



# Kilted Hate

**Author:** *Kenna Kendrick*

**Category:** Romance, Adult, Historical

**Description:** "Is it a common thing ye do, spying on men bathing or just me?"

Lady Katherine de Beaumont knows her family is just a pawn in King Edward's ruthless game against the Scots. But being promised to the Highlander who murdered her father? It's outrageous!

Katherine would rather rot in a cell than marry the brute—until a mission she can't refuse forces her into his arms.

Domhnall MacLeod has no patience for orders, especially when they involve marrying a certain sharp-tongued madwoman. But as Katherine worms her way past his defenses, Domhnall realizes he's in danger of revealing what he's sworn to keep hidden.

His ancestral magical powers...

With every kiss, the dagger Katherine's been saving for Domhnall's back grows heavier. But if she doesn't follow through with her revenge... her brother will.

She swore she'd never belong to him—but fate had other plans...

**Total Pages (Source):** 93

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## CHAPTER ONE

November 1297. At sea near the shore of the Isle of Skye...

Any other bride would not plan her husband's funeral before she'd even married the man.

And yet, as Lady Katherine de Beaumont stood at the bow of the birlinn, anchoring herself with a firm grip on the rope beside her as the boat rose and fell with the swell of the sea, that's exactly what was going through her mind.

She sighed heavily, the exhaustion of the last week of travelling washing over her. On the freezing cold November day, there had already been snowfall, and pulling the heavy cloak tighter around her, she acknowledged that the bitter winter of Scotland was a far cry from the weather back home in England.

The rough seas were hardly helping, and though she tried to fight it, as the wind pulled at the tendrils of her chestnut hair, the dizziness and seasickness threatened to overcome her.

To distract herself, Katherine dug her hand into her cloak pocket and took out the little black book she always carried with her. Among many other things, it contained a list of daring sins, all the things she had sworn she would do before she was wed. There were still quite a few remaining.

Kiss a stranger. Spy on a gentleman bathing. Ride astride a horse. Get her skin marked with a tattoo. Swim without clothes and, finally, read a banned book.

As she gazed down at the page flapping madly in the wind, she shook her head.

And yet, I will never get to complete my list now, for in two weeks, I will be forced to marry the devil himself.

As someone approached her, she cursed under her breath, fearing they would see her list, and hurriedly, she stuffed the book back into her pocket and pulled out a small knife to make space.

“I have told you before,” Reginald growled, coming to stand close by her side. “Carrying a knife is anything but ladylike.”

Katherine’s brother, Lord Reginald De Beaumont, was a tall and imposing figure with a commanding presence. At thirty-four, he was eleven years Katherine’s senior, and unlike his sister’s soft refined features, with her high cheek bones and defined jawline, his face was thin and angular.

Nor did they share the same eye color, for while his were a pale blue, a color that she had always felt perfectly conveyed his cold, calculated and a ruthless nature, her eyes were a piercing green.

Katherine flashed him a scowling glance, noting the streaks of gray in his almost black hair. His perfectly manicured beard added to his stern appearance and authoritative figure.

“We are venturing into Scotland, dear brother,” she hissed. “Ladylike or not, I will keep it on my person for protection.”

Reginald jerked his head toward the stern of the boat. “You will need no protection with all the men I have ordered to come with you.”

Katherine glanced at the group of soldiers. They were loyal men, but she had no doubt they did as her brother's bidding out of fear.

"Always remember who you are," he growled. "You may well have been forced to marry one of these Scottish savages. It doesn't mean you have to become one of them."

"I wish I were back in England," she sighed.

"As do I, sister. But your marriage has been decreed by King Edward the first himself. You do not have a choice."

"Yes," Katherine hissed. "I am aware of that. Perhaps, if our family were not of such high noble standing, the situation would be different."

Reginald glared down at her. "Do not berate the de Beaumont name, Katherine. Father did not work so hard and gain such influence with the crown for you to denounce it with such dismissiveness."

Katherine huffed in frustration. That was all well and good, but it was not her brother being forced to marry.

"You ought to be proud of your heritage. Our family is renowned for its military prowess and loyalty to the crown. No matter what you feel, we have a duty towards the king. This union will strengthen his grip on Scotland and create a loyalist faction within the Scottish clans."

"You mean control the Scots," Katherine replied knowingly. "The king talks of fostering peace, but everyone knows his real agenda. He looks to secure influence and control Scottish resistance to English rule."

Again, Reginald glared down at her. “It is well that no other can hear your treasonous tongue,” he spat.

“It is not treasonous if it is true,” she argued.

Reginald’s condescendence angered Katherine, but then, so did most men. They were all so very proud of their accomplishments, each one thinking themselves smarter than their counterpart. Of course, in their mind, women knew little, and were stupid beings who were only good for light conversation and continuing the family line.

Not Katherine. Astute and intelligent, she heard and understood things men thought were above her comprehension. While the opposite sex foolishly believed that they were smarter, Katherine quietly garnered information, snippets of conversations heard from one place or another.

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She knew the king's game, and now, she had become a pawn. A piece he could use for his own ends, not caring a wit for her thoughts and feelings on the matter. She was, after all, just a woman to him. A noble woman, but just a woman all the same. It was not just the fact that she was being forced to marry that angered her, it was who he had decreed she ought to wed.

"There is land ahead," Reginald announced. "The Isle of Skye. It will be your home, at least for a little while, Katherine, so you better tame your tongue and get used to it."

"It isn't like I have any other choice, is it?" she bit back.

"You know I will do my best to ruin the MacLeod family and free you from your marriage, but I can only do so if you give me the information I need."

On their journey, Reginald had told her that she must view this circumstance as though it were a military mission. Indeed, she would be forced to marry her enemy, but while there, she had another assignment. She had to find the weaknesses and strengths of the clan before her wedding.

Katherine had argued that two weeks was not a lot of time for what her brother was asking, but he had been determined.

"It is the only way you can be free," he had countered.

She would arrive as a bride-to-be while at the same time acting as a spy for her brother. She despised the idea. And yet, what she despised even more was being

married to this man.

As the birlinn approached the shore, the sailors hollered to one another, each with a specific task to bring the boat to its mooring point safely. They ran from one end of the ship to the other, pulling at sails and gathering rope. It was clear, by their appearance, that they had been manning ships for many years, for all of them were weathered, with lined, craggy faces.

Eventually, the boat came up against the harbor wall, and with the vessel finally secured, a gang plank was hooked onto the side. Reginald took Katherine by the hand, and, walking in front of her, he carefully guided her onto the cobblestone.

Even now she was on dry land, she still felt the swaying of the sea. Clearly, her body had become accustomed to it, and she wondered how long the sensation would last.

Reginald turned toward the men that accompanied them and ordered them to hurry off and secure horses, telling them to return to a tavern located nearby.

When he turned back to Katherine, he said, “We’ll stay in this tavern tonight. You have another long journey tomorrow. Besides, we have arrived two days ahead of time, so there is hardly any rush.”

With rooms booked for themselves, while the soldiers had set up camp nearby, Katherine and Reginald settled at a table and ordered food. Katherine was surprised to realize that she was famished, but then remembered she hadn’t eaten since early that morning.

Still, she struggled not to screw up her nose at her surroundings. The place was grubby, cold, and full of local peasants. In England, she wouldn’t be seen dead in such a place.

When their meal arrived, Katherine could only glare down at it.

“What on earth is this?” she grimaced, staring at the bowl in front of her.

Reginald gave her a cold stare. “It is stew and fresh bread. You will have to get used to it. This is what they eat in Scotland.” He paused while giving her a long look. “You’re not in England now, sister. As awful as it might be, there are a few things you are going to have to get accustomed to, the food being one of them.”

Katherine sighed heavily, and picking up her spoon, she tentatively delved into the brown mess in front of her. Surprisingly, she found it to be rather tasty, and dismissing her initial judgement, she ate heartily while Reginald laid out his plan.

“Do not be fooled, sister. As barbaric as these people are, they are still clever, and their intelligence may surprise you. You will need to be cunning and vigilant in your efforts. What you are about to do is important, and we cannot afford any mistakes.”

Once again, Katherine had to bite down her frustration, for as usual, her brother spoke to her as though she were an imbecile.

“I’m not a fool, Reginald. I am well aware of the capabilities of the Scots. Clearly, this union would not be necessary if they were the cavemen our king tells us they are.”

“Katherine,” Reginald hissed.

She rolled her eyes, which angered him even more, but she hardly cared. It was not he who was being offered on a platter, was it? Besides, she had long stopped caring about her brother’s approval. What she was about to endure was bad enough. Nothing he could threaten her with could be any worse.



“I will not be accompanying you to the castle. If I am there, I cannot enact an attack against the MacLeod Clan. But fear not. I will not be far away.”

Katherine nodded. “How will I contact you to tell you what I have discovered?”

“Do not worry about that. I will send a messenger.”

“Perhaps, if I get the opportunity, I could do something there myself.”

“No!” Reginald barked.

He then looked about him as his outburst had caught the attention of a few punters sitting a few tables over.

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Lowering his voice, he continued. "Stick to the plan. Find out what you can discover, and then report back to me. I hate the man as much as you do, but his death will not be helpful. Not yet, at any rate."

After the meal, Katherine retired to her room. Not only was she exhausted from all the travelling they had already done, but she would have to rise before the sun tomorrow to continue her journey. There was still quite a way to go before she reached Dunvegan Castle. The place she would, in two weeks, be forced to call her home.

And yet, as tired as she was, sleep did not come easily. Her mind punished her with thoughts of what her future held. There were, of course, arranged marriages in England too, but it was usual, in those cases that the betrothed were introduced at some point before the ceremony.

Katherine, on the other hand, had no idea about the man she was about to marry. Well, she knew something about him. She knew he was a vicious Viking laird who took great pleasure in slaughtering Englishmen. His hatred of her kinsmen hardly filled her with confidence. What if he took a notion to rid himself of her at some point?

You must keep your knife on your person at all times. Even when you sleep.

Knowing how precarious and delicate the situation was between the warring countries, she had every intention of doing so. Once inside those castle walls, she would be on her own. There would be no army nearby to save her. Yes, she would have guards with her, but ten soldiers were hardly a match for an entire clan.

Especially one as powerful as the MacLeods.

The following morning, at first light, Katherine readied herself for her journey and made her way downstairs. The men had secured horses, as Reginald had directed the day before, and she found her brother standing beside the only horse that didn't have a rider, clearly waiting for her.

After helping her onto the beast, Reginald looked up at her. "Remember what I told you. Find out all that you can. We will get our revenge, sister."

Katherine nodded, and after a brief and cold farewell, she and the group of soldiers that would accompany her, began their journey.

While she and Reginald were not in any way close, there was one thing uniting them. Probably the only thing, for they could both agree that they hated the man she was to marry. The king, in his wisdom, had decreed that she not just wed any Scottish nobleman, but Laird Domhnall MacLeod.

The same man who had slaughtered her father in battle.

## CHAPTER TWO

Somewhere in the MacLeod lands...

Pressing against the rough bark of the tree, most of his huge muscular frame hidden behind it, Domhnall MacLeod pulled the string of his bow up to the corner of his mouth. He took a long breath in and aimed. With his eye on the prize, he released his breath at the same time he released his arrow, but in that very second, the hairy boar jolted and ran.

"Damn it."

“Och, that’s the third time ye’ve missed it,” Kai crowed with laughter. “I think ye’re losing yer touch, brother.”

“Aye,” Magnus agreed. “Or maybe the beast can smell ye a mile away. When’s the last time ye had a bath?”

With his long dark brown wavy hair now matted to his head after hunting all day, Domhnall wondered if Magnus might have a point, but he snarled at his brothers, and with lightning speed, he was suddenly at their sides.

“Hey, dinnae be using yer gift on me, or I’ll force ye tae cry,” Kai said, readying to defend himself.

He was far slenderer than his brothers, and stood no chance against Domhnall, but he was a fine fighter all the same.

“He will too,” Magnus nodded.

“Get out of me head, Magnus,” Kai snarled playfully.

They rarely used the gifts they had been endowed with at birth on each other, but the threat to do so was always fun. While Domhnall, the oldest of the brothers, had lightning speed and the strength of ten men, Kai, the youngest, could coerce emotions, and Magnus had always been able to hear people’s thoughts, which had completely freaked him out as a child.

Domhnall smirked at the two of them. “Both o’ ye need tae grow up.”

“Hey, we’re nae the ones who cannae kill the boar,” Kai quipped back.

“Maybe I’ll bring ye home for the roast instead,” Domhnall shot back.

“Aye, I’d like to see ye try.”

The three brothers had been out hunting all morning, but to no avail. Each time Domhnall had managed to get anywhere close to a prey, the damned beasts had escaped him. Maybe Kai, the youngest of the three, was right. Maybe he was losing his touch.

Or maybe, ye’re distracted and have other things on yer mind.

There was that, too.

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Tomorrow, the woman he had been ordered to marry would arrive. A Sassenach, of all people. He abhorred the idea, of course, but King Edward I had persuaded him with arguments of peace and the fact that marrying an English woman would be the beginnings of them bridging the gap between the borders.

Domhnall had seen enough death, not least of which, his own parents'. An occurrence that taunted him even now. He was tired of war and bloodshed, for the lands of Scotland were soaked in it. If there was a chance for peace, ought he not to grab hold of it with both hands?

That being said, neither was he a fool. He was laird over the clan lands, and thus, extremely protective of his people. He had considered the king's other motivations, for he was certain he had them. There had been too many losses on either side for him to give up so easily. Domhnall was thus determined to make certain this marriage did not open the door to even more troubles, like the English pushing into Scottish territory.

"Ye're troubled," Magnus said.

He always was the more astute of them all, even with his mind-reading abilities. His hair was a shade darker and shorter than his brother's, falling in loose waves around his face, and as he looked intently at him with his deep blue eyes, something they all had in common, he waited for Domhnall's reply.

"Aye. I am. Me mind is on other things."

"The English woman," Kai said, all mockery now gone from his tone.

“Aye.” Domhnall nodded. “The English woman.”

Kai frowned. “Are ye sure ye’re doing the right thing marrying her?”

“We’ve talked about this ‘afore, Kai. I’m nae going through it all again.”

“All right.” Kai raised his hands in surrender. “I just worry about ye, is all.”

Domhnall smirked. “I think ye have enough on yer plate with all the lasses ye have after ye.”

But Kai didn’t bite. “Stop changing the subject. And ye may be laird, but there’s only a year between each o’ us. I might be the youngest, but I’m nae a fool.”

Domhnall gave him a somber look. “I ken that, braither. And I thank ye fer yer concern. But like I say, we’ve gone over this many times. There’s really naething more tae say.”

“I think we should head back tae the castle,” Magnus suggested. “I dinnae ken about ye two, but I cannae feel me feet any longer, and I’m certain a whisky will warm us all up.”

Nodding, Domhnall said, “That’s the best suggestion I’ve heard all morning.”

The snow fall beneath their feet was beginning to melt, leaving the ground wet, cold and muddy. No doubt there would be more in the coming months, for the winters on the Isle of Skye were always harsh. The bitter wind carrying the icy winds from the sea from the west didn’t help, and even with all the fires lit, there were parts of the castle that were desperately cold.

As they trudged through the forest and headed toward the main path, Kai said, “And

we could all do with a bath. Look at the state o' us."

Magnus looked down at himself and chuckled. "Well, at least we didnae wear our best clothes."

Once on the main track, they found their horses still tied to the trees, where they had left them. The dense forest they had just left ran parallel to the track, almost all the way to the castle.

"What dae ye think she'll be like, this new wife o' yers?" Kai said, tying his bag to the saddle.

"Och, nay doubt some quiet meek thing," Domhnall replied. "Ye ken the Sassenachs. They're all propriety and manners."

"She'll fit right in then," Magnus quipped.

The three brothers burst into laughter and were about to mount their beasts, when the sound of horses approaching had the three of them spinning around to look behind them.

"Get back intae the trees," Domhnall demanded.

They ran back the way they had come, and with their swords pulled from their waists, and crouching low, they waited for the horses to arrive.

"Ye think it's another attack?" Kai hissed.

Domhnall shook his head. "I dinnae ken, but I'm nae taking any chances."

They didn't have to wait long, for over the brow of the hill, a group of soldiers



emerged.

“It’s the English,” Magnus spat.

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“Aye, but it’s hardly an army,” Domhnall noted. “And besides, they’re out here in full view. It doesnae mak’ any sense.”

“What are we going tae dae?” Kai asked.

“We’re going tae ask them what the devil they’re doing here,” Domhnall said, standing fully erect and running out into the soldier’s path with his sword held high.

“Halt,” the lead soldier shouted, shocked at the sight of Domhnall and his brothers.

“Who are ye? What are ye doing here?” Domhnall demanded.

“We are here...”

But as the soldier continued, Domhnall could hear a woman’s voice behind him.

“...just get to this castle and be done with this travel. How much farther can we possibly be?”

While Kai and Magnus continued to question the soldiers, Domhnall stepped past the first few horses, searching for where the voice was coming from. He came to a sudden halt when he saw a woman sitting side saddle, and a few things flew through his mind in that moment.

This has tae be the English woman. Our lasses dinnae ride side-saddle.

My god, she’s stunning.

This is me future bride?

Glaring down at him, she said, “Have you never seen a woman on a horse before?”

“Nae quite the meek, mild-mannered lass ye were expecting, is she?” Kai whispered into his ear with a huge smirk.

“Ye have travelled far, me lady,” Domhnall began. “Welcome tae the Isle o’ Skye. I am?—”

“I am here to see the laird. Now, I beg ye, let us by.”

Clearly, given his present appearance, she didn’t realize who he was, and in truth, he couldn’t blame her. He was in a bit of a state.

“I am?—”

“Do you not understand English?” she asked. “I am?—”

But suddenly, her horse, trying to pull its hooves out of the deep mud, jerked forward, throwing the woman off its back. She landed in a muddy puddle, yelping in distress.

“Oh. Oh, my lord! Help me,” she cried, looking up at the soldiers who accompanied her.

But as each soldier clambered down from their horse, they too, got stuck and struggled to pull their feet from the thick muck to reach her.

“Perhaps the English need tae learn how tae navigate real terrain,” Domhnall said dryly.

This remark sent Magnus and Kai into peals of laughter, and the three stood chuckling for a minute. Lady de Beaumont, as he now knew she was, did not find his wit amusing in the slightest, and glaring up at him, she spat. “And perhaps the Scottish should learn some manners.”

Domhnall’s eyes flew wide at her fiery response. She certainly wasn’t what he had been expecting, and found himself both amused and intrigued by her behavior and boldness.

“Please, let me help ye.”

“I don’t need your help,” she hissed, pressing a gloved hand into the ground beside her to get her balance. Like the rest of her, her hand sunk deep into the soggy ground, eliciting a rather comical look of disgust.

“Please yersel’,” Domhnall chuckled.

Clearly, she was as stubborn as she was bold, and perhaps, given the circumstances, she felt she needed to assert her independence, what with being surrounded by so many men. Whatever her reasons, she was certainly not the woman he expected. Besides, what was she doing here? She hadn’t been due to arrive until the following day.

He sighed inwardly then, thinking about all the time and effort he had put into the arrangements he had made for her arrival. He had planned music, and entertainers, and the maids and servants were going to be lined up to welcome her. The preparations for the feast were all underway, and, he supposed, that could still happen. But he and his brothers would also have been dressed in attire fit to welcome a lady.

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Och, well. That was a waste o' me time.

After watching her struggle for several more minutes, Domhnall was growing impatient, and noting where the ground looked more solid, he placed a foot there and leaned forward. Slipping his arms under her knees and behind her back, he lifted her with no effort at all.

His action obviously surprised her, for she gasped, automatically wrapping her hands around his neck. He watched her cheeks bloom red with anger, and yet, she did not complain, nor did she fight him off.

Once back on firm ground, Lady de Beaumont brushed herself down, but in doing so, only spread the mud that was already on her hands all over her clothes. Without looking at him, she hissed, "Thank you."

"Aye, well. Someone had tae dae it or ye'd still be there by night fall. Now, as I was?—"

"Just because you laid your hands on me, without my permission, I might add, does not give you the right to speak to me," she spat. "We will be on our way to the castle now. I'm sure you..." she struggled to find a word as her eyes roved his person in disgust, "...men, have other things to do..."

Behind Domhnall, Kai was tittering, clearly finding this entire situation hilarious. Domhnall supposed he couldn't blame him. It was funny in its ridiculousness. If the woman would just let him speak.

“I’ve finished me ditch-digging today,” he countered sarcastically, “but I’d be happy tae throw ye back intae that puddle if ye carry on being so rude.”

“You are impertinent, aren’t you? I wonder what your laird would think if he knew you were speaking to me in such a manner.”

Domhnall was getting a little frustrated by her arrogance, and spinning to look at her, he said, “If ye dinnae watch yer tongue, I’ll lock ye in the laird’s dungeons.”

“I hardly think so,” she laughed mirthlessly. “My betrothed,” she spat the word with obvious venom, “would never let a barbarian like you put a hand on me.”

“Is that right?” Domhnall said, taking a long step towards her. With no hesitation, he picked her up and threw her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

“Argh,” she shrieked. “Put me down. Put me down this minute.”

The soldiers went to move, but Kai and Magnus jerked their swords towards them threateningly.

Domhnall then turned to speak to the Englishmen.

“Yer charge needs tae think before she opens that pretty little mouth o’ hers. Ye see, this rude barbarian, is nay other than her future husband.”

The soldier’s faces dropped, and behind him, he could hear Lady de Beaumont gasp again.

“And believe me when I say, I have nay problem at all locking her in me dungeons. Perhaps while she’s in there, she can learn some manners. The cold, dark cells might even teach her, her place.”

## CHAPTER THREE

“Put me down,” Katherine screamed, pummeling her fists into the laird’s back. “Put me down this minute.”

Of course, Laird Domhnall MacLeod did no such thing, and instead, actually laughed as he continued to carry her.

“This is unacceptable. How dare you humiliate me like this in front of everyone,” she bellowed.

She squirmed to free herself, while at the same time, continuing with her aggressive attack on his back, but the man did not flinch. Even in her fury, she was not really surprised. He was a great big oaf, and clearly, as strong as an ox. But nor could she believe he would treat her in such a way.

Knowing she was a lady, and not one of the wenches he was likely used to, he had still lifted her over his shoulder with no regards for her dignity. She could feel her cheeks burning, both with anger and humiliation, for the men who were with her had no choice but to look on helplessly. How was she supposed to look them in the eye after this?

“Put me...”

But as she felt his hands on her waist, she didn’t get to finish her demand, for a second later, she was on her feet, standing between the laird and a fine-looking horse. Behind him, the guards who had accompanied her on the long journey across the island were already clambering back onto their own horses, and the two men who had arrived with the laird now walked towards them.

“Turn around,” the laird said.

Katherine frowned and looked confused.

“Ye’re riding with me,” he replied.

Katherine shook her head and was about to protest, when once again, he took her by the waist and ignoring her gasps, lifted her onto the saddle. A second later, he hooked his foot into the stirrup, and throwing his leg over the broad back of the horse, landed directly behind her.



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Katherine was aghast. She had never been so close to a man before.

“Surely, this is not suitable,” she cried. “We should not be in such proximity without a chaperone.”

She heard Laird MacLeod chuckling, and suddenly, his hands gripped her and he pulled her abruptly back into him.

“Oh,” she cried.

Bringing his mouth to her ear, he growled, “We dinnae go in fer all that nonsense here, me lady. That’s the problem with ye English. Ye all have sticks up yer arses with all yer rules.”

“How dare you?” Katherine gasped. “You have no?—”

“We’re heading back tae the castle,” the laird said, completely talking over her, and speaking to one of his companions now on their horse.

“We’ll race ye,” the man said, grinning mischievously.

Katherine gasped and spun her head to look at Laird MacLeod. “You wouldn’t dare.”

The brute, once again ignoring her, grinned back at his companion. “The last one tae get there buys the first round when we’re next in the tavern.”

The other two appeared delighted at such a challenge, and before Katherine knew

what was happening, the laird grabbed her tightly around the waist and jerked the reins, forcing his horse forward.

In utter terror, she could do nothing but grip his thick arm that held her tightly at the waist as the horse thundered forward towards the huge walls of Dunvegan Castle. The rise and fall of the horse caused her to thump against the saddle in great discomfort, and alongside the terror of travelling at such a ridiculous speed, she suffered the pain of her behind being bruised as the horse galloped on.

Katherine was only grateful that the castle was reasonably close, for five minutes later, they slowed down to a trot as the castle gates yawned open. The echo of the horses' hooves clattered on the cobblestone beneath when they entered into the outer courtyard, and as she looked down at those they passed, she was met with curious gazes.

At that moment, the laird's threat came back to her. Not knowing the man, she hadn't been able to tell if he was joking earlier about the dungeons. Surely, now he knew who she was, he wouldn't dare.

It hasn't stopped him from treating you brusquely so far.

Indeed, it hadn't, and maybe, under the circumstances, she was going to have to play this a little smarter.

Approaching the stables, the laird brought his horse to a slow stop. Without turning to look at him, Katherine used her softest voice. "Are you really going to throw me into the dungeons?"

For a moment, he didn't answer. And as though he had to think about it, he said, "Aye, I will if ye dinnae behave."

She had no intention of behaving, as he called it, but she didn't want him to know that. And thus, instead of replying in the biting tone she had used earlier, she continued in her softened tone and nodded.

"I swear, I will curb my temper and behave in a proper manner from now on," she said submissively.

The laird jumped down from the horse, looked her in the eye as though trying to read her face, and upon seeing her coy expression, he nodded.

"Good."

He then reached up and with his hands about her waist, he lifted her with little effort off the horse. But Katherine was nobody's fool, nor was she going to submit to this man or any other, for that matter. The anger she had hidden so well, rose up once again, and with a swift kick, she caught the laird right between the legs.

While he let out a deep-throated cry of agony, his face crumpling with the pain, while his body doubled over, Katherine hissed, "If you think I'll be a good little wife, obeying every word of the man who killed my father, you can think again."

But her own rage seemed to pale as she watched the laird's face burn redder and redder, and it was clear, it wasn't just because of the pain he suffered. He was building into a manic rage, and with his fists and teeth clenched and his eyes glaring at her, it was taking him great effort to keep himself under control.

"Domhnall," a man beside him bellowed. It was the same man who had baited the laird to race earlier.

The laird spun and glared at the him.

“Braithair,” he continued, walking over to the laird. “Ye must calm yersel’.”

Brother?

Only then did Katherine take a closer look at the two men who now stood beside her future husband. With her attention focused on their features, she now saw something she hadn’t noticed before. Under the circumstances, she supposed it wasn’t surprising.

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When the laird had brought their party to a halt earlier, she had been bitterly cold and very weary from all the travelling. She had assumed the men to be peasants by the way they were dressed. Interfering peasants, at that. A part of her was also frightened, for she had imagined they were about to be robbed. Her brother had warned her about bandits on the road, and how she and her guards needed to be careful.

At no point, in her anger and terror, had she made any effort to connect the men to each other. She had no reason to do so. But now, knowing that they were not peasants at all, Katherine was able to look at the circumstance with far more clarity, and indeed, it was evident that the three were brothers. Not all exactly alike, of course, but the family resemblance could not be denied.

Domhnall, as his brother had called him, did not reply, but seemed to continue to battle to control himself more than an ordinary man might.

Great! My future husband has a fiery temper. Just what I need.

Without any warning, the laird was suddenly by her side, and gasping, for her feet hardly touched the floor, she was carried from the courtyard, through a large wooden door, down stone steps, and through another corridor.

Finally arriving at the cells of the dungeon, Katherine breathlessly stared up at him. “What the devil was that? How did you do that?”

The laird only scowled down at her before nodding to the guard, who, on his laird’s rather sudden arrival, had jumped up from his chair in a panic.

“Open this gate,” he growled.

“Aye, me laird,” the prison guard replied hurriedly, floundering to release the large bunch of jingling keys from his belt.

Once unlocked, the gate to the cell creaked open, and the laird jerked his head at her to enter. She could protest, even try to fight, but there was no point. He had already displayed his great strength. Besides, she didn’t relish the idea of being thrown over his shoulder a second time.

Angrily, Katherine stormed into the cell, before turning to scowl back at him. He then grabbed the gate and slammed it closed. Still wincing a little he readjusted his manhood, causing Katherine’s face to flush with heat. Clearly, he had no qualms at doing such a vulgar thing in front of her, but it was certainly not something she was used to seeing.

“Ye’re only getting what ye deserve. I am the laird o’ Clan MacLeod and I willnae be humiliated in front o’ me own people.” He then frowned. “What did ye mean earlier when ye said I am the man who murdered yer faither?”

For a long moment, Katherine only snarled at him. He may well pretend that he didn’t know what she was talking about, but he didn’t fool her.

Or perhaps, he doesn’t know who your father is? One hardly goes around asking names at these battles.

It was a fair point, but one that did little for her anger or the feeling of animosity she had towards him.

“You battled with my father, and you slaughtered him where he stood,” she spat.

The laird shook his head. "I cannae remember such a time. I ken yer people, and though I will admit, I have battled many an Englishman, I would remember if I'd killed a man o' nobility."

"Oh, what do you care? To you, one Englishman is no different to the next," she snarled. She then turned away and sighed heavily. "I was very close to my father, and I miss him every day." She spun around to glare at him. "No thanks to you."

"What proof dae ye have that it was I who killed him?" the laird asked, looking far calmer than her.

"What do you mean, proof? I have been told by my brother and I trust him with my life. He has no reason to lie to me. You, on the other hand..." she said, trailing off and not feeling it necessary to finish the sentence.

The laird seemed to look at her for a long moment, and then his reflective expression faded as he said, "I will keep ye locked up here unless ye begin acting like the lady ye are supposed tae be, and stop embarrassing us both."

But after thinking of her poor father once more, her anger rose with her loss, and stepping towards the bars, she spat in his face. "Is that ladylike enough for you?"

The laird did not flinch. In fact, after wiping his cheek, he smiled condescendingly down at her, which only made her fume even more.

"I'd prefer to rot down here for all eternity than spend a second at your side."

"As ye wish," he replied, still smirking.

And without another word, he turned on his heels and walked away.

The guard had returned to his position, and Katherine stood there for a long moment, considering her circumstances. Perhaps, if she wasn't so angry, she would lament at the mess she had managed to get herself into, but she was, and so she didn't. Instead, she paced around the cell in agitation.

It took some time for her anger to subside, but when it did, she eventually threw herself down onto the bed that hung from the wall by thick chains. Leaning forward with her elbows on her knees, she rested her face in her hands.

Looking about her, Katherine took in her new residence. Not once in her life had she ever been close to a dungeon, and thus, she had nothing to compare it to. That being said, she did feel surprised at her surroundings. The room was clean. Cold and bare, but clean. From the stories she had heard, she imagined she might be surrounded by cobwebs, or skeletons. And rats. People always talked about rats in dark, wet places such as the one she found herself in, but she could see none. Not yet, at any rate.

“Well, this is just wonderful,” she huffed. “Not only am I being forced to marry the man who killed my father, it appears he's a complete ogre to go along with it.”



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Let's not forget your part in all of this.

Katherine shook her head and ignored her inner chatter. Whatever she had said or done was deserved, and she refused to believe otherwise. Harsh words and a little pain were hardly enough punishment for the man who had made her an orphan.

She sighed again, thinking about her father. He had been a good man, an honest and forthright one. And though emotions were not something that men expressed, he had always made certain that she felt his love for her.

Staring into nothingness, memories of her father seeped into her mind, and for some time, she simply sat there remembering him. She hadn't done that for quite some time. With the news of her forced marriage, and the fact she was going to have to leave all her companions and what little family she had behind, her mind had been occupied with other things.

The sound of men talking in the corridor pulled her from her memories, and looking through the iron gate that held her prisoner, she watched as two guards brought food and ale to another prisoner across the way. There was some conversation between them, and then the men turned towards her. Clearly, she and the other prisoner were the only ones there.

"Stay back from the gate," the guard who had unlocked her cell earlier called out.

She was nowhere near the gate, and when he unlocked and opened it, she remained where she was, sat on the bed.

“The laird has sent food, ale, and some fresh clothes fer ye,” one of the men said, draping a blanket and clothes at the end of her bed. The other man beside him placed her tray of food and ale on the floor near her feet.

Neither of them said another word, and turning, they exited the cell, where the door was, once again, locked.

She stared at the food and ale feeling slight surprise. She had imagined she would be left down there to rot, especially after she had spat in the laird’s face - that had probably been a step too far, but the rage had taken her over at the time. The last thing she expected was any grace or mercy after the way she had acted.

When she knew the guard was now nowhere near her, Katherine moved across the room and gazed down at the plate. On it sat a chunk of bread, some sort of meat, and a number of vegetables. She was hungry and thirsty, but surely, to eat and drink now would wordlessly tell him that he had won, and that she had come to accept her circumstances.

She certainly had not.

Steeling herself, she turned away from the offerings and moved back to the bed. If he thought he could manipulate and persuade her so easily, the man was a bigger fool than she had assumed. She would starve if she had to, but Katherine refused to be played.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“You did what?” Enya cried.

At the dining table, Domhnall’s younger sister, Enya sat beside her twin, Thora. All the siblings were together for supper, and between Magnus and Kai’s explanations,

the sisters were now up to speed on what had happened.

While Thora and Enya were identical in almost every way, Enya's hair was a shade lighter than Thora's black-as-a-raven locks. Thora's eyes also appeared more mysterious and intense, which likely had to do with her gift, for all of the siblings possessed a power.

"I willnae be humiliated in front o' the entire clan, Enya," Domhnall defended. "Ye've yet tae meet her."

"Aye." Kai grinned. "She's nae the meek and quiet English rose Domhnall was expecting, that's fer sure."

"That's nae excuse tae throw her in the dungeon," Enya argued. "For heaven's sake, Domhnall, what is wrong with ye? She's probably terrified, and besides, she's been travelling fer days. I think I would be a little grumpy if I had been forced from me family home and sent hundreds of miles away tae marry someone I'd never met. A Scot at that."

Enya was imbued with empathy and always saw the good in everyone. Her petite and delicate build only complimented her serene and nurturing presence, and anyone who met her could not help but feel drawn to her. Her power was one of healing, but she was also the comforter of all those with troubled souls.

Her gift involved taking other's people's pain and replacing it with good feelings. Something Domhnall imagined she would try to do the minute she laid her eyes on Lady de Beaumont.

"Ye're taking her side?" Domhnall blurted as he forked meat onto his plate. "She kicked me..." He did not finish the sentence, but by now, his younger sisters were bound to have heard about it.

“Ye probably deserved it,” Thora joked.

Domhnall scowled at her across the table. “Aye, well, tell me this, sister? How did ye nae see that she was coming?”

Thora shrugged. “Ye ken me gift doesnae work like that. Anyway,” she smirked, “how dae ye ken I didnae?”

“Did ye?” Magnus blurted, his fork halfway to his mouth.

“O’ course, she didnae,” Domhnall said, rolling his eyes. “Ye ken our sister tells me all her visions.”

“Nae all o’ them,” Thora replied, a smile dancing on her lips.

Thora had discovered she had second sight when she had been only six years old. When the visions had happened in her sleep, their parents had thought they were night terrors. But once Thora began falling into trances during the day, screaming out in fear of what she saw, it became quickly apparent that it was far more than a bad dream and she learned how to recognize her visions among real dreams.

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In contrast to Enya's gentle ways, Thora was strong-willed, determined, and fiercely independent. She was as slender as her sister, yet had an ethereal presence to her character. Many found her to be mysterious, something she rather relished, but beneath her tough exterior, she had a kind heart and a deep sense of empathy for others.

With his mouth half-full, Kai said, "I'm with the lasses on this one, Domhnall. I think ye took it too far."

Domhnall looked at his brother with astonishment. "Really? After what she said and did?"

Kai shrugged and shook his head. "It was fun fer a while, but..." he trailed off.

Taking his gaze to Magnus, Domhnall said, "And what about ye? Are ye in agreement with everyone else? Dae ye think I took it too far?"

Magnus looked at Domhnall for a long moment.

"I dinnae want ye tae read me mind, Magnus. Just answer the damned question," Domhnall growled.

Magnus breathed in and let out a long, slow breath. "Aye. I think ye could have handled things a little better. Enya's right. The poor woman has been travelling fer a week or more. The dungeon is hardly the welcome we decided on fer her."

It was Domhnall who then heaved a sigh. This was his family. The closest people to

his person and his heart. He hated disappointing them, and had tried, since taking his position as laird, not to do so. It wasn't always easy, and he had failed sometimes. He was only a man after all, powers or not. He had discovered early on that his father's shoes were hard to fill.

Ordinarily, however, when he failed them, it was usually individually. This night, it was clear all his siblings were on the same side, and he was the fiend. And yet, even with their protestations, he still felt like the punishment was justified. Indeed, she had travelled many miles, and was likely cold and tired, but he had given Lady de Beaumont ample opportunity to correct her arrogance. That kick in his groin, not to mention spitting in his face, had been the last straw.

In fact, it had taken everything he had not to let his emotions overcome him entirely. It was when the likes of anger or rage took him over that his extraordinary strength burst from him, and on several occasions, he had lashed out and hurt people too much.

The excruciating pain she had caused with that kick, although it had mostly hurt his ego, had very nearly put him over the edge, and in his anger, he had taken her to the dungeons far quicker than any man ordinarily could. It had been a foolish thing to do, for she had picked up on it immediately, as anyone might. He could not have outsiders knowing about his powers. His or in fact, any of his siblings' for that matter. It was too dangerous.

He had heard stories of those with gifts being captured, kidnapped, and their powers used for the perpetrator's own gain. He would never allow that to happen to his family. He would protect them to the death.

"It's because she's English, isn't it?" Enya said.

"Nay. It's because she's a rude, arrogant woman," Domhnall replied caustically.

By Enya's expression, it was clear she did not believe him, but he knew why she had said such a thing. They had all suffered at the hands of the English. Their parents had been murdered by an English raid years before, and every single one of them felt guilty that, despite their gifts and abilities, not one of them had been able to prevent it from happening.

A knock on the dining room door cut into Domhnall's thoughts, and turning, he watched a guard enter and approach the table.

"I'm sorry tae disturb yer meal, me laird, but I thought ye'd like tae be informed that Lady de Beaumont isnae eating or drinking what has been brought tae her."

"Thank ye," Domhnall nodded.

The guard returned the nod, and swiftly left.

When Domhnall looked back towards the table, all his siblings were gawking at him. He didn't need their piercing gazes to feel worse. Him throwing her into the dungeons had been meant as a teasing punishment, not torture.

"Ye need tae go down there right this minute and let her out," Enya demanded, gesturing to the door. "Go and speak tae her, and then have her brought tae her bedchamber fer a bath, like a normal person would."

But even though Enya's words were wise, Domhnall was still struggling to forgive Lady de Beaumont's previous actions. Enya had been right earlier. Part of his animosity towards Lady de Beaumont had to do with the fact she was English. Her arrogance and the way she had acted toward him had only exacerbated his dislike of her.

"Domhnall," Thora added, "this woman is tae be yer wife. Ye cannae lock her up

every time she annoys ye.”

“Why nae?” Kai said jokingly, trying, as he always did, to add some light relief.

But Thora only scowled at him, and turning her attention back to Domhnall, she continued, “This situation is ridiculous. She has committed nay crime.”

“She assaulted me,” Domhnall growled.

“Och, come on. Dae ye ken how foolish ye sound? Look at ye? Yer the size o’ a house. I’ll bet she’s a wee tiny thing too.”

“With a good right foot,” Kai chuckled.

“Kai!” Thora and Enya barked together.



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Kai ignored his sisters and continued laughing at his own joke, returning to his food as he did so.

“Domhnall?” Thora pressed.

“Fine,” Domhnall hissed, roughly pushing his chair from the table. “I’ll dae it just so I dinnae have tae listen tae yer whining.”

Thora scowled at him, but he ignored her and headed toward the door.

Upon reaching the dungeons, the guard, John, once more, hurriedly stood at his arrival.

“Has she eaten anything yet?” Domhnall asked.

John shook his head, “Nay, me laird. She’s left the food and ale. She willnae go near it.”

Domhnall nodded. “Thank ye, John.”

He then turned toward the cell and nodded for it to be unlocked. Once John had done so, he stepped back and returned to his post.

Domhnall entered the cell, only to be greeted by a glaring stare from Lady de Beaumont.

“Have you come here to gloat?” she hissed. “To show me what a great and powerful

laird you are?"

Domhnall shook his head. "Why are ye nae eating?"

"What concern is that of yours?" she said, standing proudly to face him.

"Ye are going tae be me wife, me lady. All this stubbornness is only making things worse."

"My stubbornness," she blurted. "And what of yours? I am only in this cell because of your petty pride. Perhaps you are not used to women standing up for themselves. Perhaps all your lasses," she spat that word, "are accustomed to submissive obeisance."

Domhnall struggled to hold his temper at her attitude. Clearly, a few hours in a cell had not tempered her arrogance. Nor did he appreciate her presumptions. He wondered, if Thora and Enya could witness this exchange, whether they would be just as concerned for Lady de Beaumont's welfare.

"Nayone is asking fer submissive obeisance, but a little respect might be nice," he growled sarcastically.

"Respect is earned," she retorted.

"Aye, and that goes both ways," he said taking a step toward her. "Come with me."

He was about to take her arm, when she stepped back and pulled herself out of his reach. "I am perfectly capable of walking unaided. I don't need you dragging me through the castle like some wench."

Clenching his jaw and fists, and working hard to control his temper, Domhnall stood

out of her way and thrust a hand at the opened gate of her cell without saying another word. He feared, if he spoke, that something less than savory might leave his lips.

Still, she hesitated, but a few seconds later, she brushed passed him and left the cell with Domhnall following closely behind. It was only when she got to the end of the corridor that she seemed to realize that she had no clue as to where she ought to go, and, slowing her pace, Lady de Beaumont had no choice but to wait for Domhnall to take the lead.

He took no pleasure in it. In fact, he was wary of the woman being behind him. At least up front, he could see what she was up to. From what he had experienced of her so far, he was certainly going to have to keep his eye on her.

He led her up the stone steps and they moved through the corridors in silence. He too angry to speak, she clearly having nothing to say. Once inside the castle, they arrived at the bottom of the large stone staircase, and while Domhnall stomped up them, Lady de Beaumont struggled to keep up. So much so, that he was forced to wait for her when they reached the top.

Again, they travelled down several corridors until eventually, he came to a stop at her bedchamber. Turning the handle, he flung the door open and dismissively gestured for her to enter. While he did not show it, he was surprised to see Thora and Enya inside, preparing a bath.

Enya flashed him a smile, but he ignored it, and, after waiting for his future bride to enter, he slammed the door closed. Only then did he screw up his face and shake his fists. Thankfully, no one else happened to be in the corridor to see his raging frustration.

He glanced across the hall at the adjacent door. His own bedchamber. It had been suggested that his betrothed's chamber be close to his own, both to make her feel

welcome, but also for ease. Of course, that decision was made before Lady de Beaumont had arrived. Had Domhnall known what he was in for, he'd have cleared out the cellar and put her bed in there.

"I should never have agreed tae this marriage," he hissed, now making his way to his study.

Ye did it fer yer clan. Remember that.

Aye, but at what cost tae me sanity?

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Sometime later, with several well-needed whiskies in his system, Domhnall sat by the fire, feeling far calmer and relaxed.

He heard the study door open, and looking up, he watched Kai enter.

“I hear ye released the dragon,” his brother joked while pouring himself a drink.

“I think I’d prefer a bloody dragon,” Domhnall sighed. “Even the fire-breathing kind.”

Moving across the room, Kai lowered himself into a matching high-backed chair beside his brother and the fire.

“It’ll get easier. She’ll calm down eventually.”

“Will she?” Domhnall replied doubtfully. “I dinnae ken, Kai. She’s a feisty one. I was forced tae agree tae this marriage tae save the clan from further attacks, but at the time, I assumed I was tae marry a subdued English lady. This woman doesnae fit that picture at all.”

“Has it occurred tae ye that she might be as angry at this union as ye are?” Kai said. “Enya said it earlier, and I cannae disagree with her. Lady de Beaumont has been torn from everything she’s ever kent. Sent here against her will. Ye ken she willnae have had any say in the matter.”

“Then perhaps she ought tae be taking her anger out on the people who sent her here, and nae me.”

“Well, from what I heard, she has a lot o’ animosity against ye. Did ye really kill her faither?” Kai frowned.

Domhnall shook his head. “If I did, I’m nae aware o’ it. And surely, I would be. Like I told her, a nobleman would be obvious in battle. In his dress, the horse he rode, his demeanor. Surely, I would ken. But I dinnae.”

“Then where has she come up with such a notion?” Kai asked.

“Her braither, or so she told me.”

Kai fell silent, and the two sat there, staring into the fire, clearly contemplating their own thoughts.

After a while, Kai turned to Domhnall and said, “I ken this situation isnae what ye want, Domhnall, but it cannae carry on like this. Lady de Beaumont is tae be yer wife.”

“Tell me something I dinnae ken,” Domhnall growled sarcastically.

“Ye have tae promise me that ye’ll spend more time with her.”

Domhnall turned and stared at his brother.

“I mean it, Domhnall. Swear tae me.”

Taking a huge breath in, Domhnall eventually nodded. “Fine.”

Kai then leaned forward, placing his hand on Domhnall’s arm. Immediately, Domhnall felt a calmness wash over him. He hated Kai manipulating his feelings, but under the circumstances, he knew it was necessary. He had to get through this one

way or another, and if Kai bringing him some peace was what it was going to take, he really had no choice but to go along with it.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The door slammed behind her, and Katherine was left standing, looking at two beautiful women that looked exactly the same.

“You’re twins,” she gasped.

The one to her left nodded and smiled warmly. “We are. I am Enya, and this is me sister, Thora.”

The other one smiled and nodded.

“It is a pleasure tae meet ye, Lady de Beaumont,” Thora said. “We apologize fer our braither’s brutish behavior. He’s nae yet housetrained.”

Katherine couldn’t help but smile at the woman’s wit, but at the same time, she felt surprise.

“The laird is yer braither?” she breathed.

“He is,” Enya nodded. “But I assure ye, we are nae all as pitiless as he.”

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“So,” Katherine paused, thinking about the other men she had met earlier that day, “there are five of you altogether. Or is there more that I am yet to meet?”

“Nay. It appears that ye have met us all,” Thora said. She then gestured to the bath. “The water’s hot, and I’m sure ye would like tae change yer clothes. Though with the late hour, perhaps ye would prefer tae ready yersel’ fer bed.”

The woman glanced toward the huge four poster bed. Only then did Katherine notice a clean set of clothes and a nightgown had been laid out for her.

“Indeed, I would. Thank you.”

As the sisters helped her undress, they spoke about the upcoming Yule festivities.

“The Yule tree will be selected soon, and then, they will bring it intae the castle,” Thora said.

“The Yule tree?” Katherine frowned.

“Och, aye. It is specially chosen and brought intae the castle with great ceremony. It will be placed on the fire and lit with a torch made from a piece o’ wood left over from last year’s Yule log.”

Enya smiled at Katherine’s confused expression. “For twelve days at the end o’ December, the sun stands still. It is why the days grow shorter and shorter. If we can keep the yule log burning bright for those twelve days, then we might persuade the sun tae move again, and the days will once again grow longer.”



“And what happens if you can’t?” Katherine asked. “What if the fire goes out?”

The two sisters gasped. “We will suffer terrible luck fer the rest o’ the year if the log stops burning,” Enya declared. “That is why we have made certain fer that never tae happen.”

Katherine could not help but feel astonished at their superstition. Of course, there were plenty of similar stories in England, but she had never heard the likes of a dying fire bringing bad luck for an entire year.

Now undressed, she slipped into the hot water and let out a delighted sigh. It was the first time she had truly felt warmth since crossing the border. The sisters continued to attend her, while at the same time, talking excitedly about what Yule festivities they were looking forward to.

“I cannae wait for the mince pies,” Thora said. “They are me favorite thing at this time o’ year.”

“What about the black bun?” Enya said.

“The black bun?” Katherine frowned.

Enya nodded eagerly. “Och, aye. It is a deliciously rich fruit cake, almost solid with fruit, almonds, and spices, all bound together with plenty o’ whisky. It is baked upon a rich pastry, and is truly delicious.” She smiled widely.

At the sound of it, Katherine’s mouth began to water, for though she had stubbornly refused to eat the food that had been sent down to her, she now felt hunger pangs in her stomach.

“They might even make it as yer wedding cake,” Enya added, “fer yer marriage will

tak' place at the same time.”

Katherine wanted to dislike these women as much as she did their brother, but with their kind regard, and warm welcome, she simply found it impossible. They were both just too lovely. However, at the mention of her marriage, other thoughts seeped into her mind.

Reginald was determined to destroy the MacLeod clan, which of course, would include the family. The marriage was never to take place, if all went to plan. But upon spending just this small time with Enya and Thora, Katherine couldn't help but feel guilt at what was going to happen to them. What they would go through if her plan with her brother succeeded.

Sometime later, when Katherine was dressed in her thin nightgown, the sisters bid her farewell.

“Good night, me lady,” Enya said.

“Please, call me Katherine,” Katherine said.

Perhaps she ought not to get herself too attached to the women, knowing what was going to happen, and yet, at that very moment, an overwhelming feeling of needing connection to another washed over her. She was playing a dangerous game, allowing herself to like the sisters, but she found she simply could not help herself.

“Goodnight, Katherine,” Thora said with a smile, before she and Enya slipped out of the room and closed the door quietly behind them.

When she found herself finally alone, Katherine looked around her large bedchamber and heaved a sigh. The day had not gone the way she imagined it might, and now, she was completely exhausted.

As she slipped into the huge four poster bed and pulled the coverlets to her chin, even the thoughts of her father, Reginald, and what her future held could not stop the exhaustion from overtaking her, and with her head sinking into the soft pillow, she closed her eyes and fell immediately to sleep.

While she tossed and turned in the night, for her bed was far softer than she was used to, Katherine was still very drowsy when a noise roused her. At first, she could hardly force her eyes to open, but the more she wakened, the more aware she became of the noise coming from inside her bedchamber.

Eventually forcing her eyes open, she pushed herself up in the bed, and peered across the room. In that second, her eyes flew open at the sight of Laird MacLeod sitting in a chair by the fire, thumbing through her book. The same book that contained her list of sins.

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“What do you think you’re doing?” she shrieked, throwing the covers off her and leaping from the bed.

At the sound of her panicked voice, the laird lifted his head, but appeared unperturbed. He did stand when she came flying toward him, her hand outstretched, trying to grab the book from his grasp.

“Give that back. You have no right to look through my personal belongings.”

But each time Katherine went to grab it, he twisted away from her so she could not reach her precious book. More annoying was the fact that he was smirking at her as she made attempt after attempt to grab it from him.

“Yer book o’ secrets, I see.” He grinned.

“What is in there is none of your business,” she barked, but by his knowing expression, it was clear he had already read what she wanted to keep from him.

“Och, but we are tae be married, Lady de Beaumont. What is yers is mine and what is mine is yers.”

“I am entitled to my privacy,” she panted, still reaching for the book but failing miserably.

It was only a few seconds later, that the smile fell from the laird’s face and his eyes lowered to the rest of her body. A dark, smoldering look came over him, and suddenly, Katherine looked down at herself, realizing that all this time, she was still

dressed in a very sheer nightgown.

“Oh, god,” she cried, turning and running back to the bed.

Swiftly lifting a shawl that lay at the foot of it, she wrapped it hurriedly about herself, a blooming heat rushing to her cheeks.

“You should leave,” she said, trying in her embarrassment to sound forceful.

“Och, will ye calm yersel’, lass. Dae ye think I’ve never seen a naked woman ‘afore?”

Katherine was appalled at his words, for his gruff and abrupt manner was a far cry from the more formal, courtly language of the men she had conversed with over the years.

“That is hardly a thing you ought to say to a lady,” she replied. “Especially not the woman you’re going to marry.”

He shook his head. “Ye bloody English. Ye have a rule fer everything.”

But even as he spoke, he tossed her book on the bed and turned towards the door. Katherine decided to remain silent for once. If she did not engage, perhaps the beastly man would go and leave her be.

After yanking the door wide open, he glanced over his shoulder and spoke to her in a polite English accent, clearly mocking her. “Breakfast will be served in the dining room, me lady.” He then smirked and closed the door behind him.

“Of all the arrogant, ignorant, pigheaded...” she fumed, still glaring at the door.

Katherine then turned and lifted her book. Thumbing through it, she arrived at the page with her list of sins. Heat rushed to her cheeks once more, for she was certain her soon-to-be husband had raked his eyes over those words.

He probably thinks you are a complete hypocrite. There you are with a list such as that, and then having the nerve to tell him how he ought to speak to you.

“Then he ought not to have put his nose where it does not belong, ought he?” she said, answering herself out loud. “Besides, the way he speaks to me and what I have written can hardly be correlated. These are my private thoughts. It does not give him the right to be such a brute.”

Katherine dressed and made her way downstairs, but though she remembered which way she had come from the dungeon last night, she had no idea where the dining room might be.

As a maid came toward her, Katherine said, “Excuse me.”

“Good morning, me lady,” the maid replied, bowing towards her.

Feeling a little taken aback at such deference, particularly from a person who had not yet met her, Katherine floundered for a second. “You know who I am?”

“O’ course, me lady. The whole castle is excited that ye are here. It is a wonderful thing that the laird is tae marry. And if I may say so, me lady, yer beauty is beyond comparison.”

It was becoming very obvious that everyone else in the castle was, in contrast to the laird, quite delightful.

“Thank you.” Katherine smiled a reply. “I wonder if you could direct me to the

dining room?”

“O’ course, me lady.”

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And another minute later, Katherine, having received clear instructions from the maid, arrived at the dining room door. She hesitated for a second, and looking about her to make certain no one was around to see, she leaned her ear closer. The voices were faint, but she clearly heard a female voice that she recognized, though it could have been either Thora or Enya.

“...show her some respect. I told ye yesterday that she would be exhausted, and I was right. More so, I think she feels a little lost. She is in a land she daesnae ken, and...”

Katherine heard footsteps echoing in the corridor, and before she was spotted eavesdropping, she grabbed the handle and walked into the room.

The conversation came to an abrupt halt, and, upon seeing her, all the men immediately stood. Again, she was a little surprised. So the laird struggled to speak to her in any mannerly way, but he was polite enough to stand when a lady entered. Interesting.

The twin sisters turned in their chairs, both with welcoming smiles.

“Good morning, Katherine,” Thora declared.

“Good morning,” she replied, her eyes moving to each of them in turn and giving them all a small nod.

“Please, me lady,” Laird MacLeod said. He remained standing at the head of the table and gestured to an empty chair on his right between himself and his sisters. “Willnae ye join us?”



Though she was not a timid character by any means of the imagination, Katherine still found herself a little overwhelmed as every eye watched her move across the room. Once she sat, the men followed suit, and only then did the laird continue.

“Ye did meet them yesterday, but were nae properly introduced,” he began. He gestured to his brothers sitting across from her on the laird’s left. “This is Kai, and this is Magnus.”

Magnus smiled warmly. “Good day tae ye, me lady.”

“That was some arrival,” Kai declared with a wide grin.

“Kai!” Thora and Enya hissed at the exact same time.

Katherine couldn’t help but smile. “It’s all right,” she said, looking at the sisters. She then turned back to Kai. “You are right, and I must apologize for my rude behavior. I had no right to speak to you the way I did yesterday.”

Kai and Magnus looked pleasantly surprised, while the laird showed no reaction at all. But then, she wasn’t apologizing to him. It was he who had killed her father, after all. She felt no remorse at all for how she had treated him. Besides, after his antics this morning, he was hardly making any attempt to redeem himself. In fact, in stark contrast, he was only proving himself to be the brute she imagined him to be.

As Enya asked how she slept, Katherine cast her gaze across the table in front of her. She had been raised with good manners and thus swallowed the horror of what lay on the plates. There were items of food that looked so awful she didn’t even know what they were.

“That’s haggis,” Magnus said, as though he were reading her mind.

She brought her gaze to him to be met with the same soft smile.

“And they are oatcakes,” he continued, pointing to thick, circular biscuit-like things that sat on another plate.

“What is haggis?” Katherine said tentatively.

Kai jumped in eagerly and declared. “It’s delicious. It has sheep’s pluck minced with onion, oatmeal, suet?—”

“Sheep’s pluck?” Katherine interrupted.

“Aye,” Kai continued eagerly. “The heart, liver, and lungs.”

All the manners in the world could not stop Katherine’s jaw from dropping, but Kai didn’t seem to notice.

“They cook it with spices?—”

“Kai,” Magnus said, trying to put a stop to his description, but Kai was clearly in flow.

“And salt and stock?—”

“Kai!” Magnus said a little more forcefully, but still, his brother continued.

“And they stuff that all intae the sheep’s stomach?—”

“Kai!” everyone at the table barked at once.

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Kai halted and stared at each one of them as though they were mad.

“What? Lady de Beaumont asked,” he said, throwing a hand toward Katherine.

While the siblings now reprimanded their brother, Katherine gazed at the small oval offering on the plate with a sick feeling in her stomach.

A sheep’s stomach? Who on God’s good earth thought it a good idea to cook the insides of a sheep inside the insides of a sheep?

Still struggling to control her facial expression, Katherine thought of the normal delights she experienced at breakfast, far more refined foods than a sheep’s innards. Not wanting to appear ungrateful however, she pinned on a strained smile and placed a few items on her plate, though she avoided the haggis. There was only so far she was willing to go.

While the siblings continued to converse, she took the opportunity of them being distracted to taste the samples she had chosen, but after a few small bites, she sat back in her chair and concluded that she would simply have to skip breakfast. She only hoped what might be offered for supper would be more pleasing to her palate.

“Why are ye nae eating?” the laird asked, his voice lower than the other siblings who now appeared to be involved in a heated discussion over what was suitable to discuss at breakfast.

“Ordinarily, I skip breakfast,” Katherine lied.

The laird's frown betrayed his disbelief, and thus Katherine knew she had to add to her untruth.

"Unless I am served my favorite breakfast," she continued. "I am rather fond of manchet bread with butter and honey."

She waited for the laird to mock her, given he had done little else since she had arrived, but she was mildly surprised when he nodded, as though actually interested. It was the first normal conversation they had shared, which Katherine found, actually pleased her.

"Perhaps Enya and Thora could show ye around the castle after breakfast," Laird MacLeod said.

But his sisters clearly heard him for Enya replied. "I am helping Brianna this morning. She's asked me tae gather herbs fer her tinctures."

"And I'm teaching the bairns," Thora added.

"I'm sure I can entertain myself very well," Katherine replied, not wanting to be seen as a burden.

The laird gave her a strange look, but instead of arguing, he simply nodded.

After breakfast, Enya and Thora assured Katherine that they would spend the afternoon with her, when they had finished with their obligations. Katherine, in turn, assured them that she was fine, and that perhaps exploring the castle on her own might be beneficial, for then, she would find her way about far easier.

She had returned to her room and grabbed a shawl, for she wanted to discover the outside as well as inside the castle. As she wandered through the gardens, she

couldn't help but feel surprised at how beautiful the Highlands appeared, with tall faraway peaks entirely covered with a white blanket of snow. It was as she was admiring them, that she heard a great commotion. Swords clashed together, their definitive metallic sound echoing off the stone castle walls.

Intrigued, she rounded the corner of the castle and found herself gazing upon a group of clansmen sparring in an open area of the gardens. Despite the snow that they kicked up with their feet, the huge men battled with each other as though their life depended on it. Which, given the battles the Scots had been involved with, she supposed, it did.

Hardly thinking about what she was doing, she found herself moving closer, in part due to one particular swordsman that held her attention. He was stronger, and faster than the others, but as all of them wore helmets, she could not see his face. Even so, she could not help but feel mesmerized by him, for he fought with impressive agility and strength.

Completely captivated by his effortless movements and commanding presence, Katherine continued to move a little closer. She watched him battle several men, before one of them called a halt, and as the man took off his helmet, she gasped at the sight of her future husband.

## CHAPTER SIX

When his sisters and Katherine had excused themselves and left the dining room after breakfast, Domhnall heaved a sigh and looked over at Kai.

“I really need tae gag ye at times, dae ye ken that?”

Kai looked mildly apologetic, and with a slight smile dancing on his lips, he said, “She asked.”

“Aye. And if she’d have asked ye tae drop yer trousers and run around the room naked, would ye have done that too?”

Kai smirked and shrugged playfully.

Domhnall shook his head at his brother. “For someone who can manipulate someone’s thoughts and emotions, yer nae very good at reading them.”

“Course nae. That’s his job,” Kai replied, jerking his head toward Magnus.

“Talking about reading thoughts,” Magnus said. “Ye need tae ken, Domhnall, that Lady de Beaumont is lying tae ye.”

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Domhnall frowned deeply. “What dae ye mean? In what way?”

“She doesnae usually skip breakfast at all. In fact, she left this table starving. She just couldnae stomach what was offered her. Nae thanks tae this idiot.” Magnus jerked his head toward Kai.

“She wanted tae ken,” Kai defended again. “What was I supposed tae say?”

Magnus scowled at him. “What dae ye tell all yer lasses when they ask ye if they’re the only one in yer heart?”

Kai floundered then, and shrugging, he said, “I tell them what they want tae hear.”

“Exactly,” Domhnall said. “Ye nearly put me offmebreakfast with the stuff ye came out with ‘afore, fer God’s sake.”

“All right,” Kai finally relented, raising his hands. “I’m sorry. I’ll try and watch me tongue in future.”

“Aye. That’ll be the day,” Magnus growled.

Kai beamed a grin. “And speaking o’ tongues,” he continued seamlessly while pushing himself up from the table, “I have a young lass tae meet.”

Both Domhnall and Magnus shook their heads, but gave their brother a smirk.

“If ye dinnae give that thing a rest,” Domhnall nodded to Kai’s groin, “it’ll fall off

one o' these days."

"Then I'd better enjoy it while I can," Kai quipped back just before he left the room.

Domhnall looked back at Magnus. "We have our own appointment tae keep."

"Aye, we dae. The men will probably already be waiting on us."

Half an hour later, and kitted up in protective armor, Magnus and Domhnall were with some of their best soldiers, enjoying a vigorous sparring session. It was getting colder by the day, and none of them were immune to it, but after so many seasons, all the men were accustomed to the bitter winters of their homeland. Besides, they battled so vigorously against each other, it kept them warm against the prevailing west wind that blew off the sea beside the castle.

Domhnall had just disarmed yet another of his men, when, after taking his helmet off to catch his breath, a movement at the corner of his eye made him turn. He was surprised to see Ladyde Beaumont standing there. He was even more surprised to see her gazing at him, her lips slightly parted, and looking both mesmerized and surprised.

"This isnae the weather tae be wandering about in, me lady," Domhnall said. "Ye should go back inside."

He was trying to be considerate. They hadn't exactly started off on the right foot, and after that small glimpse of civility at the breakfast table earlier that morning, he had determined he ought to try and make her feel a little more welcome.

But then, her top lip curled, and she snarled at him. "I'm not some precious thing that needs protecting. Nor do I appreciate being told what to do."



God, I cannae win with this lass.

Not about to be humiliated again by her in front of his men, he put his consideration to one side, and once more, reverted back to mockery.

“The sparring field is nay place fer refined English ladies,” he growled mockingly.

But his words had the opposite effect, for instead of deterring her and driving her away, she stepped further forward until she was only a few feet away.

“I will duel with you any day,” she retorted.

Her remark elicited mocking chuckles from the men surrounding her, and Domhnall himself could only smirk down at her in disbelief.

“Woman, ye wouldnae last a minute. Please. Go back inside ‘afore ye catch yer death.”

“Again with the telling me what to do,” she bit back. “You may lord it over these men, but you do not own me. Not yet. Besides, I’m not the useless English woman you clearly assume I am.”

Taken aback by her boldness, Domhnall now realized that Lady de Beaumont was actually serious.

“This isnae a game, lass,” he replied. “These are real swords that can cause real harm.”

“Do you think I am some sort of fool?” she retorted.

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And before Magnus had a chance to react, she had bent and lifted the short sword that lay near his feet.

“Or are you simply too afraid to fight a woman?” she mocked, planting her feet into a stance to do battle.

He had to give her some credit. She at least seemed to have her positioning right.

Ye might as well get this over with. She’s only going tae humiliate hersel’, and clearly, nae dissuading is going tae stop her.

Rolling his eyes, Domhnall heaved a sigh. “Fine.”

Dropping his long sword into the snow, he matched her sword with his own short one. He watched as his men stepped back to give them some room, all with smiles on their faces. No doubt they had the same thought he did. His future wife was a mad woman. But if she wanted to prove herself, perhaps a little light entertainment for them all would be no bad thing.

Planting his feet firmly on the ground, he lifted his sword. “Ready?”

With her eyes full of determination, Lady de Beaumont nodded abruptly.

“Good.”

Of course, he had no intention of fighting her for real. She was less than half his size, and besides, this was clearly a show of what he now knew, was part of her stubborn

character. Something she had showcased more than any other part of her personality in the last twenty-four hours.

The duel started off tentatively, his future wife watching him carefully, waiting for his strike, and readying herself to defend against it. But as they began to get into a flow, Domhnall couldn't help notice that she was, indeed, skilled with the sword. No match for him, of course, but she was certainly no novice.

While he tried to keep the fight light and non-threatening, Lady de Beaumont tried to push him with her heavier strikes. When Domhnall did not respond, she mocked him.

“What’s the matter, me laird? Are you scared of hurting me?”

“Are ye nae afraid o’ being injured?” Domhnall countered, pushing a little harder to see how she would fare.

“I’m not afraid of you, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Domhnall smiled. “Well, ye should be.”

He out maneuvered her a few times, but still, she held her own, which, he could not deny, impressed him. He also noticed that the men watching on were no longer smiling in light mockery, but seemingly as impressed with her skills as he was.

“That’s the problem with you Scots,” Lady de Beaumont retorted. “You think because you are the descendants of Vikings, that you’re unbeatable. But the English have taught you a lesson or two about losing, have they not?”

Unbeknownst to her, Lady de Beaumont’s words cut him to the bone. Both of his parents would still be alive if it were not for the English. His mother and father were slaughtered viciously, and even though years had passed, Domhnall still struggled to

reconcile his guilt for not being able to save them.

He felt his anger rising at her words, and struggling to hold back, his next strike was given with far more force.

“Domhnall,” Magnus said, a warning tone in his voice.

“Oh, have I hit a nerve?” Lady de Beaumont smirked. “Have I finally found the warrior? What’s the matter? Have the English proven themselves to be worthy of your skills?”

She was going too far, and the rage bubbled up within him.

“Domhnall,” Magnus barked, but Domhnall ignored him and lunged at her again.

She side-stepped, and struck him with a novel move, but he could feel himself losing control, and as his anger took him over, he moved swiftly, strike after strike, pushing her further and further back.

“Domhnall,” Magnus yelled.

But it was too late. With a skilled maneuver, he swiftly disarmed her and as she stumbled backwards, Lady de Beaumont toppled back and fell into the stream that ran through the castle grounds.

“Ah!” she gasped, the freezing cold water clearly taking her breath away.

For a second, Domhnall could only stand there dumbfounded at what he had done. Spinning to look behind him, he saw the glowering eyes of his brother, who had tried to put a stop to it. Magnus, with his arms folded across his chest, only shook his head, his face loaded with annoyed disappointment.

Domhnall then turned back and reached for Lady de Beaumont, but she swiped his hand away.

“Get away from me,” she shrieked.

She was unharmed, but clearly humiliated, and as she struggled to wade through the water, Domhnall’s eyes fell to her gown. Clinging to her body, it showed off every curve, including her pert nipples that, with the cold, now peeked through her soaking wet clothing.

Good God!

He then realized that all his men could see what he could, and swinging around, he barked, “Turn around and keep yer eyes averted.”

Immediately, the men did as they were told, all of them looking a little embarrassed that they hadn’t done so without being asked.

With her body shaking from the cold, Lady de Beaumont finally climbed out of the stream, and even with her skin turning blue, it was clear she was raging with anger.

“That is how you win your battles, is it? By being a complete brute?”

But Domhnall didn’t care that she was angry. The guilt of what he had done was eating him. It was one thing to lose his temper with his men, but a completely different thing to lose it with someone so delicate as the woman who stood shaking with cold in front of him.

Magnus had retrieved the shawl that had fallen from her shoulders in battle, and approaching her with it held in front of him, so he could not look upon her body, he

handed it to her.

Snatching it from his hands, she wrapped it around her shoulders, and stormed past the brothers. But then she stopped and abruptly spun around to face Domhnall.

“As strong as you are, you are nothing more than a bully. Your men might respect your strength, but it takes more than brutish force to be a man. Indeed, you are stronger than I, but you will discover, Laird MacLeod, that I will not be dismissed so easily.”

Domhnall opened his mouth to speak, but she had already spun on her heels and was storming back to the castle before he had a chance to say anything. All he could do was watch her go.

“Well done, brother,” Magnus snarled sarcastically. “First Kai, and now ye. I’m sure Lady de Beaumont feels right at home now.”

Domhnall had no words to defend himself, and instead, barked to his men that training was over. As they quickly dispersed, Domhnall could only stand there feeling like an idiot. A very guilty idiot.

He had known what she was doing, and instead of letting her words wash over him, he had allowed her to trigger his darkest regrets. It made him wonder if she knew about his family and the losses they had sustained. Surely, she wouldn’t be so cruel. After all, she had lost her own father in battle.

It doesnae matter what she kens. Ye cannae lose control around her ever again.

No. He couldn’t. He had been intrigued by her boldness, but whether she knew it or not, she had managed to reach the pain he kept hidden deep inside. It was no excuse. He had to get a handle on himself when he was near her.

“Are ye happy now?” Magnus said.

“O’ course, I’m nae happy,” Domhnall spat. “I should’ve stopped the first time ye called me name.”

“Aye, ye should,” Magnus said knowingly. “She’s hurting as much as ye, ye ken. Neither o’ ye want tae be in this position. But ye ken yer strength, Domhnall. Ye cannae allow yersel’ tae lose it again like that when ye’re near her.”

“Get out o’ me head, Magnus.”

“Actually, I wasnae in yer head, braither,” Magnus replied. “I’m just talking sense.”

“Aye. Well. I have things tae be getting on with,” Domhnall said before walking away.

Indeed, there were things he needed to attend to, but on his way to his study, he would divert to the kitchen and get Cook to make up some manchet bread with butter and honey. It was hardly going to fix what he had done, but it was an olive branch of sorts.

Ye mean, it’ll alleviate yer guilt.

He wished it would, but it wasn’t going to be that easy.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Though her body shook with cold, Katherine’s face burned with embarrassment as she ran through the castle. Down each corridor, she met surprised and aghast faces of servants, all of whom tried to ask her if she needed help. But Katherine only continued on, determined to get to her bedchamber in the least possible time.



Once inside, she slammed the door behind her and proceeded as fast as she could to remove her soaking clothes. Still shivering, her hands could barely undo the ties of her corset, and her trembling body was hardly helping. Layer by layer, Katherine eventually removed all of her clothes, leaving them in a pile on the floor before slipping into her nightgown and moving in front of the fire.

Standing there with her hands outstretched, a small moan of relief left her lips as she began once more, to feel her fingertips. The rest of her body warmed, slowly but surely, to the point that she had to step back from the flickering flames for the heat was nearly burning her skin.

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It was some time later, when she was dressed in clean dry clothes, that a light knock made her turn toward the door. The door opened, and a young servant girl entered.

“Fer ye, me lady,” she said timidly. She hurried to the dresser, placed the tray down, and hurried away again so quickly, Katherine hardly had a chance to thank her.

When the door closed, she moved across to the tray and gazed at the plate. There before her sat a plate of manchet bread. The bread had been sliced and beside it was a large knob of butter and a small jar of honey and a spoon.

For a long moment, Katherine could only stare at it feeling confusion, surprise, and delight, for her stomach was now complaining loudly given she had hardly eaten a bite since she had arrived.

Why, after humiliating me in such a way, has he now provided me with this meal?

She knew it had come from the laird’s instruction, for while the other’s had been arguing that morning at breakfast, he was the only one who had enquired about her breakfast preferences. All the rest were determined to talk over each other.

But why?

Clearly, he feels guilty... but then again, you did push him to his limits with your words.

“He is a laird,” she finally muttered to herself. “I cannot believe he could lose his temper over anything I have to say. Besides, surely he has heard it all before.”

After his earlier actions, and now his kindness, Katherine was struggling to understand his mixed messages. First he was gruff, then he was kind, then rude again. If he continued in such a manner, she might go mad before the wedding even occurred.

“I will simply go and ask him,” she declared to herself.

But not before she took advantage of the only decent food she had laid her eyes on since being in the castle. Even for her tiny size, she made light work of the bread, butter and honey, and wiping her mouth, so as not to embarrass herself anymore that day, she left her bedchamber in search of the laird.

Enya and Thora had already informed her that his bedchamber was right next door to hers. There was also an adjacent door connecting the two rooms. She was certain that’s how he had entered that morning and read her book. While the sisters had seemed pleased, given it was their idea, Katherine had been appalled at the knowledge that he was so close to her.

Stepping down the corridor, she reached his bedchamber and tapped lightly on the door. It was doubtful he was there, but she had to start somewhere. For all she knew, he could still well be outside sparring with his men.

“Come,” a deep, gruff voice seeped through the wooden barrier that separated them.

“Oh,” Katherine gasped.

Taking a deep breath in, and making certain he would not see her nervousness, she opened the door and strode confidently inside.

“My laird,” she began, eyeing him standing at the window and looking out onto the hills of the glens beyond.

“For the love o’ God, woman, will ye just call me Domhnall,” he growled without turning to face her. “All thisme lairdmalarkey is too much.”

A little taken aback at his abrupt interruption, Katherine stopped in her tracks and lifted a hand to her breast. “Oh.”

“Oh, what?” he pressed, spinning to face her.

His eyes pierced hers as he awaited her reply, and for a second, Katherine found herself floundering.

“Dae ye nae use names in England?” he pressed; his eyebrows raised in surprise. “Is it all, me lord this, me lady that?”

“Of course, we do. It’s just... well, we only use them in close familiarity.”

“We’re about tae get married. How much more familiar can ye get?”

Katherine nodded abruptly, for she could hardly argue his point.

“Good,” he replied. “Now I can call ye Katherine instead o’ all this pompous nonsense? So, Katherine. What is it that ye want?”

Looking at him directly, she said, “I wanted to know why you sent manchet bread to my room.”

“Were ye nae hungry?” Domhnall replied.

“Well... yes. I was.”

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“Then, there’s yer answer,” he replied condescendingly.

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it.”

“Actually, I dinnae ken it. What exactly are ye getting at?”

He stared at her, waiting for her to explain herself.

“Isn’t it obvious?” she retorted, refusing to allow him to talk down to her. “One minute you’re throwing me in a freezing cold river, the next, I’m having my favorite food delivered to my room.”

He scowled and narrowed his eyes. “First of all, it was a stream, nae a river. Secondly, I dinnae want ye tae starve tae death.” He jerked his head at her whole person. “Ye’re far too skinny fer me liking as it is.”

“How dare you?!” she barked.

“Och, away with ye, lass. Ye’ve wrecked me head enough fer one day.”

“I challenged you to a fight. It is you who chose to play the brute.”

Domhnall then took several long strides toward her, his face twisted, stopping only a few feet away.

“Dae ye think this is a game? Dae ye think that when ye’re out on that battlefield, ye’re considering yer opponents feelings? Men die out there, Katherine,” he

lambasted.

Katherine was suddenly taken aback by both his words and his approach, and stunned into silence, she could only stare back at him.

“Ye may well be trained in the sword, lass, but ye cannae ken how it truly feels when it’s yer life at stake or that of the man standing opposite ye.”

A long silence hung between them, and then Domhnall turned away with a heavy sigh. Katherine remained where she was, unsure of what she ought to do or say. He was right. She had never been in battle, nor could she ever know what it felt like to smite a man. Perhaps his brutish behavior had brought her to the conclusion that he was unaffected by such horrors, but by the obvious weight in his tone, she realized that her assumptions had been completely wrong. Not knowing what else she ought to say, she turned and left the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

Back in her own bedchamber, her eye caught the tray that remained on her dresser. Even after she had pushed him earlier when they were dueling, he had clearly felt guilty for what had happened afterwards. It gave her a warm feeling in her stomach that he had cared.

She smiled sadly to herself. “Perhaps he is not the brute I thought he was, after all.”

Three days passed by, and while Katherine had seen a softer side to Domhnall, she was still not thrilled to be there. Besides, she was still on a mission. She needed to discover something Reginald could use against the MacLeod clan. The problem was, even though she had managed to escape being around Domhnall, giving her the ability to snoop around the castle, she was still no closer to finding anything meaningful.

Each morning since their duel, there had been a portion of manchet bread with butter

and honey served at breakfast. No one else touched it, and Domhnall always put it on her plate. It was the only real conversation they had each day, if him handing her food and her thanking him, could be called a conversation. That being said, she could not deny the excited twisting in her stomach evoked by his evident kind regard for her well-being.

While in the library alone that morning, Katherine was disturbed from reading her book by the entrance of a young lad with a satchel slung across his chest.

“I have a missive fer ye, me lady,” he said.

At first, Katherine frowned, for she couldn’t imagine who it might be from. But a few seconds later, she suddenly realized who might have sent it.

Hurriedly, she stood from the sofa she had been sitting on, and reached out a hand.

“Thank you,” she said, when the boy gave it to her.

“Ye’re welcome,” he replied. “Will there be a return missive, me lady?”

“Yes, but there is no need for you to wait here. Go to the kitchen to get something to warm you and I shall call for you when I am ready”, Katherine told him. She didn’t want the boy to wait, for she wanted to read the missive in private.

He nodded, and turning, he left her alone once more.

Katherine quickly broke the wax seal and unfolded the thick paper, eager to read the message she knew was from her brother. Not only did she recognize his handwriting, but any missives she might receive from England would not reach her so quickly.

Even knowing there was no other in the library, she could not help looking over her

shoulder, as though someone might have crept in. Satisfied she was truly alone, she moved over to the window, the light outside making the words easier to read.

Dear Katherine,

I trust you are well. While I am sorry you are there alone and having to suffer that dreadful fiend, rest assured, I am not far away.



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My scouts have returned with little in the way of information, and thus, I am relying upon your communication alone to give me what I need.

Please reply to this missive with haste telling me of anything you have already discovered.

R.

Clearly, she was going to have to double her efforts. It wasn't as though the information she needed was just going to fall into her lap, was it? Tucking the letter into her cloak and wondering if she should burn it, Katherine left the library and headed to her bedchamber. There, she wrote a reply, for she did not want to keep her brother waiting. She had nothing to convey, but even telling him such would assure him that she was still alive and well.

Finding the same message boy, she inquired from where he had received her message.

"A man in the village gave it tae me, me lady," the young lad said.

"Very well. Take this and find him again, will you?" As she said so, she pressed a coin into his hand. "And let's keep this between us. It will be our little secret."

The boy's eyes lit up, and with a beaming smile, he nodded eagerly. "O' course, me lady."

When the boy had left, Katherine gazed up and down the corridor. She wanted to

make certain she had not been seen, and was relieved to discover no one was about. But now, she had another problem.

How am I to find what Reginald is looking for?

For a moment, she pondered that question, but when several moments had passed, a flash of inspiration came to her completely out of the blue. Of course. Now, she knew exactly where she ought to go.

Hurrying down the corridor, she met a maid coming the other way.

“Excuse me,” she said, bringing the young woman to a halt.

“Aye, me lady?”

“Do you know where the laird is at this moment?”

The girl nodded. “I dae, me lady. He’s in the great hall getting it ready fer the Yule log. Would ye like me tae tak’ ye tae him?”

Katherine quickly shook her head. “No. No. I’m sure I can find my way. Thank you.”

“Ye’re welcome, me lady.”

Katherine waited for the maid to hurry off to her duties before turning in the opposite direction to the great hall. If the laird was there, he wasn’t where she wanted to be, which suited her plans perfectly.

With her head on a swivel, Katherine hurried through the corridors, smiling politely at anyone she met. When she finally arrived at the corridor she was looking for, she slowed her pace, and, trying to calm her thumping heart, took longer breaths.

She came to a slow stop at the study door, that the twins had pointed out to her when they were showing her around the castle one day, looked up and down the corridor again, and when she was certain no other could see her, she lifted her hand and turned the handle. But to her utter dismay, the room was locked.

Why did I not realize it would be? She reprimanded herself silently.

Reginald's study was always locked, and thus, of course, Domhnall's ought to be no different.

So, what am I to do now?

For a moment, Katherine stood there feeling a little flummoxed. The worry running through her at the thought of getting caught was hardly helping her critical thinking process, but taking some deep breaths, she forced herself to settle.

Turning from the room, she wandered down the corridor and continued to think. If Domhnall did return unexpectedly, she did not want to be found lingering around his study. As she rounded the corner, however, she noticed a maid leaving a bedchamber, and as she did so, the woman took hold of a ring of keys. They were attached to her waist by a cord. She then proceeded to lock the door.

Inspiration flew into Katherine's mind, and after taking a second to get her story straight, she approached the maid.

"Good day, me lady," the woman said, bowing her head reverently at Katherine's approach.

"Good day. I see you have the key to the rooms," Katherine said, glancing down at the ring still in the woman's hand. "The laird has sent me to fetch something from his study, but in my rush to do so, I forgot to get the key for him. He is in rather a hurry,

and,” Katherine looked a little worried, trying to sell her story as well as she could, “I do not want to keep him waiting.”

Immediately, the maid nodded, as though knowing well that her laird’s patience could run rather thin. “O’ course, me lady. Come, and I will open it fer ye.”

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“Thank you,” Katherine breathed. She did not have to act relieved, for that feeling was entirely real. A moment later, and the study door was unlocked. After thanking the maid several times, the woman hurried off to continue with her duties, while Katherine swiftly slipped inside.

All the deep breathing in the world did not settle her heart, however, for she knew well, that Domhnall might arrive at any second. Scanning the room, she wondered where she ought to start first. There were bookshelves to her left, and a little farther on, a dresser that held decanters of amber liquid along with several short glasses. On her right, two high backed chairs sat near the fire, the fireplace finished with a thick wooden mantle set into large stones that surrounded the flickering flames.

Dead ahead of her, but at the far end of the room between two tall windows, sat a huge wooden desk. It surprised her a little to find it so neat and tidy. Apart from a pile of documents that sat neatly over to the left and some pleasantly smelling pine branches in a vase, the desk was entirely clear.

That has to be the place to start.

With a final ear to the door to make certain she could hear no one coming, Katherine hurried across the stone floor. Moving around the desk, she rifled through the papers searching for anything she might be able to use.

But the more she read, the more frustrated she became, for instead of finding evidence of him being the dreadful laird she hoped, the opposite appeared to be true. Domhnall had actually cut taxes for the tenants who were struggling financially. There were letters instructing his men to deliver food parcels to those in need. She

even found a directive for guards to be sent to several homes after their cattle and sheep had been mauled by wild animals.

“For goodness sakes,” she sighed. “Does this man have wings, too?”

She was running out of time, but she scoured through a few more letters that she found in a leatherbound case on the bookshelves. There she was even more angered to find that last winter, he had provided wood to his people in the most far out parts of the land, given the snow was so bad, they could not reach the forests to cut their own.

Slamming the folder closed, she shoved it back into the shelves in frustration.

Damn him!

Her endeavors had been both dangerous and pointless. Perhaps she might sneak back into the study at another time, but for now, she did not want to push her luck. Checking that everything looked just the way it had when she entered, Katherine hurried towards the door.

Opening it as quietly as she could, she stepped out and was just about to close it, when she felt a sudden presence, and spinning around, her heart jumped at the very same second that her mouth fell open.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Will ye let me look at it, Domhnall,” Enya demanded. “Ye’re so bloody stubborn.”

“I’m fine. It’s a scratch,” he said, trying to pull his arm away.

But Enya was having none of it, and grabbing hold of his wrist, she pressed her hand

against the wound. It wasn't really a wound, but Enya was determined to heal the small cut, no matter how much he protested.

She had healed him many times before, and like on those earlier occasions, he felt a warmth move through his body, traveling from the affected area, and ending somewhere in his chest. For a second, as it was every time when Enya used her power, it was like the air had stopped and everything had fallen still.

Domhnall and a few of his men had been working in the great hall. Soon, the Yule log would be brought in and lit by the burning flames of the fire that sat in the huge fireplace. Before that could happen, the long wooden banquet tables needed arranging, as did the benches that sat beside them.

It had been as Domhnall had grabbed the end of one of the tables, that he had caught his hand on a protruding nail. A nail that ought to have been taken care of the moment it had been noticed. The cut was neither deep, nor did it hurt particularly much, but Enya had spotted it and the blood that dripped from it, and being the empathic and compassionate lass she was, could hardly help herself from going into her usual caring disposition.

Once the healing was over, however, Enya did not let go of Domhnall's hand.

"We need tae talk," she said, looking up at him knowingly.

"What is there tae talk about?" Domhnall feigned ignorance, but he knew his sister well enough to know what was coming.

Enya raised her eyebrows and gave him a look of disbelief. "Ye ken well what."

Sighing, he moved several steps away from the other men who continued working. Besides the fact that he didn't really want to discuss the subject anyway, he certainly

didn't want any gossip travelling around the castle. Whatever she had to say to him was none of their business.

When they were further across the room, Domhnall looked down at her expectantly as she looked up at him with the same expression. When Enya realized Domhnall was not going to speak, she shrugged her shoulders. "This cannae go on. Ye cannae keep avoiding Katherine as though by nae acknowledging her, she'll suddenly disappear."

"Now that would be a miracle I would look forward tae," he growled.

"Domhnall!"

"Fine," he hissed in frustration. "But I dinnae ken what ye want from me."

"O' course, ye dae. Ye're nae a fool, so stop pretending tae be one. She's going tae be yer wife soon, and then what? Are ye going tae ignore her then as ye dae now?"

"I'm nae ignoring her. She just isnae in the same places that I happen tae be."



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Enya planted her hands on her hips and tilted her head. “Then maybe ye ought tae find the places she is and be there,” she quipped back. “I’ve already told ye. This is as hard fer her as it is fer ye.”

He knew that. Not only had Katherine made her feelings perfectly clear, Domhnall was fully aware that she had been forced into this. He had spent some time considering her position over the last few days. English lasses were not the same as Scottish ones. In Scotland, the women often were as hardy as the men. In England, the women were treated as commodities.

Katherine was being used as a pawn in a game far bigger than either of them, and she had no more power over her fate than he. Taking his sister’s words several days before into account, he also realized that he had been offered the far better deal. While Katherine had been torn from everything she had known, he remained as laird in the same castle, ruling over the same lands, and looking after people he had known all his life.

Katherine knew no one. She had not even arrived with a maid, which Domhnall had found strange. From what he knew, a lady always had a maid. He had tried to work out why she had arrived alone but had reached no conclusions. Perhaps he ought to ask her, and maybe, had he not been avoiding her like she had a plague, he might have already known.

“So?” Enya pressed when Domhnall did not reply.

“So?” he repeated.

“Domhnall, ye’re being impossible. Whether ye like it or nae, ye have tae marry Katherine, and I fer one am nae going tae stand by while ye treat her like a leper.”

“All right,” he sighed. “I will try harder.”

Enya gave him a piercing look.

“I will. I swear,” he said, lifting his hands in assurance.

“Maybe ye can start now then,” she said, jerking her head towards the doorway. “Go and find her. Tak’ a walk around the gardens together.” Enya’s eyes widened and she gave him a determined look. “Avoid the streams.”

Domhnall couldn’t help but laugh at Enya’s expression, and while she tried to stop herself, Enya found herself letting out a little giggle too.

Giving her a quick kiss on the head and leaving the great hall, Domhnall strode through the castle in search of his future bride. Enya did make valid points, and in truth, he knew everything she said to be true himself. If they were going to be forced together, he supposed he ought to try and make the best of it, as stubborn as the woman was.

Rounding a corner, he met Kai and Magnus coming the other way. The three came to a stop, and Kai said, “I’m leaving for the MacDonald lands. I’ll be travelling back with Ava.”

Ava was Kai’s closest friend, and the MacDonald’s had been an allied clan for long before Domhnall was even born.

“Laird MacDonald is away, and willnae mak’ the wedding,” Kai continued. “I dinnae want Ava travelling all this way by hersel’. I’ll collect her and accompany her back

here.”

“And the fact that ye have a soft spot for her has naething at all tae dae with it, I suppose,” Domhnall said with a slight smirk.

Kai shook his head. “Nae, I dinnae.”

“Och, come on, Kai,” Magnus added. “The whole castle kens that ye carry a flame for her. Though with all the other lasses ye have in yer life, I’m surprised ye have time for another.”

Kai smirked then. “I like tae keep me options open.”

“As open as a barn door,” Domhnall quipped.

“That’s just rude,” Kai replied.

Domhnall and Magnus chuckled.

“Maybe,” Magnus said through his laughter, “but probably true.”

Kai rolled his eyes and tried not to look like he found their jibing amusing.

“Are ye leaving directly?” Domhnall asked a moment later.

“Aye.” Kai nodded.

“Then be careful, keep yer eyes open, and stay safe.”

Domhnall then gripped his brother’s forearm and pulled him against his shoulder in a warm embrace. Magnus and Kai shared the same farewell, before Kai nodded to them

both and turned back down the corridor.

Magnus and Domhnall then continued walking.

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“I have news, and it’s nae good,” Magnus said.

Domhnall frowned.

“Birlinns have been discovered on the south o’ the island,” Magnus continued. “Scouts have tried tae discover who they belong tae, but nae one seems tae ken anything.”

“Katherine would have traveled in on a birlinn,” Domhnall offered.

“Aye, but the boat would have left as soon as she was on shore. These are still moored. Besides, there are three o’ them. Even with the men she brought, Katherine would only have needed tae travel in one.”

“Ye’re saying there are people on the island that dinnae belong,” Domhnall growled.

Magnus gave his older brother a wary look, confirming the very same, and at that thought, Domhnall felt anger beginning to rise. Had their family not suffered enough? More to the point, who had arrived on the island without his knowledge, and where were they?

“Where are the scouts now?” Domhnall growled, struggling to keep his temper under control. He hated the fact that he still could not seem to get a handle on his emotions, even after all these years.

“I have them spread across the island, braither. It may tak’ some time, but we will get the answers ye seek.”

“If it’s the English, I’ll kill every one o’ the bastards,” Domhnall spat.

Magnus came to a stop and turned to face him. “Let’s nae jump tae any conclusions yet. With the wedding on the horizon, it could be guests travelling tae the castle.”

Domhnall took a deep breath. It was a possibility. A possibility that hadn’t even occurred to him.

“Aye. I suppose ye might be right.”

Magnus nodded. “But tae be sure, I’m heading tae the guard’s quarters tae send more men out.”

“Good.”

“I’ll see ye at supper,” Magnus replied, turning the corner and leaving Domhnall with his thoughts.

Turning back the way he had come, Domhnall now had other things on his mind other than his future wife. Magnus may well be right. It could be guests coming from the mainland. But what if it wasn’t? He wanted to be sure, and what better way to discover that than sending a missive to those who had been invited?

He was nearing his study and readying himself to enter it, when the door opening brought him to an immediate halt. No one ought to be in his study without his knowledge or consent. No one ever dared. Even his own siblings did not enter without asking him first. It was surprising enough to acknowledge the fact that anyone was in his study. Who he witnessed exiting it, however, astonished him even more.

Katherine was in the middle of closing the door, when she turned to find him standing

there, looking down at her.

“Oh, my god,” she gasped.

“Not quite,” Domhnall replied, looking down at her expectantly.

Clearly surprised at seeing him there, Katherine looked flustered and then a torrent of words spoken so fast flowed from her mouth, that they nearly tripped over each other.

“Oh, er... there you are. I have been looking all over for you. I... I was searching for you. Well, not exactly searching for you, but I have been looking for you. I thought perhaps, that you might have been in your study, but evidently, you are not.”

“Clearly,” Domhnall replied dryly.

“No. No. Clearly.”

“And why were ye looking for me?” he asked, wondering if he ought to be suspicious about how nervous she looked.

“Well. I... I thought that perhaps, we might... that we might. Er...” she struggled, floundering some more.

It didn't exactly help her case, for either she was making all this up as she went along, or Domhnall's piercing gaze was unnerving her.

“Go for a walk,” she blurted, as though her memory had that very second been restored. “Yes. That's it. I thought we might go for a walk. Perhaps you could help me gather some pine branches like the ones you have in your study. They smell wonderful, it reminds me of the coming holiday season.”

Had she been talking to Enya? Hadn't that been the very thing his sister had suggested only half an hour before? Was this some kind of conspiracy between the women to get them closer?



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Domhnall didn't know, and he certainly wasn't going to ask. By how Katherine had acted in the last few moments, he would likely not get a lucid answer at any rate. There still remained a small niggles of suspicion in the back of his mind, but taking a moment to think about it, he couldn't imagine what benefit she could get from being in his study.

After gazing down at her for another long moment, and coming to no conclusions of any harm she could do, he made the decision to just go with it.

"Shall we?" he said, gesturing to the corridor before them.

Still looking nervous, Katherine nodded her head eagerly, proving to be the most agreeable she had been since she arrived.

Maybe she was up tae something, but what, I cannae imagine.

Walking side by side, the complete opposite of moments before occurred, and the conversation fell into a silent lull. In truth, Domhnall did not really know what he ought to say. Indeed, she was going to become his wife, but so far, he could find nothing at all that they had in common.

Perhaps that's because ye havenae taken the time tae get tae ken her.

That was true.

But where dae I begin?

They descended the large stone steps of the staircase, and Domhnall opened his mouth to speak, but a sound above him caught his attention, and glancing up, he watched a huge picture frame tumbling from the landing above.

Beside the banister, two servants gawked with their mouths open, both looking on in helpless terror as the picture plunged at great speed towards their laird and his bride-to-be.

Without thinking about it, Domhnall moved with lightning speed, and grabbing hold of Katherine, he lifted her fully off her feet, spinning her around while using his body to block her from being hit. Unfortunately, there was nowhere else for him to go, and though he had saved Katherine from injury, the corner of the frame caught him in his upper back.

“Argh,” he cried out in agony.

A second later, the frame crashed onto the stairs and splintered into hundreds of pieces, bouncing from one step to the next, before ending up in a destroyed mess on the floor at the bottom of the staircase.

Gently, he placed a panting and shocked Katherine back down on her feet, but she was already looking at him with great concern.

“You’re hurt,” she cried.

“I’ll be fine.”

Her eyes glared down at the huge, now destroyed frame. She then looked back up at him.

“As huge as you are, I cannot believe that to be true. Turn around.”

It was a demand he ordinarily would have scowled at. In fact, it was a demand he would never have heard from another lass in the castle. Apart from Enya and Thora. Only his sisters would dare to have ordered him about with such authority, and yet, he knew her instruction came from a place of concern, and thus, he did as she commanded.

“You’re bleeding, Domhnall,” she gasped. “Come. Let me take a look at it for you.”

Domhnall turned back to look at her. “I’ll go tae the healer.”

“It’s the least I can do after you just saved my life.”

“I hardly think I saved yer life, Katherine.”

She glared at him in disbelief. “Do you really think if that great big thing had hit me,” she threw a hand in the direction of the destroyed frame, “that I would not be injured beyond repair? Look at it! And now, I must repay the favor. Please, let me attend to it.”

With a heavy sigh, Domhnall eventually relented, and turning, they made their way back up the stairs. The two young servantboys were waiting for them, their heads bent, their hands in supplication, and both of them rambling how very sorry they were for making such a clumsy mistake.

“What were ye doing?” Domhnall asked.

“The wedding, me laird,” the younger of the two said. “We were cleaning the pictures in preparation for the wedding.”

As irritated as he was, Domhnall knew they hadn’t let the frame fall on purpose, so he nodded. “Dinnae worry. Those frames are heavy. But try and be a little more careful

in future. That was dangerous and that painting was a invaluable family heirloom.”

“Aye, me laird,” the boys said together contritely.

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“And get down there and clean up that mess,” Domhnall added.

“Aye, me laird,” they both said again, hurrying past them and running down the stairs.

Domhnall continued on down the corridor, but from the corner of his eye, he noticed Katherine throwing him glances.

“Spit it out, lass,” he demanded.

“I, I suppose I am impressed.”

“With what?” Domhnall said carefully.

He had moved with lightning speed to save her. Had she noticed? It wouldn't be the first time she had mentioned it, but then, he had made the stupid mistake of losing his temper on the day she had arrived.

“With the way you handled those boys. I will admit, there are lords in England who would have had them whipped or worse for making such a dangerous mistake.”

“And what good would that have done them? It was an accident. Punishing an accident is like beating an animal for making the noises nature gave it. It's not only pointless, it's cruel.”

He realized his tone was a little harsh, but he supposed it angered him that any man thought it beneficial to beat a child for making a mistake.

When he looked down at Katherine, she had a slight smile at the corner of her mouth.

“Are ye laughing at me?”

“Not at all.” She shook her head. “I just find your view rather refreshing.”

When they arrived at her bedchamber, Katherine opened her door and walked inside. Domhnall followed, assuming that the open door was an unspoken invitation for him to do so.

“Please. Sit,” she said, gesturing to a chair beside the fire.

She then turned around to the dresser. While she poured water from the jug into a bowl, Domhnall slipped his plaid from off his shoulder and pulled his shirt from his body. He was about to sit when Katherine turned around with the bowl in hand, and upon seeing him, came to an immediate halt, nearly losing her grip on the bowl entirely.

“Oh, my,” she gasped.

He couldn’t stop the smirk from forming while watching her face flush bright red. Her wide eyes scanned his muscular body, as though seeing new territory for the first time, and in that moment, Domhnall came to a surprising realization.

She’s so innocent, she’s never seen a man in a state o’ undress ‘afore now.

## CHAPTER NINE

So stunned was she, that Katherine nearly dropped the bowl of water she held in her hands. Domhnall was obviously broad and strong. Anyone with eyes would be able to see that, even if the man was draped in every item of clothing he owned. Yet, she

could only gawk in disbelief as she grazed across the pure masculinity that emanated from him.

There were dips and crevices starting from the huge width of his shoulders, running across his chest, and then down across the mass of his musclebound stomach. In fact, having never seen a naked man before, she had to wonder if all of them looked like that beneath their clothing.

I hardly think Reginald's thin frame contains the solid mass I am looking at.

Of course, it didn't.

As she continued to drink him all in, she could feel her heart thumping in her chest, her stomach twisting, and nearly mesmerized by his sculptured form, Katherine struggled to pull her eyes away.

A few seconds later, however, she realized she was staring, and darting her eyes up, she met the smiling lips of her future husband. His expression emanated mild amusement at her reaction. It was then that she felt the heat rush to her face, and her cheeks burned as though they were on fire.

"Sit," she demanded hurriedly.

"Are ye sure ye dinnae want tae look a little longer?"

He was now smiling broadly as he teased her, but feeling utterly mortified with embarrassment, Katherine huffed and hurried past him to see to his wound. Placing the bowl on the floor, she took a linen towel and dipped it into the water. Yet, once again, she was faced with his broad and muscular back.

With the cloth in her hand, she hesitated to continue, fearful of touching the taut skin

before her.



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“I’ll nae bite,” Domhnall said, turning his head but not fully looking at her.

“Well, of course you won’t,” she replied, jerking herself out of her stupor.

Concentrate, Katherine, for goodness sakes. The man is injured.

Placing one hand on his shoulder, and feeling the heat of his skin beneath her fingertips, she moved the wet cloth towards the cut lower down on his back. It wasn’t a deep cut, and already seeing the map of white lines across his body, both front and back, it was evident that Domhnall was well used to injuries. Still, he had saved her from a terrible fate.

With lightning speed...

Yes. There was that. It certainly wasn’t the first time he had moved in a way no normal man ought, and perhaps, now might be the perfect time to discuss it. At least it might distract her.

Really?

All right, that was too much to hope for, but if she could just get him to talk about something else, something that would take away from her current discomfort, it would be better than nothing at all.

“Tell me?—”

“What is in that list in yer book?” Domhnall said, speaking at exactly the same time.

As if the situation wasn't already bad enough, Katherine could only gawk at his back as her face reddened even further.

"That's... that's none of your business," she squeaked, wiping the blood around the small wound.

"Och, come on, Katherine. Ye ken I have already read it. I just cannae remember all ye have written on it."

"You had no right to read it in the first place," she said, feeling more embarrassed than she could ever remember feeling in her life.

"Well, I did, so it's a little late fer all that. Come on. Tell me."

Heaving a sigh, and realizing that there really was no point keeping it from him, given he had already invaded her personal belongings, she said, "Why do you want to know?"

"I'm just curious."

Again, Katherine hesitated, trying her utmost to concentrate on the job in front of her. Straightening his back, Domhnall shifted in the seat, his massive muscular mass moving under her light touch as he did so.

Maybe answering the question would settle her thumping heart. Clearly, she was stuck between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, her body was reacting in strange ways being so close to her future husband in such a state of undress. On the other, the embarrassment of that list was causing her cheeks to feel like the flames of a fire.

"Fine," she said, eventually making a decision. "Sometimes, being a lady can be a

little tiresome, if not downright boring. I decided, one day, that I wanted to inject a little excitement into my life. All men have their fun with no recompense. Why shouldn't I?"

"Indeed." Domhnall nodded.

"And thus," she continued, "I made a list of things a lady in my position ought never to do." The wound was now clean, and after tenderly drying the area surrounding it, Katherine took a step back. "Only, I was ordered to travel here and to be married before I got a chance to finish completing all the items. I'm sure you noted that some had been struck out."

"I did."

Without her having to say so, he deduced that she had finished seeing to him, and standing, he grabbed his shirt and pulled it over his head. He then turned to face her.

"Thank ye."

"You are welcome."

But in that moment, his expression conveyed sympathy as though he felt sorry for her in her predicament. It was unusual under the circumstances, but more than that, it was not an expression she was aware he had the capacity to convey.

"Anyway," Katherine shrugged, "there is no time to finish it, so it doesn't really matter anymore, does it?"

She turned and folded the wet towel, before bending to the floor and lifting the bowl of water. As she walked across the room, she heard Domhnall say, "How about a truce?"

Placing the bowl next to the jug on the dresser, Katherine turned to look at him.

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” he shrugged, “if ye promise never tae disrespect me in front o’ me men again, I can help ye finish off yer list.”

For a second, Katherine didn’t speak. It wasn’t because his proposal wasn’t agreeable. She had crossed a line on more than one occasion, and embarrassed him in front of those who looked up to him, his brothers included. Her silence had more to do with the fact that she couldn’t imagine how he could possibly help her.

“Ye dinnae agree?” Domhnall pressed.

Katherine shook her head. “It’s not that I do not agree. It’s more that I don’t know how you are going to help me.”

“Well,” he smiled down at her, “I’d need tae ken what was on it ‘afore I could tell ye that.”

Katherine dropped her gaze and twisted her fingers. He was determined to get that out of her, and knowing she had to repeat her list, her face bloomed red once again. She knew her list by heart, and wanting to get it over and done with, she hurriedly rushed through them all.

“Kiss a stranger, spy on a gentleman bathing, ride astride a horse, get my skin marked with a tattoo, swim without clothes, and read a banned book.”

Her face blazed with mortification while her mind tortured her even further.

I'm pretty sure I'll die from embarrassment.

"Very well," Domhnall replied, though Katherine could still not bring herself to look at him. "I'll help ye complete yer list." He paused for a second, and then said. "And Katherine?"

She looked up to see that his eyes were soft and his expression sincere.

"I swear I'll nae mock ye."

While the mortification did not leave her, she nodded with a half-smile. "All right."

## CHAPTER TEN

The following morning, Katherine was enjoying the warm comfort of her bed. Barely awake, her eyes were just opening, when her door flew open and heavy footsteps across the wooden floor of her bedchamber tore her from her sleepiness with great haste.

Springing to a sitting position, her heart thumping in her chest, she glared at Domhnall as he approached the side of her bed.

"What the devil are you doing?" she cried. "You cannot just walk into my room whenever you feel like it. What if I was naked, or in the process of dressing?"

With a lifted eyebrow, Domhnall replied. "Ye'll be me wife soon enough, Katherine. I'm going tae see yer nakedness at some point."

Aghast at the thought, while at the same time embarrassed at his directness, Katherine's mouth fell open in stunned astonishment as heat rushed to her cheeks.

While she was speechless, Domhnall only smirked down at her.

“Get dressed. We’re going riding.”

Half an hour later, Katherine arrived at the stables where Domhnall was standing waiting for her beside two horses. One beast was far larger than the other and Katherine was still relieved when Domhnall handed her the reins of the smaller one.

As she went to place her foot in the stirrup, Domhnall took her hand and stopped her.

“Nae. Today, yer going tae ride astride.”

With her eyes flying wide, Katherine stared up at him. Domhnall held her gaze, and for a second, he frowned.

“It’s what ye wanted, isnae it?”

“Yes,” she breathed, feeling her heart begin to thump in her chest.

“Ye’ll be fine, lass. In fact, riding with yer leg either side is safer than the way ye usually ride. Come on. Let me help ye.”

Lifting her upon the horse, Katherine awkwardly placed a leg either side of her mare, and settling in the saddle, she grabbed the reins.

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“Good.” He grinned up at her. “Now for the fun part.”

Over the following hour, and slowly at first, Domhnall took his time teaching Katherine how to ride in her newfound position. It was not overly different than side saddle, though she realized, she had to find more rhythm with her mare than she would have done before.

After some time, however, she seemed to get the hang of it, and only then, did he challenge her to push herself.

“Surely, ye wanted tae learn tae ride this way so ye could move at some speed,” he observed.

Katherine nodded. “Yes, I suppose I did. That, and to feel the wind in my face.”

He lifted the corner of his mouth. “Well, ye’ll nae dae that while ye’re trotting along at this speed. Come on. Let’s see what ye can dae.”

Following Domhnall’s lead, Katherine flicked the reins, and the two galloped across the snowy glen side by side. The wind battered against her face, forcing her hood to fall backwards. Pressing her feet into the stirrups, she moved with the rhythm of her horse, and breathlessly exhilarated by the cold and excitement of the ride, she felt truly free for the first time in her life.

Riding astride was not the only thing causing that feeling. As well as the speed, it was the great open plain of the Highlands that stretched out before her, and the fact that there were no others to judge her actions. While her brother would have snarled at



seeing her acting so wildly, the man beside her only encouraged her to shrug off the chains of conformity, allowing her to feel what she had spent years repressing.

In fact, in that moment, it felt like Katherine hardly knew who she was. Like something or someone had taken her over, and yet, at the same time, it felt so good, so natural, so right.

Sometime later, and at a much slower pace, they walked their horses across the glens and through trails surrounded by tall, tightly grouped areas of forest. As Domhnall spoke about his family in his gruff manner, Katherine could not shake the thought that perhaps, she might have made a mistake. Perhaps this man had not been the person who killed her father after all.

It was a strange thought because she knew he had killed men in battle, so it didn't make much sense. And yet, it was a feeling in her gut that she just could not shift. The man who was soon to become her husband had never denied that he had been the cause of many a man's demise. He had denied killing her father, though.

Why would he admit one thing, and deny the other if it were not true?

It wasn't as though he had tried to win her favor. In fact, at the beginning, he had done quite the opposite. The more she listened to him and got to know him, the more Katherine believed that he was a man who spoke the truth, no matter the result. It was for that reason that his denial about being her father's murderer seemed to growingly resonate with her.

But even as she began feeling it, Katherine was not willing to admit it to him. At least, not yet. She needed to be certain, even though she had no idea how she was supposed to get to that point. Reginald had been adamant that Domhnall had been the culprit, but his word was the only proof he had provided. How had he known? Who had told him?

“Ye seem lost in yer thoughts,” Domhnall said, breaking into the silence.

Katherine hadn’t realized it, but evidently, her face had given her musings away. She had to think quickly, and grabbing an excuse from thin air, she blurted it out.

“I was just wondering how you tell your sisters apart,” she lied.

“Enya and Thora?”

“They’re identical,” Katherine replied, relieved that he had believed her.

Domhnall smiled, “Nae tae us, they’re nae.”

He didn’t embellish his statement, and thus, Katherine said, “Well? Are you going to tell me your secret?”

“Enya is more empathic than Thora. Her heart is softer, as is her approach.”

“That hardly helps me when the two of them are approaching from any distance away,” Katherine countered.

“All right. Well, the other way tae tell them apart is far easier. Thora’s hair is darker.”

“It is not,” Katherine argued.

Domhnall nodded. “Och, but it is. Only a little, but it is. O’ course, ‘tis easier tae see that when they’re standing beside each other, but being their brother, I can sense the difference.” He suddenly grinned. “Which is far more than my father could do when they were younger. The two would have the man’s head turned with the tricks they played on him.”

Katherine couldn't help but smile when she glanced over and saw Domhnall's face light up with the memories that were clearly now in his head.

“Ordinarily, they dressed differently because they have their own personalities. But when they had a bout o’ mischievousness, they dressed the same. Thora would meet him in the corridor as he came out o’ his room, and then Enya would meet him at the bottom o’ the stairs wearing exactly the same dress. My father would gawk in astonishment, clearly confused, certain he had seen Enya only seconds ‘afore upstairs.”

Domhnall chuckled, for clearly, that was not the only memory that played in his mind. “They were holy terrors.”

“And now?” Katherine asked, still amused by Domhnall's recollection.

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“Och, now, they’re older. They’ve lost that mischievousness. Besides, me braithers and I saw their tricks too many times tae be caught out by them now.”

“You are all very close,” Katherine observed.

“We are. O’ course, having—” Domhnall stopped suddenly, and turned at her with wide eyes, as though surprised at himself.

“Having what?” Katherine pressed.

Domhnall shook his head. “It daesnae matter,” he said quickly. “But aye. We’re very close. We fought like cats and dogs as bairns, but now we’re older, we’re a formidable force.”

While she was still curious about what he had stopped himself saying, Katherine smiled and felt a warmth at the idea of Domhnall’s family having such a connection. Swiftly after that, however, an emptiness overshadowed her. It was clear he and his siblings had experienced many years of fun and frolicking together. Something she herself had missed out on.

Reginald had been as cold in the past as he was now. Being so many years older than her hadn’t helped. If she were to describe their relationship, close would not be a word she could use. Nor had she had a sister to share anything with. She would have liked that, but unfortunately, it was never meant to be.

The conversation died down between them for a while, and they continued on in silence. The wind was now broken up by the trees, and while she could hardly say she

was warm, Katherine was comfortable and in no rush to return to the castle. The smell in the air and the snow filled her with excitement for the Yuletide festivities to come and she lost herself in thought of spiced wine, cozy fires and sweetmeats.

A little while later, Domhnall said, “Ye have told me o’ yer faither, but what o’ yer maither?”

“My mother died giving birth to my sister,” Katherine said sadly.

“I’m sorry tae hear that. Is yer sister still in England?”

Katherine shook her head. “Unfortunately, she died at the same time as my mother.”

Domhnall did not reply to that, and Katherine could only conclude that he simply did not know what to say. Most people who had learned of her mother’s and sister’s demise reacted in the very same way. It was a lot to take in, but Katherine had been only two years old at the time, and hardly remembered her mother at all. Of course, her father had told her stories about his wonderful and beautiful wife, but the only face she could put to the personality was the few portraits he had kept of her.

“What of your parents?” Katherine asked, wanting to break the uncomfortable silence that had shrouded them.

“Both me maither and faither were murdered by the English on the same afternoon,” Domhnall said far too calmly.

“Oh, me word,” Katherine gasped, glancing over at him and noting the tight muscle of his jaw. “I’m so sorry.”

Stoically, Domhnall shook his head. “Ye were nae their murderer, Katherine.”

“That’s beside the point. What happened?”

Domhnall sighed before continuing. “The English raided our castle ‘afore we kent what was happening, and then... and then, they were both gone.”

Again, a silence fell between them, and it was now Katherine’s turn not to know what she ought to say. No one had really told her anything about the MacLeod’s family history, and though she had realized their parents were no longer living, given the fact she had not seen them anywhere in the castle, she certainly hadn’t been prepared for Domhnall’s answer.

So consumed with her own frustrations about the circumstances she found herself in had she been, she hadn’t even considered Domhnall’s situation, and with this newfound information, she could only imagine he likely felt far more resentment about the wedding than she.

Being forced to marry an English woman after his parents had been murdered by the English? How must that make him feel? I suppose I ken, as I felt the same...

In that moment, she then remembered a few days afore, when she had challenged him to spar. Her heart suddenly sank at the horrible things she had said. Ordinarily, she was not a cruel person. But frustrated by what she was being forced to do seemed to have cracked open a part of her never before shown.

Now, however, she felt utterly dreadful at the things she had said. No wonder he had lost his temper.

“I’m truly sorry,” Katherine said sadly. “And I’m even more sorry for those awful things I said to you the other day. Had I known what had happened...”

“I ken, Katherine,” he replied, his tone full of understanding. “Fer all yer damned

stubbornness, I dinnae tak' ye fer a cruel lass."

"My apology hardly feels enough. I must have hurt you so deeply. I cannot imagine what?—"

Domhnall suddenly raised his hand to silence her. Katherine was about to protest when she noticed his head spinning back behind him, a deep frown lining his brow.

"What is it?" she whispered automatically.

Still turned in the saddle and looking behind them, Domhnall murmured, "I dinnae think we're alone."

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

The list idea had come to him in a moment of genius, but it wasn't just so Domhnall could help Katherine complete it. The tension between them was becoming too much, and as much as he disliked the idea of being forced to marry, he knew if he was to keep his clan safe, he simply had no choice. There was no point bucking against it.

Besides, both Enya, Thora and his brothers were all giving him a hard time. Well, maybe not so much Kai, but that was only because he was too busy with his own lasses. That, and because since their parent's deaths, he had dealt with it by hiding his true feelings and relying on jokes and humor. Domhnall hated that. Sooner or later, it was going to bite Kai in the arse, but for now, Domhnall had other things to worry about.

As mortified as Katherine obviously was when they talked about it, he was pleased that she had agreed to let him help her complete her list, and thinking of the easiest one to address, he had decided to take her horse-riding.

Admittedly, he had thought it would take her far longer to get the hang of it, but she was a quick learner, which had only impressed him more. In less than an hour, they had galloped across the glens, snow floating around them as the horses' hooves kicked it up from the ground.

It hadn't slipped his notice how invigorated she looked, how her perfectly pale skin had glowed, and how the cold air had brought a red blush to her cheeks.

She is a beauty. I cannae deny that.



But just as Katherine began apologizing for her words on the day they had sparred - something that hadn't surprised him, for as feisty as she was, he could not imagine her as cruel - he heard a twig snap behind them.

"I dinnae think we're alone," Domhnall murmured, when Katherine asked why he had stopped so suddenly.

Even as he now looked back through the trees, he couldn't see anything, but with the denseness of the forest, that meant little. It was the perfect place for an ambush. Plenty of cover meant they were an easy target, for it was not difficult to creep up on someone when they could run from tree to tree.

"We should go back," Katherine said breathlessly, now looking behind her too.

"We're nae far from the castle. These lands are full o' my people. Still, I need ye tae ride back now as fast as ye can, dae ye hear me?"

But Katherine shook her head. "No. I won't leave you. I can help."

"Nae, Katherine. I want ye tae leave. If this is an ambush, I cannae have ye hurt, dae ye understand me?"

He now stared at her intently, and as brave as she was trying to be, he could see the fear dancing in her eyes. Of course, he could tell her that he could handle the situation with ease, but she could not know that. She could not know about his power.

"Go," he demanded. "Go now."

Katherine held his gaze for a few more seconds, and then, she tightened her grip on the reigns, turned ahead, and was about to leave.

Suddenly, five men jumped out from the trees, all of them surrounding both of them. As panic rose within him, Domhnall launched himself from his horse, grabbed Katherine, and sped through the trees with unnatural speed. She was going to realize, but he couldn't think about that right now. He had to protect her.

Once he had placed her behind a huge boulder, he took hold of her shoulders and looked intently into her terrified eyes.

“Stay here. Dinnae move, dae ye understand?”

Trembling, she nodded her head eagerly.

“Ye cannae move from here, Katherine. Stay hidden. Stay hidden and dinnae look.”

Again, she speechlessly nodded, but then, she grabbed his hand.

“Please be careful.”

Domhnall nodded, and in another second, he raced back to the men who were currently running through the trees to reach him.

“Argh!” he screamed at the top of his voice, running at them with his sword held high.

If the war cry didn't terrify them, the speed at which he ran towards them obviously did, and the men's faces betrayed doubt in their ability. Still, they ventured forth.

As the gap between them closed, Domhnall swung his sword, knocking two men off their feet. These men were no match for him, and thus, he held no fear in his heart. He was angry though. Strangers on the land was bad enough, but men attacking him and Katherine would not be tolerated.

Two of the others put up a good fight, but in no time, they too, were knocked off their feet, and then, struck so hard they fell unconscious. Only one remained, and even though with terror on his face, he still came at Domhnall. With one single, unnaturally fast strike, he put the brigand on his back, and with his sword held high, Domhnall stood over him, shaking with rage, and ready to slice him in two.

“No!” the man cried. “No. Please.”

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It took all of Domhnall's self-control not to bring his sword down. So angry was he, that he wanted to smite every last one of them. Somehow, he stopped himself. How could he question them and discover why they were there if he killed them?

Kill them. Kill them all!

But as Domhnall lifted his sword higher, a movement at the corner of his eye caught his attention, and turning, he saw Katherine, her mouth agape, gazing at him in terror.

"Stay there," he bellowed.

Katherine did not move at all, but not because of his instruction. It was clear she was in complete shock, and the laird had to wonder how much she had actually seen.

"Get back behind the boulder now," Domhnall barked, his anger still seething and pumping through his veins.

It took her a second to comprehend the demand, but a moment later, Katherine turned and went back to her hidingplace. He watched her go, but not without acknowledging how aggressively he had spoken to her. This wasn't her fault. She didn't deserve that, and yet, his emotions had, once more, gotten the better of him.

"Damn it!"

Standing there feeling guilty was not going to help anyone, however, and thus, with lightning speed, Domhnall hurried to his horse. Faster than any man ought to be able, he returned to the men and, one by one, tied each of them to a tree. When he and

Katherine arrived back at the castle, he would send his men out to fetch them. For now, he needed to get Katherine back to safety.

With the men alive and secure, if not a little beaten up, he made his way to the boulder, where Katherine remained. At his approach, she stood and looked at him.

“Are ye all right?” she gasped. “Did they hurt ye?” Her eyes scanned his body as she spoke.

Domhnall could not help but feel surprised. He expected her to be fearful for her own life. That, or angry at him for the way he had spoken to her. Strangely, however, she seemed more concerned about his welfare.

“I’m fine, Katherine. We need tae go.”

Between the forest and the castle, their journey was silent. Partly because Katherine was clearly in shock, and he was still raging with anger, and partly because they were travelling at too great a speed to speak.

Once through the gates, Domhnall jumped from his horse and began barking orders at his men. In little time, a group of soldiers were on horseback and were leaving the castle gates, heading in the direction of the forest.

Swiftly turning to Katherine, who still remained on her horse, he said, “Ye need tae go inside now, Katherine.”

“No,” she said determinedly.

“What?” Domhnall frowned.

“I’m not leaving you until I know you’re all right.”

“I’m fine,” Domhnall shrugged, reaching up and gently lifting her from her mare.

But once he placed her on the cobblestone beside him, she still didn’t move. At that same moment, Magnus hurried to his side.

“What happened?” his brother demanded.

Domhnall gave him a knowing look. Clearly, his brother had sensed something had happened, even from this distance.

“Katherine and I were attacked,” he said, knowing that Magnus already had that information.

“How many?” Magnus pressed.

Again, his question was for the benefit of Katherine’s presence, but before Domhnall had the chance to answer, Katherine did it for him.

“There were at least five of them, Magnus. They came out of nowhere and were suddenly upon us. Your brother,” she nodded at Domhnall, “took all of them down by himself. He will not tell me if he is injured. Nor will he let me help him.” Her eyes were angry. “Maybe his pride will not be as thick with you.”

Magnus played along and gave her a sympathetic look. “Dinnae worry, Katherine. I will mak’ sure he is checked over. And what o’ ye? Are ye injured?”

Katherine shook her head quickly. “Not at all. Domhnall hid me before they had a chance.”

“Then perhaps ye should go and see Enya at any rate,” Magnus said kindly. “Ye’ve had quite a shock. She’s bound tae have a tonic that might settle ye.”

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Katherine looked from one brother to the other, hesitating to leave. Eventually, however, she nodded before hurriedly heading into the castle.

As they watched her go, Magnus said, “What have ye done tae her?”

Domhnall turned and frowned at him. “I’ve done naething at all.”

A smile danced on the corner of Magnus’s mouth. “Well, ye must have done something, braither. That’s the first time I’ve ever seen her so concerned fer yer welfare. And believe me. She is worried.”

“I dinnae have tae read her mind tae see that,” Domhnall murmured, feeling slightly bewildered.

Magnus nodded. “And ye’re surprised.”

“Can ye blame me, after all the animosity between us?”

“Nae really,” Magnus said.

Maybe she was in shock because of what had happened. Perhaps she’d never been in such a terrifying situation before. Whatever it was, Domhnall was still reeling over her concern. They had got off on the wrong foot, and, until today, little had improved. But then, while they had been riding, he had opened up to her far more than he ordinarily would any other. They had shared their feelings and allowed themselves to be a little vulnerable. Was that the way forward?

“Now,” Magnus said, cutting into his thoughts, “let’s go inside and ye can tell me what happened.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Katherine found one of the MacLeod sisters in the great hall talking animatedly with one of the guards, while at the same time, pointing to something across the room. There had been much activity in the last week, and Katherine had heard that the Yule log would be arriving in the coming days. No doubt, the conversation had something to do with that.

As Katherine approached, Domhnall’s sister, whichever one of them it was, sensed someone behind her, and turning, she smiled broadly at Katherine.

“Katherine,” she said openly.

“Hello...” Katherine hesitated and looked uncertain, for she did not want to make the mistake of addressing the wrong sister with the wrong name.

“Enya,” the lass said, her smile widening even further. “I ken, it is nearly impossible tae tell me and Thora apart.”

Katherine nodded. Perhaps, if she wasn’t so shaken up, she might have looked at Enya’s hair to see if she could really see any difference in the shade, but at that moment, her body trembled a little as a result of what she had witnessed.

Enya frowned then as she took in Katherine’s expression.

“Whatever is the matter?” She reached out a hand, taking hold of Katherine’s shaking arm. “Yer face is ashen and ye look like ye’ve just seen a ghost.”



“We were attacked,” Katherine blurted.

With her mouth falling open, Enya gasped. “When? Where? Are ye all right?” Taking a step back, the woman scanned Katherine’s body with her eyes.

“I’m fine, truly. I am more worried about your brother. He took on five men, and though he tells me he isn’t injured, I struggle to believe it can possibly be true.”

Enya went to speak, and then halted, as though monitoring her own speech. Katherine found that a little strange, but Enya continued so quickly, she had little time to consider it.

“I’m sure Domhnall is just fine. Ye, however, look like ye need something fer the shock. Come. We’ll go and see Brianna.”

“Brianna?” Katherine said.

Enya linked her arm and they began walking side by side out of the great hall. “Aye. She’s the castle healer.”

“But I heard you were a healer.”

Enya smiled. “I am o’ sorts. But everything I ken, I learned from Brianna.”

They headed out of the castle and with Enya taking the lead, they moved across the cobblestones of the courtyard outside. Several minutes later, they rounded the corner of a small cottage, and Enya, smiling at Katherine, came to a stop and knocked on the door.

When the door opened, they were met with a surprised smile. A smile that was somewhat toothless, but that didn’t take away from the warmth in the old woman’s

face. Katherine noted her dark eyes and white wayward hair before the door was opened even wider, bidding them entrance.

“Come in. Come in,” the older woman beckoned.

The cottage was dark inside, illuminated by candles placed on the mantle and tables around the room. But even in the dim light, Katherine could see sprigs of herbs hanging from different places.

“So, ye are the English lady I have heard so much about,” she said.

Enya stepped in then. “Brianna, I would like ye tae meet Lady Katherine de Beaumont.”

“My, my, that is a mouthful,” Brianna said, smiling playfully.

“Katherine will do just fine,” Katherine replied.

Enya then went on to explain the reason they were there, and Brianna, looking a little concerned, said, “I have just the thing.” She turned her gaze to Katherine. “Now. Ye sit yersel’ there.”

She pointed to a chair and then turning on her heels, making her long flowing clothes swirl, she disappeared from the room. When she returned a moment later, Brianna held a brown bottle in her hand. But instead of moving directly to Katherine, she looked at Enya.

“And the laird?”

Enya shrugged and the two shared a look made even more curiosity rise in Katherine.

“Och, ye ken me braither, Brianna. I’m sure he’ll be grand.”

“Hmmm,” Brianna said with a nod.

While Katherine expected the conversation to continue, Brianna turned towards her and handed her the bottle.

“Now, tak’ this sparingly. ‘Tis very strong.”

Enya was nodding. “Aye. I can attest tae that.”

“Here,” Brianna said, producing a spoon. “Tak’ a taste o’ it now. It’ll settle ye. After that, tak’ it once ‘afore bed.

With the sweet tasting tonic administered, Brianna and Enya spoke some more, and as they did so, Katherine felt a warm feeling rising in her body. It started at her toes and moved right up her legs, over her torso, and down her arms, finally making her head feel a little light. So light, in fact, that she struggled to hold it upright.

“Perhaps I gave ye a little too much,” Brianna said, looking at her with concern.

“I’ll tak’ her tae her bedchamber,” Enya said. “Perhaps some rest will dae her some good.”

Brianna nodded, and stepping forward, Enya helped Katherine to her feet. But a second later, Katherine swayed so much, Brianna was forced to rush to her other side and stop her from falling.

“Perhaps we both need tae tak’ her tae her chamber,” Brianna quipped.

Katherine had never been drunk before, but with the room spinning, and her head

feeling like it might float right off her neck, she imagined that it felt very much like what she was experiencing.

“What was in that?” she slurred.

“Never ye mind.” Brianna smiled. “Come on. I dinnae think Enya’s going tae manage ye by herself.”

After much stumbling, as well as huffing and puffing from Brianna and Enya as they tried to keep Katherine on her feet, they eventually managed to get her to her bedchamber. The women began attempting to get her undressed, but soon gave up when Katherine could not hold her arms up for more than a second.

“Just lay her down and put the coverlet over her,” Brianna suggested.

Moments later, Katherine felt her boots being pulled from her feet, and more or less falling into bed, even though Brianna and Enya tried their best to hold her steady, the soft pillow caught her head, feeling like a gentle cloud, beckoning her to sleep. She was already slipping into slumber when she felt the coverlet being pulled over her body, and though the voices were fading, she heard one last thing.

“How much laudanum did ye put in that tonic, Brianna?”

It took some time for Katherine to open her eyes. She had roused from sleep, with some difficulty, but even now, she did not seem to have the strength to lift her eyelids.

Lying there for a little while longer, she took deep breaths, trying to wake herself even further, and eventually, after another moment, she was finally able to open her eyes. It was then that she realized that she had been asleep for hours, for the drapes were closed and several candles lit the room instead of daylight.

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“What did that woman give me?” she murmured, pushing the coverlets off her.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she stretched her arms and sighed a yawn.

You have no right to be tired, Katherine.

And yet, the effect of the tonic that now sat on the bedside table beside her still lingered. Lifting the brown bottle, she squinted to look at it, but there was little point. The label made no sense to her, for the words were written in a language she did not understand.

Only after placing the bottle down, did she notice a book that she was certain, had not been there before. Lifting it, she looked at the title, but she had never heard of it. A piece of paper peeked out of the front cover, which read *Ars Amatoria*, and opening it up, she found a note.

Another item off from yer list.

Now more curious, she flicked open the pages. Scanning the words, her cheeks bloomed bright red, for she could hardly believe what was being described. The passages were certainly not written for the eyes of a lady.

“A banned book,” she gasped.

A smile grew on her lips, both at the knowledge that Domhnall was keeping his word, and the fact that, while she hadn’t quite believed that he could facilitate her finishing her list, it did appear that it might actually occur.

Placing the book back where she had found it, Katherine moved across the room to the bowl and jug of water. She wanted to freshen herself up before she ventured out of her bedchamber. But as she approached the dresser, a tray of food caught her attention.

“How long did I sleep?” she murmured, now wondering if it might be the middle of the night.

As though the sight of the food had caused the reaction, Katherine suddenly felt hungry, and thus, before freshening up, she sat and ate the cold meats, bread, and fruit.

Slipping out of her room sometime later, she made her way down the corridor towards the wide staircase. She had slept so much she no longer felt tired, and whatever time it was, she did not want to remain in her bedchamber.

The book Domhnall had left for her was tucked safely under her arm, out of sight of anyone that might pass. But apart from a few servants, Katherine found her journey to the library rather eventless, for she met with no one who might stop and converse with her.

Closing the solid wooden door behind her, she made her way across the stone floor of the library to the huge fire place, where flames licked at the air and the burning wood crackled and hissed. She had already been in this room once before when exploring the castle. Admittedly, she was surprised, on that occasion, to see so many books in the castle.

Perhaps it was because she had made a presumption before she had even left England. A presumption that had been proven false on several occasions. As she had travelled over the many miles from her beloved home to Scotland, she had thought of the Scots as an uneducated people. Uneducated and unrefined. And yet, her narrow

view had been proven wrong over and over again.

Not only were they educated, they were clever, organized, and extremely loyal. But it wasn't loyalty out of fear. These people protected each other. As many of them as there were in this clan, they treated each other like family. As though each one of them was as important as the next.

Several times, she had witnessed Domhnall speaking kindly to a maid or a servant, whereas Reginald would see that as beneath him. Not once had she witnessed her brother speaking kindly to those who served him. His orders were given to the steward or housekeeper, who then relayed his wishes to the rest of the servants.

In fact, as she settled herself onto a chaise lounge near the fire, Katherine had to admit that much of what she had thought and felt before arriving at Dunvegan Castle was either slowly dissipating or being proven wrong.

An hour later, and totally mesmerized by the book in her hand, Katherine suddenly jumped at the sound of the library door opening. Slamming the book closed, she turned to see Enya and Thora moving across the room towards her.

"There ye are," Enya said with a warm smile. "How are ye feeling?"

Katherine only knew it was Enya because she wore the same clothes as earlier, otherwise, she would have struggled to identify the sisters once more.

"Far more rested than I ever have been in my life," Katherine replied, trying to hide her nervousness.

"Well, 'tis good tae see ye looking well," Thora added. "Enya told me ye had quite a scare."



Katherine smiled. “I think that’s putting it mildly.”

The sisters dropped onto a chaise lounge opposite, while Thora continued. “Aye, sometimes we forget that ye’re nae used tae what happens here.”

Her words sounded a little heavy, and Katherine remembered what Domhnall had said about their parents.

“I’m so sorry for what happened to your mother and father,” Katherine said with genuine sorrow. “I can’t imagine what it must have been like for you, losing them both on the same day.”

Enya and Thora shared a surprised look.

“Domhnall told me,” Katherine said, confirming how she knew.

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Again, there was hesitation between the sisters, and then Thora, forcing a smile on her face, said, “Well, we dinnae think about it too much.” Her eyes fell to the book in Katherine’s hand. “What are ye reading?”

Clearly, she was trying to change the subject, but Katherine suddenly felt panic rush through her body. She couldn’t lie, for what if they took the book from her to look? But nor did she want to admit what the book was.

“Oh, its, er... it’s not really that good.”

Thora raised an eyebrow and smiled knowingly. “Ye are hiding something from us, Katherine. Ye have nae need. We’re all friends here.”

“Sisters actually,” Enya added.

“Aye.” Thora nodded. “That’s right.”

Maybe it was the fact that Katherine had never had sisters, coupled with the fact that they were so likable and open, that caused Katherine’s panic to lessen. Since her arrival, they had been nothing but kind and caring, as different in personalities as they were. She could not lie to their very faces.

“I am ashamed to tell you what I am reading,” Katherine admitted.

Thora’s face lit up, while Enya looked confused.

“Dae tell us,” Thora pressed, clearly the more adventurous of the two.

“Well—”

“Wait,” Enya interrupted. “We need wine.”

Five minutes later, all three of them had a glass of wine in hand as Katherine tried to explain what the book was about, blushing the whole time. The twins became more and more excited, and urged Katherine to read some of it to them.

“I couldn’t,” Katherine gasped.

“O’ course, ye can,” Thora said with a grin. “Come on. We might all learn something.”

The three giggled, and now that her panic had completely gone, Katherine turned to the page she was reading before the twin’s arrival.

Katherine continued to read, feeling parts of her body reacting to the words, while at the same time, feeling heat in her cheeks as she spoke the words aloud. She dared not look up to see the reactions of Enya and Thora, but she sensed they were hanging on her every word, for she could hardly hear them breathing.

Katherine paused and lifted her wine to take a sip. Her mouth was dry, but she was certain it was not just from reading.

“My god, have ye ever heard anything like this?” Enya gasped, taking advantage of the break.

Katherine grinned but shook her head. “Never.”

“Where ever did ye get it?” Thora pressed.

There was no way Katherine was going to tell these women that their brother had given it to her, and instead, thinking quickly, she said, “I found it... in a tavern we stopped at on the way here.”

Thora started to giggle. “Well, we all ken what happened in that room ‘afore ye arrived. I hope someone changed the sheets.”

Katherine gave them an appalled look which sent the twins into hysterical laughter. Katherine couldn’t help but join in, and the three giggled for ages.

Rather than continue with the book, the conversation turned, and they discussed the approaching Yule holidays. The twins were clearly excited, and talking over each other, nearly bombarded Katherine with all the things that would take place; feasts, dancing, hunting, to name a few.

“Maybe we might even find our men,” Thora said whimsically.

“Aye, and maybe if ye find one,” Enya teased, “ye can welcome him in like the book said.”

Again, the women fell into hysterical laughter. Thora nearly fell off her chair, and Katherine choked on her wine.

It was nearly too much, and the three of them laughed and laughed. With red faces, and tears running down their cheeks, they couldn’t stop. Between the giggles, they groaned in pain as their sides, tummies and cheeks hurt.

When they all finally calmed down, Katherine felt tired again, though she also acknowledged, she had never felt so happy, relaxed, and comfortable.

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“Someone else needs to continue reading this, for I don’t think my eyes will let me read any further,” she said, holding the book out to the twins.

Thora took it, while Katherine lay down on the chaise lounge, and snuggling until she was comfortable, she closed her eyes as Thora began where Katherine had left off.

A strange movement woke Katherine, as though she were back in that boat on her way to Scotland. She seemed to be rocking back and forth, and when she finally opened her eyes, she jumped a little as she glared up at a strange sight.

Domhnall looked down at her with a light smile. “It’s all right,” he said softly. “I’ve got ye.”

And he did have her, for with what looked like no effort at all, Laird MacLeod had Katherine wrapped in his arms and was carrying her down a corridor.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

After Domhnall had given orders to his soldiers to go into the forest and collect the men he had tied up, he had led Magnus to his study. With whisky poured, he had relayed to his brother about the attack.

“They came out o’ nowhere. I hadnae seen or heard them ‘afore that.”

“Our own kinsmen?” Magnus pressed.

Domhnall shook his head. “All English. They didnae have the English colors, but I

heard them speak. Or, I should say, cry out.”

Magnus had paced back and forth, assimilating the information. “There has tae be some connection tae those birlinns.”

“I agree,” Domhnall had replied. “In fact, I think it’s obvious their arrival has everything tae dae with those boats. It’s too much o’ a coincidence.”

“What about the reports from the scouts?” Magnus asked.

“They’re still coming in, but so far, none o’ them have found anyone who isnae meant tae be on this island. That being said, it’s a large area o’ land tae cover. It’ll tak’ them weeks if nae months tae cover it all.”

The brothers had sat in silence for a little while, and then Magnus had said. “But this doesnae mak’ any sense. The king has decreed that ye marry tae supposedly build an alliance. Why would he send Katherine, and then attack us?”

Domhnall had shook his head. “I dinnae ken, braither. It mak’s me wonder...”

“What?” Magnus pressed.

Domhnall had looked him directly in the eye. “What if these men havenae been sent by the king?”

Magnus had frowned and shook his head. “Who else would they be sent by?”

His brother shrugged. “Honestly, I dinnae ken. When they’re brought back here, I’ll have a fine time asking them that question.”

Magnus had left some time later, and Domhnall had spent the next hour reading the

reports the scouts had been sending in again. The scouts had documented how many people they had spoken to, as well as the areas they had covered. None of the locals had seen anything suspicious or unusual either, which only made this situation even more frustrating. There were no leads, no clues to follow, and yet, today had proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that there were people on this island that did not belong.

He had been in the middle of another report, when a knock on his door had disturbed him.

“Come.”

He lifted his head and watched Enya enter.

“Hello, braither,” she said, moving across the room towards his desk. “Katherine is sleeping. Brianna gave her a tonic, though perhaps a little too much, and she’s now in her bedchamber resting.”

Domhnall leaned back in his chair and nodded. “Thank ye, Enya. I think she got quite a fright.”

But it was more than that. As well as worrying about her welfare, Domhnall had a niggling feeling in the back of his mind that she had seen more than she should have.

“Something else is troubling ye,” Enya said.

Domhnall smiled. “I thought it was only Magnus that could read my mind.”

Enya smirked. “I dinnae need tae read yer mind when yer feelings are dancing all over yer face. What is it?”

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He sighed heavily, and said, “I had tae act quickly. There were five o’ them. I had tae stop the threat.”

“Ye think she saw ye using yer power,” Enya said.

“She’s seen it ‘afore.” He shrugged. “I’m still nae the best at controlling me emotions.”

For a long moment, Enya didn’t say anything. The fact was, Domhnall didn’t know what he wanted his sister to say. It had been his mistake, and even if she tried to appease or comfort him, it would make no difference.

“How are ye going tae hide it from her if she’s going tae be yer wife?” his sister said. “She’s going tae be family soon, Domhnall, whether ye like it or nae. Maybe, instead o’ hiding it, ye should just tell her.”

Raising his eyebrows, he stared at Enya. “She’s been here less than a week.”

“Aye, but she’s nae going anywhere, is she? Soon enough, she’ll be Lady Katherine MacLeod. She’ll be family.”

Domhnall frowned. “I dinnae quite see it like that.”

“How ye see it has naething tae dae with it. It’s fact. A fact ye have tae start getting used tae, braither.”

Enya departed a little later, leaving Domhnall to consider her words. He hadn’t really



thought about the situation in that light, but even though Enya might be right, he still struggled to just open his arms and welcome Katherine in. For a start, she was English. How, after years of battle, betrayal, murder and pain, was he supposed to just treat her and trust her like she was family? Granted, she had never been involved in the implementation of any of it, but her kinsmen had.

When one had years of ingrained hatred and resentment against another, it was difficult to just sweep that all under the carpet and forget it had ever happened. It was one thing to make things more civil between them, but quite another to treat her like one of their own.

And yet, her safety was all ye could think about earlier.

Surely, that was just a natural reaction.

At supper, the family gathered in the great hall. Their table was elevated and situated at the front of the hall, overlooking all those who joined them. Only, there was still someone missing.

It was as the food was being served that Thora leaned forward and caught Domhnall's eye.

"Should I go and wake her?"

Domhnall shook his head. "Let her rest. She clearly needs it."

But later, when supper was over, he made certain to instruct a maid to make up a tray and take it to Katherine's room. She was bound to be famished when she woke.

As he left the great hall, Magnus fell in step beside him. "How about some chess tae tak' yer mind off everything?"

“Maybe later, Magnus. I have something else I need tae dae.”

“All right,” his brother said as they parted in the corridor.

Katherine’s list had been on his mind earlier that afternoon, and while they had struck one item off, Domhnall wanted to keep the momentum going. Once in his study, he made his way to his desk, opened a drawer, and retrieved a key. Moving across the room, he knelt at a huge chest that had stood in the corner for as long as he could remember.

Five years before, the chest had contained only his father’s possessions, but over the last few years, Domhnall had added some of his own. He was certain what he was looking for was in there, and after much rummaging, and having to empty half the contents on the floor beside him, he finally found it. Replacing everything else, he locked the chest again, and returned to his desk. He wrote a small note, just a single sentence, and then made his way out of the study.

Being quiet and stealthy was never easy, given his size, and yet he made every effort to move across Katherine’s bedchamber floor making as little noise as possible. Upon reaching the bed, however, he wondered whether him making noise would have made any difference, for she truly looked out of it.

What did Brianna give her?

Lifting the brown bottle on the bedside table, he read the contents written in Gaelic. His eyebrows lifted when he noted a few of the ingredients, and while not a medically minded man, he was not ignorant either. He placed the bottle down where he found it, and digging into his pocket, he lifted the book he had found in the chest. Carefully, he placed it beside the bottle, where she would find it when she woke.

Standing by her bedside, Domhnall looked down at her for a long moment. Her lips were slightly parted, her hair splayed on the pillow, like a halo surrounding her head, and her bosom rose and fell in easy rhythm as she slept. She truly was a beautiful woman. A woman, he had discovered, with far more qualities than just her temper and stubbornness.

A few hours later, Domhnall and Magnus sat in his study, drinking whisky, talking about the upcoming festivities, while at the same time, playing chess.

“Yer wedding is on the horizon, dear braither.” Magnus grinned. “Are ye ready fer it?”

“Ready tae be tied down tae an English wench who will mak’ me life a living hell?” Domhnall replied sarcastically.

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Magnus's smile fell, and frowning, he stared at Domhnall across the table. "Ye dinnae mean that."

Domhnall chuckled and shook his head. "O' course I dinnae mean that. I just love watching yer reactions kenning ye can read me thoughts."

Magnus heaved a sigh of relief and shook his head. "Dinnae say such things. If the lass heard ye, she'd be devastated. Besides, from what I gather, things seem tae be better between the two o' ye."

"They are. But it's early days yet."

"Aye. Therefore, giving ye plenty o' time tae get better at talking tae her."

Domhnall smiled. "Actually, our ride out today was enjoyable, before the attack, o' course. She has courage."

"That shouldnae surprise ye after the way she was when she first arrived. Any other lass approached by three men might have been shaking in her boots. Katherine, on the other hand, seemed tae have nay qualms at speaking her mind, despite any consequences."

"Aye," Domhnall chuckled a little, "she did, all right."

"I ken these are nae exactly ideal circumstances, Domhnall, but I'm proud o' ye fer handling them so well."

“I’m nae sure I can agree,” Domhnall said, shifting his gaze to the game. “I dinnae think I’ve handled it well at all.”

“All right, then, ye’ve got better over the last couple o’ days,” Magnus reasoned.

“Maybe.”

A knock on the door cut the conversation short, and after Domhnall had called out for whoever it was to enter, Thora slipped into the room.

“What the devil are ye still doing up at this time o’ night?” Magnus said.

“I could ask ye the same question,” Thora quipped back.

Magnus grinned at her and Thora turned to look at Domhnall. “Katherine has fallen asleep in the library. Should we leave her there until the morrow?”

Standing from his chair, Domhnall shook his head. “Nay. I’ll come and lift her tae bed.” Turning to Magnus, he said, “I’ll be back in a while.”

But Magnus stood and shook his head. “Actually, I could dae with retiring mesel’. Besides,” he smirked knowingly, “ye might find yersel’ held up fer one reason or another.”

Domhnall grinned back and shook his head. “I highly doubt it.”

Upon reaching the library, he found Katherine on the chaise lounge with a blanket draped over her, Enya standing close by, as though keeping watch.

“We didnae want tae wake her,” Enya whispered, echoing the concerns of her sister.

“She cannae stay here,” Domhnall said, scooping her up in his arms. “If that fire goes out, she’ll be freezing in the morning. Ye both head off tae bed. I’ll tak’ care o’ her now.”

It was after Domhnall had climbed the wide staircase that Katherine began to stir, and then, as her eyes opened, she jumped with fright as she stared up at him.

“It’s all right,” he said, gazing down at her. “I’ve got ye.” His eyes lowered to the book that lay against her stomach. “And I brought yer book, so ye have something tae read ‘afore ye sleep.”

Even in the dully lit corridor, he could see her cheeks bloom. It made him smile, for as feisty as she was, Katherine was definitely the most innocent woman he knew. Well, apart from his sisters, but they didn’t really count.

With her cheeks still red, Katherine looked up at him. “What are you doing?”

“I’m playing the fiddle. What does it look like I’m doing?” he quipped back playfully. He continued down the corridor, and then said, “Thora came tae tell me ye were sleeping. Ye’ve had a rough day. I’m carrying ye tae yer bedchamber.”

“I can walk, you know.”

He dropped his gaze once more and piercing her with his eyes, he said, “I ken.”

Once in her bedchamber, he made his way to the bed and lowered her slowly to her feet. The last time he had been so close to her had been the day she had arrived, the day they had travelled to the castle together on horseback. Back then, he had been too frustrated at her antics to notice anything else. Now, however, his senses captured the soft aroma that emanated from her, and Domhnall felt other parts of himself reacting.

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The arousal continued as she stood there, gazing up at him with those wide, vulnerable eyes. He needed to leave, or his brother's earlier quip of him finding himself held up, clearly referring to things happening between himself and Katherine, might well come to fruition. But just as he turned to go, Katherine called out his name.

“Domhnall.”

Turning back to her, he looked at her with his eyebrows raised.

“Can I ask you something?” As Katherine asked the question, she lifted the book she now held in her hand.

Tilting his head, he eyed her for a long moment. She was innocent, he knew that. But she was also devious. She had promised not to humiliate him in front of his men, but nor did he relish the thought of her trying to make a fool out of him without being in their presence.

“What?” he answered gruffly.

She dropped her gaze and looked hesitant, her mortified expression putting his fear to rest. Whatever she wanted to know was causing her embarrassment, and realizing that it was taking great courage for her to continue, he stepped closer and softened his gaze.

“Ye can ask me anything, Katherine. What is it?”

“Well,” she began, hardly able to look at him, “I was reading this earlier, and... and there were some things in it that I did not understand.”

“Go on,” he encouraged.

“Well, the author talks about taking her to heaven, and... and,” Katherine struggled to carry on, now nearly trembling in her embarrassment.

“And?” Domhnall repeated in a softer tone.

“And... I dinnae understand what it means,” Katherine blurted.

Even Domhnall was feeling the embarrassment now, but that’s not the only thing he was feeling as he gazed down at her, watching her bosoms rising and falling rapidly as she tried to catch her breath.

“I’ve... I’ve never... I ken,” she continued, “I am innocent. But...”

By this time, Domhnall had closed the gap between them and stopped not a foot away. His manhood was rock hard as he imagined what he wanted to do to this woman. What her skin would feel like beneath his touch. What she would taste like when he had brought her to the height of ecstasy. Hooking his finger under her chin, he lifted her head, forcing her eyes to meet his.

“Ye will learn soon enough what it means,” he growled, his voice thick with the want of her.

Katherine’s eyes widened at his words, and as her lips parted, a gasp left her mouth. A mouth he wanted to ravish, and lips he desperately wanted to crush. Lowering his head, he leaned down towards her, but a battle began in his soul, for as his emotions built within him, he also sensed a fear.



What if I cannae control meself with this woman?

The thought caught him cold, and as though she had slapped him, he took a step back. His groin ached, his manhood rock hard, but somehow, his mind battled even harder, and swiftly, Domhnall spun on his heels and hurriedly left the room.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It had been a week since Katherine's arrival in the castle, though for some strange reason, it felt far longer. It felt as though she knew so much about the people there, especially Thora and Enya, who had clearly already adopted her as a sister.

The previous night had proved that, for the three had bonded as though they had known each other for years when they were in the library. In fact, Katherine could not recall one time before that occasion where she had laughed so much it had physically hurt.

She hadn't realized she had fallen asleep, until she found herself in Domhnall's arms. Those huge thick arms that betrayed his strength without him having to do anything to show her.

Something had come over her the night before, some form of courage, for she could not have imagined having such an embarrassing conversation with any other. It was strange in a way, for he was so gruff, and at times abrupt with her, and yet, maybe it was that which told her he was the right person to ask. He would tell her the truth.

That, and the fact that he's going to be your husband soon.

Her curiosity had got the better of her, but when they were in the bedchamber, something else had taken her over. Something she could never before have imagined happening. He had approached her so slowly, like a tiger stalking its prey. But rather

than feeling like she was going to be devoured, Katherine had wanted it. She had wanted him to kiss her, and she was certain, as he had lowered his head, that he was about to. But then, something that looked like terror washed over him, and he had practically fled from the room.

Had that happened before last night, she might have run away in dread herself. It had surprised her, when he had closed the door quietly behind him, that she had actually felt disappointed.

At breakfast that morning, Domhnall acted like nothing had happened between them, and with her manchet bread and honey placed on her plate as usual, the conversation at the table appeared entirely normal. Katherine could not say that she felt entirely normal, however, and rather than involving herself in the topic, she found it better for her to hold her tongue and pretend to listen instead.

As always, everyone dispersed afterwards. Thora and Enya walked out into the corridor with her, and turning to her, Thora said, “I am busy this morning preparing for the Yule celebrations, but how about we tak’ an afternoon walk together.”

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“That sounds like a plan,” Enya agreed. “I too, need tae go and help Brianna with some potions she’s experimenting with.”

“That woman will experiment us all intae the grave,” Thora quipped with a grin.

“I admit,” Katherine added, “whatever she put into the potion really knocked me out. I don’t think I’ve slept so long in my entire life. But yes, I would love to spend the afternoon with the two of you.”

“Good,” Enya said. “I’ll come and find ye when we’re finished.”

The men had already left, and feeling once more, a little at a loss for something to do, Katherine headed back to the library. She had finished that small book Domhnall had given her. It was certainly forbidden reading, so now she could cross yet another item off her list.

As she scoured the bookshelves of the library a half hour later, the same messenger boy as the last time stepped into the room.

“Me lady, I have another missive fer ye.”

“Oh, thank you,” Katherine replied, taking the folded paper from his hands.

The boy left as quickly as he had arrived, and though Katherine had left the door ajar while she was browsing, she now closed it to give herself some privacy.

Dear Katherine,

I am writing to you to try and discover what news you have found out to help our cause. While I appreciate that things are not easy for you there, I must impress the urgency of our situation.

Know that there are already scouts searching the island, and the sooner we can find a way to take down Laird MacLeod and his clan, the better. We are well hidden, but I do not know for how long we will remain so.

I have concluded that you cannot get word out to me, and thus, I deduce that a meeting might be more suitable. There is a well just off the road on the other side of the village. Meet me there tomorrow at dusk.

Make certain you are not followed.

R.

Katherine held the letter to her bosom and heaved a sigh. The attack the day before had been terrifying, and at the time, she had been too frightened to think. Since then, however, it had occurred to her that those men might have been sent by her brother. To what end, she was not certain.

Surely, killing the laird outright would not bring down the clan. He had two brothers who could take his place at his demise, and thus, the clan would continue. But then, the attack seemed too coincidental to be anybody else.

She hadn't made any more attempts to discover anything to prove that Domhnall had killed her father. A warrior he had proven himself to be, and she had no evidence to the contrary, but particularly after their ride yesterday, she now doubted the fact more than ever.

But how was she supposed to tell that to Reginald? He was a man of logic and

preciseness. A gut feeling was hardly going to convince him. More than that, and despite his sometimes, barbaric demeanor, everyone in the castle loved and respected Domhnall.

That hardly proves his innocence. After what he's told you, his people would hardly care if he killed an English noble.

Of course, they wouldn't. After all, it was the English who had devastated the clan by slaughtering Laird and Lady MacLeod, Domhnall's parents. Still, she couldn't shift this feeling that Domhnall was not her father's killer.

Tucking the missive away, Katherine felt she needed some fresh air, and leaving the library, she wandered out of the castle and into the gardens. She went a particular way, for she knew where the men sparred. She had watched them several times now, and found that observing them fight had become a favorite pastime.

She did miss her sparring training. It certainly wasn't something an English lady ordinarily did, but her father had noted her feisty spirit, even as a child, and instead of curbing it, he had encouraged it. Maybe, had her mother been alive to advise him against it, Katherine might never have had that opportunity. Instead, she had relished training, first with her father, and afterwards with a tutor who was an expert swordsman.

Having promised Domhnall she would never humiliate him again, she had been forced to stand by and observe, but upon reaching the area where the men usually gathered, she was surprised to find Magnus there training alone.

Not one to shy away, Katherine moved closer, watching him strike the air with his great sword. His steps were measured, and she could not help but admire his form. He certainly was advanced in his approach.

If only I could ask to spar with him. But then, Katherine shook her head. I cannot. I might offend him, like I offended his brother.

In that moment, Magnus seemed to smile, and lowering his sword, he turned toward her.

“I couldnae help but notice, the last time ye took a sword from me hand, that ye were rather adept with it. Would ye like tae join me?”

Katherine stepped eagerly forward, nodding as she went.

“I would love to.”

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“The short sword seems tae be yer weapon o’ choice,” Magnus said, throwing his broad sword down, and lifting two short swords from the snow at his feet.

But as Katherine took it from his grasp, she hesitated.

What if Domhnall sees me, and is angry that I am sparring with his brother?

Magnus smiled and swung the sword around a little.

“Dae ye ken, Katherine, that in the Highlands, a man isnae offended that a lass can fight. It is strange, but nae so uncommon. In fact, we often see it as a strength. Me braither will only see yer sparring as a good thing.”

Katherine frowned, for it was as though the man was reading her mind. Perhaps her face had betrayed her worry.

“Now,” he said, “let’s see what ye can dae.”

They started off slowly, Magnus displaying a more tentative approach for Katherine’s benefit. The swords clanged together, the sound echoing off the castle walls. Magnus advanced, pushing her back, but after a little time watching his movements, Katherine had started to preempt them.

“Ye were taught well, Katherine. I must say, I have never seen a lass who masters another’s moves as quickly as ye,” Magnus panted.

“My father taught me,” Katherine replied breathlessly. “He was a noble man, but also

a great fighter.”

Even though his skill could not save him in the end.

“I am sorry he was killed, Katherine,” Magnus said, advancing once more. “I am also sorry ye think it was Domhnall who killed him.”

Hearing those words, Katherine hesitated in her next strike, and seeing her falter, Magnus brought his sword to his side.

“I’m... I’m not really sure I believe that any more,” she said.

Maybe he wasn’t the person she ought to be saying that to, but it seemed to just leak out of her without her thinking.

Magnus took a few steps toward her. Looking down at her, he tilted his head to the side. “Why? What’s changed?”

She matched his gaze and shrugged. “I can’t really say. I suppose it’s just...” But she trailed off.

“Just what?” Magnus pressed.

“You will think me foolish,” she replied.

But Magnus shook his head. “I doubt that. I’m the smart one o’ the family,” he quipped with a smile.

His remark made Katherine giggle a little, and then she said, “It’s just a feeling. I know, it sounds ridiculous, but?—”



“Nae at all. Our gut feeling is there fer a reason. Me skin has been saved on several occasions by listening tae me gut.”

“Really?” Katherine said, feeling suddenly validated that someone else understood.

“Och, aye. God gave us brains, but he gave us senses too. I dinnae think he would give us them if we werenae supposed tae use them.”

“Give us what?” a gruff voice came from behind Katherine.

She spun around to see Domhnall approaching with long strides, and upon reaching them, he looked from one to the other. “Give us what?” he repeated, sounding a little frustrated.

While Katherine was now worried at his tone, Magnus was beaming from ear to ear.

“What’s the matter, Domhnall? Are ye jealous that I am training with yer future wife?”

“I’m worried fer her safety,” Domhnall replied gruffly. “I ken how bad ye are with that thing.” He nodded abruptly at the sword Magnus still held.

“Actually, he’s rather good,” Katherine jumped in to defend Magnus.

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Domhnall gave her a piercing look. “Och, is he now?”

“It appears me braither is a little possessive o’ his wife-tae-be,” Magnus chuckled.

The brother’s shared a look that confused Katherine, and she could only stand there, looking from one to the other as a light-hearted argument began.

“If possessive means I’m trying tae keep me betrothed alive until I can marry her, then, aye, maybe I am,” Domhnall growled.

Magnus was still grinning when he said, “I think ye’ll find yer betrothed is quite adept at looking after hersel’. In fact, maybe when we next go intae battle, I’ll tak’ her instead o’ ye.”

Katherine couldn’t help but start laughing at the brothers, for as grown as they both were, they got on like a couple of competitive boys. When they realized they had become her entertainment, Domhnall brought the banter to an end.

Turning toward Katherine, he said, “Shall we go inside fer some of the spiced wine Cook has specially prepared fer the holiday season?”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Later that day, Domhnall bathed in his copper bathtub. Ordinarily, he would use the bathing room for such an endeavor, but there was a reason he had chosen his bedchamber on this occasion.

The water was still warm when he heard the adjacent door to Katherine's bedchamber creaking open, but he concentrated on raking the cloth over his skin, pretending he was unaware of her presence. They had now knocked two items off the list she kept in her little notebook. The day of their wedding was creeping ever closer, and there were still five more to go. He had promised she would fulfill them all, and he had every intention of keeping that promise.

Today, he was going to give her the opportunity to spy on a gentleman bathing.

Once they had returned from outside, Katherine had told him she had arranged to take a walk with Thora and Enya later on in the afternoon. This had given him time to make arrangements for his bath.

After it was filled, he sent a note with a servant, telling her that he wanted to see her in her bedchamber. Of course, he wasn't going to be there to meet her. He needed to be in the bath when she entered, and thus, he had left another note on her bedside table, telling her to use the adjoining door to come and speak to him in his own room.

Clearly, she had received both messages, for she now stood in his bedchamber, somewhere behind him. Even the idea of her being in the same room as him under these circumstances had him aroused. In fact, he hadn't stopped thinking about her since he had hurriedly left her bedchamber the previous night. As much as he wanted to stay, his rising emotions had scared him, but that had not prevented him from fantasizing about her when he had climbed into his own bed.

Like then, he could feel himself harden even more under the water because she was watching him. But he didn't want her just to watch him bathe. He wanted to tease her, he wanted to know how far she would go. Things had been better between them, but he still could not know for sure if her resentment for him and his clan was as strong as it had been at the beginning. If that was the case, he deduced she would leave pretty quickly. If not...

Taking long slow movements, he dragged the cloth over his muscular chest, reaching up and over to his shoulders. Being a man, this action would highlight the bulging muscles on his arms, and from experience, he knew the lasses liked that kind of thing. Domhnall was wondering if Katherine was even still in the room, when, to his surprise, he caught her from the corner of his eye.

Not satisfied with being so far away, she had boldly moved closer so she was now in full view. Without moving his head, so as not to scare her away, he shifted his eyes to gaze at her. While he watched her, she seemed to be completely mesmerized by his body.

Domhnall could not recall a time before now, where he had been this aroused, and feeling the heavy ache between his legs, he adjusted his position in the bath, the movement revealing his thick manhood. Beside him, he heard Katherine gasp, and imagined he had inadvertently shown himself to her. He wished for much more in that moment, and seeing her flushing face, he realized that she too, was hot, bothered and feeling more than a little frustrated as the sexual tension built between them.

If he didn't think it would terrify the living daylights out of her, he'd step out of the bath in that very moment and take her to his bed. But he had to be careful. She wasn't like other lasses he had been with. He had already deduced that, but her question last night had confirmed it fully. Whether it was going to drive him crazy or not, he would have to take things slowly with her.

With that in mind, a thought came to him, and, wondering how far he could push the boundaries between them, he took his manhood in his hand. With his eyes on hers, he slowly gripped his throbbing shaft and began moving his hand up and down. It was both torturous and pleasurable in equal measures, but as he lay there and pleased himself, he was more than surprised that Katherine, so mesmerized by what he was doing, didn't move an inch.

His hand moved faster and faster, and as her mouth fell open at his panting breath, Domhnall wondered how long he could keep this going. Minutes passed, and the ache was becoming unbearable. He would much prefer to be inside her, feeling this same sensation as their bodies entwined around each other.

And then, he could stand it no longer. He wanted her. He wanted her so very badly. Surely, as she looked at him with such lust, she wanted him too. Just as he was about to stand and make a move towards her, a knock on the door cut through the tension.

As though a spell had been broken, Katherine seemed to come to, and with a final wide-eyed glance, she turned on her heels and hurried back to her own bedchamber.

An hour later, Domhnall was once more dressed and standing at the window of his study. He gazed out onto the gardens with his mind wandering.

“Did ye hear what I said?” Magnus remarked.

“What?” Domhnall spun to look at him.

His brother moved from his seat by the fire and came to join Domhnall at the window. Gazing out, he said, “Och. Well, that explains a lot.”

Domhnall turned away and moved to his desk. Once sat behind it, he pretended to look through the documents that sat neatly in a pile to his left.

“I dinnae ken what ye’re talking about,” he lied.

“Right,” Magnus said, his tone heavy with sarcasm. “So, yer werenae just standing here mesmerized by the sight in the garden then?”

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Of course, he was. He had stood there and watched Katherine, Enya, and Thora enjoying the walk she had mentioned earlier. He just didn't want Magnus to know how he was beginning to feel about her.

"Ye ken ye cannae hide anything from me, so why are ye trying?" Magnus said, walking to his desk and looking down at him. "This morning when I was sparring with Katherine, yer mind was a muddled mess o' jealousy and possession."

"I've told ye 'afore, Magnus. Stay out o' me head."

"That's hard tae dae when yer thoughts are so loud," his brother quipped back.

Domhnall jerked his head and stared at his brother. "Ye ought tae be pleased. Are ye nae the one who told me that I had tae talk tae her and make this situation easier?"

"Aye, I am," Magnus said, moving back to his chair by the fire. "I'm just wondering what's changed. I mean, a few days ago, ye could hardly look at her. Now, ye cannae keep yer eyes off her."

Domhnall sighed heavily. "Maybe I just took yer advice, and realized there was naething I could dae about it. Maybe I'm just trying tae mak' the best o' all o' this."

"And if I was any other man in the castle, I'd believe ye. But I'm yer brother, Domhnall. I ken ye nearly as well as ye ken yersel'. What's changed?"

Domhnall sat there for a long moment thinking about that answer. In the end, he could only tell Magnus the truth.

“Honestly,” he said, shaking his head, “I dinnae ken.”

The two brothers looked at each other for a long moment, until eventually, Magnus sighed and nodded his head. “I just dinnae want tae see ye get hurt, braither.”

“How am I going tae get hurt? I have tae marry her whether I want tae or nae.”

“I ken that. But just because ye’re being forced tae marry, doesnae mean ye have tae get yer heart broken,” Magnus said quietly.

Domhnall was now more confused than ever.

“Have ye heard her thoughts? Is that it? Ye have heard something that I ought tae be worried about?”

His brother shook his head. “Nay. I havenae. In fact, when she was out this morning, she was worried about ye being angry that she was sparring with me.”

“Then where is all this coming from?” Domhnall gestured animatedly.

“I want tae give her the benefit o’ the doubt, Domhnall, but ye have tae admit, we hardly ken anything about this lass. Besides, dinnae ye think it’s a little coincidental that those men attacked ye yesterday, just a few days after her arrival?”

Domhnall now stood and moved from behind his desk. “Ye cannae honestly believe Katherine had anything tae dae with that attack. She was terrified, Magnus.”

Magnus shook his head. “I’m nae saying she did. I suppose I’m just playing devil’s advocate. I’m trying tae keep yer head straight.”

“If anything, ye’re only confusing me more,” Domhnall retorted. “First ye tell me tae

spend time with this woman, now ye're warning me tae stay away."

"I said naething about staying away. I only want ye tae watch yer back."

At supper that evening, Domhnall watched Katherine enter the great hall with Enya and Thora. The three were talking animatedly as they approached the table, and were still talking when they took their seats. But as Thora and Enya moved further down the table, Katherine caught Domhnall's eye, and her cheeks bloomed. They hadn't seen each other since the episode in his bedchamber, and now, having to face him was evidently making Katherine a little uncomfortable.

"Did ye enjoy yer walk?" Domhnall asked.

"I did, thank you," she replied, seemingly relieved that he was talking of something less embarrassing.

But Domhnall wasn't going to let her off that easily, and leaning closer to her ear, he said, "I suppose ye needed a little fresh air. It's nae every day ye get tae spy on a gentlemen bathing."

Again, her face flushed, but she surprised him with her reply. "Indeed, especially when I got far more than I bargained for. Now I know what a gentleman does while he bathes, and I will be certain to make sure the water is changed before I decide to bathe myself."

Domhnall couldn't help himself. He chuckled so deeply and loud that he caught the attention of all those sat on the table with him. While Thora and Enya grinned at their brother's amusement, though they could not know the subject he and Katherine were discussing, Magnus only smiled. His smile did not reach his eyes, though.

After Magnus had left his study later that afternoon, Domhnall had been intrigued by



his brother's strange change of mind. If he had heard any untoward thoughts from Katherine, he would have told Domhnall the truth, but he hadn't. So, what was the real reason for his change of heart?

Supper came and went uneventfully, and later, the women headed off together. Domhnall was about to make his way to his study, when Magnus stopped him in the corridor.

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“I’m sorry about earlier. I was out o’ line.”

“Ye still havenae told me yer reasons fer yer doubts, Magnus. If ye ken something I dinnae, please tell me.”

Magnus shook his head and sighed. “I dinnae. And after thinking about it, I’ve come tae realize that I shouldnae have said anything. It’s just the fact that this family has suffered enough. This clan has suffered enough. With the discovery o’ the birlinns, and then the attack o’ those men, I think I jumped tae conclusions I should never have made.”

Domhnall looked at his brother for a long moment. “We both have regrets, Magnus. I ken ye carry the same guilt we all suffer. None o’ us really talk about it, but it’s there, bubbling just beneath the surface.”

Magnus nodded. “I ken. Kai and the twins feel it too. I just wish I could have done more.”

“We all dae. I think about the day Maither and Faither died nearly every day. I’ve replayed it in me mind a hundred times. Perhaps if I didnae have these damned powers, the guilt would be less. But I dae. And what use were they when I really needed them? When me parents really needed them?”

“I ken. I also ken we all feel the same. All o’ us with special gifts, and nay one o’ us could save them.”

Domhnall placed his hand on his younger brother’s shoulder. “It is a cross we must

bear. I ken all the regrets in the world willnae bring our parents back, and yet, I still have them.”

—

My dear reader,

I apologize for the interruption...

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Just click on the link!

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The day had started as usual, with Katherine arriving at the dining room and eating her manchet bread and honey with the rest of the MacLeod family. But that day was not the same as all the others. That day, she had to find a way to slip out of the castle

without anyone noticing her, and she knew it was not going to be easy.

It was the main reason Reginald had been adamant that she didn't bring her lady's maid with her to Scotland. Sitting there at breakfast, pretending to listen to the conversation that bounced back and forth between the siblings, her mind wandered back to a conversation between her and Reginald about that very topic.

"She will be a liability," he had said, pacing back and forth in his study a week before they had left. "I will need you to be able to move about freely. What you have to do will be dangerous enough, Katherine, for I am determined this man meets the fate he deserves."

Two days before, he had told her that the man she was being forced to marry was the man who had killed their father. The news had shocked her so much, she had spent those two days locked in her bedchamber, not able to speak a word to anyone.

The following day, however, Reginald had wasted no time in telling her that he had a plan. A plan to destroy the MacLeod family. A plan that would avenge their father's death.

"What do you mean by that?" Katherine had asked. "What will I have to do?"

"I cannot come to Dunvegan Castle with you, sister. I need to be on the outside, readying my men to attack when the time is right. Your job will be to find out anything that I can use against him. You will need to use your cunning, for the man is not a fool."

"I do not understand. If you're going to kill him, why do you need me to garner evidence against him?"

Reginald had turned and pierced her with his cold blue eyes. "Because when the king

discovers what I've done, I will need to give him some proof that I acted righteously, or I may find myself hanging in the gallows."

And thus, when they had departed for Scotland, they had left Mary, her lady's maid, behind. Only now, did Katherine fully understand her brother's reasoning for it. It was going to be difficult enough for her to sneak out of the castle. If Mary had been with her, it would have been nearly impossible.

The castle was now decorated in ivy and ribbons, giving the cold stone interior a far more festive feel. The Yule log had also been chosen, and in a few days, it would be brought into the great hall. Gazing about her as she walked through the corridors and made her way to her bedchamber in the afternoon, only reminded Katherine that her wedding day was fast approaching, and yet, she had still not found any evidence that might vindicate her brother when the time came.

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But she had an even bigger problem, for deep down, she no longer believed that Domhnall had killed her father. More than that, her beliefs about the man he was were slowly crumbling, right alongside the walls she had built to protect herself before she arrived there.

Yesterday, as she had watched him bathe, an overwhelming feeling of lust had overcome her. When she had run from the room, she could only feel disgust and shame at herself. But it wasn't only because feelings she had never before experienced had been awakened. She felt guilty that she was going to be a part of whatever it was Reginald planned.

It was those conflicting feelings that had brought her to a decision. When she met with Reginald that afternoon, she was going to voice her belief that he was not their father's killer. Whether her brother would believe her or not was the thing that worried her.

Katherine had not long been in her bedchamber when the adjoining door opened, and Domhnall walked in. She was now used to her privacy being trampled over, but upon seeing him, that was not her first thought.

“Why the devil are you dressed in such a way?” she said, eyeing his attire.

Instead of his fine linen and his thick plaid, things that made him stand out as the laird, Domhnall now stood before her dressed like some commoner.

Taking another step towards her, he said, “From time tae time, I go intae the village dressed like this. Nae one gives me a second glance, and I suppose, one might call it a

disguise.”

“But why?” Katherine pressed.

“Because I dinnae want tae be seen,” he replied. “I go by the name of Fin and spend time in the midst o’ me people. I want tae ken what they think o’ me. What I can dae tae be a better laird fer them.”

Immediately, his words made Katherine think of the letters she had discovered in his study. The documents had told her already what a great laird he was, and how he helped his clansmen when they were in need. Now, she was even more impressed. She certainly couldn’t imagine the man who ruled England dressing as a commoner and wandering around the towns trying to discover how better he could serve his people.

“I will admit it, that is more than noble of you,” she replied.

Domhnall lifted an eyebrow. “Praise from me betrothed. Well, that is a first.” He was smirking at her, and as usual, mocking her. This time, however, Katherine heard the softness in his tone.

“I wanted tae come and let ye ken that I am leaving. I may be away until late tonight, so, if ye need anything, Magnus will tak’ care o’ ye.”

“I’m sure I will be fine,” Katherine replied.

At the same time as her words, she felt a wave of relief wash over her too. While she would still need to be careful when she left the castle, sneaking out would be far easier without worrying about Domhnall wandering about and catching her in the act. Over the last few days, he had shown up in the strangest of places, and with little or no announcement.

She expected him to turn and leave now he had given her the information he had obviously come to tell her, but instead, Domhnall lingered. He continued looking at her, and after a moment, Katherine wondered if she was supposed to say something more.

“We are getting through yer list rightly,” he said.

She felt heat rush to her cheeks, for her gut told her he was going to bring up what had happened the day before.

Please, God, no.

But his smile told her all her prayers were a waste of time.

“Did ye enjoy the view in me chamber yesterday afternoon?”

Swallowing down her fear, she did her best to pretend his question did not bother her.

“I can say with complete certainty, that it’s a view I had never seen before.”

“I’ll bet,” he chuckled. “It’s a pity ye ran off so quickly. Perhaps ye would have got tae see a lot more had ye stayed.”

Her cheeks now burned like they were on fire, and feeling the embarrassment, she could no longer hold his gaze. But Domhnall stepped forward, and hooking his finger under her chin, he lifted her face up to his.

“There are now only a few things left on yer naughty list.”

“Yes,” she breathed, feeling her heart thump at his proximity. “I thank you for your efforts in helping me get through it.”



He shook his head. “There’s nay need tae thank me, Katherine,” he said, his voice thick and deep.

She was now mesmerized as she gazed up at him. Her embarrassment seemed to slip away as she instead, found herself caught in the moment. Her heart thumping, her stomach clenching, and her desire for him growing. Yesterday, she had felt all of those things and more. Now, her want of him had returned.

With his eyes full of desire, he slowly lowered his head to her. She did not flinch or move away. After all her bitterness toward him in the last week, she now ached for his touch.

When his lips met hers, she fell into his embrace, his arms snaking around her, pulling her into his solid frame even more. Having never kissed a man before, Katherine was unsure what to do, but somehow, nature took over, and she simply did what felt natural.

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At first, his kiss was soft and gentle. His lips pressing against hers, waking parts of her she was not even aware she possessed. But she felt the want in him grow, and soon, his tongue slipped into her mouth, roving over her teeth, and twisting against her tongue. She could feel an ache at the apex of her thighs, and panting against his mouth, a desperate need for more overtook her.

Her whole body felt as though it were singing, and in that moment, she wanted more. So much more. She wanted to feel his hands on her body, she wanted to be even closer to him. She wanted?—

“Domhnall!”

The distant sound of one of the twins calling his name shocked her out of her reverie, and breathlessly, they parted abruptly. When Katherine gazed into Domhnall’s eyes, the sight made her heart flutter, for they burned with desire for her.

“I must go,” he growled. “Thora is getting mad that I’m keeping her waiting.”

Even the sound of his thick voice made her body react, and while she did not express it explicitly, she did not want him to leave.

“Domhnall?” Thora yelled again. “Where are ye? The horses are ready.”

Taking a step away, Domhnall said, “And now, ye have kissed a stranger.”

“But you’re not a stranger,” Katherine replied with a frown.

He smiled down at her. “I am today, for I am Fin, nae Domhnall.”

With that, he turned on his heels and with long strides, made his way to the door. He opened it, turned back, cast a smile at her, and then closed it again.

Katherine could only stand there, the remaining feelings of their kiss still lingering as they danced around her soul. A week ago, she could never have imagined being in such a state, and yet, while Domhnall was certainly rough around the edges, he had also displayed loyalty and strength in his protection of her.

More than that, he had shown a deep consideration for her. What other man would have gone to such effort to help her complete a list of sins? They were going to have to marry whether they liked it or not, but he had not just tolerated her presence. He had gone above and beyond. Given his aversion for the English, surely that highlighted the depth of his character even more.

Katherine had wanted to hate him. Really, she had. But things hadn't quite turned out that way.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

An hour after Domhnall had left, Katherine slipped through the corridors of the castle and made her way into the courtyard. The previous day, she had made discreet inquiries from the servants as to whether anyone might be travelling into the village that afternoon. Trusting that her question was an innocent one, the servant girl she had spoken to had told her that a carriage travelled to the village every day to pick up any supplies they need.

It had been just what Katherine wanted to hear, and now, with the hood of her cloak up, she lingered around the stables, watching the stable hands readying the horses and attaching them to more of a cart than a carriage. She eyed the vehicle carefully,

noticing the layers of sackcloth lying on the base of it.

It is hardly ideal, but it will have to do.

Several moments later, a man climbed up on front, and with a light flick of the reins, the horses slowly walked forward. Katherine scurried past low buildings, following the cart as she went. Around her, people were busy with their duties, and thus, paid her little attention, much to her relief.

As the cart continued its approach to the gate, she made a dash for it. If she left it too late, the guards at the gate would see her. With her heart thumping in her chest, she dropped her head, clambered onto the cart, and hurriedly pulled the sackcloth over her body.

She then held her breath.

The cart stopped at the gate as the guards spoke to the man for a moment, and then, to her relief, the cart trundled on. When she was certain they were through the worst of it, she let out a heavy breath, though her heart was still thumping in her breast.

The journey took some time, with her rocking back and forth and being entertained by the man whistling a tune. As they travelled, she thought about what she would say to Reginald when she saw him. Clearly, he was still adamant for his plan to go ahead. But things had transformed, and she had no idea how she was supposed to change her brother's mind. Telling him that she was falling for the laird just wasn't going to do it. Nor did she have any evidence that Domhnall had not been their father's murderer. So, then, what was she supposed to say?

Her mind was still trying to work that out when the cart came to a stop. She waited for a few moments, before tentatively lifting her head. Peeking through the sackcloth, she noticed a row of low houses. Looking further up the road, she caught sight of the

village folk. There were women laughing and talking, children playing, and men in animated conversations. At the sight of them, another thought quickly passed through her mind.

I need to be on the lookout for “Fin”. He’s the last person I want to run into.

Slipping from beneath the sackcloth, she scurried off the cart, and, trying to look as normal as possible, continued on down the cobbled street at a normal walking pace. While it had been terrifying, she couldn’t help feeling a little proud of herself for managing to complete such a dangerous endeavor. Since being in Scotland, her life had certainly become a lot more exciting.

A young lass gave her directions to the well, and having arrived at it, Katherine could only wait. Her brother would be there soon, but rather than feel relieved, she realized that she actually felt nervous.

Behind her, the sound of rustling branches took her off guard, and stepping back, she watched her brother and three other men walk out from the trees.

“Katherine,” Reginald said. “It is good to see you.”

His tone and expression were as cold and distant as ever, which came as no surprise. Her brother would never change.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:27 am*

“Hello, Reginald,” Katherine replied, eyeing the men standing alert and protectively behind him.

“Have you had any success in your search?” he asked, forgoing any pleasantries and getting straight to the point.

Katherine shook her head. “I have not. There is nothing in his study, nor have I garnered anything derogatory from those who reside in the castle. In fact,” she hesitated, feeling the nerves rise within her, “there are only good reports from those that know him.”

Clearly, Reginald sensed her wavering, for his next words were a little harsher. “You must maintain your resistance to his charms, sister. These Scots are cunning, and will try anything to sway you from your path. Remember, you have a duty to your family, to your country.”

Katherine had known it was never going to be easy, but she was a little surprised that her brother discounted her words as though she had not spoken. Besides that, he also looked unusually agitated and jumpy.

“I am confused why you wanted to meet after only one week of me being here, Reginald. Surely, you understand it is going to take more time than that to garner the evidence that you need.”

He snarled, while at the same time, looking about him. “I do not like the idea of you having to be in that castle any longer than necessary.”

But his words didn't feel like they rang true. She couldn't say how she knew that, it was just a feeling in her gut. It seemed that her intuition had been working overtime these last few days, and no less now than before. Something seemed to be amiss, but she could not imagine what it was.

"I will return to the castle and continue to look," she replied.

There was no point in telling Reginald that she no longer believed the laird had killed their father. It was clear her brother was not willing to hear it.

"Yes. The sooner the better. I don't want Laird MacLeod to see you out here."

"How could he?" she asked, her suspicions growing at every second.

"Because he is in the village, sister."

Katherine's eyes flew wide. "How could you possibly know about?"

A heart-stopping cry of pain suddenly carried across the air, and gasping in fright, Katherine turned to see where it had come from. At first, she could see nothing, but the cries continued, and desperate to help someone in trouble, she ran from the well and back onto the road.

Gasping in terror, she quickly came upon a sight some way down the road that scared her to death, for there was Domhnall being attacked by a large group of men. Men she recognized. Reginald's men.

"No," she screamed, continuing to run toward him.

Reginald was close on her heels, yelling at her.

“Stay back, Katherine. Stay back or you will get hurt.”

But she didn't care about being hurt. She had to stop them. Forgoing her own safety, she continued on, for she was still some distance away. She had to help him, to save him.

Hardly thinking about how ridiculous her thoughts were, she reached the men attacking the laird and ran straight into the fight. In seconds, one of the men struck her with such force, she was lifted off her feet. Flying backwards through the air, she landed heavily on her back. As air was forced from her lungs, her head hit the ground with a sickening thud, and a searing pain pierced through the back of her skull.

Domhnall had been fighting them off at her approach, but upon seeing her hurt, he let out a mighty roar. His fists swung with such strength and speed that she could hardly keep her eye on them. Unleashing a rage she had never before witnessed, he cut through the men like they were nothing.

Their bodies flew through the air, and even in her injured state, now feeling dizzy and sick, Katherine could hardly fathom his terrifying strength. It was not natural. Not for any man. So astonished was she, that she barely acknowledged her brother and those who had arrived with him, running back into the dense trees from whence they had come.

Domhnall still fought, but distracted as he glanced over at her, he did not see one of his attackers struggling to his feet behind him. With a sword held high, he ran towards the laird, piercing his side.

“Argh,” he screamed.

Spinning towards his assailant, Domhnall grabbed him by the throat and head, and snapped the man's neck as though it were a twig. The laird's face was twisted in rage



as he scanned all around him, but it became clear that any of those he had not managed to kill had, instead, escaped his wrath by scarpering into the trees.

Only then did Domhnall rush to Katherine's side.

"Katherine," he breathed, cradling her with a tenderness that contrasted starkly with the violence she had just witnessed. "Oh, me God, Katherine. I thought they had killed ye."

Tenderly pulling her into his muscular chest, he gently rocked her back and forth, trying to offer her comfort. After a moment, he pulled her from him and gazed caringly down at her. With his hands still stained with the blood of her brother's men, he reached up and caressed her cheek.

"I thought I had lost ye," he whispered. "I can hardly believe ye are still here and alive. Thanks be tae all the gods fer sparing ye."

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As stunned as she still felt after what she had just witnessed, Katherine gazed into his eyes and saw a vulnerability she hadn't known the laird was capable of. He had fought to protect her. His rage, and the massive bloodshed had all been for her.

Earlier when he had kissed her, Katherine had known deep down that her feelings were growing, but in that very moment, she came to a conclusion she could never have imagined.

She was falling in love with Domhnall McLeod.

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

His heart was still thumping when Katherine's eyes fluttered.

"Katherine! Katherine!" he barked.

But no amount of shouting stopped her eyes from finally closing, and a second later, her head lolled back.

"Nay. God, nay!"

Hurriedly, Domhnall pressed his head against her bosom. Relief rushed through him as he heard the beat of her heart. It was faint, but it was still there. Scooping her up, he ran back to the village at an unnatural speed. Only when he reached the houses did he slow and run like a normal man might. No one could know, even if it nearly killed him to curb his power. Katherine needed immediate help, but still, no one could know.

There were gasps from the villagers at the sight of him, and he heard men and women calling out, asking if he was all right. He ignored them all, just like he ignored the fact that his blood-spattered clothes, face, and hands, likely had people terrified at what must have happened.

Upon finding his horse where he had left it, he jumped upon the beast, and with Katherine held tightly to his chest, he thundered off in the direction of the castle. He pushed the horse as hard as it would go, praying that she would hold on until he got her to Enya.

Ye have tae mak' it, Katherine. Ye have tae.

As the horse thundered on, Domhnall's mind continued to race, torn between the need to protect her and the guilt that he might have failed her already.

What had she been doing in the village in the first place?

He didn't know the answer to that, and nor did he really care. He just needed to get her to safety.

As he approached the gates, he yelled at the top of his voice. "Open the gates. Open the gates."

He watched as the men on the wall hurriedly called out to the men at the gate, and a moment later, the gates opened, just in time for him to thunder through them.

Bringing the horse to an immediate halt, he jumped from the beast with Katherine still in his arms.

"Get me Enya," he bellowed.

Several guards hurried away, while Domhnall ran across the courtyard toward Brianna's cottage.

He thundered his fist on the door, yelling for her to open it. When she did, Domhnall wasted no time with greetings.

"Och, me God. What has happened?" Brianna gasped.

"I need a bed," Domhnall demanded.

"In here," the old woman cried, leading him through the cottage that was so small, he had to duck his head for fear of him knocking himself out on the wooden beams above him.

"I'm here," Enya said, several minutes later.

She entered the room and immediately, her mouth fell open as she took in the scene. Katherine was now lying on the bed, and while Brianna was looking her over, Domhnall could only stand there feeling entirely helpless.

"Oh, God. What happened?" Enya cried, hurriedly reaching the bed.

"She's injured," Domhnall growled. "One minute, she was awake, the next, she wasnae."

"She's hit her head," Brianna said calmly. "I can get her something fer?—"

"It's all right, Brianna," Enya said. "I'll deal with this."

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Brianna looked from Enya to Domhnall and back again, before slowly nodding her head. “All right. I’ll leave ye tae it.”

With Brianna out of the room, Domhnall watched as his younger sister gently placed her hands on the bleeding wound at the back of Katherine’s head. She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths in and out. As always, the air went still as if sucked out of the room. A moment later, Enya laid Katherine’s head gently back onto the pillow and gazed down at her.

But Katherine didn’t move. Nor did she open her eyes.

“What’s the matter? Why didnae it work?” he demanded in panic.

Enya turned to look at him, placing a hand on his arm, she said, “It did work, Domhnall. The cut on her head is healed. Katherine is unconscious. We’re just going tae have tae give her time tae come out o’ it.”

Absently, she dropped her gaze, but suddenly, her eyes flew wide. “Ye are bleeding too,” she cried.

“I dinnae care. Look after Katherine. I’m fine.”

“I have, Domhnall,” Enya said determinedly. “There’s naething more I can dae fer her. Please, braither. Let me look after ye now.”

Reluctantly, Domhnall slipped his plaid from his shoulder and tore off his shirt, all while keeping his eyes firmly set on Katherine. The moment she woke up, he wanted

to be there, and no matter what Enya had to do, he was determined to stay right where he was.

“It is a deep gash, Domhnall.”

Flicking a glance at his sister, he said, “Ye’ve healed such wounds ‘afore. Ye can dae it, Enya.”

Nodding, she pressed both hands on his wound and closed her eyes. Domhnall felt the familiar heat circulating through his body, for she had healed him many times, and after a few moments, she took a deep breath in and moved her hands away. He could see that the Gift took its toll, as Enya looked much more tired than when she entered the cottage. However, she said nothing about it.

Domhnall glanced down at his healed side. “Ye see. I told ye, ye could dae it.”

Enya nodded and then moved to the dresser where she lifted a bowl of water and a cloth. His skin was still stained with blood, even though there was no sign of the wound, and gently, Enya took the cloth and washed the area. When she had finished there, she took his hands, one by one, and washed the blood from them too.

Domhnall sat there and let her. He didn’t much care what he looked like or whose blood he had on his hands. His eyes remained on Katherine, his mind torturing him with his failings.

He hadn’t got there in time. A husband was supposed to protect his wife, and he hadn’t done that. It was his fault she now lay there unconscious. She had been injured because of him.

Enya moved from his hands to his face. No doubt, there was blood splatter there too, but he didn’t care about that either. He was too busy worrying about what might

happen if Katherine took a turn for the worse. Enya had only ever healed wounds. And as she had said herself, there was nothing more she could do for Katherine.

What if the damage caused was too much? What if she never woke again?

Now sitting on the bed beside her, he looked down at Katherine's pale form with a fierce gaze, his heart pounding with an unfamiliar sense of helplessness. All his strength and his speed were useless in this circumstance, and as he sat there, the same overwhelming guilt he felt about his parent's deaths overtook him.

"Why was she even there?" he murmured. "When I left, she was in the castle. If she had just stayed here..."

Behind him, Enya had been clearing away the water and cloths, but now she lowered herself onto a chair on the other side of the bed. He didn't care that he could feel her eyes boring into his soul. He just wanted Katherine to wake up, to be all right, to not leave him, as his parents had.

"Domhnall," Enya said softly. "What is troubling ye so?"

His eyes widened at her question, for he thought it quite obvious. Jerking his head toward Katherine, he said so. "Are ye blind?"

"I ken Katherine is injured," she said, speaking calmly in an attempt not to rile him any further. "I suppose, I am just confused. Last week, ye couldnae tolerate being around her. In fact, it was me and the others who had tae encourage ye tae even talk tae her. Something has changed, Domhnall. Ye've changed."

He took a long breath in and let it out again slowly. Enya was pulling back the layers he used to protect himself. Ordinarily stoic and strong, it was the first time in a long time he was willing to even acknowledge he could be vulnerable, never mind show it.

And yet, there he was, feeling powerless.

But what was he supposed to say? He didn't know where to begin to explain what had changed. She was right, of course. Something had definitely changed, but until that attack, he had not taken the time to see it, to recognize it. Now, though, as he sat there, gazing down at Katherine, not knowing if she was going to come out of this, all the confusion had fallen away, and he could see it all so clearly.

"She's nae longer just an obligation or a pawn in the political game the king started," he whispered. "Something has happened tae me. She has done something tae me. Something I cannae ignore any longer."

"When ye say, she has done something tae ye, what dae ye mean?" Enya asked softly.

Domhnall shook his head. "They're nae the right words. Maybe it's more the fact that her presence, her being here has done something tae me."

He sighed again, struggling to figure out how to express what he was feeling. Feelings were something he had bothered little with. Or had he just pushed them so deeply within himself since his parent's death that they were now too hard to find?



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If that was the case, Katherine had certainly done more than he previously thought, for just by being her beautiful, innocent self, she had lit a spark in him that had been doused for years.

Catching Enya's expression of surprise, Domhnall smiled, but without mirth. "Ye cannae believe yer braither can feel," he said.

Enya shook her head. "It's nae that. You've always been able tae feel, Domhnall. But since Maither and Faither died, I think we've all struggled tae express ourselves. That being said, ye were never one tae talk about yer emotions even before that happened."

"It's nae the manly thing tae dae."

Enya rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Aye, 'o course it isnae. But whether it's manly or nae, ye're only human, just like everyone else. Ye may have extraordinary powers, but ye still feel."

Yes, he did. It was just easier to pretend he didn't. Katherine's presence had made that more difficult than he might have imagined, and in that moment, as he gazed down at her full of worry, all those emotions he had suppressed at his parents' death were flooding through him. The worst part was, there was not a damned thing he could do about it.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Flickering her eyes open, Katherine slowly roused herself from sleep. It took a minute for her to realize that she lay in her own bed, and opening her eyes fully, it

was evident, from the soft flickering flame of the candle that sat on the table beside her, that night had fallen.

However, she sensed that she was not alone, and, turning her head slightly, she was surprised to see Domhnall sitting in a chair beside her bed. With his head in his hands, he looked worried, and then, her reason for being there came rushing back to her all at once.

The battle. My brother. Domhnall was hurt.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

Upon hearing her voice, Domhnall jerked his head up, the white of his eyes clear to see as he stared at her. A second after that, he jumped from his chair and, going to sit on the bed beside her, he took both her hands in his.

“Ye’re awake,” he gasped.

Katherine frowned at his concern and nodded. “Yes. Yes, I’m awake. What troubles you so?”

With his eyebrows lifted, he shook his head in disbelief. “Ye, Katherine. Dinnae ye remember what happened? How dae ye feel? How is yer head?”

Pulling her hands free from his, she pushed herself up to a sitting position and took a moment to examine how she felt.

“There is a lightness in my head, but nothing more,” she replied.

“Ye dinnae feel any pain?” Domhnall pressed.

She shook her head.

She did remember what had happened. She had been thrown with such force, her head had hit the ground, and the pain had been excruciating. But now, as she lifted her hand to the back of her head, she was surprised to discover that there was not even a lump.

“I thought it would have been worse,” she said, feeling a little confused.

Domhnall’s eyes were still full of worry. “It was worse. Yer head was split open, and afterwards, ye collapsed in me arms.”

She frowned and shook her head. “But I cannot feel any cut.”

He dropped his gaze then, and she watched as his expression changed. A second ago, he was loaded with worry. Now, he looked coy, like he was keeping something from her.

“What are you not telling me?”

He didn’t speak for a long moment, as though trying to decide what he ought to say. Eventually, he lifted his head and gazed at her with an intensity in his eyes that unnerved her.

“There are things that ye dinnae ken, Katherine,” he said, his voice loaded with resignation. “Things that very few ken.”

“Like your unusual strength and speed,” she blurted.

Her words halted him, evidently taking him off guard. But a second later, the surprise fell from his face, and he nodded, as though realizing something.

“I havenae been as careful as I should have been around ye. Yesterday, even more so. But when I saw ye were hurt, I...” he trailed off, his face pained with regret. He took a long breath in, and then released it. “I tried tae protect ye, but I was too late.”

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Only then did Katherine realize that his earlier concern had been loaded with guilt. Even now, he looked like a man who had failed miserably. In that moment, as she gazed at him, something changed within her. A shift so deep, she physically felt it in her soul.

For the first time since she arrived, she saw Domhnall in a completely different light. No longer was he her captor, or a duty she was obligated to fulfill. He had changed from the gruff and abrupt laird, and had softened toward her, even making unusual efforts to help her when he had no necessity to do so. Now, more than ever before, however, she saw him as her future husband, her protector, the man who would kill to make certain she was safe.

That knowledge caused a strange sensation in her stomach, a swirling sensation comprised of both nerves and pride. No man, other than her father, had ever shown her such regard. Not even her brother. In fact, especially not her brother, now she remembered how quickly he had scarpered when she had been injured.

And yet, here was a stranger, by all accounts, though less so now than a week ago, willing to shield her from all and any harm. Another deep knowing came to her in that moment. A knowing that her life was now changed forever.

But his guilt was palpable, and even though she sat there before him, in perfect health and in safety, it was clear he was still troubled over what had happened. She wanted to reassure him that he had done everything he could. In fact, he had done more than any other man could.

But him battling those men had not been the first time she had witnessed his

unnatural behavior and seeing that he was nearly on the brink of trusting her, she knew this was a pivotal moment. A moment where, with just a little push, he might actually reveal what he had kept hidden.

Reaching out, she took hold of his hand, feeling his roughened skin against hers.

“I’m fine, Domhnall. Besides, there were just too many of them. Well, not that that stopped you,” she said carefully, watching his reaction. “There is something you have kept hidden from me, isn’t there?”

Again, he took a moment before he replied, and then he shrugged. “Well, I cannae hide it from ye any longer, can I? Ye’ve seen enough.”

But he did not continue, and after another moment of silence, Katherine knew he needed pushing just a little bit farther.

“So?” she said softly.

With another heavy sigh, Domhnall looked at her hands as they held his. “I discovered my unnatural strength and speed when I was a boy o’ eight,” he began, his eyes still lowered as he recalled the memory. “It happened out o’ the blue when Magnus fell from a tree, he was climbing. I saw him falling, and, one minute I was too far away tae help, terrified o’ what was about tae happen. The next, I was right beneath him, catching him ‘afore he seriously injured himsel’.”

Having already witnessed his abilities, Katherine was not really surprised at his words. She did have questions, but not wanting to interrupt his flow, she said, “Where did these unnatural abilities come from?”

“We inherited them from our maither,” Domhnall replied.

“We?” she blurted.

While she had expected some kind of explanation for what she had seen him do, she had not expected anymore, and thus, she now gawked at him with wide eyes.

Domhnall nodded and looked up at her. “I suppose, given the fact that we’re tae be married, ye would have found out sooner or later. We planned tae keep it from ye, but ye’re nae exactly the quiet English lady we were expecting,” he said with a smirk.

Katherine couldn’t help the slight smile that crept across her lips. Nor could she deny his words, for he was right. On the outside, she had always tried to portray an appearance of what was expected of her. On the inside, there was a wild part of her that had fought for freedom for a long time. In fact, it occurred to her that since she had been at the castle, Domhnall and his siblings had done nothing but encourage that part of her to show itself.

“And now ye want tae ken about them,” he said, gazing at her knowingly.

“Like you said,” Katherine replied, “I’m going to find out sooner or later.”

Domhnall nodded. “Indeed. All right. Where dae I start?” he said rhetorically. He then nodded to her head. “Enya is the healer. While those who dinnae ken about her power believe she has garnered all her talents from Brianna, the truth is, she doesnae need tonics and tinctures. She heals with her hands. That’s the reason ye nae longer have a cut on the back o’ yer head.”

“I see,” Katherine said, her eyebrows raised and feeling more than a little astonished.

Seeing her expression, Domhnall smiled. “There’s more. Much more. Magnus can read yer mind?—”

“What?” Her mouth fell open.

“Och, aye.” Domhnall smirked. “Well, it’s more that he hears yer thoughts, really. He drives me mad at times, but it has served us well when strangers o’ unknown origin have arrived at our gates. Kai’s ability helps him manipulate emotions. If ye are angry, he can calm ye but only if he’s touching ye. He cannot use his gift from any distance. And Thora has visions of things that havenae yet happened.”

Katherine was now gawking at him, and yet, as unattractive as she realized she might look, she did not have the capacity to close her fallen mouth.

Domhnall gazed at her with an understanding expression. “I ken it is a lot tae tak’ in. Each o’ us struggled when our powers manifested. We were all young, and thus, it was even more difficult. Our gifts have helped us on many occasions. All, in fact, but on the most important one.”

Watching a sudden sadness wash over him, Katherine was at first confused, but then, something he had talked about on their horse ride a few days ago came rushing back to her.

“Your mother and father,” she breathed.

“Aye,” he said sadly. “All the strength and speed in the world didnae stop them from being murdered. We’ve all struggled, since that day, tae come tae terms with the fact that none o’ us could save them. I have wished, so many times, that I could go back and dae it differently. If only I had been closer tae me faither. If only I had kent what was going tae happen...”



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“Thora didn’t see it,” Katherine concluded.

Domhnall shook his head. “It was too late. By the time she understood what the vision meant, the English were already over the wall.”

Katherine leaned forward and held his head in her hands. “It wasn’t your fault, Domhnall,” she said softly.

“I wish I could believe that?—”

“It wasn’t your fault,” she repeated, her voice a little firmer this time.

Domhnall lifted his eyes to look at her, and as she gazed back, her heart seemed to flip in her chest. Everything she thought she knew about this man had slowly slipped away; dissolved like sugar in warm water. Instead, she now saw him for who he really was. More than that, Katherine knew how much her heart now yearned for him.

You’ve fallen for him.

Yes, she had. With the resentment and the anger gone, all that was left was love and affection.

Not taking his eyes from hers, Domhnall leaned slowly forward, inch by inch, until she could feel his breath dancing upon her cheek. He stopped short of kissing her, as though waiting for her to object. But Katherine had no objections at all. In fact, quite the opposite, for she was aching for his touch.

When his lips pressed against hers, she wrapped her arms around his neck, and subtly, he shifted forward. Slipping his arms around her waist, he pulled her closer to him, his tongue breaking her lips apart and roving around her mouth.

At first, the kiss was tender. Soft, sensual, teasing. But as the passion between them grew, Katherine felt his desire as his mouth moved against hers with a sense of desperation. Their tongues clashed as they panted, their hands roving over each other's bodies, the huge muscles of his back rippling beneath his clothes. An ache at the apex of her thighs seemed to burn like a raging fire, and losing herself in his embrace, she discovered her own desperation.

Swiftly pulling away from her, Domhnall began tearing clothes from his body, not caring where they landed. Katherine could only watch in anticipation, eager for him to be close to her again.

With each discarded item, he revealed more of himself to her. Those strong, square shoulders, his rippled torso, the thickness of his thighs, and then finally, he stood there proudly, watching her reaction. Katherine's eyes had grown wide, but she could not help the sharp intake of her breath upon seeing his huge and erect manhood that stood proudly between his legs.

Slowly, he crawled back onto the bed, and wrapping his arm around her body, he lifted her and lay her on her back.

"I want ye, Katherine. I've wanted ye fer a while now," he growled, nuzzling her ear with his lips.

As he whispered in her ear, he tugged at the strings of her nightgown. Pulling the knot loose, his hand slipped under the thin clothing. Katherine let out a small moan as he caressed her breast. She let out a louder gasp when his thumb brushed across her aching nipple, for she had never felt a sensation like it.

But just as she arched her back, trying to press herself into his touch even further, he moved his hand away. A wave of disappointment washed over her, but it was short lived as she felt Domhnall roughly tugging at her nightdress. Clearly, he was eager, for before Katherine knew what was happening, he had yanked it up her body and pulled it over her head, soon to be discarded in the same carefree way his own clothes had been earlier.

“Och, Katherine,” he growled, his voice as thick as treacle, his eyes raking over her nakedness, now she lay there so vulnerable before him.

The cold made her nipples peak, yet her cheeks bloomed red, for she had never been or felt so exposed in her entire life. Automatically, she crossed her arm over her body to cover herself.

“Nay,” he said, taking her by the wrist and moving her arm away. “Dinnae cover yersel’. Such beauty shouldnae be hidden away, Katherine.”

“I... I am just ashamed.”

“O’ what?” he said, his eyes now piercing hers. “Ye have naething tae be ashamed o’. Ye’re perfection personified. Yer skin is like silk, yer body is a creation carved by the gods.”

His gaze raked over her nakedness once more, and then, he growled, “And had I kent what I was missing, I would have done this much sooner.”

Quickly shifting from beside her, his lips plunged down onto her breast, suckling on her nipple. Without thinking about it, a light moan left her lips, as pleasure flowered across her body. At the same time, his hand trailed down her flat stomach, creeping lower and lower, his slow movements only heightening her anticipation for his touch.

Her legs fell open, like a flower, beckoning the honey bee in. As his fingers slipped past the apex of her thighs, she suddenly sucked in a breath as a pleasure she had never known possible travelled through her body.

“Och, ye are so ready fer me, Katherine,” Domhnall growled against her skin. “Ye’re so soft, and warm, and wet. I cannae wait tae be inside ye.”

His fingers continued, moving back and forth, perfectly positioned in a place that elicited a sensation beyond anything she could ever have imagined.

“Dae ye remember the question ye asked me a few nights back?” he growled, his lips tickling the soft skin of her breast.

At that moment, she could hardly remember her own name, never mind something that had happened several nights before, and moaning, she shook her head. “No.”

“Ye asked me what a nub o’ pleasure was,” he continued, his fingers still moving even as he spoke.

“Yes,” she panted. “Yes, I did.”

“Dae ye still need the answer?”

As much as she writhed beneath his touch, and as much as this new, wonderful and amazing feeling rushed through her body, somehow, Katherine was able to realize in that second what he meant.

“No,” she gasped.

“Good,” he purred.

His tongue resumed its lashing of her nipple, and just as Katherine didn’t think the pleasure could get any more intense, Domhnall increased the pressure of his fingers, and moved them even faster.

“Oh, my God,” she groaned, her voice sounding as though someone else had spoken those words.

“Och, aye, me love. Now I have ye.”

Pressing her head back into the bed, her back arched, her body trembled, and teetering on the very edge of something she could not verbalize, a sudden rush of pleasure flowered out from the middle of her thighs, down her legs, and continued over her entire body.

“Ah,” she cried, her body convulsing of its own accord.

It took a few more seconds for the sensation to dissipate, and only then, with her heart thumping in her chest, did she open her eyes.

Domhnall was gazing at her, his face a picture of delight and satisfaction.

“Ye drive me wild,” he said, pushing his arms into the bed and moving his lips back to hers.

Kissing her roughly, he looked down at her. “But I havenae finished with ye yet.”

Positioning himself between her legs, he looked down at her. “I’m going tae tak’ ye now. Ye’re innocent, Katherine, so this is going tae hurt ye a little.”

So lost in her reverie was she, that Katherine didn’t care. She just wanted him. She wanted him more now than she had ever wanted anything in her life, and, as she felt him slowly edge his way inside her, her head pressed against the pillow, aching for more.

Rocking back and forth, he filled her even more, and gripping his arms, she moved her hips in time with his.

“That’s it, Katherine. Och, God, aye,” he moaned. “Ye feel so good, so tight, and warm. I want tae lose mesel’ in ye.”

“Yes,” she cried. “I want that too.”

With his eyes like dark coals, he said, “Are ye ready, Katherine?” His body was trembling now. “I cannae hold back any longer.”

She nodded eagerly, and immediately, Domhnall thrust into her over and over again. A sharp pain made her gasp initially, but Katherine was so fixated on the pleasure

that their lovemaking elicited, that the suffering faded away.

As Domhnall continued thrusting into her, she felt that same pleasure of moments before, only now, it was more intense than ever. The friction between them caused the intensity to build, and she could feel herself climbing once again. Feeling the need to hold onto something, her fingers grasped his arms, clinging onto him tightly.

“That’s it, Katherine,” Domhnall panted. “I want ye tae come. I want ye tae come with me.”

Where they were going, she had no idea, but then, nor did she care. Domhnall pushed into her, faster, and harder, grunting above her with the effort, while her whole body tensed beneath him.

“Oh, Domhnall,” she gasped. “I–I...”

“I can feel ye, Katherine. I can feel ye tightening around me. Oh, God,” he moaned loudly.

Katherine felt like she was on the edge and at the very peak yet again, of this glorious sensation. Writhing and thrusting and gripping onto Domhnall for dear life, the most pleasurable sensation exploded out of her.

“Oh, my god,” she screamed.

“Argh,” Domhnall roared at the exact same time.

Thrusting his head back, his body stilled, and then, a few seconds later, he let out a huge sigh as he gazed down at her with an adoration she had never experienced from any other.

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Later, Katherine lay in Domhnall's protective arms, her head resting upon his chest, the soft thump of his heart loud in her ear. The rhythmic beat was making her sleepy, but then, Domhnall's voice brought her back.

"Dae ye have any notion who those men were today, Katherine?"

The question was so out of the blue that Katherine was not prepared for it. Without moving, for she feared that if she looked at him, he would see her panic, she slowly shook her head against his muscular chest.

"I do not," she said quietly.

Her heart felt heavy, for after what they had just experienced together, how they had bonded, and a newfound connection made, it felt like such a deep betrayal.

That's because it is a betrayal. Here you are, lying with the man your brother wants to kill.

Indeed, she was. Worse than that, she was now certain she was in love with him. How was she supposed to reconcile that?

I have to speak to Reginald. I just have to.

"I was surprised tae see ye in the village," he continued. "I cannae understand why ye would leave the castle by yersel'. Especially after the attack the other day."

It wasn't quite a question, but she knew he desired an explanation.



Pushing herself up and turning to look at him with her best poker face, she said, “I was feeling a little homesick. I suppose, I wanted to feel like a normal person. You know, someone who leaves her abode. Someone who visits a village and perhaps buys something they like.” She heaved a dramatic sigh for effect. “I can hardly believe such a dreadful thing happened while I was there. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever witnessed something so terrifying in all my life.”

That bit was actually true.

Domhnall’s eyes softened, and, scooping her further up to him, he landed a tender kiss on her forehead.

“I’m sorry ye had tae witness that, Katherine. Truly, I am.”

She then rested her head back on his shoulder, relief flooding through her body that he had believed her story. But the relief was short lived when he continued.

“But I will find out who those men were, and why they attacked us. And God help them all when I set my sights upon them again.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Domhnall rose the next morning and went in search of Magnus. Given that Domhnall was far too invested in Katherine’s recovery, they had not spoken fully about the men who had attacked him.

In the end, he found him in the drawing room, gazing out of the window.

“Morning,” Domhnall said, closing the door behind him once he had entered.

Magnus turned to his brother with a frown of concern. “How dae ye feel?” he asked.

Domhnall shrugged. "I'm grand."

"And Katherine?"

"She woke late last night. She's well enough."

The memory of their ecstatic lovemaking sent a strange but pleasurable sensation through his stomach, but Domhnall kept that to himself. His brother didn't need to know everything.

"She kens about us all now, so there's nay need fer anymore hiding."

Domhnall had come to stand beside his brother at the window, and from the corner of his eye, he noted Magnus's lifted eyebrows.

"Dinnae say it," Domhnall said. "I had nay choice but tae tell her."

"Why? Because ye lost control o' yersel' when ye were attacked?"

It was Domhnall's turn to frown.

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Magnus gave him a knowing look. “Ye’re the talk o’ the village.”

Panic crossed his face, but Magnus shook his head. “Nay like that. Luckily, naeone actually saw what ye did, but word got around that ye had defeated many men. Some are saying ten, some are saying twenty.”

Domhnall rolled his eyes. “People dae like tae exaggerate.”

“Which one is true?” Magnus asked.

“I would say ten, maybe less, but then, I was too busy fighting tae count. I ken fer a fact it wasnae twenty, though. Has there been any news o’ who they were? Have the scouts discovered anything?”

“I sent scouts intae the village last night, but they could find naething. When they questioned those who thought they kent something, they discovered those people were as clueless as we are.”

“Great,” Domhnall spat sarcastically.

“Ye have tae admit, braither, it is a bit o’ a coincidence, ye getting attacked twice in the same week. If ye are determined that those men in the forest were English, we can only assume the same thing this time.”

The laird nodded. “Aye. I couldnae agree more. I still dinnae understand it, though. I’m doing what that bloody madman who rules their country wants me tae dae. So, why is he attacking me?”

“We already spoke about this. Maybe it’s nae him. Maybe this is a splinter faction. Ye ken, we have plenty o’ those up here as well.”

“Fine,” Domhnall said, stepping back into the room and beginning to pace. “Let’s assume ye are right. It may well be a splinter faction. They’re attacking us without the king’s knowledge, but tae what end? What are they hoping tae achieve?”

Magnus dropped himself into a high-backed chair beside the fire. “Could they have allied with an enemy clan? A clan who might be looking tae take over ye and the people o’ our lands?”

It was a possibility, but it had been a long time since they had fought with any other enemies besides the English. That being said, he knew there were clans out there allying themselves with those across the border, hoping that in doing so, they would garner favor with the King and thus be rewarded with lands and titles.

“I want the guard doubled on all the walls and gates,” Domhnall growled. “I cannae let this happen again. I’m nae going tae lose...” he trailed off, thinking about his mother and father. “We’re nae losing any more members o’ this family.”

Magnus nodded. “I agree. The problem with that is, yer wedding is in less than a week. We’re going tae have guests, and sellers, as well as more o’ our own clansmen that might nae ordinarily be in such proximity o’ the castle wandering about the place. How are we supposed tae vet everyone without causing chaos?”

Domhnall heaved a sigh, for he had no idea how to answer that conundrum. It was even more bizarre that he hadn’t taken those points into consideration.

Ye have had a lot on yer mind these last few days.

Indeed, he had, but how many men could say that they’d forgotten about their own

damned wedding?

“Ye’re saying it isnae a good idea,” Domhnall growled.

“Nae if it ye dinnae want all and sundry tae ken what’s going on. Nay. I think it might be wise tae come at this from a different angle. A more subtle approach,” Magnus offered.

“That approach being?” Domhnall asked, struggling to curb the impatient tone that threatened to creep into his voice.

For a long moment, Magnus didn’t speak. Clearly, he had made the suggestion without thinking what the ‘more subtle approach’ might be. But Domhnall knew that if anyone was going to come up with a steadfast plan, it was Magnus, and thus, instead of pushing him further, he waited until his brother had worked it out in his own mind.

“Rather than doubling the guard, how about we place more o’ our men inside the castle grounds. Only, instead of dressing as guards, they dress like everyone else. A bit like ye going intae the village in disguise.”

Domhnall frowned, and feeling slightly frustrated at what he thought was a rather lukewarm plan, said, “And what good will that dae? Once our enemy is inside the castle walls, it’s too late.”

“Nae necessarily, braither. The men are strong, intelligent and determined. I believe they will spot someone who isnae supposetae be here with ease. The problem can then be dealt with swiftly and with little fuss.”

“I’m nae convinced,” Domhnall growled.

“I can see that. But doing it yer way will warn our enemy, and thus, they’ll be far sneakier in their approach. If we lull them intae a false sense o’ security...”

“We can trap them,” Domhnall concluded.

“Exactly.”

The laird was still not convinced that it was the greatest plan, but as usual, Magnus had a point. It was him they were after, and rather than having to have eyes in the back of his head every time he left the castle, luring them to him might work far better in their favor.

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“I take it we have still got naething out o’ the prisoners,” Domhnall said.

“They willnae speak, nae matter what we dae tae them. From what I gather, they’d rather die than confess what they ken. Clearly, they’re more afraid o’ whoever it is that sent them than they are o’ us.”

“Aye, well, they havenae spoken tae me yet,” Domhnall growled, turning toward the door.

Magnus suddenly jumped up from his chair.

“Dinnae dae it, Domhnall. There are other ways. It’s nae worth yer soul.”

“My soul was lost a long time ago, Magnus.”

Magnus shook his head. “That’s nae true. And now, with the arrival o’ Katherine, I think a part o’ ye is finally beginning tae heal.”

Domhnall stared at him from across the room. “I’ve told ye tae stay out o’ me head.”

“I’m nae in yer head, braither. I promise,” Magnus replied, holding his hands up in surrender. “But it’s hard nae tae notice the change in ye these last few days. Katherine is good fer ye. Ye must see that.”

Domhnall didn’t reply. As much as he knew it to be true, a part of him wondered if his affection for Katherine was making him soft.

Is that such a bad thing?

Although it was if it meant he was putting his family and his clan in danger.

“She’s nae making ye soft, Domhnall,” Magnus said.

Domhnall scowled at him.

“Aye, now I am in yer head,” his brother admitted. “But that’s nae what I mean when I say she’s good fer ye. Ye have punished yersel’ fer so long after what happened tae Maither and Faither.”

“We all have,” Domhnall retorted.

“Aye, I ken. But it’s been different with ye. Yer guilt has caused ye tae close down, put walls up, nae allow yersel’ tae feel. That’s nay way tae be, braither. While ye dinnae want tae feel the bad, yer also missing out on the good.”

“What good?” he spat. “There’s been nay good since.”

Magnus gave him a disbelieving look. “That’s nae true, and ye ken it. Ye just havenae wanted tae see it. But I think Katherine’s arrival was good fer ye. I hope ye see that too.”

Whether that was true or not, Domhnall was not going to admit it in that moment. His stubborn pride just would not let him, and turning on his heels, he headed to the door.

Magnus looked worried at his departure. “Where are ye going?”

“There and back tae see how far it is,” the laird scowled sarcastically.



Magnus lifted his eyebrows, tilted his head, and stared at him.

Eventually, Domhnall huffed a sigh. “I’m going tae me study. As wonderful as all these touchy-feely good things that ye speak o’ are,” he grimaced, “I still have work tae dae.”

An hour later, Domhnall heard a light knock on his study door.

“Come,” he called out gruffly.

Upon lifting his head, he watched Katherine tentatively slip in, and as though her very presence cast some kind of spell on him, he felt the tension release from his body, and found a smile forming on his lips.

Maybe Magnus has a point.

“Good morning,” he said, standing and rounding his desk.

“Hello,” she said, looking a little shy.

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He had left her bed early that morning while she still slept peacefully. He hadn't been able to help gazing down at her and taking in her beauty for a long moment before quietly leaving the room.

"Did ye sleep well?" Domhnall asked.

Her face seemed to flush at that question, and he wondered if, in that very moment, what they had shared together hadn't just sprung to her mind.

"I did. Thank you. I'm here because I need your help."

Domhnall's eyebrows lifted as he gazed at her intrigued. "I see. And what is it ye need help with?"

"Are there any places nearby where I could swim?"

He suddenly frowned. "Are ye mad, woman? It's freezing outside."

Nodding, Katherine said, "I know that, but..." she trailed off with a shrug.

And then he remembered her list. For a moment, he didn't say anything as he thought about the places, he might be able to take her to facilitate what she wanted.

"I ken a place," he said eventually.

An hour later, Domhnall directed his horse into a cave with Katherine following closely behind. The rock formation above them reached up about thirty feet, and the

sound of the horse's hooves against the rock beneath them, echoed loudly as they continued on. Knowing what she wanted to do, Domhnall had made certain they had brought blankets. He'd also stopped on the way and gathered firewood and kindling.

Not long after entering the cave, a sound of rushing water echoed about their ears. Glancing back at Katherine, he grinned as she looked at him with a beaming smile of delight. It wasn't the first time he had seen her smile, but with her face lit up like that, she looked positively angelic.

Beneath that thought was an acknowledgement that he had never been in the presence of anyone so happy to plunge themselves into freezing cold water in the middle of winter, but then, he was discovering his wife-to-be was not just anyone.

Five minutes later, a flowing underground waterfall came into view, the thunderous wall of water spilling into and swallowed up by the body of water beneath it.

"Will this dae?" Domhnall declared, pulling his horse to a stop.

Katherine came to a halt beside him, and with that same beaming smile, she nodded. "This is actually perfect."

They dismounted and gathered the blankets, and choosing a spot next to the cave wall, they left them there along with the firewood. After that, Katherine began to undress.

"Are ye really going tae dae this?" Domhnall said, his eyes wide.

He had imagined that once they had arrived, she might feel the cold air and change her mind. Clearly, he had not given her the credit she deserved.

"Of course." She grinned excitedly, her body already beginning to tremble, though

whether that was from the cold or the anticipation, Domhnall could not tell.

“This journey would be pointless if I were to back out now.” She then frowned. “You’re not going to try and stop me, are you?”

Domhnall shook his head and raised his hands. “Nae at all. I think ye’re completely mad, but it’s yer list.”

As she continued to undress, Domhnall strategically stacked the wood for the fire, and then with effort, took some time to light it. When it was burning well enough, he turned back to see what Katherine was doing.

Now undressed, she stood at the edge of the water with a blanket wrapped around her. Clearly, she was trying to build up the courage to take the plunge. Most of her list was now complete. She had kissed a stranger, spied on a gentleman bathing, ridden astride a horse, and read a banned book. There were only two more items remaining, and today, she was clearly determined to markswimming with no clothesoff her list.

“Dae ye need a push,” he teased.

She spun to look at him, her eyes wide. “Don’t you dare.”

“Och, now,” he said, taking a step towards her, “ye should never dare a Scotsman.”

“I’m going,” she said, now panicking that he was indeed, going to push her in.

Of course, he would never do such a thing, but the threat seemed to be enough to hurry her on. Waiting around for the courage to do it was pointless. She just needed to get it over with.

Katherine dropped the blanket, giving him a rather delightful view of her rounded behind against the slender silhouette of her body, and carefully lowered her foot into the water. She took a steep breath in, and with her arms out for balance, stepped in fully. Slowly, she walked deeper and deeper into the body of water, panting in short breaths with every step.

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Once she was fully submerged, she turned to look at him, her lips already turning blue.

Shaking his head both at her bravery and her madness, he grinned down at her. “How is it?”

“Iiitss... reeaally... nooot... thaaat baaad,” she stammered through chattering teeth. “Yoouu... shoould try it.”

Domhnall burst into laughter, his loud chuckle echoing around the cave.

“Aye, it looks fantastic. Ye’re about as convincing as I am small.”

She beamed a grin up at him, for while she was shivering with cold, Katherine was evidently now delighted with herself for having had the courage to do it.

I cannae leave her in there all by hersel’.

Without thinking twice, Domhnall began stripping the clothes from his body, much to the delighted surprise of Katherine. In no time at all, he was naked, and before he had the time to change his mind, he waded into the water, his breath leaping from his lungs as the sharp cold bit at his skin.

“Bloody heeelll,” he stammered.

His words sent Katherine, who now appeared to have stopped shivering, her body clearly now acclimatized to the freezing water, into fits of giggles. “I told you it was

lovely,” she laughed.

With strong strokes, Domhnall swam across the water, at least making an effort to keep moving. Seeing him do so, Katherine did the same, and they swam forward and backward, swirling in circles, while at the same time, splashing water at each other, eliciting shrieks from Katherine and roars from Domhnall.

“Wherever did ye think up this list?” Domhnall said a little later, his arms wrapped around her as he held her close to him.

Katherine looked upwards, clearly trying to recall. She then smiled and, gazing at him, she said, “Us nobles have far too much time on our hands. Besides, I didn’t think them all up at the same time. I just added to the list when a notion came to my mind.”

“But why swimming naked?”

Again, she paused, but this time, she wasn’t thinking of her answer. It was clear she already knew it. But by her changed expression, there was a weightier meaning behind it.

“Freedom,” she said, her tone heavier than seconds before. “My life is not like yours, Domhnall. Was not like yours,” she corrected. “Much is expected of an English lady. We are trained to conform from the day and hour we can speak. Maybe even before that. Our hair must always be this way, our clothes must always be that way. We cannot speak our mind, or have an opinion, and God forbid if we disagree with a man. We are to be perfect in our speech and manner at every hour of every day. We must defer to men always, for they are the ones who make the decisions, and we have little choice but to go along with it.”

Domhnall was surprised at her words, for he had no real knowledge of the nobility of

England. In fact, what she described sounded more like prison than life, which, he supposed, was the point she was making.

“So, my list was about freedom. To do things forbidden, things I chose to do, rather than fulfilling obligations.”

“And ye being sent here was just another obligation,” Domhnall said pointedly.

Her eyes softened then. “That’s how I saw it at first. Not so much now.”

Lifting his hand from the water, he softly caressed her cheek. “Funny, that’s exactly how I feel. Though, I’ll be honest,” hesmirked, “the feisty lass that arrived here was nay lady o’ conformity.”

Katherine giggled and shrugged. “Maybe it was the wild Scottish air.”

Domhnall chuckled. “Aye, something like that.”

Noting the goosebumps on her skin, he took her and scooped her up in his arms.

“Right, I think ye can be satisfied that ye’ve fulfilled this particular venture. It’s time we got ye warm ‘afore ye catch yer death.”

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she nodded, and now having her approval, Domhnall whisked her back to the fire using his unnatural speed. Once there, he swiftly wrapped the blanket around her, before grabbing the other blanket for himself.

A little later, Domhnall gazed down at Katherine, his head resting in his hand, propped up by his elbow. With his other arm wrapped across her body, he held her close, trying to keep them both warm, while wrapped up in the blankets and his plaid.



Katherine gazed at the flickering flames of the fire; the shadows thrown from it dancing against the perfect softness of her cheek.

She turned to him, and gazing up into his eyes, she said, “I have a confession to make.”

Domhnall lifted his eyebrows questioningly.

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“I no longer believe you were the one who killed my father.”

“Why?” he asked, feeling both relief and curiosity flow through his body.

“It’s just a feeling. A feeling right here,” she said, tapping her heart. “Maybe it’s because I’ve fallen in love with you.”

Domhnall took a steep intake of breath at those words, and as a warm sensation washed through him, he bent and tenderly kissed her forehead.

“Then I also have a confession tae mak’. I have fallen in love with ye, too, Katherine. Ye have cast a spell on me, possessing me like nay other ‘afore ye could. I never imagined I would be blessed with this feeling o’ love, and yet, ye, with yer spirit, yer tenderness, and yer affection, have broken through the wall I built tae protect mysel’.”

“What were you protecting yourself from?” Katherine asked.

Domhnall shrugged. “I dinnae ken. Pain, hurt, disappointment.”

“I swear, I will bring you none of those things,” she breathed. “In fact, the love I feel for you is like this fire. Warm, ablaze, the flame destroying every barrier between us to bring our souls together.”

Domhnall smiled. “That is a perfect comparison, and in fact, I couldnae agree more. Ye cannae ken how happy it makes me tae ken that when we dae marry, it will be fer love, and nae obligation. I’m going tae mak’ it me mission tae bring ye happiness,

Katherine. Happiness, and tae give ye the freedom ye have so eagerly sought fer yer whole life.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

In the cave, Katherine had been swallowed up in a bubble of hers and Domhnall’s making. They had connected so deeply, it felt as though they were one and the same soul. Out there, hidden in that cave, it was as though they were separate from the rest of the world. Like they were the only two people who had, and would, ever exist again.

Once back at the castle, however, she remembered the promise she had made him as they had lay there together. She had lied to his very face, partly because she wanted to believe it, partly because she could not bear to tell him the truth.

The guilt rushed up within her, threatening to overtake her completely, especially once she was left alone in her bedchamber to freshen up and change her clothes. She had sworn to Domhnall that she would never hurt him or cause him pain, and yet, she had already done so, even be it at her brother’s hand.

In fact, what her brother was planning to do was worse than even Domhnall could begin to imagine. While her betrothed was worried about his heart being broken, since his arrival, Reginald was hell bent on destroying him and his entire family.

Pacing back and forth with worry, Katherine muttered to herself.

“I must speak to Reginald. I have to tell him to call the whole thing off. He needs to know that I’m in love with Domhnall, and that I actually want to marry him.”

Even as determined as she was, however, Katherine worried whether her brother would pay any attention to her words. But she had to try.

Leaving her bedchamber after changing her clothes, Katherine tucked the missive she had written into her cloak. She needed to contact Reginald, and she needed to do it before it was too late.

Hurrying down the corridor, she went in search of the messenger boy who had brought her the last two letters from her brother. She searched for some time, and only after asking a maid for his whereabouts, did she find the lad in the kitchen.

“I need you to deliver this for me,” she said, pressing the missive and a coin into the boy’s hand. “It is very important that it is delivered this very day. Do you understand?”

Seeing her intense gaze, the boy looked worried, but nodded his head quickly. “Aye, me lady. I will, me lady.”

“Good. Now hurry.”

Shoveling the rest of the biscuit he had been eating into his mouth, he nodded once more, and turning on his heels, he ran from the kitchen. For a second, Katherine could only watch him go, but upon noticing that she was being observed by the servants there, she too left the area as swiftly as she could.

It was as she was travelling through the corridors, her mind a worried mess about the meeting she had arranged with Reginald for that very night, that she met Magnus as he rounded a corner, the two practically bumping into each other.

“Forgive me,” he said, smiling kindly at her.

“The fault was mine,” Katherine replied.

Thank God I didn’t have the letter with me. Oh, wait. He can read my mind.

As fast as she could muster, Katherine tried to think about anything else but the letter she had sent to Reginald. But in her panic, she could not hold onto a single thought in her mind.

Think, Katherine, think!

Perhaps it was because it was Magnus who was standing before her, but the only thing she could muster were thoughts and recollections of their last sparring session.

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“Are you not practicing your excellent sword skills today?” Katherine said, focusing hard on the memory of the time they shared together.

Magnus again smiled, though whether that was because he could read her thoughts, Katherine could not know.

“I was out earlier,” Magnus replied. “Ye ought tae join me again sometime, Katherine. Ye are a fine swordsman, and I am nae too proud tae admit that I found our last session rather challenging.”

“Yes. Yes, of course. I would be delighted. But now, I must go, for I am meeting your sisters for a walk.”

He looked at her for a moment, the easiness still evident in his expression. “I hope I’m nae speaking out o’ turn, but I am delighted that ye have settled intae castle life. Ye are a breath o’ fresh air around here.”

Katherine blushed at such a direct compliment, and nodding, she said, “Thank you, Magnus. You are too kind.”

“Nae really. I only speak the truth.”

Once they had parted, Katherine breathed a huge sigh of relief. Based on his words and actions, she thought Magnus had not suspected a thing, though it had been far too close a call for her liking. Perhaps she ought to practice controlling her thoughts more often, for it had only been luck that had helped her out on that occasion.

After supper, Enya and Thora asked Katherine if she wanted to join them in the library that evening.

“We havenae got over the fun we had the other night,” Enya said.

“Indeed,” Thora agreed. “I havenae laughed so much in ages.”

“I’d love to,” Katherine said, pinning on a smile.

In fact, she had had every intention of returning to her bedchamber to while away an hour or two before she could sneak out of the castle, for her missive had instructed Reginald to meet her at the well after dark.

But perhaps spending some time with the twins would alleviate any suspicion. Besides, if she was with Enya and Thora, Domhnall could not arrive in her bedchamber unexpectedly, distracting her or keeping her back from her original plans.

With wine in hand, Katherine brought the conversation round to their gifts. Both sisters were a little surprised that Domhnall had disclosed their secret to her, but Enya, in her usual empathic way, had drawn her own conclusion for his reasons.

“I, for one, am delighted that Domhnall has told ye. Ye are going tae be family after all.”

“What she means tae say,” Thora smirked, “is that she’s glad she doesnae have tae spend unnecessary effort trying tae hide it from ye any longer.”

Katherine giggled, while Enya protested at such an accusation.

“That isnae what I meant at all.”

But Thora did not recant her statement, and clearly enjoyed teasing her sister, for the wide smile did not fall from her face.

When the laughter had faded, Katherine said, “Does it not feel strange, having such abilities?”

Thora shook her head. “Nae anymore. I cannae say it was like that at the beginning. I was young when I began having strange dreams. Me maither and faither thought they were night terrors, and consulting Brianna fer her advice, I was given a tonic tae help me sleep. It worked fer a little while, until one day, I wasnae asleep when they happened. It was only then, that me maither kent a gift had been passed down tae me. O’ course,” Thora smiled as she reminisced, “it didnae feel like a gift at the time.”

“I’m sure it didn’t,” Katherine agreed. She then looked at Enya and said, “What about you, Enya? When did you know you have a gift?”

“Mine came much later than the others. Ye must remember, Katherine, none o’ us kent what gifts we might receive, if any at all. It’s nae like I was putting me hands on people, expecting them tae be healed.”

“Yer gift scared ye, more than mine did me,” Thora added as she gazed at her sister.

“Aye, it did. I remember the exact moment it happened. I was ten years old, and beginning tae wonder if I was tae be the only one o’ me siblings without a gift. They had all discovered their powers by then. Thora and I were out in the gardens playing.”

“Tag,” Thora said confidently. “That’s how I fell.”

“Och, aye.” Enya nodded. “I was chasing Thora when she tripped and fell, cutting her knee. I crouched down beside her and put my hand on her leg tae tak’ a better look. Suddenly,” Enya’s eyes widened, “the cut began disappearing.”



Thora was smiling and nodding at Enya's recollection. "Ye went screaming off tae maither, leaving me there in utter shock."

"I did, didnae I?" Enya giggled.

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“Then Maither arrived, with ye holding her hand, scared half tae death.”

Katherine listened intently, hanging onto every word of their story.

“I’m not surprised you were frightened,” she said. “You were only a little girl.”

“Maither had a wonderful comforting way about her,” Enya said whimsically. “A few days later, I was completely obsessed with me newfound gift, and went around trying tae heal the smallest o’ cuts and grazes.”

“Only, we werenae allowed tae tell anyone outside o’ the family circle,” Thora explained. “Maither and Faither were adamant about that.”

Katherine frowned. “So, no one else in the castle knows?”

She was surprised to hear that, for she was certain Domhnall had shown his abilities in front of his men. Besides, how were they supposed to keep such a huge thing a secret. It wasn’t just one of them who held a gift, it was all of them.

“They dae now,” Enya said.

“But only a few. Nae everyone,” Thora clarified. “Domhnall’s men ken, fer our brother struggles tae control his emotions, and particularly in battle, he has been unable tae contain his fearsome strength.”

Katherine was not surprised to hear that Domhnall struggled to control his emotions, she had witnessed with her own eyes his formidable and unnatural strength.

“Our gifts are nae as obvious,” Enya added, “and thus, there are only a small number o’ people in the castle who ken about the rest o’ us. The gifts Thora, Kai and Magnus possess are far easier hidden. And while mine isnae obvious, I still need tae use Brianna and the fact that I am a healer tae cloak me abilities.”

“I will admit,” Katherine said, now even more mesmerized by their powers, “until I came to Scotland, I had never heard of such a thing. There is talk of witches, of course, but it is hardly the same thing.”

Thora and Enya both gave her the same knowing look. “I wouldnae be so sure,” Enya said.

Katherine’s jaw fell open. “Really? Are they not just women dabbling with the occult?”

Thora smiled. “Is that what ye think o’ us?”

Shaking her head diligently, Katherine said, “Of course, not.”

“And yet, how are we different?” Thora continued.

While the twins gazed at her, waiting for her to answer, Katherine struggled to come up with a reply. She had been astonished to discover that the MacLeod family had powers, but now, even more so, as she realized that perhaps those poor women who were tortured and sentenced to death possessed the very same.

“I can hardly believe it,” she gasped.

The twins smiled at her, and patting her hand, Enya said, “And yet, it is so, dear sister.”

The conversation continued on; Katherine fully invested in the topics they discussed. It was only the clock striking the hour that reminded her that she had somewhere else to be, and swiftly feigning a yawn, she excused herself, telling the twins that she was tired. When they had bid her goodnight, Katherine slipped up to her room and readied herself to leave.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

There were no carts leaving after dark, and thus, Katherine had to get creative with the truth once she had made her way to the gates.

“There is a lady I must speak to from the village,” she told one of the burly men.

“Are ye going alone, me lady? ‘Tis dangerous tae be out in these parts o’ late, what with the recent attacks.”

“She is meeting me on the road,” Katherine said quickly. “The woman is a seamstress. She is making my wedding dress, and thus, she needs to see me for a fitting.”

It was a downright lie, of course. Her wedding dress was hanging in the closet in her bedchamber. But as the guard nodded, his eyes seem to glaze over, and Katherine had to wonder if he had the first clue of what she was talking about. Perhaps that worked in her favor, for without any fuss, they opened the Jacob gate, a small gate set into the large wooden one, and let her pass.

She carried no torch, and followed the path by the light of the moon. It was not yet full, but it soon would be. If she hadn’t known that the recent attacks had actually been orchestrated by her brother, perhaps she would have been more frightened.

Even with her warm cloak wrapped about her person, the bitter cold of the night

nipped at the exposed skin of her cheeks. And as confident as she had sounded to the guard, the long eerie shadows of the trees and their branches gave her cause to shiver and hurry along even faster.

Her nerves were already frayed, having to lie not only to the twins, but to her betrothed's own men. The wind blowing through the leaves, and the creaking boughs in the darkness of the night, only amplified her anxiety.

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Walking down the cobbled street that ran through the village, Katherine was alert to anyone seeing her, and she pulled her cloak even further forward to cover her face. There were few about at such a time, that was until she neared the tavern, where the rowdy sounds and lively music danced through the windows and out onto the night air. Moving across the street, she kept to the shadows, praying that the drunken men stumbling about outside would not notice her.

Her trick worked, and with the sounds fading behind her, she carried on, now leaving the village and heading up to the well, where she had instructed Reginald to meet her.

This journey does seem far longer than the last time I travelled it in a cart. Of course, it does.

Veering off the path, she took the small track that led to the well, and no sooner had she arrived, than Reginald and two others emerged from the trees, just as they had last time.

Even by the small light of the moon, however, she could see his cold, disdainful expression. Knowing her brother, she felt her heart sink and her stomach clench. Any hope of reasoning with him swiftly disappeared along with the idea that he might even consider what she had to say.

“Katherine,” he snapped, clearly not happy to see her.

“Hello, Reginald. Thank you for meeting me.”

Baring his teeth, he said, “I am surprised you are fit for such a visit after your

stupidity the other day. What could you possibly have hoped to achieve, running into a fight of such ferocity with grown men? And to what end? To save the laird?" He glared at her. "Am I to be taken for a fool? Clearly, we are not aiming for the same result, sister."

Given that he had raised the subject, Katherine took her opportunity for fear she might not get it again.

"You don't understand," she began. "Things have changed. I tried to tell you the other day, but you would not listen. I do not believe that Domhnall killed our father. We have grown closer over?—"

"You do not believe," he spat. "And what evidence are you going to produce to verify such a claim, or is it simply your heart taking over your common sense?"

"Reginald—"

"Silence," he bellowed. "I have not spent copious amounts of time and money to listen to the whinings of a woman who has been blinded by the charms of a wretched Scotsman. I can hardly believe your words, sister. You would choose this man over your own family? After everything I have done for you, you would now betray me and our family name?"

Katherine was so astonished at Reginald's raging anger that she had no words with which to reply. With her eyes wide and her mouth open, she could only stare at him, partly shocked, partly frightened. Never before had she seen such anger, and particularly, not aimed at her.

For as long as she could remember, he had been cold, distant, unaffectionate, but this was a completely different side of him. She was also feeling confusion. Why was he so determined to destroy Domhnall and his entire family? Why would he not take one

moment to consider that the man she had grown to love might actually be innocent?

“Rest assured, Katherine. If you do not follow through with this plan, I will make certain that Laird MacLeod is made fully aware of your part in all of this. He and all his siblings will discover that while you have been in the castle, playing happy families, your real reason for being there has been to spy on them all.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Katherine gasped, now dreading what all of them might think of her if they ever discovered the truth.

“Oh, but I would. I assume, given the circumstances of their parent’s death, that they are already not fond of the English. Imagine how they will react when they discover that you are spilling their secrets to the king.”

“That isn’t true,” she hissed.

“And who do you think they will believe? You, or a letter from a concerned noble, worrying for their safety?” he spat.

He had her to rights, and she knew it. Domhnall had already stated his hatred of the attack. That, coupled with the guilt he suffered over his parent’s death was like wood doused in oil. It would take only a spark to set him ablaze. A spark her brother was clearly willing to ignite.

Katherine gazed at her brother with new eyes, as though he were a stranger standing in front of her. For how long had she veiled his true identity? How long had she ignored what she truly knew? Even in her frightened stupor, it occurred to her that this was her brother’s true state. A cruel, evil man who would sell out his own sister to get his way.

And yet, what was she to do? She was in love with Domhnall, and the wedding was



now only days away. Add to that the connections she had made with the twins, and the affection she had grown to have for Magnus. Reginald was willing to sacrifice all of that to get his own way. They would never look at her the same way again. And in truth, could she really deny that she was there to spy on them?

No. I cannot.

While her thoughts were a cascading mess, voices carried across the night air. Voices that were heading in their direction.

Grabbing her arm so tightly that Katherine winced, Reginald pulled her close to his face, and gritting his teeth, he whispered angrily. “You know what will happen if you do not do as I ask, Katherine. The choice is yours. Your time is running out.”

Roughly, he pushed her away again. While she panted and rubbed her arm to try and ease the pain, Reginald and his men hurried into the trees and out of sight. Taking a moment to gather herself, Katherine eventually left the well, and walked out onto the path.

As she was nearing the castle walls and Katherine was wondering if she could get back in with the same excuse as before, she heard some approaching horses.

“Katherine?”

Spinning at the sound of Kai’s voice, Katherine could hardly believe her ears. The twins had told her he had left to collect a friend who was attending the wedding, but what were the chances that it would be his approach that had scared her brother away?

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He walked beside his horse, while the woman beside him, walked beside hers. Clearly, they were giving their beasts a rest. That, or they had just decided to walk instead of ride.

“Hello, Kai,” she said, pinning a smile on her face, and doing her best to try and calm her beating heart.

“What the devil are ye doing out here at this time o’ night?” he said, once he reached her.

The three fell into step and continued walking.

“Oh, I just needed some air.”

He gave her a look of disbelief. “And clearly, there is nay air anywhere Behind the safety of the castle walls,” he teased.

Katherine laughed, but did not elaborate. No doubt, he had questions, but she was under no obligation to provide him with the answers.

Looking at the very pretty woman walking beside him, Katherine said, “Are you not going to introduce us?”

“O’ course. Where are me manners? Katherine, this is Ava MacDonald. Ava,” he gestured from one woman to the other, “this is Lady Katherine de Beaumont. Me braither’s soon-to-be wife.” He paused and frowned. “Unless, ye’ve killed him while I’ve been away.” He looked at her intently, still clearly teasing her. “Ye havenae

killed him, have ye?”

Katherine beamed a grin, and feeling the heavy tension slip away, the tension that had doused her soul only moments before, she shook her head. “I assure you. Your brother is alive and well.”

“Darn it,” Kai said, snapping his fingers.

“Are you ever serious?” Katherine asked.

“Nae if I can help it. Seriousness is a disease o’ the miserable, and I am determined nae tae catch it.”

Katherine now looked at Ava. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“And I, ye, me lady,” Ava replied in a beautifully soft voice.

“Please, just call me Katherine.”

Ava smiled and nodded, but said little more. Her long golden hair was tied in a braid that draped in front of one shoulder. She was pretty, and yet, her eyes held something within that Katherine found intriguing. As though, even at her young age, for she imagined she might even be younger than Katherine at twenty-three years old, she had dealt with a lifetime of experience.

Rather than slender, she appeared lean, in fact, almost athletic, and yet, as she walked, she still appeared graceful. The light dusting of freckles over her nose and cheeks gave her an almost childlike appearance, but Katherine sensed she was anything but.

As the three continued towards the castle, the conversation was a mixture of Kai and

Katherine, for Ava spoke very little. In fact, she was the complete opposite of Kai. While he was outgoing, and clearly a charmer, Ava portrayed a far demurer character. It made Katherine wonder how they could be friends at all. And yet, she did not doubt it, for during the conversation, and particularly witnessing their shared laughter and glances, their closeness was evident.

As they reached the castle, Katherine made certain that Kai and the horses were between her and the guards. She did not need any awkward questions highlighting her lies. The lies she had told each and every one of them. The lies she would need to continue telling, for fear of what Reginald might do.

Bidding goodnight to Ava and Kai, Katherine made great haste to her bedchamber, terrified of being discovered, particularly by the twins. Once inside and alone, she flopped down onto her bed in the most unladylike fashion, trying to make any sense out of her racing thoughts.

What am I going to do? What am I going to do?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

After breakfast the following morning, Domhnall had made his way to his study. Apart from wanting to read over the latest reports that were coming in from the scouts, he also wanted to ensure that everything was on track for the wedding.

In four days, he and Katherine would become man and wife. It was bizarre to imagine how much had changed in his mind from the moment she had arrived until then. Rather than an obligation, he now looked forward to their union, and from what he could tell, from Katherine's own words and actions, she too, was now far more at ease with the arrangement.

Before all that had happened between them, he had imagined he would not care at all

about his English wife. Now he wanted to spend the rest of his life being Katherine's protector. Loving her, wrapping her up in a bubble, and letting no harm come to her ever again.

Finished with the reports and the organization of the wedding, he sat back in his chair and contemplated the recent attacks. The scouts were having little success in their endeavors, and thus, he was no closer to discovering who was orchestrating them, or to what end.

Missives had arrived from the guests he had messaged, all telling him the same thing. They were arriving for the wedding, and they knew nothing of any plan to try and overthrow his lairdship.

They're hardly going tae admit it, if it is them.

His inquiry had been a long shot at best. All those invited were either close allies, friends, or strong acquaintances, none of whom had any reason or desire to inflict what he had experienced twice now. Besides, the fact that his attackers were English still niggled in the back of his mind. If it was an effort to overthrow him, and if the attacks were backed by any Scottish clan, it had to be an enemy. Who they were, however, was a mystery to him.

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After some time considering the situation, Domhnall pushed himself from behind his desk and left the study. There was only so much time he was willing to assign to something that he could do little about. At least for now.

“Where are ye heading tae with such a determined stride?” Kai asked when they met in the corridor near the great hall.

“I’m in search o’ Katherine. Have ye seen her?”

“Aye,” Kai replied, nodding his head toward the entrance. “She’s out taking a stroll in the gardens with Enya, Thora, and Ava. They are discussing the Yule banquet.”

A teasing smile grew on Domhnall’s lips. “And how was yer journey with the delightful daughter o’ Laird MacDonald?”

Kai smirked. “Wouldnae ye like tae ken.”

Domhnall chuckled. “Actually, I’m nae sure I would. I ken ye too well.”

Kai grinned, and then, the smile slipped from his lips. “What word from the scouts?”

After Kai had arrived back last night, Domhnall and Magnus had apprised him of the situation. Kai had expressed guilt for not being there to help, but Domhnall had reassured him that his presence in the castle would have made little difference given the attack had happened outside the castle walls.

He and Magnus had then told Kai what they planned to do as the wedding neared. In

fact, the plan had been implemented that very morning, for there were guards already dressed in commoner's clothes, currently wandering around the castle grounds, alert and ready for anything or anyone that looked like they didn't belong.

"Naething o' any use so far," Domhnall replied. "But I have faith we'll discover something soon."

Kai nodded. "Let's hope that happens 'afore another attack."

After leaving Kai, Domhnall headed outside to find the woman who was soon to become his wife. The wind was bitter, but he hardly noticed. He had long become accustomed to the winters on the island he called home.

It didn't take long to find them, all four women wrapped up warm in cloaks, hats and scarves.

"Good day tae ye all," Domhnall said, greeting them courteously. "Ava, it is good tae see ye again. I was sorry tae hear yer faither, maither and sister will nae be able tae mak' the journey."

The young lass smiled and nodded. "They send their best wishes, me laird. Faither is ill, and hasnae been able tae get out o' bed fer a week and me maither wanted tae make sure he's all right. Lyla is visiting our family on the mainland."

Domhnall frowned. "I am sorry tae hear that. I will be sure tae write him a missive." He then turned to Katherine. "I wonder if I might have a word with ye, Katherine."

At his words, Katherine frowned, as though worried at his request. Her reaction surprised him a little, but wanting to reassure her, he said, "All is fine. Only, with our wedding in just a few days, I would like tae tak' ye intae the village."

That seemed to pacify her, for the frown dissolved, and, bidding her farewells to the others, she took his offered hand as he led her away.

“Why are we going into the village?” Katherine asked.

Domhnall gazed down at her with a knowing smile. “Ye’ll see.”

Once in the village, they dismounted, Domhnall taking the two horses and tying them to a post.

“Are you going to tell me what we’re doing here?” Katherine said, as they began to walk down the cobbled street.

“Ye’re as impatient as ye are stubborn, dae ye ken that?” he teased.

She smiled, but unlike the times before, her expression did not reach her eyes.

“There is something troubling ye,” he said.

Katherine looked surprised and shook her head. “The only thing I’m worried about is where we are going.”

He gave her a long look, trying to decipher if that was the truth, and then nodded. Of the many things he had discovered about her of late, her need to be in control was a high contender. Afterall, had she not been controlled by everyone else for the entirety of her life?

He turned down into another street and continued on, the creases on Katherine’s brow deepening at every step, which amused him greatly. Eventually, at the very end of the row of small cottages, he came to a stop.



Turning to her, he said, “Are ye ready?”

“That all depends on what I’m supposed to be ready for?”

He grinned again. “Ye’ll see.”

“Oh, my God, you are so frustrating.”

Domhnall only chuckled, and then lifting his hand, he knocked on the door, where a lovely Yule wreath had been hung.

James Boyd appeared from behind it, his lined face betraying his many years, his fingers blackened with ink.

“Good day tae ye, James,” Domhnall said.

“Me laird,” James replied, bowing reverently. “Please. Come in.”

Domhnall introduced Katherine and James to each other. With the pleasantries over, James then turned and led them inside. Asusual, with these small abodes, Domhnall had to bend his head to fit through the doorways.

It was as they arrived in the main room, that he heard Katherine gasp, for before them sat all the tools of the old man’s trade.

“I am getting a tattoo?” she whispered with surprised delight.

Domhnall smiled. “It is the last thing on yer list.”

He watched her face as that same realization came to her, and then turning to him, she said, “I can hardly believe it. I have wanted it so much for so long, but I never imagined I’d ever get the opportunity to do it.”

“I always keep me promises, Katherine.”

“Please, sit,” James said, gesturing to the chairs beside them.

He then turned and began preparing his tools, while Katherine, who slowly lowered herself down while watching the old man, now looked more than a little terrified.

After another minute passed, James then turned to Katherine.

“Now, me lady. What image is it that ye’re looking fer?”

Katherine paused for a moment, glanced at Domhnall with a slight smile, and then turned back to speak with James. “I don’twant an image. I’d like a word. I’d like the word fire tattooed on my skin.”

“Very well.” James nodded. “And where dae ye want this word?”

Pulling her sleeve back, Katherine pointed to the inside of her forearm. “There.”

The old man nodded again.

Upon hearing her request, Domhnall felt a warmth travel through his body, a feeling of connection towards her that if asked to explain, he knew he could not put into words. When Katherine turned to look at him, her face glowing at her decision, Domhnall beamed a smile at her, the love he felt for her pulsing out of every part of him.

Of course, he knew why she desired the word. It was the reason he was experiencing the sensations that now flooded through him. He was reminded of that day they had spent in the cave, when they talked about their love being like the fire. But it was so much more than that.

She had expressed her intensity of how much she loved him, trusted him, and wanted to be with him. It encompassed the fierce passion they both shared for one another. But he was also aware that it symbolized the strength that had grown inside her since her arrival in the Highlands. Gone was the cramped and closed-in English lady. She had abandoned that hampering shroud and now lived with the knowledge that she was free from all the restrictions that had held her back her whole life.

Over the next half hour, Katherine winced and groaned as the needle pierced her skin over and over again. While Domhnall held her hand to try and comfort and support her, it took all his strength not to put a stop to it. The only thing that held him back was the knowledge of how desperate Katherine was to have this last item on her list completed.

Afterwards, when it was all over, Domhnall paid James, and even though she was still clearly in pain, Katherine landed a kiss on the old man's cheek and thanked him profusely.

"You will never know how happy you have made me," she told him, before they bid him farewell and left.

As they rode back, Katherine was still suffering.

"We need tae get Enya tae tak' a look at that," Domhnall said.

But Katherine shook her head. "I'm fine. The pain will pass."

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He paid her no heed, however, and as soon as they arrived back to the castle, Domhnall gave Katherine no chance to protest as he whisked her through the corridors in search of Enya.

When they eventually found her in the drawing room, his sister could not hide her surprise upon seeing Katherine's arm.

"A tattoo!" she gasped.

"Yes." Katherine nodded, smiling through her pain. "It's what I've always wanted."

Enya shared a glance with Domhnall who wisely remained silent. Upon getting no reaction from her brother, Enya sat Katherine down on a nearby chair and tenderly placed her hands upon the deeply reddened skin.

"Oh," Katherine cried. "What a strange sensation."

Enya beamed a smile. "Ye'll get used tae it after a few times."

To that, Katherine came back. "Well, I'm hoping I'm not so clumsy that I'll need you all that often."

When Enya lifted her hands, Katherine's skin looked far better, and appearing astonished, Katherine could only gawk at it. Even though she knew of Enya's gift, it appeared that the experience of being healed by her still amazed her.

"Thank you, Enya," she said, after running her fingers back and forth over her tattoo.

“Ye’re welcome. And by the way.” His sister nodded to the ink. “It looks great.”

“Right. And now, we have other business tae attend tae,” Domhnall said, offering his hand to Katherine.

“We do?”

But Domhnall didn’t answer, and instead, led her out of the drawing room, through the corridors, up the wide staircase, until they finally arrived at his study.

Once inside, Katherine moved further into the room in the direction of the fire place, and in so doing, did not notice Domhnall locking the door.

“Actually,” she began, “it is good that we have this time together.”

She had her back to him while she spoke, but as Domhnall strode across the room towards her, he was not really listening. He had something far more pressing on his mind.

“There is something I need?—”

But sensing his approach, she spun around and suddenly looked terrified.

“Oh,” she gasped.

He gazed down at her, watching her wide eyes flick across his face. She then blushed, for she finally realized why they were there, and then, she smiled shyly.

Without a word, he held her face and lowered his mouth to hers, feeling her fall into him as she returned his tender kiss. But his desperation grew as quickly as his passion, and slipping his tongue between her lips, he lashed it about inside her mouth,

tasting the sweetness inside.

And then, his hands fell to her body and he began tearing at her clothes. She surprised him in equal measures, for as he undressed her, she lay her hands on him and did the same.

His plaid fell from his shoulders, as her cloak was tossed onto a nearby chaise lounge. Stealing a passionate kiss, his shirt was tugged over his head, as he pulled at the ties of her corset. Their lips crashed together again while his trousers and her skirts fell to the floor at the same time. They still devoured each other while grabbing the others' under garments, until eventually, their lips parted and they stood there, facing each other, panting in their nakedness.

Scooping her up in his arms, Domhnall lowered himself to his knees and lay Katherine on the thick rug in front of the fire.

“In my life, I dinnae think I’ve set me eyes on anything as precious and beautiful,” he growled.

And he meant every word, for though there had been lasses before her, none had lit a fire within him that burned so brightly, so deeply, and so hot.

Lowering his lips, he kissed her again. Katherine snaked her arms around his neck, but he gently took hold of her wrists and pulled her arms away. While she looked disappointed, Domhnall smiled.

“I have something else planned fer ye, me love.”

Starting at her collar bone, he dragged his lips across her soft skin, delighting at the sound of the light moan that emanated from her throat. Going lower and lower, his tongue found her pert nipple, and eliciting a loud gasp from her, he flicked his tongue

over and over, feeling her writhing beneath him.



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At the same time, his hand skirted the flatness of her stomach, and pulling her legs apart, he slipped his fingers between her thighs. At feeling her soft slickness, his stomach clenched, his manhood hardened, and he let out a long, low groan.

“Och, Katherine. I will never tire of feeling ye being so ready fer me.”

Gently, he teased her, dancing his fingertips across the soft folds of her most sensitive parts.

“Please, Domhnall,” she panted, her hands lightly pushing at his shoulders as her hips writhed against his touch.

“Ye want me tae dae it again?” he said, knowing she knew exactly what he meant.

“Yes,” she gasped. “Yes.”

“Are ye aching fer me touch?” he purred teasingly, his fingers finding her tiny flower bud.

“I am,” she moaned.

“Like this?” He stroked her so softly and gently, he was barely touching her at all.

“More, please Domhnall. More.”

Hearing the frustration mixed with desire in her voice, Domhnall could tease her no more, and instead, pressed his fingers a little more, moving them gently back and

forth.

“Yes. Oh, God, yes,” she cried.

“Och, aye. Right there,” he said, knowing he now had the perfect spot.

His fingers continued to work against her, while her hands grabbed at his shoulders, her body writhed, and her breath entered her body at great speed. His teasing had heightened her senses, and he could feel her tensing already.

She was going to shatter for him far more quickly this time, and sensing how ready she was, he dropped his tongue back onto her nipple. His fingers and tongue now working in tandem on the most sensitive parts of her.

“Oh, oh, oh,” she cried, her entire body trembling.

Her moans only made his groin ache, and his manhood was now rock hard. In fact, the more she moaned, the more he struggled to contain himself.

As he brought her closer to the edge, Katherine could not help but cry out.

“Yes. Oh, God, yes.”

His groin ached so much, he thought he might explode himself, but holding back with all the strength he could muster, he felt great delight when Katherine suddenly shrieked, and her entire body spasmed.

But he could not wait a second longer, and moving swiftly on top of her, he glided into her tight, slick space, roughly thrusting back and forth. With her head thrown back, she continued to cry out with pleasure, but feeling himself building to a peak, he suddenly felt the rush of euphoria through his groin, and roaring, he emptied

himself inside of her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Katherine had left the study an hour after Domhnall had made sweet, beautiful love to her. Still reeling from the sensations, she had made her way to her bedchamber. If nothing else, she needed time to herself.

She had imagined he had wanted to discuss something about the wedding when he had taken her there earlier. In fact, before he had approached, she had been on the cusp of blurting out the dreadful plan Reginald had for him and his whole family. But that had never happened.

For the previous hour, however, Katherine had paced back and forth, wondering how she was possibly supposed to tell him the truth. Of course, she was worried for his safety, but selfishly, she was also worried about her heart.

Throwing her cloak on, and with her mind still a muddled mess, she headed out into the gardens. Yes, it was bitterly cold, but maybe that was exactly what she needed. Some clean, freezing cold fresh air to give her some perspective.

Stepping out onto the snow-covered ground, Katherine wandered far away from the castle. She needed to be entirely alone, somewhere she would not be disturbed. This was the most difficult decision she had ever had to make in her life, and with so much riding on it, she needed it to be the right one.

As it happened, the cold did little to help her. Her mind tortured her with what was right and true, but her heart battled with the overwhelming love she had for the laird.

If you tell him, he will disown you. He will never look at you again, never mind love you.

Her mind, logical and critical as always, came back with a reply of its own.

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And yet, if you don't tell him, Reginald will implement his plan. Are you willing to take that chance?

Perhaps there is a way you can put a stop to this. Perhaps you could anonymously let Domhnall know where Reginald is, and thus, he will be captured before he gets a chance to do any harm.

Which would be a wonderful plan, her mind retorted, if you actually knew where your brother was hiding.

Katherine cursed herself for not thinking to ask him the last time they had met. She could indeed, have left some anonymous note for Domhnall to find. She knew he had scouts out all over the island searching for the attackers, for she had heard Domhnall and Magnus discuss it.

Round and round the argument went in her head, but every scenario came back to the same terrifying reality. She was going to have to tell Domhnall the truth. He would hate her. She would lose the only love she had ever known, she would be miserable for the rest of her life without him, and yet, the alternative was even worse. If she didn't tell him, Reginald would murder Domhnall.

When they had first journeyed to this island together, her brother had convinced her that Laird Domhnall MacLeod was an evil man who had to pay for what he had done. At the time, she had agreed, and imagined that Reginald planned to simply destroy the clan by having it overthrown.

But her brother's intentions had always been more sinister than that. She just hadn't

seen it. Not until that day those men attacked the man she now adored, and she had been injured. Their last meeting had also opened her eyes to something else. Reginald cared little about her. He had not tried to save her on that day, and in fact, he had reprimanded her, calling her foolish and stupid.

It was mind boggling to realize that a man who had known her all her life could care less about her than a man who had known her no more than ten days. In this case, blood was indeed not thicker than water. Reginald was supposed to protect her. He was her brother, the only remaining family member she had left.

With that thought, something else bothered her. All this anger and animosity Reginald clearly displayed was supposed to come from his desire to avenge their father's death, but Katherine struggled to even believe that any longer. There had to be more to his motivation. Reginald was so hell bent on killing Domhnall, so seething with rage at him, that there had to be something else.

But what?

She had wandered far into the gardens with the castle now a good distance away. Trees surrounded her, their branches heavy with snow fall, and naked of leaves. Gazing up whimsically, she lifted her hand and gently brushed a branch, watching the snowflakes float lightly to the ground.

I will never see this garden in the full bloom of spring. In fact, once I have told Domhnall the truth, I will never see the Isle of Skye again.

Her heart ached at the thought of what the twins, Magnus and Kai would think of her. Even though she had been there only a short while, the siblings had already accepted her into their family. Their warm, loving, funny family. And what would she get when she returned to England? The pleasure of Reginald's company, her cold, distant brother being her only companion.

Back to conformity she would go. Back to the cage, where women did not speak, and were not heard. And all the while, she would be forced to nurse her broken heart, for no other man could elicit from her the love she felt for him.

I will remain a spinster, for no other will compare. Besides, how could I possibly deserve happiness after what I have done?

A snapping twig behind her made her spin around. She half expected to see Domhnall standing there. He did have a habit of arriving in places she least expected. Instead, she saw no one, which completely confused her, for she was certain there had been someone there.

Suddenly, someone grabbed her from behind. Before she had a chance to scream, a cloth pressed against her mouth, and she balked as a strange and horrid smell crawled into her nostrils. Her arms flailed, but a few seconds later, she felt dizzy, her arms held no power, and her world went deathly black.

Though her eye lids were heavy, Katherine woke to the sound of hushed whispers nearby. By the feel of it against her body, she was sitting on a chair. Wherever they were was also deadly cold, not unlike being outside. But where she was, she had no clue, mainly because she could barely open her eyes to see.

It took great effort, but when she finally managed to move her eyelids, she was shocked to see Reginald standing there, his arms firmly folded across his chest, murmuring to one of his men.

Katherine tried to look about her without moving her head. She had no idea how long she had been unconscious, nor where she was, but with the close proximity of the surrounding walls, it appeared they were in some tiny outhouse.

“Katherine,” Reginald growled. “You are awake. Good.”

He still kept his voice low, which confused her, and moving her head around, she noticed that there was nothing else in the building apart from herself and two other men.

“What the hell do you think you are doing?” Katherine spat, now angry at the realization that it had been her brother and his men who had grabbed her and drugged her to the point of unconsciousness.

Reginald stepped forward, raised his hand, and slapped her hard across the cheek.

“Ah,” she cried, swiftly lifting her hand to her face.

“Remember who you are talking to,” he spat. “I am your brother. Not one of these brainless Scottish thugs.”

While her cheek stung badly, Katherine was too busy reeling from the fact that her brother had actually struck her, for not once before had he ever lifted his hand to her.

“Now,” he continued on as though nothing had happened. “We have a small window of opportunity, and I intend to make good use of it. We need to act quickly. Your wedding is in a few days, and if we dally, you will be forced to marry that ogre.”

An overwhelming feeling nearly overtook her, for she wanted to scream from the rooftops that she loved Domhnall and wanted to marry him. But her survival instincts kicked in, and instead, she remained completely quiet.

“My plan is two-fold,” Reginald said, now pacing back and forth. “First, I need you to help with the abduction of Laird MacLeod. I have to have him in my grasp for the second part to work.”



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Katherine's eyes flew wide at his words, but worried that her brother would see her shock, and that he might react once more with violence, she dulled her expression, watching him while trying to maintain a lifeless face.

"After that, we can blackmail the others. No doubt, his siblings will give anything for his safe return, and I do think deeds to these lands would be a fine exchange."

Reginald suddenly spun and stared at her.

"What do you think, Katherine?"

He was testing her, she knew that. The brother she had always thought she had clearly did not exist, and now, fearful for her own life, for she had a very real feeling that he would have no qualms at all in taking hers, she had to think quickly. Agreeing with this madman just wasn't going to be enough.

"There... there are not many times he is alone," she stammered. "It is not going to be easy."

"Which is why I need you," Reginald replied, his tone as calm as though they were discussing the weather. "Now, I need to know exactly where he will be tomorrow night."

Katherine looked confused and then shook her head. "I have no idea," she replied. "He is in many places at different times of the day."

"So, supper is not at a given time?" Reginald pressed.

“Yes, but?—”

“And afterward, does he not retire to his study and play chess with Magnus, his brother?”

Katherine frowned, for she could not understand how he could possibly know that. But Reginald only smiled a cold, mirthless smile, his blue eyes piercing into hers.

“You didn’t actually believe I was going to leave my revenge to chance, did you, Katherine? That I was going to rely on you alone, a woman whose heart is as fickle as the day is long?”

Katherine felt pained at his words, but now understood that Reginald was getting his information from someone else. There was a spy in the castle, or at least, the castle grounds.

“So,” Reginald continued, “am I correct? Does the laird retire after supper?”

“Yes. Yes, he does.”

“Good. Then I will need you to ensure that that is exactly what happens tomorrow night, do you understand?”

Katherine nodded. “I do.”

“Excellent. Then it is high time that you return to the castle before anyone begins to miss you. We can’t have any one getting suspicious, can we?”

Hands grabbed at Katherine, shoving her roughly to her feet. The man behind her then took her by the arm and led her to the wooden door. Just as Katherine was about to step through it, she heard Reginald’s voice.

“Just to be clear, Katherine. If Laird MacLeod is not in his study tomorrow night after supper, his whole family will die.”

He glared at her with a steely expression.

Katherine then turned from him. Stepping out of the tiny building, she was astonished to find herself in the courtyard of the castle.

Reeling at the realization that she had never left, Katherine stumbled across the courtyard, wondering how her brother and his men had managed to get themselves past the guards at the gate, sneak around the gardens, and take her against her will. Maybe it had something to do with the spy they already had in place.

What does that matter? You have bigger problems.

And indeed, she did. But after all the time she had spent considering her options earlier, she now knew exactly what she was going to do. She did not have a choice. There was not a chance she was going to let her brother get his hands on Domhnall, no matter how badly this was going to turn out for her.

She loved him. She simply could not let him come to any harm. Clearly, her brother was a madman, and while he believed he had fooled her with his talk of blackmail and lands, it was clear Reginald wanted Domhnall dead. There would be no ransom, nor any exchange for Domhnall's life. He was in dire danger. It was now up to her to tell him so.

Avoiding eye contact with anyone in the corridors, Katherine hurried back to her bedchamber. If she was going to tell him the truth, she also wanted him to know how deeply she felt about him. It was doubtful he would want to hear that after what she had to say, but she was determined to write him a letter.

It would be something. Something of herself that she could leave behind. He would likely hate her for the rest of his life, but he had to know how she felt. How sorry she was that she had lied to him. How she wished she could have had the courage to tell him the truth before now. How he had shown her how to be the person she had always aspired to be, and how she had only been able to do it with his love, encouragement, and support. How she had never loved a man before she had met him, and how her heart would be broken for the rest of her days without him.

Hurrying down the corridor with all these thoughts flying through her mind, she reached her bedchamber. Barging through the door, she came to a sudden halt, gasping a great breath in.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:28 am*

Across the room, Domhnall stood at the window. Upon her entrance, he turned and looked at her. But it was not his scowling glare that had her body now trembling, and her heart thumping in her chest. It was the fact that, as she gazed down to his hand, she knew the letter he held was one she had received from Reginald.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Domhnall remained completely silent as Katherine came to a sudden stop in her bedchamber. She remained there, standing perfectly still, her wide eyes glued to the letter Domhnall held in his hand. As hard as she tried, she could not hide her emotions, and horror now danced across her face.

He waited for a long moment, watching her body trembling. He wondered if she would speak, and when, after another minute, she still remained silent, he came to the realization that it was he who was going to have to begin the discussion.

“Magnus came tae speak tae me earlier,” he said, his tone perfectly calm.

He didn’t feel perfectly calm, but, in a twist of irony, these last few weeks spent with Katherine had opened a door to a new way of being, and, along with that had been a growing ability to control his raging emotions.

“He said ye and he had conversed in the corridor,” Domhnall continued. “As ye were speaking, he caught something in yer thoughts. Something about a letter.”

Domhnall paused, waiting for her to protest with anger that Magnus had read her mind without her knowledge. But when she remained silent, a pain now dancing in

her eyes, Domhnall carried on.

“At first, I was worried. I thought that ye might be struggling with an issue that ye were too ashamed tae share. That perhaps, ye were in trouble. I wanted tae help ye, as I have tried tae dae during our time together.”

He sighed, feeling the weight of his next words.

“Ye cannae imagine my astonishment when I realized that wasnae true. That I was wrong. That ye didnae need me help at all. That, in fact, all this time, ye have been lying tae me.”

“Domhnall—” she began timidly, her voice barely a whisper.

He brought his hand up sharply to silence her.

“Fer the first time in my life, I have felt complete and content. I was convinced that I had finally found the perfect person tae spend the rest o’ me days with.”

“You have?—”

“Clearly nae,” he spat.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen. I?—”

“O’ course ye did,” he roared, making Katherine jump with fright. “I have the evidence right here.”

He shook the letter violently in his hand, feeling his control slipping, but worried at the same time, what he might do if he lost a grip on his emotions entirely.

Taking another deep breath, he clenched his fist and tried to calm himself. His heart pained him, while his stomach felt as though a knife had been plunged into it. Ordinarily, he suffered one emotion at a time. And, ordinarily, that was difficult enough for him to deal with. But now, it felt like every negative feeling he had ever experienced was desperately trying to burst into a torrent he could not hold back.

Pain, anger, grief, sadness, heartbreak, loss, despair, anguish... the list went on.

Had he discovered she did not love him only, his pain might have been less. Maybe. But the knowledge that everything that had happened between them had been a lie, a façade, a trick – that was just too much to take. She had betrayed him in the worst possible way.

“I’m so sorry, Domhnall,” she cried. “I wanted to tell you but?—”

“I dinnae want tae hear it,” he spat. “There is naething ye can possibly say that will mak’ me see this from yer point o’ view.”

“But, Domhnall?—”

“Nay!” he roared again.

Looking her directly in the eye, the pain in his chest growing by the second, he continued. “I must have been out o’ me mind tae believe I could trust ye. Ye’re English, after all. I should’ve kent better.”

“I love you, do you not understand that?” Katherine said, her voice trembling.

Domhnall glared at her and shook his head. “How can ye say such a thing? One doesnae betray the people they love, Katherine. Ye taught me how tae be vulnerable. I opened me heart tae ye. And even after I told ye the way me parents were

slaughtered, what did ye dae? Ye used all that against me.”

“No. I... I didn’t want to do it. You have to know that.”



“The only thing I ken fer sure is that I never want tae lay eyes on ye again.”

Did he really know that?

No, not at all. He loved her. But what did that matter now? She clearly did not love him in return. He would have to deal with that loss later, when the rage had subsided. For now, sending her away was the only way he could cope. His heart was breaking into a thousand pieces, but the anger inside would keep him from being destroyed completely.

Katherine brought her hand swiftly to her mouth as a sob escaped from her throat. But all the tears in the world could not save her now. She had deceived him enough. He wasn't going to fall for her attempt to manipulate him a moment longer. He had already proved himself to be the biggest fool for falling for her act. Now he knew the truth, his walls were back in place, and he would make certain no other could ever break through them again.

“My scouts have discovered that yer braither is on the Isle o' Skye. I wouldnae have believed it if I hadnae seen it with me own eyes,” he shook the letter again, “but it is evident now, that, thanks tae the information ye have been feeding him, he was able tae attack me on nae one, but two occasions.”

“I didn't feed him any information,” Katherine whispered.

“Dinnae lie tae me,” he bellowed. “I am nae a fool. Ye were there, Katherine. The only way yer braither could possibly have kent that I was in the village on that day was by yer word.”

“No!” Katherine said, shaking her head determinedly.

But Domhnall only shook his head slowly, and heaved a frustrated sigh. There was little point arguing with her. He couldn’t reason with someone who could not take responsibility for their actions, even when they had been so obviously found out.

“I dinnae want tae start a war,” he growled. “I will leave ye and yer braither unharmed on the condition that ye leave this island and never return.”

“What about the wedding?” Katherine breathed.

“There will be nay wedding. Nae now, nae ever.”

“But, the king,” she cried.

His eyes narrowed as he stared at her. “Ye are clearly more dismayed at disappointing the tyrant who rules yer country than ye are about disappointing me, but then, that should come as nay surprise, should it?”

“Domhnall, that’s not true. I?—”

“Please, Katherine,” he barked.

Domhnall then took a deep breath in, and using every ounce of strength he had left, he pushed down all the feelings that threatened to overtake him.

Speaking in a far calmer voice, he continued. “Please, stop. It’s over. It’s all over. I will send word tae the king mesel’ and tell him that I hold all responsibility fer ruining the alliance.”

“But you can’t,” she gasped. “He’ll turn on you.”

“Which will be me problem tae deal with, nae yers. There is only one thing ye can dae fer me now, Katherine, and that is tae leave this castle, leave this island, and dinnae let me see yer face again. Ye need tae go.”

Domhnall did not join the rest of the family in the great hall for supper. No doubt, news had already spread throughout the castle, for Katherine had hurriedly left not an hour after he had demanded her departure. The last thing he felt like doing was facing questions from his brothers and sisters. They would find out the details of what had happened soon enough.

Instead, he hid himself away in his study, his only companion a bottle of whisky that sat beside him on a table as he stared into the fire. His mind was a whirl of thoughts as he played back the times he and Katherine had spent together. Even though he had found the correspondence between herself and her brother, he still could hardly believe they had not been true, meaningful, real.

But how could they have been? Clearly, she had played her part from the moment she had arrived. From pretending to be angry that she was there to slowly slipping into his life, and then, his heart. Not once had he suspected that it had all been a front to get information for her brother. Not once had he imagined she could betray him so brutally.

An hour or so later, when he had slipped into some trance-like stupor of despair, the ache in his heart so heavy it was nearly unbearable, Magnus sat down beside him, making him jump at his sudden presence.

“I did knock,” Magnus defended.

“Right. Right,” he said, still bringing himself back to the present moment.

Magnus poured himself the last dram from the bottle on the table. With the empty

bottle in hand, he said, “It looks like we’re going tae need another o’ these.”

“Aye,” Domhnall said absently.

“So, are ye going tae?—”

A knock on the study door interrupted him, but Domhnall didn’t speak. Instead, Magnus called out for whomever it was to enter.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:28 am*

“So, this is where the gathering’s at,” Kai’s voice carried across the room from behind him.

A moment later, Kai had brought another chair to the fire, while Magnus returned from the dresser with another bottle and glass. After topping up Domhnall’s glass, he turned to fill Kai’s.

“How are ye, braither?” Kai said, his tone a little more serious.

“How dae ye think I am?” Domhnall growled, his eyes still watching the dancing flames.

“We are here fer ye,” Magnus said carefully. “Ye ken that.”

“Aye,” Domhnall said, his tone betraying the fact that he could not care less.

For a while, the three sat quietly, the crackling and hissing logs the only sound to be heard. His brothers were there to support him, as they always had been, but Domhnall was in no mood to converse. He had retired to his study to be left alone so he could mope in peace.

“Is she fully away?” Magnus said, his question aimed at Kai.

“The scouts are following her and her brother as far as Drynoch,” Kai replied. “Then they’ll have tae rest fer the night, fer they’ll likely be able tae go nay further with the lack o’ light.”

Magnus sighed. "They'll have another day's travel tae the coast after that,"

"Aye," Kai agreed.

His brothers fell silent once more, each of them sipping at their drinks.

"I still cannae believe it," Kai said a few minutes later. "I mean, she had us all fooled."

"Hmm," Magnus replied.

By his tone, Domhnall sensed doubt, and turning to Magnus, he furrowed his brows. "What?"

Magnus shrugged, "It's naething."

"What?" Domhnall pressed, his voice a little harsher.

His brother looked him directly in the eye. "I'm just struggling tae accept it, that's all." He sighed, seemingly trying to figure something out in his head. "What did she say tae ye when ye confronted her?"

Domhnall turned away and looked back into the fire. "She said naething."

"Naething?" Magnus balked. "She didnae even try and defend hersel'?"

"I didnae give her a chance. I didnae want tae hear any more lies. I've heard enough o' them fer a lifetime."

"Right," Magnus said, frustration simmering in his tone.

“Ye think ye could have done better?” Domhnall snapped. “Ye think ye could have been betrayed as I was and could have handled it differently?”

“Nay, braither. And I cannae imagine how pained ye are,” Magnus replied. “I’m just struggling tae believe that it was all an act.”

“Why?” Domhnall growled. “Tae begin with, she’s a woman. They’re slippery creatures at best. They’re sly and cunning and experts in manipulating us. And then there’s the fact that she’s English. The blood running through her veins is inherited from a nation who’ve hated the Scots fer a very long time.”

Magnus shook his head. “I was privy tae her thoughts on several occasions, Domhnall, and I cannae agree tae all that ye’re saying.”

Domhnall now glared at Magnus. “What are ye talking about? Sure, it was ye who told me about the letter.”

“Aye,” Magnus nodded, “but at the time, I couldnae have imagined what destruction it would bring.”

“There ye go,” he argued. “Then she fooled ye too.”

“Nay,” Magnus shook his head, “I dinnae think she did. I think we’re missing something.”

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“As dae I,” Kai added. “I ken I didnae spend as much time with her as ye two, but I ken lasses, and I ken when lasses are lying.”

“What about that time she and I sparred together,” Magnus said. “She couldnae have kent I could read her mind, but all she was worried about was upsetting ye, offending ye. Surely, if the woman hated ye, she wouldnae have cared.”

“It was an act,” Domhnall barked.

“In her head?” Magnus retorted.

Domhnall huffed because he had no reply to that. As he desperately sought something else to back up what he now believed, he said, “What about the day I was attacked outside the village?” He gestured angrily. “How could her braither have kent I was going tae be there if nae fer her?”

Kai and Magnus did not have an answer to that, and feeling victorious in his argument, he continued. “I went tae see her just ‘afore I left and told her where I was going. She kent.”

Magnus’s brow furrowed then. “Hang on. Ye told her just ‘afore ye left.”

“Aye,” Domhnall replied firmly.

“Then how did she get word tae her braither so quickly? Besides the fact that she got badly hurt trying tae protect ye,” Kai jumped in.



Magnus was nodding, and clearly thinking exactly the same thing.

Domhnall opened his mouth to retaliate when he realized exactly what they were getting at. “I... I...” But he couldn’t answer, for like his brothers, he suddenly realized that it couldn’t have happened like that.

“There is nay way she could have got a message tae her braither in time fer him tae organize his men and be there the same time as ye,” Magnus said, voicing what they were all thinking.

“Then how...?” Domhnall trailed off, trying to understand how her brother had known.

“He found out some other way,” Kai said. “There’s nay other explanation.”

“Are ye saying we have a spy in the castle?” Domhnall gawked.

“Had,” Magnus replied. “I imagine it was one o’ her braither’s men. But he’s likely with them now.”

“So, Katherine was right,” Domhnall said.

“What dae ye mean?” Kai asked.

“I accused her o’ passing information on tae her braither. I told her that the two attacks had tae have come from what she’d told him. But that isnae possible. She had nay idea I was taking her horse riding that morning, and that’s when the first attack happened.”

It cannae have been her.

“Exactly,” Magnus said.

“Get out o’ me head, Magnus.”

“What?” Kai asked, desperate to know.

“Domhnall is now realizing that it couldnae have been Katherine.”

“She still betrayed me,” Domhnall snapped. “This doesnae get her off the hook.”

“Maybe nae,” Magnus countered, “but had ye let her explain hersel’, you’d ken a lot more.”

Domhnall heaved a worried sigh, and began wondering whether he hadn’t just made a colossal mistake.

But I found the letter. She was still working with her braither.

Thinking back to what he had actually read in the letter, a slow realization revealed itself.

I have concluded that you cannot get word out to me, and thus, I deduce that a meeting might be more suitable. There is a well just off the road on the other side of the village. Meet me there tomorrow at dusk.

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Had she, at any time, been able to tell her brother anything? Clearly, the letter stated she had not sent him any information at the time he had written her. But they had met, so it was possible she had relayed news to him then... but it still didn't evidence her part in the two attacks.

"Fine, she wasnae involved in the attacks, but she was still in collusion with him."

"Tae what end?" Magnus said. "If she didnae tell him where ye were going tae be, what was the point o' her being here?"

"I think that's exactly the reason she was here," Kai offered. "I just think she didnae go through with it."

Domhnall looked over at Kai, who gazed at him kindly. "I think something changed, brother," Kai continued. "I cannae ken it fer sure, but I ken this. That woman is in love with ye."

"I agree," Magnus added. "It was written all over her face. Ye can pretend tae be a lot o' things, but ye cannae make yersel' physically glow as she did when she was with ye."

Domhnall looked at his brothers for a long moment. "I want tae believe that. I want tae believe that with every part o' me soul, but..." he trailed off as the fear of his hopes being dashed pushed against allowing himself to believe it could be true.

"She could well have been forced against her will," Kai offered.

“Or, like we said earlier, she could have been on board with her braither’s plan only she didnae foresee the fact that she would actually fall in love with ye.”

It was a reasonable explanation. And, it would explain some of the signs he had noticed in her over the last few days. Her expressions of doubt and fear. Had she been on the verge of telling him the truth?

“At the very least, she deserves a chance tae defend hersel’, Domhnall,” Magnus said. “Tae tell ye her side o’ the story.”

She had tried, but he hadn’t listened. She had told him she hadn’t fed her brother information. She had told him she hadn’t wanted to work with her brother. She had told him that she loved him. But he had denied her words, shutting her down without letting her speak. Perhaps the tears that had escaped down her cheeks had been real after all.

“Where did ye say they had stopped fer the night?” Domhnall asked, looking at Kai.

“Drynoch,” Kai said excitedly.

Domhnall nodded. “Then I will journey there and find her.”

“We will come with ye, braither,” Magnus said, his face expressing satisfaction at his decision.

“Nae.” Domhnall shook his head. “I will dae this alone. It is I who jumped tae conclusions and made this mistake. It is I, alone, who needs tae rectify it.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Katherine had little to take with her, and thus, under the watchful eye of one of the

guards, for Domhnall had stormed out of her bedchamber, Katherine was packed and on her horse within an hour.

Heartbroken, and with the weight of her choices crushing her, her heart was now shattered into a million pieces, for as she and the men who had accompanied her when she had first arrived at Dunvegan were being escorted out of the castle, the dreadful fact that she would never lay her eyes on Domhnall again was tearing her apart.

How had she been so stupid? Why had she not told him the truth from the very beginning? The first attack on Domhnall had been bad enough, but the second ought to have motivated her to spill her heart out. She knew she loved him, even then, and yet, she had selfishly kept what she knew to herself. She had been too afraid of what he would think of her and what she would lose to think of warning him of her brother's intentions.

You were selfish, and now, you are reaping what you have sown.

She had wept once Domhnall had left her in the bedchamber, and now, her throat painfully tightened again as the distance between herself and the man she loved grew by the minute.

About half an hour had passed, when her eyes widened at the sight up ahead, for there was Reginald with the men he had left, now only three, waiting on her, surrounded by five more of the laird's men.

Domhnall had evidently sent even more scouts out after discovering her brother's letter, and, with a greater force searching, and knowing that he could not be far from the castle, Reginald and his men had been discovered.

As they neared them, Reginald glowered at her. He was fuming with rage, no doubt

blaming her for being found out, as well as seething with the knowledge that he would no longer be able to implement his cruel plan.

“Are you satisfied now, sister?” he hissed, when she reached him. “Look at what your feelings have caused. I should never have sent a woman to do a man’s work. Because of you, we have failed. You have failed me, and you have failed Father. I hope you’re proud of yourself.”

Katherine did not reply. There was nothing she could say that would appease his anger. Even if there had been, she would have remained silent. While she had been on board with his plan at the beginning, she now realized that her brother’s vendetta had little to do with their father. There was something else that had driven her brother in this task. Something that she would now never likely discover.

Besides, Reginald’s feelings were really the least of her worries. She had her own cross to bear. She was only grateful that, for the hours that followed, he did not speak to her again.

They travelled for a lot longer, stopping only to rest the horses and to eat the food Domhnall had arranged to have prepared for them. Even in his anger, the laird had cared for their needs, when really, he had no obligation to do so. But then, she had come to know that his abrasive nature was part of the wall he had built to protect himself. The wall she had broken down, brick by brick, only to stab him so viciously once she had him at his most vulnerable.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:28 am*

She was no better than her brother. Beneath the laird's anger, that morning, she had seen his pain, and she had quickly realized that it was she alone who had destroyed the man she pertained to love. Reginald had planned to kill the man physically, but Katherine knew she had ruined him in a different way altogether. Maybe a worse way, for if he were dead, at least he would no longer have to suffer. But he was very much alive, and so suffer he now would.

They continued on, Katherine silently weeping at the thought of her life without Domhnall in it. Her pain, too, was immense, but she deserved every second of it. No doubt, when they returned to England, there would be consequences to face, but she didn't even care. Nothing could be worse than what she currently felt. In fact, if she died that very day, it would be a relief.

When they arrived at Drynoch, the guards led them through the village, ordered them to dismount outside a tavern, and huddled them inside.

"By the laird's order," one of them said to the inn-keeper, "we need all o' yer rooms tonight."

The inn-keeper looked worried, and checking his ledger, he looked back at the guard. "I only have three rooms available."

The guard looked back at the others, clearly figuring out what he was going to do, and then turned back to the innkeeper. "That's fine. We'll tak' them."

Soon after that, Katherine found herself in a room of her own, while Reginald and his men were forced to share one of the other two.

“There’s a floor there,” he growled, jerking his head towards the room. “Mak’ good use o’ it.”

In the evening, the guards brought her food and wine. But Katherine wasn’t hungry and instead, curled herself up on the bed. More tears trickled down her cheeks as sadness continued to overwhelm her, and at some point, she closed her eyes and fell sound asleep.

“Katherine! Katherine!”

Katherine woke up with a start, her heart pounding, her eyes still blurry.

Blinking to clear her vision, she saw Reginald standing over the top of her, his brow furrowed and an urgency on his face.

“Get up. Hurry. We are leaving.”

“What?”

“Do it. Do it now!” he ordered.

Scrambling to a sitting position, her heart still thumping against her chest, she watched as Reginald hurried towards the door. Opening it, he seemed to look out, before turning back towards her. “Move!” he hissed.

Once Katherine had gathered her bag, she hurried towards him while still rubbing sleep from her eyes.

“We need to be quiet,” Reginald whispered.

Walking out of her room, Katherine gasped at the sight of the guard lying dead



outside her door, blood oozing from his body. It was the same guard who had organized their rooms. Reginald glared at her, and then, grabbing her hand, he led her down the narrow staircase.

Outside, Reginald's men were already mounted upon their horses and clearly waiting for them. Noting the moon glaring against a black sky, the bright stars its only company, Katherine deduced that it was the middle of the night. The silence of the street and lack of people backed up her conclusion.

Reginald helped her onto one of the two remaining horses, and then, heading to the front of the group, he flicked his reins, forcing his horse into a gallop. Seconds later, Katherine and the other men did the same, following Reginald out of the village at great speed.

They travelled for several hours, stopping only to rest the horses. Katherine had no idea what direction they were going in, and at one point, she asked Reginald if they were heading back to the coastal town to catch the boat back home.

"You think I am going to trust you with my plans after everything you've done," he snapped. "You are the reason my plan did not work, Katherine. You alone, sabotaged my efforts here in this god forsaken place."

Once more, her brother seethed with anger, but beneath that, there was something more. She could see it in his eyes. Something evil. It was a side to her brother she had never before seen, for even as angry as he was the last time they had met, he now seemed to be even more driven, as though the man was possessed.

A terrifying feeling rose within her at what he could be capable of, and she concluded that they were not returning at all. Why would they be running in the middle of the night, if that were the case? With that realization, even more regret began gnawing at her soul. If she had only told Domhnall the truth. But she had not, and now she

worried deeply that her brother's plan was even darker than she could ever have imagined.

Another hour of travel passed, when the man who led them, the man who had clearly been looking for something, called behind him.

"There it is," he yelled.

Katherine looked up and followed the direction in which he was pointing. There, surrounded by trees that had not been tended to in many years, was an old and clearly abandoned house. It was large and looked badly neglected. The wall surrounding it had long fallen, and by the old ivy that crawled up the walls and into the windows, she could tell the house had not been occupied for many years.

"What is this place?" Katherine asked.

"This is where we hid out when we first arrived. We came upon it by chance, but it is the perfect place to enact my plan," Reginald growled, an evil smile thinning his lips so much they practically disappeared.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:28 am*

Once inside, Katherine saw evidence of their last stay. There were water skins sitting on a table with chairs around it. A pile of newly collected logs sat beside the large fire in the living room, and bones from the animals they had clearly caught and eaten were strewn in one corner of the floor.

“Take her upstairs,” Reginald ordered one of his men. “I don’t want her causing any more trouble.”

“Yes, my lord,” the guard replied.

“No. Wait,” Katherine cried as the guard grabbed her by the arm.

“You will obey me, Katherine, or so help me, you will never see the light of another day.”

Katherine gasped at her brother’s words, and feeling suddenly stunned, she stared at Reginald in utter astonishment, even as the guard pulled her from out of his sight.

Once upstairs, he shoved her roughly into the room, stepped back into the corridor beyond, and slammed the door shut. Katherine’s eyes darted about her, taking in her new living quarters. The floor was filthy, covered in dust and leaves that had blown in through the holes in the wall where windows might once have been. Against the far wall was a wooden dresser, and on the opposite wall, a mattress lay on the floor. Other than that, the room was empty.

Exhausted from the journey, Katherine dropped onto the mattress. It was laden with only a blanket, and pulling it round herself, she curled into a ball.

I should warn Domhnall that Reginald is coming for him.

How can you do that when you don't even know where you are? Besides, Reginald will never be able to get into the castle. It is now too well guarded after Domhnall discovered your betrayal.

Both of those points were valid, and thus, Katherine could not argue with them, even though she sensed her brother was far sneakier than she had ever thought possible. Even if she wanted to warn Domhnall, she would never manage to escape from that house without one of her brother's men coming after her. And again, even if she did escape, what direction was she supposed to go?

Katherine was still puzzling that conundrum when her eyes began to droop. She just needed to rest a while. Perhaps after a small nap, her mind would work better and she would be able to figure it out.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The morning after he and his brothers had talked, Domhnall left the castle alone. Neither Kai nor Magnus were happy about that decision, but with the knowledge that the man who had been trying to kill him was now safely on his way to the coast with an armed guard, Domhnall assured his brothers that there was no longer a threat to his life.

"Besides," he said, once he was mounted upon his horse, "I can handle Reginald de Beaumont and his men. Ye ken that. I need tae speak tae Katherine, and perhaps, if all goes well, I might nae return alone."

The truth was, he needed time to think. Not that his thoughts had changed since the night before. Kai and Magnus had helped him to see that he had been so focused on the fact that Katherine was a traitor, that he had not fully and clearly examined the

facts.

Admittedly, his heart wanted to believe that, while she wasn't exactly innocent, she had experienced a change of heart since her arrival at the castle. And that change of heart had something to do with the fact that she had fallen in love with him. But the only way he was going to discover the truth was by asking her outright. Now she knew that he was aware of her brother's plans, she had nothing left to hide. Or rather, no reason to hide.

For the following few hours, he argued, fought, consoled and contradicted himself. Before Katherine had walked into his life, he had been content. Or at least as content as one could be, knowing they were being forced to marry against their will. The only thing he had known about his future involved an English woman whom he would be joined to, whether he wanted that or not.

He never expected to like her, or for her feistiness to actually impress him, and then, to eventually fall in love with her. Once that happened, however, he was fully committed to loving, protecting, caring and providing for her with no hesitation.

Discovering she was a spy and the depths of her betrayal had nearly destroyed him. Had she just been the English woman he had expected, his heart would not have taken such a beating. But Katherine had been far more than that. She had come to mean so much more to him, everything.

As much as he wanted to believe she still loved him, there was still a large part of him that wondered if, whatever he heard from her when they eventually met, would be tainted by his emotions; that he would not be able to hear anything she said from an objective point of view.

O' course, ye willnae. Ye ken 'afore ye even see her, that ye want tae believe she wanted nay part in this.

And that's what worried him. How could he possibly be detached where she was concerned?

Ye cannae. Ye're just going tae have tae trust yer gut.

It was hardly the answer he was looking for, but knowing himself as well as he did, he also knew it to be the truth.

Eventually, Drynoch came into view, and Domhnall tried as best as possible to settle his nerves. He had made a decision based on the information he had at the time. At the same time, he had acted impulsively, angrily, and sent her away without truly thinking through all the facts. He needed to take some responsibility for the situation.

But the closer he came to Drynoch, the more he realized that something was terribly wrong, and upon finally arriving in the village, he was swiftly approached by many distraught people.

"Me laird. Me laird," one man cried. "It is devastating."

"Thank the god's ye are here," a woman cried.

"They were slaughtered."

“It’s so terrible.”

As more people approached, he heard lament after lament, and a fear washed through him, for immediately his thoughts went to Katherine. Swiftly jumping from his horse, he raised his hands to quieten them.

Looking directly at the first man who had spoken, he said, “Tell me what happened?”

“Yer men, me laird. They’re all dead. Well, all but one. They killed them.”

“Who killed them?” he pressed, but he already knew the answer to his question.

“The Englishmen yer men were guarding, me laird. They killed yer guards in the middle o’ the night and then escaped.”

It took all his strength to control both his expression and the emotions that threatened to bubble up.

“Show me,” he demanded.

The villagers led him to the area they had laid the bodies. Bound fully in cloth strips, his men lay in a row on the ground, while sobs and moans came from the crowd that surrounded him.

“What about the one who survived?” Domhnall murmured.

“He’s in the healer’s cottage, me laird. Come. I will tak’ ye.”

Again, the crowd of villagers followed him down the cobbled street until they reached the cottage. While everyone remained outside, the healer led him into a dark room, where the guard lay, his breathing short and his eyes barely open.

“I’m sorry, me laird,” he croaked, when Domhnall approached the bed. “They attacked us in the middle o’ the night. The rest o’ the men are dead. I tried tae stop them...”

“Hush now,” Domhnall said quietly. “Ye need tae save yer strength. Dinnae worry. I will find them and they will pay fer what they’ve done.”

Once outside again, Domhnall looked at the heavily saddened faces of the villagers who were looking at him with despair in their eyes.

“Dinnae fear. I will find these men. Look after this guard until I can send someone tae come and fetch him.”

“What will ye dae, me laird?” someone cried out from the crowd.

“I will return tae the castle fer more guards, and then, we will find these Englishmen and kill them,” he growled.

Soon afterwards, Domhnall was back on his horse and riding at great speed back to the castle. On his way to Drynoch, he had been concerned with the conversation between himself and Katherine. Now, he was concerned not only with Katherine’s safety, but also what her brother planned to do. The castle was already on high alert, but the man was clearly clever, and thus, Domhnall needed to return and warn them, as well as garner help.

Anger raced through him at the thought of his murdered guards. He should have sent more. In fact, he should have escorted the damn devil himself. But Reginald de



Beaumont would pay for their deaths. In fact, he would pay with his own life.

He had been travelling for about an hour when Domhnall came upon what appeared to be a man on the ground. He looked injured, while his horse was standing nearby nibbling at the grass. Had the horse been spooked by something and thrown him?

“Hey,” Domhnall called out as he neared.

The man was lying face down and did not move. Fearing that he might be dead, Domhnall jumped from his horse. He did not really have time for this, but nor could he pass by without trying to help.

“Hey,” he said again, bending and rolling the man over.

Suddenly, there was a knife at his chest, and as the man glared up at him, he snarled, “Move and Katherine dies.”

Damn it!

Hearing movement behind him, Domhnall turned his head and saw three other men surrounding him.

“At last, we meet, Laird MacLeod,” one of them said as he stood forward, his sword drawn and pointing at Domhnall’s throat.

He was taller than the others, with a commanding presence. His face thin and angular, reminding Domhnall of a rat. But there was an evilness in this man’s eyes.

“I am Reginald de Beaumont,” he declared. “You are now my prisoner. Stand.”

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But Domhnall hesitated, working out in his head how quickly he could take these men, for there were only four of them.

“I know what you are thinking,” Reginald continued. “You’re imagining, with your rather unnatural skills, that we are only four, and that you can overpower us with ease. And you would be right. But as my friend there just stated, we have something you want.”

“Katherine,” Domhnall breathed, the realization of the situation becoming perfectly clear. “But she’s yer sister. Ye wouldnae harm her.”

Reginald shrugged, his facial expression declaring that those words meant little to him. “She has failed me enough. Besides, it’s clear whose side she’s now on. She has betrayed me, she has betrayed our family, and she has betrayed her country.”

“How?” Domhnall said, now slowly standing at Reginald’s beckoning.

“It doesn’t matter. Besides, it’s not your concern. If we do not return by the end of this day, the men guarding Katherine will slit her throat, and you will never see her again. That will be your doing, my laird,” he said, his last words full of condescension.

Glancing to one of the others, he flicked his head toward the laird. “Bind him.”

The man approached with trepidation, but Domhnall could not fight back. Not knowing that Katherine’s life was on the line. He didn’t even know where she was being kept to be able to run and save her, and thus, what choice did he have? He had

to be smart about this. He would let them lead him to where they were keeping Katherine, and then, he would destroy them.

Letting himself be bound, the group then travelled for quite some time until eventually, an abandoned house came into view. Domhnall couldn't remember the family that once lived there, and he couldn't help but wonder if his scouts had managed to get this far out when they had been searching originally.

Clearly not.

Or perhaps, this was a new house Reginald and his men had discovered since their escape from the guards they had killed in Drynoch.

Helping Domhnall off the horse, Reginald came up close and snarled in his ear.

“The same rules apply. Try anything, and your beloved Katherine will be your beloved dead Katherine.”

Domhnall did not doubt the man's word. Clearly, he was deranged, but then, evil did that to a person. His anger at his sister's betrayal of king, country and family emanated from him and was almost palpable.

Shoving him through the house, one of the soldiers opened a door and led the way down a set of stairs to the cellar below. The place looked like any old cellar would, with wooden crates, cobwebs, old sacks, and broken bottles.

At least now, he knew where Katherine was, though he had not yet laid eyes upon her. But there was no other place she could be. She hadn't been left in the village, and besides, Reginald clearly needed her to blackmail him to do as he was told. Reginald was aware of his mighty speed and strength. He had probably witnessed it that day when his men had attacked him in the village. The man wasn't going to risk

unleashing such a display on this occasion, and he knew Katherine was his weakness.

The men untied the rope that bound his wrists, and, pressing him against the wall, used more rope to bind him again, this time, attaching the ropes to rings imbedded into the stone wall behind him. He pulled at them tentatively. If need be, he could likely pull those rings right out of their mounting point.

“Don’t even think about it,” Reginald growled. “I will have no reservations in carrying out my threat. In fact, my sister is already dead to me.”

Domhnall’s eyes widened at that remark.

“Oh, yes. It is true,” Reginald replied upon seeing Domhnall’s reaction. “She is a turncoat and a traitor. She now serves only one purpose.”

The man didn’t need to explain what he meant. Domhnall knew he would not be bound to a wall if Reginald did not have Katherine as a weapon. In fact, without her, all of them would be dead already.

Reginald slowly removed his jacket, folding it precisely and hanging it over a chair, before turning his attention back to Domhnall.

“And now,” he said, rolling up his sleeves and picking up a thick piece of wood, “you will suffer as I have suffered.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A strange flickering light danced in front of her closed eyelids, and when Katherine finally managed to open her eyes, all she could see was the dancing flame of the candle. It cast long shadows across the room, and finally shaking herself to full wakefulness, she realized she had slept right through the day. From the lack of

sunlight outside, she knew dusk had long arrived, and night was soon approaching.

Pushing herself up from the mattress, she stretched, and in doing so, she noted the plate sat on the dresser. On it was a chunk of bread and some cold meats. Beside it sat a cup, and on closer inspection, for she lifted it and sniffed it, she discovered wine inside.

She took a light sip, for her throat was dry. Thinking about the last time she had actually eaten or drunk, she recalled that it was sometime the day before, when they had traveled to the tavern. It was as she was taking another sip, that she heard faint cries. For a second, she thought she was imagining it, but turning herear, and trying to listen even more attentively, she heard them again.

Deep, agonizing cries from someone clearly suffering a great amount of pain.

“Oh, God, no,” she cried, her pulse quickening as she realized who might be making such dreadful sounds.

Putting the cup back where she found it, she hurried across the room to her door. Gently, and as quietly as she could, she opened it and peeked outside. The hallway was dark, but as her eyes adjusted to it, she could see no one else about.

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Katherine slipped out of the room. Keeping close to the wall, she made her way down the corridor, her heart thumping against her ribcage. Once she reached the top of the stairs, she gazed down, but could still see no one. Grabbing the handrail, she began tiptoeing down the stairs, praying she would not make a sound. But as her foot landed on a stair halfway down, a high-pitched creak sounded from the old board, and she stopped dead, awaiting a reaction from someone who might have heard it.

Another second passed with the sound of her pulse rushing in her ears, but no one came running, and thus, she continued, hurrying down the last steps, safe in the knowledge that there was no one nearby.

As she hurried through the corridor, the dreadful sounds grew louder, only this time, she heard the raging bellows of her brother. The sound was coming from beneath her, and Katherine realized the house must have a cellar.

Carefully listening, she moved toward the sound, until eventually, the heartbreaking wails were right beneath her. To her left, there stood a door with light spilling from beneath it.

This has to be it.

Katherine was just about to turn the handle, when she heard heavy footfalls beyond it. Someone was climbing up the stairs from the cellar. Someone was coming.

Hide!

Spinning her head, she looked about her and saw a door on the opposite side of the

corridor. Flinging it open, she discovered a closet, and quickly stepping forward, she jumped inside just in time, for the door to the basement flew open.

The closet door remained open a crack, and peering through it, she watched her brother and three of his men walk out into the corridor.

“Do you not think one of us should stay with him, my lord?” one of the men said, as they continued down the corridor.

“Where is he going to go?” Reginald snapped back. “No. Leave him there to suffer alone. Go and check on the others. They’ve already been outside for hours.”

“Yes, my lord.”

The voices faded the farther away they went, and when Katherine was certain they were gone, she slowly pushed the closet door open.

I have to save him. I must.

Swiftly moving across the corridor, she opened the door to the basement, making certain to close it tightly behind her again. She was then faced with a set of steps, and without hesitation, she hurriedly ran down them.

There in the dimly lit room, she gasped at the sight of Domhnall. Barely standing, his body was bloodied and cut. His wrists were bound with rope attached to thick iron rings secured into the wall behind him.

“Oh, my God,” she cried.

Her throat tightened at the sight of him, for once so strong and untouchable, he was now reduced to a man beaten and weak. It didn’t make any sense, for she had

witnessed him taking on three and four men at a time. How had her brother even captured him without being killed?

She had no time to think about that, and instead, ran to him, even as the horror of his condition threatened to overwhelm her, for he was slumped against the wall, his breathing shallow and labored, with blood trickling from wounds all over his body. Her fingers skimmed over his bruised skin, her hands shaking at what her brother had done.

The guilt crashing through her was nearly unbearable. She was supposed to have protected him. She was supposed to have told him the truth. And now, because of her silence, the man she adored with all of her heart was on the brink of death.

Tears blurred her vision, but there was no time to waste. She had to act quickly. Reginald had made his move, and now it was up to her to save Domhnall before it was too late.

“I’m so sorry, my love,” she sobbed, grabbing at the rope, her hands still trembling as she struggled to loosen the thick knots. “This is all my fault. I’m so, so sorry.” As the knots loosened, she continued to talk to him, somehow hoping the sound of her voice would bring him some comfort. “We’re going to get out of here. I will find a way out.”

But what then? Where was she supposed to go? Domhnall was in no condition to travel far. Could she find a way to get a missive to Enya? His wounds needed healing, and quickly.

“Dinnae blame yersel’, Katherine,” Domhnall croaked, still struggling to stand once he was released from his ropes. “All will be good. But ye need tae leave. Yer brother will return soon. Ye’re nae safe here.”



“I’m not leaving you,” Katherine retorted. “We just have to find a way out.”

Leaving him leaning heavily against the wall, she moved across the room, pushing aside sacks and old chests, desperate to find an outer door. There had to be one. She just needed to find it.

“Katherine, please.”

“No,” she said firmly, turning to look at him. “If we’re leaving, we’re leaving together.”

But just as Domhnall opened his mouth to argue, the door at the top of the stairs burst open.

The torture had gone on for hours before Katherine had arrived. While she had untied him, he could barely breathe, speak, or stand. In fact, he was certain he was close to the end.

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“I’m not leaving you,” Katherine retorted. “We just have to find a way out.”

Leaving him leaning heavily against the wall, she moved across the room, pushing aside sacks and old chests, clearly trying to find a door.

But she didn’t understand the danger she was in. Reginald was certain to kill her if he discovered her there. In fact, he could no longer be certain her brother would spare her life, even after Domhnall’s was taken from him. She needed to escape while she still had the chance.

“Katherine, please—”

“No,” she said firmly, turning to look at him. “If we’re leaving, we’re leaving together.”

He was too weak to run. He would only hold her back, and just as he was about to tell her that, the door at the top of the stairs burst open.

“Come tae me,” Domhnall croaked. “Quickly.”

Katherine did as she was bid, and by the time Reginald and his men reached the bottom of the staircase, she was stood beside him, her arms wrapped around his body, doing her best to keep him standing.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Reginald spat as he glared at Katherine.

“I might ask you the same,” she cried. “Why, Reginald? Why have you punished him

so? He has done nothing to you. Not now. Not ever.”

“Of course, he has. He’s a Scot to begin with, and thus, his very existence irks me. I am with the king on this one. They need to be annihilated. Every single one of them. Besides, he has killed my men.”

“Because they attacked him,” Katherine retorted incredulously. “What did you expect was going to happen?”

“Move away from him now, or you will take his place in his grave.”

“No!” Katherine spat.

Reginald then looked at Domhnall. “My sister does not seem to understand the situation. You are too weak to fight me and my men, and thus, this is my proposal. Either you die, or she does.”

At those words, one of the men launched forward, and, grabbing Katherine by the wrist, he tore her away. Holding her against his body, he lifted a knife to her throat.

“Nay!” Domhnall growled, feeling both devastated and angry.

Using what little strength he had left, he pushed himself off the wall. A part of him knew he and Katherine were both going to die in that cellar, but he had to try and save her.

“Leave her be. If ye’re so determined tae kill someone, then kill me.”

“No!” Katherine sobbed, tears escaping down her cheeks. “Please.”

Domhnall took one last long look at her. She truly was the best thing that had

happened to him, and now he would go to his grave knowing what love truly meant, and how it felt. She had given him more than she could ever know. And it was that love that impelled him to save her. She might have a chance at life. He had to hold onto that.

Looking back at Reginald, he lifted his head, pushed his shoulders back, and stared directly into his eyes. He would not show fear. He would not tremble. He would die with honor and dignity.

“I’m ready,” he said evenly.

A smirk grew on Reginald’s lips, the evident and obvious delight that he was finally going to get what he wanted after all this time beaming from him. The smile grew even wider as he looked from Domhnall to Katherine.

“Before I smite you, there is one thing you both need to know. All this time, my sister has believed you were the man who killed our father.”

Katherine shook her head, but Reginald ignored her.

“But, as a matter of fact, it was I, who arranged his murder.”

Domhnall’s jaw fell at those words, but Katherine’s screams broke through his astonishment, paining his heart as he witnessed her utter despair.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

As Reginald’s words sunk in, the truth of them Katherine struck her like a physical blow, the betrayal cutting deeper than any blade could.

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Seconds later, all the anger, pain, and hatred of what Reginald had done exploded out of her in a great torrent.

“No! No!” she shrieked. “Why would you do such a thing? Why would you take him from me?”

Clearly impervious to her distress, Reginald looked at her, his head high, his eyebrows reaching for his hairline, and his upper lip curled. With his utter disregard for her on full display, she then came to the full understanding that she had only ever been a pawn. A disposable piece that he could use and throw away.

Katherine could not know how long he had seen her in that way, but his lack of concern for her well-being had certainly been evident on this journey, this mission he had convinced her was for her benefit to avenge their father’s death.

“You do not understand, Katherine, how the world works. Father was a formidable man, and, in such good health, he was not going to die anytime soon. I could not wait for nature to run its course, and thus, I helped it along.”

“You murdered him,” she spat.

“Yes,” he nodded, “I did. Well, not me specifically, of course. But when he last went into battle, arrangements were made to ensure he never returned.”

She could hardly believe her brother was speaking so calmly about something so heinous, but more than that, she couldn’t understand why he would do such a thing.

“Surely, you didn’t commit such an atrocity just so you could take his place,” she gasped, struggling to breathe as the tears continued. “There has to be something more.”

“There is,” Reginald answered evenly. “Until Father was out of the way, I could not fulfill my ambitions to get closer to King Edward. I intend to make myself very useful to our ruler, and with that, gain the power I desire.”

“The king sent you to kill Domhnall,” Katherine breathed.

But Reginald shook his head. “Indeed, he did not. But with this impertinent beast out of the way, I can now destroy the entire clan. And when King Edward discovers that I have killed a man with powers, a man who could strike fear into any Englishman, I have no doubt that he will be even more pleased.”

Katherine frowned deeply, for her brother was making no sense at all. Did he not know that the MacLeod clan would just appoint another in Domhnall’s place? Maybe he didn’t. Maybe her brother was not as smart as he believed himself to be.

“Then you’re a fool,” she spat. “Domhnall has brothers who will take his place. Killing him will bring you no benefit at all.”

Reginald sneered at her. “You think I am stupid, sister. Believe me, I have a plan to rid this island of all the remaining MacLeod family. That way, the clan will be without a laird, leaving an opening for English rule.”

“What plan?” she demanded.

But Reginald was clearly getting annoyed at her impertinent questions, and baring his teeth, he bellowed at her. “Silence!”

Katherine jumped with fright. Feeling too terrified to press any further, she glanced over at Domhnall. Her eyes widened however, for the sight of him took her by surprise. Only moments earlier, he had looked beaten, defeated, ready to give his life to save Katherine's, and resigned to such a fate.

Now, however, there appeared fire in his eyes, his shoulders were lifted, and with his head high, his jaw and fists were tightly clenched as he shook with anger.

Perhaps it was the disclosure that Reginald had killed her father. She had hated him so much at the beginning when she had blamed him. Or perhaps it was Reginald's threat to his brothers and the rest of his family. Whatever it was, he seemed to be fighting through his suffering and pain, and pulling strength from somewhere.

Suddenly, Domhnall exploded, and, launching himself at the man nearest to him, he hit him with strike after powerful strike. The guard made an attempt to fight back, but Domhnall, even in his weakened state, continued to overpower him.

"I will kill her," Reginald shouted, panic now rising in his voice.

Yet, Domhnall, much to Katherine's relief, completely ignored her brother and continued pummeling the man until he collapsed on the floor, no longer able to move.

Reginald's dread danced on his face, and Katherine, realizing that there was now a real chance that they could both escape, lifted her elbow sharply in front of her. With as much force as she could muster, she drove it back into her captor's gut. She heard the great gasp and groan as wind was forced from his body, and a second later, he was bent double.

Spinning on her heels, she grabbed the dirk from his hand and plunged it into his stomach, gasping at the feeling of the warmblood that trickled onto her skin as the man crumpled to the floor.

Relieved, distraught, and shocked at the same time, she could only look at what she had done. She was not pleased that she had taken a man's life. It gave her no satisfaction. In fact, she stood there, frozen to the spot as she stared at the result of her actions.

Oh, God. What have I done?

She hardly had a chance to work through those emotions, however, for she suddenly felt an arm snake around her throat as she was grabbed from behind.

“Argh,” she cried, stumbling back into her brother's body.

Pulling her back into him and holding her so tight, she struggled to breathe, Reginald pressed a knife to her throat. So close, in fact, that she was certain he was already piercing her skin.



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:28 am*

“I will kill her,” Reginald bellowed again.

Domhnall had already taken down another of Reginald’s men, but at those words, he spun around, and then stopped dead, his eyes flying wide at the sight before him.

Slowly raising his hands, he said, “Nay. Ye dinnae have tae dae this.”

“Let him kill me, Domhnall,” Katherine croaked. “You have to protect your family. He’s going to kill me anyway.”

“Nay,” Domhnall yelled.

“Once I am gone, there will be nothing to stop you from destroying him. You are stronger than him, and he knows it,” she reasoned. “He killed my father. Avenge my father’s death. Please. Do it for me.”

“Silence,” Reginald bellowed

For a second, there was a stalemate. A moment where no one moved, or spoke, or barely breathed. Katherine gazed at Domhnall, her eyes pleading with him to let her die. But his own showed his denial. With his eyes full of fire and love, she could see he could never let that happen.

“It’s you or her,” Reginald growled. “What’s it going to be? I haven’t got all day.”

“Me,” Katherine and Domhnall said at exactly the same time.

At that moment, the door at the top of the stairs opened, and Katherine gasped, for with more men coming, they had now lost the advantage.

“Finally,” Reginald yelled. “Get down here and tie this monster up.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY

“Nae a chance,” Kai said, his voice carrying down into the cellar as he came running down the stairs with great speed.

For a second, Domhnall imagined he was hallucinating, for Kai arriving from nowhere seemed so unreal. How he had arrived, Domhnall could not know. He was just relieved his brother was there.

“Kai,” Domhnall blurted, still hardly able to believe his eyes.

But Kai did not stop for a greeting, and once at the bottom of the steps, he lifted his arm and swiftly punched Reginald in the head with such force, the man stumbled.

Domhnall was certain that Katherine was going to fall with him, but Kai grabbed her arm and yanked her back to safety. Immediately, Katherine threw her arms around him, her whole body trembling.

“Get her out o’ here,” Domhnall yelled.

Kai frowned deeply when he saw the state Domhnall was in. “What about?—”

“I’m fine. Besides, after everything he’s done, the man is mine. Get Katherine tae safety.”

Reginald still struggled to get off the floor while Kai whisked a distraught Katherine

up the stairs.

Looking around him, Domhnall spotted the sword they had taken from him when they had captured him, and ignoring the agonizing pain of his wounds, he grabbed it and lifted it high above his head.

“No!” the man cried, his eyes pleading for mercy.

But Domhnall had no mercy left.

“This is fer everything ye have put me men through. Fer everything ye have put me through, but most of all, fer everything ye have put your own flesh and blood through. This is fer Katherine, and fer her faither.”

With swift and deadly precision, Domhnall brought the sword down on Reginald’s head, separating it from his body completely.

Dropping the sword, he then stumbled back against the wall, and feeling the strength leave his legs, he slid down it, ending in a crumpled heap on the floor.

Help would come soon, but for now, he gazed upon the beheaded man who had caused him such turmoil. The man who would have, without any hesitation, taken his own sister’s life without remorse.

Katherine had been so very brave, so very courageous, even willing to sacrifice her own life for his. He couldn’t imagine he would ever love her more than he did at that moment. It was over, the nightmare had finally ended. And the most important thing was, all those he loved were now safe.

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Whether he would survive was a different matter, however, for he could feel his very soul slipping out of him. He had remained strong for Katherine's sake, but now his body was slowly closing down and he simply was not sure how long he would last.

Soon afterwards, Magnus and Kai hurried down the stairs.

"Domhnall," Magnus barked.

Domhnall opened his eyes, but he had no energy to speak.

Magnus shot Kai a look, and the two went to work.

With one on either side of him, they each took an arm and a leg and, with great effort, carried him to the top of the stairs. Huffing and panting, they eventually laid him down on the floor of what once had been a salon.

There, Katherine was waiting for him, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Domhnall," she gasped, clearly terrified.

"We need tae get him back tae the castle now," Magnus declared. "He needs Enya, and he needs her soon."

A cart would have been ideal, but there was no time, and thus, Magnus mounted his horse. Between him and Kai, they managed to get Domhnall on behind him. Taking rope, Kai wrapped it around Domhnall and Magnus' waist to make certain he would not fall backwards. With that done, Magnus flicked the reins and sped away.

“Ye can ride with me,” Kai said, as Katherine watched Magnus ride away.

But she shook her head.

“No. It will take longer with both of us on one horse.”

Turning away from him, she hurried to grab another horse grazing near the house. Hauling herself up onto it and throwing a leg either side of the horse’s broad body, she stilled for the slightest second, remembering the first occasion she had ever done that.

Domhnall had taught her how to ride, he had taught her to feel pleasure, how to love herself and let go of the rules and boundaries that held her back. He had taught her how to feel free.

Now, though, as she and Kai hurried to catch up to Magnus, Katherine worried that she might never get another chance to gaze into his beautiful, strong, stoic face again. Reginald might now be dead, for she knew Domhnall had killed him, but her brother had done a great amount of damage.

Upon reaching Magnus, the three rode side by side, but Katherine could not help throw glances across to Domhnall as his head lolled against Magnus’s back, his body looking as lifeless as a rag doll.

It took another two hours to reach the castle. Two hours of agony, fear, and worry, but eventually, they arrived. Once inside the city gates, Katherine ran to find Enya, while Kai was left to help Magnus.

Enya was distraught at hearing Katherine’s account as the two hurried back out to the courtyard, but when they reached it, Katherine nearly gasped at the sight before her.

No less than ten men carried Domhnall toward the castle on their shoulders, with Magnus and Kai at the front, leading the way. For a second, it looked identical to a funeral procession, but then, Katherine shook her head. She could not think in such a way. Instead, her heart filled full of gratitude, for his men dearly loved their laird, and it showed by the concern that rippled across their faces.

Once in Domhnall's bedchamber, they gently placed him on his bed, and the men hurriedly left, leaving his brothers and sisters and Katherine in the room.

Enya went to work straight away, while Katherine comforted Thora, who struggled to contain her tears. Magnus and Kai were far more stoic, but still, their faces betrayed their worry. Katherine knew from Enya that she could not use her power on a person too far gone because it would take away her life. When Enya finally began healing Domhnall, Katherine released the breath she didn't know she was holding. Healing him meant he was still there.

It took some time, but Enya finally finished, looking more tired than Katherine had ever seen her, and when she could do no more, she stood and looked at them all.

"Now, we must wait."

Katherine was confused. "But he is not awake."

With a sad smile, Enya said, "Ye ken, ye and Domhnall are as impatient as each other. When ye were injured, he said practically the exact same thing."

"I will go and fetch some fresh water," Thora said pragmatically. "He is still covered in blood."

"And I will go and make him a tonic for when he awakens," Enya declared, following her sister from the room. She then stopped and turned back to Katherine. "And

perhaps when ye are ready, I could dae with looking ye over too, Katherine.”

“I’m fine,” Katherine replied.

Enya shrugged. “Perhaps, but ye have blood on yer hands and a cut on yer neck.”

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As Enya left, Katherine's eyes dropped to her hands, and she suddenly shuddered. That was not her blood. That was the blood of the man she had murdered.

Suddenly, she started rubbing at the stains frantically, panting when they would not come off.

"Hey. Hey," Magnus said, striding towards her and placing his hands on her shoulders.

With wide eyes, she looked up at him. "It won't come off. It's not my blood, and it won't come off," she cried in panic.

Magnus looked down at her sadly for a long moment. "It will, Katherine. Come."

He led her across the room to the water jug, and pouring some into the bowl sitting beside it, he gently took her hands and placed them in. As he slowly rubbed her skin, he said, "Sometimes we are forced tae dae things we could never imagine we are capable o' doing. It's a survival instinct within all o' us, Katherine."

She still trembled as she let him continue washing between her fingers.

"I cannae say it will be something ye will forget with ease. But nor can ye hold on tae regret. A bird doesnae regret killing a fish, a spider doesnae regret killing a fly."

"It's not the same," she whispered.

"It is, and it isnae," he said, taking the linen towel and drying her hands with the same



gentleness. “The bird and the spider dae it tae survive. Just as ye did. The difference is, the bird and spider are nae under threat. They dinnae fear death. Ye did what ye had tae dae tae make it out o’ there alive.”

She understood what he was trying to say, but it made little difference. Maybe it would at a future time, but not now.

When they returned to Domhnall’s bedside and joined Kai, Katherine asked them something she had been wondering about since they had entered the cellar.

“How did ye find us?”

“Neither o’ us were happy when Domhnall decided tae come after ye alone,” Kai began.

But Magnus put his hands up to stop Kai. “She needs tae ken the reason why Domhnall was coming after her in the first place.”

“Och, right,” Kai nodded with a slight smile. “Well, tae cut a very long story short, after ye left, Domhnall began doubting himself, and between us, we came tae the conclusion that ye hadnae wanted tae help yer braither tae, ye ken, murder Domhnall and destroy the clan.” He smirked.

Katherine’s face flushed and heat rushed to her cheeks.

“Kai,” Magnus said in a warning tone.

“Och, come on. We killed the guy. We’re allowed a little light relief,” Kai quipped.

“Anyway,” he continued, “Domhnall was determined tae come and speak tae ye on his own, but Magnus and I were nae too keen, so we followed him. When we arrived

at Drynoch, we discovered the guards who had been sent tae escort ye had been killed, yer braither had escaped, and Domhnall was on the way back tae the castle tae get reinforcements tae search fer ye.”

“But we hadnae met him on the road,” Magnus said, “so we concluded he had decided tae forgo returning tae the castle, and had gone tae find ye. Kai then came across a trail of severalhoof prints and we decided tae follow it. And upon seeing the abandoned house surrounded, we kent he was there.”

“It was lucky that you got there when you did,” Katherine replied. “Any longer, and I’m certain both Domhnall and I would be dead.”

The three of them looked over at Domhnall as he lay there, his breathing still a little labored.

Later, after Thora had washed Domhnall clean of all the blood and dirt on his body, Kai and Magnus helped their sisters dress him in clean garments, and then, surrounding his bedside, the five sat watching and waiting.

There was simply nothing more any of them could do.

Hours passed, and eventually, the siblings convinced each other that some of them ought to sleep. After much discussion, Kai and Thora agreed to get some rest.

“Perhaps ye should go too, Katherine,” Magnus said, glancing across the bed at her, for her chair was positioned close to the head of the bed on Domhnall’s left.

But Katherine shook her head. “No. I’m not leaving his side.”

Whether it was the determination in her voice, or the fixed expression of her face, neither Magnus nor any of the others pressed it, and bidding them goodnight, Kai and

Thora left. More hours passed, and Katherine felt her eyes drooping. But even as gritty as they felt, she forced herself to stay awake.

As time went by, however, she felt her head loll against the side of the chair she was tucked up on, and as hard as she tried, she could not stop her lids from closing. Not long after that, sleep slowly overtook her.

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The sound of soft whispers brought her out of her slumber, and given she was not fully awake, the voices sounded so very far away.

“... she hasnae moved all night,” someone murmured. “Shall I wake her?”

“Nay. Leave her be.”

And then, there was no more sound as sleep overtook her again.

She dreamed about her father.

Wanting to see her, he had travelled from England to the Isle of Skye, and met her wonderful husband, Domhnall, and all the family. Her family, now. She heard his laughter and saw his smile once more. She listened to his soft voice, and watched as he and Domhnall enjoyed each other's company.

There was dancing and much gaiety, and everyone was happy. In the great hall, people cheered and laughed and sang. A great circle gathered, and in the middle, her father and she danced together. But then, his face looked sad, and Katherine was worried. As her father looked down, blood poured from his stomach. When Katherine looked down, she held a bloody knife in her hand. And then, the laughter and gaiety stopped, and everyone pointed their fingers at her.

“No!” she cried.

Suddenly, Katherine woke with a jolt, her heart thumping in her chest. Panting with fear, she opened her eyes to find Domhnall sitting up in bed and gazing at her.

“Oh, thank god,” she cried, jumping from the chair and throwing herself onto the bed beside him.

“Hey,” he said softly. “Bad dream?”

And then, from nowhere, Katherine felt a sob catch in her throat, and with no way of stopping it, she burst into tears.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

From the cellar to his bed, Domhnall had slipped in and out of consciousness. Partly it was to do with the pain, particularly travelling back on the horse with Magnus, for clearly his brother had been worried and had thus travelled at speed. But each thud of the horses’ hooves hitting the undergrowth had sent agony through his body, to a point where he could clearly take no more and passed out.

He remembered a point where many hands were upon him, and then the softness of the bed beneath. He recalled soft whispers, and the sensation of warmth running through his body, until he finally slipped into darkness completely.

But as the blackness surrounded him, he ventured to a place he had never before seen. It felt familiar and at the same time, strange and unknown. There was mist, like that of the early morning across a glen, but this mist did not clear, and he could not see further than a few feet. What he could see only appeared as nothingness, for there were no trees, nor buildings, nor people.

Just the mist.

Beyond it was a light glow simmering on the horizon. If he continued further, the mist would clear, and thus, he moved toward it as one might, to discover what was there. But even as he ventured forth, the distance of the light remained the same, as

though it were always moving away from him.

When he woke, he took a sharp intake of breath and a second later, Kai and Thora were at his side.

“Och, thanks be tae all the gods,” Thora cried, her eyes glistening as she gazed down at him.

“Welcome back tae the land o’ the living, braither,” Kai said, standing behind his sister.

Domhnall cracked a small smile.

In his peripheral vision, Domhnall noticed something to his left, and turning to look, he saw Katherine curled up on a chair at his bedside, fast asleep. The daylight spilling in through the windows illuminated her from behind, making her look almost angelic.

“She wouldnae leave yer side,” Kai said. “She hasnae moved all night. Shall I wake her?”

Domhnall shook his head. “Nay. Leave her be.” He looked back at Thora and Kai, his brow a little furrowed. “How is she?”

Thora’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Ye should be more concerned with yer own wellbeing.”

Domhnall looked at her with a solemn expression. “Katherine did, saw, and experienced things nay lass should have tae suffer. Battle has become second nature tae us men here, but nae tae her.”

“We ken,” Thora said sadly. “Magnus told us she killed a man.”

“Aye,” Domhnall nodded, “and that’s nae even the half o’ it.”

“Then, when she wakes, we will all have tae mak’ certain we tak’ good care o’ her,” Kai said.

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Domhnall smiled up at his brother. “Aye. We will.”

“For now, though,” Thora said excitedly, jumping off the bed, “I am going tae go and get the others.”

For the next half an hour, the siblings rejoiced at Domhnall’s recovery, all remaining very quiet with hushed whispers so as not to wake Katherine.

Magnus relayed what he had done over the last day, since they had returned.

“I’ve sent out a group o’ men tae the abandoned house, and another group tae Drynoch. Those sent tae the village have been instructed tae bring the men back here so they can be buried by their families. The men sent tae the abandoned house were told tae dig graves and bury the bodies o’ Reginald de Beaumont and his men. I imagined ye didnae want them brought back here.”

Domhnall shook his head. “Indeed, I dinnae. Thank ye, Magnus. Ye have done exactly as I would have.”

Looking at Enya, Domhnall stretched his hand out to his sister. Rounding the bed, she came close to him and took his hand.

“Thank ye, sister, fer bringing me back.”

Her eyes glistened as she nodded. “Ye had me worried there fer a while, braither,” she whispered, struggling to keep her emotions in check. “I wasnae sure I had done enough.”



“Och, ye cannae kill a bad thing,” Domhnall chuckled.

She laughed a little as the tears fell down her cheeks, and then, wrapping her arms around his neck, she hugged him tightly. Domhnall pulled her into the hug and, careful not to squeeze too hard, held her close to him, feeling the love his sister always emanated.

After some time, he told them they all should go and rest. Of course, they argued, telling him someone needed to stay with him, but Domhnall would not hear of it.

“Look at me,” he said, opening his arms wide. “I am well. I feel as good as new. Now, away, all o’ ye and rest. There will be plenty o’ time fer us tae be together again. If you rest. Remember we have the holidays comin’ up and we all have tae be in best form!”

Reluctantly, his brothers and sisters eventually left the bedchamber, all promising that they would return. Domhnall hoped that it wouldn’t be too soon, for each of them looked utterly wrecked, especially Enya. They now needed to rest after spending so long looking after him.

In the silence after their departure, Domhnall gazed at Katherine, who, clearly must have been exhausted, for she had not once moved during the time they had all been talking. But then, he imagined her body was still suffering the shock of what had occurred.

As skilled as she was with a sword, the difference between sparring and actually taking a life was abysmal. It was her first death, too, which would affect her even more deeply.

While his wounds had been physical, for the most part, hers would be much deeper, and in acknowledging that, he mused that he would have to treat her even more

gently than he had ever done before.

As time passed, Domhnall gazed out of the window into the sky beyond.

A little while later, Katherine began to move though still sleeping, and her brow furrowed, until she cried out. “No!”

Clearly, she was having a nightmare, and after what they had just experienced, Domhnall guessed it was likely to do with what she had suffered.

Her eyes flew open while, at the same time, she gasped for air. When her eyes met his, they flew wide at the sight of him sitting up in bed.

“Oh, thank God,” she cried, launching herself from the chair and clambering onto the bed beside him.

“Hey,” Domhnall said softly. “Bad dream?”

And then, her eyes filled, and expressing surprise at her own reaction, emotion flew from her in a torrent of tears. It was not a quiet sob, as some lasses might experience, but full blown, heart wrenching cries that wracked from her spasming body.

Leaning forward, Domhnall slipped his arms around her and lifted her fully off the bed. He brought her close to him, gently sitting her on his lap, before pulling her into his chest and resting his chin against the top of her head.

There were no words he could say to comfort her, and in fact, a part of him knew that it was better for her to rid herself of whatever she had been holding onto. And thus, he just sat there, his arms wrapped around her, rocking her back and forth as though she were a child.

It took a while, but eventually, the sobs subsided, leaving her breathing in and out erratically in the aftermath of her breakdown. Her body still shook, and he continued to hold her, offering her all the comfort she needed.

When she finally settled, he heard her speak. It was a whisper as the words croaked from her throat. “I’m so sorry. I’m so very sorry.”

“I ken,” Domhnall replied gently. “I’m sorry, too.”

She pushed herself up from his chest, her red rimmed eyes searching his as her brow furrowed. “But why? You have nothing to be sorry for.”

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Domhnall nodded. “O’ course, I dae. I should never have sent ye away. I should never have allowed me anger tae rage against ye.”

“You had every right to be angry,” she countered. “After what I did, I deserved nothing less.”

“That isnae true, Katherine. I should have listened tae ye, and given ye a chance tae speak. Had I done that, ye wouldnae have had tae suffer what happened tae ye.”

Her eyebrows now danced on her forehead. “You suffered far more than I.”

“Physically, aye. Every other way, probably nae.”

She dropped her gaze then, clearly thinking on his words.

“I murdered a man,” she whispered, her eyes welling with tears once more.

“Hey,” Domhnall said, hooking his finger beneath her chin so she would look at him. “What ye did saved me life. Ye have tae remember that. It was us or them, Katherine.”

“Maybe so,” she sniffed, “but it doesn’t make me feel any better.”

“Nay. And it willnae fer a while. But if it wasnae fer ye, we’d both be dead, and yer braither would have got his wish. He wasnae a good man, Katherine. He used ye tae get tae me. He lied, manipulated, and tricked ye. And all tae cover his own evil.”

For a long moment, she remained silent, and then she said, “I still can’t believe he killed my father. Or, at least, had him killed.”

“It’s the same thing,” Domhnall qualified. “Murder is murder, and yer braither was willing tae be rid o’ anyone in his way. Including ye.”

It was hard for Domhnall to believe himself, so he couldn’t begin to imagine how Katherine must be feeling. The very idea of murdering one’s own brother or sister was completely foreign to him, and there were no circumstances under which he would ever do it. He’d die first.

“What happens now?” Katherine asked. “What happens to me?”

Domhnall looked down at her tenderly. “I still love ye, Katherine. And, if it is yer desire, I would like ye tae stay. Even if it isnae yer desire, ye need some time tae heal.”

“But, I wasn’t injured.”

He looked at her knowingly, and dropping her eyes and nodding, she said, “Right.”

He didn’t need to explain himself. She knew exactly what he was getting at. There would be a time when they could speak about what happened, airing their experience with a view to some healing, but not today. Today, he would just hold her, comfort her, and love her.

What she decided to do after that, would be up to her. There had been enough people trying to control her, manipulate her, and steer the direction of her life. Now, Katherine needed to take the reins. She had desired freedom for so long, and thus, Domhnall would give it to her. Whatever decision she came to, even if it pained him greatly, he would honor.

## EPILOGUE

A week later...

“Go on, Katherine,” Thora yelled, jumping up and down in excitement.

Katherine grinned, and wielding her short sword, she lifted her arms above her head and launched toward Magnus, forcing him back.

“Are ye nae supposed tae be on me side?” Magnus panted, lifting his sword to defend her blow.

“Och, nay,” Enya laughed. “Us lasses need tae stick together.”

“I agree,” Ava added.

“Aye,” Kai said, standing beside his sisters and his closest friend, “but seeing Katherine sparring, I think I’ve decided that I’m going tae change sides.”

While Katherine continued to concentrate on her skills, she heard Domhnall’s booming laughter behind her, and couldn’t help but laugh herself.

A week had passed since they had returned from the dreadful experience with her brother, and anyone looking on might imagine that nothing terrible had happened to them at all. But then, she was certain all the siblings had colluded and come up with a plan to help her try and recover, for not once between then and now, had she spent one single day alone.

The day after everything had happened, Domhnall had not left her side, and every day after that, either one or all of them had involved her in some activity or another. There was the great hall to decorate, pine branches to collect, and sweets to be baked

for the Yuletide and the upcoming marriage. She knew they were trying to keep her mind occupied, but sooner or later, she would have to face the events of the previous weeks. Clearly, however, the MacLeod family had decided that the time was not yet right.

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While they had kept her busy during the day, they could not stop the nightmares that tortured her at night, and every night since, Domhnall had taken her in his arms as she wailed and comforted her.

Wrapping his arms around her, he lay there and rocked her to sleep. Not once had he tried to touch her in any other way, only offering her consolation.

The day after the attack, he had more or less told her that she was now free.

“I still love ye, Katherine. And, if it is yer desire, I would like ye tae stay. Even if it isnae yer desire, ye need some time tae heal.”

Without specifically telling her, Domhnall had given her a choice. A choice to stay or to leave. At the time, she had had far too many other things on her mind to really think about it, but the last few days had been different.

She was by no means healed. Not even close. That would take far longer than a week. And yes, the night terrors still clung to her like a child to its mother. But the last couple of days, when she had snatched a few and far between moments alone, she had been left to consider what she really wanted.

Brought to Scotland against her will, used by both her brother and the ruler of England as a disposable pawn in their game, she now, for the first time in her life, was being given the opportunity to decide for herself. And perhaps because it was a novelty, along with it came a sense of fear.

There is no possibility to blame another when you are the one making the decisions.



It had occurred to her that Domhnall faced this every single day of his life, for he was the laird. All decisions were laid at his feet, and now she discovered a newfound respect for the weight that was always upon his shoulders.

She couldn't really compare her life to his, of course. She was making a decision that would affect her only. His decisions affected an entire island of people. She had stopped herself in that thought, however, for her decision would, in the grand scheme of things, affect other people.

After everything she had done, and the pain and heartache she had caused, Domhnall was still in love with her. Not only had he told her, he had not stopped showing it at every opportunity since they had returned.

And yet, he was trying so very hard not to influence her decision, one way or another. Clearly, he wanted her to stay.

Yet, he had continued to show her how he felt, without any manipulation at all. It was refreshing, and at the same time, she missed his kisses, his touch, the intimacy they had shared together.

The snow began to fall once more, and, in his usual protective way, Domhnall said, "Right. That's enough sparring fer today. I dinnae want anyone catching their death."

With the swords and armor gathered, the group made their way inside.

"We need a drink tae warm us all," Kai said, leading them to the drawing room.

"Aye," Thora said, her tone laden with sarcasm. "Like ye need an excuse."

Everyone tittered at her remark, and once inside, whisky was poured into glasses. The large fire roared, and they warmed themselves as they chatted.

Katherine, Enya, and Thora sat beside each other on a chaise lounge, while Domhnall stood leaning against the mantle, and Kai, Magnus and Ava occupied the other chairs.

The chatter between Kai and Thora, was entertaining them all, but at one point, Katherine lifted her eyes to look at Domhnall. She was surprised to see he was gazing at her, a soft smile on his lips.

She wanted to look away, but she could not bring herself to do it, and for a long second, they just gazed at each other, while all around them faded into the background. Her heart thumped in her chest, for she knew soon, she was going to have to make a decision.

As much as he had told her she needed to heal, and thus, staying there was in her best interests, nor could she leave him wondering what his future held. It wasn't fair on either of them.

After supper that evening, Katherine announced she was going to retire. She needed some time for herself.

It was as she reached her bedchamber, that she realized someone was coming up behind her, and jumping with fright, she spun around.

Domhnall looked at her, his eyes laden with pity. "I didnae mean tae scare ye. I'm sorry."

"You didn't," she lied, feeling suddenly foolish when it became obvious that they both knew that he had.

"I ken ye're tired, and if ye're nae up tae it, then it's fine. But I was hoping tae talk tae ye."

Katherine looked at him for a long moment, trying to gauge what might be going on behind those beautiful deep eyes of his. But he gave nothing away, and only returned her gaze with little expression at all.

“All right,” she said with a nod.

She then opened her bed chamber door and bid him entry.

Once inside, she wandered over to the dresser. “Would ye like a drink?” she asked, lifting the decanter.

“Ye ken me. I never refuse.” He smiled.

She poured two glasses, and then, handing him one, they both moved to the chairs at the fireplace.

Domhnall didn’t speak once he was seated, and instead, he gazed into the flames, clearly thinking about what he wanted to say. Or at least, that’s what Katherine assumed, which is why she remained perfectly quiet and waited.

After another little while, he took in a deep breath and looked at her.

“How are ye?” he asked.

His question surprised her, and she shrugged. “I’m fine.”

“O’ course,” he smiled knowingly. “Katherine the strong.”

One might have taken his words for sarcasm, but she knew that was not how he meant them. Since their ordeal, he seemed to see her in a different light. Like the experience had strengthened her. And she supposed, in some ways, it had. In other ways, however, it had accomplished quite the opposite.

“I have written tae King Edward and told him that I refuse tae abide by his arrangement,” Domhnall said evenly. “I made it clear in me correspondence that neither o’ us wanted it.”

“Oh,” Katherine said.

A cold sensation ran through her entire body at the shock of his statement. Of all the things she had imagined he wanted to say, she had not foreseen that. In fact, his statement turned everything she had thought about over the last few days on its head.

Under the impression he had been waiting upon her decision, it was now evident that Domhnall had made the decision for her. Or maybe, he had grown tired of waiting. But that didn't make any sense, given the tender way in which he had treated her. And yet, how else was she supposed to see this? He had stated plainly that he did not want to marry her.

“Katherine? Whatever is the matter?” Domhnall frowned.

Clearly, as her mind had been trying to assimilate his words, her expression of confusion and disappointment was evident on her face.

“I... I don't understand,” she whispered.

Domhnall frowned even deeper, gazing at her expectantly.

“You told me that you love me,” she continued.

“I dae,” he said eagerly. “I always will, fer as long as I live.”

Katherine was now completely thrown. He was not making any sense.

“But, if you love me, why do you not want to marry me?”

He now looked as confused as she, until his eyebrows lifted and he looked at her desperately. “Nay, Katherine. Ye dinnae understand. I would marry ye in a heartbeat,” he declared. “It is only the king's offer that I am refusing.”

A sudden wave of relief washed over her as she immediately understood, and, in that exact same moment, she knew.

She had been so devastated to discover that Domhnall did not want to marry her, that she immediately realized what it was that she wanted. Of course, she loved him. She had never stopped. His soft comfort over the last few nights had been her saving grace, and she had slept soundly in his arms until the morning.

He was her bulwark, her protector, the man who had opened her mind, heart, and soul to another way of being, living, existing. He had proven that he would do anything for her, even give his life. She, too, was prepared to do the same.

Placing her glass on the hearth, she stood from her chair. Moving toward him, she placed her hands on his shoulders, and lifting one leg at a time, she straddled his lap.

While Domhnall was utterly surprised at her impromptu actions, he placed his glass on the floor beside him and snaked his arms around her back, lifting her closer, until her face was only inches away from his.

“I love you,” Katherine whispered. “I will always love you.”

As his face broke into the largest smile she had seen from him in days, light danced in his eyes as he gazed up at her.

“And I love ye, me darling Katherine. Now, and forever.”

“Take me to bed,” she breathed. “I want you to make love to me.”

“With pleasure,” he growled.

Hooking his hands under her thighs, he pushed himself from the chair and carried her over to the bed. Lowering her to her feet, he sat on the bed and, lifting his hands, he took a long time to undress her. Placing her feet on the bed one at a time, he pulled at the laces of her boots, tugging them from her feet, before sliding his hands up her legs to remove her stockings.

Katherine remained standing, now barefoot, her arms by her sides, wordlessly watching his every move. In the silence, the sexual tension grew at each piece of clothing he removed, from carefully peeling her corset from her body, to slowly letting her skirts fall to the floor.

Soon enough, she stood there in only her chemise, and as he pulled at the string at the neck of the garment, he then tugged at it, letting it fall from her body.

She heard him gasp as he gazed at her nakedness. And as before, she felt herself flush, standing there so vulnerable before him. Yet, this time, there was something different. Her flushed face was not from embarrassment, but from desire as she ached to feel his hands on her body.

Domhnall stood then, and taking her in his arms, he turned and lay her on the bed, his eyes never moving from hers. They gazed at each other for the longest moment, their eyes locked, their connection deeper than it had ever been, and, at the same time, a preview of what was to come.

Standing again, he then removed his clothes slowly, still watching her as she watched

him. Every part of her body ached, her breasts, her nipples, the apex of her thighs. All the parts of her he had explored, awakened, caressed and brought to life.

Now naked, his manhood rock hard and evidencing his own arousal, Domhnall climbed in beside her. He bent and kissed her lips, but with only the lightest brush before pulling away again.

“Ah,” she cried, bemoaning his departure.

“Soon, me love,” he purred.

He lifted her hands above her head and held them there with one hand. Lowering his mouth to her neck, he then lay gentle kisses across her skin, like a feather. Goosebumps rose at his tenderness, and her nipples peaked with the anticipation.

His lips continued over her collar bone, again, the lightest of kisses. She sighed and moaned, for while he teased her, she also felt the wonderful pleasure of his most slow and gentle touch. His lips moved down over her breasts, and at her nipple, his tongue slipped out, flicking the hard bud.

“Oh, God,” she breathed.

His tongue continued, over and over, making Katherine squirm beneath him. Automatically, she stretched her legs wide, her body aching for him, yearning for him, desperate for him.

He moved from one breast to the other and continued his lashing, while her body tensed and ached for more. But he did not linger. Instead, he trailed his tongue down the flatness of her stomach, and after shifting his position, settled himself between her legs.



Curious, Katherine lifted her head, only to see him smile up at her.

“What are you?—”

But a second later, she felt his tongue flicking against that tiny bud of pleasure, and suddenly, she gasped.

“Oh. Oh, my.”

“Och, aye,” he growled, the sound muffled from his position.

With her legs resting over his shoulders, Katherine felt herself climbing once more. Now, however, the sensation was the most ecstatic she had ever experienced as his tongue lashed her again and again and again.

She writhed against him, her body tensing, her fingers grabbing at the bedclothes beneath her while the intense pleasure heightened in that singular place on her body. He did not relent and she did not want him too, for she knew where he was taking her and she was desperate to reach it.

She panted then, for she was so very close, teetering on the edge of a colossal explosion of massive proportions. His tongue continued on, flicking her over and over, while her body tensed and she held her breath. So close. She was so very close. Her body trembled as she reached the peak, and then, with a euphoric rush, she exploded with a feeling of ecstasy.

“Ah,” she squealed, her body spasming as the sensation continued on for several seconds.

Domhnall then moved to lie beside her, and slipping his arm under her back, he rolled her onto him.

“Ye ken the way ye sat on me lap on the chair?” he growled.

“Uh-huh,” Katherine nodded, still panting, and floating, and delirious.

“Dae the same tae me now.”

She straddled his thighs and pressed her knees into the bed. Knowing without him telling her, she hovered above his thick, hard manhood, and gently lowered herself down on top of him.

“Ah,” she cried, her eyes rolling back in her head as he filled her.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:28 am*

“Oh, me God, Katherine,” Domhnall panted, as he slid inside of her.

Resting his hands on her buttocks, he slowly moved his hips up and down, while she, pressing her knees into the bed, rocked her hips back and forth. Gazing at each other, Domhnall’s eyes smoldering as he drank her in, they fell into a rhythm that started off slowly at first.

Katherine could feel him nestling deeply inside of her, her body wanting more and more of him. She could see Domhnall climbing now, desperation for her dancing across his face. And as the want of her grew, so did the thrusts of his hips, for he drove into her, faster and deeper.

The pleasure of him filling her was like heaven as she cried out. “Oh, God.”

“Och, Katherine,” Domhnall growled, his hips slamming against hers. “Katherine,” his voice grew louder as his thrusts went even deeper. “Katherine,” he bellowed. “Oh, me God.”

And suddenly, his whole body stilled, his head thrown back in ecstasy as he emptied himself inside of her.

Much later, after they had made love again, Katherine lay, contentedly wrapped in Domhnall’s arms, his soft beating heart relaxing and soothing her.

“I have a question.” Domhnall said from above her.

Shifting to look at him, she said, “What is it?”

He gazed at her lovingly, and with a soft smile, he said, “Will ye marry me, Katherine?”

But there’s more...