



Her Highlander's Dark Desire (Highlanders of Cadney #13)

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Category: Historical

Description: "I'll mark my claim on ye in every way a man can. And ye'll go from untouched tae well-ravished in a heartbeat."

One thing Alayne Ranald swore she'd avoid? Marriage. Especially to the man who killed her father. But when the King offers a deal to free her brother from gaol...

Now, she shares a bed with the devil she vowed to ruin... unless he ruins her first.

Alayne is more than Darren MacLean bargained for. Despite his better judgement, he isn't sure how much longer he can resist her before giving in to the urge to claim his bride. Even if she's the sister of his biggest foe.

Little does he know that Alayne is hiding a secret that could bring his entire clan to its knees...

Total Pages (Source): 42

BONUS PROLOGUE

Very little struck Darren MacLean as ominous, but the heavy parchment letter, sealed with the king's signet certainly made him uneasy. It hadn't yet been a full season since he had sought audience with the king regarding the feud between himself and Donall Ranald, and he'd hoped to avoid royal notice for as long as possible.

A letter with the formal seal of the king meant a royal edict or a formal proclamation, both of which he could not ignore. At least it had come by courier, however, rather than a messenger with a summons. Whatever the command was, he would have some time to think about how to enact it.

Staring at the sealed envelope wouldn't make it any easier to deal with the contents, whatever they were. With a grimace, Darren slid the point of a letter-opener under the wax seal and broke it open. He opened the envelope carefully, and removed the missive inside. A moment later, he had it unfolded and set on his desk.

Three minutes later, he sat back, letting loose a curse word that even his most battle-hardened guards would have raised an eyebrow at. He closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose, and looked at the parchment again, praying the words had changed, or that he'd read something incorrectly.

To Laird Darren MacLean of the Clan MacLean of the Isle of Mull,

Greetings,

His Royal Majesty, upon further consideration of the events leading up to and occurring during the feud perpetuated between yourself and Lairds Conor and Donall Ranald, has determined that there shall be further steps taken to ensure that Clan Ranald is not left without a laird, and that nay further dispute shall be enacted between your two households.

It has come to His Majesty's attention that Laird Ranald's household has among its members a young woman of marriageable age with no formal contract for betrothal or other consideration to her name. Furthermore, His Majesty's informants have discovered that her pedigree, as the proper-born, legitimate daughter of the previous laird, and the sister of the current Laird Ranald, makes her an acceptable match with which to seal an Alliance By Marriage between your two clans.

It is therefore His Majesty's Royal Command that ye, as the Laird and only unwed male of the leading family of Clan MacLean, shall take as your wife Alayne Ranald, and assume temporary responsibilities over both your clan territories, until such time as Laird Ranald is granted leave to return to his ancestral seat, or a second son is born of your union with Lady Alayne, and raised to the appropriate age to claim those duties for his family.

Ye are hereby commanded, furthermore, to fulfill the terms of this Command in full, including consummation of the marriage, within no more than two months of receiving formal notice of the King's Will. Failure to do so, without presenting a true and unalterable reason such as an inability to fulfill the duties of a husband, as verified by a trained Healer, shall result in the imprisonment of all responsible parties within the King's dungeon, to await His Majesty's pleasure for punishment, and the raising of a younger son or cadet line to the lairdship of both clans.

Yours,

By The King's Command

The line below the final salutation was an illegible mass of flowing script that Darren knew was likely the name of whichever Royal Scribe had been given the task of drafting the letter. It didn't matter. The king's seal was set firmly below that, proof that the order was legitimate.

He felt as if some higher power was laughing at him, tormenting him. He'd refused Alayne's hand once before, after all, and with good reason. The terms of the marriage contract would have put his clan at a disadvantage, and that was bad enough.

The real reason, though, was because he hadn't known the lass, much less cared for her the way a husband, or even a betrothed, should care for his bride. He'd also seen within moments of the first meeting that she was a shy and sheltered lass, nearly beaten into complete submission by her cruel father. He hadn't wanted a meek mouse of a maid for a wife, and wasn't sure he could convince her of that. She'd looked absolutely terrified of him, clinging to her brother like a lifeline.

Darren was many things, an unrepentant kin-killer among them - though only because it had been done in self defense and defense of his brother - but he wasn't the sort of man who would force a frightened and unwilling bride into a wedding she didn't want. Nor was he the type to take a woman into his life without considering her happiness, which Laird Conor Ranald had clearly not cared a tin farthing about.

Darren eyed the missive on his desk, and snorted bitterly. All this time, trying to be an honorable man and act in a manner toward women that his mother would have approved of, and in the end, it was all for naught. He couldn't risk the penalties that might befall his clan if he refused a royal command.

It wouldn't be as terrible as the contract Conor Ranald had tried to force him to accept, at least, it wouldn't be for him and Clan MacLean.

The real question was, how was he supposed to convince a young woman who had

every reason to hate and despise him that he could truly be a good husband to her?

CHAPTER ONE

January 1706, the King's Dungeons

Contemplating murder, especially at a wedding, was probably a sin and most definitely a crime, but Alayne Ranald wasn't sure she cared. As far as she was concerned, she could think of it all she wanted, so long as no one ever caught her indulging in her fantasies. Though for now, she had other, more important things to think about.

The air was damp, cold, and musty, the corridor ill-lit and thick with dust, spider webs and rat droppings, as well as other things she shuddered to think about. On either side of the grim passageway, heavy oak doors reinforced with steel bands stood at regular intervals, each one with a single barred window just above her eye level.

The king's dungeons were not a comfortable place to be, especially not for lady of her status. The presence of the stoic, completely silent guard didn't help. Had her reasons for going there been any less dire, Alayne knew she would likely have decided against making the trek.

But again, those thoughts were less important than her reasons for being there. Alayne steeled her nerves and followed the guard with her head held high.

Finally, they came to a stop in front of a door. The guard pulled a key from his belt and shoved it in the lock, grunting as he turned it. Once the door was unlocked, he looked at her with dull, faintly contemptuous eyes. She could tell he was aware of her discomfort, and probably thought her a soft, weak-willed woman. As far as she was

concerned, all the better.

After a moment, he grunted again. “Ye’ve got five minutes, then I escort ye back or drag ye. Nay arguments.”

He pulled open the door with one meaty fist, grabbed her arm with the other, and shoved her inside. Alayne stumbled, narrowly recovering her balance as the heavy oak panel thudded back into place and latched behind her. She took a moment to glare at it, then turned to stare at the cell’s single occupant.

Donall Ranald had been a healthy, well-built, handsome man when the king’s guards had stuffed him into his cell over a month ago. Now his hair hung in lank, greasy, matted knots around a face adorned with a wild tangle of beard. His clothing was worn, and so grime-encrusted that no washer woman would ever be able to get it clean again. He’d lost weight as well, his clothing loose and his cheeks hollow as he rose from his single, odorous straw pallet and stepped toward her. “Alayne?”

She stepped toward him and wrapped her arms around his malnourished frame, clinging to him with all her strength. Donall was her brother and her lifeline, the only reason she had in the world for living, and being without him for the past two months had been unbearable.

That was why she’d dared bargain with the king to convince him to release her brother. The price was high, but nothing compared to what she was willing to pay to secure her brother’s freedom and safety.

Donall held her close for several moments, then pulled away and looked down at her. His voice was hoarse, but still carried the familiar tone of worry and command as he spoke. “Why are ye here?”

“Tae tell ye ye’ll soon be free, dear braither.” Alayne smiled up at him. “I’ve struck a

bargain with the king. As soon as he kens I've upheld my end o' it, ye'll be released, and be able tae return home."

Donall groaned softly. "Alayne, I didnae want ye involved any further in this. 'Tis me mess and me responsibility, nae yers. I'm the one that chose tae pursue a feud with Clan MacLean tae avenge Faither's death, and I'm the one who was fool enough tae steal away Daemon MacMillan's lover tae try and force Darren MacLean tae surrender. I should have kent better, and kent as well that vengeance against him wouldnae be such an easy matter. I was a fool to rush intae the fight, instead o' taking me time tae plan and avoid any dishonor."

Alayne shook her head. "Ye had the right o' it. Faither's death at the hands o' Keegan MacLean had tae be avenged. At the very least, their clan should have paid blood wergild. The feud is Darren MacLean's fault, nae yers."

Darren MacLean. The very name made her jaw clench and her stomach twist in knots. Laird of the MacLean Clan, he'd been her personal bane ever since he'd claimed the title and her father had tried to arrange a betrothal between them.

It was bad enough that he'd spurned her and refused the alliance, claiming he was too new to his position to consider such a thing. The argument would have held more weight had she not heard that he'd tried to activate an old marriage contract with the Stewart Clan not long after he refused her. From what she knew, he'd have married Isobel Stewart, if his youngest brother hadn't been in love with her first.

Then, when her father had tried to avenge the insult, that same damned brother had killed him, and Darren had never so much as apologized, let alone acted to honor the blood debt he owed for killing the laird of Clan Ranald. It was enough to make her sick, even without the events that had placed her brother in the king's dungeon.

"Ye've that look in yer eye again. Whatever ye're thinking, leave it be, sister. I

dinnae want tae see ye in a cell next tae mine.” Donall’s arms tightened around her shoulders.

“I willnae be.” She hugged him a little tighter. “Though I cannae say I like the alternative. But still, ye’ll likely be free within the fortnight, a month at the latest.”

“Dinnae see how.” Donall frowned at her.

“I told ye, I made a bargain with the king. A part o’ it is I’m tae nae sing the king’s anthem, but the rest o’ it is that I’m tae marry Darren MacLean within the fortnight, and when the king receives proof o’ our marriage, he’ll set ye free.”

“And ye’ll be shackled tae the devil.” Donall winced. “I wish ye hadnae made such a bargain.”

“I’d have made one twice as poor, fer the chance o’ seeing ye free.” Alayne spoke the words with determination. “Ye’re me braither, after all, and the only kin I have.”

“I still dinnae like that ye’re sentencing yerself tae another sort o’ prison, simply tae get me out o’ this one.” Donall looked at her expression and sighed. “But I ken ye and can see there’ll be nay talking ye out o’ this path, and since ye’re so set on it, I’ll give ye me gratitude and me blessings. Along with me hope that ye manage tae find a way tae ensure yer ‘husband’ never touches ye.”

“Dinnae fret on that score, dear braither. I’ve some ideas in mind. Nae the least o’ which is that this marriage forces Laird MacLean tae acknowledge an alliance between our clans, and he has tae abide by the courtesies o’ kin-by-marriage toward everyone in Clan Ranald. Including ye.” Alayne promised him. Donall smiled at her.

The groaning sound of the door opening alerted both of them that her time was up. Alayne gave her brother one last, fierce hug, then stepped out into the hall before she

could be dragged out by the stone-faced guard. She waited while the door was locked, then followed the man. She made sure to keep her head down and her expression neutral, the image of a properly demure young lady. Behind that facade, her mind was full of plans.

Darren MacLean would have her as a bride, and the hostilities between their clans would be ended, but that didn't mean he himself would have any peace. Alayne was determined that he should pay dearly for the harm he'd done their clan.

For he was the devil incarnate, so far as she was concerned, and Alayne was determined to see that he experienced his own version of hell. And that he never bore a legitimate heir for his line. That such actions would assure no second son ever claimed Ranald – and that the clan would return to the Ranald line and her brother's eventual children that much sooner – was simply an additional benefit. That was a small vengeance, since he had a younger brother who could inherit, but she would take it all the same.

And if her actions convinced Darren MacLean to send her back to her family, or to otherwise exile her from his presence – well, the king had only decreed that the marriage would take place. He hadn't said how long it had to last, nor that husband and wife were required to live in the same household.

Alayne intended to see to it that Darren was eager to send her somewhere else – and she knew exactly what her opening moves would be.

CHAPTER TWO

Two weeks later...

Darren hadn't expected to have a particularly happy marriage, not once the king had decreed he would marry Alayne Ranald. However, by all the powers that existed, he'd not expected to be furious and miserable before the ceremony even started. And yet, his temper was on the verge of snapping, and he was seriously considering getting drunk for the first time in years.

Blind, stinking, can't even stagger his way to bed drunk. God above knew that, if this was a precursor for what married life would be like, anywhere was likely to be more comfortable than his marriage bed. Darren sighed and looked about the small reception room he'd chosen to hold the wedding in.

Alayne was more than half an hour late, for all that he'd sent maids up multiple times to offer assistance. He'd even sent Lyla, his ally Daemon's new bride, to speak to the girl, and got nothing but excuses in return. He was of half a mind to go up there and drag her downstairs himself, but he kept himself in check.

It didn't help that the weather was abysmal, and had been for days. Ice and snow blanketed the ground, and bitter winter winds off the Firth of Lorne made stepping outside an ordeal. Daemon and Lyla had been lucky to make it as far as MacLean Keep, for both his brothers had been unable to make the journey. He'd always hoped to have Marcus and Keegan by his side when he eventually wed, and instead, his groomsman would be Daemon MacMillan.

All of that, and it didn't even begin to cover the fact that he'd never wanted to marry Alayne in the first place. The bad blood between them made the prospect unappealing, to say nothing of the fact that he'd rejected a marriage proposal for her before.

He glanced at the clock again, then at the priest, who was looking visibly weary, and not a little uncertain about performing the ceremony. He looked at the doors again. He hadn't wanted to start his married life by dragging his bride to the altar, but...

"Dinnae even think it. I ken ye're impatient, but dinnae dae anything rash." Lyla laid a hand on his arm and shook her head. "She'll come. She was the one that sought the marriage tae end hostilities, and she'll nae go back on it, I'm thinking. Especially nae with the king's order."

"She's late."

"Aye, and likely nervous, as well as unhappy."

Darren snorted. "She's nae the only one unhappy."

Daemon spoke up, putting an arm around his wife's shoulders as he did. "Och, we all ken that, Darren, but she is the only one who comes tae the wedding without any kith nor kin at her side, and that cannae make her feel comfortable."

Darren grimaced, but he knew the words were true. He also knew that Alayne blamed him for that fact, and with good reason. His younger brother had killed her father while rescuing him from the Ranald dungeons almost two years ago, and he himself had delivered her brother to the king's dungeons. It wasn't his fault that she'd lived a fairly secluded life, kept almost a prisoner by her father, but it was his fault that she'd not escaped sooner, and that she'd suffered the embarrassment of being rejected as a marriage prospect.

He had offered to seek out any friends she might have, even a maid or cook or village lass, to stand with her for the ceremony. It had only earned him an icy glare and the sarcastic question of why he'd think her father would have permitted her friends among the servants, when he'd allowed her none among ladies her own station.

Lyla would be the witness for Alayne, but she would walk to the altar alone, and there was no one to give her hand over to him in marriage.

The door creaked open, and one of the maids he'd sent to aid Alayne in preparing for the ceremony came in. "Me laird, Miss Alayne is ready now."

Darren heaved a sigh of relief. "Good. We'll begin in a moment." He gestured to the musicians to begin the wedding march. The guests – Daemon and his friend Ryan, as well as Darren's advisor Bard, the council members, and his new war leader Adrian – shuffled into place on either side of the aisle. Darren had specifically asked for there to be equal members on the bride's side and his own, to make it a little less uncomfortable for Alayne.

The music began, and Darren turned to face the doors as they swung open to reveal his bride. It took everything he had not to groan, or swear, as she stepped into view.

Alayne was beautiful, with her chestnut hair and green eyes, and she'd taken care with her appearance. She'd also dressed in a dark, plain dress, understated jewelry, and a dark shawl draped over her head as a 'veil'. The outfit was one more suited to lighting a funeral pyre than to becoming a wife. Her whole aspect was one of mourning, rather than celebration, and the implication was clear.

He'd known she was likely to be unhappy to be ordered to wed him, but he hadn't realized she would go so far to demonstrate her displeasure. His stomach knotted with tension, as he forced a pleasant expression onto his face – as pleasant as he could manage, given his mood and the tracing of tattoos that he'd used to hide the scars on

his body. He knew he looked fierce and warlike at the best of times, but he did his best to present a welcoming face to his bride.

She stopped at his side, and he offered her his arm as courtesy. She ignored it. Darren sighed again, then shifted so that he was offering her his hand instead. “Ye need tae take me hand. ‘Tis part o’ the ceremony.”

Alayne gave him a look that suggested she’d rather stick her hand in a midden heap, but she did reach out and lay the very tips of her fingers on his hand. Darren took a deep breath, and reminded himself that Alayne had every reason to be unhappy. He could bear with it, even if her actions made him angry at the deliberate and very public snubbing.

The priest stepped forward to speak the opening lines. “Who comes this day to be joined in holy matrimony?”

“I, Alayne Ranald, sister tae Laird Ranald, come this day tae be wed tae this... man .” Her voice was strong and clear, but she made no effort to hide her dislike of him.

Darren cleared his throat, and spoke his own words. “I, Darren MacLean, Laird o’ Clan MacLean, come this day tae be wed tae the Lady Alayne.” He kept his voice even and his tone courteous, mindful of the things Daemon and Lyla had said to him earlier.

The priest intoned a short blessing. Then gave a speech on the sanctity of marriage and the importance of coming into wedlock with the proper mindset. Darren fought to keep a scowl off his face. He’d told the priest it was an arranged marriage, planned solely to form an alliance and end the fighting between their clans. Did the man really think either one of them wanted to be here, let alone feel a deep sense of ‘loving commitment to a lifelong partnership’?

Finally, they got to the wedding vows. “Dae ye, Darren MacLean, take this woman tae be yer wife, tae have and tae hold, tae care fer and tae guard, in wealth and poverty, sickness and health, troubles and joy, fer as long as ye both shall live?”

He didn’t want to. Nonetheless, Darren forced himself to speak the words. “I dae”

“Ye pledge yer troth tae her, and promise tae take nae other intae yer bed or yer heart?”

“I dae.” That at least was easier to promise – he knew his own honor would insist on faithfulness to his new wife, no matter how difficult she made his life.

The priest turned to Alayne. “Dae ye, Alayne Ranald, take this man tae be yer husband, tae have and tae hold, tae care fer and tae stand beside, in wealth and poverty, sickness and health, troubles and joy, fer as long as ye both shall live?”

Silence greeted the question. Darren turned his head to look at Alayne, and found her standing with her lips pressed tightly closed in silent refusal.

Whispers spread throughout the room. The priest looked uncomfortable as he looked imploringly between the two of them. “Lady Alayne?”

She remained silent. Darren clenched his teeth and nudged her leg with the toe of his boot. Alayne turned to give him a look that, if looks could kill, would have slain him on the spot. Darren stared back, refusing to stand down. The vows were part of the ceremony – a vital part without which the whole arrangement could be declared null and void.

“Lady Alayne... yer vow?”

Another piercing glare, and then she finally turned to the priest. “I suppose I dae.”

The words were begrudging, but at least they weren't a refusal.

“Dae ye pledge yer troth tae him, and promise tae take nae other intae yer bed or yer heart?”

Silence again, and Darren prodded her with his boot a little more forcefully. Alayne's lip curled in a brief sneer before she deliberately smoothed her expression over into one of disdainful indifference. “Aye, since I suppose I must, or we'll nae ever leave here.”

The priest was wise enough to leave it at that. He offered up another blessing, and a brief discourse on the expectations of marriage – as if they didn't know what was expected of them – then announced. “By the power vested in me, I dae pronounce ye husband and wife. Ye may kiss yer bride.”

Darren wasn't expecting to be met with any enthusiasm, but he wasn't expecting Alayne to jerk back as if he'd tried to slap her. Her eyes blazed fury at him. “Dinnae even try. I'll nae have ye kissing me.”

Darren felt his face burn with mortification as another wave of whispers, and not a few poorly muffled chuckles, went through the room. He was half tempted to let her have her way, but the kiss was meant to seal the bond. It was another part of the ceremony that couldn't be ignored.

He stepped close, and caught her arm when she tried to back away. He lowered his voice to a deep rumble, audible only to the two of them. “I dinnae demand a proper kiss, but 'tis part o' the wedding tae have one, as a sealing o' the vows. Make it as chaste as ye like, but I will be kissing ye.”

“Is me wish tae count fer naething?”

“Yer wish counts well enough, but I’ll nae yield on this.” He couldn’t afford to. Bad enough that she’d made it plain there was no love lost between them, and humiliated him in front of his clan. He couldn’t have her leaving any loophole to say the marriage was invalid. Especially not in a situation where she might be able to give him the blame, and thereby force him to incur the king’s wrath.

She glared at him, and Darren stared back, determined to keep his word. Finally, she tossed her head. “Very well. Ye may kiss me on the cheek, if ye must.” She turned her head and presented her left cheek to him.

He was tempted to grab her chin and turn her back to face him, so he could insist on a proper kiss. He restrained himself. He’d never forced his attentions, or physical intimacy, on a woman, and he wasn’t going to start now, even if she was his wife.

He bent and kissed her gently but firmly on the cheek, then stepped back to give her some space. He wasn’t at all surprised when she gave him a venomous look and swiped a hand across her cheek in apparent disgust.

The priest once again proved his wisdom and hastened the dismissal. “I give ye the Laird and Lady MacLean!”

Customarily, Darren would have offered her his arm or his hand to lead her from the room to the Great Hall for the wedding feast. Given her reactions, he thought it better to choose a different course of action. He bowed to Alayne. “Will ye join me at the door fer greetings, me lady?”

She gave him a single, sullen nod and walked beside him to the door, then stood at his right. Darren took a deep breath as the guests lined up to greet and congratulate them. The council members were first, the Elders and then the younger members of the council. Then came his friends and family.

Daemon and Lyla were last in line, behind Adrian. Darren knew she'd met both of them, and been Lyla's caretaker during her brief captivity. Still, he introduced them dutifully. "Me lady, I present tae ye Laird Daemon MacMillan, and his wife, Lady Lyla MacMillan. Laird, Lady, allow me tae introduce ye tae me wife, the Lady Alayne MacLean."

He didn't miss the flash of ire in her face as he spoke her new name, and resigned himself to keeping a sharp watch on his cup during the feast. He didn't think she would outright poison him, but there were plenty of things that, if slipped into a cup of mead, would make him uncomfortable for days.

Daemon and Lyla offered a courteous greeting and a softly spoken "Congratulations, me laird, me lady." Then they exited to the Great Hall, and he was left with Alayne.

By custom, they would both attend the feast, while the married chamber, and more importantly, the marriage bed, were prepared for them. However, Darren wasn't sure either of them could stomach eating together. His gut felt tied into knots, and she looked as if she wanted to spit at him.

"Dae ye wish tae go tae the wedding feast, or dae ye wish tae retire? I ken this has been a difficult day fer ye, and I'll respect either course o' action. I can make yer excuses easily enough."

Alayne gave him a contemptuous look, followed by a wicked smile. "Och, o' course I'll attend the feast. 'Tis part of the marriage customs and ceremony, is it nae?"

"'Tis. And ye're more than welcome, if that's yer wish." He offered her his arm. "Shall we enter?"

She refused his arm, but did consent to step into place beside him. Darren took a moment to steel himself for the likely ordeal of the meal, then strode through the door

and down the short corridor to the Great Hall.

The room was filled with whispers, all of which stopped at their appearance, and Darren clenched his teeth again. No doubt all the talk was about how Alayne had made a token refusal of him not once, but thrice, at the altar.

Given his tenuous position already, the council was going to be insufferable for days, and he'd be weeks, if not years, repairing the damage to his reputation.

They made their way to the head table and their chairs. Darren pulled Alayne's out for her. Alayne stepped in front of it, but didn't sit. "I wish tae say something afore the feast begins. Am I permitted that?"

Darren suppressed a groan. He already knew that whatever she intended to say, it would mean nothing good for him. However, she was the bride, and it was the right of the wedding party to make speeches and toasts. He dipped his head in agreement, and moved to stand before his own chair.

Alayne looked out at the small assembly of guests. Silence fell. Darren braced himself, sure he was about to be embarrassed once again.

He wasn't disappointed, as Alayne lifted her cup. "Gathered guests, we come taeday tae mark the end o' a life – the end o' me life, the freedom I've had and me peace o' mind. We come tae see me clan bound over tae those who have already deprived it o' two lairds. I stand here, with the man who was me braither's sworn enemy, nae out o' love, but out o' duty tae me clan and the king. I stand here, kenning I am shackled tae a husband I didnae choose, all fer the sake o' ending a feud that was also nae o' me making."

She lifted her cup higher. "Let us drink taenight, in remembrance o' a life where choices werenae dictated by conquerors, but guided by kinfolk, and in remembrance

o' the freedom and dignity that a maiden may have, and wife may nae."

She drank, and Darren felt his gut roil as a good number of the assembly followed her lead. Not Daemon or Lyla or Ryan, he was pleased to note, and not Adrian or Bard. But the fact that most of the council seemed to side with his new wife meant more headaches for him.

He'd tried to put up with her antics, but enough was enough. Darren reached out and took the cup from her, then secured her arm in a firm grip, though he was careful not to exert bruising force. "Come speak with me a moment, wife."

He didn't give her a choice as he all but dragged her back to the nearest secluded alcove. He would have taken her from the hall entirely, but didn't trust her not to pretend that he'd hurt her if they were out of sight for an extended period of time.

Once they were far enough away to not be overheard, Darren released her. Alayne's expression was full of rage, but Darren gave her no chance to vent it. She'd had far too many such chances already. It was his turn to vent some frustration. "What dae ye think ye're doing?"

The direct question at least gave her pause. "What dae ye mean?"

"The way ye're acting. I ken ye despise me. A blind man on the other side o' the Highlands could tell that much. But what dae ye mean by continually shoving it in me face, and insulting me? Like it or nae, and I ken very well which ye feel, we're married now. The clans and the king will expect us tae make a decent showing o' it, and ye ken that as well as I."

"And what am I tae make o' that, if ye think I'm lacking thus far?" Her eyes sparkled with anger, her chin up in defiance.

“Courtesy. The courtesy due a husband from his wife. I’ve nae asked fer much, but casual contact and a kiss or two is expected, and if I’m tae be married, then I’ll have that much from me wife at least.” Darren scowled at her.

Alayne’s eyes narrowed, her body tensing in clear outrage. “Ye call that courtesy due a husband? Kisses and embraces and holding hands? And why should I be giving ye any o’ it, when ye’ve so much already, me laird .” She spat the words like a curse. “After all, ye’ve kith and kin tae support ye through a disappointing marriage, and tae coddle yer pride if ‘tis bruised. I’ve nae one, nae friend nor family member – nae faither, maither, sister or brother. And two o’ those can be laid directly at yer feet, fer ‘tis yer fault me faither lies buried and me brother in gaol.”

Her words were sharp as knives, and nearly as cutting. Darren winced as a stab of guilt passed through him. She was speaking the truth, but even so, he couldn’t simply let her use that to excuse her continual insults and mockery. “Yer braither and faither attacked me and declared feud on me clan. I didnae have much choice. And yer faither would as soon have killed ye as me and mine, the day me brother dispatched him.”

“Mayhap. We’ll never ken. But whatever me faither was, whatever kind o’ man he was, he was still me faither, and me kin. Why should I forgive the man who had him killed?”

Darren bit the inside of his cheek to avoid speaking words he knew he’d later regret. “I told ye, I didnae ask fer forgiveness. Only courtesy, and the respect due a husband.”

“Ye’ll get both when I think they’re merited.” Alayne tossed her head. “And as fer yer ideas o’ kissing, or anything more o’ me ‘wifely duties’, I tell ye this now: Ye’ll take them by force, or have naething from me at all, fer I’ll nae kiss nor bed me faither’s killer and me braither’s gaoler.”

Before he could find a response, she whirled around and stalked back to the table. Darren followed, a massive headache forming behind his eyes and around to the back of his skull as he did.

He understood Alayne's position, of course. He wasn't exactly enthralled with the idea of bedding her, and he certainly wasn't planning on forcing his attentions on her. But she didn't have to be so sharp about it.

Adrian stood as he approached, the pale hue of his skin and the slightly forced smile on his face a clear indicator that the gossip had been going strong – and it was entirely possible that a servant would have heard them speaking, which would have fueled even more talk. The war leader lifted his cup. “A toast tae Laird MacLean, who is generous enough tae take someone like me intae his clan and his home. May his marriage be prosperous and peaceful.”

Darren snorted into his cup, and Alayne gave hers a look that suggested someone had switched her wine for horse piss. Adrian might wish him a prosperous and peaceful marriage, but Darren was fairly certain it was a futile wish.

A guard at the door interrupted his thoughts, as servants began to bring out the meal. He started to rise, but Bard, his chief steward and advisor, waved him back and went to answer it. He came back moments later with a sealed missive and a worried expression. “Me laird, I believe ye’ll want tae read this immediately.”

Darren took it, and suffered an intense urge to bang his head on the table when he saw the royal seal on the parchment. He restrained himself, and broke the seal open.

Twenty seconds later, he was biting his lip to avoid cursing and scandalizing his guests with his own intemperate display.

The message had clearly been delayed by the weather, but that made it no less

ominous. Bard leaned over from his chair. “Ill news?”

“The king is sending a man, a royal messenger, tae verify the wedding has taken place. Nae just taken place, but been consummated. We’re required tae provide proof – the sheets from our marriage bed, tae be precise.”

Bard gave him a sympathetic look as Darren folded the message and stuffed it into his sash.

They both knew the king required evidence of the ‘claiming’ of Alayne’s maidenhead as proof. The blood shed by a virgin on her wedding night.

Darren knew, as surely as he knew the sun rose in the east, that any attempt to secure such proof would leave his blood on the sheets, not Alayne’s.

CHAPTER THREE

The wedding feast was over, at long last, and Alayne was more than ready to leave the hall. She'd obliged Darren's request to be civil – more or less. She'd ignored him for the majority of the meal, and been glad that he was content to leave it at that.

Dining among those who had so recently been her enemies was uncomfortable at best. Dining beside the man she detested more than any other was an ordeal she wasn't sure she could have stomached at all, if she hadn't been so hungry, and if she hadn't known she'd need her strength for what came next.

They would be expected to sleep together. The idea of sharing a bed with Darren MacLean, new husband or not, made her shiver. She would have liked to say it was with pure, unadulterated disgust, but in the privacy of her own mind, she knew that wasn't true. There was a good deal of long-remembered humiliation there as well.

Darren MacLean. She could still remember when her father had informed her that she'd been offered to him as a potential bride. She'd been terrified of the man who looked like a barbarian raider more than he did a proper laird. The tracing of knot-work patterns, laced between symbols she didn't understand the significance of, made him look wild and threatening.

She'd also been intrigued. She was curious about the reasons behind the emblems he chose, in among the lines. His clan emblem and war cry she understood, but she'd wondered why he'd chosen a thistle, a celtic cross, and some of the other symbols.

That hadn't been the only thing that interested her about him, when her father first

suggested the match. Under the tattoos and scars, he was a relatively handsome man, and from what she'd seen, he wasn't the worst person her father could have chosen. At the very least, she'd thought that being his wife might offer her more freedom than she had as her father's unwanted daughter.

But then he'd refused her. Decided she wasn't good enough to be his wife for some reason. Whether it was her looks or her family or her small dowry, she didn't know, and it didn't matter. All that mattered was that Darren had refused her, and even gone so far as to mention some 'prior contract' to the Stewart Clan. He'd claimed it meant he could not accept the suit from her father, but it was a lie.

She could have endured it, if he had married the Stewart lass. It would have stung to be refused for another, but she could understand the demands of honor. Instead, his younger brother had fulfilled the contract, leaving her scorned and Darren unwed. Her reputation, already precarious through her father's dislike, had plunged from relative obscurity to outright notoriety, as people questioned what had made Darren refuse her.

Even worse were the whispers that had begun after her father had attempted to force Darren to wed her and been killed. Then the whispers had changed tone to something akin to horror and distaste, with everyone wondering what sort of problem or curse she bore that Laird MacLean would resort to killing another laird rather than accept her hand in matrimony.

It was a cruel joke to now be wed to the man who'd put her through such shame – far worse to be expected to bed him and sire his sons. And the worst of it was, she still felt some lingering hurt over his rejection. Despite her rage and her dislike, some small part of her heart was still the same as when she had been the maiden who'd looked at him two years before and felt a glimmer of hope – the faint hope that she'd be wanted, perhaps even desired by such a man as he.

Alayne clenched her hands in her skirts, annoyed by the way her thoughts were going. Yes, she'd once hoped for a wedding, but that was before. She'd not let the lingering remnants of her foolish naivete influence her actions now. Darren MacLean was her enemy, husband or not, and she'd stick a knife in her own heart before she let him touch her in that manner.

The last of the plates were cleared away, and Darren rose from his seat. "'Tis late. Let us retire, wife." He offered her his hand.

Alayne gave him the coldest look she could manage, and rose to stand beside him. She'd much rather have run from the room, or refused him outright, but she'd pushed her luck far enough. If she acted too fractious, the king might decide she'd changed her mind and refuse to release her brother.

Darren led her through the quiet halls to the laird's family wing. They passed the door to the room Darren had given her for when she arrived, and Alayne resisted the urge to dart into it, slam the door in his face, and lock it tight. Perhaps even barricade it.

For all she knew, there were spies among the guests, or the servants, who would tell the king if she did not enter her husband's chambers for their wedding night. The king's demand had insisted on a 'true' marriage, a consummated one. She might have no intention of fulfilling that demand, but she couldn't reveal that until her brother was free.

Two doors down, Darren opened a room and led her inside. A warm fire blazed in a front room, a table for meals set with two chairs and a comfortable array of furniture arrayed in the rest of the space. Then Darren led her to another door, which opened to reveal a slightly smaller bedchamber, dominated by the large bed in the center of the room.

Alayne stepped inside, noting that her clothing chest had already been placed in the

room, and a night dress laid on the bed for her. Alayne felt her lip curl as she eyed the garment. She turned to find Darren standing in the doorway, watching with an impassive expression on his tattooed face. “Are ye too much o’ a beast tae even give me some privacy fer changing?”

Darren’s jaw tightened, and she could see frustration in his eyes. “Ye’re me wife, and I ken I’ll see plenty o’ ye, sooner or later.”

“Sooner or later doesnae mean now, ye great boor.” Alayne folded her arms. “I’ll nae be changing with ye in the room.”

Darren scowled, but he did step back and shut the door behind him. Alayne hurried to the bed and removed her dress, then went to her clothing chest and opened it. From it, she drew out every chemise and night shirt she owned, and a pair of leggings that she usually wore in winter under her long skirts, to keep warm. She pulled them on, then began putting on the rest of the clothing, one layer after another, until she felt stifled by the weight.

It might be uncomfortable to sleep dressed in such a manner, but she intended her message to Darren MacLean to be clear – he’d not be getting a hand, or any other part of him, near her maidenhead. Not tonight or any other.

The door opened again just as she slipped the last garment into place. “What are ye...?” Darren stopped, staring at her with a raised eyebrow. “Ye cannae seriously mean tae sleep like that.”

“I can and I dae, fer this way I’m certain sure ye willnae be touching me, let alone aught else.”

Darren stared at his new wife, unsure if he wanted to break into laughter or thump his head against the nearest wall in frustration. She was wearing enough clothing to count

as quilted armor, by his estimation, and glaring at him as if she expected him to pounce on her and try to rip it all off. It was ludicrous.

He sighed. “Ye dinnae need tae go tae such lengths. I’ve never forced a woman in me life, and I’ll nae be starting with ye. ‘Tis a willing lass I’ll have in me bed, or nae any lass at all.”

“Then it will be nae any lass at all.” She snapped. “I may have tae sleep in the same chambers as ye, but I willnae be sleeping with ye or beside ye.”

Darren fought back a groan. “Ye ken we’re wed, aye? ‘Twould be best tae make some effort at a civil marriage, at the least, even if we dinnae care much fer each other.”

He knew he’d said something wrong from the way her eyes flashed with renewed fury, but he had no idea what it was he’d said that had angered her.

“Dinnae care much fer each other? I’d sooner sleep with an adder than with ye.”

“I’m nae so happy either, but neither o’ us have much choice in the matter, lass.” Darren bit the inside of his cheek in an effort to hold his temper. His head was throbbing, his stomach uneasy, and he was tired. He wanted to sleep, not fight with a madwoman.

She was so determined to hate him, and make life as difficult as possible. He wondered what she’d say if he told her about the letter he’d received at dinner. Would she comply, or would she fight him all the harder?

He wasn’t sure, but he did know that the king’s messenger would come, sooner or later. The weather that had delayed message and courier couldn’t last forever. And when the man arrived, they’d best have a wedding sheet, unless they both wanted to

risk being thrown in gaol for ignoring the king's orders.

Even so, he was fairly certain that now wasn't the best time to tell her that. She was already far too angry, and she might accuse him of falsifying the letter and the command in an effort to force her. He didn't think his temper would hold if she accused him of such things. Better to leave the letter for later.

He sighed and decided to address a different issue. "If ye want tae sleep like that, then so be it. I said I'd nae force ye intae something ye didnae want, and I'll keep me word. But there's only one bed, so we'll have tae share that at least."

"I willnae." Her voice was laced with venom, and Darren felt his headache pulse with pain. "I'll nae share a bed with ye, even just tae sleep. I'd rather sleep in the barn."

"That's nae an option." Darren scowled. He wanted to just collapse into the bed and sleep, but he couldn't bring himself to be so rude. She might be acting the part of a harriidan, but she was still his wife. She was also, as Lyla had pointed out, a lonely girl without any family or friends around her, wed to a man who had been an enemy to her clan. "Fine. I'll sleep elsewhere. On the floor or, the rug in front o' the fire."

He'd had worse beds, and it would be worth the stiff muscles he'd have in the morning if it meant he'd get a little peace. Better still if the gesture appeased her temper. Unfortunately, that didn't seem to be the case, as she glared at him again. "Ye think I'd want tae sleep in yer bed? I may have tae sleep in yer chambers, but 'twill take an act o' God tae make me set a finger on that bed." She emphasized the point by stepping back to the far wall.

Darren scowled. "I'll nae be in it."

"I dinnae trust ye nae tae come sneaking under the covers when ye think I'm sleeping. And even if I did, I'd nae want tae sleep on the mattress o' me faither's

killer.” She folded her arms.

Darren groaned and rubbed his forehead. “God above woman, can ye nae cease being contrary over everything? Take the bed. One o’ us deserves a good night’s sleep, and I’ll nae be the sort o’ man who denies his wife comfort.”

“So ye admit ye only offer it tae me in order tae save yer pride and reputation. All the more reason fer me tae nae take it.” Alayne’s chin went up, her expression mulish as she stared him down, daring him to do something about it.

He wasn’t going to take the bed, and let her start telling tales of how cruel he was, leaving her to sleep on the floor while he slept in comfort.

“As ye will.” He went to a chest and withdrew a winter blanket, scented with mountain pine sent by his brother Keegan, and tossed it in her direction. “Sleep where ye will. I’m after sleeping in the other room by the fire.”

Alayne snatched up the blanket with a scowl and promptly began arranging it on the floor in silent challenge. Darren heaved an exasperated sigh, then took the coverlet off the bed, along with a pillow, and stalked back into the main room. The fire was down to embers in the hearth, and he lowered himself to the thick rug in front of it, discarding boots and belt as he did so. The floor underneath the rug was unforgiving stone, but Darren stretched out on it with a sigh of relief.

The hard surface wouldn’t do his back or his head any favors, but he was long past caring. At least out here, he could get some sleep without worrying that his new wife might try to strangle him in the night. That was good enough for now.

Tomorrow, he would figure out what to do about the king’s messenger, and the ultimatum he’d been given in regards to the relationship between him and his confrontational new wife.

CHAPTER FOUR

A layne woke early after a restless night. The blanket Darren had given her had served as something of a cushion, but the floor was still far from comfortable, and her many layers of clothing had made her feel far too warm.

There was no sign of Darren in the bedroom. Apparently he'd been serious about not sleeping in the same room. On the one hand, she was relieved. On the other, she was faintly disappointed. She'd thought he might make more effort to win her over. At the very least, she'd thought he would eventually take the bed. Sleeping on the floor was, after all, undignified for a laird.

It was irritating, to have him behave so properly. It was difficult to find excuses to be angry with him, when he was so... she couldn't call him weak, but he wasn't treating her with the callousness she expected from the man who'd imprisoned her brother.

Speaking of her brother - she needed to have Darren write the letter that would confirm their marriage to the king. That letter was essential to ensuring her brother's freedom. The knowledge that she needed Darren to agree to write it made her mouth twist in distaste. To secure his cooperation, she might need to be polite, even somewhat friendly with him. The idea made her stomach feel queasy.

She didn't hear any stirring from the other room, so she decided to go to the window. If nothing else, she could see if there was a way to escape once her brother was free. She opened the shutters and opened the room to the clear morning air.

Moments later, she stepped back, her face pale and her hand shaking, her breath

coming in sharp, panting gasps. She quickly shut the window and moved to lean against the wall, shivering.

She'd known that MacLean Keep was on a plateau, situated on a higher position to be able to keep better watch over the village nearby, and the firth beyond it. She hadn't realized that the laird's chambers were in the back of the keep, at the back edge of the plateau. Below the window, a cliff dropped off in a steep and ragged descent.

She'd always hated heights. Ever since she was a child and had nearly fallen from the battlements due to a careless gesture from her father. She could tolerate being on a horse, but that was about the limit. Seeing the rocky ground so far below made her nearly nauseous with fear.

There was no reason for Darren MacLean to know about her fear. Nonetheless, he'd inadvertently managed to trap her quite neatly. As long as she was forced to share his chambers, her escape routes were limited. And with him sleeping in the front room, they were virtually non-existent.

Alayne swallowed hard to calm her breathing, then went to prepare for the day. Fright or not, she had things she needed to attend to, not the least of which was making sure her despised husband sent the letter that would secure her brother his freedom.

She felt a slight satisfaction at the knowledge that Darren MacLean would be responsible for freeing the man he'd imprisoned, without even knowing he'd done so until it was too late.

Alayne had just finished dressing when she heard the sounds of movement and muffled swearing from the other room. She went to the door and opened it to find Darren buckling his belt into place, his boots already on. He glanced up as she entered. "Good. Ye're awake. I've business tae attend tae, but I wanted tae speak tae ye afore I left."

A slight sense of unease went through her. “And what would ye be wanting tae discuss with me?”

“A letter I received last night.”

Alayne recalled the missive his second-in-command had brought to the banquet. She’d assumed it was some sort of official correspondence, but given it no more thought. “Are ye saying it concerns me?”

“Aye, though I ken ye’d rather it didnae.” He set the missive on the table close to the fireplace. “’Tis a royal message, tae say that a royal courier will be coming tae verify the wedding has been performed and consummated. We’re expected tae provide our wedding sheet as proof.”

A cold spike of mingled anger and fear shot through her. “Wedding sheet?”

“Aye. Ye can read it fer yerself. But ‘tis what’s expected, so ye’ll have tae decide what ye want tae dae about fulfilling the king’s demand. If ye dinnae stop being difficult, who kens what might happen. The king might even choose tae annul the marriage and punish us both fer noncompliance.”

His eyes were inscrutable as he gazed at her. “I’ll leave ye tae think over the situation. In the meantime, if ye’ll excuse me, I’ve other concerns tae deal with this morning.” He gave her a stiff nod and left before she could gather her wits enough to respond.

Alayne reached out and picked up the letter. She opened it, half-hoping the whole thing was just a crude joke, or an attempt to pressure her into yielding to him. Unfortunately, the letter was all too real, and the seal was one she recognized as genuine.

Her plan of having Darren write a letter was meaningless. The king demanded greater proof. She should have expected it, but the thought of consummating the marriage, even to secure Donall's freedom, made her stomach roil even worse than the sight of the drop beneath the bedroom window. She certainly had no desire to eat breakfast after reading that letter.

She wanted to see Donall freed as soon as possible, but how was she to go about it, when the king demanded the one action she simply could not bear to commit?

"She's determined tae be as difficult as possible." Darren blocked a swipe of Adrian's sword, and returned with a thrust of his own. "Doesnae matter what I dae, or how I try tae be kind tae her, or accommodate her fears and anger, she fights me."

"And ye said the king's sending a special messenger tae verify the marriage?" Adrian blocked in turn, and the two broke free of the clinch and began to circle, looking for an opening. "When?"

"Dinnae ken, precisely. The weather likely delayed them on the road, but how far behind the message they are, there's nae way tae ken. It could be taeday, taemorrow, or any time within the next seven-day." Darren unleashed his frustration in a flurry of blows that Adrian just barely fended off.

His war leader evaded, then stepped back, ceding his place to Daemon. The laird of MacMillan Clan met Darren's attack effortlessly, and put him back on the defensive. "Surely at least sharing a bedchamber is a start."

"Couldnae tell ye. She refused the bed, and I couldnae sleep there with her on the floor. She'd have cause tae take offense in that case, so she wound up sleepin' on the floor by the bed, and I slept by the fire in the front room." Darren grunted as he parried a strike that almost clipped his side.

“Ye’re joking. Ye slept on the floor?” Bard raised an eyebrow.

“What else was I tae dae? Couldnae sleep in another room.”

“Why nae? The messenger wouldnae need tae ken.” Ryan asked.

“Wouldnae put it past him tae ask, and I cannae lie. I dinnae like falsehoods.” Darren scowled, and ceded his own place to let Bard spar with Daemon. His own mood was too dark for sparring. He was likely to strike too hard, or too recklessly when he was in such a mood.

“Ye could try flowers. Special privileges. Take her on a ride. What sort o’ things does she like?”

Darren winced. “I dinnae ken. I only ken her faither kept her sequestered much o’ her life. And that she’s close tae her braither, and loyal tae clan and kinfolk. Little enough, and ye can imagine she’s nae likely tae tell me aught any time soon.”

“Och, that makes it more difficult.” Ryan grimaced in sympathy. “I suppose telling the king’s man she wasnae a maiden when ye bedded her is out o’ the question. Or saying she didnae bleed? Or that ye couldnae bed her because she’s in her moon cycle?”

“The first I’ll nae be saying because ‘tis nae only a falsehood, but it would shame her. The second he’s nae likely tae believe. And as fer the third, he’d likely make us prove that as well.”

Adrian snorted. “I dinnae see why ye’d fret about shaming her. Serve the wench right, after the display she put on at the wedding yesterday.”

“Doesnae mean I have tae sink tae her level, any more than I have tae follow the bad

examples o' me parents. Ye should ken as well as I why I'd nae want tae become entangled in such things, Adrian."

He didn't mean to bring up painful reminders, but Adrian was one of the few who knew the whole reason behind his determination not to circulate unfounded stories or lies, especially about his spouse.

Lies and deception had been what had led to his mother's death, and very nearly his younger brother's as well. Those same deceptions and poor decisions had cost Adrian his father, when Darren's father, Cathal, discovered he'd been cuckolded by his wife and brother.

Adrian was his cousin, as far as both of them knew, but he might have been Darren's half-brother in different circumstances. Or if his mother had decided to enjoy infidelity earlier in her marriage to Cathal MacLean.

Whatever might have been, her lies and indiscretions had led to the darkest period of Darren's life, and caused Adrian grief as well. He'd sworn to himself, after her passing, that he'd never be that type of man. He might have tricked his brothers into admitting their feelings for the women they'd eventually married, but that was the extent of his deceitful machinations. The idea of lying for his own gain made his stomach churn.

Daemon switched with Ryan, and made his way to Darren's side. Darren studied the other laird. Daemon was the only one of them aside from himself who was married, and he had been married for some months.

More than that, Darren recalled that Daemon and Lyla had apparently argued at her sister's wedding, and been virtual strangers before that. And yet, somehow, they'd managed to develop a loving relationship between them.

“Whatever ye’re thinkin’ ye may as well ask.” Daemon gave him a cool look, and Darren realized he’d been staring rudely at the man while lost in thought.

“Rumor has it that ye and yer wife didnae start on the best o’ terms.” He ventured the statement, curious to see how the other man would respond.

“Nae so bad as yer braither Marcus and Lyla’s sister, if one believes the whispers, but aye. We didnae see eye-tae-eye in the beginning.”

“How did ye get past the strife between ye?”

“Speakin’ tae each other honestly, mainly. She said what was on her mind, and I spoke me own. ‘Twas nae always pretty, but it worked. And listen tae what she says and how she says it. Sometimes, anger is a mask fer another emotion - and usually is one that’s important tae understand yer partner.”

Darren could think of many times he’d used irritation to mask his own feelings. Keegan was the same, while Marcus had tried escaping to the bottom of a bottle to avoid his own problems. Still, there was one crucial difference. “Ye and yer wife werenae mortal enemies and members o’ rival clans when ye were wed.”

Daemon certainly hadn’t been involved in the murder of his wife’s father, or seen her brother put in jail.

“True enough, and I’ll own it makes it more difficult fer ye, but in the end, the lass is still human. Be patient, and ye’ll sort it out.”

“Would I could but there’s still the messenger tae be concerned with. I cannae go against the king’s command, but I willnae force the lass.”

“Then ye’ll have tae seek another answer, or pray the man delays long enough fer yer

wife tae warm toward ye.”

Darren switched back into the sparring circle, but his mind was wandering in circles of its own.

Seek another answer, or pray the messenger was delayed until Alayne accepted him. Both seemed equally difficult outcomes to bring about.

Och, the way things are going right now, it might be that getting the marriage annulled and the pair o’ us tossed in cells beside her braither is the best solution I can hope fer. Morrigan’s crows take Donall and his faither both, fer putting us in this position.

CHAPTER FIVE

Alayne found staying in the laird's chambers after Darren left to be utterly impossible, especially after the revelation of the king's ultimatum. She sought out the kitchens to get herself a small breakfast, knowing she needed to eat in spite of her inner turmoil. Once she'd finished, she began to walk the halls of MacLean Keep, exploring the place that was now meant to be her home.

She'd been exploring idly for about an hour when she opened the door to what turned out to be the drawing room. Alayne paused, startled to find the room occupied by none other than Lyla MacMillan. The younger woman looked up at her entrance, and smiled in welcome.

Alayne hesitated. It was true that Lyla had been involved in the disaster that befell her brother, but it was also true that said involvement had been none of her making. Donall had kidnapped and threatened her. It was also true that Lyla had been part of the reason Donall had been spared from death at the hands of Laird MacMillan or Darren.

She'd hardly spoken to Lyla, save for a few brief words exchanged when she'd served as caretaker for her brother's prisoner. Still, she didn't feel the same anger toward her that she felt to the menfolk among Lyla's kith and kin. She hoped Lyla didn't feel resentment toward her either.

Lyla waved her over. "Come in and take a seat, if ye want."

"I wouldnae want tae disturb ye..." What if the young woman loathed her for her part

in taking her prisoner?

“Ye’ll nae be a disturbance, fer I’m nae doing anything very important. Besides, we’ve nae had a chance tae talk, just us women, and I’d like tae get tae ken me new sister-by-marriage better.” Lyla smiled, no shadow of resentment or anger in her eyes.

Alayne moved forward and settled into a seat next to her, feeling slightly off balance. “I’d have thought ye’d be angry, fer what me braither did tae ye.”

“’Twas yer braither, nae ye. And he was nae the first one tae behave in such a manner. At least it could be argued he had something o’ a reason, being out tae avenge his kindred. I might nae like it or agree with it, but there’s the truth o’ it. The first man tae kidnap me did so tae try and force me sister tae wed him.” Lyla offered her a wry smile.

Almost against her will, Alayne found herself liking the other woman. She was straightforward, polite and friendly, despite their initial interactions. She seemed kind, and Alayne found herself wondering if it might be possible to have a friendship with her, in spite of everything that had happened. “He didnae succeed, did he?”

“Nay, but he was a hard, cruel man, who hurt all o’ us, and threw me in a dungeon. ‘Twas a bad time. In comparison, yer braither was almost a gentleman.”

Alayne blinked. “I dinnae think I’ve ever heard someone describe their kidnapper as a gentleman.”

“’Tis true by comparison tae Laird McCouorcodale.” Lyla shrugged her shoulders. “But there’s nae need tae speak too much o’ such matters. I wanted tae ask ye how ye’re settling in, and if there’s aught ye need. I’ve visited me sister here often enough that I can help ye find whatever ye need, and tell ye much o’ what ye might need tae

ken.”

“I dae feel a little lost. This keep doesnae have the same layout as me home, and I’m nae sure where I’m permitted tae go.”

“Kenning Darren as I dae, I cannae imagine he’ll forbid ye any area within the keep walls, unless ‘tis fer yer own safety. I wouldnae recommend exploring the guard barracks, fer example. And he may nae wish ye tae enter his study without good reason. Although, he’s just as likely tae nae mind. We certainly spent enough time at cards by his study fire when I was visiting me sister.”

So there was a chance she might be able to find important information she could give her brother after he was released. That was good to know, even though Alayne was fairly certain Lyla was being optimistic about how welcome she’d be in such a setting.

She considered a moment. “I dinnae have much in the way o’ writing materials. Nor much by way o’ supplies for needlework.” She’d brought her own supply of cloth and thread, as needlework was something she found soothing, and also one of the few pursuits her father hadn’t adamantly disapproved of - at least, not once she’d learned to make small neat stitches, suited for a lady.

“Writing materials, ye can ask Darren fer. Or mayhap Bard, his advisor. He’s likely tae ken where tae find them. As fer sewing materials, ye could ask the healer, or one o’ the maids. I ken that there’s a supply left over from the last Lady MacLean, but I dinnae ken where ‘tis kept.” Lyla grimaced. “I wouldnae ask Darren about that.”

“Why nae?”

“‘Tis a difficult matter for him. The circumstances o’ her passing were nae pleasant.” Lyla shook her head as Alayne opened her mouth. “if ye want tae ken more, ye can

ask Darren or one o' the older members o' the household for the full story, but dinnae be surprised if they dinnae want tae speak o' it."

Alayne dipped her head in agreement, though she privately resolved to find out as much as possible. She did recall that something had happened, and rumors surrounding the deaths of the previous Laird and Lady MacLean, but she knew nothing of the details.

"I'll ask Bard and the healer about those things, then." She considered. "And what o' the kitchens? Some dinnae welcome the lady o' the house..."

"The cook here willnae mind too much, so long as ye dinnae take something without checking if she needs it. Och, and leave alone any venison ye find. Darren loves it, but there's nae any deer on the island, so he cannae get it unless he trades fer it special, or goes hunting on a visit with his braithers."

He'd served venison at the wedding feast. She hadn't cared much, but knowing that he'd deliberately used up something he savored as part of their wedding made her stomach twist a little, especially when she considered that he had to know that venison was even scarcer on her clan's table than his own. It almost seemed as if he'd been trying to provide something special for the wedding feast, in spite of being no more enthused than she about the union.

She shook her head sharply. I'm overthinking the matter. Likely as nae, he just wanted an excuse tae eat his favorite meal, and what I might enjoy or take interest in eating didnae factor intae it at all.

"Are ye all right?" Lyla's soft query interrupted her thoughts. "I ken Darren wasnae in the best mood last night, but if he did something tae ye..."

"I dinnae want tae discuss it." Alayne swallowed hard against a feeling of nausea. "I

dinnae want tae think about that man fer now.”

“But he is yer husband.” Lyla laid a hand on her arm. “And while I wouldnae have thought it o’ him, if he hurt ye without realizing...”

“He didnae.” As tempting as it was to paint Darren as a cruel husband, she couldn’t bring herself to do it. Not after he’d gone out of his way and slept on the floor, rather than force her into something she didn’t want to do. “I just... dinnae want tae talk about him.”

Talking about him would only remind her that she was supposed to bed him. That she had to bed him, if she wanted her brother to be freed. She’d tried so hard to avoid that very thing, and now she had no choice, and the knowledge made her feel sick.

Why did I nae think tae ask fer the full terms o’ the king’s demand afore the wedding? I could have asked fer some time, or found a reason tae ask tae be spared... at the very least, I could have been prepared fer the necessity o’ sleeping with a man I hate, rather than being in this situation now.

Somewhere, a bell tolled the hour, and Lyla looked up in surprise. “Och, I’m meant tae be meeting Daemon near the library.” She rose. “I’m sorry tae be leaving ye, but ye ken who tae speak tae if ye need anything, and we can talk more later if ye like.”

“I... Thank ye.” Alayne watched the other woman leave, feeling a mix of relief and disappointment. Relief, that she no longer had to avoid the subject of her husband, and disappointment as she realized she’d missed a chance to ask the one person she felt comfortable speaking to about the realities of the marriage bed.

Her mother had died long before she could even become curious about such things. Her father would have given her a clout across the face had she dared to ask, and her brother was... well, her brother. She’d never felt comfortable seeking a healer or

midwife's expertise, especially after her father's furious reaction to her search for answers after her first moon cycle.

Lyla was married, and presumably had no issues with engaging in intimacy with her husband. If Alayne had asked, the other woman might have been able to tell her what to expect. That would have made it at least a little easier to face.

Sitting in the drawing room wasn't going to get her any answers, or anything else. With a sigh, Alayne rose and departed the room, intent on searching out Bard so she could acquire some materials for writing. The letter to the king was pointless, but she could write letters for the Ranald household, to ensure it was still functioning smoothly in her absence.

She was passing by a large set of doors, partially ajar, when she heard a familiar voice. "...and what would ye like tae dae with me?" Lyla, talking to someone.

Intrigued, she paused, then inched closer to listen as a man - most likely her husband, Daemon - responded. "We'd be here a score o' years if I were tae say everything I wanted tae dae with ye, ye minx." His voice sounded affectionate. "Though, I'm o' a mind tae be sure ye're nae leaving scratches and bite marks on me the next time I bed ye. I cannae hide all o' them, and Ryan's far too smug o' late."

"And how would ye stop me from marking me claim, husband?" Lyla's voice sounded very different, and Alayne felt herself blushing at the tone the woman was using. It reminded her of the one time she'd heard a snippet of conversation between a maid and a stable hand she was interested in, but far more intense.

"I'd tie ye tae the bed, so ye cannae scratch me. And I'd give ye a pillow or a belt tae bite on, and tae muffle yer screams while I take ye. And then I'd have my way with ye, until ye were limp and sobbing with pleasure, and too wearied tae even think o' marking me. And then, after we rest, I'd have ye again, until we're both too sore and

exhausted tae move.”

Alayne’s hands clenched together, her face so hot she thought she could light a candle with it. Biting? Scratching? She’d never heard that such things were part of intimate relations with a man. And binding? Gags to muffle screaming? None of that was any part of her admittedly limited fantasies.

Was that what Darren expected of her? Was it normal for the fulfillment of wifely duties to be so... so violent? It sounded like something she might hear in a bawdy, boastful story in the guard’s barracks, more than it did a relationship between a husband and wife.

But then, what did she know? She’d lived most of her life in seclusion, isolated by her father’s hatred of her. Maybe what Lyla and Daemon were discussing was normal, just one more thing she’d never learned.

She heard footsteps, coming closer, and hurried away. She might have wanted to ask Lyla what the marriage bed was like, but she wasn’t sure she wanted to know anything more. She was sure, however, that she didn’t want to be caught eavesdropping on what had clearly been a private conversation.

Back in her rooms, Alayne considered the situation. Whether she liked it or not, she was expected to consummate the marriage. In order to secure her brother’s freedom, it would have to happen sooner rather than later. And if she had no other choice, she’d far rather approach the matter on her own terms.

The only real question was - where was she to find the rope and other things?

CHAPTER SIX

Something was bothering Alayne, something that hadn't been troubling her that morning before he'd left their shared quarters. The problem was, Darren had no idea what it might be, save the revelation that the king's courier would be expecting a wedding sheet as proof of their consummated marriage.

He'd told her about the demand, and given her the letter, because he wanted her to be prepared. It was something that affected her just as much as it did him, and he'd wanted to give her the day to get used to the idea. It was also why he'd made an effort to stay away from her, lest she feel he was trying to pressure her into yielding.

From the pallor of her complexion and the way she seemed to start at every movement he made, it might have been better to try and discuss it further with her. He'd considered it, but assumed she wouldn't believe any assurances he made - assuming she even conceded the necessity of consummation in the first place.

Darren watched Alayne listlessly poke at her food, and wondered if he'd made a mistake in leaving so quickly after telling her the news. After all, he knew she despised him and, as she'd put it, 'would rather sleep with an adder. But even with that vehement declaration, he knew that her life of relative isolation meant she was likely inexperienced. That begged the question of whether her current demeanor was because she was nervous about intimate relations in general, or because of him specifically.

Either way, it wasn't a question he was crass enough to ask at the supper table. There would be time enough to address the issue when they retired to their quarters for the

night.

Alayne remained nervous and tense all through supper. By the time they rose to leave the table, she actually appeared to be shivering slightly. Darren felt a sense of unease growing in his gut. He knew that she didn't want to sleep with him, but even so, her reaction seemed extreme.

Surely she kens I willnae be hurting her any more than I can help? And I'd nae even press the matter, if it werenae fer the king's ultimatum.

They reached the door to the bedroom. Darren pushed it open, and was startled to see that Alayne now looked positively ill. His concern deepened. Is she that afraid o' me? 'Tis nae like I'm going tae murder the lass!

Alayne shoved the door closed as soon as he stepped inside. Darren watched as she paced toward the bed, before turning to face him. "I ken I have tae sleep with ye, and I'll tell ye now, I hate the idea. But, I willnae shirk me duty, nor disobey the king's command, so I've spent this afternoon preparing fer ye."

Darren blinked, uncertain what she meant. He was even more perplexed when she pulled out several lengths of rope, and a leather strap that looked as if she'd borrowed it from his healer. "What is this?"

"I told ye, I've been preparing. I dinnae ken how ye want tae go about this, so ye'll have tae tell me that much, but I brought everything ye need." She lifted her chin, trying to look defiant in spite of the way her hands visibly trembled. "I cannae tie all the bonds myself, but I can tie the gag, if ye'd rather nae. And..." Her hand strayed to the ties of her bodice. "I suppose I should be undressing, unless ye'd rather dae that yerself..." Her face colored. "I ken every man has his preferences."

It dawned on him then, what was happening. Somehow, Alayne had gotten the

impression that restraints were necessary for bedsport. Or, at least, that he was the sort of man who enjoyed such things. Darren stared at the ropes, then did the last thing he ever would have expected to be doing.

He sat down against the wall and laughed until his sides ached, and tears of mirth streamed down his face.

Fair Folk help me, but how am I tae explain this ?

Alayne stared at Darren, red with mortification as he laughed. She'd done her best to prepare to consummate their marriage. It hurt that he would make so light of her efforts, even going so far as to laugh at her.

It hurt even worse to think that he would find the act of sleeping with her so hilarious, as if he considered her not worth looking at, let alone bedding. She knew he'd rejected her, but she hadn't thought he held her in such low regard.

She stood there, silently fuming, her face burning with embarrassment, as his laughter tapered off and finally stopped. It was only when he looked up at her that she spoke. "I dinnae see what ye find so funny. I'm nae experienced, but I am doing me best tae fulfill the king's mandate."

Darren took a deep breath, then stood. "Aye. I can see that." She could hear the edge of laughter still in his tone, but at least he was no longer outright laughing at her. "But I'd have tae ask what gave ye the impression that this was necessary? Fer certain sure, I didnae ever mention aught o' the sort."

Alayne felt herself flushing an even deeper crimson, and her whole body felt tight with humiliation. Still, she gave him the honest answer. "I heard Laird and Lady MacMillan speaking. They were talking about... that is... they mentioned... he said he would tie her up and... other things."

She wasn't surprised when he burst into laughter again. "Och, nae wonder..." He took a deep breath, and visibly calmed himself. "I ken what the issue is now. Me apologies if ye thought I was mocking ye, but I didnae realize ye were basing yer assumptions on those two." He tipped his head at her, the sparkle of humor in his eyes making him look far less fierce, almost boyish. "Ye wouldnae ken, but me sister-by-marriage reads a lot o' books about that sort o' thing. She and Daemon like tae... try new things, every so often." His tone was wry. "'Tis something we all learned quickly after their marriage - dinnae enter a room they've taken over unless they've answered yer hail. Otherwise, there's nae telling what ye'll walk intae. And some things all o' us are happier tae nae see."

Alayne blinked, then blinked again, as the meaning of his words sank in. "Ye mean... the bindings and things...?"

"Likely as nae, some sort o' game they're playing with each other. They might nae even have been serious about it, just teasing each other. I cannae pretend I understand all o' what's between them, and I'm certain sure I dinnae want tae ken more than I dae."

Alayne considered his words. "Then, ye mean... ye'd nae... 'tis nae..." She couldn't seem to find the words to express what she was thinking.

Darren stared at her for a moment. Then, without warning, he pulled a dirk from his belt, and slashed a cut across the back of his hand. Alayne watched, speechless, as he leaned over the bed and dripped the blood onto the sheet. He smeared it a bit, then whisked the sheet off the bed and bundled it away. "I'll make me own contribution later."

"What?" She didn't understand.

Darren looked her in the eye, and his expression was as solemn as she'd ever seen it,

though not as dour as it had been the night before. “I dinnae need more than a glance tae see yer terrified o’ me touching ye, much less doing more than that. I told ye last night, I’ve never forced a woman, and I will nae ever. A bloody sheet will be enough for the king, and there is nae way fer him tae tell the truth, so long as there’s evidence enough o’ an assignation. If there’s blood, he’ll nae ask question, se we’ll nae even have tae lie tae him.”

Alayne swallowed. She’d never imagined he’d dare lie to the king. Much less go so far. “But, for the marriage tae be binding...”

“It must be held, witnessed, and consummated, aye. Well, ‘tis been held, and ‘tis witnessed. Consummation... ’twill come when ye’re ready, but nae before. And this much I’ll promise ye - when the time comes, there’ll be nae gags or ropes involved.”

He offered her a small smile and a roguish wink that made him look younger and far less cold than she’d known him to be. “That is, there’ll be nae ropes or gags unless me lady commands it.”

The blush that had been fading from her cheeks flamed to life again. “I’d never!”

“We’ll see.” Darren shrugged. “In the meantime, ‘tis late, and I’ve a sheet tae prepare, and an excuse tae make for my arm. There’s fresh linens fer yer pallet on the floor if ye wish, or... ye could be reasonable and take the bed.”

In truth, her back ached at the mere thought of sleeping again on the stone floor. Besides, he was being... kind, in spite of all she’d done to humiliate him and all her harsh words. Almost against her will, she found herself nodding slowly. “I... I think I wouldnae mind the bed taenight. But I...”

He gave her a wry look. “I’d nae intention o’ joining ye. Nae when yer so distressed. I’ll be sleepin’ in front o’ the fire again.”

“Then ye should take an extra blanket.” She moved to the chest he’d opened the night before and removed a heavy quilted coverlet.

Darren took it with a solemn nod. “Thank ye. If ye’ll hand me those tae put away...” He gestured to the ropes and the leather strap. “I’ll leave ye tae yer rest.”

Alayne bundled the items together, then watched as he folded them into the soiled sheet. A moment later, the door closed softly behind him. Alayne sank down on the bed, staring at the closed oak panel in disbelief.

She’d come up here tonight expecting to be ravished. Not this. She hadn’t expected him to be considerate, or to give up his bed two nights in a row. Much less speak to her so gently. She certainly had never dreamed that he would take the risk of lying to the king and falsifying the evidence of the fulfilled marriage contract.

Yes, his laughter had been humiliating, but he’d been kind to her afterward. And while the little he’d said had left her confused, his words made it clear that whatever was meant to happen in a marriage bed, it wasn’t what she’d thought.

But knowing that only reinforced how little she did know about such things. And now she knew that it might not be wise to hope for advice from Lyla. Clearly she and her husband enjoyed very different things from what Darren might prefer.

She was still trying to figure out how she might learn the things she needed to know about Darren, and about intimacy, when the last of her fear drained away, and sleep took its place.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Darren groaned as he stretched the soreness out of his back and shoulders. Sleeping on a stone floor was hardly comfortable, even with the thick coverlet and the rug to cushion it. The fact that his ribs and stomach still ached from how hard he'd laughed the night before didn't help at all.

Not even pleasuring himself so that he could leave his own mark on the sheets had provided enough relaxation to soothe the soreness of his muscles, especially the tension in his shoulders. He didn't like the idea of lying to the king about the state of his marriage. Still, better the falsehood than to have forced his attentions on an unwilling and terrified woman. At least this way, his conscience slept easy, no matter how badly the rest of him fared.

He knew there was no way he could have managed the situation without compromising some facet of his morals, not in the time they might have. But this way he could be satisfied that he'd managed to allay some of Alayne's fears of him - or at least, he hoped he'd managed that much.

At the very minimum, he'd looked in on her at one point, and seen that she was indeed sleeping in the bed. That was a small victory.

He finished stretching, then laced up his boots and the change of clothing he'd had a servant leave in the front room for him. A splash of frigid water on his face made him feel reasonably alert and ready for the day.

He was not, however, prepared for Bard to find him halfway to breakfast. "Me laird.

The royal courier is here.”

Darren cursed. He’d hoped to at least get some food in him before he had to deal with any business, but it seemed it was not to be. “Where is he?”

“In the Great Hall, being served a meal tae break his fast. He came over on the dawn ferry.” Bard’s expression was troubled. “He doesnae look the best pleased, and I gather he’s heard some o’ the gossip around the town, here and across the firth.”

“O’ course he has.” Darren groaned. Naturally, people would have talked about the disaster of a wedding. It would likely be the talk of Scotland by the time the next Highland Gathering came around. Darren growled low in his throat in exasperation before he set the frustration aside for larger concerns.

The courier was here, which meant he needed the sheet that was still in his rooms, and a way to warn Alayne so they could attempt to present a reasonable depiction of a civil marriage, if not a particularly cordial or loving one. He took a deep breath.

“I’ll go tae greet the courier. Ye find a maid tae take a breakfast tray up tae Alayne, along with the message that the courier is here, and we’ll be up as soon as he’s finished his meal.”

“Aye, me laird,” Bard nodded and strode away, his steps quick as if he wanted to be as far away from the upcoming difficulties as possible. Darren didn’t blame him. Given a choice, he’d have made for the stables and been riding the bounds long before the courier arrived.

Another deep breath, then Darren squared his shoulders, ran a hand through his hair in an attempt to neaten it, and made his way to the Great Hall. The courier was seated at the high table, busily devouring cold breakfast meats, a bowl of hot porridge, and some fresh bread, with a cup of strong, mulled wine at his elbow to chase the winter

chill from him.

The man looked up at Darren's approach. "Laird MacLean." He rose. "I am Conell MacGill, the king's courier. I trust ye ken why I am here?"

"Aye. I ken. But there's nae rush. Please, enjoy the hospitality o' me clan this morn, and take as much time as ye need tae warm up. Crossing the firth's a cold, hard journey at this time o' year."

"It is. Even so... I have been hearing some most concerning rumors about yer wedding." The courier's expression was more than a little displeased, though he did settle back into the chair and take another sip of the wine. "In point o' fact, I hear 'twas hardly a proper ceremony at all, and the bride was forced tae her vows at knife-point."

"'Tis an exaggeration, Master MacGill." Darren gave him a wry smile and a shake of his head, attempting to look slightly bemused and more than a little exasperated, the way his father had often looked in his early childhood, when he caught Darren in a falsehood or a bout of mischief. "I'll grant the bride was a wee bit shy o' speaking, and a fair bit out o' temper, but..."

"I heard she came dressed as for a funeral, and even gave a speech along those lines at the banquet." MacGill raised an eyebrow. "Is that an exaggeration as well, Laird MacLean?"

Darren cursed in his head, even as he attempted to show an expression of chagrin. "Would I could say it wasnae, but 'tis true. However, I've spoken tae me wife, as has Lady MacMillan, and we're in agreement that it was merely her nerves and her distress getting the better o' her. After all, she was alone, with nae kin nor friends tae stand beside her at the altar, nae even a well-liked lady's maid. All that, and being forced tae wed the man who saw her braither put in prison... well, 'tis a hard thing fer

any lass's sensibilities. She was overwrought and nae thinking clearly. Women can be fair foolish in such a state."

Conell's expression gave no sign of whether he believed Darren or not. When he next spoke, his tone was thoughtful, and very carefully devoid of any emotion. "And yet, the lady didnae join ye tae break yer fast?"

"She's nae slept well these past nights. I ken 'tis the newness o' the situation, and her worries about bein' a proper wife, and mayhap some concern over her braither. She finally fell asleep, and I didnae have the heart tae wake her when I rose tae go about me business. I didnae ken ye'd arrived, or I would have chosen differently, but I thought tae be courteous tae her, given the circumstances."

"Admirable." Conell finished his last bite of porridge and drained the contents of his cup, then rose. "However, I have a duty to perform, and I dinnae wish tae be detained. The days are short, and the weather is far from pleasant. I wish to be back across the firth as soon as possible."

"As ye will. I had a lass sent tae wake me wife, so she should be roused by now, but if nae, I ken where the item ye seek is set aside fer ye." Darren rose as well and gestured for the courier to follow him, praying as he did so that Alayne would be awake and at least somewhat presentable.

At the door to his rooms, he knocked carefully. "Alayne?"

"Come in, me laird." her voice was calm, even, and gave him a small measure of hope that they might come out of this without any more unpleasantness.

Alayne was seated by the fire when he entered with the courier, and a bundle of cloth was conspicuously set on the opposite edge of the table. Darren bowed, then held out a hand. He was surprised when she took it with barely noticeable hesitation. Still, he

wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. "Me wife, I present tae ye Master Conell MacGill, the king's courier. Master MacGill, me wife, Lady Alayne MacLean."

"Me lady." Conell bowed over her hand in turn. "I trust ye are well?"

"I am well enough." She smiled, an expression so different from the looks she'd given Darren thus far that he would have choked if he'd been drinking anything. As it was, he had to cough to mask his surprise. "I am pleased tae see ye here."

"'Tis good tae hear ye say so, especially since I was given tae believe, from the talk o' the village, that the wedding wasnae as smooth as might be hoped?"

Alayne blushed and lowered her eyes. "Och, aye. I can admit that I behaved poorly. I was overwrought, and - well, I didnae tell anyone, but I had a bottle o' wine in me trunk, and I..." She trailed off, her voice soft and shy. "Well, ye ken now why me faither and braither never let me drink more than half a goblet o' wine with a meal."

"I see. Yer laird didnae mention that."

The look Alayne gave the courier could rival honey for the sweetness. "Och, well, Laird Mac - Darren, I mean - has been fair kind tae me. Fer all I behaved poorly, I ken he's done his best tae see tae me comfort, and avoid causing me further grief."

Darren could hardly believe what he was hearing. If he hadn't been standing there, listening to every word and watching every movement, he'd have sworn his wife had been replaced by a changeling - or that his wits had been addled. As it was, a part of him wondered if he was still asleep, or ill and caught in a fever dream.

Still, however amiable Alayne was being, best to take care of business and see Conell MacGill off before one or both of them said or did something to reveal the ruse. It

was only good fortune that he'd hidden away the 'preparations' Alayne had made last night. One wrong word, and MacGill might get suspicious again.

Darren went and collected the sheet from the table, and brought it over to the courier. He'd made an effort to fold it so that the bloodstain was visible, though hopefully not positioned so the courier, or the king, would come in accidental contact with it.

Conall examined the sheet for a moment. "All looks tae be in order. I will take this tae the king straight away." He transferred his gaze to Darren. "Expect tae receive a royal letter of acceptance, and assurance that the terms o' the contract have been fulfilled. As for Laird Ranald..."

He was interrupted by a surprised yelp and a crash, as Alayne tripped, staggered, and fell - right into the table holding the remains of her breakfast.

Alayne grimaced as tea soaked her skirt, and foodstuffs went everywhere. She hadn't meant to cause such a mess, but when she'd heard Conell speak of her brother, she'd panicked. She couldn't let Darren know that she'd bargained to have Donall set free after she was wed. Neither could she afford for Master MacGill to know that she'd been keeping information from her husband.

Darren was at her side in an instant, offering her a hand to help her sit up. "Are ye hurt?"

"Nay, or at least, I dinnae think so, beyond mayhap a bruise or two." She saw Conell hovering over her husband's shoulder, and managed a wan smile. "Yer pardon, Master MacGill. I cannae think why I'm so clumsy this morn. I meant tae offer ye refreshment, but..." She blushed.

"'Tis nae issue, me lady. Accidents will happen. I trust ye've taken nae harm from yer fall?"

Alayne allowed Darren to help her to her feet. She ached a little where her side had impacted the table, and her knee had hit the floor, but she'd certainly had worse injuries. She allowed herself an abashed look. "Naught but a few bruises and a loss o' me dignity."

"Even so, perhaps yer husband should see ye tae the healer." The words were polite, but it was very clearly not a suggestion.

"O' course." Darren nodded, an arm around her shoulders as if to steady her. "If there's aught else ye need, I can have a man take ye tae me study..."

"I have everything I require. I would prefer tae be on mw way." Alayne was a little surprised by the sudden brusqueness of his tone, but Darren seemed to expect the answer, from the expression on his face.

"As ye will. The healer's cottage is in the courtyard, if ye'll allow us tae escort ye so far."

"That will dae." MacGill turned to her once again. "That is, if ye feel up tae the walk, me lady?"

"I'm certain I can manage it." She leaned slightly into Darren's side. "Especially with me husband tae support me."

Darren made a sound that might have been agreement, but she could see the questions in his eyes. Still, he was wise enough to say nothing aside from a softly spoken "Careful here" or "Let me assist ye" as they made their way from their chambers to the doors of the main hall.

The weather outside was clear but cold, and Alayne shivered as they crossed the courtyard, glad to have Darren blocking some of the wind.

Once they'd reached the healer's hut, Alayne watched the courier walk away while Darren called for the healer to attend her. She breathed a sigh of relief when the man disappeared through the gate. Her secret was safe.

She shrugged out of Darren's hold. "I dinnae need any more help."

"Ye're sure?"

"Aye." She glanced at the healer, then at him. It wouldn't do to drop their charade too early. "I'll get some salve, and mayhap a potion from the healer, then a hot bath. I'm sure 'twill be enough tae see me mended."

"If ye say so. I'll send a lass tae clean up the mess and start drawing the bath fer ye then." With one last lingering look, Darren turned and walked away.

Alayne watched until he entered the keep proper, then turned to the healer. "I dinnae need the potion, just a salve fer bruises and an extra cloak or blanket if ye've one tae spare."

"A cloak or blanket, me lady?" The healer raised an eyebrow.

"Aye." Alayne swallowed. "I've changed my mind. I think I'll be going fer a ride, tae soothe me nerves after dealing with the royal courier's questions. 'Twas more difficult than I expected, and I could use the freedom and a breath o' fresh air."

The healer nodded sympathetically. "Men dinnae have an idea how stressful questions about private matters can be. If ye'll come in, I'll get ye the salve, and me winter gathering cloak. 'Tis mayhap nae as fine as ye're used tae, but 'tis thick and warm, which I'll wager ye'll find welcome, especially if the winds come up again."

"Aye." Alayne smiled in relief. "I'd like that just fine."

CHAPTER EIGHT

As soon as Adrian and Bard reported the courier was back at the harbor village, Darren took himself to his study, with orders to have a tray sent up to him, and further instruction that he was to be left alone for an hour. He'd already given the instructions for the maids to clean his quarters and draw up a bath for Alayne, and now he wanted some time to sort out his own thoughts.

On one hand, he was relieved that the courier's visit had gone as smoothly as it had, especially given the gossip their wedding had caused, and the suspicions the man might have had based on those rumors. He was equally glad that Alayne had managed a plausible explanation for her behavior, and to support his own explanation without needing to be prompted.

On the other hand, seeing her interact with Conall MacGill had given him a glimpse at the type of relationship they could have, if she would stop being so afraid and angry around him. And that glimpse made his stomach clench. He hadn't realized, until he saw her smile without bitterness or sarcasm, how much he truly did want an amiable relationship with his wife.

He wouldn't demand love, he had no right to. But a cordial, polite relationship where they could exist together in the same space without sharp words or worried glances? That was something he thought might be possible, and he wanted it. He simply had no idea how to go about building such a relationship with a woman who had excellent reasons to hate him.

There was also the sense that she was keeping something from him. He respected her

privacy as much as he could when they shared their lives and much of their rooms, but some instinct in the back of his mind whispered that her sudden clumsiness when the courier spoke her brother's name had been no coincidence.

Though perhaps that had simply been a bout of nerves, given the deception involved. He'd certainly felt nervous as he handed the sheet over, and he wasn't the one whose family would bear the brunt of the king's anger if the lie were revealed.

And then, of course, there was her clear ignorance as to what was and was not involved in intimacy. Last night had showed him that she truly had been very sheltered, far more so than he had thought. Most lasses her age had some experience, or at least some education on such things, whether it was a mother's teaching, a healer's warnings, or even accidental spying on the servants who happened to be trysting. She'd looked so embarrassed at his laughter that he hadn't had the heart to embarrass her further by trying to explain how such relations normally worked.

He wondered if he ought to suggest that Lyla talk to her, but that would mean explaining why he was asking, which in turn would mean revealing that Alayne had overheard Lyla and Daemon. That would rather embarrass everyone, he suspected. And even if he chose to ignore that, he'd already warned her that Lyla and Daemon had something of an unconventional approach to such matters.

Darren groaned and poured himself a half-glass of whiskey, then sipped it slowly. It was early for drinking, but between the soreness of sleeping on the floor and the way his head ached from worrying, he felt in need of the bracing heat of the liquor. It wouldn't really help solve his problems, but at least it took the edge off his thoughts, and allowed some of the tension to leave his back and shoulders.

Breakfast came, and he ate heartily, filling a cup with a bracing tea when he'd finished the scotch. By the time he'd finished his meal, his thoughts had settled somewhat, enough for him to have come to at least one determination.

He had to speak to Alayne. They needed to have an honest, and preferably polite, discussion about how they would go forward. At the very least, he wanted to find terms they could agree to for a peaceful marriage, if not an overly loving or joyous one. There had to be some manner in which they could form a partnership, despite their differences.

She might not agree, but Darren thought he might be able to convince her to hear him out, for the sake of both their clans, if nothing else. Surely she understood that a comfortable relationship between them meant her clan would fare better while it was under his care.

With that in mind, he left the study and made his way to their bedroom. Mindful of the face that she might still be bathing, he knocked. “Alayne? May I speak tae ye?”

Silence greeted him. Darren knocked again, a little more forcefully. “Alayne? Are ye dressed? I need tae speak with ye, and it cannae wait.”

No answer. Anger rose in his gut, and Darren grabbed the handle and shoved the door open roughly before storming in. It was only as the panel slammed shut behind him that he registered the reason for the lack of response. The room was empty of any occupant.

There was no sign of Alayne, no sign of a servant to attend her bath - no indication of anyone at all, save that the tub stood steaming by the fire, and the mess of breakfast had been cleared away. Now uneasy rather than angry, Darren went to the bedroom door and opened it, to find that it too was devoid of any presence. Alayne wasn't there.

If she'd already finished her bath, the servants would have cleared it away, surely. But in that case... Darren opened the door to the bedroom, only to stop short as he nearly collided with a maid carrying a steaming pitcher of water.

The maid blanched. “Me laird. My apologies. I didnae ken...”

“Never mind that.” Darren waved away the apology. “Have ye seen mey wife about? Dae ye ken where she’s gone?”

The maid winced and looked down, shoulders hunching. “I dinnae, me laird. I came on Master Bard’s order tae clean the room and fill the bath, but I never saw me lady. I dinnae think she’s been in the rooms since breaking her fast, me laird. Never made use o’ the bath supplies I brought her, at least.”

Worry spiked through him. Darren dismissed the maid with an absentminded order to clean up the bath, then hurried toward the front doors and the healer’s cottage, his mind seething with a level of fear he wouldn’t have expected to feel for his wife.

She said she wasnae hurt badly, but what if she lied because she didnae want tae look vulnerable in front o’ me or the courier? Or mayhap she didnae realize she was wounded worse than she thought? Or it could be that fall was a result o’ some illness that overset her - dizziness or some such? But then why did the healer nae send fer me?

By the time he reached the door of the healer’s home, his heart was pounding, and every scenario from a sprained ankle, to a lethal wound, was playing through his mind. It was all he could do to knock on the door, rather than slam his way through it.

The healer answered within seconds. “Me laird? What is wrong?”

“Ye tell me. What’s wrong with me wife? The servants say she didnae return tae the rooms fer her bath after she visited ye. What happened tae her? Is she well?”

The healer blinked, a look of such honest surprise on her face that it stopped him from shoving her aside to storm into the dwelling to look for Alayne. “Yer wife, me

laird? She's well enough. 'Twas only a bruise or two she suffered, naething serious. I gave her a salve, and she said she was going tae go fer a ride, tae sort her thoughts. She was well enough, so I gave her me winter cloak tae wear, so she didnae take a chill."

Darren stared at her, unable to form words as her explanation sank in. Alayne was well. Not wounded, not ill. She'd just gone for a ride.

Without telling him. Without sending a message to let him know what she intended. And, as near as he could tell, unescorted. He swallowed back a rising tide of anger. "Did she take a guard or anyone with her, even a maid or a boy tae aid her?"

"I didnae see anyone at her side."

She'd ridden out alone then. Alone in the chill weather, with snow and ice still in places on the ground to make the footing treacherous. Alone, though she had to be aware he had enemies, and she could be kidnapped, as others had been. Or killed.

Rage flooded through him, displacing worry entirely. Darren clenched his fists, offered the healer a curt nod, then turned on his heel and strode toward the stables, the heat of his ire so great he was surprised he wasn't leaving a trail of steam in his footsteps.

O' all the stupid, mule-headed things tae be doing! When I find ye wife, I guarantee I'll teach ye a lesson tae be sure ye're nae so foolish again!

The air was cold, but no longer held the biting chill of a few days prior, and the sun actually lent a semblance of warmth. After a few minutes spent wondering if the guards were going to rush after her and drag her back, Alayne began to relax and truly enjoy the ride.

Riding was something she'd come to take great enjoyment in after her father's death. Before that, the elderly laird had never let her ride. Donall, however, had encouraged her to learn, and she'd come to love the feel of the saddle underneath her, the wind in her face, and the motions of the different gaits. If nothing else, she took pleasure in the freedom of it.

She'd been stuck in MacLean Keep for so long, she'd almost forgotten the feeling of free air, and what it was like to be able to see the world, instead of the stone walls of a cage that she was meant to call a home. As if it could ever be that. No place could be home where her brother was unwelcome.

It was tempting, very tempting, to ride for Ranald Keep. If she could reach it, she could lock herself inside until Donall returned, and together, they could force Darren MacLean to give up his claim to her. The marriage could be annulled, and life could go back to what she remembered. Or perhaps, it could be better than that, if she could convince Donall to keep the peace her wedding was meant to have forged.

It was a wonderful dream, but she knew it would never work. Darren MacLean and his family were quite capable of invading her home and dragging her back. Besides, the guards and warriors had been told there was now an alliance, and Darren MacLean was the acting laird until their own returned. If he rode up to the gate, they'd likely let him in and let him do as he pleased, without a sword being drawn. And if Donall was there, he'd likely get himself killed trying to defend her.

No, much as she wished it, she couldn't simply ride for home and hope to escape her fate that way. As little as she liked it, Darren MacLean was her lawfully wedded husband. They also couldn't annul the marriage without revealing the lie they'd given the courier. And worse, nothing said that the king couldn't reimprison Donall if the marriage was annulled or otherwise broken.

Eventually, she would have to talk to her new laird. Her husband. It was simply too

exhausting to keep up the effort of despising him all the time, especially when he continued to respond with such calm courtesy. She still hated him, hated what he'd done to her family, but the withering scorn she'd thought would last forever had been quenched by his consideration of her over the past two days.

Alayne sighed and guided her horse to a stop as the path she'd been following came to an end at a small loch, surrounded by trees. After a moment, she slipped out of the saddle. It was far too chilly to think of entering the water, but the serenity of the spot appealed to her. It was a good place to sit and mull over her situation.

The thought of being intimate with Darren MacLean still made her insides squirm, but it was no longer entirely with revulsion. That troubled her a little.

There was also the issue of her brother. Provided the king believed the lie Darren had created for them, her brother would be released to return home soon. She wanted, more than anything, to return to his side. But at the same time, she was at a loss for what to tell Darren, or even if she should tell him.

A part of her wanted to simply wait until Donall returned, and then have her brother come to take her away. Another part of her felt uneasy. What if they attacked each other and started another feud? Or if something happened to Donall?

And even if she could be assured that nothing happened to Donall, she felt as if she owed Darren some consideration in return for how he'd treated her the past few days. It didn't sit well with her to repay his patience and courtesy with deceit.

But how could she even think like that, knowing all he'd done to her? He hadn't even paid wereguild for the way his brother had murdered her father. Nor had he ever apologized for shaming her in the first place, or sending Donall to prison, just for trying to avenge their honor.

She felt trapped, caught between the honor of her clan, her pride, her love for her brother, and her newfound lack of hatred for the man she'd married. She couldn't see any way out of the tangle she found herself in, and that knowledge made her head ache.

The turmoil was so great, she never heard the footsteps behind her. She did, however, hear the snarling words that broke her reverie and sent her scrambling to her feet. "So this is where ye decided tae run off tae, wife ."

CHAPTER NINE

The trail Alayne had ridden down was easy to follow. The snow melt made the ground soft, and the hoofprints were so clear a half-blind drunkard might follow them. The fact didn't improve Darren's mood as he rode. In fact, it only made him angrier.

The paths were soft and treacherous, this time of year, with snow and ice and mud churning up to create an uncertain surface. Furthermore, if he could read the tracks, then so could others. Bandits were rare, but not unheard of on the isle, and any one of them could have followed the trail Alayne had left. Without a guard to accompany and protect her, she would be easy prey for such men, or indeed for any predator who happened across her.

And even if she avoided that fate, he knew well that she wasn't particularly schooled in finding her way in unfamiliar lands. And certainly, she'd never been given any guide over his territory. For all she knew, she could ride over a cliff, or down an embankment, or get lost on a half-formed deer trail in the woods. It was pure luck she happened to be taking a trail down to one of the lochs the servants sometimes enjoyed visiting in summer.

By the time he reached the trail's end, to find her dismounted and staring over the water, seemingly oblivious to her surroundings, he was angrier than he'd been since Lyla had been kidnapped. It was all he could do to dismount and secure his horse before he snarled out a greeting.

At least she had the sense to scramble to her feet and away from him when he spoke.

And she did have a knife at her belt, though she hadn't drawn it. Another growl rose in his chest at the realization. Did she not understand that if he wished to hurt her, there was no way she could draw it fast enough to stop him?

For a moment, he thought she might have sense enough to apologize. Then her chin rose, eyes sparking defiantly as she faced him. "What are ye doing here?"

"What in the name o' God dae ye think?" He snapped the words out, stalking forward in his anger. Alayne danced back, and Darren forced himself to stop with an effort. "Ye rode out without informing me o' where ye were going, without taking even a guard tae watch over ye. Nay word when ye'd be back, where ye'd be going... ye could have slipped on snow or fallen intae a gully or got lost in the woods, and who would have kent tae look fer ye afore ye froze tae death?"

"I'm nae so poor a rider as all that."

"Ye're nae familiar enough with these lands tae be riding them unprotected."

Anger filled her eyes. "I'm nae a child, nor a prisoner, tae be kept inside yer walls or shackled tae yer side."

Darren clenched his fists. "I never said ye were. But I cannae keep ye safe if ye dinnae even tell me when ye leave."

Her response was harsh, mocking laughter. "Safe? Caged rather. Yer bride o' conquest, a prize tae show off."

Darren felt his jaw clench in irritation. "I didnae say ye couldnae ride if ye wished. Only that ye needed an escort. If ye'd but mentioned the matter, I'd have sent someone with ye."

“And who would I trust of yers, tae nae put a knife in me ribs? Then ye’d be rid of an inconvenient wife, and nae blame tae ye.”

Fury filled him, that she would question his honor in such a manner. “I’m nae that sort o’ man, and ye well ken it!”

“And why should I? The king’s messenger is gone, and ye’ve nae more need o’ me tae save face. Why would I trust ye, when ye never wanted me?” She spat the words, and they struck like whips of fire and venom. “Why would I entrust me life tae the hands o’ a man who put me braither in gaol after near killing him, and stood by while his kinfolk slew me faither?”

The thin threads of his control over his temper snapped. “Yer braither took me kinfolk hostage, and I didnae ken if he’d kill her or nae! And that, after he swore tae me that nae further violence would stand between our clans after yer faither died.”

“Ye still had me faither murdered and made nae restitution!”

“Aye! Yer faither was a bastard who used his daughter as a bargaining chip and tried tae hold me prisoner and beat me intae surrender! If I’ve aught I regret, ‘tis that I didnae kill him meself, fer being the wretched, ill-tempered, greedy and spiteful monster he was!”

“As if ye’d kenned aught about him! Ye think ye kent him, but ye didnae live with him! Me father...” She actually stepped toward him, her eyes blazing with a ferocity he might have appreciated another time. “He hated every breath I took, and never did he let me forget it. I couldnae eat, save what I scavenged from the kitchens, or Donall got fer me. I couldnae find clothing, save what I got from servants, and the rare dress from me maither’s wardrobe when he had tae present me tae someone else. Every time he was in his cups, or even if he thought I was breathing wrong, he’d thrash me until I could barely move!”

Tears sparkled in her eyes, but they were of fury as much as anguish. “More than once I thought he’d kill me, fer little or nae reason at all. More than once, I dreamed o’ killing him. But he was me faither, and I couldnae.”

She stepped closer, until they were scant inches apart, cheeks flushed and chest heaving as she spat more words at him. “Ye may think he was a monster fer what he did tae ye, and mayhap me, but ye’ve nae idea the depths he could sink tae. But monster or nae, he was me faither, and mine tae deal with, whether it was by death or some other manner. Mine and Donall’s. And as fer ye - ye dinnae get tae act as if ye did me a favor, when ye were the one who refused me safety and an escape, as well as bringing his wrath down upon me the worst.”

The words hit like knives to the gut, or a wave of icy water, quenching the worst of his fury with the uncomfortable truth of them. Darren caught his breath, wanting to refute them, knowing she spoke true, and utterly entranced by the way her anger had transformed her.

Honest anger, unlaced with poisonous bitterness or false courtesy, gave her eyes a vivid shine, and brought her face to life. The wind reddened her cheeks and, for the first time, she looked alive . Present and full of a confidence he hadn’t known she possessed.

As angry as he still was, he couldn’t help but admire the sight before him. Or suppress the urge to grab her shoulders and kiss her senseless, to see if that passion could be turned into a different sort of flame. He actually found himself leaning forward, his hand rising to cup her cheek.

Alayne startled, and seemed to realize how close she was. Her eyes widened, and she darted back, away from him and toward the trees.

Still dazed, Darren followed her movements, and his eyes spotted the tell-tale mark of

a trapper's snare, likely set by one of the castle servants. It was right at her heels, and another step would trigger it. "Alayne, wait..."

Too late. She stepped back, and the trap snapped a rope around her ankle and yanked her off her feet, into the branches several feet above.

CHAPTER TEN

Everything happened so fast. One minute, she was yelling at Darren MacLean, letting the rage and frustration of long years of abuse pour out of her. The next, she realized his gaze had changed, and she was backing away from him, suddenly wary of what he might do.

Then his eyes widened, and he spoke her name, just as something snapped tight around her ankle and jerked her off her feet and upward into the branches of a tall tree. By the time she stopped, she was a good twenty feet above the ground, and helpless as any forest creature might be.

Terror filled her, her breath seizing in her chest as she realized how high she was. Her hands scrabbled for a purchase, but there was nothing, and her heart began to hammer in her ears. Nay, nay, nay, help me!

She didn't realize she'd spoken the last words aloud until Darren appeared below her. "Stay calm lass. I'll get ye down."

She whimpered. "I... I cannae breathe... I..."

"Calm yerself. I'll get ye down safe." Darren's voice was gentle, but it helped not a bit with her fears.

"I cannae! I... I cannae stand heights..." She hated to admit it, but the fear clawed at her too sharply for dignity to be her primary concern. "Please, please..."

The blood was rushing to her head, making it ache further, and every fiber of her being was consumed with a desperate need to get down, any way she could. And yet, there was nothing she could do.

“Easy lass. Dinnae struggle so much, or ye’ll break the branch and fall. Ye’ll nae like that at all.” Darren looked away from her, then walked across to his horse. A moment later, he was leading the beast to stand underneath her. Once the horse was secured, he swung himself into the saddle, then carefully rose to stand in his stirrups.

The combined height of man and horse bridged more than half the gap between them. He wasn’t close enough to reach her, not quite, but he was close enough that her fear began to subside a little. It was enough to help her drag in a lungful of air, then another one. The clawing panic began to subside.

She was still terrified, but at least she could think somewhat better. She listened as Darren continued to speak low soothing words, as if she were a frightened wild beast. Alayne’s head still ached with the blood rushing to it, and she still wanted down more than she’d ever wanted anything in her life, but she found enough strength to stop thrashing and fighting.

“There ye go. Well done.” Darren gave her an encouraging smile, though that was slightly nerve-wracking as well, given the tattoos that adorned his face. “Now then, will ye be all right if I get off the horse?”

“I... mayhap. Where are ye going?”

“Tae see if I can find the other end o’ the snare and undo it. If I cannae, I’ll have tae climb up and cut ye free from there, and that’s a far riskier thing tae be doing.”

Both ideas scared her nearly senseless, but she’d much rather combat her fear while he rescued her than remain where she was. “I can manage. Just - please, get me

down.” Her voice quavered, but she didn’t care.

“All right. I’ll leave the horse - if worse comes tae worst, ye’ll have a slightly gentler landing, mayhap. Though I dinnae intend fer it tae come tae that.”

With that, he dismounted and strode off into the bushes a few feet away, looking for the trap line. Alayne felt the panic trying to drag her under again, and fought it with all her might, concentrating on her breathing.

Darren reappeared. “I dinnae ken who set this trap, but either they werenae thinking, or they believe we’re all squirrels.” He huffed.

“Please, just get me down. I cannae handle this much longer.”

“I ken, lass. Just breathe. I need tae think how tae dae this safely. I cannae afford tae be as careless as the hunter who set this.”

After a moment, Darren sighed. “Naught fer it but tae make the best o’ the situation. I’ll be as careful as I can, Alayne, but this willnae be easy.”

She bit her lip and refrained from saying that she didn’t care. She didn’t want to fall, and it was clear he was trying to prevent injury to her.

She watched as Darren shucked out of his sword belt, removed his boots, and slipped a dirk into his sash. After a moment of examination, he raised himself up, grabbed a knob on the side of the tree, and tugged himself upward. His other hand caught on the stump of a branch, too small to be called a proper handhold, and his toes dug into the bark.

Alayne watched in amazement as he carefully scaled the tree, using little creases in the bark and knots that she never would have dared entrust her weight to. He got to

the lowest branch, grabbed it, and heaved himself onto it with one smooth motion.

Within minutes, he was cautiously sitting on the branch that supported her weight. He considered her position, then undid his sash. "If I lower the end down tae ye, can ye grip it tight enough fer me tae lift ye?"

If it meant getting out of the tree and back to solid ground, she could and would do anything. She nodded weakly.

The end of the cloth fell next to her shoulder a moment later, and she seized it and wrapped it around her wrists, before clenching her hands in the fabric. "I'm ready."

A careful tug, then a stronger one, and she felt her upper body rising into the air. Her wrists burned and her shoulders hurt, but she couldn't find it in herself to care as the blood rushed back to where it was supposed to be, and the earth and sky resumed their proper positions.

As soon as she was within reach, Darren let go of the sash with one hand and clasped her wrist, then pulled her up to sit on the branch beside him. "There ye are. That's the worst o' it, I think."

Alayne shivered. She was beyond glad to be upright once again, but it hadn't escaped her notice that she was now several feet higher. She gulped and clenched her eyes shut, clinging to Darren as he moved to sever the rope that held her ankle.

Once she was free, he leaned back and looked at her. "Can ye climb down?"

Even the thought of trying made her stomach churn and her heart pound. "I... I never learned."

And I'm far too scared tae try.

Darren heaved a sigh. "I was afraid ye'd say that." He looked around. "If I turn around very carefully can ye loop the sash around both o' us and hold on tae me shoulders while I get us on the ground? Willnae be the gentlest trip, nor the fastest, but far as I ken, 'tis the safest. I promise I'll keep ye safe."

She would have preferred faster, but she could live with a safer choice. She nodded tightly. "I can do that."

Darren shifted backward toward the tree trunk, then pushed up and flipped a leg over to stand on a branch on one side. Another shift of his weight - she didn't quite see what he did, and didn't care to with the way watching him made her head spin - and he was facing the tree. "Inch toward me, until ye can loop the sash around me waist."

Moving was the hardest thing she'd ever done, and it was only by keeping her gaze firmly trained on Darren's broad back and the reassuring bulk of the tree trunk that she could manage it at all. Still, she managed to scoot forward until she was close enough to feel the heat of his body. Her hands were clumsy as she worked them free of the sash and used the length to bind herself to Darren, but eventually, she was pressed against him, the sash binding them both at the waist while her arms locked, vise-like, around his chest.

"Good. Well done." Darren's voice was warm, and the vibration of it rumbled through his chest, offering a reassuring sense of safety. For all she didn't like Darren MacLean - or at least wasn't sure she should like him - she knew he wouldn't let her come to harm. Nor would he harm her himself, not after going to such lengths to help her.

"Now, I need ye tae move with me, and swing yer right leg over the branch, tae this side. Dinnae worry, I'll be with ye, and I willnae let ye fall."

His hand gently pushed on her knee for her to move. It was still terrifying, but with

his help and the pressure of his hand and his leg guiding her, she finally got her leg over the branch. There was a brief feeling like she might fall, then Darren caught her leg. “Easy does it lass.”

He paused. “I’ll let ye have the choice. I cannae hold ye and climb at the same time. Ye can wrap yer legs about my waist if ye want, or try tae climb with me. Or ye can just hold on tae my shoulders and trust me tae see ye tae the ground.”

Wrapping her legs around his waist invoked images and a fluttery feeling she didn’t want to think too much about. But the idea of clinging to him while her legs dangled uselessly was even more frightening, in its own way. She swallowed hard. “I... if ye can tell me what tae dae...”

“Dinnae worry about handholds. Let me manage those. Just move yer feet as I tell ye.” She nodded against his shoulder. “Good lass. Let’s dae this.”

Inch by inch, they slowly made their way down the tree, with Darren directing her movements with calm, quiet instruction. Finally, they reached the lowest branch, and Darren paused. “Alayne, ye might want tae close yer eyes fer this last part.”

“Why?”

“Because I cannae see a good way tae take us both down, nae without risking a fall. I’m thinking twould be best tae jump.”

Jump, and they were still about eight feet above the ground. Alayne shuddered. “Ye climbed up afore...”

“Aye, but that was with only me own weight tae consider, and even then, ‘twas nae easy. One wrong move and I’d lose my grip, and we’d both hit the ground hard. I can control it better if I jump, but ye’ll have tae trust me.”

She didn't like the idea - no, she honestly hated the idea with a passion that rivaled her feelings about her brother being in gaol. But even that wasn't as bad as the idea of remaining stuck in the tree. "What dae I need tae dae?"

"Clinch yer knees tae me sides, like I'm a horse ye're training tae saddle, hold on as tight as ye can, and close yer eyes."

She'd never trained a horse to saddle, but she could guess what he meant. With an effort, she did as he suggested, tightening her grip till her thighs ached and her hands were white-knuckled and nearly numb with the strain. She screwed her eyes shut and buried her face against his shoulder for good measure. "All right. I'm ready."

Shifting weight, the leaves rustled as he moved. Then Darren grunted, and there was a sudden lurch that flung them both backward, away from the tree trunk. Alayne shrieked, the sound muffled by Darren's shirt, as they fell through the air.

Then they hit the ground, or rather, Darren did. Alayne felt the jolt as he landed on his feet and took a few staggering steps to regain his balance. His hands snaked back and wrapped around her in a sort of cradle as he moved, keeping her from falling as he found his footing.

When Darren finally stopped moving, Alayne mustered her courage and peeked over his shoulder. The sight that met her eyes - good solid ground, the proper distance away - made her want to weep with relief. She went limp against Darren's back. "Och, thank god..."

"Aye. I'll have tae be having words with whoever put a trap like that so close tae the loch. Could have been a nasty business, if there had been a bairn here, or a lass on an errand o' her own. Me folk ought tae ken better than tae be so careless."

Her heartbeat was gradually returning to normal, but Alayne's legs felt weak and

shaky as Darren untied the knots of the sash and released her. It was a blessing to have her feet standing on a solid surface once more, but she didn't feel as if her legs would hold her yet. She was shaking like a leaf in a strong breeze.

Darren shifted, turning in her grasp so he could see her face. "Are ye well?"

She couldn't figure out how to answer that, her mind a haze of fading fear and overwhelming gratitude, as well as relief. She felt weak-kneed and overwhelmed, but even so, she was conscious of a desire to show her appreciation.

A sudden impulse took her. She leaned into Darren and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Thank ye."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Darren froze as Alayne's lips pressed against his cheek, followed by the brush of warm air as she whispered her thanks in his ear.

It wasn't the first time a woman had kissed him like that, nor whispered such words to him, and yet, the sensation of Alayne, so close, and for once actually welcoming his touch, made him feel like a youth with his first woman. His nerves tingled, and familiar tightness flooded his loins.

He wanted to kiss her, to see if he could evoke the same heat in her that she was producing in him, but he held himself back with iron control. Alayne was overwrought, her thinking clouded by the fright she'd received. To do anything more than comfort her and bring her back to MacLean Keep would be taking advantage of her, and he'd sworn he'd never do such a thing.

Alayne might be his wife, but he'd not push for more than she was ready to give. Besides, giving in to his desire now would only destroy the fragile relationship between them. She'd hate him for that as surely as she would have if he'd forced her that first night.

He took a deep breath and raised his hands to take her arm in a gentle grip. She was shivering, from cold and lingering fear both, he suspected. He'd seen how a bad fright could shake the nerves, though he'd not have guessed heights was something that might frighten her.

He wondered if it was a natural fear, such as the kinds children sometimes developed

and never grew out of, or if something had happened to make her so terrified. He also wondered if there was a way to help her get over it, and if she would let him try.

But those were considerations for another time. For now, it was best to get her back to the keep, and into the hot bath she'd requested hours ago. A good warm soak and a solid meal, along with some rest, ought to make her feel more herself again. Perhaps when she'd regained her calm, they could discuss what had happened, along with the reasons he'd sought her out in the first place.

She was shaking too much to sit on her own horse. Darren guided her to lean against his mount, while he went to untether hers and bring it back. Once the lead rein was fixed to his saddle, he boosted Alayne up, then swung himself up behind her. It was a bit uncomfortable, especially with the way his manhood ached at her closeness, but fortunately, she was too dazed to notice.

Darren settled himself as comfortably as he could manage, and as far back on the saddle as was safe. Then he looped an arm around her to keep her safe and set the horse to a leisurely walk back to MacLean Keep.

Alayne didn't say much during the journey. The shivering slowly eased off, replaced by a sort of stiff-backed wariness. A fit of the vapors, or something akin to battle-shock, perhaps. Or maybe she was simply frightened by being off the ground, even if she was seated firmly on the back of a horse, and safely held in place.

Then again, how likely was it that she felt safe in his arms? It was one thing, he knew, to cling to him when he was her only means of escaping her plight. But now, with the aftermath of fear and his arms around her in a different manner?

Uncertain of whether or not it would help, Darren transferred the reins to one hand, then slid the other one between their bodies and began to rub soothing motions across her back and shoulders. Keegan had sometimes been soothed by such gestures, after

an injury or a nightmare or one of their father's drunken rages. He didn't think it would hurt.

It was an awkward position at best, and did nothing to decrease the discomfort of his stirring manhood, but it was all he could think of to do.

Alayne's hands were still shaking as Darren helped her up into the saddle, and though she didn't want to admit it, she was grateful for his solid presence at her back and his arm around her waist as they rode back to MacLean Keep. After such a scare, even sitting on the horse felt uncomfortably high.

Still, the pace was easy, and her seat was secure, and Alayne gradually began to relax as the fear left her. Unfortunately, the lack of terror clouding her mind only made her think of other things. Things like the fact that she had kissed Darren MacLean.

Yes, he had helped her, and it was a gesture of gratitude. She'd reluctantly begun to admit to herself that she didn't quite hate him as intensely as she once had.

The problem lay in the fact that some small part of her had enjoyed the feel of his weather-roughened skin under her lips, and liked the taste of sweat and tree sap that touched her mouth. Some treacherous part of her had enjoyed the feel of his thick, tousled hair under her fingers, and the pressure of his muscular body against hers for that brief span of time.

And now that the terror was wearing off, she was acutely aware of how close he was behind her. His warmth and the masculine scent of him - leather and sweat and wood-scent - surrounded her. She felt every shift of the muscles in the arm around her waist, and the feeling was oddly - distracting. It made her skin tingle and her stomach flutter in ways she couldn't recall experiencing before.

It also made her feel warm and restless, though she couldn't say why. She found

herself wanting to scoot further away, but also to lean back into him and press her face into his broad shoulder, all at the same time. It was confusing, and a little frightening.

Then his hands moved, one taking up the second part of the reins, while the other arm dropped back. Seconds later, she felt his hands roving softly up and down her spine, and across her shoulders in slow, gentle arcs.

It felt like the way Donall had soothed her a few times as a child, but also undeniably different. Donall's touch was calming, gentle, the type of action that had often put her to sleep, when she was feeling unwell or had awoken from a bad dream.

Darren's touch made her feel as if embers were coming to life under her skin, a slow blaze of warmth that built and seemed to leisurely coil inward. His touch made her heart beat faster and gave her the desire to arch her back into him, like a cat might respond to a hand stroking its fur.

It was enjoyable, but also embarrassing, and confusing. She wasn't sure how to react. Part of her wanted to ask him to stop, but it was drowned out by the parts of her that wanted more. More warmth, more tenderness. More of him .

By the time they rode into the courtyard and he helped her dismount, she felt as if she'd swallowed a jar of butterflies, and her hands were shaking again for an entirely different reason. She wanted to run away, but at the same time, she didn't.

Darren led her inside, up the stairs toward their quarters. He seemed to realize that she was troubled. He also seemed determined to be gentle, and that confused her more.

Finally, it was too much. Alayne pulled herself free of the arm around her shoulders. "I can walk on me own, thank ye. If ye dinnae mind, I'd like tae have a hot bath and a

meal in private taenight.”

Before he could answer, Alayne hurried away, head down so he couldn't see her burning cheeks, or the conflicted expression she knew adorned her face. She hurried to their chambers and shut the door fast behind her, wishing she could lock it as well.

There was a bath already waiting, likely the one she'd told him to arrange for her earlier that day. It was still steaming too, as if Darren, or someone else, had ensured the water never got too cold. Alayne felt tears prick her eyes at the sight of it, even as she hurried to undress and slide into the water.

She didn't know if this was another example of Darren's courtesy or not, and she wasn't sure it mattered any more either. Somewhere, somehow, something had changed. Something within her had transformed her anger and her hatred into another feeling, one she had no idea how to deal with, or even put a name to. It felt almost as if she was being bespelled.

Darren MacLean... what have ye done tae me? I swore I'd hate ye until the day me braither made me a widow, or ye divorced me o' yer own free will and took his place in the king's dungeon. And yet now, things are changing tae fast fer me tae keep up. I nae longer ken what I feel, or what tae dae about it.

When Donall comes, will I still be strong enough tae go tae his side, or will ye have ensnared me so much I nae longer desire tae return home - or avenge me kin?

CHAPTER TWELVE

“ Y e cannae go on like this.” Bard’s voice was sympathetic as the two of them stood side-by-side, waiting for Daemon and Lyla to finish their farewells. Darren scowled at his advisor, but it was half-hearted. Most of his attention was on the slender figure standing on the other side of the open gates.

Alayne. Ever since he’d rescued her from the tree a week ago, she’d been avoiding him as if she thought him a leper. She’d taken to blocking the bedroom door when she retired for the night, and refused to emerge until after he left. It was something, he supposed, that she at least had the kindness to leave him clean clothing, a pillow, and plenty of blankets, but it wasn’t enough.

Ten days of sleeping on the stone floors, or sometimes on a settle or a nap in his study when it got too unbearable, had left him with a constant ache that not even the hottest bath could soothe. He’d tried bathing in water so hot it threatened to scald him, to no avail.

He’d finally, two nights ago, resorted to seeking out the healer for a poultice or a potion to relieve the pain enough for him to sleep. She’d looked at him in askance when he’d also asked for a liniment, claiming a strained shoulder from sparring practice with Daemon.

Which, of course, had given him the added frustration of being unable to spar, lest the healer give him a scolding and force further restrictions on him.

He understood that Alayne might be embarrassed about being so vulnerable and

frightened in front of him, but it was getting ridiculous. He was on the verge of giving her a different set of quarters, or claiming another set for himself, just for the sake of getting a decent night's sleep.

He'd hoped he'd have a chance to talk to her while they were waiting to bid Daemon and Lyla farewell, but she seemed determined to speak to anyone except him. Any time he approached her, she would step away and withdraw.

It was driving him mad. He was glad for the cessation of hateful words and angry glares, but there were already whispers around the keep. He didn't need any more trouble, and he certainly didn't need any rumors of a breach between them to reach the king's ears.

The rough thump of a hand on his shoulder jarred Darren from his thoughts with a wince. He turned to see Bard and Adrian both staring at him in concern. "Aye?"

"Ye cannae go on like this." Bard huffed. "Even if yer muscles and bones can take the strain - and I ken full well they cannae, with how ye've been moving - ye've circles under yer eyes that make ye look as if ye've been punched in the face, and half the time ye seem tae be away with the Fair Folk or asleep on yer feet."

Darren scowled. He knew Bard was right. He also knew that the man knew full well what the problem was, and why he'd been unable to remedy it. "And what dae ye suggest? Breakin' down the door and cornering her, or throwing her out o' me rooms altogether? I cannae think either will go well, and she's been avoiding me like I've the plague."

"So find a way tae make it so she cannae avoid ye, and talk with the lass. 'Tis nae so hard." Adrian shook his head. "Especially with ye sharing the laird's chambers."

"I dinnae want tae make her feel uncomfortable. Ye ken she has good reason tae

resent me. ‘Tis getting better, but I dinnae want tae push her tae far or too fast.” Darren glanced over to where Alayne was giving Lyla a tight embrace, which was being earnestly returned.

“Mayhap ye can take her somewhere. Dae some proper courting.” Bard spoke up. “Ye’re enemies who were forced intae a marriage with little tae nay warning - wouldnae hurt fer ye tae take some time alone tae get tae ken more about one another.”

Adrian nodded. “Aye. There’s a fine place I ken a lot o’ trysting folk go - a waterfall from the cliffs a candle-mark or so ride from here.”

Darren considered the suggestion. He knew the place Adrian spoke of, he’d gone there more than once with a casual lover.

His first thought was that anything to do with a cliff was a bad idea, given what he now knew about her fear of heights. His second thought was that they could enjoy the view from the foot of the waterfall just as well as from the top. His third was that he’d been considering helping her recover from her fear of heights - perhaps this was a good method? It was too cold to brave the water, but maybe the scenery would help take away her fear.

He grunted. “I’ll consider it. Might be a good idea tae dae just that.”

Bard smiled. “Ye can go taeday, or taemorrow. Winter duties are light enough, and we’ve Ryan tae help Adrian in working with the guards, so ye can afford tae take a proper day fer yerself and the lady.”

Adrian gave an enthusiastic gesture of agreement. “Aye. Take a luncheon basket or the like, and make a day o’ it. Ye could certainly use the rest and the time taegether.”

There was plenty of work to be done, but Darren was sorely tempted to take their advice. He needed to talk to Alayne about a number of things, including the sleeping situation. Perhaps forcing an outing wasn't the best way to go, but if she wouldn't talk to him otherwise, then what else could he do?

As if to underscore the thought, his eyes met hers, across the expanse of the gate. Alayne quickly turned away and bustled off toward the keep proper, her farewells apparently completed while he and the others had been talking. Darren felt his jaw clench.

“Bard.”

“Aye.”

“As soon as Daemon and his wife are on their way, please tell the kitchens tae pack me provisions fer a noon meal fer two, away from the castle. Include some o' that sweet wine Alayne seems tae favor. And ask the stable hands tae saddle one o' me horses with the wider saddle fer riding double.”

He was through with letting his wife have things her own way. They were going to talk, even if he had to act like a barbarian and carry her out of the keep draped over his saddle like a war prize.

Alayne was contemplating starting a new needlework project when a sudden, sharp knock on the door of the bedroom made her jump. She looked up, just as the door swung open to reveal the one person she'd hoped to avoid. Her husband.

Darren looked... well, it was clear he'd not slept well in some time. Beyond that, his face held an odd mix of determination and consideration that immediately made her feel wary. “What dae ye want?”

“Tae speak tae ye. We havenae had a chance, these past days, and I thought we might take a chance tae remedy that.” His voice was quiet, calm, and neutral, and the difference between it and the stubborn cast to his features made her warier still. So did the fact that she had no desire to talk to him.

She’d been avoiding him since he’d rescued her from the tree, but despite several days of thought, she was no closer to understanding the confusing emotions he inspired in her than she had been during the ride back. She knew she should speak with him. She knew her determined avoidance was endangering the fragile truce they’d established before the courier arrived.

The problem was that seeing him made her stomach flutter as it had when he’d touched her. She couldn’t help remembering how she’d kissed him, and the thoughts and sensations it had invoked. It embarrassed her, and it was the last thing she wanted to even consider discussing with her husband.

He was still waiting for her answer. She swallowed hard, and forced herself to be courteous, though what she wanted was to shut the door in his face until he left her alone. “What sort o’ talking were ye thinking o’? Is this tae be a quick conversation or nae, because I dae have things tae be doing...” She trailed off as Darren raised an eyebrow.

“Ye dinnae have much tae dae, I ken that well enough. Winter’s a time fer few duties, and spring is nae expected tae start in earnest for weeks yet. Even I’ve nae much tae be concerned with.”

She scowled at him. “Doesnae mean I’ve naething tae work on. There’s always sewing tae be done, or books tae read.”

“Aye. But there’s other occupations as well, such as spending time with those around ye.” Darren sighed. “I ken ye have yer reasons fer staying apart, and I have respected

them as much as I can, but ‘twould help if we could get tae ken each other a little better. That’s why I was thinkin’ tae take a day off, and tae ask ye tae come with me.”

Alayne blinked. “Come with ye?”

“Aye. It occurred tae me...” He paused and made a wry expression. “That is, I was reminded that circumstances meant we didnae get much chance tae get tae ken each other afore we were wed. And neither o’ us were o’ the mind tae dae so, in any case. But I’d like tae change that, and get tae ken ye better.”

Alayne stared, too startled to do anything else. Of all the suggestions she’d expected him to make, the suggestion that they take time to get to know one another wasn’t among them. That was usually something courting couples did, in her admittedly limited experience. They were already wed.

Darren simply stood there, waiting for her reply. Curiosity drove her to seek more information. “Ye said ye wanted me tae come with ye? Where? And tae dae what?”

“Out riding. Ye seemed tae have a fondness fer it. It occurred tae me that I was angered because ye went riding alone when ye werenae familiar with the area. That being said, rather than wishing tae restrict ye, I should take the time tae show ye around, and make sure ye ken where it is safe tae ride and where it isnae.” He shifted his weight. “I thought tae show ye some o’ me favorite places tae go, and perhaps we could spend some time, even enjoy a meal outside the keep walls.”

“‘Tis winter.” She mustered the most logical protest she could think of, though in truth, she knew it was a weak one, given that the conditions had been both colder and more treacherous when she’d ridden out a week before. The idea of riding with him, however, made her feel uncomfortable. It was too much like the situation which had led to her inner turmoil in the first place.

“Aye, but the sun is shining, and the weather bids tae stay fair, fer all I can tell. ‘Twillnae be tae cold, nae so long as we both wear cloaks and gloves and sturdy boots.”

He was right, but she still didn’t trust herself to be alone with him. Who knew what other lapses in judgment it might lead to? She shook her head. “The invitation is kind, but I dinnae wish tae go riding.”

He caught the door before she could shut it. “Ye dinnae wish tae go riding, or ye dinnae wish tae spend time with me?” His voice had developed a harder edge.

She should say she didn’t want to go riding, but the truth was that she enjoyed the activity. Alayne knew she’d hesitated a second too long when his expression darkened with what looked like frustration, anger, and some other emotion that vanished before she could properly identify it. “Ye cannae avoid me forever.”

“Doesnae mean I cannae refuse ye now.”

“If nae now, then when? When would ye be willing tae spend time and talk with me? When will ye at least give me a chance tae prove I’m nae a monster, and that I’m willing tae be a fair husband?”

She had no idea, and even if she had, she wouldn’t want to voice it. She was already confused enough by their previous interactions. “When I feel like it.”

In truth, she didn’t want to do anything until she’d received word that her brother was home once more. Home, with his health on the mend after the depredations he’d suffered in the king’s dungeon. She couldn’t let herself think about anything else until she knew he was all right.

Daemon and Lyla’s departure had reminded her that a week had passed since the

courier's departure. Surely that was enough time for Donall to be released and make his way home? She'd had no letters from him, and heard no news of his return, but the village that bordered the firth and served as the MacLean ferry was hardly the only port on the island.

She'd intended to write to him, later in the day, and after she'd have figured out a way to get the letter delivered that wouldn't alert Darren to the fact that her brother was likely a free man once more.

Darren's expression, however, suggested that she might not have the chance. Her answer had clearly displeased him. Though he was making an effort to remain civil, she could see the spark of frustration and anger in his eyes when he answered her. "When ye feel like it isnae enough o' an answer. If ye're truly indisposed taeday, then give me another day that ye will go with me. Nae a vague 'mayhap' or 'later' but a day. Taemorrow. The day after. My patience has an end, Alayne, and 'tis just another vague answer away."

Alayne felt her own level of irritation rise. She understood why he might be impatient, but they'd scarcely been married a fortnight. Why was he pressing the matter so urgently?

She hadn't meant to speak sharply, but in her worry about her brother's situation and her own recent confusion, the words came out harsher than she intended. "I meant what I said. I'll come tae ye when I'm ready, and that's as direct or as specific as I'm willing tae be. Ye owe me that much."

"I owe ye the courtesy due a wife, 'tis true. But dancing tae yer every whim and waiting on yer every pleasure isnae part o' the deal." His jaw clenched. "I'll ask ye once more, will ye come with me willingly ? Agree tae spend the time with me taeday, kenning that I'll let ye have yer space and yer own way taemorrow?"

It would have been wise to simply concede and get it over with, Alayne knew that. But she'd spent a lifetime of being ordered about by her father, forced into positions she didn't want to be in. The marriage was just one more in a long line of situations she was forced to endure that she hadn't chosen for herself - or, at least, a situation she wouldn't have chosen had there been any other way to secure her brother's life and freedom.

Maybe if she'd never had Donall, she would have been content with being a meek little mouse of a lass. But her brother had encouraged her to know her own mind, even in the face of her father's disapproval and cruelty. And it was that, and her frustration, that made her snap back at her husband. "I said nae now, and I meant it. Go away and leave me in peace."

She started to shut the door, but he caught it and shouldered it open, eyes hard and determined. "Nae this time." He took a breath, and his back straightened into a posture and a look she knew well. It was the 'lairdly' look - the expression donned by a man who was used to giving orders, and having them obeyed, or enforcing them as required. "Whatever ye've planned, it can wait. Fer taeday, ye'll be coming with me, so I can show ye the MacLean lands and where 'tis safe tae ride, among other things."

Her first instinct was to snarl out another refusal, but she knew that tone of voice. It was one she'd grown up fearing and despising. The voice of command.

She'd thought he might be different, but it turned out he was more like her father than his previous behavior had led her to believe. Alayne swallowed back bitter anger, her whole body stiff with hurt and outrage as she replied. "As ye will, me laird."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Darren grimaced as yet another uneven spot in the path resulted in Alayne's elbow jabbing him painfully in the ribs. He'd known she was displeased at being ordered to accompany him, and angry about being forced to share a saddle with him, but he hadn't expected how determined she'd be to make her displeasure known. At this rate, his ribs were going to be black and blue before they even reached the waterfall, let alone returned to MacLean Keep.

On the other hand, he supposed he should have expected this. Their wedding had shown him that she was more than willing to indicate her unhappiness in the most uncomfortable ways possible for him.

He'd regretted his decision to force the matter the moment he saw the furious, almost betrayed look in her eyes. The only thing that had stopped him from retracting his demand was the knowledge that he would lose her respect, and that of his people, if he gave in so easily. He also didn't want her to think she could manipulate him so casually, or that a simple display of temper would be enough to sway his mind.

He'd considered ordering a second horse, but then there was no telling what she would have done, or if she would have stayed with him. He wouldn't put it past her to deliberately try to lose him, just to show her anger. The only way to prevent it would have been to tie her horse to his, like a parent restraining a child's training mount. He doubted she would have accepted that with any more grace.

Knowing those things, however, did not mean he wanted to let the matters stand as they were. The point of this journey was to help them develop a better relationship,

not a more poisonous one. He thought for a moment, then cleared his throat. “What’s yer favorite color?”

It was an inane question, but it broke the silence and startled her into looking over her shoulder at him. “What?”

“I wasnae joking when I said I wanted tae get tae ken ye better. Asking after yer preferences seems a fair place tae start.”

“And why should I want tae answer?”

“Aside from making sure I ken yer preferences, so ye can take me tae task if I dinnae remember them?” He paused. “Fer every question ye answer, ye can ask one in return.”

“Of the same ilk, I suppose.”

He suspected he would regret his next words, but he spoke them anyway. “Nae. Ye can ask anything ye like. So long as ‘tis nae a matter tae dae with clan security, I give ye me word I’ll answer honestly.”

She considered that for a moment, then replied. “I like blue. The color o’ the sky on a sunny day.” A beat of hesitation. “Dae ye have any issues with performance in the bed chamber?”

Did she really ask that?

“Nae so far as I ken. Though I suppose if I were drunk enough, I might. ‘Tis said tae be a thing that happens tae men, but ‘tis nae something I’ve experienced.” Marcus had been the more inclined to drinking of all his father’s children, before he’d decided to sober up, and even he had never seemed to have problems in that

department.

He was tempted to ask why blue was her favorite color, but opted for something more neutral. “Dae ye have a favorite food?”

“Aye. Berry tarts with fresh cream or honey.” There was a moment of silence, and then, to his surprise, she added “My brother used tae make sure I had a plate o’ them fer me birthday every year. Wasnae always easy, but he did it. One time, he even climbed a tree fer the honeycomb himself. Came back covered in welts from the stings, but he was so proud o’ himself.”

Berry tarts with honey or cream or both. He made a note to be sure he had some for her birthday, even if he had to order them specially from the mainland.

“What’s the most embarrassing thing ye’ve ever done?” Her question was soft, and some of the harshness of anger had gone out of her voice.

“Och, there’s nae end o’ stories there...” He was tempted to bring up the wedding, but decided against it. “There was the first time I got drunk, but I think all boys coming tae manhood can tell that story, and ‘tis always the same. Fer me... I suppose it was dealing with me braithers.”

“How do ye mean?” She sounded genuinely curious.

“I kent both me braithers were in love with their lasses long afore they did. Or at least, afore they were willing tae admit it. I got so frustrated with the pair o’ them moon-calfing around the matter that I actually pretended tae be falling in love with the lasses meself, just tae provoke them intae admitting the truth. Earned me a sore jaw both times, and I was the subject o’ gossip fer weeks after.”

Silence fell between them, and he wondered for a moment if he’d upset her, by

reminding her of Keegan, and how that had led to the death of her father. She still seemed relaxed though, her shoulders and her seat both loose instead of ramrod stiff as they'd been in the beginning. He decided to dare a slightly more personal question, since she seemed to have no trouble asking him such things. "Why are ye afraid o' heights?"

She stiffened, and he wondered if he'd pushed too far, too hard. But just as fast as the tension had come, it started to ease. Her voice was subdued, but not angry, when she spoke. "I used tae follow me faither and braither around when I was a wee child. One day, I followed them up tae the parapets - I dinnae even remember why they were up there. But at one point, me faither turned and he knocked me over. I fell off the parapet ledge on the inner courtyard... if it hadnae been fer a quick guard, I'd have fallen the whole way. I dinnae think I'd have survived. I've been afraid ever since."

If the elder Ranald weren't already dead, Darren would cheerfully have strangled him. "I'm sorry ye had that experience."

"'Twasnae the worst one." A pause. "What's the worst thing yer faither ever did tae ye?"

He was surprised she didn't know the story. Then again, perhaps she did, but had forgotten it. Or maybe her father had kept it from her, thinking she might refuse to honor the contract if she'd known.

He hated reliving those memories, but he'd promised to answer honestly, so he did. "Killing me maither and forcing me tae kill him tae save me braither."

"What?" her voice was shocked, as well it might be.

"Isnae a pretty tale, but I'll tell it if ye wish."

There was a long pause, and then she spoke softly. “Aye. Please.”

He took a moment to get his thoughts in order, before he began. “Me faither wasnae always a bad man, but he started drinking, and he was a cruel man when the drink was in him. Over the years, the drinkin’ got worse, and so did his temper.”

It still hurt, remembering those years of watching his stern but fair father turn into a monster, consumed by the demons he found at the bottom of a flagon.

“Me maither - she wasnae happy, but neither could she leave him. Eventually though, she sought comfort from my uncle, and it became something more tan just that. I dinnae ken how long they spent sneaking around fer their trysting behind me faither’s back, but ‘twas long enough that there’s question o’ whose son me braither Keegan truly was. It doesnae matter tae me, but when me faither heard the whispers and learned he’d been cuckolded, the thought he might be raising another man’s son drove him mad. He swore he’d kill all o’ them - me maither, me uncle, and Keegan.”

“But yer braither is alive.”

“Aye, but at a cost.” Darren heard the leaden tone to his voice, but there was no point in trying to change it. “Faither killed me uncle, Cathal, and left Adrian - me war leader, who is also me cousin - without a family. I tried tae save me maither, but I failed her. Faither beat her badly. I managed tae get her away, but she died later o’ the wounds he inflicted upon her.”

He swallowed back the bitter tang that speaking of the incident always brought to his mouth. “He tried tae break intae the healer’s cottage tae finish the job, and I had tae stop him. He was swearing he’d kill her, then find Keegan and kill him. There was nae reasoning with him, so we fought. In the end, I was forced tae kill him tae end the madness. I didnae plan it. It just... happened.”

He didn't tell her how Keegan had spent years hating him for that, or how his younger brother had run away in disgust at his actions, not knowing the full reason behind them. Nor how he'd gotten his first tattoos to cover the scars of that fight, and the shame he felt that he hadn't been able to save any of them. Those were his memories and his burdens to bear.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

She'd expected some trite story about getting punished for misbehaving, or perhaps a moment of anger between father and son. Hearing Darren's tale about his mother and brother made Alayne's heart ache with sympathy.

It also made her wonder if there was more to the story of his initial refusal for her hand. While she was still angry and hurt in that regard, she also recalled that his younger brother had been the guard for the Stewart lass he'd allegedly refused her for. She knew that because she'd overheard her father and Donall discussing it. Had something else happened involving his brother?

She wanted to know, but at the same time, she didn't want to hear any more such stories. Darren didn't seem to be in a hurry to ask a question, despite the fact that it was his turn, so she elected to ask a relatively innocent question of her own. "I've heard yer favorite food is venison. Is that true?"

Darren chuckled. "Och, ye've been listening tae Lyla. She thinks me favorite food is venison, fer I always ask folk tae bring some from the main Highlands when they can. But she's nae completely correct."

"Isn't she?"

"Nay. I just never told her how much I like sweet cakes. The cook kens, and she's often sent a plate up o' an evening, after supper is over. Sweet cakes with honey, or cream, berry preserves... I'm fair fond o' them all."

It was such a simple, silly thing to have in common, but she found herself warming to him more, knowing that he shared her love of honey cakes.

She might have asked another question, but Darren drew the horse to a halt at a forking in the path. “Left or right?”

She blinked. “I dinnae ken. Where dae they go?”

“Both paths lead tae a waterfall glen I’m fond o’ visiting. The left hand path leads tae the base o’ the falls, and the little pool it forms. The right hand path leads tae the top o’ the falls, where ye can see the view, all the way tae MacLean Keep on a clear day.”

Her first impulse was to vehemently refuse the idea of the right hand path. Her second was to be angry that he would suggest such a thing, when he knew about her fear of heights. Her third was curiosity. “Why would ye offer me a choice? Surely ye ken which I’d choose.”

“I wanted ye tae have the choice, as I’ve seen it matters tae ye, and I can guess why. And because I want tae show ye that heights are naething tae be feared, as long as ye respect them. Ye’ve good reason fer yer fear, but I’d like tae help ye move past it.”

Alayne swallowed hard at the unexpectedly thoughtful reasoning behind his decision. Not even Donall had offered to help her conquer her fears. She considered a moment, then gathered her courage the same way she’d gathered it the night she’d thought they were going to consummate their marriage. “I’d like tae see this view yer talking o’, so long as I’ve the choice o’ returning tae the lower path if I dinnae like it.”

“O’ course.” Darren’s voice was reassuring and held a note of something like... pride? Respect, at least. Alayne basked in the unexpected warmth the thought brought her, clinging to it as Darren guided his horse to the right and started them up the path

toward the top of the waterfall.

The ascent was noticeable, but gradual enough that she felt no fear of it. It was rather like climbing the stairs in the keep, with the trees to either side forming a 'hall' that enclosed her and kept her worries about falling over the edge at bay.

They emerged onto the top of the rise, and Alayne blinked to see that they were on a small plateau, stony but with the odd growth of bushes here and there, especially where the rill appeared from within the rocks and began its journey to the pool so far below.

Alayne dismounted and moved to regard the thin stream of water. "Is there a spring or something o' the sort underground?"

"I cannae say." Darren dismounted as well. "I've never thought tae look intae the matter. I suppose I feared that tae pry tae deep would lead tae damaging the flow, and losing the stream and the waterfall and the pool below."

He moved closer and cupped some of the water in his hands. "I can tell ye 'tis fresh water, nae salt. Wherever the water comes from, it doesnae come in contact with the firth, and 'tis fit fer drinking." As if to prove his point, he lifted the water to his lips and swallowed, a small trail of water sliding onto his chin.

Alayne watched, then stooped to scoop up a handful or two of her own. She was thirsty, and the water was cool and clear. It was frigid, as if filled with snow melt, when she raised it to her lips, and wonderfully fresh.

Darren let her drink her fill, then stepped away, toward the edge of the plateau. "Come here."

Hesitantly, she moved to stand beside him. Darren held her firmly but not too tightly,

and guided her until they were a scant few feet from the edge, the water dancing over the stones as it began the downward journey not an arm's-length away. Alayne felt her breath hitch.

“Relax. Ye’re safe enough. I’ll nae be letting ye fall, and the ground is stable. Solid as stone. ‘Twillnae fall out from underneath us. Ye’re as safe as ye would be in the courtyard o’ yer own home.”

If he’d said such words to her a fortnight ago, or even a week ago, she wouldn’t have believed him. She wouldn’t have been able to. She would have been far too terrified to heed his words, and far too sure he was lying to placate her. Now though, it was different.

Now, she remembered the careful, easy way he’d helped her out of the tree, and how he’d kept her in the saddle as they rode back, even when she felt like all her limbs had turned boneless as lengths of ribbon. To her surprise, she found herself calming, relaxing in the strength of his grip.

“Go ahead and look intae the distance. ‘Tis easier sometimes than looking straight down.”

She looked.

Away from the plateau, the woods stretched out, uneven with the hilly ground beneath them. Thinner places could be seen, and in the distance, she thought she spotted the location where she’d had her misadventure a week ago. When she shifted her gaze, she spotted the very edge of a tower, and what might be a roof. She pointed. “Is that...?”

“Aye. ‘Tis MacLean Keep.” Darren’s voice was a quiet rumble in his chest, steady and firm as the earth beneath her feet.

He was right. Looking out was easier than looking down, and the view was breathtaking. If she squinted, she thought she might even be able to see the glittering edge of the ocean, there on the horizon where the sky met the earth.

“‘Tis nae so bad, is it?”

“Nay. ‘Tis nae. I didnae realize - I dinnae think I’ve ever seen anything like this.”

“Most people consider the ridgelines a nuisance tae be crossed or gone around. But there’s plenty tae like about them. I used tae explore them a fair amount, while I was meant tae be hunting fer wild goat.”

She looked again. “If this is the sort o’ thing ye like, ye must feel I’m an awful fool fer bein’ afeared o’ heights.”

“Nae so much. A fear’s nae a foolish thing tae have. It keeps ye alive. ‘Tis when ye try tae pretend ye dinnae feel it - or try tae lie about what ye feel and what ye think - that ye’re bein’ foolish.”

“Ye think lying is foolish?”

“I prefer truth. When I think o’ dishonesty, I think about what happened between me faither and maither.” Darren’s voice was somber. “I cannae say it would have ended well in any case, but I think ‘twould have been better fer her tae have spoken tae me faither, rather than gone behind his back. Better too, fer me uncle tae have admitted when he fell in love with me faither’s wife.”

“Ye think he would have spared them?”

“I think, at the very least, that he wouldnae have wanted tae kill me youngest braither fer me mother’s indiscretion. And he could have had the marriage ended, and sent

them away, if he was so angered. As it was, the lies and the sneaking around - and the fact that half the clan kent afore he did that he was being cuckolded - it was too much. His mind snapped. And fer it, me braithers and I lost both parents, and Adrian a faither.”

He’d mentioned Adrian. His war leader, as well as his cousin. “Is that why ye took him on, as a member o’ yer household and one o’ yer advisors?”

“I took him as war leader because he was competent, and eager fer the job, eager tae prove his faither’s faults werenae his own. But if he hadnae had the skills fer war leader, I would have found a place fer him, as kinfolk, and one I owed a debt too, aye.”

Silence fell, and when he spoke again, his voice was quiet. “I’m sorry.”

Alayne twisted around to face him. “What fer?”

“I cannae stand dishonesty, but I wasnae forthright when I told yer faither I was refusin’ ye fer a prior contract. I kent even then that the contract didnae have tae be filled, and that it could have been one o’ me braithers instead. I should have spoken the truth, and negotiated. I cannae say it wouldnae have come tae a feud, but it would have been an honest one, instead o’ yer kinfolk feeling I’d slighted yer family honor. And ye.”

“But if ye didnae want tae wed me, regardless...” Alayne swallowed back the old feeling of hurt.

“I didnae ken enough about ye as a person tae ken whether I wanted tae wed ye or nae. I kent ye were Laird Ranald’s daughter, and fair reclusive, but little more. ‘Twas the terms yer faither tried tae set upon the contract that I refused, but I was fool enough tae try and avoid sayin’ so, and ended up slighting ye tae the point yer

braither was willing tae declare against me on yer behalf.”

“Ye did see our faither killed as well.”

“So I did, and I wish it hadnae come tae that. But tell me true - would yer braither have declared feud if the reason fer me refusal had been that I couldnae accept yer faither’s terms?”

Alayne considered that. She’d never seen the contract that had been proposed for her marriage. “What were the terms?”

“A hefty bride price, fer starters, and one that would have near beggared me kinfolk. But there were also parts o’ the contract that would have given yer faither control over MacLean, whole and entire, if I died without an heir, or if the heir wasnae old enough tae take the lairdship. Bein’ the man he was, I didnae think that the clan would have ever regained its name and status as a sovereign clan if that happened, and I wasnae certain I’d nae meet with an ‘accident’ if I agreed tae it.”

That made a great deal of sense. Her father would have written such a twisted contract if he’d thought he could get away with it. And Donall - Donall might not have known the terms. If he had, he would have understood Darren’s refusal, and not borne him a grudge for it.

If the positions had been reversed, and Darren had offered a contract with a heavy dowry and conditions that would make him Ranald’s laird in the event of her father and Donall’s death? Her father and brother both would have refused it in a heartbeat.

“Ye make a good argument. And ye’re right - Donall wouldnae have been so quick tae take offense if he’d kent that was the reason fer ye tae refuse.” She grimaced. “I cannae speak fer faither though. He would have likely started a feud, regardless.”

“Doesnae matter, ‘tis done. I simply wanted tae apologize fer the mistake I made, that caused so much strife with yer kinfolk.”

Alayne blushed, remembering how much trouble she’d caused him at their wedding. “I suppose I should apologize as well, fer the way I acted at our wedding. Ye were a perfect gentleman, and ye werenae demanding more than what propriety and custom dictated. Even angry as I was, ‘twasnae fitting that I should have displayed it in such a manner.”

Darren’s mouth twisted in a wry half-smile. “Och, well, I cannae say I enjoyed it, but in truth, ‘tis nae the most difficult ye’ve been.”

Alayne glared at him. “And what is that supposed tae mean?”

“It means I miss sleeping in me bed, woman.” Darren grimaced and released her to roll his shoulders. “Dae ye ken how stiff it makes a man, sleepin’ on stone floors night after night? I’m nae some stripling lad tae be unaffected by such things.”

“Oh.” She hadn’t thought of that. She’d been so grateful for his continued absence from the bedchamber, and his lack of any demands in that regard, that she’d not considered the matter beyond that. “I didnae realize... I thought ye were sleeping on a cot, or in another room.”

“Couldnae dae that. Certain sure it’d be the talk o’ the keep, if nae the whole clan and the village beyond, if I did. Such whispers spread like the wind, and I didnae want tae cause suspicions.”

He was still being considerate, protecting her reputation and his own, as well as making sure the king heard no rumor of strife or discontent. Alayne’s embarrassment intensified. Her cheeks heated with a blush. “Surely, with the wedding sheet sent...”

“I wouldnae ken, but I kent, from the way ye and the courier spoke, that yer braither’s well-being depended on the king being satisfied with the status between us.” Darren paused. “I’ve had nae news. Were ye angered with me because something happened tae yer braither?”

It felt as if a large rock had been shoved into her gut. Fear over his reaction warred with her desire to be honest. In the end, fear won. “I’ve had nae news either. I havenae seen me braither since he was taken tae the king’s dungeon. I couldnae visit him there, after all – ‘twould nae have been safe, and he’d have been angered had I risked myself tae see him.”

“Ye could write him a letter. I dinnae ken if he’ll have been told about the wedding, but as yer kinfolk, he should be told. If naething else, perhaps he can be reassured yer safe, and nae trying tae hold the lands yerself against the greedy lairdlings in search o’ a title and a place tae lay claim tae.”

Alayne shivered as she imagined what that would have been like. Trying to hold the clan together on her own, without even the basic training she needed for such a task - there were so many disasters that might have happened. She knew so little about effective clan leadership - barely even enough to serve well as the lady of a clan, let alone the laird’s regent of one.

Darren saw the shiver, and mistook it for cold. He shrugged off his cloak and wrapped it around her shoulders. Alayne sighed as the remains of his warmth permeated through the layers of her own clothing. She wasn’t frozen, but she did feel chilled, and the added heat and protection were welcome.

Darren glanced at the sky, and at her. “I’d thought tae have a sort o’ picnic by the water, but if ye’re already feeling chilled, mayhap we should return tae the keep and try another time.”

Alayne shook her head. “Nay. The weather’s fine. And who kens when it will be so clear again? Spring is coming, and ‘tis nae the sort o’ season kent fer its predictable weather.”

Darren eyed her for a moment longer, then relaxed. “Aye, ye’re right. I’ll get the food then.” He started to turn away.

Guilt overwhelmed Alayne. He was clearly trying, in the way he’d given her space to think, and slept on the floor in spite of his aching body without complaint - without complaint to her, at least. He’d given up a whole day that surely could have been filled with more productive pursuits, just so they could talk and spend time together. He’d even thought of trying to help her conquer her fears, and how to do so in the gentlest, easiest way possible.

He’d just told her how important honesty was to him, and why. And what had she done? She’d lied to him. More than lied, she was deliberately concealing information that it was important for him to know. For all she’d planned to keep her brother’s freedom a secret, she couldn’t bear to keep maintaining the falsehood, not when he was making such effort to be honest and considerate.

Alayne reached out and caught Darren’s sleeve. “Wait.”

He turned, just as she stepped forward. The movement had them both stumbling to a halt, mere inches from each other. Darren caught her, his arms around her, and Alayne felt that same tingling, uncertain excitement she’d felt before shoot straight up her spine.

So close, he smelled more than ever of wild woods and salt spray and well-oiled leather, all layered over a distinctly masculine scent that was unique to him. His hands were steady, and his muscles under her fingers were firm and well-defined.

He was so close, his face angled slightly toward hers as he looked down. She saw the way his eyes widened, felt the slightly deeper breath under her hands, and knew that he felt the same things she did, though he seemed to have better control over himself than she did.

Warm breath ghosted over her face, his mouth tantalizingly close. Alayne remembered the feel of his lips on her cheek. What would it be like to kiss him, the way she should have on the wedding day? She didn't know, and the urge to find out was sudden and overwhelming.

She started to lean up, to lean in toward him. His eyes widened a little more, his stance and his grip shifting as if he too was longing for a kiss. His head bent toward hers, one hand coming up to brush lightly along her cheek.

Then his focus changed, his expression going from hungry and focused to sharp and wary in a split second as he swept her into his arms and stepped back, his movements hard and quick.

Alayne gasped. "What are ye...?"

Darren slapped a hand over her mouth and darted toward the horse. He ducked behind a small rock outcropping. "Quiet."

She was about to give him a tongue-lashing fit to blister his ears, when her gaze followed his to the place where they'd been standing. Her breath caught in her throat, this time for a reason far different than her earlier desire.

There, buried in the ground where she'd been standing, was a long oak-shafted arrow, still quivering from the force of its plunge into the stone.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Darren stared at the arrow, embedded in the ground where they'd been standing. If he hadn't heard the faint whistle, and seen the flicker of movement as it arched toward them, it would have hit Alayne in the back. He couldn't see the arrow head at the moment, buried as it was in the ground, but that didn't matter.

If it had hit her, she might have died. Or been paralyzed, if it had hit her spine. He'd seen warriors crippled by spine wounds. Few of them had enough will to continue living, if they even survived the wounding itself and the complications that came with it.

The idea of Alayne suffering a gut shot was no less horrifying. Gut shots were tricky, and if you weren't lucky, they promised a slow, painful death.

He knew she was angry for the way he'd manhandled her, and he was sorry for it, but there hadn't been any time to warn her.

He saw her face pale as she spotted the arrow, all anger disappearing in horror and fear. "Did someone...?"

"Someone shot at us, aye. I didnae see who could have done it though." There was no sign of the archer, but then, he hadn't expected to see them. There were plenty of places to hide in the rocks and trees around the waterfall and the glen at the base of it. Besides, the size and shape of the arrow shaft indicated a longbow, or a heavily powered crossbow. A weapon with that range could be shot from a fair distance.

“Why would anyone shoot at us?”

“I dinnae ken. I’ve enemies enough, but nae any I’m aware o’ who’d be this brazen.”

Alayne was shivering again, her hands clutched tight in his shirt. Darren wished he could have told her it was a careless hunter, but he didn’t believe that, and he wouldn’t lie.

It made him wonder if the snare in the woods had been an accident, or a clever trap. Or even practice for some other scheme. It would explain why someone would use such a snare in a place that most of his clansmen knew was frequented by villagers, maids and even children in the summer months.

“We need tae get back tae the keep.” He looked at the horse, the lead line draped casually over the ground. “Can ye get tae the horse and intae the saddle? I’ll watch over ye.”

Alayne nodded, her expression firming with resolve. Had the situation not been so dire, Darren would have smiled. She was a brave lass, and no mistake about that. It was also a pleasant surprise to see that she evidently trusted him enough to leave her safety in his hands.

He shifted his weight onto the balls of his feet, eyeing the ground, the horse, and the most likely directions for an arrow to come from. If it was one assailant, it would come from the same way, but if it was a group, there might be other bowmen.

“Ready?” Alayne nodded. Darren tensed. “Go!”

The pair of them dove from cover, Darren on the side of the horse that was exposed to potential attacks, and Alayne on the side closer to the trail and the wooded area of the escarpment. True to her word, she wasted no time heaving herself into the saddle.

Darren was turning the horse so he could mount as well when a tell-tale flicker of movement caught his eye. Another arrow, this one aimed for where Alayne sat on the horse. He dared not startle the animal into moving, not when it was already restive from the tension in the air. Instead, he took two running steps forward, angled toward a rock, and launched himself into the arrow's path, his off hand moving to slap it out of the air.

His aim was good, for the most part, but he struck a little too far forward, and the back edge of the bladed arrow head sliced into his palm. Darren hissed at the sting, but the arrow clattered to the ground, landing at the same time as his boots hit the stone.

He didn't bother to examine the cut. He knew from experience that it was shallow, and it would keep until they were safely away from the danger of being shot. He whipped around and flung himself onto the horse, wrapped an arm around Alayne's waist to hold her steady, and kicked the horse into a canter, then a run.

It was risky to run the trail going down, but he knew it well and he was a strong enough horseman to manage. He'd no idea what Alayne thought of his actions, but if she was afraid or angered by his near reckless behavior, she made no mention of it. She simply clung to his arm as they rode through the trees.

Once they were at the base of the trail and deep into the wooded area, Darren slowed the horse to a walk. There was no good way for a bowman, however talented, to attack them here. And even if someone tried, there was enough foliage to make sure he'd hear the threat coming.

But who had attacked them? And why? Why now? For that matter, how had anyone known where they were? It wasn't as if he'd told many people what he had planned for the day.

The signs pointed to a spy or a traitor among his clansmen, and that thought made him feel cold with rage. He knew he wasn't well liked by some of his people, especially those who had been closer to his father, or Adrian's. He could accept that. But the fact that someone had dared attack him and endanger Alayne - that he could not condone.

"Ye're bleeding." Alayne's quiet voice startled him out of his dark thoughts.

His hand. It must have bled around his grip on the reins. "'Tis nae more than a scratch. The healer will see it mended as soon as we get back."

"I saw the arrow. Could easily have been far worse."

"But it wasnae. I kent what I was doing lass."

"I dinnae doubt it. 'Tis only that I kent ye could have been wounded far worse, and saving me life at that. I'm nae warrior, but I ken what an arrow like that can daeo tae a man." She paused. "Or a woman."

"They'll nae be able tae shoot us like that while we're in the woods. And when we get in sight o' MacLean Keep's walls, I'll signal an alarm. The guards will keep watch over us crossing tae the gates." He tightened his grip just a bit. "Dinnae fret lass. I'll keep ye safe."

"I ken, and I believe ye." There was a moment of hesitation, and her voice was soft when she spoke again. "Thank ye, Darren, fer protecting me."

Warmth filled him, banishing the cold chill of his rage momentarily. "Ye're welcome, Alayne."

Alayne was still trembling slightly when they rode through the gates of MacLean

Keep. She felt almost ashamed as Darren helped her off the horse and gave her over to the maids with instructions for them to get her a calming tea and something sweet to eat.

He'd even promised her he'd see the healer as soon as the horse was in the stable, and now that she knew of his preference for honesty, she believed him.

It was hardly the first time she'd been attacked, or at risk of being killed. Her own husband had put a knife to her throat at one point! He hadn't been her husband then, not even her betrothed, but the point still remained.

Perhaps it was the fact that she could put no face to the attacker, and no motivation for why they would have tried to harm her or Darren. Darren, she knew, had enemies. Any laird did. But why attack in such a manner that she was likely to be hurt as well?

She settled into the chair by the fire in the bedroom, with the promised tea and cakes, and an offer of mulled wine and a hot bath if she wished it, as well as a noon meal to replace the one they'd never had a chance to unpack. Her nerves were slowly calming, enough that she could start to think about what had happened without feeling the blood drain from her face.

The first person that came to mind was Donall. He had grievances enough against the MacLean laird. Somehow though, she couldn't quite bring herself to believe it. Yes, Donall had his grievances. Even so, he'd not have endangered her for the sake of them. Nor would he have attacked from afar, like a coward. He wasn't the sort to shoot arrows from a distance at a man when he could challenge him with a blade.

Even if he had been, Donall knew his freedom was dependent on peace between the MacLean and Ranald clans. Surely he wouldn't endanger that freedom, and destroy all she'd done for him, with such ill-timed and ill-considered actions.

It had to be someone else. But she'd no idea who it could be, and she wasn't sure Darren had any more knowledge than she did. The idea of an unknown enemy in the shadows was terrifying.

After several moments, Alayne forced herself to put the thought out of her mind. There was nothing she could do about an enemy attack, not unless it did turn out to be her brother, or someone from Clan Ranald. In the meantime, she had more pressing matters to think about.

Darren. He'd been so kind to her, and she was beginning to feel almost fond of him. Perhaps more than fond. She wasn't sure if she was ready for any sort of intimacy, but she did want to do something to show her appreciation of his consideration.

"I'd like tae be able tae sleep in me own bed..." The words he'd spoken earlier came back to her, along with the look on his face as he'd tried to loosen what were obviously very sore muscles.

Donall had sometimes complained of stiff shoulders, and she'd learned from the Ranald Clan healer how to ease the stiffness and aching. She didn't have any of her own supplies, but she was willing to bet that the MacLean healer, Evina, did.

Alayne finished her tea and one of the cakes, leaving the other for Darren to enjoy whenever he made it to the room, then donned her cloak once more and hurried from the room.

She had no idea what the future held in store, but she knew one thing for certain - part of a wife's duties was to ensure her husband's comfort, and tonight, she'd make every effort to see that she fulfilled that responsibility as well as she was able.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“ A nd ye’re sure there was naught ye could use tae identify where the arrow came from? Nae design or coloring o’ the fletchings, or any colors on the shaft?” Ryan was frowning. “‘Tis odd.”

“Nae if ‘tis bandits. Or someone who doesnae want tae be kent.” Darren rubbed the bandage on his hand as he leaned back in his chair, waiting for the rest of the Council to arrive. He’d sent Adrian to summon the full council as soon as Evina had released him. This matter was too important to wait until the next day.

He was a little surprised that Bard hadn’t already arrived. Usually, he would have been close as a shadow as soon as he heard the summons go out, or the first rumor from the walls. It was strange that he hadn’t made an appearance.

Adrian returned a few minutes later, his expression grave. “I couldnae find Bard anywhere. I’ve left word with the door guard tae send him here immediately whenever he’s found.”

Strange, that Bard should be absent, especially since he’d given no indication of plans to go anywhere, and he wasn’t scheduled to patrol the borders for the day. Usually, his advisor was good about leaving him some sort of word when he planned to be gone from the keep for any length of time.

Still, this was no time to worry about it. Perhaps Bard had merely gone on some personal errand or other, and been unexpectedly delayed. Darren knew he could find out the truth of the matter easily enough. In the meantime, he had more important

concerns.

A map of the MacLean lands was set across the desk. Darren pointed out where he'd been, and a rough area he thought the shooter had occupied. Ryan studied it. "Ye think there was more than one?"

"Nae. Both shots came from about the same angle. I didnae see anything tae indicate there was another attacker. And there were nae more attempts once we entered the trees." Darren frowned. "Didnae seem like it was a well-planned attack."

"Even so, it doesnae mean we can afford tae ignore it." Darren scowled. "The worst o' it is, I cannae guess who it might have been. There's been nae declaration o' a feud. Likewise, there's been nae sign o' bandits."

"'Tis troubling." Ryan agreed.

Adrian surveyed the maps. "I ken we likely need extra guards on the wall, but should we have extra border patrols as well?"

"Wouldnae hurt." Ryan agreed.

The door opened, and Bard stepped into the room, his expression somber and slightly flustered. "Me laird. I apologize, I've only just returned tae the keep. I was on business elsewhere, and I didnae receive yer summons."

"'Tis well enough." Darren told Bard about the incident on the cliffs. They continued planning, but Darren felt a lingering sense of unease.

Why was Bard away from the keep? What business did he have?

Alayne was waiting when Darren finally returned to their shared chambers. She'd

gotten a soothing scent from Evina, and reviewed all the things she'd learned for helping Donall. She'd also asked the maids to deliver a light repast and a flagon of mead, in case he hadn't had a chance to eat.

It wasn't all that late when Darren entered the room, but he looked weary, as if he'd been fighting a battle the whole time. Alayne met him at the door to the bedchamber. "Are ye well? Is yer hand all right?"

"Aye." He held up a bandaged hand. "'Twas nae more than a scratch. 'Twill nae even scar."

Alayne nodded. "I had the maids bring up some food and drink fer ye, if ye havenae had a chance tae take yer supper."

"Bard had a meal brought up. But the mead wouldnae go amiss." He offered her a wan smile. "And then I was thinking tae retire."

"Ye should take the bed." Alayne offered. Darren stilled.

"I dinnae want tae disturb ye."

Alayne huffed. "I didnae say I'd be sharing it with ye. But I thought it would dae yer back some good tae sleep in the bed. And if ye like, I can give ye a massage as well."

"Ye can? And ye'd be comfortable with that." His tone sounded uncertain, as if he wasn't sure she meant the offer.

"I wouldnae have offered if I wasnae comfortable with the idea." Alayne huffed and turned the covers on the bed back for him. "Ye said earlier ye were sore from sleepin' on the floor. As I'm the one responsible fer it, 'tis only fair I help soothe the injury. Besides, ye can consider it a repayment fer ye saving me earlier."

There was a sparkle in Darren's eyes, as if her words amused him. He did however, move into the bed chamber and remove his sash and sword belt. Alayne watched as he carefully removed his boots, and a myriad of weapons from his person. When he went to remove his shirt, however, she stopped him. "That's nae necessary."

Darren blinked at her. "I thought ye were going tae give me a massage."

Alayne huffed and thumped his shoulder with a fist. "Aye, and ye dinnae need tae be shirtless fer me tae dae any such thing. I can manage well enough through the cloth, so leave the shirt on and lie down, where I can work on ye properly."

He definitely looked amused at that, but Darren complied and lowered himself onto the bed with an easy motion, to sprawl on his stomach. Alayne studied the broad expanse of his back for a moment, then reached for his shoulders.

The muscles underneath the thin cotton were tight and hard, and Alayne winced in sympathy as she felt the coiled knots. She'd had such knots once or twice, and knew how painful they could be. She started with gentle, smoothing motions, then applied more pressure until Darren gave a grunt. "Och, that..."

"Did it hurt?"

"A bit. But nae in a bad way."

Encouraged, Alayne pressed a little harder. Darren gave a low groan, then seemed to collapse into the bedding as the knot released and his muscles loosened.

Alayne rubbed the muscle a little further, imparting some warmth to keep it from tensing up again. Then she shifted her attention to a different part of his back and repeated the process. To her surprise, she was almost enjoying the task, and the soft noises Darren made - groans of contentment and relief as she loosened the muscles,

and hums or muttered words of contentment as his body slowly relaxed.

She'd never seen Darren so relaxed and unguarded. It made her feel somewhat proud of her ability to make him feel better. It also made her feel warm, that he was so comfortable in her presence. It wasn't that long ago that he would have been too wary to fully relax in her presence.

She had to admit, he might have had good reasons for that. She wouldn't have wanted him to be comfortable in her presence. Now she was enjoying being able to do something for him.

Alayne worked her way across his shoulders, up across the nape of his neck, then down his back, taking care to completely loosen and smooth away each knot. By the time she reached his waist, Darren looked as if he was on the verge of falling asleep. She shook his shoulder. "Here now, ye need tae roll over so I can take care o' the muscles on yer shoulders and chest."

Darren blinked groggily at her. Then his gaze sharpened as he shifted his weight. "I think I'm well enough."

"Ye said ye were sore. I can help ease the tension in yer sides and chest as well." She tugged, trying to get him to roll over. "Ye'll feel better."

"I'm sure I will, but that's nae the point. I cannae..."

"Och, stop being such a stubborn fool." She got a hand under his shoulder and shoved. Darren swore as he rolled over onto his back. Then he rolled further, tumbling off the bed.

It wasn't until he came to a stop on the other side of the bed that she saw the bulge in his kilt and realized there was a reason for his stubbornness.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Darren swore inside his head when he saw Alayne's eyes widen as they fastened on his erection. He'd hoped to avoid startling her with his arousal.

He hadn't meant to react that way to her touch. He'd even been somewhat relieved when she'd insisted he leave his shirt on. The barrier of cloth had served as a form of protection against the possibility of being overly stimulated.

Then she'd started massaging the nape of his neck. Her hands were warm, gentle but firm as she worked the tense muscles loose and helped him relax. Her fingers traced lines across his skin and he couldn't help the way the warmth seemed to go straight to his groin.

He'd felt his arousal growing against the bedding with every stroke of her fingers, as if she was caressing him like a lover, rather than as a simple kindness. His treacherous mind and body had supplied images of her hands touching him in other places, and that only heightened his desire.

He'd tried to focus on the feel of the knots loosening and relaxing. He'd tried to focus on keeping his breathing even and his body still. He'd even tried thinking of things he generally avoided considering, in an effort to stem the burgeoning erection.

It hadn't worked, and now she was staring at him, no doubt about to run away in disgust. Or slap him for his temerity.

A long moment of silence passed. Then Alayne gulped. "What... what happened tae

ye?” Her eyes were round, her expression caught between curiosity, uncertainty and fear.

Darren took a moment to consider her question. “Ye’ve never... has nae one told ye what happens between a man and a woman?” He’d known from their earlier misadventure that she was uninformed in the matter of intimacy. But surely she knew about how different bodies worked.

“I ken there’s supposed tae be...” She flushed a deep crimson. “That is... I ken about intimacy...”

“But ye ken how tae recognize when a man’s interested in having an intimate encounter with ye?”

“I... I dinnae... I mean...” The way she struggled with the words told him all he needed to know.

“Ye’ve never had anyone explain these things tae ye?”

“I... well, I’ve never had a maither or sister tae explain things. The healer gave me instructions on what tae dae when I began tae experience me moon cycles, but she didnae tell me much more than that.” Alayne looked away. “The first time I ever heard anything more was when I heard Lyla talking tae her husband...” The flush deepened so fiercely that Darren wondered if she was going to faint from the force of it.

“So ye dinnae ken anything?”

“I... cannae say.”

Darren groaned as the hesitant words confirmed his suspicions. She wasn’t just a

virgin, she was a virgin with the understanding of a child. No wonder she'd been so terrified that night.

He sighed and sat down on the bed, keeping his distance from her. "There's ways o' telling if a man or a woman is interested in ye as a partner, as well as ways tae tell that ye're experiencing desire fer someone. I cannae speak tae how a woman kens such things about her own desires, but I can tell ye what it feels like from a man's side."

He indicated his groin. The erection was slowly subsiding, but the bulge under his kilt was still very evident. "When a man is interested in intimacy, his manhood responds tae that interest by growing harder, and stiffening. 'Tis called an erection, or arousal. 'Tis normal fer a man tae experience such things with an attractive woman."

She hadn't tried to escape the room yet, so he continued. "There are many reasons fer a man tae become aroused. Fer me, 'twas the way ye were touching me. It felt pleasant, and I was enjoying it. I liked the feel o' yer hands when ye were massaging me."

"But ye didnae want tae roll over."

"I didnae want tae give ye a wrong impression, or upset ye. Ye've said afore ye'd nae interest in being bedded by me, and I didnae want ye tae think I was trying tae test ye, or demand something from ye." He'd never considered that she might not even understand what arousal meant.

"But ye were responding tae me. And it was...this is a good response?" She blinked at him.

"'Tis. It means I want tae sleep with ye. Tae bed ye."

“But I... I dinnae ken...how would I ken how tae reciprocate? Ye ken I dinnae ken aught o’ lovemaking.”

“I ken. But there’s many ways o’ experiencing pleasure and giving it. Every man and woman is different, so it would be something o’ an experience between us. In the normal way o’ such activities, I would show ye things, and ye’d tell me if ye enjoyed them or didnae enjoy them. When ye kent more, I’d ask ye tae dae things fer me, and show ye what I enjoyed or didnae like.”

“But, ye’re so much more experienced. Why ye want tae be with me when I’m as clueless as a child?”

“Every coupling is unique. Every pair o’ lovers starts at the beginning with learning about each other.”

“Oh.” She appeared to consider that. “But how dae ye ken... I dinnae ken what desire feels like.”

“‘Tis a wish tae be closer, physically. Tae touch, or tae kiss. I’ve heard women say it makes them feel warm, like bein’ in front o’ a fire. Yer heart beats faster, and ye tend tae notice more.” He hesitated. “Fer men, arousal is the main thing. Fer women, I’ve been told it makes their breasts feel sensitive, and their nether regions feel like they’re tingling, and ye’ll become wet down there.” He gestured vaguely in the direction of her hips. “Ye want tae touch, and be touched.”

“And if... if both man and woman want that... with each other... what happens?”

“Ye touch. Ye kiss. Ye enjoy each other. And when and if ye’re ready, ye make love. Again, there’s a number o’ ways o’ doing so.” Darren gave her a wry smile. “Lyla and Daemon enjoy one way. They like tae take risks, and explore ideas that Lyla finds in books, like bindings and other situations. ‘Tis nae the sort o’ thing I’m

interested in, if ye're concerned about that."

"And what... what dae ye like?"

"Making sure me partner enjoys herself. Taking me time tae learn a woman's body and make it sing fer me." He'd had enough partners to know that he enjoyed a variety of styles of lovemaking, but he preferred honest interactions, with full and willing participation on both sides.

Alayne appeared to be mulling over his words. "How dae ye learn what ye like?"

"Experience." That was the only answer he could give her. He could see she had more questions, but he honestly wasn't sure how to answer them. He was no woman, to understand how their bodies worked. He himself had learned the basic ideas of intimacy from stories among the guards, and taken his first steps with a willing maid who'd known far more than he had.

'A virgin bride is a valuable lass. A virgin groom is a hopeless lad, or one who isnae a proper man.' That had been all his father had said on the subject when he'd discovered Darren was bedding a servant. Well, that and a terse warning that if he sired a bastard, he was responsible for it.

Alayne was still watching him with wide eyes. "And ye... ye'll teach me?"

Darren felt like he'd been punched in the gut. A part of him wanted very much to teach her everything he knew about bedsport and making love. Another part of him felt his gut twisting in knots, unsure if he could do such a thing, when he knew she'd never wanted to be wed to him.

He was still trying to sort out his thoughts when Alayne moved closer to him.

Heat, a racing heart, a desire to kiss or to touch - Alayne knew those feelings. She'd felt them earlier that day, out on the plateau, standing in Darren's arms. She felt them now, along with a faint tingling in her chest and her core.

Did that mean she was feeling desire? That she desired Darren? She wasn't sure. Her father kept her so sheltered, she felt as if she'd been living in another world. But then, he'd said that all couples had to learn such things together, and he was her husband. Who else would she explore such sensations with?

And his response... did that mean he desired her too? That was what he was saying, what his words and the prominent bulge under his kilt seemed to imply.

She'd never considered such things. She'd never wanted to consider them before now. She'd never even experienced much curiosity about a man's body. But now she did wonder what he looked like underneath his clothing.

He had strong muscles, that much she knew. Without thinking, she reached out to run a hand over his shoulder, feeling the lines of his arm. The skin underneath wasn't completely smooth. There were small ridges that she thought might be scars.

Where had he gotten those scars? Were they all covered with tattoos, like the ones visible on his face? She was suddenly full of questions she'd never considered before.

What did they feel like? Were they sensitive? She didn't really have any scars, so she had no idea. She had a sudden impulse to see how he would react if she traced them.

Without thinking, she found herself scooting closer, wondering - what did that bulge under his kilt feel like? She started to reach toward it, then froze, suddenly uncertain. She didn't know what to do.

"Dinnae worry, ye dinnae need tae dae anything that ye dinnae feel comfortable

with.” Darren’s hand moved to cover hers. “It will subside with time.”

He was so close, her face was so near that she could feel the breath from his mouth, smell the meat and mead he’d had for supper. She could kiss him, and she could do it without the haze of shock and fading fears influencing her. She wanted that.

She started to lean forward. Darren tensed, then suddenly, he was pulling away, slipping off the bed and out of her reach. She blinked, startled by his actions. “What are ye...?”

“’Tis late. I’m going tae sleep in the other room.”

Hurt and confusion speared through her, a twisting morass of emotions she couldn’t find any way to decipher. “But... ye...”

“Dinnae worry about it. I can manage. And me back feels much better, thanks tae ye. I’m sure I’ll sleep well.” His smile was tight, but gentle. “Thank ye fer yer kindness.”

He slipped out the door before she could respond. Alayne swallowed a feeling of bitter disappointment, her hand falling to her side. She felt confused and hurt, uncertain what to make of Darren’s reactions to her.

He’d said his body indicated desire, and yet, his actions suggested something else. Why?

He said a man’s body will react tae many things. Mayhap he felt something fer the massage, or it brought back memories o’ someone else he’s truly attracted tae.

Is it me looks, or something else about me that he doesnae care fer? I wish I kent. Then... mayhap... mayhap he would want me...

She was still thinking about that, and fighting back tears of sorrow and hurt when sleep finally claimed her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“H ow is Adrian settling intae his duties?” Darren growled the question out, trying to ignore the ever-present ache in his shoulders.

The massage had helped, but the sleepless night he’d spent hadn’t done him any favors. He’d spent well over a candle-mark trying to quell his arousal enough to get to sleep. Trying to do so without letting images of Alayne giving him pleasure fill his head had been even harder.

He’d been horribly tempted to give in to her innocent explorations. He’d wanted to let her touch him, and had wanted to touch her in return. To give her a practical demonstration of what intimacy could be like. But she was so inexperienced and untaught, he was afraid of going too far, too fast.

That was why he’d stepped away, afraid he couldn’t stop himself if he had given in to even the tiniest of advances. Even a kiss had seemed like a dangerous indulgence.

“He’s doing fair well. He has a knack for the duties o’ a war leader.” Ryan’s answer drew him back to the present, and their discussion of Adrian’s progress. “He has a talent for seeing how things need tae be arranged.”

“Aye?”

“Aye. He was a braw hand supervising the warriors and their training as well.”

“What about coordinating with Bard? The second-in-command and the war leader

need tae be able tae work well taegether.” It hadn’t been a problem when he’d had Marcus serving both functions, but now that they were two distinct positions, he needed to be sure there were no problems between them.

Ryan frowned. “Hard tae say. Bard left soon after ye did yesterday, and we didnae see anything o’ him until he came tae the meeting last night.”

Darren scowled. “He mentioned having duties. But I didnae hear what it was that took him away fer so long.”

“Och. I thought ye kent.” Ryan blinked. “There was a message from the village, asking for someone tae mediate a dispute or an incident o’ some kind. Since ye were gone with yer new wife, Bard went in yer place. It must have taken some time. He could probably tell ye more o’ the details.”

“Aye. Perhaps I’ll ask him later.” Darren frowned.

He wanted to believe it. But the timing was coincidental, and it made him feel uneasy. “Dae ye ken if the problem is resolved?”

“I dinnae ken fer certain, but I believe Bard said everything was resolved.”

Perhaps it would be best if he went down to the village later and confirmed that. It might also make for a pleasant outing for Alayne. She’d not had much time to get to know the clanfolk of MacLean, and they’d not had a chance to greet their new Lady MacLean. Both were things that should be remedied as soon as possible.

In the meantime, the council needed to be informed about the possible threat, and the risk of a new enemy. The warriors needed to be readied to fend off any possible attack. He couldn’t let danger creep up on them unawares.

There was a knock on the door, and it opened to admit Adrian and Bard, still amiably discussing something or another. Darren sighed and shelved his thoughts to consider later. For now, there was work to be done, and he couldn't afford to neglect the things he knew needed to be dealt with in favor of the problems that had not yet showed themselves.

The morning was bright and the temperature was warming with the first hints of spring, and yet, Alayne couldn't shake a feeling of uneasiness. She'd spent the morning exploring the keep, familiarizing herself with the layout and the locations of things like the servant passages, the store rooms, and the stillroom. There was a disused solar that she was looking forward to filling with light and herbs and her little projects. In fact, there were several places that she could see adding a woman's touch. She wasn't sure she dared do anything without Darren's approval, but she had some hope that he might allow her to make some changes.

There was also the library. Her family had never had much in the way of books. There weren't a lot of books, but there were several she hadn't read, and she was looking forward to perusing them.

However, some time in the past candle-mark or so, she'd come to feel as if she was being watched. There were no overt stares, and any time she looked around, she couldn't see anyone paying attention to her. But the feeling persisted, until finally she felt compelled to leave the castle in search of the outdoors and company.

She found the MacLean Healer, Evina, tending to the herb garden and carefully snipping the ones that could be used in potions and poultices. "Can I help ye?"

Evina glanced up. "Me lady... ye dinnae need tae, but if that's yer wish, I'd welcome the assistance." Her smile was warm.

Alayne fell into step beside her, helping hold the plants that required careful trimming

and plucking the ones that didn't require such gentle handling. They worked in companionable silence for a while before Evina spoke. "Ye have an interest in herb lore and healing?"

"I cannae say fer certain. Still, 'twas one o' the few pursuits me faither didnae disdain or sneer at me fer showing an interest in. And it was a way tae be useful tae me clan, even though he made it clear that I wasnae wanted."

"A foolish faither, tae nae see what a gift a child is." Evina's voice was soft. "But I'm glad ye've come here. Ye've got some skill, and I'm nae getting any younger."

Alayne watched her work. She had a quiet confidence that was inspiring. Eventually, she found herself relaxing enough to ask a tentative question. "Healer Evina, dae ye ken much about... things between men and women?"

"I'm a healer, and I've been a midwife, if that's what ye're asking." Evina's voice was still gentle, and there was no trace of judgment.

Alayne hesitated, but curiosity drove her to continue. "I meant... other things."

"I'm nae a virgin, and I've learned a few things otherwise. Is there something ye're curious about? Or someone?"

Alayne felt her cheeks heating with a blush. "Nae one in particular, but... I didnae have a maither tae teach me anything, and the healer o' our clan didnae tell me anything save how tae handle me moon cycles. I... I've never learned anything. And now that I'm wed..." She trailed off.

"Ah. Ye're nae certain about the bedchamber? And yer husband hasnae showed ye?"

"He's been kind tae me. He's been... waiting." She couldn't admit that Darren didn't

seem to want her in that manner. “He kens I’m nae the best informed, and more inexperienced then I should be at this age.”

“I heard something about the wedding sheet though. I was surprised tae nae see ye the morning after, but it makes more sense now.” Evina’s voice was still quiet, friendly.

Alayne stared at her, terror filling her at the idea that someone might know the secret that she and Darren were keeping. “Ye... ye cannae...”

She stopped as Evina gave her a soft, almost motherly smile. “Dinnae fret. I keep a healer’s confidence, me lady.”

“Thank ye.” Alayne felt her shoulders loosening in relief. She hesitated. “Why would I see ye the morning after?”

“Fer women, the first time is a wee bit uncomfortable. The claiming o’ the maidenhead is painful fer a brief moment, and can leave soreness inside. There’s a potion that can ease the feeling. And others that can help or prevent child bearing.”

“Oh. I dinnae think I can take the ones preventing a child to be conceived. Part o’ the purpose o this match is tae bear an heir tae the lairdship.” Alayne took a breath. “I didnae ken about the first time. Is there anything else ye could tell me, tae make it easier?”

“There’s much I can tell ye.” Evina’s smile widened, and she laid a hand on Alayne’s arm. “Come. We can talk while we work tae preserve and prepare the herbs. I cannae tell ye everything, but I promise that I’ll nae leave ye feeling any more uncertain or unprepared than any other lass on her first time.”

Alayne smiled, feeling as if a weight had been lifted from her spirit. The unease she’d felt before fled in the face of her relief. “Thank ye. I’d like that.”

By the time they'd finished their work, evening was falling. Darren sought out Alayne, and found her in Evina's company. The two of them were smiling, and chatting as they worked on various medicinal preparations.

Evina was the first to notice his presence. "Dae ye need something, me laird?"

Darren shook his head. "I dinnae need any medicine. However, I was thinking tae visit the village fer supper this evening, and I was wondering if me wife might like tae accompany me."

"Ye want me tae come with ye?"

Darren nodded. "Aye. I'd like tae try again fer a pleasant outing, since our last was interrupted. I thought a chance tae meet some o' our clansmen might be nice fer ye. And I ken me folk would like tae meet their new lady."

For a moment, he saw a flash of hurt in her face, and thought she might refuse. Then she set aside her tools. "If me laird wishes, I'd be pleased tae accompany ye."

"Then I'm pleased tae have yer company." He offered her his hand, and she took it.

She looked calmer and more confident than she had, and he made a note to find Evina in private and thank her. It was clear that she and Alayne had become friends, and that it was something his new wife had needed.

Together, the two of them walked down to the village. Bard, Ryan and Adrian were already there, settled at a table when they entered the tavern. Darren guided Alayne to a table and lifted a hand.

The serving girl was a woman he recognized, and one with whom he'd enjoyed many a night's casual company. Darren smiled easily as she came over. "Shannon. I'd like

tae introduce ye tae me wife, Lady Alayne MacLean.”

“Och, I’d heard ye were wed.” Shannon’s smile was wide, teasing. “First Marcus and now ye, it seems as if all the best MacLean men are off and getting wed.”

“There’s Adrian and Bard.” Darren indicated his advisors. “And mayhap Ryan, though I ken he’s a MacMillan lad.”

“Och, I dinnae ken those three. I’ve hardly met any o’ them.”

Darren frowned. “But I’d heard that Bard was visiting the village just yesterday. Some sort o’ dispute that needed a mediator.”

“Och, there’s been naething o’ that sort happening here. We ken we’re the laird’s closest village, and we ken better than tae bother ye with small things we can manage ourselves.” Shannon shook her head. “And I’d ken if the laird’s advisor had been about the village yesterday.”

“I see. Well, I might have misunderstood.” Darren gave her a small smile. “But enough o’ that. I’d like a flagon o’ honey mead and two plates o’ whatever’s being served taenight.”

“As ye will, although...” Shannon tipped him a wink. “If ye want more than a meal and a drink, I’m happy tae serve ye that as well.”

“Dinnae be such a tease in front o’ me wife. I’m nae one tae be so brazen or rude tae the woman I pledged tae.” Darren huffed and waved her off.

“As ye say.” Shannon winked again, and flounced away, making sure to flash her assets at him as she did. Darren snorted and turned away, his thoughts turning down another path.

Bard hadn't come to the village. There hadn't been any altercation. If that was true, then what had Bard been doing the entire day? And where had he been, if not in the village?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A layne watched the tavern maid walk away, a tight feeling in her chest. She knew enough now to understand that the maid had been flirting with Darren. More than that, from the ease of their conversation and the things she'd said, she was someone Darren might have been intimate with.

The thought made her feel hot, and angry, and gave her a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. Out of nowhere, she felt the urge to confront the woman and make it clear that she was Darren's wife. She was the one who belonged in his bed now. Her hand itched with the urge to slap the woman.

She'd never felt this way, and the strength of it surprised her.

Is this what jealousy feels like? I've never felt so angered, or ready tae fight with someone. I dinnae understand - a fortnight ago I hated him, and I'd have been well pleased tae see him risk breaking his marriage vows.

The drinks and food arrived. Darren poured them each a cup of mead, and Alayne drained hers without thinking. It was sweet and bitter both, and tingled on the way down her throat. She drank deeply, then held out her cup for him to refill it.

Darren did so, a bemused expression on his face. "I didnae think ye were much o' a drinker."

"I dinnae drink often, but it doesnae mean I cannae." Already, the warmth from the mead was filling her belly. She sipped the second tankard more slowly, content to

savor the taste of something she'd never tried before.

The food was plain, simple fare, heavy and filling but easy to wash down with more mead. As she finished her second tankard and started her third, Alayne began to feel as if the world was melting away. Everything took on a hazy glow, and her mood mellowed to match. She watched the people of the village as they ate, drank, sang and laughed together.

She'd never been allowed to be a part of such things before. Her father had never permitted it, and Donall had been wary about letting her go too far from home. He'd always worried about her getting hurt or kidnapped.

But now she was here, safe with Darren MacLean, meeting his clan-folk and getting to know them. Like the mead, it was a new experience, and one she found more enjoyable as the night went on.

It wasn't until she tried to rise from the table, overheated and in need of a breath of fresh air, that she realized she might have drunk more than she should have. She'd joked about not being permitted more than one or two glasses of wine at a meal, but the truth was, she'd never indulged in alcohol all that much.

The world swayed around her, making her feel light-headed and dizzy, a slightly more pleasant version of the way she'd felt when she'd had a winter fever as a child. She stumbled, and Darren caught her in his arms. "Och, I think 'tis time tae be getting ye back."

"I'm nae ill. Just a bit dizzy." She blinked at him.

Darren smiled slightly, his expression both amused and exasperated. "I'm sure ye are. And I'm a fool fer letting ye have four tankards o' mead when I kent ye werenae one fer drinking so much. 'Tis just as well I didnae offer ye a sip o' me whisky, fer ye'd

probably be unconscious with something that strong.”

She hadn’t even realized he’d been drinking something different from her. “Is whisky... stronger?” She’d never had whisky. Father insisted it was a man’s drink, not something a woman should consume.

“Aye. Much stronger. If I’d had as much whiskyas ye had mead, they’d be carrying me out o’ the tavern taenight, and I’d likely be insensible fer days. Tae say naething o’ how I’d feel once the hangover came.”

She looked at him with curiosity. She knew the term, but she didn’t know what one felt like, although her brother had often warned her to avoid their father when he had one.

“Ale head, some call it. Ye’ll see what I mean in the morning, I wager.” Darren turned, still supporting her. “Och, Camden! I need tae borrow a horse from ye. I’ll have the stable boys bring it back in the morning, but me lady isnae feeling so well, and I dinnae want her tae risk walking.”

Someone responded, and Darren took her arm and began to guide her to the door. Alayne leaned on him gratefully. The floor seemed to be swaying like the deck of a ship, making it difficult to find her balance, and Darren’s support kept her from stumbling into tables and tripping over things she couldn’t quite see.

Outside, a young man brought them a horse. Darren handed her off to someone - she thought it might be one of his advisors - while he mounted, then lifted her gently up into the saddle in front of him. “Just relax, lass. We’ll be back soon, and then ye can sleep it off.”

She wasn’t sure she wanted to sleep away the warm softness that filled her, but she couldn’t deny that everything felt heavy and her eyes wanted to close. She felt warm

and content, in a way she'd rarely experienced before, and she was enjoying it too much to protest as Darren guided the horse in an easy walk up to the keep.

She rode in a daze, and was scarcely more coherent when they arrived at the keep. Darren helped her dismount, then guided her inside and along the now familiar path to their quarters. The arrival at their bedchambers sparked a thought in her.

Bed. She wanted to sleep, but there was something else. She wanted Darren to share her bed. Perhaps not to do all the things she and Evina had talked about, but he was her husband. Her husband, and no one else's. And she was his wife. Being together was only right for them, and enveloped in the soft golden haze of mead-induced calm, she could admit that she wanted it. She wanted him.

Darren guided her into the bedroom and helped her remove her cloak, then her belt. Once she was in just her skirt and blouse, he helped her lay down on the bed, and gently removed her shoes.

Alayne watched him through half-lidded eyes. When he started to turn away, she reached out and clumsily caught his sleeve. "Ye're nae going tae... undress me?"

"Nae more than this. I wouldnae want tae make ye uncomfortable." His voice was soft, gentle, and warm.

"But... ye're me husband. Ye could. Or ye could kiss me, if ye wished. I wouldnae mind." She wanted him to kiss her. She wanted him to touch her. For that matter, she wanted him to desire her.

Darren stepped back, gently removing her hand. "Ye wouldnae mind now, but I wouldnae want tae take a chance on what ye'll think o' it in the morning. I'll nae take advantage o' ye, not when ye're bein' influenced by the mead."

Anger and hurt flashed through her, and Alayne sat up so fast she nearly hit her head. The room spun, but she chose to ignore it as she forced herself upright on unsteady feet. “I might have drunk more than I’m accustomed tae, Darren MacLean, but that isnae the reason I say these things. And I wouldnae say I didnae mind kissing ye if I didnae think I would mean it in the morning as well.”

“Ye’re drunk. Ye cannae be sure what ye’ll think in the morning.”

“And ye’re a stubborn arse.” Alayne glared at him, then reached up to unlace her bodice. “Ye think I dinnae mean it? That I’m too drunk tae ken what I really want? Dae I have tae throw meself at ye like that tavern wench before ye understand I’m nae lying or tae far gone with drink tae ken me own mind?”

She pulled the blouse over her head, then pulled loose the ties of her skirt and dropped it to her feet. Darren’s eyes went wide, and he stepped back. “Alayne... dinnae be rash...”

“Dinnae be a stubborn fool then. Ye’re me husband. If I’ve said that I’m willing tae have ye, then why should ye refuse?” She stepped toward him, her hands clutching her chemise in preparation for dispensing with it as well.

Darren’s jaw clenched. “I’ll nae take advantage o’ ye. Nae when ye’re inebriated.”

Before she could argue further, he turned and stalked out the door. She was trying to find her footing to follow him when she heard the door to the outer room close as well.

He’d left. He’d left her. She’d offered herself to him, told him over and over again that he was welcome in her bed, welcome to touch her, to love her, and he’d refused.

Shame and hurt flooded her, extinguishing the warmth of the alcohol as she sank

back onto the bed, then curled herself into a small ball under the coverlet. She'd hoped she was wrong, and that his arousal the night before had meant things were different between them, but it was clear she'd been right all along.

He didn't want her. Maybe it had been the massage, maybe it had been thoughts of a lass like Shannon, but whatever he'd reacted to the night before, it wasn't her.

She'd been an unwanted daughter, and now she was an unwanted wife. She'd thought nothing could equal the sting of her father's dislike for her, but somehow, Darren's disinterest cut a thousand times deeper.

Eventually, the lingering effects of the alcohol and her own dizzying emotions pulled her to sleep, and Alayne succumbed gratefully to the bliss of dreamless slumber.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Darren wasn't sure which hurt more as he made his way to his study - his head, his heart, or his aching manhood. He could count it a small favor that Alayne had seemed too drunk to notice his reaction to her advances. At least, she wouldn't feel quite so disgusted with him and with herself when she regained her senses.

He'd wanted to respond to her, almost more than he could stand, and in the end he'd fled from their shared chambers entirely rather than risk losing his self control. He'd feared that if he stayed, he'd wind up giving in to her advances, and that was something he couldn't do. Not if he wanted to be able to face himself, or her, in the morning.

He opened the study door to find Bard, Ryan and Adrian seated around the fire. The sight of his second-in-command recalled a more important matter to his mind. Namely, Bard's whereabouts the day before.

Ryan was the one to break the silence between them. "How's the lass?"

"Sleeping by now, I hope." That was all Darren was willing to say on the matter of his wife. He turned to Bard. "I need ye tae explain something tae me."

"Aye? Whatever ye need." Bard's brow furrowed at his brusque tone.

"Yesterday, when me lady and I were attacked, ye werenae at MacLean Keep. I was told ye went tae the village tae mediate a matter o' some urgency."

“’Tis correct. A dispute over farming lands and resources. ‘Twas nae difficult, but it took some talking tae sort out.” Bard said.

“I can imagine.” Darren had mediated land disputes a few times. “What’s confusing me is that when I mentioned ye tae the maid at the tavern, she didnae ken who ye were. She said she hadnae seen ye in the town afore taenight.”

Bard’s frown deepened. “I’m nae surprised. It wasnae the keep village. ‘Twas the village two candle-mark’s ride northeast o’ MacLean Keep.”

Ryan nodded. “I was there when the lad rode in. And the stable boy told me this morning that Bard’s horse picked up a stone on the way back. The horse wasnae lamed, but his pace would have been slower than usual.”

“Aye. Two candle-marks tae the village, but more than three tae return.”

So nearly a quarter of the day had been lost in travel. And Bard wasn’t much of a bowman as far as Darren knew. “I see. That makes more sense. I was a bit confused when Shannon said she hadnae seen ye. She’s nae one tae miss a new face, nor word o’ any trouble brewing nearby.”

“Apologies fer the misunderstanding, me laird. I didnae realize I hadnae conveyed which village.” Bard dipped his head.

“’Tis fine. ’Tis nae important. I just wanted tae be sure I had understood properly.” Darren dismissed the matter. Until he had more evidence, there was no reason to suspect Bard more than he suspected anyone else in the clan.

And for all he knew, it had been an attack by bandits after all. Such things were rarer on the isle than they were across the Firth of Lorne, but sometimes a few brigands sought to escape punishment by crossing the firth. They were usually caught and

dealt with fairly quickly, but that didn't mean they couldn't cause trouble enough before then.

Bandits, an enemy clan, or internal enemies he'd not yet identified... sooner or later he'd discover who was behind the attack, and what they wanted. Then he would take care of it.

Maybe, by the time he managed to discover the perpetrators, he'd also have found a way to handle the complicated and frustrating situation between himself and Alayne.

Alayne woke to a feeling of utter misery. Her eyes felt as if she had sand in them, her face felt sticky, and her head was absolutely throbbing. Even trying to lift it made her feel like she'd gone headfirst into a wall. Multiple times.

Even worse, she remembered every single detail of the night before, from the tavern maid to the mead, and how she'd behaved when they arrived back at MacLean Keep. She felt utterly mortified with her behavior.

That Darren hadn't accepted her invitation, and evidently left her alone for the night and slept elsewhere, made it even worse. Bad enough to have lost her senses enough to invite him to her bed, but he hadn't even accepted the invitation.

She felt wretched, and splashing cold water on her face did little to help. It got rid of some of the gritty feeling in her eyes and the stickiness of her face, but did nothing for the rest of her complaints. She emerged from the bedroom to see a tray of food on the table, covered and awaiting her pleasure, and discovered yet another unpleasant consequence of her drinking when her stomach rebelled.

Sick and miserable, she made her way down to the main doors, and from there to Evina's cottage. There was no sign of Darren or any of his advisors, and she thanked whatever guardian spirit might be watching over her for the small mercy.

Evina met her at the door of the cottage, a tonic in hand. "I saw ye come in last night with Laird MacLean. I had a feeling ye'd need a remedy fer ale-head this morn."

"'Twas nae ale. 'Twas mead." Alayne took the tonic and drank it gratefully, happy that her stomach seemed to settle, rather than reject it. "And if I'd kent that being drunk was such a miserable experience, I'd have taken more care tae stick tae a small beer or wine."

"Now ye ken, and ye'll be well able tae avoid this in the future." Evina studied her face. "Although, I'm thinking 'tis nae just the after-effects o' drinking that has ye distressed."

Alayne groaned. "It isnae. I made a fair proper fool o' meself last night, and I dinnae even ken why."

"Och? Mayhap if ye tell me what ye mean, I can help ye feel better about that as well." Evina's smile this time was a warm, inviting thing, the same smile she'd worn the day before when she explained the basics of intimacy and making love and other womanly things that Alayne had never been taught.

The memory of Evina's quiet, non-judgmental explanations steadied Alayne, as did the sudden easing of pain as the tonic went to work. She breathed a sigh of relief, then settled in the chair by the hearth, while Evina poured them both tea. "It started at the tavern - there was a serving lass there, and she was acting familiar with Darren, and I realized he'd... he'd probably been intimate with her."

"Och, he was never as light o' love as his braither Marcus, but he was never a monk either. Though he's careful with his lasses, and he makes sure there's nae bairn from the bedsport. As far as I've ever heard, he's as good a lover as ye could wish o' a man."

Alayne blushed. “I wouldnae ken. I only ken that it was bein’ jealous o’ her that caused me tae drink so much. Darren had tae bring me home and put me tae bed. Only, when he did, I tried tae get him tae kiss me. I wanted him tae act as me husband. I even...” She felt her blush deepen. “I even started taking off my clothes tae seduce him. As if I kent how tae dae any such thing.”

“I see. And ye regret it in the morn light?” Evina’s voice was gentle.

“Aye. But nae just because I acted a fool. Darren... he... he didnae stay with me. He just refused me and left. He didnae even come back tae our rooms.”

“Och. I think I ken the matter. Or rather, ‘tis two things that bother ye.” Evina took her hand and patted it gently. “Ye’re embarrassed at yer own behavior, but ye’re also upset that Darren didnae take ye up on the offer.”

“Aye.” Alayne ducked her head. “I dinnae even ken why I’m so angered over the second. I cannae imagine how mortified I’d feel if he had stayed, and I’d woken tae him in me bed.”

“‘Tis simple enough, and both things tied tae the same reason.” Evina patted her hand again, then refilled both their cups and added a splash of soothing lavender to Alayne’s. She handed the cup over and waited until Alayne had drunk a few sips before she continued.

“I ken ye didnae like Laird Darren much when ye first arrived, or when ye wed, but whatever yer feelings were, ye’ve come tae find him an acceptable spouse since. Desirable even. And ye acted on it, which is naething tae be ashamed of.”

“Naething tae... but I...”

“Ye acted as a woman who desires her partner. Enemies ye may have been, but ye’ve

clearly found some common ground. And nay matter what the history between ye, ye're now husband and wife. Such behavior is perfectly normal and accepted in such a case. In truth, it says that ye, and yer relationship with yer husband, are healthy and developing well. That's nae a bad thing."

Alayne felt her shoulders slump. "But he didnae want me."

"Ye think so? He's never shown any sign o' bein' attracted tae ye?"

Alayne winced. "I gave him a massage two nights ago, and he was... aroused, it seemed. But then, when I tried to kiss him, he backed away from me. So he mustnae want me."

"I wouldnae say that. A man's body is usually more honest than his words, and sometimes more than his actions too." Evina's voice was thoughtful. "'Tis possible, however, if he kent how little ye kent about physical intimacy, that he wouldnae wish tae push ye too far, tae fast, and risk scaring ye. 'Tis also likely that last night, he didnae wish tae take advantage o' yer state, and possibly upset ye, or make ye feel used or something o' the sort."

"But I said he could kiss me."

"Aye. But there's some women who say one thing when they're in their cups, and think another when they're sober. And some relationships that have been broken by a misunderstanding when one or both partners were three sheets tae the wind, as the sailors say. Like as nae, he'd want tae avoid that with ye, especially with the way things started between ye."

Alayne felt her stomach twist. "But, he didnae want tae marry me."

"Did ye want tae marry him?" Evina raised an eyebrow. Alayne grimaced. Anyone

who'd attended the wedding knew the answer to that. "He's nae the sort tae take an unwilling woman tae his bed, and were it nae fer the royal edict, I doubt he'd have taken ye as an unwilling wife either. 'Tis why he never wed Lady Stewart or Lady MacDougall either, albeit all were offered tae him in marriage and alliance contract."

"I didnae ken that. I thought it was because they were contracted tae his brothers."

"Contracted tae a son o' MacLean. But they loved his younger brothers, and he didnae stand between them, although all his siblings tried tae be noble and allow him the first chance at courtin' the lasses." Evina snorted.

He'd mentioned something of the sort about Keegan, but she hadn't known that he'd been offered Erin MacDougall's hand as well, and refused it.

Evina saw her thoughts on her face, and smiled commiseratingly. "'Tis something tae think over. But for now, take a healer's advice and get some food intae ye. Something easy like sweetened porridge. Then get yerself a bath. Ye'll feel better, and better able tae consider how ye want tae proceed with yer husband after ye've eaten and freshened up."

It sounded like good advice. Alayne rose gratefully from her seat. "Thank ye, Evina."

"Dinnae thank me. 'Tis what a healer is fer."

Alayne smiled, then stepped back out into the courtyard. The mid-morning sun was shining overhead, but it no longer made her feel as if someone were grinding hot pokers into her skull. The smell of baking bread and roasting meat as she ventured around toward the kitchen doors for her food no longer turned her stomach.

A bowl of sweet porridge, mixed with fresh cream, did much to improve her mood and quiet her stomach. Once she'd finished the meal, she made her way back to her

quarters, intent on getting the bath Evina had recommended, before going to seek out her husband. Now that she understood a few more things, she wanted to discuss what had happened with Darren.

Maybe he didn't desire her as a man desired a woman, but he had argued for an amiable marriage, and there was the matter of an heir to consider.

And, if she was being completely honest with herself, now that she understood what desire was, she no longer wanted to live her life as a spinster maiden. And she could think of no one she might want to teach her the ways of love and intimacy - in the practical sense at least - than Darren MacLean, her no-longer-despised husband.

She opened the door, so lost in thought that she didn't even notice the humid air that wafted out through the opening, or the faint scent of pine soap filling the air.

In fact, it wasn't until she heard her name softly spoken that she came back to herself and realized two things. One, the rooms weren't empty.

Two, Darren was there, sitting in a bathing tub, completely naked and without a cloth or a bubble to be seen for modesty.

Her first impulse was to tear her eyes away and turn around, perhaps even flee the room. Her second was to step closer, her mind alight with curiosity. She'd never seen a man naked before, and she'd deliberately avoided seeing Darren unclothed. Now, she could see him quite well, from the well muscled and tattooed shoulders to the lean, strong thighs - and his manhood, which seemed to be changing shape and size even as she watched.

Then there was the part of her that wondered how he would respond if she undressed and stepped into the bath with him. It was an absurd idea, and the tub clearly wasn't large enough for the two of them, but she thought it nonetheless.

Darren stared at her, without saying a word, and that made the whole situation even more difficult. Alayne had no idea what to do, or say. All she could do was stand there, staring, her cheeks burning with embarrassment and a single thought running through her mind.

What am I supposed to do in a situation like this?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Darren had been in the middle of relaxing, and letting his mind wander to a particularly self-indulgent fantasy, when the door opened and his wife strode into the room.

Alayne froze. Darren froze, cursing his wayward thoughts that immediately added details - such as the expression on Alayne's face - to the mental picture he'd been building as he sought to relax through self-pleasure.

Alayne said nothing, but he saw her eyes glide over his body, widen slightly at the sight of his growing erection, then dart away, and back.

He was tempted to invite her into the tub with him, but that was taking things a bit too far, he suspected. However, if she was going to stand there and watch him bathe...

He'd jerked both hands up and out of the water at the unexpected intrusion. Now, he let his right hand dip beneath the surface, to lightly encircle his growing hardness. Callused fingers slid along the shaft, teasing with the pleasant sensation of gentle friction.

He saw Alayne swallow, her cheeks turning crimson. Still, she didn't move, her eyes locked on the easy motion of his hand. Darren felt his own mouth go dry.

He'd never had someone watch him pleasure himself, and never considered the idea either. He'd always assumed that if someone else was in the room, either it wasn't a

good time for such activities, or the other person was a welcome participant. In which case, the arousal, and the pleasuring, would be mutual and enjoyed by both.

He would have expected to be self-conscious, unable to act. Instead, the feel of Alayne's eyes on him while he slowly, easily stroked himself erect acted as fuel to his desire. His mind imagined those eyes closer to his, her hand instead of his. Were her fingers rough or soft? How would she grip him?

Tentatively, he thought. Gently. A maiden untried, she would be hesitant in her touches, uncertain of how to proceed. He shifted his grip to match, letting his hand fall loose until it barely teased the sensitive, aching flesh of his hardened member.

He heard her indrawn breath, but she still made no move to leave, and said nothing.

He slid his hand across his shaft a few times, light and skimming, the way he imagined she might do. Then let his hand drift down to delicately caress his bollocks. The touch was light, and yet it went through him like a bolt of lightning, stronger than he'd ever experienced while pleasuring himself before. He flicked his hand back up to his shaft.

Stronger now. He would show her the pressure he liked best, the speed. He used his free hand and cupped it over the hand on his erection, imagining his hand over hers as he tutored her in how to best bring him pleasure and guide him toward release.

Slow, hesitant, but then faster as he imagined guiding her to the proper rhythm. The feeling was also more intense than he'd ever experienced, the edge of pleasure combined with the thrill of knowing that the figure of his fantasy was watching every move, witnessing every touch and every noise he made.

She still hadn't retreated or protested, and Darren took that as permission. He relaxed, letting his hips shift against his hand, soft sighs and grunts escaping his mouth as

small changes in pressure, speed and angle sent new sensations darting through him in waves of tingling enjoyment, mingled with desire.

How would she react? Would she continue as she was doing, or would she add more sensations to her teasing and caresses?

He reached up and pinched a flat male nipple in an approximation of teeth. She might nip him, if she knew how sensitive he was there, and how much he enjoyed it. Or perhaps... he slid his hand up to pinch on his collarbone.

She might mark him thus, with lips and teeth and tongue. He'd always enjoyed that. A bruise that marked not anger, but claiming. Not violence, but companionship.

The small darts of pain heightened the sense of pleasure and heat emanating from his groin. His hand sped up, and he groaned as he applied a little more pressure, and a slight twist of his wrist.

The head of his shaft was leaking precome, and he rubbed his thumb sensuously through the liquid of his arousal, groaning at the feel of contact against the head of the shaft. The stimulus made his hips buck in the water, and he shivered at the feel of heated skin rubbing together, the cooler water and the wash of still colder air over his exposed shoulders and chest.

He could feel his release coming, his bollocks drawing tight and heat and pressure coiling through him, tighter and higher. His breath came in harsh pants as he worked himself closer to the edge.

He felt his climax coming, and he opened his eyes and met hers. The hand he'd been stroking himself with swiped over the head of his shaft as his other hand fondled and lightly pinched his aching balls. The combination of sensations, and the delicious thrill of Alayne's eyes on him pushed him over the edge, and he climaxed harder than

he had in a good long while. Air left his lungs in a sharp burst, his head thrown back with enough force to impact the edge of the tub as he spurted his release into the cooling water of the bath.

The world disappeared in a haze of white heat and pleasure the likes of which he wasn't sure he'd ever experienced. For several moments, he was utterly lost in bliss, his mind drifting in a haze.

He opened his eyes to find Alayne practically at the edge of the tub, eyes wide as she took in every inch of his form and the state of him. Her eyes were darting between the now cloudy water, his softening shaft, and his hands.

Alayne opened her mouth to say something. Darren braced himself for everything from a slew of questions to a blistering tirade of recrimination.

"I... can I..."

A knock on the door startled them both. Darren swore as he splashed water all over the floor. Alayne jumped like a scalded cat and immediately disappeared into the bedroom.

"Morrigan blast it..." Darren hissed the words and hauled himself from the tub. "Who the devil..?"

"'Tis Ryan me laird. Apologies fer disturbing ye, but the council has assembled. Ye wanted tae make sure everyone was informed o' the status of the guard, and any new information we might have."

"Och, hells..." Darren's gaze flicked to the bedroom door, which was firmly closed. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

He wanted to speak to Alayne about what had just happened. But there was no time. The council had gathered, and he knew many of the Elders would be displeased if he made them wait any longer than he had to.

Damn it!

Perhaps tonight, after the meeting, they'd be able to talk - assuming she was willing to talk to him. Darren sighed, then moved to get dressed as quickly as he could. He made a note to send some servants to change out the water, if Alayne wanted a bath.

Once he was fully dressed, he left the room with a soft farewell and strode down the hall toward the council chamber. But though he tried to bring his mind back to the issues at hand, his thoughts kept drifting back to Alayne, and the scene in the bedchamber.

She hadn't run away. In fact, she'd come closer. She even looked as if she might not be disgusted by what she'd witnessed. But what did that mean for them?

Was it that she wanted him, or simply that she'd been drawn in by something she'd likely never seen before? He didn't know.

As he reached the door of the council chamber, Darren made a promise to himself. He wasn't sure what had happened, or why she hadn't fled from his activity. But no matter how late it was, or how long it took. Before he went to sleep, he was going to find out.

Alayne slid her dress over her shoulders, preparing for bed. Her hands moved in practiced motions, but her mind was lost in thoughts of what had occurred earlier.

She knew she should have left when she realized Darren was there, naked, and in the bath. She certainly should have made herself scarce when she realized he was having

an intimate moment to himself. And yet, she hadn't been able to move. She'd been far too mesmerized by the sight of his hand, stroking and teasing himself until he climaxed right before her eyes.

She hadn't known such things could be accomplished on one's own. Perhaps it was only true for men, and that was why Evina hadn't told her about such things. Or perhaps, Evina thought she'd no need to know, given that she was married.

Either way, watching Darren as he pleased himself had given her quite the education into male bodies, and her husband in specific. It had also raised new questions for her.

His hands were clearly skilled at giving pleasure. What would it feel like to have those hands on her? Touching her the way he'd touched himself?

And what might it be like to touch him, to try and give him the same pleasure he'd given himself? She'd almost reached for him, there in the bath, but Ryan had interrupted, and by the time she'd managed to control her embarrassment enough to stick her head back out of the bedroom, he'd been gone.

The door latch clicked, and she turned, still clad in just her chemise, as Darren stepped into the room. His eyes landed on her and he stopped so fast he almost tripped over his own boots. "I beg yer pardon. I didnae mean tae intrude. I'll let ye..."

"Darren, wait." She didn't get any further than that before he whipped around, so fast that he knocked his skull against the door frame when he misjudged how close he was to it. The sight of him cursing as he gripped his head was the last straw, and the feelings she'd been harboring for days broke free. "Am I really so deplorable tae ye?"

Darren's head snapped around. "What?"

“Am I really so undesirable?” She swallowed hard. “I’ve tried tae show ye that yer advances are welcome. I’ve tried tae invite ye closer. But all ye dae is spurn me and push me away. Dae ye really despise me so much that ye can barely stand civility, much less more?”

Darren felt as if his jaw might come unhinged from surprise alone. He’d expected to have a show tossed at his head for daring to interrupt Alayne’s changing. Possibly followed by a diatribe about his shameless behavior earlier. Instead, she was accusing him of not wanting her.

How on God’s green earth can she be thinkin’ I dinnae want her? Stars above, I near lost me mind just pleasin’ myself while she watched!

He swallowed hard. “It isnae that I dinnae want ye.”

“Is it nae?” She raised her chin in challenge, but he caught the gleam of hurt in her eyes as well. “When first me faither offered ye me hand, ye turned it down with excuses and half-truths.”

“I told ye, yer faither wanted a contract I couldnae accept, fer the good o’ me clan.”

“But then, after we married...”

“Ye told me ye’d rather sleep with a viper.” He raised an eyebrow. “Ye wrapped yerself in so many layers ye could scarcely move, and ye looked as if ye’d geld me if I so much as touched ye. I’d say ye made it clear that ye didnae want me . Nae the other way around.”

Alayne flushed, looking embarrassed. “That was then, afore I grew tae ken what sort o’ man ye were. I’ve tried tae show ye that me feelings have changed. But even when I ask ye tae kiss me, ye refuse. How could I see anything save rejection in that?”

“Because it isnae rejection. ‘Tis caution.” Darren felt the words rasp in his throat. “I’m tryin’ tae be a gentleman fer ye, Alayne, but what I feel, and what I want... if I touched ye, I’d kiss ye. And if I kissed ye, I wouldnae want tae stop there.”

Alayne’s eyes widened. “What is that supposed tae mean?”

Darren stepped forward. His voice was sharp with growing desire as he answered her. “It means, Alayne, that I wouldnae stop with a kiss and a touch. I ken ye’re unschooled in intimacy, so I’ll say it plain: once I touched ye, I’d claim ye. Ye’d find yerself in me bed, and I’d mark me claim on ye in every way a man can. Ye’d go from unschooled tae well-ravished, me lass.”

He took a deep breath, feeling the heat that curled through him. “Once I kent how little ye kent o’ love making, I kent I couldnae touch ye, or I’d push ye far beyond anything ye were ready fer. I’d wind up makin’ ye dae somethin’ ye didnae want, and worse. I couldnae stand tae dae that.”

Alayne blinked, and he braced himself for her rejection, or withdrawal. Perhaps even for a response of disgust and a renewed declaration that she’d never share his bed.

Instead, Alayne took a hesitant step forward, then another, until she could reach out and put a hand on his chest. Darren stiffened, desire, anticipation and a faint spark of hope surging through his blood. “Alayne?”

Her eyes rose slowly to meet his. “And what if I didnae want ye tae stop taenight?”

“Ye realize that if I give ye what yer asking fer, it cannae be taken back. The marriage will be consummated and sealed.” He lifted a hand to cup her cheek. “And even if dissolution were possible, once I claim ye, I’ll nae be ever letting ye go.”

“If I wanted ye tae let me go, I’d nae ask ye tae claim ye now.”

She meant it. He could see it in her eyes, the interest in her face. “Ye’re sure?”

“Aye.” her cheeks flushed a faint rose hue. “I’ve been speaking tae Evina. She taught me some things, but...” Her blush deepened. “Now I’d like tae feel and experience the things she was telling me about.”

“Then I shall be happy tae grant me lady’s command.” And with no further deliberation, Darren brought his lips to hers in a searing kiss.

Alayne gasped as Darren’s mouth captured hers. He tasted of salt and mead and meat, his lips dry and slightly chafed as they sealed over hers. The kiss was firm, demanding, and possessive, a wordless claim that was as exciting as it was overwhelming.

His tongue teased her lips, and she hesitantly parted them, gasping again as his tongue stroked over hers, to caress and taste and claim every corner of her own. By the time Darren straightened, she was breathless, her chest and core aching with feelings she’d never felt before.

With a small grunt, Darren lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed, to lay her down. Alayne blinked at him as he began to divest himself of his clothing. She started to reach for her chemise, to remove it as well, but Darren’s low growl stopped her. “Leave it. I’ll take it off fer ye.”

A thrill of uncertainty, and desire pulsed through her as he finished divesting himself of everything but his kilt. The fabric was already bulging forward, evidence of his growing arousal.

Alayne leaned back against the pillows as Darren set a knee on the bed and settled in beside her. She wanted this, wanted him, but she had no idea how to go about acting on it. Tentatively, she reached for his kilt, only to be stopped by his hand over hers.

“Nae yet.”

“What... what should I...?”

“Dinnae dae anything, fer now.” Darren’s voice lowered again, rough yet smooth, like smoke and velvet in the dimness of the room. “I ken this is yer first time, so let me dae the work. All I want from ye are yer honest responses tae what I dae. If ye like something, let me ken. If I dae something ye dinnae like, let me ken. I want tae ken everything ye feel.”

That sounded deceptively simple. She wondered if that applied to what she felt right now. What she felt - a shivery, fluttery feeling deep in her abdomen.

Warm, callused fingers caressed her cheek and stroked back her hair. Above her, Darren’s eyes glittered with something sharp, something primal - desire. Alayne had never seen such emotions directed at her before, and the thought that Darren might feel desire for her was an intoxicating one, more potent than the honey mead she’d had before.

“Ye look so beautiful. A priceless jewel, just waiting fer me tae inspect ye, and learn every facet and curve o’ ye.” Darren’s voice was low, husky, and sent another wave of tingling through her. “Yer hair is so soft, so shining, ‘tis like silk and satin on me hands, softer than the finest cloth ever a royal could wear.”

His voice caressed her as surely as his hands, and Alayne felt her mouth go dry in anticipation as he bent his head to claim her lips in another long, lingering kiss.

“So sweet. So beautiful and so sweet. Like fine wine in the moonlight.” Darren shifted, and his lips pressed a kiss to her temple, then her cheek, before marking the hinge of her jaw. Alayne gasped as his teeth nipped at the lobe of her ear, then grazed the delicate, sensitive skin above her pulse, sending shivers like lightning through her

body. “Darren...”

“Aye?”

“I want... more...” She couldn’t articulate anything beyond that, but she didn’t seem to need to, because he hummed softly against her skin, a sound of satisfaction.

“Then more ye shall have, me lady.”

His hands slid down her shoulders, across her breasts. He cupped them briefly, then slid his palms down the flat plane of her stomach, molding the soft fabric of her chemise to her body as he caressed her. It felt as if he were worshiping her with his touch, his hands attempting to memorize every curve through the linen. Alayne felt bathed in the warmth of his touch, branded by the most pleasant fire.

His hands smoothed over her hips, thumbs teasingly close to the junction of her thighs, and the warmth that pooled there in her core. Alayne found herself shifting restlessly under his hands, and made an effort to still herself.

“Dinnae dae that. I want tae see ye move fer me. I want tae watch every move ye make. I want tae see every expression on yer face, and hear every sound ye make. I want all o’ it.” Darren’s voice rolled through her like a low pulse of thunder, leaving her feeling as if she’d been gently touched by lightning.

His hands slid all the way to her bare feet, and stroked them. Alayne shivered as the callused fingers traced the lines of each of her toes in turn, and applied gentle, massaging pressure to the bottoms of her feet. She flexed into the pressure in appreciation, and was rewarded with his low chuckle. “Ye like that? Massaging?”

He increased the pressure, massaging circles into her feet, then ankles, then up into her lower legs. Alayne felt bliss as every muscle was engulfed in warmth and relaxed.

She was so engrossed in the sensations, she scarcely realized it when his hands slid under the cloth of her chemise to massage her thighs. She gasped at the feeling, especially as his hands moved higher, closer to the junction of her thighs. She was suddenly conscious of a tingling sensation - a feeling of warmth and dampness that seemed to pool between her legs.

Darren made a low, rough sound of appreciation. "Ye're already so ready fer me. So wet fer me."

Alayne felt her face blushing scarlet. "I..."

He smiled at her. "Dinnae fret. I like this. 'Tis a compliment tae a man when a woman reacts so tae his touch." He leaned closer, inhaling deeply. "The smell o' yer arousal is intoxicating, better than the smoothest whiskey."

Alayne shivered in mingled embarrassment and delight. The sensations were so new, including the feeling of pride. For the first time, she felt some confidence as a woman. Darren's admiring gaze left no room for doubt as to the honesty of his words. Neither did the cloth-covered hardness that she felt against her leg as he bent close to her.

Darren's hands moved higher, removing her undergarment inch by inch, massaging as he went. Alayne felt her breasts turning more sensitive as he neared them, the nipples hardening in anticipation of his touch. She actually whimpered when he did nothing more than lightly skim his palms over the sensitive flesh.

"Patience, lass. I want tae see all o' ye. Every inch. I want tae look at ye properly, and take me time with ye." Darren's voice poured over her, smooth as honey. Entranced, Alayne lifted her arms as Darren slid the chemise the rest of the way off of her prone form, leaving her completely bared to his gaze.

Any uncertainty she felt was quelled by the honest desire burning in his eyes, and the way his hands slid over her arms. Every touch was both reverent and wanting, treating her like a pagan goddess worshipped and desired by an ardent follower. She'd never felt such things before, and all she could do was relax as he finished his massage, leaving her warm and relaxed against the pillows.

Darren's hands slid down her arms to cup her breasts. Warm palms held her, and strong dextrous fingers, roughened from hours of holding a sword, gently kneaded her skin. His thumbs teased her nipples, stroking circles around them before he used thumb and forefinger to pinch and tug them lightly. The sensations made Alayne quiver underneath him, shivering as heat seemed to shoot from her breasts to her core. She shifted restlessly.

"So sensitive, so responsive... dae ye ken what it daes tae a man? What it does tae me? It drives me mad, and I want tae tak' ye, here and now, until ye're screaming me name, and me possession o' ye is branded on yer innermost being."

His hands left her breasts, one supporting him while the other glided over her stomach. The muscles quivered as his hand moved lightly over them, and Alayne heard herself squeak, attempting not to laugh at the sensation.

Alayne shivered again as he palmed the soft mound of her sex, fingers carding through the fine, damp hairs that covered her there. "Already so wet... will ye open yer legs fer me? Fer me touch? Let me touch ye there?"

It was hard to breathe, against the sensation of his hand there, the feel of his fingertips grazing the edge of her slit, just at the uppermost edge of her sex. A part of her wanted to turn away, but a greater part of her, a part of her she'd never known existed before Darren, wanted more.

Hesitantly, she opened her legs to his touch, baring the lips of her sex to his admiring

gaze. His hand slid lower, fingers stroking over the wet and sensitized lips of her sex. Alayne shifted, caught between wanting to pull away from the sudden onslaught of sensation, and wanting to press herself closer to his hand.

“Nae need tae be afraid. Just relax. Let me see ye enjoy it. Let me bring ye pleasure.” Darren pressed down, a slight but firm pressure, and Alayne shivered again and allowed herself to arch her hips up into his hand.

“Ye want more?”

Darren bent close, his rough voice a seductive whisper in her ear. “Tell me ye want me tae touch ye more. Tell me ye want me tae enter ye, tae feel me fingers inside those slick, soft walls o’ yers, bathing in yer heat and yer arousal.”

She hadn’t known she wanted any such thing, but the words from his lips sounded like a promise, an offering as much as a demand. “Please. Please...”

“As ye command.”

Alayne gasped, a stifled shriek emerging from her throat as a single finger slipped inside her, sliding through the lips of her sex to caress the inner walls that led to her core. Darren’s finger stroked through the lips of her sex a few times, then pressed deeper, into the channel of her. Alayne keened at the feeling of pressure, the slow burn of her inner sheath being stretched around his finger.

The hand withdrew as his movement stilled. “Too much?”

“Nae enough. Please...” She rocked her hips up. Now that she’d felt that pressure, that presence, she felt empty without his touch, empty and aching.

Another dark, smoky laugh that drifted across her senses like whiskey and velvet.

“As ye will. But let me ken if I hurt ye.”

His hand covered her again, and she gave a soft cry of relief as his finger slid inside her again, pressing deep to caress her innermost walls.

“Ye’re so hot, so tight and wet. A man might call ye heaven. And ye’re me heaven and nae one else’s. Nae one else will ever see ye like this, feel ye like this, feel the heat and silken softness o’ ye...” Darren’s voice was thick, hoarse with emotions that Alayne sensed matched the rising tide of heat, desire and pleasure she herself felt.

Another finger entered her, and the added pressure made her body writhe against his hand. His thumb found and caressed a small, sensitive nub of flesh, and Alayne’s back arched as a wave of pleasure crashed over her. She keened, desperate for more, and Darren stroked her again, before guiding his fingers deeper and circling the sensitive spot with his thumb. The sensation was maddening, driving her higher on waves of heat and pleasure, like sparks dancing through her skin.

She felt something inside her coiling tighter, stronger and hotter with every stroke. It was like watching the rise of a wave made of fire and delight, standing on the top and waiting breathlessly for it to come crashing down.

Darren stroked deeper with his hand. “I can feel how wet ye are, how ready ye are... tell me what ye want, Alayne.”

“I... dinnae ken... I... more...”

Darren bent his head to kiss her, then passed his thumb firmly over that sensitive center of her pleasure again, and Alayne felt herself come undone as the wave crashed around her. She was caught up in a wash of heat and pleasure, body shuddering and rocking against Darren’s hand as the climax crashed through her. She felt a wave of fluids across her thighs and his hand as her release rocked through her,

and shivered as the sensation sent a new wave of pleasure dancing through her.

Darren let her ride his hand until the sensations ended, holding her close as she drifted on the haze that followed the heat of her release.

Alayne blinked, becoming more aware as she felt him withdrawing. Darren lay next to her, still clothed in his kilt, and still very clearly aroused. “Ye...”

“Did ye think that was the end o’ it?” Darren’s smile was slow and deep, like a cat after a bowl of cream. He raised his hand, still covered in her fluids, and licked across the fingers and palm in a way that made Alayne’s stomach clench in another wave of anticipation and want, despite how sensitive she still felt.

Darren cupped her chin with his hand when he finished, and bent closer. “I told ye, Alayne, if ye permitted this, then I wasnae goin’ tae stop. I’ve claimed ye with me touch, and now... I’ll claim ye with me mouth, and taste every inch o’ ye. And then, when yer sobbing me name, I’ll claim ye properly as me wife, and bury meself so deep inside ye that ye’ll never stop feeling me possession o’ ye.”

He shifted to kiss her, and Alayne felt her whole body react at the taste of him, now mingled with the taste of herself, salt and sour and heavy with musk. A part of her thought it should have been repulsive, but the taste was oddly arousing. Proof of his desire and hers, shared between them.

His mouth slid to press at a point just behind her jaw, then he nipped at her ear. Alayne twitched, feeling a shock of heat at the pleasure/pain sensation of it.

Another kiss to her pulse point, then a firmer one and the lightest hint of teeth on her collarbone, as he marked her with lips and tongue. A faint soreness lingered as his mouth moved lower, an oddly enthralling reminder of his possession.

She'd never imagined it could feel like this - that lovemaking could be like this. Evina had told her some things, but nothing the healer had ever said had mentioned this - the sensation of Darren's mouth slowly teasing her nerves back to life, building anew the fire of pleasure and desire that she'd thought had been wiped away in her climax of earlier.

His lips fastened over her right breast, suckling gently while his teeth pinched and tugged and his tongue flicked and danced over the taut flesh. Alayne's hands grabbed onto his shoulders without thinking, pulling his head closer as the darts of fire shot to her already aching and wanting core.

Darren shifted his attention, suckling and teasing both breasts until she was writhing against him, whimpering at the aching need that built in her sex. "So ready fer me already, wife?"

He kissed his way down her center, each kiss light and teasing and sending sparks over her skin. Then his tongue dipped into her navel, swirling inside, and Alayne yelped and squirmed.

Darren's hands took her thighs as he shifted lower, pressing her gently open to his gaze. "'Tis amazing tae ken that nae other man will ever have this. Only me."

"Only... ye!" The second word emerged on a half-voiced cry as Darren's tongue slid across her and plunged into her dripping folds to stroke deep inside her.

She'd thought his fingers were marvelous. His tongue couldn't stroke as deep, but the sensations of it, the way he curled and twisted it inside her - within moments, Alayne was writhing against his hold, wanting more. Her legs spread wider of her own volition, desperate to grant him deeper access. "Darren... please... Darren..."

The heat was rising again, pleasure almost too much to bear. All she could do was

gasp and clutch at the sheets, crying his name. She felt her release coming closer, closer...

Darren pulled away, hands and mouth leaving her cold and desperate for more. "Darren!"

"Patience, me wife. Did I nae tell ye? When ye're begging and calling me name... did I nae promise I'd take ye?"

Darren stripped off his kilt with a smooth movement, and Alayne stared at the sight of his erect and straining manhood. She felt the heat and the rigid length of him as he bent over her, erection trailing across her thigh as he moved slowly and sensuously to cover her.

She felt the head of his shaft against her entrance, as Darren leaned close to whisper in her ear. "Spread yer legs fer me a little more. Let me feel how much ye want me."

She did as he commanded, her whole body humming with need like she'd never experienced. She felt him shift his hips slightly, then the head of his member began to press slowly inside her.

It was larger than his finger, stretching her. Alayne whimpered and pressed her hips closer, the burn of being stretched and filled mingling with the pleasure of his flesh sliding against hers.

Darren pressed deeper, his breath going ragged to match hers, even as more words escaped him. "So hot... so tight...so soft..." Inch by inch, he slid inside her, until he paused.

Alayne tensed, sensing the thin barrier of her maidenhead. Evina had warned her that this part wasn't so pleasurable, even with a caring and skilled partner.

“Brace yerself, Alayne.” Darren’s mouth closed over hers in a kiss, and she felt his hips thrust forward. There was a brief, sharp flash of pain as her maidenhead was broken, a dull burn as Darren slid the rest of the way inside her, sheathing himself to the hilt in her core.

They lay locked together for a moment, both panting. The pain faded swiftly under the feeling of heat and pressure. Alayne shifted, desperate for something and uncertain what. “Darren... please...”

Darren chuckled. His hips pulled back, then forward, pumping his shaft into and out of her as he set up a slow, steady pace. Their bodies rocked together, and the last lingering pain disappeared as fire and desire swept through her.

The heat built, the friction of his member gliding into and out of her channel bringing with it waves of heat. But it wasn’t enough. Alayne clutched at his shoulders. “Darren... please... more...”

Another laugh, but there was light in his eyes, pleasure and warmth and enjoyment that took any sting from his laughter as he increased his pace and the strength of each thrust. His movements became more demanding, more powerful, and she found herself watching to meet him and pull him deeper with each thrust.

She’d thought she’d felt pleasure before, but it was nothing compared to the sensation of having him inside her, having him move within her. It was driving her out of her mind, she was going to burn in waves of his passion and hers, and she had no idea what to do. Alayne felt like she was drowning in the sensations.

Then Darren’s teeth found the mark he’d made before, and his hips shifted to apply pressure to her pleasure center. A spark of pain from her collarbone as he nipped her, and a flash of pleasure as he pressed at just the right angle, and she was gone, washed away in the tide of a release so strong it sent stars across her vision and wiped away

any thought she might have had. Pleasure and heat flooded through her, and her inner walls clamped around Darren's shaft.

Darren shuddered, stiffened, and she felt it as his release spurted his seed deep into her hot and welcoming body. Fluids mingled together as they shook with shared pleasure.

Then that awareness too, disappeared, as the two of them surrendered to the aftermath of their lovemaking. The last thing Alayne was aware of was Darren's body slipping free of hers, before his arms slid around her, and carried her into sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Darren woke to the feel of Alayne in his arms, the first good rest he'd had in weeks, and a sense of satisfaction he'd never felt before.

He'd bedded many a lass in his day, but there was something different about last night's lovemaking, and he couldn't deny it. Like her eyes on him in the bath, everything about it seemed more intense, more pleasurable than anything he'd experienced before.

He didn't know if it was because Alayne was his wife - his alone to bring pleasure to - or her previously untaught state and the open honest reactions she offered to his touch, and he couldn't find it in him to care. What they had was too beautiful, and too enjoyable, to tarnish with worry over how or why it would be so.

Perhaps there was some truth to the idea that God blessed a marriage bed. Or maybe it was some favor from the Fair Folk, though how he'd have earned either he had no idea. Again, it was nothing he cared to ponder, lying in his bed with his wife asleep beside him.

His wife in every sense of the word, now. He marveled at the fact - something he'd thought would be impossible, only a few days ago.

Alayne stirred in his arms, and he shifted so he could give her space. He had no regrets about their activities the night before, but he was prepared to leave her alone if she wasn't of the same mind. Alayne blinked open her eyes, and smiled sleepily at him. Then she frowned. "I feel..."

“I ken. Lie there, and I’ll go warm some water tae help ye clean up.”

“Afore that...” Alyne flushed. “There’s a potion in my dresser, in the corner o’ the top drawer. Evina gave it tae me. She said it would help for the morning after.”

She’d been talking to Evina about consummating the marriage? Was it something that had come about as part of the wedding preparations, or something she’d chosen to do, before she invited him to share her bed by choice? Either way, the idea that she’d actually prepared for this, that she might have wanted it, made his heart feel light.

He went to find the promised potion, then swept his discarded kilt around himself and went to heat some water over the fire. Once it was warm, he soaked a rag in it and brought it back. He felt sticky and more than a little uncomfortable himself, but he could wait until Alayne was cared for.

She accepted the rag with a smile and a blush, before ducking beneath the coverlet. Darren smiled at her maiden-like shyness, and went to get another rag for himself.

By the time he came back, she was dressed. He dressed himself, the two of them doing a slow, awkward dance around each other as they prepared for the day. Darren finished dressing, then turned and offered her his hand. “Will ye join me in the Hall fer breakfast?”

“I’d rather eat here.” Her blush betrayed her shyness once again. Darren smiled, and bent to kiss the knuckles of her hand.

“As ye like.”

He sent for a tray, and they enjoyed a quiet breakfast. Afterward, Darren rose. “I’ve work tae dae, and a meeting with Bard, Adrian and Ryan tae attend tae, regarding the attack. But afore I go... will ye come somewhere with me?”

“I... I will.”

He led her from their rooms, down toward the laird’s study, then across the castle from it, into a wing that was hardly used. Alayne looked on curiously as he opened a door to reveal a winding staircase going upward. “Where are we?”

“Western Tower.” He offered her his hand, and she took it with her newfound show of trust. Darren gave her an encouraging smile in return, and began to lead her upward.

Alayne was visibly tense as they neared the top of the tower, her eyes darting here and there. She actually flinched when he opened the door to the uppermost balcony, which sometimes served as a watch-post, though it hadn’t in some time. “What?”

“Relax. Ye’re in nay danger here. The tower isnae frequently used, but ‘tis sturdy.” He urged her forward, and stepped behind her to wrap an arm around her waist. “Most o’ me clan dinnae bother coming up here - there’s naught but the view. I thought it would be a good place tae help ye face yer fears again, since there’s nae audience save me. And also, fer one other reason.”

“What reason?”

“The lookout, where we are... if ye stare across the hills on a clear day, ye’re looking in the direction o’ Ranald lands. I dinnae ken if ye can actually see where our territory ends and yers begins, but still, I thought it might comfort ye tae look toward home.”

The way her smile lit her face was all the reward he needed, even before she turned back to the edge of the watch post and took a determined step toward it. She was still more than her own length from the edge, but that didn’t change the meaning of the gesture.

“Ye can let me go.” Her words were soft, but clear.

“I didnae want ye tae be afraid.”

“I’m nae.” She turned back to him, still smiling like the sunrise on the other side of the keep. “Why should I be? Me husband is here tae protect me.”

“Aye. That I am.” He reached out and drew her close. “Fer as long as ye want me.”

Alayne paced toward Evina’s cottage, her mind whirling. A part of her was still dazed from Darren’s lovemaking last night. Another part of her was singing softly in wonder, at the knowledge that she trusted her husband, and more than that, was unafraid to show it.

The rest of her thoughts were filled with worry.

She’d never managed, between different events, accidents, and encounters, to tell Darren about the full details of her bargain with the king. As far as she knew, he was still unaware that Donall’s release from the king’s dungeon was a part of the agreement.

At first, she’d enjoyed keeping the secret, knowing that he was unaware he would soon have his vengeful brother-by-marriage virtually on his doorstep again. Then, as she’d warmed to him, and come to realize what sort of man Darren truly was, she’d also come to see that she was being unkind to him.

And now, someone had attacked them. She didn’t think Donall would put her in that sort of danger, but who knew what the depredations of the king’s dungeons might have done to his mind, or his heart? He might have fired an arrow at Darren, unthinking of the danger to her, or thinking that he’d not hit her, and she was safe from all other injury.

She didn't want to believe it, and didn't truly think it was anything of the sort, but she had to consider the possibility. At this point, she was almost certain that Donall would have returned to Ranald Keep. If he hadn't, he must have at least crossed the firth by now.

She had to tell Darren, but she couldn't. After going so long without telling him, he would surely be angry with her. At the same time, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was betraying Donall by revealing the truth.

She needed advice, and thus far, Evina hadn't steered her poorly.

Evina answered the door at her first, hesitant knock. "Me lady?" A small, knowing smile touched the healer's expression. "Ye look well."

Alayne couldn't help the blush that spread across her face. "Aye. I've been making some use o' the things ye taught me in our last meetings."

"'Tis a good thing, so long as me laird is a good husband tae ye. Nae all men are, but I've never heard any complaints o' Laird MacLean."

"Ye'll nae be hearing any from me either." Alayne looked away from the healer. "'Tis another matter I've come on, and I could use yer advice once again."

"Fer yer health, or me laird's?"

Alayne shook her head. "'Tis nae a health concern as yet, just a worry o' mine. But it could lead tae something dangerous in the future I fear. I was hoping ye could give me some ideas o' how tae ward away the worst possible consequences."

"Sounds serious." Evina gestured her to a chair and put a kettle over the fire for tea. "Tell me what it is that has ye flustered, and I'll help ye as I may."

Alayne smiled with relief, and proceeded to lay out the whole story. Her bargain with the king for Darren's release, and everything that had followed. She explained her original decision, and how her thinking had changed over the past few days. She ended the tale with "And so I want tae tell him, but I dinnae ken how, or where, or even when I should speak tae him about it."

Evina placed a cup of sweet tea in her hand. "As tae when - I'd say ye should tell Laird MacLean the truth as soon as possible. Nay later than taenight."

"But how?" Alayne stared miserably at the tea in her hands. "I ken he values honesty, and I've been telling him a falsehood. He's sure tae be angry."

"Aye, 'tis possible. Even likely. But the sooner ye admit tae it, the less anger he'll feel. As tae the where and the how, ye'd ken better than I." Evina took a deep breath. "This is nae something I can give ye sure advice on. Though, if I may speak o' something I've observed over the years?"

"I'd appreciate anything ye can tell me."

"Dinnae try tae seduce him and then tell him. A man is vulnerable and open during lovemaking in a way he isnae any other time. He'll feel the betrayal all the more keenly in such circumstances, especially as Darren MacLean is intelligent enough tae ken what ye're doing if ye try."

Alayne nodded. The tactic had crossed her mind, but she'd discarded it for a different reason. "I wouldnae ken how tae seduce him when I was worried about something like that." She sipped her tea, then paused as a thought came to her. "Darren has a liking for sweets. Would it be so bad tae offer him a cake or sweet biscuit, then tell him?"

"Nae. 'Tis a good idea, actually, especially if ye frame it as an offering o' apology."

Tell him ye've something ye need tae explain tae him, and the sweets are yer way o' apologizing that ye didnae tell him sooner. Tell him why ye did as ye did, and speak frankly."

That seemed like good advice, and it matched what Alayne had been thinking. She finished her tea and rose from her seat. "Thank ye Evina. I'll be sure tae take yer advice."

She left the cottage and stopped by the kitchen. A quick conversation with the cook assured that Darren's favorite sweet cake would be prepared as an after-dinner treat. She decided to serve it in his study, where they could expect some privacy, but without the overtones that such a gesture in the bedroom might have.

The day passed slowly, with no sign of Darren. She knew he was in strategy meetings, but the long hours of waiting wore heavily on her nerves. The noon meal passed, then the afternoon, then the supper hour, and still there was no sign of her husband.

As the time passed, Alayne moved from worry that she'd done something wrong, to irritation that he was apparently avoiding her.

She spent a candle-mark or so after she ate looking for him, but the shadows made her uneasy, for reasons she couldn't explain even to herself. She felt as if she was being watched, though every time she looked around, there was no one there, save the occasional servant hurrying about their tasks.

Eventually, she returned to the study to wait for him, still uneasy over Darren's absence, and frustrated. But when the evening hours deepened, and she saw Ryan, Adrian and Bard going about their other duties, the irritation and unease vanished to be replaced by outright panic.

Darren was no longer in meetings... so where was he?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Meetings were often tedious, but strategy meetings, when they had no idea what they might be facing, much less how to counter it or who was involved, he'd never been fond of, and that's what the meeting amounted to. A futile exercise.

Unfortunately, it was still necessary to take such measures, otherwise he risked leaving his people vulnerable to attack. He refused to be so irresponsible as a laird, no matter how much he'd rather be spending the day with his wife.

Several candle-marks passed as they discussed strategies, battle plans, the best place to station warriors, and the routes for scouts to take to maintain a watchful eye on the borders of the clan. With that inevitably came discussions of resources, and whether or not it was necessary to call upon the clan's allies.

They'd eventually agreed that Ryan would send a letter to Daemon explaining the situation in the morning. Beyond that, there would be no attempt to summon aid from their allies. There was no purpose to it, not when they were still unsure of what was transpiring.

Adrian and Bard, on the other hand, would take a trip around the borders of the clan. Adrian would look for signs of invasion or hostilities within view of the border patrols, while Bard spoke to the various villages under the MacLean clan banner, to find out if there were any rumors of unrest among the clan folk.

Darren himself would remain at the keep and manage the day-to-day running of the clan. In winter, there was little to do, but the warm weather of a few days ago had

shown that spring was on its way, and preparations for spring clearing and planting needed to begin. There was very little farmable land on the island, so every inch and every moment of growing space and time needed to be utilized.

They could, of course, supplement their food resources with fishing, and traveling to the main part of the Highlands for hunting and supplies, but Darren preferred not to depend on such measures.

He sent the others on their way, while he remained in the council chambers to gather documents and write out a few notes for further consideration when the men returned.

It was late, past the supper hour when he finally finished up his work. Darren stretched, then dragged his papers together. Once he put the papers in his study, then he could search out some food and find his wife.

Things between them had changed, and he was looking forward to exploring those changes further, even if tonight involved gentler pursuits than the passionate lovemaking of the night before.

He stepped out into the dimly lit hall and began to traverse the corridors of the keep between the council chambers and his study. The evening was quieter than usual, enough to make the hair on the back of his neck prickle. Darren tried to dismiss the feeling as stress from the meetings that had consumed his day, but it persisted, making his shoulders heavy as well.

Something was wrong. The certainty grew with every step he took, supported by a lifetime of training as a warrior. Someone was watching him, someone who was hidden in the shadows, avoiding being seen.

Darren's hand clenched on the hilt of his sword. His steps slowed as he passed by the Western Tower he and Alayne had ascended that morning.

Near soundless footsteps sounded in the silence. He started to turn, but it was too late. Something slammed into the back of his skull. The papers went crashing to the ground as he staggered. Pain sent sparks dancing behind his eyes, and his hand slid limply from his sword hilt as he fought to retain his balance.

Another blow dropped him to his knees, then to the hard stones of the corridor. The landing cracked his temple painfully against the ground, further stunning him. Through the haze of near-blinding agony, he thought he saw someone moving toward the tower door. Then the darkness filled his vision as he lost the fight to remain aware, and he slumped unconscious to the floor.

Alayne woke with a crick in her neck and the cake cooled to a sticky mass beside her. The first light of dawn was coming through the window, but there was no sign of Darren.

She'd fallen asleep at the study. Alayne rubbed her eyes, then looked around, hoping she'd somehow missed something. But a closer look at the study revealed that her first thought had been correct.

The fire was cold, and the rest of the room was undisturbed. There was no sign that a meal had been delivered, or the hearth tended to. It didn't look like anyone had entered the room since she had come to wait for her husband. Including Darren.

She left the study, determined to find someone to ask for the whereabouts of her husband. She was so concerned, she nearly crashed headlong into Ryan who was coming down the hall toward the study. She staggered to a stop, noting the weary, haggard look on his face. "Ryan? Are ye looking fer Darren?"

He frowned. "Aye. He's nae in his study?"

"Nae. I was waiting there tae speak tae him last night, but he never came tae the

study. Is he nae in the council chambers, or in our quarters?”

“Nae. The study was the last place I was goin’ tae look fer him.” Ryan cursed in terms that would have made the guards of the king’s prison flush, or smile in admiration. “I’d hoped I was readin’ the signs wrong.”

Cold dread coalesced in Alayne’s gut. “Reading what signs wrong?”

“I remembered something I meant tae tell Laird MacLean afore I retired last night, but when I went tae look fer him, I couldnae find any trace o’ him. When I was walking the corridor between the council chambers and here, I saw signs o’ a struggle, and found some o’ the papers he was looking at last night on the ground. Looks like someone was lyin’ in wait fer him.”

“But how would they get inside?”

“Dinnae ken. A spy we’ve nae ferreted out, mayhap. Or just the fact that our defenses are weakened with Bard and Adrian out scouting and looking for information on any threats, or people who might have shot that arrow at ye.”

“Bard and Adrian are gone?”

“Aye. At first light this morn.” Ryan’s face was grim. “There’s signs o’ Darren being taken away. Whoever did it kent what they were doing.”

Alayne felt her gut clench in fear and shame. Fear for Darren, and shame because she feared she knew exactly who had attacked him and why.

Donall. Donall knew all the ways their father had used to spy on Clan MacLean. Including the methods by which Darren had been kidnapped once before. The fact that Darren had been attacked inside his own home once again, and kidnapped from

it, argued that her brother was likely involved.

She'd known Donall was free, and likely to attack the MacLean clan, and the MacLean laird in particular. And she'd failed to warn anyone, including her husband. Guilt felt as crushing as the weight of the stones of the keep around her.

She'd failed. She should have taken the chance and interrupted his strategy meetings, regardless of how harsh his reaction might have been. Had she done so, he would have known to be on his guard, even within the keep. Instead, she'd let timidity and her own shame put Darren's life in danger.

"Here now, lass, dinnae be so upset." Ryan's voice pulled her from the well of self-recriminations she was drowning in. Alayne realized there were tears streaking her cheeks. Ryan's comforting hands gripped her shoulders. "He's likely still alive."

She blinked up at him through blurred eyes. "What dae ye mean?"

"There's traces o' where he was taken, and a trail fer us tae follow. If they're skilled enough tae attack him and capture him without bein' detected, then the only reason tae leave a trail is for us tae follow. They want him found."

"They want us tae come after him?"

"Aye."

"Then we have tae go. We have tae get him back."

Ryan shook his head. "Nae quite. I need tae take a group o' warriors tae go after him. Ye need tae stay here. Darren would kill me twice over if I let ye come tae harm."

She understood his predicament, but even so, the guilt that filled her would not allow

her to sit idly by. If it was Donall who had attacked them, then she was partially to blame. She reached out as Ryan and started to turn away. "I cannae just stay here. I willnae. If ye try tae leave me here, then I'll simply go on me own."

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "Ye can track?"

"Nae. And I dinnae ken me way around these lands. So if ye dinnae want me wandering around alone and lost, then ye'll take me with ye." She tilted her chin up. "I'll make it an order from the lady o' Clan MacLean if I must."

Ryan heaved out a sigh. "Just... promise me ye'll stay with the warriors I assign tae ye. Stay back and stay safe, and follow me orders. Otherwise, I'll have the healer give ye a sleeping potion tae keep ye unconscious until I return with Laird MacLean."

"I'll listen tae ye. I just cannae stay here waiting fer news, when me husband is likely in danger." And when she might be the reason Darren was in danger in the first place, she thought to herself.

Ryan grimaced. "All right. Meet me at the stables. I'll be assigning two warriors tae guard ye."

"Aye." Alayne turned to make her way to her rooms, intent on changing into clothing suitable for riding and outdoor activity in the late winter weather.

"One last thing. If ye're nae ready when the horses are saddled and the men are gathered, I'll nae wait for ye." Ryan stated.

Alayne scoffed. "I'd neither want nor expect ye tae wait fer me, with me husband's life and health at stake."

Ryan smiled grimly and turned away. Alayne hurried to the laird's quarters to change

her clothing. She changed as fast as she could, praying as she did so that they would find Darren before it was too late.

She prayed too that the culprit was someone other than Donall.

Darren's head was throbbing as the first vestige of consciousness crept over his senses. His eyes were too heavy to open, and his body might as well have been a statue for all he could move it, but he could hear voices. They were close by, and somewhat distorted by the dizziness in his head.

Still, he could at least understand the words, even if he couldn't recognize the speakers by sound alone. "He doesnae look so strong, nae like this."

"Nae many would. But that's all the better for the two o' us. We'd be in far more trouble if he were capable o' fighting back."

"We could kill him. 'Twould be easy like this." The voice was vaguely familiar, but his dazed and muddled mind couldn't figure out who it was.

"Nae a chance. Dinnae even think o' tryin' it."

"Ye're nae any fun. And why shouldn't we kill him?"

"Because we'd be in the king's gaol for murdering a laird. I've been there and I've nae desire tae return. And I cannae think ye'd want tae return there yerself."

"Cyprian..."

"Nae. That's final. Ye cannae kill a laird, nae matter how much ye might want tae. Nae even him." The second voice - Cyprian's - was sharp. "We made this plan tae gain money. That's all we're after. Money and vengeance. We'll go nae further than

we need tae fer achieving those goals.”

“Ye say that, but ‘tis nae as if anyone would ken our identities. There’s nae witness. Besides...” The second voice - the one that seemed most familiar - was thick with bitterness. “Me faither deserves vengeance fer his unneeded death. Why should I stop short o’ getting that fer him when I have a chance?”

Darren felt his stomach roil with more than the pain in his head. There weren’t that many people who wanted vengeance on him for a murdered father. First and foremost - his wife’s brother, Donall Ranald. But Donall was in prison at the king’s palace.

Who else? He couldn’t think of anyone. That didn’t mean there wasn’t someone else that might have declared a vendetta against him. But then why not do so openly and honorably?

“Stop whinging like a child. Ye’ll soon have enough coin tae appease yer vengeful feelings, and yer faither’s spirit, with plenty tae spare. But we need tae hurry. The guards will be following the trail we left, and they’ll be here soon, I’m thinkin’. Best tae finish up and get out o’ here afore we’re caught.”

“As if we couldnae handle them.” There was scorn in the second voice. “After all, their laird wasnae any trouble.”

“But then they’d ken who ye were. And what would ye be able tae dae then?”

“Och, shut yer mouth. I ken that well enough. Still, ye arenae objecting tae me having me fun, I hope?”

“Nae. So long as we give him another dose afore we leave. We dinnae want tae take any chances. Have yer fun while I check the letter one last time.” Cyprian sounded both amused and resigned, as if he was humoring his partner.

The crack of a fist against his cheekbone rocked Darren's head back. He was in no shape to respond, much less fight, as someone seized his hair, jerked his head back, and tipped a vial of something down his throat.

His mouth was shut by another fist that cracked his teeth together. Then another blow. And another. Face and body were beaten without any discrimination. Before long, Darren felt himself dragged back into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The trail Ryan followed was easy enough to see, once he pointed it out to her. It led across the MacLean lands, doubling back a few times and winding through wooded areas, but still plainly visible. It finally terminated at a rundown building.

Ryan grunted. “I shouldnae be surprised. This is an old border barrack. ‘Tis sometimes used as a waystation for patrols and scouts, but otherwise abandoned. Nay one would think o’ using it in winter.”

“Or guarding it.” Alayne swallowed. It didn’t escape her notice that the abandoned barrack was perilously close to the border between the MacLean and Ranald lands.

“Aye. Stay here, and I’ll take a couple men tae scout it out.” Ryan waved two of the warriors forward.

Alayne waited nervously, as the two went close to the barracks. She was about ready to take her chances with climbing down from her horse and making a run for the door when there was a shout. “Master Ryan! We’ve found the laird!”

Ryan stepped forward. “Anyone else?”

“Nay. ‘Tis only Laird MacLean inside. He’s bound and unconscious, but alive.”

Alayne didn’t wait to hear any more. She scrambled off her horse and hurried toward the doorway. Ryan was only a step or two ahead of her as they entered the barracks.

Inside, Darren was sitting bound in a chair. One of the soldiers was working to release his bonds. Alayne felt her breath stutter in her throat as she beheld her husband's body.

Whoever had captured him might have left him alone, but they'd clearly not wanted him capable of fighting. His face was a misshapen mask of bruises and blood, from a cut on his forehead to a split lip, a purpling jaw, and two black eyes, as well as a bloodied nose that looked like it might be broken. Alayne feared his body was in no better shape.

She went closer and found him breathing shallowly, but steadily. She shook him, but got no response.

"He's unconscious, and nae waking up. 'Tis either severe wounds, or some sort o' sleeping drug. Might be a combination o' both." Ryan looked grim. "And there's this." He held up a piece of paper. "As the lady o' the clan, ye should have this until Laird MacLean recovers."

Alayne took the paper and opened it.

To Clan MacLean,

Ye ken we've stolen yer laird from ye, from right under yer guard. And ye ken we can dae it again, when ye dinnae ken who we are or where we'll strike next.

Ye have yer laird back fer now, but if ye want tae keep him, ye'll do as we command and bring 2,000 gold coin to this barrack within the next seven-day.

If ye choose to disregard our warning and refuse tae bring it, we'll strike again. And next time, we willnae leave yer laird alive and whole fer ye to find. We'll be watching tae see yer response.

Save yer clan's fortune, or save yer clan's laird. The choice is up tae ye.

Alayne read the note twice through, then folded it and tucked it into her belt pouch. She had no idea how much wealth the clan had, but that much gold would beggar anyone.

Could Donall be behind such a ludicrous demand? She didn't want to believe it. On the other hand, she had no evidence to the contrary. It would require more thought on her part.

For now, however, they needed to take Darren home and tend to his wounds. She didn't think the wounds were fatal, but that didn't mean they weren't dangerous. And of course, there was the risk of a brain swelling, or an infection if he wasn't tended to promptly.

She set the note and her suspicions aside, and went to help the warriors care for her husband.

Darren woke with the foul aftertaste of a sleeping potion in his mouth, a throbbing headache, and more pain than he'd felt since the last time he'd fought his father. A cautious assessment confirmed that his upper body was bruised and battered, as well as his face.

He vaguely remembered getting hit across the face by someone. And the potion. But what had happened after that? He was no longer bound, or sitting in a chair, he could tell that much.

"Me laird? Are ye awake?" The familiar voice of his clan healer made him open his eyes. It took more effort than he expected, and there was a stiff, heavy feeling that told him he had two black eyes on top of everything else, but he managed.

“Evina.” he looked around. The familiar sight of the healer’s cottage at MacLean Keep surrounded him. “How did I come tae be here?”

“Master Ryan and Lady Alayne followed the trail yer captors left behind and found ye. Ye’re wounded, so they brought ye tae me immediately.”

Darren grimaced, then winced as the shift of facial muscles pulled his cut lip and made the bruises throb. “How bad?”

“Yer skull was soundly thumped, but ‘tis nae cracked, and thank God fer the MacLean hardheadedness. As fer the rest, ‘tis mostly bruises and abrasions, with the exception o’ a cracked lower rib. Ye’ve seen worse, though ye’ll certainly be feelin’ the beating ye took fer some days.”

“How long was I unconscious?” That was important.

“Just over a day. But ‘twas nae yer injuries that caused yer sleep. Ye were dosed with a strong sleeping potion. Enough valerian and other medicines to put a stable full o’ horses tae sleep.”

That explained the foul taste in his mouth. But in a way, he was glad. Injuries that left a warrior unconscious for so long were dangerous, and he knew Evina wouldn’t hesitate to confine him to the cottage if he’d been that badly injured.

He started to move to sit up, and found his other hand weighted down to the bed. He turned his head, just in time to see Alayne blinking sleep from her eyes as she sat up. His left hand was held securely in both of hers, and she’d clearly been using their joined hands as a pillow.

Their eyes met, and Alayne shot into a sitting position. “Darren! Ye’re awake!”

“Aye.”

Her eyes searched his face. “Are ye in pain? Dae ye need a potion fer those wounds? They look painful.”

“They are painful, but I’ve had worse.” He smiled gently at her.

To his surprise, Alayne reached out to hug him. “I’m so glad ye’re alive, and back home safely.”

“Ye’re nae the only one.”

She looked as if she was about to say something more, but the door opened and Ryan entered. His grim expression lightened a fraction as he saw Darren awake and sitting up. “’Tis good tae see ye awake and moving around. I was beginning tae get sore worried.”

“I’ll live. Evina said ye found me and brought me home. Were there any clues tae who took me?” He vaguely recalled the conversation he’d heard, or thought he’d heard, but he didn’t mention it. For one thing, memories could be unreliable after taking a blow to the head. For another, he wasn’t sure what any of it meant. If there was any chance that Ryan might be involved, no matter how unlikely, then it was best for him to keep the matter to himself.

“Just this note.” Ryan pulled a folded scrap of paper from his sash and handed it over.

Darren read it, then blinked and reread it. “They cannae be serious.”

“The condition o’ yer face says otherwise, tae say naething of how they drugged ye. A wee bit more, or a stronger dose, and ye’d have fallen intae a sleep nae one could wake ye from.” Ryan’s expression was solemn. “And we still dinnae ken fer certain

how ye were taken.”

“Hit on the back o’ the head while walking toward me study. And I thought...” Darren frowned, trying to recall what he thought he’d glimpsed. “I was near the Western Tower, thought I saw someone...”

“We’ll check and see if the tower’s been accessed recently.”

Darren sighed. “Dinnae bother. I took Alayne up tae show her the view, the day I was attacked.”

“There might still be some clues.” Ryan nodded toward the note. “How will ye respond?”

“By ignoring it as the useless, idiotic drivel that it is. Nay man with any sense would demand 2000 gold coin from a clan like mine. And I’m nae mad enough tae consider paying it, nae when it would beggar me entire clan fer years tae produce that sum.” Darren almost sneered, before he remembered how much that expression was likely to hurt.

“Ye could borrow from yer braithers, and even from Laird MacMillan. They’d help ease the burden, if ye let them.”

“Aye, by taking the debt themselves. Nae thank ye. ‘Tis one o’ the worst ways tae fracture a clan, by havin’ debts between kinfolk.” Darren shook his head, then winced at a renewed throbbing in his skull.

He couldn’t do anything while he was in the healer’s cottage, and it was clear that whoever their enemy was, they were three steps ahead. The measures they’d planned out wouldn’t be enough.

He looked to Ryan. “Are Adrian and Bard back from their missions yet?”

“Nay. Taemorrow or the next day, I’m thinking.”

That made getting his work done even more important. Darren moved to stand, grimacing as the movement reminded him that he’d taken a number of bruises to the body as well as his face.

“Ye shouldnae be moving around.” Ryan scolded him, but he must have realized that Darren was going to rise with or without help. The MacMillan warrior clasped his arm and assisted him to his feet. Darren grunted as he stood, but his legs held him, and after a moment, the throbbing pain in his skull subsided back to a dull ache.

Alayne rose at the same time, and he could see the weariness in her movements. He reached out to caress her cheek. “Go get some rest. I’ll join ye later.”

Together he and Ryan made their way to the study. Once inside, he took a seat at the desk. “What happened?”

“I dinnae ken all the details. Ye were taken around the supper hour, two days ago. As near as we can tell, ye were attacked in the corridor, close tae yer study. There were signs o’ a struggle, and blood on the floor.”

“I recall that. I took a blow tae the back o’ the head. Two actually.” As if to punctuate his words, a renewed throbbing went through his skull. He resisted the urge to rub the injured area, knowing it would only aggravate the wound.

“Ye were carried out through a servant’s passage near the Western Tower, and taken to an abandoned barrack near the Ranald Clan border. I dinnae ken why they chose that location.”

“Mayhap because Ranald’s the clan we feuded with most recently.” Darren tapped a hand on the desk. “The marriage was supposed tae end hostilities, but I wouldnae be surprised if some o’ Conor Ranald’s older followers were holdin’ a grudge.”

“Ye think they’d act against the interests o’ the previous laird’s daughter?”

“If commanded by the current laird, or if one o’ them thought they had a chance o’ taking over the clan in the absence o’ any members o’ the main family.” Darren felt a twist of annoyance pass through him. He didn’t know the bloodlines and familial relationships among the Ranald Clan members, not well enough to guess who might be next in line for the lairdship.

The only good news was that he was certain Alayne and her brother weren’t part of the attack. Alayne was his wife, and their relationship was improving by the day. Donall was safely in the king’s gaol. It was possible he’d been permitted to write to his clan, but Darren would have expected him to write to his sister first.

Darren sighed. He wanted to do something, but there was too little information for him to make any plans other than the ones he’d already enacted. The best thing he could do for now was get some rest, and allow himself to heal.

He raised his head to look at Ryan. “Was there aught else tae find where ye found me?”

“Nae. Just ye and the chair ye were tied tae.”

Darren nodded. “I cannae add much more tae what ye ken. I was unconscious most o’ the time. The one time I did regain awareness, I wasnae able to open my eyes afore I was knocked unconscious again. But I did learn two things that may help.”

“Aye?”

“Aye. There were two men involved, at the least. One o’ them, I never heard the name o’, but he called his acquaintance Cyprian. I dinnae ken if it was his real name, but...”

“But ‘tis something tae go on. ‘Tis a name he might have used afore now, and we can see if there’s records o’ someone by that name coming across the firth recently.”

“‘Tis a good plan.” Darren considered a moment, but there was nothing else he could think of to do. He pushed himself wearily to his feet. “There’s naught else tae be done for now. We’ll send someone tae speak tae the ferry-master taemorrow. For taenight, I think ‘tis time fer me tae seek me bed, and ye as well.”

“I’ve some tasks I wish tae complete, but aye. I wish ye a pleasant rest, me laird.” Ryan raised an eyebrow. “I trust ye’ll actually make use o’ a bed taenight?”

Darren managed a small smile. “Aye. That I will.”

And mayhap Alayne would be willing tae give me another massage, and put some bruise ointment on some o’ me wounds.

Ryan left, and Darren made his way to his bedroom. He was longing for a hot bath and his wife’s touch. But all his anticipation disappeared, turned into concern, as soon as he opened the door.

The room was empty, and there was no sign of Alayne.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The night air was cold, but the nip of chilly wind was a relief to Alayne after the warmth of the healer's cottage. She'd intended to go to the rooms she shared with Darren and wait for him, but her own restlessness made her unable to sleep, and she'd eventually decided to take a walk in the gardens to soothe her thoughts.

The garden was dormant now, waiting for spring to bring it to life. Alayne amused herself by trying to guess what sort of different plants were in the kitchen garden, the main garden, and the family gardens. The bushes were mostly generic hedges, of the type most lairds cultivated to form borders and makeshift walls. Some of them, however, had thorns that she thought indicated they were actually roses. She wondered what color they would be.

She'd always had a fondness for red roses, though yellow and white were also beautiful. But she was most fond of roses that had sweet scents she could use in perfumes and scented sachets.

The kitchen garden most likely held vegetables and herbs. The smaller plots were likely herbs, and there was a large section that might be potatoes. The rest she couldn't guess.

As for the rest of the plants - maybe Darren would allow her to plant flowers and foliage of her own choosing. Did he care at all for gardens, or were they simply a part of the keep that he left alone?

"What are ye doing out here?" Alayne's heart leaped into her throat at the sound of a

familiar voice. She turned.

Darren stood behind her. He looked weary, and there were shadows of pain in his eyes, but as he walked toward her, she could see he was steady on his feet, and his eyes were clear of the drugged haziness they'd had before.

"Alayne?"

She recalled the question he'd asked. "I couldnae sleep. I thought a walk in the garden would help settle me thoughts." She reached out to embrace him gently, mindful of his wounds. "I was sore worried for ye, this past day."

"I'm sorry ye were worried. I should have been more careful. But even so, 'tis nae safe tae be wandering the gardens at night. We still dinnae ken who attacked me, or how they managed tae sneak intae the keep."

Her heart thumped painfully against her ribs at the reminder that she still hadn't told him about the promise of Donall's release, or the likelihood that he'd returned home to Ranald Keep by now. She started to speak, then stopped.

Yes, her brother's release was something Darren needed to know about. But surely it could wait until morning, after he'd had a chance to rest. She still didn't believe that Donall was involved in attacking him, which meant there was time to tell him later.

A sharper than usual gust of wind blew across the back of her neck, and Alayne shivered. Darren frowned slightly. "Yer goin' tae catch a chill if ye remain out here." He pulled her closer to his warmth. "We should go inside."

"Aye. But I'm still nae sure I can sleep."

To her surprise, Darren smiled slightly, in spite of the bruises and his cut lip. "I think

I have a way tae help with that.”

Her stomach fluttered, her skin tingling as the obvious suggestion came to mind. “Aye?”

“Aye.” Darren steered her toward the doors of MacLean Keep. Alayne went willingly. She was surprised to find that she was hopeful for another intimate encounter. Her stomach still fluttered with nerves, but it was a pleasant sensation, calling to mind the joy she’d experienced two nights ago.

She was surprised again when Darren led her not to their room, but to the library. She’d perused the shelves idly a few times, especially after Darren had told her that Lyla and Daemon often found inspiration for their lovemaking among the tomes in Daemon’s collection. However, she hadn’t found anything that seemed to offer inspiration for her.

She looked at her husband. “What are we doing here?”

“When I couldnae sleep as a lad, there was a book me maither read tae me tae help me sleep. I thought I could share it with ye, and perhaps it will work the same way.”

“Even if it doesnae, I’m sure I’ll enjoy the book - and listening tae ye read it.” Alayne smiled at him. ”Or I could read it tae ye, tae help ye relax and take yer mind off things.”

“’Twould be a welcome respite. ‘Tis worryin’ nae kenning how enemies got inside the keep.” Darren’s gaze turned troubled. “I danae like it, but I cannae find any explanation save that there’s a traitor among my clan-folk. I hate tae even think it, but someone in me keep is hiding things from me and lying about their true loyalties.”

She recalled what he’d said about despising lies and secrets because of the way

they'd torn apart his family. Her stomach flipped with nerves, but she still couldn't bear to bring up Donall, not when he was still troubled by so many other concerns.

She'd tell him first thing in the morning. At the moment, Alayne wanted nothing more than to erase the lines of strain and weariness that his recent ordeal had created.

Darren stepped around her to a nearby shelf and reached out to grab a well-worn book. "This is the one..."

Alayne couldn't stop herself. She stepped close, reached up and pulled him close. Then, before he could react, or she could lose her nerve, she kissed him.

Darren stiffened in surprise as Alayne's lips captured his own. Her kiss was soft, tentative. gentle against his bruised lips. It was also one of the most arousing sensations he'd ever experienced. Even the faint, stinging pain from the cut on his mouth added to the enticement. Heat pulsed through his body as desire overcame weariness.

He had just enough presence of mind to set the book to one side and fold his arms around her. "Are ye sure?"

"More sure than I've ever been in my life. If that's something ye want right now, then I want ye."

"They say that making love can heal a man." He'd never put much stock in such stories, but he was willing to try it, if she wanted him.

He started to move toward the door, intent on going to their bedroom, but Alayne stopped him with a shy hand on his arm and a deceptively beguiling look on her face. "Ye also told me once that yer kin-by-marriage often find inspiration in the library." Her smile was daring, if a little uncertain, and Darren felt himself hardening where he

stood. Suddenly, walking to their shared quarters seemed like it would take too long.

He pulled her closer, so he could cup her jaw and thread his fingers through her soft, thick hair. “Are ye feeling inspired, me wife?”

“Mayhaps.” She stepped closer, her body soft and pliant against his. “And I... I can tell ye might be experiencing some inspiration o’ yer own.”

“That I am.” The fire was nothing more than low embers in the hearth, but it was enough to cast intriguing shadows across Alayne’s face as he guided them both down to lie on the thick rug that lay just in front of the fireplace.

His wounds still ached, and his bruises twinged as he lay down beside her, but neither of those sensations mattered next to the warmth that spread through him as he bent to kiss her, soft and sweet and lingering. Unhurried hands slid to the laces of her bodice to undo them enough to slide his hand inside and cup the soft mound of her breasts. He gently teased her nipples, pinching and rolling them until they were hardened peaks, and Alayne was whimpering and moving restlessly beneath him.

Then his hand slid lower, across her belly to gently press against her sex. Through the cloth he could feel the heat of her, and Alayne arched into his touch. “Please... Darren...”

Despite the rug, the library floor was hard, and his own body too badly battered for many of the things he wanted to do with her. The door was also unlocked, adding the risk of being interrupted. He wasn’t sure Alayne’s newfound boldness would withstand the embarrassment of that, if someone were to walk in on them.

Even so, his aching manhood begged for release, and Alayne’s kiss-reddened lips and desire filled eyes were too great a temptation for him to ignore.

He bent to kiss her, another gentle, lingering kiss, a languid exploration of lips and teeth and tongue, as his hand slid her skirt up until he could reach underneath the hem and caress the softness of her thighs, then guide his hand between them to run his fingers through the curls that adorned her sex, already damp with the evidence of her arousal.

His fingers slid against her, and Alayne whimpered, legs parting as she pressed into his hand.

“Ye’re so ready fer me...” He buried his nose in the valley between the peaks of her breasts. “The smell o’ ye, willing and waiting fer me touch...”

He slid a finger between the lips of her sex, stroking along the inner walls until he found her pleasure center and circled it with his finger, making her squirm against his hand as she cried out his name. Then he shifted his hand so his thumb could tease the sensitive area, while his fingers pressed deeper into her, opening her up for his claiming.

He could see the passion in her eyes, the dazed heat as her pleasure took her over, and pulled back before it could become overwhelming. As tempting as it was to carry her beyond the edge, to see her come apart around his hand, he wanted something else.

Alayne whimpered again as he removed his hand. “Darren... please...”

“Aye?”

“Please. I need ye... please...”

“What is it ye need?” He pitched his voice low, with just the hint of a rough growl on the end, the way she seemed to like it best, and was rewarded with a blush across her cheeks and a flash of desire in her eyes. “Tell me what ye want.”

“I want ye... tae claim me.”

“I’ve already done that.” Nothing said he couldn’t enjoy a bit of teasing, to heighten both their pleasure, even if his erection begged for him to bury himself in her warm and willing channel.

“Please, I want ye... inside me...”

“Ye want me hand?” He stroked her again, and she whimpered and squirmed.

“Nae. I want... ye... yer...I want ye tae take me as a husband takes a wife.”

“Dae ye now?”

“Please...”

She looked so desperate, he couldn’t tease her any more. He reminded himself she was still fairly untaught in the ways of lovers. Too much teasing might upset her, rather than excite her.

“As ye will.”

He slid her dress up, baring her to his gaze as he knelt between her legs. He started to remove his kilt, then stopped as a different idea occurred to him. Instead, he shifted the fabric just enough to allow him to position himself at her entrance, then pressed himself inside her hot, tight, velvet-soft channel until he was fully sheathed.

Alayne gasped, muscles tightening around him and drawing him deeper, until his aching shaft was completely swallowed by her feminine core, to the point he could feel the softness of her buttocks against his bollocks.

He wouldn't last like this. More to the point, he wasn't sure he could enjoy it, bruised as he was. Already, his aching body was protesting, the pang of bruises and abused muscles sharp enough to cut through even the rising fog of pleasure.

"Shall we try something different taenight, my wife?" With that, he took her hips, and rolled them over, so that she was straddling him.

The sensation of the hard floor under the thick rug, and the feel of fabric teasing sensitive skin were new and exciting enough, but the feel of Darren shifting inside her as he rolled over and positioned her above him was enough to leave her breathless with pleasure and heat.

Dazed, she stared down at her husband. Darren's hands on her hips held her in place as she regained her balance, knees on either side of his waist, her sex pressed against his groin. "What..."

"Rise up on yer knees a little." Darren's hands guided her up, separating them, before he drew her back down. It felt like riding a wave, heat spiralling up from their joined bodies to her core as she settled atop him again.

She repeated the motion, and watched as Darren's face tightened with pleasure, and words spilled from his mouth in that rough, admiring tone he'd spoken with the last time they made love. "Och, look at ye, riding me like ye were born tae it. Aye... that's it... a little faster."

She moved a little faster, a little higher, changing the height, and her position ever so slightly with every rise and fall. Darren groaned, head thrown back and hands falling to clench the rug as she moved over him. The words dissolved into a groan as his hips arched up to meet her in helpless response.

It was exciting, arousing, to have such power over him. Enthralling, all the little

differences in this moment that added to her pleasure.

The soft fabric that teased her sex and ruffled the curls there with every movement, the way his kilt and her dress covered them, hiding the joining and making it seem all the more intense, like savoring forbidden sweets while hidden from notice.

The location too, added another layer of enticement. She'd never thought of enjoying intimacy outside the bedchamber. There was a thrill to it, something that stung and teased her nerves, the delight in her husband's body mirrored by the tingle of fear that someone might come in and see them.

One of Darren's hands moved, to caress her chest and loosen the laces further, before he pushed back the fabric and tugged the bodice down to bare her breasts to the cool night air. "That's it. Just like this. Show me yer pleasure, love..."

Under his admiring eyes and his touch it was easy to fall into a rhythm, to give herself over to the sensations that spiraled through her in a rising coil of heat and pleasure. The feeling of his manhood filling her, the burn of being stretched around his hard member combined with the cool air teasing her bared breasts, and the fluttering sensation of desire and the thrill of possible discovery that flowed through her.

Alayne gave herself over to it. Even the ache in her knees from the floor was a welcome sensation, a bit of pain to add spice to the pleasure.

The wave built, stronger and higher with every motion she made, every rise and fall of her body.

"Lean forward a little." Darren's voice was strained, cracking.

She did as he suggested, feeling his body change position within hers, a new and

startling sensation that made her gasp with pleasure. Then one of Darren's hands moved to tease her breasts, while the other slid between them to press against her pleasure center as his hips arched into hers.

Alayne cried out, body arching as her release exploded through her with enough force to send stars dancing through her vision. Her core muscles tightened around Darren's member, and he made a hoarse sound as his own climax hit, their bodies nearly fused together at the point of joining. The feel of Darren's seed spurting deep into her welcoming core sent another wave through Alayne, and she felt herself collapse bonelessly against her husband's chest as the pleasure swept her away.

Darren regained his senses with Alayne lying across his chest, and a combination of aching from bruises and the warmth of satisfaction flowing through his veins. It was tempting to let himself sleep, but he could feel the hard floor beneath the rug. He knew if he gave in to the urge to sleep, he'd wake twice as sore and unable to move.

He shook Alayne's shoulder gently. "Much as I like having ye there, lass, I think we'd be better taking ourselves tae bed."

Alayne shifted and sat up, only to blush furiously as she remembered her state of dishevelment. She hurried to rise and set her dress to rights, while Darren followed more slowly.

Once they were both marginally better attired, Darren took a moment to pick up the book he'd come for. "Shall we retire, love?"

"Aye." Alayne was still blushing, but she managed a shy smile, before she took his arm.

Together they made the relatively short journey back to their shared quarters. Once inside, the two of them separated to get ready for bed. Darren was tempted to sleep in

the nude, but in the end he wrapped a fresh kilt around himself.

Alayne joined him in the bed, wearing her night dress, and a small blush. In her hands was the book. She held it up. “I was thinkin’ I could read it tae ye, if ye’d like.”

He’d intended to offer the same, but he couldn’t deny that the idea held a certain appeal. He settled himself against the pillows and held out an arm to tug her close. “I like the sound o’ that.”

The story was an old one, a child’s story his mother had often read to him, regarding a traveler through the realms of the Fair Folk in search of his destiny, and someone to share his life with. He had many adventures over the course of the journey, fought many battles of both wit and muscles, and learned many lessons.

Darren himself had learned a great deal from the story, enough that it had continued to be a favorite, even well into adulthood.

He leaned back and watched as Alayne opened the book to the first well-worn page and began to read in a clear, strong voice. “Many years ago, in a town so small it had nae name, there lived a youth o’ surpassing intelligence and skill...”

The familiar words rolled over him, and Darren found himself relaxing, much as he had in his youth. Then his eyes began to grow heavy, and against his will, they slipped closed.

Long before the youth’s first adventure came to an end, Darren surrendered to sleep.

He awoke some hours later to find Alayne leaning against him, fast asleep. The book lay between them, open to a random page. Darren blinked to rub the sleep out of his eyes, trying to discern what had awoken him.

Then he heard it, the soft but insistent knocking on the door of his bedchamber. He frowned, then eased himself out of the bed and went to the door.

Ryan was waiting for him, his expression an odd mix of apologetic and determined. Darren scowled. “What time is it?”

“Just a wee bit past the dawn, me laird.” Darren’s scowl deepened. It was later than he’d expected, but not late enough that anyone should have come looking for him, especially since Ryan knew he’d been wounded.

“Are Adrian and Bard back?” That was his first thought. Perhaps one or the other had discovered information they felt he needed to hear at once.

“Nae me laird. But there’s something else, someone at the gates ye need tae see.” Ryan’s uncharacteristic solemnity gave Darren an uneasy feeling, as did his clear reluctance to speak any further. “I’d rather nae say more until ye’ve seen the situation fer yerself.”

Darren sighed. “Let me get dressed.” He shut the door in his advisor’s face and went to find something clean to wear.

Alayne woke to find the bed empty. She blinked at Darren’s side of the bed, the rose and peeked through the window. The morning sun was still fairly close to the horizon, indicating that it wasn’t even late enough for breakfast. Alayne frowned as she shut the window and changed into a skirt and blouse for the day.

Why would Darren be up so early? Had someone come to wake him for some reason? Perhaps his advisors had returned with more information about who had attacked him.

There was no sign of Darren in the main hall. She was wondering where he might be

when a maid came up to her and curtsied. “Me lady? The laird was looking fer ye. He asks that ye join him in his study.”

Alayne smiled. He must be busy, but he wants tae see me.

She nodded to the maid, then hurried toward the study. She was still smiling as she knocked on the door and heard Darren call for her to enter.

The smile faltered as she stepped into the room. The man who greeted her looked like her husband, but gone was any trace of good humor or softness. His face was cold and stern as he turned to look at her. Alayne blinked in surprise. “Darren?”

“Laird MacLean.” His voice was as cold as his expression. “I’ve been waiting fer ye.”

She felt as if she’d been slapped in the face. “What? Why are ye behaving this way? Last night...”

“Last night, I didnae have the information I have now.” There was no sign of any softening in his stance and his tone. Alayne found her own mood sinking.

“I dinnae understand what ye’re saying. Why are ye being so cold?”

“I’ll show ye. Come with me.” Without another word, or any sign of affection, he strode past her to the door. He opened the door and bowed stiffly. “After ye.”

“I... I dinnae ken where ye want me tae go.” She could feel herself faltering under his evident anger.

“I’ll guide ye, but I prefer tae keep ye where I can see ye.” The obvious distrust in his voice stung. Alayne straightened her shoulders and stalked past him. A hand clamped

around her elbow and guided her down the corridor.

Hurt deepened to unease as he led her down the corridor to a staircase she'd never actually descended before. "Where are we going?"

"The dungeon." That was all he said before they reached a heavy oak and iron door. Darren shoved it open.

The first thing she saw was Ryan, standing in front of a dimly lit cell.

The next thing she saw made her gasp, her heart suddenly in her throat as the occupant of the cell stepped forward into the greater light provided by the torches in the larger room.

"Hello Alayne." Donall stared through the bars at her, his expression calm despite the bars that separated them. "I think one o' us owes Laird MacLean an explanation."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

His heart ached and his head was pounding. Darren could barely breathe through the ache of betrayal. All this time... all this time...

He clung to the hope that perhaps Alayne hadn't known about her brother. Maybe he hadn't told her he was free of the king's dungeon. Perhaps she was as startled as he'd been when Ryan showed him who was waiting at the gates of MacLean Keep.

That hope was dashed as she spun to face him. "Why is me braither in yer dungeon?"

There was only outrage in her eyes, not true surprise. She might be startled that her brother was a prisoner, but not that he was here.

Betrayal felt like knives in his gut. It was all he could do to hold his temper enough to answer her without lashing out. "He arrived at me gates a candle-mark ago and asked tae see ye. I can only assume he escaped from the king's gaol, though he's a fool if he came here as a fugitive."

"He's nae a fugitive!" Alayne stepped toward him. "When I made the bargain with the king tae marry ye, the agreement was that once we were wed, hostilities would cease, and me braither would be set free. The reason he insisted on proof o' our union was because he wanted tae be sure the bargain was completed on my end." Her fierce expression faltered. "I... I meant tae tell ye."

"Nay. Ye didnae. Ye had plenty o' chances." She could have told him any time between her arrival at MacLean Keep for the wedding and last night, when they'd

been lying together in the bed.

From the way her expression clouded with guilt, she knew it as well as he did. "I... 'tis true I didnae intend tae tell ye at first. I was angry. But then, as I got tae ken what sort o' man ye were, I wanted tae tell ye. I kept trying tae find the proper time, but..." Tears filled her eyes. "I was going tae tell ye the night ye were kidnapped - I was waiting in yer study fer ye, but ye never arrived. And last night... thought ye deserved a chance tae rest. I was planning tae tell ye this morning."

"'Tis easy tae say, now that ye ken yer braither's been caught. But how am I supposed tae believe ye?" He felt heartsick and numb with fury and a gut-wrenching sense of betrayal. "Fer all I ken, yer brother is the one who attacked us both."

"If I may speak, Laird MacLean." Donall stepped forward. His face was still calm, no trace of anger.

Darren swallowed his fury. "Ye may."

"I kent the terms between the king and me sister. She came tae tell me afore she left tae come tae the wedding. I didnae realize ye hadnae been told, or I would have sent ye a letter informing ye o' the arrangements. As it was, I only came tae ensure me sister was well, and that the new alliance between our two clans was going well. I didnae come tae participate in any hostilities."

Alayne watched as Darren considered her brother's words. A part of her wanted to demand her brother's immediate release. Another wanted to plead for Darren to listen to her. She wasn't sure which urge was stronger.

Then Ryan stepped forward. "Laird MacLean, may I speak?"

"Aye." The word was short and clipped, but at least Darren was listening.

“Laird Ranald only had one man with him when he arrived this morning. He also didnae put up any resistance when we placed him under lock and key. His actions dinnae appear tae be aggressive.”

Darren nodded. “And yer recommendation?”

“Release him as a sign o’ good faith. We can keep a guard with him as an escort and wait until yer other advisors return with the results o’ their scouting trips.”

Darren took a deep breath, and she watched him consider Ryan’s words. “Darren…”

The cold look he gave her made the words die in her throat. She swallowed hard.

He looked away and gave Ryan a curt nod. “Let him loose. I dinnae wish tae offer a breach o’ courtesies that might serve as the impetus fer a new feud.”

“I dinnae intend tae take offense. I understand yer caution.” Donall responded.

“Even so. Ryan, release him.”

The MacMillan warrior moved to unlock the cell. Donall stepped free and offered a bow to Darren. “Thank ye, Laird MacLean. I appreciate yer trust.”

“‘Tis nae trust. I simply dinnae want any more bloodshed on me lands if it can be avoided. That doesnae mean I believe ye werenae behind kidnapping me two days ago.” Darren’s glare was hot. “After all, the man who took me spoke o’ being in the king’s dungeon, and o’ getting vengeance fer his faither.”

“Understood. I can understand yer suspicion. I’ve nae problem agreeing tae whatever restrictions ye require.”

“For now, go with Ryan.” Darren turned away from Donall and began to walk toward the door to the dungeons.

Alayne moved to stand before him. “Darren...”

“Nay. Dinnae speak tae me.” Darren’s voice, like his expression, was hard as steel. “Ye kent yer braither was free. Ye kent how I felt about honesty and trust. Ye had plenty o’ chances tae tell me about yer bargain with the king. And ye said naething, even after the past two days.”

His eyes were icy, but under the cold, she saw a maelstrom of rage and hurt, so strong it was almost palpable. Alayne felt her stomach churning with guilt. “I’m sorry. Darren, please... I didnae mean...”

“I dinnae care. I cannae even stand tae look at ye. Mayhap I’ll forgive ye in time, but nae right now.” He walked past her.

It felt as if Darren took all the warmth from the room as he left, and Alayne’s heart hurt like it was shattering. She barely even felt it as Donall approached and enfolded her in his arms.

“I’m sorry sister. I should have gone home and sent a letter tae ye and Laird MacLean afore I came tae see ye.” Donall’s voice was apologetic.

“’Tis nae yer fault. I should have told him the truth, especially when he told me why he values honesty so much. He warned me how he felt about secrets, and I didnae listen tae him.”

That was the worst part. She’d known she needed to speak the truth to Darren, and she’d kept hesitating. She’d broken his trust, and she couldn’t even claim that she’d done so unwittingly.

Ryan coughed to get their attention. "If ye like, perhaps we can go tae one of the receiving rooms, and I can have a maid bring us all a morning meal."

Alayne had no appetite, but she knew that not eating would only upset her brother. She forced herself tae smile tightly and nod.

The three of them made their way to a room. Ryan sent a maid for food, and the three of them made themselves comfortable. As they settled down with cups of hot tea, Alayne turned to her brother. He was still thin and looked a little worn, but there was more color in his face than there had been, and less weariness. "When were ye released?"

"As soon as the courier returned tae the castle, I was released, with me belongings returned tae me." Donall cradled his tea. "I took a day or two tae recover, then began tae make me way home. I didnae have a horse, and I didnae want tae waste coin tae purchase one, so I walked, or found folk willing tae bring me part o' the way. I took the first ferry from the main Highlands this morn, and came here."

"And the journey wasnae too difficult?"

"Nae particularly. If anything, it gave me time tae think, and tae regain the weight and strength I lost while imprisoned." Donall sipped his tea. "That was when I realized we were bein' fools, chasing vengeance fer a man like Faither. 'Tis true we had a debt o' honor because he was our kin, but 'twas foolish tae take it so far and tae sink tae his level in pursuing vengeance. That's why I'm content tae let the matter lie and the peace stand."

Her brother looked at her a moment. "I was hoping I'd nae need tae convince ye, but now I'm thinking ye've reached that decision on yer own."

Tears stung her eyes. "Aye. Laird MacLean - Darren - he's been a good husband tae

me. A better husband than our faither was a parent. He's been kind, and courteous." She swallowed. "He hates deceit, but when he kent I was uncertain about the duties o' the marriage bed, he didnae force the issue. He helped me deceive the courier."

"And now?" Donall raised an eyebrow.

"I ken more than I did." Alayne felt her cheeks heating at her brother's knowing gaze. "The healer Evina explained a few things, and Darren's been a good teacher in the practical aspects."

To her surprise, her brother smiled. "'Tis good tae hear. I was afraid I was sentencing ye tae the best o' a set o' bad choices. But it seems ye have the luck o' the Fair Folk, or the grace o' God with ye after all."

"Aye. Save that I've managed tae destroy what I had." Alayne felt her throat aching with regret and grief.

"Och, it may be a bit o' a mess, but dinnae write Darren off just yet." Ryan spoke up. "Give him time tae think things over. Once his temper's cooled and the current issue has been dealt with, then ye'll have a better chance o' patching things up."

"Dae we even want tae ken?" A voice from the doorway made all three of them turn to see Bard and Adrian in the door. Both men looked tired and travel-worn.

Ryan glanced at Alayne. "Me lady?"

"Aye. Tell them." Alayne gripped her brother's hand for support.

Ryan nodded. "Bard, Adrian, afore anything else, I'd like tae introduce ye tae Laird Donall Ranald, current laird o' Ranald Clan and braither tae Lady Alayne."

Adrian scowled. "I thought he was supposed tae be in the king's dungeon."

"He was released, as a condition o' the bargain that was made between Lady Alayne and the king." Ryan sighed. "The problem is that Laird MacLean didnae ken that Laird Ranald would be released after the laird and lady were wed."

"Och, I'll wager he didnae like that." Bard grimaced.

"'Tis worse than that." Ryan grimaced. "He was kidnapped shortly after ye left fer yer scouting missions. He was attacked from behind, never saw the ones who took him. They left him tied in an abandoned barracks with a note demanding an impossible amount o' gold."

"When's it tae be paid?" Bard was the one to speak.

"Never, according tae Laird MacLean, though I'm nae sure that's the wisest course o' action." Ryan sighed. "All I ken is that Laird MacLean is in a right sore temper with all that's been happenin' while ye were gone."

Alayne nodded. "He feels I've betrayed him, and he's angered fer having been attacked, and nae kenning who's behind it."

Bard grimaced. "That's nae good. Dae ye think he'll be doin' something rash?"

"I hope nae." Ryan's response was sober. "I was thinkin' o' writing his braithers and asking fer their assistance."

"He hasnae told his braithers?" Adrian frowned. "Should they nae be the first tae ken there's trouble? I ken we said we werenae goin' tae call fer support just yet, but that was afore all this occurred."

“Aye.” Bard nodded.

“Perhaps with ye here, we can talk some sense intae Laird MacLean.” Ryan said.

Alayne shared his sentiments, but as she listened to Ryan call for a man-at-arms to be Donall’s escort while the three advisors searched out their laird, she found herself wondering what she could do. After all, she was part of the reason Darren was so angry. The problem was, she had no idea how to go about mending the breach that had appeared like a chasm between them.

Darren didn’t trust easily, she’d known that for some time. She also knew that, whatever they’d been in the process of forging between them, whether it was love or simple respect and fondness, her failure to reveal the truth about her bargain with the king had badly damaged it.

She wanted to repair their relationship. And she wanted to help Darren and Donall find some common ground, because it hurt to think of the two most important men in her life being so estranged.

But trust, as she well knew, was like an earthenware container - easy to break, much more difficult to mend, and all but impossible to be sure that all the cracks were sealed even when it was patched back together.

Winning Darren’s trust once more would be no easy task.

Easy or nae, I’ll find a way tae heal this wound between us. I may have married him fer duty, but now I ken what sort o’ man Darren MacLean truly is, I’ll nae be letting go o’ him so easily, and I’m certainly sure I’ll nae let our marriage be ruined by me foolishness!

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Darren was in the middle of demolishing his third or fourth practice target when Ryan approached, Bard and Adrian trailing behind him. One look at his advisors' faces revealed that Ryan had told them about the recent occurrences, and his mood soured further.

He was in no mood for commiseration or well-meant advice from either man at the moment. He wanted information, so he could do something about whoever was attacking him. Once that was taken care of, then he might have the time and, more importantly, the control of his temper, to deal with the more personal concerns.

He addressed Bard first, before his senior advisor could speak. "Did ye learn anything?"

Bard shook his head, regret clear in his expression. "I didnae. There's nae unrest in the villages, at least, nae that I heard a whisper o'. Farmers and the like might have complaints about the weather, or the crops, or small disputes among neighbors, but naething that would result in attacking their sworn laird."

Adrian nodded in agreement. "The scouts and border guards havenae seen or heard aught. As near as any man can tell, there's nae one on the island or across the firth that wishes ill o' ye."

He'd been afraid of that. He took another tactic. "Have either o' ye heard o' a man who calls himself Cyprian?"

That earned him twin frowns of confusion, and a shake of the head from each man. Darren snarled under his breath. He'd known that it was unlikely, that if the man was wise, he'd not be using his real name for the scheme, but he'd hoped for some lead.

“Ryan said ye were told tae provide a ransom in coin, but he didnae tell us the amount, only that ye refuse ta pay it.”

“O’ course I dae. Me attackers asked fer 2000 gold coin. Even a large clan like the Stewarts or the Campbells wouldnae be willing tae part with such a sum. MacLean would be beggared, tae a point that me children’s children would be struggling tae prosper.”

Both men had paled considerably at the revelation of how much had been demanded. Finally, Adrian spoke. “Yer braithers...”

“I’ll nae ask them tae drain the resources o’ their clans tae protect me.” Darren shook his head, then eyed the two men. “Right now, ‘tis some sword-work and time tae think I need. If ye’re willing tae stand as me sparring partners, then get warmed up and armed. If nae, go rest, and we’ll call a council meeting tae deal with the situation.”

Bard and Adrian both nodded and moved off to the armory to seek out practice swords. Ryan stayed beside him. Darren gave him a dark look. “I thought I told ye tae watch Laird Ranald.”

“I left him in the care o’ his sister and a man-at-arms, with instructions tae bar him from the private rooms o’ the keep, and tae make sure he doesnae go beyond the walls o’ MacLean Keep.” Ryan hesitated. “If I may speak tae ye frankly, me laird?”

“Ye might as well.”

Ryan paused a moment, his voice low when he replied. “I’ve seen Donall Ranald across a sword blade, and in chains. I realize I dinnae ken everything about the man, but I have faith in me ability tae ken truth when I hear it in a man’s voice. And me gut tells me that Donall Ranald wasnae lying when he said he came fer peace, nae fighting.”

“Ye think he wasnae one o’ me kidnappers then?” A part of him wanted to believe it, if only because of his marriage to Alayne. A part of him remembered how Donall had stood by when his father had kidnapped Darren the first time, and then taken part in the kidnapping of his sister-by-marriage, only a few seasons ago.

Ryan, however, nodded. “I think he’s cooled his head while he was coolin’ his heels in the king’s gaol. And even if he hadnae, he has tae ken it would go ill fer his sister if he were tae act foolishly. By all accounts, nae matter how he feels about ye, or his faither’s memory, he cares fer her.”

That much was true. Darren bit his lip, then winced as the action made the wound there throb. “I’ll take yer words in consideration.”

Bard and Adrian returned then, and Bard claimed the first bout. The MacLean steward and advisor was a fair hand with a sword, but he was nowhere near Darren’s level of skill. Within a few minutes, Darren had disarmed him twice.

He switched to fighting with Adrian. His new war leader was far more skilled than Bard, one reason he’d chosen Adrian for the position he had. The two circled and fought for several minutes, unable to gain a clear advantage, until Darren finally got in a feint that tangled Adrian’s sword and managed to hook an ankle around his heel to send him off balance and to his back on the muddy earth.

“If ye’re nae done, might I have the next match with ye, Laird MacLean?” Startled, Darren looked up to see Donall Ranald standing to one side, Alayne not far behind

him. The younger clan leader was holding a blunted practice blade and shield, his regular weapons in Bard's hands.

For a moment, he wanted to refuse. Then he recalled the last two times he'd faced Ranald over a blade - both of which had involved hostages and allies. He'd never had a good clean fight with the man.

You could tell a lot about a man by the way he fought. No matter how a sparring match started, every man fell into his own patterns and preferences sooner or later, unless they were an experienced training master, or the match was so unequal that one could afford to think of how to avoid giving away such information. Fighting Donall might not tell him for certain if the man had played a part in his kidnapping and beating, but it would give him a better sense of his character.

He nodded. "Aye. I'll spar ye. First disarmed or unable tae continue suit ye?"

"Aye." Donall limbered up his arm. Then Ryan called the start of the bout, and the fight began.

Within the first few moves, Darren knew that Donall was skilled. Skilled, and he fought with his head, not his temper. Whether that was a trait he'd always had, or one he'd learned during his imprisonment, he was wise enough not to charge into the fight headlong.

The Ranald laird wasn't as strong as Darren was - to be expected given what Darren knew of the king's dungeons, but neither was he weak. Darren guessed that, if both were at their best, they'd be about evenly matched in terms of physical strength and agility. However, Donell was recovering from his imprisonment, and Darren was bruised and battered from the attack of only two or three days before.

He was also beginning to tire from several minutes of hard drills on the the targets,

followed by two fairly intense practice bouts.

On the other hand, he was finding that he liked Donall's style of fighting. Straightforward and strong without being overly reckless. He paid attention to his opponent, but he never moved to take advantage of any move that might be considered dishonorable, such as the point where a step sent Darren stumbling off balance and left his injured ribs open to attack for a second too long.

He didn't fight like the type of man who would hit his opponent from behind. Nor did he fight like a man who'd strike a prisoner repeatedly. Again, Darren wondered if it was something he'd gained during his time in prison, or if perhaps what he was seeing was the real Donall, the man who'd been forced into the shadows by the previous laird's cold, calculating, and often cruel behavior.

It was cathartic to fight the man, and he saw a recognition of that fact, and an appreciation of it, in Donall's gaze as the match continued. He wasn't the only one who was using this fight to release some old angers and resolve some troubled thoughts.

Then his foot slipped on a particularly muddy patch of the ground, and he slid off balance. Donall had just begun a strike to his shoulder, too far committed to the attack to pull back. Darren twisted, sacrificing his balance and his footing to avoid the blow. Unfortunately, the movement pulled a muscle that had been strained previously, causing him to flinch and lose his balance entirely. He hit the ground hard enough to make most of his bruises scream in protest.

Donall's blade came to rest lightly on his chest a moment later. Darren considered a response, then sighed and let his own blade go. He was sore, tired and in any other situation save a real battle, this was the point where it was better to concede. "Yer bout."

Donall handed off his blade to Ryan and offered Darren his hand. Darren took it, wincing as he was pulled back to his feet with a grunt of effort. “Yer fair handy with a blade.”

“Ye’re as skilled. And I had the advantage o’ ye, bein’ unhurt and less wearied.” The response was honest, carrying neither false modesty or overbearing pride. It was a simple acknowledgment, one warrior to another, and Darren found himself nodding reluctantly.

“Ye’ve changed.”

“Had some time tae think about what I wanted. And mayhap more importantly, about who I wanted tae be when I left the dungeon. Fer me sister. Fer me clan. Lookin’ back, I’d become a wee bit too much like me faither afore me. I decided I’d nae follow his footsteps any more unless I found ye were making me sister miserable. But troubles this morn aside, I’m given tae understand ye’re good tae her, and good fer her. I’d nae like tae see me unintentional intrusion and her reluctance tae speak ruin that fer either o’ ye.” Donall raised an eyebrow.

Darren understood the message clear enough. “I’ll speak tae her, but ye must understand... there’s things I have trouble lookin’ past.”

“And ‘tis fair enough, fer we’ve all some such ghosts in the tower, and I ken that as well as any man. But I dinnae think ye can fault me fer standin’ at me sister’s side this time.”

He couldn’t. And if he was being honest, Darren had to admit that he would likely have respected and trusted the other laird less if he’d been willing to ignore or dismiss his sister’s happiness. That was, after all, one reason he’d refused to ally with the previous laird.

A peal sounded over the lawn and Darren looked up. "'Tis time fer the midday meal." He looked to Donall. "I trust ye'll dine with us?"

"Aye. I was hopin' tae visit with me sister fer some time afore I return tae me lands. Then too, I need tae speak with ye, since ye've had stewardship over the Ranald Clan in me absence."

"Aye. We can discuss that as well, though I'm thinkin' it might dae us both better tae have some rest afore that discussion."

"I've nae argument. I await yer pleasure." Donall nodded. "And if ye'll excuse me, I'd like tae go and freshen up."

"Aye. Bard, go with him and have the maidservants arrange quarters fer Laird Ranald."

His advisor nodded and led Donall away, Alayne at her brother's side. Darren watched them go.

Donall was right. He didn't want Alayne to be miserable. However, the fact that she hadn't told him Donall was going to be released still bothered him. After all, how could she have known her brother would arrive wanting peace instead of with warriors at his back?

Even if he'd been outwardly peaceful, Donall could still have been hostile and bitter. Sometimes a peace enforced by royal decree was as bitter and ugly as any feud, even if no more blood was spilled. Darren was relieved that now would not be one of those times, but the fact that it might have been haunted him. Especially as he would have been caught off guard.

It was something to consider, but his bruises were aching, and his stomach was

growling. Darren heaved out a deep breath and went to put up his practice weapon.

First, he'd see Evina about a salve or potion for his bruises. Then he'd get a meal. After that he could start considering how to best address the rift between himself and his wife.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Sitting between her brother and her husband during the noon meal was something of an ordeal for Alayne. On the one hand, she was relieved that the two most important men in her life had apparently set aside their differences and come to some sort of accord. On the other hand, their newfound civility made it all the more evident how strained things still were between herself and Darren.

He'd come back to their quarters briefly to change out of his mudstained clothing into fresh garments. However, he'd not said more than three words to her, nor had he offered her his arm as they both left to attend the meal.

She wanted to talk to him, but she couldn't bring herself to speak about the situation in front of their friends and kinfolk, even if most of them clearly knew what had transpired. The turmoil robbed her of any appetite, but she forced herself to eat, not wanting to upset Donall.

Finally, Darren finished his meal and rose from his chair. Alayne hesitated, caught between wanting to try and mend matters with her husband and wanting to spend time with her brother. She was so caught in her indecision that she actually jumped when Donall put his hand on her arm.

Her brother was smiling gently. "Go ahead and speak with him, and mend matters as best ye might. I'll be stayin' here fer a few days. We've time tae talk later, when ye're nae so troubled."

Alayne squeezed his fingers with a smile relief. "Ye ken me so well." She bent and

kissed his brother on the cheek. “Thank ye, Donall.”

She hurried after Darren. She half-expected him to return to their rooms, but he made his way to the study instead. She waited a moment, to be sure she wasn’t interrupting a meeting, then knocked. After a moment, she heard him respond. “Enter.”

She stepped inside, then shut the door behind her. Darren’s eyes darkened, a mask falling over his expression. “Yer braither is nae in any trouble, nor suspected o’ aught by me, if that’s what yer concerned about.”

“’Tis nae. I kent as much from Donall afore I came up here.” She latched the door, then stepped forward toward him. “I wanted tae talk tae ye.”

“About?”

“Ye ken what about.” She swallowed. “I ken yer angered, and I ken ye have a right tae be, but please... will ye nae let me explain? Can I nae even have that much o’ yer attention and time?”

“I suppose, as I’ve heard out yer braither, I can give that.” He dipped his head.

It wasn’t the response she’d hoped for, but at least he was listening. She swallowed again, then spoke. “When I came tae yer keep tae wed ye, I was angry. I didnae want tae, especially nae when ye’d refused me afore, but it was either shackling meself in a wedding, or leaving me braither tae rot in chains, and he’s the only kinfolk that’s ever cared fer me. I couldnae abandon him in that dungeon.” Her voice cracked. “Surely ye can understand that.”

“Aye. I can. But ye didnae tell me that.”

“Nae. I didnae. ‘Twas me form o’ vengeance against ye. I thought me braither would

come tae claim me back with warriors behind him. At the time, I didnae ken why ye'd humiliated me by yer first refusal, and all I truly kent o' ye beyond that was that ye'd seen me faither killed and taken me braither from me."

"Aye. We've spoken o' this afore."

"I ken. But that's what I was thinkin' when I wed ye."

"And when ye kent me better? After I told ye about me past?" His voice was heavy.

"I wanted tae tell ye. But there was always something... the first time I wanted tae tell ye, we were shot at. Then ye were busy dealing with the attack. I planned tae tell ye the evening after we... were taegether the first time. I even went tae Evina fer advice o' how tae tell ye, and went tae the cook tae get yer favorite sweets made, so I could give them tae ye as an apology. I waited here all night. But ye never came."

"I was on me way tae the study when I was attacked."

"So I learned from Ryan in the morning." She took a deep breath. "I thought tae tell ye after ye woke, but ye looked so tired, and then I got... distracted..." She couldn't help the blush that rose to her face. "And then, we fell asleep. And when I woke..."

"Ryan had already come tae me, tae tell me Donall was at the gates."

She nodded miserably. "Aye."

Silence fell between them. Then Darren spoke. "I did wonder why there was a cake sitting on me desk." His gaze slid across the room, and she turned to see the covered dish on the table near the fire.

"And ye didnae think the cook made it fer ye, fer nay particular reason?"

“Nae. She’d have sent it tae me in the meeting, never mind me bein’ the laird, or what else might be happening. Or she’d have sent it wherever she kent I was, or kept it safe in the kitchen.” There was a hint of amusement in Darren’s tone - the first sign of softening she’d seen in him all day.

“I’m sorry I didnae tell ye sooner. I just... I didnae ken how , and everything between us changed so fast...”

“Aye. So it did.” Darren heaved out a breath. “And I suppose ye’re nae the first person tae keep secrets tae the detriment o’ a relationship.”

She winced. “I didnae mean tae remind ye o’ that. And I’d never...”

“I ken. Or at the least, I’d like tae believe I ken that much. Besides, ‘twas nae what I was referring tae.” Darren stepped closer. “Dae ye recall how we first began tae understand each other?”

As if she could forget. She could recall very well the shouting match that had occurred between them and ended with her strung upside down in a hunter’s snare. Just thinking of it made her cheeks heat. “Aye.”

“Ye were angered that I lied tae ye and yer kin, when yer faither offered me yer hand. And I’ve come tae see I did ye wrong in that. So it seems we’ve both made one sore mistake that wounded the other. That I made mine afore we wed, and ye made yers after doesnae make one offense worse than the other.”

Alayne felt as if her throat had rocks in it, while her stomach seemed tied in knots. “What are ye saying?”

“Yer braither bein’ here reminded me that I’m nae blameless. I wasnae without fault in the way the feud came about, and I’m nae without fault in this either. But ye’ve

forgiven me, and even entrusted me with yer innocence, yer life, and I think - I hope - yer heart.”

The answer was clear and simple. “Aye. All of that.” She stepped closer to him. “’Tis true. I dinnae ken how or when, but these past days... I’ve come tae love ye, Darren MacLean.”

“Have ye?” To her surprise, there was a look of wonder in his gaze, dawning and slowly wiping away the coldness that lingered. “Have ye true? Fer if we’re bein’ honest...” He reached up and framed her face with his hands. “If there’s aught I’ve learned, ‘tis only those ye love that can wound ye. And when I saw yer braither and felt that ye’d betrayed me, it hurt worse than any wound I’ve ever taken at any man’s hand.”

“Ye...” It was hard to breathe. “Ye...”

“I love ye, Alayne MacLean from Ranald Clan. I love ye true and deep, though I ken nae when or how it happened, and the idea that ye’d summoned yer braither, that ye might want tae leave me was worse than a dagger tae the throat.”

His hands dropped to lift her hand with the wedding band on it. “I didnae think anything could hurt more than the thought that ye wanted tae give this back and sever the wedding ties between us. Then I saw ye come here, and realized that there was one thing that could be worse - that me own temper might have driven ye away.”

“Nay. Nae ever, so long as ye promise tae hear me out, if something like this happens again.” She freed her hands and lifted them to twine around his neck. “I cannae promise I’ll never keep any secret, but I promise I’ll nae ever dae it without a good reason.”

“I cannae promise I’ll never lose me temper, but I promise I’ll never strike ye, and I’ll

listen afore I act too much a fool again.”

She knew it wouldn't be that easy, not always. They both had their own scars, deep inside, and their own private grief to deal with. There would probably be mistakes and misunderstandings in the future. But that was in the future. “I can live with that.”

The ice was gone from his eyes, and she found the cold was melting away from her insides as well. She found herself smiling.

“What are ye thinkin' me wife?”

“That I love ye. And that I missed waking up beside me husband this morn.” She caressed his cheek, and saw the heat of desire flare to life in his eyes.

“Did ye now? Then it seems that's something I need tae remedy.” Darren shifted, then swept her into his arms. “Ye ken, 'tis tradition fer a man tae carry his bride tae their rooms, or across another threshold, tae begin their married lives? I couldnae dae it afore, but...”

He bent his head closer, to whisper in her ear. “Now, I'd very much like tae carry ye tae bed, and show ye something I learned from Laird MacMillan and his wife.”

The heat of desire that ignited within her surprised her. “Daes it involve... ropes?”

“I was thinkin' something a wee bit different, but if that's yer pleasure... I think I can manage that.” His smile was a wolf's smile, full of want and need and mischief, and she found herself answering in kind.

“I'd like that very much, me lai-me love. Very much indeed.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

His arms were burning by the time they reached the bedroom, but Darren could scarcely bring himself to care, any more than he cared that it was somewhat difficult to walk by the time the door closed behind him. The ache that had filled him from the moment he saw Donall Ranald at the gates of MacLean Keep had finally faded. In its place were relief, love and desire, so strong he could think of nothing else.

Alayne's cheeks were flushed as he set her gently on the floor and began to remove his boots. "What... dae I..." Her blush deepened. "I dinnae ken..."

He kicked his boots off, then came close to her and lifted her chin gently with one hand. "Dae ye trust me?"

"Aye."

"Will ye undress fer me, and lie on the bed?"

He saw a flash of nervousness in her gaze, but underneath was curiosity and desire. "Aye."

Her hand began to undo the laces of her bodice, and he stepped back to remove his own clothing. He stripped off sash, vest, bracers and shirt. He hesitated a moment, then left his kilt to remove later, when he judged it to be the right time for both of them. Once he was undressed he moved to the door, ensured it was bolted, then walked over to the chest that held her clothing.

After a moment he found what he was looking for - a linen shawl, but so soft and fine it felt like silk in his hands. He closed the chest and carried it over to the bed.

The sight of Alayne laying on his bed, completely naked and waiting for him, made his breath catch. For a moment, all he could do was stare, dazed by the force of his desire. The arousal that came with it was enough to make actually getting into bed slightly difficult. He saw Alayne's eyes drift to the very evident erection tenting his kilt, and the soft blush that dusted her cheeks only made him ache more for her.

He moved to crouch beside her, showing her the shawl. "Raise yer hands above yer head and cross yer wrists fer me."

Slowly, with just a hint of uncertainty darkening the curiosity in her eyes, Alayne followed his direction. The sight of her moving according to his command, was enough to set a fire in his blood, flaring like a bonfire that had been stoked with oil-soaked tinder. The breath left his lungs in a harsh rush. "Look at ye..."

He lifted the shawl, threaded it around the head of the bed, then drew it down and tied one end around each of Alayne's wrists. "Is that comfortable for ye? Nae too tight or too awkward?"

Alayne shifted, testing the soft bonds. "Nae. I dinnae think so. But..."

"If ye find yerself struggling or too uncomfortable, call me by me last name, and I'll stop and release ye."

Alayne nodded. "Is there... aught else I should be daing?" She blinked at him.

Darren smiled, a rogue's smile he only allowed himself when he was truly anticipating an enjoyable encounter. "Just relax and let me ken what ye like and what ye dinnae."

Darren shifted to straddle her, letting the kilt just brush her skin as he bent forward and laid his hands by her bound wrists and kissed her deeply. He slid back slowly, trailing his hands down the soft skin of her forearms and upper arms, to frame her chest as he tilted his head to press a kiss to her jaw, her throat, then the hollow at the base of her throat.

The thin cloth of his kilt was all that separated his erect manhood from her warmth, and he felt the heat, the teasing of cloth over his sensitive body with every move. The sensations were enough to drive him slowly mad, and it heightened his pleasure, to know that, and to know that he was in control. Everything was his to decide, to take as slowly as he wished, or as quickly.

He slid his hands lower, thumbs just barely teasing her breasts as he guided them down her sides, mapping the contours of her ribs as he moved to encircle her waist with his hands. The warmth of her sex teased his erection, the tip of his manhood sliding into the crease between her thighs like it was meant to be there. Alayne whimpered and shifted against him. "Darren."

"All in good time. I want tae take me time with ye. Tae taste and feel every inch o' ye, and enjoy the sight o' ye, just like this, waiting fer me touch." He slid further down, pressing a kiss to the valley between her breasts before he shifted to suckle on right breast. His tongue tingled as he drew the soft mound into his mouth and laved the nipple until it hardened and peaked under his ministrations.

He licked and nipped, teasing with teeth and tongue until Alayne was squirming against him, her breath coming in soft, whimpering panting noises. Then he turned his attention to the left breast, giving it the same attention until her body was arching against him, and she was making wordless pleading noises.

From there he kissed a slow trail down her center, across the quivering muscles of her belly. His tongue swirled around her navel before dipping inside, resulting in another

soft cry as she arched into his mouth. Her thighs brushed his buttocks as her knees drew up and her legs shifted in a vain attempt to bring his mouth closer to the most intimate parts of her.

The smell of her arousal was intoxicating, the curls that adorned her sex already wet with her desire. Darren shifted to inhale deeply, drawing the scent of her into his lungs until he thought he'd never smell anything else. His arousal stiffened to the point of being almost painful as he drank in the scent of her.

Alayne whined and arched against his hands as his breath washed over her. Darren laughed, enjoying her reactions, then blew deliberately over the curls that covered her soft mound. Alayne's voice pitched higher, hips flexing and hands tugging at the silken bonds that held her. "Darren... please..."

That wasn't his last name. He smiled and blew again, then touched his tongue lightly to the top of the crease visible between her legs. He could feel her knees flex behind his hips, a silent plea.

He slid back to crouch over her calves. "Bend yer knees, then part yer legs fer me." Alayne slid her legs from beneath him, her shins stroking lightly across his erection as she moved and sending a shockwave of pleasure through him.

Then she was parting her legs, her most intimate parts open and wet, begging for his touch. A part of him wanted to bury himself in her softness, but Darren controlled himself. He wanted to take his time and let both of them enjoy this. It wasn't just as a reconciliation and a reaffirmation of their relationship either - he wanted her to enjoy trying new things with him. New ways of being intimate. He wanted her to be curious, so he could show her all the different ways there were of making love. Next to the anticipation of future pleasures, a little bit of patience now was just a way to prolong their mutual enjoyment of each other.

Darren slid himself between her legs, placing his hands on her thighs. He stroked and caressed the soft skin, deliberately avoiding her sex, until she was whimpering and pleading. Then, when she was panting and squirming for his touch, he slid his thumbs over the lips of her sex, and bent to taste her.

She'd never expected it to be like this. Alayne felt like she was drowning in pleasure, and Darren hadn't even touched her most pleasurable and sensitive areas yet.

There was just something erotic about having her hands bound. An edge of helplessness, of being constrained. She'd thought at first that she might be frightened, that it might be uncomfortable. But the shawl was soft around her wrists, and there was enough movement for her not to feel too restrained. There was also the knowledge that one word from her would see her free. She knew, as deeply as she knew her own name, that Darren would honor his word. If she spoke his clan name, he would let her go, and do whatever she wanted him to do to make her feel more comfortable.

To an outsider, he was the one who had all the power. But she knew, as she watched him slowly and thoroughly worshiping her body, taking his time with her, teasing her to the point of madness, that she still had control. He might decide how he moved, but he made those decisions by listening to the sounds she made, the words she said, and the way she reacted to different touches.

The knowledge was enough to let her give herself over to the sensations, to respond without any hesitation as he kissed, nipped, sucked and licked his way over her body. By the time he reached her sex and told her to part her legs, she was desperate for him.

And still he teased, hands caressing her thighs but never touching where she most wanted him. Then, without any warning, his thumbs caressed the edges of her sex, just before his tongue laved over the length of it, from where her buttocks met the

sheets to the top edge. Alayne yelped, thighs parting further at the sensation.

Darren chuckled, and the sensation rippled through her, sending sparks dancing to her core. The vibration made her shiver and try to press closer to his mouth.

His tongue slid inside her, stroking deep as his hands held her open to give him deeper access to her dripping inner folds. Alayne gasped, head pressed back against the pillows and body writhing against her bonds as he licked and sucked at the fluids of her arousal. His tongue stroked her inner folds with one movement, then teased her channel with another, before pressing deep to pleasure her in yet a different way.

Alayne shrieked as his tongue found her pleasure center and swirled around it, then stroked over it before his mouth closed over the sensitive flesh and sucked. The sensations created lightning strokes of pleasure that surged through her, carrying her closer to the edge of her release.

The pleasure wound higher, making her feel as if she was awash in heat as her climax came closer. Her inner walls quivered on the edge of her release, her whole body tensing as the edge of the wave began to crest...

Then Darren pulled back, leaving her empty and wanting. Alayne wailed, back arching as she fought to find the last bit of pleasure to end her frustration.

Darren laughed again. "So impatient. But did ye really think I wanted tae let it end so soon?"

Dazed, barely comprehending his words, Alayne stared at him. Darren rocked back on his heels, and her eyes widened as he slowly, sensuously, unwrapped his kilt to reveal his erect and straining manhood. He removed the fabric and tossed it to the side, then shuffled his hips closer to hers.

His eyes held hers, dark with lust as his hands found her hips and guided her thighs to frame his own. His erection pressed against her, teasing without entering her, his hands holding her still when she tried to press closer.

Alayne squirmed, a soft keening sound escaping her as she found no release. “Darren... please... please... I need ye...”

“Aye.” His hands opened her further for him as he positioned his member and slowly, finally, slid the tip of his erection inside her aching sex.

“More... please... I want ye...”

“Aye?” He looked at her. His voice was low, commanding and filled with desire as he spoke. “And what is it ye want? This?” He rocked himself a little, the head of his shaft teasing her inner folds while failing to penetrate her core.

“Nae. I want ye... inside me... all the way. I want... all o’ ye... please...”

His eyes held hers still, as he shifted and slid an inch or so deep. “Dae ye ken how ye look?” His voice was so low it verged on a groan, as if he felt the same need and frustration she did. “Waiting fer me... begging fer me... wanting me... och, ye could drive a man mad.”

His hands slid off her hips, and began to glide slowly up her body as he moved smoothly to cover her. Every shift of his weight caused him to move inside her, changing angles, pressing slowly deeper into her core. It was like nothing she’d felt before, the sensations magnified by her own constrained movements. Alayne moaned as Darren slid up her body, ending with his shaft fully inside her and his body over hers, his face inches from her own.

Darren shifted, withdrew, then thrust his hips in a slow rolling motion. Their bodies

moved together, his hands on either side of her bound arms and his eyes holding hers as he buried his hot, hard length inside her, again and again.

The heat built again in slow waves, rolling over her like Darren's body, and Alayne gave herself over to the pleasure as it built once more. The slow-building heat drove her higher on waves that rose and rose, but never seemed to crest. Alayne surrendered to the sensations, eyes closing, head falling back and spine arching to meet each of Darren's thrusts as they moved together.

Higher and higher the heat and pleasure built, a fire originating at their point of joining and threatening to burn them both to ash. She was going to burn, to fall apart, to go mad with desire...

Darren's lips fastened on her collarbone, kissing lightly before he nipped at the skin. Alayne gasped as the dart of pleasure-pain set off an inferno that swept her away. Her back arched, head pressed into the pillow and hands clenching against her bonds as her vision went wild and the breath left her lungs in a shriek of raw pleasure so strong her vision went white.

Above her, Darren's slow rhythm picked up, then stuttered as her inner walls clamped around him and wrung his own climax from him. His body stiffened as his seed pumped into her body, his release driving a grunt and a long animalistic groan from him as he rocked against her. His actions sent another wave of release through her, and she shuddered around him, legs clamping around his hips as she pulled him deeper.

Everything vanished into a white haze, and Alayne was only barely aware of movement as Darren fell to his elbows, then used one hand to free her wrists. Her arms fell limp against the pillows, her awareness fading as the last waves of pleasure faded into a warm feeling of lassitude that flooded every limb.

Her last conscious thought was one of satisfaction and wonder, and a hazy acknowledgment that, if this was what it was like, she needed to speak to Lyla MacMillan about where she got her inspiration for bedsport.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Darren woke feeling slightly sore, but more relaxed than he'd felt in a long while. He also woke completely nude, with the fingers of one hand tangled in a soft linen shawl. The sight of it brought a smile to his face. As did the sight of Alayne, curled amid the blankets and pillows beside him, still asleep.

Then he heard the soft but insistent knocking at his door, like too many other mornings lately. With a sigh that was almost a groan, Darren rolled himself to the edge of the bed and carefully eased himself into an upright position. To his relief, he was far less sore than he'd been the day before, though still fairly stiff. He took another breath, growling quietly at another knock, then heaved himself out of bed and went to collect his discarded kilt.

Once he was decently attired, he went to the door, to find Bard on the other side of the portal, looking faintly apologetic. Darren stepped into the front room and shut the door. "What time is it, and why are ye waking me?"

"Tis two hours past dawn, me laird." Darren raised an eyebrow. That was later than he'd slept for some time, not counting the days he'd spent unconscious. "And I was thinkin' tae let ye rest, but ye've visitors, and the situation is..." he trailed off.

"Who is it?"

"Yer braither Marcus and his wife turned up about a candle-mark ago. Apparently, Ryan sent word tae yer braithers that there was some trouble here, and they elected tae come see what the situation was fer themselves. I was plannin' tae make yer

excuses and wait until ye woke on yer own, but then Laird Ranald came down tae break his fast, and yer braither was a wee bit upset.”

“I’ll wager he was.” Marcus had been there for the whole feud between himself and Donall’s father, and his wife’s sister had been kidnapped and threatened by Donall himself. Given Erin’s temperament, Darren was entirely uncertain which of the pair would be more likely to attack Alayne’s brother.

He scrubbed a hand over his face with another groan. He didn’t need a misunderstanding between his brother and Donall creating more problems to deal with. “Who’s keeping an eye on them?”

“Adrian and Ryan.”

“All right.” He took a deep breath. “Tell the cooks tae make extra breakfast, if they havenae already, then get me braither and his wife something warm tae drink, and tell them I’ll be down as soon as I’ve dressed.”

“Aye, me laird.” Bard dipped his head in a half bow, then turned and left. Darren went to tip some water from the nearest pitcher into a basin to wash his face. The cold water made him feel a little more alert, and ended any amorous thoughts that might have been budding before Bard’s knock. He raked his damp hair back, and went to get dressed.

He hadn’t planned on disturbing Alayne, but she was awake, and already getting dressed when he reentered the room. She looked up as he entered. “Is there a problem?”

“Nae yet, but there could be.” Darren went to collect a clean shirt and sash, before he donned his belt and boots. “Me braither and his wife are here, and they’ve already learned that yer braither is a guest as well.”

Alayne winced and hurried into a skirt and blouse. As she turned to find a brush to tame her wild hair, Darren spotted a dark mark from their lovemaking at the edge of her throat. He cleared his throat, grinning as he did so. “Ye’ve a bit o’ a mark there,” he pointed.

Alayne’s hand flew to her neck, and she blushed. “If Donall sees...”

“He’ll ken that we’re a husband and wife, and have a healthy relationship inside the bedchamber.” Darren smirked.

“That’s nae the point,” her flush darkened.

Darren considered, then bent and shifted the pillows until he found what he was looking for. He held out the shawl he’d used the previous evening. “Use this tae cover it.”

“Darren!” Alayne gave him a wide-eyed stare. “I cannae...”

“And why nae? Nae one else will ken about last night.” He stepped closer, and looped the shawl over her shoulders. “It covers the mark, and it looks lovely on ye. But at the same time, every time I look at ye, I’ll remember last night. I’ll be able tae look at ye and think o’ ye, and ye’ll be able tae watch me and ken that I’m thinkin’ o’ how much I want ye.”

“Ye’re a proper beast, ye are, Darren MacLean.” Alayne stepped away from him, cheeks flushed, and began to brush her hair. Darren turned to finish dressing with a smirk on his face.

When they left the room she was still wearing the shawl, one eyebrow raised in silent acceptance of his challenge. Darren grinned and offered her his arm, and the two of them went down to breakfast.

It was just as well that he'd found something to amuse him before they descended, because they walked into the main hall to find a scene so tense it could have been mistaken for a dueling ground. Marcus and Erin were seated on one side of the main table, with Donall on the other side. Marcus was glaring daggers at Donall, one arm about his wife, and Erin looked as if she was one wrong word away from stabbing the man who'd once kidnapped her sister.

Donall, for his part, was obviously attempting to look as calm and non-threatening as possible. It was just as obvious that he was tense, his shoulders tight and his body poised to move if one of the others lost control and decided to attack him.

Darren sighed, and addressed his brother first. "Stop considering whether ye could get away with murderin' him. Ye'd only get me thrown in gaol fer a breach o' the king's treaty. Besides, he's nae the one who's behind the mischief that's plagued me o' late."

Marcus's gaze flicked to him. "Ye're sure?"

"Aye. Sure enough. We've had our talk and buried our grudges, and he's a guest in me home, visiting his sister and getting the report on his clan afore he returns home tae take up his duties."

"Ye may have buried yer grudges, but I've nae forgotten mine." Erin's voice was venomous.

"Then have it out with him in the sparring yard or a contest o' yer choice. But please dinnae attack a man who's both guest in me home, and kin-by-marriage tae all o' us."

There was a moment of tense silence as they all considered his words. Then Marcus sighed and squeezed Erin's shoulders lightly. "All right. I'll dae me best - we'll dae our best - tae be civil. So long as ye dinnae expect us tae be friendly with him."

“As long as ye’re civil. Speakin’ o’ which, let me make proper introductions fer ye, as ye couldnae attend me wedding.” Darren led Alayne a little more forward. “I present tae ye me wife, Lady Alayne MacLean, formerly Ranald, and her braither...” Donall rose and bowed. “Laird Donall Ranald o’ Clan Ranald.” He paused while Marcus and Erin also rose. “Laird Ranald, Alayne, I present tae ye me braither Marcus MacDougall, formerly MacLean, heir tae Clan MacDougall, and his wife, Erin MacDougall, eldest daughter o’ Laird MacDougall.”

Alayne curtsied. “A pleasure tae meet ye both.” Donall, perhaps wisely, just dipped his head in a second greeting.

Marcus and Erin both mumbled a begrudging but fairly polite response, and all of them sat down as the servants, waved over by Adrian, Bard and Ryan, brought out the morning meal and drinks for everyone.

Marcus waited until they’d all been served before he spoke again. “So, now ye’ve told us what the trouble ye’ve been dealing with isnae, tell us what is. All we ken from Ryan is that there’s been some trouble, and ye were attacked.”

Breakfast was... difficult.

One the one hand, Alayne was delighted to once again be sharing a meal with her brother. It had been months since she’d been able to sit and eat with him, and she’d missed his presence beside her.

On the other hand, it was hard to ignore the veiled hostility from Marcus and his wife. It would have been under any circumstances, but Alayne had to admit, the worst part was trying to make any polite conversation with Erin MacDougall.

As the only other woman present, it fell to her to entertain the MacDougall lady, but Alayne found Erin’s cold demeanor toward her brother to be somewhat distressing.

And even if that hadn't been the case, Erin MacDougall was an intimidating woman.

She was, quite simply, everything that Alayne had never been, never been allowed to be, and in some cases, everything she'd never even considered wanting to be. Erin was a warrior, Alayne barely knew how to handle a small dagger in self-defense. Erin was tall, with a body made strong by regular exercise and skin tanned by hours in the sun. Alayne was shorter, smaller, softer in every way, her skin pale from spending the majority of her time indoors.

And what did they have in common to talk about? Erin apparently enjoyed things like combat and weapons. She was skilled enough and knowledgeable enough to contribute to the discussion about the dangers that threatened Darren. Alayne knew very little about such matters. Her interests and skills were more ladylike - sewing, herblore, gardening and the like.

Erin was confident and almost forward, for a lady. Alayne felt shy and nervous.

She was therefore very surprised when Erin turned to her and asked, quite candidly "Is Darren treating ye right? I ken ye have an arranged marriage, and ye werenae the best pleased, according tae rumors."

Alayne blushed. "I wasnae very happy, 'tis true. But Darren's been a proper gentleman with me, and fair kind. I've nae complaints."

Marcus raised an eyebrow. "So long as he's a gentleman without bein' a monk."

Alayne felt her cheeks redden, her hand tugging the shawl tighter around her shoulders. Fortunately, she was spared from having to answer as Erin turned and punched her husband in the shoulder. "Marcus! That's nae something ye ought tae be asking about?"

“Why nae?” He raised an eyebrow. “I was only thinkin’ tae offer her some friendly advice, if he’s being tae standoffish.”

“I dinnae need yer advice braither. Me wife and I dae quite well.” Darren’s voice was stern. “Start tae pry tae much, and I’ll start asking yer wife if ye’re behaving properly in the marriage bed, and if she needs some advice in how tae cool yer enthusiasm.”

Erin and Marcus both flushed, and Erin looked away. Marcus, on the other hand, looked slightly smug. Darren noted the expression. “Ye’ve something tae tell me?”

“Aye.” Marcus looped one arm around Erin’s shoulders and tucked her close, his other hand moving to cover her abdomen. “We actually came fer two reasons: Tae help ye with yer troubles, but also tae tell ye some good news.

“Aye?”

Marcus nodded, and a slightly shy, but highly pleased, expression lit his face. “Aye. Only a seven-day the healer confirmed that Erin is with child, carrying our first bairn.”

Any nerves Alayne felt around Erin disappeared in delight. “Och, that’s wonderful news! Are ye very far along?”

“More than a month, but less than a season, according tae the healer.” Erin smiled warmly, the awkwardness between them forgotten in the quiet delight and commiseration that only women could share.

“Ye’ll be needing some new dresses when ye’re further along, or so I’ve heard. I’m a dab hand with a sewing needle, I could make ye some comfortable things tae wear if ye like.”

To her surprise, Erin flushed. “Ye dinnae have tae...”

“’Tis nae difficulty. Ye can call it a late wedding gift, or a congratulation, or something o’ the sort.” Erin and Marcus had sent a wedding gift when the weather had made it apparent they wouldn’t manage to attend the wedding. “Or a gift fer yer day of birth or some other occasion if ye like.”

“I’d appreciate that.” Erin smiled wryly. “I’ve never been much fer needlework, and me younger sister is more interested in reading than sewing, though she’s more skilled than I.”

Alayne flushed, recollecting what she’d overheard about Lyla’s reading.

“Ye cannae be embarrassed about bein’ skilled at sewing and such. There’s naught wrong with being interested in such pursuits, so long as ye truly like them.”

“’Tis nae that...”

Erin studied her face, then rose. “Darren, we’d like tae celebrate with ye, a belated celebration o’ yer marriage and early celebration o’ our coming first babe.”

“I was thinking tae suggest the same.” Darren smiled. “I’d welcome the chance tae celebrate such joyous news with me kinfolk, nae matter what else brought ye.”

“Wonderful.” Erin smiled at Alayne. “Ye and I can take some time tae get tae ken each other while we help the cook plan fer a small feast this evening. Meanwhile, the menfolk can speak about other matters.”

For a moment, Alayne was tempted to decline. Then she gathered her courage. Erin was making an effort to be friendly, despite earlier hostilities between their kin.

For better or worse, they were kin-by-marriage now, and she'd far rather have an amiable relationship with Erin than a difficult one. And really, she'd always wanted a chance to have friends who were women. Her father had never permitted it, but Lyla had been kind to her, and she looked forward to seeing if she could develop some common ground with Erin as well.

"I like the sound o' that." She offered Erin her arm, and the two of them made their way toward the kitchens.

Erin waited until they were out of earshot of the menfolk before asking quietly. "Now then, why did ye turn so red when I mentioned my sister's reading?"

Alayne made a wry face. "I never learnt much o' the ways between men and women afore I was wed. Me maither died when I was too young tae ask her, and our healer wasnae interested in tellin' me more than what tae dae fer me moon cycles. Or mayhap she was too scared o' me faither."

"Och, so when ye married..."

"Didnae ken what tae dae, or who tae ask. And then I happened tae overhear yer sister and her husband talking about something they were plannin' on doin' taegether... Darren told me later they got the idea from a book ..."

"Och, say nae more." Erin shook her head, sympathy on her face. "I ken well what ye mean. I've heard some conversations between me sister and her husband... well, if I werenae married tae Marcus, I'd never lose me blush. And I thought afore I wed that I'd run out o' things tae be embarrassed about."

Alayne blinked. "Why would ye be embarrassed?"

Erin laughed. "I was a warrior maid. Never cared tae learn aught about courtin' or

loving a man, until I decided I needed tae seduce... Darren tae seal an alliance between our clans. And because in our youth I thought I fancied him. I made a right fool o' meself, and then I went and asked Marcus, o' all people, tae teach me how tae be a seductress."

"But... ye married Marcus, nae Darren?"

"Aye. Learned me lessons so well I seduced me teacher, and found meself seduced by him in turn. 'Twas the most embarrassing thing I'd ever done in me life, I dinnae mind tellin' ye." The blush on Erin's cheeks lent truth to her words.

Alayne laughed as well, and the two of them were still laughing as they entered the kitchen.

Twenty minutes later, they had a feast planned, including favorites for almost everyone, while still being possible for the cooks to prepare with less than a day's notice. The venison would be the most difficult, but still manageable, according to the lead cook.

As part of it, she and Erin decided to try their hands at making sweet pastries for their husbands. They were in the middle of gathering ingredients when Erin made a soft noise. "Och, I need tae put me wedding ring on its chain." She fumbled with her ring, then removed a necklace to slide the ring on it. She met Alayne's glance with a shy smile. "I cannae wear it when I'm training my blade skills, so Marcus and I both have a second place tae wear the rings when we need tae take them off."

It sounded like a good idea. Alayne set her ingredients on the table they'd chosen to use and moved to remove her own ring.

Her finger was bare. Alayne swallowed hard, her eyes widening as she looked at the place where her wedding band should be.

Somewhere, somehow, she'd lost her wedding ring. She closed her eyes, trying to remember where she was sure she'd had it on last.

"Alayne? Are ye well?" Erin's concern interrupted her thoughts.

"Aye. 'Tis only... I've lost my ring. I ken I'm supposed tae be helping ye, but I need tae find it."

"Och, I understand completely." Erin actually made a motion as if to push her out the door. "Go, find yer ring. I'll be here, probably messing up the dough and exasperatin' the cook, when ye return."

Alayne breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank ye." She turned and hurried to the door, still thinking hard about where the ring could be.

The study. Darren had taken her hand and toyed briefly with the band before he'd carried her to their rooms. So she'd had it then.

She'd start with the study, look to see if it might have slipped off in there, then retrace their steps to the bedroom. If she didn't find it after she searched the bedroom, particularly around the bed, then she'd seek out Darren and see if he'd found it, or had some idea where it could be.

Alayne felt better once she had a plan. She picked up her pace, hurrying to the study in the hope that the ring would be easy to find, so she could rejoin Erin in the kitchens.

She heard the scuffling in the study, but she didn't think much of it until she opened the door to find Adrian standing on Darren's side of the desk, his hands flicking through the files with a furtive air. His eyes when they rose to meet hers were wide and shocked, filled with guilt.

Time seemed to freeze as Adrian registered her presence, and she recognized his. Then it occurred to her that if the men were having a war council, Adrian should have been with them. She stepped forward. “What are ye daeing here?”

She saw the moment he looked as if he would make an excuse, tell her something innocuous. She saw the moment he decided not to, as a sneer curled his lip, along with a look of loathing.

He was the threat they’d been unable to fight. The unknown assailant, the one behind the attacks and Darren’s kidnapping.

Alayne turned to escape, but she barely made it one step before Adrian grabbed her. One hand covered her mouth and nose, cutting off her ability to scream or breath.

The last thing she heard as darkness fell over her was Adrian’s voice in her ear. “Sorry, lass. Ye’re in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I cannae have ye babbling tae yer laird and ruining all me efforts tae become his trusted war leader.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Darren couldn't say what was bothering him, only that something was.

Alayne was with Erin, planning the celebration feast. He, Adrian, Bard, Marcus and Donall had gathered in the main council chamber to discuss everything they knew. It wasn't much more than they'd known before, but Marcus provided a fresh pair of eyes and new insights, and he had a better knowledge of the older relationships that might have soured than Adrian and Bard did.

Adrian had left a short time into the meeting, claiming he'd an irritated gut and training drills to give to the captains of the guard while he was in the courtyard. He hadn't returned, and Darren had wondered if the drills were more difficult than expected, or if Evina had decided to hold Adrian for observation for some reason. She might have, if he was more ill than he'd been letting on.

It was approaching time for the noon meal, and they'd agreed to take a break. Bard offered to seek out some musicians for the evening festivities, and Marcus had offered to go check on the warriors in the training yard. Donall had requested to go with Marcus, clearly hoping to build a better relationship with Darren's younger brother.

Left to his own devices, Darren had opted to look in on the women first, before going to look for Adrian to let him know they were taking a break.

He found Erin in the kitchen, engaged in some sort of baking. His sister-by-marriage greeted him with a smile. "Och, did Alayne find her ring, or are ye helping her look

fer it now?”

Darren’s brow furrowed. “Her ring?”

Erin’s smile faltered slightly. “We were getting ready tae dae some baking, and she realized she didnae have her wedding ring. She went tae look fer it, some candle-marks ago.”

“Did she say where she was looking?”

“Nae tae me, but she must have had some idea where she left it.”

“She was wearing it in me study last night.” Had she been wearing it when they went to bed, or when they made love? He couldn’t remember, though he wouldn’t be surprised if it was somewhere among their sheets.

“She might have begun her search there.” Erin nodded.

“Well, Marcus is out supervising the warriors, and we’ll be settling down tae the noon meal soon.”

“I ken. I’ll go collect him so he doesnae forget.” Erin waved him away with a flour covered hand. “Go find yer wife.”

If Alayne had left candle-marks ago, she’d likely already searched the study and not found the ring there. So if she hadn’t returned to Erin, she was either searching the corridors or searching their rooms. Darren considered, then decided to start with their quarters.

The rooms were empty when Darren arrived, with no sign that Alayne had ever returned to them after breakfast. Darren frowned, but made a cursory search of the

bed linens anyway. He'd only been looking for a few minutes before he spotted a glint of gold almost buried under the pillows. He reached for it, and smiled in triumph as his hand closed around smooth metal.

He'd been right about where, and likely about how, it had been lost. Now all he needed to do was find his wife and return it to her.

Since she hadn't been in their quarters, she must still be searching his study, or the corridor between them. Darren started off for the study, ring tucked safely in his sporran.

He'd only traveled a part of the way before a spot of color caught his eye. The placement, carelessly puddled against the stone of the corridor, was the first thing he noticed. Then the color, a soft, slightly faded heather color. Darren frowned and went to pick it up.

The item turned out to be a shawl. Darren's frown deepened as he took in the familiar color. He bent to pick it up, and his fingers encountered a very familiar silken texture.

It wasn't just a shawl, it was the shawl. The shawl Alayne had been wearing to hide the love mark he'd left on her. The shawl that was their own private joke, a quiet game between them.

She wouldn't have just left the shawl in the hallway. There was no reason for her to do so, and no reason she would want to. Something was wrong.

On impulse, he went to his study. The door wasn't locked, though it should be, and his papers were in disarray. There were faint signs of a scuffle as well, as though someone had moved in a hurry, or two people had struggled.

His unease solidified into outright worry. Something was definitely wrong, and

Alayne was caught up in whatever it was. How she was involved he didn't know, but she was.

He hurried back to where he'd found the shawl, his steps slowing as he realized that the spot wasn't that far from the Western Tower, or the place he'd been attacked less than a seven-day ago.

A closer inspection revealed that the door to the tower was open though, like his study, it shouldn't have been. Very few people had any reason to enter the tower. And Alayne...

Alayne was afraid of heights. She wouldn't go up there by choice, and certainly not without a shawl to ward away the early spring chill.

Darren swore under his breath, then went back to a more occupied hallway and caught the first servant he saw. "Find Marcus in the training yard, as well as Bard, Adrian and Ryan, and Laird Ranald. Tell them tae guard Lady MacDougall, and tae send someone tae the Western Tower. There's an intruder about, and he may have taken Lady MacLean."

The maid hurried away, and Darren turned and raced back to the tower and through the lower door. His body ached as he began climbing the stairs, but he ignored it.

Someone had entered his tower and taken his wife. They'd regret that. And if they'd hurt her, or worse, then they'd live just long enough to truly regret their actions, and no longer.

Alayne regained consciousness to find herself cold, slightly dizzy, and being dragged gracelessly up a set of stairs like a sack of potatoes. Then her mind cleared a little further, and she began to notice other things.

She'd lost her shawl somewhere. That's why she was cold. Furthermore, the stairs that Adrian - she was horrified to realize that hadn't been some sort of bad dream - was dragging her up, seemed familiar. A moment later, she recognized them as the stairs to the Western Tower, which Darren had led her up a few days ago.

Of course. The Western Tower, where few if any of the clan-folk ever went. What better place for Adrian and his accomplice to hide or meet? No wonder Darren had been attacked near the tower, and small wonder she'd often felt uneasy passing by the door that led to the staircase.

She started to struggle, and Adrian's hand tightened painfully on her arm. "Keep fighting, and I'll toss ye back down the stairs. I should do it anyway, for the trouble ye've caused me, but ye might survive that."

"What?"

Adrian gave her a cold, sneering smile. "We're going tae the top balcony. 'Tis a lovely view, and looks toward yer lands. And then... ye're going tae have a tragic accident. A fall from an unstable portion o' the balcony. I'll get there too late tae save ye... or mayhap I'll let Darren ken I saw ye going up here, and make it look as if he murdered ye. Might be enough fer yer braither tae kill him in vengeance, and 'twould solve all me problems."

Cold terror washed over Alayne, and it was all she could do to keep silent. Darren would know it was no accident. He knew she'd never come this way alone.

Darren knew how much she feared heights, and why. Adrian didn't. Which meant, if she could stall him long enough for someone to come looking, Darren would know the truth. Even if she couldn't, a fall would reveal the traitor.

She wondered where her shawl had fallen, and if it might provide a clue to whoever

found it. She hoped so.

She swallowed back the terror that made her want to scream and fight him. “Why? Why would ye dae this?”

“And why should ye care?”

“Because ye’re plannin’ tae kill me fer it. Dae I nae deserve tae at least ken why I’ll be dyin’?”

Adrian sneered as he pushed open the high door and shoved her out onto the balcony. Alayne shivered in the chill air as she turned to face him. “Please...” She let her voice quaver, let him see her as a weak and helpless woman. “Why should I go tae me death without kenning why I’m tae be killed? Surely nae one else has tae suffer such injustice. Why should I receive such treatment from ye?”

Adrian snorted bitterly. “Och, well, it doesnae matter so much, and ‘tis worth it tae watch ye fall cursing yer husband’s name.”

“Darren? But... he’s yer laird.”

“Me laird ?” Adrian spat the words with enough venom to make Alayne flinch. “And by what right is he me laird? When he’s a kinslayer and the son o’ a kinslayer, what right has he tae wear the laird’s torc and lead the clan, when he should be in exile or dead fer his crimes?”

Darren had told her the story, and that was the only reason she wasn’t completely horrified. Still, she gasped and widened her eyes as if it was the first time she’d heard such things. “I dinnae understand. I kent he helped murder me faither, but it was self-defense...”

“He’d like ye tae believe that, just as he’d like everyone else tae believe ‘twas defense when he killed his own faither.” Adrian’s lip curled. “Aye, but nae afore the blackguard killed me faither, and left me orphaned, nor afore the man killed his own wife.”

An ugly laugh, matched by an equally ugly snarl, contorted Adrian’s once handsome face, making him resemble the tales of Dark Fae she’d often read - fair of face until their true natures and intentions were revealed. “Defense o’ self and clan, he calls it, but how convenient that it should come after everyone else who had a claim tae the lairdship aside from him was dead. Save fer a braither who ran away in disgust and another who practically licks his boots when he’s nae acting like a bitch in heat.”

Adrian grabbed her chin, forcing her to look into his eyes. “I might have forgiven him, had he done the honorable thing and stepped aside, tae give another the lairdship. Or had he even considered giving wereguild fer the deaths his accursed family caused. But he didnae.”

“He took ye intae his household.”

Adrian slapped her. “And what o’ it? Did he place me in line tae inherit? Nae even when his braithers married intae different clans. Nae acknowledgment o’ our kinship, or granting o’ any status. Nae even a proper place among his folk, until I worked me way through the guard and fought me way intae the position o’ war leader. And that only because his braither had luck enough tae claim heirship in another clan by seducing that hard-tempered wench o’ his that nae one else would have.”

The coldness in Adrian’s voice was edged with madness, all his rage pouring into the cold air like a river of bile.

“I thought then I might get some recognition, but then he went and married ye, and didnae even offer me stewardship o’ Ranald.”

His face twisted further. "I wanted tae kill him - I've been hopin' tae have an 'accident' in the sparring yard fer so long, but the one time I was truly close tae it, yer braither had tae interfere. As long as he wasnae married, I'd hoped tae take the lairdship, but after he wed ye, he told me that if he died without issue, his brother Keegan would be the next in line. Asked me tae serve a bastard third son, as if 'twas nae enough o' a disgrace tae be forced tae serve him!"

"Ye always planned tae kill him?" Alayne heard her voice waver in truth. She couldn't imagine such hatred. Even knowing what sort of man her father had been, even with all his cruelty, she and Donall had never planned his death with such calculating coldness.

"I thought I might at least take the gold due me as wereguild, planned tae force him intae that much, but then he decided tae be a stubborn fool."

So he had been behind Darren's kidnapping. She'd guessed it, but it was somehow worse to hear him admit it. She wondered who Cyprian was. Was it a name he'd used, or someone who was helping him?

"Enough talk. Ye ken what ye wanted. Time fer ye tae have yer accident." Adrian's hands seized her shoulders.

"If anyone is tae have an accident 'twill nae be me wife." The familiar, beloved voice made Alayne's heart melt with relief as Darren stepped out onto the landing, sword drawn and cold fury in every line of his body.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Adrian. After everything, the intruder was no intruder, but a traitor. It made sense - how they'd managed to slip into - and out of - the keep without raising the alarm, the way they had access to his every move. He knew now why the one kidnapper's voice had sounded so familiar to him. Everything could be explained by the now-revealed traitor in their midst.

Darren knew the pain would hit later, when he'd fully realized the truth. As it was, he was locked in the cold, vicious focus that often came upon him in battle - a state that left no room for grief or the pain of betrayal. All he could focus on was the danger to Alayne, and the enemy who was the source of that danger. That the enemy wore the face of a friend didn't matter - not right now.

He strode out onto the balcony, circling slowly to drive Adrian and Alayne away from the edge. He could see Adrian thinking frantically, trying to decide how much he'd heard, how much he could try to lie his way out of trouble.

"Dinnae bother. I ken enough." Darren heard his voice, cold as winter ice, and knew Adrian would hear the truth in his words. He might not have heard everything Adrian confessed, but he'd heard how Adrian had planned to kill him, he'd been part of the kidnapping, and now he was threatening Alayne. Darren didn't need to know anything else.

Every bit of false confusion and wariness washed away, leaving spite and hate so thick in Adrian's face that Darren wondered how he'd never seen them before. How had Adrian hidden his hatred so well? Or had Darren just not seen it, too blinded by

their kinship and the distraction of the Ranald Clan, as well as his guilt over his father's actions?

It didn't matter. What mattered was what was happening here and now. "Release me wife, and ye may live tae see taemorrow."

"I'll live. But ye willnae!" That was all the warning he had before Adrian drew steep and launched himself forward in an attack. He blocked, then blocked again and managed a riposte that put Adrian on the defensive.

The space was smaller than he would have preferred to fight in, and the fight was further complicated by the need to avoid the edge of the landing, the damaged stonework, and Alayne. Still, Darren was a warrior with more than two decades experience in fighting. He might still be bruised and battered from the beating Adrian had given him a few days ago, but he'd been in worse condition and survived. And Adrian, for all his skills, was nowhere near his match either in experience, training or strength.

The fight wove back and forth across the landing, then Darren managed to get Adrian on the back foot again, with an attack that opened a deep cut in his shoulder and hindered his ability to raise his blade. Darren pressed forward as Adrian staggered back. He'd considered taking Adrian alive, but with no idea who 'Cyprian' was, or who he was, the risk was too great. Besides, Adrian knew too much about the strengths and weaknesses of the clan.

He pressed his cousin backward, seeking the opening he knew would appear. Adrian's eyes were widening with panic, and Darren pressed him harder. Then Adrian staggered, and he lunged forward, prepared to drive his blade home...

Something slammed into him from the side, hitting him hard and sending him crashing to the stone with enough force to make his bruises, and his head, scream with

agony. He'd no time to recover before a heavy boot stomped hard on his wrist, then kicked his sword out of his hand for good measure, before delivering a kick to his head that made stars dance in his vision.

Stunned and breathless, his vision blurred by pain, he heard Adrian's winded voice speak. "Were ye taking a nap then Cyprian? Another second and ye'd nae have any partner."

"Quit yer fussing. I arrived in time, did I nae? And now the great Darren MacLean is at our mercy. And this time, I've nae argument for whatever ye want tae dae tae him."

Alayne felt her heart fall to her gut, a sick feeling washing over her to replace the relief she'd felt moments before. Darren's arrival had given her hope, but the appearance of the second man, Cyprian, sent her plunging into despair once more. Especially when he sent Darren crashing to the stones, winded and wounded.

She tried to make a run for the stairs, but Adrian caught her before she'd gotten no more than two or three steps away. He laughed, a cruel sound that made her shudder and flinch away from him. "Did ye really think I'd let ye go, when ye ken as much as ye dae?"

"How... how did ye...?" Darren coughed the words out from the ground, his voice rough with pain. His rage filled gaze was on Cyprian, and the man chuckled unpleasantly.

"Adrian showed me a side door near the tower he leaves unlocked fer me. He said nae one ever comes tae this tower, so I was free tae take up residence here, so long as I wasnae seen coming and going. I've been here, biding my time fer when Adrian needed aid, or found aught o' particular value. And if I was in need o' wandering the keep, twas nae difficulty tae pretend tae be a messenger, going about me business on

the order o' War Leader Adrian."

The man's sneer was cutting, but at least it was impersonal, rather than the bitter, ugly thing that Adrian wore.

"How... long?"

"A fortnight... a month... a season... what does it matter? All ye need tae ken is that we've been partners fer some time, and we'll be the ones tae finally defeat ye." Cyprian waved a hand dismissively. He glanced at Adrian. "Have ye decided what ye'd like tae dae?" He nudged Darren roughly with his boot. "Ye could kill him easily enough."

"I could, but I've an idea I like better." Adrian sneered. "I say we kill his wife, and tell her braither that he did it. Even if Ranald doesnae kill him, he'll be in the king's gaol fer her death. 'Tis only fitting. We'll send her over the edge o' the parapet, and claim he pushed her, because he hated her. Ye can play the part o' a servant who came tae tell me ye'd seen the laird and lady arguing."

"A worthy plan. Perhaps even a way tae find yerself a lairdship, or stewardship over the clan at least." Cyprian nodded. "Shall ye push her, or shall I?"

Adrian responded by pushing her in Cyprian's direction. "Ye dae it. I want tae watch the bastard's face as his world falls apart."

"As ye like." Alayne tried to fight free, but a powerful backhand left her reeling and dazed. She dragged her heels, fighting with everything she had.

"Ye bastard!" Darren roared the words, and she saw, through tear-filled eyes, that he was struggling as hard as she was, but with as little luck. He was at too much of a disadvantage, wounded and unarmed and pinned to the stone as he was.

The parapet inched closer, and Alayne fought with every bit of panicked strength she possessed. It wasn't enough. The crumbling stones shifted under her feet, and she tried to find some purchase to slow the inevitable progression.

Time slowed to a crawl, as if she was under a spell. She saw the edge of the balcony looming closer. She felt Cyprian's hands like manacles around her arm.

Then there was a roar of fury from the doorway. Adrian turned, and Cyprian paused.

Two shapes slammed onto the balcony with a blur of bared steel and clan colors. One man kicked Adrian hard in the knee, then the jaw, and sent him skidding across the stones to crack his head on the low wall, on the left side of the parapet.

The other figure grabbed Alayne, and stabbed Cyprian, all in one motion. The man staggered back, gasping as blood blossomed across his chest. Alayne went staggering back in the other direction, away from the edge and into the arms of her rescuer.

Alayne's breath came raggedly as she looked up to see Donall holding her close, one arm around her as he glared at Cyprian with a look that would rival dragon fire for heat.

She turned her head to see Marcus helping Darren up from the stone, a snarl to match Donall's on his face as he glared at Adrian. "Ye traitor. I cannae believe I recommended ye tae take me place."

Adrian scowled back, too winded to reply.

"Ye'll nae ever... defeat me." Cyprian lurched forward. He was clearly fading, a mortal wound bleeding over his clothing. He was also determined to do harm if he could.

He never got the chance, as Marcus took three steps sideways, knocked Cyprian's blade to the side, then kicked him hard in the chest. Blood sprayed as Cyprian was flung backward, and over the parapet he'd intended to toss Alayne over.

"Nae! Ye bastard, I'll kill ye!" Adrian lunged at Darren, who was still breathless and unarmed, unguarded now that Marcus had moved. A dagger was in the former war leader's hand, and his eyes were filled with the madness of a ravening beast.

Marcus was too far away. Darren couldn't move fast enough. Donall, however, acted without hesitation. He released Alayne, pressing her back against the wall for safety even as he lunged forward and stepped between Adrian and the wounded Laird MacLean. Alayne cried out as the dagger gouged her brother's side.

A second later, Marcus MacLean's blade was buried to the hilt in Adrian's chest, exiting his back in a flood of crimson. The war leader choked and collapsed dead before he hit the stones.

Darren caught Donall and eased him down, checking his wound as he did so. "It glanced off yer ribs... hold still, man, while I put pressure on the wound. We cannae have a laird bleeding out on me tower."

"'Twas... what I... was thinkin'... though 'tis nae... me tower..." The words were hissed between harsh breaths, Donall's face contorted in pain as he spoke.

"Hush yerself. Quit tryin' tae talk." Darren paused. "If ye were after proving ye had naething tae dae with Adrian's mad scheme, I believe ye, and apologize fer sayin' otherwise. Now please dinnae die, or me wife will never speak tae me again - assuming she doesnae kill me in turn."

Donall managed a hoarse chuckle. Marcus snorted in amusement. Alayne collapsed to her knees at her husband's side, near hysterical with relief.

It was finally all over - both the attacks from within, and the feud that had for so long divided their clans.

EPILOGUE

One week later...

Darren's bruises had almost completely disappeared, but he couldn't say he was well. As he'd predicted, Adrian's betrayal had hit like a kick to the gut once the battle focus had worn off. The knowledge that he'd forced Marcus to kill their cousin, therefore earning his own brand of kinslayer, had made him even sicker than the repeated blows to his head. He'd spent much of the first night after throwing up in a basin - a thing he'd not done since his father's death years before.

He hadn't enjoyed being stuck in the healer's cottage for several days either, but Evina had been adamant that if he couldn't stay out of danger and avoid further injury on his own, she was going to ensure that he was relatively well before she let him out of her sight. She'd refused to let him leave until his headache had disappeared and his vision had settled.

His only consolations had been Alayne's frequent visits, the knowledge that Marcus and Bard were keeping the clan well- looked after, and the man who now stood before him preparing to leave.

Donall Ranald had been his constant companion in the healer's cottage, confined for the deep gash over his ribs, and the severe blood loss complicated by his time spent in the king's dungeon. He'd picked up a cough and an infection, and Evina had confined him in the same room as Darren.

Between sleep and medical treatment, they'd had plenty of time to talk to each other.

Now that Donall was no longer seeking vengeance for his father, the younger laird proved to have a good head on his shoulders, and a sound understanding of the difficulties and necessities of being a laird. Not having been raised a warrior, or in competition with two brothers, he approached problems and solutions differently than Darren did.

Talking with him had proved enlightening, plus the young man had a fine sense of humor once the awkwardness of getting to know one another properly had worn off. Even better, Marcus had gotten over his dislike of the Ranald laird, resulting in a few nights of card games that had well and truly ended any hostilities between them, even if Evina, Erin and Alayne had scolded Donall and Darren for drinking too much.

Now they were both free to leave, and Donall had announced his intention to return to his clan. Spring was coming soon, and there was much to be done to prepare for planting season. Darren didn't begrudge him the work he would need to do, much less the fact that he would need to find a new head of household, with his sister now the Lady MacLean.

Had he been in better condition, he would have offered Donall Bard's services. But his own clan was unstable after the revelation of Adrian's betrayal, and Bard's presence, along with Ryan and Marcus, was the only thing keeping the council even slightly calm - to say nothing of his brothers.

Keegan and Daemon had both sent long, incensed letters berating him for not calling for their help sooner. Ryan and Marcus had apparently agreed that the best thing to do was send his family a full account of everything that had happened. He and Donall had commiserated on the scathing lectures-by-letter that he'd received.

"Ye look miles away," Donall's voice broke his thoughts. Darren shook his head with a wry smile.

“Just thinkin’ over everything that’s happened. Dinnae ken if I envy ye the lack o’ trouble tae sort out, or pity ye fer the work ye have tae oversee tae be ready fer planting and growing season.”

“The latter, fer I’ll have trouble o’ me own tae sort out. The Elders o’ me council will have something tae say that ye were in control o’ our clan fer almost a season - and more tae say that I’m nae avenging me faither’s honor, or me sister’s virtue any more.”

Darren snorted. “The elders o’ both our clans can sit on a horseshoe nail fer all either o’ us should ken. I’m o’ a mind that we’ll all be better off with the peace we’ve forged.”

“Ye’ll get nay argument from me.” Donall agreed. “’Tis better fer the island as a whole, too. We’ve both good harbors, and the extra places fer ships tae dock will dae both clans some good.”

“Aye. And grant us more safety on both our borders.” Darren nodded.

Donall looked up at the sun rising in the sky, and the horse he was borrowing from Darren’s stables. Then he turned to his sister. “I wish I could stay longer, dear sister. Ye and yer husband have been good hosts and good friends tae me. But there’s much tae be done, and waiting willnae lessen the work fer any o’ us.” He kissed his sister, then embraced her.

Once that farewell was done, he exchanged a strong handclasp with Darren, and a solemn shake with Bard and Marcus.

His eyes met everyone’s once more, and then he turned and mounted. The group watched him ride away. Marcus and Bard drifted away as soon as he was through the gates, but Darren stayed, holding Alayne close as she watched her brother’s form

until it disappeared among the hills.

She looked so sad, he couldn't help lifting her chin to kiss away her tears. The soft, sweet scent of her filled his nose, making him suddenly aware that it had been a seven-day since he'd last had a chance to love her.

His body responded instantly, his groin tightening in response. He tried to push the reaction away, fearing Alayne would be disappointed that he was thinking such things when she was distressed over her brother's departure.

He was surprised when she suddenly wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling her body flush against his. "Alayne?"

"Aye."

He blinked. She couldn't mean what he thought she meant with that word. "Aye? Ye mean..." He trailed off.

"I want ye. I want ye tae take me tae our rooms and make love tae me until I cannae think o' me braither's departure."

Well, he wasn't going to argue with that. He lifted her into his arms with a kiss to her brow and a soft smile. "As me lady commands."

And with that, he turned and carried her inside. And if his growing arousal made it somewhat difficult to walk, well, that just made his anticipation and desire all the sweeter.

She hadn't meant to seduce Darren. But she'd felt his growing arousal, and the sensation of his body hardening against hers reminded her that it had been a seven-day since she'd last been able to give or receive pleasure from her husband.

Alayne was surprised when he lifted her into his arms, but she didn't protest. It was, as he'd once reminded her, the way she should have come home to MacLean Keep. She knew Darren did it because he cherished her, and wanted her to know it.

In their bedchambers, he lay her on the bed, and stilled her hands when she began to undo her bodice. "Let me."

"Only if I can undress ye in turn." She'd helped undress him to tend his injuries, but that wasn't the same, and she certainly hadn't felt free to touch and admire his body with Donall and Evina in the room.

"Bargain struck, me lady."

She kicked off her slippers, and he slid off his boots. His hands slid the laces of her bodice loose, as well as the ties of her skirt. She undid his belt and let it fall with a thump to one side, followed by his sash.

Strong, callused hands tugged her shirt free of her skirt, and molded her chemise to her body as he slowly dragged it up over her head. Her hands removed his shirt in turn, her fingers gliding over new scars and old. "Will ye get tattoos for these as well?"

"Dae ye wish it?" His soft, sincere question caught her off guard.

"It makes ye more comfortable." She traced her hands over a puckered red line.

"It daes."

"Then I want ye tae dae it. But... I'd like tae choose the symbols. Tae place me mark on ye, as ye seem tae enjoy daeing tae me." She glanced up at him through her lashes, and he laughed, more at ease than he'd been in some time.

“Seems fair tae me. Speakin o’ which... I gave ye yer ring back, but I’d like tae give ye a ring that ye cannae lose, ever again.” He lifted her hand to kiss her finger.

“Seems fair tae me.” She freed her hands to grip the ties of his kilt, then smiled and lowered her hand to cup his growing erection through the cloth. It was something Erin had suggested she try.

Darren’s breath hissed between his teeth, and she felt him harden further in her hand. “Vixen.”

“Aye. But ye enjoy it.”

He laughed again, stroking her hair back from her face before his hands went to her hips and began to tug skirt and chemise up. “Aye. That I dae.”

He slid his hand under her skirt to stroke her, a smug smirk teasing his mouth as he caressed her damp curls. “Already wet fer me, are ye?”

“As ready fer ye as ye are fer me.” Her breath was shorter, panting, and her breasts were already peaking, nipples hardening with anticipation.

A finger slid between her folds, startling her. They were both still sitting, her legs close together as she knelt on the bed, and the sensation was different from what she was used to. She gasped, body arching against his hand.

Darren’s smirk widened, and he slid his finger over her and into her several more times, until she was squirming against his hand, gripping his wrist to pull him closer. Only when she was breathless with desire did he pull away, and continue removing her clothing.

She reciprocated by stripping off his kilt and wrapping her hand around his hardened

shaft. Darren shuddered, and he almost tore her chemise in his effort to remove it and fling it to one side.

“Ye’re so beautiful. I’ve been dreamin’ o’ ye, o’ having ye in me arms and me bed once more.” Darren guided her to lay back on the bed, kneeling between her willingly parted legs as his body lay over hers. The taut skin of his chest pressed her breasts, teasing the sensitive flesh with the heat of him as he bent over her. His shaft teased the inside of her thigh and made her long for him inside her.

“I dreamed o’ ye too.”

He chuckled, the sound sending shivers through her as he placed his hands on either side of her head. “And what did ye dream, wife o’ mine?”

“I dreamed... I dreamed o’ ye burying yer length inside o’ me. O’ ye taking me, slow and strong, until we were both mindless with pleasure. Until we both lost ourselves in the pleasure. And then, tak’ng me again once we’d recovered, hard and fast, until I couldnae breathe. And then again... all night long.”

Darren pressed his lips against her jaw, his hips already moving as he guided his shaft into position and began to slowly penetrate her. “I dinnae ken if I’ll last all night, so soon after me release from Evina’s domain, and I imagine we’ll be wantin’ tae eat at some point, but...” He smiled down at her and slid himself inside her to the hilt, making her gasp at the heat and friction, the burning, stretching feeling as he filled her to the core. “I’ll certainly dae mw best.”

Her hands found his, fingers folding together as he began to thrust, setting up the slow, steady pace she’d spoken of. Alayne gave herself over to the pleasure of her husband’s body within hers, the friction and heat of each thrust sending sparks dancing through her.

There was none of the teasing he usually indulged in, but Alayne couldn't bring herself to care. There was pleasure and delight in the sensation of nothing more than their hands and their bodies joined, in no contact save the grip of his fingers and the sensation of his hardened manhood sliding into and out of her core.

The pleasure built, heat spiraling from her sex to her core and back again, muscles tightening and flexing around him as she arched her hips to meet each thrust and draw him deeper.

The world dissolved into the sensations and the pleasure they invoked. Far faster than she'd expected, she felt herself building to her release. The edge of the wave of her climax rose inside her.

Then, to her surprise, Darren stiffened, his rhythm breaking as his movements faltered and his own climax swept over him. Alayne arched her back, muscles tightening as his seed spurted into her core. The sensation was enough to wring her own release from her, muscles clamping down to milk his shaft of every last drop as pleasure swept her away.

The climax was more intense than she remembered it being, and the last thing she felt, as her vision faded in a white haze of heat and pleasure, was Darren's warmth as his body covered hers, locking the two of them together in their shared pleasure and the relief of being together once more.

But there's more...

Eager to learn what happened with Alayne and Darren ?

Then you may enjoy this extended epilogue .

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:16 am

One month later, MacMillan Keep....

MacMillan Keep was larger than MacLean Keep, and situated in a more open area of moor land, though still somewhat near the sea. Darren found the change of scenery enjoyable, almost as enjoyable as the company.

He'd finally found a war leader to replace Adrian, this time trained and questioned extensively by Marcus, before his brother had returned to MacDougall lands, and his duties there. By now, the man was fairly proficient, enough so that Darren hadn't felt uncomfortable leaving him to watch over the clan with Bard, while he went to return Ryan to Laird MacMillan, and then visit his brothers.

According to Erin's latest letter to Alayne, the child was growing well and healthy, a joy to all. Erin, while delighted with the fact that the process was so easy thus far, had been lamenting that her belly was growing enough for her to struggle with finding clothing she could wear comfortably.

Alayne had responded by producing a small chest of dresses that would be easy for a woman in the final stages of pregnancy to wear, and comfortable besides. Her preparations had also included a pair of slippers that were soft and easy to slip on, made slightly large to accommodate possibly swollen feet.

And so their plans had expanded from 'see Ryan off on the ferry' to, 'accompany Ryan to Laird MacMillan, pay respects, then travel to visit Laird MacDougall and Marcus, then visit Laird Stewart and Keegan', because his youngest brother would never forgive him for not going to visit, after everything that had happened. He'd no desire to receive another angry letter from Keegan or his wife.

Now they were approaching MacMillan Keep, and Darren found himself studying the keep and comparing it to his own. He would always prefer MacLean Keep, since it was his home, and where he would raise his children, but he couldn't deny that MacMillan Keep had an elegance and presence all its own.

At the very least, the guards would have a much easier time than his own warriors did, in seeing approaching riders. By the time they approached the main gates, the portal was open, and he was fairly certain their approach had been watched for a good half a candle-mark or more.

Daemon was waiting to meet them, with Lyla at his side, as they rode into the courtyard and dis-mounted. Lyla hurried forward to embrace Alayne, while Daemon came forward to clasp Darren's arm in greeting. Daemon's manner was polite enough, but there was something reserved in his manner as his eyes flicked to Ryan.

Darren wondered at the reserve, only to receive an explanation as the second young woman wait-ing behind Daemon raced forward and flung her arms around Ryan. "Ye're back! 'Tis so good tae see ye!"

"Alyn." Daemon's voice was low, a note of disapproval clear in it. "Be polite and greet our guests."

The young woman pouted, but released Ryan long enough to give a passable smile and a curtsy. "A pleasure tae see ye again, Laird MacLean. And tae make yer acquaintance, Lady MacLean. I trust ye've had a peaceful journey."

"Aye, that we did." Alayne smiled at the younger woman. Darren saw a flicker of interest in her eyes, and stifled a groan.

Alayne, ye cannae interfere with whatever's going on here. Please, please dinnae start trouble I'll have tae resolve.

As Daemon gestured the last man forward and introduced him as Cai, his steward, Darren watched his wife. The look in her eyes made him want to thump his head on a wall.

He didn't know what shape the trouble was going to take, but he knew, sure as the sun rose in the east, that trouble there would be. And if Alayne wasn't in the thick of it, she would still most certainly be involved.

Alayne had seen the way the young woman had greeted Ryan. She'd also seen the way Laird MacMillan ordered the two of them apart. What she didn't understand was why. It was clear the two were affection-ate with each other, if not madly in love. Why did Daemon look so disapproving?

She wasn't going to ask in his hearing, but as soon as Lyla led her away so the men could talk among themselves, she spoke up. "It seems Ryan has a lass he fancies."

"Och, that. 'Tis naething o' the sort, or if it is, Daemon doesnae ken it." Lyla shook her head. "Tis one o' the few matters about which my husband is a fool still."

"Can I ask fer an explanation?"

Lyla sighed. "Ye may as well ken, fer if ye're at all like me, then ye'll only be tempted tae go lookin' fer answers, and getting intae trouble because o' it."

She seemed reluctant to talk, so Alayne made an educated guess. "Is she his younger sister?"

"Nae. Cousin. Even so, they both lost their parents around the same time, and Daemon took over the rais-ing o' her. He loves her deeply, but he's so protective, I

fear sometimes he smothers her. She tries nae tae resent him fer it, but there's times I worry that one day her temper will explode and tear them both tae pieces." Lyla grimaced, and the worry was a shadow in her eyes.

"And Ryan?"

"They're close friends. If 'tis more than that, they're fair discreet about it. But..." Lyla shook her head. "Daemon's determined nae tae risk even the chance o' more developing between them. I could tell him that his disapproval only makes her want the lad more, but he'd only exile Ryan, and Ryan doesnae have any other kin. He's a foundling, ye see."

Alayne nodded. He'd mentioned something of the sort, during his stay at MacLean Keep. "Daemon can-nae be holding that against him?"

"He isnae. I dinnae ken quite what he does have against Ryan courtin' Alyn, save he's protective, and Ryan has a bit o' a reputation as a light o' love. Nae so much tae be called a rake, but enough tae make a protective father figure wary o' his behavior."

"And ye think that's it?"

"I cannae say. I can only say that Ryan and Alyn spend as much time taegether as they can, and Daemon daes his best tae keep them separated. 'Tis one reason he was willing tae have Ryan visit ye fer so long."

Alayne frowned. She liked Daemon well enough, but it still seemed unfair to Ryan and Alyn. If they were well-matched and fond of each other, why shouldn't they be wed? It wasn't as if Daemon lacked alliances, with his wedding to Lyla, and Lyla's connection to the MacLean clan and their allies.

There had to be something else. She asked the most obvious question. "Does he think

Ryan will stray and break her heart?”

Lyla frowned in thought for a moment before she shook her head. “He might fear it, but I dinnae think Ryan’s the type. Rather, I think he’s much like Marcus – he’s a light o’ love only because he kens, or thinks he kens, that he cannae have the woman his heart truly desires.”

“Ye think he’d stand true, if Daemon would stop interfering.”

“Either that, or they’re true friends, and he’s keeping her out o’ more trouble than Daemon kens – playing a lover tae keep the vultures away.”

Alayne could both picture that, and appreciate it. There were times when her father had been trying to marry her off for his own benefit, when she would have appreciated that sort of interference. She was aware that she was lucky she’d wound up with an honorable and loving husband like Darren, instead of married off to the man who could offer the most gold for her with no consideration for how abhorrent the man might be.

She tipped her head. “Is there any way tae learn which way the wind blows for certain?”

Lyla blinked. “There might be. But ‘twould be difficult without alerting and angerign Daemon.”

“Then we’ll have tae be very careful with our plans. But I’ve seen enough unhappiness in life, I’m nae o’ a mind tae let yer stubborn husband stand in between two who might be happy taegether.”

Lyla stared at her for a moment, then smiled wickedly and took her arm. “I’m glad we’ve become friends, Alayne. I have a feelin’ this is the beginning o’ a delightful

relationship.”

Alayne smiled back. She knew Darren probably wouldn’t approve of their plans, but for the moment, she didn’t care. “I agree.”

Against all odds, she’d found her happiness with her husband. And if she could find joy with a man who’d once been an enemy and who she’d been forced to wed, then it was possible for anyone.

And who better to help others find joy despite adversity, than one who’d walked through the fire to find love?

The End.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:16 am

One month later...

Lyla studied the fall of her wedding gown in the mirror and smiled. The fit was perfect, just like the weather outside. Downstairs, she knew the servants would have decorated the Great Hall to stunning perfection for the wedding.

The weather was passing from summer to autumn, but there were plenty of flowers still growing for the decorations, and the first harvest had provided an excellent bounty for the feast afterward.

A knock on the door announced the presence of her two attendants. Erin and Alyn would be walking with her, even as Ryan and Cai would stand with Daemon.

Erin smiled at her as she studied her appearance. Lyla looked down at the pale green gown she wore, decorated with flowing vines around the hem and sleeves. It accented the color of her eyes and her hair, and Erin nodded approvingly. "Ye look lovely."

"Thank ye." Lyla stood still as her sister fastened the MacDougall clan tartan as a sash around her shoulder for the last time. At the end of the ceremony, she would receive her new husband's tartan, as well as his name.

"Are ye ready?" Alyn looked flushed with excitement. "'Tis nearly time."

"Aye. Nearly ready." Lyla caught a momentary look of concern on Erin's face. "What is it?"

"News from MacLean. Darren brought it this morn. The king has decided on an

additional measure tae ensure the harmony between Clan Ranald and Clan MacLean is maintained.” Erin’s voice was soft, with undercurrents of uncertainty that were rare to hear in her elder sister’s voice.

“Aye. What sort o’ measure?”

“The king has decreed that Darren MacLean will be wed tae Alayne Ranald, tae form a bond o’ kinship between the two clans, and Laird MacLean will claim stewardship over Clan Ranald until such time as Laird Ranald is released from prison, having been reformed, or until a second son is born and raised tae take up the mantle o’ Laird Ranald.”

Lyla grimaced in sympathy. “Poor Darren. He didnae wish tae marry Alayne Ranald. Did he nae try tae wed the sister o’ Laird Stewart tae avoid being forced intae a union with the Ranald clan?”

“He did.” Erin sighed. “But mayhap it willnae be too bad. I’ve heard Darren only refused the match because the conditions that the former Laird Ranald proposed were unfavorable fer MacLean. ‘Tis possible that he’ll have a good marriage with Alayne.”

“‘Twill be difficult. There’s bad blood between them, and nae telling how she feels towards him, especially with his involvement in the fate o’ her faither and braither.” Lyla sighed. “I cannae say who I feel sorrier fer, in all honesty.”

“Aye. Ye and me both. But enough o’ that.” Erin smiled and tossed her head. “‘Tis yer wedding day, and a day o’ celebration.”

Lyla smiled. “Ye’re right.” She took a last look at her reflection, and followed Alyn and Erin out of the room and toward the Great Hall.

Her father was waiting at the door for her. He smiled and offered her his arm. “Are ye

ready, daughter?”

“I am, Faither.” She looped her arm through his as Alyn and Erin took up their positions in front of her.

Musicians began to play the music selected for her entrance. The doors swung open, to reveal a long carpet, with an arch of flowers at the far end. To either side, the friends of her family stood arrayed, including Darren and Marcus, and their brother Keegan, with his wife and brother-by-marriage, as well as other friends of the family. At the end of the aisle, she could see Daemon, wearing the formal attire of a Clan Laird, waiting with Ryan and Cai. Her heart skipped a beat at how handsome he looked.

Her father led her forward to where her groom waited with the priest. Once there, the music stopped and Kaelin placed her hands in Daemon’s.

The priest stepped forward. “Who brings this woman here taeday tae be married?”

Her father’s voice was strong, resounding through the space as he replied. “I, Laird Kaelin, Laird o’ Clan MacDougall, dae hereby bring me daughter, Lyla MacDougall, tae be wed this day tae this man.”

The priest nodded. “And who brings this man here taeday tae be married?”

Ryan spoke up. “I, Ryan MacMillan o’ Clan MacMillan, war leader and adopted kinsman o’ Laird MacMillan, dae hereby bring this man, Laird Daemon MacMillan, Laird o’ Clan MacMillan, tae be wed taeday tae this woman.”

“Laird MacMillan, and Lady Lyla MacDougall, we are gathered here taeday tae witness the bond o’ marriage established between the two o’ ye. Dae ye both consent tae this union, and come tae it willing and in sound health o’ both body and mind?”

“Aye. I dae.” The words came from both of them.

“And dae ye pledge tae love each other, tae support each other and stand taegether in sickness and health, in good times and bad, in poverty and wealth?”

“Aye. I dae.” The words came from both of them once more.

“Speak yer vows.”

Daemon turned to Lyla, and she met his eyes. Her heart was singing as he spoke. “Lyla MacDougall, ye brought sunshine and joy intae me life, when I was wrapped in gloom and sorrow. Ye taught me how tae live, when I was trapped in grief. Ye chased away me sorrows and helped me rediscover the happiness I had forgotten fer a long time. Fer now and forever, I will love and cherish ye, and strive tae bring ye the same joy ye brought me. This I so swear.”

Lyla took a deep breath. “Daemon MacMillan, I never kent passion or what it meant tae love a man, until I began tae love ye. Ye showed me things I had never dreamed o’, and joy I’d never imagined possibly. Ye made me life richer and deeper and more wonderful. Ye gave me stability and safety, and another home tae love. Fer now and forever, I will love and cherish ye, and strive tae give ye the same strength and support ye have given me. This I so swear.”

“Dae ye, Laird MacMillan, take this woman tae be a member o’ yer clan, as yer wife and the Lady MacMillan, from this day henceforth?”

“I dae.”

“And dae ye, Lady Lyla, agree tae tak’ the name o’ yer husband and yer place as Lady MacMillan, from this day henceforth?”

“I dae.”

The priest raised his hands and intoned a short blessing over both of them. Then his hands clasped theirs. “Then, by the power invested in me by God and afore these witnesses, I now pronounce ye husband and wife. Laird MacMillan...” The priest released them. “...ye may kiss the bride.”

Daemon’s lips claimed hers in a searing kiss that made her heart sing and set her body aflame. Lyla leaned into him, and it was only the chuckling of their friends and family that made her pull back.

Daemon smiled roguishly and bent to whisper in her ear. “We’ll continue this later.”

Together, the two of them turned and faced their friends and family as the priest raised his voice a final time. “I give ye, the Laird and Lady MacMillan!”

As the two of them joined their friends and family in celebration, Lyla’s heart soared in joy.

At long last, she’d found the love of her life. And she knew that, somewhere, Rowan smiled and celebrated their marriage as well.

The End.

PROLOGUE

MacMillan Castle, two years ago...

Even in June, Caitlyn MacMillan needed a shawl around her shoulders. The wind tugged at the pages of the book in her lap, teasing them open, threatening to blow them over and make her completely lose her page. However, as she sat in the gardens surrounding her father's huge castle, it was not the wind or her turning pages that distracted her. She had now read the same passage nearly four times and had not retained one single word.

It was, in fact, the thought of Aengus Lamont who held her concentration, for while she sat and attempted to read, Caitlyn was waiting for his arrival. She and Aengus had been courting for four months now, and she was certain, he would soon ask for her hand in marriage. In her mind, it was simply the next logical step.

Of course, she would say yes. A summer wedding would be so pretty. They might even have it in the very gardens where she sat. Her father's castle was large enough that even if the weather was not favorable, the great hall would certainly accommodate all who might attend. But Caitlyn would much prefer the gathering in the beautiful outdoors that surrounded her home. Looking about her, she imagined the ribbons and wreaths, the laughter and chatter of their guests, the music in the air, and she, the proud wife of a fine man.

The sound of footfalls behind her gave her great excitement. Not caring that she would lose her place, she slammed the book closed and jumped from the bench. With a wide smile, she turned to look upon the man she hoped would soon be her

betrothed. Only, it wasn't Aengus at all.

"Good day tae ye, Caitlyn," Edan MacLachlan declared, striding confidently toward her.

Caitlyn dropped her smile and regarded him with the disdain she felt at his approach. While other lasses could hardly keep their eyes off him, Caitlyn was the opposite, and with good reason. Indeed, his dark hair flowed to his shoulders, and his striking looks got him anything he desired. He was tall, and broad, and full of charm. Charm she found repulsive.

Where other lasses saw Edan as the man he was now, Caitlyn had the unpleasant memories of a time when he was far less accomplished. When he had been younger and had relished in her making her life a misery.

Their fathers had been good friends for many years and would often travel the glens to visit each other. Thus, as her mother and father would enjoy the delights of Laird and Lady MacLachlan, Caitlyn and her sister Effie were forced into the company of Edan and his brother, Darach.

While close, the brothers could not be more unlike each other. Darach had always been serious and intelligent, while Edan was always the prankster or picking a fight. Given their characteristics, one might imagine that Darach was the older of the two, but as it happened, Edan was two years his senior.

The MacLachlan's visits came with instruction from Caitlyn's mother and father that she and Effie were to entertain the boys. And as much as she hated it, Caitlyn had no choice but to suffer Edan spending the entire visit making her life miserable. He loved teasing her and playing pranks – on one occasion, he actually put a frog in her bed, causing her to scream and cause an embarrassing commotion.

He would start arguments, and then blame her when the maids came to break up the fight. He pulled ribbons from her hair, making her chase him to retrieve them. He teased her about being delicate, comparing her to fine china. And on and on it went.

Edan MacLachlan had been the bane of her childhood.

After the dreadful murder of his father, Edan had taken on his role as laird of the MacLachlan Clan. Four years older than her, at seven and twenty, he led his people with bravery and fairness. But no matter how powerful, or mighty, or courageous he was, Caitlyn had never been able to shift her resentment.

Even now, after all these years, he still found great satisfaction in frustrating her. Bracing herself for whatever might be coming, she gave him a steady gaze.

“What are ye doing out here, Edan? Should ye nae be with me sister?”

“I cannae be with Effie every minute o’ the day now, can I?” He smirked. “We’ll be married soon enough, and then she’ll be tied tae me.”

Gritting her teeth, she tried to repress her annoyance at his arrogance. “Ye are intolerable.” She spun around and turned her back to him. “I dinnae ken what me older sister sees in ye.”

“Clearly, me good looks and charming personality,” Edan continued, ignoring Caitlyn’s rudeness, and walking around to face her.

“Well, ye may find somewhere else tae be. Aengus will arrive soon. I’m certain he’s with me faither this minute, asking fer me hand.”

Edan snarled. “Ye cannae be serious in wanting tae marry that man, Caitlyn.”

“Who are ye tae judge? Aengus is a good and fine person, which is more than I can say fer ye.”

As fine a man as Aengus was, Caitlyn was not in love with him. Not the kind of love the novels talked about. Not the love she had often witnessed gushing from her older sister when she gazed up at Edan. But that didn't matter. That was fairytale love, and from what she had seen, very few people discovered it anyway. Aengus made her feel comfortable. They had much in common, and she felt excited when she saw him.

They had met many years before at a carnival. Caitlyn had been much younger then, but he had made her laugh, and she had enjoyed being with him. Providence had caused their paths to cross once more just over seven months ago. Their friendship had started slowly, until one afternoon, Aengus had asked her if he might court her. It was certainly not love at first sight, but Aengus was a man of principles and great manners, and those things had impressed her. Was that not better than marrying a person she hardly knew, as so many of her peers had been forced to do over the last couple of years?

She would never disclose such a thing to Edan, of course. For a start, it was none of his business how she felt. But that was not her main reason for keeping it to herself. Edan, the trickster and teaser of her childhood, had not changed much in that regard. The last thing she needed was his snide remarks about her and Aengus's relationship. She had never confided in the man, and she certainly was not going to start now.

A movement behind Edan's shoulder caught Caitlyn's attention, and she beamed a smile as Aengus approached. While he was neither as tall nor as handsome as Edan, Aengus was still a striking man. He kept his blonde hair tied, emphasizing his strong jaw. His eyes were dark and intelligent, and his wide mouth always had a smile for her.

Until today, for as he approached, his brow knotted at the sight of Edan. The men

shared a dark look, before Aengus finally came to stand at Caitlyn's side.

"Edan," Aengus growled.

"Aengus," Edan scowled back.

Caitlyn looked from one to the other worriedly. Fearing Edan's presence would scare Angus away, she said, "Ye must leave us now, Edan. Aengus and I have much tae speak about."

"Gladly," Edan spat. And without another word, he spun on his heels and stormed away.

Even as confusion danced in Caitlyn's head, she pushed it down. The two men were not often in each other's company, and thus, she couldn't remember a time before now, where they had displayed such anger towards each other. Clearly, something had happened.

Now isnae the time tae ask.

No, it wasn't. She would find that out later. At that moment, she was just delighted that Aengus was by her side.

Turning to him, she gave him a warm smile. "I am so delighted tae see ye, Aengus."

Pushing herself onto her toes, she reached to kiss his cheek, the way she always greeted him. Only, to her surprise, Aengus took a swift step back. At her stunned expression, Aengus took her two hands in his and sighed heavily.

"I need tae talk tae ye, Caitlyn. I have something important tae say."

While she felt bewildered at his reaction, she concluded that it might, perhaps, have something to do with Edan's presence only moments before. Internally, she scowled. Was she never to be rid of him ruining everything?

Shaking Edan's face from her mind, her heart skipped a beat as Aengus led her to the bench she had been sitting on earlier. Guiding her to sit, he settled himself beside her. Caitlyn could hardly contain herself as the anticipation grew.

This is it. He is going tae propose.

"I've been speaking tae yer faither?—"

"Aye, and?" she said, the eagerness too much for her to contain.

"I'm here tae say me farewells, Caitlyn," Aengus replied steadily.

What?

So stunned was she, Caitlyn could only gawp at him for several seconds. In startled silence, her thoughts escaped her, like her mind had been wiped clean of all the words she knew. It took a little time for the strange numbness to pass. And then, a wave of fear started in the pit of her stomach. Her mind whirled, trying to grasp on to a meaning that would make her heart stop thumping, but she could think of anything that would make any sense. Eventually, she seemed to find her voice.

"I beg yer pardon?"

Aengus lowered his gaze and continued. "We willnae be courting any longer. Nor will there be a union between us."

While she had already, if not a little slowly, come to that realization, hearing it stated

so plainly stabbed at her heart. How could this be true? It made no sense. Why, after all this time, had Aengus decided that he didn't want to be with her?

Maybe this wasnae his decision.

Anger welled up in her breast as she drew the only conclusion that made any sense. "Me faither refused ye?"

Aengus looked at her sadly, and then shook his head. "Nae, Caitlyn. It wasnae yer faither. I didnae go tae him tae ask fer yer hand in marriage. I went tae tell him that I'm breaking off the courtship. I thought it was only right that he kent first."

Caitlyn could not feel more confused. Only yesterday, she and Aengus had wandered around the castle, gleefully talking about their future. Aengus had spoken about inheriting his father's land, and what he wanted to do with it. Caitlyn had talked about a family, and what a joy it would be for them to have children of their own.

What has changed? What happened between then and now, fer Aengus tae suddenly change his mind?

Caitlyn felt her heart shattering into a thousand tiny pieces. The future she had been imagining for the last few months had been snatched away in a few simple words. As devastated as she felt, however, her stubborn independence refused to let her emotions show. As delicate as everyone thought she was, inside she was as resilient as any of her father's soldiers. If she wasn't good enough for Aengus, then he certainly didn't deserve to see her heartbreak.

Steeling herself, she shifted and lifted her chin, determined to save face. At least, on the outside. "May I ask why?"

Aengus dropped his gaze, but didn't reply immediately. He seemed to be weighing up

what he ought to say. Finally, but still without looking at her directly, Aengus murmured, “I cannae court ye any longer because o’ Edan MacLachlan.”

Caitlyn was now even more stunned. As the wave of shock washed over her, her earlier anger returned. Narrowing her eyes, she stared at Aengus. “What has our marriage got tae dae with him?”

“Edan doesnae approve o’ me marrying ye. He’s made it clear, he’ll make mine and my clan’s life hell if I go through with it.” Aengus stood, and as astonished as she was, Caitlyn stood with him.

“But, Aengus?—”

“I’m sorry, Caitlyn. Truly, I am. I’ll miss our conversations. I’ll miss yer soft brown hair and the vibrant green o’ yer eyes. Ye’re such a charming and elegant wee lass, and I was lucky tae have yer company fer as long as I did.”

Taking her hand to his lips, he kissed it tenderly. Sorrow marred his face, and with a final heavy look, he turned, leaving Caitlyn stunned, alone, and reeling.

It was hard to imagine how she was supposed to feel, but feel she did. Everything from devastation to inner rage raced through her body. Dropping onto the bench in astonishment, a flurry of thoughts battled for her attention. Why had Edan threatened Aengus and his clan? What had happened between them?

Whatever it was, it didn’t matter. Edan had no right. He had no right to threaten Aengus. He had no right to tell the man who he could or could not marry. He had no right to ruin the future she had been looking forward to this past month.

Who the hell does he think he is?

Aengus was hardly off the hook, either. One threat was all it had taken. One threat, and he had turned and ran. What kind of man was he? What kind of warrior was he? Was she not worth fighting for?

Clearly not.

Back and forth her mind went; anger, confusion, despair. The life she had imagined would make her happy had been just there, on the horizon, beckoning her. Now, it had dissipated, faded like the early morning mist under the heat of the rising sun. Edan had done that to her. Did he truly hate her that much? As the anger boiled in her heart, Caitlyn determined one thing that would remain true for the rest of her life.

I will forever loathe Edan MacLachlan.

CHAPTER ONE

A tavern in the village next to Castle MacMillan. Present day...

The tavern was full of boisterous noise, but none of the group seemed to mind. A week before Effie and Edan's wedding, they were spending some time away from the castle to enjoy a drink and a little fun.

Caitlyn sat beside Effie, listening to the conversation she was having with their cousin, Kieran. The son of their father's brother, Kieran was strong and mighty. His arms and body were covered in tattoos, reminders of the battles he had fought and won. His hair was long and blonde, and his eyes were gray.

His parents had been slaughtered when Kieran was only a boy of seven. Her father had taken him in, and he had grown up with them, more like an older brother than a cousin. As the war leader of Clan MacMillan, Kieran was trying to explain why her father was concerned about Effie's upcoming wedding.

"Ye have tae understand, Effie," Kieran said, sitting straight in his chair, and wearing the same serious expression that donned his face on most days. "Yer faither worries fer yer safety and the safety o' the clan."

"It's a wedding, Kieran. Nae a battle," Effie defended.

"Aye. A wedding where anyone could infiltrate the castle posing as one o' the MacLachlan's."

Effie was not convinced. “Och, ye’re being ridiculous.”

“He has a point, Effie,” Edan interjected. Edan and Darach sat across the table, listening with interest. “Yer faither’s only doing what he thinks is best. Laird MacTavish has caused nae end o’ trouble so far. Dinnae be so na?ve tae imagine, after all he’s put yer clan through, that he’ll nae try tae ruin this union.”

The wedding had already been put off for far too long. Edan had been made to attend to some business connected to his extended family, forcing him to travel to Spain. He had been gone for nearly eleven months. Laird Brendan MacTavish had upped his advances, determined to take over the MacMillan Clan, and this union was, in part, a way to deter the greedy laird. When the MacMillan and MacLachlan clans joined forces, they would be a formidable opponent.

“Fine. Well, ye can choose tae think o’ all the things that might go wrong.” Effie tilted her chin defiantly. “I, on the other hand, came here tae have some fun. Can we nae dae that instead?”

While Caitlyn was the more serious of the sisters, Effie enjoyed having fun and did not take life too seriously. As beautiful as her sister was, with her long dark hair, and thick eyelashes that fluttered around deep blue eyes, Effie’s reputation for getting herself into trouble was only surpassed by her kindness, and her willingness to help another in need.

“I agree,” Caitlyn said. “We can have such doom and gloom while sitting at home in the castle.”

“The lasses are right,” Edan declared, jumping up from his chair. “We’re meant tae be having a good time. Right. ‘Tis me round.” Edan turned and headed for more drinks, leaving the other four to continue the conversation.

“Yer faither is only trying tae be practical, Effie,” Darach said.

“Darach!” Effie and Caitlyn cried at the same time.

Kieran chuckled at their indignation, and turning to Darach, he lifted an eyebrow. “Maybe ‘tis time we changed the subject, me friend.”

Darach gave a dismissive shrug and lifted his tankard from the knotted and stained wooden table. He was both taller and broader than his older brother, but far more serious. His dark intelligent eyes betrayed the fact that his mind never stopped working, and for as long as Caitlyn could remember, he was always three steps ahead, which made playing chess with him a losing battle before it had even begun.

Edan returned with drinks for all. After placing down tankards of ale for the men, he gave Effie a glass of whisky, and with a broad smile, handed Caitlyn her glass. “And for the only one among us who doesnae drink, a glass o’ elderberry.”

Caitlyn rolled her eyes at his snide remark and took the glass. “Thank ye, Edan.”

“Aye, thanks, braither,” Darach said. His appreciation was mirrored by the others.

Lifting the glass to her lips, Caitlyn took a long draw. But as she went to swallow, a strange and potent taste hit the back of her throat, and Caitlyn found herself spitting the drink out all around her. Across the table, Edan fell into hysterical laughter, slamming his hand on the solid wood in delight.

“What the devil is wrong with ye?” Caitlyn screeched, glaring at Edan as he sat across from her. “What’s in this?” She lifted the glass she still held in her hand.

“Och, I might have asked the barman tae add a wee dram o’ whisky.” He could barely speak through his laughter. “I thought it might bring ye down from yer high horse.”

But Caitlyn did not find his antics funny at all. She never had, and that wasn't going to change any time soon. Pushing herself from her seat, she edged around the table. "Ye are a child, Edan MacLachlan. Naething but a child." She then turned and stormed away.

She didn't get too far before she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. When Caitlyn turned, Effie was stood there, looking apologetic. "Dinnae let him ruin the afternoon, Caitlyn. Ye ken what he's like."

"I dae," Caitlyn hissed back. "He's an idiot. I still dinnae ken what ye see in him."

"Please, Caitlyn. Dinnae fight with him. Our wedding is only a week away, and I cannae imagine a future with me sister and me husband at each other's throats. I ken ye dinnae hate him?—"

"Dinnae I?" Caitlyn glared back at her. "Yer betrothed acts like a child, even as a man o' nearly thirty years of age. I surely hope ye can knock some sense intae him when ye finally dae marry."

Effie dropped her gaze, and Caitlyn quickly realized that perhaps, she had gone a little too far. "I'm sorry, Effie. He just drives me mad," she growled. Taking a deep breath in, she tried to calm herself, and looking at her sister a little more gently, she continued. "I'm just away for some fresh air. I'll come back tae the table in a wee while."

"All right," Effie said with a nod.

Walking outside, Caitlyn could still hear music trickle out of the tavern. She didn't want to stray far, and turning the corner, she walked into the alley at the side of the stone building. Leaning on the wall, she took a deep breath in, still shaking with frustration.

Calm yersel', Caitlyn.

With the constant of her inner thoughts reminding her of all the tricks Edan had played on her over the years, it was far easier said than done. It was bewildering to believe that the same man was actually a laird over an entire clan. And yet, she had witnessed the strength and fairness of his rule herself. The MacLachlan Clan not only loved him, but they revered and respected him.

Aye, well. I'll bet he doesnae play silly tricks on those people.

The frustration was slowly waning, when Caitlyn felt a strange sensation creep across her skin. She looked about, but saw no one, although she felt like she was being watched. After Laird MacTavish's efforts these last six months, it was probably unwise for her to be out there alone. Pushing herself off the wall, she was about to return to the others, when a man turned the corner and drunkenly swayed towards her. Clearly, he had just left the tavern himself.

"I ken ye, dinnae I?" he said, struggling to form his words as he closed in. "I ken yer face."

He was at least her father's age, but the crevices of his skin betrayed a man who had spent more time in the ale house than anywhere else. White frizzy hair framed a grubby face, and black teeth, those that were left, jumped in and out of view as he spoke.

Caitlyn shook her head. "I'm afraid ye have me confused with another, sir. I dinnae ken ye at all." She side-stepped to try and get around him, but as drunk as he was, he matched her step, and blocked her path.

A stench of ale and old body odor reached her now that he was so close. It took all her strength and manners not to screw up her nose. Torn, stained clothes hung off his

frame, and though he looked as thin as a whippet, he was tall.

“Och, ye dinnae have tae be running away, lass. I only want tae talk tae ye.”

Seeing her escape blocked, Caitlyn backed up and found herself trapped. The alley was narrow, and with him in her way, she had nowhere to go.

“As I’ve told ye,” Caitlyn continued, now trying to sound far more confident than she felt. “I dinnae ken ye. Now, let me by.”

The drunkard continued with his approach, closing the gap between them. The stench of his odor made her gasp for air.

“What’s yer hurry, lassie?” he sang, a smirk dancing on his lips.

There was no one else about, and Caitlyn now regretted leaving the others and putting herself in such a stupid position. Trying to remember the things Kieran had told her about protecting herself, she forced a smile to her lips.

“Disarm them first, Caitlyn. With that beautiful smile, it willnae be hard.”

Seeing the closeness of the man, she then planted her two feet firmly on the ground. She pictured Kieran standing in front of her, telling her exactly what she should do.

“Now, ye lift yer two hands and grab his shoulders. Dae it tae me,” Kieran had instructed, tapping his shoulders. Caitlyn had gripped Kieran’s muscular shoulders, though her hands hardly covered their full size. “Good. Now, drive yer knee intae my groin as fast as ye can.”

“I cannae dae that tae ye,” Caitlyn had balked.

Kieran had placed his hands, one on top of the other and held them in front of himself for protection. “Dae it, Caitlyn. Dae it with all the force ye can muster.”

“How about a little kiss, lassie,” the old man crooned. He took another step forward. A thick tongue slipped out of his mouth and ran along his dry, cracked lips, as though he were about to eat.

Terror ran from the soles of Caitlyn’s feet to the top of her head. She had to do it now, before this man lay a finger on her. She lifted her hands to grab his shoulders, when suddenly, the man spun around at great speed. By his expression, he was as surprised as Caitlyn, but his mouth dropped when he saw the dark face of Edan who now glared at him.

“What the hell dae ye think yer playing at?” he barked. “Get away from her before I give ye a bloody hiding.” Edan shoved the man with such force, he nearly fell forwards, and like a rat, he scurried up the alley and turned the corner toward the tavern.

Edan then turned to her with a terrified expression. “Are ye all right, Caitlyn?” Did he hurt ye?”

Even though he had just saved her from what could have been a dreadful ordeal, Caitlyn could not help but feel frustration rising. She had been ready to save herself, and the fact that Edan did it before she got the chance, only irritated her further, for some strange reason. It was just a natural reaction after all the years of his constant harassment.

“Och, as if ye care how I am?” she hissed.

Edan stared at her as though he could hardly believe her words, but then, his face relaxed. With a steady gaze, he said, “I dinnae hate ye the way ye dae me, Caitlyn.

Fer all my teasing, I would never wish any harm tae come tae ye. I care about ye. I'm surprised ye dinnae ken that by now. After all the years we've kent each other, ye dinnae really ken me at all."

"Aye, ye care fer me so much, ye broke off me engagement. Ye sent away the only man I ever cared about. In fact, ye threatened him tae the point that he left and never returned."

Edan frowned and looked confused. "What are ye talking about?"

Caitlyn's eyes flew wide. "Ye deny it?" she said incredulously. "Ye have just conveniently forgotten what ye did tae me and Aengus?"

At the mention of his name, Edan nodded. "Och, that."

"Aye, that. I've never forgiven ye fer that, Edan. And I never will. I dinnae care that ye're marrying me sister, or that ye'll soon become me brother-in-law. I willnae forgive ye. Ever."

Edan shook his head. "I ken ye dinnae understand, Caitlyn. But I didnae like the man. I assure ye, it was fer the best."

Maybe it was because she was still a little shook up from being accosted by a dirty drunkard, or maybe it was because she had thought far too many times of Edan's arrogance in what he had done, but something within her just snapped.

"It was never yer decision tae make," Caitlyn shrieked. "He was marrying me, nae ye. Neither ye nor me faither nor anyone else, fer that matter, had any right tae take that away from me. Ye've done naething but make me life hell from the day and hour I met ye. But ruining my childhood wasnae enough fer ye, was it, Edan? Ye continue tae interfere and make me life a misery even now."

While at first, Edan's eyes had widened at Caitlyn's attack, by the time she had finished, his eyebrows had knotted together as he scowled at her. Taking a step toward her, his face not an inch away from her own, he hissed, "There are many things ye dinnae ken, Caitlyn. 'Tis best fer ye tae accept what happened as a good thing. Ye havenae any right tae speak tae me like this."

With the two of them clearly angry, neither of them seemed to know what to say for several minutes. Caitlyn tried to calm herself, and in that time of consideration, realized that the least she ought to do was show her appreciation for Edan's timely arrival.

"Fine," she said a little brusquely. "We should get back inside. And fer what it's worth, I thank ye fer what ye did."

Edan opened his mouth to answer, when a noise behind him caught their attention. Caitlyn imagined the drunk was back in hope that Edan had left her be. But as they both turned toward the sound, two huge men appeared out of the shadows. Grabbing Caitlyn, Edan shoved her behind him and stood protectively between her and the approaching men.

"What dae ye want?" Edan demanded.

But neither of the men replied, and without a word, the first launched his fists at Edan. While Edan defended himself and battled back, the other side-stepped the fight and grabbed Caitlyn by her arm. His thick fingers dug painfully into her soft skin. "Argh. Let me go," she screamed.

Edan fought with great strength, while Caitlyn, still trying to pull herself free, kicking and swiping at the man who held her captive, watched on in terror, praying that Edan could overpower the man he fought. While throwing heavy punches, Edan threw a glance back to see where Caitlyn was.

“It’s all right, Caitlyn,” he yelled breathlessly. “I’m going tae save ye in a minute.”

Edan continued to battle, but the huge man he fought did not relent. He was several inches taller than Edan, though both men looked as strong.

“Let me go,” Caitlyn screamed again.

Edan was struggling to fight off one man, there was no way he could battle two of them alone. If she could get someone in the tavern to hear her, they could fetch Kieran and Darach.

“Help! Somebody help us,” she screeched.

Immediately, she felt a huge hand slam over her mouth. Her lips crashed into her teeth, and a second later, the coppery taste of blood sat on her tongue. His hand didn’t stop her from trying. But she knew her muffled cries were useless.

“Get it done,” her captor bellowed.

“He’s fighting fer her,” the other growled back. “I’ll have tae kill him.”

Caitlyn’s eyes flew wide at those words. “Nnn,” she screamed, though her cry was barely audible.

“Nae. He’ll nae want that. We’ll just have tae take them both.”

“Fine.”

Caitlyn’s panic had reached epic proportions. Fear swirled with confusion about who these men were. Why were they attacking her and Edan? And, where were they taking them? She was still struggling against the immovable strength of the man who

held her, when she felt a heavy, sharp pain at the back of her head. An overwhelming nauseous feeling came up from her stomach, her legs buckled beneath her, and everything around her seemed to blur.

Before she collapsed completely, she felt the strong arms of her captor around her body, halting her from hitting the ground. Thrown over his shoulder like she weighed nothing at all, her head lolled from side to side, and as the blackness edged in, the last thing she saw was Edan falling to the ground.

CHAPTER TWO

The floor was cold and hard, but it was the jarring sensation in Edan's ribs as he roused that woke him. Blinking his eyes open, he groaned with pain. His face lay against the stone floor, and for a second, he panicked. He couldn't move his hands.

Glancing down his body, he noted the thick rope that bound his wrists together. That rope was attached to more rope that was tied around his middle, pinning his hands to his body. His captors were diligent, he would give them that. Making a fist, and then stretching his fingers wide, he tried to bring some life back into them. The blood began to flow again, followed by an excruciating feeling. Gritting his teeth, he continued the process until the gnawing ache passed and he could finally feel some sensation.

Pressing down on his elbow, he fought through the piercing pain in his ribs, and with great difficulty, finally managed to push himself to a sitting position. While he needed to figure a way out of the mess they had managed to get themselves into, his first concern was Caitlyn.

She was lying a few feet away, still unconscious. Dried blood sat above her eyebrow, smeared from a gash she must have sustained in the fight. A bluish bruise bloomed on her cheek, and her lip was split. Edan tried to control the rage building up in him at the sight of her.

I'm going tae kill the bastards.

At least her clothes looked intact. It was the only consolation under the

circumstances. They had not tried to take advantage of her while she couldn't fight back, but that didn't mean they wouldn't try once she woke.

The room was small and empty. To the left of him, there sat a fireplace that looked like it hadn't been used for some time. To his right, a window was set into the wall. It was covered with boards of wood, leaving tiny cracks where streams of light broke in, highlighting floating dust.

So, it's daylight. But where the hell are we?

Directly in front of him was a wooden door. The only escape from their prison. The room they were being held in looked too small to be a dungeon, and outside was too quiet for them to be in a castle. He could hear birdsong and little else. If he had to guess, Edan imagined they'd been brought to a safe house of some kind. What he didn't need to guess, was who it was who had captured them. It could only be one person. The same person who had relentlessly attacked the MacMillan Clan for the last half a year.

Knowing, at least in part, where they were and who had taken them, Edan turned his attention back to Caitlyn. He shuffled himself closer to her, wincing with every movement. Leaning forward, he tried to reach her, but his wrists were tied fast.

Damn it!

He could reach her with his feet, but he certainly wasn't going to kick the lass awake. Instead, he dragged himself closer, inch by inch, until he was eventually by her side.

"Caitlyn," he murmured, nudging her gently with his elbow. "Caitlyn, ye have tae wake up now."

A low moan left her lips. A second later, her eyes fluttered open, but upon seeing

Edan looming down at her, her eyes widened.

“What... where... what?” she flustered.

Like Edan, she tried to move her hands, but they had bound her as tightly as they had bound him. Her head jerked in sharp movements, her gaze darting around the parts of the room she could see, panic seemingly growing at every passing second.

“Where are we?” she cried. “Where have they taken us?”

Edan shook his head. “I dinnae ken. Come on. Try and right yersel’.”

Using a similar technique to Edan, but without the wincing, Caitlyn struggled to find her balance. It took her a little longer, but eventually, she was upright. After catching her breath with the effort, she turned to Edan.

“Those men,” she said. “Those men took us.”

“Aye. They did.”

“But why?” Caitlyn cried. “I dinnae ken who they are. Why did they take us?” Her head spun to look around the room. “Where did they take us?”

Edan looked around the room again and gave the only conclusion he had managed to come up. “I think we’re in a safe house. I cannae hear much noise outside, so we’re nae in a village or a castle. Me guess is, we’re out o’ the way somewhere. A place where naeone will be able tae find us.”

Her jaw dropped. “What?”

Their circumstances were precarious to say the least, and while Edan didn’t feel

particularly calm about being tied up and imprisoned, he had to try and remain so for Caitlyn's sake. It was clear she was already terrified. Right now, she needed him to be her support.

"It'll be all right, Caitlyn. I'm here with ye. I'll take care o' ye. Try nae tae worry."

"Aye. And I'm the last person ye want tae be stuck here with," she quipped.

Edan smiled widely at her. "Actually, ye'd be surprised. It's quite the opposite."

Caitlyn frowned in confusion and opened her mouth to speak, but at that second, they both heard the sound of approaching voices, and turned to look at the door.

"Open it," a gruff voice demanded.

"Aye, me laird," another voice answered hurriedly.

The door flew open, and just as Edan suspected, Laird Brendan MacTavish burst into the room. As tall as he was wide, MacTavish filled the space with his aggressive presence. A man who always wore a scowl, he was a fierce warrior with much blood on his hands. From what Edan could remember, the laird was nearing his fortieth year, and his muscular frame betrayed how most of them had been spent in battle.

"Well, well," he growled, looking from Edan to Caitlyn. "What dae we have here?" He gave Edan an intent stare. "Laird MacLachlan. Leader of Clan MacLachlan. A fierce warrior, or so I hear. I wonder what yer men would think o' ye if they discovered ye were caught so easily."

He turned his attention to Caitlyn. "And the youngest daughter o' Laird MacMillan. Och, how yer faither is going tae anguish over yer capture, me pretty lass."

Caitlyn dropped her gaze and shuddered, but Edan did not move his eyes. He continued to glare at Laird MacTavish, who stood tall, looking down at them, seemingly considering the situation. The scowl fell from his face, and an evil grin danced on his lips.

“I can hardly believe me luck. I’ve won twice as much. Kenning how important ye are, I can hold ye both tae ransom.” He looked at Caitlyn and began to chuckle. “Though whether ye return tae yer faither in the same condition ye left him is still tae be determined.”

A tiny growl escaped from Caitlyn’s lips, and she lowered her head even further.

“Ye’ll nae lay a finger on her,” Edan barked.

“Och, now, lad,” MacTavish smirked, “calm yersel’. Anyone would think this is yer sweetheart. But wait,” he said sarcastically. “Are ye nae betrothed tae her older sister? Have I got them mixed up? Or are ye taking them both tae ye bed?” The laird burst into laughter.

Edan clenched his jaw and bawled his fists. “Set me free from these bindings and this lad will put ye on yer back.”

“Och, ye mean the way ye did with me men?” MacTavish chuckled. “Dinnae make promises ye cannae keep, lad. Besides, I have other plans fer ye. Nae only have I captured MacMillan’s youngest daughter. I have his future son-in-law too. A man who will be fit tae tell me all the MacMillan Clan’s weaknesses.”

“I’ll tell ye naething,” Edan spat, still jerking against his bindings.

“We’ll see about that,” MacTavish snarled. He looked from Edan to Caitlyn and back again. “This battle will be fought on me terms. While MacMillan scurries tae pay fer

yer release, I'll make certain he never lays his eyes on either one o' ye again. He'll rue the day he refused an alliance with me."

Edan, who had been glaring at MacTavish, now looked at Caitlyn with great concern, for she was shaking in fear.

"It's all right, Caitlyn," Edan consoled. "Dinnae worry. I'm right here."

Taking a step toward Caitlyn, MacTavish dropped to his haunches and hooked his finger under her chin.

"Get away from her," Edan bellowed.

The laird flicked a glance to the guards at the door. A second later, one of them rushed toward Edan and punched him hard at the side of the head, sending a searing pain through his temple.

"Argh."

"Nae!" Caitlyn cried.

MacTavish grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him. "Ye see what happens if ye dinnae behave yersel'?" His thumb caressed her cheek and a low growl left his throat. "Now, if ye make it worth me while, perhaps I dinnae have tae be in any hurry tae get rid o' ye so quickly."

Even with the immense throbbing in his head, Edan felt sick to his stomach watching the evil laird. He pulled against his bindings again and again, but it was no use. Anger raged in his stomach, but all the anger in the world was not going to change the situation.

The laird looked over at Edan and smirked. “Ye ken, if I didnae ken any better, I’d say ye had a wanting fer this lass.”

“Just leave her alone,” Edan hissed.

MacTavish dropped his hand and stood to his full height. “I will. Fer now.” He turned and walked toward the door, but then he looked back. His lips curled once more as he snarled at them.

“I’ll get me just rewards from what I’m going tae dae tae the both o’ ye. And when I’m done, I’ll get even greater satisfaction out o’ smiting ye. Yer demise will destroy MacMillan, which is what he deserves. As well as losing his youngest daughter, he’ll lose the man whose clan was supposed tae fortify his own. Then,” he continued, now looking directly at Caitlyn, “when yer faither is distraught and weakened with grief, I will strike and take what he should have given me in the first place.”

He was about to walk out when one of the guards said, “What about food, me laird? Will we untie them? They have nae escape from here.”

MacTavish looked back over his shoulder and glared at Edan. “Leave him tied. I dinnae trust him. Leave one o’ the lass’s hands loose. She can feed them both.” The laird then fixed his gaze upon Caitlyn. “Dinnae make me regret me decision. If ye try anything, I’ll kill him right in front o’ ye.”

When Laird MacTavish left, the two guards grabbed Caitlyn and dragged her to her feet.

“What are ye doing?” Edan bellowed.

“Dinnae worry about yer little wench,” one of them spat. “We’re nae allowed tae touch her. She’s going tae the privy. When she’s finished, ye’ll be next.”

When Caitlyn and Edan were returned to the room, one of the guards untied Caitlyn's right hand, while the other dropped a bowl of porridge on the floor between them.

"Dinnae try anything," he growled at Caitlyn. He turned his attention to Edan. "I dinnae want tae have tae slice yer throat in front o' her." The guard turned on his heels and left, slamming the door closed behind him.

Neither Edan nor Caitlyn spoke for a long moment. It was like neither of them could think of any words to say. Edan was both surprised and impressed that Caitlyn hadn't broken down in tears, for after what MacTavish had done and threatened to do to her, it would have been a completely natural reaction. Instead, she sat there with her face blank. Perhaps she was simply in too much shock.

Edan, on the other hand, was angry. Angry and desperate to get them both out of there before MacTavish had a chance to do any lasting damage. How he was going to do that, he did not yet know.

"We should eat," he said, nodding to the bowl. "We need tae keep our strength up fer our escape."

"What escape?" Caitlyn replied.

"I dinnae ken yet, Caitlyn. I just ken, we've got tae get out o' here."

CHAPTER THREE

With a spring in his step, Brendan left the prisoners and stormed down the hallway. As he turned the corner and headed toward the exit, he passed two more guards, both of whom suddenly straightened themselves as he approached.

“I want this place guarded day and night, dae ye hear me?” he growled.

“Aye, me laird,” the men said in unison.

“Ye take it in turns tae guard the prisoners. Swap over every six hours tae give the others time tae rest. I’ll be back here in two days.”

“Aye, me laird,” they said again.

After a final glare at them to drive home the importance of his commands, Brendan turned and headed out of the door. Fortune finally shone upon him, and while he could hardly believe how well the capture had gone, he was now determined to make the most of it. He was remembering the soft smell of the MacMillan girl when he arrived at the stables.

“Well? What happened?” John Flynn asked, still seated on his horse.

Grabbing the reigns of his own sturdy steed, Brendan threw his leg up and mounted his horse. He gave his closest advisor a long look. “Me day has come, John. At long last. It’s taken nearly ten years, but finally, I will get me revenge.”

“Is it Laird MacLachlan in there with the MacMillan lass, like the guards said?” John said.

“Indeed, it is. And now I have them both, me plan just got a whole lot better. MacMillan will pay fer what he’s done. I’ll see tae that.”

“There are other clans out there, me laird,” John said carefully.

His advisor was a thin weed of a man, with a pointed nose and a protruding mouth. His face had always reminded Brendan of a rodent. John Flynn had been his advisor for nearly eight years. His predecessor had been far too opinionated, something that had gotten him killed. But while John was careful, he was also a little gutless. He didn’t entirely agree with Brendan’s vendetta, but he was too scared to say so directly.

Brendan jerked the reins and clicked his tongue, telling his horse to walk on. John followed suit, and the two men rode side by side.

“I ken, well, there are other clans, John,” Brendan said, struggling to keep the frustration from his tone. “But those other clans didnae shun me and leave me out in the cold. Conor MacMillan should have allied our clans when he had the chance. Now, I’m going tae destroy him.”

“I have tae wonder if all this effort is really worth it.”

Brendan glared at John. “O’ course it’s worth it. Besides, I dinnae want any other clan. The lands the MacMillan clan own are vast and worth a lot o’ coin. Ye ken the alliance was never about needing the union.”

“Nae. Ye wanted tae get rid o’ Laird MacMillan and take over his entire clan.” John nodded knowingly.

“Exactly. But now that Laird MacLachlan is going tae marry the MacMillan’s oldest daughter, that chance has been snatched from me. Until today. Once I’ve tortured the information I need out o’ him, I can get rid o’ him too.”

“Which means, Laird MacMillan willnae have an ally,” John said.

“And so, I’m back where I started. I dinnae need his union. I’ll get rid o’ him and take over his clan by force.”

“And what o’ the girl?”

Brendan grinned as his groin twitched at the thought of her. “Och, I have many plans fer her.”

John flicked an uncomfortable glance at him. “I mean the ransom.”

“MacMillan will pay if he thinks I’ll keep her alive. His daughters are his life. I ken that much. I will send a note and demand a ridiculous amount. An amount that will cripple him. And tae get his precious child back, he will pay it.” Brendan smirked as they neared the village they were heading to. “He’ll just never see his daughter again.”

“Or his soon-to-be son-in-law,” John added.

“I might get some coin for him too, if I ask. I was a fool nae tae think o’ it ‘afore. It never occurred tae me tae snatch him. With the strength his clan will bring tae MacMillan, he’s almost as important as the girl. But now I have him, I plan tae make good use o’ him.”

Travelling down the cobbled street, they eventually arrived outside The Thistle. The tavern was like any other, small and inconspicuous. Somewhere no one knew them. It

was to be Brendan and John's home for the next few days. Or, as long as it took for Brendan to break Edan MacLachlan.

The men dismounted and tied up their horses. As usual, John looked worried. "What if he doesnae talk?"

Brendan smirked. "Och, he'll talk, me friend. Let us get some food, and I'll tell ye why."

When they entered the boisterous tavern, their ears were assaulted with a clash of sounds. The fast, high-pitched fiddle and thumping bodhran competed with punters' laughter, excited conversations, and a few men at the bar arguing.

Threading through the room, Brendan snagged a table as far away from anyone else as possible and lowered himself into a chair. John sat down opposite.

"Why?" John pressed, clearly eager to know how Brendan was so certain.

The laird was about to reply when a pretty maid arrived at their table asking what they wanted. Brendan grabbed the wench around the waist and pulled her down onto his knee.

"How about ye, me lovely?" he growled.

He had been aroused since being so close to Caitlyn MacMillan, and it would do him no harm to get rid of the building frustration between his thighs.

The lass laughed uncomfortably, before pushing herself off him. "Come now, gentlemen. What'll ye have?"

They ordered ale and stew with fresh bread, and then the maid was gone, not before

Brendan threw a lingering look at her voluptuous retreating behind.

“Ye were saying?” John continued, now that they were finally alone.

Brendan frowned, trying to remember what they had been talking about. “Och, Laird MacLachlan.”

“Aye. Ye were going tae tell me why ye thought he would definitely talk.”

“Because o’ her,” Brendan said.

John’s brows knotted as he turned his head and looked at the maid who had just left them.

“Nae her, ye eejit. I mean the MacMillan lass. Caitlyn.”

John still frowned and shook his head. “Why? That doesnae make any sense. He’s betrothed tae the other sister.”

Brendan looked John straight in the eye. “Believe me, John. Betrothed he may be, but he cares about this one too. I’m certain o’ it.”

“How can ye possibly ken that?” John blurted.

Brendan shrugged. “He was protecting her the entire time I was there.”

“Surely, that’s only natural under the circumstances, me laird. They’ve both been captured. This lass is the younger sister o’ the woman he’s about tae marry. Perhaps he feels it’s his duty tae protect her, as any decent man would.”

Brendan shook his head. “Ye werenae there, John. It was more than that. He was

filled with rage when I laid my hands upon her. Fiery, jealous rage.”

After considering his words, John said, “Ye’re thinking o’ using her tae get him tae talk.”

Brendan nodded with an evil smirk. “It’ll be interesting tae see where this goes. Besides, I cannae say I willnae take great pleasure in it.”

Not long after that, their ale and stew arrived. After giving the maid a slap on her rounded backside, Brendan tucked in hungrily. He had some business to attend to on the morrow. It was arduous and he resented it. He would far sooner prefer to be getting down to business with Laird MacLachlan. But that would have to wait, even though the anticipation sent a thrill of excitement through him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Caitlyn gazed at the boards that covered the window. Little by little, the streams of light that slipped through the gaps slowly faded, and eventually, the room darkened. The guard had returned a little while before. Without a word, he had tied her hands again, scooped up the empty bowl, left the room, and closed the door firmly behind him. Hearing the lock slide into place had made Caitlyn shudder.

For a while, she had been mesmerized with the fading light, caught in some sort of trance that took her far away from her present reality. It was an escape, of sorts, if only in her mind. But as the darkness loomed, the fear within her expanded.

“What’s going tae happen tae us?” she asked.

When Edan did not reply, she pulled her eyes from looking at the window and gazed at him intently. A part of her needed him to have an answer. He was a laird, a leader of his clan, a mighty and courageous warrior.

He returned her gaze and softened his eyes. “It’ll be all right, Caitlyn.”

It was not the first time he had said those words, and yet, they held little conviction. They did not give her the comfort she sought, no matter his effort. She wanted to press him for more, but deep down, she feared his reply. He could not tell her nothing she did not already know. What good would it do, hearing the truth? She knew the truth. They were prisoners of a madman who had been adamant in making his pleasure at their suffering clear. All they could do now was wait for the inevitable.

Edan shuffled beside her. “We should try and get some rest.”

Caitlyn waited for him to continue, but he said nothing more. He didn’t need to say they were going to need their strength for what was to come. His unspoken words lingered in the air between them.

She nodded, and the two awkwardly lowered themselves down to the cold stone floor. With her hands tied to her waist, she could not even use them as a pillow. Nor had the guards left them a blanket to cover them. As she took a deep breath, feeling the icy cold of the stone pressing against her cheek, she could not help but wonder how she was possibly supposed to sleep.

When she closed her eyes, her mind whirled with wonderings. Where were they? Would they be found? What must be going through her mother and father’s mind at that very moment? What was Effie feeling? Was her family out there searching for her and Edan at this very minute?

O’ course they’re out searching fer ye.

Kieran, Darach and Effie would have rushed back to the castle the moment they discovered her and Edan’s disappearance. Her father would have, in his usual methodical manner, organized a search party, and her mother would be completely distraught. At least she had Effie. No doubt, they would be comforting each other.

Though Caitlyn tried to fight thinking about it, Laird MacTavish’s threat lingered at the front of her mind. The man had leered at her so obviously, his intentions had been written all over his face. It had made her feel sick to her stomach at the time, and as the memory played over in her head, fear threaded through her very being.

Eventually, tucking her legs up into her stomach, like a child comforting itself, Caitlyn tried her best to silence her mind, so sleep would come. The uncertainty of

their circumstances, as well as the low temperature of the room and the freezing cold floor made it nearly impossible. It took a long time to shut out the terrors she imagined she and Edan were going to suffer. But eventually, she did fall into slumber.

A sensation of someone pressing into her back woke her with a start. She was shivering violently from the cold, and upon waking, the sound of her teeth chattering vibrated in her head. But none of that mattered at that moment. All she could feel was fear.

Quickly pulling away from the person who was now close behind her, terror rushed through her, making her shake even harder. MacTavish had returned to make good on his earlier threat. He had waited for Edan to fall asleep, and slipped into the room. The horror of what was about to happen nearly swallowed her whole.

There was no way she could fight him off, even if her hands were not tied. He was too huge and strong. Begging seemed pointless, for clearly, he was a man who took what he wanted with little care for the pain he caused, and Caitlyn was certain he was about to cause her great pain.

She had never been with a man. She had never wanted anyone so much to give herself to them. Now, her innocence was to be stripped away by this huge ogre, and the violation of her body sent her into a panic.

“Please. Nay!” she cried.

“Caitlyn! Caitlyn! ‘Tis all right. I willnae harm ye. ‘Tis only me. Edan.”

Gasping with surprise, relief flooded through her, and with the intensity of the feeling, a tiny sob escaped from her throat. Her body still shook, and no matter how she tried, she could not stop it.

“Hush now. Ye’re perfectly safe,” Edan soothed. “But ye’re freezing. Let me lie beside ye tae keep ye warm.”

A second later, Edan pressed himself into her, only this time, she did not pull away. She felt his bound hands press into the base of her spine, his chest pressed into her upper back, and his legs tightly curled up against hers.

“I wish me hands werenae tied,” he growled. “Then I could wrap them around ye and keep ye warm.”

“It’s all right,” Caitlyn chattered. “Thank ye.”

While she continued to shiver for a good while afterward, the soft heat eventually built between them, and her body warmed beside his. A calming sense of comfort washed over her as Edan lay protectively behind her. As the shivering dissipated, she even allowed herself a smile.

How strange that such circumstances can change a person.

Once more, her eyes felt heavy, and feeling relatively content, under the circumstances, sleep overtook her once more.

“Och, look at these two love birds.”

The mocking sound of the guard roused Caitlyn from her slumber. It took a moment for her to blink her eyes open, but even when she did, she remained where she was, attempting, in some way, to ready herself for what the day was to bring.

When she went to move, a deep ache ran across her back and ribs. Lying on the cold stone floor had stiffened her body. Gritting her teeth, she moved through the pain, but did not make a sound. She refused to give their captors the satisfaction of knowing

she suffered any discomfort.

“Are ye all right?” Edan asked.

By his clear tone, he had been awake a while, and yet, he still lay closely beside her to keep her warm.

“Aye,” Caitlyn lied. “Just marvelous.”

“Right. Come on,” the guard said, stepping forward and yanking her to her feet. Searing pain screamed through her body as he pulled her so abruptly, and Caitlyn let out a yelp. She just could not swallow it down as she had done moments before.

Edan quickly scrambled to a sitting position. “Where are ye taking her?” he demanded.

The guard sneered at him. “I’m sure both o’ ye need tae piss,” he said crudely. “Ye’re nae doing it in here and stinking up the place.” He turned back to Caitlyn, whose body was still struggling to get blood flowing to her legs, and giving her a shove, he growled, “Move.”

She stumbled as he pushed her, but just as she was certain she was going to fall flat on her face, the guard caught her arm. “Stay on yer feet, lass. If anything happens tae ye, the laird will have me head on a plate.”

He walked Caitlyn out of the room, giving her a chance to get a first glimpse of where they might be. The previous night it had been dark, and nothing had been visible. Now, in daylight, she might at least be able to get some idea of their location. But Laird MacTavish was not a foolish man. The windows she passed in the corridor were also boarded up to block the view to the outside. Her eyes flicked from left to right, as they passed another room, before eventually being shoved into the small

closet with a bucket placed in the corner.

“Dae what ye have tae,” the guard growled.

He turned and was about to close the door when Caitlyn cried out.

“Wait. Please.”

Turning back to her, he glared at her with contempt. “What?”

“I cannae dae this with me hands tied.” She gazed down at the reddened skin at her wrists, where the rope had scored it.

He glanced down at her, and then snarled an evil grin. “I can always come in there and help ye,” he sneered.

Caitlyn panicked and hurriedly, she shook her head.

I should have kept me mouth shut!

For a second, the guard stood there just looking at her, and then he took a long stride forward.

“Nay,” Caitlyn cried.

“Stop whining.” His hands moved and worked at the rope, loosening it until one of her hands was free. “Now get on with it.”

When she was done, the guard tied her hands again and marched her back to the room. As Caitlyn lowered herself to the stone floor, the guard grabbed Edan and dragged him out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Edan returned shortly afterwards, but remained standing. The guard glared at him before closing and locking the door behind him. She watched Edan pace back and forth for some minutes.

“What is it?” she asked. “What are ye thinking?”

“I’m trying tae figure a way out o’ this mess.”

“I couldnae see anything outside. They have the windows boarded up everywhere.”

“Aye, I ken,” he replied. “But at least I ken me original assumption was right. We’re being kept in a safe house. Where we are, is the conundrum.”

“Daes it matter?” Caitlyn sighed. “We’re stuck here under the watchful eye o’ those dreadful guards. We’ll never escape.”

Edan stopped pacing and moving across the room, he crouched down in front of her. “Dinnae give up hope, Caitlyn. I promise ye, I’m going tae find a way out o’ here.”

By the determination of his face, Caitlyn could see he meant every word. It should have inspired her with confidence, but it didn’t. The fear of what was to come still overwhelmed her. Nothing more so than what MacTavish had promised to do to her.

Edan turned at the sound of the bolt sliding open. The door opened a second later, and the guard stepped into the room. “Sit down ‘afore I put ye down,” he growled.

Edan did as he was instructed, and with one guard standing watching them at the door, the other walked in with a bowl in his hand. He tossed it on the floor beside them, before bending toward Caitlyn and loosening the rope on one of her wrists.

“Dinnae try anything,” he snarled, when her hand was free. “We’re right outside the

door.” He then turned and left the room.

When she was certain the guard was gone, Caitlyn turned to Edan excitedly. “I should untie ye, and then we can get out o’ here.”

Edan shook his head. “Nae yet. I need more time. So far, I’ve only seen four guards. They’ve taken turns tae guard us, but we havenae been here long enough tae see if there’s anymore.”

Caitlyn looked crestfallen. The idea of having to spend another night in that dreadful place was more than disheartening, and the idea of still being there when Laird MacTavish returned was even more terrifying.

“Hey,” Edan said kindly. “Dinnae worry. I’ll get us out o’ here.”

He kept saying that, but his words did little to ease her worry. How was he going to get them out? If there were more guards, he could not fight them by himself.

“Ye ken, ye’re braver than I gave ye credit fer.” Edan smiled at her. “Many a lass would be hysterical by now. Ye’re a courageous woman, Caitlyn.”

“I dinnae feel very courageous,” she grumbled.

“Take it from me. Ye are.”

She lifted the spoon and scooped up some porridge, bringing it to Edan. He opened his mouth wide and ate it, a sound of satisfaction growling from his throat. She repeated the action, but Edan shook his head. “Nay, Caitlyn. It’s yer turn.”

A little shyly, she took the porridge, and only after tasting it, did she realize how hungry she actually was. “Hm, that’s good.”

At each occasion she lifted the spoon to Edan, he opened his mouth slowly, swallowed the porridge, and then thanked her. A strange sensation swirled in Caitlyn's stomach as she continued. It wasn't hunger, she knew what that felt like. It arose as she watched Edan gazing at her as she fed him. It almost felt like...

Dinnae even think it. This man cannae stand ye, and ye feel the same way. It's just the circumstances, and probably the lack o' sleep.

The guard returned to tie Caitlyn's hands again, and retrieve the bowl. This time he did not utter a word, and turning on his heels, left the room as swiftly as he had entered it.

Caitlyn gazed up at the window a little later, pining for the freedom she had taken for granted for so many years. "I wonder what Faither is doing right now?" she said whimsically.

"If I ken Conor, he'll have every member o' the clan looking fer ye. He'll have stable hands, maids, farmers, anyone he can spare, searching the area," Edan said confidently.

Caitlyn looked at him for a long moment. "Dae ye really believe that?"

Edan nodded. "With every part o' me being. He loves ye, Caitlyn. There's nae a chance he'd risk losing ye."

Caitlyn sighed, wondering when she had last told her father she loved him. It had been too long. She could make excuses. She could say he had been too busy, or that the constant terrors of Laird MacTavish had taken up all his time and attention. But that wasn't the truth. Caitlyn had just not taken the time to say it. It was that simple.

I swear, if we get out o' this alive, I will tell him I love him every single day.

“I’m sorry, Edan,” Caitlyn said, now beginning to understand that this mess was all because of her. “If I’d just stayed inside the tavern, we wouldnae be here.”

“Aye, but if I hadnae teased ye by buying ye whisky instead o’ elderberry, ye wouldnae have been outside at all. So really, ‘tis me fault.”

Caitlyn shook her head. “They would never have come after ye if it hadnae been for me. All this is tae punish me faither. Ye’ve just got caught up in it all.”

Edan shrugged. “That may be, but I wouldnae have it any other way.”

“Och, dinnae talk such silliness,” Caitlyn scoffed. “Nay one in their right mind would want tae be here.”

“Then perhaps I’m nae in me right mind.” He grinned. “But if I had tae dae it all again, I wouldnae dae anything any differently. I’d sooner be here with ye, than let them take ye, and ye be all alone.”

“Aye, of course ye would,” she said sarcastically. “Says the man who daesnae care a wit about me.”

“Ye dinnae believe me?”

Caitlyn could not help but look at him when she heard the pain in his voice. His expression only reinforced his hurt as he looked at her in disappointed disbelief.

“It’s nae that I... it’s just... well, ye ken.” Trying to lessen the offense she had caused, Caitlyn fumbled to find the right words. “It’s just that I never felt like ye cared.”

“Whereas I see it quite opposite, Caitlyn. ‘Tis ye that daesnae care. I might tease ye,

and aye, sometimes, I can take it too far. But never in me life would I ever want tae see ye suffer.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Edan stirred after another cold and uncomfortable night. Once more, he had pressed his body against Caitlyn's to keep her warm, though the necessary heat was not the only thing he had felt as he had lain beside her.

During the day, he had been consumed with finding a way to escape. Once settled for the night, though, his mind had wandered to the strength of the woman who lay beside him. She had denied his observation of her courage earlier, but Edan knew bravery when he saw it.

She had been terrified when MacTavish had leered over her, abusing her ears with his disgusting desires, but not then or since had she broken down or become inconsolable, which was pretty impressive given their circumstances. Pressing his face into her hair, he had fallen asleep, shrouded in the soft scent of rosemary.

The guard arriving sometime later woke Caitlyn, and the same routine as yesterday occurred. They were taken to the privy, and afterwards, given porridge to share. Shortly afterward, the guard had returned, had taken the bowl, and secured Caitlyn's hand. When the door slammed closed, they were left alone again.

"What is he waiting fer?" Caitlyn asked.

"Who?" Edan frowned.

"Laird MacTavish." By her tone, she was worried. "He has us captured here, but what is he waiting fer?"

Caitlyn had a point. This was now their second day of imprisonment. The man had threatened to do them great harm, and yet, they hadn't seen him since. But his lack of presence did not give Edan any hope. The man had a reputation for being evil and callous. He was simply biding his time.

Ye cannae say that tae her.

Of course, he couldn't.

Instead, Edan tried to sound as convincing as he could. "Maybe he's waiting tae hear back from yer faither. If he's sent word that he has us, and he wants yer faither tae pay, nae doubt he'll have given him a time tae dae it."

"Dae ye think he'll pay?" Caitlyn sounded uncertain,

"Och, o' course he will," Edan replied lightly. "I've told ye 'afore, Caitlyn. He loves ye."

While she expressed a small hint of relief, Edan felt nothing of the sort. Perhaps Caitlyn had forgotten MacTavish's plan. Or maybe, denying the fact that the laird had every intention of killing them rather than returning them, was the only way she could cope. Either way, Edan decided not to remind her.

It was not long after that, that the door to the room burst open. And as though they had conjured him up by talking about him, Laird Brendan MacTavish strode in.

Edan immediately stiffened as a mixture of anger and hatred flooded through his body.

The laird turned to the guards who stood behind him. "Get him up."

Seconds later, Edan found himself yanked roughly to his feet and being marched

from the room.

“Nay!” Caitlyn screamed behind him. “Leave him be.”

“Shut up, wench,” MacTavish barked back.

Even in the corridor, he could hear that Caitlyn was not going to give up.

“Where are ye taking him?” she shrieked.

Stay quiet, Caitlyn.

He was worried that her persistence, as brave as it might be, would result in a harsh strike. He heard the door slam behind him, and spinning around in panic, Edan released a heavy breath of relief at the sight of MacTavish.

He was snickering. “Did ye think I might be staying behind tae give her a good seeing tae?”

It was like the man was reading his mind. The guards slowed, giving MacTavish a chance to catch up. “Och, dinnae ye worry. I will. When the time’s right. I might even let ye watch.”

Edan felt sick to his stomach at the delight he heard in the laird’s voice.

“Have ye had her yet?” he continued excitedly. “What was she like? Did she taste sweet? Was she nice and tight fer ye?”

“That’s enough,” Edan barked, feeling even more angry that his hands were tied, and he could not put this man on his back with a hard fist.

MacTavish laughed loud and hard, clearly enjoying the fact that he was getting to

Edan so much. “I’ll bet she is. I’ll bet she’s as sweet and juicy as a ripe plum. I cannae wait tae taste her.”

Not caring that the rope sliced into his thick wrists, Edan yanked at his binding’s with all his might, desperate to get his hands free. The guards tightened their grip, trying to control him as he thrashed back and forth.

“Ye should save yer strength, lad,” MacTavish growled. “Ye’re going tae need it.”

The guards shoved him into another room further down the corridor, and suddenly, Edan stopped struggling. His eyes flew wide, and as the rage left his body, terror swiftly rose in its place.

Lined along a bench that stood against one wall were ropes, sticks, knives, and swords. Several chairs were in the room, as well as buckets of water. Tossed over a beam in the roof, was a noosed rope. The other end of the rope was tied to a metal bracket on the wall beside the large fireplace.

“Aye. Nae so feisty now, are we?” the laird sneered. “I have something special planned fer ye, lad. Something I’m going tae enjoy very much.”

Edan was dragged over to a chair and, with great force, pushed down onto it. When the guards dragged the noose over his head, the coarse rope scratched at the flesh on his face. As they tightened it around his neck, Laird MacTavish paced back and forth, expressing his thoughts.

“I was only telling my advisor the other day, how fortune has shone down on me. My plan would’ve worked with the MacMillan girl alone. But now, I have ye. In some ways, I see it as poetic justice.” MacTavish threw a smirk at Edan. “Ye’re one o’ the reasons MacMillan got so cocky, after all. If ye hadnae agreed tae be his ally, I would have crushed the man long ago.”

“Ye’re gone in the head,” Edan growled. While the fear of what was about to occur sat firmly in his gut, he wasn’t going to let the laird see it. “Conor MacMillan arranged this union years ago with me faither.”

“MacMillan only made that arrangement after refusing me.” MacTavish spat. “Or didnae ye ken that? O’ course ye wouldnae. Sure, ye were still a boy back then.”

Edan growled. “Then he was as wise then as he is now. He made the smart choice. Besides, I ken Conor MacMillan very well, and he wouldn’t join with ye if ye were the last clan in Scotland.”

MacTavish shrugged indifferently. “Perhaps ye’re right. But his stubbornness will be his undoing. Had he agreed tae me terms, I would have let him and his family live. Now, Clan MacMillan and the land it occupies will be mine. But first, I must destroy the man.”

“Laird MacMillan will fight back,” Edan said confidently. “He willnae be overtaken so easily.”

“Even with his daughter slaughtered?” MacTavish snarled. “And what o’ ye? He has been relying on yer support tae strengthen his forces. How will he battle when yer death results in nae union between yer clans?”

Edan’s wedding with Effie had not yet occurred, and thus, the union between the MacLachlan and MacMillan clans had not been finalized. With him out of the way, the lairdship would be forced onto Darach’s shoulders, but even so, there would be no time for any agreement before MacTavish attacked. By his own admittance, his advance would be imminent. Edan breathed heavily, trying to control his rage. For all his evil tactics, Laird MacTavish was a clever man.

“Nay, Laird MacLachlan,” MacTavish continued in Edan’s silence. “I believe ye’ll discover that the death o’ his youngest daughter will break the man. Learning o’ yer

demise will destroy him so much, he'll nae have the heart tae fight. It will be an easy win."

The laird was clearly very pleased with himself, for the smugness was written all over his face. "Now, tae make certain o' our victory, and tae ensure I sustain as little loss o' me men as possible, I want tae ken the chinks in MacMillan's armor. I want tae ken all the weaknesses in his army, and ye're going tae tell me."

"Go tae hell," Edan spat.

MacTavish chuckled and walked across the room. Bending at the waist, he curled back his top lip, narrowed his eyes and glared at Edan, his face not an inch away. "Och, I've been there, lad. I've been there many times," he said, his low, gravelly voice sounding more dangerous than ever. "And believe me when I tell ye, by the time I'm finished with ye, ye'll be begging tae go there too."

Before Edan had a chance to notice the laird retracting his arm, air propelled from his body as his huge fist collided with Edan's stomach.

MacTavish stood and paced around Edan's chair like a lion stalking his prey. "Tell me what I want tae ken, and this will go much easier fer ye."

"Then it looks like I'm taking the harder route," Edan growled.

"Very well."

A second later, the noose tightened around Edan's neck, and he found himself yanked into the air. Gasping for breath, his legs kicked beneath him, the rope cut into his throat, and he could feel his eyes bulging from his head. He hung there for likely less than a minute, and then felt himself falling at great speed. The chair had been moved, and his knees buckled as his feet hit the stone floor. Agonizing pain shot into his knees as his full weight landed on them.

Someone tugged at the noose to loosen it, and Edan opened his mouth, gulping in great gasps of air, while at the same time, coughing and choking. He was still coughing and spluttering when he felt the guards lift him to his feet.

“Tell me what I want tae ken,” MacTavish said.

Edan swayed a little, trying to balance himself, but shook his head. A right hook caught him across the jaw, sending him sprawling across the floor. The coppery taste of blood seeped into his mouth, and he spat it out. Once more, the guards lifted him to his feet.

“I’m only getting started, lad. Are ye sure ye want tae put yersel’ through this?”

Edan nodded. He would die there if that’s what needed to happen, but there was no way he was going to betray the MacMillan clan. How could he, knowing what MacTavish planned? He’d be better off dead, rather than know he had caused any part of the MacMillan’s downfall.

“Very well, lad. But dinnae say I didnae warn ye.”

The punches and blows continued, but Edan, even in pain and agony, remained tight-lipped. MacTavish was determined he could break him, but there were things about him that the laird did not know. Like the fact that this was not the first time he had been tortured.

James MacLachlan, Edan’s cousin, was a weak man of little character. He also had a terrible gambling habit. Worse still, he was a dreadful card player. He had left Scotland many years before to seek fame and fortune in the warmer and more arid climates of Spain. Every so often, Edan would receive a letter from him. It was usually a begging letter disguised as correspondence, but Edan had never sent him money.

A while back, Edan had received yet another letter from his cousin, or so he thought. However, it had not been from him. The letter described how James had lost a rather hefty amount of coin to a huge and wealthy family in Castilla. James had been kidnapped, and would not be released until his debt was paid.

For good measure, and to state the seriousness of their conviction, they had sent one of James's fingers with the note. The letter promised more of James's body parts if they did not receive their money. A weak man, James might be, but he was still family.

Knowing he was being held against his will, Edan had organized a small group of his men and rushed to Spain to save him. He had no intention of paying what was owed, and instead, managed to free his cousin from their clutches. The family, however, did not give up so easily, and in a turn of events, captured Edan. They spent two weeks torturing him, before James and Edan's men had been able to gather enough support to charge the house and free Edan from the hell he had endured.

MacTavish used similar tactics; Edan was punched, whipped, kicked, struck, cut, and nearly drowned him, along with the occasional hanging. It was relentless. MacTavish had been at him for several hours when, covered in Edan's blood, he staggered back breathlessly. He had given him his all, but Edan, as weak as he now felt, had not broken.

His left eye had swollen so much, it had closed over completely. Coppery blood was all he could taste in his mouth. His throat was dried and ragged from the systematic choking, and though he was injured in other places over his body, he was nearly too exhausted to feel it.

"Tell me what I want tae ken, ye bastard!" MacTavish panted.

Edan could barely see or hold his head up. He had been knocked unconscious too many times to count. Nor could he stand. Currently, he sat slumped in a chair, the

noose still hanging around his neck, wondering when the world would go black again.

“Me laird,” a calm voice Edan didn’t recognize, seeped into the room. “I dinnae think ye’re going tae get any sense out o’ him now.”

MacTavish muttered a reply that Edan could not hear, and then he said. “Get him out of here.”

If Edan had been capable of feeling anything, a sensation of relief might have washed over him. But he was too exhausted to even feel that. He winced as the guards grabbed at him with little care, dragging him off the chair with great effort because he could barely support his own weight.

Desperately trying to put one foot in front of the other, he stumbled ahead, swaying from one side to the other while his head lolled forward on his chest. As they reached the door, MacTavish stopped in front of them, halting them in their tracks.

“Dinnae think this is the end, lad,” he growled. “Today was just the beginning. I will break ye. I will wear ye down until ye tell me what it is I need tae ken. Only then, will I let ye die.”

Even if Edan had a reply, he could barely speak to give it. Nor did he have the capability to acknowledge what the laird had said. He was in too much pain, too tired.

MacTavish remained standing in the way, waiting for Edan to speak. When he realized Edan could give him nothing more, the laird finally stood to the side. “Get him out o’ me sight,” he spat.

The walk down the corridor and back to the room seemed to take forever. The guards groaned and huffed, struggling to carry his weight as Edan’s feet dragged across the floor, unable to support himself.

“Get the door,” one of them grunted when they finally reached the end.

Edan heard the bolt slide across, and then the door was kicked open. The sound that followed pierced him to the very bone, for upon seeing him, Caitlyn screamed in despair.

“Oh, me god! What have ye done tae him? Ye bastards. What have ye done tae him? Oh, me god.”

While he could not see her, he knew she was sobbing through her words as she wrenched them from her body. He could imagine what he looked like, he just didn’t particularly care. What bothered him, even through the pain and exhaustion, was the fact that she was suffering such anguish. Her pain was palpable, and he was helpless to comfort her. He had tried, since their capture, to reassure her that things would be all right, but he could not do it this time.

He felt himself being lowered to the ground. At least the guards did not throw him, which was a surprise. Then Caitlyn was screeching at them again.

“Bring me some water. Bring me some water right now. Are ye animals? Dae as I tell ye.”

One of the guards murmured something back, but Edan didn’t hear it. The door closed, and a second later, Caitlyn was beside him on the floor. With her hands bound, she struggled to place his head onto her lap. But Edan knew what she was trying to do, and with the last bit of strength he had, he lifted his head and dropped it onto her legs.

The door opened again, but at this point, Edan was slipping. The voices seemed distant, as though his whole body was floating above and away from them.

“Ye think I’m going tae escape and leave him like this? He cannae walk. Untie me

hands this minute.”

Inside, he smiled weakly at Caitlyn’s feistiness, but not for long, as he was just too tired. MacTavish had tried to break him, and now he needed to rest. No number of strikes or blows or attacks to his body would make Edan betray the MacMillan Clan. He had held fast, and he would continue to do so. As long as it was his body that took the pummeling, he could handle that.

There was only one way MacTavish could get Edan to talk. One way that would convince him to tell every single thing the laird wanted to know. He would spill his guts and more, if he had to. That way was right there, staring MacTavish in the face. Edan could only hope the man didn’t figure it out before he and Caitlyn managed to get out of there.