



Heart of the Highlands: The Rose (Protectors of the Crown #6)

Author: *April Holthaus*

Category: Historical

Description: The Saga continues

Abigail Abby Sinclair grapples with the burden of her seers curse. Though her visions are both a gift and a curse, one ominous truth looms over her fate she must never fall in love, for it will lead to her ultimate death. Destiny, however, has other plans when a mere glance into the eyes of a mysterious man changes everything.

Thrust into the role of laird following his grandfathers death, Aiden McKeirnan faces an ultimatum marry and produce an heir or risk losing his clans legacy. As time nears his deadline, Aiden is no sooner at finding a wife than he is finding the woman from his dream who had stolen his heart.

With so many missed connections and a twist you wont see coming, following Abby and Aidens story of love and sacrifice.

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April 1551, Scottish Highlands

She smelled it before even seeing it, the rows of lavender fields blooming near the market outside Inverness. The last of the snow had just melted, and this was the first week the weather had warmed considerably enough to enjoy. Abigail Sinclair had traveled with her sister, Alys, to purchase textiles for new dresses to be fashioned and embroidered. The birth of her sister's fourth child left Alys unable to wear many of her older gowns, and she had to make do with her limited wardrobe until she slimmed down and her figure returned.

The marketplace, situated in the expansive courtyard just outside the castle walls, bustled with activity as the afternoon sun cast a warm glow over the vibrant scene. The air was filled with the enticing aromas of freshly baked bread, sizzling meats, and fragrant herbs. Merchants called out to potential buyers, their voices competing to attract attention.

Nearby, the clanging of metal on metal resonated from a blacksmith's stall. The blacksmith, muscles bulging as he worked the bellows, expertly forged a new sword. Sparks flew, illuminating his focused expression.

Abby and Alys continued the path toward a cluster of tailors showcasing their finely woven fabrics and garments. The seamstress, a middle-aged woman who looked tired beyond her years, deftly threaded a needle, her nimble fingers fashioning intricate embroidery on a luxurious purple silk gown, fit for royalty.

Abby watched with admiration as her sister, Alys, fanned through a stack of vibrant-colored fabric. The sun's light played upon the rich hues, illuminating the array of

options available. Alys's fingers gently brushed against the soft textures, weighing the choices before her. Abby did not need as much time perusing as Alys did to pick out her favorite color, for she always chose teal in particular—not too green, not too blue, but a color that matched the sea and was flattering with her orange spiced-colored hair.

While waiting, Abby couldn't resist the allure of the bustling market. She spun around, taking in the sights and sounds that surrounded her. It was the first time she'd been out since the long winter. The energy of the marketplace enveloped her, mingling with the enticing fragrances of spices and freshly baked goods that filled the air. She breathed in deep and deliberately.

It had been months since she'd left the grounds of Sinclair Hall, and she was eager to explore and engage in conversation with other young women her age. Alys kept Abby on such a short rope she hadn't even made a new friend in a year. But this year, Abby swore it would be different. This summer, she'd turn eighteen, a prime age for young women to secure themselves a husband and learn how to run a household. But that was not the life Abby would have, although it was all she had wanted for herself for the past three years as she watched friends, cousins, and other neighboring ladies progress forward with their lives. Some even welcomed children.

She was grateful for her sister Alys and her brother-in-law Leland, who had taken her in and raised her, but she was not a child anymore—something Alys refused to see.

Abby's gaze wandered to the grand structure that loomed above the village below—the majestic Inverness Castle. Its gray stone facade, weathered by centuries of history, stood firm against the passage of time. Two round turrets adorned the castle's corners, their conical roofs pointing skyward like ancient sentinels. The sun cast gentle shadows on the rough surface of the stone walls, revealing the castle's scars and stories.

High on the hill, the castle's keep stood tall and proud, overseeing the surrounding landscape and the River Ness. Abby marveled at the thought of the stories that echoed within those ancient walls—the triumphs and tragedies, the rulers and rebels, all contributing to the castle's rich tapestry of lore.

Lost in her musings, Abby turned her attention back to Alys, who had made her choice—a deep indigo fabric that shimmered like the night sky. The sisters exchanged smiles; their excitement mirrored in their eyes. With their newfound treasures in hand, they continued their exploration of the castle market.

Pass the stalls and across the road where green fields had burst into brilliant colors as spring flowers began to bloom, Abby's attention was stolen by a pair of dark, masculine eyes that had locked onto hers. A spark of recognition coursed through her, nearly knocking her off her feet. She was inexplicably drawn toward him. She knew him, and the way his gaze matched hers, she was sure he also knew her. Though it was as impossible as it may have seemed, he was the man haunting her visions as of late. Nightly, actually, for more than a month. And now, there he was in the flesh. She was as certain of it as she was of her own reflection.

It was just a fleeting look, a mere moment, yet its impact lingered within her as if time had momentarily suspended around them. The intensity of his gaze penetrated her, stirring emotions she had never known. It was as if this stranger had seen through the layers of her existence, unraveling the depths of her soul with a single glance. She had not understood the visions she had. They were often alone in a dark, damp room that could only be described as a cave. And all she had remembered was seeing his face, the shimmering orange glow of a fire reflecting on his skin as they lay side by side in silence.

She knew the exact color of his eyes, a dark, stormy blue, the curve of his jawline, and even the feel of his arms around her. She even knew his voice. The only thing she didn't know about him was who he was or how a brief exchange of glances could

elicit such a profound response within her.

Linked arm and arm with her sister, Alys, who walked at an exceptionally fast pace, pulled Abby down the road, causing her to lose him in the crowd. With each step further away from him, an unexplainable ache tugged at Abby's heart. Her curiosity, fueled by an inexplicable attraction, became an invisible thread that tugged at her, urging her to seek him out amidst the crowd. Unable to resist the yearning that had taken hold of her, Abby disentangled herself from her sister's arm.

“Abby, where are ye going?”

Abby strained to hear Alys's voice over the loud commotion in the market as she navigated through the bustling crowd with determination to find him. Her senses were heightened, attuned to any sign or glimpse of him, as she ignored her sister's call. Her eyes scanned faces, hoping to catch a familiar glimpse, but to her dismay, he was gone. She paused long enough for Alys to catch up to her.

“Abby, what are ye doing? We must go,” Alys insisted, gently touching Abby's arm.

“Do ye see him?” she asked, continuing to scan the crowd.

“See who?”

“The man who was standing across the field.”

Alys scanned the crowd.

“I dinna see anyone. Now make haste,” Alys said, motioning her to follow.

“But ye dinna understand. I must find him.”

“Find who?”

Abby turned away from the question, a sense of frustration building within her. Each passing minute felt like wasted time, slipping through her fingers like sand. She scanned the area with growing urgency, her heart racing as she searched every corner, hoping to catch a glimpse of him. But after searching for what felt like an eternity—half an hour, to be exact—he was still nowhere in sight, leaving her increasingly anxious.

“Abby, whoever ye think ye saw is now gone. ‘Tis time to go home.”

Abby released the breath she’d been holding as she gave up the pursuit and followed her sister to the stables. They returned to the horses in silence, the sound of footsteps echoing her unspoken disappointment. She had visions of him for a reason and needed to know why. She made a resolute vow that she would find him again.

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Six months later...

Mid-October

Abby Sinclair's eyes narrowed and focused intensely into the bushes for any sign of movement. Missing her target once already, she was determined not to miss again. She notched another arrow in place. With the nock tightly pinched between her fingers, she drew back the bowstring toward her chin. She took a sharp breath and held it as she released her grip.

The arrow soared through the air and disappeared into the bushes with a thud. Silence followed. She crept forward, not wanting to frighten the creature in case she missed it again. She spent the entire summer honing her skills and had yet to hit her target. She brushed back the thorny stems, delighted to uncover that her arrow had pierced through the heart of a hare. She reached down into the small shrub, wrapping her tiny hand and bony fingers around the rabbit's ears, and lifted it out of the bush. It was meaty, plump in size, and weighed at least five pounds.

"Yer the bugger who's been stealing our vegetables in the garden, aren't ye, my wee fatty friend? Now, dinna ye go looking at me like that. 'Tis only fair that we provided ye a good meal, and ye do us the same courtesy," she said in a pensive tone as she grabbed the rabbit by its hind legs to carry it home.

She walked along the edge of the sea cliffs as she returned to Sinclair Hall. The smell of brine in the air left the taste of salt on her lips. The sea was calm. She could hear the waves lapping gently against the shore. She welcomed the sun's warmth on her skin and the gentle caress of the sea breeze, feeling content for the first time in days.

Winter was expected to arrive early this year, leaving only a few weeks of warm weather before the blistering snow covered the land.

In the distance, the crow-stepped gables of the tower of Sinclair Hall came into view. Perched on the ledge of the ornate oriel window, which offered a spectacular view across Sinclair land, a large seabird belted out an ear-piercing call. The flock responded and flew overhead before diving into the water below. Of all creatures, Abby felt most like a seabird. Unlike morning birds that chirped outside her window to greet the day with a beautiful melody, seabirds only communicated with loud, obnoxious squawking with no rhythm or pattern. It seemed to be the only species of bird that God had forgotten to have given a song.

Abby crossed the wooden bridge that led into the courtyard. Within the walls of the bailey, soldiers and servants busied themselves with their duties. The clang of swords, the blacksmith shouting orders to his apprentice, and womenfolk corralling rowdy children resonated around her. The smell of roasted meat and freshly baked bread wafted through the air, adding to the atmosphere of her proud and studious clan.

Clan Sinclair had changed exponentially over the past ten years since the civil war ended between the Highland clans under the reign of James V of Scotland. With his daughter as Queen, Scotland was in a time of peace. After decades of feuds and battles, England agreed to end hostilities between their countries and withdrew their forces from Scotland. Almost on the verge of collapse, this action allowed her clan to thrive again. But there were clans in the north that were still a danger and a threat that could not be controlled or contained.

With the rabbit still in hand, Abby climbed the steps of the keep and entered. She went directly to the kitchen and plopped the hare onto the counter before she took a seat on the stool with a confident grin. The housemaid's face lit up when Abby entered the room to see the gift she had brought in. Abby felt a swell of pride at her

accomplishment.

“My lady, what in heaven are ye doing out this early fetching rabbits? We have men for this sort of thing,” Heloise, a housemaid nearing her fifties, reminded her, though she did not need reminding. “It's dangerous work for ye, milady,” Heloise admonished, her concern for her mistress evident in her tone.

It had already been suggested to her that she leave the hunting to the men while she devotes herself to more suitable tasks for a young lady, like embroidery, reading, and social etiquette. Not one to follow convention, Abby was not a typical young woman.

“I need no’ be coddled, Heloise. I am perfectly capable of handling my own. And might I add that this rabbit would go verra nicely wit’ yer famous rabbit stew that I enjoy so much eating.” Heloise gazed at her under her lashes. “Please do no’ tell Alys,” Abby added.

“I am afraid, Miss, she already knows. Ye skipped breakfast again. Yer sister was no’ verra happy when ye did no’ join her.”

“She’s returned?”

“Aye. Just this morning.”

Abby expected a reprimand from her sister the moment she arrived. Heloise’s warning, though appreciated, came a little too late as heavy footfalls echoed in the hall. As if a bird had whistled in her ear to tell her that Abby had returned, her sister Alys marched into the kitchen. Her face was as red as her hair. Abby’s shoulder sank as she slumped on the stool. She steeled herself for the worst but was prepared to accept what was to come and braced herself for the consequences.

“Abigail Sinclair, what have I told ye about leaving these grounds unescorted? Ye

know the dangers of roaming these woods alone, so why do ye persist in doing so?"

Alys's anger filled the room with palpable intensity.

"Ye cannae keep me locked in a tower," she argued. "If Leland was here..."

"Well, he's no' here. No' yet, at least. He's gone to visit his brother Ian and Keira and he will no' be back for another few days."

"Alys, I am no' a little girl anymore."

"Aye, ye are. Ye know nothing of the dangers that are out there. If someone were to..."

"Stop! Ye need to stop protecting me. I am already eighteen years of age. Ever since Ma died and Keira got married, ye've sacrificed to raise me and I know I haven't made it easy on ye. But I've made a decision, and I think it's time for me to move on."

"What do ye mean... move on ? This is yer home."

"Is it that hard to believe that I may want to find a husband for myself? If I leave it up to ye, I'll end up a spinster or a nun like Ava or Isla," she replied in a deadpan tone, unable to shake off the fear of a meaningless life. Abby felt her stomach churn in dread as Alys's lips twisted and the wrinkles on her forehead deepened.

"I knew it! This is about that lad ye saw at the market again, isn't it?"

"So, what if it was?"

It had been nearly six months since that fateful day at the market, but it was

memorable enough to occupy her mind and haunt her dreams. This was not a fleeting crush or youthful enthusiasm. This was a permanent stamp on her heart. The only dilemma was she hadn't a clue who he was. She didn't know his name or where to find him, but she knew their paths would cross again someday.

She had set out to find him with a determined mindset and full of hope. She looked for him in every place she had gone. And each day, she felt increasingly closer. Her visions intensified. She could feel his presence as if it lingered in the air. It was as if they had been in the same room, but she had only missed him by moments like two passing ships in the night. But her search ended swiftly when Alys demanded that she not leave the castle grounds.

"Abby, I know I have been hard on ye, but it's only because I'm trying to keep ye safe."

"Safe from what? Life?"

"Abby, ye know what ye saw in yer visions. What kind of mon will marry ye if ye cannae bear him children?"

"My visions could be wrong. They've been wrong before."

Alys grabbed Abby by the hands and held them tight in hers.

"And what if they're not? Ye are a seer, Abby. It's an unfair curse to bear, but ye know what will happen if ye become heavy wit' child. I will no' lose ye the way we lost our mum. Now, I will no' hear another word of this again."

Born a seer, Abby had seen a great many things, both blessings and devastation alike. Despite the challenges and risks, Abby never shied away from living her life to the fullest. She believed her curse was a gift, even if she didn't always understand it, and

had oftentimes misinterpreted what her visions had shown. In the end, she did everything she could to make sense of whatever outcome she was given, no matter how grim or miraculous.

Abby was only four when she'd seen her first vision. At first, it was hard to distinguish whether her visions were a dream or a memory. Four, after all, is an impressionable age. From what she'd been told, her mother, Catherine, had passed away within a few short moments after giving birth to her. She heard a baby's cry in her vision, followed by a woman's desperate plea and then nothing—total blackness.

The voice was distant and faint, yet it echoed in her head like the ripples of the ocean. At first, Abby thought her vision had conjured up the past, bringing her to the very first moments of life, but the voice was all too familiar. She knew the woman she heard was not the foreign sound of her dead mother but of her own disembodied voice. It brought forth confirmation and horror. How could anyone truly live when they knew how they were going to die? As for Abby, she was to share her mother's fate, so she had made a vow to never marry, never fall in love, and never bear a child. But this lad in the market was different. She could not rid him of her thoughts. She knew in some unexplainable way they were meant to be together. And now that she was older, she realized that to live without love is not living at all. Many great men and women died for that very thing. She wanted to be loved and would embrace it, Lord willing.

Abby brushed past Alys and ran from the kitchen, escaping to her chamber. As she climbed the steps, she could hear the sound of her sister calling her name drifting up from the kitchen. It grated on her nerves, but she tried her best to ignore it, causing her to quicken her pace, eager to escape the sound of her sister's wretched voice. Her eyes were wet with tears as she climbed the steps two at a time until she reached the second floor where her room was located, down at the end of the hall. As she stepped inside, she slammed the door with such force the painted portrait of her mother rattled on the wall. Without warning, the picture fell.

She reached out her hand to catch it, but gravity was faster. The frame shattered upon hitting the hard wooden floor. Tears welled in her eyes once again, blurring the broken pieces. She stared at the door with ragged breaths as her emotions boiled over. She waited, expecting Alys to burst into the room any moment now and scold her for disrespecting her wishes, but as the seconds passed, all remained silent. Abby knelt and carefully picked up the pieces, trying to salvage whatever she could. She ran her fingers along the broken edges, her heart aching with every jagged piece she touched.

A part of her was angry that she had ever been born. No one else in her family shared this curse. Often, she wondered if her mother knew what was to transpire after she had given birth to her. For years, Abby carried the guilt and blame for killing her mother, but what if she knew? What if Catherine had known the outcome but had freely given up her life for her child? Abby wondered if she could ever be strong enough or brave enough to do the same, but what if that was her destiny?

Abby gathered up the broken pieces and placed them on her dresser. The canvas had a small tear, but there was a chance it could be mended. As for the frame, it would have to be replaced. Satisfied she'd be left alone to her thoughts, she fell flat onto the bed, her arms stretched out wide. She could no longer count the number of times she'd counted the knots on the ceiling. There were seventy-four to be precise, and she wished on each of them like stars.

As she silently wished for a hopeful future, she allowed her thoughts to drift. She felt a spark of courage and optimism; with that, she knew that no matter what happened, she'd find the strength to get through it just as her sisters had with their trials and tribulations. At least that's what she told herself. The Bible taught her to live for today and not for tomorrow, and that is all she could do.

A quiet tap rattled the door, which had interrupted her thoughts. She sprang from her bed. Quickly, she snatched the cloak that was resting on the back of the chair in front of the hearth and tossed it up onto the dresser to cover the broken picture frame. She

braced herself, waiting for her sister to enter. Alys would have killed her to find their mother's picture torn. She tensed as the door opened, but as Heloise stepped inside, relief followed. As her tense shoulders began to settle, she took a reassuring breath.

"My lady, is everything all right? I've been knocking. Why did ye no' answer?"

"I'm sorry. I dinna hear ye."

Heloise looked at her suspiciously, her lips pursed, and her eyes narrowed. After being Abby's nursemaid her entire life and having known all the trouble and mischief she has gotten into over the years, their close relationship often compelled Heloise to turn a blind eye. Abby glanced away, trying to keep Heloise from looking at the pile on her dresser. Slowly shaking her head, Heloise's disapproval was palpable in the silence. She was clearly not fooled by Abby's deception but did not press the issue further.

"Yer sister wanted me to remind ye that you are to accompany her to West Mey first thing in the morning. The Earl and Countess have acquired some land there and are considering building a second home. They are to meet with the landowner."

"I have no' forgotten."

That was another lie. She had forgotten about traveling north and was unsure why her sister was so insistent she came with her. It was probably another one of Alys's devious ways to keep an eye on her.

"Well, milady, it's time to wash up for supper, and I'd suggest to no' be late this time."

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There is nothing more heartbreaking than losing a loved one, especially when that loved one is a man people so dearly admire, a hero.

But Thomas Rose was not everyone's hero.

As the sun began to rise over the Highland hills, it brought with it a day of mourning. A somber melody played, draining the hearts and souls of each clan member. Dark clouds rolled across the Highland skies, but even they refused to cry. As the rain held out, folks gathered in the cemetery to say their final, everlasting goodbyes to their beloved laird as a final scoopful of dirt was tossed into the burial ground.

Aiden, the new Laird of Clan Rose, turned, unable to linger any longer. Deep inside, his emotions were reserved for his grandfather. He was not quite sure how he felt other than a void he could not explain.

He returned to the keep tired from the day's ceremony after sending the auld laird to his final resting place. He rubbed his heavy eyes and returned to his solar. Tomorrow, he expected would hold another eventful day as his first full day as acting laird. As for today, there would be no rest or time to reflect. There was still much to be done.

As he stepped into the solar, a wave of nostalgia washed over him. The room remained untouched, a time capsule from a decade past, each detail echoing his childhood. Sunlight filtered through the tall, arched windows, casting golden patterns on the richly woven tapestries that adorned the stone walls. The scent of aged wood and the faint trace of old parchment hung in the air.

He settled into the well-worn chair that had belonged to his late grandfather, its

intricate carvings still telling stories of strength and wisdom. Surrounding him were his councilmen, their expressions of anticipation and concern as they awaited his thoughts. With a heavy heart, he unfolded the delicate pages of his grandfather's will; the ink faded, but the words resonant as he pondered the legacy that now lay before him, a mantle of responsibility that felt both daunting and profound.

He was astounded to see his name listed as the heir to Kilvarock Castle in Croy off the southwestern shore of Moray Firth. Aiden was never Thomas's favorite grandchild, and though Thomas had raised him for as long as he could remember, they were never close and could not have been any more different. His grandfather always seemed to favor his cousins over him, all of whom Aiden felt was more qualified to become laird of a clan.

There was never even a mention that Thomas was leaving anything to Aiden; in fact, for years, Aiden was convinced the old man hated him. He did not even share the same Rose name, as McKeirnan was his father. But Thomas Rose chose him specifically to take his place. It could be because he was the oldest grandchild or that he felt guilty losing his only daughter and was trying to do right by her by naming Aiden his heir, but it was certainly not because he had any admiration for Aiden.

Since the tender age of eleven, all Aiden wanted was his grandfather's approval, but nothing he'd ever done seemed to be enough. It had mattered not that he had received the favor of the Queen nor the high-ranking position in the Royal Army. Instead of praise for his accomplishments, Thomas ridiculed and rejected him. Thus, Aiden decided to take his own path and not seek validation from anyone else.

Aiden did not aspire to be a laird. He had no formal training and very little of politics. The battlefield was all he knew, but here he was, sitting in his grandfather's solar, packing the late laird's belongings and replacing them with his own. No matter the cost to his pride, he had a duty to his people and would do his best to fulfill it just as his mother would have.

“My laird, I wish to discuss wit’ ye our needs to prepare for the winter months,” Jorah, the youngest service council member, explained. “I have asked William for an inventory report on our livestock, but we still need inventory on our food and drink supply.”

“I will see to it that the task is delegated. How many live in the village?” Aiden asked.

“We have five hundred fighting men, my laird.”

“Five hundred? While other clans have secured themselves nearly five thousand! This was once a clan of two thousand men. Did my grandfather’s ill judgment of leadership leave our forces defenseless?”

“’Tis the coffers, my laird. There is little work for the villagers and no coin to fill the treasury. The land is poor and does no’ yield many crops. Not to mention the auld Laird McKiernan spent most funds on frivolous expenditures.”

“While our people starve?”

Jorah lowered his gaze. No one could answer Aiden’s questions. It was frustrating. He could feel the man’s shame as if a thick, suffocating fog had just filled the room. In his old age, his grandfather had lost touch with reality. His weak mind had lost memories as well as his sense and logic. Aiden felt a similar shame. He had been gone for so long. Had he known his clan was at the brink of devastation, perhaps he could have done something to turn it around.

In his final days, Thomas had left much unfinished. Luckily, his council had done as much as they could to prepare for Aiden’s arrival. But looking at the stack of ledgers piled on the desk since his grandfather had fallen ill, it seemed they had done very little.

He was fortunate, however, that his younger cousin, Trey, had journeyed with him, eagerly offering to share some of the burdens and responsibilities as he would be next in line if Aiden did not produce a son in the coming years. Aiden was much more reserved, whilst his cousin was bold and foolish, but he loved him like a brother and trusted him more than anyone.

Aiden had counted nearly a hundred unsigned documents and treaties. Each one needed his immediate attention. The meeting continued well into the late hours of the night. There was so much to discuss. It was going to be a long night.

“The last thing on the agenda, my laird, is a request from Harred, the blacksmith. He wishes us to approve his marriage to Mary Parsons, a maid in the kitchen.”

“I have no objection to the union,” Aiden replied. “Well, if there is nothing more to discuss, I shall take my leave,” he announced as he rose from his chair. The councilmen exchanged glances. Aiden sensed there was more, but hesitation followed. He cleared his throat and asked, “Is there something else you need to tell me?”

The councilmen's silence confirmed his suspicions.

“My laird, it is wit’ the advisory of this council to see to it that certain rules and regulations are followed. It is how we have sustained our very way of life for countless generations. Well, forgive me, but it seems in the haste of yer grandfather’s funeral preparations, we have no’ discussed wit’ ye the details of yer grandfather’s conditions,” Elder Montrose, a middle-aged man with premature, white-colored hair and a long beard, began to explain.

“Conditions? What are ye referring to?”

“A clause in your grandfather’s will. Before ye can officially inherit the title of

Lairdship, certain stipulations must be executed and followed through before ye are given full rights.”

“What sort of stipulations?” he asked, not at all surprised knowing his grandfather. The man would not make anything easy on him. Even in death, the man proved to be difficult.

“Well, there is the issue of yer marriage contract, my laird.”

“Marriage?”

“Yer grandfather had verra carefully chosen a list of suitable wives for ye to take if ye do no’ have one picked out already of yer own choosing.”

“An arranged marriage was no’ part of this agreement.”

“I am sorry, my laird, but rules are rules. To be Laird of Clan Rose, ye must wed and agree to bear a child within the first year. It is our tradition and our way of life.”

“And when is this marriage expected to occur.”

“Before the new year, my laird.”

“Three months? Are ye telling me that I am supposed to marry a complete stranger within three months? And if I refuse?”

“Then the lairdship will be passed down to yer cousin, hoping he, himself will have a bride.” Aiden turned to Trey, whose color had drained from his face. “But know this: if ye step away, I am afraid ye will be cut off entirely.”

“Why me? The old man hated me. Why did he choose me to be his heir in the first

place?”

“Despite what ye think, young Aiden, the Laird only saw ye as his successor. Ye was the only one he could no’ break. Ye, out of all yer cousins, was the only adversary he saw worthy. He raised ye wit’ a sharp tongue and well-oiled belt to strengthen and prepare ye to take his place. He saw yer greatness and feared it. He was determined to mold it so that ye will become the mon ye are today. This clan needs leadership. He would no’ have chosen ye if he did no’ believe that ye dared to receive it.”

Speechless, Aiden fell back into his chair. He felt overwhelmed and unsure of how to respond. He felt the immense pressure to formulate a response quickly, but he knew he needed to take a moment to think before he could appropriately respond.

He could very well refuse. That decision was on him, but turning his back on his people would make him no different from his grandfather, a man he despised. He composed himself, took a few more moments to contemplate, and spoke confidently and clearly.

“How the hell am I to find a wife in three months?”

“Yer grandfather suggested ye wed the daughter of Baron André De LaCroix. They come from a strong line of French ambassadors.”

“If I am to marry, I will choose my own bride,” he shot back.

“Verra, well, my laird,” Elder Montrose replied. “I will give ye this, however. It is a list of other suitable choices.”

As the elders and the councilmembers excused themselves, Aiden and Trey stared at one another until the door was closed, and they were free to speak without judgment.

“That bloody cheeky bastard,” Trey cursed as he leaned back on his chair and kicked his boots onto the table. “You’d think wit’ the old mon gone his clansmen would be glad to be rid of him instead of still referring to him as their laird.”

“‘Tis no’ the mon they are loyal. ‘Tis the crest. Despite their chieftain, Clan Rose is a proud people with a strong history and lineage. I am sure many disputed my line of succession as well.”

“So, what are ye gonna do?”

“What other choice do I have?” Aiden responded with defeat in his tone. “Unless ye wish to marry.”

Trey scooped up Elder Montrose's letter with the list of eligible women his grandfather wished him to marry. His eyes pursued the list of names.

“The women on this list come with large dowries and wealthy benefactors. If the Baroness De LaCroix is no’ worthy, all ye need to do is pick a name, and the title is yers,” Trey suggested.

“I’m no’ choosing a horse, Trey. This is the woman I am to share my bed, bear my children, and spend my life wit’.”

“Ye only need a woman wit’ a pretty face and child-bearing hips. I am sure she will have other things to do to allow ye yer freedom. And it’s no’ like she need be the only woman to share yer bed. Yer the great Laird of this clan. Ye can have yer choosing of any woman ye like.”

“I can see now why grandfather did no’ choose ye as laird.”

“I suggest ye send a summons to each one. Perhaps if ye meet them in person, it will

be easier to decide.”

“Perhaps ye are right, but a summons may no’ be necessary. We have been invited to attend a gathering at Inverness later this week. I am sure every woman on that list will be in attendance once word gets out that I am seeking a bride.”

“That will shorten yer time. ‘Tis best ye start early. What can I do?” Trey asked him.

Aiden carefully considered his decision. Recalling his agenda, he categorized his list of priorities from what needed his personal attention to what tasks could be delegated to another.

“If we dinna figure out how to bring in more coin and sustain our clan, I may no’ have a clan left to lead and therefore have no reason to marry. Our grandfather has left some unfinished business that I must see to. In the meantime, there are several acres of land in the northern Highlands in West Mey that we need to sell. It should be deemed profitable. I want ye to head north and complete the sale while I tend to things here. Ye will find the deed on my desk.”

“Verra, well. And what of this?” he asked, referring to the list of potential brides he waved in his hand.

“This shall have to wait,” Aiden said, plucking the letter from Trey’s hand and taking his leave.

After walking a few doors down to the laird’s master chamber, Aiden pulled open the heavy wooden door. A warm breeze greeted him as the door swung open on its hinges. A roaring fire was set ablaze inside, and a cooled bath awaited him. He had nearly forgotten when the housekeeper, Eira, notified him that his bath was ready over an hour ago.

As he unlatched his belt, his plaid fell to the floor. He removed his burgundy tunic over his head, tossed it over the chair, and sank down inside the large circular tub. The cool water chilled his skin, but it was as refreshing as a dip in the loch on a hot summer day. He closed his eyes and let the water's gentle ripples calm his weary heart. He felt the worries of the day slowly ebb away.

After soaking in the tub, he stood before the hearth and allowed the heat from the fire to warm his skin. Water snaked down his back from the tips of his unkempt russet-colored hair and caused a slight shiver. The flames danced wildly along the log. He watched as the red, yellow, and orange flame tendrils illuminated the room's darkness, mesmerizing him with their vibrant show.

Suddenly, a soft knock on the door interrupted his reverie. He wrapped a linen cloth around his waist and approached the door.

"Who is it?" he asked, trying to hide the irritation in his voice.

"It's me, Eira," came the timid reply from the other side.

He hesitated momentarily before opening the door, revealing the young woman standing outside with her head bowed.

"What do ye need, Eira?" he asked, trying to sound more polite than he felt. He was in no mood for company.

"I...I just wanted to bring ye some fresh linen for yer bed, my laird," she stammered, holding out a bundle of white linens.

He took it from her without a word, then watched as she quickly scurried away, her long braid swishing behind her.

Setting the linens on his bed, he looked over at the folded piece of paper on his dresser. He picked up the letter of names and sat near the hearth. Other than the clan names, in which he was familiar, he hadn't met any of them.

Perhaps his cousin was right for once. He'd be given less chance to meet them all while in Inverness and even less time to get to know them all. Perhaps if he had invited them individually, he would know for certain which one would make a suitable match. He knew any one of them could potentially make a good wife, but in his mind, there was only one he kept close in his heart.

His eyes were drawn to the portrait he'd painted on the easel in the corner of the room. Even though he wasn't a renowned artist, the image of the woman he envisioned captivated him. He was mesmerized by the way the light from the window illuminated the curves of her face and the way her gaze seemed to follow him across the room. He'd only seen her once and often wondered if he'd ever see her again. It was only a glance; perhaps he may have been mistaken, but he'd seen her before in countless dreams. It very well could have only been his eyes playing tricks, for when he searched for her, she seemed to have vanished as if she were merely a ghost.

He was not one to put his trust in fate, but with the new year a little less than three months away, time stopped for nothing, and he did not have time to chase dreams.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:38 am

As dawn broke over the rugged Scottish Highlands, the first rays of sunlight filtered through the heavy mist, casting a golden glow over the landscape. The fall air was fresh and invigorating, tinged with the earthy scent of dew-kissed grass. The horse-drawn carriage, its wheels creaking softly on the cobblestone path, embarked on its journey northward. Wisps of fog curled gracefully from the fields, weaving like ethereal veils around the ancient stone walls and timeworn trees.

Abby sat beside her sister inside the old wooden carriage as the sound of the horse's hooves clapping against the stone road filled the otherwise quiet morning.

Perched on the plush, cushioned carriage bench, Abby cocooned herself in a thick, soft blanket. Its warmth provided a fleeting shield against the biting chill that seeped in from the outside. She was never one to like the cold.

Rage simmered just beneath her surface, directed towards her sister. She allowed the tension to linger in her stubborn silence, transforming their journey into a prolonged and heavy solitude.

Just like the monks , Abby mused, proud of her commitment.

As the carriage meandered through the breathtaking Scottish countryside, its wheels creaking over the well-worn path, Abby's eyes wandered out the window, drinking in the rolling hills adorned with patches of vibrant heather and the quaint stone cottages nestled within small villages that dotted the landscape. Each picturesque scene outside seemed to blend into the next, offering her a momentary escape from her thoughts as the beauty of the terrain captivated her weary mind.

“Abby, ye cannae ignore me all day,” Alys said, trying to break the silence between them.

“I sure can,” Abby protested.

“Well, then, I guess I dinna have to tell ye the news I have received this morning from Inverness?”

Abby turned to face her. She hated intrigue.

“What news?”

A mischievous smile spread across Alys’s face as she leaned into a whisper.

“I heard that the Duke of Inverness is hosting a grand ball at Inveraray Castle early next week, and the chieftains of each clan will be in attendance to host a few of our French allies. It is to be a masquerade ball.”

“A masquerade?”

“Aye, and I dinna tell ye the best part. Our cousin Bella and her father will be attending.”

“Bella will be there?”

Abby's eyes widened with surprise and sheer joy as the news reached her ears. It had been years since she last saw her cousin Bella, a figure she had always looked up to with admiration and fondness. The thought of reconnecting filled her with an exhilarating sense of hope. Perhaps this was the opportunity she'd been waiting for. Bella had always hoped Abby would come for a visit at their chateau in France. If her sister allowed it, she could stay for the holiday and return after the new year. That

would at least allow her some freedom and see more of the world than just the boundaries of her front yard.

She knew, however, that Alys would never allow it, but perhaps if she were to convince Leland of such a thing, he could be her voice of reason. Her relationship with her brother-in-law was as close as a father and child. She knew he'd understand.

The carriage slowed to a studded halt. Abby glanced out the window and was greeted by lush green fields and a sandy coastline. Unlike Wick, where Sinclair Hall stood high on a rocky cliff, Mey was a coastal seaport where the ocean lay a blanket of sand between the water and the land. The sea was calm and serene, a tranquil blue expanse that seemed to stretch out to infinity.

Abby removed the blanket from her lap and opened the carriage door.

“What do ye think? I think this would be a perfect place to build a second home for us,” Alys asked.

“It’s wonderful,” Abby replied, unable to rid her smile.

She meandered her way down to the shore. The sun beat down on the sand, casting the beach in a warm, golden glow, and the gentle sea breeze carried the salty scent of the ocean. The beach was long and wide, stretching for miles in both directions. The sand was a pale golden color, shimmering in the sun, and littered with seashells of every shape and size. She gazed out at the endless expanse of water, the waves lapping gently at her toes.

In the not-far distance, smoke rose from a small wooden house with a thatched roof made up of bundles of reeds and straw. She observed her sister heading in that direction. Abby walked back to join her.

“I do apologize, my lady that my laird could no’ join us. He had other pressing matters to attend to. I am Trey, the Laird’s cousin,” the landowner explained to Alys.

“That is too bad. I looked forward to meeting the new laird. It is a pleasure. Please accept my utmost condolences on the death of yer previous laird.”

“That is kind of ye to say.”

“Forgive my manners. This young lady is my sister, Abby.”

He turned and bowed his head.

“My lady,” he greeted.

Abby gave a curtsy, customary for anyone above her station.

“One could hardly imagine this one-room hovel would be sufficient to use as a laird’s summer cottage,” Alys speculated.

“The auld Laird Rose was a simple mon, my lady.”

“I understand,” Alys replied.

“Well, if ye wish to come inside, I have drawn up the paperwork if you still wish to purchase the land.”

“May I ask, is there a reason the new laird wishes to sell in such haste? A property as beautiful such as this I would imagine must be hard to see go,” Alys questioned.

“Like all lairds, my lady, Laird McKiernan is making sacrifices for the good of his people. Now that he is to be married soon, he will no’ need a bachelor’s residence,”

Trey explained.

“Alys,” Abby interrupted. “Would it be all right if I took another stroll down to the beach while I wait?”

“Aye, of course. This should no’ take long.”

It wasn't long before Abby returned to the water. There was no need for her to listen to business transactions between Alys and the landowner, and it gave her an excuse to find some unique shells to brighten her room. It was beginning to look and feel drab and depressing, like a dark basement...or a prison. As a keepsake for each new place she'd traveled, she used to collect rocks, some with crystals embedded inside, a few red volcanic rocks, and others with unique colors and shapes. Shells would make a great addition to her collection.

“Abby.”

Alys's voice carried on the wind. Abby looked over her shoulder to see Alys standing near the carriage, waving her hand and motioning for her to come.

“Coming,” Abby replied, falling into step beside her sister as they returned to the carriage.

As they approached the familiar surroundings of Sinclair Hall, Abby's gaze caught sight of Leland's horse, a majestic figure grazing contentedly in the sun-drenched pasture near the barn. A warm smile blossomed on her face, radiating the joy that bubbled within her. She had longed for this moment, anxious for the wellbeing of her old friend, and relief washed over her like a gentle breeze as she confirmed he had returned safely. When the carriage finally came to a smooth halt, Abby wasted not a second; she leaped from the carriage with an eager heart, her eyes shining as she spotted Leland stepping out from the shadows of the barn.

“Leland!” she called out with excitement. “Yer home.” Abby wrapped her tiny arms around his large midsection. “How is Keira? How is my wee nephew, Erik? You must tell me everything.”

“Everyone is doing well. They are all excited to join us for the holidays.”

“If only that were no’ three months away. I miss them all so verra much. Did you hear the news? Bella and her father are coming to visit us.”

“I have. And I am certain she is just as anxious to see ye as well.”

“I was wondering if I could speak wit’ ye about that?”

“What is it ye wanted to discuss?”

“It’s about Alys,” Abby began, her voice tinged with apprehension as she shifted her weight nervously from one foot to the other. Leland always treated her kindly, but she didn’t want to overstep her boundaries or impose on their close-knit relationship. “I was hoping you’d be willing to speak wit’ her on my behalf. I want to return to France with Bella for the holiday season, just until after the new year. Alys would never agree to this on her own. Could you talk to her for me?”

Leland paused, his brow furrowing in concentration as he stroked his chin thoughtfully, the light of the fading sun dancing in his eyes. “I’ll see what I can do,” he replied slowly, the weight of her request evident in his tone. “But I cannae make any promises. Ye know how yer sister can be when it comes to making decisions.”

Abby felt a flicker of hope igniting within her chest, a smile blossoming on her lips as gratitude washed over her. She was aware that the path ahead would be challenging, filled with potential obstacles, yet with Leland’s support, she believed there was a chance to sway Alys’s heart and persuade her to allow the visit she longed for.

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:38 am

Aiden walked the grounds of his home; the crunching of his boots on the frosted-covered grass echoed in the morning's quiet stillness. He breathed in the crisp, cold air, feeling it fill his lungs and clear his mind. Despite the stunning beauty of his surroundings, his thoughts were troubled.

As he approached the castle, he noticed a group of people gathered at the entrance. His heart sank as he realized that it was another group of men hoping to gain his favor and offer their daughters as potential wives.

Aiden sighed heavily, feeling the weight of his responsibilities as the laird of his clan. He knew he needed to find a wife soon to secure the future of his people, but the thought of choosing someone based solely on her family's wealth or status left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Kilvarock Castle had never buzzed with such fervor as it had in the past three days. The news had rippled through the surrounding valleys and hills like wildfire; the clan's laird, Aiden, was looking for a bride. In response, fathers from every corner of the realm eagerly paraded their daughters to the imposing fortress, their hopes hanging heavily in the air. Although Aiden had reluctantly agreed to this pursuit of partnership, he found himself troubled by the notion of uniting his clan amid such desperate fervor.

The great hall, usually filled with the warm glow of firelight and the rich scent of roasted meats, now echoed with the soft shuffle of gowns and whispered conversations. Young women entered an endless procession, each appearing more like cattle being herded for sale than potential partners. Their eyes darted nervously around the room, scanning the faces of the curious onlookers as they awaited the

judgment of the laird. Aiden stood at the head of the hall, his brow furrowed, contemplating the weight of the tradition that obligated him to choose from among them, even as his heart yearned for something more profound than mere obligation.

Aiden reclined in his high-backed, intricately carved chair, its plush cushions enveloping him in comfort as he surveyed the array of young women before him. Each one stepped forward with a mix of trepidation and formality, their eyes downcast as they barely dared to meet his gaze. He couldn't help but feel a flicker of disappointment; the knowledge that many of these young women were here only at the behest of their fathers weighed heavily on his heart. He was beginning to lose hope of discovering a true partner—someone who would stand by his side as an equal rather than simply serving as a pawn in the relentless means of political alliance.

Beside him, Trey leaned forward, his sharp eyes scanning each newcomer with keen evaluation, assisting Aiden in gauging whether their clans shared the moral and ethical values that he so deeply cherished. The atmosphere was thick with the scent of polished wood and the faint aroma of blooming flowers from the garden outside, starkly contrasting Aiden's internal turmoil.

To him, morals and values weren't merely admirable traits but the cornerstone of his leadership. He sought allies who embodied integrity and shared vision, knowing that every choice he made would reverberate through the fabric of his people's lives. Finding a suitable wife was not simply a personal pursuit—it was a mission that bore the weight of his clan's future on his shoulders. Each decision held significant implications, and he yearned for a companion who would navigate that tumultuous path with him, sharing in the challenges and triumphs that lay ahead.

“Laird McKiernan, may I have the honor of introducing my daughter, Beatrice Hamilton,” the chieftain announced, gracefully stepping aside to allow his daughter to take center stage.

Before him stood a young woman who appeared no older than fifteen. She possessed a pallid complexion, contrasting sharply with her long, slender arms that lacked the robust strength of youth. Beatrice peered up at him from beneath a curtain of unkempt brown hair, her wide eyes flickering with a blend of curiosity and shyness reminiscent of a timid mouse peering from its burrow.

“It is a pleasure to meet ye, my laird. Do ye have a fondness for music?” she inquired, her voice soft and tentative, yet the question carried an unexpected depth that piqued his interest.

“Aye, I believe that music carries the soul,” he responded, his heart stirred by the sincerity in her gaze.

“I would love to play a song fer ye. As of recent, I have found a passion for playing the lute.”

“Have ye? Well, I would love to hear it,” Aiden remarked.

Her father handed her the instrument, the worn lute glimmering dimly in the light of the flickering candles that adorned the walls. As she began to strum the strings, the unmistakable truth settled in the air: she was no musician. The notes that spilled forth from the lute were harsh and discordant, sending ripples of discomfort to everyone in the room. Aiden caught a glimpse of Trey’s face contorting in a grimace, his eyes crinkling in disbelief.

Lady Beatrice, undeterred by the sound that could only be described as noise and nothing more, pressed on with her playing. With every attempt to hit the right notes, the music grew increasingly chaotic, as though the lute itself was mocking her efforts, joyfully relishing in her lack of talent. The sharp twangs of the strings echoed around the chamber, twisting the atmosphere into one of palpable tension.

Aiden leaned closer to Trey, his voice barely above a whisper yet filled with urgency. “Do we have anything—anything at all—that could drown out this noise left in the castle?”

Trey shook his head slowly, a look of genuine pain etched across his features. “I’m afraid no’, my laird,” he replied, his voice a hushed lament. “We used all of them during Lady Matilda's rather... unique bagpipe performance yesterday.”

Aiden sighed, the weight of their predicament settling heavily on his shoulders.

“Well,” he said, a hint of dark humor creeping into his voice, “it seems we must brace ourselves for the Symphony of Discord. Perhaps it would be wise to send word to the villagers to evacuate for their own safety.”

Trey nodded in agreement. “A wise precaution, my laird. We wouldn't want any shattered windows or fleeing livestock on our hands,” he said, his voice tinged with mock seriousness.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of torturous playing, Lady Beatrice gave up.

“That was very interesting music,” Aiden said, trying to be kind. However, the look of distaste on his face made her put down the lute and run out the door, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “I apologize for my daughter’s rudeness, my Laird,” her father replied as he chased after her.

“Perhaps the next one will be better?” Trey said, his tone carrying little hope.

“And how many more are we to expect?” asked Aiden, with clenched teeth, almost afraid to hear the answer.

“Only a few, my laird. But there are more tomorrow.”

Aiden's eyes widened in horror, and he desperately tried to maintain a polite facade. “More? Tomorrow?” he muttered, his mind racing with images of a daunting future.

Aiden waited anxiously for the next arrival. The loud, pounding footfalls outside the great hall door sounded like a bear had entered the castle. When the door swung open, a heavy-set woman appeared, her wide hips and round face giving her a striking presence. She carried herself with confidence and grace, dressed in a simple, homespun gown. Her hair was pinned tightly in a bun on top of her head, reminiscent of one of the nuns from his youth during lessons at the church in Edinburgh.

“Good day, my laird. I am Lady Julia of Clan Fergusson,” she said, bowing.

When she spoke, her voice was more profound than any man he had ever known.

“Lady Julia,” Aiden replied, bowing his head.

He could not take his eyes off her muscular arms, reminiscent of tree trunks.

“Dinner is served, my laird,” Eira, the housemaid, announced.

Aiden forced an awkward smile as they sat down for dinner. Julia helped herself to a hearty meal, tearing meat off the bone with her teeth. Juice from the chicken dripped down her chin. Instinctively, Aiden reached for a cloth napkin, shooting a look at Trey, who giggled like a young lass. At least one of them found some amusement.

“Yer sure a scrawny one, my laird,” Julia said playfully. “But dinna ye worry. As yer wife, I will make sure ye eat like a king.” With that, she passed him a plate of chicken legs.

While he was not one to judge based on appearance, he wondered if marrying her would leave him feeling as flat as a slice of bread.

Hurrying through dinner, Aiden concocted an excuse to leave early, complaining that his head hurt. He felt relieved to retire to his chamber, leaving Trey to escort Lady Julia out. He couldn't ignore the look of disdain Trey shot him as he went.

The following day was not much better. Two more women came and went with disappointment. Aiden was beginning to lose hope. He could meet every woman in the land, and none of them could make him feel the way his mystery woman had. He knew she was out there, somewhere, but he had given up hope of ever finding her.

That morning, the castle woke up to a light blanket of snow, a reminder of how close winter was and the new year would follow. He needed to make his decision quickly.

“My laird, you have a visitor,” announced his steward, Nigel.

“Send them in,” Aiden replied, finishing his mug of ale as he braced himself for another wave of women eager to impress him.

Through the doorway, Nigel announced the arrival of Laird Sorley Munro and his eldest daughter, Josephine. She was said to be the wealthiest woman in all of Scotland, possessing a fortune in gold and jewels that would make any man's eyes water.

As Aiden was introduced to Lady Josephine, he couldn't help but notice her air of superiority and greed. Her conversation revolved solely around her wealth, and she seemed more interested in his fortune than his character.

“You're a laird, are ye no'?” she said, raising her eyebrows expectantly. “Surely, ye must have a decent fortune of your own.”

Aiden was taken aback by her audacity. He had never met anyone so fixated on wealth before.

“We are a humble clan, my lady,” he replied cautiously, “but I believe that love and companionship hold greater value in a marriage than material possessions.”

Lady Josephine sniffed dismissively, clearly unimpressed.

“That’s easy for ye to say. Ye have a castle and lands to yer name. I have only my fortune to rely on.”

Aiden studied Lady Josephine, his thoughts stirring in a mix of disbelief and disdain. She sat, poised and immaculate, yet he could sense the material hunger beneath her delicate facade. The woman was a creature of luxury, molded by wealth and social status, and that was not the kind of woman he desired to stand beside him.

With a half-smile that could scarcely be called sincere, he leaned forward. “Well, Lady Josephine,” he began, his voice smooth yet laced with a cutting edge. “I can only assume ye have a taste for finer things. Perhaps we could discuss a marriage contract with a generous allowance and lavish gifts to satisfy such...refined desires.”

Her lips curved in a coy smile, eyes twinkling with greed, she tried to mask her interest but failed miserably. “Oh, I would be most intrigued by such an arrangement, my Laird,”

Aiden’s gaze flicked to Trey, who sat beside him, barely suppressing a smirk. Aiden leaned back in his chair, casting a sideways glance toward the woman who was all too eager to bargain for his wealth.

“Aye,” Aiden replied with a casual tilt of his head, speaking now more to Trey than to Josephine. “We may need to have the master blacksmith forge a shovel.”

Lady Josephine's brows furrowed. "A shovel, my laird?"

"Aye," Aiden said with a dry smile, his voice as sharp as the steel he'd just mentioned. "A heavy one, for when the quantity of horse manure pouring from your lips becomes too great to manage."

Josephine's jaw fell open, taken aback, but Aiden's eyes remained cold, and he had become quite bothered with their interaction, though he tried to make light of it. He had decided the moment she entered the room; this was not the woman for him.

"Ye-ye dare speak to me so?" she hissed, her voice trembling with fury.

"How dare you insult my daughter in such a manner," her father added.

"Perhaps ye shall teach yer daughter the value of integrity, Laird Munro."

Without another word, Josephine turned sharply on her heel, her silken skirts swirling behind her as she marched toward the great hall doors, her father following closely behind. Lord Munro paused momentarily on the threshold as the heavy wooden doors swung open with a resounding thud. He cast a final glance over his shoulder. "Ye will regret this, Aiden McKiernan. Ye will ne'er be as great of a mon as yer grandfather."

A silence fell between them, and Aiden's mind was already moving on. There were more important matters to tend to than the fleeting tantrums of a woman who valued silver more than sincerity. He knew his heart was still reserved for someone far more worthy, someone who understood the value of honesty, loyalty, and love.

With that, they stormed out of the hall. The door slammed shut behind them. Aiden shook his head, his gaze lingering on the door. He hoped what Laird Munro said was true. He wanted to be nothing like his grandfather. He wouldn't be great. He would be better than great. He would be the laird this clan needs and deserves.

Aiden rose from his chair.

“This is pointless, and I’ve had enough. I will no’ meet another woman on that list,” Aiden said to Trey.

“But my laird, there is only one name left.”

“I dinna care who she is. I will marry Lady De LaCroix. We only need to be married in name. Hopefully, she will no’ drive me to insanity like the others.”

Aiden stormed from the room, wishing he could rid himself of women for good.

Eira stepped into the room where Trey stood near the fire, his arm resting on the mantle.

“Laird Aiden dinna seem so happy today. I take it he has yet to find a love match.”

Trey shook his head.

“How many women are left?”

“Only one, but he refuses to meet anyone else. He has decided upon Lady De LaCroix at our grandfather’s request. We will travel to Inverness tomorrow, where he will make his intentions known.”

“Well, at least he’s made his decision.”

Trey’s eyes swept across the letter before crumpling it in his hand and setting it on the mantle.

“Ye can toss the invite away for Lady Abigail Sinclair. We shall no’ longer need it.”

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:38 am

The landscape surrounding Inveraray Castle was painted in warm hues of orange and gold as the sun set behind the hills. The crisp autumn evening air carried the earthy scent of damp, decaying leaves. As Abby inhaled deeply, the coolness of the evening seemed to seep into her bones, causing her to shiver.

Heavily swathed in furs, she followed closely behind Alys and Leland as they exited the carriage. She carefully navigated the uneven cobblestone of the courtyard as they walked toward the keep. Guards standing near the door opened the large, heavy wooden doors, allowing them to enter. From the several carriages and horses, she'd seen outside, it was clear the castle was already full of honored guests who had traveled to Inverness from afar.

Abby spun around the crowded foyer, looking for familiar faces. Even with a blue mask adorned with black feathers, she spotted her cousin Bella and her father from across the room. She weaved her way through the crowd to greet them.

"Bella, I cannae believe ye are here," she said, giving her cousin the biggest, tightest hug she could. "Ye are as beautiful as ever," Abby said, admiring the slender young woman's royal blue gown made of silk and draped over a lace chemise.

"You look lovely as well," Bella returned the compliment.

Hidden behind a teal mask with silver lace embroidery and a matching-colored gown, Abby brightened the room. Bella was not the only one in the room who took notice of her. Several men also caught a glimpse as she stepped further into the room. Abby could feel her cheeks begin to warm under her mask.

“How long will ye and yer father be staying?”

Bella’s cheek bloomed red as her lips curled into a smile.

“Indefinitely. I am here to find a husband,” she replied matter-of-factly.

“To whom do ye wish to marry?”

“I don’t actually know. That is why we have come. To find me a husband. The Duke of Inverness has invited all the eligible bachelors here tonight as a feasting ground. Perhaps we can also find you a match tonight as well,” she teased.

“I dinna think my sister would approve.”

“Among so many fine men, choosing one will be nearly impossible,” she replied, her eyes sweeping across the room. “It would be like picking only one favorite treat from a buffet. With so many ladies hoping for a husband, I don’t know what will make me stand out from the crowd, but Father seems determined on his choosing. I do, however, have my eye on one young man, Theo, the eldest son of Laird Gregory Hudson. He is perfect. His long, honey-golden hair rests just above his shoulders, and his eyes are the color of the sea. Fighting for his attention will not be easy. He has been surrounded by the other young women all night but did not seem interested in them either.”

Abby could not hold in her giggle. There was a very good reason why Laird Theo Hudson was not interested in the flashing young women, as his pursuits were of a more masculine nature—a fact she did not wish to share and disappoint her cousin.

As the music began to play a lively tune that echoed through the grand hall, Abby and Bella joined the couples promenading the dance floor. They glided gracefully and elegantly, their gowns billowing around them as they twirled.

Abby's eyes sparkled with delight as she caught glimpses of the enamored gazes directed toward Bella. It seemed the entire room had fallen under her cousin's enchanting spell. Whispers of admiration filled the air, mingling with the gentle melodies accompanying their movements.

Hidden behind her dark blue mask, Bella exuded an aura of allure and mystery. Her vibrant presence lightened the room, drawing attention from all corners. As she floated across the dance floor, her gown swaying with every step, she was a vision of elegance.

Several gentlemen mustered the courage to approach her, extending their hands for a dance. Each suitor hoped to capture her attention and win a few precious moments in her company.

Abby, watching from a distance, felt pride and amusement. Amidst the joyous atmosphere, she found a dance partner, Leland, who must have seen her hiding in the shadows, took her hand, and whisked her away into the rhythm of the music. As they danced, Abby stole glances at Bella, who was now engaged in a spirited conversation with a handsome, masked laird.

But here was Abby, twirling gracefully on the dance floor, not in the arms of a charming suitor like her cousin, but rather with her brother-in-law. His intense gaze seemed to drill into anyone who dared to glance her way, a clear warning that sent shivers through the room. Abby couldn't shake the feeling that these silent orders were heavily instigated by her protective sister, hovering just out of sight like a watchful guardian, ensuring that no man would approach without facing a formidable challenge.

As the music ended, Abby turned on her heel, desperate to escape the overwhelming emotions that threatened to consume her. She raced toward the door and stepped out into the cool night air. She found herself in the solace of the castle garden. The

muffled music from the ballroom grew distant the further she walked. She followed the winding path that led to the heart of the maze, where a tall willow tree stood at its center, its long, sweeping branches swaying gently in the breeze. The branches of the willow hung low, touching the ground as though it had grown tired or reaching for the sky, a prisoner to its beauty. She stood there for a moment, her heart heavy.

A sudden whisper of movement behind her caused her to jump. Her heart raced, every nerve in her body on high alert. She turned, only to see the silhouette of a figure emerging from the shadows.

“Is someone there?” an unfamiliar male’s voice called out, breaking the silence.

Not now.

Abby instinctively hid behind the shelter of the long branches of a willow tree, her heart pounding in her chest.

“No one of importance, ye can be on yer way,” she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

The voice persisted, filled with concern. “Forgive me; I did no’ mean to disturb ye.”

She sniffled, trying to compose herself. “Yer no’ disturbing me,” she managed to reply, her voice betraying the hint of sadness that lingered within.

Curiosity piqued, the man continued the conversation, his tone gentle. “Are ye crying?”

Abby paused, caught off guard by his perceptive question. She wiped away a tear, her voice trembling as she denied it. “No, it is just a bit cold out here.”

Silence hung in the air for a moment before he probed further, his concern unwavering. “Why are ye hiding behind that tree?”

“To block the wind,” she answered. It was a horrible lie, but she hoped her response would suffice, hoping to create a barrier between them.

“It seems quite silly having a conversation wit’ ye entangled behind these branches. Please come out, or I’ll be forced to join ye in there.”

“Why would ye do such a thing?”

The man chuckled softly, his voice filled with a mischievous tone. “Well, if ye insist on hiding, I can no’ leave a lady in distress. It would be ungentlemanly of me not to lend a hand...or join ye in the shrubbery, as it were. Perhaps ye are hiding from some rogue, and ye shall need my assistance in protecting ye.”

Abby's cheeks flushed with embarrassment. Still masked, she slowly emerged from the branches, brushing off twigs and leaves from her gown.

As she stood before him, her eyes met his twinkling gaze. “I assure you,” she began, her voice imbued with a lighthearted charm, “I am no’ in hiding from anyone. If I were to seek refuge, it would certainly no’ be from a mon but from my dear beloved sister. Yet, here we are. I understand yer concern, and it seems you’ve encountered me in quite an unusual situation.”

He flashed her a roguish grin. “Ah, but unusual situations often lead to the most memorable conversations, don't ye think?”

Abby couldn’t help but smile as a comforting warmth blossomed within her, contrasting against the crisp chill of the evening air that wrapped around her like a thin veil. “And what conversation do ye propose we have? I suppose it is only right

that ye ask why I find myself hiding away, yet here ye are, wandering from the light of the others. What draws ye out into the cold?"

"The same as you, I suppose," he replied, his voice carrying a somber weight. "But I'm no' hiding from just one woman, but from many." Through the haze of tears that blurred her vision, Abby noticed how his features softened with genuine empathy, casting a fleeting light over his otherwise troubled expression. "My apologies, m'lady. I did no' mean to intrude upon your solitary refuge or burden ye wit' my troubles. Seeing ye appear well, I shall take my leave."

Abby blinked in surprise, momentarily disarmed by his unexpected courtesy and grace. "It was no intrusion, Sir. I sought the tranquil solace of the garden—nothing more. But it appears I am no' the only one yearning for peace amid the chaos."

He chuckled softly, the sound soothing to Abby's ears. "Ah, the garden does have a way of drawing people in, especially during moments of contemplation."

"Is something weighing on yer mind that ye wish to speak to a listening ear?"

He sighed, his gaze wandering into the distance. "Just a restless mind, I suppose. There are matters of the heart that occupy my thoughts."

"Did ye come to find a bride?"

"I am afraid one has already been chosen for me."

"I can understand, and I dinna mean to intrude. Tis no' my business. Besides, a tale is but half told when only one person tells it," she replied softly, her voice tinged with wistfulness.

"Ye are quoting the Saga of Grettis?"

“Ye know it?” she asked with surprise.

“Aye, tis a fascinating tale of the misfortune and mishaps of the Nordic outlaw.”

“Well, then ye should know that sometimes only the whispers of nature can provide clarity when the heart is in turmoil.”

He nodded, a flicker of understanding crossing his face. “Indeed, the garden's tranquility has a way of calming even the most troubled of hearts.”

“Well, I can no’ say the same. I did no’ come here with hopes and promises of marriage.”

“No?”

“Nay. I am only a spectator.”

“Well, shame to any mon who does no’ ask for yer hand.”

Abby felt her cheek blush. “If only it were that easy. I’d imagine that if I were to marry, I would only marry for love and to be an equal partner. It can’t be a matter of obligation; it must blossom from a place of real connection and steadfast commitment. There should be no compromise.”

“I think ye are the first honest woman I’ve met yet tonight.”

Abby felt the weight of his words settle heavily on her chest. For a moment, she stood frozen, her breath caught, unsure how to respond, but she didn’t have to. Thunder struck, and the sky erupted with jagged flashes of lightning, illuminating the landscape in stark white. Almost immediately, a torrent of rain began to pour. Abby had never been one to shy from the rain even though it matted and curled her thick,

wavy hair. Besides, she was too far from the keep. Whether she chose to run for cover or not, she'd be soaked either way. Together, they slipped under the canopy of the willow, seeking protection from the rain.

As the water cascaded around them in sheets, their soaked clothes clung to their skin, and laughter bubbled up between them.

“Oh, my goodness,” Abby exclaimed, struggling to peel the heavy, soaked fabric away from her skin. “Now, this certainly is a story to tell.”

Suddenly, her sister's voice sliced through the heavy rain. “Abby!” It was hard to hear what she was yelling, but Abby could hear her sister's voice for miles. Her eyes scanned the perimeter but landed on Alys, standing on the threshold of the towering castle keep, her face a portrait of disappointment as she scanned the rain-drenched scene for her sister.

“I must go. Thank ye for yer company.”

“Wait, I dinna get yer name,” she heard him say as she ran toward the keep.

Alys stood with her arms tightly crossed, a narrow frown etched across her brow. Abby knew a scolding awaited her.

“Abby, come inside before ye check yer death,” she called out, her voice rising, straining to be heard above the relentless pounding of the rain. “Outside, in the rain, alone. What has gotten into ye, Abby?”

As Abby passed Alys and stepped through the heavy wooden door, she could feel the warmth of the castle enveloping her, contrasting sharply with the cold, damp air outside. She ached to respond, confessing that she was not alone, for a man was waiting just beyond the shadows of the storm. But she silenced her thoughts. Alys

would never understand. The storm in her heart surged with intensity, widening the divide between her and her sister even further.

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The fire crackled softly in the hearth, its warm amber glow casting playful, dancing shadows across the timeworn stone walls of Aiden's private study. He sat at his sturdy oak desk, gazing out the window where the sky was painted in vivid hues of orange and purple by the setting sun. The room, filled with the scent of burning wood and aged leather, felt both cozy and isolating. A slight chill lingered in the air, contrasting with the warmth of the flames. Aiden's fingers drummed absently against the polished surface, the rhythmic tapping echoing the turmoil of his thoughts, each beat a reminder of the burdens that weighed heavily on his mind.

"My laird, ye have no' been yerself since we left Inverness. May I ask what ails ye?" a soft voice broke his fixed concentration. He turned his head to the door. Trey stood in the doorway, concern etched on his face.

"I am contemplating whether I have made the right decision."

"Ye refer to yer engagement to Lady De LaCroix," he presumed.

"Mm-hmm," Aiden mumbled, confirming Trey's suspicions.

"She is a good choice, my laird." Trey circled the room to stand beside Aiden to both gaze at the painting. "Are ye still thinking about her? I say ye put it out of yer mind and onto more important things. This woman, real or no', is of no consequence. Lady De LaCroix is of real flesh and blood. With her, she will help continue our family's lineage when ye sire an heir. And all will be well."

Aiden looked again at the painting. He could not explain why it was so hard to let go. It was as if he was grieving and saying goodbye to his closest friend. She would

forever be his in his dreams, but in life, she would be only a memory.

“Yer right, cousin. I have sworn an oath and have a duty as laird of this clan. Take this. Put it away. I wish no’ to see it again,” he said, pulling the canvas down from the easel.

“Aye, my laird.”

“Prepare the kitchen for our new guests. I shall be dining in the great hall this evening.”

“It does make me wonder though. The woman ye mentioned that ye conversed wit’ in the garden. Did ye ever find out who she was? Ye seemed quite taken wit’ her.”

“She was just someone who lent an ear.”

Aiden entered the great hall where Bella and her father, Andre, had been briefly entertained by the music the minstrels played. At the sight of his bride-to-be, the warm smile on her face lifted his spirits. She was everything a man could want in a woman. Not only was she beautiful, but he had found himself enjoying their conversation on the dance floor at Inverness. She was articulate and well-spoken and showed interest in art and history, two areas of study in which Aiden excelled. She came with no complication nor desperation. She was simply a young woman seeking to expand her knowledge and provide a warm home for her future husband.

As he stepped further into the room, Bella stood to greet him. Dressed in an ornately fashioned purple gown, she was as lovely as a bouquet of lilacs.

“My laird,” she greeted with a honey-laced accent.

“My lady,” Aiden replied, his voice carrying a hint of formality. He bowed

courteously, his eyes studying Bella's graceful figure. Clad in his nobleman's attire, he exuded an air of stoicism, his demeanor concealing the nervousness within him.

Bella's smile, delicate as a budding flower, graced her lips as she motioned for him to join her by the tall, arched window. They settled into two intricately carved wooden chairs, the light of the setting sun streaming in to bathe them in its warm glow. With a soft sigh, Bella clasped her hands together, her gaze fixed upon the lush gardens below.

"My laird," she began, her voice carrying a trace of uncertainty. I cannot deny the apprehension that fills my heart. If an engagement were to come of this, I would not know what lies ahead.

Aiden's gaze softened as he turned his attention toward Bella, his eyes gentle and empathetic.

"I share yer sentiments, my lady," he responded, his voice laced with empathy. "Let us approach this topic wit' patience and a willingness to understand one another before a hasty decision is made. Come. I want to show ye the grounds."

Bella, her chestnut-colored locks cascading around her shoulders, met Aiden's gaze with a mixture of apprehension. Her emerald eyes flickered with the weight of responsibility, yet a spark of anticipation shone beneath the surface. After bundling up in furs and a long woolen cloak, Aiden guided Bella along a winding corridor out to the courtyard. The warm, wintry air was still.

"These grounds have been a part of my family for six generations," he explained. "Our land reaches as far north as the shores of Moray Firth. And o'er there, those hills in the distance, do ye see them? 'Tis called Beinn Mhor. The home of the Clan Chattan."

As the evening sun painted the sky with hues of gold and amber, Aiden and Bella continued their exploration of the castle grounds. He pointed out various features of the estate and shared stories of the castle's rich history. Bella listened attentively; her eyes alight with fascination as she absorbed every detail.

In turn, Aiden listened to Bella tell him about her life in France. He'd never been, but the possibility of meeting her family began to excite him. How she spoke of her chateau and the surrounding landscape was described vividly as if he'd already been there. But besides their shared love for the natural beauty of their surroundings, Aiden discovered they had little in common. They walked silently, unable to converse without running out of things to say.

In a dimly lit chamber within the stone walls of the castle, Bella and Aiden found themselves seated across from each other, their hands clasped in nervous anticipation. Aiden was about to embark on a conversation that would shape the course of their lives—a discussion they've both seemingly seemed to skirt around, the topic of marriage. But as Aiden began to speak, his mouth snapped shut, and a moment of silence hung between them. Aiden hesitated as his mind drifted momentarily to the marketplace and the image of the woman in his painting. The feelings she conjured were too hard to bury.

There was no doubt Bella was the most logical choice to marry. Her dowry was more than enough to cover the debt he inherited from his grandfather and enough for the season and the coming winter months. But he didn't think he'd ever give up his pursuit of looking for her, the woman from his painting. He might be able to fool himself into thinking he could let that memory go, but for his clan, he must.

"I shall arrange wit' the church to exchange our vows by the end of the week. That should give ye ample time for any preparations ye need," he informed her.

"Of course, my laird. I will inform my father of your plans," she replied, her tone

maintained a respectful formality, though it lacked warmth and held little emotion.

The distinct sound of someone clearing their throat interrupted Aiden's attention. He turned to see Trey standing outside the room, leaning slightly against the doorframe, his arms crossed over his chest and a folded piece of parchment in his hand. The light from the hallway spilled around him, casting a warm glow that highlighted the intent look on his face, urging Aiden to acknowledge his presence.

"Pardon me, my laird, may I have a moment of yer time?" Trey asked as he stepped inside the room.

"Bella, will ye please excuse us?"

"Of course, my laird," she said, rising from her chair.

Bella slipped past Trey as she exited the room.

"What is it?" Aiden asked.

"Tis a missive. Ye've been summoned to Tulloch Castle in Dingwall by Laird Bayne and the other members of the Highland Council.

"When is this summons to take place?" he inquired, furrowing his brow with concern.

"In two days' time," Trey informed him.

"Verra, well then," he said with a sigh, steeling himself for the eventualities that awaited him. "I trust ye will manage affairs here in my absence with due diligence. Additionally, my union wit' Lady De LaCroix shall be celebrated at Inverness at the end of the week. Please see that all necessary arrangements are made while I am away. I want her belongings delivered to my mother's chamber and ensure that the

staff is well prepared to graciously welcome their new Lady.”

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Achoo!

Abby covered her sneeze with her kerchief. Her throat felt raw, as if she'd swallowed a handful of thorns. It was swollen and ached each time she coughed. The gunk draining from her nose to the back of her throat seemed to worsen. She sat upright on the bed, and a sharp, dry cough racked her chest.

“By the saints,” she muttered, rubbing her throat.

She hated lying about, but this was the result and consequence of standing out in the cold rain. But it was worth it. Her moments spent in the garden with a complete stranger had momentarily suspended any thought of the lad in the market so many months ago. Was she finally giving up her pursuit of looking for him? The thought lingered, uncomfortable, as though the answer might be too painful to admit.

The man's words lingered in her mind long after they had spoken. Her heart ached at his kindness, which gave her a sliver of hope that perhaps, just perhaps, others might gaze upon her with the same intense understanding and genuine concern he had shown. She had spent so long chasing a fleeting moment, a half-formed possibility, that she never thought to allow her heart to open to anyone else. But Bella was right, and so many potential suitors were just waiting for her to love. The path forward wasn't clear, but if she were to have another vision to tell her what to do or how this would end, now would be the time.

She picked up the black beetroot tea Helena had left for her earlier. It was horrible stuff, but Helena had sweetened it with honey to rid it of its bitter taste. Abby waited for it to cool slightly before picking up the mug. As she took the first sip, the hot

liquid seemed to soothe her voice as the steam momentarily unblocked her stuffed-up nostrils. Alys, with nothing more than pure motherly intentions, accurately predicted Abby would get sick. Abby wondered if she had become a seer as well. When she was young, she had always played in the rain, and despite her sister's warnings, she had not once become sick until now. She had barely slept after waking several times with coughing fits and spitting up mouthfuls of phlegm. She could not recall another time she'd ever felt this sick.

It had rained considerably the past two days, and the sun had yet to find a break in the clouds. Outside, the wind grew stronger and rattled the windowpane. Abby shivered, her body heavy with fatigue. She coughed once more, wincing at the sharp pain in her throat.

"Wretched weather," she cursed.

Abby lifted the woolen blanket higher and buried her face in the soft fabric. She was cold and tired, and her growling stomach continued to remind her how hungry she had become, having not eaten anything yet this morning. After much internal debate, Abby pulled herself out of bed. She donned her heavy robe and shuffled toward the small hearth in the corner of her room. The heat of the flames warmed her chilled skin. Outside the window, the landscape was bleak, with dense fog stretching across the sea and creeping onto the shore. The faintest hint of sun struggled to cut through the gloomy grey skies, proving to be another cold and damp day.

A soft knock at the door broke the silence. Helena stepped inside with a concerned frown creasing her brow. She was bundled in a woolen shawl, her fair hair tucked beneath a simple linen coif, but her eyes, wide with worry, caught Abby's attention.

"Abby, lass, what are ye doin' out of bed?" Helena's voice was tinged with disbelief as she crossed the threshold, carrying a steaming bowl of broth in her hands. The savory scent of garlic and herbs filled the room, making Abby's stomach growl. Ye

shouldna be out of bed. The colds still clingin' to ye. You'll only worsen if ye dinna rest."

Abby sighed.

"Helena, ye know I am no' one for sitting idle all day. I've been cooped up in that bed long enough. The broth is all I need."

"Ye no' fine, and ye know it. I can see it in yer eyes, the fever still holds ye. Yer color is all wrong. Get back to bed before ye catch yer death."

Abby's eyes darted toward the bed, where the blankets still lay in disarray, as if mocking her. She grimaced. "I am no' some helpless bairn, Helena. I can sit here by the fire to keep warm. I dinna need to lie there like a corpse."

Helena gave an exaggerated sigh, clearly frustrated. She set the bowl of broth down on the small table. "Yer as willful as ever," she muttered, "But yer right about one thing. A sip o' this broth will help, even if ye won't be staying in bed like ye should."

Abby pulled a chair and sat down. She reached for the bowl, its warmth seeping into her cold fingers. She took a careful sip. The broth was rich in flavor and comforting, the heat spreading through her chest, soothing the ache in her throat.

"See, I'm feeling better already."

Helena shook her head, refusing to argue further. She remade the bed as Abby continued to finish the broth. With as much hope as she had that she was starting to feel better, a fresh, dull ache that had not faded with the rise of the sun pounded in her head. She waited for Helena to leave before crawling back into bed and slept the rest of the night.

The stillness of the room surrounded her until, with the first light of dawn creeping through the curtains, she was jolted awake by a persistent tapping on her door. Each knock echoed in the quiet space and coaxed her from her dreams.

“Abby?” It was Alys’s voice, bright and unmistakably chipper. “Are ye awake? May I come in?”

The door opened, creaking on its rusty hinges as her sister stepped inside, her smile wide and unrestrained. She was dressed in a soft blue gown, her hair pinned neatly atop her head. She radiated a kind of excitement Abby could hardly bear to witness in her bitter, deadpan state.

“Young lady, ye’ve been moping ‘round here like the dead spirits haunting these halls.”

“I’m sleeping, go away,” Abby argued.

“Nonsense. Fresh air is what ye need. Besides, I have come wit’ good news. Yer cousin Bella has found herself a proper suitor, and I have agreed to help wit’ the wedding. Leland is traveling today to Dingwall to meet with his brother, so I will need yer help.”

Abby groaned, sinking further into the bed.

“Oh, marvelous. A wedding. I supposed I should be thrilled. The dresses, the flowers, the endless talk about napkins that match the shade of the tablecloths,” she paused and shot her sister a dramatic look, “Ye are planning on discussing napkins, aren’t ye? Ye know I’d only be on the way. I could be out of the way if perhaps I went to Dingwall with Leland where there are actual useful things to do. I could help him mend a fence, or I dinna know, chase down a runaway cow. Anything that doesn’t involve organizing which lace goes with which flower petal.”

Alys crossed her arms.

“It’s an important day, and she is your cousin.”

“She’ll still be my cousin, married or no’, and I am sure it will be lovely wedding.”

Alys looked at her for a long moment, her lips pressed together. Then, with a sign, she finally gave in. “Fine, ye can go with Leland to Dingwall.”

Abby’s face lit up. “Really?”

“Aye, but dinna get yerself into trouble, and ye are no’ to leave Leland’s side unescorted. I dinna want to hear about ye getting caught in a bog or injured wrestling a sheep or whatever else ye get yer mischievous self into.”

“How much trouble can I get into?”

At that moment, a cascade of vivid images flooded her mind—at least a dozen memories of times when she had found herself in less-than-ideal situations.

To her defense, she was only a child and often unsupervised.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:38 am

Aiden walked the halls of Tulloch Castle to meet with the Highland Council. As he entered the room, he spotted Leland, his brother Ian, and several other clan lairds. Aiden had remembered meeting Ian once last May after signing the Treaty of Norham. He had heard rumors about the secret society of men who served the crown. They called them the Protectors. They were Scotland's own sheriffs, acting according to the law. Leland's presence and his brother, being certain the other Protectors were also in attendance, could have only meant one thing. There was more to this uncharacterized event than what was perceived, but perhaps an informal way to bring together the Highland Council of Lairds. As a new clan leader, it was an opportunity to show his strength and resilience, earning him the respect of both allies and rivals, especially with tension rising between the factions.

Aiden took his seat in the crowded room.

"Ye understand why I've called this council together," Ian said, his voice low but steady. "We can no longer afford to ignore the tension that's building between the clans. There's talk of alliances and talk of betrayal, but no agreements have been made. If we are to ensure the future of our people, we need to be strategic."

A few of the men nodded gravely. One of them, Fergus of Mackenzie, leaned forward, his brow furrowed. "Aye, Ian, we're all aware of the unrest, but an alliance won't come easy. There are those who see strength in independence and no' unity."

"I'm aware, but we can no longer stand divided. We're stronger together, and the time has come for us to make that known." He paused, letting the weight of his words sink in. "We've heard the whispers of threats from beyond the borders. We need to make alliances official."

The second leader, Ruairidh of the Mcleods, crossed his arms, a scowl tugging at the corners of his mouth. “And if those who refuse to bend will decide to turn their swords on us instead of our enemies, what then?”

Ian met his gaze, unwavering. “Then we fight. But we fight with allies by our side.” The room was silent, the crackling fire the only sound. “I have presented our terms,” he continued.

“Fergus is right. No’ all clansmen have the queen’s ear or full coffers. Some clans, more than others, have suffered greatly,” Laird Munro argued.

“Which is why I ask for this alliance, Laird Munro. Ye aligned yerself many times wit’ our enemies, but today we can change all that. ‘Tis no about our differences but of our commonalities as Scotsmen. These feuds must end if we are to thrive,” Ian explained in a calm tone, but in his eyes, he was seething.

“Then I want what is rightfully mine—five hundred acres to the north from Clan Ross and the two hundred acres of Rose land. We had a contract before the auld laird died, and he had defaulted on that loan.”

“Now, wait just a minute!” Aiden interjected. “I have looked through my grandfather’s ledgers, and it shows that all the loans Thomas borrowed have been paid in full.”

“Then ye saw wrong, lad,” Laird Munro accused.

“Do ye have copies of these ledgers?” Ian asked.

“Aye, I can bring them to ye directly in the morn’.”

“Laird Munro, I will consider your grievances, but war wit’ Clan Ross...well, that is

inadvisable as the odds are no' in yer favor."

"We shall see about that," Laird Munro cautioned. With a measured gaze, he turned to Aiden, his expression grave. "As for ye, while ye may possess the title and the reverence that comes wit' being a laird, yer status has yet to be officially recognized. I have no' forgotten the ill-treatment of my daughter, Laird McKeirnan, and I will make sure ye pay for yer...disrespect."

Those were his final words before he turned on his heel and stomped away.

"Dinna ye worry about Laird Munro, if ye have those documents, then ye have our support," Ian assured him.

The sun's light was barely visible through the thick canopy of trees. Aiden clenched his jaw, still simmering from the harsh accusations hurled at him by Laird Munro. With a determined grip on the reins, he urged his horse through the tangled bramble thicket, the underbrush rustling softly with each careful step. The path back home was familiar, but it felt longer today. The weight of his turbulent thoughts made time seem to stretch, but he welcomed the slow pace. It had given him time to think.

A rustle sounded behind him. He peered over his shoulder. A shadowy figure darted across the trees. Too swift to be a deer, Aiden's hand instinctively hovered over the hilt of his sword. He stopped his horse, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the surrounding trees. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end as the noise grew louder.

Aiden held the reins tightly in his hand. "Whoa, lass. Ye feel it as well, eh?" The horse reared up and stomped her hooves, indicating that she was unsettled. "Who goes there?" he called, but there was no answer in return.

The crunching sound of leaves on the forest floor caught his attention as a large black

wolf-like creature emerged. He waited to see the animal's intentions, but Aiden shook off his apprehension with relief when the overly plump dog happily stepped toward him. The large animal resembled a childhood dog he had once called Beggar, a bloodhound his father would take hunting. Aiden dismounted.

"Well, aren't ye a beastly one?" Aiden said, scratching the dog behind the ear as he laughed at the ridiculousness of his rushing thoughts, but before he could react, the sudden rush of movement came from behind him as three men emerged. They were fast and precise, each armed and wearing weathered cloaks that helped them blend with the forest around them. They circled him, causing the horse to step lightly from side to side. Aiden's heart pounded, his instincts telling him to fight, but he knew the odds were not in his favor even as he braced himself.

One of them, the tallest of the three, approached with a sneer curling on his lips. His voice was rough as if he hadn't used it in days. "Ye're a hard mon to track down, McKeirnan."

"And who are ye to be looking for me?" he demanded, his voice low, though his pulse raced with the realization that these men were not after a simple skirmish. He did not know these men, nor could he have insulted them in some way to provoke them to seek vengeance. They were after him with an entirely different agenda.

"We were hired men, sent to bring ye to our laird, dead or alive. Dinna care which. I'll let ye decide."

"And who is this laird ye speak of?" Aiden's stomach twisted. He had a faint idea who would have hired mercenaries to capture him, but the thought made his blood run cold.

"We'll be getting to that," the second one, shorter and stockier than the others, said.

“Well, I have no intention of leaving wit’ ye without a fight,” Aiden expressed.

“I was hoping ye’d say that. Yer reputation precedes ye, McKeirnan. But that’s no’ going to save ye today.”

Aiden’s eyes flicked to the trees around him. The three men had him surrounded, and they were trained and too experienced to be quickly dispatched. His heart raced as he considered his options.

He drew his sword, but the first man struck before Aiden could move. Pain seared through his shoulder and down his right side as he struggled to maintain his grip on his sword against his opponent’s onslaught. Another bone-jarring blow from the warrior’s broadsword forced Aiden to his knees. His sword slipped from his grasp. Blood oozed from the wound along his right side. He drew a staggered breath, then collapsed onto his side. Before he could react, a heavy rope looped around his waist, pinning his arms to his side and pulling him down to his knees with a brutal yank. The reins slipped from his hand, and the horse bolted, disappearing through the trees. He twisted, trying to free himself, but the rope was tight, and the mercenaries moved like wolves, closing in on him. The short man placed his beefy hands on Aiden’s shoulders and drove his knee into his core. Bile rose to his throat from the blow. Aiden fell to the ground.

“Get him on his feet,” the tall one ordered.

The stocky one grabbed Aiden’s arms, forcing him upright, while the quiet third man circled behind, his dagger glinting in the light as he pressed it tight to Aiden’s neck. Aiden froze. The cold steel against his skin sent shivers down his spine. His chest tightened. He had been caught off guard, isolated, outnumbered, and unprepared for an ambush. He should have listened to Trey. He should not have traveled alone. Aiden struggled unsuccessfully to free himself from their grip, but it only tightened the rope even more.

“Easy now, McKeirnan,” the tall one continued, his smirk widening. “We get a hefty bounty if we deliver ye alive.”

“Who sent ye,” Aiden asked through gritted teeth.

“Ye’ll find out soon enough.”

They dragged him through the forest, forcing him to march at a pace he couldn’t maintain, the weight of the rope chafing against his wrists. By the time they reached a secluded clearing, Aiden had time to rest as they tied him tightly to a tree. A cold dread began to settle in Aiden’s chest as his mind settled on one thought.

No one was coming for him.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:38 am

The day had stretched on, the hours blending in a dull haze as Abby patiently awaited the conclusion of Ian and Leland's meeting with the esteemed Highland lairds. The air was thick with anticipation, yet her surroundings offered little to occupy her restless mind. Alys had made her intentions clear; she was not to venture beyond the castle's grounds unattended. However, with a glimmer of understanding in his eyes, Leland granted her an unexpected sense of liberty. If she remained within the sprawling confines of Dingwall Castle, she found herself free to roam and explore at her leisure. Emboldened by this newfound freedom, Abby eagerly seized the opportunity.

She had just stepped out into the courtyard when she spotted a group of lads around her own age, clustered near a stone wall, laughing and pointing at something in the distance. Their attention seemed focused on a makeshift target; a few old barrels lined up against a fence with a strip of cloth hanging loosely in the wind as a target.

One of the lads, a tall, gangly boy with wild red hair, spotted Abby from across the square and nudged his friend.

“Oi, look at her. Ye think she could e’en hit a barn wit’ that bow of hers?”

The others burst into laughter, their attention now on the bow strapped to her back. Her bow was always her constant companion, and she was all too eager to accept the challenge.

She approached them, a mischievous grin playing on her lips.

“Is there something ye’d like to say?” she asked, leaving no hint of hesitation.

One of them, the tallest of the group, stepped forward.

“Ah, just wondering if ye can do better than our Robbie here.”

He gave a nod toward a lad at the front of the group, who was holding a bow in his hands, looking as proud as a rooster.

“Go on, lass. Give it a go if ye think yer up to it,” Robbie said as he stepped back.

Abby raised an eyebrow, the playful spark in her eyes giving away her intent.

“I have a mind to try.”

The lads exchanged looks and made way for her to shoot. She stepped forward, adjusting her quiver and drawing her bow with practiced ease. The air was still as she notched an arrow, her movements fluid and graceful. She aimed without even thinking, and with a sharp twang of the bowstring, the arrow flew, striking the center of the clot target, dead center.

The lads stared wide-eyed. There was a moment of stunned silence before Robbie cleared his throat, trying to mask the surprise in his voice. “Well, ye got lucky wit’ that one.”

Abby tilted her head, a sly smile on her lips. “Luck? Nay, lad, that is called skill.”

“Alright then, let’s see ye do it again. Hit the center twice, and we’ll call it a fair shot.”

Abby drew her bow again, her stance perfect, and she released the second arrow in one smooth motion. Once again, it struck the target square in the middle.

“Blimey!” Robbie muttered loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Alright, Robbie, yer turn,” one of the boys shouted.

Abby stepped aside for Robbie to stand in her place.

Robbie held his arrow back for a long moment as he judged his target before releasing it. The arrow curved in the air as if it were caught by the wind and hit the tree behind the barrels. The lads burst into laughter again. “You’ve been bested by a lass,” they teased.

Unhappy being beaten by a lass, Robbie marched away. The others followed closely behind him.

Abby wasn’t quite ready to return to the castle. It was still early, and the talks with the council could go on for hours, leaving her with nothing to do but sit and wait. The castle ground outside the walls of Dingwall looked inviting. With the air thick with the talk of war and alliances, Abby made her way into the woods alone. It wasn’t the first time she’d gone without an escort, though it was something Alys had cautioned against numerous times. She had spent her youth roaming the depths of the woods around Sinclair Hall, gaining confidence in navigating them that no escort could replace. The forest felt safer to her than the stone walls of the keep. And so, before anyone could stop her, she slipped away.

As she ventured deeper into the forest, the sights and smells calmed her restless mind. The ground was still soft from the recent rains, and the air was sharp and crisp.

As she walked further into the forest, she couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling that she wasn’t as alone as she thought. The wind shifted.

The birds had quieted, leaving an eerie silence broken only by the rustling of leaves

and boots scuffing against the ground. She twirled around. The heavy exhales of breath carried on the wind, and she sensed shadows weaving through the trees. Her heart quickened, and her breaths became loud like galloping horses. And then...nothing.

The vision was gone. It was her first vision in weeks, but it was soon an unexpected reality.

Before her, caught in a grim struggle, was a man bound tightly with coarse, fraying ropes. His clothes were disheveled and stained, and his expression betrayed fear and defiance as he faced three imposing captors. The men loomed over him like dark shadows, their voices low and menacing, punctuated by the rustling of their heavy boots against the underbrush. The dappled sunlight that filtered through the branches above cast fleeting shapes, creating an almost surreal atmosphere that amplified the tension in the air.

Instinctively, Abby dropped to her knees behind a large boulder, its cold, damp surface grounding her as her heart raced in her chest. She held her breath, her pulse pounding in her ears as she peered through the thick foliage. The once-soothing sounds of the forest faded into a backdrop to this unfolding chaos, and her mind raced with thoughts of how she might intervene without being discovered. The weight of the moment pressed down on her, a mix of fear and determination igniting within her as she contemplated her next move.

The air was thick with a foggy mist as Abby's boots crunched against the cold, damp earth. Her breath came faster, her pulse loud in her ears, but she kept moving forward, pushing through the undergrowth. The trail was treacherous, winding through thick forests and dangerous terrain. She had no time to hesitate. The path narrowed, and she neared the camp.

She could see two men holding their hostage and another keeping watch. She

crouched low to the ground, moving silently, certain they would see her if she came into view, and she wasn't sure she could outrun them. She needed to find a way to him without being seen. Neither one of them could afford to get caught. Her heart thundered in her chest as she waited and observed. The two men ran rope around a large oak to keep their prisoner hostage. They had gagged his mouth with a sort of cloth of some type. Abby couldn't tell. His back was to her, and she couldn't see his face. His broad shoulders were slumped, and his hands were bound. Blood seeped down his arm from a gash on his shoulder, and his clothes were torn and stained with what appeared to be dirt and blood.

As she crept forward, the weight of her foot broke a small, dry branch.

"What was that?" one of the captors said as he quickly stood. Abby dropped to the ground, her body as close to the earth as possible.

"I dinna hear anything," the other said. "Come mon, there's no one out here. Let's get some rest. It's too foggy to keep traveling in these conditions. We will leave by the first light. Our Laird is expecting us and we dinna want to disappoint him or lose out on our reward."

Two of the three men had gone to lay near the firepit to keep warm as the other went into his tent. The prisoner was left alone, but her presence had been known to him. He craned his neck to look over his shoulder. She couldn't take on three of them with her bow.

When she knew enough time had passed and one of the guards began to snore, she crept closer until she was behind the oak. Gently, she placed her hand on his. "Dinna move. I am here to rescue ye," she whispered as she took the small knife from her pocket. Leland had gifted her the small dagger on her last birthday. It had become a handy and now life-saving tool.

“Yer a woman!” he said with surprise in his voice.

“Shh. They will hear ye,” she warned.

“Ye shouldn’t have come. ‘Tis too dangerous.”

“Bloody hell! Would ye stop talking and let me save ye?” she argued as she struggled to cut the ropes free.

The man flinched when she nicked his wrists with the blade.

“Sorry,” she winced, cutting away at the rope. It was a moonless night, and as dark as a cave, she couldn’t see anything. Only by touch could she feel the ropes giving away. Once free, the man slowly crawled out of the ropes and ducked behind the tree trunk.

“Follow me. I will get ye out of here,” she insisted as the man crept into the woods behind her.

“Wait! We should take the horses,” he suggested.

“That would only wake them.”

“But a hell of a lot harder for them to chase us on foot.”

“Trust me, we dinna have time,” she said with urgency in her voice as one of the guards began to stir in his sleep.

Aiden looked into the woman’s pleading eyes, and something inside him told him to trust her. Her hair was pulled back in a braided bun, and loose tendrils curled around her heart-shaped face. Her dress was simply fashioned, curving along her thin

waistline and hugging her hips better than any fancy dress he had seen the ladies wear at court. With her small nose, freckled cheeks, and thick brows, even roses could not compare to her beauty.

He wiped his hand down his face. He could feel the heated blood in his veins and struggled to conceal his anger at what had happened. Though her intentions were honorable, they were the foolish thoughts of an inexperienced woman. She knew nothing about war or battle. And by coming here, she inadvertently put them both in great danger.

They retreated deeper into the woods, the dense foliage only offering them the slightest protection from the eyes of the men who would soon wake and begin to hunt them down. The scent of pine and damp earth clung to the air.

Aiden leaned heavily against a thick oak; his breath ragged from the escape. His hands and wrists, still raw from where they had been bound, trembled slightly, though he tried to hide it.

“I dinna know how long we’ll have. I knew ye are tired, but we must keep going,” she said, her voice calm and steady.

Aiden’s gaze drifted over to her, noting how her eyes, a piercing green, never wavered from the trees around them. His mind, which should have been focused on their escape, was drawn to her. She had saved him—a woman. A stranger to him, yet without hesitation, had cut through the ropes and freed him from the men who meant to kill him. His eyes were drawn to her, captivated by how she navigated the underbrush—swift and assured as if she possessed an innate understanding of this wild, untamed land. The air was thick with unspoken tension, their silence amplifying the urgency of their situation.

Was she some sort of angel? His mind wandered.

“Ye dinna understand how dangerous it is for ye to be out here.”

“I certainly could no’ have left ye tied to that tree. Alone. Besides, ye dinna look like ye had things under control.”

He couldn’t argue with that, not with the raw truth of her words. Had she not come, he very much could have been killed. He owed her his life. A vow he would not take lightly.

Footsteps crackled through the underbrush, and Aiden’s eyes narrowed, his body tensing. He stood straighter, instinctively positioning himself in front of her. Though his legs still felt weak, he’d not let anything happen to her. He’d give his last breath as she was so willing to give hers.

“They must have realized ye are gone by now,” she murmured, her lips brushing against his ear as she passed him, moving toward the trees further into the shadows.

Aiden’s heart raced at the proximity of her, but he nodded, willing to do whatever it took to survive. He was no stranger to running or fighting if he had to. His time spent in the Royal Army taught him a great deal, but never had a woman been involved. Her safety now was his number one priority.

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It was quiet—almost too quiet. They continued navigating the hilly terrain, but the thick brambles and littered forest floor slowed their pace. The man was in desperate need of medical attention but appeared to be fighting the pain well enough. She was confident they had lost their pursuers or had put enough distance between them to allow them to stop and rest for a short time, and coming into a clearing protected by a wall of trees alongside a running creek bed seemed to be an adequate place to stop.

“We should make camp,” she suggested. “I imagine we have at least a few hours ahead of them, and we can use the darkness for cover. Are ye hungry? I can scavenge us up some food.”

“Nay. I’m...I am fine,” he answered with a broken response. Abby wondered if he was in more pain than he was letting on.

“How are yer wounds?” she asked, hiding her concern, though her expression was not as easy to hide.

“I’ve had worse,” he said, holding his hand tight against his abdomen.

Abby scraped the dead pine needles aside with the side of her foot to reveal the soft grass underneath, grateful that it was dry. Aiden settled down, resting his back against the trunk of a large oak tree. They had no blankets to keep warm or flint to start a fire. All they had was Abby’s bow and quiver, which weren’t very helpful at the moment. Abby unbuttoned her cloak and draped it over Aiden to keep him warm.

“What is yer name?” he asked.

“Abigail Sinclair, but most just call me Abby.”

“Sinclair. They are good people. Ye must be the best of them. My name is Aiden. Laird McKeirnan of Clan Rose.”

“It is a pleasure, my laird. I am happy I was there to assist ye when ye needed it before something terrible happened.”

“As am I,” he replied, wincing as he held the side of his chest.

“Ye are in pain, aren’t ye?” she observed gently, recognizing that he was trying to hide it.

Abby knelt beside him, her heart aching to help, even though she knew little of healing.

“’Tis just bruised, but it hurts like the devil,” he admitted, the strain evident in his voice.

Abby pushed her hair back from her face, wishing she could ease his suffering.

“Sometimes, when I’m hurt, my sister would help distract me from the pain. Would ye share a bit about yer home with me?”

“Alright, I suppose that could help. I come from just south of Moray Firth, at Kilvarock Castle.”

“And your family?” she asked softly, her concern palpable.

“My parents have been gone for a long time now,” he replied, a hint of sadness in his eyes.

“I’m truly sorry to hear that. I understand your pain; both my parents are dead as well. I never knew my mother; she passed when I was born, and my father followed shortly after when I was just five. My sisters took care of me after that.”

“My father was an Irishman. He came to Scotland as an officer on a ship when he met my mother. He’d be gone for weeks, and my mother would sit along the north shore every day, waiting for his return. Their love was greater than the height of any mountain. It was immeasurable. One day, my father took an assignment that forced him to be gone for months. My mother was heartbroken and had fallen ill. She died before he returned. She was so distraught my father could not live without her. He became angry and distant. One night, he ventured out to the water. They searched for him for days, but they never found him. He was presumed dead. My grandfather then raised me, but I grew up wit’ many of my cousins.”

“Oh, Aiden. I couldn’t imagine all you’ve endured.”

“I do no’ feel that burden. I am blessed and a mere vessel of the love they shared. There is nothing greater in life than love.”

As Abby reached out to gently place her hand on Aiden’s, he accepted her gesture with gratitude. They talked for nearly an hour. Their conversation flowed effortlessly, seamlessly transitioning from one topic to another. She confided in him about things she had never revealed to anyone else, finding it incredibly easy to talk to him. In return, he shared many stories until their eyes grew heavy.

In the dark, it was hard to make out his features other than the shadows on his face from the little light the moon cast, but there was a familiarity to him that she could not explain. He had a pleasant demeanor and gave off a sense of security that made Abby feel safe around him, though she kept herself guarded.

Abby settled down beside him, enveloped by the cool evening air. As she nestled

close, she caught a faint scent of blood; the rich aroma of leather emanating from Aiden's tartan and an alluring spice first captivated her senses. Aiden draped the edge of his cloak over her shoulders, a protective gesture that invited her to draw nearer. Together, they huddled for warmth, their bodies sharing the heat of a shared cocoon against the chill of the night.

"We should sleep now," he instructed softly, his voice a gentle command.

Abby closed her eyes, yet sleep was elusive. Her mind churned with burning questions, a tempest of thoughts that kept her wide awake. As she stole glances at Aiden, she couldn't help but notice that, within moments, he had drifted off, a light snore escaping him, a rhythmic sound that filled the silence around them. Her heart took pity on him. Judging his actions, she concluded he was strong at heart and refused to succumb to weakness. He reminded her of Leland. Being only her brother-in-law, he was the only father she really ever knew. She had few memories of Angus Sinclair. She was only five when he died, and though she had many childhood memories at that age, he'd travel often. So often that she barely knew the man.

The air was cold. Her limbs began to shiver, and her teeth chattered.

Turning to face her companion, Aiden began to stir. He looked peaceful. The contour of his jawline and plump bottom lip was nearly as perfect as the sculptures in Saint Ninian's garden at the parish church in Ross-shire.

He was beautiful. No matter how much she denied the attraction, it existed.

Aiden stirred. Like the wind, his expression changed. His brows furrowed, and a soft whimper escaped his lips. His breath quickened, and his head shifted from side to side. Balling the fabric in his hand, Abby soon realized he was trapped in a nightmare. She crawled next to him and held a cautious hand on his shoulder. The light caress seemed to have settled him, and Abby had fallen asleep, her head resting

against his shoulder.

It was not long until Abby heard the high-pitched sound of a wren singing its morning song. The sun had not yet risen, which in their particular circumstance was a blessing. She stretched, her muscles stiff from sitting stationary. Aiden was still asleep, though she didn't know how anyone could sleep with that loud, wretched bird. She rose and went in search of food to break their fast. The sweet scent of earth and the fresh aroma of morning dew enveloped her as she spotted various critters emerging from their hidden havens to greet the day. The idea of a tender, roasted rabbit crackling over the fire danced enticingly in her mind, making her stomach growl, but she knew fire would mean smoke, and smoke would alert their pursuers to their location. Instead, they would have to settle on berries.

Abby returned to the tree where she'd left Aiden sound asleep. He stirred as she approached, causing him to stand quickly to defend himself.

"It's just me," she said to calm him, afraid he might confuse her for someone and trample her. "I brought ye something to eat," she continued, holding the berries toward him with an open palm. "Tis no' much, but it's something." Abby dumped the berries into his hand and watched him as he popped them into his mouth one by one. Abby's feet felt rooted to the ground as the sky began to lighten. It was him. An undeniable certainty coursed through her veins; it was him—the man from the market. Every detail, every flicker of memory, flooded back to her with startling clarity. This was why he had haunted her dreams, the figure that lingered in her visions. She could feel an inexplicable connection pulling her toward him, urging her forward with a single, resolute truth, she was meant to save him.

She had rehearsed this moment so many times in her head of what she would say if she were ever to see him again, but the fact had remained that though she may know him, he may know nothing of her. Her secret, her gift, was not something she freely shared. Perhaps this very moment was the reason fate had brought them together. For

now, she'd keep this to herself.

"How are ye feeling this morning?" she asked him.

"Angry," he said with a sharp tongue. Abby understood. With all he had been through, she had no doubt he wanted revenge.

"Do ye know who they were?" she asked.

"No, exactly, but I have my suspicion. They mentioned they were hired men. My guess is Laird Munro sent them after me. He wants my land. E'en threaten me to get it."

"I concur that Laird Munro is no' the most favored Laird in the Highlands. But if that's true, then I would assume he will keep coming after ye."

"What do ye mean?"

"Well, if he wanted ye dead, ye'd be dead already. Clearly, there is something ye have that is important enough to keep ye alive. Those men had plenty of chances to off ye, wit' ye being tied up like that. Yer better off finding out what he wants or whatever it is before it, or ye are useless to him." Abby wished she could see his future in a vision, but her mind was as void as a starless night. "T'will be light soon. We should leave."

Abby slowly circled. They had run and walked for hours in the middle of the night, and nothing looked familiar, and there was no telling how far they'd gone. She had no idea where they were or which way to go. A hint of panic set in when she realized they might run right into Aiden's assailants if they went in the wrong direction.

Aiden must have sensed the unease that gnawed at Abby, for he also cast a thoughtful

glance around the dense forest, assessing the paths ahead.

“Come, he will follow the flow of the creek. It must lead out to a nearby river; where there is a river, there will certainly be a village,” he explained.

Abby hesitated, biting her lip in apprehension. “But what if they don’t take too kindly to strangers?” she inquired, her tone laced with concern.

Aiden shrugged, his expression resolute. “We will have to take our chances.”

With a deep breath, Abby stepped behind him, the sound of the babbling creek guiding their way.

After nearly an hour, they reached the point where the creek widened into a meandering river, just as Aiden had predicted. Across the river, a silhouette of a towering structure began to emerge, its sharp outline defined against the soft glow of the morning sun.

Aiden’s gaze remained fixed on the cross perched high atop a rising tower. His heart began to settle with the sight. He knew exactly where they were as they reached the river’s edge. He exhaled slowly, a sense of peace overtaking him. His shoulders relaxed for the first time in hours.

“We are safe, lass.”

His companion, still tense, squinted in the direction he pointed. “How can ye be certain?”

Aiden smiled faintly, lifting his hand to gesture toward the distant church. “Ye see that, o’er there? That is the Priory of Beaulieu, a place of refuge. More importantly, it lies on Mackenzie land.” He paused, letting the weight of his words sink in. “We’re

no' on enemy territory but among friends.”

They crossed the river with ease, the sound of the flowing water growing fainter as they ventured northward toward the imposing stone walls of the Makenzie stronghold. They crossed through the gates into the bustling courtyard and were greeted by the sights of servants tending to the horses and guards keeping watch. One of the men standing outside at the guardhouse approached them.

“Visitors,” he called out to the others. “What business do ye have with Laird Mackenzie?”

Aiden stepped forward, shielding Abby. They were on neutral ground among allies, but he was not about to take any chances.

“My name is Aiden McKiernan, Laird of Clan Rose. I need to speak to yer laird at once.”

The man eyed them suspiciously but gave a sharp nod as he quietly turned and led them to the keep. Aiden and Abby followed him inside and were instructed to wait in the front foyer. Columns and arches lined both sides of the long entrance hallway, and the high ceilings allowed them to see the second-floor walkways above. They stood at the bottom of the staircase that ascended before them.

Through one of the many side doors, a tall man with broad shoulders and a protruding belly emerged.

“Laird McKiernan, I did no' think I would see ye so soon. What brings ye out this far west?”

“It's a long story, but first, let me introduce you to Lady Abigail Sinclair. Abby, this is Colin Mackenzie,” Aiden replied, gesturing gracefully toward the lady beside him.

“Lady Sinclair,” Colin said with a respectful nod, his expression warm yet formal.

“I do no’ wish to intrude on ye. It is imperative I return to Inverness at once,” Aiden explained.

Colin glanced over Aiden's shoulder, his gaze settling on Abby.

“Perhaps the lady would appreciate a warm bath and a hearty meal,” he suggested, his voice smooth and inviting. “Then you and I can discuss matters in a more secluded setting. Bonnie!” he called out loudly. Within moments, a young woman, who looked tired and worn with unkempt hair and bags under his eyes, entered the room. “Please ensure Lady Sinclair is cared for,” he instructed.

Aiden turned to Abby, his dark eyes filled with concern and anticipation, silently hoping she would not voice any objections.

“Ye will be fine. I will come find ye soon,” he promised.

Abby nodded and followed Bonnie up the staircase. Aiden watched until she reached the top step. She rounded the corner and disappeared. Once he knew she was safe, he followed Colin to his study to explain their circumstance. His mind was already turning toward the next steps. He had to protect Abby, first and foremost. She saved his life, and his debt must be repaid. But once that was achieved and she was far from harm, he would turn his attention to the treacherous Laird Munro. The attempt on his life was a grave mistake, and he would make sure it would not go unpunished.

Aiden stepped inside the laird’s solar behind Colin. In the center of the room was a large hearth with a roaring fire heating the room. On each side sat two wooden chairs with worn velvet cushions. Laird Mackenzie sat down in one of the chairs. Aiden followed in step and sat across from him. The man, who was of considerable age, was still imposing in stature. His eyes, sharp and calculating, gazed into Aiden’s as he

waited for him to tell his tale.

“My laird, I appreciate yer hospitality, but we cannae stay long. I require a horse and safe passage to return the lady to Inverness. I have business with Laird Munro.” Aiden continued to explain all that had happened and his allegations against the Munros.

“Ye know the risk, lad. Munro’s a man no’ to be taken lightly. But if ye are set on it, I’ll stand beside ye. Ye’ll have my support in whatever ye may need. But first, I ask that ye stay and join me for dinner and get yerself a good night’s rest. I’ll see to the horse and yer safe journey.”

“Thank ye,” Aiden said. He stood and took Colin by the hand.

The rest of the evening passed in a quiet, comfortable lull. After a long hot bath and given clean garbs to wear, Aiden and Abby joined the laird and his clansmen in the great hall for the evening meal. They listened to the stories of the other clan members, making it a lighthearted and enjoyable evening.

When the meal was finished, they were led down a dimly lit hallway to a small chamber on the upper level. A fire already burned in the hearth, and a large comfortable bed was made up, the woolen blankets inviting after spending the last night out in the cool air. Aiden could see the tiredness in her eyes, nearly bloodshot and barely able to stay open.

“Ye should get some rest,” he said softly, knowing the night ahead held uncertainties. “I will keep watch for a while.”

“Ye wish to stay...here..in my room?”

Aiden glanced down at Abby, her unreadable expression hinting at the tension that

filled the air. Her face was set in a hard line, masking thoughts of what could come next.

“It’s just to keep ye safe,” he replied a sense of resolve in his voice, determined to stand guard. He insisted on staying, even in the safety of allies.

The night was unnaturally still, the kind of silence that clung to the edges of Abby’s thoughts and made every slight noise feel amplified. The wind outside Castle Mackenzie howled through the high stone towers, rattling windows and making the ancient walls groan in protest.

Abby sat on the edge of the large four-post bed, her back straight as she stared at the flicking flames in the hearth. He should have been grateful for the safety of the castle, thankful that they were finally out of danger from the men hunting them. But her thoughts were scattered, her nerves still on edge. The event of the past two days felt like a blur, constant movement, adrenaline, fear, and in the wake of it, she found herself growing tired in a way that sleep could not solve.

And then there was Aiden.

She couldn’t ignore him, not after everything that had transpired. She still had not told him about her visions. She was uncertain why she kept her gift from him, especially when all her visions led her to this moment and him.

His desire to protect her and make her feel safe made her feel like he could weather anything.

She glanced over at Aiden, who stood near the door to the bedchamber, his tall form outlined by the soft glow of firelight. He hadn’t left her side since they’d arrived. As a man of honor and duty, his instincts were evident.

“Ye should rest too,” she said quietly.

“Aye, I will,” he replied.

He didn’t move toward the bed, nor did he make any move that caused her discomfort. He had made himself a small bed of blankets on the floor. She settled back against the pillow, her mind racing as she tried to sleep. She shifted slightly under the covers, trying to make herself more comfortable as she listened to the soft rustle of his movements.

Abby lay on the soft bed, pulling the thick blanket higher to hide her face as though somehow that might shield her from feelings rising within her. She stared at the ceiling, her thoughts restless despite her exhaustion. She turned slightly, glancing toward the fire where Aiden sat before the hearth. His broad shoulders were hunched forward. His posture, while calm, still radiated tension. The muscles in his back and arms flexed even as he sat still, and if his body would not relax. He did not need to be so protective, yet he remained steadfast.

She felt a longing, an urge to reach out to him, to somehow ease his burden. He was too proud, too stubborn, and too determined to protect others, but so was she. She walked straight into danger to free him without regard for herself.

The sound of his soft, steady breathing calmed her. She glanced at him again, noticing for the first time the subtle weariness in his posture and his eyes closed as if he had fallen asleep in the chair.

A small sigh escaped her lips before she could stop it, and she quickly bit down on her lower lip, her fingers gripping the blanket tightly. It was a good thing he could not see her face, for surely, she was bright red. She did not want to shy away from the feelings swirling within her. If anything, it fueled her curiosity more, drawing her deeper into wanting to explore these growing feelings. She only wondered if he felt

the same.

“Ye’re safe, lass. I will no’ let anything happen to ye,” he said after a moment as if to reassure her.

Her heart swelled at his quiet promise, and though she knew little of him, she believed in him. He crossed the room to the makeshift bed on the cold stone floor. A part of her wanted to invite him to share the bed. It was large enough for the both of them, but the pull she felt toward him, the force that seemed to draw her in, filled her with a sense of apprehension. She went from wanting to be close to him to wanting to be closer. But the fear of the future, of what fate lies ahead, she was too scared to risk it.

As sleep began to claim her, Abby closed her eyes. The soft warmth of her blankets and the faint scent of Aiden’s presence eased her worries. Though she knew she would never admit it aloud, she wished the night would never end, for tomorrow they would return to Inverness and part ways, possibly forever.

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The morning sun bathed the rolling hills in a soft golden light as Abby and Aiden rode along the narrow path leading away from Mackenzie's land and back toward Inverness. The wind had picked up slightly, rustling the trees and carrying the fresh scent of the nearby loch.

Aiden could still feel the sting of his bruised ribs as the horse trotted along, but he felt comfort as Abby squeezed her arms tightly around his midsection and snuggled behind him, stealing his warmth. He'd grown quite fond of his travel companion in the past few days. Though he'd only known little of her, from what he did know, he was enthralled. Her bravery and courage were unwavering. There was something so quietly noble about her. And the moments they've shared, they've bonded quite quickly. He couldn't deny the pull he felt toward her from the moment they met. Either way, meeting her has changed everything.

They rode across a web of rivers and streams, forests and open fields for over an hour until a slight tug on his shirt sleeve got his attention.

"Did ye mind if we rest for a bit?" she asked. "I need some privacy."

Aiden reined in his horse, guiding the animal toward the edge of the train, where a small stream trickled over smooth stones. After hours of riding, his body started feeling the toll of his injuries and the rugged terrain. His thigh muscles ached from squeezing them tightly around the horse's large midsection, and his rump felt numb. He could only imagine that she felt the same.

Abby dismounted without assistance, but Aiden made slow, deliberate movements as he slid down the saddle, and pain shot down his shoulder to his ribs. He led the horse

down to the water as Abby began walking further ahead to find some privacy to relieve herself. He wanted to tell her not to wander too far, still worried about the men who had come after him. He would never forgive himself if anything happened to her.

Aiden had found a spot on a large boulder to sit and stretch his legs while he waited. A moment later, Abby emerged from the trees. She met his gaze.

“How are ye fairin’? Are yer ribs and shoulder well enough to continue?” she asked with a wry, almost sheepish smile.

As much as he longed to linger in this moment, to savor the soft sound of her laughter and the sparkle in her eyes, the urgency of returning to Inverness remained paramount. He did, however, find that he enjoyed her companionship.

“I will be fine,” he answered. “We must make it to Inverness to alert the council what had happened, but yer safety is my priority. I will make sure ye arrive home safe and sound. Ye must have family worried about ye, or someone close to ye that...,” he did not want to say the words for fear that there was someone waiting for her for whom she had given her heart.

“My sister,” she said, correcting him. “There is no other.”

A sense of relief washed over him like heavy rain until a whisper of guilt flooded in. He hadn’t had a second thought about Bella since his capture. Even in his most desperate moments, she had not crossed his mind.

“What of ye?” she asked.

Aiden’s throat went dry, and he felt a knot form in his stomach as he grappled with how to answer. The truth was that he was set to marry in less than three days. But as

the realization hit him, he felt the discomfort grow. The thought of returning to his betrothed and honoring his promise before he met Abby now seemed foreign. He did not feel a connection with Bella like he felt toward Abby; he was unsure he wanted that connection to break.

“I have...responsibilities,” he said instead, his words clipped, as they were the only ones he could allow to slip past his lips. “Family obligations.”

As they returned to the horse, his mind felt heavy with unspoken thoughts. Once she settled in, he mounted in front of her and turned slightly to offer a reassuring smile. She wrapped her arms around him for a steady hold. The horse stamped the ground, ready to move.

The journey to Inverness stretched before them, the final leg of their long ride. The sun had long dipped below the horizon, leaving a veil of darkness across the landscape. The path they had been traveling had become smoother, the terrain more forgiving as they approached the outskirts of the town. The horse trotted steadily, its hooves making soft sounds against the earth. Though cooler than it had been earlier, the air carried with it a faint sense of anticipation of something coming to an inevitable end.

“No’ much farther now,” he said as the light in the distant town flickered in the distance.

“There will be so much to tell when we return,” she said. “But we will tell them together. A tale is but half told when only one person tells it,” she said to him, words he had heard before.

Aiden’s hands fell away from the reins as a jolt of realization coursed through him, striking with the force of a lightning bolt. At that moment, everything came to light. It was Abby who had been the woman in the garden that fateful night. Memories

flooded back—her laughter, the way the moonlight danced in her hair, the undeniable connection that sparked between them. How many times had fate orchestrated their paths to cross, weaving their lives together in a tapestry of chance encounters? The thought left him breathless as he pondered the significance of their intertwined destinies.

He had to tell her. For once they walk through the gates of Inverness, he may never have this chance again. He wasn't sure how he'd tell her or how she would react. But he had to trust his heart and accept whatever the outcome may be. As they reached the outskirts of the town, he slowed the horse to a halt.

“Abby, there is something I must tell ye. I...”

“Aiden!” a voice echoed loudly, stopping him in mid-sentence. Aiden turned toward the caller to see his cousin Trey riding from the gates toward him, relief in his eyes. Three other men on horseback followed shortly behind.

“My God, mon! Where have ye been? We’ve had men out searching for ye the past two days. We thought ye were dead,” Trey said, with relief. “Laird Rose is alive,” he shouted cheerfully to a group of men off in the distance.

“As ye can see, I am fine, cousin,” he assured him. “But I need to speak to the Highland Council at once. We are in grave danger, but first, I must see that Lady Sinclair returns home safely.”

“Abby, thank the saints,” Leland said as he rode up alongside them and dismounted. Abby leaped down from the saddle and wrapped her arms around him. “If ye had any idea the hell yer sister has gone through.”

“I know. I am sorry but I can explain.”

“’Tis no’ her fault, my laird,” Aiden explained as he climbed down from the saddle. “The truth is, Abigail saved my life. I would no’ be here if it wasn’t for her. Let us go inside, I will explain everything,” Aiden suggested. Turning to Abby, he spoke in hushed tones. “Go inside and wait for me. I will talk to the council and then come find ye. I promise.”

“Then I shall wait.”

Every seat at the table in the great hall was filled with a member of the Highland Council and neighboring chiefs. Everyone except Laird Munro, which in Aiden’s case was a relief and quite peculiar. It would allow him to speak freely against the man without prosecution or protest. His absence made him all the more guilty in his mind.

Ian MacKay sat at the head of the table to facilitate the meeting and moderate the discussion. Before the meeting, Aiden had given him a few details of what had transpired, but Ian wanted a public record of the allegations against Munro. He had arranged the last-minute meeting, urging the councilmen to attend.

When everyone was settled in their chair, Ian raised his hand to quiet the crowd. He gave Aiden a nod to plead his case. Aiden took a breath, feeling the weight of his words before releasing them.

“Laird Munro has committed a grave felony: he has engaged in kidnapping and has made an attempt on my life.”

A shocked silence swept across the room. For a long moment, no one spoke.

“Yer certain?” one of the members asked.

“I am fairly certain it was him. Two men were hired to capture me. It just happened

to be the same night Laird Munro threatened me in front of witnesses. Due to an old debt, my grandfather had with him, Laird Munro believes he had the right to two hundred acres of my land. I refused to give it to him without any proof of this claim. If it weren't for...other circumstances, I may no' be standing here now."

"These are dangerous allegations, Laird McKiernan. Ye are new to this council and yer station. I have known Laird Munro for twenty years, some of us, more than that. I know Munro can be an unreasonable man, but what ye are suggesting is out of character," elder councilmen stated.

Aiden clenched his fists, his frustration rising as he explained that he was on his way to retrieve the documents when he was attacked.

"If the loan was in default, Munro could take everything. However, I have documentation that the loan is paid in full. The deed and the land, by all rights, belong to Clan Rose."

"If you can present this deed, it will clearly indicate that Munro has no legal standing. In the meantime, we will work to apply pressure on Munro in order to avoid any conflict between the clans. As for the recent attempt on your life, we will address that matter separately."

Aiden nodded, then turned toward the door. He would leave immediately, but there was something he needed to do first.

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The fire crackled in the hearth, its warmth casting a soft glow inside the solar, keeping the cold at bay. After being served a warm meal of roasted lamb and root vegetables, Abby was given a hot bath and a fresh gown. She was grateful for their hospitality.

She sat at a cushioned chair near the back of the small room while the other ladies of the castle busied, who sat at the far end, themselves with embroidery and needlework. Situated by the window, she gazed out the rugged terrain, her mind consumed by the past few days. In just a few short days, she'd grown quite fond of Aiden, and being apart from him now, even being only a few doors down from him, she felt a yearning to be near him. The future, however, and what was to come, she did not know what to expect.

Just as she leaned back in her chair, the door creaked open. An instant smile came to her face with anticipation that Aiden had returned as promised. She turned to see not Aiden, but her cousin Bella entering the room, her silken silks rustling with every step as she made her way toward Abby.

“Oh, my goodness, cousin. Are you alright? Leland has been looking for you for days. You must have been so scared being out there all alone.” Bella said, with deep concern etched on her face.

“I am more than fine,” Abby admitted. “And I wasn’t alone. I came across a man in danger who needed my help. It was quite the adventure.”

“Well, I am so happy you have returned. There is so much I have been wanting to tell you. When I called upon you, I was told you had been ill, and then you were missing.

But I have exciting news to share. I am to be married to Laird McKeirnan in just a few days. Isn't that exciting?"

Abby's heart skipped a beat. Laird McKeirnan? Her Laird McKeirnan? The man she'd rescued from the woods? The man refused to leave her side ever since. The man she had most certainly fallen in love with? Her chest tightened at the thought. Abby swallowed hard, her fingers gripping the edges of her seat.

"Laird McKeirnan of Clan Rose?"

"Yes. He had signed the marriage contract with my father the night of the masquerade."

Abby's heart sunk deeper with every passing moment.

Engaged?

She repeated the word in her mind like an unholy chant. Her mind swirled with confusion and...anger. If he was engaged, why hadn't he said anything? He had been so kind and caring, and if he had any balls under that kilt, he should have said something. It wouldn't have mattered if he were engaged or not. That most certainly would not have stopped her from rescuing him that night, but it would have prevented her from cozying up to him under that tree or allowing him to stay in her bedchamber, whether it was on the floor or not. Anger began to boil over, but her face and reaction did not express her feelings. She sat frozen in her seat.

In any other situation, she would have been overflowing with joy, her heart dancing at the news of her cousin's engagement. His betrothal to Bella, a woman he had just met, would typically have seemed a charming and delightful union worthy of celebration. Yet, instead of a radiant smile lighting up her features, Abby grimaced, her heart heavy with unspoken emotions. The corners of her lips tugged downward,

reflecting a tumultuous storm within as she grappled with feelings far more complex than mere disappointment.

Deep down, in the shadowy recesses of her heart where Abby dared not venture too deeply, she grappled with the poignant truth that gnawed at her soul. With his noble title, Aiden was a laird destined for greatness, and in his world, legacy was everything. She understood, with a heavy heart, that she could never offer him the future that Bella could. The weight of that realization settled like a stone in her stomach; Aiden needed an heir to carry on his lineage and fulfill the expectations bound to his birthright—something she felt, with growing despair, she could never provide.

How could she have allowed herself to dream? This was nothing more than an unrealistic fantasy. Alys was right, and she should have listened.

“I am verra happy for ye, Bella. I truly am. Ye will make a wonderful wife and mother,” Abby said, rising from her chair. “Will ye excuse me?”

Abby turned sharply away from the solar, her breath catching in her throat. As she made her way through the cold, stone corridors of the castle, she took steadying breaths, wiping away the tears that had begun to fall despite her best effort to keep them in. She didn’t know if she could face him. Seeing him would only break her heart. She’d leave tonight before he’d have a chance to summon her. It was time to go home.

She stepped back into the dimly lit chamber, where the faint scent of fresh linen lingered in the air, remnants of the housemaid's diligent work. Her gown delicately hung clean and dry while her slippers, neatly placed beside it, awaited her return. With a quick exhale, she gathered the gown into her hands and shoved it into Leland’s travel bag with a decisive motion, a mix of urgency and determination coursing through her veins. She’d convince him to leave once the council meeting

was over. She knew in her heart Aiden deserved a chance to explain, but it wouldn't change anything. In her vision, she saved him. She fulfilled her purpose. There was no reason to stay. No reason to say anymore. He'd marry Bella, and that was the way of it.

Abby spent the rest of the evening in the stables helping to ready the horses. She had brushed down her mare, a sandy-colored draft horse named Wind Runner, known for her quick speed and agility, and fastened the saddle. She wanted to be all set for when Leland was ready, not to mention the stable boy had trouble approaching the mare as she did not take kindly to strangers. Only Abby knew how to calm the beast by bribing her with an apple first. For anyone else who'd tried to mount her, the horse would kick her front legs up into the air and boot them off.

"Abby, are ye in here?" she heard a voice call out.

"I'm o'er here, Leland," she answered buckling the last strap around the mare's midsection.

She turned to welcome him, but as her gaze lifted to meet the approaching figure, her heart skipped a beat. It was Aiden.

"Are ye leaving?" he asked, his voice tinged with a sadness that weighed heavily on Abby's heart. She couldn't help but feel the depth of his disappointment, a feeling that mirrored her own.

"Aye. Leland is expected to return home and I am sure my sister is worried about me," she said, bringing her attention back to the horse, to shield her emotions.

"I was hoping ye'd stay," he replied.

"Bella De LaCroix is my cousin. Did ye know that?" she questioned, allowing him

the opportunity to acknowledge her feelings. “And I heard congratulations are in order. It all makes sense now. That night in the garden. That was ye. What I don’t get is why ye kept it from me. But honestly, it doesn’t matter. I am no one of circumstance, and it was by mere chance that I even came across ye in those woods, but I have done my duty and offered my service, and now it is time for me to return home.”

“It’s true. I accepted the marriage contract, but only to ensure my clan’s future.” Abby’s eyes shimmered with unshed tears, and Aiden felt a sharp ache in his chest, terrified that she might pull away and he would lose her forever. He gently took hold of her arms, hoping to provide some solace. His voice wavered as he spoke. “Abby, I wanted to tell ye the moment I realized it was ye in the garden. I never betrayed ye; I would never lie to ye. Somewhere between that day in the garden and this morning by the river, I fell in love with ye. I’ve loved ye since the very first moment our paths crossed. It was at the market many months ago. I saw ye, and ye’ve lingered in my thoughts ever since. I didn’t know it was ye until I saw ye again after we escaped the camp. I thought I was dreaming, seeing an angel, but it was you coming to rescue me. And that’s when it dawned on me—those dreams were about ye all along. It has always been ye, Abby.”

They stood before each other, enveloped in a heavy silence that seemed to stretch on for an infinity.

“Please, say something,” he implored, unable to bear the quiet any longer.

“But you’re not mine to have,” Abby whispered, her voice breaking with sorrow. “Ye are engaged to Bella.”

“Bella is no’ the woman I am in love wit. It’s ye, Abigail Sinclair.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I cannae marry ye.”

“Why?”

“I cannae tell ye.”

“I would spend every last day of my life loving ye. But to live wit’ out ye, I can no’ imagine a greater pain.”

“Ye have an obligation. A duty. A contract that ye yerself admitted that ye must follow through.”

“And what of the obligation to my heart? Abby, please,” he pleaded. “Tell me ye dinna feel the same. Tell me ye dinna love me, and I will go and marry Bella and move on wit’ my life.”

“I cannae do that. Because it would be a lie. But in order for ye to keep your title and lands, ye must produce an heir. That is something I simply cannae do.”

“We dinna have to have an heir right away,” he said, wiping a tear that escaped her eyes.

“Yer no’ listening, Aiden. I can ne’er bear children. Ever.”

He reached out, gently cupping her cheek, a tender gesture sending shivers down her spine.

“I dinna understand, but I do know this, I’d rather spend one night wit’ ye than a lifetime wit’ out ye. Ye fill a void I dinna know I had. I feel complete every time I’m near ye. Whatever may come, we will figure it out...together.”

Aiden leaned in closer until the distance between them had gone. His lips brushed against hers, soft at first but then deepened, turning into something more urgent, more

desperate. The way her body responded, he could feel the passion growing between them. But as quick as it came, it faded. Abby pulled away.

“I’m sorry. I can’t. I can’t give you what you need. You have a duty, a responsibility, and I cannot give ye the future ye and yer clan needs. I am leaving today for Sinclair Hall. And you will marry Bella. You have to. Goodbye, Aiden.” she said before turning and escaping down the hall.

Aiden stood frozen in the hallway, the echo of her footsteps fading, feeling the weight of her absence and ache in his heart. Aiden stood there, rooted to the spot, his heart pounding. His face had gone pale as if her words had struck him harder than a sword. He didn’t understand why she was rejecting him. He felt a strong urge to chase after her, but it seemed as though she had already made a choice for both of them, leaving him with a sense of helplessness and the finality of a broken heart.

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Aiden had been away from home for only a few days, yet it felt like an eternity. Upon his return, he was warmly welcomed by his clansmen, who assumed his absence was tied to clan business. Unbeknownst to them, he had confronted peril and safeguarded them from impending threats. It was Aiden's solemn vow to ensure they remained unaware. As Laird, he embraced his noble duty to protect his people.

He vowed to rise above his grandfather's legacy and lead with a greater sense of purpose and integrity. He'd gone through all the paperwork and could not figure out how his grandfather had fallen so far behind in debt or where the silver had gone.

Thomas Rose had led their clan through wars, plagues, and peace for over forty years, brilliantly at that. He shouldn't have been concerned about the clan's wealth. The land was profitable, and there hadn't been a storm large enough to damage the crops.

What, then, had changed?

He rose from his chair and crossed the floor to the wooden chest in the small alcove of the room near a large oak bookshelf. He lifted the hinged lid and emptied the coffer, placing a large handful of silver coins in a brown leather satchel. He tied the satchel to his belt. He'd need it for assurance in case Ian's diplomatic strategy did not succeed.

"How's it going?" Trey asked as he stepped into the room.

Aiden rubbed his tired eyes. "I feel defeated. I have gone through these ledgers, and nothing makes sense. Nothing. I must find the contract with Laird Munro. That, at least, will stop the Munros from seizing our land. But even that will not shield us

from the others who will undoubtedly come seeking their own dues. And it will not satisfy the other debts our grandfather had made.”

“He changed the last two years. He’d leave for weeks, sometimes months. God only knows where he’d gone, and when he’d return home, he went on about his day as if his absence had no bearing. Some days, he didn’t even know where he was. He often was confused. To see a powerful mon, grow so weak in such a short time. It was heartbreaking. He should have given up his seat as chief long before his death.” Trey took a seat in the chair opposite of Aiden across the desk. His expression was grim. “So, how do we fix this?”

“Just as we planned. I will marry Bella De LaCroix. Her dowry is a substantial amount. At least enough to pay off these debts. And then from there, we will rebuild.”

“I will come wit’ ye. Ye have my support, cousin. We will no’ let Laird Munro get away wit’ this. But what of the lass? Ye cannae betray yer heart. I saw the way ye looked at her, and she at ye. Christ’s sake, Aiden, she’s the woman from yer painting. I didn’t say anything before, but that has got to mean something.”

“I have made my decision. Tomorrow, I will travel back to Inverness and make my intentions known.”

Trey nodded in understanding. He stood and walked toward the door, stopping inside the door frame.

“Ye know, there were so many times Thomas blamed yer father for yer mother’s death. He said he should have been a husband at home taking care of his wife instead of commanding a ship on the water. Thomas had to watch his only daughter die alone. But Lily’s love and bond with yer father was worth losing everything for.”

Trey's words peeled open old wounds. But he was not wrong. He spoke the truth, and the recognition of it stung deeply. The love his parents had for each other was something only written in fairytales.

Time, however, was not on his side. It was running out like watching sand bleed through the narrow vein of an hourglass—slowly but unstoppable.

The last speck of wick flickered out, leaving Aiden to sit in total darkness. He hadn't bothered replacing the candle stub with a new taper, nor had he had time to add another log to the hearth to keep the embers aflame. He found a copy of the contract he'd been looking for documents in the back of the disorganized desk drawer. Its pages crumbled but were still legible. He set it on top of another vital contract. Bella and Andre De LaCroix already signed the marriage contract, and his cousin Trey was a witness. His signature was missing before it was presented to the church.

Securing the documents in his hand, he picked up the bottle of whisky left on the edge of his desk and brought them to his chamber, sitting them on his bedside table. He would get the documents to Inverness tomorrow and present them to the council. Tonight, he would rest both his weary muscles and his weary heart.

He tried hard to push thoughts of Abby aside, keeping his thoughts on the days before their encounter as if they'd never met. He had lived without her before; he could live without her again.

It was better this way, and that was what she wanted. She had made it clear that she did not want him by practically forcing his decision to marry Bella. He would honor her wishes.

With a fire set ablaze in the hearth, Aiden sat on the edge of his bed. Whisky in hand, he drowned his sorrows. Images of Abby flooded in his head, a bittersweet reminder of what he had lost, spurring him to take another deep sip, then another until the

bottle had run dry.

His head pounded, and the whisky went down too smoothly, creating a ball of anger to build inside him, restless and uncontained. He was hurting, and he fought it.

This was not the life he imagined. Faced with an arranged marriage, the stress and pressures of a chieftain, the financial turmoil left behind by his grandfather, and the rising tension between rival clans, all this made his life as a warrior seem more tolerable. His life now was no longer his own. His choices were now no longer his own and his freedom gone.

Aiden's fingers clutched around the neck of the bottle. His pulse hammered in his ears. He shot to his feet, the force of the movement unsettling, unable to contain the chaos raging within him. With a roar of frustration, he swung his arm, every muscle taut with the force of his fury, and hurled the bottle into the hearth. It exploded on impact. Shards of glass scattered across the floor. He stood there, chest heaving, heart pounding in his throat, as the fire crackled in the aftermath. Aiden's hands were still trembling as he raised them, burying his face in his palms.

His silence was broken when the door flew open and two guards entered the room, swords raised, ready to defend their laird.

"My laird, are ye alright?" one of them asked as they scanned the room.

"Aye," Aiden assured them. "Please have Eira come upstairs to clean this mess."

"I am already here, my laird," she said slipping into the room and observing the glass shards on the floor. "Good heavens. Let me fetch a broom." Once the guards decided there was no intrusion, they returned to their stations as Eira began picking up the large pieces of glass from the floor. "When the embers cool, I will clean out the hearth and replace the logs."

“Thank ye Eira.”

“My laird, if I may speak freely, having ye here has given us hope for a better future. They are counting on you during these uncertain times. The men, yer people, look to ye for strength and guidance. And when the time comes, they will stand behind ye.”

Aiden felt her words. Though she was young, Eira spoke with confidence and wisdom beyond her years. Gently, he placed a hand on her shoulder and smiled.

Once the room was clean and back in order, Aiden picked up the documents from the bedside table and placed them in his satchel. As he lifted them up, a small, crumbled piece of paper fell to the floor. Aiden bent down to pick it up and see what it was. He turned it over, recognizing it as the list of ladies his grandfather wished him to marry. Just as he was about to set it down, he stopped when something caught his attention.

Lady Abigail Sinclair

It was written right there, at the bottom of the page. The last and only woman on that list he had not invited to his home. How different events would have changed had he only had the patience to meet one more? But in his hasty decision and with much disappointment, he dismissed his grandfather's letter and decided upon marrying Bella.

Too many circumstances, too many coincidences to overlook. His grandfather added Abby to that list for a purpose. Was this Fate's way of guiding them together once more?

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Abby gazed intensely at her target, her arrow at the ready. The light wind blew her hair into her eyes, but she did not let it distract her. Distraction, Leland had taught her, was the difference between survival and getting killed.

With her elbow raised high and her hand near her cheek, she released the string she had held tight between her fingers. The arrow buzzed through the air, hitting its mark.

“Well done,” Leland praised. “Yer dedication has paid off.”

“Enough to join the Guardians of the Crown?”

“Where did ye hear that name?” Leland asked, his voice filled with suspicion.

Abby cocked her head as if he should have known her long enough by now to know that Abby has a talent at finding things out long before she should have.

“Ye were eavesdropping again, weren’t ye?”

No one said eavesdropping wasn’t a talent.

“Oh, come on, Leland,” Abby’s voice cracked with desperation, her hand flailing in exasperation. “Ye have been training me to be a warrior long before I could e’en hold a sword! I’m no’ meant for the convent life like Ava and Isla. Do ye know what happens to unmarried women when they reach a certain age? They become servants and,” she stopped abruptly, eyes wide. “Spinsters, Leland,” she blurted out. “Do ye know what they do? They sit around all day knitting socks and brewing tea. Do ye know what that does to a woman’s sanity? I am meant to fight. Or at least get good at

throwing knives while pretending to pray.”

Leland could not stifle his laughter.

“Ye’ve always been a wild one, lass. But I dinna think joining forces is what this is really about, is it?”

“I dinna want to talk about it.”

“Did he compromise ye?”

Abby’s head shot up; her eyes wide. “Nay, of course not.”

“Cause if he did...”

“Nothing happened. This has nothing to do wit’ him.”

Leland scratched the scruff on his face with disbelief in his eyes. He walked over to a fallen log and took a seat. Abby joined him.

“Abby, ye’ve been like a daughter to me and though she is my wife, I dinna always agree wit’ yer sister, Alys. She can be a stubborn one. I know ye look at yer gift as a curse, but from what I have seen o’er the years, yer visions have always been helpful. They’ve never brought on devastation, ne’er put anyone in harm’s way, in fact, ye’ve saved many lives, including mine. What I am trying to say is, what if yer vision of death, is no’ what it seems? We’ve misinterpreted them before, but they’ve always led ye on the right path. It pains me to see ye hurting, but yer no’ really living. E’ery day, I see ye going through the motions, but I dinna see ye really happy. And if it’s love ye seek, then maybe it’s worth exploring. Dinna give up on yer heart, Abigail. He’s a good man.”

Abby could taste the salt of her tears as they fell from her eyes. His words pulled at her heartstrings, causing an ache and emptiness to fill her heart, more than she'd felt before. She was certain she had done the right thing, pushing him away. Running and hiding is all she had ever done for fear of being hurt, fear of her vision. But perhaps, Leland was right, and what a fool she had been. Maybe she had it all wrong, and now she committed the worst sort of crime. Betrayal to both her heart and Aiden by pushing him into Bella's arms. Her stomach churned as if she had received a crushing blow.

Oh my God! Bella!

"They're getting married tomorrow!" she gasped, adrenaline pumping through her veins. Without a second thought, she sprang to her feet and dashed back toward the keep, her heart racing as she willed her legs to move faster than ever before. She had to stop them!

"Leland, quick," she hollered, urging him to follow. "We must make it to Inverness by sunrise."

"No!" her sister's stern rejection against Abby's return to Inverness cut through the air like hot steel.

"Alys," Leland interjected. "Damn it, lass. God knows I love ye, but ye press my nerves. Ye cannae keep doing this to Abby. She's stronger than ye think and much like ye at this age, if I recall. I know ye hate to hear it, lass, but yer no' her mother."

Alys shot her husband a seething look; her brows knitted together, lips pursed to a thin line before she turned her attention back to Abby.

There was a long pause between them. Abby knew her sister was torn between her desire to protect her and the reality of her fierce determination. In the end, she didn't

need her sister's permission, but leaving without her blessing would equally destroy her.

"Alys, I have to do this. Ye dinna understand."

"Abby," Alys opened her mouth to argue again, but Abby cut her off.

"Whatever the outcome, whatever may come, I must do this." Her voice was calm but stern.

Alys's eyes softened and an exhausted sigh escaped her lips.

"Yer right, Abby. I cannae protect ye anymore. Ye are a grown woman."

"Thank ye. I will always be yer little sister, Alys. That will never change."

The two sisters hugged in a warm embrace. The tension in Abby's chest, the uncertainty about the future, seemed to melt away, if only for a few seconds. When Alys finally pulled back, her hands lingered on Abby's shoulders. She said softly, her voice thick with emotion, "Just promise me, that no matter what happens, ye'll pay attention to yer visions. I cannae lose ye."

"Ye won't."

"I'll take ye and make sure ye arrive there safely," Leland added.

After packing a small bag, it was not long before Abby and Leland were on the road back toward Inverness. She perched on the edge of the wooden bench inside the carriage, her nerves tingling with worry and excitement. She'd only inadvertently interrupted one wedding before—purely by accident.

She could still see the look on that poor bride's face when Abby stood up in front of the whole congregation and mistakenly accused the groom of kissing another woman just hours before the ceremony, when, in fact, that man wasn't the groom after all, but his twin brother. It was not her finest moment. But who would have ever guessed that the man was a twin? Then again, she was only ten and fairly certain the ceremony had continued, though so embarrassed by her actions, Alys had set her straight to her room without even a slice of cake.

This wedding, however, was different and she had a very good reason to stop it. Of course, as for the bride, she may never forgive her.

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Laird Munro stormed into the room. Members of the council rose from their seats as if readying for battle.

“This is an outrage,” he hollered, his booming voice echoing in the room.

“Take a seat, Sorley,” Ian urged him.

Aiden eyed the man down with an angered glare. He didn’t trust him. The man was nothing more than a weasel trying to intimidate every laird to do his bidding. Well prepared, Aiden presented the documentation he’d found in his grandfather’s desk, satisfied he’d put Laird Munro in his place once and for all and make sure the attempt on his life did not go unpunished.

“And did ye or did ye no’ have yer men deliberately capture laird McKeirnan?”

“Is this the contract ye had wit’ the Laird Thomas Rose?” Ian questioned him as he slid the papers across the table.

Sorley glossed over the document with scrutinizing eyes.

“It appears to be.”

“There we have it. Proof that the terms of the contract have been paid in full,” Aiden confidently stated.

“Ye mistake my words, boy. I only said it appears to be. No’ that it was.”

“What the bloody hell does that mean?”

“This is a forgery.”

“Bullshit!”

“Look again. My eyes may be old, but even I can tell the signatures dinna match,” Sorley remarked, leaning back in his chair with a smug grin.

Ian took the document from his hand and looked it over before passing it to Aiden. It couldn’t be true. Why would his grandfather possess a forged copy? There was more to this story than he’d realized.

Aiden meticulously examined the document multiple times. Laird Munro had to be wrong. No one else would have benefitted from attempting to have him killed. He shifted his attention to the other documents inside the leather-bound binder he had taken with him and examined the signatures.

Bloody Hell.

The realization hit him hard—the man was right. But admitting that would only make the situation worse. He couldn’t afford to show any sign of weakness. There had to be a way to turn this around without exposing his vulnerabilities.

“Thomas still owed three months of payments,” Sorley stated.

Aiden pulled the satchel from his belt, placing it on the table with a thud.

“Consider this debt paid in full.”

Sorley picked up the satchel and pulled the ties. He eyed its contents, feeling the

weight and counting the coins.

“Yer short.”

“Ye’ll get the rest when I am satisfied that ye’ll never set foot on my land again.”

The man’s expression faltered momentarily, but Aiden saw the flickering uncertainty in his eyes.

“I think that is a fair, deal,” Laird Gunn, one of the elder councilmembers, added. “Wagering war would no’ be in yer favor, Sorley.”

Sorley gave the room a seething look, his eyes diverting back to Aiden.

“You will regret this decision, Laird McKeirnan,” he warned, backing away slowly. “You’ve made a powerful enemy today.”

Aiden remained unflinching. As the man retreated, Aiden felt a mix of resolve and a deep churn of unease. He had won this small battle, but the war was far from over. And he knew Munro would come, perhaps with a fury he did not yet imagine. But Aiden was ready to face whatever threats lay ahead. It may not be today or tomorrow, but he’d always keep an eye over his shoulder.

“We’ll keep an eye on him,” Ian declared.

With Munro’s absence, the council convened in the dimly lit chamber, the air thick with urgency as they deliberated on the impending winter and the critical need for alliances. Now was a time for trade and treaties. Discussions flowed as they considered potential partnerships that could bolster their resources and ensure survival against the harsh elements to come. Newly titled, Aiden learned the importance of setting aside his differences and acting upon his clan's best interest.

In the forefront of his mind, however, there was still one issue at hand, the forged contract. He'd racked his brain and could not find a satisfying explanation to understand the stark differences in the signatures.

As the council meeting drew to a close, the heavy weight of the discussion still hung in the air. The member filed out, their murmurs fading into the corridors of the castle. Aiden stood momentarily, his mind racing with the decisions to be made.

Outside the chamber, servants bustled about, preparing for the evening's ceremony. Aiden's heart quickened. He'd only met Bella once, not counting the brief moment they shared at the masquerade. His time with her had been pleasant, but there was still so much uncertainty.

With a final glance toward the castle's grand hall, he took a deep breath and went down the narrow corridor leading to the chapel.

As he reached the castle's west wing, he heard Trey further down the hall, his voice growing louder as he neared. Rounding the corner, Aiden skidded to a halt when he saw Trey conversing with two unmistakably familiar men. His stomach churned, and his heart pounded violently against his ribs with fury at the sight of his captors.

Several gold coins slipped into the taller man's palm from Trey's hand. Aiden paused, hidden in the shadows just beyond the doorframe, his pulse quickening with every word. His cousin's smooth and calculated voice slithered through the stone walls, each sentence laced with venom.

"'Tis only half of what ye promised," the man said, his tone angered.

"Well, since ye didn't finish the job, I'd say we're even."

"We did exactly what ye told us. How could we have known he'd escape?"

“Ye were supposed to kill him. In three hours, he is to be married, and the title of lairdship will officially be his. This is yer last chance.”

The two men marched away further down the hall. Trey stood by the window, observing the scene below.

Aiden’s breath hitched, the words sinking deep into his chest like a knife. His cousin, his own blood, had plotted to kill him. He felt his heart stutter, then rage, boiling up from his gut. His fingers tightened into fists, the blood rushing to his knuckles, the bitter taste of betrayal rising into his throat.

All those years, his cousin had played the role of a trusted ally, a loyal family member, and a brother. And he gave all that up for a title and power that he will never retain.

He stepped forward, his hands shaking with fury, his footsteps heavy against the stone floor.

“Aiden!” Trey said with a hitch of surprise. “I was just coming to find ye to see how it went wit’ Munro.”

Aiden’s rage drowned out his words.

“How could you do this?” His voice was low and controlled, but his words quivered with anger.

His eyes narrowed, revealing the depth of his fury. This situation was more than just an attempt on his life; it had been years in the making. He had assigned Trey to assist with the documents, which would have made it easy for him to forge them, and Trey had access to the coffers. Additionally, he had been the only one by their grandfather’s side before his death. Trey would have known how much Thomas

disliked the idea of Aiden succeeding him, and perhaps he thought Thomas would have given Trey the title. Aiden could only imagine Trey's fury when he was left with nothing.

Trey's brows furrowed in confusion, unaware that Aiden had witnessed his betrayal. Without a thought to his following action, Aiden drew his dagger and backed Trey up against the cold stone wall, and the steel pressed hard against his throat.

“What is there to stop me from ending yer life when ye so quickly wanted to take mine?”

Trey's face went pale, but he dared not move. Aiden would feel his pulse quicken beneath the blade. He swallowed hard, his face flooded with guilt.

“The title was ne'er meant to be yers,” he finally responded.

“Ye better start talking before I cut yer tongue out,” he warned in a voice devoid of emotion.

“The land was supposed to be seized by the Munros. He paid me to forge the contract. Then, my transgressions would be overlooked once they took the land, but only under one condition. Ye were no' supposed to survive. Ye dinna understand. They were going to take my life. I dinna have a choice.”

“What transgressions?” Aiden demanded.

“His daughter. She is wit' child. My child. When ye dismissed the idea of marrying her, it left her shamed and damaged.”

Heavy footfalls came down the hall. Two guards approached Aiden from behind.

“What is the meaning of this?” one of them asked, swords drawn.

“Aiden!” a woman’s voice cried out as she ran into the hall. At first, his heart leapt, his mind wishing to turn and see Abby once more, but as he glanced over his shoulder, it was Bella who stood in the hallway, concern etched on her face.

Aiden turned his attention back to Trey and kept his eyes firmly on his cousin. It was a sobering lesson to not trust so easily again.

“There will be no blood spilled today, but know this, as of today, ye are banished. Ye are a disgrace to yerself and our clan. Guards, get him out of my sight,” Aiden ordered, lowering his blade.

As soon as the guards took Trey forcefully by his arms and led him away, Bella ran into his arms.”

“I was so worried about you, my laird. I heard the guards speak your name as they ran down the hall. Are you alright?”

Aiden looked down at his lovely bride-to-be and smiled.

“Aye, I am fine, lass, but there is something I wish to discuss.”

Aiden sat across from Bella just a mere few hours before they were expected at the chapel. He sat quietly, trying to guess what thoughts were on her mind. He had not mentioned anything to her about Abby. The conflict of them being cousins would complicate it further, and he did not want to be caught in the crosshairs between the two women.

“Do ye wish to marry me?” he asked, looking for an acceptable answer other than simply formality.

“We have already decided upon this, my laird,” she replied with a hint of confusion.

“I mean, is it yer wish to be tied to me, no’ my title, nor my station, or e’en because of something written on a contract? What is it that ye want? Am I the mon ye wish to father yer children, a mon ye can see yerself loving and sacrificing everything for?”

“Tis a strange question, my laird. No one has ever asked me before what it is that I want. I am no’ given that luxury to decide.”

“And what ye had that luxury?”

“I do not like where this is going, my laird. We have obligations and duties to uphold.”

Aiden lowered himself to his knees. With a gentle touch, he placed her hands in his, looking up at her with empathy.

“If ye truly wish to marry me, I will honor my vow and marry ye if I know that is what ye truly wanted. Because once we cross that threshold, there will be no turning back.”

Aiden could see the distress in Bella’s eyes. Her palms became clammy to the touch. He could sense her inner turmoil as she chewed over his question.

“I appreciate your concern for my welfare, my laird, but I can assure you, I came to Scotland to find myself a husband. I do not have the luxury of my own choosing.”

“That, my lady, may be one luxury I can offer ye.”

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Abby had insisted they abandon the carriage as soon as they reached the shimmering waters of Dornoch Firth, opting to ride their horses the remaining distance. The mountainous terrain loomed ahead, and she knew that taking the longer route would double their time. Time, she did not have.

Determined, she pressed her heels into her horse's sides, urging it forward as she raced toward the imposing silhouette of the keep against the evening sky. Frustration bubbled within her, and she fought back a curse that threatened to escape her lips. After a long day of travel, they finally arrived as dusk settled.

The earthy scent of horse and sweat clung to her, a testament to their arduous journey, while her hair cascaded wildly around her shoulders—untamed and free. She cared little about how she looked.

As Abby reached the sprawling courtyard, she swiftly dismounted her horse, her heart racing with urgency. With a fluid motion, she passed the reins to a nearby stable boy, barely sparing a glance at Leland, who lingered behind. A knot of anxiety twisted in her stomach; she feared she might already be too late.

The imposing doors of the keep swung open with a creak that echoed like a distant thunderclap as Abby bolted inside. The corridor leading to the chapel stretched before her and seemed endless as she descended the long hall. Each footfall seemed to echo in the nearly silent hall, amplifying the distant murmurs of the guests as she drew closer to the threshold.

With a determined effort, she heaved on the ancient oak door. It groaned in protest, a heavy sound that betrayed its age, and she let out an almost primal grunt as the

weight shifted before her. As she slipped inside, catching her breath in ragged gasps, a few congregants at the rear turned their heads, curiosity flashing in their eyes. Yet, Abby's focus zeroed in on the scene before her—time seemed to slow as her gaze locked onto the radiant bride and her groom standing in their sacred space at the front of the room.

They were faced away from her, kneeling in front of the pastor, and Abby felt a wave of disbelief wash over her. Her heart sank as she struggled to find her voice. She tried to speak, to object to this marriage, but no words came out as if a blow to her stomach struck her. She was too late.

She wrapped her arms around her midsection as a cold chill swept across her skin. Her head dropped, and her hair fell over her watery eyes. Slowly, she backed up toward the door. She wanted to leave before anyone noticed her. Just as she was about to turn to reach for the handle, the congregation stood as the bride and groom rose to face the crowd.

Abby nearly fainted. Her cousin Bella, the most beautiful bride she'd ever seen in a flowing white gown that cascaded around her like rippling silk, was not standing next to the man who had stolen her heart, but instead, she stood next to the strikingly handsome, Laird Theo Hudson. Perhaps she should have warned Bella after all about his nightly pleasures.

Abby exhaled sharply, the breath she'd been holding finally escaping her lungs. Her thoughts swirled. If Bella hadn't married Aiden, then that could only mean one thing...

Bollocks .

Aiden wasn't here. He had probably already returned to Kilvarock by now.

Bloody hell.

With a huff of frustration, Abby pushed forward, the heel of her slipper scuffing the store floor, echoing inside the narrow corridor. The flickering sconces cast long shadows along the walls, but no amount of warmth or light seemed to ease the tension coiling inside her.

Abby exited the door that led out to the courtyard. She returned to the stables to find Leland talking to...

“Aiden,” she cried out, her heart swelling inside her chest.

Leland nodded to Aiden and shook his hand before excusing himself to leave them alone. Abby nearly tripped over the skirt of her dress as she quickened the pace. She stopped just a few feet from him. Her eyes were glazed over as she dutifully waited for him to speak.

“I dinna think I’d e’er see ye again,” he said.

“I thought ye were getting married.”

“Nay. I nearly was, but turns out, Bella was wooed by the devious Laird Hudson while I was away. He needed a bride and an heir to pass on his title, and he had won Bella’s heart and compassion.”

“But isn’t he...,” Abby couldn’t quite bring herself to say the words.

“Aye, but ye cannae make a loaf of bread without flour,” he replied with a smirk, clearly amused by her discomfort.

Abby cheeks warmed at his bluntness, but a soft smile began to form on her lips.

“Flour and bread, is that what ye call it? I suppose next ye’ll tell me that a mon cannae steer a horse and reins.”

Aiden smirked, clearly entertained. He stepped closer, his voice dropping low and serious. “Oh, I’d wager you’d be surprised by what some men can do. There are some truths behind it. No’ everything need be so complicated.” He paused, locking eyes with hers.

The weight of his gaze silenced Abby for a moment. The palpable tension began to fill the air. Abby’s heart skipped a beat. She could feel the heat of his skin radiating through the small space between them.

“Truths?” she breathlessly whispered, swallowing hard. She was suddenly aware of the distance his lips were so dangerously close to hers.

Abby lifted herself onto the tips of her toes, drawing closer until their lips brushed against each other with a tender featherlight touch. The gentle warmth of the moment quickly intensified, transforming the softness into a lingering passion and desire.

“Wait,” she said, breaking off the kiss. “There is something I have to tell ye. There is something about me ye dinna know, and I haven’t shared this wit’ anyone. I am cursed,” she confessed, hoping to ease him into the revelation without overwhelming him.

“Cursed?” he lightly asked in disbelief, as if she was joking with him.

“I can see things, visions before they happen. I see glimpses of the future, and ye were one of them.”

As Abby lowered her gaze, Aiden gently placed his fingers under her chin, tilting her head upward till their eyes met.

“I know.”

Abby cast him a sidelong glance, her brow arching in surprise as she processed his words. “How could you possibly know?” she challenged, her voice laced with disbelief. “We’ve managed to keep it hidden from everyone.”

“I know because I, too, share the same curse.”

“WHAT!” Abby exclaimed, her pulse quickening. “You’re a seer?”

Her emotions surged within her, a thrilling concoction of curiosity and exhilaration. The revelation sent a ripple of excitement through her, for she had never encountered anyone who shared the same extraordinary gift.

“My dreams started about six months ago when I saw this beautiful woman in the market at Thurso. And she has been haunting my dreams e’er since. That woman has my heart. It took some time to realize that that woman is ye, and I think ye and I share the same visions.”

“Then ye know why I cannae marry ye, because if I ever become heavy with child, I willnae survive. Ye need an heir, and I cannae give ye one.”

Aiden’s brow knitted together.

“Oh Abby, that is no’ what happens. Ye dinna die in childbirth,” he said as happy tears filled his eyes.

“How can ye be so certain? I’ve seen it. Once a child is born, everything goes black.”

“I think I understand now how we are connected. In yer visions, ye see only the beginning. In mine, I only see how it ends, like night and day. Ye do no’ die in

childbirth, Abby. E'erything goes black because once ye give birth, 'tis the death of yer gift."

Abby stood there, her mind racing, still processing the unexpected comfort Aiden's words had given her. Her heart was pounding in her chest, but this time, it wasn't from fear or anxiety; it was from a strange, overwhelming relief that she had never experienced.

She had spent so many years in isolation, afraid to let anyone close enough to see that part of her that was so different. But now, everything has shifted.

For the first time, Abby allowed herself to imagine a life that wasn't constrained by the weight of her visions. She has always feared the inevitable, what her gift might cost her. The whispered warnings, the half-dreams, the unspoken assumptions that would not allow her the chance for a normal life and have caused her to vow never to marry, never have children, and never fall in love. But now, all those fears have evaporated.

Her heart swelled with joy and hope that almost felt foreign to her but welcomed. Her visions, while so much a part of her identity, had also shaped her deepest fears. And with that simple thought, she glanced up at Aiden, his eyes steady, his expression tender, and for the first time, Abby realized how excited she was about all life's possibilities before her.

With an everlasting smile and excitement coursing through her, Abby wrapped her arms around Aiden, kissing him with fervor, pouring her heart into that moment, and allowing herself the freedom to fall deeper in love.

"So, it was fate that brought us together after all," she said.

"Well, we certainly do no' want to tempt fate, now do we?"

“What do ye mean?”

“Well, the way I see it, ye’ll just have to marry me,” he said, a playful smile forming on his lips.

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After receiving her sister's blessings and debating for what seemed like hours, Abby stood before the pastor, reciting her vows. She'd waited years for this moment. A moment she never thought would come. The air was thick with the quiet hum of celebration, the soft murmur of guests still lingering in the church, but for Abby, all she could hear was the beating of her own heart.

The evening was drawing to a close. The long hours of anticipation were finally coming to an end. Aiden, ever vigilant and ever protecting, noticed her slight stumble and immediately placed his palm on the small part of her back. Before she could protest, she swooped her into his arms and began ascending the three flights of stairs with Abby in his arms. The flickering candlelight from the scones on the wall illuminated the hall, but all Abby could focus on was Aiden and what was to come once they crossed the threshold and into the bedchamber.

She wasn't ignorant of what happens between a man and a woman. Nor did she fear it. Aiden had assured her countless times over the past few days that he'd be gentle. But she did not need that reminder as he was the gentlest of men she'd ever known. She rested her head against his chest as he finished climbing the stairs. When they reached the top step, Aiden paused outside the door to their room. He lowered her gently to her feet.

"If ye wish to rest tonight," he began to say, but Abby wouldn't hear another word. She'd waited long enough for him to hold her in his arms. For his sweet kisses. For his touch.

"Nay, I wish to no' sleep tonight but to spend it all night wit' ye."

They stepped into the room, the fire burning hot, filling it with intense heat. The door clicked as Aiden locked the door behind him. He stepped toward her and delicately helped her remove the layers of her gown until she was left in nothing but a thin chemise that did nothing to conceal what was underneath. She felt a tinge of embarrassment, with her body exposed to him in a way it never had been before. When the last of her garments slipped over her head, she stood in the soft candlelight, Aiden admiring her with a soft gaze.

“Ye are more beautiful than I could have ever imagined,” he whispered.

Aiden clasped her hands, drawing them to the hemline of his shirt. In that unspoken demand, Abby pulled his shirt over his head, tossing it onto the floor. With a feather touch, she ran her fingers over his shoulders and then across his chest, wanting to know what every inch of him felt like. The tips of the fingers slid down to his waist to the top of his trews. Her gaze dropped to the string that secured his trews. With a swift tug on one cord, then the other, she felt a surge of adrenaline.

She stepped toward him, closing the distance between them, kissing him without hesitation. They guided themselves to the bed with their arms wrapped around one another. Softly, Aiden lowered her onto the bed and climbed up beside her. With roaming hands, he left a trail of kisses along her neck and slowly down her shoulder. She craned her neck, offering him better access, and took in every sensation of his touch.

Abby’s heart pounded as she deepened the kiss, her hands trembling slightly as they rested against his chest. The warmth of his body pressed against hers amplified the burning she felt inside. Every breath, every touch, her body responded, pulling him closer to her until there was no distance left between them.

He was gentle as promised, despite the moments of pain that shortly followed, but did not last long. Pain quickly turned into pleasure like a wave of warmth spreading

through her until a storm began to brew. Her breaths quickened, and the gentleness she once knew had turned into a hunger.

The room was still, save for the steady rhythm of Abby's breath. She lay in Aiden's arms, her head resting against his chest, her body feeling both weightless and grounded at the same time. The silence between them was comfortable, filled with the aftermath of the moment they'd just shared.

Her fingers traced the outline of his chest lazily, feeling the beat of his heart beneath her touch. His arms encircled her, holding her close. She had never known a moment like this when all her emotions, fears, and desires came together in such an overwhelming rush. It was nothing she could explain.

She looked up at Aiden, her eyes tracing the lines of his face, memorizing how he looked, his hair slightly disheveled, his jaw clenched, his breathing ragged. His eyes met hers.

"Are ye all right?" he asked, his voice low, but there was concern.

Abby nodded. "I am more than all right," she said, smiling with her reply. "Ne'er would I have known that fate would lead me to ye, but I am forever gratefully yers."

"Always," he replied, as he placed a soft kiss to her forehead.

Abby closed her eyes, and together, they fell asleep in each other's arms.

One year later...

The storm had rolled in just as Abby predicted, the sky, a blanket of heavy grey clouds. Aiden stood by the window, staring out over the hills of the Highlands, watching the wind lash the trees with an urgency that mirrored the knot of worry in his chest. His heart pounded, knowing what was coming. The past year, with his beloved wife Abby by his side, had been the most remarkable of his life, overflowing with an abundance of love and laughter that felt like it could fill a lifetime. But now, as he sits in the dimly lit room, his heart races with anticipation and concern, waiting for the moment when their first child will enter the world. He knows that this moment—one of joy and wonder—also carries with it a weight of fear that she had so often expressed. The air is thick with emotion as he nervously fidgets, yearning to support her and bravely face the unknown that stretches before them.

The days leading up to the birth were filled with an urgent, desperate sense of anticipation. Aiden refused to leave her side, his presence a constant reassurance even as their small, secluded cottage became a hub of activity. Abby had been adamant that the birth of their child had to happen, and every instinct told him to be terrified he would not lose her.

Abby has never been so tired. The pregnancy, once a source of joy, now weighed heavily on her body. But the knowledge that the child she carried would be the key to ending the warring clans kept her focused. She often wondered whether the vision she'd seen was truly inevitable or if it was simply the price she had to pay for the peace that would follow.

As labor grew near, Aiden took every precaution. He hired the most skilled midwife

he could find and called every nearby healer in the nearest village who could assist. Every moment felt like the calm before the storm, and Abby's life hung in the fragile balance between life and death.

The storm outside raged fiercely on the night Abby went into labor, the wind howling through the trees and snow piling up against the door. Inside, the flickering light of the candles illuminated the room as the midwife worked swiftly, preparing Abby for what was to come. Aiden stood by her side, holding her hand as she gripped tightly, her face pale with the strain of contractions. As the night dragged on, so did the labor. Hours seemed to pass, and the babe had not made his arrival. The midwife worked tirelessly, and all through the agony Abby must have felt, Aiden could see the exhaustion on her face as she held on with every ounce of strength.

“Aiden, come,” Leland urged. “Ye need no’ see this.”

With tears in his eyes, he followed Leland outside the door. As it closed, he fell to his knees. Aiden felt comfort after Leland placed his hand on his shoulder. And then, just as the first light of dawn crept through the window, Abby’s cries were replaced with the sound of a baby’s cry, loud and healthy.

Aiden’s heart skipped a beat as he rushed back into the room. His eyes were immediately drawn to the crying bairn as the midwife swaddled him in a blanket, but then, as he looked at the bed and to Abby’s sweaty face, the truth hit. She was alive.

“Abby,” he whispered, his voice raw with emotion. Ye did it.” He kissed her forehead, then her cheek, and settled on her lips. “Rest now. I will be here when ye wake.”

Her eyes fluttered open, and though the pain still lingered, there was a warmth in her gaze as she saw Aiden sitting in the chair near her bedside, a small squirming bundle in his arms. Her heart caught in her chest at the realization that she was alive and just woken from a dreamless sleep. The silence in her mind was like a vast emptiness. For

the first time, she felt...nothing. She had always been able to see glimpses of the future, small visions that gave her warnings or guidance, but there was nothing but an overwhelming stillness. She couldn't sense anything. She felt as if a part of her was missing, as if a part of her had died. But it had. All this time, she saw her death during childbirth, but it wasn't her demise that would be lost. She didn't see her future past this day because, after today, she'd no longer have her gift. Everything made sense now. All this time, she had been afraid of nothing. And it had nearly cost her the one thing she wanted more than anything. Something she was willing to die for...love.

"Good morning," Aiden said as he stood and walked over to her with the bundle in his hand.

"Would ye like to meet our son?"

She nodded, her heart full. Tears welled in Abby's eyes as she cradled him in her arms. She lovingly gazed at their newborn son, still wrapped in blankets, his tiny fists flailing in the air. He was perfect.

Abby went on to have three more children. As for her son Leland, cursed with a rare gift of his own, he often came to her with visions of his own. Abby could see the weight of his visions upon him, and with a gentle heart, she listened to his concerns, offering comfort as he navigated the complexities of his rare abilities. Together, she and Aiden would help guide him to become one of the greatest laird Scotland had ever seen.

The End