his irritation.

"Why were ye watchin' us?" she asked, knowing it would be more effective to hold onto the key if she wanted an answer from him. "Did ye nae think that ye could have ruined everythin'? After all the trouble I put meself through tae get this key!"

"Ye were watchin' them?" Alaric asked, raising a curious eyebrow.

Evan stood with his hands on his hips, glaring at the two of them. "We are meant tae be watchin' Ruthven, in case ye have forgotten. I was only doin' what I was supposed tae be doin'."

“Ye were glarin’ at him from afar,” Bonnie pointed out. “I dinnae understand how ye could ever think such a strategy could help ye.”

“Is yer strategy any better?” Evan asked.

“Well, I have the key, so I would say aye, it’s much better,” Bonnie said.

“Let us nae argue,” Alaric said, stepping between them to put an end to their argument. “Now that we have the key, we can go tae the room an’ see what we can find.”

Bonnie and Evan glared at each other over Alaric’s shoulder, at least until Alaric shifted to hide them from each other.

“Enough,” Alaric said, turning back and forth to face both of them. “We should go tae the room now.”

“Fine.” Bonnie handed the key to Alaric, giving him a smile that was more of a baring of teeth. “Here. I’ll be waitin’ fer ye.”

“Yer comin’ with us,” said Evan, in a tone that implied she had no other option.

Bonnie’s eyes narrowed, head tilting to the side. “What dae ye mean? Why would I come with ye?”

“Because someone needs tae keep guard an’ it’s better tae have two pairs o’ eyes over one,” said Evan wearily, as if it was perfectly obvious. “Alaric will keep watch an’ we will search fer anythin’ we can find.”

Bonnie shook her head vehemently. “Nay . . . nay, nay, I am nae goin’ there with ye. I already stole the key fer ye. Ye can dae this on yer own.”

“Yer comin’ with us,” Evan insisted.

“An’ why would I dae as ye say?”

“Be quiet, both o’ ye!” Alaric said, a hand coming up to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Yer givin’ me a headache an’ yer both shoutin’! What if someone walks by an’ hears ye? Be quiet!”

Bonnie’s and Evan’s mouths snapped shut immediately at the reminder that someone could hear them. At least they both had enough common sense to keep their voices down, Bonnie thought, even as they continued to glare at each other, neither of them willing to back down. She didn’t think she would ever manage to understand Evan fully. One day, he was leaning close to her to kiss her and now he was looking at her as though he wanted to murder her.

With a sigh, Alaric turned to Bonnie, giving her a gentle smile that she didn’t like at all, already knowing what was to follow.

“I understand that the idea o’ lookin’ around in Ruthven’s things isnae very appealin’ an’ may even sound dangerous?—”

“It is dangerous,” Bonnie corrected.

“An’ is dangerous,” Alaric said without missing a beat, “but we need ye. It will be easier with ye there. Faster.”

“I dinnae even ken what it is I should be lookin’ fer.”

“Neither dae we,” Alaric said with a small shrug. “We will ken when we find it.”

“I’d rather nae be involved in this,” Bonnie said, trying to refuse as diplomatically as

possible.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

“Yer already involved,” Evan said as he headed to the door, yanking it open. “Come.”

Bonnie looked between him and Alaric, who only gave her an apologetic look. It meant little to Bonnie, though, when she knew he, too, wanted her to follow them but was simply not as vocal about it as Evan.

Throwing her hands up in exasperation, Bonnie followed Evan out of the room, Alaric walking close behind. “Dae ye even ken where the room is?” she asked, hoping that they wouldn’t have to go around the entire castle testing out the key in the locks.

“We have an idea,” Alaric said quietly, even though there was no one else around. “We saw him exit and lock a room two days ago. We think that must be the one.”

Evan led them all towards the room, the entire time watching all around them to make sure no one was following. Alaric was doing the same from where he was walking behind Bonnie, the two of them working together seamlessly. In the soft light of the torches that lined the hallways, Bonnie kept thinking that someone was, indeed, following them, every time a shadow stretched over the walls, every time a flame flickered nearby. Soon, though, Evan stopped in front of a narrow, unassuming door not too far from Ruthven’s study and pushed the key into the lock, quietly pushing it open.

When he looked at Bonnie and Alaric over his shoulder, he was grinning.

“Quickly,” Alaric said, pushing the two of them inside and closing the door. Suddenly, Bonnie and Evan were alone after days of having a buffer between them,

and she froze for a moment, uncertain of what to do or say.

Evan didn't seem to have the same internal turmoil as she did, though, and he immediately threw himself to his task, looking through the documents that were piled on a small table by an equally small fireplace. After seeing him, Bonnie began to look through Ruthven's belongings as well, looking into the drawers of the desk.

It was a small room, illuminated only by the moonlight that streamed in through the window, but it was packed to the brim with small cabinets, chests, and papers. Bonnie didn't even know how they could possibly manage to go through it all and find what they were looking for, especially when they could hardly see what they were doing. Once again, the shadows loomed over her, ominous and terrifying, and she swallowed drily around the knot in her throat, trying to convince her heart to slow its erratic beating.

“Good evenin’! Are ye on patrol again?”

Alaric's loud voice made both Bonnie and Evan freeze, the two of them glancing at each other in the darkness of the room. Bonnie could hardly see his expression, but she was certain it was one of fear, just like the one on her face.

Guards . . . dae they ken we are in here?

Silently, Evan approached her, walking slowly so that his footsteps would remain quiet, as well. Then, he placed a hand between her shoulders and steered her behind the desk, pushing her down to the floor before joining her there, huddling behind its large frame. When Bonnie looked at him, Evan raised a finger to his mouth, motioning to her to stay silent.

“Ach, I couldnae sleep!” Alaric said from outside, in response to something Bonnie hadn't heard the guards ask. “I thought I would go fer a walk an' see if it would tire

me.”

Evan was torturously close, warmth radiating from his body. Bonnie could feel all of it, every tiny shift of muscle, every breath he took, too loud in the quiet of the room. As they knelt there, hiding behind the desk, Evan’s hand was still on her back, all solid heat that seeped into her body even through her tunic, and her own breath stuttered, a shiver running through her.

She only hoped Evan couldn’t feel it or if he could, then at least that he would blame it on the fear of being caught.

“On the morrow?” Alaric asked, his voice only getting louder the more he spoke. Bonnie wondered if the guards found it strange that he was shouting for no reason, but so far, no one had come in through the door, so she considered that a victory. “Aye, perhaps I could. I’ll tell ye in the morn.”

The more they stayed there, the closer Evan seemed to lean towards Bonnie, until they were pressed up against each other, sharing the same air. Perhaps it had been Bonnie, too, who leaned closer, seeking any comfort she could find in her terror. When they touched, Evan turned his head to look at her, the two of them staring at each other in silence, his dark eyes glittering in the dim light. Once again, they were close enough to kiss. All Bonnie would have to do was move just a little closer, bridging the gap between them.

She didn’t and neither did Evan.

Laughter echoed through the room as Alaric and the guards said their goodbyes, but even after it faded, neither Bonnie nor Evan dared to stand from their hiding spot. Only when the door opened a few moments later did Evan move, trying to stand only to bang his head on the ornate arm of the chair that stood next to him, a curse flying past his lips.



“What did ye find?” Alaric asked, closing the door once more behind him. Bonnie was relieved to hear his voice, to know that it was him who had come into the room and not one of the guards.

Dazed and rubbing the top of his head, Evan stood and Bonnie followed him as he walked around the desk. The moment was gone, dissipating like smoke from an extinguished candle, and a part of her was relieved for it. Another part, though, a small, hidden part that she would never acknowledge truly, mourned yet another lost chance to feel Evan’s lips against her own.

“Nae much,” Evan said in a hushed voice, but then he rummaged through some papers at the same spot where he had previously been looking and handed them to Alaric, who perused them quickly. “Only these letters. But there is so much here. Surely, we can find more proof than this.”

“What are these?” Alaric asked. “Did ye manage tae read them?”

“Correspondence between Ruthven an’ Balliol,” Evan said. “We must read them carefully, but it’s all I could find fer now.”

“Alright,” said Alaric, nodding. “Alright, we will take these an’ study them an’ then . . . then we’ll try tae return here an’ find somethin’ more.”

“Ye must be jestin’, surely,” Bonnie said, hands on her hips as she stared the other two down. “We’re here now. An’ we cannae keep the key or Ruthven will begin tae suspect us. We should try tae find out as much as we can.”

“There isnae any time,” Alaric said. “The guards will be back soon an’ we cannae risk them seein’ us here. It’s too dangerous.”

“So is keepin’ the key,” Bonnie insisted.

“We’ll return the key,” said Evan. “An’ then we will steal it again.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

Bywe, Bonnie had the distinct and unpleasant suspicion that Evan meant her and her alone. She could already imagine his voice as he would try to convince her, claiming that since she had already done it once, she could very easily do it again and not get caught.

Before she could protest any further, Evan grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the room, much to Bonnie's irritation. Once they were a few steps down the corridor, she yanked her hand away from his grip and Evan let her go without protest, though she didn't miss the way he rolled his eyes at her.

He was an infuriating man. Even when Bonnie was close to changing his mind about him, he did something to prove that her initial assessment of him had, in fact, been correct. Evan MacGregor was a brute and he would never change.

When they reached their chambers, Evan and Alaric both entered Evan's, leaving the door open for Bonnie to join them. She had no desire to spend another minute in Evan's presence, though, and even Alaric had begun to irritate her with his attitude, as he let Evan do as he wished with her, never once standing up for Bonnie.

But why would he? He's Evan's brother.

Bonnie would do the same for Cathleen, had they been in their shoes. In fact, she had done much worse for her, going along with a scheme that could have hurt several innocent people had she and Cathleen not changed their minds in the end.

Once she was inside her room, she pushed the door shut with a slam, making sure Evan and Alaric would hear it and know just how upset she was. Whether they would

care or not, though, was an entirely different matter.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Determined to stop himself from thinking about Bonnie during each and every one of his waking moments, Evan threw all his efforts into the plan, he and Alaric working tirelessly to gather as much information as they could. After Bonnie refused to join them in his chambers, he and Alaric, spent the rest of the night going over the letters again and again, desperately trying to find any evidence that would be incriminating enough, but with no success.

Evan had proposed the possibility of ciphers being used. Alaric took it a step further and proposed those letters were only meant to be a distraction, something to confuse those who would intercept them and reveal their identities to Ruthven and Balliol. Both of them labored over the papers, trying to find some meaning, only to fall asleep over them near dawn, too exhausted to continue.

When Evan opened his eyes, his cheek was pressed against the table, drool collecting in the corner of his mouth. He sat up quickly in his chair, one of the letters sticking to his skin before he ripped it roughly off his face.

The sound startled Alaric awake, who also shot up straight, eyes wide as he scanned the room around him. He only relaxed when he saw there was no immediate threat, and then he turned his gaze to the pile of letters on the table, looking at them forlornly.

“Did we manage tae find out anythin’?” he asked Evan as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “I dinnae even remember.”

“Nay,” Evan said with a groan. “We cannae prove much other than the fact that there is correspondence between them, but that doesnae damn him. We need more

information if we wish tae destroy Ruthven.”

Alaric cursed under his breath, letting his head fall back against the chair. Outside, the sun was high up in the sky, the light relentless as it poured through the window. Evan didn't know how long they had slept, but it was certainly not long enough, even if it seemed to be later in the day. In fact, it had been several days since he had last had a good night's sleep, and he didn't know how much longer he could take this before he stopped functioning.

“We need somethin' . . . somethin' more,” Evan said, racking his brain to try and find another way to gather information. “We cannae bribe the guards, we have limited access tae Ruthven . . .”

“The maids?” Alaric asked, suddenly alert as he leaned forward in his seat. “Bonnie said they look intae the laird's things, didnae she? So maybe they'll have somethin' tae tell us.”

“Why would they tell us?” Evan asked. “I suppose we could offer them some gold, but enough fer them tae risk their lives?”

Alaric pinned Evan with a mischievous look, cocking one eyebrow and smirking at him suggestively. At first, Evan didn't know what it was he was trying to imply, but then it struck him and he shook his head, unwilling to even consider it.

“Nay,” he said. “Nay, I'd much rather find a different way.”

“Why?” Alaric asked. “All ye have tae dae is charm them. Yer good at it.”

“Why dinnae ye dae it instead?” Evan asked. “Why must it always be me?”

“Because they're nae as afraid o' ye as they are o' me,” Alaric pointed out and Evan

had to admit that he had a point. There were always women, though, who enjoyed Alaric's rugged and frankly dangerous look a lot more. He even often had more success with them—not so much because of his looks, but rather because Evan was not well-versed in the art of meaningless conversation.

Evan could do it, of course, if he wanted to. He could sweet-talk the maids and make them spill some of their secrets, but the mere thought brought forth a pounding headache. He preferred a more direct approach, something simple and honest, like taking an important man hostage and getting the truth out of him. Flirting with the maids, though perhaps a necessary evil, was not high on his list of preferred methods.

“Find one o’ the young uns,” Alaric said. “One who is impressionable. It willnae take long.”

“Or she’ll suspect me an’ she will tell Ruthven,” Evan pointed out.

“Ye can make sure she willnae suspect.”

Evan tapped his fingers against the armrest of his chair, watching Alaric through narrowed eyes. He knew his brother would not budge no matter what he said, but even if it wasn't something Evan wanted to do, he figured there was more to gain than to lose if he tried.

He would be discreet about it. He would make sure the woman wouldn't suspect him.

“Fine,” he said with a sigh, finally relenting. “Fine, but if it doesnae work, we’ll dae it the way I want.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

“An’ what, precisely, would ye suggest?” Alaric asked, gesturing his arms as if to say he was all ears. “I would love tae hear yer suggestions.”

Evan glared at him, unimpressed by Alaric’s sarcasm. He didn’t, in fact, have any suggestions and Alaric knew that perfectly well. Had he been capable of coming up with another plan, he would have done so already.

“Well . . . get out o’ me chambers,” Evan said, standing up with a decisive sigh. “An’ let me prepare.”

With an inelegant snort, Alaric stood and slapped Evan encouragingly on the back as he walked by him. He was gone without another word, heading to his own chambers, and once Evan was alone, he began the task of looking as presentable as possible.

It was easier said than done for him, of course. There was a natural roughness to his looks, from his dark beard to the hair that refused to lay neatly on his head. His size didn’t help either, as he towered over men and women alike, looking very much like what he was—a human weapon.

After trying his best with his hair, looking intently at his reflection in the looking-glass, he gave up and decided he was simply going to have to take his chances. Leaving the room, he made his way around the castle and tried to figure out which girl he should approach first, his mind going through the list of all the maids he had met during his stay.

As he passed by the bottom of the stairs, he caught a glimpse of one of them as she hurried towards the kitchens. Evan recognized her as Ada, one of the younger women

in the castle, who had smiled openly at him only a few days prior.

As far as his options were concerned, she was perhaps the best one.

Evan approached her quickly, sliding up in front of her to block her way. At first, Ada was startled, but when she saw it was him, she smiled warmly, giving him a bow.

“Good mornin’, me laird,” she said bashfully, her cheeks turning a soft shade of pink. Though she didn’t resemble Bonnie at all with her blonde hair and bright blue eyes, Bonnie was still the only one Evan could think about in that moment. He had to chase the thought of her out of her mind to focus on the task at hand, and he forced a smile on his lips as he leaned against the wall.

“Good mornin’, Ada,” he said, voice dropping low and taking on a sultry tone. “Are ye busy?”

“Only a little,” Ada said. “Is there somethin’ ye need?”

“I only wished tae speak with ye,” Evan said with a small shrug.

Around them, the corridor was empty, but the privacy they had was little more than an illusion. Not too far from them, the kitchens were bustling with activity and at the other end of the corridor, guards and servants went about their days and chores. Evan didn’t have much time to get what he needed, and he had to be clever about it.

“Did ye?” Ada asked, looking at him through lowered lashes, her hand coming up to smooth her hair. “About?”

Evan gave another shrug, his mind scrambling to figure out a way to ask her what he needed to ask. “Just about ye,” he said. Perhaps if he turned the conversation towards



her, then he could eventually steer it towards Ruthven. “What have ye been doin’ today?”

Ada raised an eyebrow as if she didn’t quite believe that was all Evan wanted from her, though she probably thought it was a pathetic attempt at flirting rather than a ploy to get information on her laird. She looked at Evan from head to toe and then up again, gaze locking onto his.

“Well . . . I helped in the kitchens an’ then I scrubbed the floors,” she said. “I’m afraid it isnae anythin’ that would thrill ye, me laird.”

Evan took a deep breath, considering his next words carefully. “A bonnie lass like ye . . . ye shouldnae have tae dae such things.”

As he spoke, he took her hands in his, thumbs brushing over the calluses and the roughened skin, drawing a gasp out of Ada. She blushed once again, her cheeks turning a bright shade of red, but made no attempt to pull away from Evan.

“An’ what should I be doin’?” Ada asked, eager to play along.

“If ye were in me castle, I would have ye servin’ me an’ only me,” said Evan. “How is it that Laird Ruthven doesnae dae that?”

“Well . . . I’m nae only servin’ Laird Ruthven, but I dae serve him often personally,” Ada said, taking the bait much to Evan’s relief. “I bring him his meals, I clean his study . . . I serve his guests.”

“His guests? Does he have guests often?”

“Och aye,” said Ada. “People visit him often an’ he invites them tae stay fer as long as they’d like.”

“How kind o’ him,” said Evan, though even he couldn’t make the words sound like he meant them. “Is John Balliol one o’ those guests, perhaps?”

Ada gave him a curious look, one that betrayed her suspicion. At first, she said nothing, glancing around her for a moment as if she wanted to see if someone could hear them.

“I will tell ye in exchange fer a kiss,” she said in the end, all that bashfulness from before suddenly gone.

Was it all an act? Perhaps she isnae the shy lass I thought she was.

Then again, Evan wasn’t who he claimed to be either. He could hardly blame her for putting on an act to get what she wanted when he was doing the exact same thing.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

“Very well,” Evan said, chuckling as he leaned closer to cradle her cheek in his hand. For a moment, he only looked at her, before he captured her lips in a soft kiss, feeling her sigh against his mouth.

Footsteps echoed down the corridor before coming to a sudden halt. Ada, frightened by them, wrenched herself free of Evan and turned around to look at the intruder with wide eyes.

Evan’s were just as wide when he saw who it was: Bonnie, standing there, at the end of the hallway, her delicate features contorted into a mask of betrayal.

Dinner was once again a tense affair. Bonnie and Evan sat across from each other, with Laird Ruthven at the head of the table and Alaric next to Evan, but they had exchanged no words so far. They only glared at each other every chance they got, over their forks and the rims of their cups, uncaring of what Alaric and Laird Ruthven would think of it.

Bonnie pushed the piece of rabbit around her plate, her appetite gone from the moment she had stepped foot in that corridor earlier that day and seen Evan kissing one of the maids. The sight had made the blood in her veins run cold, a chill running through her as though she had been doused with cold water. Her stomach had turned into a knot since and she couldn’t stomach any food that was placed in front of her.

The worst part was that she shouldn’t care. Why should she care what Evan did? Why should she care if he kissed other women? What had happened between them was nothing more than a mistake, nothing more than a few moments of weakness, and besides, it meant nothing. They hadn’t kissed. They owed each other nothing.

Still, the mere sight of Evan was enough to stoke the fires of her rage, her fury threatening to bubble over. She couldn't stand being at the same table as him. She couldn't stand the memory of him kissing that maid.

"Yer very quiet today, Miss MacLaren," Laird Ruthven said and Bonnie's grip tightened around her fork, a wave of fury coursing through her. "Is somethin' the matter?"

"Nay, me laird," said Bonnie with a reassuring smile—as reassuring as she could muster, at least. "I simply dinnae have an appetite."

"Is the food nae tae yer likin'?" Ruthven asked. "The cooks could prepare somethin' different fer ye. Anythin' ye wish."

"Thank ye, yer very kind, but I truly am fine," Bonnie said, before she turned her gaze back to Evan, eyes narrowing. "Perhaps I will eat later, in me rooms. Alone."

Silence stretched over the table for several moments. Even the sounds of scraping cutlery stopped entirely, and Bonnie could hear nothing but the ringing in her ears as her rage grew.

"If I am affectin' yer appetite, cousin, perhaps I should leave the table," Evan said through gritted teeth. "We wouldnae want ye tae waste away because o' me."

The nerve o' him tae be angry with me!

Ruthven and Alaric both looked back and forth between them, wearing identical looks of confusion. Though she had thought that Evan and Alaric said everything to each other, it seemed the kiss with the maid was something Evan hadn't shared with his brother.

“Or perhaps it is time fer ye tae head back home,” Bonnie said. From the corner of her eye, she could see the panicked look on Alaric’s face, but she continued to speak before he could interrupt her and try to salvage the situation. “I’m sure there are plenty o’ maids there who are tae yer likin’.”

“Perhaps there are,” Evan said with a shrug. “What does it matter tae ye?”

It was a good question, Bonnie thought—one that she couldn’t answer, of course, especially not in front of Ruthven. Instead of the truth, she said, “It is hardly proper an’ ye are well aware o’ that. It doesnae become ye.”

“An’ this doesnae become ye,” Evan shot right back, his tone taking on a sharp edge. “Ye speak o’ things ye dinnae ken.”

“I think I ken enough.”

“Ye ken naething.”

“Alright!”

Alaric’s booming voice cut through the argument, silencing both Evan and Bonnie immediately. Sheepishly, Bonnie looked at him and then at Ruthven, color rushing to her cheeks when she realized how much the argument sounded like a lovers’ spat. She shouldn’t have lost her temper like this, especially in front of Ruthven, but then again, Evan hadn’t been any better than her.

“We will discuss this later,” said Alaric with a tight, forced smile on his lips. “As a . . . family.”

Bonnie drew in a shaky breath. Distantly, she heard Alaric explain to Ruthven that she had always been protective of her family, her sister and her cousins alike, the

excuse coming to him with practiced ease. She hardly heard anything Alaric and Ruthven had to say, though. She could only hear the rush of blood to her head, the rabbit-fast, erratic beat of her heart.

Though she could hardly call what Evan had done a betrayal, it still hurt; it hurt more than she ever thought it would, as though an arrow had pierced through her, leaving her to bleed out in agony. After a few seconds of her and Evan staring at each other, she couldn't take it anymore, and so she stood, the chair's legs scraping loudly against the stone floor.

"Excuse me," she mumbled. "I require some fresh air."

Before anyone could stop her, before anyone could even offer to accompany her, Bonnie was gone, spilling out into the darkness of the courtyard where she could finally be alone.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Arelentless wind blew through the training grounds of Castle Ruthven that morning and the sky was a dark grey, reminding Evan of the steel of his blade. After that disastrous dinner the previous night, he had come there to train with the Ruthven men, eager to get some of his frustrations out before he would have to see Bonnie again later that day, but none of them posed a real challenge to him.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

He had begged Alaric to fight him. Then he had tried to goad him into it, irritating him just to get him to agree, but Alaric hadn't stooped low enough to accept the challenge. He had only given him a pat on the shoulder and told him he would spend the day trying to find information if Evan wished to meet him later.

It frustrated Evan to no end. He couldn't do his job while he was frustrated and he couldn't let go of his frustration unless he released it.

Sweat dripped from his brow as he parried the blow dealt by the man he was fighting. He was young, barely more than a boy, with bright eyes and fat still clinging to his ruddy cheeks, and though he was nimble and spry, he was no match for Evan's skills. At the next blow, Evan swung his dulled sword hard, disarming him when their blades met, before he pressed the edge of it just against the skin of the man's throat.

Even without the threat of a real blade, he froze, his throat bobbing as he swallowed.

"Yer skills make me men seem incompetent."

The familiar voice broke Evan out of his thoughts and he turned around to see Ruthven there, standing just at the edge of the training grounds. How long had he been watching, Evan wondered? And how was it that even though his words were praising him, they sounded mocking coming out of his mouth?

Evan grinned, though the gesture lacked all warmth. He walked over to Ruthven, the tip of his sword dragging over the ground with a hiss, and he stopped right in front of him, their gazes locking. From up close, there seemed to be little difference in their sizes—Ruthven was almost as tall and broad as Evan, posing a different kind of

challenge for him.

“Perhaps ye should fight me yerself, Laird Ruthven,” he said, making it sound like the challenge it was. “If ye think that yer men are nae good enough fer me.”

Ruthven responded with a smile of his own, one that was just as fake; nothing more than a fragile, barely polite mask that threatened to slip off his face at any moment. Even though Evan was already too close, Ruthven took a step forward, invading his space.

“I accept yer challenge,” he said. Then, he sidestepped Evan and held his hand out as he walked to the middle of the large, marked-out square the men used for training, waiting for someone to hand him a sword.

One of his men was quick to offer him one, placing the hilt into his palm. Evan chuckled to himself before he approached, his fingers curling tightly around the handle of his sword, his gaze never straying from Ruthven. There was no doubt in his mind he could defeat him. There were few who were a match for him, and with his fondness for luxury and a soft life, he doubted Ruthven was one of them.

A small cloud of dust kicked up as Evan planted his feet into the ground, bracing himself. As they stared at each other, a few drops fell on Evan’s skin, announcing the beginning of the storm that had been looming over the land ever since dawn broke. Neither man was fazed by it. It was cold, it was windy, and the ground would soon turn into mud, but all Evan could see was Ruthven as a target in front of him, all but asking to be defeated.

For a short while, they only circled each other, taking care to notice the pattern of each other’s footsteps. In order to really gauge Ruthven’s ability, though, Evan had to attack him, and so he threw himself at him with a huff of breath, their swords clanging in the silence around them as Ruthven easily parried the blow.



It had been a lazy attack, one meant to test, and Evan was certain Ruthven knew as much. It wouldn't be long, though, before they were both trying to prove themselves to each other and to their audience, striving for the victory. After the first attack, Ruthven dealt one of his own, another attempt at testing skill.

The two of them continued like this for a few more minutes, trading blows without trying to get the upper hand. Once Evan had puzzled out the pattern of Ruthven's attacks, though, his next blow was a real one.

Ruthven realized in time, his sword coming up to parry the blow just at the right moment. The force of the impact sent both men stumbling backwards, away from each other, but Ruthven wasted no time before attacking again. His sword arced in the air as he rushed towards Evan, his lips curled into a snarl and his eyes wide with more than the excitement of the fight.

There was no doubt in Evan's mind that the same rage which coursed through him had also overtaken Ruthven. Their animosity towards each other was not a secret anymore, laid bare in front of the eyes of all the men who stood around them, watching them fight. And yet, neither man cared enough to stop or to try, at least, to hide the real reason behind their fight.

It was all because of Bonnie, Evan knew. Before the disastrous dinner of the previous night, he hadn't been so openly hostile to him.

Around them, the rain had begun to pour in earnest, thick drops of water splashing onto the ground under their feet. The dirt was quickly turning into slick mud and Evan's boots sank into it with every step he took, making his task all the more difficult for him. At least Ruthven seemed to have the same problem, feet sliding over the ground as he rushed towards him with his sword prepared to strike.

With a swift, hard swing of his blade, Evan disarmed Ruthven. Under the force of the

blow, it flew out of Ruthven's grip and landed in the mud a few feet away, much to Ruthven's chagrin. He growled deep in his chest, the sound reverberating in the air around them, but then planted his feet into the ground and raised his fists.

"Come on, then," he said, eyes narrow as he looked at Evan. "If ye are so good, ye dinnae need a sword tae defeat me."

Evan wanted to point out that he had already defeated him. All he had to do was press his blade against his throat, and that would end the fight between them, declaring him the winner. Fighting him—properly this time, with his fists colliding with flesh—seemed more appealing, though, and so he tossed his sword aside, hands curling into fists.

The gesture drew a shocked gasp out of the audience. Those around them whispered among them, but Evan neither could nor cared to hear what they had to say. They were all Ruthven's men, so naturally, they would be supporting their leader, but no one had the gall to chant his name or yell any encouragement.

In fact, the training grounds were almost silent, save for the patter of the rain. Evan pushed a few strands of hair away from his face, water dripping from them as he circled Ruthven like a predator, trying to find the best moment to strike.

Still, Ruthven struck first. His fist flew towards Evan's face and he barely managed to dodge it, ducking just in time for Ruthven to miss and stumble forward with his momentum. As he moved forward, Evan threw himself at him and grabbed him by the waist, tackling him to the ground.

Ruthven landed on his back, his breath rushing out of his lungs. Evan's fist swiftly found Ruthven's cheek, knuckles colliding with the bone hard with a sickening crunch. Pain flared up his arm, his knuckles stinging with the impact, but Evan didn't care. All he cared about was that he had Ruthven exactly where he needed him, in his

mercy.

Once again, he brought his fist down, only for Ruthven to move his head at the last moment. Evan's hand plunged into the mud and Ruthven took the chance to wrap his fingers around his wrist, using his hips as leverage to throw Evan off him and onto the ground on his back. Suddenly, Evan found himself staring up at the grey sky, the rain pouring on his face as he lay there for just a second, trying to catch his breath. Then, he pushed himself up and steadied himself as Ruthven circled him in turn, watching him like a hawk. At least he was giving him some time to stand instead of attacking him right away. He had enough honor to hold back until they were at the same level once again; until Evan was on his feet, steady and ready to go.

Uncertainty spread around them as the men debated whether or not they should pull the two of them apart. Evan hoped noone would intervene; he and Ruthven needed to settle this, and leaving the fight unfinished would only cause more problems between them. Once again, Ruthven rushed towards him, but this time Evan was ready for it. Still, Ruthven's fist connected with his cheek, his head snapping to the side as his ears filled with a ringing sound. At first, there was no pain. There was nothing but the vibration of bone against bone, before the pain finally seeped in, spreading all over his skull.

Evan was quick to retaliate, even disoriented as the punch left him. He grabbed Ruthven by the front of his tunic with his left hand as he dealt one punch, then another on the side of his face. Before he knew it, though, a dull pain bloomed in his stomach as Ruthven hit him there with a strong fist, making him double over.

“Stop!”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

Bonnie's voice rang over the training grounds, though Evan hardly registered it. The only thing that stopped him from attacking again was the hand on his shoulder, rough as it tugged him back and away from the other man.

"That is enough," Alaric growled, coming to stand between them. At the sound of his brother's voice, Evan's head cleared a little, some of his rage dissipating—just enough for him to hold himself back instead of tearing his way through to get to Ruthven.

A few paces away, Ruthven spat blood on the ground, a hand coming up to rub his injured cheek. But then, when Evan felt a pair of hands—these much gentler than those of his brother—Ruthven's features contorted with uncontrollable rage, a snarl baring his teeth.

"It seems like Miss MacLaren has clear preferences," Ruthven said, his words dripping with venom. "It's rather odd, dinnae ye think?"

Evan didn't know who, precisely, it was that Ruthven was addressing with his question, but he doubted he was talking to him. Bonnie, her hands slipping off Evan's shoulders, took a few steps forward, mouth set in a firm line.

"I am concerned fer me cousin," she said. "Is that so terrible, Laird Ruthven? Dinnae ye think it is me duty tae take care o' me kin?"

Ruthven said nothing. He only stared at the three of them, his frown deepening the longer he remained silent. Then, he huffed and turned around, stomping back towards the castle without offering another word.

“Come,” Bonnie told Evan, placing a hand on his shoulder to guide him. “Let us take ye tae the healer.”

“I am fine, Bonnie,” Evan said with a roll of his eyes. “I’ve had much worse than this.”

“Ye should still see the healer,” Bonnie insisted, completely ignoring Evan’s protests and pushing him insistently towards the healer’s quarters near the training grounds. “I will feel better if ye dae.”

Evan frowned in confusion as he turned to look at Bonnie while she dragged him along. Not so long ago, they were arguing, eagerly shooting hurtful words at each other, and yet now there she was, worrying about his health. Though he didn’t think there was any need to see the healer, he went along with it just because it would give Bonnie some peace of mind.

Once Bonnie shoved him into the healer’s quarters, the man took over, quickly checking over all his injuries. He was not particularly gentle as he poked and prodded at Evan, but at least he was efficient and thorough, and in only a few minutes, he had reassured both him and Bonnie that he was perfectly fine—he only needed some rest and ointments for his bruises.

“Forgive me,” the healer said. He was an older man, with greying hair and shallow lines around his eyes that betrayed a life of smiles. “I must attend tae me laird.”

With that, he was gone before either Evan or Bonnie could leave his quarters, and suddenly the two of them were left all alone for the first time after several days.

At first, neither spoke. Evan sat at the edge of a ratty bed pushed against the wall, while Bonnie paced in front of him, her eyes never meeting his.

When she finally spoke, she said, “Why would ye dae such a thing? I dinnae understand ye. Why would ye attack Laird Ruthven in his own home?”

“He suggested it,” Evan was quick to say. He wouldn’t take the blame for this when it had been Ruthven who had come to him searching for a fight. “I only did what he wanted.”

“Even if he suggested it, ye shouldnae have agreed,” Bonnie pointed out. Deep down, Evan knew she was right, of course. He should have kept his temper in check. He should have taken a step back, tried to diffuse the tension between them as much as he could. He hadn’t done that, though. He had taken the bait and he had risked ruining all his plans.

Will Ruthven send us away now?

It sounded more likely than Evan would have liked to think. After all, Ruthven had every right to kick them out of his castle after such a violent display from Evan.

“Well, he deserved it,” Evan said. It was easier to insist, to pretend that he wasn’t in the wrong at all. “An’ he asked fer it, so I dinnae see why ye are beratin’ me instead o’ him.”

“Because we are meant tae be nice tae him!” Bonnie huffed in exasperation, a hand coming up to rub her forehead wearily. “I dinnae have tae explain this tae ye. Ye already ken we must be polite.”

Gritting his teeth, Evan considered his next response carefully, since he knew Bonnie was right but didn’t want to admit it. Still, he didn’t know how he would get out of this unscathed.

“It was only a spar between two men,” he said in the end with a deep sigh. The

excuse was weak even to his own ears, but it was too late for him to back down now. He had long since made the decision to stick to this line of defense and admitting he was at fault now seemed less than ideal to him. "I am sure he will look past it. It was only a minor brawl."

"Is that what ye call it?" Bonnie asked with a humorless laugh, coming to a halt right in front of Evan to glare at him. "A minor scuffle? Ye are both covered in bruises an' cuts! Ye fought in front o' dozens o' his men! Everyone saw ye an' everyone will be discussin' this fer weeks!"

"Why should I care what Ruthven's men discuss?" Evan asked, standing from where he sat on the edge of the bed. Suddenly, they were impossibly close, Bonnie's chest brushing against him with every breath she took. The realization brought them both to a tense silence and a shiver passed through Evan at their proximity, his hands itching to reach out and touch.

Yet again, all he had to do to kiss her was close that small gap between them, and suddenly, it was the only thing he could think about, every other thought banished from his mind.

"If I must explain this tae ye, then I can only assume ye are an unthinkin' fool," said Bonnie, a muscle in her jaw jumping as she gritted her teeth. Evan raised an eyebrow at the insult, more intrigued than offended.

"It doesnae become a lady tae speak like this," he said, half-serious and half-teasing.

Predictably, Bonnie didn't miss a beat. "It doesnae become a laird either. Is this how yer parents raised ye?"

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

Evan froze. The last thing he had expected was for Bonnie to mention his parents, and the memories of their death flooded through his mind, as they tended to do whenever he thought about them. Everything, from the smallest smile they had ever given him to his most vivid and important memories, had been marred by their death. There was nothing joyful left. There was nothing he could hold onto that didn't bring back this lancing pain that tore his heart in two.

Slowly, Evan pushed past Bonnie, throat closing uncomfortably around the lump there. For a moment, he felt the brush of her hand over his arm, but then she let go of him.

A part of Evan wished she hadn't.

"I must . . . I must go," he said, providing no better explanation. Behind him, Bonnie sighed but said nothing as he stumbled to the door, opening it to reveal that dark sky once more and the rain that poured relentlessly on the cold ground.

He chanced a look over his shoulder as he stepped out of the room, but Bonnie had already turned her back to him.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Bonnie saw neither Evan nor Ruthven after the fight. Both men seemed to simply vanish into thin air, disappearing into different wings of the castle, and Bonnie—if she were honest—was quite relieved about it. Ruthven would surely be furious with Evan and she didn't know how that would affect his attitude towards her; after all, he had argued with Bonnie over the preference she showed towards Evan, and so for all



she knew, he was furious with her, as well.

On the other hand, just when she had thought Evan would finally kiss her, he had withdrawn from her and left her without an explanation. Bonnie could never understand him, but she wasn't sure if she wanted to at all. Every time they got closer to each other, he pulled back. Every time she thought she understood him better, he acted in a way that not only confused her, but also angered her, to the point where rage simmered under her skin at all times, just waiting for the right moment to erupt.

She didn't want to be like this. She missed the cheerful, joyful person she was before she was thrust into Evan's schemes, like a pawn he could use and discard as he wished.

The following morning brought more rain with it, thick, cold drops of water pattering against the outside walls of the castle. Bonnie sat on her bed, twirling the key to Ruthven's secret room in her hand as she considered her next steps. They had already kept it for too long; it was a wonder Ruthven hadn't realized it was missing yet. But with the tense dinners and the fight between him and Evan, and then their subsequent disappearance, neither she nor Alaric had found the chance to place it back where it belonged.

I must find a way tae return it.

Slipping the key into her pocket, Bonnie made her way to the laird's study, knocking on his door. At his call, she entered and bowed, her eyes immediately scanning the room for anyone else who could be there, as well as for any places where she could put the key without being noticed.

Thankfully, no one but Ruthven was there, sitting on a large, intricately carved high-back chair behind his desk. The rest of the study was just as grand, with a heavy cabinet taking up an entire wall and a plush carpet that warmed the room even more

than the fire that burned in the fireplace.

It was a terribly neat place, very different from his secret room, where papers were thrown haphazardly everywhere and covered seemingly every inch of space. Any change would be rather obvious, Bonnie thought, no matter how small.

When Ruthven saw her, he stood and gestured at her to sit. Bonnie did so, perching herself on the edge of another beautiful, heavy chair of English oak, but just as she was trying to come up with an excuse for her visitation, Ruthven spoke first.

“Miss MacLaren . . . I am glad ye came tae see me,” he said, reaching for the carafe of wine on his desk. He poured some in a cup that was already in use and then pulled another, filling it as well before passing it to her. “I would summon ye had ye nae come.”

Bonnie took the cup in her hands but didn’t sip from it. Her stomach had tied itself into a knot, her hand trembling slightly as she began to wonder what Ruthven could possibly want from her.

Will he tell me that we must leave? We must have all offended him so it wouldnae be surprisin’.

“Is there somethin’ ye wished tae discuss with me, me laird?” she asked, desperately trying to keep the tremble off her voice.

“Indeed,” said Ruthven. After taking a sip of his wine, he placed down his cup and leaned forward, steepling his fingers in front of his face as he looked at Bonnie through them. His eyes, usually a light blue, seemed to turn a steely grey in the dim light of the day, mirroring the sky outside. “I wished tae ask ye if ye are interested in this marriage, after all. Our councils have been plannin’ this fer a long time an’ I have put significant amounts o’ effort, as weel. It is only ye who seems reluctant.”

There was something about Ruthven—something about the tone of his voice, the way he pinned her with that cold gaze. So far, she had only seen this side of him once, at the Hamilton wedding, when he had been displeased with one of the servants, but she had never seen this intensity directed towards her before. All this time, despite his rivalry with Evan, he had been a charming man, always smiling warmly and making sure Bonnie lacked for nothing while she stayed in his home.

Now, it was as though a different man sat before her; someone whose face had never even formed a warm smile.

The change was unsettling, making Bonnie's breath catch in her throat. She was suddenly very aware of the fact that she had to tread lightly, to consider her responses carefully before she uttered them.

She hesitated. She couldn't promise Ruthven that she would marry him, not when her plan from the very beginning had been to avoid this marriage. Still, she couldn't outright refuse. As long as there was no proof of what Evan and Alaric claimed about him, then he seemed like the perfect match and Bonnie would be blamed for ruining such an alliance.

"Well . . . every lass dreams o' the perfect husband, wouldnae ye say so, me laird?" she asked, giving him a half-hearted smile. "An' yer certainly an excellent choice fer anyone. Many would be thrilled tae wed ye."

"This doesnae answer me question, Miss MacLaren," said Ruthven in a clipped tone. His impatience showed in the way he tapped his fingers against the desk, their rhythmic bouncing sounding like deafening drums to Bonnie's ears. In her panic, with her heart leaping to her throat, she could hardly focus on anything else. "I believe I asked ye a very simple question, an' yet ye seem incapable o' givin' me a simple answer."

“Dinnae ye think that we should ken each other better first?” Bonnie asked, thinking that perhaps it was better to seem like a hesitant, rather than a reluctant, bride. If she played the role well enough, then perhaps she could buy herself—and Evan and Alaric—some time. “It has only been a few days since I came here tae visit ye an’ several o’ these days, ye have been occupied with other matters. Surely, ye understand that I wish tae spend time with the man I will wed first.”

“Others have wedded complete strangers,” said Ruthven, uncaring about her excuses. “Ye are lucky ye had the chance tae visit me here. Besides, what more dae ye need tae ken? Ye ken me clan is strong an’ wealthy. Ye have seen me an’ I can only assume me appearance is tae yer likin’. I have provided fer ye all this time. What else is it that ye require?”

Bonnie let out a shaky breath, her fingers curling around the edges of her seat. In her other hand, she was still holding the cup of wine, and now she took a tentative sip, trying to calm her nerves.

How is it that I am always involved in somethin’ dangerous? Why couldnae they find me a better man tae wed?

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

And how was it that her council hadn't seen Ruthven for the man he was? She, too, had been fooled at first by his charm and his politeness, but now she could see it had all been a facade, one that had easily cracked under the smallest of pressure. In the back of her mind, Bonnie had always had doubts about Evan's and Alaric's claims, seeing what a perfect gentleman Ruthven was, and had he held onto this mask of politeness for just a little longer, perhaps she would have believed him to be the perfect suitor, after all. But now, seeing him like this only confirmed what Evan and Alaric had warned her about.

This was not a good man. This was not a man who would be kind to her in marriage, nor the kind of man who would hesitate to ally himself with the likes of Balliol.

It must all be true . . . it must all be as Evan says.

And if it truly was, then Bonnie had, once again, involved herself into something much bigger than her.

"I am only askin' ye fer some time," she insisted, her tone turning pleading. If she could only trick him into believing she wanted nothing more than to know him better, then perhaps she could escape his clutches. "Spend some time with me. Let us . . . let us speak o' our past an' our future. Perhaps we could go on a ride or visit the loch like ye said."

That seemed to appease Ruthven, if only a little. He leaned back against his seat and stared at Bonnie for a few moments, clearly studying her for any signs of deception. If he found any, he didn't share it with her. Instead, that charming smile was back as though it had never left his plush lips, lighting up his whole face.

This change was even more intimidating than the previous one to Bonnie. Once the mask had slipped, it was uncanny to see it back on all of a sudden, as though it was as easy as breathing for him to fool those around him. Bonnie had underestimated the man. Perhaps even Evan and Alaric had underestimated him, but now she knew him for who he truly was: a ruthless liar, terrifying in his abilities.

“Aye, the loch,” he said, his gaze taking on a faraway look. “It’s a bonnie place. I’m sure ye’ll enjoy it very much.”

“We will go soon?” Bonnie urged. The last thing she wanted was to be alone with Ruthven, but for now, it seemed like her best option. She could only count on the fact that he seemed to need the alliance with the MacLaren Clan, and so he couldn’t hurt her—not before their marriage, at least. That gave her some time to protect herself. “Perhaps once the weather clears?”

Ruthven turned to stare out of the window over his left shoulder, gazing at the rain that was still falling with no sign that it would soon stop. As he had the back of his head turned to her, Bonnie took the chance to pull the key out of her pocket, quickly placing it onto the carpet and sliding it in the gap under his desk, where it could have easily fallen off his pocket.

Her heart pulsed everywhere—in her throat, in the ends of her limbs, rattling the bones of her chest. She bit down hard, molar to molar, waiting for the moment Ruthven would reveal that he had caught her in the act, that he knew precisely what she had done and would now punish her as she deserved.

The moment never came. Ruthven simply turned around again, sipping casually on his wine.

“When the weather clears,” he confirmed. “Hopefully, it will be so soon.”

Bonnie could only nod, not trusting herself to speak. She knew the moment she would open her mouth, her voice would be shaky, breathless, betraying her fear, and so she remained silent, taking a sip of wine to hide it.

“Well . . . if ye wish tae ken somethin’ about me, all ye must dae is ask,” Ruthven said. It was as though the previous conversation had never happened, as if the tension had been nothing but a bad dream, and with the sudden change, Bonnie could almost believe it. But she held onto the memory of his gaze, cold and relentless, betraying his real intentions. “Shall I tell ye about me family?”

With a small smile, one that was as sincere as she could muster, Bonnie nodded.

---

My dear reader,

I apologize for the interruption...

But you just stumbled upon a SECRET GIFT!

And if you download this book for free, you’ll get a ONCE ONLY opportunity to join my ARC group.

This means MORE GIFTS! Because you’ll be getting books of mine and other authors of the genre one week ahead of release and for FREE.

The only thing you need to do is use the link below and download the book!

I’ll reply in your inbox to let you know the details.

So, what do you think? Will you join me on this reading adventure? The clock is

ticking...

Just click on the link!

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

By early afternoon, the skies had cleared over Castle Ruthven and the sun shone through the gaps in the dark clouds, the dappled light bathing the grass and the trees in gold as Graeme Ruthven looked out of the window. In the courtyard, the servants and the guards scrabbled to complete their chores for the day after being unable to step foot outside all morning, reminding him of a colony of ants as they rushed around the grounds.

And there, among them, were Bonnie and Evan. They walked leisurely side by side, just the two of them, discussing something Graeme would never know.

He was so close to getting what he wanted. He was so close to getting Bonnie and the power and influence that came with a bride like her. The MacLaren Clan was more powerful than ever, after all, ever since her sister Cathleen married Macauley Sinclair, and thus solidified the MacLaren ties with the Drummonds, the Hays, the Murrays, and the Menzies—all just as powerful clans, connected through the ties of marriage.



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

Graeme wanted to be part of that alliance. Nothing could prove more useful in his quest for influence. Not only would his own clan have important allies, but he could also get the resources he needed in order to suppress any opposition against the English and Balliol.

I could be the one who wins this war for him. I could be the one who keeps him in power.

And if he kept him in power, then Balliol, and even King Edward I, would owe him plenty.

The knock on the door pulled Graeme away from the window and he sat once again behind his desk, instantly reaching for his cup of wine.

“Enter,” he called, and the door opened to reveal his advisor, Ranald, as he walked into the room. Ranald was older than him by a decade and his dark hair had begun to grey at the temples, lines adorning the corners of his dark eyes, and yet he was still one of the best warriors the clan had seen. “Ranald . . . come, sit.”

Ranald bowed before taking his seat across from Graeme, his expression turning even more somber than usual. He wasn’t the kind of person to smile often. In fact, Graeme couldn’t remember if he had ever seen a genuine smile from him.

“It is just as we suspected,” Ranald said with a weary sigh. “Miss MacLaren and Laird MacGregor are nae cousins, as they claim to be.”

Graeme echoed that sigh, a hand coming up to scratch at the back of his head as he

drained the rest of his wine. With the last drop, he slammed the cup on the desk, his rage getting the better of him.

“Are ye certain?” he asked, even though he already knew the answer.

Ranald nodded. “Perfectly certain, me laird. We made sure.”

“I see.”

It was nothing Graeme hadn’t already expected to hear. For one, he didn’t think he had ever heard of a connection between Clan MacGregor and Clan MacLaren, at least not one recent enough to render Bonnie and Evan cousins. Then, he had thought that perhaps they were distant cousins and simply happened to have a closer bond, but Ranald’s research had disproved that. From the way they were acting, he could only assume they were lovers, but he couldn’t imagine what their scheme was.

Perhaps they wish tae stop this weddin’.

But then why wouldn’t Evan simply ask for Bonnie’s hand in marriage? Why would he go to such lengths when he, too, was a good match for her?

Does it matter? All that matters is that I wed Bonnie.

“What shall we dae about him, then?” Graeme asked, mostly talking to himself. There really was only one thing he could do; Evan had left him no other choice. “I suppose we must dispose o’ him as soon as possible.”

“Dispose o’ him, me laird?” Ranald asked with the sort of timidity Graeme wasn’t used to hearing from him. “Dae ye think that is wise?”

“Why wouldnae it be?” Graeme asked with a shrug. “We shall make it seem

accidental.”

“Even so . . . he is the laird o’ Clan MacGregor,” Ranald reminded him, rather unhelpfully. Graeme knew as much, of course, and it didn’t matter to him at all. “An’ there is also the issue o’ his brother.”

“His brother?”

“Aye,” said Ranald. “He is here, too. What if he doesnae believe it was an accident? What if he suspects?”

Much could point to Graeme as Evan’s killer, especially after their brawl in the training grounds. It had been a mistake, fighting him like that in front of everyone. Now not only his people, but Bonnie and Alaric, too, had seen the murderous rage Graeme carried for Evan and it was likely that they would question his death, no matter how accidental it would seem.

Graeme couldn’t deny that it could cause a problem, though if Alaric had no proof, then there was little he could do.

“We will be discreet,” Graeme said. “Or . . . perhaps we could dispose o’ them both.”

What was one more body in the line of bodies he had left behind him in his efforts to gather more power and wealth? Alaric wouldn’t be the first to become collateral damage nor the last.

“There may be a better way tae deal with this,” Ranald said. For a man who was such a skilled fighter, he certainly did his best to avoid a bloody conflict. Then again, that was why he was his advisor, Graeme thought. He didn’t allow Graeme to make any rash decisions. “Bloodshed may yet prove tae be unnecessary.”

“If ye have a better plan, then by all means, tell me,” Graeme said, though he had already made up his mind. There was no better plan. Some things were unavoidable. “But it must happen soon. I’m sure ye have seen Laird MacGregor’s interest in Bonnie. I cannae allow him tae ruin this alliance afore it even begins.”

“Surely, Miss MacLaren kens what her duty is,” said Ranald. “The MacLaren council has already arranged yer marriage.”

“I dinnae think it matters tae her.” For all her reassurances that all she wanted was to get to know him better, Graeme couldn’t believe her until they were both saying their vows in front of the priest. She had already stalled long enough and still claimed the time they had spent together was not enough, so Graeme could only assume she was trying to find a way out of this marriage.

And Evan would be more than willing to help her.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

Graeme fell silent, surely considering the best course of action. In the end, there was only one way forward, and that was to kill Evan. With him gone, Bonnie would have no reason to reject his offer of marriage.

“Very well,” said Randal. “I will arrange it.”

“Good,” said Graeme. He wanted to be done with Evan as soon as possible. “An’ find out why he came here with her if they are nae cousins. How dae they ken each other? What does he want?”

“It is certainly suspicious.” As he spoke, Ranald’s brows furrowed in that way they did whenever he was trying to puzzle something out, whenever he was close to a revelation. “As far as we ken, they had nae connection afore the Hamilton weddin’.”

“Are ye sayin’ that they met there fer the first time?”

That was perhaps the oddest thing out of this entire situation, Graeme thought. How could it be that they had only met each other? Surely, they must have had some history if Evan and Alaric decided to accompany her all the way to Graeme’s castle and stay by her side this entire time.

Unless they have a reason o’ their own tae be here.

Judging by the concern in Ranald’s face, in the tense line of his jaw and the eyes that shifted around as though he expected an attack to jump out of nowhere at any moment, Graeme was certain he was thinking the same thing.

“We cannae say fer certain,” he said. “It is possible they are friendly an’ have been fer a long time.”

“But there is nae evidence o’ it?”

“Nay, me laird.”

Odd, indeed.

“Find out why they are here,” Graeme said in the end, reaching for the wine pitcher to pour himself another drink. He would need as many as he could get if he was going to survive that day without marching over to Evan and Alaric and demanding an explanation.

They would deny it all, of course. This time, Graeme had to keep his rage in check and wait for the right moment to strike. Too soon and he could ruin all his chances to rid himself of Evan, and perhaps even his chances of marrying Bonnie.

“O’ course,” said Randal, smoothing his tunic with his hands as he stood. He bowed and then turned on his heel, leaving Graeme alone with his cup of wine.

Graeme stood as well, wine in hand, to look out of the window. His gaze instantly found Bonnie and Evan as the two of them strolled around the gardens, walking closer to each other than ever.

Graeme’s mouth twisted into a snarl around the rim of his cup. He finished the wine in a few gulps and tossed the cup on the floor in his rage, relishing in the clatter of the metal against the stone floor.

They think they can fool me. They think I willnae discover the truth about them.

They were the ones who were fools. They had made the mistake of coming to his castle under false pretenses, thinking they would not be discovered, but nothing could happen within those walls without Graeme's knowledge. He had eyes and ears everywhere.

Pushing himself away from the window, Graeme left the study and headed to the room where he kept all his important documents, wondering if perhaps there was something there that could help him. Perhaps there was something he had missed in the reports his men brought him. Perhaps there was something which could reveal the relationship between Evan and Bonnie, or give him some idea of the reason behind his and Alaric's visit.

When he got to the room, though, he reached into the pocket where he always kept the key only to find it empty.

It cannae be. Where is it? Where has it gone?

That key was like an extension of himself. He only rarely removed it from his pocket and yet now it was nowhere to be found.

Alarmed, Graeme dug into the pocket, thinking that perhaps he had missed it the first time he looked for it. Still, the pocket was empty, offering no clue as to the key's whereabouts. His heartbeat quickened as he searched his other pockets, thinking that maybe he had accidentally slipped it in one of them, but they were all just as empty as the first.

Doubt crept into his mind. The only one who could have taken the key from him was someone who was close, but there was no one in the castle he kept that close. Could it be a maid, he wondered? Could one of them had taken it while tidying his clothes?

But what could their goal be? Those wenches cannae even read.

Blood rushed to Graeme's head as he stalked the corridors of the castle. He had to find that key before it could fall into the wrong hands—assuming it hadn't done so already. The papers he kept there were too precious, too incriminating to leave them unprotected.

As he stomped through the hallways, he couldn't help but think that Evan had somehow found a way to take it, impossible as it sounded. Had he managed to creep into his quarters in the middle of the night? Had he somehow managed to convince one of the maids to grab it for him?

“Guards!” Graeme called and instantly, half a dozen pairs of footsteps approached him, his men rushing to his aid.

He was going to find that key one way or another.



### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The hallways were dimly lit, shadows flickering in and out of existence along with the flames of the torches that lined the walls. The castle was eerily quiet at that time of the night, at least in the wing which held the sleeping quarters, and every step he and Alaric took sounded like a thundering drum in Evan's ears. His fingers, white-knuckled and stiff, were wrapped firmly around a copy of the key to Ruthven's secret room—a key he and Alaric had painstakingly created in secret and which Evan could only hope would work.

It took them several minutes to reach the room, not because it was far from their chambers or because the maze-like interior of the castle confused them, but rather because they snuck from corner to corner, dodging the guards and keeping to the darkness that permeated those small pockets of space between the torches. This late at night, there were few men around and even fewer walking the corridors. Most of them remained outside, up on the walls, watching for any signs of danger, but Evan and Alaric remained vigilant, quiet and careful as they snuck around the castle.

Once they finally reached the door, Evan pulled the key out of his pocket and glanced over his shoulder to make sure they were alone. His heart raced, anxiety settling heavy in his stomach. For a moment, he thought he heard a sound, but the more the two of them waited there, the more evident it became that they were truly alone and no one was watching.

Still, after the chaos Ruthven had caused when he couldn't find his key, Evan thought it best to exercise plenty of caution. Though Ruthven didn't seem to suspect that it had been taken from him at all after it was found under his desk the very same day,

he realized he had lost it, even a hint of suspicion from his part would be enough to warrant a full investigation.

Evan couldn't allow him to look too closely. One wrong step and the truth about him and Alaric—the truth about their goals—would be revealed.

Sliding the key into the lock, Evan turned it slowly, praying that it would work. At the soft sound of the door opening, he breathed a sigh of relief, and he and Alaric snuck into the dark room, closing it firmly behind them once more.

The last remnants of a dying fire burned in the fireplace. Evan didn't want to risk getting caught by lighting a candle, but he had no other choice. The sky bore no sign of the moon that night, dark clouds blocking its light, and so Evan grabbed one of the candles in the room and held it near the last of the flames. One of them would have to do; any more and they risked flooding the room with light, the illumination that seeped out from the cracks in the door announcing their presence to anyone who walked by.

"We must be quick," Alaric said in a whisper as Evan approached him, the two of them using the scant light of the single candle to look through the documents strewn all over Ruthven's desk. Some of them Evan recognized from the last time they had searched the room, but others were new, the ink still fresh on some of them.

We barely missed him.

"Some of these are new," said Alaric, echoing Evan's thoughts. "How will we read all these? There are mountains o' documents in here!"

"We'll read as much as we can," said Evan. Surely, there would be something they could find. Any mention of the English, any mention of Balliol or the King would be enough to point them to the right direction.

Unless, o' course, they are written in cypher.

For all Evan knew, Ruthven and Balliol were working hard to keep their correspondence as secret as possible.

With nimble fingers, Evan looked through a stack of papers that sat on the desk right in front of him, flicking through the pages as quickly as he could. His eyes strained to read the letters in the dark, squinting to make out the words, but no matter how hard he looked, he could not find a single reference to Balliol or the King.

What if there is naething here? What if he keeps those letters somewhere else?

If he had one secret room, then there was a chance he also had another—a room no one but him knew about.

“Here,” Alaric whispered, nudging Evan with his elbow. “Look.”

As he spoke, he held up a piece of paper and upon closer inspection, Evan saw that it was a letter from Balliol himself. His eyes scanned the words quickly, catching on the ones that seemed most damning: debt, favor, alliance. According to the letter, Balliol owed Ruthven for the assistance he had already provided, as well as for the assistance he would provide in the years to come, and he promised Ruthven not only his own support, but the King's, as well. It was the kind of proof Evan and Alaric needed to show the clans that Ruthven was working with the English—the kind of proof that was irrefutable. Ruthven wouldn't be able to deny it once word reached the other clans. No matter how he would try to spin this, in the end the letter would be palpable proof of everything he had been trying to hide for so long.

“We must copy it,” Evan said, rushing to rummage through the drawers for a pen and paper. He only found the latter, but Alaric handed him an inkwell and a pen he found nearby, and Evan wasted no time before he hurriedly copied the letter, making sure

he wrote it down word by word, missing not a single one.

“What if they dinnae believe us?” Alaric asked, standing over Evan’s shoulder. “The original?—”

“It is far more dangerous tae take the original,” Evan pointed out. The letter must have been recent, he thought, since it was near the top of its pile and they hadn’t found it the previous time they had looked for proof. There was a good chance Ruthven would know something was amiss if he couldn’t find the letter and Evan was unwilling to risk it.

If the clans didn’t believe them, then he would have to steal the letter; until then, a copy of it would have to do.

Once he was done, he placed everything back where he had found it and by then, the ink on the paper had dried. Folding the letter, he blew out the candle, replaced it in its spot, and he and Alaric fled the room as quickly and as silently as they could, all but barricading themselves inside Alaric’s room.

Alaric pressed himself against the closed door, letting his head fall back against the wood with a thump. Evan crossed the room and all but collapsed on the bed, his heart still beating frantically, even though the worst of the danger had passed.

It was easy to forget they were in the mouth of the wolf, its fangs bearing down at them at every moment. It was easy to get swept up in other things—the normalcy of their dinners with Ruthven, Evan’s encounters with Bonnie—but through it all, the danger was ever-present. In the moments when that danger became more apparent, when its reminders were suddenly all around Evan, unease began to simmer once more just under the surface.

This wasn’t a battle. The victor would not be decided through raw strength and

numbers, at least not if Evan and Alaric played their roles well enough. It was only the two of them against Ruthven and all of his men, and were they to be discovered, there would be no salvation for either of them. Ruthven would have their heads and there would be nothing Evan or Alaric could do about it.

“We should make several copies,” Alaric said as he finally peeled himself off the door and took a seat at the chair by the window. “An’ I shall leave at once tae deliver them.”

“It is the middle o’ the night,” Evan pointed out. “Dinnae ye think ye will raise suspicion if ye leave now? We must wait until the morn.”

Alaric didn’t seem very pleased at the thought that he would have to wait, but he didn’t try to argue with Evan. Surely, he knew Evan had a point and that such a sudden departure would only draw more attention to them, but patience was not one of his virtues.

Evan couldn't claim it was one of his either.

"Fine," Alaric said, though he stood regardless and began to pack for his trip, as though he couldn't stay still. Evan could hardly blame him. Even as he sat on the edge of the mattress, shoulders and head slumped forward, his foot had not ceased its tapping against the floor.

It was more than the anxiety of being in enemy territory, so bare and unprotected; more than the thrill of a job well done, the proof of Ruthven's treason in their hands. He shared those things with Alaric, the two of them trapped in the same cycle of constant worry and fleeting victory, but there was something that plagued Evan and Evan only—something his brother didn't know.

Evan couldn't keep it to himself anymore.

"There is somethin' I must confess," he told Alaric as he walked back and forth in the room, gathering his things. At his words, he came to a sudden halt, piercing gaze turning to Evan.

"What is it?" he asked, worry tinting his tone.

"I havenae been meself these days," Evan admitted, shaking his head. "I am distracted . . . I have trouble focusin' on what is truly important an' I often lose me temper around Ruthven."

"Aye," said Alaric. "I've noticed. But ye've always been quick tae anger, brother. I wasnae expectin' ye tae be any different now."

Evan couldn't resist the urge to roll his eyes, no matter how accurate Alaric's assessment was. It was true that he was short-tempered—especially when it came to the English.

“This isnae what troubles me,” Evan said. “Nae this time.”

“What then?”

Evan drew in a deep breath, the words turning to lead on his tongue. It was rare that he couldn't find a way to say something to Alaric, the two of them close their whole lives, but now it seemed impossible to give sound to his feelings.

Perhaps because this is naething but foolishness.

He didn't want Alaric to be disappointed. He didn't want him to think their mission wasn't important enough to Evan for him to keep his wits about himself when a pretty girl was around.

But Bonnie is more than simply a bonnie lass . . . this isnae why I cannae stop thinkin' about her.

“Well?” Alaric prompted. He abandoned the task of preparing for the trip and instead came to sit next to Evan, bumping his shoulder with his. “What is it?”

“It's Bonnie,” Evan admitted with a sigh. “I cannae . . . I never thought it would be this much o' an issue, but every time I see her with Ruthven . . . every time I see him lookin' at her like that . . .”

He didn't know how to finish his sentence. There were feelings he hadn't even admitted to himself, feelings that he couldn't face. Alaric, though, didn't seem to need any more explanation to understand what Evan was trying to say. It was often

like this between them, the two of them understanding each other deeply without either of them having to speak, and Evan was grateful for it.

“I think ye should follow yer heart,” Alaric said, reaching over to lay a hand on Evan’s shoulder, fingers curling comfortingly around the joint. “If this is what ye want, then ye should pursue it.”

With a groan, Evan let his head fall in his hands, fingers clutching at the strands of black hair in desperation. Next to him, Alaric chuckled softly, patting his shoulder.

“What is it now?” he asked. “Is that nae what ye wished tae hear?”

“I dinnae ken,” Evan admitted. “There is still the matter o’ the marriage the council is tryin’ tae arrange fer me.”

“Och aye,” said Alaric. “But as far as we ken, they havenae found anyone yet. An’ Bonnie would be a good bride fer ye. I’m sure they would accept her with ease.”

Evan’s eyes widened as he stared at the floor under his feet. His gaze traced the intricate details of the carpet, the reds and greens that weaved into each other to create those intricate patterns. He hadn’t considered marriage in any way other than the theoretical. He knew, of course, that one day he would have to wed, either because the council would find a woman for him or because he would, unlikely as the latter sounded.

An’ yet I have found someone, even when I didnae expect it.

Still, he hadn’t considered the possibility of marriage with Bonnie. He didn’t even know what, precisely, it was that he was feeling for her. All he knew was that every time he looked at her, the mere sight of her punched the air out of his lungs and made his heart beat erratically, off-rhythm and so fast that the whole experience was akin to



fear. All he knew was that he couldn't bear to think of her in someone else's arms and he would do anything to avoid such a fate.

"We will speak tae the council together," Alaric continued, seemingly unaware of Evan's conflicting emotions. "Even if they disagree, we will make them see reason. Dinnae fash. All ye have tae dae is tell Bonnie how ye feel."

But how can I tell her how I feel when I dinnae ken how I feel meself?

With one last pat on his shoulder, Alaric stood and resumed his task of preparing for his travels. Evan, knowing Alaric would need more than one copy of the letter, sat by the window at the small table there and began to painstakingly create more copies, one by one until he had a dozen on them in his hands and dawn was already breaking in the horizon. By then, Alaric was ready and once the ink was dry, he tucked all the letters in his bag, where they would be safe for the journey.

"What shall I tell Ruthven when he asks where ye've gone?" Evan asked as Alaric grabbed his cloak and his bag, adjusting it over his shoulder. "There will surely be questions."

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

“Tell him I was urgently needed back home,” said Alaric, but Evan wasn’t convinced that was a good idea. After all, he was the laird of the clan. If anyone would be summoned back urgently, it would be him, not Alaric.

“What kind o’ emergency would require yer presence but nay mine?” asked Evan. “Nay . . . nay, I will tell him ye had tae return fer a lass.”

“A lass?” asked Alaric, incredulous. He gave a short laugh, shaking his head. “How is that better?”

“It isnae as suspicious,” Evan pointed out with a small shrug. “He willnae question ye runnin’ after a lass.”

“It’s embarrassin’.”

“Precisely.”

The more embarrassing the excuse, the less likely that Ruthven and his men would question it. Evan could get away with minimal explanations, giving them just enough information to justify Alaric’s absence.

For a few moments, the brothers only stared at each other, neither of them willing to back down. In the end, Alaric gave a long-suffering sigh, finally relenting with a nod, much to Evan’s satisfaction.

“Fine,” he said. “Fine, tell them what ye wish. But dinnae forget tae speak tae Bonnie. Ye willnae feel any better until ye dae.”

Evan knew that to be true, of course, but he also couldn't help but worry something would go wrong. After all, half of their conversations seemed to devolve into arguments and the last thing Evan wanted was to try and confess his—largely unknown to him—feelings only to say something foolish and anger her.

It sounded more likely than he wanted to admit. He had never been good with words; neither had Alaric. But at least Alaric could always handle women better than he could and he was bound to know how to speak to Bonnie.

Perhaps he could tell me what tae say.

Just as that thought popped into Evan's mind, he dismissed it. It wouldn't be honest, he figured. Alaric could give him some pointers as to how to charm her, but he couldn't know what Evan felt for her.

Besides, Alaric had to go. Their mission was more important than Evan's inability to form a proper sentence in the presence of the woman with whom he was infatuated.

"I will," he promised Alaric, and once the two of them exchanged their goodbyes, they left the room—Alaric heading to the stables and Evan heading to the neighboring chambers, which he had called home ever since they had arrived at Castle Ruthven.

It was still early in the morning; too early for Bonnie to be awake, and so Evan resigned himself to the fact that he would have to wait for a few agonizing hours, until she woke. In the meantime, there was only one thing he could do: practice what he was going to say to her.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The water was like a warm cocoon around Bonnie, its surface still steaming from the

last bucket the maids had poured into the tub. Small ripples formed around Bonnie's fingers as she slid them through the water, watching the displaced liquid move back and forth with the kind of serenity she missed those days.

Even this bath wasn't enough to calm her. For hours after she had returned the key to Ruthven, only for him to finally realize it was gone and sending all of his guards on a hunt around the castle, she had feared the man would figure out the truth and have her, along with Evan and Alaric, hanged. As the time passed, though, no one had come to her chambers to drag her to the gallows or demand an explanation. If Ruthven suspected anything, he certainly didn't suspect her.

But what if he suspects Evan an' Alaric?

Bonnie hadn't gathered the courage yet to speak to either man, fearing that if Ruthven caught them together, he would see the truth. It was a foolish notion, she knew—after all, she had every right to speak to the men who were meant to be her cousins. Still, the concern held her back and so she had stayed in her chambers since the incident, claiming she was feeling under the weather so she could avoid the previous night's dinner.

Sooner or later, she would have to face Ruthven, though. Sooner or later, she would have to spend time with him without even anyone else acting as a buffer between them.

With a sigh, Bonnie held her breath and sank under the surface of the water, closing her eyes. It was peaceful in there, the warmth of the water enveloping her entirely, every outside sound muffled. For a few moments, she could pretend that she was all alone in the world; no responsibilities on her shoulders, no schemes she had to follow. Just her and the silence of the water, holding her safely in its cradle.

The peace didn't last long. Suddenly, a pair of hands grabbed her and dragged her out

of the water, and Bonnie screamed in terror. In her surprise, she inhaled just as she broke the surface, water shooting up her nostrils and down her throat and choking her, the hair that plastered itself on her face and the drops that fell in her eyes blinding her entirely.

With frantic hands, she tried to push her hair back, eyes blinking rapidly to expel the water. Distantly, she was aware that someone was talking to her, the voice rough and demanding, but she could hear nothing over the rush of blood to her ears.

“Bonnie!” that voice shouted and she finally recognized it as Evan’s. “Are ye alright? What happened? Talk tae me.”

“What?” Bonnie asked around a cough. Her eyes still stung, but she managed to focus her gaze on Evan, noting the terror in his wide eyes, the rapid rise and fall of his chest as he took quick, shallow breaths.

What is he askin’? What happened?

Bonnie’s mind struggled to catch up with Evan, her initial panic at being dragged out of the water so suddenly still lingering. Her heart had almost lurched out of her chest in her fear and now no matter how much she told herself there was no danger, her body didn’t seem to understand that.

Mebody . . . me body! I’m still in the bath!

“What are ye doin’?” Bonnie demanded, her voice coming out in a shrill cry. “Let go o’ me!”

Stunned, Evan stumbled backwards as Bonnie drew her legs up and wrapped her arms around her knees, trying to hide as much of her body as she could from him. It hardly mattered now, she supposed; Evan had already seen everything there was to see and Bonnie would never get over the embarrassment. Even now, her face burned with it, hotter than the water in which it was half-submerged.

“I thought . . . I thought somethin’ had happened,” said Evan sheepishly, a hand coming up to scratch the back of his head. He lowered his gaze and for the first time ever since Bonnie had first met him, he looked like a scolded child, uncertain and just as embarrassed as she felt. “Forgive me, I didnae mean tae frighten ye or . . . or . . .”

Or barge intae me chambers like this?

Bonnie didn’t say those words out loud, not because she wanted to spare Evan any further embarrassment, but rather because she could hardly speak herself. What was there to say? Nothing either of them could say would make the situation any less awkward.

“Turn . . . turn around, please,” Bonnie said, teeth grinding as she clenched her jaw. Evan swiftly turned, staring at the far wall, and Bonnie stepped out of the bath, drying herself quickly with the cloth the maids had given her, before she threw on her tunic and over that, her cloak. Perhaps it was a little ridiculous, pulling on her cloak in her own chambers, but until she could dress properly, it would have to do.

“Alright,” she said, drawing in a deep breath. “Ye can turn around now.”

Evan turned once more, his gaze resolutely glued to her face. He didn’t dare glance below her neck, even though she was now fully covered from her shoulders to her ankles, as if he feared her clothes would suddenly disappear if he looked.

When Evan remained silent for several moments, Bonnie realized he wouldn’t speak unless prompted. “Did ye wish tae speak with me?”

“Och aye,” Evan said, as if he had only just remembered the purpose of his visit. “Aye . . . why were ye in the water?”

“Is that what ye wished tae ask me?”

Evan sighed, shaking his head. “Nay. I’m only concerned. I thought perhaps ye had fainted or somethin’ had happened tae ye.”

Bonnie responded with a heavy sigh of her own. Evan was only concerned; as embarrassed as she was, she shouldn’t resent him for it. “I was fine. I only dipped me head in the water tae wash me hair.”

It wasn’t the truth, but Bonnie didn’t know how to explain the truth to Evan. How could she put into words the desperate need for a few moments of quiet away from the world? How could she stop that need from sounding desperate?

She wasn’t desperate, she told herself. She was only tired, weary to the bone. Once all this was over, she would be back to normal.

Unless I cannae avoid this marriage. Unless I end up weddin’ Ruthven.

“That’s good,” Evan said and if he had any suspicions regarding her lie, then he

didn't make them known. There was only relief in his features, in the way his shoulders finally slumped, falling from his ears. "I can only ask fer yer forgiveness fer comin' intae the room without yer permission."

"Yer forgiven," Bonnie assured him. "Ye were only concerned."

"Aye," said Evan, taking a stumbling step forward before stopping himself, as if he didn't want to get too close to Bonnie even now. "Aye, I'm very concerned, Bonnie. Ye must stay as far away from Ruthven as ye can."

Bonnie wanted to point out that she was doing her best all this time, refusing to be alone with him whenever she could avoid it. The worry in Evan's tone, though, stopped her. Instead, she asked, "Did somethin' happen?"

Something must have happened, she thought, if he was so eager to come into her chambers and warn her. Surely, Evan already knew she had no desire to be around Ruthven if she could help it.

"We found a letter which proves everythin' we suspected," Evan said hurriedly, his voice hushed as though he feared someone would overhear him. "Alaric has already left with copies o' it. He will distribute them all tae our allies."

Bonnie couldn't stop the relieved laugh that escaped her, her hand laying over her chest as the reality sank in. They finally had proof. The world would know Ruthven for the man he was and she could rest assured this wedding would never happen. The council wouldn't allow it once they found out Ruthven was connected to Balliol.

"Yer certain ye have all ye need?" she asked, needing that final reassurance that she was truly free from Ruthven.

"The clans have nae reason tae doubt us," Evan said. "But if they dae, I will steal the



original letter an' show it tae everyone who doesnae believe us."

It wasn't as reassuring as Bonnie wanted it to be, after all, but she didn't allow herself any doubt. This would work, she told herself. Like Evan pointed out, the clans had no reason to distrust him or Alaric.

In her relief, in the joy of the moment, Bonnie flung herself into Evan's arms, laughing delightedly at the news. For a moment, he stiffened against her, staying still like a pillar of salt, before his arms finally wrapped around her in a tight embrace.

His body was solid heat against her, his arms enveloping her entirely as she laid her head on his shoulder. It occurred to her then that this was the feeling she had been seeking in the tub—this quiet warmth, this certainty that everything would be alright.

Pulling back just enough to look at him, Bonnie found Evan already staring at her, lips slightly parted as he drew in a soft breath. The golden light of the morning brought chiseled away the usual chill that his features held, replacing it with a pooling warmth in his dark eyes. The severity of the lines of his face was still there—the sharp, bearded jawline, the strong nose, the dark, heavy eyebrows—but it had shifted to something softer, as if the walls he always kept around him had begun to crumble.

It was in moments like this that Bonnie regretted the circumstances of their acquaintance. If only her council had decided Evan would be the best choice as her husband; if only she had been allowed to make that choice herself; if they had met at a gathering or by sheer chance then perhaps, they could be happy now.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

Her own breath caught in her throat as Evan leaned closer and her eyes slipped shut, eagerly awaiting the kiss he would give her. Just as she felt the first brush of his lips on hers, though, a thunderous knock echoed in the room.

Bonnie planted her hands on Evan's chest and pushed him back before she could even realize what she was doing, but Evan was already stepping backwards, putting distance between them. It was too late, though; Bonnie had gathered too much momentum and she planted right into Evan's chest, the two of them falling backwards for a few terrifying seconds before he managed to right them both, one hand on Bonnie's waist and the other on the post of her bed.

"Miss MacLaren?"

It's Ruthven!

Evan, too, must have recognized the voice, as the two of them stared at each other, wide-eyed. Slowly, he brought his finger to his lips, silently motioning for her to be quiet.

"Miss MacLaren, may I come in?"

"One moment!" Bonnie shouted, as she had no other choice. Ruthven knew she was in the room if he was so insistent, and she couldn't remain silent and let him enter when she and Evan were in such a compromising position.

Taking a few steps back from him, she looked frantically around the room, trying to find a place for him to hide. At first, she thought about shoving him in the closet, but

it seemed too small for a man his size. One wrong move and he would spill right out of it in front of Ruthven's eyes.

"Hide!" she hissed at him. Evan, too, was trying to find a hiding spot, before giving up on something more creative and falling to the floor. Quickly, he shimmied under the bed, his bulk knocking once against the frame before he settled—surely with no comfort—into the small space.

Bonnie took a moment to breath and smooth her cloak over her torso. Clearing her throat, she said, "Come in."

The door opened to reveal Ruthven, looking regal as always in his extravagant tunic, the fur trim of his collar an unnecessary expense for something that he only wore to break his fast. It didn't surprise Bonnie, though; every time she saw him, he looked even more grand than the last.

"Good mornin', Miss MacLaren," Ruthven said, his curious eyes taking in her appearance and then the tub full of water near her. "Are ye headin' somewhere?"

For a moment, Bonnie frowned in confusion before she remembered she was still wearing her cloak. "Ach! I was on me way tae the gardens, actually . . . it seems like such a lovely day."

As she spoke, both she and Ruthven glanced at the world outside, where most of the sun was concealed by dark clouds, nothing but a few golden rays shining through.

"Indeed," Ruthven said with a tight-lipped smile. "Perhaps ye wish tae dry yer hair first. Ye will catch a cold."

Bonnie's hand shot up to her still soaking hair, throat convulsing as she tried to swallow around the knot there. "How foolish I am!" she said, her voice sounding

shrill even to her own ears. "I must have forgotten."

Ruthven stared at her as if she truly was quite dull-witted, though Bonnie could hardly blame him. "Well . . . I came tae ask ye if ye would like tae ride with me tae the loch on the morrow, as we discussed. Hopefully it will be an even nicer day."

With an awkward laugh, Bonnie dragged her gaze away from the window, cursing under her breath for the terrible excuse she had given him.

How can I avoid this ride? I was the one who suggested it in the first place!

The more she stalled in her answer, the more expectantly Ruthven looked at her, hands clasped behind his back and he shifted his weight back and forth from foot to foot. In the end, Bonnie realized there was nothing she could do but agree.

"I would be delighted," she said, only for something to pinch her ankle, making her jump in surprise.

"Are ye alright?" Ruthven asked, brows furrowing in a frown.

"Och aye," Bonnie assured through gritted teeth, subtly trying to kick Evan's hand away. "I believe there must be somethin' in me shoe. Well! It doesnae matter. Shall we leave after we break our fast?"

Ruthven tilted his head in agreement. "I would like that, aye."

Another pinch from Evan, this time more insistent. "Ach!" said Bonnie, suddenly aware of what he was trying to tell her. "But I would like tae have a chaperone with us. Me cousin. It is only proper that Evan accompanies us while we're nae yet wed, dinnae ye think?"

Ruthven's lips split into a wide grin, one that looked a little too pleased for Bonnie's tastes. What was it, she wondered, that pleased him so about her request? Surely, he would rather it was only the two of them, with no one else to interfere with his courting plans.

"Excellent," said Ruthven. "As ye said . . . it is only proper."

For a few moments, neither of them spoke. Ruthven stared at Bonnie as though he was looking straight into her mind, peering into her thoughts. It was a ridiculous notion, and yet Bonnie couldn't help but feel a raw vulnerability, as if she had been flayed open right before his eyes.

"I will leave ye, then, tae finish . . . whatever it is yer doin'," Ruthven said. "Good day, Miss MacLaren."

"Good day."

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

The words were barely a whisper on Bonnie's lips as she watched Ruthven leave the room, closing the door behind him. Something about their interaction had filled Bonnie with unease. Something told her Ruthven knew something she didn't, something vital that she was missing.

But if he knew about Evan and Alaric, then surely, he would have captured us all by now. Why hesitate?

Ruthven didn't seem to her like a man who waited for anything. As long as she, Evan, and Alaric lived, then it meant he was none the wiser.

Crawling out from under the bed, Evan stood and dusted himself. Once again, he kept his distance from Bonnie and she kept his distance from him. She never knew how to act around him after they were inevitably drawn into each other's orbit once they were left alone.

"That was too close," Evan said.

Ever since she had stepped foot in Castle Ruthven, Bonnie had that very same thought too often.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

With Ruthven gone, Evan perched himself on the edge of Bonnie's bed, relief washing over him. Perhaps it wouldn't be so strange, he thought, for a man to visit his cousin's chambers, but with Alaric's absence and the fact that she looked like she had just been in the bathing tub, his presence there would surely raise some

suspicions.

“Ye truly should stay away from him,” Evan mumbled, his elbows resting on his knees as he let his head fall in his hands. For a moment, he sat there, slowly sinking into a well of guilt that threatened to swallow him whole. He had been the one to drag Bonnie into this. He had been the one to put her in danger in the first place.

But what would happen if I hadnae involved her in this? She would still be in Ruthven’s clutches.

She would have been safer, though, knowing nothing about the plan. Evan should have found a different way into the castle, one that didn’t involve her at all.

Too late fer that now.

When he felt the mattress dip next to him, Evan looked up to see Bonnie there, taking a seat next to him. Slowly, she unclasped her cloak and folded it neatly, placing it by the foot of the bed, and then simply sat there in silence next to him, one hand coming to rest on his forearm in a gesture of comfort.

Just as slowly, Evan placed his own hand over Bonnie’s and after a moment of hesitation, laced their fingers together.

“Believe me, I dinnae wish tae be around him,” Bonnie assured him. “An’ I promise ye, I will stay away from him as much as I can. But I couldnae reject his invitation. I was the one tae suggest it in the first place.”

With a frown, Evan turned to look at her. “Ye were?”

“I panicked,” said Bonnie sheepishly, giving a small shrug. “I had tae tell him somethin’, so I told him the first thing that came tae mind.”

Evan couldn't help but laugh, shaking his head in disbelief. It was just his luck to be caught up in something like this. "Well . . . dinnae fash. I'll be there."

"I ken," Bonnie said, fingers squeezing around his. "Thank ye, Evan. But I can also take care o' meself. It isnae the first time I must deal with a terrible man."

"It isnae?"

Bonnie shook her head, hiccupping as she drew in a deep, steadying breath. "After me faither an' maither died, the clan was given tae a cousin until either I or me sister would wed. But Faolan, me cousin . . . he didnae wish tae relinquish his power. He wished tae keep the clan fer himself. An' he . . . he forced me an' Cathleen tae dae horrible things. He wanted us tae hurt innocent people, but we couldnae dae it. I'm lucky that me sister is alive . . . that we all are."

Evan listened to Bonnie's story in silence, his heart aching at the thought of everything she must have gone through. She was such a sweet, compassionate woman that Evan couldn't imagine her ever hurting someone else. And now, instead of her troubles finally being over, she had been thrown into another violent and dangerous situation she could not escape.

"I'm sorry," Evan said, for lack of anything better to say. "I'm sorry fer makin' ye dae this. I'm sorry fer puttin' ye in danger. I'm sorry fer everythin' that has happened tae ye."

"It's alright," Bonnie assured him with a tentative smile. "We must all endure hardship."

Evan wished that wasn't true. He wished he could protect Bonnie from it all—everything that could cause her pain, everything that could harm her.



“Yer parents . . . what happened tae them?” Evan asked.

Bonnie drew a shuddering breath. She parted her lips as if to speak, but no sound came out at first, as though the mere thought of speaking about them was painful.

Evan couldn’t understand that. It was difficult for him, too, to speak about his parents.

“They were murdered in a village raid,” she said after a few moments of silence. When Evan looked at her, her eyes shone with unshed tears. “It should have never happened. I was simply stubborn an’ wished tae stay at the village market longer. We were meant tae be gone by the time o’ the raid. Had it nae been fer me, they would still be alive.”

“Bonnie . . . it wasnae yer fault,” Evan said, but even as he spoke the words, he knew Bonnie wouldn’t believe him. There was nothing anyone could say to her that would change her mind on this matter. Evan knew, because it was the same for him.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

Not a single day had passed since his parents' deaths when he didn't blame himself for their demise.

Bonnie didn't respond and Evan didn't know what else to say. The two of them were plunged in silence, time trickling by slowly as they sat there, clinging onto each other.

Evan had never spoken to anyone about the demise of his parents. He hadn't even discussed it with Alaric, though his brother had tried to get him to talk several times since their deaths, only for Evan to refuse every time. It was doing more harm than good, he knew, and it didn't hurt only him—it hurt Alaric, who wanted to talk about it only to be met with a brick wall of silence.

Alaric didn't deserve this. Every time Evan thought he could speak to him about their parents, though, he regretted it the moment he opened his mouth and eventually decided to say nothing.

Perhaps if I tell Bonnie, it will be easier tae speak tae Alaric, too.

It felt easier, talking to her about it, simply because he knew Alaric would insist none of it was Evan's fault, while at the same time blaming himself. It was what Evan was doing, after all—putting the blame on himself while knowing Alaric could have done nothing to prevent their deaths.

“Me parents are dead, too,” he said, the words like thorns in his throat as he spoke, tearing into his flesh. “They were murdered in the hands o’ Sassenachs. That’s why . . . that’s why I must fight Balliol. I ken what will happen if he remains in power,

Bonnie. I ken how many people will suffer an' I cannae allow it. They will stop at naething tae get what they want."

It was all he could share about them. He couldn't talk about the day he found them slain, his mother's dress soaked in blood, his father's blade still in his hand as he tried to save her and himself. He couldn't talk about the night before, when they had all gone to bed thinking they would have a lifetime ahead of them—he, Alaric, and their sister Isabeau none the wiser to the catastrophe that was to follow. He couldn't talk about the goodbye he never got to give them.

Distantly, he realized that his eyes were burning with tears that threatened to spill and he pulled back from Bonnie, quickly wiping away any evidence.

Bonnie, though, didn't allow him to get too far. She reached for him, her hands cupping his face gently as she stared into his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Evan," she said. "I'm sorry this happened tae ye. Tae yer parents."

Evan nodded quietly. There was nothing more he could say. The words had run dry in his mouth and now all he could do was look into Bonnie's eyes, wishing he could at least tell her how grateful he was for her, how much she meant to him.

That was why he had come to her chambers in the first place, he remembered—to tell her how he felt. And yet now the words wouldn't come.

Instead, he did what he had been trying to do for so long. He leaned forward and kissed her, pressing his lips against hers gently for a brief moment.

But when he made to pull back, Bonnie didn't let him. Her grip on him tightened and she deepened the kiss, lips parting to allow for a brush of his tongue against hers. Evan sighed softly in her mouth, his hands reaching for her, grabbing her waist to pull

her in his lap, greedy to touch and explore every inch of her that he could.

Then, when they finally parted, it was easy to speak.

“I’m in love with ye,” he said and knew it to be the truth.

Bonnie stared up at Evan, her eyes wide with shock. Warmth spread over her chest and up to her face, and her heart lurched in her chest, skipping beat after beat. At first, she thought that she must have surely heard Evan wrong, but the more she looked at him, the clearer it became that not only had she heard him correctly, but also that he was serious.

Never would she have guessed that someone like Evan could have grown to love her like she loved him in such a short time. Bonnie had resigned herself to the fact that whatever existed between them was mostly one-sided and that—even if perhaps he would grow to love her one day—his actions were driven by desire and not love.

But now he had proven her wrong. Evan loved her. He wanted more than just a night with her.

“I am in love with ye,” Bonnie whispered. “I am.”

She had hardly finished speaking when Evan’s lips crashed against her own once more, claiming them in a searing kiss. His hands on her waist were like twin flames, burning even through her tunic, their warmth travelling all over her body and settling deep within her core, her desire like molten lava. There was no going back now, she knew. After all the times they had kissed, this had become inevitable, but now they had crossed a line they could never uncross.

An’ in me betrothed’s own castle, at that.

It didn't matter to Bonnie. All that mattered was that she finally had what she had longed for ever since she had felt the first stirrings of love for Evan.

His lips trailed a heated path down her neck as he pressed kiss after kiss on her sensitive skin, leaving goosebumps in their wake. Bonnie let her head fall back with a gasp, losing herself in the pleasure, her eyes falling shut so she could feel Evan's touch in its full intensity—every brush of his lips, every caress of his fingers, the ghost of his breath on her skin. It was almost too much. She had never experienced anything quite as maddening, her need for another body so inescapable that she couldn't help but pull him closer and closer.

As she trailed her hands down his shoulders, his chest, she traced their grooves, the muscles strong and firm under her hands. Evan arched into it as if he, too, craved her touch; as if he was just as affected as she was, taken over by his desire for her. It was difficult to believe that after all the women he must have had in his lifetime, Bonnie could affect him like this, but when their kiss came to an end and she pulled back to look at him, she found him looking as dazed as she felt, eyes glazed with lust and unfocused, cheeks flushed a faint red.

Bonnie took a moment to admire the sharp lines of his features, the dark, hooded eyes, the thick dark hair that shone faintly under the morning sun. Her fingers traced the curve of his brows, the peaks of his cheekbones, then down to the cupid's bow of his lips. Evan laughed softly, tongue darting out to flick over her thumb. It drew a responding laugh out of her and she leaned in to kiss him again, yelping in surprise when Evan flipped them over, laying her over the mattress and crawling over her body.

For a moment, he hesitated, looking at her as his hands found the hem of her tunic, pushing it up just a little over her thighs. It was only when Bonnie nodded that he continued to push the fabric up, baring her thighs, then her stomach and breasts. When he pulled it off entirely and tossed the bundled-up tunic aside, Bonnie couldn't

help but wrap her arms around herself, trying to hide as much of her body as she could, but Evan was quick to take her hands in his and bring them to his lips, pressing a kiss to each of her knuckles.

“I wish tae see ye,” he said. “Dinnae hide yerself from me.”

Heat spread over Bonnie’s body, her chest and face burning under Evan’s appreciative gaze. It was like a physical caress, the sensation of his eyes on her, roaming over the swell of her breasts, the valley of her stomach, taking in every detail as though he wanted to commit it all to memory.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

Bonnie had never felt more bare in her life, but the more Evan looked at her, the more she realized she didn't mind. Once the initial embarrassment subsided, she even found that she enjoyed it. Never before in her life had she felt so desired, so wanted by someone else.

"Yer the bonniest lass I've ever seen," Evan said as he leaned closer once more, pressing kisses over her chest. His hands circled her waist, thumbs tracing gentle circles over her skin, and Bonnie couldn't help but melt into the touch.

How had she gone so long without experiencing something like this? She couldn't imagine spending another day without Evan. She couldn't imagine a future anymore in which she couldn't be close like this to him, the two of them clinging onto each other as though they wanted to become one.

A soft moan escaped Bonnie as Evan's lips found her breast, kissing the soft swell of her flesh. When those lips wrapped tightly around her nipple, teeth grazing just barely over the hardened nub, that moan deepened, turning loud and unabashed. Bonnie buried her fingers in Evan's hair, tugging at the soft strands, and Evan responded with a moan of his own, the rumble in his chest reverberating through her entire body.

Evan tore himself away from Bonnie with what seemed to her like great difficulty, though he didn't go too far. He only hovered over her, watching her intently, and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead.

"Dae ye wish me tae touch ye?" he asked and before Bonnie could respond, he added, "I'll make ye feel good. I promise."

Drawing her bottom lip between her teeth, Bonnie nodded slowly. “Please,” she breathed, shuddering at the promise.

“I willnae take ye,” Evan said, mumbling against Bonnie’s throat as he scattered kisses there once again. “But there are more ways in which I can bring ye pleasure.”

He doesnae wish tae ruin me afore marriage.

On the one hand, she was grateful for his understanding. She knew as well as he did that a woman of her standing could not enjoy sexual relations outside of marriage. On the other hand, it was a painful reminder of the fact that she was still meant to marry someone else.

As he spoke, his hand reached between them, sneaking over her stomach and mound. Shivering at the touch, Bonnie held her breath for a moment that seemed to stretch forever—the anticipation of that first touch, the endless wait for it to finally happen. She didn’t know what to expect. She had nothing in her past to which to compare it.

And then Evan finally brushed his fingers over her, the touch barely more than a tease. Still, it had Bonnie’s toes curling in pleasure, her hips jerking first in surprise and then in an attempt to repeat that sensation, to feel him once more against her.

When she looked at him, Evan gave her a cocky smile, one that looked infuriatingly handsome on him. His other hand reached for her thigh, fingers caressing the ample flesh before pushing her leg aside gently, baring her core for him.

“Keep them open fer me,” he whispered as he pressed a kiss to that knee, settling between her legs on the mattress. It was easier said than done, though, when a new wave of embarrassment flowed through her, the urge to hide away from him warring against the desire for more. “I told ye . . . dinnae hide.”



Bonnie wanted to point out that it was easier said than done, as she didn't have the same experience as he did, but her words were cut short before she could even utter them at the first tender touch of Evan's tongue over her folds. Once again, her hips jerked, her body uncertain of what to do at the sudden pleasure. Evan's hands were there, though, holding onto her thighs and keeping her still as he began to feast on her, his tongue pressing in firm strokes over her opening again and again before it circled a spot just above that tore a wailing moan out of Bonnie. Even far gone as she was, she had the presence of mind, at least to slap a hand over her mouth, muffling the sounds in case someone walked by her chambers and heard her, knowing just how precarious their position was.

One mistake and everyone would find out about her and Evan.

Pleasure coursed through Bonnie's entire body as she surrendered to the sensations. Her hips moved again on their own accord, rocking against Evan, chasing maddening feeling of every soft stroke of his tongue and lips, the warmth of him as he licked over sensitive flesh. Her other hand found his hair again, holding onto him, fingers carding through the strands. It pulled another moan from him, its rumble passing through her and making her shiver, amplifying each sensation.

Tentatively, she craned her neck to look at Evan and found him already staring up at her through dark lashes, taking in the flush of her cheeks, the lust-drunk look in her eyes. Instantly, she was captivated by the sight: Evan between her thighs, his hair mussed by her fingers, his own cheeks a faint red. As she watched, one of his hands let go of her thigh and instead reached under his own body, disappearing under his stomach. His gaze never left hers as his hips began to roll in a languid rhythm, matching that of his tongue.

With a sigh, Bonnie fell back against the mattress, back arching as she pressed herself closer, hungry for more. Evan was happy to oblige, it seemed to her, tongue flicking repeatedly over that sensitive nub until pressure began to coil deep inside her, her

body instinctively searching for some form of release.

When Evan's tongue dipped inside her, just past her entrance, Bonnie's body felt like a taut string on the verge of breaking apart. Her entire body shook with pleasure, which was only amplified by the slight burn of Evan's beard on her thighs as his face rubbed against her delicate skin. It only took a few more flicks of his tongue over her sensitive spot, coupled with a gentle suction as his lips closed around her, for Bonnie to come apart.

She had to bite down on her hand to keep herself from screaming out his name, her climax washing over her likewave after wave. It seemed to last forever, that lingering pleasure as her body twitched and shivered, Evan continuing his ministrations until Bonnie had to pull him up, pushed over the edge of oversensitivity.

Evan went easily, draping himself over her. He rested his head on Bonnie's chest, lips finding her nipple again as he continued to work himself over, his hand buried under his tunic. Soft moans fell from his lips and Bonnie couldn't help but watch him, shifting so that she could pull his head towards her and kiss him.

Evan's movements quickened, his hand moving eagerly over his length as they kissed. Hesitantly, Bonnie reached between them, hoping that she could give back at least a fraction of the pleasure that he had given her, twining her hand with his around his shaft.

That first touch had Evan curling in on himself, hips stuttering as he pushed into their joined hands. Their lips met again in a searing kiss, and Bonnie held onto him with an arm wrapped tightly around his shoulders, her thighs bracketing his hips as they rocked together to bring him to completion.

It didn't take long for Evan to spill over their fingers with a groan muffled in the crook of Bonnie's neck. For a few moments, he stayed there, motionless against her

as he tried to catch his breath, before he finally rolled off her and settled on his side, watching her with a small smile on his face.

This one was neither teasing nor smug. It was simply fond, giving her a glimpse of the love, he had confessed to her when he first kissed her. Bonnie scooted closer to him, burying her face in his shoulder as Evan held her close, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

“Did ye mean it?” she asked, her voice barely audible where it was muffled against him.

“What?” Evan asked, pulling back just enough to look at her.

Bonnie, though, couldn’t meet his gaze as she said, “That ye love me.”

Evan’s smile widened as he nodded once, firmly. “O’ course I meant it,” he said. Slowly, he disentangled himself from Bonnie, standing from the bed and smoothing down his clothes. “But I must leave now, mo ghraidh, afore someone finds me here. We shall discuss this later.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

“Dae ye promise?” Bonnie asked as she pulled the bed covers over herself, suddenly very aware of her nakedness. Even though Evan had seen all of her only moments prior, now her embarrassment was too strong to resist the urge to cover. “Or are ye leavin’ so we dinnae have tae speak about it?”

Laughing, Evan approached her, leaning over the bed. “Ye willnae rid o’ me so easily, lass,” he said, pressing a kiss to her lips.

Bonnie knew the day would never come when she would want such a thing.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

The next morning arrived too soon for Bonnie’s liking. It was just past dawn when a maid woke her under orders from Ruthven himself, claiming that the man had requested her appearance at breakfast once she had prepared for the horse ride to the lake. Reluctantly, Bonnie stood and dressed, wishing that she could somehow get away with staying in her chambers instead.

She could pretend to be sick, she thought, feigning a cough. But then, that would only prolong the inevitable and draw unwanted attention to herself. The last thing she needed was Ruthven fretting over her, concerned about her health.

No, it was better to take that ride with him, Bonnie thought. After all, Evan would be right there with her.

The breakfast was a quick affair. Ruthven had summoned Evan, too, and the three of them broke their fast while making small talk about the weather—already sunny, if a

little cold—the bannocks—very fresh and soft that morning—and the horses they were to take—very calm and obedient, Ruthven assured her. He seemed excited that morning; perhaps a little too excited for something as simple as a ride to the nearest lake. In contrast, Evan seemed sullen, barely saying a word the time they sat around the table.

Once they were brought their horses, Bonnie took a few moments to acquaint herself with the mare she had been given. She was a young one, strong and sturdy and white as snow, calm as Bonnie strapped her bow and arrows to the saddle. Petting her flank, Bonnie smiled as the mare snorted, bowing its head to munch on the grass that grew at the edges of the castle grounds near the gates.

“A good day fer a ride,” Ruthven said, not for the first time that morning. For a moment, he stood with his hands on his hips as he stared out into the distance, then up to the blue sky adorned with small, fluffy white clouds. “A good day, indeed.”

Bonnie exchanged a quick glance with Evan, and though he frowned as he glanced back at Ruthven, he said nothing. Once Ruthven mounted his horse, the two of them followed him and they rode past the gates and down the path that led to the lake.

“I used tae visit this lake with me faither when I was a bairn,” Ruthven said as they fell into a leisurely pace, Bonnie riding between him and Evan. It was a comfortable path, worn smooth and wide, allowing them to stay next to each other with ease. The breeze blowing past them was pleasant, gentle, ruffling the hem of Bonnie’s cloak. “I enjoyed it greatly as a young lad. Sadly, I dinnae often visit it anymore.”

“Why is that?” Bonnie asked, figuring it would be better if she feigned interest with Ruthven. The more interested in him he thought she was, the easier it would be for her to gain his favor, to stop him from ever suspecting her.

“I dinnae have the time,” said Ruthven. “It is unfortunate, but this is the life o’ a laird.

I'm sure Laird MacGregor understands, though he has been away from his lands fer a long time. Tell me, how is it that ye can stay away fer so long?"

"I have loyal men," Evan called from Bonnie's right side. "I trust them with me life an' I trust them with me clan. Me council can always take care o' me people whenever I am away, an' now that Alaric is returnin' home fer his lassie, he can also take over fer a while, until I can return."

"Ye can return at any moment, surely," said Ruthven, and it was the first time that day that his tone was so strained. "What is keepin' ye here?"

Bonnie's heart came to a halt, skipping a beat, then another. Fear ran cold in her veins, the implications of Ruthven's words not escaping her.

He wanted Evan gone—or perhaps he wanted an explanation for his presence other than the fact that he was there for Bonnie. Did he not believe this excuse anymore, she wondered? Or had he simply tired of Evan's presence, wanting Bonnie all to himself, with no one there to stop him from finally getting what he wanted?

Would he force me tae wed him were Evan tae be gone? Would he care about what I desire? What me council desires?

He had the council's approval, though. They had sent Bonnie there for the explicit purpose of marrying him and she doubted there would be something they could do if Ruthven forced her into a marriage, even if they found out the truth about him.

"Me cousin," Evan said gruffly, his gaze glued straight ahead. "Until Bonnie wishes me tae leave, I will stay."

Silence stretched over them for several moments as they rode down the path, Bonnie right in the middle of it. Though she, too, looked straight ahead, she could feel

Ruthven's gaze as he looked just past her shoulder and at Evan, the tension he radiated almost palpable in the air around them. She wrung her mind for something to say, anything that would take the attention off Evan and back to herself, but she didn't know how to subtly change the subject.

In the end, she gave up on the subtlety, as the silence lasted too long.

"Tell us more about the lake, me laird," she said. It took Ruthven a few moments, but he finally tore his gaze away from Evan to look at Bonnie instead, his lips stretching into a tight, thin smile. "Is it big? I've never seen a very big lake . . . the ones near me home are all quite small."

"It's quite big," Ruthven confirmed and his tone held the same cheery quality as it did at breakfast, only now Bonnie recognized how artificial it sounded. "There's even a small waterfall that feeds it. It's a lovely place."

"It sounds marvelous," said Bonnie, mustering a smile of her own. It wasn't entirely sincere, she knew, but she hoped it was enough to convince Ruthven she was as excited about this short trip as he was. "Is it possible tae swim there?"

"Och aye," said Ruthven. "Though the water is very cold. Perhaps too cold fer a lady."

"I find it pleasant," Bonnie assured him. "Just as ye visited yer loch with yer faither, so did me sister an' I with our maither. When we were young, our parents took us there often an' we swam with our maither fer hours an' hours."

Bonnie remembered those days fondly, though any mention of her parents brought a familiar ache in her chest, one that had never ceased ever since their demise. When she glanced over at Evan, he found him clenching his jaw, the change in his mood hardly perceptible. She noticed, though; there was no mistaking it for anything else

now that she knew about his parents.

As they entered a part of the path that ran through the forest, Bonnie couldn't help but notice the way Evan glanced around them, gaze searching through the trees and bushes as though he had caught a glimpse of something. She saw the way his fingers curled around the reins. She saw how his other hand came to rest on the hilt of his sword, seemingly in a casual way. There was little that betrayed the tension in him, and the only reason why Bonnie could recognize it at all was because it reminded her of the way she tensed momentarily when catching a glimpse of game while hunting, before relaxing into her hunting stance.



Is he huntin' or is he hunted?

Something told Bonnie the latter was more likely. Evan said nothing, perhaps not wanting to alarm her, but Bonnie was alarmed nevertheless. She, too, began to look around, wondering if she could see whatever it was that he was seeing. To her left, Ruthven continued his leisurely ride, showing no signs of concern.

Perhaps there is nae reason fer concern. Ruthven kens these parts better than anyone. If somethin' was wrong, he would ken, surely.

And yet now that all her senses were alert, Bonnie couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched. The short hairs at the back of her neck stood straight, a shiver running through her that left her feeling chilled to the bone in a way that had nothing to do with the gentle breeze.

This is a thick part o' the forest. If someone were tae attack us, this is where they would dae it.

And yet no attack came. The forest only became thicker and thicker, the tree branches growing closer together. Sparse sunlight shone through the lattice of the leaves, dappled and dim, shadows growing dark and long around them.

"Is there nae other way tae reach the loch?" she asked. This seemed like a dangerous path, one which should be avoided if possible.

"There is," Ruthven said. "But it is much longer. It goes around the forest an' takes hours. This way is the fastest."

It made sense, then, Bonnie thought, that Ruthven would choose this one. They didn't have all day ahead of them, after all. They were meant to be back before nightfall.

From the corner of her eye, Bonnie saw Evan looking at her, his gaze flitting back and forth between her face and her bow—a silent warning.

Bonnie's hand hovered just over her bow as the first arrow whizzed past her head. The sound of it splitting the air right next to her ear forced her to freeze for a moment, every muscle in her body seizing up in shock, her breath rushing out of her lungs in a terrified exhale. Immediately after, though, her bow was in her hand, along with an arrow that she quickly strung, firing it towards the general direction of her attacker with no hesitation.

In the chaos, she didn't know where the archer was, but it didn't matter. She only wanted to create a distraction, to make it harder for the other to find the mark.

Within seconds, more arrows followed, coming from several directions. A cry tumbled out of Bonnie's lips as some of them came too close, her horse—now filled with terror—rearing at the face of imminent threat.

“Stay behind me!” Evan called as he positioned himself between her and the arrows, grunting as he tried to steer his equally fearful horse into position. It was no easy task, keeping them from running away towards any direction they wished, and as much as Bonnie tried to keep her balance on her mare while stringing another arrow, she was close to slipping off her saddle with every movement the horse made.

“Bonnie!” Ruthven called. It was the first time he had called her by her given name, and even in the middle of the fight, Bonnie couldn't help but think it sounded odd, coming from him. “Come with me, quickly!”

As he spoke, Ruthven made to turn back and head out of the forest, towards the

castle, but Bonnie refused to move. She was not going to follow Ruthven, the two of them fleeing. She was not going to leave Evan there alone.

Instead of responding, she began to fire arrow after arrow once more, taking the chance when Evan came close and grabbed the reins, steering both their horses expertly. Suddenly, unburdened by the task of keeping her mare still, Bonnie could focus on picking out her targets where they were hidden between the trees. One of them was to their right, she saw—a man whose arrows landed too close for comfort. Taking a deep breath, she aimed and let her arrow fly through the air, hitting her target fractions of a second later.

The man collapsed immediately, but the rain of arrows didn't stop. Neither did Ruthven's shouts as he commanded Bonnie to follow him, his voice ringing clearly in her ears even as she ignored him. Evan, on the other hand, remained silent save for the grunts of effort as he controlled the horses, using his body as a shield for Bonnie.

She had to take out the others quickly. One of those arrows could find their target in Evan at any moment.

She spotted another man up in one of the trees ahead, standing on a sturdy branch. From where she sat on her horse, Bonnie had a clear view of him, and all she needed to do was twist her body to the left, firing another arrow. When he moved, though, to grab another of his own, Bonnie's flew straight past him, embedding itself on the tree trunk behind him, splinters flying everywhere.

In the time it took the man to utter a curse, Bonnie had reached for another arrow, this time determined not to miss. The horses' hooves were deafening as they stomped against the ground, demanding to be released from Evan's control—so was Ruthven's voice, echoing all around them. Still, Bonnie shut everything but her target out, exhaling as she let the arrow fly and tear through the man's chest, sending him tumbling to the ground.

There was only one archer left, she knew. He was somewhere up ahead of them and her gaze scanned the area around them, looking into the bushes and the trees for any sign of him.

“I dinnae see him!” she called, hoping Evan or at least Ruthven could spot him.

It took a few moments of futile search before Evan shouted, “There! In the bushes!”

Bonnie followed Evan’s directions, catching a glimpse of the last archer in a thicket several meters ahead of them. Relieved, she strung one last arrow, sending it towards the man.

Her relief was short-lived. Just as the arrow left her grip, a searing pain exploded in her shoulder, a cry of agony tearing itself through her chest. When she looked down, she saw blood trickling steadily down, soaking her tunic, an arrow sticking out of her right under the end of her clavicle.

No pain she had ever experienced could compare to this. The muscles torn by the arrow’s tip burned, the ache radiating down her arm and chest. The bow fell from her hand, her fingers letting go of their grip on their own accord, and her vision began to go dark at the edges with every pulse of pain that shot through her.

Distantly, she heard Evan call her name, but with every passing moment, his voice grew dimmer and the ringing in her ears louder. The last thing she felt before darkness finally swallowed her was her body slipping off the saddle of her horse. Before she met the ground, the world went dark.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Time trickled by like water falling in slow drops from the edge of a leaf. Hour after hour, Evan sat by Bonnie’s bed in the healer’s quarters, praying that she would wake

up, but every time he looked at her, she still had her eyes closed, far away from the world. There was a thin sheen of sweat on her forehead and blood had already soaked through the cloth with which the healer had bound her shoulder.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

And yet, Bonnie had managed to save them from such an attack—not against one or two but three archers, all of whom died by her hand.

She had been swift and decisive, showing no hint of hesitation. Evan had not understood the extent of her skills until that very day and now that he had seen just how good she was with a bow and arrow, he couldn't help but see her in a completely different light.

She tricked me the last time. She didnae wish fer me tae ken how good she is.

Clever lass.

A chuckle escaped Evan, though it was short-lived when his gaze fell on her again, laying on that bed. For someone who had seemed so powerful only a few hours prior, now she looked so fragile, her small frame looking even smaller in that bed that was meant for soldiers. Now more than ever, she seemed pale, the color drained from her face. She had lost a lot of blood; the healer had told him. Some of it was still on Evan's clothes, staining his tunic a dark red that had now dried to black.

“Is there somethin' funny?”

Ruthven's voice sounded grating in Evan's ears. He didn't turn to look at the other man; he had no desire to see the irritation etched clearly on his features.

Ever since Evan had brought Bonnie to the healer's quarters, neither he nor Ruthven had left her side, no matter how much they didn't want each other there. Evan wanted Ruthven to leave them alone, Ruthven wanted Evan to leave his castle, but in the end,

they both sat there, waiting for Bonnie to wake up.

They had not exchanged a single word up until that moment. What was there to say, after all? Ruthven had wanted Bonnie to flee the attack with him and she had ignored him, choosing to stay by Evan's side, and Ruthven would never let that go.

I hope Alaric has reached some o' our allies. We cannae stay here much longer.

But perhaps we dinnae have tae stay.

With Bonnie hurt like this in Ruthven's own lands, no one would blame them for leaving. Evan could play the role of the concerned cousin and take Bonnie back home, where she would be safest. Ruthven would try to stop them, of course, but there was nothing he could do as long as he had no way of proving that his lands were safe.

If nothing else, it would buy them some time.

"What happened?"

Bonnie's voice tore Evan's gaze away from Ruthven and he stood from his chair, rushing over to her bedside. He sat on the edge of the bed, but as much as he wanted to reach for her, to pull her into his arms and never let her go again, he refrained from touching her. He didn't want Ruthven to think they were too close—that they could be something other than cousins.

"Yer awake," he said, allowing himself a small smile. "There was an attack in the forest. Ye were hit with an arrow."

Bonnie blinked up at him, then looked down at her injured shoulder before her head fell back onto the pillow with a groan. "I remember now," she said. "I never even got

tae see the loch.”

Evan couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled out of him, shoulders shaking with it. “Nay . . . I suppose ye didnae. But ye did fool me. Ye made me think ye could hardly shoot a bow.”

“O’ course I did,” Bonnie said. Still, her voice was weak, barely more than a whisper. “I couldnae let ye ken me real skill.”

Footsteps echoed in the small room as Ruthven approached, looming over both of them as he stood by the bed. Bonnie frowned as she looked up at him, as though she was surprised to see him, but when she made to sit up, Ruthven gestured at her to stay down.

“I am so relieved yer well, Miss MacLaren,” he said. “How are ye feelin’? Are ye in pain?”

“Some,” Bonnie said, but Evan knew that had to be an understatement. Though the healer had assured them there would be little lasting damage, as the arrow had pierced straight through flesh and had not damaged any bone, the injury still had to hurt. If it was anything like a knife wound, then Evan knew just how bad the pain was, and yet Bonnie didn’t complain. “How long has it been since we returned?”

“A few hours,” said Evan. “The healer instructed us tae allow ye tae rest. An’ ye should still rest if ye wish tae recover soon.”

“Ye will have the services o’ me healer, o’ course,” Ruthven assured Bonnie, but Evan was quick to shake his head.

“We willnae stay long,” he said. “In fact, I think we should part on the morrow.”



Both Bonnie and Ruthven stared at him as though they couldn't comprehend him. It was Ruthven who spoke first, confusion evident in his tone.

“Where will ye go?” he asked. “The weddin’—”

“The weddin’ is o’ little importance now,” Evan said, interrupting him before he could finish his sentence. “What matters is Bonnie’s safety, Laird Ruthven. I’m sure ye will agree.”

Ruthven stammered for a moment, uncertain of what to say in response. He couldn’t argue with Evan on that point, of course, but he couldn’t agree, either, if he wanted to keep Bonnie there.

“I can assure ye the castle is perfectly safe fer Miss MacLaren,” he said instead, assuming a haughty look. “There is nae threat tae her life here. Me men guard these walls an’ they ken their tasks.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

“Perhaps,” said Evan with a small shrug. “But unless ye wish tae keep her imprisoned in these walls, then I dinnae see how she can be safe. Are ye sayin’ that ye would rather keep her here instead o’ allowin’ her tae return tae her home?”

Evan could practically feel the smugness radiating off Bonnie as she stared at Ruthven expectantly, waiting for his response. Ruthven glanced back and forth between them, his lips parting as though he was about to speak before he shut them once more, changing his mind.

When he spoke, he addressed Bonnie rather than Evan.

“Ye’ll be safe here,” he said. “Those men were naething but brigands, surely, an’ brigands exist everywhere. Ye must have brigands in yer lands, too, Miss MacLaren. An’ I’ll have me men sweep the woods tae ensure ye will be safe.”

“Ach . . . I dinnae ken if that will be enough, me laird,” Bonnie said, regret tinting her tone. “As much as I wish tae stay here an’ acquaint meself better with ye, I think me cousin is right. We should head back tae Castle MacLaren as soon as possible.”

“An’ the weddin’?” Ruthven demanded. Blood had begun to rush to his head, his skin turning a faint shade of red, though he hid his anger well. “I dinnae think I need tae remind ye that we are supposed tae be wedded soon.”

“As me cousin said, we will be in communication,” Bonnie told Ruthven with a placating smile. “Once we are back with me council, I will make sure they write ye tae arrange everythin’.”

Ruthven, naturally, wasn't convinced. Evan had expected resistance from his side, and he was willing to argue about this matter for as long as he needed in order to get Bonnie out of there. Not only was it a good opportunity for them to leave, but he was also truly concerned that someone else could attack them. After all, Ruthven surely had plenty of enemies and people who wanted him dead. What would stop them from killing Bonnie and Evan too in the process?

"I truly think ye should reconsider," said Ruthven, one final, half-hearted attempt at making them stay.

Bonnie and Evan exchanged a quick glance, and Evan instantly knew they were in agreement. They had to leave.

"We shall take our leave on the morrow," he said. "An' we will be in touch."

With that, he turned to Bonnie, carefully examining the wound on her shoulder. It was as good as any dismissal, but Ruthven still lingered for a few moments before he turned on his heel with a huff and left the room.

The moment he was gone, Evan could finally breathe with ease.

"We can leave," Bonnie mumbled, as though she could hardly believe it. "We can truly leave."

"Aye," said Evan with a soft chuckle, nodding. "Aye, we can."

It was good to see her relief at the realization that they would soon be away from Ruthven. Nothing but a few hours stood between them and their departure, and Evan was determined to keep Ruthven as far away from them both as he could until then.

"Rest," Evan told Bonnie, leaning closer to press a kiss to her forehead. "I'll stay

here. I promise.”

Bonnie nodded, closing her eyes once more. Soon, she fell into a calm, deep sleep, and Evan watched her, that weight in his chest slowly disappearing as his mind caught up with the fact that she was alive and well.

When Evan had seen that arrow pierce Bonnie’s shoulder, he had instantly been flooded with terror at the thought of losing her. There had been so much blood—no matter how much pressure Evan had placed upon the wound, it had still flowed over his fingers, warm and sticky, a stark reminder of Bonnie’s mortality. He could lose her at any moment, he thought, especially if Ruthven found out the truth about their plans.

He didn’t think he could handle such a terrible fate. If anything happened to Bonnie, he would spend whatever would be left of his life as a broken man. The only reasons for him to keep going would be the clan and his brother, but even so, he didn’t know if it would be enough to keep him going.

But she is alive. She is alive an’ nae harm will come tae her as long as I live. I will ensure it.

Even if he had to give his own life, he would do anything to protect her.

Bonnie slept peacefully through the night, knowing Evan was right there, next to her. When she opened her eyes once more, it was just starting to turn bright outside, the first rays of the sun bathing the land in a cold light. Out of the window, she could see that it was going to be another nice day—the sky clear and blue, the weather perfect for travelling.

She couldn’t wait to get out of there.

Dragging her gaze away from the window, she searched for Evan and found him slumped in a nearby chair, his head tilted back and his mouth hanging open as he slept. The sight of him like that drew a soft chuckle out of her, though she couldn't help but feel a little sorry for him. Surely, the position in which he was sleeping could be nothing but uncomfortable.

Bonnie took a few moments to stretch—her left arm, at least, since that was the one attached to her uninjured shoulder. Her right shoulder still ached, the pain sharp and ever-present despite the soothing brews the healer had given her the previous day. She supposed their effect had to be fully gone by now, leaving behind this insistent pain that she would have to call her companion for their entire trip back home, until she could be given another analgesic.

She would rather be alert while they travelled, after all. Even if there was little she could do to defend herself with her right arm useless, she could at least run and hide in the face of danger if she was fully aware of her surroundings. An analgesic would only fog her mind and slow her down.

With a wince of pain, Bonnie pushed herself off the bed. She tested her shoulder once, rolling it gently, but the pain that shot down her arm and torso as she moved halted the movement before it was complete, and Bonnie had to bite down on her cheek to stop herself from making a noise.

She didn't want the first thing Evan heard when he woke to be her groans of pain.

Nae movin' that shoulder, then.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

Riding, too, would be difficult, but she refused to spend another day in Castle Ruthven. She was well enough to travel and so she would, reluctant to miss this opportunity to leave.

Once she stood, slipping her feet into her shoes, she made her way over to Evan and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder, shaking him awake. Slowly, he opened his eyes and blinked up at her, before glancing over his shoulder at the windows that lined the far wall.

“What time is it?” he asked, hands coming up to rub the sleep from his eyes before one of them rested over Bonnie’s.

“Early still,” said Bonnie. “But we have a long way ahead o’ us.”

They would have to spend the night somewhere, she knew, and she didn’t know the way from Castle Ruthven to Castle MacLaren at all. As far as she knew, neither did Evan, and so it was best to be as cautious as possible, which included leaving early. Besides, she was certain Evan was just as eager to get out of there as she was.

“I shall prepare the horses,” Evan said, standing from the chair and stretching the kinks out of his back. For a moment, he glanced around as if he was looking for someone, before he leaned close to pull Bonnie into a kiss, one that had her melting against him. Then, he was gone too soon, heading for the door. “I shall meet ye at the courtyard once ye are ready. Have a servant call me.”

With that, he was gone and Bonnie took the chance to gather some supplies from the healer’s quarters—clean cloth, some of the ointment that was left by her bed, larger

strips of cloth with which she could rebind her shoulder—before she, too, left and headed to her chambers to pack for their trip.

It was a quick affair. By the time the rest of the castle was up, she was already done and two servants were carrying her items down to the courtyard for her.

When she stepped out of the doors, she found not only Evan there, two horses ready for them by his side, but also Ruthven, who seemed anything but pleased by their departure. The man stood a little to the side, arms crossed over his chest as he glared at a seemingly oblivious Evan—though Bonnie knew better than to assume he hadn't notice the stare—and even when he spotted Bonnie, the frown didn't leave his face.

It was odd, seeing that look directed at her. Ruthven had always made a point of being pleasant to her, but she supposed now he had no reason to hide his irritation. All his hopes rested with the MacLaren council, but he had to know that the farther Bonniel was from him, the harder it would be to have the wedding he so desperately wanted.

“Laird Ruthven,” Bonnie said in greeting, bowing to him. “Thank ye fer bein’ such a gracious host.”

Ruthven gave Bonnie one of those half-hearted smiles that she had come to expect from him. “It was me pleasure,” he said. “I only wish ye could have stayed.”

“It is rather unfortunate,” said Bonnie, but that was all she offered on the matter. “As me cousin promised ye, we shall write tae ye as soon as we are back.”

“I will be awaitin’ yer letter, Miss MacLaren,” said Ruthven. “I hope yer travels are safe.”

There was something about Ruthven’s tone that sent a shiver down Bonnie’s spine.

There was nothing that justified that feeling, though—at least nothing she could identify. Perhaps it was all in her head, she thought. Ever since she had found out Ruthven worked with the English, her dislike of him had been infected by a thread of fear.

With one final, strained smile and a small bow, Bonnie turned around and mounted her horse with Evan's help, favoring her left arm for the first time. It would slow them down, but at least they weren't in a terrible hurry. They could take their time as long as they were out of that castle.

Ruthven stood by the castle doors and watched them as the two of them left, but Bonnie refused to look behind. She rode out of the gates without hesitation, and only when they were several steps down the path, did she finally breathe with ease, her chest expanding with the first deep breath she had taken after days.

The sound of the gates closing behind them was like music to her ears.

“Free at last,” Bonnie mumbled to herself. Behind them, the castle seemed smaller and smaller the farther they travelled. Ahead of them, there was nothing but the open path, the one that would finally lead her home.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“I think we should go tae me castle instead.”

Evan had been thinking about it for a while now, ever since he and Bonnie had gone around the first forest in their way—the very same one they had crossed the previous day where they had been attacked. Neither of them was eager to go through the same path again, and so they had decided to take the longer route, even if it would delay them by hours.



Now, the sun was slowly sinking in the horizon and there was no town in sight. When they had left Castle Ruthven, Evan had been under the impression that they would find a place to stay, some inn or even a cottage where they could seek shelter in exchange for some gold. They had found nothing but empty land, though, as all the settlements and towns seemed to be at the other side of Castle Ruthven, closer to the north than the south.

Neither of them knew the area and so they didn't know when they would reach another town. Evan didn't want to risk going too far in the dark. Sooner or later, they would have to set up camp.

"Yer castle?" Bonnie asked, frowning as she turned to look at him. "Why?"

"Because we dinnae ken how many people Alaric has managed tae reach," said Evan. "An' we dinnae ken if yer sister an' her husband have made it back by now. If they're nae there, then yer council will make the decision about ye an' Ruthven an' there will be nae one tae oppose them if they decide tae go ahead with the weddin'."

"Surely, Cathleen an' Macauley must have reached the castle by now," Bonnie said. "It's been a long time since the Hamilton weddin'."

"It is most likely," Evan agreed. "But if there is even a small chance that they're nae there an' Alaric's news havenae reached yer council, I would prefer ye were with me instead o' them."

Evan had to admit that he also had a selfish reason for wanting to go to his own castle rather than Castle MacLaren. If he brought Bonnie home, there was no telling whether or not he would be allowed to remain near her. If he brought her to his home, then no one could tell him a thing.

He didn't reveal that to Bonnie, though, even if he doubted she would fault him for it.

He simply found it a little embarrassing, and he even felt his cheeks heat a little at the thought of sharing the whole truth.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

“I suppose yer right,” said Bonnie after a few moments of contemplation. “I will write tae Cathleen once we are there tae make sure she has returned an’ tae inform her o’ me departure. I truly hope she willnae look fer me in the time it will take me tae write tae her. I dinnae want her tae think somethin’ happened tae me.”

“Surely, Ruthven will tell her ye left if she does,” Evan said. “She willnae fash.”

“She will,” said Bonnie, sounding certain of the fact. “She always does, even when there is nae reason.”

With a chuckle, Evan nodded slowly, thinking about him and Alaric. The two of them worried about each other all the time, even though they were used to danger, even though they always sent each other to risky missions. It was only natural. Even if they knew what had to be done, they never once stopped worrying about the other.

Bonnie and Cathleen must have been the same, he thought. From what Bonnie had shared with him, the two of them were close; they had always been. Now that they had no one left but each other, their parents long gone, they only clung to each other even more.

“We should make camp,” Evan said just as the sun began to dip under the horizon. “It is best tae stop now while we still have some light.”

“We willnae try tae find a town?” Bonnie asked, seemingly alarmed at the concept of spending the night in the middle of nowhere. She wasn’t as used to it as Evan was, surely, he thought. It would be a rough night for her, especially with her shoulder injured. “Is it . . . is it safe tae stay here?”

“It is safer than searchin’ fer a town,” said Evan. “At least if we are in a camp, I can defend us if someone attacks.”

“Ye cannae defend us on the road?” asked Bonnie in a teasing tone, following Evan out of the path as he brought his horse to a halt near the first trees.

“I can defend us anywhere,” he said with a soft chuckle, helping her dismount. The wince of pain she gave at the movement didn’t escape his attention.

She is in pain. It is dangerous enough fer anyone tae travel, let alone an injured lass. I must be more careful than ever while she cannae use her bow.

“But it is still better if we are stationary,” he added, grabbing the two horses to bring them further into the woods. It was darker there the deeper they walked into the trees, and cooler, the temperature dropping significantly under the shade of the leaves. From the corner of his eye, he saw Bonnie clutch at her cloak, tightening it around her shoulders.

Deeper still, though not too far away from the main path, Evan found a small clearing, just big enough for them to camp there for the night. He tied the horses to a nearby tree and then unfastened his cloak, draping it over Bonnie’s shoulders as he brought her to sit by the large roots of a towering tree.

“What are ye doin’?” she demanded, making a valiant, though still unsuccessful, effort to give him the cloak back. “Ye’ll be cold, Evan! An’ then ye’ll fall ill an’ how will I ken where tae go?”

“I’ll be fine,” Evan assured her, rolling his eyes at the dramatic scenarios her mind conjured up. “I’ll gather some wood fer a fire, so that will keep me warm. Stay here. I willnae take long.”

“I can help ye,” Bonnie said.

“Nay, ye cannae,” Evan countered, already walking away from her. “Yer injured an’ ye must conserve yer strength. An’ as I said, it willnae take long. There is wood everywhere here.”

As he spoke, he began to gather up branches, some bigger and some smaller, bringing them to the middle of the clearing. Thankfully, he didn’t have to argue with Bonnie for her to stay put, and she simply watched him as he brought all the wood he needed to the pile, before grabbing the tinderbox from his bag to light the fire.

Within seconds, the warmth of the flames seeped into him and he rubbed the life back into his arms. Despite his promise that he would not be cold, he had to admit that the chill of the late evening had quickly gotten to him, leaving his skin freezing.

With some effort, Bonnie pushed herself closer to the fire, joining him by the flames. The sky was dark now, a deep, velvety blue that almost blended with the darkness of the forest, the branches above them casting shadows all around them. Their little clearing, though, was illuminated well by the fire—perhaps a little too well, announcing their presence to anyone who passed by.

Evan kept his sword close. If there was going to be an attack, he would be prepared for it.

In the silence that followed, Bonnie leaned closer to him, resting her head on his shoulder, and Evan wrapped her arm around her with a soft, content sigh. It was enough to simply have her close to him. It was enough to hold her, knowing that she was unharmed and that he hadn’t lost her like he had feared back in that forest.

“When I saw ye . . . when I held ye while ye were bleedin’,” Evan said, but then he didn’t know how to continue. How could he explain to her how terrified he was?

How could he explain to her that his world had come to a halt and he thought that in the span of mere moments, he had lost one of the things he held dearest? There were no words to explain the terror, the sorrow that flooded his mind when he thought she would not make it. There were no words to describe the horror of her blood coating his hands as he desperately tried to keep that wound closed, the nauseating weight of reality as it crashed down upon him.

“I’m here,” Bonnie assured him, reaching up to cup his face in her hands. She brought their foreheads together, the two of them resting against each other, sharing the same air. “I’m here, Evan. I’m fine.”

Obvious as it was, hearing it from her brought Evan some peace of mind, some comfort he had been lacking. “I love ye,” he said, pulling her into a kiss. “I love ye, Bonnie. I never wish tae lose ye.”

“Ye willnae,” she said, voice hushed and gentle against his lips. “I promise ye. Ye willnae lose me. I’m all yers.”

As she spoke, Bonnie fell backwards onto the earth, pulling Evan along with her. He let himself be tugged, though he braced himself on his forearms over her, mindful of her injured shoulder. When her thighs bracketed his hips, wrapping around him, he couldn’t help the soft gasp that escaped him. No woman had brought him to this kind of despair, this kind of need before. Every part of him craved her, seeking out her warmth, the softness of her skin, the tender, yielding flesh of her curves where he could sink his fingers and drag his lips, his tongue, just to see her shiver.

“I want ye,” she whispered. “Make me yers.”

Evan could hardly refuse such a sweet order.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

The words were out of Bonnie's mouth before she could stop them, but she didn't want to take them back. At first, she had been a little hesitant, especially as she remembered Evan's warning that he would not take her as a husband takes a wife, since they were not married. But then she couldn't help but crave him, every part of her body calling to her to be as close to him as she could. She didn't want anything to separate them any longer. She didn't want to hide a single part of her from him.

She had come close to death, and she knew the day could come when Evan would be in dire danger. If anything, that day was close. He was going against powerful men, men who could kill him with a simple order, and Bonnie couldn't handle the grief that welled up inside her at that thought.

Before that day came, she wanted to be his and for him to become hers.

Evan showed no resistance as he kissed her, despite his previous claims. Had he changed his mind, Bonnie wondered? Did he, too, want it as much as she did after realizing that they could lose each other at any moment?

She didn't want to break the spell cast over the night by asking him, and so she remained silent as he pushed his cloak off her shoulders, smoothing it down onto the ground, and then unclasped hers, doing the same. Bonnie shivered as the cool night air hit her exposed skin, but Evan's warmth, coupled with the heat of the flames, was more than enough to keep the chill of the night away.

Just as the cloak fell off her shoulders, though, Evan hesitated and Bonnie realized it wouldn't be as easy for her to convince him that it was alright, even if she was unmarried.

“Are ye . . . are ye certain?” he asked, himself sounding entirely uncertain. “Ye ken what could happen if this is revealed. If anyone finds out?—”

“I ken,” Bonnie assured him, nodding. She wasn’t a fool. She knew that any hopes of marriage with anyone but Evan would be ruined for her if anyone ever found out, but the truth of the matter was that she didn’t want to marry anyone else. “I ken, Evan.”

“I cannae promise ye anythin’,” Evan said in an anguished tone that had Bonnie frowning in confusion. “As much as I would love tae promise ye that I’ll make ye me wife, I must first speak tae me council. They’ve been lookin’ fer a wife fer me an’ I tried taeavoid it as much as I could, but they may have found one already, an’ I . . . I wish tae wed ye, Bonnie. I dinnae want anyone else, but if me council?—”

Bonnie hushed Evan gently, pulling him into another kiss to soothe his fears. All that mattered to her was that he wanted to marry her, just as she wanted to marry him. As long as they had each other, as long as they loved each other, then that was enough for her.

“Please,” she said, whispering against his lips. She looked right into Evan’s eyes, gazing into their dark depths. “I want ye.”

It was that which convinced Evan in the end and he wasted no more time before he began to push Bonnie’s tunic down her shoulders, eager hands exposing her breasts. Then, he paused, looking down at her body as though he was in awe of what he saw, before he quickly helped her take off all her clothes, leaving her entirely nude.

“Yer so bonnie, lass,” he said, leaning down to drag the flat of his tongue over her nipple before his lips wrapped around it, sucking hard on the pebbled nub. Bonnie moaned, loud an unabashed, and Evan’s hips jerked against her, a gasp shuddering through him as he drew back. “Make that sound again.”



Evan's hands found her breasts, fingers toying with her nipples, and Bonnie didn't need to be told again. She couldn't stop the moans that tumbled past her lips even if she tried, the pleasure shooting straight to her core. Against her thigh, she could feel Evan's manhood already hardening, a thick, solid heat even through their clothes.

"Ye make the loveliest sounds when I play with yer breasts," Evan said, one of his hands sliding lower and lower as he stared at Bonnie's heaving chest, tongue darting out to lick his lips. "Dae ye like it? Does it make yer bonnie cleft all wet fer me? Let us see."

Bonnie's face burned at the seemingly endless stream of filthy words, but as embarrassed as she was to hear Evan speak like that, it also only served to make her want him more, spark after spark of lust igniting inside her. When Evan held her thighs apart, his hand reaching between them to brush over her folds, Bonnie realized with growing embarrassment that she was, indeed, already wet, Evan's fingers rubbing slickly over her flesh.

"Soakin' wet," he said around a deep, rumbling moan as his thumb circled her sensitive spot, drawing out her pleasure. Bonnie was entirely at his mercy, caught between the pulsing pleasure in her core and the strange mix of lust and embarrassment that fogged up her mind. "Keep yer legs spread wide fer me. I want tae watch ye take me inside ye."

"Evan," Bonnie whined, heart hammering in her chest. "Ye cannae say those things! It's . . . it's utterly indecent!"

"Then let us be utterly indecent," Evan all but growled as he brought his fingers to his lips, both wetting them and tasting Bonnie on them at the same time. "If only I could taste yersweetness all the time . . . but nay. We shall try somethin' different now an' I wish tae look at ye."

His fingers found Bonnie's opening once more, a wicked grin on his face as one of them slipped slowly inside her. Bonnie cried out, half in surprise and half in pleasure, her innermost walls fluttering around Evan as they adjusted to the new sensation. Evan, true to his word, never once looked away from where they were joined, staring like a man dying of thirst who found an oasis.

"So tight . . . I can only imagine how tight an' hot ye'll be when I push inside ye."

Nothing could have prepared Bonnie for the intensity of her need when Evan began to talk to her like this, teasing out things she didn't even know existed within her. Certainly, on the one hand, she could hardly bear to listen to him, feeling as though she would combust from sheer embarrassment, but on the other hand, she never wanted it to end. She had never felt such desire, such lust before. Nothing could compare to this urgent need that left her gasping and moaning and begging for more.

"Ye want more?" Evan asked, and Bonnie realized she had begged him out loud for it. "I'll give ye more, mo ghraidh. I'll give ye anythin' ye want. I'll make ye come apart fer me, listen tae yer bonnie moans as I plunge inside ye an' make ye mine."

"Yers," said Bonnie mindlessly, hips rolling ceaselessly against Evan as she sought out more from him. "All yers."

"All mine, aye," said Evan, and then pushed another finger inside her, making her arch off the cloaks and into his touch. His hands were still gentle as he thrust inside her, but the rhythm of his fingers was demanding, Evan determined to draw the first orgasm out of her.

When he curled his fingers, hitting a spot inside Bonnie again and again that made everything else melt away, her world turning into nothing but blinding white, her body surrendered to him, Bonnie reaching her peak with a scream of his name.

At first, there was nothing but the warm, pulsing sensation travelling up and down her body, her mind beautifully blank, anything that wasn't Evan too far away to matter. Bonnie came slowly back to her body, thighs shaking as Evan gently removed his fingers and draped himself over her, pulling her into a deep, searing kiss.

Bonnie lay there, practically boneless, lazily kissing Evan back, all the urgency now gone—from her, at least. Evan was still eager, hips twitching against her as though he couldn't help it. A laugh bubbled out of her, bright and happy, and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders as they kissed, letting the joy wash over her.

It had been a while since she had last been so happy. Being with Evan was a relief like no other.

Soon, though, she remembered that Evan hadn't had the chance to reach his own release, nor had he truly taken her as she had asked. Breaking the kiss, Bonnie looked at him, her handsneaking between them to wrap around his length over his clothes.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

It had an immediate effect on Evan. He froze, his entire body shuddering with pleasure, eyes falling shut. Bonnie loved to see him like this, so affected even though he had been with many others before.

“I told ye I want ye tae take me,” she reminded him. “An’ I still dae.”

“Are ye certain?” Evan asked. “We can?—”

“I am certain,” Bonnie insisted. “I want it, Evan. I wantye. Please . . . dinnae make me wait any longer.”

For a moment, Evan was stunned into silence, but then he nodded and pulled back from Bonnie. In only a few seconds, he had ridded himself of his clothes, throwing them in the same pile as hers, and for the first time, Bonnie could appreciate him in all his beauty.

Under the light of the fire, he looked as though he was sculpted from marble; broad shoulders, thick arms, a muscular chest and stomach. And right below, his length curling towards his belly, thick and weeping from the head.

Bonnie swallowed in a dry throat. She had never seen a man entirely nude before and certainly no man who looked like Evan. Too late, she realized she had been staring, and Evan chuckled as she quickly averted her gaze.

“Yer allowed tae look,” he said, shuffling closer to her. “Dae ye like what ye see?”

Bonnie nodded, one hand tentatively reaching out to caress the grooves of his

muscles on his chest and stomach. They were hard under her fingers, the skin a little rough from the sparse coating of hair, dark as that on his head. A trail of it led under his bellybutton to his crotch, drawing her gaze back to his manhood once more.

She had to admit it was rather intimidating. Evan was a big man—proportionate everywhere. Compared to him, Bonnie felt too small.

Gathering some of her wetness in a sudden movement that had Bonnie gasping, Evan brought his hand to himself and stroked his length languidly as he watched her. Then, he draped himself over her once more, his other hand carding gently through her hair.

“If ye wish tae stop, ye’ll tell me.”

It wasn’t a question—more of an order—but Bonnie nodded regardless, even if she knew she had come too far now to stop. She wanted Evan more than she had wanted anything in her life and she would be damned if she left that clearing without having him at least once.

The first thrust was torturously slow as Evan entered her, taking his time and giving her time, too, to adjust. He was shaking above her, seemingly using all his willpower to go this slowly, controlling himself as well as he could, his eyes firmly shut and his lips parted around a moan. Bonnie clung onto his shoulders, fingers digging into the rigid flesh, her breath caught in her throat as Evan filled her to the brim, taking up all the space inside her.

By the time he was buried in her to the hilt, they were both covered in a thin sheen of sweat, panting as they tried to catch their breaths.

“Ye truly are . . . so tight,” Evan said, voice strained as he stopped himself from moving, his hips only giving small, restrained twitches. “Yer heavenly, lass. How I wish I could remain inside ye, pleasin’ ye time after time.”

Bonnie didn't respond. There was nothing she could say when each and every sense in her body was overtaken by Evan and by the pleasure, he was giving her. Slowly, he withdrew his hips and then plunged himself inside her once more, twin moans falling from their lips.

"Evan . . ."

She didn't know how to finish that sentence, but Evan nodded anyway, pressing a kiss to her lips.

"I ken," he said. "I ken."

And it was then that Bonnie knew he felt the same thing she did, the two of them lost into each other, chasing the same release.

Nothing could have prepared Bonnie for this. Nothing could have prepared her for how close she felt to Evan now, how it felt as though they were becoming one. More than ever, she knew just how much she wanted him by her side, the two of them spending the rest of their lives together.

Every thrust of Evan's hips sent a jolt of pleasure through Bonnie, the brush of his manhood against her walls driving her mad with need. Her body responded to each of his movements, legs wrapping tightly around his hips to keep him close, her opening parting eagerly for him as he pushed deeper and deeper. Whatever she couldn't say to him, she showed it in the way she kissed him, deep and greedy, their tongues twining as they rocked together on the ground.

Slowly, her pleasure grew once more, Evan's ministrations bringing her closer and closer to another climax. She could feel him everywhere around her, inside her, the sweet assault on her senses too good to resist.

“Evan, please,” she said, the words coming out in a breathless gasp.

“Are ye close, mo ghraidh?” Evan asked, doubling his efforts. “Come . . . I wish tae see ye again.”

It only took a few more thrusts for Bonnie to be tipped over the edge, diving into the depths of another climax. Her body shook with the force of it, head thrown back and ears buzzing with the rush of blood in her veins until it was the only thing she could hear.

Warmth spread all over her body, her core pulsing even as she came down. The aftershocks of pleasure drew a startled gasp out of her as Evan gave a few more thrusts in quick succession, and then buried his face in her neck with a groan, spilling against her thigh.

Afterwards, neither of them could move. They stayed there, entwined as they tried to catch their breath once more in silence, their chests heaving. It was only when Evan became too heavy to bear that Bonnie pushed him off, and though he went easily, he quickly pulled her into his arms.

Bonnie was grateful for it as she snuggled against his chest. Now that they were finished, the cooling sweat on her body had left her shivering, even with the warmth of the fire.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

“Did ye enjoy it?” Evan asked, and Bonnie looked up to give him an unimpressed look. She was quite certain that her enjoyment had been more than clear, and yet Evan still asked. She could only assume he was trying to stroke his own ego.

“Must ye ask?” she said, giving him a playful shove. “I think ye ken the answer.”

“I wish tae hear it from ye,” Evan said with a small shrug. “I truly dae. Is that so bad?”

It occurred to Bonnie then that Evan was not asking because he wanted to hear her admit it, but rather because he feared there was a chance, no matter how small, that she had not, in fact, enjoyed it. The realization stunned her into silence for a few moments, but then she rolled on top of him, bracing her hands on his chest to look at his face.

“I enjoyed it very much,” she said. “In fact, I dinnae think I have ever enjoyed anythin’ as much as this.”

As he looked at her, Evan’s lips split into a wide grin, genuine joy radiating off him in waves. “I’m glad,” he said. “I enjoyed it very much, as well.”

For a while, they stayed like that, content to simply enjoy each other’s presence. Then, they quickly cleaned up and dressed, before settling in for the night, once again in each other’s arms. The only difference now was that Evan had his sword right next to him, and the mere sight of it brought some uneasiness to Bonnie at the thought that there could be an attack.



There was another thought, too, which filled her with unease. She remembered what Evan had said about the two of them getting married, and she didn't know if she should believe him or if he was only using the council as an excuse. He had told her repeatedly that he loved her and his actions spoke of the same, but Bonnie had long since learned to be wary of people.

What if he doesnae wish tae wed me? What if it was naething but an excuse?

"Hush," Evan said, his eyes closed, as though he could sense what Bonnie was thinking. "Relax . . . go tae sleep. I'm right here."

He's right here . . . he's nae lyin' tae me.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Bonnie's eyes shot open only to find that everything was dark. There was little light around her, only what remained of the dying fire and the few rays of moonlight that penetrated through the branches of the trees. She didn't know at first what it was that had woken her. Could it have been a dream? Could it have been pain from her shoulder injury? Could it have been nothing more than the stress of the past few days?

But then she heard it. There was a sound not too far from her and Evan, a sound which reminded her too much of footsteps. It wasn't the natural rhythm of the forest. It wasn't a small critter, trying to find some prey in the middle of the night. No, Bonnie was quite certain it was a human and the only reason she could come up with regarding their presence was an attack.

Which could only mean there were more than one of them.

Slowly and quietly, she shook Evan awake, instantly motioning at him to stay silent.

At first, he opened his mouth to speak, confused as he was so suddenly woken from a deep sleep, but Bonnie was quick to clamp a hand over his mouth silencing him.

Then, his gaze snapped away from her when another sound echoed around them and he, too, knew that there was someone watching them.

Bonnie pulled her hand back, knowing Evan would stay quiet. The darkness around them was thick, but it was even thicker the farther she looked from the fire, where whoever was watching them was hiding. It hid them better than it hid her and Evan, who were close to the small flames and every movement they made was much more visible to their attackers.

Just as several footsteps suddenly sounded, rushing towards their small clearing, Evan stood, his sword already in his hand. Bonnie saw three men, all of them large and armed, approach, circling around them as she cowered by the fire.

What was there for her to do? She had no weapons on her and even if she did, her dominant hand was useless. She couldn't fight. All she could do was hope that Evan could kill or at least chase away all three of them while she found a place to hide.

But she couldn't move. From the way the three men were circling them, there was nowhere for her to go without running straight into one and that would only make matters worse. It was safer, she thought, to stay where she was rather than try to hide or escape.

The only sound in the clearing was that of the men's footsteps and of the night—the rustling of the leaves, a nearby river whose gurgle could be heard even there. Before her, Evan stood perfectly still, waiting for the first attack.

“When I tell ye,” he said, his voice quiet so that only she could hear him. “Run tae the horses. Untie them an' flee. I'll try tae follow.”

Bonnie's voice died in her throat as Evan spoke those last words. She knew there was no time for arguing, not when death was so near, but the last thing she wanted was to leave him there all alone against three men. She couldn't flee without him. She couldn't go on, knowing that he would die there.

What she could do, though, was follow his orders and untie the horses at his command. It would give them a chance to escape, no matter how small, and so Bonnie pushed herself up but didn't stand quite yet, as she didn't want to make herself into a target. She only watched carefully, keeping her ears open for Evan's command.

The first man to attack was the one from the right, charging towards Evan. He was savage in his attack, swinging his sword wildly as the other two joined him in an unfair fight, the three of them quickly threatening to overwhelm Evan. With all of them occupied, though, Bonnie saw the same opening as Evan would and stood, muscles tense as she waited one moment, then another.

"Now!" Evan shouted and Bonnie shot into a sprint, rushing to the horses. No pain slowed her down. She could feel nothing but the wild beating of her heart even as she used her right arm, trying to untie them as quickly as she could. In that moment, she was certain she could have even shot her bow or fought with a knife. Such was the adrenaline that kept her going, allowing her to feel no discomfort from her injury, no fear from the attack.

"Go!" she heard Evan say, but she decided right then and there that she would go nowhere without him. The clanging of the swords and the shouts of the men, the grunts coming from Evan all filled the clearing with deafening sound. The horses, spooked as they were, reared and neighed, trying desperately to get away from Bonnie's grip as she held tightly onto the reins, trying to stop them.

Soon, they would overpower her, she knew. They were both young, strong horses and

the only reason why they hadn't yet fled was because they were too confused and terrified to even flee in the dark. Behind her, she heard a grunt of pain and turned with wide, fearful eyes to see that one of the men dropped to the ground, dead, blood pouring out of the wound in his chest.

The other two men took a few steps back from Evan, who was looking at them as though he was issuing a challenge. Before any of them could move, though, Evan's horse reared once more and this time, it managed to escape Bonnie's hold on it, rushing into the clearing. Bonnie's eyes met Evan's for a moment so brief, it was almost as though she had imagined it. It was enough, though, for them to know they had both reached the same conclusion: there was only one way out of this that could almost guarantee the safety of them both.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

Bonnie jumped onto her horse just as Evan swung around, grabbed the reins to his, and still running alongside it, heaved his body up to the saddle. Something akin to awe sparked within Bonnie as she watched him, the feat nothing short of impressive, a display of his physical strength that left even the two attackers stunned, unable to do anything but watch as she and Evan fled the clearing. They had no horses, after all, at least not nearby. It would take them too long to grab them and follow in pursuit, especially in the dark, and they knew it just as well as Bonnie and Evan did.

Steering and controlling their frightened horses was no easy task. Bonnie felt the mare's fear, her panic as she galloped erratically down the path, eager to get as far away from the commotion of the clearing as she could. A less skilled rider would have already fallen off the saddle and the only reason why Bonnie could still hold on and even fought the mare's instincts was her early training and the fact that her father had encouraged her to ride instead of taking the family carriage ever since she was a young girl.

For a while, she rode alone through the narrow path that led away from the forest. Evan's own spooked horse had taken him somewhere through the woods, through a more treacherous path, and Bonnie kept her eyes open for any sign of him—but also for any sign of danger, which could still lurk in the shadows. The men who had attacked them didn't look like brigands. From the glimpses Bonnie had caught, they were well-groomed, with cropped beards or clean-shaven, in cloaks that may have been patched and mended, but had been done so with care and expertise. Their swords had glinted in the light of the fire, newly polished and sharpened.

No, those had been soldiers, not brigands. But that didn't mean that there were no brigands lurking around, waiting for the right moment to strike, and Bonnie was

defenseless without the use of her arm.

It was then that her shoulder began to ache once more, that throbbing pain returning in waves of increasing intensity. At first, it did nothing more than bother her, distracting her attention from the shadows. As she rode, though, her arm stiffened, pain shooting down its length with every movement she made, as though the tip of that arrow sank into her flesh again and again, relentless in its search of a target.

A whistle cracked the silence around her, loud and clear, and Bonnie had to swallow back a cry of pain as her horse reared once more, forcing her to tighten her grip. Then, it stopped, idly turning to the left and right as Bonnie took a moment to catch her breath.

Evan found her moments later, bringing his own horse to a halt next to her. Sweat coated his brow, glistening on his skin under the light of the moon, and his cheeks were flushed with exertion, eyes wide as he reached for her arm and cradled it gently in his hand.

“Are ye alright?” he asked. “Were ye hurt?”

“Nay,” said Bonnie, shaking her head. “Ye?”

“Nay,” Evan assured her. “But we must keep ridin’. It’s too dangerous tae stay here much longer.”

“Aye,” said Bonnie, already gripping the reins once more. “How far is Castle MacGregor?”

“We should be there by morn,” Evan said. “But we could stop an’ rest once we’re far enough from Ruthven.”

“I dinnae need tae rest,” Bonnie said, knowing it would be for her benefit rather than Evan’s. She would much rather keep going, riding as far as the horses would take them before they reached the point of exhaustion, putting as much space between her and Ruthven as she could.

Those men werenae brigands.

That thought had bothered her ever since it had first appeared in her mind. The only one who could have any reason to send men after them was Ruthven himself, but that had to mean that he knew the truth, at least partially.

Or was he simply so angry we left that he sent men after us?

It sounded absurd, but then again, she had found out plenty about Ruthven that would seem absurd at first glance. He had always seemed like the perfect gentleman, up until he wasn’t.

“Let us continue, then,” said Evan, his voice pulling Bonnie out of her thoughts. She didn’t share any of them with him yet, though she would be surprised if he wasn’t thinking the same things as she did, suspecting Ruthven just as much as her. It was the only explanation that fit.

What if those men who attacked us near the loch were his men, too?

But why would he risk the bride he so wished tae have?

Maybe the arrow that struck her was meant for Evan and not for her, after all. Maybe he was the one they were trying to kill, Ruthven eager to get him out of the way so he could have Bonnie under his thumb, doing as he pleased with her with no one around to stop him.

The thought sent a chill down Bonnie's spine. They had both been so much closer to peril than they realized.

For the rest of the night, they rode in silence, pushing their horses as much as they could to reach Castle MacGregor by the morning. The sun had just risen in the horizon when the hill appeared before them after a bend in the path, the castle sitting atop like a gleaming jewel in the morning sun.

"There it is," said Evan as he and Bonnie came to a brief stop, letting the horses drink from a small creek and munch on the grass that grew on its banks. "Home."

Bonnie gazed upon the castle, taking in the pale rock of its walls, the turrets and the steepled roofs, the green valley that stretched under the hill. It was a beautiful place, one that she would be happy to call home, though she didn't know if she ever would.

Evan had been clear: he had to speak with his council first, and that could either mean that he truly meant it and there was a chance his council would reject his decision or that he was merely trying to avoid any commitment by using them as an excuse. Either way, Bonnie feared her chances were lower than she would have liked.

Once the horses were ready to continue their journey, they made their way down that hill, through the valley, and up the next, finally reaching the gates of Castle MacGregor. Upon seeing their laird, the guards threw the gates open while shouting for Alaric, who appeared in the courtyard before Bonnie and Evan had even had a chance to dismount, his face pallid and waxen with concern.

"Ruthven kens," was the first thing Evan told his brother, confirming Bonnie's suspicions that he had come to the same conclusion as she had. "He sent men after us. Or after me."

"Well, he certainly kens we're nae Bonnie's cousins," Alaric said, rushing over to



Evan. “I dinnae ken how much else he kens but . . . I wouldnae be surprised if he kens everythin’.”

“We must prepare fer?—”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

A dry cough sounded around them as Bonnie jumped off her horse with Evan's help. It drew everyone's gazes on the source, and Bonnie turned to see a man standing a few paces away from them. He was tall and lean, his skin weathered by time but his body appearing robust still. His pale blue eyes found Bonnie first and then slid over to Evan, who stood a little straighter at the man's presence, a small, confused frown on his face.

He couldn't place him, Bonnie knew, and so was being careful with how he addressed him.

"Laird MacGregor," said the man before Evan could speak. He bowed to Evan, but despite the inherent submission of the gesture, he still held a haughty, unaffected air about him. "I am Dougal McIlroy, advisor tae the Lady Medea Buchanan. I am here tae discuss yer weddin' tae yer betrothed."

The pain that tore through Bonnie's chest was akin to that which she felt as the arrow pierced her flesh, leaving a gaping wound in its path. The word *betrothed* bounced around in her mind again and again, a torment which seemed to have no end. Evan was already betrothed to someone else. That man was not here to discuss a betrothal but rather a wedding, and now Bonnie knew Evan for the liar he was.

He had promised her he would speak to the council. He had promised her he would at least try to convince them, but what was there to convince them of when he already had a woman? This was an arrangement he couldn't change without a valid reason without risking the wrath of Clan Buchanan, and no man was foolish enough to put his clan in peril because of a woman.

He kent . . . he had always kent an' he lied tae me.

And he had even pretended to care about her virtue. How could he care when he so thoughtlessly ruined her when he knew there was no chance, they could ever wed? How could he be so cruel?

Bonnie looked at Evan and suddenly he, too, was as pale as his brother, the color drained from his face when their gazes met. Good, Bonnie thought. Perhaps it meant he could still feel guilt over what he had done. She hoped it would torment him for the rest of his days.

“I dinnae understand,” Evan said, turning back to Mr. McIlroy.

“I think I was quite clear,” the man said, turning on his heel and taking a few steps towards the castle. Then, he stopped and looked at Evan over his shoulder, seemingly puzzled to find him so far away. “Well? Follow me, Laird MacGregor.”

It was a blatant disregard of etiquette, but Mr. McIlroy seemed to have no patience or desire to wait for Evan. He walked around the castle as if he owned the place, and Bonnie could only wonder what kind of clan the Buchanans were for one of their advisors to have such power over a laird.

As if dazed, Evan gave Bonnie another brief glance before he followed Mr. McIlroy into the castle. From where she stood, frozen in her spot, Bonnie couldn't hear them, but she could see Evan gesturing wildly as he spoke to Mr. McIlroy, who remained impassive as he listened. Then, they both disappeared inside, Alaric trailing quickly after them.

And then Bonnie was all alone, with nothing to hold onto but her grief.

“Lady MacLaren?”

It was a soft, melodic voice, one which befitted a girl just at the cusp of maturity, but when Bonnie turned around, she saw a young woman close to her age who towered over her. Her hair was ink-dark, spilling down her back in straight strands, and her green eyes held a softness Bonnie had seen in few people before.

“Isabeau MacGregor,” the girl said when Bonnie didn’t respond, curtsying elegantly. Bonnie rushed to copy her, remembering her manners, but compared to her, she felt like a clumsy drunkard who had never even seen a curtsy before. “It’s a pleasure tae meet ye. Alaric has told me much about ye.”

Isabeau . . . this is their sister.

Evan had spoken of her a few times and now that Bonnie was looking at her, she certainly saw the resemblance. Even though she was far more delicate in her features than her two brothers, who upon first glance seemed like brutes, she had the same colors, the same way of carrying herself with imperial dignity.

“Miss MacGregor!” Bonnie said, the words rushing out of her mouth. “Forgive me . . . I must be tired from the journey an?—”

“Please, dinnae apologies. An’ call me Isabeau,” she said. “A friend o’ me brothers is a friend o’ mine as well.”

Bonnie smiled. “Then please, call me Bonnie.”

“Come, Bonnie,” Isabeau said, as she threaded her arm around Bonnie’s. “Let us head inside.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Me laird, such a union cannae be allowed.”

Evan sat behind his desk, fingers tapping repeatedly against its surface as he regarded his advisors, all of them standing around him in a semi-circle. Alaric was by his side, but he had taken no part in this conversation—or rather argument, Evan though would be a better term—so far, choosing instead to stay silent and observing.

The man who had spoken was one of those advisors; a Chief of his clan who had served his father before him; Padraig Malloch, a man of approximately fifty years of age, his dark hair peppered with grey. Out of all the advisors, he had always been the one to share his thoughts most openly with Evan, and Evan couldn't help but think it was because he still viewed him as a young boy rather than a man, a laird with an entire clan in his hands. He had been an advisor to the clan as long as Evan remembered and though Evan valued his opinion more than anyone else's in the council, the thing he admired most in him was also the thing which now enraged him: Padraig only considered the good of the clan, letting no other factors affect him.

Evan had expected such backlash from him, more so than from anyone else. He had no doubt Padraig had been the one to select Medea Buchanan as the woman he was to wed after careful consideration, finding Evan the best match he could politically and financially.

But Evan would not be swayed.

“Ye didnae even consult me in this!” he said, hand slamming down onto the desk in a rare show of rage against his council. Slowly, he took a deep breath and tried to control himself. Showing such anger could only complicate things. “Ye betrothed me tae a lass without me ken an’ ye expect me tae agree tae this weddin’? Ye never once asked me. Ye never once even informed me o’ yer decision afore I came here an’ found that man in me castle!”

To say the presence of the Lady Buchanan's advisor had been a surprise would be an understatement. Evan had lost his wits in that moment, freezing, his words failing

him like they never had before.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

An' all o' it happened in front o' Bonnie's eyes!

How heartbroken she had been when Mr. McIlroy had spoken. How she had looked at Evan, betrayal etched in her eyes. Evan had felt her grief in his own body, settling heavy in his stomach, and he hadn't even yet had the chance to find her and explain the situation to her, all because his council would not let this matter go.

"It was necessary," Padraig said with a slight bow of his head. "Ye were gone fer too long, me laird. The council was forced tae make a decision, an' I maintain it was the correct decision."

"Ye should have consulted me first," Evan insisted. "I have told ye now o' me plan tae wed Bonnie an' there is naething ye can tell me about the Lady Buchanan or her men tae change me mind."

"An' yer men?" Padraig demanded, taking a halting step forward. "Everyone in this room agrees. A union with Miss MacLaren would be too perilous. We ken o' Graeme Ruthven's intentions. We ken Miss MacLaren is betrothed tae him an' it is only a matter o' time afore they wed."

"It is more than a matter o' time," Evan interrupted, holding up a hand. "I willnae allow him tae touch her."

"It may come tae be that yer involvement is unnecessary," Padraig said. "Once Ruthven's plan is revealed, surely Miss MacLaren will be relieved o' her betrothal tae him. Either way, our involvement is ill-advised. We will remain neutral in this conflict."

“It is far too late fer that,” Evan pointed out, looking at every man in the room. “I have already brought her here an’ I will wed her. An’ if any o’ ye is opposed tae this, then . . .”

What threat was there for him to give? Replacing them with other advisors would surely cause a riot among them, and so would challenging them to a fight. Tensions between them were already high and Evan was doing a terrible job at calming them.

“What me brother is tryin’ tae say,” Alaric said, stepping forward, “is that perhaps there is merit in considerin’ Miss MacLaren as a potential bride. Is there doubt among ye that the MacLaren Clan is stronger than ever? Surely, they would make better allies than Clan Buchanan.”

“It is o’ nae importance when ye consider that both our laird an’ Miss MacLaren are already betrothed!” cried Padraig in a rare burst of exasperation. He had always been a patient man, level-headed and mild-mannered, but now he could hardly contain his anger. Evan saw it in the way his eyes narrowed, the skin around them crinkling with annoyance, his skin getting a faint tint of red.

Silence followed the man’s outburst and Padraig took a moment to breathe, bringing himself back under control. Presently, he said, “I implore ye, me laird . . . see reason. It is a heavy burden ye carry, but ye ken as well as anyone in this room that the clan is more important than the matters o’ the heart.”

Evan knew that to be true, of course. Few in his position were lucky to marry for love, fewer still could say they had made the right choice. And yet, whenever he thought about Bonnie, whenever he remembered the pain in her gaze, he couldn’t bring himself to agree to this wedding with the Lady Buchanan.

“Leave me,” Evan said eventually, having the council away.



“Me laird?—”

Before Padraig could finish, Evan said, “We will discuss this later, Padraig, I promise. I wish tae speak tae me brother.”

After a moment of hesitation, Padraig nodded and ushered the rest of the advisors out of the room. When the door closed and plunged them in silence, Evan let his head fall in his hands, drawing a deep, steadying breath. From the corner of his eye, he saw Alaric pull a chair next to him, perching himself on it.

“I cannae dae this, Alaric,” he said. “I cannae betray her like this.”

Castle MacGregor was as grand inside as it was outside, though it lacked the ostentatious character of Castle Ruthven. The glory of this place came not from sprawling tapestries and branching chandeliers of solid gold, but rather from the portraits of the previous generations, hanging in the rooms and the hallways and revealing the clan’s past to Bonnie.

Isabeau hardly gave her time to see any of it, though, as she dragged her around the place, until the two of them came all the way to the north side and went once again out into the courtyard, but this time at the other end of the castle. There, Bonnie noticed a smaller building, one that resembled one of the cottages out in the country, surrounded by a garden of flowers and herbs whose scents permeated the air, making it fragrant.

“This is where I spend much o’ me time,” said Isabeau as she pulled Bonnie along once more, into the small building. Inside, the air was just as fragrant from the dried bunches of herbs that hanged from the ceiling, dappling the light as it crossed them. The walls were lined with shelves, some of which held books while others held jars and other containers, all of them neatly labelled.

Bonnie knew a healer's cottage when she saw one and now she walked around, looking at the old, cracked spines of the books in awe.

"Yer a healer?" she asked Isabeau.

"A midwife," said Isabeau, leaning against the table that dominated the middle of the room. "But I have learnt many things. An' I can see yer hurt."

Bonnie turned to look at Isabeau in surprise, her hand reaching for her shoulder on instinct. "How did ye ken?"

"I can see that ye favor yer left arm," said Isabeau. "An' ye protect yer right arm as though there is a fresh wound. An' we received word from Evan, so I already kent."

Bonnie couldn't help but laugh, joining Isabeau at the table when she gestured at her to approach. Bonnie sat in one of the chairs there, a simple wooden seat with a short back, as Isabeau walked around the room to gather her supplies. She returned with clean cloth, a few jars filled with pastes Bonnie couldn't identify, and a small pot of hot water from the large one which sat over the fireplace.

"An' I thought fer a moment that ye were a witch," Bonnie teased as she bared her shoulder for Isabeau to take a look at the injury. The cloth that was wrapped around it had only a few specks of blood on it, and Bonnie could only think that was a good thing—slowly, she was healing.

"Ach, I hope nae one thinks I'm a witch!" Isabeau said, only half-joking as she began to clean Bonnie's wound with soft, methodical movements. She was very careful, Bonnie noted, making sure she missed none of the blood and the old paste the healer at Castle Ruthven had applied over the wound. "I promise ye, I'm nae evil."

"I dinnae think anyone could see ye an' think yer evil," Bonnie assured her. It was the

truth. Isabeau looked like innocence personified, with her wide green eyes and the smile that never seemed to leave her rosy lips. She resembled the dolls with which Bonnie played as a child with her patrician beauty and her shiny dark hair. “Nae one who is evil would care about a wounded person . . . or fer a maither an’ her bairn, in fact. How is it that a young noble lass wishes tae be a midwife?”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

Isabeau shrugged a shoulder, opening one of the jars with delicate fingers. “I wished . . . I wishtae help people. I ken that perhaps I willnae have the chance once I wed, but I will dae it feras long as I can. I’ve seen too many maithers, too many bairns sufferin’. This clan has lost some good, young lasses in labor an’ I want tae put an end tae that.”

Isabeau spoke with such passion, such conviction, that it was difficult for Bonnie—or for anyone else, she suspected—to remain unmoved by her words. She wasn’t doing this because she was in need of gold. She was only eager to help other, to ease some of the pain of her people.

“I wish there were more people like ye in the world,” Bonnie said, meaning every word. Isabeau smiled and the two of them fell into a silence that was surprisingly comfortable for two women who had only just met each other. Bonnie’s thoughts drifted to Evan once more, thinking about all the similarities he shared with Isabeau, but also all the differences between them. Her mere appearance radiated a certain calmness, one which seeped right into Bonnie and gave her some comfort in the midst of all this grief and chaos.

She seemed to be perceptive, too, as she said, “Me brother . . . he came into his power very suddenly. There are many things he doesnae yet ken how tae handle. Afore our parents’ death, nae one o’ us thought he would have tae take our faither’s place so soon. But he did an’ he hasnae even had a chance tae mourn them.”

Bonnie knew that to be true, but it didn’t ease the ache in her chest at the thought that he had lied to her so blatantly, so carelessly. She wasn’t about to share with Isabeau that he had bedded her, but that was the one thing she could not look past—despite

his reassurances, he had taken his pleasure from her when he knew they could never wed. Instead of promising her that he would speak to his council, he could have admitted that he was already betrothed to someone else. Had Bonnie known that, she wouldn't have given him her virtue.

"I ken that," Bonnie said, forcing a small smile to her lips as she nodded. "I dae. I ken it's difficult fer him, more so than fer many other men in his position."

I only wish it wasnae so.

Bonnie didn't speak those words out loud, nor did she say anything else on the matter. She didn't want to burden Isabeau with her own pain, nor did she think it proper to tell her everything about her relationship with her brother, no matter how easy it already was to talk to her.

I suppose that is somethin' they all have in common . . . they make ye feel at home.

Once Isabeau had finished cleaning and bandaging the wound, Bonnie pulled her dress over her shoulder once more, reaching for her hand. "Thank ye," she said. "It feels much better now."

"Does it hurt?" Isabeau asked, giving her hand a gentle squeeze before she cleaned up the table. It was spotless, Bonnie noted, and she wondered if Isabeau allowed maids in this room or if she kept it like this herself. She knew how possessive healers could be of their spaces, how they disliked anything being out of place—whether that place was on a shelf or strewn over the floor.

"It does, but it comes an' goes," said Bonnie. "If I'm nae careful an' try tae move me right hand, there's much pain."

"Let us see . . ." Isabeau looked through her shelves, eventually picking a small bottle

and handing it to Bonnie. “This will help with the pain. Place three drops in yer tea twice a day. An’ if it gets worse or if ye run a fever, ye must see me immediately.”

This is a lass who has also lost her parents. An’ yet she seems so strong.

Stronger than her brothers even, perhaps. Ever since Bonnie had met Evan and Alaric, the two of them had been visibly fraying at the edges, slowly coming apart under the pressures of their clan. Isabeau may not have had the same pressures, but she, too, had gone through much and Bonnie could understand all of it. She, too, had gone through the same thing, after all. Surely, Isabeau felt the pressure of being the perfect daughter, of honoring her parents’ memory. It was more than likely that she would end up in an unwanted marriage, one which would soon come.

“Come,” Isabeau said, offering her hand once more with a smile, and Bonnie couldn’t help but think she would be a ray of sun in this gloomy time. “There is much I must show ye.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Evan paced back and forth outside Bonnie’s chambers, all the frustration of the past few days clouding his mind like a thick fog. He had tried approaching her in the gardens only for her to slip away from him. He had tried talking to her in the library, in the great hall, even in the stables where he managed to corner her by chance, but Bonnie kept refusing to speak to him, either outright ignoring him and walking away or managing to evade him at the very last moment.

But now she was in her chambers. Evan had watched her enter and he had proceeded to follow, reaching the door just after she shut it.

He came to a halt, hard gaze fixed on the carved wood of the door. Vines decorated its surface, twisting and twinning in dizzying patterns. It was the first time Evan had

stood there so long, staring at that door, and now he thought it was a shame that he was about to ruin it.

He took a deep breath and a few steps backwards, muscles tensing in preparation. Then, he threw himself right at the door.

A shriek sounded from inside the room, but Evan barely heard it over the buzz in his ears, the pain of the impact radiating down his right side. Maybe it hadn't been a very good idea, in retrospect, but he wasn't going to give up. With a growl, he threw himself at the door again, the hinges budging under his weight but not yet breaking. He didn't know what would break first—the door or his arm.

One last time, Evan threw himself at the door and this time, splinters flew around him as he broke both the lock and one of the hinges. At the other side, he found Bonnie standing near the bed, a candelabra clutched tightly in her hands as she stared at him, wide-eyed.

“What are ye doin’?” she demanded, voice high and thin with terror. “I thought someone was comin’ tae kill me!”

“In me castle?” Evan asked in disbelief, as if the mere thought was ridiculous. “Nae one will harm ye here.”

“Ye broke the door! Ye could have harmed me!”

Evan hadn't thought about that. His goal had been to get in the room, and so he did. “Aye, I suppose I could have,” he admitted. “I am sorry, Bonnie. I only wished tae speak with ye.”

“An’ so ye decided tae break down me door?” Bonnie’s cheeks were flushed a deep red, her knuckles bone-white where she was still gripping the candelabra. Slowly, she

put it down and collapsed on the bed, face in her hands as she breathed deeply. “Ye scared me half tae death.”

Evan looked down, avoiding her gaze. He had been so eager to talk to her that he hadn’t quite thought about the consequences of breaking down the door, other than to make a mental note to have it repaired later. Now he stood by the broken door awkwardly, unsure of what to do or say.

“Well?” Bonnie asked, looking up at him. “Yer here now an’ ye broke a door tae speak tae me. So speak.”



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

Evan was there and he had Bonnie attention. And yet now that he could talk to her, the words failed him, dying in his throat before he could ever utter them. How could he explain this situation to her in a way that wouldn't make him seem even worse than he was? How could he tell her he never wanted this marriage with Medea when he couldn't even promise Bonnie, she would be the one he would marry?

Bonnie looked at him expectantly; impatiently. Evan didn't have much time before she would get fed up with him and tell him to leave.

"I . . . I didnae ken, Bonnie, I swear it," Evan said, taking a few halting steps towards her, uncertain of whether or not he should approach. "I didnae ken about the betrothal. Me council arranged it with her advisors an' they never informed me o' it. They thought once I returned, I would dae as they asked an' . . . an' I would if I hadnae met ye."

Had it not been for Bonnie, Evan would have married Medea Buchanan without any protest. It wouldn't matter to him that she was a stranger. It wouldn't matter whether or not they were compatible, whether they could be happy together. Such things had been inconsequential—at least until he met Bonnie and she showed him what true happiness meant.

"But I did meet ye," Evan continued. "I did an' I loved ye an' because o' this, I cannae marry the Lady Buchanan. Me heart is an' always will be yers. Ye can dae with it as ye please. Ye can send me away. Ye can curse me an' scream at me an' scorn me fer the rest o' yer life, but ken I will never marry her."

Bonnie stared at him in silence for so long that Evan began to think she would never

speak to him again. With a defeated sigh, he turned around and made his way to the door, thinking it would be better to simply leave her be. He had told her everything he needed her to hear, and he had promised her she could now do as she wished. If what she wished was to never see him again, then Evan would have to accept it, even if the ache was so much that his feet could hardly carry him to the door.

With one last look at Bonnie, he righted the door on its hinges; one last attempt to fix what he had broken.

“Wait.”

Evan paused by the door just as he was crossing it, his gaze hopeful as he turned to look at Bonnie. For a few moments, though, she remained silent. She didn’t know what she wanted to say to him. She only knew she didn’t want him to go.

“Ye will nae wed her?”

It was all Bonnie could bring herself to ask. None of this mattered if this was just another lie, if Evan’s council managed to convince him to go through with the wedding in the end. Evan was not a weak man, prone to outside influence, allowing others to dictate his actions, but at the same time, his sense of duty was so strong that Bonnie couldn’t help but fear he would rather sacrifice himself, his happiness, their love than risk anything happening to his clan.

And it was that which filled her with guilt—knowing Evan was trying to do the best for his people and still being filled with this fury that gnawed at her insides ever since she had found out the truth.

She shouldn’t be happy that he would refuse to wed that woman. She shouldn’t find joy in the fact that he was letting down his council, his people.

Evan shook his head. “I willnae wed her. Ye have me word.”

There was no mention of a wedding between the two of them, though. Evan wouldn’t wed the Lady Buchanan, but he also wouldn’t promise Bonnie she would become his bride.

Even so, nothing could stop her as she stood and approached Evan, a hand cradling his cheek to pull him into a tender kiss. In an instant, Evan’s arms were around her waist, pulling her close and clinging onto her as though she was the only thing that kept him upright.

“Forgive me,mo ghraidh,” Evan whispered against her lips. “Forgive me. I never meant tae hurt ye like this.”

There was no doubt in Bonnie’s mind Evan was telling her the truth, but that didn’t lessen the ache of their reality. Could it be that she could never truly have him? Could it be that even after he refused to marry the Lady Buchanan, his council would still forbid him to marry Bonnie?

It seemed more likely than she wanted to think. It was no secret that his council didn’t approve of her as an option and they made it clear to her, even without outright admitting it to her face. Padraig, one of his advisors, asked her when she would be leaving every time he saw her—a less than welcoming thing to do.

Bonnie didn’t want to think about any of that, though, not when Evan’s lips were soft and warm against hers, his hands holding possessively onto her waist. Even if it was only for a short while, she wanted to be lost in the fantasy of being his. Even for a short while, she wanted to believe it—she wanted it to be as real as it could be.

“Make love tae me,” she mumbled as they kissed. Moaning softly into the kiss, Evan kicked the door shut as well as he could,small gaps forming between it and the frame

as it failed to close. Picking her up, he carried Bonnie to the bed and she wrapped her legs around him, holding on, never once breaking their fevered kiss.

Evan laid Bonnie on the bed gently, crawling over her as they both settled on the mattress. She was completely surrounded by him and his warmth, his weight a comforting pressure over her, helping her push any other thought away from her mind. Nothing else mattered but the two of them in that moment, twined together on her sheets, reaching to each other for whatever they could get.

As he undressed her, slipping her dress off her shoulders, Evan's hands were soft, gentle, moving with deliberate slowness. Inch by inch, he bared her skin and followed the path of his hands with his lips, his kisses leaving goosebumps in their wake. Bonnie gasped, breath catching in her throat, her body arching off the bed as she sought out the drag of his lips over her skin, the drag of his beard. It left a slight sting behind, one that drove her mad with lust.

"Evan," Bonnie said in a soft moan, her fingers carding through his dark hair. She could feel him getting impatient, his hands tugging insistently at her dress as he tried to take it off her, laughing softly in triumph once he finally had her naked.

He wasted no time before he descended upon her once more, tongue dragging hotly over the swell of her breast before the tip swirled the hardened nub of her nipple. Bonnie could not look away from him, mesmerized by the sight of him as he grazed his teeth over her sensitive skin, her fingers curling in the strands of his hair to tug gently at it, just to feel his rumbling groan as it reverberated through her. Already, warmth pooled deep in her stomach, her desire coursing through her, wetness gathering in her core, and Evan's groan deepened as his thigh pressed against her, feeling that liquid heat.

"Already wet for me?" Evan asked, grabbing Bonnie's waist as she writhed against him, shuddering with every brush of her sensitive spot against the heated skin of his

thigh under his kilt as she rolled her hips. She would have thought his words mocking had he not sounded just as affected as she felt, his voice rough and gravelly, thick with desire. On her own thigh, she felt the rigid length of Evan's manhood growing thicker and she couldn't help but reach for him, slipping her hand under the kilt.

When she wrapped her fingers around him, stroking him firmly once, Evan gasped, his forehead coming to rest against hers. Bonnie stared into his eyes, tongue darting out to wet her lips before Evan captured them in a kiss, her other hand insistently tugging at his shirt in a silent plea for him to undress.

Reluctantly, Evan peeled himself away from her, quickly tossing all of his clothes on the floor carelessly. The moment he was done with the last layer, he was on top of Bonnie once more, refusing to stay away from her for any longer than necessary.

Not for the first time, Bonnie was distracted by the sight of him before her, hands reaching out to touch before she could even realize what she was doing. Her tender touch as she dragged the tips of her fingers over the ridged wall of muscles that was Evan's stomach drew a sigh of pleasure out of him, one that deepened when she scraped her nails just under his navel. His length twitched in response, flushed and leaking as Bonnie wrapped her fingers around him once more to stroke the feverish flesh, losing herself in the soft moans he made. She loved watching him, listening to him as he gave in to pleasure, and she loved even more knowing that she was the source of it.

"Me love," Evan whispered as he buried his face in Bonnie's neck, sucking the sensitive skin there between his lips as he thrustled lazily in her fist. His hands stroked her hair, her jaw, her shoulders, running over her breasts and the dip of her waist in an almost reverent manner, as if Evan was trying to map every inch of her in his mind. For the first time, neither of them was in a hurry; they were content simply enjoying each other's touch, each other's proximity, Bonnie's need stoked and intense, but simmering just under the surface.

It was as though neither of them wanted this to end.

Slowly, Evan rolled onto his back, settling against the pillows and pulling Bonnie in his lap. For a moment, he only looked at her, pushing her brown hair over her shoulders until it cascaded down her back. Another teasing touch then, fingers ghosting over her body and coming to rest on her mound, giving Bonnie a moment of anticipation before Evan circled her sensitive spot with his thumb, drawing a desperate cry from her. As she straddled his hips, she couldn't resist the urge to roll hers, seeking the friction of his manhood against her folds, her wetness leaving Evan's length slicked and throbbing with desire.

"Please," she said, and Evan was quick to indulge her, taking himself in his hand to guide his length in her entrance. The first contact stole all the air from Bonnie's lungs, forcing her to brace herself on Evan's shoulders as he breached her.

And then, he looked up at her with a teasing smirk, simply waiting.

Bonnie decided right then and there that she was going to wipe that smirk off his face. Just as slowly as he had moved, just as teasingly, Bonnie sank onto his length, taking him inside her inch by inch until she was fully seated on his manhood. Just as she had wished, that smirk had been replaced by an expression of raw desire, Evan's gaze glazed and his lips parted, his breath coming in pants as he stared at her, his hands leaving marks on her hips. She felt him pulse where he was buried in her core, already close to reaching his climax.

She could hardly blame him. Her body throbbed around him, the stretch of her sensitive flesh as she accommodated his girth quickly bringing her closer to the edge.

As Bonnie began to move, holding onto Evan's chest as she rode him, his gaze flitted between the place where they were joined, watching as his manhood disappeared inside her, and the bounce of her breasts as she picked up speed. Then, he glanced to the side and Bonnie followed his gaze over her shoulder to see their reflection in the looking-glass in the corner of the room. She saw herself, her skin flushed all the way to her chest, her breasts engulfed in Evan's large palms as he reached for her, pinching her nipples between thumb and forefinger to draw a moan out of her. She saw the arch of her back, the swell of her buttocks, and under her, she saw Evan, illuminated by the soft light of the evening sun that streamed in through the windows, looking like a statue carefully chiseled by a loving hand.

Pulling her gaze back to Evan, Bonnie met his eyes, keeping the eye contact as she rolled her hips in a slow, sensual rhythm. There was no part of her that wasn't filled by him, the honeyed drag of him against her walls a sweet torture like no other.

Bonnie's moans turned high and needy as every thrust brought her closer to her climax. Evan's fingers dug into the soft flesh of her hips while her nails painted crescents on his shoulders, desperately holding on as one of Evan's hands slid from her hip to stroke her, thumb matching the rhythm of her movements. It didn't take long for Bonnie's pleasure to crest over her, rushing like fire in her veins and setting her entire body aflame. She couldn't help but quiver as her core pulsed and throbbed, her opening clenching hard down on Evan's length and pulling his own climax out of him within moments.

Afterwards, Bonnie sat there, still straddling Evan's hips, trying to catch her breath. Wrapping his arms around her, Evan pulled her over his chest and Bonnie went easily, nuzzling into his neck.

"Everythin' will work out, me love," said Evan in a reassuring tone, though Bonnie didn't know if he was saying it for her sake or his. "I promise."

An' yet, still nae mention o' marriage.

Perhaps Bonnie was expecting too much. Perhaps it would be better if she stopped hoping, if she let go of any expectations and simply accepted whatever ended up happening in the end. After all, there was no changing Evan's mind if he had already decided he didn't want to wed her.

She only wished she didn't have to think about changing his mind in the first place.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

It was a gloomy day, thick clouds looming ahead, a storm quickly approaching. Evan looked up at the darkening sky, glad that his men had spotted a carriage heading their way from down the valley.

It meant Cathleen and Macauley would arrive before the storm caught up to them, hopefully. They ran little risk of getting soaked in the rain.

Next to him in the courtyard stood Alaric and Isabeau, the three of them standing close to the castle doors while Bonnie paced back and forth farther down, close to the gates as she waited for her sister to arrive. Ever since they had received word of the carriage's approach, she had been outside, waiting to greet Cathleen, getting more restless by the minute.

Evan got restless too just by watching her.

"What is troublin' ye?" Isabeau asked, perceptive as always. Could it be she had spoken to Bonnie about this? In the short time they had spent in Castle MacGregor, the two girls had become fast friends, Evan knew. He often saw them together around the castle, walking arm in arm, engaged in deep conversation.



“Ye ken what is troublin’ me,” he said, figuring he didn’t need to explain any of it to Isabeau. If she hadn’t talked to Bonnie, then she had certainly talked to Alaric. “But let us nae discuss it now.”

For a few moments, Isabeau remained silent, but Evan could feel her gaze boring holes into him, his sister shifting her weight from foot to foot restlessly, in the way she always did when she had more to say. There was no avoiding this conversation, he knew, even when they were all standing in the middle of the courtyard.

“I think we should discuss it now,” she said eventually and Evan couldn’t stop the sigh that escaped him.

He turned to face her fully, lips stretched in a thin line. “What is there tae discuss?” he asked quietly, making sure Bonnie wouldn’t hear him, even though she stood too far for his words to carry over to her. “Ye ken how it is. Ye ken what the council has said, dinnae ye?”

“I’ve heard,” admitted Isabeau with a small shrug. “But yer council is there tae counsel ye, nae tae make decisions fer ye.”

“Padraig—”

“Padraig is worried,” Alaric said, interrupting Evan before he could finish. “An’ his concern is makin’ him overly cautious. He is truly doin’ what he thinks is best fer the clan, but there is nae point talkin’ about what is best fer the clan if we dinnae consider what is best fer ye. We need ye tae be as strong as ye can be.”

“Dae ye truly think I will let romance cloud me judgement?” Evan asked, offended at the mere suggestion. “I will always dae what is best for the clan, even if I dinnae like it.”

“It already is,” said Isabeau calmly. In moments like this, she reminded Evan terribly of their mother—her quietly commanding nature, the way she could sway a crowd with just a word. “I heard ye will refuse tae wed the Lady Buchanan.”

So, she has been talkin’ tae Bonnie.

“Aye,” said Evan. There was no point in hiding it now. Alaric didn’t look surprised, either, though perhaps that was because he was there at the meeting when Evan had argued endlessly with the council. “That is the plan.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

“Then yer judgement is already clouded,” she said. “But yer happiness matters, too, Evan. An’ we want tae see ye happy.”

“We’ll deal with Ruthven,” Alaric was quick to assure him, before Evan could protest. “We were always goin’ tae be his enemies. We made that choice when we decided tae stop him an’ Baliol. If anythin’, ye’ll stop him from gettin’ the resources he needs if ye wed Bonnie. Padraig wishes tae take the conservative approach, but when have we done things that way?”

Alaric, Evan thought, had a point, but how could a laird go against his entire council and keep their trust? How could he defy them all and still have them wish to serve him?

Before any of them could say anything else, the gates opened and the guards announced the arrival of Macauley and Cathleen as their carriage rolled into the courtyard. Evan watched as Bonnie rushed to them, falling into her sister’s arms the moment she was out of the door.

“Come,” said Isabeau, putting a hand on Evan’s shoulder as the three of them walked over to the carriage. It was the first time Evan was seeing either of them, and upon first look, he had to suppress a small laugh.

While Bonnie and Cathleen looked only vaguely alike, sharing their delicate features and long, brown hair but little else, he and Macauley could have been long lost brothers. He, too, was a large man, towering over everyone else around him, with dark hair and eyes that made him seem right at home in Clan MacGregor.

“Laird MacLaren, Lady MacLaren,” Evan said in greeting as he bowed to them. “Welcome. I hope yer travels were pleasant.”

“Laird MacGregor,” said Macauley with a bow of his own, Cathleen mirroring him. “Thank ye fer receivin’ us. But I dinnae think there is any need tae be so formal with each other. Any friend o’ Bonnie is our friend, as well.”

“I agree,” said Evan, his shoulders relaxing a little. He was not yet used to all the formalities that came with his title. “This is me sister, Isabeau, an’ me brother, Alaric. Let us head inside afore the storm comes.”

Leading the way, Evan guided everyone into the drawing room, where the servants were already laying out a spread of food and tea. As they all sat on the couches, only one remained standing: Bonnie, who was still pacing back and forth as though she couldn’t help it.

Evan didn’t have the chance to ask her what was wrong. Just as Cathleen had taken her seat, Bonnie spilled everything.

“I helped Evan an’ Alaric find proof against Ruthven that he is workin’ with Baliol an’ the King,” she said, the words tumbling out of her mouth so fast that Evan had to concentrate to understand her. “An’ now Ruthven is very angry with me, with us, an’ I am quite certain those men who attacked us were sent by him an’ he willnae stop until we are all dead.”

The five of them stared at Bonnie, stunned into silence. After a few moments, it was Cathleen who spoke first, her tone soft and gentle.

“Alright,” she said, standing to wrap an arm around Bonnie’s shoulder and bring her to the seat next to her. Even when they sat, she didn’t let go of Bonnie. “We have been through worse. We can . . . we can get through this, Bonnie. I promise.”

Evan had not once seen Bonnie tremble in fear, and she didn't tremble now. Her foot, though, tapped incessantly against the floor and she wrung her fingers with such force that he could only imagine it was painful.

“Proof?” Macauley asked. “What proof did ye find?”

“A letter,” Evan said. “Alaric copied it an’ distributed it tae our neighbourin’ clans. It proves that Ruthven an’ Baliol are workin’ together.”

“Here,” Alaric said, puling one of the copies from his pocket and handing it to Macauley. The other man red it quickly, eyes skimming over the words, before he shook his head.

“It is proof,” he said. “But a copied letter . . . I dinnae think it will be enough. We must find somethin’ more. People can say it is forged. Ruthven himself can say it is forged.”

“Aye, we thought o’ that,” said Evan. “But we had nae other choice. We thought we would have a chance to steal the original if they didnae believe us, but now . . . I suppose we will never make it back intae Castle Ruthven.”

But they couldn't have stayed there. That attack had rattled Evan and Bonnie still bore the consequences of it.

“We will write tae Kian an’ Deirdre,” said Macauley. “Laird Drummond, he is me good friend. He will help us.”

“An’ we will write tae . . . anyone we can,” Evan said with a firm nod. It was all they could do for now, as they waited to see how Ruthven and Ball would act.

“Me laird, if I may.”

Evan turned to see one of the messengers at the door and beckoned him closer, a weary sigh escaping him before he had even received the note. He didn't need to read it to know that whatever it was, it couldn't possibly be good. It had been a long while since something good had happened.

The note was from his scouts, informing him that Ruthven's men had been spotted near the clan borders. So, Ruthven had sent men after them, Evan thought, and he was most certainly preparing for an attack. Whatever it was they were going to do to defeat him, they had to do it fast.

"What is it?" Alaric asked, glancing over his shoulder. With vicious strength, Evan crumbled the paper in his fist.

"War."

Ever since his conversation with Isabeau and Alaric, Evan couldn't get his mind off what they had told him. It didn't help, this looming threat over his head that was Ruthven and his forces, even now scouting his lands to find the best way to attack.

What am I doin'? I could end up in the ground an' Bonnie would never ken how much I love her.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

What was the point of any of this—being the laird, fighting against the English, seeking victory after victory—if he couldn't be a decent man to Bonnie? He had been so selfish with her. He had acted on his desires and then hidden behind the words of his council like a coward, leaving her to wonder if what they had was even real.

He had caused enough damage already. All he could do now was try to fix it and pray that Bonnie would still forgive him for everything he had done.

I must find Cathleen.

In the two days that had passed since her arrival, Evan had been avoiding her, worried of what she would think of him. Bonnie had surely told her sister everything, and he didn't want Cathleen to think he was toying with her, giving her empty promises. But now it was time to seek her out and talk to her, as he had finally made up his mind.

Pushing himself off his chair, Evan rushed out of his study and asked every guard and servant in his way if they had spotted her. It was only when he reached the ground floor that one of the guards directed him to the library, where he had last seen them.

Even better. I can speak with both o' them.

The storms of the previous days had passed and now the sky was clear outside the windows as Evan ran to the library, finding Macauley and Cathleen there just as the guard had said. Macauley leaned against a large chair as Cathleen browsed the books, crouching down to look at the ones on the lowest shelves.

Macauley spotted him first, smiling as Evan approached. “Good mornin’,” said Macauley, but then frowned, perhaps spotting the flush on Evan’s cheeks, the thin sheen of perspiration on his forehead. “Is somethin’ wrong?”

“Nay, nay,” Evan assured him, waving a hand dismissively. “I merely wished tae speak with the two o’ ye.”

Cathleen straightened, smoothing her hands over her green dress that seemed to make her eyes sparkle an even deeper green. “What is it?” she asked. “Is it about me sister?”

“Aye,” said Evan, but then Cathleen looked at him, alarmed, her eyes wide with fear. “Ach, nay . . . I mean, it is about Bonnie, but it isnae a bad thing. I hope.”

Cathleen frowned in confusion, but then she and Macauley looked at Evan expectantly, waiting to see what he had to say. It was then that he realized he had no idea how to approach the subject.

Better to get it over with, he thought.

“I wish tae wed yer sister,” he said. “Me council, they dinnae want this marriage, but I love Bonnie. I love her. I dinnae care what me council says or if they approve. I have already caused Bonnie too much pain an’ I never wish tae hurt her again. I’ll spend me whole life makin’ her happy, Cathleen. I swear it.”

For a few moments, neither Cathleen nor Macauley spoke and Evan feared he had said something wrong or that perhaps after everything he had done to Bonnie, Cathleen didn’t want him anywhere near her. But then, before he could question her reaction, she grinned and grabbed his shoulder, patting it with a surprising amount of force for such a small woman.



“Ye have me blessin’,” she said. “I’m sure Bonnie will be very happy tae hear this.”

It took Evan several seconds for his mind to catch up with the fact that he had Cathleen’s permission. A relieved laugh escaped him and he laid his hand over his chest, trying to calm his racing heart.

It was as though he was a boy again, preparing to speak to his first infatuation for the first time. It was strange, he thought, how love could reduce him to such a babbling, nervous mess.

“Dinnae waste any more time,” Macauley said, nodding towards the door. “Go. Find her.”

Grinning from ear to ear, Evan nodded, turning on his heel. Macauley was right; he shouldn’t waste any more time.

Rushing through the castle, Evan spilled out into the courtyard and hurried to the gardens. Just as he reached them, though, he came to a sudden halt at the sight in front of him—Bonnie, standing over a rosebush, her hand cradling one of the flowers as she took in its fragrance, the morning sun bathing her in golden light, the scene like a portrait painted by a loving hand.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Bonnie had taken to spending her time in the gardens, surrounded by the kaleidoscope of flowers and bushes that grew there. Today, the clear sky gave her the perfect opportunity for a stroll and she walked around aimlessly, enjoying the fragrant air around her. The sunshine, the calmness of the gardens helped her clear her mind, though she still couldn’t chase the thought of Evan away.

And then, as though her mind had summoned him, she saw him standing near the

gardens, staring at her in silence.

What is he doin' there? Why is he standin' so far?

Slowly, as though he was reluctant to approach, Evan walked closer, stopping only a few paces away from her. "Good mornin'," he said in such a stiff tone that Bonnie feared something was wrong.

"Good mornin'," said Bonnie, resisting the urge to fidget with the edge of the sleeve. For a while, they fell in an odd, awkward silence as Evan shifted his weight from one foot to the other, opening and closing his mouth repeatedly as though he was trying to say something but then changed his mind.

Looking over his shoulder, Bonnie saw there was no one else there. Patiently, she waited for him to get his bearings and tell her whatever it was he was trying to say, but the more seconds ticked by, the more restless she became.

"Is everythin' alright?" she prompted when Evan said nothing.

It was amusing, seeing him freeze, eyes wide as though he had been caught stealing bannocks from the kitchen. He was a tower of a man, a laird with so much power in his hands, and yet here he was, unable to speak.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

“Aye!” Evan said way too loudly and then he shook his head, taking a deep breath. It seemed to calm him a little and he smiled at Bonnie, reaching for her hand to lace their fingers together. It was a tender gesture, one that made her smile, too, despite herself. “Aye. Everythin’ is fine. I wished tae speak with ye because I . . . I came tae a decision.”

“A decision?”

Evan nodded firmly. “I’ve been terribly unfair tae ye, Bonnie. I never meant tae hurt ye. I never meant tae make ye think that ye dinnae matter tae me because ye dae. Ye matter more than anythin’.”

Bonnie frowned, tilting her head to the side. She was waiting for him to shift his words around, to tell her that even though she mattered to him so much, he couldn’t disobey his council; that even though he wished they could be together, they never could be.

“I wish tae make ye me wife.”

Bonnie’s heart stopped. At first, she feared that she had misheard Evan or that perhaps she was dreaming, her mind conjuring up fake scenarios in which she could be happy. But Evan was real next to her, his hand warm and solid around hers, his smile as blinding as the morning sun. It was real. There was no doubt about it.

“Say somethin’,” Evan prompted and it was only then that Bonnie realized she had been stunned into silence, giving him no answer.

“I want that,” she said, nodding fervently as she flew into his arms. Evan’s laughter was a deep rumble in her chest as their bodies collided, his arms wrapping tightly around her and holding her impossibly close. “I want it. I want tae be yer wife.”

Neither of them wanted to leave each other’s arms. They stood there for several moments, Bonnie hiding the tears of joy in Evan’s shoulder as she clung to him, her happiness so overwhelming that she could think of nothing else. Her entire body felt warm, a tingle of excitement spreading through her as she imagined their future together.

When she pulled back, though, she couldn’t help but ask, “An’ the council?”

“I will tell them soon. Today,” Evan promised. “I dinnae care what they say. They cannae stop me. If they so wish, they can give the lairdship tae Alaric. Yer more important that this tae me.”

Fresh tears welled up in Bonnie’s eyes. She could hardly believe Evan would be willing to give up his title, his position, all just for her. She didn’t want him to do such a thing but when she looked at him, he seemed to be at peace with his decision.

“Come,” he said, before she had the time to wonder if she should protest, if she should try to convince Evan to do anything to keep the lairdship. “I wish tae show ye somethin’.”

Evan had barely finished speaking before he began to drag her along as he walked towards the castle walls. Bonnie followed him, trailing after him and wondering where he was taking her when she saw a small door there in the wall, hidden behind some bushes. Two guards stood on that side and Bonnie and Evan greeted them before they slipped outside and found themselves at the far side of the castle, where the land spread in a gentle slope.

In the distance, a small lake glimmered under the morning sun. If the slope of the land didn't deceive her, then she thought it must have been a twenty-minute walk to the lake, down a narrow, winding path.

"Are we goin' there?" she asked, smiling at Evan.

"Aye," he said. "If ye wish. It is me favorite place in the world."

"Let us go."

Still hand in hand, the two of them walked down the path, Evan helping her whenever the path became too slippery or steep. Bonnie looked around her in wonder, gazing at the beautiful valley that spread all around her and farther down the distance, a sprawling forest of towering trees. All around them, the air was filled with the songs of birds, the whole world alive under the morning sun.

When they reached the lake, Bonnie realized it was a little farther down the path than she had originally thought, but still close to the castle. She could see why Evan loved the place so much; not only was it beautiful, but since it was so close, he could probably visit it often, even as a child. It was even a little bigger than it seemed from the top of the hill, with shrubs and flowers growing all around the bank in an explosion of color.

"It's a very bonnie place," she said, the soft, long grass brushing against her legs as she raised the hem of her dress a little, trying to keep it from getting soiled by the mud which collected near the edges. "Dae ye come here often?"

"Nae as often as I would like," said Evan as he laid out his plaid and sat on the edge, gesturing at Bonnie to join him. When she did, he wrapped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close and pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "I've been away a lot lately . . . an' when I'm here, there is too much tae dae. But I'll try tae

come here more often . . . with ye. With our bairns.”

Our bairns.

Bonnie’s heart melted at the mention of children. She could hardly believe that Evan was already thinking about the family they would have, that he didn’t fear talking about such things when only the previous day, he had been so reluctant to oppose his council.

Would they ever accept her, Bonnie wondered? Or would they always spurn her, blaming her for their laird’s decision?

And what if they were right? What if Ruthven attacked with the shadowed support of Baliol and the King, bringing the MacGregor Clan to its knees? What if the clan was destroyed and Evan was killed by Ruthven’s hand?

Bonnie didn’t think she could ever bear it.

“Me love,” Evan said softly, cradling her cheek and making Bonnie look at him. “Whatever it is that is makin’ ye fash, forget it. I am here right the now, with ye. I’m with ye.”

Bonnie nodded, sighing softly when Evan kissed her. At first, it was barely more than a brush of lips, but then it quickly turned hungry, lips and teeth clashing together as they tried to get ever closer. Evan pulled her into his lap once again and Bonnie had quickly come to realize how much she loved being like this, their bodies plastered together as she was enveloped in Evan’s arms.

“Maybe we should begin tae try fer those bairns,” Evan said, laughing against Bonnie’s lips. “What dae ye say, mo ghraidh? Will ye give me an heir?”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

Bonnie couldn't help but laugh, too, pushing Evan playfully away. He was quick to move close again, nosing at her jaw and neck, his hands trailing a path down her curves until they came to rest on her rear, fingers digging roughly into her flesh. Then, he gathered the fabric of her dress, pulling it up, up, until he could slip his hand underneath, fingers searching for her molten core.

When they brushed against her, Evan swallowed the gasp Bonnie let out as they kissed. Every first touch was like the very first time, sending the same sweet thrill down Bonnie's spine as when Evan had first touched her, and this was no different. She couldn't help but shiver when Evan caressed her folds, his touch light and teasing before it turned more insistent, one of those devious fingers slipping inside her with no resistance.

"Come," Evan said, mumbling against her lips. "Let me hear ye."

Bonnie moaned as Evan crooked his finger, brushing up against a sensitive spot inside her that had her seeing stars behind her closed lids. With trembling fingers, she undid her dress as much as she could, pushing the collar down to bare her breasts just to see the wild look in Evan's eyes as he stared at her curves. His lips found the crook of her neck, the kisses he pressed there on her soft skin driving Bonnie wild with lust.

One hand curled around the back of Evan's head, threading through his hair as the other reached for him, slipping under his kilt to stroke his manhood. Bonnie thought she would never get used to this, this feeling of closeness, of oneness, the likes of which she had never experienced before. But now she had her whole life ahead of her with Evan by her side, and she would never have to be without this feeling.

“I wish tae be inside ye,” Evan said, voice a hushed whisper, his tongue dragging over her neck, her collarbone, leaving behind a trail of heat. “Please . . . I cannae take this any longer.”

Nodding in agreement, Bonnie shifted her hips, moving even closer to him. The loss of his fingers was regrettable for only a moment before Bonnie guided his length to her opening, her arousal already so great that she could easily sink down, taking him all the way to the hilt.

Their lips met again in a feverish kiss. Their movements were syrupy slow, bodies writhing together in a slow rhythm as Evan’s arms caged Bonnie between them, both of them clinging to each other desperately. Every thrust of their hips pushed Evan deeper and deeper, filling Bonnie to the brim, stretching her walls in a way that sent shivers down her body. When Evan tilted his hips just right, groin meeting her sensitive spot with every thrust, Bonnie threw her head back in pleasure, a shuddering moan escaping her.

It was as though flames licked her skin, leaving her overheated and desperate under the morning sun. There was nothing around them but the sound of their coupling and their broken moans, the whispered promises they exchanged between them.

Bonnie looked at Evan, pressing their foreheads together. He was intoxicatingly handsome under the golden light, his dark eyes shining with all the emotion that hid behind them, all the love he felt for her. Bonnie had no doubt he loved her. She had no doubt he meant every word and that from now on, she would never have to wonder.

“Inside me,” she said as she felt his manhood throb and twitch, hearing the desperate moans that tumbled past his lips. She quickened her pace, hips rolling frantically as she tried to bring them both closer to their climax, her nipples brushing against the stiff edge of her dress as her breasts bounced—a slight sting that only served to stoke



her lust. “Inside me, Evan. I want tae feel ye.”

Groaning, Evan grabbed Bonnie’s hips, rolling her over onto her back before he drove relentlessly into her, making her cry out with every push of his hips. He took her hard and fast, seemingly losing all patience until they were both adrift, swimming in the depths of their pleasure, the world narrowing to the point where their bodies were joined.

Just as Evan stilled, spilling inside her, Bonnie’s orgasm shook her to the core, the pleasure so intense that everything around her went white. She held him close, soothingly whispering in his ear as he trembled where he was draped over her, chasing the last of the aftershocks with short, jerky thrusts.

Then, he collapsed on top of her with a chuckle, one that Bonnie echoed even as he pushed all the air out of her lungs.

“Yer too heavy,” she said, pushing him off—or at least trying to. Evan moved reluctantly, rolling over onto his back on the plaid and Bonnie sat up, fixing her dress as best as she could, before focusing on her hair. It was a mess, she was certain of it, but there was little she could do other than hope she wouldn’t meet too many people on her way to her chambers.

“How long can we stay here, dae ye think, afore yer council?—”

The sound of approaching footsteps cut Bonnie’s words short. There were several of them, jarringly loud in the quiet of the lake, and before she could turn around to see who it was, Evan was already jumping to his feet, grabbing his sword from where he had left it earlier by a nearby rock.

When she looked over her shoulder, breath catching in her throat, she saw a band of men approaching, their weapons already drawn.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

We are too far from the castle. They willnae hear us. They willnae see us.

They had no one to rely on but each other, but Bonnie was once again unarmed. She had not considered the possibility of a threat approaching them in the middle of the day, especially so close to the castle. She didn't even think she would be leaving the castle in the first place, and so she had nothing but her fists with which to fight. Against half a dozen men twice her size, she didn't stand a chance.

Before they could get too close, Evan threw himself in front of her, using his body as a shield. They had no time to flee, but Bonnie couldn't convince herself Evan could defeat six men at once. Their odds were too bad. Any hope that still lingered quickly began to evaporate.

These must be Ruthven's men. How have they come so close?

Had they slain Evan's men to approach the castle? Or had they simply hid, making their way through the shadows and staying away from Evan's patrols?

Bonnie didn't know. All she knew was that those men were out for blood and they wouldn't rest until they had their fill.

She watched, helpless, as Evan threw himself at the first man on his path. Their swords collided with a clang, the sound loud and jarring around them, slicing through the silence. Another man was quick to join the fight next to his fellow soldier, both of them attacking Evan at the same time.

They will kill him. They will kill him an' there is naething I can dae about it.

"Bonnie, run!" Evan called as he ducked, avoiding the sword that threatened to slit

his throat. As he stood back up, Bonnie saw something small and glinting in his left hand—a knife. A knife that he tossed to her, the blade landing close to her feet. “Run I say!”

Bonnie didn’t run. She wasn’t going to leave Evan there all alone, especially not now that she had a knife. Scrabbling to grab it, Bonnie held it tightly in her hand, ignoring the pain that shot through her arm as she moved and tightened her fist. The physical pain was nothing compared to the agony Evan’s death would bring her.

Unlike her sister, Bonnie was better with a bow than with a knife, and it didn’t take her long to spot an archer among themen, his bow neglected in favor of a knife not unlike the one she was holding. He was waiting in the fringes, wary of an approach when Evan was wielding a sword, and Bonnie rushed to him, flying through the small crowd of men, their hands shooting out to grab her only for her to slip right out of their clutches in her haste.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

She hoped she had distracted them enough for Evan to get some advantage, at least. She didn't have the chance to look back, not when her target was right in front of her, armed.

The archer was one of the smaller men in the group, but still larger than her, standing a good head taller. He seemed nimble, too, light on his feet as he jumped back when Bonnie approached him, watching her with a curious look.

It didn't take long for him to lose all trepidation when he realized his opponent was a small woman. This was the mistake every man made, Bonnie knew—they underestimated her, thinking she was weak, lacking the skill they did. But Bonnie's father had made sure his daughters knew how to defend themselves against foes twice their size. The biggest mistake they all made was to underestimate them.

Bonnie's vision narrowed down to that man, taking in his stance and the way he gripped his knife. With a feint to the right, Bonnie forced the man to guard his left side and quickly shifted hands, switching her blade to the left with the goal of putting an end to this as soon as possible. The man was quick and perceptive, noticing the change in hands—he was just a fraction too late.

Bonnie's blade pierced through the man's flesh right under his ribs. For a moment, he seemed to be surprised by the pain, as though he couldn't believe he had been struck at all. His eyes were wide as he stared up at Bonnie, but she couldn't bring herself to look at him. Even if the man was the enemy, even if he would have harmed her, she couldn't stomach the fact that she was responsible for his death.

With a grunt, she pulled the blade out of him and let him fall to the ground, his blood

seeping into the earth. There was no time for her to consider what she had done, to give the man any more thought. Instead, she grabbed his bow and arrows, stringing one and swiftly turning to the men fighting Evan.

She noticed too late that the sounds of the fight had stopped. It wasn't until she took in the sight before her that she realized Evan had already been overpowered and that she, too, was too late in the end.

Two of the men from the crew were holding his head under the water as Evan jerked and flailed, trying to push them off. Water sloshed everywhere around them, soaking all three men, but the more Evan tried, the more he tired himself out. Bonnie could see it in the way his movements turned weak, his legs barely holding his body up, his arms going slacker with every passing moment.

“Unhand him!” she shouted, training her bow at the larger of the two men. “Unhand him or I will shoot!”

The men only laughed and Bonnie's hands trembled with rage and fear for Evan's life. Her blood rushed hot in her veins, every part of her demanding revenge.

“I already killed one o' ye!” she said and it was then that their laughter died, as they saw their fellow soldier lying dead on the ground.

“But can ye kill us all?”

Bonnie looked at the man. He was still holding Evan under the water and he seemed unfazed to have Bonnie's arrow pointing right at him. In front of her eyes, Evan slowly went still, all the fight draining out of him, and she realized she had no other choice.

There were too many men for her to fight on her own. Even if she was shooting her

bow from a distance, there was only so far, she could get before one of them grabbed her. There was no time for her to get to Evan, to pull him out of the water. Her only chance was to beg them to let him live.

Slowly, she lowered her weapon, her stomach churning at the sight of that man grinning in satisfaction. It sickened her to see just how much he was enjoying inflicting this torture on her, on Evan.

“Unhand him,” she said once more. Before the man could answer, though, and before Bonnie could demand Evan’s release again, a dull thud echoed in her head, a skull-splitting pain radiating all over from her crown.

Within mere seconds, the world went black. The last thing she heard was the laughter of those men, cold and cruel, like the rattle of bones.

Evan squinted against the light in the room that, for a brief moment, seemed blinding, even though it was nothing more than a few burning torches. He blinked in confusion, trying to place the room, but it was not one he recognized.

He was not home.

Slowly, the rest of his senses caught up. His lungs ached, his back ached, and the skin on his wrists burned where it had chafed. He was bound on a chair, he realized, hands behind his back, the knots so tight that the rope was digging harshly into his flesh and even the slightest movement was enough to irritate his skin.

His head was heavy, as if it was made of lead. With great effort, he looked to one side, seeing nothing that could help him. Then, he rolled it to the other, and it was then that he truly woke, the sight alarming him into full consciousness.

It was Bonnie. She, too, was bound and her head had lolled forward, the strands of

hair that had escaped her updo concealing most of her face. The only indication that she still lived was the slow rise and fall of her chest, and Evan breathed a sigh of relief when he spotted it. At least she was still alive. At least there was still hope.

“Yer awake. Good.”

A familiar voice spoke behind him. The memories rushed back to him—Ruthven’s men attacking, Evan trying to fight them off just so Bonnie could escape their clutches, two of them holding him underwater until he lost consciousness.

So, he was once again in Ruthven’s castle, only this time, escape seemed unlikely.

Does he ken everythin’, then? How did he find out?

Even as Ruthven walked around him, coming to stand right in front of him, Evan ignored him. He had no desire to hear whatever the man had to say. He’d rather Ruthven kill him than subject him to his endless talking.

Instead, he focused his attention on Bonnie, calling her name gently a few times to try and wake her. He wished to reach for her, to cradle her in his arms, but he couldn’t get out of his bonds, tight as they were. Ruthven’s men had completely immobilized his hands.

“Bonnie,” he said, trying once more, but still, Bonnie remained unconscious.

With an impatient sigh, Ruthven approached Bonnie, his boots thundering against the stone floor.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

“Nay!” Evan shouted; his rage so strong that it threatened to choke him. “Dinnae dare touch her.”

Ruthven ignored him without sparing him a single glance. He grabbed Bonnie and shook her roughly, forcing her to wake with a gasp, her body jerking in panic in his grip as she looked at her unfamiliar surroundings.

“There,” Ruthven said, taking a few steps back from them both.

“I’m here,” Evan told Bonnie, leaning as close as he could towards her. “I’m here, Bonnie. It’s alright. Everythin’ will be alright.”

Slowly, hearing his voice, Bonnie calmed down and glared up at Ruthven, a muscle in her jaw twitching as she ground her teeth. Evan could only wish there was something he could do, anything to comfort her, to reassure her that everything would work out in the end, but even he couldn’t promise that.

How could he, when they were in enemy territory, with no one there to help them? This time, Ruthven was bound to do anything in his power to keep them both there.

“How is it that ye thought I wouldnae find out the truth?” Ruthven asked as he began to pace back and forth in front of them. “How did ye think I would ever believe ye were cousins?”

Evan glanced at Bonnie from the corner of his eye, only to see her giving him the same guilty look. He supposed neither of them had been particularly subtle with the way they had been acting around each other.



“So, ye ken,” Evan said. “An’ we ken what ye have done. We ken ye’ve been workin’ with Baliol. An’ we’ve spread the word tae all our allies.”

Ruthven didn’t seem surprised by this reveal, nor did he seem concerned. “Aye, I am workin’ with Baliol. In fact, I’ve been workin’ with him fer a while now, gatherin’ information on the clans fer him . . . with our King’s support, o’ course.”

“He isnae me King,” Evan said, spitting on the floor in front of Ruthven’s feet. “An’ Baliol willnae be in power fer long.”

“That is what ye think,” said Ruthven, giving Evan a cold smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “But once I wed Bonnie, I’ll have all the gold an’ men I need tae solidify our power.”

Evan’s blood ran cold, his heart seizing. He could not believe that after everything, Ruthven was still planning to marry Bonnie, but perhaps he shouldn’t have been so surprised. He was still after the security Clan MacLaren could offer him. He just didn’t understand that he would never get their help.

“Laird MacLaren will never help ye,” he said. Why would Macauley do anything that would aid Ruthven’s cause? He, too, wanted Baliol gone as much as Evan did and knowing him and Cathleen, they would rage a war against Ruthven to get Bonnie back to safety.

“Then I will kill him an’ the clan will be mine,” Ruthven said. From the corner of his eye, Evan saw Bonnie stiffen, panicking at the threat, but once again, there was nothing he could do to reassure her.

“Bonnie will refuse,” Evan said, hands straining against his bonds in an attempt to loosen them. “What will ye dae with an unwillin’ bride? Sooner or later, everyone will ken she despises ye.”

The first punch was one Evan hadn't predicted. Ruthven marched up to him, fist swinging, and Evan's head snapped to the side with the force of the blow, his nose taking the worst of it with a sickening crunch. Instantly, blood pooled in his mouth, the coppery taste of it making him wince, and he spat as much as he could out, glaring up at Ruthven.

The second blow was one he anticipated, and yet the pain was still excruciating as it spread over Evan's face, rattling his skull. Ruthven was no weak man and Evan had little choice other than to sit there, bound on the chair, receiving punch after punch as Ruthven took all his frustrations out on him, his fist colliding with Evan's face so many times that he quickly lost count.

"Stop!" he heard Bonnie scream next to him, her voice pleading and broken, the word morphing into a sob. "Stop it! Ye'll kill him!"

It was a cowardly way to kill someone, Evan thought distantly. First trying to drown him and then beating him while he was bound, unable to defend himself. But then again, Ruthven seemed like a coward.

"Stop! I'll dae anythin' ye want!" screamed Bonnie as another punch landed on Evan's face. He couldn't tell where the previous pain stopped and the new one began. It was all a fog, his ears buzzing, his vision going dark at the edges. "I'll marry ye!"

It was only then that Ruthven stopped but Evan was anything but glad about it. "Nay," he tried to say, but all that came out was a quiet exhale, the word never making it past his lips.

"I'll marry ye willingly if ye let him live," Bonnie said and Evan could hear the tremble in her voice, the panic that threatened to overcome her. "I'll give ye what ye want. But only if ye let him live."

Evan's head fell back the moment Ruthven let go of him, taking a few steps back and flexing his injured fingers. With a groan, Evan turned to look at Bonnie in a silent plea for her to stop.

"Nay," he mouthed again and again, hoping she would listen to him.

But Bonnie wasn't looking at him. She was looking at laird Ruthven, gaze pleading and eyes brimming with tears.

"Guards!" Ruthven called. In an instant, two guards entered the room, ready to receive his orders. "Take Miss MacLaren tae her chambers. She must prepare fer our weddin'."

It was then that Evan found his voice once more, even quiet and hoarse as it was when he said, "Nay! Bonnie, dinnae dae it, I beg ye. I beg ye, leave this place."

Turning that desperate gaze on him, Bonnie shook her head. "I love ye," she said. "I'm sorry."

Then she was gone, the guards dragging her along down the corridor as Ruthven followed them. The last thing Evan saw before he was left alone was Ruthven's victorious, mocking smile.

### CHAPTER THIRTY

Evan felt the bruises forming on his face. His left eye was swollen shut and blood was caked all over his nose and chin, painting the front of his shirt a red so deep it was almost black. His arms ached after being bound behind his back for so long and the skin on his wrists was bloody and torn, the rope leaving behind its mark.

But Ruthven had made a mistake—he had left his legs unbound.

Despite the pain, despite the fact that the world was still spinning, Evan stood, determined to get out of there and reach Bonnie before Ruthven could force her into this marriage. Taking a deep breath to steel himself, he jumped and fell onto the floor, bracing for the impact just as the chair shattered underneath him, pieces of wood and splinters flying everywhere around him. Swiftly, he brought the rope under his legs and pulled his hands to the front, gnawing on the knots to untie them as quickly as he could.

He had barely managed to loosen up one of the knots when the door banged open and a guard rushed in, surely having heard the commotion. Evan cursed under his breath for not being quicker, tugging at the rope once, twice, three times.

On the fourth, the knot gave way.

Evan couldn't help the grin that spread over his lips, one that seemed to unsettle the guard, who held his sword in his hand but made no move to approach. He was a young man—barely more than a boy, really. Perhaps Ruthven thought it unnecessary to place more protection around Evan, so certain that his bonds and the damage he

had inflicted on him would be enough to keep him in that room.

He had thought wrong.

Evan lunged at the guard, who quickly swung his sword, trying to defend himself. He was clumsy, though, his body not yet used to fighting a real foe with a real sword—one with a wickedly sharp blade, which could maim him as much as it could maim Evan. With a hit to the man's forearm, Evan forced his fist to relax around the hilt and with a second hit, to fall completely from his hand, but Evan didn't reach for it immediately.

He didn't have the heart to kill him. Instead, while the guard was still dazed by the encounter, he punched him once, hard, right in the face and knocked him out cold.

After dragging him into the room, Evan grabbed the sword and left, locking the door behind him. Now it was only a matter of getting to Bonnie.

He hadn't yet figured out how he would get to her. He didn't even know where she was being kept or how many guards he would encounter on his way.

I'll try her old chambers first.

It was the only clue he had, and so it was the one he would follow. As he exited the dungeons, he was met with the silence and the darkness of the night, and relief washed through him as he snuck around the grounds, keeping to the shadows. Surely, Ruthven would have tightened his security, but many would already be asleep. There would be no maids and servants to stop him on his way—only guards, whom he would have to avoid or kill.

With light footsteps, Evan made his way through the castle, staying close to the walls and the shadows. When he heard footsteps approach, he ducked into the nearest

alcove, concealing himself until the guards were gone and only then continued his journey to Bonnie's chambers. It took him three times as long as it should have, but by the time he peered around the corner into the corridor where Bonnie's old chambers were, he hadn't met a single guard.

But now he saw two standing outside her door. It was as good a sign as it was a bad one. On the one hand, it meant that Bonnie was there. On the other, Evan would have to kill them before they could sound the alarm.

Approaching them stealthily was not an option. Either way, they would see him coming, and so Evan decided on speed instead, running towards them and engaging them in battle before they could even shout for help. The first one raised his sword, bringing it down just as Evan took the opportunity to slide his blade through his stomach before pirouetting away, avoiding the guard's blow by the breadth of a hair. It was a risky move, one that could have cost him his life, but it left him with only one more man to dispatch.

The second was not as easy. Their swords met with a clang, a sound that reverberated throughout the entire hallway. It was that which scared Evan the most—if anyone heard them, the guards would come running and he would lose any chance he had to save Bonnie. The guard parried another blow, moving fast, but Evan abandoned his double grip in favor of delivering a punch to the man's stomach, knocking the air out of him.

It had the intended effect; the guard stumbled back, faltering for just a moment, but it was all Evan needed to pierce him with his sword, quickly silencing him.

He took a moment to listen for any approaching footsteps, but there were none. Then, he grabbed the keys that the guard had hanged on his belt and opened the door to reveal Bonnie, standing right behind it as if she was expecting him.

She didn't heed the blood that now covered Evan from head to toe. She only ran to him, falling into his arms, and Evan embraced her tightly, her presence the only thing that calmed his racing heart.

She's alive an' well. We can still leave this place.

When Bonnie pulled back, she raised a trembling hand as if to touch Evan's cheek, but then stopped short, her palm hovering just over his face. "What did he dae tae ye?" she whispered as tears streamed down her cheeks, the horror in her eyes showing him the damage Ruthven had done better than even a looking-glass.

"I'm alright," he assured her, because he was. As long as he breathed, he was fine. Those were bruises that would heal. "But we must leave. We cannae stay here any longer."

Bonnie nodded and made to leave, but Evan stopped her, going against his own words in favor of holding onto her for one more brief moment. He kissed her, soft and tender, and the kiss tasted of blood and salt.

"I willnae let anyone hurt ye," he said. "I promise."

Even if he had to give his own life, Bonnie would make it out of there.

Bonnie could hardly bear to look at Evan without her heart shattering again and again. She couldn't imagine the pain he must have been in after Ruthven had hurt him so viciously. And yet there he was, still fighting to get her out of the castle, doing anything in his power to keep her safe.

His hand was a vice around hers as he pulled her along through the hallways. Every sound, no matter how small, sent a new wave of dread through Bonnie and she looked around her in terror, trying to spot a threat that never came.

It was only when they were nearing the kitchens that Evan stopped and pulled her into a small alcove, clamping a hand over her mouth as the two of them were pressed against each other. She didn't know what it was that had alarmed him so greatly until she heard heavy footsteps and her breath quickened, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she tried to push down her fear.



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

They will hear me. They will ken we are here.

But then no one came to find them. The footsteps faded away as the guards went the other way and Bonnie slumped against Evan, her legs barely holding her.

“We’re alright,” Evan assured her in a whisper, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “I promised ye, did I nae? I promised ye I would keep ye safe.”

Once again, he tugged her along, out of the alcove and towards the back of the castle, where she could only assume there was an exit that was not as heavily guarded as the front gates. Then again, wouldn’t Ruthven place more guards that night around the castle to ensure neither she nor Evan escaped? Or would he think it was impossible?

Evan’s footsteps quickened as they got closer and closer to their freedom. But then, just as they rounded one more corner, Evan came to an abrupt stop, Bonnie slamming into him in her hurry.

In front of them stood Ruthven with a small group of his men, who all drew their swords upon seeing Evan, pushing Ruthven behind the protective wall they formed for their laird. Bonnie had to choke back a sob. They had been caught. Evan was as good as dead, and she wished it was the same for her, knowing the fate that awaited her.

“Will ye fight all me men?” Ruthven asked with a cruel laugh.

“If I must,” said Evan, his hand tightening around the hilt of his sword.

“Yer both foolish,” Ruthven said. “I see now . . . I cannae even wait until the morrow. Well, I suppose it doesnae matter. We will wake the priest an’ he shall wed us tonight, Miss MacLaren. Since I cannae trust yer word, I will take what I want by force.”

The first line of solders advanced towards them, eager to rid themselves of Evan’s threat. They had only taken a few steps, though, before a bell rang throughout the entire castle, loud and jarring, the kind of bell that signaled an attack to everyone who was there to hear it.

Evan laughed, the sound sweet and clear over the sudden chaos that erupted around them. Outside, Bonnie heard the first sounds of battle—men screaming orders, others screaming in pain, the gates obliterated under the force of an unstoppable army.

“It seems I’m nae alone,” Evan said.

Just behind Ruthven, men poured into the castle through the main doors. Suddenly, his men’s job wasn’t to protect him from Evan, but rather to protect him from the hordes of soldiers who had broken in through their defenses and were now heading for their leader. In the chaos of the battle, some of them pulled Ruthven away to protect him while others scattered, trying to defend their castle from within.

And Bonnie was in the middle of it all, not knowing what to do.

“Evan, what?—”

She didn’t finish her sentence, stopping dead in her tracks when she turned to look at Evan and found that he was not there. In the few moments of indecision, during which she had remained there, frozen, the battle had pulled Evan away from her. Bonnie saw him in the distance, blood and sweat dripping off his forehead as he fought one of Ruthven’s men. He seemed not only exhausted, but distracted as well

as he looked around as though in search of something—or someone. It was only when his gaze fell on Bonnie through the thrashing crowd that he regained his focus, gaining a new determination as he struck his opponent down and began to make his way towards her.

He only made it a few steps before another soldier stepped in his way, stopping him. Bonnie would never be reunited with him like this, she realized, not if she didn't try to reach him, too.

Around her, the floor was covered in bodies, the stench of spilled blood thick in the air. Once again, her stomach churned at the thought of all this violence, all this senseless death. So many lives had been lost, all because of one man's greed.

Bonnie refused to be one of those dead bodies. Grabbing the first sword she found discarded on the floor, she decided to reach Evan in the middle, no matter what it took. The sword was a solid weight in her hands, but lighter than the ones her tutors had used to train her, and Bonnie wielded it with confidence, even if it wasn't her weapon of choice.

There were no bows around. The sword would have to do.

The first man to attack her was one Bonnie had never seen before—a young guard who seemed built for battle. Bonnie tried to parry the first blow, but when their swords clashed, she couldn't hold him back, her strength no match for his. His blade inched closer and closer, threatening to slice her throat.

She should have seen it coming. She should have relied on her speed instead.

“Ye fool!” another man called and this time, it was a guard Bonnie recognized—one of those who had dragged her to her chambers. “Ye cannae kill her!”

Both Bonnie and her opponent froze. That was right, she thought. No one could kill her unless Ruthven gave the order, and Ruthven was too busy defending himself and his castle. Even if he wanted her dead now, his men didn't know it.

Grinning up at the man, Bonnie shoved his sword away from her but before she could run away, he grabbed her arm to stop her.

"I cannae kill ye, but I can stop ye," he said, his voice a malicious growl in her ear. "Our laird doesnae need all o' ye, does he? Only the parts that will make him an heir."

Rage coursed like fire through Bonnie. She had had enough of people treating her like an object, like nothing more than a means to an end, and any inhibitions she had about taking another life vanished in an instant. With a cry of rage, she put all the force she could muster behind a kick to the man's knee, knocking him off-balance. He collapsed on the floor with a pained moan, and Bonnie hesitated for only a brief moment before she sliced through his stomach with her blade, silencing him forever.

Afterwards, watching him, she didn't tremble. She wasn't even sickened by the sight.

But then, before she could try to find Evan again, another blade flew just by her head, and the only thing that saved her were her quick reflexes as she jumped back from its reach—and right into a wall.

She was cornered; there was no way out for her other than fighting.

“Well . . . I never thought ye could kill one o’ me men.”

Ruthven . . . so he will kill me himself.

Bonnie turned to face him; sword raised in defense. He, too, was now covered in blood, though none of it seemed to belong to him. He didn’t look injured. If anything, the battle had given him a new glint in his eyes, as excited as it was mad.

“Mistake after mistake,” Ruthven said, shaking his head in disappointment. “Ye could have had a good life with me, Miss MacLaren. I would have treated ye well.”

Bonnie couldn’t help but laugh, the sound bitter and dripping venom. “A good life? While ye worked with Baliol tae bring death an’ misery tae the Highlands? How could I be glad when everyone around me suffers? How could I stand by yer side as yer wife with the ken that yer responsible fer all this pain?”

“All the gowns an’ the gold would have silenced ye,” said Ruthven. “Dinnae pretend yer any better than this. Dae ye give yer gold, yer books, yer bonnie things tae the poor o’ yer clan? Nay. Ye sit in yer castle an’ enjoy yer wealth an’ yer balls. It is nae different from what I dae.”

Disgust welled up in Bonnie at the suggestion that she was anything like Ruthven. She would rather give all her wealth away than ever become the monster he was. “Me people prosper,” she said. “An’ so dae our allies, because we work together. Because we dinnae conspire with the Sassenachs.”

“A noble dream,” said Ruthven with a cruel laugh. “But a dream nonetheless.”

As he spoke, he walked closer to Bonnie, preparing to strike. Could she fight him, Bonnie wondered? Could she at least flee from him if she couldn't kill him? That blade came closer and closer as she assumed a defensive stance. If nothing else, she would try to make her death a quick one.

“Touch her an’ ye die.”

Evan's sword was suddenly between her and Ruthven, a protective barrier that would strike him down if he dared harm her. A trembling exhale left Bonnie's lips and she glanced between him and Ruthven, heart threatening to jump right out of her throat.

Evan was breathing heavily, chest heaving with every drag of air. One of his eyes was swollen shut and under all the blood, Bonnie saw that bruises had already formed on his face from the beating he had taken.

He was in no position to fight Ruthven. He was in no position to fight anyone and yet he still persisted, throwing himself in the midst of the battle to save his men—to save Bonnie.

Ruthven growled like an angered beast as he swung his sword towards Evan, blades clanging wildly as they began to fight in earnest. Bonnie stood, frozen, watching as they danced around each other, each man taking every opportunity he found to attack. Ruthven raised his sword in the air and brought it down towards Evan's shoulder, a blow Evan parried at the last minute, shoving Ruthven back with all his strength. In retaliation, he aimed for Ruthven's stomach, dragging the sharp edge of his blade through the air right in front of him, missing by a mere inch as Ruthven quickly leaned back to avoid him.

Back and forth they exchanged blows, pushing each other away before the desire to destroy the other brought them back together. Among the screams of the wounded and those still fighting, their cries were piercing in Bonnie's ears, the two of them

like wild animals whose only goal was to taste blood. Their blades met again and again in deafening clashes. The very walls of the castle seem to tremble with their feral fighting.

And then Bonnie watched in horror as Ruthven's boot collided with Evan's chest in a blow so hard that he flew to the ground, back hitting the solid stone with a thud. Immediately, he raised his sword but didn't have time to stand before Ruthven loomed over him, ready to plunge his blade in his heart.

"Evan!"

His name tore through Bonnie's throat in the form of a desperate sob as she fell to her knees. Grief swallowed her whole as their eyes met for one last time, the seconds before his death stretching into an eternity.

Another war cry rang out in the hall, drowning out everything else. Before Ruthven could deliver the final blow, Alaric snuck up behind him and struck him in the back, his sword piercing fully through him. Ruthven's eyes widened in shock. He looked down at the blade sticking out of his chest, and the last thing Bonnie heard from him was a quiet gasp before the life bled out of him.

Tossing him aside, Alaric knelt next to Evan, his hands frantically hovering over him even as Evan assured him, he was all right. Bonnie joined them, kneeling at his other side and pulling Evan close the moment he pushed himself upright, clutching onto him for dear life.

"I'm alright," he assured them both, one arm wrapping around her as the other found his brother. "I'm alright. I'm nae hurt."

"I thought . . . I thought ye were dead," Bonnie said. She couldn't bring herself to speak those words any louder than a whisper. "I thought I'd lost ye."

With a small smirk, Evan pulled back, eyes crinkling with mirth as he said, “Me? I’m nae goin’ anywhere, lass.”

Bonnie made a sound that was half a laugh and half a sob. “Ye are right. I’m nae lettin’ ye.”

## EPILOGUE

Two weeks later

Evan tapped his fingers nervously against his desk as the council members walked one by one into the room. Next to him, Bonnie stood straight as a rod, refusing to sit or to even move from his side.

They were both tense—they had been tense for the past couple of weeks as they waited for the council to come to a decision about their future.

Evan had made it clear to them he was not going to marry the Lady Buchanan. The only woman he was going to marry was Bonnie and if they couldn’t find a way to come to an agreement about this, well . . . he would marry her anyway, consequences be damned. They could do as they pleased with him. As long as he could make Bonnie his wife, he wouldn’t put up a fight.

He was done with fighting for a while, both figurative and literal. Though two weeks had passed since the battle in Castle Ruthven, his face was still bruised and aches still shot through him whenever he exerted himself, but the knowledge that Bonnie was now safe gave him all the strength he needed.



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:31 am*

Once everyone was in the room, Padraig came to the front of the group as he always did as the voice of the council. He looked as though he had grown older in a mere few weeks, eyes sagging with weariness and expression pinched. Now, though, he gave a small smile, one that gave Evan hope there would be no further arguments.

“We have come tae an agreement, me laird,” said Padraig. “Mind ye, it wasnae easy. The Lady Buchanan, as ye can imagine, was very displeased with yer decision.”

Evan could hardly blame the woman. She had been promised an alliance only to have it yanked right out of her hands, and now many would view Evan’s rejection as a humiliation. He wished he could explain the situation to her. He wished there was something he could say to ease the rejection and reassure her it was only because he had fallen in love with another, but he feared that personally reaching out to her would only make things worse.

“An’ what is yer decision?” Evan asked, fingers finally stilling. Both he and Bonnie went rigid, and the only movement she made was to reach for his hand under the desk. Evan laced their fingers together, holding on just as desperately as she was.

“We approve o’ yer decision tae wed Miss MacLaren,” said Padraig and the relief Evan experienced slammed into him much like those practice swords that stole his breath whenever he was hit with one of them. “An alliance with Clan MacLaren will surely be beneficial.”

Next to him, Bonnie finally sagged, all the tension seeping out of her. With a laugh, she draped herself over Evan’s shoulders and Evan brought her knuckles to his lips, pressing a tender kiss there.

“An’ it is good tae see ye happy,” Padraig added, smile widening. “Congratulations, me laird, me lady . . . ye shall wed in a month.”

Each of the council members bowed as they took their leave. Bonnie and Evan were alone, truly alone, for the first time ever since returning from Castle Ruthven after Clan MacGregor’s victory, and now that they were betrothed, there was no reason for them to hide any longer.

Evan pulled Bonnie eagerly into his lap, the sound of her bubbling laugh like music to his ears. When she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, he stole a kiss from her, sweet and tender and lingering.

“I wish I could wed ye right the now,” Evan said, looking into her dark eyes, losing himself in their warmth. “I wish tae call ye me wife. Tae have our own family.”

“Patience,” Bonnie said, smiling softly at him, warmer than the sun. “Soon, we’ll have it all.”

“All?” Evan asked as he trailed his hand down her breasts, drawing a gasp out of her, before he laid it over her stomach. “Bairns?”

Another laugh, the sound of it filling Evan with joy. He wanted to make Bonnie laugh like this every day for the rest of their lives. He wanted to give her a reason to laugh and smile.

“Aye, bairns too,” Bonnie said, her own hand coming to rest over his. “I want a big family. Three, perhaps four bairns.”

“I can certainly dae that,” said Evan, resting his head against Bonnie’s with a sigh as he imagined the life they would have. He thought about four little children running around—two girls and two boys, perhaps, all of them looking a little bit like Bonnie and a little bit like him. He imagined teaching them everything he knew. He imagined

taking them to the lake where he had spent his childhood years, watching them smile and play under the summer sun.

“I cannae wait,” Bonnie said, her fingers running through his hair in that way he had quickly come to love and crave. “I love ye, Evan.”

“An’ I adore ye, mo ghraidh,” said Evan, finally feeling at peace.

But there’s more...