



A Wife for the Highland Wolf (Lasses of Clan Clyde #4)

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Category: Historical

Description: "The contract is binding...Ye're mine now, sweetheart."

Accused of his first wife's murder, Laird Murdoch can't find a bride to raise his son. Until an old contract between clans thrusts the bonniest lass his way.

Forced to marry the most feared Laird in the Highlands, Lydia vows not to let the handsome warrior terrorize her. So she sets some rules. The most important one: he can't claim her unless she asks for it.

The alluring hellion is not the obedient wife Murdoch had hoped for. But he knows exactly how to tame her. By the end of the month, she'll be begging for his touch...

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“Repeat that.” Murdoch Nairn, Laird of Clan Lochlann, folded his arms and stared blankly at the council member who’d just spoken. “I’m sure I dinnae hear ye correctly.”

“And I am sure ye heard me perfectly well, me laird.” Keenan Rourke, one of the council Elders, spoke up. “Ye need a wife and heirs. Therefore, tis the council’s decision that ye must marry or step down as laird and pass title to another who is willin’ and able to provide a continuation of his line.”

Me uncle or cousin, ye mean, never mind that Arthur is past his prime for fathering a bairn, and Gordon is even less inclined to marriage than I am.

“Ye have to see the necessity, Murdoch. The clan cannae be too long without an heir to secure its future. A leaderless clan will fall into chaos,” his uncle Arthur admonished.

Murdoch snorted bitterly. “Aye, because securin’ a marriage and sirin’ an heir worked splendidly last time I attempted it. Of course I should be willin’ to jump into that again.”

A chorus of voices flooded the room, and every councilman seemed to have something to say. Murdoch let it go on until he grew tired of the din and slammed his fist on the table. The council fell silent at once. “Enough of this! Ye ken why it wouldnae ever work to try to secure me a bride. Stop askin’ me for things that cannae happen.”

“Tis nae true. Yer father signed an agreement to promise ye a bride of the Knox family of Clan Clyde.” Senior Elder Devon Malloy nodded his head encouragingly.

Murdoch laughed derisively. “Again with yer tales? Ye ken as well as I that Faither would nae have done such a thing, especially since me first wife wasnae a Knox, but from another clan entirely. Faither said naught about another betrothal.”

Devon raised his chin and stood from his seat. “I ken well enough he never told ye, but I accompanied him to Clyde Castle, where the agreement was signed. You were to be betrothed and wed to Nora Knox after yer return from yer duties in the field. Yer faither would have told ye after ye came home, save that circumstances changed. As ye know, Laird Clyde was killed and nae others of his line were able to inherit the title. It couldnae go to a cadet line either, as the previous laird had four daughters, all of whom could wed and have their husbands claim the lairdship.”

Murdoch frowned as Devon continued. “The clan was without a laird, and yer faither dinnae want ye to be saddled with such a burden. That was why he encouraged yer match to yer first wife and kept his silence on the matter. Nay one from Clan Clyde has come forward to dispute the matter, thus none of us ever challenged Laird Lochlann decision. But the old contract still stands, and there’s nothin’ in it that says yer first marriage would make the contract invalid. Or prevent ye from demandin’ a new one to honor in place of the old.”

Murdoch felt a headache building in his temples. The worst part of it was that the story was plausible. He knew his father had intended to negotiate for peace and a possible alliance with Laird Clyde. It wouldn’t take much for those negotiations to also include a betrothal, if Laird Clyde had unmarried daughters and no sons.

Murdoch had heard rumors of the laird’s death, involving a dispute with one of his neighboring lairds over a marriage to one of his cousins, but he did not know the details, and with his own problems, he had never cared to find out.

He took a deep breath and forced his voice into a more reasonable tone than the growl he wanted to release. “Even if the contract is true and valid, ye ken I’ll nae force a lass to wed me.”

“Certain sure, there’s nae any lass who would deserve to be saddled with ye.” Murdoch was certain Michael Dover, another elder from his father’s council, hadn’t meant for his words to reach Murdoch’s ears. His disrespect vexed Murdoch, who had no intention of letting the words pass.

He rose from his seat and stalked around the council chamber, noticing how every man braced himself in his chair and avoided his eyes. Michael paled as Murdoch stopped beside his chair and looked down at him with a deceptively pleasant expression.

“Given what ye think of me, Dover, perchance ye will wed me to yer daughter, and spare me the trouble of seeking another? I ken she’s the biddable sort.” And as plain as a fence post, which is why she’s nae wed yet.

Dover gulped, his mouth opening and closing several times, but no words came forth. Murdoch smiled coldly at him. “As I thought.”

He turned on his heel and started back toward his seat, then hesitated. There wasn’t likely to be anything else important said at the meeting. Why should he stay and subject himself to more insults or ultimatums?

He had a headache, and a powerful need for something stronger than beer or mead to ease the tension that was coiling his muscles into knots in his back and shoulders. A drink in the silence and privacy of his study sounded like a grand idea.

He was nearly at the door when Keenen spoke again. “It doesnae matter what the circumstances of the agreement were. If it still exists, and the lass is still among the

living, it must be honored. As the laird of this clan, ye'll see it done, and done within the season, or we'll be asking for ye to step down."

Murdoch stopped a moment, anger boiling under his skin at the latest demand. Worse, he knew that it was backed by the council as a whole, and there was more than one man on that council who would be willing to take the matter all the way to the Highlands Gathering of Lairds, if not further, should he choose to ignore them.

Still... "Enough of this. I'll hear nay more demands from ye about a bride, marriage, bairns or anythin' else. This meetin' is over, and I will decide when the next is to be held, and whether yer demands are even possible to meet." Ignoring the usual meeting protocols, Murdoch left before any of them could protest and slammed the door behind him.

He'd said he would decide whether to meet Council's demands, but Murdoch knew they weren't going to give him a choice, unless he could prove that the first contract no longer existed. There was always the option of finding it and burning the parchment, but Laird Clyde, whoever he was, would likely have a copy as well.

Besides, he might be a temperamental bastard, but he wasn't so dishonorable as to do such a thing. If the contract was still among his father's papers, he'd find it. When that transpired, he could worry about honoring it.

On his return to his office, Murdoch immediately poured himself three fingers of scotch and drained half of it in one long swallow. It didn't do much for his headache, or his irritation, but it did ease the aching of his throat, and the smooth heat of it eased some of the tension from his back.

With his initial thirst quenched, Murdoch sighed and went to the cabinet that held his father's old papers, which he hadn't yet managed to sort through. He opened the first drawer and began his search.

He was halfway through the second drawer, becoming more frustrated by the moment, when the door opened and his cousin Wilma wandered in, only to pause at the sight of him. “Oh, cousin. I dinnae think ye’d be here. Can I look through yer shelves? There’s a botany book I’m searchin’ for.”

Murdoch grunted in response, knowing she’d do as she pleased, regardless of what he said. Wilma took that as his permission and made her way to the bookshelves and began scanning through them, although Murdoch knew she was watching him with interest. He was not surprised when she gave up halfway through the second shelf and turned to him. “Ye’re in a foul mood, and I cannae remember the last time I saw ye going through those old papers. Did somethin’ happen?”

“Aye, it did.” Murdoch scowled as he pushed aside yet another pile of faded documents and dragged the next set in front of him. “Council’s demandin’ I wed, or they’ll force me to step down. Elder Malloy swore in the meeting that Faither arranged a match with the laird of the Clyde clan, and the council said I’ve to honor it, or be removed from me position.”

Wilma’s jaw dropped. “Ye cannae be serious! Surely me faither...”

“Yer faither’s in agreement with the rest of them. Says a laird must do his duty, including providing heirs for the continuation of his line.”

The dismay and outrage on Wilma’s face made him feel a little better, even if he knew there was nothing his cousin could do to aid him. “That’s foolish! Ye’ve already sired an heir in Finn, and even if ye hadnae, ye’ve years of life left, plenty of time to find a wife if ye want. And if ye daenae, I’ll be finding a husband someday, and there’s Gordon too.”

Her tone softened as she stepped forward to put a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. “I cannae believe they’re tryin’ to force ye into this and threatening to take the title,

when ye've done so much to help our clan prosper."

"Apparently what I've done is nae enough, so far as the Elders are concerned. A laird is apparently nae a laird without a wife and wee ones." Murdoch grimaced and set aside the stack to reach for another. "If they take the matter to the Highland Gathering or the court, I cannae be sure of winnin' the argument."

Wilma returned to the bookshelves, though she continued to ponder as she did so. "Can ye nae just seduce a lass and wed her?"

"Has to be a lass of proper station. With me reputation, nay lass will want me, and nay father, brother, or cousin would consent to give his female relative to me in wedlock."

Wilma gave him a fierce look. "I daenae ken what ye mean by that."

"Ye ken as well as I what happened to me first wife. And ye ken the rumors that have been driftin' through the clan since. Nay woman would risk it." The words grated like sandpaper in his throat, but he'd long grown used to the knowledge that no one would ever listen to his side of the story. No one, save his cousin.

Wilma opened her mouth, and Murdoch shook his head. "Daenae argue. We both ken that what people think and what truly is are rarely the same. Leave it be."

Wilma frowned but turned back to the bookshelf. Her brow furrowed in thought. "Ye said Malloy was going on about an old contract? If ye prove it doesnae exist, does that mean they'll have to relent?"

"Like as nae, they'd find some other way to...och, and now I've found it, the devil take me luck." Murdoch swore in mingled disbelief and annoyance.

There, under his hand, was a document clearly titled ‘Contract of Alliance by way of Marriage Between Two Clans’.

He read it quickly, his mood worsening with every word. Rourke had told the truth. His father had indeed signed a contract for him to be wed to a Lady Knox of Clan Clyde, as part of an alliance to be formed between them.

Further reading told him the lady’s given name was Nora, and that the terms of the agreement stated all children would be heirs and daughters of Clan Lochlann.

Murdoch scarcely heard Wilma’s soft, triumphant exclamation a moment later. “Found it!” He barely registered her soft touch on his shoulder, or her murmured “I wish ye luck in yer quest, cousin.”

The door clicked shut behind her a moment later, and Murdoch sat back in his chair with a thump. He had a sudden, almost overwhelming, desire to trade the glass of scotch he’d poured himself for the rest of the bottle. Had he not been in a position that required full use of his wits, he might have given in to that desire.

The document was real. There was a woman out there, a woman he’d never met, who was his betrothed.

Murdoch picked up the paper again, studying the name written in the faded ink. “Nora Knox...”

I daenae ken ye, Miss Knox, but I hope ye're a strong lass, for ye're me only hope of keepin' the peace. In the words of the old bard... ‘somethin' wicked this way comes’...and ye’ll be the makin’ or the breakin’ of me clan’s fortune.

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“Here’s an interesting looking laird...och, never mind.” Lydia Knox, youngest among the Knox sisters of the Clyde Clan, shivered as she turned the page of her Book of Records.

“What? Was he already married?” Her sister Isobel leaned around her shoulder, grimacing as she shifted the weight of her belly. She was seven months with child, and her belly was as round as a ball.

“Nae as such. That is, he was, but it appears he killed his first wife.” Lydia shivered again.

“Killed his first...och, I think I ken which laird ye’re looking at. Tis Laird Lochlann, aye?”

“Aye. Do ye ken of him?” Lydia raised a hopeful eyebrow. She knew what was written in the records, but she also knew that records weren’t always accurate.

After all, records had stated that Emma’s husband Hunter had killed their elder brother, and they’d discovered that to be a falsehood - a story spun by their detestable cousin Geoffrey to hide his own nefarious misdeeds.

Fortunately for them all, Geoffrey was dead, and his lies and manipulations with him. Instead of being exploited as his puppets (one of them forced to wed their own cousin, at that) the sisters had found safe havens and loving husbands. All of them, except for Lydia.

Lydia understood that it was only right for her sisters to marry first. She was the youngest, after all. The bairn of the family. She couldn't begrudge her sisters the happiness they'd found, especially after how they'd all struggled to find peace and joy after fleeing Geoffrey.

Even so, it stung to be the only one who'd yet to find a potential husband. Especially after Nora and Isobel, who'd both sworn not to marry at all, had managed to acquire husbands who could give them love, as well as the lives they'd always dreamed of having.

Lydia wanted that for herself. A loving husband and a happy marriage. Even more than that, she wanted to be able to support and aid her sisters. Everyone had always protected her from the worst that befell them, and Lydia longed to be able to do something for them in return. Finding a good husband would mean they no longer had to worry so much about her safety, as it would be her husband's duty to protect her.

Additionally, it would also silence the whispers. Despite her tender age, being unmarried always brought unwelcome questions and suspicions. Notwithstanding her natural modesty, Lydia knew she was a bonnie lass, and knew as well that there were those who thought her unwed state meant there was something amiss with her that her pretty face hid. It was untrue, but that didn't stop the rumors from flowing.

With three older sisters, it was impossible to ever be truly lonely, but Lydia couldn't help feeling that something was lacking in her life. . Perhaps it was impractical, even naive, but Lydia wanted to experience a romance like the ones she'd read about, and the kind of love her sisters seemed to have found.

"Ye ken, I've only heard what's been said of him at Highland Gatherings and the like." Isobel's words yanked Lydia out of her thoughts, and back to the subject of Laird Lochlann.

“Well, tis more than I ken of him. I’ve never heard much, save that the old laird died a few years ago, and the new laird, his son, is reclusive.” Lydia frowned at the book in her lap. “And what’s in these records, of course.”

Isobel frowned. “I couldnae go to the last Gathering with Alex, what with the mornin' sickness and all, but he mentioned Laird Lochlann. Said there’s rumors that the clan may ask him to step aside, for he cannae seem to form any alliances to aid them.”

“He cannae form any alliances?” Alliances were a necessity among the many clans of the Highlands, and there were few offenses so great that a laird would be shunned so harshly. “Maybe he really did kill his wife.” Lydia pursed her lips. “Or is the wife a speculation as well?”

“Nay. That I can be sure of being true. She was a lass from a neighboring clan, and they married to end a feud of some sort. Tis said she was expecting his heir, but once the bairn was born, he killed her. Dinnae have more use for her, and nay interest in havin’ a wife to keep him from doing as he pleased.”

“Surely, if the clan had witnessed such a thing, they’d have taken action?” Lydia couldn’t imagine anyone letting a kin-killer, even if it was kin-by-marriage, escape without consequence.

“Och, but word is nay one actually saw him commit the deed. They were alone on the road, travelin' to visit her kinfolk, and by the end of the journey she was dead. There was a story about bandits or the like, but nay proof of them.” Isobel’s voice was grim.

“Well, surely that’s nae so uncommon. Bandits attack on the roads all the time, and some of them are too superstitious or cautious to leave evidence that might lead back to them.”

“Aye, and that was me first thought too, until Alex told me the rest of it. According to

the older lairds and some of the Elders of his clan, the marriage wasnae a happy one. Seems the laird and his wife were always arguin' and fightin'. Shoutin' fit to be heard clear down to the village, and some say it came to blows more than once. They say the truth of it was that it wasnae bandits, but that he killed her as soon as he'd proved to her kin that she and the bairn were alive and healthy, rather than stay wed."

That was a troubling thought. Lydia frowned. "But...they couldnae prove the truth one way or another?"

"They couldnae. But her clan renewed the feud over her death, and though there's nae fighting now, tis only because their clan cannae afford to lose more warriors, nor their only chance at an heir, now the laird is getting on in years, with nae issue other than a deceased daughter, and a grandson in his enemy's keeping."

Lydia considered that. "They must have had some reason to risk the fight, kenning that. But even so...surely ye've some thoughts on the truth of the matter, Isobel."

Her sister scowled. "As to murderin' his wife, I'll nae say one way or the other, for I've nae proof. But even so, I do wonder what sort of man would have a woman near childbirth traveling with him, or risk being on the road with a newborn bairn and his maither." Isobel thinned her lips in disapproval. "Me Alex wouldnae ever take such risk with me, nae even if Nora told him it was safe. And ye ken how her husband feels about riskin' her."

"Aye. But ye ken Emma travels with Hunter much of the time, and ye cannae say he'd ever do anything to risk her."

"She dinnae travel with him when she was carrying their bairn. Och, I think those nine months mark the longest Hunter has ever voluntarily stayed indoors since we've kenned him. And even after the birth they dinnae leave the castle grounds for months."

Lydia considered that fact. It was true that all three of her sisters stayed at home for the most part when they were with child. Even Nora, despite her passion for being a healer and her determination to offer her skills to those in need, had remained in her husband's home and had the patients come to her during that time.

She looked at Isobel's prominent belly. "Is it really so difficult and dangerous to travel when ye're carrying a bairn? Or directly after the birth?"

"Och, aye." Isobel scowled at her rounded stomach, though it was a scowl liberally laced with deep affection. "Me feet and back are always hurtin'. I cannae pull a bow at the moment, and even the thought of trying to ride..." She snorted derisively. "It'd take a troop of guards to get me into and out of the saddle, never mind keepin' me balance doin' anythin' other than a slow walk." She sighed. "I cannae speak for after the birth, but I wouldnae wish to have to care for a newborn bairn on the road."

"Laird Lochlann shouldnae have been making his wife travel." Lydia shook her head. "Truly, men who are cruel to their female relations, or their wives, should be spirited away by the Fair Folk, or hunted by the Wild Hunt. It would be even better if they disappeared entirely."

"Aye. I ken one cannae believe all the rumors, especially after seein' what our cousin did to Hunter, but still..." Isobel shook her head. "They say that Laird Lochlann is short tempered and likes his drink, and that he's kenned to threaten those who cross him. They say he threatened to kill a man's daughter for speaking ill of him."

"Surely that's an exaggeration."

"I wouldnae ken, but there was nay lass I ever met at the Highland Gatherings that was willin' to come near him. Nae even the married ones are willin' to risk being in his presence." Isobel looked worried. "There's also rumors about how his faither died. They cannae all be wrong, and a man with such a reputation for violence isnae

one I'd want to have dealin's with." Lydia shivered at the thought.

"Well, have ye met any members of his clan or council? Maybe one of them has a better notion of who he truly is." Laird Lochlann sounded like a beast, but she'd heard awful things about Hunter and Alex as well, and they'd turned out to be good men.

"Nay. He's too reclusive. But I hear his father was a willin' supporter of our cousin. They had an alliance when Geoffrey was actin' as Laird Clyde, for all that they never came to his aid against Hunter."

Lydia shuddered. Anyone who willing to aid her cousin was either deceived by his honeyed words or worse than a brute. Geoffrey had been a power-mad, depraved bastard.

"If Laird Lochlann's son is of the same nature, perhaps tis better that he's nae inclined to socialize. Surely, we're all better off. And it's nae as if he needs a wife...nae in the normal way of things. Unless ye've heard similar stories about his heir?" That didn't bear thinking about. A man who could also harm his child was truly a monster.

"Nay, I've nae heard anythin' save the bairn was born. Rumor has it though, that one of his kinfolk has taken over the bairn's care. Some say tis because he has nay notion of how to raise a bairn, and some say tis because nae even his own kinfolk would trust him with a wee, helpless bairn."

Isobel sniffed. "Alex has even heard that they want him out of the lairdship so it can be handed to a cousin, rather than risk his son in the laird's chair, bein' as dangerous as he is. Tis rumored the clan Elders have demanded he take a wife, to prove he's nae a complete madman, incapable of sustaining such a bond."

“If they really thought him a madman, surely they’d have come to the Gatherings to renounce him.” Lydia frowned. “Or the King’s Court would have him committed, for the sake of peace in the Highlands.”

“Aye, ye’ve the right of it there, and that’s one rumor there’s nae much stock in.” Isobel nodded. “Even so, I pity the poor lass who might wind up wed to him, for a man like that will find a way to win a bride and maintain his lairdship, likely even if it takes a hefty bride price. Perhaps he’ll kidnap a lass, but his intent willnae be so benign as Leo’s.”

Lydia still remembered the insanity that had surrounded Leo’s kidnapping of her sister Nora, to care for his sick son.

“Would kidnapping a lass to force her to marry even work? I cannae imagine any sane priest would bless the marriage, even if ye could find willing witnesses. And why would anyone wish to have an alliance with such a man? Or agree to stand for such a marriage, if they feared him enough to keep their own daughters away from him?”

“There’s ways of making such things happen. Before we burned the papers, I saw some of the plans Geoffrey had made to arrange his own wedding, and what one man can conceive of doing, so can another. Even more likely, he might have shared such plans with the previous laird.”

Both women shuddered. After a moment, Isobel continued. “Willingness and trust wouldnae matter, nae to some men, as long as the tie was forged. After that...ye ken how it would look to march against someone who was kin-by-marriage. If he brought a lass to the altar and managed to wed and bed her, her clan would be forced to stand neutral, or support him, whether they wished to or nae.” Isobel said.

“I cannae imagine what marriage to such a man would be like.” Lydia shook her

head. “T’would likely be a nightmare.”

More than a nightmare. Being wed to Laird Lochlann sounded as if it would be worse than wedding Geoffrey. At least Geoffrey had possessed some reasons to keep his chosen bride alive. Clearly, Laird Lochlann considered his women less valuable.

Lydia's skin crawled. She'd had far too much experience with one monster to want to come close to being bound to another. If Lochlann was as bad as the rumors made him out to be, his poor wife might have welcomed her death.

Isobel patted her hand. “Aye. But fortunately, ye daenae need to worry about him. We’ll find ye someone else, someone with a better reputation and temper.”

Lydia nodded. She was about to turn the page on the book of records, when a knock at the door made them look up.

A maid entered, her expression worried, as she curtsied hastily. “Me ladies, I daenae wish to disturb ye, but there’s a visitor at the door, insisting on seeing Miss Knox.”

Isobel and Lydia exchanged a startled look. Lydia was the only one who still went by that name, but there was no one she knew of that would be visiting her.

“To be specific, I said I wished to see Miss Nora Knox.” The deep voice startled the three women. Lydia rose to her feet as the stranger entered the room.

He was handsome, possibly the most handsome man Lydia has ever seen. He was tall, with eyes the color of storm-tossed waves, hair dark as a raven’s wing, and tanned skin. His arms were muscular, his shoulders broad, and his stride confident. Under other circumstances, he would have made her mouth dry and her face flush.

But his eyes were cold, snapping with impatience, and he clearly had no manners,

having followed so closely after the maid and forced his presence upon them. His mouth was set in a stern slash that looked as though he never smiled, let alone laughed.

He looked dark and dangerous. Lydia was already struggling to think of a way to quickly and politely dismiss him when he spoke. His words froze her in place.

“Me name is Murdoch Nairn, Laird of Clan Lochlann, and I’ve come to claim the bride that was promised me - Nora Knox. Where is she?”

Murdoch looked at the three women in front of him. The maid had deferred to them, so they were clearly the ladies of the Castle. Presumably, the one who was with child was the current Laird Clyde's wife.

However, the document his father provided had stated that Nora was the eldest of the Knox sisters, and the second woman looked younger than the first. He didn't think she was of an age where his father would have contracted for her hand.

On the other hand, it was best to be sure. "Are either of ye Miss Nora Knox?"

The younger one stepped forward. "We're nae. I'm Lydia, and this is me sister, Isobel, wife of Acting Laird Clyde, who is also Laird Rothach."

"A pleasure to meet ye." He spoke the required courtesies, but even to his own ears, his voice held no interest, merely a hint of impatience. Murdoch knew he probably appeared rude and impatient, but he wasn't one to mince words, nor waste time. "But it's Nora Knox I'm looking for, and I'd appreciate it if she could be sent for. I've urgent business to discuss with her, and it cannae wait."

The younger lass, Lydia, pursed her lips. "Nora is our sister, aye, but she doesnae reside here. She resides with her husband, Laird Buckhan."

Murdoch stiffened, feeling as if the words had slapped him across the face. He might not want to fulfill the contract, and could even admit that his clan had been first to breach it, but for some reason, the young woman's words stung his pride. He'd never

met Nora Knox, and yet, it felt as if she'd rejected him, and that was an uncomfortable feeling. "That wasnae supposed to happen. She was promised to me."

The lass who was with child heaved herself to her feet, glaring at him. "And what right have ye to say that? For I'm certain Nora never promised herself to anyone, and I ken Hunter dinnae take a contract on her behalf. She wasnae shackled to anyone afore she chose to wed the man she loved."

"Nae true. I've the contract right here, saying I'm betrothed to Miss Nora Knox of Clan Clyde, to be wed as part of an alliance." Murdoch produced the contract and handed it over, glad he'd thought of bringing his copy. "Ye should have it among the previous laird's papers."

The older lass snorted in derision, contempt and bitterness obvious in her eyes, even as she read the document he'd given her. "We burned everything Geoffrey wrote, and good riddance to him. An agreement with that snake wasnae worth the parchment it had been written on."

"He was still the laird, and the contract is binding." Murdoch could feel his temper fraying, frustration taking hold with each word that passed between them. He needed a bride, and he'd been promised one. He wasn't planning to leave without a bride. He wouldn't tolerate the scorn and humiliation he would face in the aftermath of such a debacle, no matter whose fault it was.

"He's also dead, and nay one save he ever saw nor signed this paper. There's naught bindin' to us in this document. And even were there, Nora's long since wed, and the marriage consummated. Ye cannae claim her now."

"Then I'll claim another bride. I ken there's more than one Miss Knox. Choose another of yer sisters, and I'll wed her instead."

The youngest lass spoke up then, her eyes flashing as she protectively shielded her elder sister. “And why would we ever agree to that?”

“Because I’ll nae stand for being humiliated by a broken promise. If ye willnae honor yer clan’s promise, then ye’re declaring war between Clan Clyde and Clan Lochlann. And I daenae think ye want any such thing.”

“Perhaps. But I daenae think ye will come out the better in such a confrontation. But tis beside the point, for the fact of the matter is this: Me sisters are wed. I’m the only lass who carries the name Miss Knox anymore. And I daenae consent to marry a boorish man such as ye.”

Murdoch felt his lips twist in a reluctant grin. She was as spirited as she was pretty, this wee lass, and not afraid to face him down. She wasn’t his promised bride, but he thought he’d be doing well if he could secure her hand.

When I secure her hand in marriage. Nae if.

He stepped forward with a wolfish smile on his face. “I dinnae say ye had a choice about refusing. Did I nae tell ye that ye can offer me a bride or I can bring ye a war?”

“Are ye threatening me sister?” The other woman tried to step forward but was hindered by her sister’s arm.

“I’m stating the realities o’ the situation.” Murdoch folded his arms. “This must nae be difficult. Surely, we can discuss things like civilized clan-folk.”

At that, the older woman did step around her sister. “Anything ye have to discuss on this matter, ye’ll discuss with me. Tis me husband that’s the laird.”

“And yer sister, tis the one I’ll be marryin’. I’ll discuss the matter with her, or nae at

all.” He smirked at her. “I’ll nae have ye sayin’ the amendment o’ the contract isnae valid for the same reasons ye dismissed the first - that the lass in question dinnae see or agree to it. We’ll settle the matter between ourselves, and yer husband can have his say later...if it comes to that.”

Lydia wasn’t sure what to make of Laird Lochlann, or Murdoch Nairn. He was arrogant, churlish and ill-tempered, but he had also said he was willing to talk. She swallowed. “What would we be talkin’ about?”

“Terms of the proposal. There werenae any written out, save the name of me bride and the fact that the marriage was to secure an alliance between our clans.”

Lydia bit the inside of her cheek. On one hand, the thought of being tied to such a dangerous and temperamental man terrified her. On the other hand, what choice did she have? She didn’t want to cause her sisters and their families to be embroiled in a war, not when there was a simple solution available to keep the peace between the clans.

She put a hand on Isobel’s arm. “Tis all right. I’m willing to speak with him, as long as we can use Alex’s study for privacy.”

Isobel looked at her with distress clear in her eyes. “Lydia...ye...”

“I’m the last unmarried Knox lass. This is something I must do, for all our well-being.” Lydia smiled at her sister. “Daenae fret, Isobel. I’ve learned well from the rest of ye over the years.”

She stepped forward, toward Laird Lochlann. “If ye’ll come with me, I’ll take ye to a place where we can speak privately.”

Isobel huffed and she followed behind them, her eyes on the swell of her belly. “I’d

be able to handle any ‘discussions’ that were needed if I dinnae have to be mindful of me condition. But ye ken, little one, ye could let yer mother shoot an arrow now and then.”

For a brief second Lydia saw Laird Lochlann’s surprised expression before he concealed it behind his mask of arrogance. Still, the brief glimpse heartened her. It seemed the man possessed some basic human traits after all. And if the mask could be cracked once, perhaps it could be cracked again.

Together they made their way to the study, passing two of Isobel’s many dogs and one of the cats on their way. Both dogs bounded up to Lydia and demanded scratches behind their ears, and the cat purred when she ran her fingers through its thick, soft fur.

Laird Lochlann looked slightly annoyed by the delay, but he was astute enough to say nothing as Lydia greeted her friends.

At the door of the study, Lydia stood aside to let the laird enter first, only to retreat quickly as her sister’s middle-aged wolfhound bounded into the room past them.

Lydia laughed and patted the dog’s head. “I suppose ye’re to be me guardian and chaperone then, Hector.”

“Should be me.” Isobel grumbled at her. “I may be carrying a bairn inside me, but I’m fair certain I could manage to put an arrow in him if he tries somethin’.”

Lydia smiled as her shoulders relaxed. “I’m sure Hector would take care of him before ye could even find your bow, Isobel. But daenae fret. I’m certain I’ll manage.”

“I’ll be waiting here, right outside the door. Call out if ye need somethin’.” Isobel glared at the laird and pulled the heavy door shut.

Lydia took a deep breath. She could do this. She turned to Laird Lochlann and raised her chin, determined to act as a laird's daughter should. "Very well, Laird Lochlann. What terms would ye like to discuss?"

Murdoch took a closer look at his chosen bride. She was shorter than her sister, but well proportioned, with generous curves and clear, slightly tanned skin. Her face was surrounded by a carefully tamed silken mane of hair, dark as night. Her green eyes were bright, lively and sharp with a keen intelligence that added maturity and wisdom to her otherwise youthful face.

The girl, Lydia, he needed to remember her given name if he was to be courting her, folded her arms under her bosom, and Murdoch found his eyes drawn to the swell of her chest. She was well-endowed, and it had been a long time since he had paid much attention to a woman.

He jerked his gaze back to her face quickly, but saw by the gleam in her eyes that she hadn't missed the momentary shift of his attention. Murdoch found himself appreciating her quick vigilance.

"Well, Laird Lochlann?" She raised an eyebrow at him, amusement almost covering the apprehension he'd witnessed earlier. She had boldness and sense both, and he liked that as much as he did her physical attributes.

"Murdoch." He stepped closer to her. "Since we're to be married, tis best ye get used to me given name."

Her eyebrow rose higher, skepticism clear on her face. "I dinnae agree to marry ye, and ye've yet to convince me why I should."

His admiration was joined by a spark of irritation. "Miss Knox, I ken I made meself clear. We're to be wed, or there will be war between our clans. And make nay

mistake lass...” He stepped closer, using his height to loom over her. “I’ve never lost a war and I’ll nae lose to yer kinfolk either.”

The small step she took back revealed that he’d made an impression. Nevertheless, she was quick to rally and respond. “I daenae ken whether tis blackmail or threats ye’re after makin’, but neither’s a good way to win a bride. Did nay one ever teach ye that, me Laird?”

Murdoch’s respect for her grew at the impudent challenge. Even so, he wasn’t without a response of his own. He stepped closer and bent to whisper in her ear before she could back away. “Would ye prefer I try seduction then, Miss Knox? For I’d be more than willin’ to do so if that’s the sort of convincin’ ye’d rather have.”

He’d suspected she was a maiden, but when she blushed furiously at his words it was all the confirmation he needed that he was correct.

Lydia quickly found her words again, her eyes flashing with ire at being caught out by Murdoch; at least he thought that was what had sparked the heat in her eyes. “Are ye a rake then, and only playin’ games with me? I daenae like being toyed with.”

His moment of amusement faded. His voice became deadly serious as he responded. “Ye’re the one playin’ games, games I daenae have any time to indulge. I need a bride, and by the terms of the contract, ye’re me choice. Ye will wed me by the end of the month.”

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Laird Lochlann's, no, Murdoch's moods, if she was truly going to consider marrying him, seemed to shift from moment to moment. One minute she was certain he was amused, perhaps even teasing her, but in the next, he seemed indignant and impatient.

It was troublesome, and not solely because of the way that his brief whisper had affected her. She had no idea why his words had made her heart race, and her face heat. She didn't understand why her skin tingled, as if she'd been in the sun too long.

She recovered her momentary loss of poise with a challenge, thinking to tease him a little. Instead, his mood changed again, - or so she thought, until she glimpsed the slight upward quirk at the corner of his mouth.

Perhaps he was only testing her mettle, the way she was testing his. Lydia supposed it was only fair.

Still, he kept saying the same things; that he'd create trouble for her clan if she refused to marry him. Aside from that one moment of teasing, he'd yet to offer anything other than to say there would be negative consequences for her refusal. She was growing tired of his intimidation tactics. Time to see if Laird Lochlann had anything better to offer than threats.

Lydia tossed her head and held his gaze. "Since ye're so insistent, suppose ye tell me what yer offer is."

Murdoch's frown this time was more pronounced, and more frank. "What do ye

mean? I thought I'd made meself perfectly clear."

"Och, ye've made some bold statements, nay doubt of that, but aside from preventing a war, ye've scarcely given me an incentive to agree. Ye cannae bargain with just that. And ye're hardly the only one to make an offer for me hand."

Lydia squared her shoulders and raised her chin. It was true, she didn't have many suitors, but she also wasn't completely without offers either. She'd simply never met any man she'd felt was worth pursuing. Not that he needed to know either of those truths.

He still hadn't said anything. Lydia pursed her lips in exasperation. "Ye ken, there's other lairds who can make similar claims of alliance and threats of war. So convince me, why should I choose a man who's kent to be a murderer, over one with a less dangerous past?"

She knew the second the words had left her mouth that she'd made a mistake. His expression twisted into genuine fury. Before she could think to step away, Murdoch's hands were gripping her shoulders with bruising strength. "Who told ye such a thing? Who?"

The suddenness of his reaction was terrifying, and Lydia was grateful when Hector shoved his way between them, a low growl rumbling in his chest. Lydia stepped back and laid a hand on Hector's neck, trying not to shiver at the violence of his response. "Good boy, Hector. Ye're the best of dogs."

She looked back up to see that Laird Lochlann, she couldn't really think of him any other way in that moment, had once again composed himself, though his eyes remained dark with anger and his jaw was tense. "Who told ye that I was a murderer?"

“It hardly matters. It was somethin’ I’d heard, but I cannae remember where.” Her heart was once again thumping quickly, but this time with a fading fear, rather than excitement.

A look flashed across Murdoch’s eyes, too fast for her to decipher. His expression then smoothed out and resumed its usual impassive mask. He stepped back, deliberately giving her space, placing Hector’s furry bulk between them. “Very well then. Let us speak of terms and conditions, me lady Knox, that we may have a peaceful union between us.”

It was strange. One moment, he’d been furious, enraged that yet another person was judging him without ever listening to his side of the story. In the next moment, he met her gaze and the rage cooled.

He’d obviously frightened her, but Lydia stood her ground. Whoever had conveyed to her the rumors surrounding his wife’s death, it was someone she was willing to protect, even if it meant facing him down.

Murdoch could respect, even admire that degree of determination and protectiveness. If he could harness that fierce loyalty for himself, for his family, then he might even be tempted to forgive the council for forcing him to marry.

But first, he had to bargain with the lass, and convince her to come home with him.

Murdoch stepped back and slightly sideways, to create some distance and leave Hector between the two of them. She still hadn’t replied to his offer to negotiate, so he tried again. “Well, what are yer terms? What do ye want to claim, to be willin’ to accept me proposal?”

He’d taken her by surprise. That much was evident by the widening of her eyes and the shift of her stance. Still, she responded by straightening her spine and facing him

directly, exactly what he was coming to expect from her. “What do ye mean?”

He sighed. “Me clan is insisting on a marriage. If we wish to avoid strife between our kinfolk, we must wed. I want to ken what will make ye agree to honor the contract, what it is ye want from me in return for yer hand.”

She blinked. “Ye mean, what would make me comfortable?”

“Agreeable.” He corrected. There was no clever way for Murdoch to guarantee Lydia’s comfort, unless she was willing to accept it, but he could provide her the things that would make her less inclined to leave, and more inclined to behave as the proper lady of Clan Lochlann. “I want ye to be agreeable and obedient.”

“There’s nothin’ in the world that would make me become the latter, me laird.” Her eyebrow rose once more. “I daenae let anyone order me about, nae since I stopped bein’ a wee lass.”

Murdoch was fairly certain that Lydia was baiting him. He also knew that two could play that game. He returned her arched stare with a calculating one of his own. “Is that so? Then perhaps ye should try it. Ye might enjoy the experience.”

From the brilliant flush that spread over her cheeks, Murdoch saw he’d made an impression. And though the lass might be a maiden, she wasn’t completely innocent, not if his suggestion could bring that shade of crimson to her cheeks. “I...I never...”

Murdoch watched in amusement as she visibly gathered her composure. Lydia Knox had spirit, and she was quick to recover from surprises. He found those traits appealing, like many other things he’d already noted about her.

The flush was still present on her cheeks, but her voice was calm and even when she answered him. “Ye wanted to speak of conditions. Very well, I have a few.”

Lydia had never encountered someone as confusing or exasperating as Murdoch Nairn. Each time she thought she had a sense of what nature of man he was, he'd surprised her again.

Still, his shifting demeanor did not amend the terms she intended to set, so she offered up her first condition. "Afore there can be a marriage, I want to get to ken ye. So, me first condition is that I must have the opportunity to spend time with ye and learn about ye. If, at the end of our time together, I daenae trust ye, then we'll nae be wed."

He tilted his head in consideration. "I cannae be away from me lands for long, as I've duties to address. If it's time together ye're after, then ye will have to come to me castle and spend yer time there."

Lydia had expected that. None of her sisters had wed without spending time with their betrothed in their homes. Moreover, she didn't trust Murdoch. She didn't want him near her sisters, possibly endangering or threatening them.

She was willing to take the chance, so long as she knew that she'd be able to leave if he was as wicked as the rumors had implied. It was a way to protect her family.

As if he'd read her mind, Murdock's expression darkened. "Ye will come live with me, and a month from now, we will wed. I'll do ye the courtesy of getting' to ken what sort of lass ye are afore I claim ye, but there's nay question of nae proceedin' with our weddin', whether ye like the idea at that time or nae."

Lydia swallowed hard. She didn't like the idea that she might be wed to someone she didn't wish to marry, but she understood it might be necessary to go through with the wedding to keep peace between the clans. Marriages had been made for such reasons for countless years.

Still, there was the matter of his first wife, and exactly how she'd passed. If he'd killed her after she'd borne him an heir, then it was vital for her to impede any chance of the same fate befalling her.

"Me second condition is that I'll be the one to decide when and if we consummate our marriage." She felt heat rising in her cheeks, but managed to lift her chin and maintain her composure. "I ken ye have an heir already, so ye'll nae touch me, unless I permit it."

She saw a spark of amusement in his eyes. "As ye will. I've nay interest in forcing an unwilling lass into me bed." He stepped closer, and his expression sharpened. One hand reached out to tip up her chin. "However, I can promise ye that by the end of the month, ye will be more than permittin' me in yer bed. Ye will be beggin' for me to take ye into mine."

Lydia cheeks burned as she jerked away from his touch. She could feel the crimson flush flooding her face, and yet couldn't stop her gaze from sliding across his broad shoulders, handsome face, and well-muscled form.

She'd read so many stories...how would it be to have this man show her the truth, to teach her what those mysterious encounters were truly like?

Lydia bit the inside of her lip and shoved the thought away. She couldn't afford to think such things about such a dangerous man. She forced herself to stoically meet his gaze as though his brazen promise hadn't affected her. "We will see about that."

Beside her, Hector barked softly, as if in agreement. The sound sparked an idea.

Hector had already proven himself an able protector. With the dog by her side, she would have much less to worry about.

Lydia raised her head to smile at the smirking laird in front of her. “Me final condition is that Hector must accompany me to your home. If Hector isnae welcome in yer household, then I willnae come either.”

She’d hoped to fluster him at least a little. After all, he already knew Hector would defend her from him. He wasn’t going to be able to harm her, if that was his intention.

Instead, he smiled. It was only a small twist of his stern mouth, but it was a smile, nonetheless. “Yer dog is welcome to come with ye. But in return, ye must agree that I’ve claimed yer hand.”

He stepped forward and laid his hands upon her shoulders and bent down to murmur into her ear. “Ye’re mine now, Lady Lydia Knox.”

Murdoch departed Clyde Castle not long after the negotiations concluded. He'd agreed to give Lydia a week to pack and prepare before coming to his castle to formalize their betrothal.

He rode back to his castle in something of a daze, his mind mulling over the events that had transpired, as he tried to sort out his feelings regarding them.

Murdoch experienced a grim sense of satisfaction. He'd secured a bride, and there would be no one who could now say he wasn't fulfilling his duties as laird. Better still, no one could force him into intimacy with her, when part of the terms she'd set was that she, not he, would determine the course of their physical relationship.

They could force him to wed, but thanks to Lydia Knox, they couldn't force him into anything beyond that.

That was yet another source of satisfaction and amusement to him. He wasn't sure how many of the council knew of the initial terms of the contract, or the name of the bride he'd been intended to wed. Even so, there was something darkly hilarious about being able to both honor the contract and ignore it at the same time.

Then, of course, there was Lydia Knox herself. Murdoch hadn't expected her to be so...well, different. Straightforward, plain-spoken and quite willful. She was refreshingly different from his first wife, despite also being strong-willed and unwilling to wed him.

His first wife had been a harridan who'd nearly been forced to the altar at sword-point. She had never let a day pass without reminding him that she'd rather spit in his face than grace his bed. As with Clan Clyde, the wedding had been a contracted affair to create an alliance, though in that case, it had also been intended to end a long-standing feud.

They'd ended the feud between their clans, but he'd been in a constant state of war with his wife until their son was born. It was only after Finn's birth that she'd softened towards him and they'd developed a tolerable relationship.

Lydia clearly didn't trust him, and certainly disliked the threats he'd offered her family, but her responses to him were unusual. She'd challenged him, but not in a way that felt like a blow to the gut or a slap to the face.

Arguing with Lydia Knox felt more like a particularly interesting and productive sparring match than a war. It made him ponder what working with her would feel like.

He rode into Lochlann Castle courtyard still mulling over the events of the day. Laughter drew his attention to the gardens, and he followed it to find Wilma playing with Finn, while her father and brother watched with amusement. All three adults turned to him as he approached.

"Ye returned quickly." His uncle was the first to speak after they'd exchanged greetings. "Did ye secure a lass to become yer bride and fulfill the contract?"

The image of Lydia's defiant expression and flashing eyes danced in Murdoch's memory. "Aye. That I did. She'll be comin' in a week to stay with us until the weddin'."

Wilma laughed. "Och, well, I may nae ken the lass's name, but I can see she's a good

match for ye, cousin. Congratulations on finding a lass that suits ye.”

Murdoch blinked at his cousin. “Why would ye say that?”

Wilma smirked at him from her seat on the ground. “Why would I nae? The look in yer eyes when ye answered...ye looked the way our hounds look when they see the kennel master comin’ with beef bones. Excited and hungry all at once, near to the point of salivatin’ all over the ground. If she can make ye look like that after one meetin’, she’ll surely make ye happy in other ways.”

The arch of her brow made her meaning clear, and Murdoch scowled. He was drawing breath to chastise her when her father spoke, his voice disapproving. “Wilma! Tis nae seemly for a lass to say such things.”

“Aye. Tis inappropriate to speak so to the laird, even if he is our cousin.” Gordon nodded.

“I speak of what I see.” Wilma shrugged nonchalantly.

“Be that as it may, I’d ask ye to exercise some restraint over yer tongue when me betrothed arrives, cousin.” Murdoch kept his tone stern. The last thing he needed was Wilma’s frankness scaring Lydia away, or further encouraging her boldness.

Wilma responded with an enigmatic glance, then rose from the grass and gathered Finn into her arms. “This bonny lad needs a clean nappie, and mayhap some time to rest before supper.”

With that, she walked away, leaving the three men standing in the garden. Murdoch watched her leave, a slight sense of trepidation settling into his stomach. Wilma was a willful lass, as was Lydia. Once Lydia arrived at his castle there would be no keeping the two apart, but he wondered what the result of their meeting would be.

Gordon broke the silence that followed Wilma's departure. "Well, I'm relieved ye've found a lass to wed, and a way to maintain the alliance contract." His cousin's eyes were full of concern as he addressed Murdoch. "Even so...do ye think weddin' the lass will let ye retain hold of the lairdship?"

"Tis what the council demanded, thus it will have to suffice." Murdoch scowled. "They've nay right to ask more of me."

"But ye ken they can. Ye've an heir in Finn, lad, but ye ken that the council is concerned for his health, and their need for a second heir. Aye, and mayhap a third, if yer wife's line holds heirship to the lairdship of Clyde Clan."

"The coming of a bairn for the lairdship is in the hands of God, nae me own, or with any lass I might wed. If that's their true concern, then best to take it up with Him, nae me. I've sired an heir, so they cannae say I deserve to be dismissed for failure on that front." Murdoch growled out the words.

Still, he couldn't help feeling some concern. His uncle was right that Finn's status as his heir was somewhat in contention. His former wife's family also needed an heir for their clan. If the council wanted a second heir to avoid further strife, then Lydia's second condition to their marriage might cause him some difficulty.

At least he had no fears that their children would be in contention for Clan Clyde. The contract stated that all children were part of Lochlann Clan, without argument. Besides, Lydia had an older sister, married to the current Laird Clyde, who was already with child. The bairn from that union would likely be the one to inherit.

Lydia Knox...ye're an interesting woman, nay question of that. But I wonder, will ye be a solution to my problems, or yet another tangle of thorns for me to deal with?

"Ye shouldnae have agreed to this. Ye dinnae have to." Lydia sighed as Isobel

scowled at her, arms resting awkwardly over the swell of her belly. They'd been having this discussion since Laird Lochlann's departure, and she was growing weary of it.

"I did have to. Ye heard him. The contract demanded a bride from the Knox family, and I'm the only one whose nae yet wed. It had to be me who agreed to go with him."

"Ye could have let me handle it. Me husband is the Laird Clyde, so tis me duty."

Lydia took a deep breath and reminded herself to be patient. Her sisters were accustomed to looking out for her. Besides, Isobel was surely feeling more protective than usual now that her maternal impulses were strengthening as the bairn inside her grew.

She reached out and clasped Isobel's hands. "Ye ken that the result would likely have been the same. The choice was to offer a bride or suffer a war, and I daenae think we could have changed his mind on that front."

Isobel started to protest, but Lydia pulled her into a gentle hug. "I ken ye're worried. For all of me life, ye and the others have been protecting me. This once I can do something in return, so please let me do it."

Isobel made a soft, frustrated noise. "I daenae see why ye should. I'm nae afraid of going to war. As soon as Alex returns I'll be calling the others, and we'll find a way to get ye out of this."

"Ye daenae need to go to such extremes." Lydia tightened her hold. "Och, Isobel, I ken the circumstances are nae ideal, nor what we thought they would be, but ye'd kent I'd be marryin' sooner or later. It might nae be a love match, but will bring us allies and peace, and who can ken? Perhaps a good match will come of it after all."

“With a man with Murdoch’s reputation? I daenae believe it, and I daenae think ye do either.” Isobel pulled free of Lydia’s hands. “Ye can put a brave face on it all ye like, but I’m worried for ye, sister of mine.”

“I daenae see why. In the event that Murdoch is truly as dangerous as the reputation that comes before him, I’ve made some arrangements to safeguard meself. As for all else, I’ll have me books to keep me occupied, and Hector to keep me company and protect me.” She ruffled the big dog’s ears. “Hector’s an impressive guard, so I’ve nay thing to fear.”

“A man who may have killed his first wife isnae someone I trust with me younger sister.” Isobel scowled. “Ye’re nae a fighter, what if he attacks ye? Ye wouldnae be able to stop him.”

“That’s why Hector will be me defender.” Lydia sighed. “I ken ye’re just concerned for me safety, sister, but ye and I both ken that what’s done is done. I’ve promised to go to Laird Lochlann’s castle as his betrothed, to at least give him a chance to prove whether or nae he’s as terrible as rumors have made him out.”

“Ye’re nae there yet. We could send word that ye’ve taken ill. Nora could send it, as she’s a healer.” Isobel suggested.

“And then Laird Lochlann would wonder why I wasnae gettin’ better, with a healer for a sister, when he already kens I’m nae particularly sickly.” Lydia responded. “Besides, the contract was for Nora, and I daenae want to bring his attention back to her, nae when he’s been successfully turned to a different course. Ye ken Leo would never accept another man claimin’ her hand, and Nora doesnae need the stress of war on her doorstep. Her gift of healing demands enough of her as it is.”

Isobel scowled, then sighed, her shoulders slumping. “I daenae like this, and I daenae want ye to go.”

“Even so, I’ve given me word, and I’ll keep it. There’s naught to be done, save packin’ to journey to his castle.” Lydia responded.

Isobel sighed. “Ye’re a stubborn lass, Lydia, indeed ye are. But I kent that years ago, and I ken now there’s nay stoppin’ ye when ye’ve set yer mind to somethin’. Even so, daenae think ye’ll get out of explainin’ to Alex and the others what it is ye’ve gone and gotten yerself into.”

Lydia smiled softly. “I ken, but daenae think ye’re going to change me mind either.” She gave Isobel another embrace, then left the room, her mind full of the things she needed to pack, and the things she’d need to take care of before she departed.

She couldn’t deny she was nervous, perhaps even somewhat afraid of placing herself in Laird Lochlann’s control. However, her sense of excitement and accomplishment refused to be quelled by any warnings to heed what was to come.

She’d always been the bairn of the family, sheltered and safe. She’d never resented it, knowing why her sisters were the way they were, but as of late she’d begun to feel stifled and constrained.

Now, at long last, she had an opportunity to step forward and spread her wings, and she intended to make the most of it.

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“Yer sister’s right. Ye shouldnae be doing this.” Lydia finished tying the straps of her final pack, then turned to face her brother-by-marriage.

She liked Alex, she truly did. He was a good husband to Isobel, and a good acting laird for their clan. The men he’d brought to their clan, his former pirate associates, were decent, hardworking people, if somewhat rough around their edges, and Alex was much the same. Normally, she enjoyed spending time with him and Isobel.

However, the past week had been filled with endless irritation and strained words passed between them, to the point where she was ready to be somewhere else, anywhere else. She would have already gone to the homes of Nora or Emma, save that she had to pack and she knew full well that neither of them would be any less determined than Isobel about trying to change her mind.

Lydia had done her best to avoid confrontation by immersing herself in packing. Her clothing, of course, was a necessity, but she’d also made a determined effort to spirit away as many books as she could sneak into her luggage. She didn’t think Alex or Isobel would notice, as both of them preferred more active pursuits, such as archery and fencing

Such as finding her when necessity forced her to visit a place in Clyde Castle where she couldn’t easily take her leave, and trying to once again convince her that she shouldn’t be keeping the promise she’d made to Laird Lochlann.

She scowled at Alex and at Isobel standing behind him. “I’ve said it afore, and I’ll

say it again. I've given me word, and I'll nae be going back on it."

She gestured for one of the servants to take the final pack. "Me things are gathered and me plans are set. Ye willnae be changing me mind."

"Ye should have waited for me return afore ye made any plans at all. Ye shouldnae have made such a deal out of me presence. Acting laird I may be, but tis still me role to negotiate alliances on behalf of Clan Clyde at this time." Alex folded his arms, a stern scowl on his face. His voice was deep, the commanding voice of a laird, rather than her sister's husband and her brother-by-marriage.

Lydia huffed. "Ye were away on land inspections, and Laird Lochlann dinnae seem to be the most patient of men. I dinnae want a delay to cause further strife when the end result would be the same, so I did what was needed."

Lydia gave her brother-by-marriage an exasperated look as she continued. "In any case, I cannae see why ye're so angered. He's a strong laird with a powerful clan. In terms of alliances, tis a good match, of the sort most lairds would gladly partake. If ye were thinkin' as Laird Clyde instead of Isobel's husband, ye'd be supportin' me decision."

Alex grimaced, but she'd scored a point and she knew it. "Aye, sure there's that, if we're only thinkin' of clans and alliances. But a laird's character is also an important thing to consider, and what of the man himself? Ye ken he's a murderer, do ye nae?" Alex raised an eyebrow in challenge.

Lydia glared right back. She was tired of that particular rumor being thrown in her face. As if she didn't know Murdoch Nairn's reputation as well as any of them! "I see. And yer hands are bloodless, then? Nay deaths at yer doorstep?"

It was a cruel thing to say, and she knew it. Alex had killed, but he also regretted it

fiercely. She saw him flinch from the words as if she'd hit him, and Isobel stepped forward, her eyes snapping with anger. "Lydia, daenae call..."

Lydia interrupted her sister, too frustrated to keep the peace. "Ye keep speakin' of Laird Lochlann bein' a killer, as if that's all there is to be concerned about in respect of the man. I'm only remindin' ye that there's oft more to a man than rumors would tell of it."

Isobel looked ready to argue the point further, but Alex laid a hand on her arm. "Och, enough me dear. The lass has a point. Besides if ye get too angered, ye're like to upset the bairn, and ye'll both be uncomfortable for hours. Ye daenae want to be stuck in bed for risking yer health."

Isobel looked as if she wanted to strike someone, but she finally nodded. Alex turned back to Lydia. "Accompany yer brother to the garden, will ye lass? I've a few more words to be speakin', and if ye're truly set on this, I'll nae keep ye past that."

Lydia nodded. She was tired of arguing, and she didn't want to part from her sister in poor spirits. Lydia did not wish for their last words together to be ones of bitterness and anger.

Alex silently led Lydia out to the garden. It was only when she fell into step at his side, with Hector loping along a pace or two behind them, that he spoke. "I ken why ye spoke as ye did, lass, and I daenae hold it against ye. But even so, as there's truth to me reputation, yer sister and I fear there's truth to his."

"I ken. But even so, I must do this." Lydia met his eyes. "Do ye nae understand that?"

"I'm nae sure I do. Though I ken from Isobel that Laird Lochlann threatened us with war if ye dinnae go. And if that's what ye're afeared of, then daenae be." Alex smiled grimly. "T'would be three clans to one, and nae any one of us are weaklings, nor

unschooled in defending what's important to us."

"Doesnae mean ye couldnae get hurt, or worse."

"Ye ken very well Hunter, Leo and I would do our best to avoid such a thing. And nae one of us are untrained youths. I'm certain we'd be alright and come home safe." Alex set a hand on her shoulder.

"But ye cannae ken for certain. And ye would also need Nora. I daenae think Isobel would stay behind either, if she could find a way to the field of combat. So, I'd be risking five of me dear family, just to avoid a danger that might or might nae come to pass." Lydia shivered. "Six, if ye count the bairn. I cannae do that."

"Ye cannae think of that at a time like this." Alex sighed. "In this, ye need to first be thinkin' of yerself and yer own safety and happiness, little lass."

"I cannae! Do ye nae see?" Lydia pulled herself free of his hand, her fists clenching as she faced him. "All me life, I've thought of meself. I've been protected by everyone else and never cared to step up to defend me sisters as they defended me. Ever since I was a wee child, everyone's always looked after me safety and happiness, even if it cost them their own."

She took a deep breath, trying to calm her rising frustration. "Do ye ken what tis like, to be sheltered, to watch yer sisters goin' through trial after trial, and never be able to help shoulder the burden? This one time, I can be the one doin' the protectin'."

Alex looked taken aback, and well he might. She'd never spoken such words to any of her kinfolk. "Lydia..."

"Ye say ye'd go to war for me, but what then? Men die in battle. What will ye tell the widows and sons and daughters of those warriors? That their loved ones are gone

because I was a spoiled, fearful child who refused to honor an alliance because I daenae like the man to whom I was contracted?"

She could tell her words had hit home, but Alex wasn't without words of his own. "And what should I tell yer sisters, if ye go to him and he murders ye in yer bed some dark night?"

"That I'm a woman grown and I made me own choice, come what may. But I daenae think it will come to that." Lydia shook her head. "If worse comes to worst, I'll run away, as me sisters and I did long ago, and come back home to ye."

"Ye may nae have the chance." Alex held her gaze for a long moment, then sighed. "But I can see ye're dead set on this, and there's nay changin' yer mind. Ye Knox sisters are all alike - ye will never let good sense stand in the way of what ye truly wish. So I'll cease arguin' with ye, and leave ye with a final gift that will aid ye if all goes poorly."

He turned and whistled to Hector. The big dog came forward and leaned happily against his thigh, nose pressed against his palm in a bid for attention. Alex smiled and scratched the dog's ears. "I ken ye're taking Hector with ye. That's a good plan, better than ye ken."

"What do ye mean?" Lydia frowned, puzzled by his words.

"Hector's been trained to the hunt, and I've ridden with him meself a fair number of times. He's never failed me, once he was set on a trail, he always caught his prey. Keep him by yer side, and if all goes badly, tell him to attack."

"To attack?"

"Aye. Just shout his name and give the word, and he'll go to whatever ye point him

toward and do his best to take it down. Doesnae matter if it's hare, wolf, deer or man."

Lydia nodded her understanding. "Just 'attack'? Nay other word?"

"Nay other word." Alex nodded.

Lydia held out her hand, and Hector immediately trotted over for more attention. The big dog seemed to sense something was happening, for he woofed softly and leaned into her. Lydia stroked her new protector's fur. "Thank ye, Alex."

She swallowed a lump in her throat. She knew her belongings were packed and ready, and Alex's chosen man-at-arms would be waiting to ride as her escort. There was little point in delaying further. Yet, now that it was time to leave, she couldn't help feeling sorrow and a desperate longing to stay.

She fought back looming tears as she looked back to Isobel's husband. She'd fought so fiercely for this; she could not retreat now. "Take care of me sister for me."

"I will." He hugged her briefly. "Come and say farewell then, and we'd best get ye on the road so ye can make Lochlann Castle afore dark."

She nodded and followed him back to the main doors that led from the castle proper to the courtyard. Isobel was already waiting for her beside the carriage that held her belongings. "Did ye talk sense into her?"

Alex shook his head. "Ye ken well enough that there's nay talkin' sense into any one of ye when ye're set. But I gave her an extra form of protection, and we can hope tis enough."

Isobel's expression crumpled with sorrow, but she only sighed. "I dinnae think ye'd

succeed, but I hoped..." She shook her head. "Well, there's nay help for it." She stepped awkwardly forward and wrapped her arms around Lydia as best she could. "If ye're set on this, I cannae stop ye. However, ye'd best write."

Lydia hugged her sister in turn. "I will."

"Mark me words. Every day. If I daenae see a messenger a day, then I'll be coming after ye. Bairn or nay bairn, if I think ye're in trouble, I'll be there, and I'll shoot the blackguard in the most painful place I can think of." Her lips thinned with worry and irritation. "I ought to in any case; he'd nae be concerned with marriage and heirs if I put an arrow through that part of him. It'd serve him right for coming here and acting so high-handed."

Despite the ache in her heart, Lydia couldn't help but laugh. "I love ye too, sister. I promise I'll write." She kissed Isobel's cheek, then stepped back and quickly made her way to the carriage.

"Come Hector." The big dog jumped up beside her, and Lydia nodded to the man-at-arms, who clicked his tongue and sent the horses forward.

A moment later they'd passed through the gates of Clyde Castle and out onto the road. Lydia held Hector tightly and refused to look back, knowing her resolve might fail her if she did so. Her eyes stung with tears, but she resolutely blinked them away.

It was time to see what she could make of the world and discover whether Laird Lochlann was everything or nothing like he was reputed to be.

“J ust to be sure I understand ye, Murdoch Nairn...ye rode into the woman’s home, invaded her presence without permission and essentially threatened her into agreein’ to wed ye?” Murdoch winced at Wilma’s scathing recitation.

He’d gathered his family to tell them that Lydia would be arriving, and to explain the terms of their agreement; the first and third of those terms, at least. The second was no one’s business save his own.

He hadn’t expected that his younger cousin would decide to give him a tongue lashing. Wilma might be the youngest of the family and the only lass, but she had no trouble speaking her mind, particularly when something upset her. And there was no doubt she was quite displeased by his actions.

“I need a wife. I daenae want to risk refusal.”

“Och, and so ye went about the matter in the way least likely to appeal to any lass with any sense of self-worth or loyalty to her kin. Well done, me Laird.” Wilma’s tone was caustic and sarcastic and Murdoch’s face reddened in spite of himself.

Wilma continued before he could get a word in for his own defense. “Ye may need a wife, Murdoch, but that was nay reason to behave like a barbarian, or an uncivilized lout.”

“The Council...”

“The council be hanged. Ye’re already givin’ the lass a month to get to ken what sort of man ye are. Ye could have started with that, ye bampot, instead of having her suggest it as a condition of fulfillin’ the contract. As it is, ye will be fair lucky if one month is enough for her to get over her resentment at being treated so vulgarly. Especially in front of a sister who, by yer account, is both protective and in a delicate condition.”

Murdoch felt his cheeks burn again in a rare moment of embarrassment. He’d been angry about the council’s ultimatum and had been determined to deal with it as quickly as possible, but Wilma was right.

He hadn’t handled the negotiation in a manner befitting a laird, or even a proper gentleman. Instead, he’d let his own temper, wounded pride, and distaste for the situation do the talking for him.

“Good. Ye ken ye’ve been a fool. Ye’ve that much sense, at least.” Wilma nodded in satisfaction. “The least ye can do is meet the lass when she arrives, and make sure she’s as comfortable as possible.”

Murdoch scowled. “I was planning to let her have the laird’s rooms, and I’ll take over the spouse’s or heir’s quarters.” He ignored the look of surprise on Gordon’s face, and the faintly disapproving look his uncle offered him.

“Tis a good start.” Wilma said. “Have someone fetch me when she’s close. We’ll greet her together, as a family. Tis nae much, but it may make her look more kindly toward ye.” She paused. “Ye did tell her ye have a son, did ye nae?”

He hadn’t told Lydia much of anything, especially after she’d revealed that she’d already heard the rumors regarding his late wife, but she did remark to him during their negotiations that she knew he had an heir through his prior marriage. Murdoch was silent.

Wilma sighed. “Och, ye’re a great boor, that ye are, cousin. Ye may be a good laird, but ye’re hopeless when it comes to courtin’ a lass.”

Murdoch glared at her. “I’ve skill enough.”

“In the bedchamber mayhap but winnin’ a lass’s heart beyond the bed it will take much more effort than that, cousin.” Wilma smiled. “Tis good ye’ve meself around to help ye smooth things over. I’m lookin’ forward to meeting this lass of yers.”

She frowned. “Speakin’ of which, if ye’ve been that much a fool, then I daenae think it will suffice to simply be at the doors meeting the lass when she arrives. Best ye ride out to meet her and escort her the rest of the way to the castle. It’ll give ye a chance to talk.”

Murdoch grimaced. He wasn’t much in the mood for talking at the best of times. “I’ve duties to address.”

“All of them can wait for a half-day, or even a full one, while ye start repairing the damage ye’ve done to yer betrothal with yer attitude and antics. That includes seein’ to the lass’s comfort when she arrives, which I can manage in yer stead. Tis the proper duty of the steward and the chatelaine anyway, and I hold the latter position til ye’re wed.”

She disappeared before he could say anything to rebut her plan. Murdoch groaned and sank defeatedly into the chair by his desk. He ignored his uncle and other cousin as they quietly took their leave.

Wilma was a good lass and had a good heart, despite her eccentricities and her fascination with magics, herblore and witchery. Even so, he found himself wondering which would cause more chaos in his household: Wilma and Lydia becoming fast friends, or if the two took an instant dislike to each other.

The weather was breezy and pleasant. Lydia quite enjoyed the ride toward Lochlann Castle, despite her trepidation over what would happen when she arrived. She didn't often go anywhere that wasn't the home of one of her sisters, and traveling outside the familiar borders made her feel energized.

The carriage made their journey slower than it would have been otherwise, but Lydia couldn't say she minded. It was as good an excuse as any to take her time and enjoy the journey.

The sun had just passed the noon zenith, and Lydia was contemplating a good place to stop and eat their midday meal, when her guard stiffened. "Me Lady...that man..."

Lydia followed his gaze. They'd encountered a few other travelers on the road, but the one approaching them now seemed to be doing so with more purpose than those who'd come before. He was also riding a horse that was far better quality than some farmer's beast of burden, and he wore the Lochlann tartan.

Mayhap tis a messenger, come to tell me that Laird Lochlann has changed his mind. I cannae say I'd be surprised nor disappointed.

Still, there was something faintly familiar about the man. Lydia frowned, looking more closely. The soft breeze that had been blowing intermittently all day chose that moment to send a playful gust over her shoulder, and the man's cloak hood blew away from his face. Lydia stiffened in surprise.

The rider was none other than Laird Lochlann himself.

She huffed, and Alex's man-at-arms turned to look at her. "Me Lady?"

"Tis Laird Lochlann. I daenae ken why he's here, but ye daenae need to stand guard, so long as he doesnae draw a blade on either one of us."

The guard nodded, and the two of them waited as the laird rode up to greet them.

“Miss Knox.” Steely eyes turned to Lydia’s man at arms. “And ye are?”

“He’s me guard and escort, since ye dinnae send anyone to guide us.”

“Nor did ye tell us ye were plannin’ to return to Clyde Castle.”

“I wasnae. Me decision was sudden.”

That was intriguing. “And what prompted that, if I may ask?”

Laird Lochlann (Murdoch, if she was going to use his given name, which as his betrothed she should) ignored the question. “Have ye eaten?”

“Nae since we broke our fast, some hours ago.”

He nodded. “There’s a village less than half a candle-mark out o’ the way, down that road.” He pointed to the left hand fork of the branch in the road. “The tavern there is supposed to serve decent food. We can eat there.”

“We could also eat the food me sister packed for me.”

“Stopping at the tavern would also allow horses to be fed and watered, and affords ye a more pleasant opportunity to rest.” Without another word, Murdoch turned his horse and started up the road.

“Me Lady?” There was a clear question in Gareth’s voice.

“Ye may as well follow him.” As tempting as it was to ignore Murdoch’s suggestion and simply ride on, she didn’t want to try her newly betrothed’s temper too soon.

Besides, a hot meal and a cool drink did sound nice, as did a proper chair instead of eating in the carriage or on the grass.

Gareth nodded, and the carriage lurched into motion. Lydia settled back into her seat, watching the tall figure riding in front of them with a mingled sense of curiosity and frustration.

It hadn't escaped her notice that Murdoch had very pointedly ignored her question. And that made her doubly curious as to what the answer was. Why had the laird of Clan Lochlann come out to meet her?

The village tavern to which Murdoch had chosen to guide Lydia for their noon meal was reputed to have hearty food, but it was also situated in a village where his face wasn't well known. Murdoch had deliberately avoided wearing his laird's torc, or any other sign of his rank, in the hope that it would help them avoid trouble.

Clansmen in this village would surely know of the 'murderous laird', but they were less likely to know Murdoch was the man they spoke of. That, at least, was his hope.

By the time Lydia's carriage had pulled up to the building that served as both an inn and a tavern, Murdoch had already passed his horse off to the stable boy, along with a coin to see that all of their horses were fed, watered, and rubbed down before being resaddled for the remainder of the journey.

He helped Lydia down from the carriage, then glanced at the man she traveled with. "Will yer escort be joining us?"

A quick glance passed between the two, and the man-at-arms shook his head. "I'll be nae more than a shout away, but I prefer to stay with the carriage."

Murdoch nodded and turned to offer Lydia his arm, only to find she'd already entered the tavern. He grumbled under his breath and hurried after her.

He found her seated at a table with a pitcher of weak ale and two tankards. "Daenae go wandering off without me."

“Why nae? Surely tis perfectly safe.”

“Ye daenae ken that. Besides, I came to guide ye safely to Lochlann. I cannae do that if ye wander off.”

“Tis nae as if I’d kent ye’d meet us on the road.” She smiled up at him, but there was an edge to that smile that made him think of Wilma in one of her more curious or mischievous moods. “Besides, I went ahead to get ye something refreshing to drink.” She offered him a tankard.

Murdoch sighed and sat down, then took the tankard. He couldn’t deny he was thirsty, and the ale, when he sipped it, was a satisfying balance of flavors, as well as cooling to his parched throat. He took a larger drink and drained half the tankard.

Lydia watched him with bright, interested eyes. “Do ye like ale?”

“Tis passable.” He’d have preferred a proper ale, but he understood her restraint, given that they still had a fair distance to travel.

Lydia sipped at her own drink. “I suppose. I’ve never been much of a drinker, but I thought a bit of shared repast between us might help us get to ken each other.”

Murdoch stifled the urge to groan and thump his head on the table behind another large swallow of ale. He’d never been one to enjoy conversation for conversation’s sake. Still, Wilma would kill him, or at least make him regret his actions, if he didn’t make some attempt. “Aye?”

“Aye. Do ye have any kinfolk?”

“Two cousins, an uncle and a son still living.”

Lydia smiled. “That sounds lovely. I’ve three sisters, and three brothers-by-marriage, as well as nieces and nephews. Tis a large family, but I’m glad of it. Do yer cousins have children? How old is yer son?”

“Nae. And me son’s seen a year and a half.”

Lydia’s smile widened. “I like bairns. What’s his name?”

“Finn.”

“Finn. Tis a nice name. Is it short for somethin', or is he named after someone? How did ye decide the name?”

His wife had chosen the name for a brother who’d passed away in childhood. She’d said the bairn reminded her of the lad for some reason, and Murdoch had never argued, as it had been one of the few civil conversations they’d had at that point.

Still, he wasn’t about to bring up his wife. “It was the name of a family member who passed away young.”

Lydia’s expression softened with sympathy. “Och, I’m sorry I dinnae mean to be insensitive. Were ye close?”

Considering he’d never met the boy, or the man he might have become... “Nay.”

“But ye named yer son after him?” Lydia frowned, clearly confused. Murdoch winced behind his upraised tankard. He was beginning to wish he’d either ignored the question or lied.

Blast Wilma for making me deal with this afore I was prepared.

Fortunately, a sense of urgency in a different area presented him with the perfect excuse to take a moment away. He finished his tankard, then rose. “Yer pardon.”

Lydia grabbed his arm before he could make his escape. “Where are ye going?”

“Privy. Or a back alley, if there’s nay piss pot or privy about.” Lydia blushed and released him, and Murdoch took the opportunity to scurry away.

The time it took to find the privy and relieve himself was enough for him to regain some of his composure. Beyond that, he was fairly certain their food would by now have been set before them, which meant he could hope that she’d be too occupied with eating for more questions.

Still, necessary as his actions had been, he couldn’t help but feel as if he’d done Lydia a disservice. He hadn’t needed to be quite so abrupt, and he should have at least made sure someone was there to watch over her. It wouldn’t have taken more than a moment to send her man-at-arms in while he took care of his business behind the stable, for example. The hound could watch over the carriage easily enough.

Perhaps he should stop by the kitchens and ask for the cook or the maid to make something as a treat for Lydia - or else recommend someone who would make such things. Some village taverns served a ‘standard’ fare that could be augmented by others in the village. Others could make a little bit of anything, so long as they were paid the coin for it.

He was halfway to the kitchen door before he realized that he’d left Lydia unescorted for far too long already, and that it would be better to ask the serving maid who brought their drinks about that sort of thing.

He entered the main dining area to see that he was correct. The tavern maid had delivered their food as he’d anticipated. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the only thing that

had come to the table while he was otherwise occupied.

Two men, burly laborers in farm smocks, had also taken up places by the table. From the looks on their faces, they'd had more ale than was good for them and they'd clearly gotten the wrong idea about Lydia.

Murdoch stalked closer, just in time to see the first man reach out to grab Lydia's arm. "Come on, pretty wench, daenae be so rude. I can make it worth yer while to be nice...come have an ale with me and me friends."

"Unhand me, please. I daenae wish to join ye. I'm waitin' for me companion."

The second man leered drunkenly at her. "Nae much of a friend to leave ye alone. I'd never do that."

Lydia's eyes were sparkling with anger, and, unless Murdoch missed his guess, she had her free hand on her belt knife. "I wish ye would."

The man's companion sniggered. "Seems like the wench thinks she too good fer us. Oughta teach her a lesson..."

"I think ye're right." The man's grip tightened on Lydia's arm.

Enough was enough. Murdoch surged forward and clamped his hand around the man's wrist. "Unhand the lass."

He squeezed hard, and the man let go with a gasp of pain. Murdoch shoved him back toward his friend, his lip curling menacingly. "Get back to yer table and back to yer drink and leave me companion alone."

"Bastard. Who do ye think ye are?" The man he'd shoved was too busy nursing his

bruised wrist to fight, but his friend was apparently both drunk and foolish enough to try his luck. “We’ll decide when we want to leave.”

“Nay. Ye will both go and do it now, and leave me betrothed in peace afore I stick me blade in yer liver and me fist through yer teeth and leave ye eating soup for the rest of yer life.” Murdoch dropped a hand to his sword hilt.

The man was a drunken fool, but he had just enough wits left to know Murdoch was serious, and that he wasn’t going to win a battle with either fists or blade. With a final scowl, the two men slunk back to their table, to the laughter of their companions.

Murdoch sat down. Lydia gave him a sharp look. “I could have handled them. I ken how to fight.”

“Aye. But I ken how to win without fightin'. And without riskin' the injuries ye might have taken.” Murdoch applied himself to his waiting meal. After a moment, Lydia did the same.

It took him a moment to recall the thoughts he’d been having, prior to the distraction caused by the men. He lifted a hand to call over the serving maid. “Yer tavern cook, do they serve standard fare, or can a man ask for something extra?”

“Extra items will cost ye more, and the price depends on what ye want - and double if ye want something that has to be sent for from old Molly down the road.”

Having to send for something would take longer, and he wasn’t of a mind to linger. “What sort of sweet things can yer cook make, that willnae take too long?”

“Got some scones from the mornin', and a bit of fresh cream and honey. Can also make biscuits with fruit preserves from last fall’s harvest.”

Murdoch turned to Lydia. "Do ye like the sound of either of those?"

She blinked, flustered. "I...I daenae need..."

"I ken. But I was thinkin' to apologize for leavin' ye on yer own for too long, when I should have had better manners. Besides, tavern was me choice, and I'd like to give ye somethin' while we're here."

Lydia blushed, but after a moment, she nodded to the serving maid. "A scone with cream and honey sounds good, thank ye. And another tankard of ale, please?"

"One silver." Murdoch handed over the money, and the maid sauntered away.

"Ye dinnae need to do that." Lydia said.

"And if I wished to?" He met her eyes, and was surprised when Lydia blushed, a shy smile on her face.

"Then, I'll say nay more than thank ye. For the sweet, and for the rescue." Her hand touched lightly on his. "I was a wee bit indignant to be treated like a damsel in distress, but I cannae deny it was impressive, what ye did. And convincin' them to leave without hurtin' more than their pride or riskin' damage to the tavern - tis kind of ye."

The scone and the ale arrived then, and Lydia withdrew her hand to finish the meal. Murdoch had barely finished his own food when she offered him a bite of the scone. "Ye should try this."

"I got it for ye."

"And I'm offerin' ye a bite, as a thank ye for yer courtesy." She smiled coyly at him.

“Ye should accept with grace when a lady offers ye a token of gratitude, or affection.”

“If ye say so.” He took a bite of the scone. It was sweet, the cream and honey melting in his mouth. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten something like it. “Tis good enough, I suppose.”

The rest of the repast was spent in silence, and within the candle-mark, they were back on the road. Still Murdoch couldn’t help tasting the honey and cream on his tongue, even as Lydia’s words lingered in his mind.

She’d called him kind, and thanked him, despite the fact that his discourtesy had put her in an uncomfortable position. She’d even called him ‘courteous’. And she’d hinted at some sort of affection for him, even if she had little cause to feel that way.

How long had it been since a woman other than his cousin had given him any of those, much less all three?

Lochlann Castle was slightly larger and sturdier than the castle Isobel and Alex had claimed as their home, but Lydia couldn’t help thinking that the structure looked slightly foreboding. However, she was sure that was merely a figment of her imagination.

She kept Hector close as they passed through the gate and entered the courtyard. The sounds of guards practicing filled her ears, but her eyes were drawn to the main doors of the castle.

Murdoch was already dismounting. There were two women waiting by the doors, one of whom was holding a bairn who appeared to be barely a year or so in age. Lydia wondered if the child was his son, or the child of other kin. Perhaps the woman was a maid who’d come to speak to the laird about something and happened to have her

bairn with her. For the first time, Lydia wondered about how the common folk of Clan Lochlann lived, and what they thought of their laird. She'd only ever heard about Laird Lochlann, his late wife and the bairn they'd supposedly had together, as well as the rumors of what had happened to the woman. The stories were worrying, to be sure, but she knew as well as anyone that rumors often left out critical information, even when they were accurate.

The carriage rolled to a stop and Alex's man-at-arms helped her down from her seat. Hector jumped down lightly beside her.

She'd scarcely turned to her betrothed to ask for an introduction when the younger, unencumbered woman lunged forward and caught her in a tight embrace. "Welcome to Lochlann Castle! Tis good to meet ye!"

The woman stepped back to look her in the eyes, her wide smile so warm that Lydia felt a smile of her own blossom on her face. "I'm Wilma Nairn, Laird Lochlann's younger cousin, and I think we're destined to be great friends, ye and I."

The servants came to gather her things from the carriage, while Wilma led her over to the others, Hector pacing along at her side. "Ye've met me cousin, Murdoch Nairn, Laird of Lochlann Clan, and this adorable wee lad..." She took the bairn from the other woman and smiled into his chubby face as he burred adorably at her. "...this fine bairn is me nephew and Murdoch's son, Finn."

"He's a fair handsome child." Lydia smiled and held out her hand to the bairn. Finn grabbed her finger and made sounds that seemed to indicate approval, if his smile was anything to go by.

Beside her, Hector barked softly, his tail beginning to wave from side to side. Wilma smiled and crouched so he could sniff the bairn. "Finn, this is Lady Lydia's companion..."

“Hector. He’s me loyal defender.” Lydia settled her hand on Hector’s shoulder, ready to pull him back if she needed to.

“Hector.” Wilma addressed the bairn in her arms with mock seriousness. “Ye’ll likely see a fair lot of him, so be kind to him.” She turned to the dog. “And ye, be gentle with the wee bairn, for he’s nae used to such large, furry creatures as of yet.”

Finn giggled and reached out a chubby fist to grab Hector’s fur. Hector barked again, a much gentler, softer sound. The wagging of his tail sped up. He snuffled the lad, then licked his face with a quick swipe of his tongue. Finn shrieked with delight.

Wilma laughed. “It looks as if yer guard and me wee nephew are destined to be great friends as well.”

“Aye. If I dinnae ken better, I’d say I’ve lost Hector to Finn already, for he looks fair smitten with the lad.”

She’d forgotten that Hector was one of the few dogs who could be trusted around abandoned or orphaned newborn animals; kittens and pups without mothers, or foals in need of extra care. Hector had willingly taken on the role of watchdog and caretaker for many of them. Small wonder he’d be so taken with the young bairn.

They stood there for a few moments, until Finn offered a sudden look of distress and emanated an acrid scent that made it clear his nappy was in need of changing. Wilma gave Lydia an apologetic smile. “Och, I need to see to the lad, but I promise we’ll talk more later. In the meantime, me cousin can show ye to yer rooms. I trust he’ll be a gentleman about it, but if he isnae, ye’ve only to let me ken. I’ll be more than happy to spike his mead with something that will make his guts grumble for a good long while.”

She gave Murdoch a glare, to which he responded with a smirk and a raised eyebrow.

Then, with a final smile in Lydia's direction, she carried Finn inside, followed by the maid, who most likely served as the bairn's caretaker when she was unavailable.

Murdoch lifted a hand to the still-open doors and bowed slightly. "If ye will, me Lady."

Lydia followed him inside, one hand on Hector's head as the large dog padded along beside her. She knew her faithful guard wasn't likely to misbehave, but it was comforting to have him close by.

Murdoch led her through the castle, pointing out various rooms: the Great Hall, the receiving room, the solarium, and the wing that led to the servant's quarters. He then led her into the private family wing.

She expected to get one of the rooms closer to the main hall where guests or extended family might be housed. She was surprised when he guided her to a set of well-appointed, comfortable-looking chambers, clearly meant for a laird or lady of the clan. "These rooms..."

"They're me own. I had them prepared for ye."

Lydia whipped around, startled and slightly affronted by the boldness of his statement, as well as what seemed like a blatant attempt to disregard the terms he'd previously agreed to. "Ye think to be so forward with me? How dare ye presume..." The rest of her words were cut short as his hand covered her mouth.

"I think to house ye in the most comfortable manner I can provide, including these rooms." He gave her an inscrutable look. "But I think ye mistake me. I said these were me rooms, prepared for ye. I dinnae say I was intending to share them with ye. I've had another set of rooms prepared for meself."

Lydia felt her face heat, color rising to her cheeks. “I...apologize. When ye said...I shouldnae have taken affront so easily.”

“Nay, ye shouldnae have. I’m a man of me word, Lydia Knox. I agreed to yer conditions, and I’ll keep to them. We’ll nae be sharing the rooms, or a bed, until ye wish for me to join ye.”

The last was said with a small leer that made her stomach clench and her cheeks heat in a renewed blush. “Ye think highly of yerself, to assume that I’ll be asking for that any time soon.”

“And ye dinnae think well enough of me, if ye're thinkin' that I’ll put any less thought into claimin’ yer affections than I did in choosin' yer quarters.”

His hand shifted to cup her chin, the grip light enough that Lydia could have pulled away, had she not been possessed by the intensity of his gaze. “I daenae ken everything ye’ve heard of me, Lydia Knox, but I told ye I’ve never lost a war. Did ye think I’d concede this one so easily, simply because the first engagement ended with terms ye favored?”

She wasn’t about to admit that she hadn’t considered the matter at all. She’d been too focused on protecting her sisters and their families to consider how he would respond to her demands.

Then again, all she knew of him was that he was rumored to be a bad-tempered man who had killed his first wife and alienated himself from many other clans as a result. Nothing she’d heard mentioned any details of what had happened, at least, not any hard facts that she could cling to, just speculations and whispers of dislike that might or might not have been true.

The rumors and speculations were worrying, yes, but then again, she’d heard similar

stories about two of the men who were her kin-by-marriage. She also knew that Alex and Isobel sometimes fought, and so did Nora and Leo, as well as Hunter and Emma. With the exception of Emma, who was more of a peacekeeper than anything, all of them had been known to fill the halls with their tempers.

Despite that, she was keenly aware that all three marriages were filled with love, and none of the three men would raise a hand to their wives in anger, no matter how vexing the argument.

This man before her, who made efforts to see to her comfort and had taken time out of his no doubt busy schedule to greet her; she wasn't sure she knew anything of this Murdoch Nairn at all. He certainly wasn't like the man the rumors had perpetually described.

Still, she wasn't going to let him have his way so easily either. She stepped back, freeing herself from his grip. "I wouldnae care to say what ye might do, me Laird, but I'll promise ye that ye'll not find this match won with just a few polite gestures, a sweet or two, and a few words. I'm nae so simple to sway or easy to win."

He made a sound that might have been a snort, or a smothered laugh. "Daenae fret, lass. I enjoy a challenge. And I'll take victory where I can, including kenning that yer guard has been won over by me son."

Lydia smiled at him offering him sweetness over an edge of teasing. "Tis true that Hector has a soft spot for small things, but I dinnae think ye were the sort to let a wee bairn win yer battles for ye."

This time she was sure she saw a small smile break through his stony facade. "Yer nae wrong. But I'm nae fool enough to ignore the chance for a foot in the door to get past yer walls, either."

She hadn't expected such a frank response. Lydia stared at him, unable to find any words to say that would be a proper rebuff. She couldn't deny that Finn had captured her attention as well as Hector's, and she certainly wasn't going to tell him that she liked Wilma already.

Murdoch's smile widened just a fraction as he pushed open the door to the rooms and led her inside. "I ken ye must be tired from the journey, Miss Knox, so I'll leave ye to freshen up and rest. The maid I've assigned to ye will be here soon, and ye can ask her for whatsoever ye need, including supper, if ye daenae wish to brave the Great Hall tonight."

"I...thank ye." She'd been expecting to have to meet the members of his clan with barely enough time to settle in and shake off the travel dust, and the thought had filled her with trepidation. A night's reprieve, before facing them in the morning for breakfast, was a gift.

"Ye're welcome. If ye will excuse me, I'll see that yer escort and yer horses are also taken care of. If there's something else that ye need me for, then ye can send a maid or a serving lad for mi. Someone will ken where I am." He started to turn away.

His words reminded her of her luggage, still waiting to be unpacked. It also brought to mind one room he hadn't shown her. "I...wait, I did have one question for ye, before ye leave."

He paused, and Lydia took the chance. "Will I be permitted to enter yer library? Ye dinnae show me where it was."

Silence fell. Murdoch blinked, and if she didn't know better, she'd have thought he was genuinely confused by the question. "Library...ye mean ye want to see the books in me study?"

Lydia flushed, this time in awkwardness. She'd grown up with sisters who loved to read, at least, Emma and Nora did, and all her sisters and their spouses had been cheerfully indulgent of her own fascination with the written word. It hadn't occurred to her that other clans might not have such a love for books, or the resources and time to indulge in them.

The idea of living in a place without a library sent a pang through her. Even so, she forced an abashed smile onto her face, "I...never mind. I was thinking...at home, well, I suppose it doesnae matter, as I'm here now. Apologies for the misunderstanding. I suppose I'm just a wee bit more tired than I thought."

"Then I'll let ye rest." With that, Murdoch left, closing the door behind him as he went.

Lydia moved to the chair by the fire and sank into it. She knew she should start unpacking her things, but her mind was whirling with everything she'd seen of Lochlann Castle and Murdoch thus far.

She'd hoped to have access to a library. Her kin kept their family records there, along with the books, and she'd entertained the idea on the journey that she might find documents to tell her more about Murdoch's past. Or, failing that, anything that might give her an idea of what kind of man he was, and what the members of his family were like.

It apparently wasn't going to be that easy, and the only thing she had learned through that approach was that they did not appear to be a clan who valued scholarly pursuits.

If she wanted more information about her new betrothed, she was going to have to find an alternative way to discover it.

Lydia took a deep breath, then released it slowly. Tis fortunate I brought plenty of

books of me own. If I cannae look to perusing clan Lochlann's written words, perhaps sharing me own will help me gain the insights I seek.

M urdoch sighed as he settled into a chair across from his uncle and cousin. Supper wouldn't be for a candle-mark or two yet, and they'd elected to have a quick meeting about what should be done next. He couldn't help feeling tired, though the day hadn't been all that long and he'd done little more than usual.

“So, I heard yer bride arrived.” Gordon was the one to break the silence. “With a guard dog and an escort even.”

“She dinnae ken I was coming to meet her, when I dinnae ken meself until Wilma near threw me out the gate, and she couldnae very well travel between our lands unescorted, ye ken that. Nay matter how hard any laird may try, there's always the dangers of bandits and brigands.” Murdoch retorted. “Her kinfolk are looking out for her, as is proper. Tis the same with the dog, and seein' as how he's taken so quickly to Finn, I've nay objections to him either.”

“Then that would be the dog?” His uncle Arthur pointed out the window, to where a now-familiar hound was allowing Finn to tug happily on his fur while Wilma snickered at him.

“Aye. His name is Hector, and he's fair keen on watching over the lass.”

“She has a name, I'm assuming.” His uncle spoke dryly. “And I'd like to think ye ken it, since we'll be having a council meetin' tomorrow to announce that ye've chosen a bride to fulfill the contract.”

Murdoch grinned. “Aye. Her name is Lydia Knox. From what I ken, she’s the younger sister to the woman Father originally contracted for, but that’s all to the good, for it means her children aenae like to ever be in line for the Clyde lairdship.”

“And what of the woman ye were contracted to? Why did ye nae bring her?” His uncle frowned.

Murdoch grimaced. He wasn’t sure of the full details himself, but he’d gathered from Lydia and her sister’s comments that the previous laird hadn’t been the most honest or savory of individuals. He offered up the only scenario he’d managed to piece together that made sense; or at least, the most likely one his uncle would accept.

“Seems the previous laird offered Faither a lass who was already promised to another. I daenae ken if he did it out of ignorance or some other reason, but the man’s dead, and the new laird dinnae ken anything about the matter. Since we’d made nay claim and I’d married another, tis nay surprise that they’d settle the matter by allowing the lass to fulfill the other promise.”

“The new laird dinnae bother to take a proper look at the obligations the previous laird left him with?” Arthur’s frown deepened.

Murdoch shook his head. “If I’ve a guess, from what his wife told me, the previous laird wasnae the sort of man we should have been allying ourselves with in the first place. I’m nae convinced the current laird ever had a chance to learn of the matter.” He tipped his head to look at his uncle. “Ye did say Father chose to renege on the contract because the laird died and the clan was leaderless, with all the living relatives being unwed lasses.”

“Aye. I did.” Arthur sighed. “But ye said the lass is of the proper family?”

“Aye. Younger sister.” Murdoch hated repeating himself, but at least his uncle had

gone from stewing in disapproval at the actions of a man long dead and had shifted his attention to the matter at hand.

“And the weddin’ will secure an alliance with the new Laird Clyde?”

“Acting Laird until his wife bears him an heir, or there’s a second son among the other sisters, but aye.” Murdoch smiled. “And the council should be pleased, for will also tie us to Clan Rothach and Clan Buckhan, and mayhap another, for the lass said all her elder sisters were wed.”

“Rothach and Buckhan?” Gordon’s eyebrow rose.

“Aye. The Acting Laird Clyde is also Laird Rothach, and the sister the contract was originally written for is wed to Laird Buckhan, or so says me newly betrothed.”

Gordon smiled. “Yer right. The Elders will be pleased. One betrothal to secure three, mayhap four alliances. They’d be fair fools to even consider tryin’ to unseat ye now.” Gordon chuckled. “I cannae wait to see the faces of some of those grumblers when they hear of this.”

Murdoch was about to respond when the door to his study slammed open and sent all three of them scrambling for their swords. Murdoch scowled as he realized who the intruder was, but he waved a hand to the other two men to stand down. “Tis only me betrothed.”

Lydia blinked at the three men, then flushed. “Och, I am sorry. I was looking for Hector. I dinnae realize...”

Murdoch groaned. Trust Wilma to have borrowed the dog without warning its master. Or had Lydia just let the hound wander off? Either way, this was not how he’d wanted to introduce his betrothed to his cousin and uncle.

“Lydia, I’d like ye to meet me uncle, Arthur Nairn, who also serves as me chief advisor and aids me steward. And this other gentleman is me cousin and second-in-command of the warriors, Gordon Nairn.”

He gestured to each of the men, and Lydia flushed, but managed a reasonable curtsy and a “Good noontide to ye.”

He stepped forward to take Lydia’s arm. “Uncle, Cousin, I present to ye me betrothed, Lydia Knox of Clan Clyde.”

His uncle gave a short, sharp nod, clearly disapproving of the way she’d interrupted their meeting. Gordon gave her a small bow, his expression reserved. Murdoch couldn’t blame either of them for their coolness toward Lydia. They’d both known his previous wife, after all.

To Lydia, he said, “Yer dog is with me other cousin and son, in the garden there.” He pointed. “If ye like, I can show ye the way.”

Lydia flushed a bit, clearly able to read the irritation in his tone. “I can find it. I wouldnae want to interrupt yer meetin’...”

“Ye’ve already done that.” He turned toward his uncle. “If ye will excuse me, I’d like to have a word with me betrothed while I get her to where she needs to be. In the meantime, please inform the Elders and other council members that there will be a meetin’ tomorrow, directly after the mornin’ meal.”

With that, he led her out of the room and shut the door firmly behind himself.

It was obvious she’d annoyed Murdoch, but nonetheless, Lydia could feel her own temper spiking as he politely but firmly escorted her from the room.

It wasn't as if she'd known that particular room was his study, or that he was holding a meeting with his advisors. She'd simply been concerned with Hector, who'd disappeared while she was unpacking and trying to find the best place to put her books. She hadn't meant to intrude.

Yes, she could have knocked first, and if she'd paused a moment before opening the door, she would most likely have heard voices and realized the room was in use. But then, if the meeting had been that important, he could have locked the door or called for a servant to escort her, instead of taking her himself.

Murdoch finally slowed down and pointed towards a door. "That door there is the fastest way to the gardens from the family wing."

"Thank ye." She tried to tug her arm free, but he held her fast.

"I willnae have ye bargin' into meetings and embarrassin' me in that manner again. I could have been meeting with any number of folk, and such behavior doesnae reflect well on either of us. I'll nae have me betrothed, or me wife, randomly interruptin' important gatherings."

Lydia's temper sparked at the rebuke, and she jerked her arm free with a hiss of anger. "Ye should have locked the door, if it was that important, Laird Lochlann."

"Murdoch. Ye ken me given name, and I'll thank ye to use it."

"And so I will when ye're nae being a temperamental boor, and trying to act more like a laird than a suitor." She snapped back.

His scowl deepened. "I'd think the daughter of a laird, and the sister o' one, would ken how to use proper courtesy, instead o' barging into random rooms."

“Youngest daughter and sister-by-marriage! And if ye’re so concerned about that, perhaps ye shouldnae have demanded a random lass to fulfill yer need for a bride and a Lady of yer clan!” She emphasized the word, remembering how he’d said he’d take any Miss Knox. “Ye wanted a Miss Knox as yer lady, now ye will have to make do with what ye’ve chosen.”

She started to turn and walk away, but he caught her wrist and pulled her back round to face him. “A younger daughter or sister ought to ken how to listen to her laird, as well as minding her tongue and her manners. A Lady of a clan should strive to do the same.”

This close, she could feel the heat of him, see the smolder in his eyes. It was oddly intriguing to think she had that much control over this Murdoch’s moods. Lydia knew quite well that the wisest course of action was to nod, look away and answer with an agreement and perhaps a soft apology.

However, she wasn’t interested in being wise. If Laird Lochlann, if Murdoch Nairn, she corrected herself, wanted to claim her as his bride, then he’d take her as she was or wed her not at all. She wasn’t going to play the demure, timid maiden for him, or cower in the face of his temper. She might be the bairn, the protected child of her family, but she was far from weak or spineless.

Instead of an apology or agreement she smiled challengingly up into Murdoch’s face, her cheeks flushed with her own anger and daring. “Is that so, me Laird? And what if I daenae agree? What are ye going to do then? Decide nae to wed me, or...?”

She got no further than that before his hand grasped her chin, and his mouth fastened over hers in a searing kiss that drove all her words away.

Murdoch hadn't meant to kiss her; hadn't really been thinking about it at all. All he knew, in that one moment before his mouth captured hers, was that he wanted to silence her, to answer her challenge in a way that even she couldn't defy, or deny.

Lydia Knox. She was as infuriating as she was intriguing, and she awoke feelings inside of him that he hadn't paid any heed to in far longer than just the past two years.

She was beautiful; the flash and fire of her temper only made her more so. Her eyes glittered like emeralds with sparks hidden in their depths. The pale luster of her skin and smooth gleam of her night-black, velvety tresses made him recall stories of the fae folk walking the moors and bewitching those who heard their soft, plaintive songs.

If she was such, then he was truly in danger of falling under her spell. Murdoch doubted that he would mind being spellbound by such a woman, be she Fair Folk or mortal.

As his lips met hers, all argument faded away in a rush of intensity and sweetness.

Her lips were as soft as the linens in which Wilma dressed Finn and tasted of wine, the sweet scone from their noon meal, and a light trace of sweat from her journey, coupled with an odd leather-and-parchment scent that imbued his senses. Her mouth opened in surprise, a soft gasp rushing between their lips as he deepened the kiss.

Yielding, honied and pliant, her mouth was intoxicating to a man who'd long been

without such sweetness or softness for many a season. Murdoch had never shared such a kiss with his first wife.

They had barely ever even touched unless it was absolutely necessary and even then, their contact had been as brief as possible, full of rigid touches and words that had neither kindness nor softness to them.

Kissing Lydia was like drinking the finest honey mead after living his entire life drinking brackish water from an ill-maintained cistern. Without forethought he pulled her closer to deepen the kiss and taste more of her.

Lydia gasped again, this time with an edge of shock and unease. Her hands pressed firmly against his chest, pushing him away as she stumbled free of his grip.

For a long moment they stood staring at each other. Murdoch drank in the sight of her flushed cheeks, the color of summer roses in the garden, and her kiss-swollen lips. His body felt fiery, the beginnings of a rigidity he'd not felt in years gathering in his groin.

Lydia flushed a deeper rose color and looked away. "Excuse me...I...Hector..." She turned and darted away from him, through the door that led to the garden.

Murdoch watched until the door closed behind her, then released a deep breath and turned to go back to his study. He'd never wanted to return to a meeting less, but the plans were important. While Gordon was right that most of the Elders and council members would be pleased with the result of his visit to Clyde Castle, there were some who would not be as satisfied.

Even now there were council members who regarded him with suspicion and disdain and whispered such accusations as 'kin-killer' behind his back when they thought he was out of earshot. Like as not, they'd try to find a way to challenge his lairdship on

other grounds.

He'd secured a betrothal, but Wilma wasn't the only one who would protest the manner in which he'd accomplished it. He needed to plan his explanation and his responses carefully, as well as prepare himself for the inevitable arguing that would follow. It would be counterproductive and foolhardy to lose his temper.

At least the thought of the council meeting took care of the aching tightness in his groin.

Hector was still outside with Wilma and Finn when Lydia entered the gardens. Hector woofed as she approached. He came bounding up to her to get his ears scratched, then wandered back to flop down and watch Finn with an adoring gaze. Lydia smiled in exasperation. "Some guard ye are. Abandoning me for a bairn. Though tis a cute bairn."

Wilma smiled. "Come and join us if ye like. The weather's good and Finn's learning to walk on uneven ground. Tis safer for him to learn out here where there are nae stairs to tumble down or furniture to strike."

"Ye're right about that." Lydia seated herself on the ground beside Wilma and watched as the young toddler made his way over to Hector with a determined wobble and a babble of baby chatter.

"Ye look fair flushed. Are ye well?" Lydia turned to see Wilma regarding her curiously.

She blushed slightly darker, remembering what had taken place with Murdoch. She wasn't ready to talk about the kiss or her feelings regarding it, but Wilma did deserve an answer. She settled on what had happened before she and Murdoch were alone. "I was looking for Hector, and I accidentally intruded on a meeting between the laird

and his advisors. It was embarrassing.”

“I can imagine. But surely Murdoch dinnae make ye feel too badly for it.”

“Nay. He was polite enough, though he said he’d prefer that his betrothed nae embarrass him like that in the future. But I dinnae ken that it was his study. I’ve nae exactly been given much of a tour, aside from where me rooms are and how to get to the Great Hall or the kitchens or the like.”

“Well, I’ve Finn for now, but sometime when he’s with the maids or Murdoch, I’ll give ye a better showing of the place.” Wilma smiled.

“Thank ye.” Thinking of her rooms made her remember what Murdoch had said about them. “Do ye have a lot of family living here?”

“Nae so much. Murdoch, Finn, me father, Gordon - me brother - and meself. Why do ye ask?”

“Because Murdoch said he’d given me his quarters, and I wondered if there was a lack of space, and that was why.” Lydia flushed. “He said it was a courtesy, but I feel awkward for taking his rooms.”

“Ye shouldnae, after all, it was his decision.” Wilma smiled gently at her. “I daenae ken what me cousin told ye, but he told me that, aside from seein’ to yer comfort, he dinnae want ye to be placed in the Lady’s chambers, because they used to be his wife’s. He dinnae want ye to feel as though ye were being treated as her replacement and naythin’ more.”

Lydia swallowed. “Tis surprisingly kind of him to think so much of me.”

Wilma looked sharply at Lydia. “And what do ye mean by ‘surprising’? Murdoch’s a

good man, and good to those he cares for, or who happen to be in his care.”

“I can see that, aye.” Lydia looked around at the castle grounds. “It looks as if he cares well for his clan.”

“He does. He’s a good laird, nay matter what some might say about him. But that’s nae me place to speak of, so I’ll say nay more.” Wilma made a face.

“I believe ye that he’s a good man and a good laird. I just...” Lydia found her hand straying towards a small wildflower before a litany of childish babble caused her look up and see Finn tottering determinedly in her direction. She caught the bairn easily and smiled at his giggles.

“Ye just...” Wilma prompted her.

“I just - I can see he’s a good laird and a good man. But I wonder if he’s a good father, and if he’ll be a good husband.”

She was instantly aware that she’d said the wrong thing, as Wilma stilled, her smile vanishing as if it had never been. “Ye’ve heard things, haven’t ye?”

She had, but she didn’t think she wanted to speak of them. She had a feeling that revealing the rumors she’d heard from Isobel would only make Wilma angry with her. Besides, feigning ignorance might get her a more precise understanding of what Murdoch’s clan thought, as well as information on what had really transpired.

She forced herself to shrug and adopt the same look she wore when she was curious about something her sisters were trying to avoid telling her. “Nae much, and naythin’ on that front. I only ken that he had a wife who passed away. Finn’s mother, I’m guessin’. Is there something else I should ken?”

Wilma's eyes searched her face. "Ye...havenae heard? The stories?"

"Nae at all. Should I have?" She kept her eyes on Wilma's face, and a puzzled expression on her own. "Is there something ye can tell me that I need to ken about Murdoch or the clan?"

Wilma hesitated, then shook her head. "Nay. Nae that I can tell ye. Words from me wouldnae make much difference in the end. Tis somethin' ye'll learn of soon enough."

"Is it...bad? Or is something wrong?"

Wilma shook her head again, then rose from the ground and brushed the grass from her skirts. "As I said, tis somethin' ye'll learn of soon enough. Best I daenae speak of it one way or the other."

She reached down and picked up Finn. The child gurgled happily, a line of drool streaking down the corner of his chin as he showed off a mouth full of baby teeth. "I need to take Finn in to bathe and feed him. I'll see ye at dinner."

Lydia watched as Wilma turned away. She felt chilly and suddenly lonely. She'd never lived in a place without her sisters, and the idea of being without female company made her suddenly, desperately, homesick. She pushed herself upright and reached to catch Wilma's shoulder, mindful of Finn and the need to not jostle him.

Wilma stopped and looked back at her with a questioning gaze. Lydia swallowed and looked down at the bairn in the other woman's arms. "I was wondering...could I come with ye? I'd like to learn how to care for him too."

Wilma's uncertain expression melted like ice in the spring sun. "Aye. I think that's an excellent idea."

The meeting was finally over and Murdoch was tired. Not so tired, however, that he couldn't look in on his son. He'd seen Wilma take Finn from the garden earlier, with Lydia and Hector trailing along beside them.

Like as not, Wilma had taken Finn in for his mid-afternoon feeding and changing, and possibly a nap. He wasn't entirely sure where Lydia had gone, but he was determined to see Finn before seeking out his betrothed.

As a laird, he often had to entrust his son to the care of the servants or his kinfolk. Even so, he preferred to spend as much time as he could with his son. It gave him some peace of mind to witness Finn's innocent delight in his presence.

He couldn't say that he'd been the best husband, but he did his best to be a good father, and saw to it that the lad had an abundance of love and attention while he was forced to turn his attention to other matters.

As he neared the door to the nursery he heard soft voices and gentle endearments muttered in counterpart to Finn's laughter and nonsense noises. Murdoch paused as he realized there were two voices. One was Wilma's, easily recognizable, but the other was harder for him to identify.

Then he saw the large furry bulk that rested just outside the nursery door and smiled to himself. It seemed he'd have an easier time finding his betrothed than he'd previously expected.

He crouched to scratch Hector's ears, moving quietly so as not to disturb the scene within the nursery. Hector huffed softly at him but didn't make any noise to draw the attention of the two women, which allowed Murdoch to watch to his heart's content.

Inside, Wilma and Lydia were both leaning over Finn's bed, whispering quiet words to soothe the bairn into sleep. The sight gave him a sense of peaceful satisfaction as he rose to his feet and leaned against the door frame, as still unnoticed by his cousin or bride-to-be.

He'd been well pleased with Lydia as a betrothed for several reasons but now, seeing her with Finn only proved that he'd been correct in choosing her. Her attentiveness to a bairn not even her own hinted at Lydia's excellent instincts for motherhood, which would please the council.

Truth be told, it pleased him as well. He'd never demand children from Lydia, but he couldn't deny that he'd be happy if there were more bairns and a larger family in his future. He'd never struggled with being an only child, not with Gordon and Wilma raised alongside him, and he wanted his son to have siblings, since cousins were unlikely, at least for the moment.

He watched as Finn slowly settled down for a nap, making soft, murmuring noises as he slipped into whatever dreams a wee bairn might have.

"Och, he's the sweetest bairn, that he is." Her words shifted his attention from Finn to Lydia, who was leaning over the crib and stroking Finn's cheek with a feather-light touch.

"He always has been. From the day he was birthed, he's brought joy to our household." Wilma responded.

"I can see why." Lydia's brow creased. "Do ye think...will yer cousin mind if I spend

time with him, perhaps watch over him from time to time when ye've work to do?"

The question was so hesitant and uncertain that Murdoch couldn't help himself, and snorted out a laugh. Both women started and looked up, wide-eyed, as he stepped into the room.

"O' course ye're welcome to spend time with me son." He tipped his head toward Lydia. "Leavin' aside the fact that ye're to be his mother in all but blood one day, the only mother he's like to ever remember, ye're nae a prisoner in me home, nor a distrusted guest. There's nay reason, so far as I ken, that ye shouldnae be welcome to spend time with the lad."

He stepped closer, looking down at Finn's cherubic face, relaxed in sleep. "In fact, I'm fair pleased to see ye takin' interest in the wee bairn. It will certainly help to have the experience when we begin raisin' our own."

He accompanied the last words with a raised eyebrow and a meaningful look that made Wilma smother her giggles and Lydia flush a brilliant crimson.

Still, as he'd come to expect of her, she was quick to find words to respond. "Daenae ken when ye're thinkin' there might be bairns for us, me Laird, but I am glad ye daenae mind me feedin' him. I've grown fond of the duty, helping care for me nieces and nephews."

The frank admission, the teasing, and the way she looked so tenderly at Finn's sleeping form...all of it struck a chord deep inside of Murdoch's gut. He wasn't sure what the feeling meant, only that it was powerful and deep. He swallowed hard against a sudden wave of mingled nostalgia and wistfulness.

His voice was slightly hoarse as he responded. "As I said, tis fine. However, tis nearly supper time, so best the two of ye freshen up and head down to the Hall for the

evening meal.”

He didn't wait for a response. His heart was tripping out a peculiar rhythm he couldn't recall ever experiencing,. He felt as if remaining for another moment would lead to an embarrassing display of sentiment on his part. He wasn't ready to reveal such closely held emotions to Lydia. Not so soon in their acquaintance.

Without another word, he turned away and strode down the corridor, seeking a place where he could be alone with his thoughts and the feelings that accompanied the image of Lydia holding his child.

The first thing Lydia noticed when she arrived downstairs for supper was the notable absence of her betrothed. Confused, she allowed her eyes to scan the hall, wondering if she'd simply missed seeing him.

Her escort, Gavin, was seated among the men-at-arms and the guards who were currently off duty. He offered her a good-natured nod of his head, which she returned with a smile before resuming her search for any sign of her betrothed.

Murdoch's cousins and his uncle were seated at the High Table, along with others she suspected were prominent members of the clan, but the laird himself was nowhere to be seen.

She took a moment to regard the table. A part of her wanted to believe that he was simply planning to arrive later. Perhaps he was bathing, or changing his clothing, or even attending to some other form of business. However, she couldn't understand why he'd specifically informed them that it was nearing the supper hour if he was going to disregard it himself.

Furthermore, no plate was set at the laird's chair on the High Table. Plates were arranged on either side, but Murdoch's place setting was conspicuously absent of

tableware. In her experience that could only indicate one thing: that he'd no intention of joining them for the meal.

Murdoch's uncle and cousin Gordon were both watching her with composed, assessing gazes as she took her seat in the empty chair beside Wilma. Lydia felt herself flush slightly, wondering if they were simply reserving judgment or showing their disapproval for the interruption she'd caused earlier. She was tempted to apologize again, but she did not want her contrition to appear awkward and forced.

"Why the sour expression?" Wilma's question, along with her friendly tap with an elbow, brought Lydia's attention back to her closest dining companion. "Ye look as if ye found a frog in yer soup."

Lydia laughed a little, feeling some of the tension inside her dissipate. At least she had one friend and ally at the table. "Naythin' so dire. I was only recallin' how I'd earlier made a fool of meself in front of yer cousin and uncle and wonderin' if they hold it against me."

"Nae likely, though Faither might have words to say about propriety, I'll grant ye. But then, he always does."

"And yer...brother?"

"Gordon likes to take his time to get to ken people. Moreover, he's never been the best at speakin' with womenfolk." Wilma shrugged. "Give him time."

She was willing to trust Wilma's judgment, though it didn't do anything for her primary concern. Lydia couldn't help feeling that Murdoch was currently ignoring her or avoiding her. She wondered why that would be and what she could do about the matter if her intuition was accurate.

“Ye still look vexed.” Wilma noted. Lydia considered, then decided to air her fears. If she was wrong, Wilma would surely know.

“I feel as though Murdoch is avoiding me; as though he finds my presence uncomfortable for some reason.” She confessed. “I cannae think why else he would go out of his way to inform us that tis supper time, and yet nae join in the meal with us.”

To her surprise, Wilma actually giggled. “Och, that’s nae yer fault. He does this most nights. Says he cannae stand to eat at the same table with me.”

“Really?” It seemed a harsh way to speak to one’s cousin.

“Aye.” Wilma didn’t seem to be at all offended. In fact, she seemed more amused than anything else. “He says that at the end of the day he wants to eat his meal in peace, and all me chatter and energy doesnae suit the quiet he’d prefer.”

Lydia considered Wilma’s words as she ladled meat, bread, and vegetables onto her plate and filled her cup with wine. On one hand, she did want to respect Murdoch’s need for time and space to relax. She knew very well how demanding the job of a laird could be.

On the other hand, how were they to get to know each other if he was always busy or keeping to himself? What sort of relationship could she have with a man who was never present? That was no way to develop any sort of proper understanding between them.

She also couldn’t deny that she felt somewhat uncomfortable with the stares of all his clansmen upon her, and Murdoch nowhere to be seen. She’d yet to be formally introduced to anyone except his kinfolk, and she worried what the Elders and members of his clan might think of her, and the fact that her betrothed had not elected

to accompany her to her first meal in his castle.

What would happen if she wasn't the only one to wonder whether he was avoiding her? Would his clan declare her an unfit prospect as a spouse? Would they take advantage of the situation to try and further influence his future lairdship?

As much as she disliked the idea of being forced into a contract marriage, there was a part of her that didn't want the outcome decided by others. Whether they ultimately wed or decided against fulfilling the betrothal, that was something that should be their decision, and theirs alone.

Her decision made, she finished filling her plate, then rose from the table. Wilma blinked at her. "Where are ye going?"

Lydia smiled back at Wilma. "I'm going to find me betrothed. Meals are a good way to spend time together, especially as busy as a laird can be."

With that, she stepped away from the table, resolutely ignoring the stares of the rest of the clan and stopped the maid who had just deposited a fresh basket of bread on the table. "Excuse me."

The maid stopped. "Yes, me Lady?"

Heartened by the acknowledgment implicit in the address, Lydia lifted her chin. "Please escort me to the laird's study. I wish to join him for the remainder of his evening meal."

Murdoch was enjoying his evening time with Finn, the bairn fast asleep and content in his arms, when a quiet rapping on the door startled him out of his reverie. A wave of irritation washed over him. It intensified as the door creaked open. "I said I wasnae to be disturbed unless the castle is afire or there's an enemy storming the gates."

His voice was harsh, for all that he kept it low to avoid waking Finn. Even as careful as he was, some measure of his frustration must have seeped through, for the bairn frowned and stirred fretfully in his sleep. Murdoch hurried to soothe the sleeping child, even as he turned around to glare at whoever was intruding on his privacy and his rare moment of peace and quiet.

He wasn't expecting to see Lydia, standing there with a plate of food and a wine goblet. He blinked in surprise. When she didn't disappear, he found his voice again. "What are ye doing here?"

Lydia's answer was slow in coming. She seemed startled and a tad embarrassed, her eyes darting from Finn's closed eyes to Murdoch's face and back again. Even in the dimmed light of the study, he could see a faint blush suffusing her cheeks. "I...me apologies, me Laird. I dinnae intend to intrude..."

While it would certainly have been a very unwelcome intrusion by anyone else, Lydia's presence stirred conflicting feelings in him. A part of him begrudged her presence. However, another part of him awoke and whispered that she was his betrothed and would soon be Finn's mother. As such, her arrival was something to be

approved of and encouraged.

He shook his head as she started to turn away. “Nay. Ye daenae need to leave. Just give me a moment to settle him.”

He turned to the large, overstuffed chair he rarely used, save for when he had Finn with him. A blanket along the edges formed a soft, cozy nest in its middle. Not only did it make a comfortable bed for the bairn, but the barrier of thick, woolen cloth ensured his son would be snug and unable to roll over and fall out, or wake and escape to injure himself before Murdoch could reach him. It wasn’t as ideal as the child’s bed in the nursery, but it suited them both during their times together.

Once Finn was safely settled, Murdoch moved to the couch. A small table at one end held the covered platters that contained his own meal, and a single tankard of mead - all he would permit himself while watching his son.

He took a seat and waved Lydia to the cushion beside him. He waited until she had settled in place before speaking again, his voice low to avoid disturbing Finn. “What brings ye to me?”

“I wanted company.” Her admission made him frown in confusion.

“There’s company enough in the Hall.”

Lydia gave him a sideways glance that suggested he was making a somewhat foolish argument. “Aye. But me betrothed wasnae there. Who else would I be wantin’ to eat with, me first night in the castle of me husband-to-be?”

Murdoch winced at the subtle rebuke. Now that he thought about it, she certainly had a valid argument. He should have been there to introduce her to whatever members of the household and the council were in attendance. As her betrothed that was his duty.

He'd been so caught up in his routine, so uncertain about the feelings that she'd awakened in him that he'd forgotten his basic obligations to her.

If Lydia noticed his chagrin, she didn't say anything about it. "We're meant to spend this time learnin' about each other. How are we supposed to do so, if ye're always busy or avoiding me?"

Murdoch raised an eyebrow at that. He wasn't aware that he'd been avoiding her, just caught up in other things. Still, there was no point in protesting, since doing so would make him look thoughtless, rather than nervous, and he'd had enough of that already. "I take it ye think ye have a solution?"

"Aye. I'd like to add another condition to our agreement." She took a deep breath. "Every night, regardless of what else may be happening, I want us to eat together, ye and I."

He blinked. "Every night?"

"Aye. Until we're either wed or dissolve the betrothal, at the very least. Though if we wed, I'll make it a condition of the marriage as well."

It wasn't the most unpleasant prospect, but he could see a few issues with it. "And what if I've business that takes me away from the castle for a night? Or a council meeting that runs late? Or what if ye want to visit yer sisters, and I cannae accompany ye?"

The last he thought was the most likely to come up, but he did have duties beyond the walls of Lochlann Castle every now and again, like the Highland Gatherings.

She considered it a moment. "Then we'll write each other letters, to be read over the evening meal each night. Or, when we're together again, we shall take extra time to

ourselves to make up for the lack.”

The idea of writing and sending that many letters made his fingers ache, but he had to admire her wit in coming up with a solution so quickly. And not just that, she’d provided an alternative, if the first suggestion proved untenable. That showed a better mind than many of his council members possessed.

“Well, have we a bargain?” She was waiting for his response.

Murdoch answered by tapping his tankard to her cup. “Aye. We have an agreement.”

Lydia smiled, and sipped her drink, then turned her attention to her food. Murdoch watched as she delicately lifted a slice of roast meat from her plate and placed it in her mouth. Somehow, she managed to make it look graceful, even when a small drop of juice ran down the side of her chin. She wiped it away with a cloth before it could drip on her dress. Not, however, before he felt a sudden urge to bend forward and kiss it away.

God above, it’s been too long since I was with a woman, if even the simple act of eating a meal heats my blood in this way.

He took a sip of his mead to wet his dry throat. He tried to imagine a fortnight of nights like this, or a season, and it made his groin ache. Living through such nights would be maddening, and he wasn’t entirely sure his control would withstand the temptation.

He knew he’d agreed to her suggestion already, but he couldn’t help being aware of the new complication, now that he’d thought of it. He decided to voice the consideration and see what she made of it. “Ye want to eat a meal with me every night, but ye daenae want to permit me anythin’ else? I’m to sit with ye every evening, and never lay a hand on ye?”

He was hoping to fluster her, but aside from a slight blush she didn't react. "Aye. Unless I say otherwise. Tis what we agreed, and I'll nae be changin' that."

Her words were both maddening and intriguing. He'd taken the condition to be a maiden's reticence when she'd first proposed it, but her appearance in his quarters suggested otherwise. A maiden so shy would never have sought him out in the absence of a chaperone or escort.

At the very least, he would have expected her to request Wilma's accompaniment, but she didn't seem discomfited by being alone with him, just by the notion of being physically intimate with him.

He wondered if a concern for her virtue directed the matter, or something else. Whatever her reasons, he'd not discover them unless he took the time to get to know her.

She was still watching him expectantly, so he dipped his head to acknowledge her response. "As ye will. A new condition of our betrothal; we'll dine together every night and get to ken one another, but I'll be a gentleman about it, unless ye say otherwise."

Her smile filled him with warmth, but also trepidation. One way or another, he very much suspected that suppers with Lydia were going to test his self-control far more than anything else he'd ever experienced.

Lydia discovered that securing Murdoch's agreement to the supplementary condition to their betrothal turned out to be the most tranquil part of the evening. The man was more reserved and reclusive than even Hunter had been.

"Did ye have a productive meeting with yer advisors?"

“Aye.” Beyond that single word, he made no further effort at conversation, instead focusing on his food and eating with an almost single-minded concentration.

She tried again. “Do ye eat here often?”

“Aye.” Again, no more was forthcoming.

“Wilma says ye told her that ye dinnae wish to dine with her because she has too much energy and chatter, and ye dinnae like it. Is that true?”

His response this time was a grunt that could have meant anything. She considered his previous responses, then rephrased the question. “Do ye really object to Wilma’s enthusiasm while dinin’?”

Murdoch paused for a moment, and she felt a momentary hope that he would reply to her query with a full sentence. Murdoch shook his head. “Nay.” He returned to eating, leaving her to scowl at her own plate in vexation.

She could ask questions of Murdoch all night, but never do more than scratch the surface of his likes, dislikes, and general personality. She was almost tempted to ask something rude, just to see if he’d react. The only thing that held her back was the newness of the situation, and the bairn sleeping on the chair nearby.

Mayhap if I asked less pointed questions he would be more forthcoming. At the very least, I may get something more out of him beyond yes or no. She tried again. “What’s yer favorite color?”

That earned her a shrug and a noncommittal mumble. “What about seasons? Mine is winter. Tis a cozy time to sit by the fire and read, or spend time in games with yer family.”

“Aye.”

Did the man really not have an opinion on anything, or was he just determined to thwart her at every attempt she made on getting to know what sort of man he was?

She'd intended to keep the conversation light and simple, but she was sorely tempted once more to edge slide towards rudeness, just to see if he could engage his mouth and unsettle his uncooperative composure. Even so, she didn't think it right to press him too hard, when she was already intruding on his quiet time with his son. “What sort of foods do ye like?”

He grunted and made a vague gesture toward his plate. She had no idea if he was saying he liked everything or trying to indicate a particular portion of his meal. “Do ye prefer mead or beer with yer meals?”

No answer, but he gave her a pointed look, before indicating the flagon on the table. Clearly he expected her to know his preferences simply by what he'd been served for supper. As if she knew him well enough to know whether he demanded certain meals according to his tastes or ate whatever the cooks felt like making.

Alex would eat and enjoy anything he was served and rarely expressed a desire for or a dislike of a specific dish. Leo, on the other hand, had defined preferences. He'd eat other things, but anyone who spent much time around him knew he had some foods he much preferred over others. In part, it was because his son sometimes took ill from certain plants, but not always.

Hunter was again different. He had no determined preferences, but there were some things he absolutely would not eat, like porridge, or bread that wasn't freshly baked, or small beers and watered wine.

Lydia scowled at her betrothed. Why had he suggested she stay and agreed to her

alteration of their previous agreement, if he was going to be so stubborn in his refusal to get to know her, or allow her to get to know him?

She had been asking a lot of questions. Perhaps that was the problem. She took a deep breath to calm her exasperation. “Ye ken, ye can ask questions of me if ye want.”

“Aye.”

Frustration won out. “Are ye always this stubborn?” Too late, she realized she’d raised her voice and spoken louder than she’d meant to.

Finn stirred restlessly on his makeshift bed and they both froze. Murdoch glared at her as he set aside his plate and stood to check on his son. Lydia set aside her own plate and followed.

The bairn shifted for a few moments, rolling over to bury his face in the soft cloth of the blanket, and settled once again.

Murdoch stroked a gentle finger over the wee lad’s face, just as Lydia reached out to tuck the edge of the blanket closer around Finn’s shoulders. Their hands touched, and Lydia pulled back in surprise.

Murdoch stared at her for a moment, then bent and lifted Finn into his arms. Lydia watched as he went to the door and called for a maid to take the sleeping bairn. Once the child had gone back to his nursery, Murdoch turned to face her. “Was past time for him to be put to bed. He’ll be fussy if he gets woken now.”

It was such a simple action, so domestic, that Lydia couldn’t help blinking in surprise. Murdoch gave her a slightly irritated look. “If ye’ve a question, ask it.”

Lydia shook her head. “Tis naythin'. I just never expected ye to be the sort to take an

active hand in caring for a bairn, even if he is yer son. Tis strange to see how gentle ye are with him.”

“He’s me son, and that’s nae a question. And nae the one ye really want to ask.” Murdoch folded his arms. “Ye might as well say whatever it is ye’re thinking.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask why she should bother, when he’d so steadfastly refused to answer any of her other questions. In the end, however, curiosity overruled her stubbornness, and she asked the question that had been uppermost in her mind ever since she and Isobel had first spoken about him.

“Did ye really murder yer wife?”

The effect was immediate. Murdoch stiffened, every trace of relaxation and softness leaving him as he stalked towards her. “Ye daenae ken what ye’re speaking of, or ye wouldnae ask such a question.”

He appeared terrifying, but she refused to back down. “Then tell me. Did ye?”

Murdoch’s hands seized her upper arms. “Ye will apologize for the insult of asking me such a question!”

“Nay I willnae. As yer betrothed, I’ve a right to ken the truth or falsehood of the rumors surrounding ye. So I’ll nae be apologizing until I hear the answer from ye.” She met his furious glare with an unwavering stare of her own.

Silence fell between them, leaden and heavy, neither one of them willing to yield. Finally, Murdoch released her and looked away. “Nay.”

“Nay, ye willnae answer, or nay, ye dinnae do it?” Lydia scowled. She was tired of these one-word answers.

“Nay, I dinnae.”

She wanted to believe him, but why was he so defensive and angry if he’d had nothing to do with his wife’s death? And why wouldn’t he elaborate, and offer a stronger defense of himself? “I daenae ken if I believe ye, nae unless ye tell me what happened.”

Murdoch’s face went stone-hard, eyes glittering with fury and something much deeper, something that made her stomach clench. “Ye demanded an answer, nae an explanation. And if ye willnae accept what I tell ye, then there’s naythin’ more to say!”

Lydia stepped forward, intending to press the matter, but Murdoch clapped a hand over her mouth. “Daenae even think it. If ye willnae trust me words, then there’s nae point to speaking further. Go lock yerself in yer chambers and leave me be, if ye’re so determined to think me a monster.”

Before she could properly sort out her thoughts, Lydia found herself standing in the corridor, plate and cup in hand, as the door shut firmly in her face. She scowled at the heavy oak panel for a moment, then sighed.

It was partially her fault, she knew. She’d pressed too hard and too fast, and it had been foolish to admit she was struggling to believe him.

The truth was she didn’t know what to make of Murdoch Nairn. One moment he could be gentle and soothing, almost kind. The next he would be cold and forbidding, his anger wrapping like a storm cloud around him, making her feel as if lightning would strike her for a single misspoken word.

Perhaps it would be best for her to sort out her own thoughts and feelings before she approached him again.

The only thing she was sure of at this point was that Murdoch Nairn was a fascinating, complicated man, whom she desperately wanted to know. Whatever else he was, the pain she'd glimpsed in his eyes when he spoke of being thought a monster was all too raw and real.

Monsters, as she well knew from her cousin Geoffrey, didn't care what other people thought of them, which meant Murdoch wasn't a monster at all.

Nae a monster, but I cannae say for certain whether ye're truly innocent of all ye've been accused of doing either. But tis early days yet, Murdoch Nairn, and I promise I'll nae be giving up on unearthing what sort of man ye truly are .

Remaining in his study with Lydia's words still ringing in his ears wasn't an option. Neither was going to the quarters he'd temporarily claimed as his own. They were still full of his late wife's possessions, and the idea of trying to achieve any sort of rest or peace of mind there after once again being accused of her murder was ludicrous.

Murdoch snarled an oath into the air, then whirled to collect his belt, sword and cloak. He felt full of restless energy, anger, hurt and frustration seeping from his core and roiling through his gut. He didn't dare seek out a sparring partner in this mood, but a ride to patrol the surrounding area might soothe his mind.

No one stopped him as he stalked through the halls of the castle. No one said a word to him as he stormed across the courtyard to the stables and saddled his favorite horse. His people had learned to be wary of him in this mood, and made themselves scarce.

In some ways it was a relief. In others, it was a twisting of a knife in his gut. He'd been as good a laird as he knew how to be, and yet his people feared him. A single rumor had nearly made him as isolated as a hermit.

Murdoch shoved his morbid thoughts aside as he rode through the castle gates and out onto the moors. The evening breeze was cool and it felt good against his heated skin. He kicked the horse into a gallop and leaned over its back to embrace the exhilaration of speed as the stallion thundered over the landscape.

Murdoch rode until the castle was little more than a pinprick in the dusk. Both he and the horse were streaked with sweat and a pleasant weariness filled his limbs. He guided the horse to a stop beside a small, clear rill in the rocks and dismounted. Man and beast drank their fill, before Murdoch leaned back against the cooling stones with a sigh.

He'd thought Lydia's boldness meant she wasn't afraid of him. Perhaps he'd been wrong, and she was simply better at concealing her fear than many of his own people.

The idea that she might be afraid of him made his heart ache, and yet, her distrust might also be a shield of sorts against his enemies. He knew he had them, and he never had been convinced they weren't involved in the death of Finn's mother.

He still did not know who had attacked him and his first wife on the road that fateful day. Lydia's fear might keep her as safe as his first wife's anger and resentment had apparently done until Finn's birth.

Even if that attack had been a random occurrence, a bandit attack perhaps, Murdoch knew he had enemies aplenty, both inside the clan and out. It might be best for both of them if Lydia kept her distance and maintained a sense of wariness while around him.

He didn't like it, but what else could he do? Murdoch grimaced into the deepening gloom. He'd spent the past year living under a heavy cloud of suspicion. He would have thought he'd become impervious to the sting of judgment by now.

Murdoch took a deep breath and let it out slowly and evenly. Such thoughts would only undo all the good his ride had done him. He would have to try to take things as they happened and hope for the best.

He climbed to his feet and remounted, then turned his horse back toward Lochlann

Castle. The ride back was slower, allowing him to relax and feel the wind in his hair and appreciate the smooth gait of the animal underneath him. By the time he rode through the gates of the castle and into the courtyard he felt calmer and more resigned than angry or hurt.

He stabled the horse and was walking across the gardens toward the main part of the castle when he spotted a slender figure stealing out of a side door. His first thought was that Wilma was up to some of her usual antics, which could and had included trying to sneak out to hold midnight dances on the moors to attract fairies, but her build was different from this being.

Murdoch suddenly realized it was none other than the woman who had occupied his thoughts for the past few hours. Lydia. Intrigued by her appearance, and curious about her intent, he silently slipped closer.

Lydia scowled at the shadows around her as she searched for her wayward dog. Hector was supposed to be her guard, and yet he seemed determined to abandon her at every turn.

First, he'd gone running to play with Wilma and Finn. Then he'd disappeared during dinner, only to reappear after her argument with Murdoch. And just now, he'd escaped her rooms through the terrace door, and she'd no idea where he'd gone or why.

She didn't want to draw too much attention to herself, which was why she'd gone sneaking out the side door Murdoch had indicated to her earlier that day. But despite her best efforts, she'd yet to locate the dog, and her nerves were fraying.

"Hector! Come here, bonnie lad. Hector!" There was no sign of the dog, and Lydia huffed in irritation. "Some guard ye are, always running off!"

“He’s only exploring and getting to ken a new territory. Let him, and he’ll come back soon enough.” A low voice from the shadows made Lydia jump with a startled squeak.

She whirled around, to find Murdoch standing only a few feet away. His face was as impassive as ever, but Lydia was sure that he was laughing at her somehow. She glared at him. “Ye daenae have to startle me so.”

“I cannae say it wasnae amusing. Even so, ye ken I’m right about the dog. A proper guard kens the lands and the possible threats about him,- whether he be man or dog.”

“That’s as may be, but he was supposed to stay beside me, nae leave me alone at the drop of a leaf.”

Murdoch actually snorted, a sound that might have been a laugh or a sound of exasperation. “First Wilma, then Finn, then the dog, and even me...what is it with ye lass, to always be seeking company? Ye act as if ye’re so desperate for it that ye’d welcome anyone by yer side, be it friend, foe or...” His voice tightened on the last word. “...killer.”

Lydia folded her arms and glared at him. Maybe he’d meant his words to be a rebuke and maybe he hadn’t, but it wasn’t his place to judge her. Nor was she about to explain that she’d spent her whole life in the presence of friends and family, never without someone to watch over her and keep loneliness at bay. On those occasions when everyone was busy, she’d had the library of Clyde Castle or her sister’s homes to keep her occupied and amused.

She missed her sisters. She also missed her library, the smell of leather and parchment, the silence rich with the promise of stories, and a thousand different friends to sweep her into their worlds.

“I seem to have touched a sore spot.” Murdoch raised an eyebrow.

“And ye thought ye wouldnae, when ye took me from the place where I wouldnae feel alone, and had me brought here, to a place where the one who should be offerin’ me the most comfort spends most of his time doing other things instead?”

Murdoch cringed at Lydia’s accusation, his expression transforming with his contrition. “Ye make a fair point.” He took a deep breath. “I suppose it wasnae kind of me to sweep into yer life and drag ye away from kith and kin. And less kind of me to nae see that ye had someone to give ye company and support, when I cannae do it meself. I kent Wilma was looking forward to yer presence, but I dinnae think what ye might need, or do, when she was attending to her own duties.”

He stepped closer. “Ye’ve a right to be vexed with me, but ye should ken that I’ll do me best to see that ye daene regret the bargain. Ye will have as much freedom as I can offer ye, and ye’ve me promise that I willnae demand anythin’ more from ye than I have already, nae even a husband’s rights after the wedding.”

A pang of disappointment shot through her. She was still wary of him, but she couldn’t deny there was part of her that had hoped he’d meant those teasing words of seduction he’d spoken at their first meeting.

He was a handsome man, and he intrigued her despite his uncertain past and his obvious troubles controlling his temper. She’d seen his gentleness towards Finn, and his bemused but patient responses to Wilma. She wanted to see more of that gentle side of him and see what lay beyond the cloak of rumors that shrouded him.

She wanted a marriage that was of the same partnership her sisters had with their spouses, not a life where she was married only in name and was as isolated as a convent nun.

Still, those were also things she wasn't willing to say, not right now. Instead, she tipped her chin up and met his eyes. "Tis a wee bit early to be talking of after the weddin', when we've nae even kent each other for a fortnight. But until then, there's two things ye'd best be understanding, Murdoch Nairn."

She stepped closer to him. "The first is that I'll decide what I want, so daenae begin handing me promises without kenning that. The second is that, whatever ye're thinkin', it best not be that ye will be getting' out of havin' supper with me every night. Ye agreed to it, and I'll be holding ye to that promise as well as the others."

Murdoch blinked, and she saw a rare moment of unguarded surprise in his stern visage. "Ye still want that? I thought ye'd changed yer mind after our argument."

Lydia raised an eyebrow at the odd tone to his voice. "Thought I'd changed me mind, or hoped I would?"

Before Murdoch could answer, a large furry shape barreled between them, huffing softly. Lydia laughed as Hector buried his nose against her stomach, woofing gently and wagging his tail madly. "Hector. There ye are."

She looked up at Murdoch to find him watching her and the dog with an expression she couldn't decipher. Something like sadness, resignation and perhaps a bit of...longing?

She had no time to ask about it or to say anything at all before his expression smoothed back into the mask she was beginning to despise seeing on his face. Murdoch offered her a tip of his head. "Go to bed, Lydia. Tis late."

Before she could say anything in response, even just a simple 'good night', he had turned and melted into the shadows, leaving her alone once more.

His mask is nae who he is. Underneath lies an enigma shrouded in mystery. Beneath
hides the true man, the one I will unearth.

The night was cool, but it was warm in the study where he'd gone to brood over the situation with Lydia. His shirt was already uncomfortable with drying sweat and his muscles were aching from the long hours of riding.

Murdoch flinched as he stripped off his shirt and set it aside. The healer had warned him before about letting his shoulders and back get too tight, but the stress of the past week had taken its toll. His muscles were drawn tighter than his bootlaces and every movement sent twinges of pain through his shoulders and spine.

Fortunately, he still had the liniment in his study that the healer made for him. It was a necessity, as long hours of poring over paperwork and reviewing reports and requests could also cause his back to ache .

Murdoch scooped up a generous portion of the liniment and started working it into his tight muscles, standing close to the fire so the added heat could help. Most of the soreness lay where he could reach; the small of his back and up around his shoulders, but there were a few awkward areas that he could not quite touch.

Murdoch grimaced. He could go back to the healer, but that required either putting his shirt back on or walking shirtless in the chilly night air. It also meant he was sure to get a well-intentioned but irksome lecture from the healer.

The other option was to leave it be and hope the soreness he'd already tended to would fade and help the rest of the muscles relax.

Murdoch contemplated calling on a servant to help him. Or Gordon. Or Wilma, though she would likely give him the same lecture as the healer.

He continued to ponder the matter as he moved to the side cupboard and withdrew a glass and bottle of scotch. Alcohol would also help him relax, perhaps enough that it would accomplish what the liniment couldn't.

He was replacing the lid on the bottle when the door to his study opened and a slender figure stepped inside.

His first thought was that it was Wilma, come to check on him, or to borrow a book to read before bed. The figure paused as firelight illuminated silken hair the color of a raven's wing. Murdoch's sour mood darkened. "Are ye determined to bedevil me tonight then, Miss Knox?"

Lydia flushed, startled by Murdoch's unfriendly words. She'd been so intent on trying to sneak a look at the books she'd only glimpsed at earlier that she'd failed to notice the room was occupied.

Murdoch stood by the fireplace on the opposite side of the room. Lydia felt her cheeks burn as she realized that not only had she intruded on the laird for the second or third time that day, but, apparently, she'd caught him at a most...inopportune moment.

His shirt had been draped over a nearby chair. Lydia felt her mouth go dry at the sight of his bare chest. She'd guessed he was well muscled, but it was one thing to guess and another to witness his chiseled stomach muscles and broad shoulders.

"Well?" The sharp question caused Lydia to look up and notice Murdoch's annoyed expression.

She swallowed. "I dinnae realize ye were in here. But ye said the books ye had were in yer study, and I wanted to see if there were any I hadnae read."

Murdoch snorted and sipped at the drink in his hand. "Tis a little late to be lookin' for reading material."

Lydia scowled. "Well, tis a new place and I couldnae get to sleep, so I thought I'd read for a bit."

That earned her a tilt of the head and a look of bemusement. "And ye dinnae bring a book with ye?"

"O' course I did. But I've read them already, and I wanted something new."

"Them?" He raised an eyebrow and Lydia flushed.

"I like to read, and me elder sister Isobel is more for active pursuits, like archery or such. She wouldnae begrudge me a few volumes."

"In that case, ye should have plenty to keep ye occupied."

Lydia huffed. "I told ye, I read them already. I was searching for something new."

"And ye thought invadin' the laird's study at this time of night was the answer?"

"That's where ye said the books were." She tilted her chin up. "It was nae as if I had kent ye'd be in here at this hour. Besides, ye did ask me if I wanted to see them."

"That doesnae make the situation better. Do ye nae ken what might have been said had one of me advisors caught ye enterin' this room at this time of night?"

He was clearly trying to goad her into an argument or intimidate her into leaving. Both possibilities made her angry.

“I daenae ken what yer advisors might say, but I would tell them the same thing I’m tellin’ ye. I wanted a book, and this is the only place I ken where to find one. And since ye’re here, I’ll also be askin’ for paper, pen and ink, which I was goin’ to ask ye for in the mornin’.”

He frowned. “Why?”

“To write to me sisters. I promised I’d write Isobel every day, and like as nae, Nora and Emma will also be expecting word from me, though mayhap nae as frequently, since tis a longer journey.”

Murdoch’s frown deepened. “And what would ye be needin’ to write every day about?” He stepped closer, eyes dark and gleaming menacingly in the firelight. “Are ye here spying on me clan for yer kinfolk?”

She resisted the urge to slap him. “And why would I be? They’ve other things to be thinking about.”

“They might be thinkin’ to mount an attack against me clan.”

His ludicrous suggestion was enough to make her laugh in his face. “And why would they be doin’ that? They’ve clans of their own to manage and nae a single one of them cared one bit about Clan Lochlann until ye showed up with yer demands for a betrothal on the basis of some contract me bastard of a cousin concocted with yer previous laird.”

She glared up at him, then poked him hard in the chest to make her point. “I daenae ken what sort of life ye’ve led to make ye such a suspicious, temperamental man, but

I'll tell ye now; ye're nae the center of the world. The only reason me sister wants to hear from me every day is because of the way ye acted when ye came to her home to claim me. So if ye daenae like it, ye've only yerself to blame."

She could tell she'd scored a point from the way his eyes glittered and his jaw tightened. He looked much like Leo did when Nora challenged him on some issue or another and won the argument, which was more often than he liked to admit.

Several moments of tense silence passed. Murdoch huffed and stepped back. "Ye can take any of the books from the shelves that arenae clan records. As for the writin' supplies, I'll have the steward bring ye some in the morn."

"Alright, thank ye." Lydia kept her voice steady and her tone as polite as she could manage, determined to be courteous in her victory.

She started to turn around, but stopped as Murdoch caught her shoulder with one hand and her chin with the other. His touch was gentle but as solid as iron as he lifted her chin to meet his gaze.

"Ye might be tellin' the truth about yer clan or ye might nae, it doesnae matter to me." A small smile teased one corner of his stern mouth and softened the lines on his face. "But one thing I will change for ye, Lydia Knox."

He leaned closer, and she felt her cheeks heat with a renewed fever, wondering if he was going to kiss her again. Her heart started to pound faster and she nearly squeaked when his breath brushed across her ear. "Ye say I'm nae the center of the world. Mayhap tis true, but I'll promise ye this: by the time this month is over, I'll nae only be welcome in yer bed, I'll be the center of yer world."

His lips brushed her cheek in a gentle teasing caress too light to be called a kiss. "Think of that, as ye read yer books and write yer letters, and dream of yerself in me

arms.”

Her heart felt as if it would explode and her face was on fire as he released her. Still, she couldn't bear to let him have the last word. She forced herself to meet his amused gaze. “I'm sure I will think on it, Laird Lochlann. But in the meantime, best ye think on this in turn: if ye're the center of me world, then there's nay part of yers that I'll nae touch. And ye can dream of that, if ye like.”

She turned and left the room before he could respond. It was only back in her room, lying on the bed with her cheeks slowly cooling, that she realized she'd never picked out a book after all.

Murdoch scowled at the empty glass in his hand and thumped it onto the table. A pitcher of water sat to one side. He tipped some into the nearby basin and splashed his face. The chill of it forced him into some semblance of alertness, but did nothing for the weariness that flowed through his blood like molasses..

Despite lying in bed for candle-marks on end, he hadn't slept a wink. His mind and the twisting in his gut refused to settle when he recalled the way Lydia had looked at him in the moonlit gardens and in his study.

She was wary of him, but she also looked upon him with curiosity and kindness. He'd sensed her sincerity in her repeated demand for sharing evening meals, and it baffled him. How could she insist on eating with him one moment, then ask him whether he'd murdered someone the next?

And then there was their second encounter in the study, or was it their third, and their confrontation over books and writing materials. That altercation had left him stunned by her boldness, both in sneaking into his study and in challenging him so forthrightly.

It had also left him with an aching manhood and a desperate need for more relief than just the relaxation of his stiff back muscles.

He almost wished he'd asked her to apply liniment to the places he couldn't reach. He'd been sorely tempted, but feared that if she touched him like that, he would lose all control. Besides, she'd fled before he could respond to her last bold sally.

Lydia was more difficult to understand than Wilma, and he'd long grown resigned to never knowing what was going on in his younger cousin's mind. The edge of desire he felt for Lydia also didn't help matters.

The few times he'd thought he might sleep, he'd been jolted out of his rest by memories of the kiss they'd shared in the corridor, and the feel of her body, warm and pliant against his own. The softness of her hair and the gentle floral scent that enveloped her made his loins tighten and his mouth grow dry.

When he thought of touching her, brushing back her silky locks and exploring that petite but well-formed figure...

Murdoch shook himself and splashed another double handful of cold water on his face, shivering as it ran down his neck. Betrothed or no, he'd no business thinking such things about a woman who'd, as of yet, shown little interest in having him.

A knock on his door startled him out of his ruminations. "Enter."

The door opened to reveal his senior man-at-arms. "Me Laird, ye told me to inform ye when Council gathered."

"And they're waiting, I take it?"

"Aye, me Laird. The final member arrived only a few minutes ago."

"Good. Tell them I'll be there momentarily." The man-at-arms nodded and vanished. Murdoch took a moment to breathe and collect himself. He poured himself a single finger of scotch and drank it down, letting the smooth burn of the alcohol settle him a little further. He set the glass down, sealed the bottle, then squared his shoulders and went to face the Elders.

When he entered, the Elders were waiting. Murdoch took a moment to study their faces. He disregarded the murmurs of disapproval that he had been absent upon their arrival.

Some Elders looked amused, even approving. Others looked worried or upset. Obviously, word of his newly betrothed, and how he'd claimed her, had already spread throughout the clan.

Murdoch was not surprised, given the loud scolding Wilma had handed to him on the matter. In any case, it meant he had less to explain and that suited him. He wasn't in the mood for explanations.

He didn't bother with formal greetings, he simply cut straight to the point. "As ye've nay doubt heard, I found the contract Master Malloy spoke of, and I've claimed fulfillment of it. Me betrothed currently resides with us, to spend time among our clan before our weddin', which will be held in one month."

Dover spoke out first, his expression fierce with all the disapproval Murdoch had come to expect from the man, no matter what he did. "We heard ye kidnapped the girl."

"Is it true she's nae the lass ye were supposed to wed? How do ye ken she's a viable match to honor the contract?"

"Did ye truly threaten her clan with war if she dinnae come with ye, without first consulting the Council?"

"Did Laird Clyde declare a feud against ye for yer discourtesy?"

"Is it true she came here with guards, because she fears for her safety?"

The questions came thick and fast and Murdoch suppressed the urge to snarl at the lot of them. The sleepless night had done nothing to improve his temper. Unfortunately, snarling and cursing at his Council would do little to improve his reputation.

Fortunately, Murdoch's uncle Arthur chose that moment to step into the fray. "Enough of this. Yer questions and concerns will be addressed, but they cannae be if ye insist on making a fuss worthy of a lot of children demanding honey cakes."

The questions and mutters slowly subsided. Once it was quiet, Gordon took up his place. "I've nae spoken much to the lass, but me sister has, so I ken a bit more about her than the rest of ye. To start with, her name is Lydia Knox."

Malloy stumbled to his feet in objection. "But the contract was for Nora."

"Aye, but since we defaulted and made nay earlier claim, the lass believed herself free to wed another, and did. Tis as much our clan's fault as Clan Clyde's." Arthur spoke up again. "And besides, tis for the best. Nora was the eldest daughter, with the strongest claim to the title of Laird Clyde. Lydia is the youngest, and her children are nae in contention for the lairdship, for her elder sisters are all wed with bairns already birthed or on the way."

Murdoch wondered when and where his uncle had come by that information. He supposed Arthur must have been busy contacting other clans and lairds, or looking up the records of highland marriages, births and deaths that most clans kept regarding each other.

"Is it true she came with guards, fearing for her safety? That ye made her feel threatened?"

"She came with one escort who intends to return to his master, Laird Clyde, on the morrow." Gordon replied. "She also has a dog, a large hound, which serves as

something of a guardian, but I wouldnae say she feels threatened. The dog is often with me sister and me cousin's son, as is the lass. And he seems fair friendly, so she's plainly nae upset enough to set him on edge."

"And what of her clan? There's rumors ye threatened them into offerin' her as a bride." Malloy appeared to be the appointed spokesperson for the dissenters.

Murdoch broke his silence. "I warned them if they dinnae honor the contracted word of their previous laird, that would have given us offense and set themselves in a position for us to declare feud against them for the insult."

"So ye did threaten them. Which means if the lass is at all displeased or frightened, her kinfolk has reason to march against us." One of the other Elders scowled at him.

"Nay such thing. I negotiated the terms of the betrothal with the lass. If she's nae satisfied, then she has only to bring her displeasure to me for renegotiation."

"But ye said she's the youngest of her kinfolk. Surely her word has nay power if Laird Clyde is affronted by yer actions."

Sensing that Murdoch was within a breath of losing his temper, Gordon spoke up in response. "She came of her own will, under her own terms. If Laird Clyde was so affronted by the way the matter was handled, then surely he wouldnae have permitted her to reside here for the month before the wedding."

"There's still many a way for a man to make his displeasure kent." Malloy shook his head. "I cannae help but think that ye acted rashly, and that the lass's presence here is but a gambit before the storm rains down upon us."

Murdoch rose from his seat. He'd had enough, and he knew that if he remained to tackle their baseless fears and accusations, he really would do something rash.

Silence fell. Murdoch surveyed the faces of the Council. “Enough of these mutterings. Whatever else may be, Lydia Knox is me betrothed, in fulfillment of the alliance contract forged between the previous Laird Clyde and me father. She will remain in Lochlann Castle for one month as a guest until our wedding, or until I decide otherwise.”

He met each man’s gaze with his own, his voice sharp and commanding as he continued. “While she is here, ye willnae question her. Ye willnae try to make her feel unwelcome or uncomfortable. Ye willnae spread rumors to make her fearful, nay matter how true ye deem those rumors to be.”

He raked them with his gaze again. “Ye will be courteous to her and treat her with the respect due the daughter of a laird, the sister-by-marriage of three lairds, and her future status as Lady Lochlann. Have I made meself perfectly clear to all of ye?”

Grumbles and nods of assent echoed around the table. He saw more than one sullen, even mutinous face, but they all spoke their agreement, and that was enough to satisfy him. “Good. Then nay more needs to be said. Ye are all dismissed.”

With that, Murdoch left the council chamber, ignoring the whispers that echoed in his wake.

He’d done everything they’d asked and demanded of him and yet they still searched for reasons to find him unworthy.

He needed to get out of the castle before someone or something caused him to lose his temper entirely. He was afraid of what the consequences might be for whoever became caught in the flames of it.

“D o ye wish to see something amazing, not far from here?” Wilma’s question surprised Lydia into stopping as they paced through the garden.

True to her word, Wilma had spent most of the day showing her around the grounds of Lochlann Castle. She now knew the purpose of every room in the castle’s family wing and where the most important rooms of the castle were located.

She also knew the easiest way to find the stillroom, the best path to take to the kitchens if she wanted a midnight snack, and where the various storerooms were. She knew where to find the lady’s solarium, the main receiving room, and where the servants were housed.

She also knew why Murdoch hadn’t showed her the library. Quite simply, there wasn’t one. Different clan folk had small collections of books, with Wilma’s being the largest, but there wasn’t a central place to store them. The closest thing Clan Lochlann had to a library were the shelves adorning one wall of Murdoch’s study.

The absence of a library was somewhat disheartening, though she hoped that Murdoch would permit her to claim one of the small storerooms and turn it into a library, or at least a cozy little reading room. It wouldn’t be perfect, but it would be something. Not only would she feel more at home, but she rather thought Wilma would like it too.

Now, however, the other woman was looking at her with bright eyes and an inquiring glance. Lydia nodded. “I’d like to see whatever ye want to show me.”

“Ye will like this.” Wilma took her hand and led her towards a small postern door.
“Tis a special place.”

They walked a short distance across the moors as Wilma led Lydia to the rocky crags that served as a backdrop for Lochlann Castle. Once they drew closer, Lydia spotted a faint winding path heading deeper into the hills. Curious, she followed as Wilma led her along the path to a small overhang and pointed downward. “Do ye see?”

Lydia looked down and her breath caught in her throat. Below the overhang was a series of pools, connecting to each other through thin streams of water that formed small cascades and ripples over the rocks.

The water was clearer than any she’d ever seen, and even from where she was, she could see the smooth stones glittering faintly on the bottom of the pools. Around them grew lush vegetation and a backdrop of soft heather and grasses that led to a clearing of velvety, bright green moss.

“Tis beautiful.”

“Tis a fairy pool. I come here often, when I can get away, to see if I can catch the water sprites dancing. I’ve nae had much luck so far, but then half the time Murdoch catches me before I leave the castle.” Wilma made a face. “He doesnae think much of looking for the Fair Folk, but I’d like to meet one, just once.”

“And ye’re nae afraid of encounterin’ a kelpie or a pooka instead of a water sprite? Ye ken there are plenty of water-dwelling fey who’d rather be cruel than kind.” Lydia wasn’t sure she believed in the Fair Folk herself, but she wasn’t about to say she didn’t believe in them either. Not so close to a fairy pool.

“Och, tis a risk, but a kelpie can only harm ye if ye touch him, and a pooka the same. I’m nae such a fool as to follow a strange horse so close, nor to try and touch an

animal I daenae ken.” Wilma shook her head.

“Besides, the water here is blessed, nae cursed. I’ve often taken some away to use in me healing remedies. It works better than anythin’ else, and a draught of it can heal many an ill. One year, there was a bad round of winter fevers, and we boiled it in medicines to make them more potent. Dinnae lose a single patient who took those tisanes, and most recovered faster than expected.”

Lydia wondered what Nora would make of fairy pools, and the supposedly magical healing properties they possessed. Her sister was a healer to the soul, but she put her considerable faith in herbals, tonics and poultices, not magic.

On the other hand, her healing was a powerful gift. Who was to say there wasn’t a bit of magic in it, in all of her sisters? Nora possessed the gift of healing, and Emma was a born peacemaker. Isobel was a bonnie warrior, for all she was a woman. Mayhap there was a bit of magic in all of them.

Or mayhap it was only through skill and study and the caliber of people she knew them to be. For surely, if there’d been a fairy blessing in the blood of the Knox family, it would have protected the heir to the clan.

Lydia was distracted from her thoughts by a ripple of movement on the far side of the fairy pools. She touched Wilma’s arm and pointed, just as a figure heaved itself out of the water, bare skin glistening in the afternoon light. “Is that...?”

“Nae a fey, I daenae think, but how would I ken?” Wilma’s voice was hushed with excitement. “We should get closer.”

Just then, Hector bounded past them, tail wagging. Lydia made a grab for the dog, but it was too late. “Hector!”

The two of them followed the dog down to the edge of the pool. Wilma made a soft sound of annoyance. “Nae a fey at all, just me cousin.” She perched her hands on her hips with a scowl. “And ye, Murdoch. Ye ought to have the decency to put a shirt on when ye see ye’ve company.”

Murdoch snorted. “I dinnae ask for company and I daenae appreciate bein’ followed when I come out here to find some peace and quiet to cool down from the council meetin’.”

“As if I’d be followin’ ye for any reason, unless to remind ye of somethin’ ye should already ken.” Wilma huffed. “I was just showin’ Lydia the fairy pools. I thought she might enjoy seein’ them. I dinnae think she’d have to put up with seeing ye as well.”

Lydia giggled at Wilma’s teasing and thought she ought to speak up, but the words froze in her throat. Standing majestically before her was Murdoch, dressed in nothing more than a loincloth. Water traced glimmering paths along toned muscles and tanned skin and caught on the myriad of scars that scattered across his frame, creating flashes of water like tiny diamonds on his skin. His dark hair cascaded untamed around his face and neck, and his eyes were the color of the water in the fairy pools.

He might not be a fey, but Murdoch magically sparked a sense of raw desire deep in her core, made her mouth dry and her heart pound with a force greater than any fey could have had on her composure.

Wilma blinked. “Ye ken, never ye mind. I’ve to get back to feed Finn and lay him down for his afternoon nap, and I’ll wager Hector is hungry too.” She turned and whistled. “Come on Hector, come with me and I’ll get ye a nice thick soup bone for ye to enjoy.”

Before Lydia could even think to protest, Wilma disappeared up the path to the castle, leaving her alone beside the fairy pool with Murdoch.

Lydia was now alone with her scantily clad betrothed and a sudden bloom of desire, neither of which she knew how to control.

Murdoch watched Lydia's face flush deeply. She seemed torn between hurrying after his cousin and staying right where she was. Her conundrum made Murdoch smile.

He'd been irritated when he'd first seen Hector bounding over to greet him and listened to Wilma's strident words. After all, he'd come out to the fairy pools for privacy, a place to relax, cool his temper and clear his head. Being interrupted as he finished his swim was the last thing he'd needed.

At least, that is what he'd thought until he'd seen the way Lydia's gaze traveled over him, and noted the rising flush in her cheeks. Her widened eyes and sudden blush chased away all of his irritation, leaving him free to appreciate Lydia in turn.

Lydia Knox was a beautiful woman. Her wind-tousled hair and rosy cheeks only added to her allure. The way that she gazed at him with unmistakable desire pleased him greatly. Her blush reminded him she was still a maiden and that pleased him even more.

Murdoch took a step forward. Lydia took a step back. He silently watched as her expression wavered between nervousness and curiosity. Maiden she may be but she was no shy and shrinking damsel. "Afraid of me?"

As he'd expected, her chin rose and her eyes met his in that defiant manner that always made his blood simmer and his manhood stiffen. "Why would I be?"

Murdoch laughed, his eyes holding hers as he stepped closer and reached out to cup

her cheek with one callused hand. “Why? Because every time I’m near ye, especially when we’re alone, I find meself wanting to break yer rules.”

Lydia blinked, her expression unfocused, clearly showing that he had her attention. Nevertheless, she managed an arched brow and a soft, teasing response. “Ye mean...ye daenae want to dine with me in the evenings?”

Murdoch rumbled, pulling her close enough for him to feel the heat of her body and the soft warmth of her breath on his chest. “Ye ken very well that’s nae the rule I’m speakin’ of breakin’.”

He bent his head, his lips claiming her soft, full ones in a slow kiss. It wasn’t as searing or as sharp as the one they’d shared in the corridor the day before, but it was no less heady. She tasted like wine, sweet cakes and sunlight, her hands soft as they clutched at his shoulders.

He swept his tongue across the delicate crease of her lips as she opened her mouth, letting him explore and claim her. Their tongues danced together, vying for dominance, as he swept one arm around her waist, and the other hand came up to cup her head.

They broke apart panting deeply. His arousal strained against his loincloth, making him ache in a way he’d never before experienced.

Her eyes sparkled like emeralds with stars trapped in their depths. “If that’s the way ye break the rules, we’ll have a fair chaste wedding night indeed.”

“Vixen.” He tipped her chin up as he pulled her flush against him. “Ye said ye’d decide, nay, that I couldnae tempt ye to decide in me favor. Are ye going to run from me now, or tell me to let ye go?”

“I’ll nae run, but ye’ve nae convinced me to rescind me condition yet ...me Laird.” Her gaze was hot and coaxing, teasing and demanding, and yet still infused with a shadow of innocence. Her artless temptation made his blood race and his heart soar. His body strained and begged for some release.

He bent to whisper in her ear, his voice raw with desire. “Shall I show ye what it means to be a wife and lover to a laird, Lydia Knox?”

“Can ye, without breaking yer word to respect me conditions? For I rather think that’s a thing I’d be interested to see, Murdoch.” His name slid off her tongue with a smoothness of the most potent whiskey, and the heat it produced was just as strong and intoxicating.

He swept her back to lay amid the soft grasses at the edge of the pool, a beautiful flower amid the green. “Aye. That I can.”

Lydia swallowed nervously as Murdoch bent over her, his eyes dark with desire, his expression sharp with a hunger she felt echoed in the deepest core of her being. A part of her wanted to escape, but a greater part of her wanted to stay, to feel his touch and his warmth.

She knew so little of Murdoch. If she could know him in part as a lover, perhaps she would see beneath the mask that concealed the rest of him.

His mouth swiftly claimed hers for another deep kiss, and any coherent thought she had dissolved under the urgent press of his lips against hers.

Her whole body tingled, and she gasped as his hand slid up her leg, molding cloth to thigh and leaving behind a trail of warmth that contrasted with the faint chill in the air, and the small bursts of cold as water dripped from his skin to hers.

Murdoch braced himself with one hand while the other glided across Lydia's stomach, caressing her, then higher still to gently stroke her breasts. The unfamiliar sensations made her shiver, but not with cold. It felt as if every part of her body was suddenly alert and wanting, in a way she'd never known before.

She tingled as his hands loosened the strings of her bodice and slid under the fabric to gently cup the soft mound of her right breast. Skillful fingers teased the sensitive flesh, sending sparks dancing through her as her nipples hardened into sensitive peaks under his ministrations.

Murdoch drew back and folded down the top of her dress to expose her breasts to his touch. He then leaned forward, kissing her again passionately before his mouth drifted to press against the corner of her jaw and trace a slow line down her throat. Every press of his lips, every touch of the rough stubble on his jaw, felt like she was filled with lightning, swirling through her straight to her core.

She did not know what to do, was helpless to do anything more than respond to his touch. Her hands clutched at his shoulders, reaching for anything to anchor her within the tidal wave of new sensations.

Kisses traced over her collarbone, then down the softer skin of her chest. Lydia shivered, a soft cry escaping her as Murdoch's mouth fastened over her breast and his teeth teased the already hardened nipple, nipping and suckling gently.

Murdoch's hand slid down her stomach, then gently across the junction of her thighs. Lydia gasped as the pressure of his hand sent an electric current through her, causing her to shiver and shift greedily against his palm.

Murdoch laughed, the sound sending waves of tingling pleasure through her body, straight to her core. His voice was low and husky when he spoke. "Ye like that? Shall I continue?"

The words wouldn't come. She arched into his hand, her whole being igniting with a need for something more. Lydia whimpered as Murdoch's hand slid lower, then began to tug up the material of her skirt, sliding it slowly and tantalizingly up her legs until it reached her thighs.

Lydia shivered at her awareness of cool air and soft grass so close to her most sensitive and secret places, Murdoch's mouth on her breast, and his hand slowly stroking its way up the soft, sensitive skin of her inner thigh. He was driving her mad with desire.

His fingers teased the skin of her upper thighs, then shifted to play in the soft curls that adorned her sex. Lydia quivered at his touch, shuddering under his hand as he stroked the fine hairs there. Her body trembled, caught between wanting more of his touch and a shyness that made her want to pull away.

Murdoch laughed again, and his lips moved to whisper in her ear with a voice like smoke-touched velvet. "Just relax, Lydia. Relax and enjoy yerself."

As if to punctuate his words, the tips of his fingers caressed the upper edges of her sex. Lydia whimpered at the sensation, hips pressing into his hand in wanton abandon as his touch sent waves of heat and desire through her body. "I..."

"Just relax and let me give ye what ye need." Murdoch's hand slid lower, stroking the lips of her sex, drawing slowly and sensuously through the moisture that had gathered between her thighs. "I can feel how ready ye are for me touch. Open yerself up to me, lass, and let me show ye what pleasure can be had from the touch of a lover; betrothed or husband."

His hands continued to stroke her, every touch sliding a little further between her thighs. Lydia shuddered deeply as her body responded in harmony to each movement of his fingertips with waves of sensation that bordered on overwhelming. Without

thought, her knees parted to grant him further access.

Murdoch slid his hand lower, calloused palm pressing gently against the soft mound as his fingers traced the outer edges of her most sensitive areas from top to buttocks. Lydia squirmed, desperate for more as his hand caressed her.

She cried out as his finger slid inside her, pressing gently through the outer folds to glide across the slick inner walls of her sex. The feeling was like nothing she'd ever experienced, and Lydia couldn't help the soft noises that escaped her as he continued to probe deeper inside her.

There was heat pooling in her abdomen; moisture gathered at her thighs and the walls of her sex slickened. Intense pleasure robbed her of her words. The touch of Murdoch's hand and mouth combined and drove all sense of thought out of her mind.

His hand slid deeper, pressing a second finger into her as his thumb slid gently across the upper portion of her sex. Lydia jolted, moaning as his thumb found an especially sensitive spot that sent a burst of pleasure shooting through her like a wildfire.

Murdoch laughed again, and his thumb began to circle the sensitive spot, rocking her body with wave after wave of euphoria. It was more intense than she'd ever imagined could be possible, and she found herself gripping his arm, desperate for more of his touch. "Murdoch..."

The pleasure built higher, until she thought she would drown in it, or burn to ashes with the heat that filled her. Murdoch leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her pulse point, before biting down gently.

The sensation was too much. A firework of stars exploded behind her eyes as pleasure swept over her, flooding her body and carrying her away as she cried his name.

Murdoch....

Murdoch smiled as Lydia began to stir beside him. It hadn't taken much to find his own release in the aftermath of hers, and he'd dipped a portion of his cloak in the water to clean them both up. That was all he'd had energy or desire to do before sinking onto the soft grass beside her, more relaxed and content than he could remember ever being, except when he held his son.

Now Lydia was stirring beside him, a soft smile playing on her lips as her emerald green eyes opened. "That was certainly an interesting demonstration, me Laird."

"Aye." He leaned on his elbow beside her.

Silence fell between them for a long moment, then Lydia spoke. "Will ye tell me?"

Murdoch felt himself tense slightly. "Tell ye what?"

"Tell me about yer past. About the things that make ye who ye are. If we're to be wed, should we nae ken more about each other?" She looked at him hopefully.

Murdoch grew cold inside. He didn't want to think about the past, especially not the events to which he now knew she was referring. He took a deep breath. "And what of ye? What's so important about this library ye mentioned? Why not tell me why ye were so interested in seein' if we had one at Lochlann Castle?"

It was the wrong thing to say; he knew that the instant his words escaped him. Lydia's previously content expression faded and she sat up. With a few deft

movements she pulled her clothing back into place and rose to her feet.

Murdoch caught her hand as she turned away from him, confused by her apparent eagerness to leave. “Where are ye going?”

“Back to the castle. I daenae wish to be out here after dark, especially without Hector.”

Murdoch blinked, taken aback by her cool demeanor and how quickly the evening’s mood had disintegrated. “What? I daenae understand.”

“Nor do I. It appears I mistook the meanin’ of yer seduction of me for something else. Ye’ll have to excuse me for the misunderstandin’, me Laird.” Her voice was tight with a myriad of emotions, but among them he could identify hurt, and a sense of frustration.

Murdoch released her to roll to his feet and caught her arm. One part of him told him to just let her go. But a larger part of him, the part that felt alive when Lydia was near, whispered not to release her. “Wait.”

Lydia pulled her arm free of his grasp, but she didn’t turn away from him, despite the look in her eyes. “Why should I? Ye’re clearly nae willin’ to tell me anything about yerself.”

Murdoch swallowed hard. It was true, he didn’t want to talk about the past. But he also didn’t want to let her walk away from him, not now. “Ye daenae understand. I daenae like talkin’ about me past. Besides, I’ve already told ye the truth. Ye daenae believe me, so what more should I be sayin’?”

His stomach was in knots as he waited for her response. Lydia’s eyes searched his face for a long moment, and her gaze softened a little. “Alright. I believe ye. Ye

dinnae kill yer wife. But if that's the case, why let everyone say ye did? What really happened to her?"

How could he tell her? How could he make her appreciate how long he'd tried to get someone, anyone, to believe that he hadn't killed his first wife, before he'd realized his efforts were futile? He'd tried explaining to Mary's parents and brothers. He'd tried to tell the truth to his own clansmen.

Whomsoever he'd tried to tell, he'd been met with scornful, unbelieving and suspicious glares. Only his closest kin had seemed willing to believe him, although he suspected his uncle Arthur did not truly believe him.

Why would they? What evidence could he have shown them all to provide his innocence? The bodies of the attackers had disappeared by the time he'd sent his men to retrieve them.

What point was there in trying to explain it all again? "I daenae wish to talk about the past. I daenae care to keep relivin' those events, not when it cannae undo what happened. Leave the past in the past; what's the point of relivin' it?"

"The point?" Lydia's gaze was distant and withdrawn once more as she looked at him. "Perhaps to show some sort of trust in me, as I trusted ye by comin' here, away from the safety of me kinfolk. Or mayhap, ye could tell me things, so when I walk to the altar on our weddin' day, I'd ken I was walkin' to a man I ken and care for, rather than weddin' a stranger."

The words hurt, but he couldn't say they were unwarranted or unfair. "Wait. I...I could..."

A sudden peal of thunder startled them both. Murdoch looked up as the first drops of rain splattered down and quickly became a downpour. Within seconds, the two of

them were drenched to the bone and shivering.

By the time Murdoch managed to gather his thoughts and turn back to Lydia she was already hurrying back toward Lochlann Castle.

Lydia reached the doors of Lochlann Castle nearly frozen and thoroughly soaked. She was glad that Wilma and Murdoch had made certain the guards were acquainted with her name and appearance, otherwise she might have been forced to wait for Murdoch's arrival.

She thought she might understand Murdoch's position. The sordid events she wanted to know about were painful for him to recollect. Nonetheless, it hurt that he'd tried to avoid her questions in the way he had.

She could accept that he didn't want to talk about it. What stung was his constant attempts to avoid it, not by honestly admitting his feelings, but by trying to manipulate her through silence, anger, threats, seduction, and redirection.

A maid met Lydia at the door of the castle, just as Murdoch appeared at the gate of the courtyard. Lydia turned away from Murdoch before he could catch her gaze, not wishing to recall their dismal discussion or the events that had occurred before it.

"Me Lady? Can I do somethin' for ye?" Lydia focused on the maid. A chill wind blew across her shoulders, and she shivered at the reminder that she was currently soaked to the bone.

"Aye. A hot bath, and some mulled wine, if ye've any. If nae, hot tea will be fine. I just need to chase the chill from me bones."

"Aye." The maid nodded sympathetically. "These spring storms can be frigid ones, and I'm sorry ye were caught in it."

A quick trip to the kitchens secured her a warm brick wrapped in a thick towel. She was then escorted to her rooms, wrapped in a warm blanket and settled with a steaming cup of tea and the promise of an upcoming bath.

The warmth of the tea and the fire in her rooms eased her shivering but did nothing for the cold that filled her core.

She hadn't expected to start caring for Murdoch. Hadn't thought it would be so difficult to resist him. Still, she knew that if he'd suggested going further than they had, she might have given in. For all of his brooding, temperamental behavior, Murdoch could be surprisingly charming and seductive when the mood struck him.

Nevertheless, she couldn't let herself be swayed by his teasing words and kisses, however intoxicating.

"Me Lady?" The maid's voice brought her back to the present. "The bath is ready for ye."

"Thank ye." Lydia rose and went to the other room to grab her favorite soap. After a moment, she also picked up the book she'd been reading. It was a romance, one of her favorites, and she thought it might soothe her unsettled mood. At the very least, it would give her something else to think about.

She settled into the water, careful to keep the book well away from it, and flicked it open to the last place she'd stopped. The heroine had just escaped from a pack of ravening wolves, rescued by the hero, and they were huddled together in a cave, a feeble fire all that stood between them and the encroaching chill of evening.

'Are ye cold?' She looked up into his dark eyes, shivering slightly as another gust of wind sent frozen drafts of air through their meager shelter.

‘And if I said I was?’ There was a heat in his eyes that rivaled the flickering flames of their fire; a heat she feared would burn her if she got too close.

‘Then I’d say I know a way to keep ye warm.’ His hand, calloused from sword and shield, cupped her face, his thumb caressing her cheek in a tender gesture.

‘Ye cannae be suggesting...’

‘And why nae? Will ye really look me in the eye and tell me that ye daenae want me as much as I want ye? That ye daenae feel the heat and passion between us?’

She stared into Murdoch’s eyes, tempted and terrified all at once, drawn toward the promise she saw in them even as she...

Lydia slammed the book shut and tossed it away , her heart pounding and her face hotter than the bath water.

Why? Why had she thought of Murdoch in that scene? She’d even used his name, rather than the hero’s! And now all she could think of was how the scene in the story progressed, and what it would be like if it was Murdoch as the hero, and herself as the heroine.

Face burning with embarrassment, Lydia hurried through her ablutions, futilely trying to wash away the memory of those blissful moments by the fairy pool. As the water cooled, she abandoned the tub and retreated to her bed chamber to don the soft, worn, casual dress she’d had the maid lay out for her.

The book still lay on the floor, and it was only her respect for all things literary that made her pick it up and place it gently on top of the bedside table. Just looking at the cover made her face heat.

Murdoch Nairn. He was frustrating and infuriating,. but also handsome, and friendly when he wished to be. Clearly, he was no stranger to the art of seduction. Although it had been fun to dream about such romantic encounters, now that she'd had her first true experience , it felt utterly different.

She wanted him; desired more of what they'd shared. But she'd meant what she'd said about choosing her own time to consummate the marriage. How could she risk such intimacy, when to him it was merely physical?

No matter how much he tempted her, she couldn't give herself to a man who was unwilling to share all of himself with her. That was all there was to the matter. Until he was willing to be open with her, willing to let her into his past, she couldn't afford to indulge in any more games of seduction with him.

Though, she did still want to have meals with him and get to know him better. She just wasn't sure if it would be worth the effort if he only intended to continue with his previous mulish behavior.

She was still trying to decide whether she would seek him out, brave the Great Hall, or ask the maids to bring her up a tray, when there was a knock on her door.

Murdoch leaned wearily against the nursery door, watching as Finn played a game with his stuffed animals under the watchful eyes of Wilma and the nursery maid. The lad was happy enough, babbling and giggling as he waved the animals about in a joyful manner.

Not far away, Hector was curled up, watching the bairn with half-lidded eyes. Murdoch studied the dog, wondering why he was so comfortable with the hound's presence.

Hector wasn't a small dog. If he chose, he could easily hurt, or possibly even kill, any of them. And yet, Murdoch trusted him as a guard for his son. Seeing Hector nearby made him feel more at ease, not less.

It was ironic that he'd never thought of getting a dog as a guard and companion for his son, yet Lydia's protector fulfilled that role with ease.

Lydia. She'd not even been in his home for seven days, but was already making her presence felt, leaving marks that would be difficult, if not impossible, to erase. She'd become Wilma's friend, provided a protector for his son, and somehow managed to sneak past his defenses to awaken feelings he'd thought were dead and buried.

It was more than his first wife had ever accomplished, and it left him feeling oddly off-balance. As much as he disliked the loneliness he'd grown accustomed to before Lydia arrived, at least it was something he was familiar with. Her presence changed everything, and left him uncertain how to deal with the changes.

He could still recall how she'd played with Finn, chatted with Wilma and smiled at him. Bold, bright and fearless;- or at least strong enough to conquer her fears. It was difficult to imagine not having her around. Being around Lydia was like finally seeing the sun, when all he'd seen for uncounted days was rain.

He couldn't ignore or deny Lydia's influence. That meant he needed to make a decision to either pull her close or send her away.

He didn't want to send her away, which meant he needed to do something to convince her to stay. Murdoch considered his options for a moment, then called over the nursery maid. "Dress me son in his Holy Day clothing. Then call one of the serving lasses and have them bring dinner for two, and a smaller portion for Finn, to me current chambers."

"Yes me Laird."

Orders given, Murdoch returned to his own room and dressed in his best kilt, a dress shirt, his formal clan sash, and the torc of his rank. Once he was finished dressing, he returned to collect his son from the maid.

Finn looked up at him, poking at the torc with interest. "Da? Dress nice? Feast?"

"Somethin' like that. I'm going to invite Miss Lydia to eat with us, and I want to make it a special dinner. Would ye like that?"

"Miss Lyda! Hector!" Murdoch allowed himself a small smile as his son giggled and waved a hand at him.

"Aye. Miss Lydia is Hector's mistress. Would you like to be the one to ask her to eat with us?"

“Aye!” Finn’s smile was bright and cheerful. Murdoch settled the bairn a little more firmly in his arms and made his way to the door of his former room. He knocked firmly.

A shuffling sound greeted his gesture. He waited a moment, then knocked again, a little more firmly.

The door clicked, then swung open to reveal Lydia dressed in a lightweight and obviously well-worn dress. Her hair was wet, braided back to confine the water to a towel slung over her shoulders. She looked pale and tired. When she saw him a crimson flush spread over her cheeks. “What are ye doin’ here?”

In answer, Murdoch looked at Finn. The wee lad held out his hands with a smile. “Miss Lyda come eat wi’ us? An’ Hector?”

Lydia stared at Murdoch’s son and her mouth quirked up in a slow smile. A small laugh escaped her as she reached out and took Finn into her arms to press a kiss on his forehead. Finn giggled with delight.

Still holding the child, Lydia looked at Murdoch. “Tis nae fair to use so cute a bairn as yer wee lad to sway me.”

“I never said I played fair, Miss Knox. When I enter a game, I play to win.” Murdoch smiled.

Her answering smile was one that mixed sadness and challenge. “And what are ye aimin’ to win, me Laird?”

“Yer presence at dinner, to start with.”

“Ye daenae think I’d break me own rule so soon.” She smirked. “Never mind that I

wouldnae want to deny this adorable bairn.” She glanced down at her clothing. “Though I do need to change before I join ye.”

“We’ll wait for ye.” Murdoch took Finn into his arms, then turned to make his way back to his rooms.

Lydia was surprised that Murdoch had sought her out. From the way he’d seemed to avoid talking about anything personal or of importance, she’d expected he’d be relieved if she failed show up for their evening meal. Apparently she’d been in the wrong on that score.

Lydia inspected the dresses she’d brought with her. With no idea of how things were done in Lochlann Castle, she’d brought every sort of clothing, from old, patched skirts she could wear while tending the garden to formal dresses fit for a feast.

After a moment’s consideration, she pulled out a forest green dress with silver and gold curling vines stitched over it. The skirt was cut to allow an underdress to be worn with it, and she chose one that brought out her skin tone and the shine of bluish tints in her dark hair. The dress was simple to put on, with a silken cord that allowed adjustment in the bodice to be form fitting, showing off her endowments to her best advantage. Lydia topped it with a sash-belt in her clan tartan, and a simple necklace that Emma had given her when she came of age. Once she was satisfied with her appearance, she made her way to Murdoch’s rooms.

The door was open and she felt a thrill of satisfaction when his eyes widened, and his jaw tightened at the sight of her. Now that she knew what she was looking for, it was easy to read the flash of desire in his eyes. Still, he managed to gather his composure quickly, bowed and pulled out her chair for her.

“Ye look magnificent.” His tone was full of honest admiration, and despite the decisions she’d come to before and during her bath, Lydia couldn’t help but smile at

him.

“Ye and Finn are dressed so well, I thought t’would be good to dress accordingly.”

A small smile softened Murdoch’s stern mouth. “Say, rather, ye’ve dressed to outshine both of us poor males.”

“Daenae fret. Yer wit and his innocence will surely make up any possible lack, and the food smells wonderful.”

Murdoch laughed. “Always so bold, me lady. Tis fair refreshing.”

They took their seats while the maid served the food and drink. Mindful of the situation and Finn’s presence, Lydia limited herself to a single goblet of wine with her meal.

They ate in companionable silence, the two of them taking turns to feed Finn, and making the occasional idle comment about the food, or a request for more to drink or to eat.

Finn seemed unaware of the subtle tension between the two adults. He took what he was served and ate most of it with a good appetite, occasionally distracted by Hector’s presence at the base of his chair.

By far the most humorous moment came when Murdoch settled sliced meats and fresh vegetables on his son’s plate, and Finn promptly tossed a bit of spring onion to the floor. Murdoch reached down to grab it before Hector could. “Ye shouldnae waste food, Finn.”

“No waste.” Finn’s bright eyes were guileless, yet sparkling with mischief. “Feed Hector.”

“Hector cannae eat an onion. Twill upset his stomach.”

Finn eyed the onion as Murdoch put it back on his plate, then poked a carrot toward the edge of his plate. “Hector eat ca-ot?”

“Carrot. And nay, ye cannae give Hector the vegetables ye daenae feel like eating, son.” Despite his serious tone of voice, Lydia could see that Murdoch was struggling not to smile. She hid her own laughter behind the rim of her goblet.

Finn pouted a bit, but he did grab the onion and begin to nibble on it. Lydia and Murdoch shared an understanding smile.

Murdoch shrugged. “He doesnae like vegetables as much as other things. Tis the first time I’ve ever seen him try to feed them to a dog though.”

Lydia laughed. “I wouldnae fret. Tis a phase I’ve heard all children go through. Tis when he gets old enough to try and hide what he’s doing that ye need to worry.”

“I suppose ye gave yer sisters some trouble on that front.” He smirked.

Lydia adopted an expression of innocence. “I couldnae say. I was thinking more of Leo’s son.”

“Oh?”

There was little harm in telling the story, and perhaps telling him more about her family would encourage him to reciprocate. Even if he didn’t tell her what she wanted most to know, she could get to know him through stories of his childhood.

“Aye. The boy kept getting sick, and nae one could understand why. Leo was so frustrated he kidnapped me sister to see if she could discern the cause. She’s a healer,

and he wanted to ken if she could figure out what was ailing the boy.”

Lydia let her lips twist in a rueful smile. “Turned out, he’d been getting flowers from his estranged relatives, and he reacted badly to some of them. He was hiding them in his room, and his sickly episodes were when he’d received a fresh set of them.”

“And did yer sister figure out what was happening?”

“Aye. But twas a frustrating time for her.”

Murdoch nodded. “I ken some of what ye mean. I love me cousin, but she’s always after sneaking things into the castle, or sneaking away. She’s a passion for old lorecraft, and I’ve lost count of the times one of us has had to go after her, when she took it into her head to go out onto the moors in the middle of the night.”

“She mentioned something of that.” Lydia laughed.

Murdoch snorted. “Did she mention that Gordon and I taught her to swim, just so she’d nae drown herself sneaking into the fairy pools to try and catch water sprites?”

Wilma had mentioned the water sprites, but the mention of the fairy pools brought something else entirely to mind. Lydia lost her train of thought as the memory resurfaced, sharp and vivid in her mind.

She saw the moment Murdoch noticed her silence and divined the cause. She felt her cheeks heat, but she couldn’t find any words to break the sudden, slightly awkward stillness that fell between them.

Finally, the meal was over, and the nursery maid appeared to take the already drowsing Finn to his bed. Lydia watched them go. “Ye daenae wish to accompany yer son?”

“I was of the impression we were meant to use this time to learn more of each other.” Murdoch sipped from his tankard of beer. “After last night, I was expecting a host of questions.”

“I dinnae think ye’d wish to answer them, based on last night. In any case, tis only one question on me mind tonight.”

“And what is that?”

Lydia met his gaze, keeping her own expression as serene as she could manage. “What was it ye were planning to say to me, before the storm caught us unaware at the fairy pools?”

Murdoch’s expression of amusement faded into seriousness as shadows darkened his eyes the color of the storm clouds outside. “Och, that.”

He stood and took her hand to raise her gently from her chair. His hand slid through her hair, and it was all Lydia could do not to shiver deliciously under his touch.

“Truth? Ye asked about me wife. I dinnae commit that crime, for all I’ve been accused of it. But that doesnae mean I’ve nae killed. I have, and enough men that it would likely horrify ye if ye ken.”

She wanted to assure him that he did not need to worry about that. After all, her three brothers-by-marriage each had some darkness in their past, and lives ended by their blades. At one point, they’d thought Hunter had actually killed his brother. Next to that, Murdoch couldn’t possibly have done anything too horrible, especially if he was telling the truth that he hadn’t killed his wife.

However, Murdoch didn’t give her the opportunity to reply. “I daenae want to focus on the past. I daenae want to talk about it, or the death I’ve seen and meted out.”

His hand cupped her chin, tipping it up so he was looking into her eyes. “I want to discuss a future between us. A future built on understanding from this day onward, nay past sins and old scars. Tis all that matters to me.”

Lydia felt her heart sink.

How could they build a future on understanding if they hid away the scars of the past? Did Murdoch not realize that, unless such things were spoken of and shared between two people, they’d forever remain ghosts to haunt and choke their relationship until it withered?

Lydia couldn’t find the words that would make him see the light, not when he so adamantly refused to see what she meant. Instead, she tried a different approach. “And what of our rules?”

Murdoch bent his head and she felt his warm breath brush across her cheek as his deep voice whispered in her ear “What rules?”

Before she could react, he pulled her close to his body so she could feel his growing arousal. His lips claimed hers in a demanding, hungry kiss as his hands went to her waist, lifted her up and set her on the edge of the table.

She could feel the heat of his passion and longed to match it with her own. And yet...

Lydia brought her hands up between them and pushed. Taken off guard, Murdoch stumbled back and fell into his recently vacated seat. Lydia hopped down from the table and smoothed her skirt before looking him.

The hurt and frustration on his face was nearly enough to make her relent, but she knew if she did she would forfeit a portion of his respect. He’d always be thinking that a kiss and a bit of pleasure could sway her.

Worse, she'd lose respect for herself. She might fantasize about his touch and his kisses and she might long to experience more of both, but she wasn't going to sacrifice her dignity and independence for that. Not for Murdoch or any other man.

"Lydia..." He reached for her again, but she retreated from his hand.

"Nay, me Laird Lochlann. Ye cannae change me mind or make me forego me decisions with pretty words and seduction. Ye ken what I desire, and why."

She lifted her chin, ignoring the ache in her chest that begged her not to press him so. "If ye're nae willin' to even try and talk to me about the things I feel I should ken, then ye daenae have a right to try and seduce me to surrender me virtue. I'll nae press ye if ye're unwillin' to speak, but neither will I give meself over to ye."

His jaw clenched. "There's nay need to talk about the past."

"If ye feel so, then we must agree to disagree. But me decision stands. When ye wish to talk to me, truly talk, then I will be more than willing to listen. Until then, I'll not be seduced into yielding."

It was difficult to watch as his face smoothed over, expressions vanishing behind a stone mask of indifference and distance. "Then it appears the evenin' is over."

"Aye. It is. I bid you a good evenin' and a fair night's sleep, me Laird." With that, she turned and walked away.

She half-hoped he would call her back or follow after her, but only the sound of her own footsteps accompanied her to her rooms.

Murdoch silently lamented as he nursed his glass of whiskey. It was early enough that Wilma and Gordon were both giving him strange looks for drinking but he didn't care.

After Lydia's departure he'd had a sleepless night, full of restless dreams and uncomfortable thoughts. By the time dawn had started to show through his window he'd developed a headache that felt like a band of iron around his temples and his eyes burned with weariness. A drink could hardly make him feel any worse.

A slender, petite figure entered the Great Hall and strode toward the head table. Murdoch stifled a groan and a scowl as Lydia sat beside him with a polite but distant "Good morning, me Laird."

Murdoch grunted in response. He didn't dare say or do anything else, not with how their last encounter had ended. He'd spent the entire night wondering how it could have gone so wrong and how he could repair the situation.

Of course, there was the obvious solution, but he shied away from it. He'd meant what he said about not discussing the past. He hated even thinking about it. There was no point in telling his side of the tragic event when he didn't trust that anyone would listen, or believe him.

Wilma abandoned her disapproving stare at Murdoch and turned to greet Lydia. "Good morn, Lydia! Have ye decided what ye're wearing to the village festival?"

Lydia blinked, and Murdoch smothered an annoyed oath. He'd completely forgotten to tell her that the village was holding a festival. It had been planned before he'd gone to secure her as his betrothed, and the festivities had been expanded to celebrate the betrothal after he'd announced it. He'd also forgotten it would be held today.

"Festival?" Lydia asked his cousin.

Wilma smiled. "Did Murdoch nae get a chance to tell ye? There's a festival today in the village. We'll have a variety of merchants and food stalls and the like, and later there will be dancin' and music in the square."

"It sounds grand. But I dinnae sleep well last night. I was thinking of having a quiet day in me rooms or in the garden." Lydia's answering smile was strained, and Murdoch could see the shadows under her eyes.

Evidently her night was no better than mine. The thought made him feel oddly disquieted.

Wilma pouted. "Are ye sure? Murdoch said ye liked to read, and there's supposed to be at least one bookseller present today. I've been saving me coins in case he has anything of interest."

"Anything of interest?"

"Herbals or grimoires or the like." Wilma grinned. "Although he might also have some poetry or romance books."

Murdoch watched as his betrothed went from weary to wakeful in the blink of an eye. "In that case, I'll finish me breakfast and go get changed into somethin' suitable."

"Ye daenae need to be quite so hasty." Wilma shook her head. "We daenae need to

leave before the noon meal. Ye have some time to rest if ye'd like. I can meet ye at the gate after we eat at midday."

"That sounds wonderful. I look forward to it." Lydia smiled, then returned her attention to her breakfast, eating with more appetite and energy than she had been earlier.

Murdoch felt his stomach twist. He knew well what the villagers thought of him. The thought that Lydia would be listening to their whispers and rumors that flitted among the common folk was enough to banish what little appetite he had. "Lydia."

She didn't answer. She simply finished the last bite of her bread and honey, as well as her tea, then rose from her seat. Murdoch reached out and caught her arm as she began to pass his chair. "Will ye nae speak to me, even for a moment?"

Lydia looked at him with quiet impassive eyes. "Why? Did ye not demonstrate very clearly that ye daenae want a bride who wanted to talk to ye?"

Before he could respond, she pulled free and walked away. Murdoch watched her walk away, his heart in his stomach.

Gordon laid a hand on his arm. "Ye ken, ye can always announce that she's nae a suitable bride after all. There are a number of excuses ye can make, including that she's nae the lass ye were promised. Tis a temporary measure, but twill satisfy the council until ye have time to look for a lass of yer choosing."

Murdoch ignored the comment about a lass of his choice. He'd never seen a better candidate than Lydia, and he knew it. Still, he couldn't help giving his cousin a sour look. "I dinnae think ye and Uncle Arthur were after a temporary measure. After all, ye were among the loudest in suggesting a marriage and a wife for me."

Gordon winced and had the grace to look embarrassed. “That was before I saw how unhappy this was all makin’ ye, and how difficult yer betrothed is. I may think ye need a wife and a second son for the heirship, but I’m nae so enamored of the idea that I’d wish ye a second loveless marriage.”

“Pity nay one else thinks I deserve anything more.”

Gordon’s expression was sympathetic as he clapped Murdoch on the shoulder. “If I could take the burden from ye, cousin, I would, but I’m nae the laird, and even if I were, I’d be in worse straits.”

Murdoch sighed and let his anger go, knowing why his cousin was so determined to avoid becoming the focus of the council’s determined matchmaking. As the son of a second son he could choose his own partner, and Murdoch knew enough about his cousin’s preferences, and the discreet affair he was currently engaged in with one of the castle staff, to accept that Gordon was probably better off retaining his current position.

He took a final drink from his cup, then rose. “I’m for some sparrin’ and then a bath. Will ye join me on the practice field?”

“Aye.” Gordon fell into step beside him. “Will ye be goin’ to the festival later?”

Murdoch felt his mood sour. “We’ll see. I may have other business to attend to.”

He wouldn’t, and he knew it. Custom dictated the laird make an appearance at the festival. It didn’t matter that his presence was more likely to silence the merry making than improve it.

If he didn’t go there would be whispers that he was a cold, distant laird who didn’t care to mingle with his people. If he did attend, they’d whisper about how shameless

it was that the murderer, the wife-killer, could walk among them.

It was a no-win situation, as far as Murdoch was concerned. Much like his current impasse with his betrothed.

Following breakfast Lydia found herself at loose ends. She was no longer tired enough to want to return to her bed, but neither did she feel like doing anything in particular. Eventually she decided to make her way out to the fairy pools Wilma had showed her.

She decided to take her favorite book and Hector with her. She went to the kitchens and procured a flagon of sweet wine, then made her way outside. None of the guards stopped her, which was a relief. The walls of Lochlann Castle had begun to feel stifling. She had no intention of breaking her word, but she did enjoy stepping beyond the walls.

The spring air was refreshingly cool, and when she bent to take a drink of the water in the pool, she found it cold and delicious. She drank her fill, then settled on the blanket she'd brought with her, and began to read.

She'd only read a few pages when a shadow loomed over her. She looked up to see Murdoch with a scowl on his face. "What do ye think ye're doing?"

She sighed. "Readin', of course."

His lip curled, and she could see the frustration in his eyes. "Daenae pretend ye daenae ken what I mean." He gestured. "What are ye doing out here? Do ye really think ye're safe here?"

"I dinnae think I was in any more danger here today than I was yesterday." Lydia heaved out a breath and marked her page before she shut the tome. "However, I

daenae see any reason to stay. I came out here for peace and quiet, and clearly I'll get nothin' of either."

She rose and started to turn away, but Murdoch grabbed her shoulder. "Daenae just walk away from me."

Anger roared to life within her and she spun round and slapped his hand away, ignoring how it made her own hand sting. "Daenae touch me! Ye daenae own me, and ye daenae have the right to order me about."

Thunderclouds loomed in Murdoch's eyes, darkening their color. "As long as ye're me betrothed and within the walls of me castle ye will heed me words and do as I say."

"Tis a good thing then, we're nae in yer castle, isn't it me Laird?" She could see his anger rising to match hers, but she didn't care.

"Daenae even pretend ye dinnae ken what I meant. Ye're on me land, under me protection. I am laird here."

"But ye're nae me Laird, nae yet, and nae ever if I decide to refuse yer suit."

Murdoch growled and pulled her closer, close enough to feel the fierce heat of his body. His furious gaze held hers, and for a moment Lydia thought he might kiss her, as he had before.

If he tried, she was determined to slap him. She was tired of him running hot and cold. Trying to seduce her but trying to keep himself separate from her in every way that mattered.

"Ye're a stubborn lass." Murdoch stepped back. "Ye daenae ken how dangerous it is

to be a woman walkin' around alone. Did ye learn naythin' from the incident at the tavern?"

"Aye. But I've learned since that the drunken brutes I might encounter are naythin' compared to ye." Lydia tossed her head.

It was a low blow, but Murdoch covered his reaction well enough. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

Lydia met his eyes, determined to smother her own conflicted feelings. "Ye ken what I think, and yet ye keep trying to push me. Doesnae matter whether ye try seducin' me or orderin' me. Until the day ye learn I'm me own woman, and learn to trust and respect me the way ye demand respect in turn, we'll get naywhere."

Reading was no longer attractive, especially not when the book she'd been perusing was a romance and she was faced with someone who inspired too many erotic images without any literary inspiration.

"Excuse me, Laird Lochlann." She packed her book away, grabbed her blanket and turned. "Come Hector."

The dog came bounding over. Lydia moved toward the path, only to have Murdoch move to block her way. "Lydia..."

"Ye ken Hector is a hunter. Alex trained him to hunt, and to attack on command." Lydia set her hand on the large dog's head, making her threat clear.

After a moment, Murdoch stepped back. Lydia walked past him, ignoring the look in his eyes.

Perhaps she was being unfair, but she'd made her position clear. She was attracted to

Murdoch and thought she might even be falling in love with him, but she wasn't going to sacrifice her principles for that. Not for him, or for any man.

Murdoch glared as he watched Lydia walk away from him for the second time in as many candle-marks. He wasn't sure which was worse; her unyielding attitude or the feeling that she might have a point.

She seemed determined to fight him at every turn. Unfortunately, as their last few clashes had proved, she was a match for him. Even so, he couldn't bring himself to yield any more than she could. It was incredibly frustrating.

Wilma had teased him before about having the bedroom skills to keep a woman's interest there, but lacking skills in the courting department. At the time he'd dismissed her words as just part of her usual scolding. He was beginning to rethink the matter.

He stalked back toward the keep and was met by his cousin. Wilma had her arms folded and a distinctly unimpressed look on her face. "I saw Lydia coming back. What did ye do now?"

He scowled. "What makes ye think I did anything?"

"The look on her face and the way she was holding on to Hector's ruff and her book." Wilma greeted his glare with a raised eyebrow. "To say nothin' of the way ye were both behaving at breakfast."

Murdoch snarled softly and ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "She keeps trying to dig up the past, and I dinnae see any point in goin' over old history."

“Ye mean, she wants to ken the truth about yer wife, and ye keep refusin’ to tell her. Did ye just refuse to tell her, or did ye try to distract her with yer dubious charmin’ manner?”

Murdoch flushed, and Wilman snorted. “And she wasnae havin’ any of yer teasin’ or yer attempts to change her mind. Of course she wasnae. Lydia has a healthy sense o’ pride and she’s as stubborn as ye are.”

Her smirk faded. “Ye have to tell her something, Murdoch. She’s asking ye because she wants to believe ye’re better than the rumors paint ye. If ye truly want her to agree to wed ye, then she deserves a proper explanation. More to the point, tis the only way ye will move forward, in this relationship or any other.”

The words felt uncomfortably true, but he was reluctant to even consider it. “Why should she respond any differently than anyone else I’ve tried to explain the truth to?”

“I told ye. Because she actually wants to ken the truth, especially since ye dinnae kill the mother of yer son.” Wilma sighed and her expression softened. “If ye cannae bring yerself to speak about that just yet, then the least ye can do is to show yerself in a better light.”

“How do ye mean?”

Wilma tipped her head. “I’ll escort Lydia to the festival. Give us some time and then meet us there. Ye’ve never done any proper courtin’ of the lass, so ye might as well try treatin’ her like a proper betrothed. At the very least, ye can let her see ye out among yer people.”

He hated the idea. Even so, he was getting nowhere in his courtship efforts thus far. And perhaps if he let Lydia see how his people reacted to his presence, she might understand his reticence.

He sighed. "All right."

As soon as the noon meal was cleared away, Lydia found herself being escorted to the village by Wilma and her brother, Gordon. Time didn't seem to have improved his disposition toward her but he was courteous enough, so Lydia resolved to let the matter be. Perhaps he was simply one of those who took time to open up to new people.

The village was laid out in much the same manner as the one closest to Clyde Castle and Lydia could hear and see the sounds of merrymaking long before they arrived, with a cheerful bagpipe providing a lilting counterpoint to the chatter of excited voices.

Once they had arrived, she realized the festival was everything Wilma had promised it would be. Lydia felt her mood lifting with every step she took. The smell of baked goods and roasting meat hung in the air, and all around her tradesmen and villagers alike plied their wares.

The blacksmith and the tanner were at the far end of the designated festival space, and a tinker had a cart set up alongside the smithy, while a shoemaker was nearest the tanner. A sensible arrangement, in Lydia's opinion.

Moving toward the keep, there was a wide array of different wares. Pottery, dairy products, candles, soap, ribbons, woven cloth, and wood carvings were just a few of the things on display.

In addition to goods, there was a bard, an acrobatic performer and a handful of musicians, all engaged in plying their trade for coins in their caps.

Best of all, as promised, there was a bookseller, set up in a hastily erected stall full of artfully arranged tomes.

Lydia knew herself well enough to save the bookseller's stall for last, otherwise, she could have cheerfully spent the entire festival browsing through his wares. Instead, she took her time looking around at the other stalls.

Halfway through, Wilma excused herself to go speak to an older woman who worked at a small table. There was a sign for herbal remedies, but Lydia had also spotted the more discrete sign of a fortune-teller and wise woman, and she had no doubt Wilma had seen it too. Most likely, Wilma was going to see if the woman could teach her anything about witchery, the Fair Folk, or spirits.

No doubt, she'd also be asking the bard for any tales he had about the fey folk, and the musician for any songs of that sort. Even in as short a time as she'd known Murdoch's cousin, Lydia could tell she harbored a passion for magic and lore worthy of any scholar.

Lydia didn't begrudge the young woman her enthusiasm. In fact, it reminded her a little bit of Nora. Her sister mostly worked with natural healing remedies these days, but she had done some study into more esoteric subjects when she was younger.

Of course, that was before she'd been falsely accused of witchcraft twice, once by their cousin, and decided to avoid any potential misunderstandings in the future.

The villagers were friendly enough, more than willing to chat with her about harvests and the basics of their lives. More than once, Lydia was tempted to ask about Murdoch, to see how they felt about their laird, but she held herself back. She didn't want word getting back to him that she was a gossip.

They were beginning to set up the main square for feasting and dancing when she made her way to the bookseller's stall. Lydia had a quick discussion with the merchant to be sure he didn't need to take down his stall, then slowly began to peruse the offered volumes. She was joined by an older woman, who asked the merchant

about herbals and recipe books; probably a tavern cook, an herbalist or a healer from another village.

There were two or three books that she thought Wilma might like, which she shared with the older woman. Then, in the second to last pile, she found a true treasure. A collection of stories and tales from the Continent, most of which she'd never read. The cost of the volume would take most of the silver she'd brought from home, but Lydia thought it would be well worth it. She could spend many days reading such a tome and never grow bored.

She was just finishing her browsing when silence fell around her. The music slowed to a halt, and in the place of laughter, whispers flew around the village square. A low, familiar voice sounded from behind her. "Did ye find somethin' to interest ye, Lydia?"

She started to turn, but the older woman grabbed her hand. "Tis best ye don't acknowledge his interest in ye, lass. Leave before he does more than ask ye a question."

Murdoch moved into her line of sight, a frown on his face. The woman released Lydia's hand as she winced away from his forbidding expression. "Enough. Leave me betrothed alone."

The woman gulped and hurried away. Murdoch looked at the book he'd taken from Lydia. "Were ye interested in this book?"

"Aye." She glared at him. "But I can pay for it meself."

"I'm sure ye can, but ye're me betrothed and me guest. Tis me honor and me pleasure to purchase it for ye." He turned to the merchant. "How much are ye asking for this one?"

The number the merchant quoted to Murdoch was far lower than Lydia knew the book was worth. Murdoch apparently had no idea of the book's worth, for he simply pulled out the requested number of coins from his purse and set them down.

He handed the book to her. "I hope ye enjoy it." He offered her his arm. "Will ye walk with me?"

On one hand, she was still angry with him. On the other, they were in public, and she was his betrothed. That meant keeping up appearances. She nodded and laid her hand on his arm as they strode away from the bookseller's stall.

Once they were a safe distance away, Lydia looked up at him. "Is that the way everyone reacts when ye're around?"

"Aye." His expression was somber, although she couldn't tell if it was due to anger, irritation or hurt.

"And that's why ye daenae like to leave the castle very often?"

"Aye." His answer was curt, but she was beginning to realize that was simply how he acted when he was feeling particularly uncomfortable.

Lydia bit her lip to stop an exasperated smile from forming. She knew that Alex had suffered from similar problems during the beginning of his lairdship. She also knew what the best solution was. "Ye need to go about and talk to them, instead of holdin' yerself aloof."

Murdoch snorted. "What's the point of that? They'll nae listen and talking willnae change their opinion of me." His voice was bitter.

"Tis nae about the words ye speak. Tis about lettin' them get to ken ye, makin' them

see ye as one of them.”

Murdoch didn't look convinced. Lydia looked around. They'd walked toward the edge of the square, and the festival was gradually returning to its former merriment. The music had restarted, and couples were beginning to throng toward the clearing.

Lydia turned and grabbed Murdoch's hand. “Come dance with me.”

Murdoch froze as if she'd whacked him in the face with a shield. “Ye cannae be serious.”

“That I am.” Lydia huffed. “Daenae mistake me, I'm still fair miffed with ye for yer actions yesterday, and last night, to say naething of yer behavior this morning. However, ye did buy me a book, so I'll repay ye with a lesson in betterin' yer reputation.” She tugged him back toward the square. “Come dance with me.”

Murdoch didn't move. “Is this to be another of yer conditions?”

Lydia fought the urge to pout at him. “I'd rather nae make it so, but I will if ye daenae give me any other choice.”

Murdoch sighed, looking somewhat put out. “There's nay need to go so far.” He took the book and handed it to a young woman that Lydia recognized from the castle. “See this gets to me lady's chambers.”

The servant left, and Murdoch led Lydia to the square, into the beginning of a couple's reel.

Lydia matched her steps to his and they came together smoothly, easily, as if they'd danced together for years. Lydia felt her heart skip a beat as she gazed at Murdoch. He was as graceful as he was handsome, and it made her heart ache that he should be

so stubborn.

Murdoch drew her closer and bent to whisper in her ear. “Are ye still angered with me for me recent behavior, even though I’ve agreed to dance with ye?”

“I said I was and one dance willnae change that. Nor one book. Ye owe me at least an apology.” She offered him a challenging look.

Murdoch smirked. He leaned closer, his voice lowering seductively as he murmured. “Does that include an apology for convincing ye to scream me name in pleasure?”

Lydia stared at him, torn between wanting to slap him and wanting to laugh as her cheeks flared red. “Ye...”

Before Lydia could retort there was a scream from the other side of the square. Murdoch stiffened and yanked her close against him, just as an arrow skittered past only inches away.

Murdoch spied the first cloaked man enter the square, blade drawn, just before a rain of arrows poured from the heavens. One of them fell perilously near Lydia, and Murdoch pulled her away from its path.

He'd been relaxing, even beginning to enjoy himself. At the sight of the first drawn weapon, all of that disappeared in a surge of fury so strong it stained his vision red.

He drew Lydia back behind him as the enemy warriors converged and the townsfolk scattered. None of them joined the attackers, but none of them came to Murdoch's aide either, making him all the more furious.

"Nae ever again! I'm nae lettin' this happen!"

He heard Lydia gasp behind him, but as the first swordsman attacked he had no time to ask what had frightened her.

He blocked the first strike, then the second, then slid his blade home with a thrust that snuffed out the first swordsman's life in an instant. Two more took his place, and Murdoch launched himself into the fray, conscious to always keep Lydia at his back, protected by his blade.

The second swordsman fell to his blade. Then the third. Before he had time to engage the fourth, Gordon struck from the side, taking the man's sword arm and clubbing him senseless all in one swift move.

Murdoch stopped, panting. “Gordon.”

“That was the last of them, me Laird. Soldiers are searching out any more archers.”

“Did any of the attackers or our clan folk leave the square?” There could have been a traitor among the villagers, one who had given the signal to attack.

“Nay. Nay one had the chance. The guards ye sent with yer lady and the ones that came with ye were quick to take up their positions.”

“Good.”

Anger still burned under his skin, anger and protectiveness. His hands were shaking with the force of his wrath. He turned to Lydia. “Are ye hurt?”

“I daenae think so.” Her voice was small and quavering, her face ashen. He didn’t know if it was because of how close she’d come to being hurt, or the violence he’d shown in front of her.

He didn’t care.

Murdoch sheathed his sword and lifted Lydia smoothly into his arms. He turned to Gordon. “I’m takin’ Lydia back to the castle. Collect statements from everyone here, and every scrap of information ye can.”

“As ye command.” Gordon nodded.

Murdoch turned to face the townsfolk still huddled by the stalls and in the doorways of the square. His voice lifted to ring through the space, as harsh as a crow’s cawing with his anger and disgust.

“Ever since I claimed the lairdship, I’ve fought to see this clan thrive. I married for alliance, gave the clan an heir. I’ve done everything ye ever wanted and more. And this is how ye repay me stewardship, with distrust and violence.”

He swallowed hard, his throat aching with a disappointment so sharp it felt like it could mortally wound him. “I could forgive yer suspicions of me, even though I’d have thought ye would have more faith in yer laird. But now ye attack me and ye attack me bride. Even those who dinnae lift a weapon against me I hold accountable, for ye dinnae stand with me either, and for all I ken, ye saw the attackers and did not a thing, nae even warn yer laird of what was coming.”

He couldn’t find any more words to speak, none that would convey the rage, betrayal and sorrow that burned through him. He clenched his jaw and took a deep breath. Then he addressed the assembled folk once again. “Any of ye who ken anythin’ about this attack, speak to me man-at-arms and me cousin. The rest of ye...pack up and get to yer dwellings, or whatever shelter ye have. This festival is over.”

Wilma appeared at his side, pale and solemn. Murdoch nodded to her. “Come with me.”

Still carrying Lydia, he turned and made his way toward Lochlann Castle, Wilma following like a silent shadow.

They arrived at Lochlann Castle gates to find Arthur waiting for them. “Murdoch, are ye all right? Was anyone injured?”

Murdoch felt himself stiffen and fought to keep his face impassive. “What do ye mean? How do ye ken that anythin’ happened?”

“Some of the villagers made it to the castle to tell us ye were bein’ attacked by brigands.”

Murdoch's stomach clenched.

Gordon said that nay one got away from the square. There was nae time for anyone to get to the castle. If someone had come to sound the alarm, warriors would have been mobilized.

Somethin's very wrong.

He quickly pushed that to the back of his mind. He had other things he needed to take care of. "Very well. We're nae hurt, but Lydia's been fair upset. I'm takin' her to rest in her quarters."

"I'll go to check on Finn." Wilma spoke up, her usually cheerful voice subdued.

"Aye. I'll be in to look in on the lad in a few minutes." Murdoch nodded to his cousin, then turned and started for the castle proper.

He was inside, almost to Lydia's rooms, when she spoke. "Is that what really happened to yer wife?"

It had all happened much too quickly. The attack itself, and the way Murdoch had dealt with the attackers who'd come for them with swords drawn. Even now, Lydia wasn't sure she'd really had time to realize what had happened. She felt numb and shaky, as if trapped in a dream state.

Even so, she recalled clearly what she'd heard Murdoch mutter. 'Not again.'

Admittedly, there were any number of things he might be referring to, but the way he'd protected her suggested one particular event. The one thing he'd refused to talk about in all their time together.

The death of his wife.

She waited until they were alone before she asked the question. Murdoch stiffened, his steps faltering for a moment before he continued. “Ye daenae ken what ye’re speaking of.”

“I heard what ye said. Not again. Ye said ye couldnae let it happen again.” She swallowed hard. “And the way ye were so determined to protect me, it seems clear to me.”

Murdoch stayed silent until he reached the door to her rooms. Then he paused and set her down gently. His voice was low and flat when he spoke. “We were on the road from her family’s home, on our way back to Lochlann Castle. We hadnae visited them since our wedding and we wanted them to meet Finn.”

“And ye were attacked by brigands?”

“I daenae ken whether they were brigands or hired warriors. Given the way the bodies disappeared, I’ve long suspected the former.” His jaw clenched. “Doesnae matter. I still failed to protect me wife. Her death is me fault, because I wasnae strong, fast or careful enough to keep her safe.”

“But ye couldnae control everythin’. Anyone can be overwhelmed.” Lydia felt her heart breaking for him.

Murdoch’s expression warped. “Mayhap, but that’s nae the whole reason tis me fault.” His fists clenched. “She was sore injured but alive when the last of the attackers fled. I could have saved her, but there was Finn to worry about. I couldnae be sure of being able to protect both of them or keeping them both in the saddle with me if I tried to get them both to the castle.”

He stopped then, but Lydia didn't need him to say anything more. It was clear that he'd chosen to save Finn, and his wife had passed away while he was trying to save his son.

She laid a hand on his arm. "Shall we see how Finn is doing? He should be getting ready to go to bed right now."

Murdoch relaxed a little, though his expression was still troubled. "Aye."

Together, they walked a few doors down to the nursery. The maid was tucking the bairn into his bed, but she bowed and moved aside as they stepped inside. Together they made their way to Finn's bedside.

Finn gurgled at them sleepily, his chubby hands waving loosely in their direction. Lydia put one finger in his hand and smiled as his fist closed around it. Beside her, Murdoch reached down to stroke his son's face.

"He's all right." Lydia spoke softly. "And I'm sure yer wife would have agreed with the choice ye made."

"I ken she did. But that doesnae mean I hold nay responsibility for what happened to her. I failed to protect her."

They stood watching the child for a few more minutes, as Finn slid into sleep.

Murdoch straightened and took Lydia's arm to lead her from the room, his expression grim. He guided her to the door of her quarters, then turned to face her. "I was a fool to bring ye here. The contract was never about ye and it was a mistake to bring ye to me home and place ye in danger."

It felt as if ice was being pumped into her veins. Something cold and heartbreaking

was beginning to fill her with foreboding. “What are ye sayin’?”

Her voice cracked slightly, but Murdoch’s expression didn’t change at all . “I’m sayin’ that I want ye to leave. First thing in the morning, ye will depart for yer home.”

Murdoch could see the shock in her face as he spoke. Shock and betrayal. For a moment his will wavered, but he stiffened his resolve.

He wasn't surprised, however, when she regained her composure a moment later. "Ye cannae mean that."

"I can, and I do. Havin' ye here was a mistake. Tomorrow mornin' ye'll go home. That's me final word on the matter."

"Why?" Shock gave way to anger and indignation. "Ye think I'll be in danger if I stay? That I might get killed?" Her eyes glittered with determination. "Tis nae as if I'm helpless. I'm stronger than I look. I also have Hector and I can use a bow and arrow. Isobel taught me, so I'm a fair good shot, ye ken?"

She looked so determined, like a kitten facing down a wild boar. It was endearing and heart-breaking. He knew all too well that a kitten could never survive such a confrontation.

Murdoch let his lip curl. "I daenae care if ye can defend yerself. I daenae want or need ye here. Tomorrow mornin' I expect ye to leave and if ye disobey I'll have ye thrown out by force."

He could see the tears of hurt shimmer in her eyes. For a moment he wanted to reach out and brush them away before kissing her and telling her he'd changed his mind.

With a curse, he turned and stalked away from her, his back rigid with anger and self-loathing.

Let her think I have disdain for her or am unwilling to tolerate her weakness. She will be safer if she departs in hurt and anger as a spurned lover, than remain here as a corpse in my castle.

Even if his decision led to war with Clan Clyde or to his removal from the lairdship, he would not waver.

If what he suspected was correct it was better this way. Lydia needed to be out of harm's way before he acted to confirm his suspicions.

In the meantime, he already knew he was never going to be able to sleep. I might as well get some work done. Murdoch made his way to the study, already planning his next steps. He had guards to talk to, plans to make, and arrangements to see to to make sure Lydia returned to Clyde Castle quickly and safely.

Plans and questioning didn't take long and Murdoch found himself in his study in the early hours of the morning, cursing that he hadn't managed to find more tasks to occupy his time.

Scowling, he went to a cabinet and pulled out a glass and a bottle of scotch. He cracked the seal and poured a generous measure into the glass.

Several candle-marks later the sun was rising over the garden and he'd refilled the glass three times to no avail. He was no closer to the bliss of drunken forgetfulness than he'd been before he'd begun.

Something large and furry came bouncing into view and Murdoch glared at it until it evolved into Hector, with Lydia trailing closely behind. Beside them stood the maid

with Finn.

Lydia was probably saying goodbye to Finn. He supposed he couldn't expect her to leave before saying farewell. He wondered why Wilma wasn't with them. She usually took Finn for his breakfast.

His question was answered when the door to his study was flung open and Wilma stormed inside. "Murdoch, ye insufferable lout!"

Murdoch transferred his glare to his cousin. She threw him a contemptuous look and crossed her arms. "Have ye anything to say for yerself?"

"About what?"

Wilma scoffed. "I should have kent. Of course ye'd be an ass to the end." She glared at him for a moment longer. "If ye werenae me laird and cousin I'd nae bother tellin' ye, but as ye are me laird, ye should ken that I'm leavin'."

The words shocked him out of his sullen anger. "What?"

"I've decided to accompany Lydia to her home, since some heartless fool is throwing her out of the castle without even the courtesy of a few days to gather her things."

Lydia must have confided in Wilma. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask how she was or to try to explain his reasons for his decision. He wasn't sure which it would be, but it didn't matter. Wilma gave him no opportunity.

"Lydia said she could introduce me to her eldest sister Nora. She's a healer, ye ken. A skilled one, who can teach me a number of things. I'm lookin' forward to it."

Murdoch found himself unable to speak as her words raked over him like blades. Her

eyes flickered over his face. “Ye look terrible, Murdoch.” She sighed. “I only came to bid ye farewell, and to give ye a warnin’. Ye will regret yer course of action, sendin’ Lydia away. Ye will realize soon enough that ye made a terrible mistake. But from the look of ye, ye willnae realize the truth until tis too late and ye’ve lost the most important thing in yer life.”

Murdoch was still trying to figure out a response to her words when the door slammed behind her and he winced.

He was finishing his scotch and contemplating another when the door opened again to admit his uncle. “Murdoch, I heard ye’re sendin’ the lass from Clyde Clan back home.”

“Aye.” The word was bitter in his mouth.

Uncle Arthur’s face formed an expression of sympathy and understanding as he came around the desk to clap Murdoch on the shoulder. “Tis a shame that it dinnae work out, but nay one can fault yer effort. Still, with the unrest from yesterday, I’m certain ye’re doin’ the proper thing.”

“Aye.” Murdoch set his glass down and sealed the bottle once again. Although he agreed with his uncle in words, he couldn’t help the thought that lingered under the surface.

I’m doin’ the right thing...but for whom?

Breakfast that morning was the most difficult meal she’d ever endured. It took everything Lydia had to make her way to the great hall. Still, if she was going to leave, she wasn’t going to skulk away like a whipped pup or a thief in the night.

Murdoch wasn’t there, which was a blessing. She hadn’t expected Finn or Wilma to

attend, not after last night, so she wasn't surprised to find herself eating with only Murdoch's cousin and uncle in attendance.

To her surprise, it was Gordon who spoke first. "Are ye all right, Miss Knox? Ye look unwell."

She swallowed a bit of tea and forced what she hoped was a pleasant expression to her face. "Tis nae much. However, if I could ask a favor of ye, could ye see that a carriage or cart is made ready for me?"

The cart she'd used to travel to Lochlann Castle had been taken back by Gareth a few days ago. That reminded her of another matter. "Also, if ye could spare me a guard or two to accompany me."

"Aye. I can manage that easily enough, even after yesterday." Gordon nodded. "But, if ye'll forgive me sayin', I daenae think it safe for ye to be traveling, so soon after an attack like the one yesterday."

"Aye. I would agree with ye, but it seems yer laird has another opinion." Lydia felt her lips twist in an effort to hold back tears. She was glad her voice managed to remain steady as she continued. "I was informed last night that he feels the betrothal was a mistake, and that I'm to vacate the castle directly after the morning meal, or be removed at sword-point."

It wasn't exactly what Murdoch had said, but she'd little interest in being fair to him, not after last night.

"I'm sorry, Miss Knox." Gordon sounded as if he meant it, which surprised her. "I ken that must have been difficult to hear, comin' after yesterday." A hand touched hers in a comforting gesture. "I'll have the carriage and guards ready within the candle-mark."

The younger Nairn rose and left the table, leaving Lydia with his father. After a moment, Arthur cleared his throat. "I apologize that me nephew is bein' so abrupt with ye. I daenae ken why he's changed his mind, but...I cannae say I think he's made the wrong decision."

The words stung, and Lydia looked up at him, a spark of anger taking the place of the coldness in her gut.

Arthur shook his head at her look. "Daenae take me words wrongly, Miss Knox. I'm sure ye're a bonny lass, but Murdoch..." He shook his head. "He's inclined to rush into things, and I fear he may have done ye both a disservice with his impulsiveness. Better to undo it now, than to risk makin' ye both more unhappy later."

He might be right, but Lydia felt her throat tighten at the implication that there was no way she and Murdoch could have been happy. She tried to swallow the last of her tea, then rose, the rest of her breakfast untouched. "If ye'll excuse me."

She hurried away from the table, vision blurry with tears that she refused to let fall. She kept walking until she reached the nursery.

To her relief, only the maid was there, along with Hector. Finn was also awake, his face messy with the remains of the porridge the maid had been attempting to feed him. He held out his hands with a smile as she entered. "Lyda!"

"Hello, me bonny lad. And how are ye this morn?"

Finn giggled. "Lyda! Hector!"

"Aye. I saw ye had Hector with ye. Were ye playing with him afore eating yer breakfast?"

“And determined to share, he was.” The maid answered the question with a fond smile. “He’s been in a good mood this morn.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” She smiled at the bairn and took up a soft cloth to wash his face. Once she was done, she stood and took the maid aside. “I’m sorry to say that he’s like to be unhappy in the next few days. Laird Lochlann is sending meself and Hector home.”

“I’m sorry to hear it me lady.” The maid’s eyes were sympathetic. “I’m sure the lad will miss ye both.”

“And we’ll miss him.”

Lydia turned and brushed a hand across Finn’s cheek, before pressing a kiss to his brow. “Fare ye well, Finn. I’ll miss ye.”

She turned away before her tears could escape, and tapped her leg to get Hector’s attention. “Come Hector.” The big dog rose and followed her, his tail low as if he too sensed and mourned their departure.

Back in her quarters Lydia looked at the assembled bags and travel chests piled near the door. It had taken her most of the night to pack her things, but in a way she was grateful for it. It had given her less time to think about the fact that Murdoch was sending her away.

It hurt. She’d finally found her answers and had begun to realize that she had feelings for the tall, taciturn laird who had claimed her as his bride. Now he was sending her away, as if the feelings that had been building between them meant nothing to him.

Worse, he didn’t seem to care about her relationship with Finn or Wilma or anyone else. He’d all but dragged her to the castle, and now that she’d gotten to know and

care about its people he was forcing her to leave most of them.

Wilma had come to check on her last night and found her crying while trying to pack her things. The young woman had been outraged on Lydia's behalf once she'd explained to her what had transpired.

She still wasn't sure how they'd gone from their teary conversation to Wilma deciding to accompany her home to meet Nora, but Murdoch's cousin would be coming with her when she departed. Lydia had no idea how long Wilma might stay, but knowing she wouldn't have to make the journey alone was comforting, nonetheless.

She'd already sent messages to her sisters informing them she would be returning. She hadn't had the heart to explain why and finished the letters with a simple 'I will tell ye more when I see ye at our home of Clyde Castle'.

The problem was, she wasn't entirely sure what had happened or what was running through Murdoch's mind. Yes, the attack had been sudden and dangerous, but it wasn't as if such things were unknown amongst the clans her family controlled. She'd lived through far more difficult and dangerous situations.

Perhaps she was as inured to violence as Isobel and Nora, whose particular talents often saw them facing the aftershock of battle, but she wasn't some helpless bairn either. Before last night, she'd thought Murdoch could see that.

Lydia felt tears stinging her eyes and made an effort to shake them away. She couldn't afford to let herself think of such things. She needed to begin her journey before Murdoch fulfilled his promise to have her thrown out of his home by force.

She started to turn and call the servants when her eye fell on a book left lying on her bedside table. It was the one Murdoch had purchased for her. After everything that

had happened, she'd all but forgotten about it.

Her hand traced the leather cover. She'd been so looking forward to reading it, but now just looking at it made her feel ill. She couldn't imagine reading the tome, knowing that every turn of the page would remind her of Murdoch and the events of the previous night.

After a moment she turned away and left the book on her bedside table. Murdoch had paid for it so one might argue it was his. She wouldn't have him accuse her of stealing something he'd spent good silver on. It was a pity such a priceless treasure wouldn't get the attention it deserved, but it was better than the possible alternatives.

She called the servants to collect the traveling chests and most of her packs, taking only one small pack that held two books and her cloak in case of rain. Then she whistled softly and called out "Hector."

The big dog, who'd been laying in front of the hearth, came up to stand beside her with a soft inquisitive whine. No doubt he'd picked up on her morose mood. His nose pressed against her hand as if consoling her. Lydia swallowed hard and patted his head in reassurance. "Come on, me fine lad, tis time to go home."

Out in the courtyard, Wilma was busily loading her own things into the carriage that she'd convinced the castle steward to give up for the trip. Lydia was grateful she'd managed to secure it, as traveling without it would have been lengthy and cumbersome.

Lydia greeted her with a strained smile as she approached.

"There ye are. I was beginnin' to worry about ye. Have ye said yer goodbyes?"

"Aye. I saw Finn this morn, and Hector and I both bid him farewell. I spoke to yer

faither and brother at breakfast.” Not that she’d had the appetite to stomach much of it.

“And Murdoch?”

The name was enough to almost upset her. Lydia clung desperately to the dignity and strength she’d developed from dealing with her own cousin years ago. “I havenae seen him, and I daenae care to. Nor do I think he has any interest in seeing me.”

“Ye daenae ken that.” Wilma looked at her, her expression gentle.

“If he cared, he wouldnae be sendin’ me away in this manner, without even a word to plead me case. If he cared he would be here to see us off, nae hiding wherever he is.”

“He’s in his study, drinking like a fool.”

“Then he can stay there, for all I care.” Lydia bit her lip. “If he’s nae goin’ to apologize or explain or change his mind, then there’s nothing I want to say to him, nor hear from him either.”

“Tis fair. I cannae say I like it, but ye’re correct that me cousin is acting a fool.” Wilma sighed. “If that’s the way of it, then best we get on the road. I’ve said me farewells already, and cook has packed us a basket for the noon meal, so the sooner we leave, the sooner ye’ll be home, and I can meet the sister ye were tellin’ me about.”

Lydia nodded and forced herself to focus on the prospect of introducing Nora to Wilma. She was sure the two would get along quite well. Wilma shared Nora’s passion for learning and healing, and she could imagine her sister would be glad to pass on all she’d learned, if only to have another healer in the region who could help lessen the burden of her duties.

As they clambered into the carriage, she saw Finn and his nurse emerge to see them off, followed by Wilma's father and brother. But though she searched doorways, shadows and windows of the castle, Lydia saw no sign of Murdoch.

He obviously had no intention of seeing them off. Lydia fought back tears of hurt and indignation. It was bad enough that he'd not even do her the courtesy of saying farewell, but she was furious that he had so utterly neglected to see his cousin on her way.

Ye've made yer choice, Murdoch Nairn. I hope tis one that makes ye happy.

Murdoch listened to the sound of hoofbeats and creaking wheels fading into the distance. He hadn't gone to watch his cousin and Lydia depart; he'd been afraid that if he actually saw them leaving, he wouldn't be able to maintain his resolve.

He wanted Lydia safe, and having Wilma out of the way was an unexpected benefit to his decision to dismiss his betrothed and dissolve the contract. That didn't stop him from wanting, with every fiber of being, to follow after them, wrap his arms around Lydia and refuse to let her go.

He'd done what he could to protect them both, but he wasn't sure Lydia would ever forgive him.

Still, what was done, was done. All he could do next was see if his suspicions were accurate, and decide what course of action he would take if they were.

Twenty minutes later, his cousin and uncle both entered the office. Arthur looked restless and tired. In contrast, Gordon looked troubled.

Murdoch waited until the door shut before he spoke. "What did ye find out from the village folk?"

"Nae much." Gordon shook his head, frustration etched on his face. "There was little to nay rumor of an attack coming. Until they drew weapons, everyone at the festival thought they were merely random travelers or visitors from distant villages."

“Aye. The guards said there was nay warnin’ as well, as did the scouts.” Murdoch folded his arms.

“An attack like that with nay warnin’? How is that even possible?” Gordon shook his head. “What’s happenin’ in the clan?”

“Tis a good question. Might be best to ask yer faither.” Murdoch said grimly. “He kent that we’d be attacked, and when.”

“How can ye say that, me Laird?” Arthur’s voice was full of wounded anger. Murdoch didn’t trust his offended tone for one second. “I told ye, the villagers escaped to tell us what was happening.”

“I spoke to the gate guards and the watchmen, and they said nothin’ of the sort occurred. Besides, the village is too far away for someone to have reached ye, reported the information, and left again.”

“Me men were watching the festival. Nay one escaped.” Gordon’s voice was uneasy with uncertainty.

“And yet, when I arrived with Lydia and Wilma, ye asked me if we were all right. Ye had kent we’d been attacked even though it was clear nay alarm had been sounded.”

Murdoch scowled at his uncle, wrapping himself in his anger to try and mask the pain of his betrayal. He knew Arthur hadn’t always approved of him and the way he’d acted as laird, but he’d never thought him capable of outright betrayal of his own kin.

The words yet unspoken had to be said. “Ye planned the attack, Arthur, admit it. And do tell me, uncle, were ye behind the attack that killed me first wife and nearly me son as well?”

An attack without witnesses, no bodies left behind. Murdoch had been too distraught to pay heed to his uncle's actions or whereabouts, but it wouldn't have been hard for the older man to remove the evidence of an attack in order to cast the suspicion on him.

Looking back, so far as Murdoch knew, Arthur had never openly decried him as a murderer, but he'd never helped to silence the rumors and whispers either, and had never protested when the Elders tried to have him removed from the lairdship.

Arthur didn't answer but his silence, and the expression on his face, was answer enough. "Why?"

"I daenae ken what ye're talking about. Ye've lost yer mind."

"If I have, tis me, the gate guards and a double handful of warriors, to say nothin' of the villagers, I'll wager our captives are as 'mad' as the rest of us."

Murdoch sharpened his tone. "Have ye nae disgraced yerself enough yet, uncle? At least preserve some shred of honor and be honest, now that ye have been caught."

Arthur stood frozen for a long moment, then did the last thing Murdoch expected. He laughed. The sound was cutting, bitter and mirthless, a hollow manic laughter, but laughter all the same.

"Honor? And what good is a life of honor nephew, when it gains ye nothin', save a life in the laird's shadow, bowin' and scrapin' to men who should be yer equals, or bowing to ye?"

Gordon stepped forward. "Faither, what are ye sayin'?"

Arthur made a derisive noise. "Daenae act as if ye dinnae ken, when I did it all for ye,

Gordon.”

“I dinnae ken, and I daenae understand what ye’re meanin’. Faither...”

“All me life, livin’ in the shadow of me elder brother, calling him heir, then calling him laird...as if an accident of a few minutes made him me true elder or me better! He never was, but I’d had to bow and scrape to him all the same. I’d hoped that when he died, that would give me a chance to prove me own worth. But then his wife bore him an heir, and ye lived to adulthood. Worse, he dinnae perish before ye reached an age where ye could claim the lairdship, or before ye wed a lass of yer own.”

Arthur’s voice was thick with bitterness and a rising edge of madness, as if his mind was fraying with every word he spoke. “Yer birth ensured I’d never be laird, especially when ye wed. I had to do somethin’ if ever I or me son was to have a chance at the title we should have had from the beginning.”

Arthur’s eyes were filled with a hatred so bright that Murdoch was stunned he’d never witnessed it before. “I couldnae move against me brother, but I dinnae have to. And then ye...ye never loved yer wife, even after she bore ye a son. I thought an attack on the road might rid me of all three of me problems, but I was sure ye’d at least lose the brat, weak and helpless as he was. I was sure ye’d save yer wife first, for the sake of the alliance, if nae anythin’ else.”

Murdoch felt ill. His uncle had conspired to see Finn, his precious son, murdered. He’d suspected Arthur was trying to kill him, but never imagined that his hatred and desire for power ran so deep.

Arthur spat at him, his voice thick with venom. “I thought the contract would get ye out of me way. – I’d kent before ye even searched it out that the Knox girl was married. But ye had to go and find that little brazen wench of yers and convince her to actually allow ye to court her!”

“Why nae destroy the contract, if that was the case?”

“Because it was a way to force yer hand! I dinnae think ye’d ever have a chance of getting’ any wench, nae even a tavern whore, to wed ye! Nae after I went to the effort of makin’ it seem like ye killed yer first wife!”

So, his uncle had been the force behind those rumors. He must also have been the one who moved the bodies of the slain attackers, so it would appear that Murdoch had lied about bandits on the road.

Murdoch hadn’t thought he could feel any more betrayed than he already had, but the way the words felt like taking a hard blow to the gut proved him wrong.

Gordon spoke before he could. “Why? Why would ye do this, faither? To plot the murder of yer own kinfolk, and one of them yer laird...how could ye ever consider such a thing?” His cousin’s voice was rough with anguish as he confronted the man they’d once both looked up to.

“For ye!” Arthur’s voice rose in volume, his expression wild. “For ye, and yer sister and yer children! Ye deserved better than bendin’ yer knee to someone who was only yer laird by an accident of a few minutes at birth! Better than bein’ always in yer cousin’s shadow. With Murdoch and his son out of the way, ye could have been laird!”

“I never wanted to be laird.” Gordon’s jaw clenched. “I never wanted the title, nor the responsibility, just as I never wanted to wed or sire children. As laird, I’d have been expected to take a wife and continue me line, and I was never interested in doin’ such a thing.”

He shook his head. “And to involve a lass like Lydia, who came here in good faith...”

“Who cares about some upstart wench from a nothing clan! What does it matter if she was caught up in it! It would only have further tarnished Murdoch’s reputation and make it easier to have him removed from the lairdship and exiled, if nae dead!”

Arthur’s eyes gleamed with poisonous malice, like a snake about to strike. “If Murdoch died, ye could take his son as yer own bairn.” Arthur snarled. “Tis nae as if the lad would remember any part of it. He’d have taken ye as faither easily enough.”

Gordon looked as if he’d been slapped. “Faither, ye cannae be serious...”

“I did it for ye! For ye to have the prestige I never gained, the recognition ye deserve!” Arthur scowled. “All we need is for Murdoch to be out of the way!”

Murdoch had been watching Arthur grow ever more frenzied. He was therefore not surprised when Arthur suddenly drew a blade and lunged at him. He was shocked as Gordon stepped between them. “Faither, nay! Daenae do this!”

The two grappled briefly, then suddenly Gordon reeled backward and slumped against the wall. A red stain bloomed on the upper part of his shirt.

“Gordon...” Arthur’s voice broke, grief mingling with the madness in his eyes. “Ye bastard, ye’ve forced me to kill me son!”

He lunged at Murdoch once more, but Murdoch was ready, his dirk drawn in favor of fighting in the closer quarters. He grappled with his uncle, adjusting his balance easily as Arthur strove to push him backward.

Arthur was strong, his madness and grief giving him even greater strength, but he was still no match for Murdoch. His insanity-driven attacks were straightforward, powered by brute strength alone.

Blades clanged and locked together, then wrenched apart violently as they attacked, parried, and retreated. Murdoch dodged some blows, struck aside others and watched for some sign that his uncle would regain his sanity.

He wanted to spare his uncle if he could, but he feared that Arthur was beyond saving. He was too maddened by rage, grief and guilt. Too lost in his bitterness.

And what, really, would he be sparing Arthur for? It was not as if leaving him alive would truly be any sort of mercy.

By law, a clansman who attacked his laird or endangered the life of the laird and heir would be executed or exiled. And if ever his first wife's clan discovered Arthur was responsible for the death of his wife and the violence of the months that followed, they would not show him Murdoch's kindness.

The realization was a grim one, but it was enough to make Murdoch cease holding back. He parried, then used his free hand to seize his uncle's blade and slam it down against the desk. Arthur gasped in pain, his grip loosening. Murdoch took the opening and slid his own blade up under Arthur's ribs and into his heart. He twisted the blade, and Arthur coughed and choked as blood spurted from the gaping wound.

Within seconds the blood flow had slowed and Arthur's last breath shuddered from his lungs as he collapsed and died.

Murdoch lay his uncle's body on the stone floor. He'd have to decide later how he would handle his uncle's burial. Or rather, that would be something Gordon needed to decide, if he was well enough to do so.

The sudden realization made him sheath his blade and hurry to his cousin's side. Gordon's breathing was shallow, a deep gash in his shoulder, but he was not dying. Murdoch helped him stand upright and slung Gordon's unwounded arm across his

shoulder.

His cousin was barely conscious, but he still managed a soft word. “Faither?”

“I’m sorry. I had to kill him.” Murdoch kept his voice as low and kind as he could.

“Sorry.” Gordon looked stricken. “I dinnae...”

“Ye dinnae have any part of this. Ye’ve nothin’ to apologize for.” Murdoch guided his cousin into his rooms and helped him to the bed. He removed Gordon’s sash and shirt to look at the wound, then sent a serving lass for Irinia, the castle’s resident healer, while he gathered some rags and water to clean and staunch the injury

“Over?” Gordon’s tentative question broke the silence.

“I daenae ken, but I think so. I cannae imagine there were many folks involved in the scheme. Otherwise, I’d have kent somethin’ was going on much sooner.”

That fact that he hadn’t known would haunt him. Murdock had never suspected that Arthur held so much anger and resentment inside, nor that he would ever betray him. He felt he should have seen the signs of his uncle’s bitterness and done something to prevent it from going this far. There had to have been some way to keep his uncle from succumbing to his own madness.

But it was too late for that. Too late to do anything but continue with his task of upholding his lairdship.

Gordon’s hand tightened on his arm. ‘Ly-di-a?’

The word was like a knife to Murdoch’s belly. He swallowed hard. “I...I lost her.”

Gordon looked as though he wanted to say something else, but he was barely conscious. A knock on the door announced Evina's arrival and Murdoch stepped away to let the healer do her work.

His tracks took him to Lydia's rooms and he went inside. He didn't know what he expected, perhaps a parting note or some other sign of her recent departure. But her things were gone. The only thing remaining was a single tome.

Murdoch moved forward to lift the book from the bedside table. The ache in his heart intensified when he read the cover. It was the book he'd bought for her the day before.

She'd been there less than a fortnight, and yet she'd left a mark on his spirit as deep and as real as the book he held in his hands. And because of him, she was as distant as the lands from which the stories had originated.

25

“Lydia?”

Lydia looked up at the sound of her sister’s voice. She’d been sitting in a quiet corner of the gardens, petting Hector and ignoring the dog’s attempts to get her to play. She felt listless and weary, her eyes sore from the countless bouts of crying that had overtaken her the past week.

It had been seven days since she’d returned to Nora’s home from Lochlann Castle, and she’d yet to find the strength or energy to do anything, lost as she was in the numb haze of hurt that filled her.

Waking and sleeping she was plagued by thoughts of Murdoch. She’d never thought she’d be like one of those pining maidens in stories, but the reality was that everything reminded her of the man she’d begun to love, then lost.

And she did love him, had loved him. She knew that to be true, just as she knew that if she had a chance to change the past, there were many things she’d do differently.

Why had she pushed so hard on the subject of his wife’s passing, particularly when she’d determined he was telling her the truth about his innocence? Why had she pressed him to know secrets that were obviously painful for him to speak about?

She wished she could go back and make it so she hadn’t been so cold to him, so demanding.

“Lydia?”

Startled out of her melancholy thoughts, she looked up to see that Wilma had joined Nora. Both of their faces wore matching expressions of concern.

Nora crouched to look her in the eye. “Are ye feelin’ better? I’m worried about ye.”

“Aye.” Wilma joined them on the grass. “Ye’ve been so distressed as of late. I ken some of the reasons why, but...”

“I ken. I ken. I just...” Words failed her. She couldn’t seem to find the strength to explain how she felt. In fact, even thinking about it made her eyes sting with renewed tears.

“Och, lass, everything will come out all right.” Nora’s voice was soft, comforting, like the hand she ran gently through Lydia’s hair before pulling her into a hug. “I ken it doesnae seem possible just now, but ye’ll nae feel so hurt forever.”

“I ken...but it...but I...”

There was a faint sound of jingling from the courtyard. Hector’s ears perked up; nose lifted as he sniffed the air. Before Lydia could react, the big dog surged to his feet and bounded toward the courtyard with an excited bark.

Curious, the three of them stood and followed the dog.

There were two horses in the courtyard and a rider dismounting from one. The figure was wrapped in a traveling cloak, but there was something familiar about his build. He bent to scratch behind Hector’s ears. “Good lad. Is yer mistress nearby, I wonder?”

Lydia's heart skipped a beat at the familiar voice. She stumbled to a stop, unable to move or even draw a proper breath. It was Wilma who surged forward with a startled exclamation. "Murdoch! What are ye doin' here?"

Murdoch raised his head. "I was lookin' for Lydia."

"And what would ye be seeking me sister for?" Nora stepped forward, her expression one of cool disdain. "Ye were quick enough to send her away without a word of explanation. I daenae see why I should let ye say one word to her."

Murdoch grimaced. "I ken ye've nae reason to welcome me, but as for permission to speak to Lydia, is that nae a decision for the lady herself to make?"

Nora turned to her. "Lydia?"

A part of her wanted to ask him to leave immediately. Another part of her wanted to turn around and walk inside without uttering a single word to him. In the end though, curiosity and courtesy won out. "I'll speak with him, at least for a moment."

Nora studied her face, measuring Lydia's temperament in the same way she'd learned how to gauge a patient's health and whether or not they were lying to her about how much something hurt. She then nodded. "As ye will. However, me Laird Lochlann, if I return to find ye've reduced me sister to tears again or distressed her in any way, then I'm nae above making sure ye're very uncomfortable for the next fortnight or so. And if ye ken anythin' of me from Lydia, then ye ken I'm a healer, and I ken ways of making ye miserable that ye will never see coming."

Murdoch nodded, hands upheld in surrender. "I ken what a healer is capable of doin'. Wilma's nae fully trained, but she's left me regrettin' me folly a time or two when I upset her."

“Then ken that I can do worse and keep it in mind when ye’re speakin’ to me sister.” Nora tipped her head at Wilma and the two of them withdrew. Hector stayed, but he moved to lean against Lydia’s leg, providing a comforting support for her.

Lydia waited, but Murdoch didn’t seem inclined to speak first. “Well?”

“Well...I’m sorry I sent ye away. I shouldnae have, at least, nae without an explanation. But...” Murdoch ran a hand through his hair, his expression weary. “I was afraid.”

“Afraid of what? That I’d learn yer secrets? That someone might get through that iron guard of yers? Afraid to let someone come to ken and care for ye? Was the idea of me carin’ for ye that repugnant?”

“Nay. It was nae any of that.” Murdoch heaved out a breath that seemed too strained and deep to be a sigh. “I’d solved who was behind the attack in the village. I’d kent then that they might have been involved in the attack that killed me first wife. I dinnae want ye where ye could be harmed until I’d proven whether I was right or nae.”

“Ye...how?” But that wasn’t the most important question. “Who?”

“Me uncle, Arthur Nairn. He was behind both attacks. I never suspected before that day, but when we returned to Lochlann Castle after the attack, he asked if we’d been injured.”

She remembered that. She hadn’t thought anything of it at the time, especially since he’d said some villagers had informed him about what had happened. She frowned. “I thought it was because the villagers came to warn him of the attack. Was that nae correct?”

Murdoch shook his head. “Nay one from the village ever came to Lochlann Castle that evenin’. Nay one left the square before we did. Gordon’s men had them constrained.”

“But that...och...I see.” Lydia swallowed hard as the pieces fell into place. “He’d kent the attack was going to happen.”

“Aye. After ye left, I confronted him and learned his truth - that he’d arranged that attack and the one before to either kill me or leave me without wife and heir, to convince the Elders that I was unsuitable as a laird.”

Murdoch’s eyes were full of grief, haunted by a deep regret that he wasn’t bothering to hide behind his usual mask. Lydia’s heart went out to him.

He loved his family, and a member of his family had betrayed him. Betrayed his trust and plotted his death. “Why would he do such a thing?”

“Resentment. He and me father were twins, their births separated by minutes. He dinnae like that he was the younger and never had a chance to claim the lairdship. He wanted to take it from me for himself or pass the title to Gordon.”

She’d never really gotten a chance to know Arthur Nairn or his son, but she’d seen that Gordon was close to Murdoch. “Surely Gordon dinnae...”

“He dinnae ken anythin’ of his father’s plans, nor help with them.”

That was a small mercy. “And yer uncle?”

“Dead. He went mad and attacked me, and I couldnae stop him without killin’ him.” Murdoch grimaced. “I dinnae inform Wilma yet, but I need to. But before that...”

He stepped closer to her, his hand rising to brush a stray lock of hair back from her face. “I dinnae want to send ye away. I thought I was keepin' ye safe, and mayhap I was, but that doesnae mean I daenae regret it, for I do. I've regretted that decision every moment that ye were gone from me side.”

A part of her was thrilled to hear those words, but so much time had already passed. She couldn't deny that she'd been hurt by his actions and was still aching from the sting of his rejection. It didn't matter how justified his actions had been or how good his reasons were.

She stepped back, putting distance between them once more. “Ye dinnae even try to explain before ye sent me away.”

“I ken. I was a fool. I'm used to keepin' me own counsel, and I dinnae think of how ye'd feel, nae kennin' why I acted as I did.”

“Ye think a simple apology is enough to make me forgive ye? To make me forget the hurt ye caused? Ye think I'll trust ye nae to make the same mistake again, when it seems to be a habit with ye?”

“I dinnae say that.”

“Then what is yer purpose here?”

“To apologize, and to ask ye to return with me to Lochlann Castle. There's somethin' there I want to show ye, and a question I want to ask. After that, if ye wish to return to yer sister, I'll nae hold ye back. If ye wish to have nothin' else to do with me, I'll tell the Council that the betrothal willnae work and I will find another way, even if I need to step down as laird.”

“So ye hope to show me a trinket to win me back, and if I daenae agree, ye'll nae

even fight for me?" Perhaps it was rude, perhaps it was even petty to say such things, but she was in no mood to be gentle with his feelings. Not after he'd pushed her aside so often.

There was a wry quirk to his mouth when he answered. "I dinnae say that. I'll nae hold ye back if ye wish to cancel the arrangement between our clans, but that's nae the same as sayin' I'll cease tryin' to win ye on me own."

He stepped closer to her once more, his eyes dark with passion and promise. "I'll own I dinnae want this contract when first I came to yer door, but ye're a rare woman, Lydia Knox. Ye've made me feel things I've never felt before, and I'm nae so eager to lose that. I've made a fair fool of meself in this contest of hearts and wills, but I told ye that I've never lost a war, and I'm nae of a mind to start losin' here, even if I've well and truly mismanaged a battle here and there."

"What if I choose to withdraw from the field? Will ye deny me that right?" She glared at him.

"Nay. But it daenae mean I willnae seek a way past the gates by other means." He looked so utterly serious that she wanted to believe he meant it.

Believing in Murdoch would be difficult after what had passed between them. She didn't want to risk being hurt again, especially not by his silences or his unwillingness to let her come close. "I daenae ken if I can believe ye again."

"I ken. That's why all I ask for now is that ye return to Lochlann Castle with me, to see what I want ye to see."

"And ye'll nae try to use Finn to manipulate me?"

"The bairn will be happy to see ye, for he's sore missed his three playmates this past

seven-day, but I'll nae try to use him to win yer heart back. There's nay point, when I want yer heart for meself, nae Finn."

Lydia felt a flush rising to her cheeks at his candid speech.

She still felt the urge to refuse him and send him away. However, his words intrigued her, and curiosity had always been her weakness.

Besides, in every story she'd ever read, there was always some trial to test the lovers before they achieved a happy ending. She'd yearned for a romance like the ones in her stories. What point would there be in such dreams if she could not see them through? She owed it to her own heart to see if there was happiness past the pain his actions had caused.

"Very well, Laird Lochlann. I will come with ye." She paused. "I need to speak to Nora before we go, and ye should speak to Wilma."

Murdoch nodded. "Aye."

The ride back to Lochlann Castle was a quiet one. Lydia was engrossed in thoughts of her own and Murdoch found he was quite content with that. He had enough to occupy his own mind as they traveled.

He was glad Lydia had agreed to accompany him. He wasn't sure what he would have done had she refused to speak to him or to return to Lochlann Castle with him. Every option he'd thought of to persuade her had ranged from 'foolhardy' to 'embarrassing' to 'will only infuriate her'.

He was equally glad that Wilma had decided to stay with Lydia's sister for the time being. His cousin had taken the news of her father's treachery and his death about as well as he'd expected.

Like Murdoch and Gordon, she'd been crushed by her father's duplicity, hurt by his actions, and blamed herself for not realizing the truth before it came down to a fight to the death.

She felt that, as a healer-in-training, a scholar, and someone well versed in the lore of natural and supernatural ailments, she ought to have realized something was wrong with her father. She felt she should have seen and recognized the madness and the malice in him before he reached his breaking point.

Wilma had cried in Murdoch's arms for several minutes before declaring that she was going to become the best healer the Highlands had ever seen, and make sure that such tragedies never happened again.

To that end, she'd elected to stay with Nora and continue learning from her. Murdoch had teased her, saying it wouldn't make her a witch or a sorceress, but at heart he was relieved. Better that she find a productive way of dealing with her grief and her pain, instead of letting it fester.

At least his teasing had earned him a watery smile of acknowledgment and a bit of laughter from Nora and Lydia, who'd joined them.

Gordon had dealt with his anguish by shouldering his father's duties and vowing to serve as the best advisor he could be, once he recovered from his wound.

Gordon also spent more time with Finn, watching over the bairn his father had once tried to kill. It seemed to help steady him, and Murdoch could no more begrudge him than he could begrudge the fact that Gordon had spent most of the past few nights with his lover, seeking comfort and a place to mourn in relative privacy.

Murdoch was glad his cousin had that support, and relieved that Gordon had still been under the healer's orders to remain in bed when the Council had convened over Arthur's death.

The meeting had been a tense, ugly affair. More than one Elder had seemed perfectly willing to see the sins of the father pass to the son. By the end of it, Murdoch had been on the verge of challenging at least three Councilmen to honor duels. Eventually, however, he'd gotten his way, and had seen to it that Gordon would suffer no shame for his father's madness.

The sun was low in the sky but not yet setting when they rode through the gates of Lochlann Castle. Murdoch was relieved that the ride was over, and pleasantly surprised to find Gordon waiting, with Finn perched on his uninjured arm.

Lydia swung down from her horse and immediately made her way over to the pair.

Finn held out his arms for her and giggled. “Ly-da!”

“Hello Finn.” The smile she gave the bairn as she spoke to him eased some of the tightness in Murdoch’s chest. For all that she’d insisted he couldn’t use Finn as a way to coax her to stay, it was clear that Lydia cared greatly for his son.

“Ly-da!” Finn giggled again, then looked around. “Hec-tor?”

“Hector stayed with yer aunt Wilma. She’ll bring him back soon.”

“Back soon.” Finn nodded. Then he cocked his head and looked up at Lydia with an intent expression that Murdoch thought Wilma would have classified as adorable. “Lyda eat with us? Lyda an’ Da?”

Murdoch swallowed hard at the childish question. He saw Lydia’s smile falter for an instant before she summoned it again, and ruffled Finn’s hair gently. “We’ll see, me bonnie lad.”

Finn smiled, apparently reassured. Gordon looked between the child and Murdoch, then addressed Lydia. “Tis good to see ye back, Miss Knox.”

“Thank ye, Gordon.” Lydia hesitated. “I’m sorry to hear about yer faither.”

“Me faither made his choice. I’ll mourn the man he was, nay the man who died consumed by madness. But I thank ye for your kind words, and ye have me gratitude that ye can still think kindly of us, after everythin’.” Gordon dipped his head in the closest approximation of a bow he could give while holding Finn in his arms.

Murdoch stepped in before it could become too awkward. “Ye have the same rooms as ye were in last time, Lydia. I’m sure ye’d like a chance to freshen up and wash away the dust of the journey.”

She nodded. Murdoch breathed out a sigh of relief that she hadn't decided to turn around and go home. "Aye."

"We'll give ye the privacy to do so. However, I'd greatly appreciate it if ye'd meet me in the corridor outside yer rooms, an hour before supper. There's something I wish to show ye."

"I'll be there." Lydia nodded, then took up her bag, a single travel pack this time, rather than the carriage full of chests and bags she'd had before, and went inside.

Gordon looked at him. "Ye think she'll like yer surprise?"

"I hope so."

"Ye think she'll stay?"

Murdoch took a deep breath. "I hope so."

By the time the appointed hour came around, Lydia was burning with curiosity. She couldn't help it. Despite her best efforts, she'd seen no evidence that would tell her what Murdoch's surprise was.

Jewelry? She'd heard of such gifts being used to reconcile after an argument, and she supposed it would be all right, though she'd little use for jewels and trinkets, especially if she could have a good book instead.

Something about his first wife? She wasn't sure she cared to know more, not now that she knew the truth about her death. Still, as hard as she'd pressed the topic, perhaps Murdoch thought something like that would placate her.

A location like the fairy pools? She'd enjoyed her visit there, and he had to remember

that, as well as what else had transpired at the edge of the pools. Maybe he knew other spots that she might enjoy seeing.

Really, it could be anything. She simply didn't know enough about Murdoch to hazard a guess. For all she knew, he wanted to show her the history of the Lochlann Clan, and all the reasons he'd make an admirable match for her.

With no idea what Murdoch wanted to show her, Lydia chose to dress in a casual day dress, her hair confined to a single plait down her back. She hoped to gain some insight from what Murdoch wore, but when she emerged from her room and saw him in the corridor, he was wearing his usual kilt, shirt, sash and belt. There were no hints there.

He offered her his arm. "Will ye come with me?"

"Do I need a cloak, or anythin' of the sort?" He could at least tell her if they were going outside.

"Nay. We're nae going far."

So it was something inside the castle. That narrowed down the choices of what he might show her. It also didn't appear to be something he'd brought with him, so perhaps it wasn't jewelry.

She took his arm and kept pace with him as he led her down the hall to a set of rooms that were mostly unused. Wilma had pointed them out as long disused family quarters, meant for visiting second or third cousins, and occasionally used for important guests, or for younger children of the laird, when the laird had a large family, which was rare these days.

Murdoch led her to one of the doors and pushed it open. There was a fire blazing in

the fireplace and a small table to one side, as well as a large, comfortable looking chair, but none of those things were what caught Lydia's attention first.

What caught her attention first were the shelves.

Any furniture that might have been in the room had been cleared out, and the walls had been lined with shelves. Most of them were empty, but the ones across from the door had been filled with a haphazard looking collection of tomes. And there, in the center of the middle shelf, was a single book.

Lydia stepped closer to be sure she'd seen what she thought she had.

The book standing so prominently in the center was the one Murdoch had bought her at the fair, the one she'd never had a chance to read. Her fingers caressed the spine.

There were other books, some of which she thought she'd seen in his study, and some she didn't recognize.

She turned to look at Murdoch. "What is this?"

"Yer library. Or the beginning of it. Tis the book I bought ye, and the ones from me study, as well as some more I bought from the merchant before he left." Murdoch waved at the shelves. "There's nae much, but there will be more booksellers. Ye can buy more. And if ye fill the shelves, I'll have the local carpenter build more, or we can expand it to a larger room."

"Ye built this...for me?" She could scarcely believe it, even with the evidence staring her in the face.

"Aye. As a wedding present, if ye'll have me." Murdoch stepped closer, his eyes filled with warmth. "I dinnae ever get ye a betrothal gift, so I thought the books could

be for betrothal, and the library for the weddin', if ye are willing to marry me after everythin'."

Her heart felt like it would jump out of her chest and her throat felt tight with emotion. "I thought ye dinnae want me."

"I dinnae want ye hurt. But the danger is now past, and even if it werenae...I daenae like being without ye, though I'll understand if ye daenae feel the same."

His frank and heartfelt admission crashed into the walls she'd tried to use to protect and harden her heart, and smashed them like paper before boulders. Lydia flung herself into Murdoch's arms.

"Ye fool. of course I feel the same. I'm sorry I was so cold to ye, but ye were so stubborn - I couldnae figure out how to respond tot it. But after ye sent me away, I couldnae stop thinkin' about ye. I kept rememberin' the way ye held me, the way ye kissed me. It was too hard to speak to ye and imagine I'd never have that again, never get to tell ye..."

"I love ye." Murdoch's hand caught her chin and tugged it upward until their gazes met. "I love ye more than I ever thought possible, and I'll spend the rest of me life showin' ye how much I love ye, if ye'll let me."

"O' course I'll let ye." Lydia reached up to twine her arms around his neck. "I love ye too."

And with that, she pulled him down for a kiss.

M urdoch had hoped that the offer of a library and books would convince Lydia that he was sincere about wanting to wed her. He'd hoped she would accept his apology and give him a chance to mend what he'd so foolishly broken between them.

He didn't expect her to cling to him, much less to say that she loved him. He certainly wasn't expecting it when she pulled him down and pressed her lips to his.

Lydia tasted of sunshine and honey, her lips soft and sweet against his own. Her mouth opened under his, welcoming him as he deepened the kiss.

He felt heat moving through his veins, his body responding to the warmth and weight of her in his arms. With an effort, he pulled back. "Lydia..."

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright with joy and desire as she looked up at him. "Aye?"

He didn't want to admit what he was thinking, but the truth was that he wanted her far too much to stop at one or two kisses. "I want ye. If ye kiss me again I cannae promise to stop."

The smile she gave him was bright as sunlight and sent a pulse of desire straight to his groin. "Then daenae stop."

She pulled herself flush against him, going up on tiptoes to whisper in his ear. "If we're to be wed at the end of a month, then there's nay reason we can't be together in

other ways before then. Besides, ye do remember me second condition for our marriage, aye?”

“Aye. Ye’d decide when we consummated it.”

“And do ye remember what ye said when I gave ye that condition?”

“That before a month was out, ye’d be asking me to take ye to me bed.”

The smile she gave him was pure teasing, full of desire and heat that made his heart pound. “Tis nae precisely yer bed, but I’m thinkin’ there’s more than one way to christen a library.”

He took her chin gently in one hand. “Are ye declarin’ yer intention to have me fulfill that second condition of yers?”

“And the promise ye made me.”

“Yer wish is me greatest desire.” He tilted up her head to kiss her again.

The room wasn’t heavily furnished, but there was a thick rug in front of the fire. Murdoch lifted Lydia into his arms and carried her to the rug, then bent down to lay her upon it.

He turned to lock the door and remove his boots, belt and sash. When he turned back, Lydia was still lying on the rug, but her bodice was unlaced in clear invitation, her skirt pulled partway up her legs in a teasing manner.

Murdoch smiled and went to kneel beside the woman he’d chosen to be his wife.

Lydia sensed her heart speed up as Murdoch knelt beside her. She was nervous, but at

the same time she was certain of what she wanted. She wanted Murdoch, and she wanted him to love her as a husband loved a wife.

His hands caressed her face as he knelt beside her. “Ye’re so beautiful.” He bent close. “I love ye.”

“And I love ye.” Daringly, she slid her fingers into the laces of his shirt and undid them. Murdoch chuckled and removed his shirt, revealing the broad expanse of his brawny chest.

Lydia ran her hands over his newly revealed skin, reveling in its warmth, the solid feeling of his muscles. Her fingers found and traced the scars she’d seen before, and she smiled as Murdoch groaned quietly under his breath. Beneath his kilt she could see his arousal growing.

She wanted him. She wanted to feel him inside her. She reached out to the growing erection, only for Murdoch to grab her hand.

“Daenae do that or I’ll nae last long, and I want to take me time with ye.” His voice was a low, husky growl that made her shiver with delight and desire.

His hands slid over her body, gently caressing and exploring, before they reached the hem of her skirt and began to slowly guide the fabric upward to bare her body to his heated gaze. Lydia shivered as Murdoch’s warm hands brushed over skin, followed by the kiss of the cool evening air.

He slid the dress up her arms and let it fall away, leaving her naked before him. Lydia shivered as his mesmerized eyes drank her in.

Murdoch bent to kiss her again, a long, heated kiss that left her breathless, her mouth thoroughly ravaged by his. One hand came up to cup her chin as Murdoch shifted to

press another kiss to the point of her jaw.

Another kiss to her pulse point, then her shoulder, as his hand slid down her chest to caress her breast. Lydia gasped as he teased her nipple into a hardened peak. His mouth traveled down to suckle on her other breast and Lydia found herself unable to do anything other than arch into the pressure of his mouth and hands as sparks flew from her breasts to her core.

By the time he'd ceased teasing the sensitive flesh Lydia felt her stomach quivering. Every brush of his lips as he kissed his way down her center pulsed shivers across her skin.

His palm slid across the junction of her thighs, sliding through the damp curls that covered the soft mound of her sex. "Part yer legs for me."

Lydia obeyed, her heart pounding. Every touch set her afire, making her want more.

Murdoch's tongue teased her navel, making her squirm, as his hand stroked over her sex and caressed the outer lips of her most secret place.

Murdoch slowly kissed his way back to her breasts, bending to suckle the one he'd teased before, while he slid one finger inside her and stroked the inner folds of her sex before he caressed her pleasure center. Lydia gasped and writhed, her back arching as she pressed up into his touch, seeking more stimulation.

His fingers caressed her, sliding slowly and more deeply inside, seeking out the inner folds to her channel. Lydia gave herself over to the intense heat and pleasure that Murdoch's touch invoked. She could feel the innermost core of herself spinning faster and faster as the intense pleasure built up inside of her..

Murdoch withdrew his hand and she whimpered at the sudden loss of her rapture.

Murdoch sat back and unwrapped his kilt to reveal his prominent arousal. His member was fully erect, hardened and ready. Murdoch shifted to kneel gently between her legs and envelop her.

“Ye’re so beautiful.” One hand braced him while his other caressed her face. “Are ye sure?”

“Aye.” Lydia smiled and shifted her hips, arching her back to press herself up against the tip of his stiffened shaft.

Murdoch made a guttural sound, his eyes flaring bright with desire. Desire for her. “I love ye, and how ready ye are for me.”

As he positioned himself Lydia vibrated with anticipation as the head of his member pushed apart the outer lips of her sex, then slid slowly inside.

Inch by inch, Murdoch glided into her. The pressure and heat against her innermost folds shot surges of intense pleasure through her. She felt herself being tightly stretched around his thickened member, the burn heightening her pleasure. Her body was sizzling and taut, encased in roaring waves of sensation with his every movement.

Lydia gasped as Murdoch encountered the fragile resistance of her maidenhead. He stooped and claimed her mouth in a fierce kiss as his free hand teased her nipple. The combined sensations rendered Lydia’s pain to a distant ache as he claimed her maidenhood, which faded as he slid deeper into her channel, his erection filling her completely as he pressed inside her.

Murdock was sheathed fully inside of her, his body locked to hers as they both breathed heavily. The sensation of him pressed so far inside of her that his ballocks brushed the cleft of her buttocks was extraordinary, but it was still not enough.

He shifted against Lydia, who gasped at the feeling of him moving within her. Murdoch grunted, pulled back and thrust deeply again.

Murdoch set a steady rhythm and Lydia responded, arching into his thrusts with every move, the two of them moving together in harmonious passion and pleasure.

The heat built around them, their bodies shining with perspiration as they made love in front of the fire. Their pleasure built higher and higher, coiling about her core as Lydia fused her body to Murdoch's.

A raging tide of intense passion threatened to consume her. She felt as though she would explode into thousands of stars of pure ecstasy. Her entire being was focused solely on the strokes of Murdoch against her and within her.

His thrusts deepened and Lydia felt her insides coiling tighter, burning brighter. Murdoch dipped his head and kissed her intensely, his body tight against hers as he buried himself to the hilt. Lydia felt herself dissolve into a wave of pleasure that crashed over her and swept her away. Her body shuddered, her inner walls convulsing around Murdoch's shaft. She felt him convulse as well, his seed spurting deep into her body as he climaxed along with her.

The sensation sent a renewed wave of release through her and swept her away again in a surge of white heat that drove every thought from her mind.

The last thing she perceived before succumbing to the rapture of her release was Murdoch's soft words. "I love ye, Lydia Knox."

Lochlann Castle, Two Weeks Later

The gardens were a riot of colorful blooms and the weather was perfect, with not a cloud in the sky. As far as Murdoch was concerned there could be no better day to have a wedding.

Today he would marry Lydia Knox and officially make her Lydia Nairn, Lady of Clan Lochlann. Unlike his first wedding, which he'd approached with detachment and resignation, this event filled him with nothing but joy.

The garden was full of guests. His council was there, as were his two cousins and Finn, watched closely by Wilma. Hector was also nearby, having become as devoted to guarding the Lochlann heir as he was the woman who would soon be Finn's mother.

Murdoch's gaze skimmed across the rest of his guests, the men and women he'd only recently come to know; his soon-to-be kinfolk by marriage and his new allies.

He'd met Nora Barclay nee Knox and Isobel Rothach nee Knox, before, but it was only yesterday that he'd met Lydia's third sister Emma, as well as the husbands of the three women.

Laird Hunter Murray was a quiet man, and he knew from his betrothed that Laird MacRoss preferred being outdoors. It was one of the reasons Lydia had wanted to have the ceremony in the garden if possible. Despite his taciturn nature he proved to

be a well-spoken man.

Laird Leo Barclay was a stern man with a sharp, sarcastic tongue but an appealing sense of humor. He was very protective of his wife, but also courteous, when the situation demanded. His son was a quiet but cheerful youth.

Of all Lydia's kinfolk, Leo had been the most understanding of Murdoch's actions. –After first politely threatening to thrash Murdoch to a pulp if he harmed Lydia, Leo admitted that he'd also had a son by his first wife and had done some foolish things of his own with regard to Nora.

Then there was Alex Rothach, who was far too similar to his wife Isobel for Murdoch's peace of mind. At their first meeting, Alex had punched him for upsetting Lydia and causing Isobel undue stress while she was heavy with child.

After the punch that left his gut aching and the rest of his guests staring with mingled apprehension and appreciation, Alex Rothach had opened their meeting with "So ye're the unruly bastard who upset me wife dragged me sister-by-marriage into the problems of yer clan."

Murdoch swallowed, wondering if he was about to be challenged to an honor duel. "Aye. I cannae claim otherwise. In me defense, I dinnae expect it to end the way it did. Me uncle was a good actor."

After a moment of tense silence, Alex sighed. "Och, well, I cannae say much. Me faither was a proper bastard in his own right. Sold me to pirates to 'toughen me up'. At least ye dinnae kidnap Lydia. Tis better than Leo's tactics."

Leo snorted. "I dinnae kidnap Nora for a bride. I'd kidnapped her for a healer. The rest came later." Leo smirked and elbowed the man beside him. "Unlike Hunter."

“I dinnae kidnap anyone. Emma walked into me castle of her own accord .”

Murdoch sighed. “Lydia came to me home by choice as well.”

“Aye. But ye did threaten her kinfolk.” Alex clapped him on the shoulder and Murdoch felt the weight of his muscles. “Do it again, and I’ll pound the foolishness out of ye.”

“If I ever do it again, I’ll deserve it twice over, for bein’ a fool and for harming Lydia.”

“Good. Ye understand. Just so ye ken, tis the same deal we all have with each other.” Leo held out a hand. “Welcome to the family lad.”

That conversation, as well as the ones that had followed over cards and whiskey, convinced Murdoch that all three men were good men, and he believed he might have a chance at becoming good friends with them all, as well as being kin-by-marriage.

With this marriage, Clan Lochlann would be the most prosperous and peaceful it had been in years, if not decades.

That fact was only one among many that made Murdoch happy these days.

Laughter sounded from the courtyard and he looked over to see yet another group of villagers and clanfolk entering the gates, laden with food, drink and gifts.

That was another thing that had changed since Lydia had returned to him. At her urging, he’d spent more time among the nearby villages, talking to the folk there.

As she’d predicted, the clanfolk were mistrustful at first, but as he made it more of a point to interact with them, and as the story of his uncle’s actions spread, the air of

cautious, wary hostility faded.

They now fully accepted him as their laird. They were welcoming when he moved among them. Instead of shying away, men sought him out for conversation, or to share a glass of ale and local gossip. The women would smile and offer up things to him if they happened to have something they felt he or Lydia might enjoy.

Thanks to his lovely betrothed, he had become the laird he'd always hoped to be. His beautiful betrothed, who would soon be his wife.

"Come cousin. Tis time to get to yer place." Gordon's voice drew him out of his musing.

The ceremony would be starting in a moment. Murdoch nodded and moved to the head of the long aisle that had been laid amidst rows of flowers, terminating at a wedding arch that Lydia's sisters and Wilma had created. The priest was already waiting for him. Murdoch took his place, with Gordon and Wilma standing in for his family.

As the bagpipes began to play, the guests arranged themselves on either side of the aisle. A hush fell over the crowd and Murdoch turned to see his bride, radiant as she walked gracefully toward him.

Lydia adjusted the fall of her emerald green wedding dress, intricately embroidered with golden flowers to compliment her eyes, one last time before she took Alex's arm. Hunter was technically the eldest of her male siblings-by-marriage, but Alex was the laird of Clan Clyde, which was why she'd chosen him to escort her in her father's place.

Isobel was too far advanced with child to stand for long, but Nora and Emma would stand at her side and that was fine. Her entire family was here. Soon she would be

wed to her beloved Murdoch.

Lydia took Alex's arm as the bagpipes played and began her slow walk up the aisle. Her breath caught in her chest as she spotted Murdoch, his cousin's at his side.

Murdoch looked breathtakingly handsome, his dark hair brushed back and confined by the laird's coronet on his brow. He was wearing the same kilt he'd worn the night he'd come and invited her to dinner with himself and Finn, and he had donned a shirt decorated with green and gold embroidery to match her gown, though it was an intricate pattern of knotwork instead of flowers.

His face was open and shining with joy, and it transformed him from a handsome man into one that was breathtaking to behold. It almost made her wish she could drag him somewhere private.

Almost. But this ceremony would make her his wife and join their clans and their lives together. She could wait a little longer, knowing that they would eventually have their wedding night.

The thoughts of what they might do with that night made her blush.

"Come on lass." Alex tugged her forward gently. Lydia blushed deeply once she realized that she'd stopped walking, too caught up in staring at her groom to approach him.

A small, teasing grin played on Murdoch's mouth as she traversed the last few feet to his side. It was clear he knew what had distracted her.

Alex laid her hand in Murdoch's and they turned to the priest.

"Friends, kin and clanfolk, we gather here today to witness and bless the union of two

hearts. Who comes this day to ask for the blessing of God upon their union?"

Murdoch spoke first. "I, Murdoch Nairn, laird of Clan Lochlann, do come for a blessing upon me marriage to this woman."

Lydia swallowed and managed to bring forth the words. "I, Lydia Knox, daughter of Clan Clyde, do come for a blessing upon me marriage to this man."

"And who stands witness to present these two for the ceremony of holy matrimony?"

"I, Gordon Nairn, first cousin and advisor to the Laird, do present this man for marriage."

"I, Alex Rothach, laird of Clan Rothach and acting laird of Clan Clyde, do present this woman for marriage."

The priest intoned his blessing as Alex and Gordon stepped back. More words were spoken, but Lydia was too busy watching Murdoch to pay much attention until the priest said "Ye may now recite yer vows."

Murdoch looked into her eyes. "Lydia Knox, ye've brought light and joy into me life. With ye beside me, I've become the laird I always wanted to be. More importantly, I've become the father, and the man, I'd always hoped I could be. Ye're the sunshine in me world and the magic in me life. You are everything beautiful and wondrous. I swear that I will love ye, body, heart and soul, through good and bad, joy and sorrow, health and illness, from now until the stars crumble or the world ends, whichever comes last."

Her throat was tight and made it difficult to talk, but still she managed. "Murdoch Nairn, I had never kent what passion was until ye taught it to me. I iced me life in me books, protected from the world, until ye claimed me hand and brought me forth to

yer world, to experience all the things that I'd only read about. Ye gave me the life I'd always longed for and helped me become a better woman for it. Ye're the pillar that gives me strength, the gift I never imagined receiving, and I'm blessed to be with ye, and to love ye. I swear that I will love ye body, heart and soul, through good and bad, joy and sorrow, health and illness, from now until the stars crumble or the world ends, whichever comes last."

Gordon and Emma came forward with their rings, while Alex solemnly removed the Clyde tartan from her shoulder and replaced it with the tartan of Clan Lochlann.

The priest intoned another blessing, then spoke the words she'd been waiting to hear. "Ye may now kiss the bride."

Murdoch's lips claimed hers in a fiery kiss that made her melt against him. She would happily have stayed like that for the rest of the day, had they not been nudged apart by discrete bumps from Gordon and Emma.

As they turned together to face the assembled guests, the priest called out "I give ye, the Laird and Lady Lochlann!"

As they walked toward the doors of Lochlann Castle to begin the wedding feast, Lydia knew she'd never been happier.

EPILOGUE

The head table at the wedding feast was more crowded than Murdoch had ever imagined it could be, much less actually seen. Between three more lairds, three more ladies, his cousins, and Lydia's determination to have Finn with them at the wedding feast, Murdoch had thought his steward was going to tear his hair out before he managed to get the seating arranged to his satisfaction.

In the end, he and Lydia sat side by side, with Finn between them, Gordon on his opposite side and Wilma next to Lydia. Across from them sat Murdoch's new kin-by-marriage, with each laird seated beside his lady.

Their table was separated from the others, one on either side, at which sat the elders and council members of his clan. The lower tables were filled with a mingling of villagers, armsmen and clan-folk from all the associated clans.

The result was a wedding feast that was loud, crowded, and absolutely perfect. Even with his general discomfort around people, there was nothing Murdoch wanted to change.

Under normal conditions, he would have served his guests first, before taking anything from the platters for himself or Finn. But he and Lydia were the guests of honor, so they received the first servings of everything.

Finn pouted as he received a healthy serving of vegetables, before he looked up at Lydia. "Feed Hector?"

Lydia laughed. “Hector has a treat of his own, me braw lad. He doesnae need feeding from our table.”

Leo guffawed. “Already tryin’ to get up to mischief? Me lad was a year or two older before he tried to be sneaky.”

“Wish I could say the same about Lydia.” Isobel shook her head.

“Wish we could say the same about ye!” Nora swatted at her sister. “Lydia might have had a habit of disappearing to read in corners instead of doing her chores, but she wasnae the one who nearly shot the master-at-arms in the foot at the age of seven summers!”

“I said I wanted to learn the bow.” Isobel pouted.

“Aye, but ye kent that bow was too big for ye, and we told ye to wait until he had some blunted arrows for ye.” Emma clicked her tongue. “As it was, all the warriors of our clan were wearing an armored kilt, or something like it, whenever they saw ye on the practice field for seasons after.”

“Wish I’d kent. I’d have had an accident when Geoffrey was walkin’ by. Would have been worth the trouble after.”

The rest of the table broke into laughter, Murdoch included. Over the past month, he’d heard stories from Lydia about the type of man her cousin truly was. He’d come to realize that his father had made a mistake dealing with the man, though it was a mistake that had worked to his benefit in the end.

Murdoch was only glad that Geoffrey and his uncle had never had a chance to meet and compare their ambitions.

Although, the current discussion did make him wonder about something else. “Ye ken, I’ve heard that Nora wins her arguments by threatening to spike yer food with herbs to make ye ill. Isobel clearly threatens to shoot anyone she disagrees with.”

He turned to Emma. “What example did ye set yer younger sister that I’ll have to be wary of crossing?”

The second eldest of the Knox sisters offered him a serene smile. “I simply taught her to choose her words wisely, and that tis easier to win a battle of wits with an unarmed opponent, as so many men are.”

More laughter. Even Hunter only shook his head in commiseration as he leaned over to refill Murdoch’s cup. “Best ye leave it be. I’ve learned nae to argue with her.”

“Och, I’ve wondered where she learned to wield that sharp tongue of hers. Now I ken.” Murdoch shared in the laughter as he met his wife’s eyes.

He nearly choked when Lydia leaned over to whisper in his ear a moment later. “And who should I be thanking for the things ye’ve learned to do with yer tongue?”

Lydia watched Murdoch’s expression change as she sat back in her chair with a sense of satisfaction. She hadn’t minded being teased, but she had no compunction about teasing her husband in turn.

“Saucy wench.” He muttered back to her a moment later, too low for her sisters to hear.

They’d both temporarily forgotten the child between them, until Finn spoke up in his high, cheerful voice. “Saucy wech!”

Silence fell. Time stopped. Then Lydia and Murdoch flushed in unison as laughter

exploded from their guests, in counterpoint to Finn's delighted giggles.

"Murdoch! What have ye been teaching him!" Wilma scolded her cousin around Lydia's shoulder. "I leave ye alone with the bairn for a month, and he starts talking like that."

"Twas nae me fault. I was simply answering something Lydia said." Murdoch pulled a woebegone expression. "She was teasin' me."

"Tongue!" Finn piped up, and Lydia felt her blush deepen, turning her cheeks a crimson to rival the roses outside.

Murdoch rose from his seat and lifted his son into his arms. "I think tis time for ye to take yer nap, me braw lad."

Lydia didn't miss the heated look, full of promise, that he offered her before he walked away to find the maid who had charge of his son.

Not his son, their son. The thought made Lydia smile, despite her embarrassment.

"Ye look happy." Isobel reached out to awkwardly touch her hand. "Like ye love the man and the bairn both."

"I do." Lydia clasped her sister's hand. "Though I'll warn ye now, ye'll have to be wary of little ears once yer bairn is born." She smirked. "Ye never ken what they hear, or when they'll speak of it."

"So I see." Isobel smiled back. "So what was it ye said that Finn found so entertaining? I ken the 'saucy wench' was Murdoch's fault, but I dinnae think for a moment ye were blameless, sister, nae with the smile on yer face afore the bairn spoke."

Lydia felt her face flush yet again. She was still trying to find a response when a warm arm draped around her shoulders, and a familiar voice answered her sister. “Twas naythin'. A request for me to fulfill later in the evening.”

“Murdoch!” Lydia shot a look at her husband as he retook his seat and smiled at her.

“Been demonstrating ye can be a good husband in every way then?” Alex raised a knowing eyebrow. “Ye ken a Knox woman needs to be satisfied in every way for a happy marriage.”

Isobel hissed in outrage at her husband. Murdoch simply sipped from his tankard. “O’ course. Tis why I built Lydia a library. We’ve spent many a night in there, satisfyin’ her desire to learn.”

Lydia choked on the wine she’d been drinking. “Murdoch!”

He leaned over and took her hand. “Relax me dear. Tis all said in laughter and love.”

The warmth in his eyes melted her embarrassment, and Lydia relaxed. “Aye. That it is.”

“A toast.” Alex held up his tankard. “To life and laughter and love, for all the days of our lives.”

The words echoed up and down the table, and Lydia smiled as she raised her cup to chime against her husband’s.

To life and laughter and love, for all the days of our lives.

The End?

1

“ S it down!” Isobel Knox cried loudly over the bellowing sound of many male voices raised in high dudgeon. Silence slowly fell over them as they each looked at her one by one. “Either speak as one man, or dinnae speak at all. We’ve been runnin’ around in circles for minutes, and we cannae reach a resolution.”

She surveyed the scene before her with a sense of dread growing in her belly. The Clan Clyde council chambers were bedecked with many candles, but the flickering light did little to penetrate the darkness at the edges of the room. Isobel had grown accustomed to it over time, but it was still a disheartening place.

When she first set foot here, many weeks before, she remembered the overwhelming burden she had felt on her shoulders. Mediating between Clan Clyde and Clan MacRoss had not been an easy task, and that was putting it mildly. At the time, she had felt fear run through her at being responsible for steadying this rabble of men.

She smiled to herself—how times had changed.

Slowly, the men surrounding her took their seats, some more reluctantly than others. Angus remained standing, as she had known he would, his solemn expression matching that of almost every other man in the room as he met her gaze.

“Say yer piece then, Angus,” she said softly, sitting up a little higher in her chair and glaring at one of the council members who seemed to be about to interrupt.

“Everyone in this room kens Laird MacRoss is a valuable ally,” Angus began, his

words sincere and warm as he spoke. “And he’s been a sturdy rudder, steering us through this recent storm.”

A few of the council members murmured their assent.

Angus looked directly at Isobel, his jaw set. “But he isnae the Laird of Clan Clyde. He cannae be, and wouldnae be a suitable leader for us. He’s too far from our boundaries, too far from our home. If we should ever need him for an urgent matter, it could take him a day to reach us. Longer, if the rain falls.”

Isobel sighed, turning the words over in her mind, willing them to be false, yet knowing he was right. She was well aware of how far it was to Clan MacRoss—she and her sisters had walked the distance in the dead of night, with nothing but hope and despair to guide them.

“Ye care for our people, Isobel,” Angus continued. “Ye and yer family ken our lands and our ways. We must secure a laird for our clan. Someone who will put our people first.”

Isobel glanced up at the tired faces around the room, feeling unease skitter down her spine. If they could not accept the laird of a neighboring clan, one who had freely offered to rule them, then they would have to find their own. That meant only one thing: an alliance by marriage.

Isobel tried to keep her expression neutral, ensuring that none of the anguish the idea instilled in her was visible on her face. She hated the thought of marriage, of being tied to duty and service. It made her heart feel like a canary might—trapped in a cage, singing for freedom with no one to hear her song.

She looked at Angus’s face and saw the determination in his gaze, the knowing superiority of his expression. She almost let out a frustrated curse as she considered

her infamous reputation. There wasn't a man around the table who had not heard of her frequent escapades away from the castle grounds.

Everyone knew Isobel Knox was a wild will-o'-the-wisp, untamed, unbridled, and outspoken. In their minds, she would need to be shackled to a man to ensure she behaved as a lady should. She scowled inwardly at the very notion.

"Laird MacRoss must see it's the only way to ensure our clan's future, following Geoffrey's death," Angus barreled on. "None of us discounts what ye have done for us these past weeks, but it cannae be for the long term."

The faces around the room were all looking at her with an expectant air of understanding, as though this was the easiest decision in the world. She felt nausea rise in the back of her throat.

So, it has come to this. I'm to be caged by marriage in the name of duty.

Having said his piece, Angus took a seat, the high screech of the chair mimicking the scream Isobel wished to let fly from her lips at the injustice of it all. But as she prepared to respond, another man rose to his feet. A few seats down from Angus, Hamish Baran stood tall against his fellow council members, his greying hair turning amber in the firelight.

"We have all heard the rumors." His voice was low, but it echoed through the room with quiet authority. "The Laird of Clan Rothach has returned to claim his birthright. Ye may have heard yerself of the wild nature of his past. Years at sea as a pirate, livin' the darkest life there is, and now he's on our doorstep. Alex Bain is as cruel and heartless as any man alive."

Hamish had the entire room's attention. Isobel could feel the alarm spreading through each man, like mist creeping across a valley floor.

“This is nay time for us to be divided and leaderless,” he continued. “I second what Angus said—ye’ve done admirably well since Laird MacRoss sent ye back to us, but now is the time for things to change.”

He took his seat amidst much nodding from those around the table. Isobel knew he spoke the truth, they all did, but the idea of cowing to their wishes was a bitter pill to swallow.

Her sisters, Emma and Nora, had both found love and happiness in marriage. Isobel knew that it had brought them both great joy, and yet she and her siblings were not molded from the same clay.

Isobel had a need for the outdoors that her sisters had never felt with the same intensity. Nora was a skilled healer and respected the natural world beyond all things, but she didn’t feel the same belonging in it that Isobel did.

Isobel rode through the glens every chance she got, enjoying nothing better than to dive into a wild pool in her underclothes, be damned who might see.

She could shoot and ride as well as any man—better in many cases—even going so far as to give lessons to some of the guards in the keep when they plucked up the courage to ask her.

That was not the conduct of a laird’s wife. She had a wild spirit, and she refused to smother it. To her, marriage was servitude, boredom, and conformity, when she longed to run wild as a river, claiming the world as her own. She could not imagine any man worthy of sharing a life with her.

“We cannae delay,” Hamish continued, perhaps taking her silence for disagreement. “Alex Bain is a threat we must confront now. I believe ye must marry within the month to secure our fate.”

Isobel looked around the room, aware that it was not just her life that was at stake. These men had been tolerant after Geoffrey's death, but Hunter Murray had still murdered the man who had once ruled over them all. If she didn't comply, there was a chance Clan Clyde would rise against Clan MacRoss, putting Hunter, her sister Emma, and their wee bairn in grave danger.

One month to find a man I can tolerate enough to marry. Unthinkable! How am I supposed to find a spirit that matches me own?

Isobel hesitated as an idea started to form in her mind. Perhaps there was a way she could agree to their demands yet indefinitely delay the result. She could find a worthy husband, whilst enjoying a game at the same time. She felt a spark light up in her mind—who didn't love a game?

A ghost of a smile flickered across her face as she reluctantly made her choice. She knew what she must do, and if she was cunning, she would be able to comply with their wishes on her own terms.

"Gentlemen, I have heard what ye have said, and I agree with yer concerns. Ye are right, Laird MacRoss is a fine man, and a finer braither-in-law, but he cannae lead both our clan and his own." She took a deep breath. "I'll agree to yer terms, and find a suitable laird to marry, who can bring peace and prosperity to our lands."

As she spoke, it was as though the entire room let out a collective sigh of relief.

"But," she continued resolutely, "I will choose a man who is worthy of Clan Clyde. If he can best me in an archery tournament, that will be the man that I marry."

One Week Later

Isobel let out a slow breath as she counted backward from ten. The taught bowstring

cut a familiar groove in her fingers as she waited for the perfect moment to let the arrow fly.

Behind her, her sister Emma stood with her newborn son, watching her with thinly veiled exasperation. A few feet down from her stood Laird MacLaughlin, her most recent opponent, who was about to discover his shot was not as famed as he supposed.

Isobel loosed the arrow, watching the tight feathers spin away from her, barely needing to look at the target to know where it would land. The arrow thudded deep into the straw, dead center, almost six inches to the left of Laird MacLaughlin's final attempt.

She breathed a quiet sigh of relief and turned around, schooling her features to ensure she did not appear too conceited. Another husband thwarted—this had been easier than she had dared to hope.

“Lady Isobel is the victor!” came the booming voice of Angus, who had agreed to adjudicate the games.

She had been competing for almost a week, and she had beaten every single opponent with barely a flicker of doubt. Angus and the council were becoming increasingly aggravated.

Isobel approached Laird MacLaughlin, feigning timidity in her smile, bowing to him, as he too dipped his head in acknowledgment. The wind was up today, and she could feel her hair fluttering behind her.

When Geoffrey had ruled their lives with an iron fist, he had forced her to cut her hair short. Every inch it grew was a reminder of her newfound freedom, and she would not be forced to give that up—not by any man.

“Ye are a truly excellent shot.” Laird MacLaughlin gave her a rueful smile. He was a good deal older than her, with greying hair at the temples, but his face was kind and sincere. Unlike some of her prior opponents, he also seemed gracious in defeat. “I am bested, I admit it freely,” he concluded, bowing low once more.

“Ye are welcome to stay and enjoy the feast, M’Laird. Ye’re a worthy opponent, to be sure.”

He took her words for the dismissal they were and walked back toward his man-at-arms.

Isobel returned to her sister, holding out her forefinger to her nephew with a warm smile. He grasped it tightly and brought it straight to his wee, toothless mouth.

“Ye’re causin’ unrest, Izzy,” Emma whispered, a hint of amusement on her face, but there was worry in her eyes.

“I willnae be rushed by the council,” Isobel stated, a little sharper than she’d intended. “I shall take a husband who is worthy and nay other.”

“Oh, aye?” her sister hissed. “And what makes a man worthy to wed when all he can do is plant an arrow in a stag’s heart? Ye’ll have him out hunting from dawn until dusk?”

Isobel grinned with approval, and her sister chuckled, shaking her head.

“Ye’re an impossible woman, Isobel Knox.”

Emma’s eyes turned soft as they settled on something over Isobel’s shoulder. She turned to see Hunter approaching, his eyes on his wife and child, the heat in his gaze familiar and warm.

“Felled another one, then?” Hunter asked Isobel, his voice low so as not to let the visiting clan members hear. He gave Isobel a knowing look. “People are startin’ to question if anyone will ever be worthy of ye.”

Isobel was about to retort with her usual wit when a sudden hush fell over the gathered crowds. Hunter tensed up, always aware of the danger lurking nearby, and they all turned as a group of men entered the clearing.

Isobel frowned. No other clan was expected to arrive today, she had seen to the invitations personally.

Her heart stuttered in her chest as she saw three men approaching them. They were like no clansmen she had ever seen. Their faces were marked by years of toil. The way they walked, and the way they dressed marked them as outsiders immediately. But it was the figure at the head of the group that caught her attention.

The group’s leader was a huge man, his dark hair fluttering in the breeze, his eyes as green as the forest floor she rode through every day, wild and fierce as an eagle. He had a livid scar across his left eyebrow, running down to the top of his cheekbone. Everything about him seemed ragged and broken, as though he were a rock battered by the sea.

As a councilman approached her, a rumbling murmur rose from the crowd, a wave of fear rushing through them like the wind through a forest canopy.

Isobel took a sharp breath, realizing with dismay who the stranger must be—a single name being whispered through the air on all sides confirmed it. Her games had caught the attention of Alex Bain, the Pirate Laird. Precisely the one man she did not wish to stand on their lands.

How dare he invite himself to me private games between reputable clans?

She scowled. It was not his place to ignore common customs, no matter his station in life. Isobel felt rage course through her as she watched him approach, his face arrogant and proud.

Hunter took a step forward—as Clan Clyde’s acting laird, it was right that he should greet the newcomers and find out their business—yet Isobel could not stay silent. These were her games to control. No one was going to disrupt them, no matter who they were.

She stepped forward, blocking his path. Hunter looked down at her with a stern expression, but she fixed him with a stubborn glare that brooked no argument. He stepped back, giving his wife a tired glance, as Isobel went to greet their uninvited guests.

She walked swiftly forward, bow in hand, feeling her hair fluttering in the wind coming off the hills. She reached the middle of the archery range and stood on a small tussock, her hand on her hip, looking over at the newcomers with as much disdain as she could muster.

“This is a private game,” she shouted over the hum of the assembled crowd, “ye werenae invited.”

Alex Bain stood in the center of the unfamiliar gathering, the tension and dislike in the air so thick that he could almost taste them. He had never had a plainer reminder of where he did not belong. He felt Gavin, his man-at-arms, stiffen beside him. They were not welcome here.

His eyes moved to the woman who had challenged them. In fact, he had not been able to drag his gaze away from her since he had entered the place. So, this was Isobel Knox, a lass willing to choose a husband with an arrow. He wondered why she had decided on that method—she was the bonniest wee thing he'd ever seen.

Behind her stood Laird MacRoss, recognizable only by the terrible scars across the right side of his face. His stance was rigid, poised to attack, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword, staring at Alex with venom in his eyes.

Alex felt anger boil in his gut at the assumptions that had been made about him and his men since they had arrived on land. No one knew them, and yet everyone believed they did. Their reputations as pirates preceded them wherever they went.

He looked back at the fierce female warrior who stood before him. Her blonde hair, shorter than the fashion for a woman of her station, fluttered behind her in the wind, her blue eyes pinned on him with quiet fury. They were the color of a fresh river stream, lively and bright. He found himself wondering how they might look in different lights. They were such a bonnie blue.

Alex remained where he was as his man-at-arms stepped forward, his gravelly voice

booming across the quiet hillside as he introduced Clan Rothach to those assembled before them. All the while, those eyes never left Alex's face—bird egg blue, that's what they were—brimming with contempt. She was a feisty lass, make no mistake.

Gavin's ringing voice finally died away, to be met with a leaden silence. He stepped back, giving Alex an uneasy look. Gavin had been strongly against coming to Clan Clyde, but Alex needed a bride, and he couldn't see an easier way of winning one than loosing an arrow.

"A pretty speech," the woman declared loudly. "But it doesnae change the fact that ye're nae welcome here. The lairds who play receive me invitation, nae others."

Alex was mesmerized by her, even as she looked him up and down with disgust written all over her face. She did not see him as any laird she wished to know, that was clear. Well, she was about to discover that Alex could match her discourtesy with ease.

He hooked his hands into his belt. "I hear ye're lookin' for a husband."

A loud gasp went up from the crowd around them. Every eye he could see widened with shock. The adjudicator of the games turned pale, his eyes darting to Laird MacRoss and back.

"What of it?" the feisty vixen asked mockingly. "Do ye want to join?"

Alex stepped toward her, cocking his head, keeping his gaze steady, his feet planted firmly on the soil beneath them.

"Aye." There were more scandalized exclamations from behind him. "Would ye deny me?"

He saw her eyes flash. Alex knew, as well as she did, that to deny a neighboring laird this request was dangerous. He did not know everything that had occurred between Clan Clyde and Clan MacRoss, but Isobel Knox was in no position to start a war.

She shifted her weight, her knuckles white around the handle of the bow in her hand. It was a fine piece. He would bet everything he owned that she had modified it herself. She clearly knew her craft.

The adjudicator moved to step forward, but Isobel signaled to him with a flick of her wrist, and he remained where he was, shooting Alex a glare of pure hatred.

There was no way for them to deny him without causing offense—it had been what Alex had counted on. After all, what self-respecting lady would marry a pirate laird? He grimaced at the nickname, hating that he was only known for his exploits at sea, rather than who he was and what he stood for.

“Well?” he prompted.

His tone was impertinent, but then so was she. Those eyes returned to his immediately. If they could have turned red from fiery rage, they would have.

“Of course,” she gritted out. “Let us see what skill ye have, M’Laird .”

She turned, her comely figure swaying as she made her way to the targets. He followed behind, Gavin at his heels, holding out his bow and quiver of arrows. He hung them both over his shoulder, feeling the bow bend across his chest as the arrows rattled in their quiver.

“I hear ye’re quite the archer,” he said softly, for her ears only, as she stepped up to her mark.

She glanced back at him, her eyes roaming over his chest just for a moment, before returning to his face. She lifted her chin defiantly.

“I’m the best archer in all the Highlands,” she replied, her lips curling into a knowing smile as she notched an arrow and looked back at the target.

Alex took the opportunity to run his eyes over her figure, watching her practiced stance as she raised her right arm, her eyes fixed on the target like a hawk tracking a vole.

The whole crowd was so silent that he could hear the bleat of sheep on a distant hillside. A long moment passed, and the lady took a deep breath, then loosed the arrow. It charged forward with superb aim and landed squarely in the bullseye. The crowd behind him cheered with great joy, and what sounded like a fair amount of relief.

Alex unfurled his arms from where he had crossed them over his chest and pulled the bow from his shoulders with practiced ease. She was good—perhaps, in time, she’d even be as good as him.

The lady turned, her expression neutral as she stepped back, allowing him to approach the mark. He had expected her to tease him or challenge him further, but now she seemed desperate for the game to be over.

He took up his position, the target low to the ground, seventy yards ahead. He could have hit it in his sleep. He stretched the bow back, feeling the trill of the feather fletchings against his forefinger as he drew it back to his ear. Calm washed through him as he saw the line, a perfect angle, felt the bow go taught, his elbow locked in place.

The arrow lurched forward with a sharp twang, and he watched it soar through the air

in a graceful arc. Then, just as he had planned it, the tip slammed directly into the base of the lady's arrow, shredding it right through the middle, splitting it into several pieces.

As he watched her arrow fall to the floor, and his own replace it in the center of the target, he was suddenly reminded that the game had ended, and he would have a wife for his prize.

Isobel stared in horror at the shredded remains of her arrow. It was splintered into bits, lying on the short tufts of heather below the target. She tried to school her expression in order to mask her shock, her mind numb as to the implications of what she had allowed to happen.

Never in a thousand years did she believe a pirate could best her in archery.

Alex Bain turned around, his massive bulk even more imposing as he stood in the path of the sun, his enormous shadow falling over her and the crowd behind. Everything was utterly silent around her, fear and disbelief hanging heavy in the air.

Isobel glanced at Angus, who looked just as shaken as she felt.

What have I done?

"Do we have a deal?" the deep voice rang out into the stillness of the castle grounds, shattering her future with just five words.

Isobel felt panic rise in her chest as she looked up into Alex's glowering expression. His mouth was set in a hard line. She glanced at his man-at-arms, who stood behind him in a way that suggested there would be trouble if she refused.

This was not over, however. Isobel Knox would not be trampled on by an impostor

who deserved nothing from her people. She plastered on a smile and handed her bow to Emma, who was standing mutely beside her, seemingly paralyzed with shock.

“Would ye walk with me, M’Laird?” she asked pleasantly.

She received a single nod in response, and then she turned on her heel and walked away from the crowd, moving around the bend of the hill, wanting to get the brute away from the many anxious ears of her people.

As she slowly rounded the side of the tent and stepped over the guide pegs, she saw Laird MacLaughlin and his men seated inside, doing just as she had suggested and enjoying the feast that was laid out for them.

Her gaze locked with Laird MacLaughlin’s, which then landed on the towering menace behind her. She looked hurriedly away. Perhaps she had been unwise to turn down so many suitable prospects, given what she was now left with.

She walked up the rise of the hill behind the tournament tents, looking down at her favorite view of the valleys of Clyde lands. The sun was teasing her, streaming through the clouds and making the world look impossibly beautiful—just as everything she loved fell apart around her.

She waited, hearing the brute’s heavy footfalls approaching as he came to stand beside her. She couldn’t allow her clan to fall into the hands of this man. She wouldn’t.

“Ye’re a fine archer,” she began begrudgingly, hoping flattery might end his desire for her to fulfill their deal.

“Oh, aye? Better than ye, I’d wager.”

His voice had a rough edge to it, a hint of his time at sea. There was a looping twist to his accent that she imagined he tried to disguise whenever he could.

She had to admit he was a handsome man, standing with one leg cocked to balance himself at the brow of the hill. His kilt fluttered in the wind, his huge shoulders framing his long, dark hair. He had sharp features, and his skin was bronzed by his time at sea.

“Perhaps we can come to an agreement,” she said. “Ye are newly arrived. There is much that Clan Clyde can offer ye.”

His eyes twinkled as he looked down at her. “Like me new bride?”

She clenched her fists at her sides as the humiliation of her situation settled within her.

For the first time, she realized how dangerous this could be for her people. She decided to dispense with the pleasantries. He was a barbarian, after all. Perhaps he would respect a more direct approach.

“Ye ken I wouldnae marry ye if ye were the last man alive.”

He turned fully toward her then, looking at her with a quizzical stare that she could not quite decipher.

“Yet I won yer game. I’m owed a prize,” he countered smoothly.

“Ye’re a rogue and a vagrant, only just returned to claim lands ye didnae want, after ye likely lost yer ill-gotten fortune at sea. I willnae have a pirate leadin’ me people.”

“Oh, aye, then who will ye have? Ye are the one who offered this wager, sellin’ yer

hand for a sharp shot?—”

“Ye werenae invited to attend!” she spat.

“Yet ye let me play, did ye nae?”

Her retort died on her lips, and she had to force herself not to stomp her foot in frustration. He was right. Why had she not made up some excuse?

“Ye left me nay choice?—”

“Ye left yerself nay choice. This is what comes of believin’ ye’re better than ye are.”

She felt her cheeks flame at the insult. She had never been so tempted to strike a man in her life.

“Ye’ve seen me once loose an arrow, and now ye believe ye ken me talents best, dae ye?”

“Ye’re a good shot,” he conceded. “But yer stance is too wide, and yer shoulders should be lower when ye release.”

She scoffed. “Me stance is just fine when I’m nae firin’ a shot that might end me life.”

He frowned at her, and she inwardly cursed her loose tongue. There was something about this man that brought out the worst of her temper. If Nora were here, she would have chastised her to no end for losing her composure.

“End yer life?” His voice was deeper now, and for a moment there was such understanding in his eyes that it stole her breath. “I wouldnae say marriage is that,

lass. There can be great pleasure from takin' a wife, I can assure ye of that."

His hand came up to brush gently against her cheek, and she felt a shiver run through her. With a gasp, she knocked his hand away and took a step back.

As she did so, the softness evaporated from his face, and his expression turned hard as she saw a ruthless pirate standing before her once more, proud and resolute.

"I'll ask ye again, do we have a deal or nae?"

Isobel considered her options. She knew they were limited, but there must be a way to delay things if she were clever about it. Perhaps she could agree to it now and find a way to renege on the deal in the future.

There was little chance the council would agree to the humiliation of having Alex Bain for a laird. She could make her promises now and ensure that she did not break them by forcing him to leave of his own accord.

He would see that taking her as his wife would only cause them both pain and suffering. She was a woman of her word, but her word could be bent, if not broken.

She looked out at the lands she loved so much, the rippling hills, the boggy glens, and the wide, bright blue sky. She turned back to him, feeling the stubborn set of her jaw, the determination coursing through her blood as she met his eyes.

Alex Bain was going to rue the day he ever heard the name Isobel Knox.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 5:30 pm

“ A ll right,” Isobel said, sounding more confident than she felt. “I’ll marry ye, but I have some conditions before we wed.”

Alex’s eyes were almost amused as he gazed down at her, and she looked away, infuriated that he appeared to see this marriage as a game.

“Och, aye?” he responded. “Let’s hear them, then. I may have some of me own, but ladies first.”

Isobel raised her chin, reminding herself that she spoke not only for herself but for her people. If she was saddled with this man as a laird, she would ensure that he worked for them, not against them.

“Ye’ll move to me castle,” she stated firmly, watching as his eyes flicked sideways, as though to look behind him at the stone walls just visible on the horizon. “Me clan needs a laird that resides on our lands—they have been without counsel and leadership for too long.”

She sniffed and squared her shoulders, trying to look as imposing as possible. It was difficult when she was looking up at him, squinting into the sun. She wished she was tall, like Nora.

“Nay.” He said the word so quickly that it startled her. He had barely given the condition any thought at all.

“What do ye mean ‘nay’?”

“I mean”—he turned to look at the castle as he spoke—“that Clan Rothach needs a laird close by, just as much as Clan Clyde. I cannae live here, it’s too far to the east, and ye dinnae ken what me people have been through these last months.” He turned back to her. “It’s a fine castle, but it willnae be our home.”

She ground her teeth, her hands clenching into fists. “Very well then, if ye willnae agree to those terms, do ye have an alternative? Or shall we live in the forests at our borders, and counsel our people from the treetops?”

His lips twitched as he shifted his massive bulk down the hill. As he did so, his body blocked the sun, and she no longer had to squint to look at him—almost as though he had moved for that very purpose.

“There is a place,” he said quietly, his expression more wistful than she had seen it yet. “It was me maither’s castle, but it was never her home. When she married me faither, her parents lived there for a time, but since their deaths, it has been empty.” He frowned, staring off into the distant hills. “It has been taken by the land,” he confessed, “but it is on the border between our clans.”

“Ye want us to live in a ruin?” she asked scathingly.

His eyes were piercing as he looked back at her. “I want us to live in the best place for our people. I’ve been at sea me whole life, I dinnae need four walls to make a home. I go where I’m needed, and that castle would do its duty.”

Isobel begrudgingly considered it. Despite her desire to remain in Clan Clyde, she knew that he was right. To force him to live in her lands would merely transfer the challenges Clan Clyde had faced from one to the other.

“It’s an hour’s ride to Clan Clyde and Clan Rothach,” Alex continued, clearly noting that she could be persuaded. “We can rebuild. The keep is still intact, as is much of the central structure. I willnae leave ye to sleep beneath the stars, even if ye might

enjoy it.”

She scoffed, irritated that he seemed to have guessed so much about her in such a short time in her company. Despite her reluctance to bend to his will, she could see no reason to disagree.

“Very well. Yer maither’s castle it will be.”

As she said the words, she prayed that she would be able to escape the proposed marriage before she had to settle there. It sounded like a miserable place.

“And what is the name of our new home?” she asked.

The question seemed to confuse him, and he frowned down at her, looking bewildered. “Rothach Castle. What else?”

“Roth clyde Castle? That will do very well, then,” she said, feeling great joy at being able to rile him up.

Surely, he would protest her insistence on renaming his mother’s castle. No laird would agree to remove his clan’s title from his seat.

To her dismay, however, a smile spread across his face. Isobel found herself mesmerized by it for a moment. His eyes were kinder, dancing with light, his teeth flashing in the sunshine. She wondered what opportunity this man might have had for mirth before.

“Very well, lass. Rothclyde Castle it is. I can hardly be wedded to a name when I didnae carry it for the first twenty years of me life.” He seemed to enjoy the notion greatly. “Any other conditions?” he asked.

Isobel rallied from her surprise swiftly, going over the past weeks and months she

had spent as an intermediary between her people and Clan MacRoss. Every decision she had made had been challenged and picked apart, her choice and agency stripped from her at every turn.

She was tired of men dictating what she could and could not do. She may have been forced to take a husband, but she would not let a man command her fate ever again.

“Under nay circumstances will ye tell me what to do,” she declared, her anger seeping into her tone, unbidden.

Alex raised one sardonic eyebrow. “Nae even if ye like it?”

“Ye can have nay fear of that,” she retorted, injecting as much venom into her voice as she could muster.

“So ye say, lass. So ye say,” he replied dismissively. “Anythin’ else? The list is gettin’ longer than our shadows, and I’ll need to get back to me people before the sun sets.”

She scowled at him. “If ye ever touch me again, without me permission, I will chop off yer hand,” she concluded, her fingers automatically moving to the dirk concealed beneath the many layers of her skirts.

Alex looked down at her arm to follow the movement of her hand. She dearly desired to slap the smug expression off his face. He crossed his huge arms over his chest and then scratched his stubbled jaw.

“Very well, but I have one condition meself,” he stated.

“Och, aye? And what is that?” she asked, a note of apprehension creeping into her voice.

“Ye must give me an heir.”

Isobel felt her stomach turn over. The very idea of bearing a child had rarely occupied her thoughts.

The notion brought into stark relief the reality of her situation—she was going to have a husband. A husband who would demand a bairn to continue his family name.

“Given yer third condition,” Alex mused, “I’ll only lay a finger on that bonnie skin if ye ask me first. In fact, perhaps I’ll wait for ye to beg me before I’ll break that particular rule.”

His eyes held a dark promise that spoke to something deep within her. She suppressed a shudder.

“If ye dinnae give me a bairn,” he continued, “the deal is off, and ye and yer clan will have to fight me for the offense of nae giving me the prize I’m owed.”

Isobel balked at the very idea of agreeing to such a condition, so cold and calculating were his terms. But this was a man who had lived a violent life at sea, he would have no qualms in laying waste to her people in order to claim their lands and resources if she defied him.

She looked back at the tournament tents behind her, where she saw Emma standing at a distance, watching them intently.

Emma had experienced her own trials with marriage—she had made hard choices in order to protect her sisters. Isobel was one of the main reasons they had all been forced to abandon their home and fall to the mercy of Clan MacRoss in the first place. It had worked out for the best in the end, but her reckless and hasty choices could just as easily have ended in disaster.

She looked back at Alex, who was watching her, waiting for her reply. The consequences of her impulsive nature stood before her clear as day. She had invited danger into her life and the lives of her people. She desperately wished to undo it, but she could not see any other way.

“Very well,” she conceded finally, swallowing past the bile that rose in her throat. “I agree to yer terms.”

He nodded. She had expected him to crow with triumph at managing to secure her agreement, but his face was stoic and grave.

“I have one final condition,” he added, finally.

“And ye said me list was long,” she muttered.

“We will relocate the pirates to the lands owned by yer clan. Rothach havenae accepted them. They are suspicious of their pasts, and me crew dinnae feel they can fully settle there. In Clan Clyde, they arenae so associated with me—they could have a better chance of making a life.”

“That cannae surprise ye,” Isobel stated derisively. “How can ye blame the folk of Rothach for presuming the dark truth of their nature?”

She felt ice course through her veins as Alex’s expression turned to stone. For the first time, she saw the beast lurking in the darkness there, and she was afraid. Not just for herself but for anyone who had ever crossed him. Her hope that she would be able to go back on her word was dwindling by the second.

“Och, aye?” His voice was carefully level. “And just what do ye mean by that?”

She collected herself quickly. “I... I meant nay offense. Ye cannae have imagined comin’ here, following a life of pillagin’ at sea, that ye’d be welcomed with open

arms?”

His expression hadn't softened a fraction. If anything, he looked more furious than before.

“Do ye ken what I did when I first arrived on these shores, Isobel Knox?”

She felt something warm spread through the deepest part of her as he said her name.

“I stopped a war,” he continued. “I ensured that me people were protected from the feuds and battles that me faither had chosen to bring upon our lands.” He scoffed, looking out at the rolling hills beyond. “And were me people grateful? Nay. They still see me as nothin’ but a ‘Pirate Laird’ .” He spat out the words in disgust.

“I could commit me soul to the earth, lay me body at their feet, and it would never be enough for them to forget who I was.” His voice became so low that she had to strain to hear him. “A man I was never meant to be.”

Isobel watched his eyes become lost in the past. She realized then how much she had assumed about his life, and how, in truth, she knew as little about him as he knew about her.

She felt guilty at the assumptions she had made, a part of her wishing to soothe him, although she did not understand where the compulsion came from.

“Ye dinnae ken that,” she said softly as he looked back at her. “Ye havenae been here long. Our people dinnae like what they dinnae understand. Give them time. There will come a day where they forget who ye were. They cannae fear ye forever just because of yer past, surely!”

His expression darkened. “Aye... among other things.”

Isobel felt herself recoil at the sinister nature of those words, but she could hear the hubbub of many voices from the tournament behind her and knew that they had dwelled here alone for too long. She had made her decision, now it was time to face the consequences.

“I will allow ye to relocate the pirates to our lands,” she conceded. “Ye are right, they may have a warmer welcome amongst me people—as long as ye can guarantee their safety.”

She could not quite keep the grimace from her face, and Alex didn’t miss it.

“Ye permit them entry, but ye would rather the name of any pirate didnae mix with honorable folk. Isnae that right, lass?”

The thinly veiled anger behind his words thrummed in the air between them.

Isobel jutted her chin, ignoring his ire and barreling onward. “Do ye fear retaliation? Will Rothach rise up against ye? If that is the case, I need to ken it now. I dinnae want Clan Clyde caught in yer internal quarrels.”

Alex shook his head. “Dinnae worry. I willnae let anyone hurt yer people or injure ye. Ye have me word on that.”

Almost on instinct, his hand went to his sword. She watched it in fascination, imagining what it would be like to be this man’s enemy.

And what would it be like if I were his ally?

“I can take care of meself,” she said forcefully, shaking the thought from her head.

“Aye. I believe that ye can, lass,” he replied sagely. “But just because ye can, doesnae mean ye should.”

And with that, he turned away from her, looking back at the crowds that were starting to gather, craning their necks to try and see what they might be discussing.

He walked back toward his man-at-arms, leaving Isobel standing on a hill she could no longer call her home, watching a stranger walk away with her freedom.

As he was about to round a corner, he stopped, looking back at her with a smirk on his handsome face. “I trust ye to follow through with our arrangement, of course. But just to be sure, we’re getting married one week from today.”