



Her Sister's Highlander

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Category: Historical

Description: "Whatever this is, it has tae stop, it isnae right. Ye are supposed tae be marrying me sister."

This Scot is everything Caitlyn Macmillan loathes in a man – arrogant, rude and undeniably attractive. Oh, he's also her sister's fiancé. And when theyre kidnapped together, well, things cant get worse...

Until she realizes shes falling for him.

Edan MacLachlan harbors a secret: he's been in love with Caitlyn for years. However, when she becomes a target in a game of power, hes compelled to confront his buried feelings... complicating his plans to marry the Macmillan's clan eldest daughter.

Caitlyn and Edan know that love always comes at a price. And for Caitlyn, that price might mean losing her sister forever...

It was a curse, watching the one she loved marrying her sister!

This is a Historical Scottish romance novel of more than 400 pages. STANDALONE story, No cheating, no cliffhangers, and a guaranteed happily ever after. Scroll up and GET IT NOW!

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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 for?" Caitlyn asked.

"Who?" Edan frowned.

"Laird MacTavish." By her tone, she was worried. "He has us captured here, but what is he waiting for?"

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.

CHAPTER SIX

The guard looked from Caitlyn to Edan and back again. He heaved a sigh, and then crouched down to her. He loosened the knot on the rope, freeing one hand. But one free hand was all she needed.

“Thank ye,” she said, still struggling to swallow her sorrow.

He nodded brusquely and then left the room.

“It’s all right, Edan,” Caitlyn whispered. “I’m going tae take care o’ ye now, everything will be all right.”

But Edan didn’t answer.

Her eyes gazed at his chest, and in the light of the flickering flame of the candle, she watched it rise and fall slightly. He was still alive, barely.

“Dinnae give up on me now, Edan. Please. Stay with me.”

Dipping the cloth into the water, Caitlyn gently started washing the dried blood on his face. The more blood she removed, the clearer she was able to see the wounds he had sustained. A deep gash above his left eye looked vicious. She determined she would come back to the cuts and gashes when she had washed the excess blood away.

Edan also had a deep gash across his cheek bone and two cuts, one on his upper lip and one on his lower lip. Blood had also dried at the base of his nose. MacTavish had

evidently left no part of his face untouched.

Bastard!

“What did he dae tae ye?” she whispered tenderly.

She had heard each sickening strike, one after the other, and the immediate cry or groan falling from Edan’s lips. There were times she heard nothing at all, but then Edan would begin coughing and spluttering, as though he were being choked.

Tucking her legs under her chin, she had sobbed at the sounds of torture that went on and on. Rocking herself back and forth in some sort of self-soothing motion, Caitlyn’s heartache had been immense, the sick feeling in her stomach rising at the dreadful sounds.

She had wanted to cover her ears, but her hands were bound tightly to her waist. Ye ought nae tae cover ye ears, even if ye could, she had reprimanded herself. It’s yer fault he’s here. Why should ye suffer any less than he?

And suffer she had. For hours.

She gazed down at the many scars on his body. All these years, she had thought him an arrogant ass, a showy man who cared only for himself. She knew of his other qualities, of course; his bravery, his courage, his loyalty to his men and his clan.

But in the room next door, he had neither been protecting his clan or his own men. She had heard his demands loud and clear, and based on the fact that MacTavish had continued the horror for so long, Caitlyn deduced that Edan had not told Laird MacTavish anything he wanted to know.

She could not imagine herself holding out for so long. As much as she loved her

father and her mother, Caitlyn knew deep down that she would not be capable of enduring the torture Edan had experienced.

As she continued to wash the blood from his face, that thought concerned her. What if she were next? What if Edan didn't break, and MacTavish tried her instead?

The thought sent a wave of terror through her, swiftly followed by a sense of disappointment. If she gave in, everything Edan had suffered would be completely pointless.

With Edan's face and neck now thoroughly cleaned, Caitlyn dipped the cloth into the water again to concentrate on the gashes. The liquid was now a dark red hue, but it would have to do. She hardly imagined the guards would be willing to give her fresh water.

The gash above his eye was deep and raw. While the blood in the wound was still moist, it was no longer flowing. When Caitlyn dabbed the cloth onto it, Edan suddenly jerked and hissed.

"Ah," he groaned.

Evidently, the pain she was causing had roused him from his unconscious state.

"Och, Edan. I'm sorry."

"It's all right," he murmured.

"I'll be as gentle as I can," Caitlyn said, continuing to clean the gash.

Edan hissed and clenched his teeth as she pressed the cloth against his raw, open skin. When she had finished with that one, she continued with the cut on his cheek. It

elicited the same wincing and jerking.

“I dinnae want tae hurt ye,” she whispered. “Truly, I dinnae. I’m so sorry.”

Astonishingly, Edan glanced up at her with his barely open eye and gave her a lopsided grin with his swollen lips. “Aye, I believe ye,” he said.

Caitlyn had tried so hard to repress her emotion so far, but at that reaction, a tiny sob escaped from her throat. Maybe it was relief that Laird MacTavish had failed in breaking him. Maybe it was simply the fact that Edan was stronger than she could ever have imagined him to be.

“Hey,” he said gently. “I’m the one who should be crying here. Look at me face? What if all lasses run away now when they see me?”

Entwined with the sob, a jerky laugh left her mouth, releasing even more tension from her body.

He smiled and then winced, but pushed through the pain. “That’s better.”

Rinsing the cloth again, she dabbed the now grubby rag across his swollen lips. Those wounds seemed to be healing a little quicker than the others, but Edan’s grimace betrayed how painful they were.

“Where else are ye injured?” Caitlyn asked.

“It’d be easier asking where I’m nae,” he said, surprising her with yet another smile. “But dinnae worry about me. I’ll be as right as rain on the morrow.”

“Aye. Sure ye will,” Caitlyn said sadly.

“Ye dinnae have much confidence in me, Caitlyn,” he said wryly.

“I have plenty o’ confidence in ye. More than ye can ken after today. But ye’re badly injured, Edan, and ye need tae rest.”

“Dae I actually hear kindness in yer voice?” He teased. “Well, wonders will never cease.”

“I’m so sorry,” Caitlyn said, that familiar pain tightening in her throat once more. “This is all me fault.”

“Och, it isnae yer fault, Caitlyn. Well, aye. All right. It probably is.” He grinned up at her again, clearly forgetting his wounds, and then winced loudly.

“Ye see what being a smart arse gets ye,” she quipped back.

“And there she is. Me feisty companion.” He gazed up at her for a long moment. “Thank ye fer looking after me. I might have been done fer had ye nae been here.”

“Ye wouldnae be here at all if it wasnae fer me.”

“Och, will ye stop talking about yersel’,” he said. “It’s all me, me, me.”

Caitlyn couldn’t help it. A giggle trickled from her lips as she held Edan’s head gently with her hand.

“Tell me the truth,” Edan said. “Am I a complete ogre now? Will I have tae walk about with a sackcloth on me head, so I dinnae scare away small children?”

Caitlyn shook her head. “Nae,” she said gently, wanting to reassure him, even though she knew he was trying to cheer her up. “Ye’re as stunningly handsome as ye always

were.”

Edan raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Ye think I’m stunningly handsome?”

Caitlyn gazed down at him tenderly. “I always did,” she said gently.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Five days had passed since the first torture session. Laird MacTavish had not returned the following day, which had given Edan a reprieve. There was not much time to recuperate, but one day was better than nothing. The laird, however, returned the day after that, and the torture commenced as before.

Edan held his ground, though the second time was far harder. Not only because he knew what was coming, but for the fact he was already injured to begin with. Before he had been dragged into that room again, he had told Caitlyn he was fine, though he was certain there was damage to his ribs. He couldn't really examine his body, being bound all day and all night and when Caitlyn had offered to look, he had refused.

She was worried to death as it was. The damage to his face had distraught her enough. She didn't need to see any more bruises, swelling, or cuts. Even though he had tried to keep them from her, however, he had struggled to stop small winces escaping his lips whenever he moved.

"Ye are more hurt than ye're telling me," Caitlyn had deduced.

She had always been a clever lass.

"I'll be fine," Edan had replied. "There's naething he can dae tae me that will break me, Caitlyn. Ye dinnae have tae worry about that."

"What?" she had balked. "Ye think I care if ye break or nae? What kind o' person dae ye take me fer? If I thought ye would listen tae me, I'd tell ye tae spill yer guts tae the

laird. If it would make him stop hurting ye, I'd tell ye tae dae it."

Her words had surprised him a little. He could not have imagined that was what she had been thinking. And while he understood why she would say such a thing, he had shaken his head firmly. "I cannae dae that tae yer family."

"Exactly," she had countered. "That's exactly why I havenae said anything. I ken ye well enough, Edan MacLachlan. I ken ye're brave and courageous and loyal. I ken ye will suffer anything tae protect me faither and me clan."

"It's the right thing tae dae."

"Even if it kills ye?" Caitlyn had cried.

Edan had dropped his head. "I cannae bear such a responsibility on me shoulders. If I talk, everyone dies. It would be me fault, and I cannae live with that."

"And what if everyone dies even if ye dinnae talk?" she had asked. "What if we die, even if ye dinnae talk?"

"Then, I'll die with me pride intact," Edan had said solemnly. "I'll leave this life kenning I did all I could dae tae prevent it."

The second day of torture was as bad as the first, and then he was dragged back to the room where Caitlyn sobbed at the state he was in. She demanded water that time, too, and nursed his wounds with her tender touch.

When Edan regained consciousness again, it was daylight outside. Blinking his eyes open, the first sight he saw was Caitlyn. With his head in her lap, he gazed up at her and noticed that her eyes were closed and her head had fallen forward. It took another second to realize that she had fallen asleep sitting upright against the wall.

Clearly, she had not wanted to disturb him. As painful as it was, he smiled warmly up at her. Captivity teaches you a lot about a person, and he was certainly learning a lot about Caitlyn.

He was about to wake her when he stopped himself. She had taken care of him the night before in his delirium. Clearly, she was exhausted and needed the rest. Besides, he couldn't imagine she would have got much sleep in that awful position. Instead of disturbing her, he gazed up at her, watching the soft rise and fall of her bosom.

His eyes scanned the long, brown hair that hung beside her sunken, grubby cheeks. Neither of them had been given an opportunity to wash since they had been taken captive, and one meal a day was hardly filling their bellies. Against his wishes, Caitlyn had been giving him more porridge, telling him he needed the strength for what he was being forced to endure. Edan had tried to argue with her, but she had argued back. Seeing she had been the one wielding the spoon, there was little he could do about it.

He took in the rest of her face, her delicate tiny nose and her soft, relaxed lips. She really was a beautiful woman. A woman who did not deserve to be here. A woman who was being punished for the 'sins of her father', how Laird MacTavish had described it, at any rate. It wasn't right, nor was it fair, but right and fair did not seem to be in Laird MacTavish's vocabulary.

A dull ache in his ribs eventually forced him to move, and when he did so, a slight wince left his lips. Immediately, Caitlyn took a steep breath in and opened her eyes.

Damn it!

As annoyed as he was at himself for waking her, he still gave her a lopsided grin, mainly because his lips were too swollen to smile properly without causing him pain. "Morning, sleepy head."

Caitlyn yawned and looked toward the window. “Is it morning?”

It was a good question. Edan had no idea. But the guards had not yet come in and woken them up to take them to the privy or give them breakfast, so it must be.

“I’m guessing so.”

Caitlyn took a long look at him, her eyes scanning over his wounds. After a moment of thorough examination, she said, “Yer eyes and lips are less swollen today.”

“I’m fine,” he replied.

“Aye. Course ye are.” She took in a big breath and sighed heavily.

Something about that sigh felt more ominous than usual.

“Are ye all right?” he asked, still looking up at her.

She half-grinned mirthlessly. “Ye mean apart from the fact we’re living on borrowed time and are soon tae be killed fer MacTavish’s pleasure?”

Edan smirked. “Aye. Apart from that.”

“Well, there is something else,” she said, her tone laden with something Edan couldn’t quite put his finger on.

“What?”

“Ye dinnae remember?” Her eyebrows lifted.

He shook his head, and immediately winced. “Nay,” he breathed through the pain.

“Today is the day ye’re meant tae be marrying me sister,” she said carefully.

Edan’s eyes flew wide at her remark. “Me god!”

Caitlyn nodded. “I was thinking about it last night, when ye were moaning in yer sleep.”

“Is it a dreadful thing that I have forgotten all about it?” Edan said, feeling guilt well up within him.

“Och, ye cannae be blamed, Edan. Ye’ve been fighting fer yer life. But I suppose the wedding will never take place. We’re never getting out o’ here.”

With agony as he moved, Edan struggled with much grunting and panting to sit himself upright. It took far longer than he would have liked, and he knew the damage to his ribs was now worse than before. When he finally righted himself, he inched closer to Caitlyn, taking her fingers in his own.

“Dinnae think like that, Caitlyn,” he said, a little breathless from all his efforts. “We’re going tae escape. I promise.”

“How?” she balked. “I mean, look at ye. That bastard has all but killed ye. Now we ken why he only has four guards here. He kent he was going tae pummel ye so badly, ye wouldnae have the strength tae escape.”

He couldn’t argue with that, but nor was he willing to give up. Not now. In fact, Caitlyn was right. His survival depended on them getting out, for he didn’t know how much more brutality he could endure.

“Listen tae me,” Edan began. He was about to continue, when the sound of the sliding bolt on their door silenced them, making them both sit up a little straighter.

When the morning routine was over, and the guard retrieved the empty bowl, Edan felt his eyelids grow heavy again. The lack of sustenance, along with the torture, was weakening him day by day.

“Ye need tae rest. Lay ye head upon me shoulder,” Caitlyn said.

“I should stay awake in case MacTavish comes back.”

“Ye ken he’ll wake ye at any rate. Ye might as well try and get some rest while ye can.”

Edan nodded, and positioning himself a little lower, he leaned against Caitlyn and rested his head. As his eyes closed, he thought of Effie. He wondered what she might be thinking at that moment, given it was supposed to be their wedding day. As his body relaxed, and his breathing slowed, a final thought ran through his mind before sleep overtook him.

If we get out o’ here, I need tae call the wedding off. I cannae marry Effie. Nae now. Nae after all we’ve been through.

Caitlyn’s trembling body roused Edan from his sleep. The room was dark, and clearly, the day had passed with no sign of MacTavish. Maybe he needed as much rest as Edan.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, pushing himself up from Caitlyn’s shoulder.

The room was cold, but Edan was certain that wasn’t the reason for her trembling. They had acclimatized to the temperature to a degree, and for the last few nights, their body heat had kept them as comfortable as they could make it.

“Can ye nae hear it?” she whispered, a tremor in her voice.

Edan listened then, and heard a howling wind blowing against the window. The boards rattled with the strength of it, and Edan deduced that a storm was coming.

“Ye dinnae like storms?” he asked, sounding a little surprised.

“The wind terrifies me. It has done since I was a little girl.”

Edan instructed her to lie down, and as he had done every night, he tucked himself closely in behind her. “’Tis all right, Caitlyn. I’m right here with ye.”

She still trembled for a while, and trying to give her more comfort, Edan blew his hot breath softly against her neck in an effort to calm her and keep her warm.

The wind thrashed against the window, and the rattling boards made it difficult to sleep, but Edan did not feel tired anyway, having slept for most of the day. He could hear a frenetic rushing sound as the wild wind blew through, what he imagined to be, trees close by.

Perhaps we are being kept in a dense wood, or forest.

“Can I ask ye something?” Caitlyn said sometime later.

Edan thought she was sleeping, and the fact that she was still awake surprised him.

“Anything,” he replied.

“Why did ye force Aengus Lamont tae break off our betrothal?”

Edan sighed. He couldn’t have imagined that would have been her question. Had he known, he might have been a little less open in his reply. He was willing to answer most things, but not that. She was suffering enough. He just couldn’t cause her such

hurt now.

“’Tis best ye dinnae ken,” he said plainly.

“But I want tae ken,” she said.

“Well, I willnae answer ye, Caitlyn. Now try and sleep.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

We have tae find a way out, even if we die trying.

Caitlyn stared at the door in a mindless trance. The painful hunger pangs now told her when the guards would arrive. One meal a day was simply not enough, and though hunger often stopped her from sleeping, the pain was much worse in the morning. She and Edan had now been captive for just over ten days. She had been counting them, in some way, to save her sanity, but her ragged, filthy dress told her how weak she had become, for it now felt much looser on her body.

Edan was in far worse condition. The torture had been brutal, but that hadn't stopped him from trying to protect her when MacTavish had made his advances.

Yesterday, the laird had tried to kiss her but she had sunk her teeth into his hand, eliciting a strong backhanded slap across her cheek that had stung more intensely than anything she had felt before in her life. Edan had screamed at the laird, which had earned him a punch in the side of his head. Things were going from bad to worse, and Caitlyn truly believed that they did not have much time left.

When the door opened that morning, Caitlyn shook with fear. Edan was still sleeping, and she feared what MacTavish might do. Relief flooded through her at the sight of one of the guards carrying their usual bowl of porridge. At least they had never laid a finger on her.

"Get up," the guard said, kicking Edan's feet.

While Edan struggled to waken and right himself, the guard untied her hand and dropped the bowl on the floor beside her. He left the room as swiftly as he had entered it. It was the way now. Everyone knew the routine. It only changed if MacTavish arrived.

Caitlyn grabbed the bowl and shuffled herself over to Edan, but he seemed preoccupied with something else entirely. With a frown, she leaned forward to see what he was doing, when she suddenly felt a rush of heat bloom on her cheeks.

“Just give me a minute,” Edan whispered.

But by the bulging mass that sat between his legs, Caitlyn imagined he was going to need more than a minute. He was desperately trying to readjust himself, which was nearly impossible, for with his hands tied at the waist, he couldn’t reach that far down.

Clearly, he had been dreaming about something that pleased him, maybe Effie, and he had woken in an aroused state.

“For goodness’ sake,” Caitlyn huffed, feeling completely mortified. “Hurry on with it. The guard will be back soon.”

“I’m sorry. Just give me a minute.”

Caitlyn noticed his face was now bright red, likely both with embarrassment and effort. The more he struggled, the more mortified she felt having to sit beside him and watch. No matter what way he positioned himself, he could not adjust his... arousal.

This cannae be happening.

While she looked away, Edan continued to fight with his bindings, nearly falling over

with the effort.

“Och, fer heaven’s sake,” Caitlyn cried.

Edan actually began to laugh, though Caitlyn was certain it was more from humiliation than anything else. Even so, the situation was so ridiculous, she found herself wanting to laugh with him.

“Can I dae it?” she said, no longer able to deal with the discomfort.

“What?” Edan balked.

Waving her free hand, she said, “I can dae it fer ye, because this situation is getting too embarrassing with ye fidgeting.” Though even the suggestion made her cheeks beam even brighter.

Clearly embarrassed, Edan hesitated at her suggestion. “Ye cannae... it’s nae right.”

“Och, well. We should just wait until it goes down all by itself then,” she hissed sarcastically.

“Caitlyn.”

“Just let me dae it, it’ll take nae more than a second and we forget about it forever,” she demanded.

Edan threw his head back and heaved a sigh. “Fine.”

Looking down at his groin in fear, Caitlyn hesitated.

“It’ll nae bite ye,” Edan said, struggling to hold back a chuckle.

Mortified at his words, Caitlyn hurriedly leaned over and pressed her hand against the bulge. She didn't know what to expect, but she was surprised at how solid it was.

Edan closed his eyes as she pushed at it to the side.

“Dinnae dae that,” she spat. “Ye’re nae meant tae be enjoying this.”

He grinned. “I cannae help what I feel, Caitlyn.”

“Ye are unbelievable.” And with a harder shove that made Edan jerk a little, she finally pressed his hardness down between his legs, pulling her hand swiftly away.

For a long moment, neither of them said anything. They just smiled nervously and looked away. Caitlyn, however, was experiencing a strange feeling in her stomach that had completely replaced the feeling of hunger. It felt like an ache, and while unfamiliar, it was not unpleasant. It was that fact that unnerved and annoyed her.

“Let us never speak o’ this again,” she growled.

Edan chuckled then, annoying her even more. “O’ course.”

“Nay! Nay!” Caitlyn screamed.

Even with her hands still bound, she tried to fight MacTavish off, but he shoved her onto the stone floor and lifted her skirts, putting the full weight of his huge body on her, crushing her beneath him. He tried to kiss her while his hands prized her legs apart.

“Nayyy!” she screamed again.

She felt someone pushing at her body from behind as she screamed.

“Caitlyn! Caitlyn!”

The voice sounded far away, but she felt another shove in her back.

“Caitlyn, wake up. Wake up!”

With immense effort, she blinked her eyes open. Her heart thumped in her chest, and she panted with terror, too breathless to speak. Light peeked through the boards at the window, and MacTavish was nowhere to be seen.

“Caitlyn. Talk tae me. Are ye all right?” Edan said, his voice much clearer now.

The nightmare felt so real, she was now shaking from head to foot with the dread and horror of the memory of it.

“It’s all right. I’m here. Tell me what happened?”

But Caitlyn did not want to speak of it. She shook her head and swallowed a sob. Tears trickled across her cheeks, and as hard as she tried, she could not stop herself from crying.

“Och, me darling,” Edan whispered soothingly. “Ye’re safe now. Ye’re here with me.”

She heard shuffling and Edan grunting behind her and imagined he was sitting up. She then felt his fingers caressing her hair.

She sobbed for a little while longer, until eventually, the emotion was drained from her body. Still, she could see that bastard on top of her, crushing her, forcing her legs apart. Shaking her head to try and rid herself of the image, she pushed herself to sit up.

Now beside Edan, and with her back to the wall, she cleared her throat. “Tell me something,” she pleaded. “Anything tae get these thoughts from me head.”

“What thoughts?”

“I dinnae want tae talk about it,” she cried.

“All right. All right,” Edan said soothingly. Turning his body closely into hers, he took hold of the sleeve of her dress. “Then I will tell ye something ye have never kent about me.”

Sniffling, Caitlyn frowned. “What?”

“When we first met as children, I liked ye from the moment I laid eyes on ye.”

“What?” Her jaw dropped in utter astonishment, and reeling from his remark, Caitlyn could only stare at him. “But... but, ye were so wicked,” she gawked.

“I ken. And I also ken it wasnae fair.” He shrugged, and then said, “But I had me reasons.”

“What reasons?” Caitlyn pressed. “Ye spent years teasing me, fighting with me, doing wicked things. Ye made me life a misery.”

Edan sighed and nodded. “I ken that too. I remember it all.”

“But why, Edan. Ye’re nae making any sense. If ye liked me, why treat me so horribly?”

For a moment, he was quiet, and then, he said. “I ken ye dinnae understand, but it was me way o’ coping. I couldnae have ye, and so, I found my solution tae stay away.”

“But ye didnae stay away. Ye just tortured me.”

“I never meant tae make yer life a misery, Caitlyn. I’m sorry about that. Maybe a part o’ me wanted ye tae hate me. It made it easier, but only a little. Believe me, it was harder fer me than it was fer ye.”

“I doubt that.” She smirked.

Edan smiled, but it wasn’t his usual grin. It was a soft, sad smile. “These last couple o’ weeks have only reminded me o’ what I’ve always desired, but could never have.”

Still reeling from his disclosure, Caitlyn could hardly believe what she was hearing. In fact, she still couldn’t imagine it to be true.

“Ye mean, me?” she breathed, needing him to confirm it.

“Aye, Caitlyn,” he gazed at her with soft eyes. “I mean ye.”

Edan was so very close to her now, she could feel his warm breath on her cheek. These last couple of weeks had done things to her too, though the feelings she had tried to repress were not from years ago.

She had witnessed an entirely different side to Edan MacLachlan. A side that had always been there, but she had chosen to ignore. Being captive with long hours of doing nothing, she had spent a lot of time thinking of all he had suffered for both herself and her family. Everything she had felt about him before their capture had dissipated. Now, she could only see the courageous, resilient, brave man who had always been there.

“Ye were always the one, Caitlyn,” Edan whispered.

When he bent his head toward her, Caitlyn did not pull away. That same pleasant sensation swirled in her tummy, like a powerful waterfall raging within her. She leaned her head toward him, and just as their lips were about to brush, the hard cold sound of metal sliding open shocked them into pulling swiftly apart.

Shaken out of the reverie that had captivated her, Caitlyn sat bolt upright as the door flew open. To her relief, it was a guard that stormed in, and not Laird MacTavish. Thinking about the horrid man made her shiver as her nightmare flew back into her thoughts.

In fact, she realized that the laird had not been near them for the last couple of days. It had given them both some reprieve. Edan had been given a chance to rest and heal from the pummeling the laird seemed to take such pleasure in giving.

But his absence made Caitlyn curious, and as the guard helped her to her feet, she said, “Has the laird given up on us?”

He sneered. “Ye should be grateful he’s been away. But he’ll be back in a few days. Dinnae worry. He hasnae forgotten about ye.”

A few days.

That was the best news she had heard in a while. As he dragged her out of the room and down the corridor, she could feel the relief washing over her. The guard untied her hand and opened the closet, pushing her inside. Caitlyn was crouching over the bucket and doing what was necessary, when she heard whispering voices just outside the door.

A breathless voice said, “They’re gone. All o’ them. Someone didnae close the stable door last night.”

“Well, get the stable hand tae help ye.” It was the guard who had brought her from the room.

“There’s too many. He cannae dae it alone. We need tae go after them. If the laird finds out we’ve lost our horses, he’ll have our heads on spikes.”

“Fine. Ye three go. I’ll stay here,” the guard said.

“Can ye handle them?” the breathless voice asked worriedly.

“Och, away with ye. It’s a girl and a cripple. Now go, and hurry up.”

A moment later, silence resumed. Caitlyn could only assume that the other three guards, those who had been watching over them this entire time, were now running in the direction they thought the horses might be.

This is our chance. It might be our only chance.

Excitement and terror ran through her in equal measures. Edan could not help her. He was still bound. If they were to escape, she would need to do this on her own.

What if I fail?

She pushed that thought aside. She would sooner die trying than not try at all. Edan would likely not survive another session with MacTavish. If she did not do this now, the laird would surely kill them anyway.

Think, Caitlyn.

As she wondered how to best take advantage of this opportunity, Caitlyn tried to think of a way to overpower the only guard left. He was too strong for her to fight.

There had to be another way.

The guards have dirks tucked intae their belts. If I can just get tae it.

“Are ye done?” the guard barked from outside.

Caitlyn jumped at his unexpected intrusion. “Aye. I’m coming now. Just a minute.”

Hurriedly, she loosened the rope on her tied hand, but positioned it in such a way that it looked like her wrist was still bound. If this was going to work, she was going to need both hands.

Opening the closet door, she stepped out and positioned herself to his right. Clearly, he thought little of it, and grabbing her arm, marched her forward. A little way up the corridor, she began to sway from one side to the other, moaning a little, and lifting her free hand to her head.

“What the hell’s wrong with ye?” he growled.

“Och, I feel dizzy,” Caitlyn moaned.

In that same moment, she pretended her legs had given way, and leaned heavily into him.

“What the devil?” he barked.

Her lack of balance forced him to use both his hands to support her, which is exactly what she wanted. Swiftly regaining her equilibrium, Caitlyn reached for the dirk, pulling it out of his belt.

“Hey!”

But before the guard had a chance to stop her, she drove the dagger into his side, over and over again in a frenzied attack. Maybe it was fear, or the terror, or pure desperation, but by the time she had finished, her hands were covered with blood.

“Och, me god.”

The guard lay on the ground beside her, and for a second, she stared at him in utter shock. Is he alive? Dear God, did I kill him? Her body began to shake in realization that she might have just murdered a man, and her feet seemed to be planted to the floor.

Move, Caitlyn. Move now or ye’re going tae die here!

She listened to that little voice inside her head, and with forceful effort, lifted one foot and then the other, until eventually, she was running toward the room she had been held in for all this time.

Bursting through the door, she saw Edan jump with fright. He glared at her; his eyes wide. His stare fell to her hands as they shook in front of her. She was still gripping the knife, the warm blood on her skin.

“It’s all right, Caitlyn. Come tae me. Come on. Bring the dirk tae me.”

CHAPTER NINE

Once Caitlyn had cut Edan free, he immediately wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into him. “Ye’re so very brave, Caitlyn.” As he felt her body shake against his, he held her even tighter. “It’s all right. Ye’re safe now.”

While he would have liked to stand there and comfort her until she stopped shaking, there was simply no time. Taking a step back, he lifted her chin and forced her to look at him.

“We have tae go now. Are ye ready?”

Caitlyn nodded, though with her eyes wide, and clearly in shock, she looked far removed from his gaze. Wrapping his arm around her shoulders, he hurriedly took her out into the corridor. As they stepped over the guard, Caitlyn gasped, but Edan covered her eyes and guided her.

“Dinnae look.”

He had no idea what had happened to the other guards, and in her quivering, shocked state, there was no point in asking. Instead, he concentrated on getting them out. Moving through the building, they passed the closet they had used as a privy, and turning left, they followed the corridor.

Seeing what appeared to be a rear door ahead, he tried the handle. To his relief, it wasn’t locked, and hurrying Caitlyn outside, the two squinted at the bright light. It had been weeks since they had seen daylight. They stepped out into a backyard of

sorts, and with a glance back over his shoulder, Edan confirmed his deductions to be correct. They had been kept in one of MacTavish's safe houses.

Up ahead was a dense wood with tall trees. He looked up at the thick branches, and imagined it was those same trees that had caused the loud rushing sound he had heard on that stormy night.

"We need a horse," he murmured to himself.

"They're all gone," Caitlyn said absently.

"All gone?" Edan did not stop walking towards the woods, his arms still around Caitlyn's shoulders, keeping her close by his side.

"Aye. That's where the other guards are. The horses escaped out o' the stable, and three o' them went tae find them."

A lack of a horse was going to make their escape more difficult, but there was nothing he could do about it.

"Then we'll stick tae the woods. They'll hardly be looking among the trees for missing horses."

They walked for some time, clambering over broken branches, and pushing through overgrown bushes, until eventually, they came upon a small stream running through the towering trees that surrounded them. Edan took Caitlyn to the river and washed the blood from her hands. She had spoken not one word since telling him where the guards were, and he was certain she was still in shock.

Aimlessly, letting him do as he wished, she sat beside him as he doused her hands in and out of the water. Even the stark cold of the stream did not rouse her from her

trancelike state. She did not look at what he was doing, and instead, stared around about her, like she was dreaming.

They continued on, Edan ever alert to noises around them. But in the hours that followed, he heard no shouting, or in fact, any noise made by man. Birds sang, and branches moved with flitting squirrels, but the two of them were the only people there.

It was late afternoon when they reached a small village. Perhaps there was a tavern where they could rest until the following day. They were miles from Caitlyn's home, and they could certainly not carry on in their current condition. The closer they approached, however, the more wary Edan became. They might have walked for hours, but he could not know if MacTavish's guards or MacTavish himself might be in the area.

Surely, their absence would have been discovered by now, and he could only imagine the guards, in fear of what Laird MacTavish would do to them, were in a desperate panic trying to locate them.

Turning to Caitlyn as they came upon the first house on the periphery, he said, "Stay here. I want tae check it's safe first."

"Nae!" Caitlyn cried, gripping his shirt sleeve tightly. Her eyes were wide and full of terror. "Dinnae leave me. Please, Edan. Dinnae leave me."

"All right, Caitlyn," he said soothingly, taking his hand and wrapping it around hers. "I'll nae leave ye. Come on."

They walked through the village carefully, Edan's head swiveling back and forth, ever alert to those around him. They received strange looks, which, given their state, came as no surprise. He was still wounded, and no doubt, his pummeled face alone

was cause for concern. His clothes were blood spattered and dirty, and Caitlyn was not much different.

Arriving at the tavern with no threat from anyone nearby, Edan left Caitlyn at a table. Keeping her in his line of sight, he spoke to the landlord.

“We’ll need a room and a meal.” He slid a large clan ring from his finger and handed it to the burly man. “We also need fresh clothes, and a horse for travelling tomorrow.” He nodded to Caitlyn.

The landlord lifted the ring and eyed it carefully. It took him a moment, but eventually, he said, “Aye, all right. Go over there and I’ll bring ye something tae eat. I’ll send my wife out for new clothes. She’ll leave them in yer room.”

“Could ye kindly bring the food into our room. And dinnae tell anyone who asks that yes have seen us.” The landlord nodded. “And a bath,” Edan added, as an afterthought.

Glancing at the state Edan was in, the landlord frowned. “Looks like ye’ve had a hard time o’ it.”

“Ye could say that.”

The landlord handed them a key and accompanied them upstairs to their room. It was small and sparse but seemed like a palace to them.

The food arrived a short while afterward. A huge bowl of steaming stew with freshly baked bread. “Now, that’s a meal,” Edan said, lifting his spoon.

Caitlyn seemed to have come out of her shock a little. “And now ye dinnae have tae put up with me feeding ye.”

He gazed over the steam emanating from his food, his eyes pinning on hers. “Sure, that was me favorite thing.”

Her eyes widened a little, clearly surprised at his remark. A blush rushed to her cheeks, before she dropped her gaze and concentrated on the bowl before her.

As they ate, two servants prepared a fresh, hot bath waiting for them. Clean, new clothes were laid out on the bed.

Nodding to the tub, Edan said, “Ye first, Caitlyn. I’ll go and check if the landlord has managed tae find us a horse.” He turned toward the door.

“Dinnae leave me, Edan. Please,” she begged.

Edan looked back, noticing Caitlyn’s fearful expression. “This isnae a good idea, Caitlyn.”

“What dae ye mean?”

“Me being here while ye bathe.”

“Why?”

He tilted his head knowingly. “Ye ken well, why.”

Her expression told him he did not need to explain his concern any further. Their captivity had changed the dynamics of their relationship, and they both knew it. As tempting as it was to stay, he could already feel the excitement crackling between them, just being in the same room.

“All right,” she said timidly.

She turned away from him and began to undress, but just as he was about to reach for the handle of the door, her body began to shake.

A heavy sadness washed over him. Gone was the carefree, easy-going lass she once was. She had suffered an immense ordeal. Unlike him, her life had been sheltered, safe behind the castle walls under her father's protection. It was going to take a long time for her to get over what had happened to her. She was going to need a lot of care. And there he was, about to leave her alone.

Ye cannae dae it. Ye cannae leave her now.

He knew he couldn't, and instead, he turned and took a step back into the room.

"I'll stay with ye, Caitlyn. Dinnae worry. I'll nae let any harm come tae ye."

Caitlyn glanced over her shoulder and smiled sadly. Edan then turned and moved over to the bed and sat with his back to her.

Listening to the water splashing against her skin was torturous to say the least. With little to occupy his mind, his thoughts wandered, and he struggled to contain them. Only that morning, they had sat so very closely together, him comforting her after her nightmare. Never in his life had he imagined he would ever tell Caitlyn how he felt about her over all these years. He had resigned himself to the fact that he would have to marry Effie, and from that time on, had made a concerted effort to remain faithful to that arrangement.

Indeed, there had been times he had been cruel to Caitlyn. But his cruelty had served another purpose. It had kept her at arm's length, and saved him from going quite mad. But these last two weeks had weakened all such previous resolve. Their close confinement had only shown him more fine qualities of the woman he had forced himself to stay away from. It was harder to stay away when confined to one room.

Even worse, had been the ordeal she had suffered. In his protecting her, he had only grown closer to her, both physically and emotionally. What they had suffered, they had suffered together, and in some ways, it had formed a bond stronger than anything that could have happened without it.

“I’m finished,” Caitlyn said, her words breaking into his thoughts. “The water is still hot.”

Edan stood and cautiously turned to look at her, fearing he might find her in a state of undress. He was just not certain his self-control was strong enough for that. But she had dried herself, put on the new shift, and was pulling her frock over her head. Edan began taking off his boots and socks, but hearing a sob from across the room, he spun his head to look at Caitlyn again.

She had managed to tangle herself up in the laces, and she was beginning to panic as she had been bound for such a long time. Clearly, being bound again was having an adverse effect.

“Wait. Let me help ye.”

Striding across the room, he tugged the frock up and off her head, pulling the laces out of Caitlyn’s hair. Her face had been full of panic, but she showed relief once she was free of the dress.

“Now. Lift yer arms above yer head,” he said gently.

Like a child, Caitlyn did as she was told. She looked so vulnerable as he carefully placed a sleeve over each arm.

“Bend yer head forward,” he continued.

She followed his instructions, and, carefully, making sure the laces were far away from getting caught again, Edan pulled the frock down over her body.

“There,” he said, gazing down at her tenderly.

Caitlyn looked up at him with wide, grateful eyes. Neither of them moved or said a word, and as much as Edan knew he ought to walk away, he found himself bound to the spot, right there, not a foot away from her. Her full, soft lips were slightly parted, and her breath danced upon his chest. His stomach twisted, his heart thumped, and giving in to all the years of denial, he cupped her cheek with his hand and lowered his mouth to hers.

CHAPTER TEN

She knew what was about to happen, but Caitlyn did not step back. After all she had suffered, she wanted to feel Edan's touch. She needed to feel his touch. A desperate ache in her stomach yearned for his protection, and as his lips met hers, she felt a depth of safety that had been missing for weeks.

Breathlessly, she floated as his lips pressed against her own. Holding her at her waist, he pulled her body against his. It had been such a long time since she had been kissed, but as Edan slipped his tongue inside her mouth, this felt nothing like the chaste embraces she had shared with Aengus in the small time they had been together. His tongue roved about hungrily, only exciting her more. Her stomach tumbled, her heart thumped, and spinning out of control, she could barely catch her breath.

But then, Edan's hunger lessened, and with his tongue retreated, he kissed her tenderly, lightly, and then slowly, he pulled away. Still gazing down at her breathlessly, he growled, "Ye cannae imagine how long I have wanted tae dae that."

His voice was thick and full of passion, whereas, Caitlyn could hardly find hers. Instead, as each second passed, guilt welled up in her for what they had done. Edan was Effie's betrothed. How could she do this to her own sister?

"The water's getting cold," was all she managed, and stepping past him, she avoided his eyes.

After darkness fell, they ate a late supper before retiring. When it came to the

sleeping arrangements, Edan suggested he take the floor, but Caitlyn would not hear of it.

“Absolutely nae,” she said determinedly. “I think we’ve spent enough time sleeping on hard, cold floors, dinnae ye? The bed is large enough fer the two o’ us. We’ll share it.”

Edan gave her a careful look. “Are ye sure?”

She knew why he was asking, but instead of acknowledging it, she just shrugged it off. “It’ll be grand.”

The following morning, Caitlyn awoke to find herself wrapped in Edan’s arms. Too tired to pull away, she took a deep breath in. He bent forward and kissed her forehead.

“Ye had another nightmare last night,” he said softly.

She remembered it well. MacTavish. Again .

“I tried tae waken ye. Ye opened yer eyes fer an instant, but then ye fell straight back tae sleep. Are ye all right?”

His voice was soft and tender, and once again, Caitlyn could feel that strong pull toward him. But immediately following her desire, and in stark contrast, was the knowing that what she felt for Edan was wrong.

“This has tae stop, Edan,” Caitlyn said, catching him off guard.

She knew he was trying to look after her. He had done nothing else for the whole time they had been prisoners, but even as she lay in his arms, she knew they were in

dangerous territory.

“Whatever this is has tae stop. We’ve suffered a dreadful ordeal together, but ye’re still supposed tae be marrying me sister. This isnae right.”

“Caitlyn...” he begged.

“Nay, Edan. Ye have tae listen tae me. I already feel dreadful fer dragging ye intae this mess. What MacTavish made ye suffer was horrific, and the sounds that came from that room that will haunt me fer a long time tae come. I’ve caused enough damage. I willnae add tae it by ruining yer betrothal tae Effie.”

While she was speaking, Edan was stroking her hair. Even now, when she was trying to be vigilant in her stance, the sensation sent shivers across her skin.

“I would dae it all again if it would mean ye wouldnae be left alone,” he murmured. “But more than that, Caitlyn, there’s something I have tae tell ye.”

Swiftly pushing herself up in the bed, Caitlyn shook her head. “Nay,” she cried. “Dinnae say it. Dinnae say the words.” Somehow, she just knew he was going to tell her how he felt about her. “Please, Edan. If ye say it, everything will change. I dinnae have the strength right now tae deal with me own heart.”

He gazed at her steadily with soft eyes. “All right, Caitlyn. I’ll nae say it. But at some point, we need tae talk about it.”

“But nae now,” she confirmed.

“Nae now,” he agreed.

They arrived back at her father’s castle by midafternoon. When the guards saw them

approaching, a lot of shouting began, and by the time their horse reached the gates, her whole family were running to meet them.

Her mother and father embraced her tightly, with tears trickling down their faces. Effie, too, wrapped her arms around her, while Kieran stood to the side, looking more than concerned. With her head pressed against her father's chest, Caitlyn watched as Darach held his brother in the same heartfelt and relieved embrace. Edan turned a little and caught her looking, and for a second, their eyes locked.

"We thought ye were dead," her mother cried, when Caitlyn was eventually released from her parent's tight clutches.

Effie was on one side of her, and her mother was at the other, both of them asking questions as they made their way back to the castle.

"Me dears," her father interrupted them. "Caitlyn has suffered a traumatic ordeal. She needs our love and attention at this time, nae an inquisition."

Effie and her mother apologized, and wrapped their arms around Caitlyn once again.

Edan approached Laird MacMillan and, walking beside him, said, "We need tae arrange a meeting with the council immediately."

"Ye're injured, lad. I think it best ye get looked at first," the laird said calmly.

"Me laird... Conor," Edan replied. "I was far worse than I am now. I need tae brief ye on MacTavish's plans. 'Tis o' the upmost importance."

With a final glance at Caitlyn, her father brought his attention back to Edan. "Very well. Kieran?"

“Aye, me laird,” Kieran said from a few steps behind.

“Rouse the council. We will meet in the great hall immediately.”

“Aye, me laird.”

Entering the castle, the men marched in the direction of the great hall, while Caitlyn’s mother and Effie guided Caitlyn down a different corridor.

“Are ye hungry? Have ye eaten?” her mother asked. Her worried expression only deepened as her eyes scanned Caitlyn’s waiflike frame.

“I’m fine, Maither. I’m just tired.”

“Then come tae me bedchamber,” Effie beamed. “Ye can rest in me bed. I cannae believe ye and Edan are actually home. We thought ye were...” Her sister trailed off.

“Now, Effie. Remember yer faither’s words,” Lady MacMillan warned.

Upon reaching Effie’s bedchamber, their mother pulled back the heavy covers of Effie’s bed. “Come, me dear. Get in here.”

“Och, I couldnae sleep now, Mother. Edan and I managed tae rest in a tavern last night after we escaped.”

“Get intae bed anyway. We’ll nae leave ye,” she said, smiling kindly.

Caitlyn was surprised that, once she clambered into the bed, Effie crawled in on one side, and her mother crawled in on the other. Both sat close, her mother wrapping her arm around her shoulders.

While Effie gushed at Caitlyn and Edan's return, Caitlyn's guilt rose. Her sister had been worried sick, as one might expect. And how had Caitlyn repaid her? By kissing the man she was supposed to marry.

Effie and Lady MacMillan talked in general of what had been happening in the castle in Caitlyn's absence. Clearly, following her father's directive, they steered clear of her capture and what might have occurred while she had been a prisoner. Caitlyn tried to pay attention, but instead, her mind wandered.

We are home now. I cannae allow anything more tae happen between me and Edan. It isnae right. Besides, things will surely go back tae normal. 'Tis only because o' the extreme circumstances that we did what we did.

Even as those thoughts raced through her mind, she knew she was lying to herself. Edan had feelings for her, and she for him. Thinking their death was imminent every single day had only pushed them closer. How was she now supposed to go back to normal life? How was she supposed to quash her feelings, when she would see him every day for as long as he remained at the castle?

Much later, when Effie and her mother had fussed over her, bathed her, brushed her hair, and dressed her in fresh clothes, they went down to the great hall for dinner. The huge room was packed with people, chattering, and laughing, but Caitlyn jumped with fright as her arrival caused a great cheer from them all.

"It's all right, Caitlyn," her mother calmed, holding her arm warmly. "I'm right by yer side."

At the high table at the far end of the room, her father and all the men were already seated. As Caitlyn approached, she caught Edan gazing at her. A soft smile danced upon his lips, but afraid that Effie might see, Caitlyn cast her eyes away.

When they were all seated, Laird MacMillan stood and gave a grand speech, talking of Edan's bravery and Caitlyn's courage. Edan had clearly told him exactly what had occurred, particularly regarding their escape, for he spoke of details he could not know otherwise. He regaled the cheering crowd with how courageous Caitlyn had been in... murdering the guard, and only for her bravery, she and Edan had escaped. But at his words, the dead guard's body flashed into her mind, and she felt suddenly breathless. No one seemed to notice. Everyone seemed far too busy shouting in delight at what she had done.

The food was served after that, and while everything looked delicious, Caitlyn did not feel at all hungry. She ought to be ravenous after eating only one measly meal a day. Perhaps it had something to do with still being able to see the guard's blood on her hands.

Beside her, Effie sat next to Edan, fussing over the cuts and bruises that were still very apparent on his face. The same cuts and bruises Caitlyn had tenderly cleaned and cared for in that dreadful room. As hard as she tried to fight it, she could not help but feel jealous.

Is this how it is going tae be? Am I tae be tormented fer the rest o' me life as I watch me sister take care o' him?

Edan was evidently not enjoying Effie's fussing, and continued pulling away from her when she tried to kiss him. He was trying his best to make his excuses, but Caitlyn knew the real reason. As hurtful as it was, she had to admit Edan's behavior was, in part, her fault. She was wondering how on earth she was supposed to cope, when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Ah," she cried, jumping up from her chair in fright. As her hand shot out, she knocked over her glass of wine, spilling it all over her dress. No more than a few seconds later, Edan was by her side.

“Caitlyn,” he gasped, grabbing her arm. “Are ye all right?”

By this time, Caitlyn had realized her overreaction, and now felt utterly foolish. A maid, who had been the one to gently tap her shoulder, remained standing there with a plate of bread. She looked both stunned and terrified.

Caitlyn looked at the young lass. “I’m so sorry.”

“Nay, miss. ‘Tis I, who am sorry,” the lass said, still looking distraught.

“Ye are safe, Caitlyn.” Edan said calmly. “We’re home now. Nae harm can come tae ye here.”

“I ken. I’m sorry. I’m fine,” Caitlyn rambled. “It was silly o’ me.” Looking down the table at all her family staring at her, she shook her head. “I’m so sorry. I didnae mean tae ruin yer dinner.”

“Ye havenae ruined anything, child,” her father said, looking at her with kind sadness. “This is only tae be expected. Ye’ve been through a great deal.”

“Aye.” Caitlyn nodded.

She felt overwhelmed, and seeing all the eyes of those in the hall were upon her, Caitlyn needed to get out.

“I need tae change me frock. I’ll nae be long.”

Her father nodded, and without waiting for anyone else to say anything, she left Edan standing there and hurried from the great hall, trying her best to ignore the sympathetic smiles and glances of those she passed.

Having no intention of going to her bedchamber, Caitlyn rushed out into the gardens of the castle. Her favorite place, before her dreadful experience. She opened her mouth and gasped in great gulps of air. When she felt satisfied she was not suffocating, she moved toward a tree and leaned upon it.

“Yer faither is right,” Kieran’s voice came from behind her, making her jump again. “It’s all right, Caitlyn,” he said, approaching her and taking her hands in his. Kieran was a giant of a man, and her hands were swallowed under his calloused fingers. “What ye’re experiencing is entirely normal. But I promise, it will pass.”

“What if it doesnae pass?” Caitlyn cried. “What if I’ll never be the same again?”

“Ye will,” her cousin soothed. “I can help ye rebuild yer confidence. Though, I have tae say,” he smiled wryly, “when Edan told us how ye killed that guard, I couldnae have been prouder o’ ye.”

“Ye shouldnae be proud o’ me,” Caitlyn barked. “I dinnae think I did any great thing. I killed a man.”

Kieran looked at her carefully. “Ye killed a man who was holding ye prisoner, Caitlyn. He wasnae a good man.”

“That doesnae make me feel any better here.” She tapped her fingers against her heart.

“I ken, lass. Sometimes I forget how innocent ye truly are. I’ve blamed mesel’ since ye were taken. I should have been out there with ye when ye stormed out o’ that tavern. It was a foolish mistake on me part.”

“Ye couldnae have kent,” Caitlyn said. “Naeone could.”

“After the attacks we’d had from MacTavish, I should’ve been more careful. More wary.”

“It wasnae yer fault,” she replied. “I was foolish tae run out by mesel’. Me actions caused Edan tae get taken and tortured, and I still have tae find a way tae live with that.”

“Och, Edan’s tough enough.”

“That’s nae the point.”

Kieran gazed down at her with an inquiring expression. “Things have changed between ye and Edan. The last I saw ye, ye hated each other.”

Caitlyn was wary of Kieran’s words and slight change of subject, and could not help but wonder if he had picked up something no one else had.

“I suppose two weeks in captivity with each other will dae that,” she said vaguely.

“Aye,” he said slowly. “I suppose it will.”

For a long moment, he didn’t say anything else, and then lowering his head to catch Caitlyn’s eye, he said, “Ye ken ye can tell me anything, dinnae ye, Caitlyn? If ye ever need tae talk, I’ll be there fer ye.”

She nodded. “I ken.”

“Ye’ve been through a lot. I’ve always been there fer ye, and this isnae any different. There’ll be nay judgement. Nae fer anything,” he said pointedly. “Just a listening ear.”

“Thank ye, Kieran,” Caitlyn whispered.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A fter bidding all goodnight when supper was over, Edan retired to his room. He was weary after the hectic day, but the rampant thoughts in his mind would not let him rest. While the earlier meeting with the council lingered, it was not the imminent threat from Laird MacTavish that caused him such unease.

Laird MacMillan had informed him earlier in the council meeting that as time had passed after he and Caitlyn had been taken, they were all beginning to lose hope.

“Please tell me ye didnae send any ransom money,” Edan had said.

“O’ course we did,” Conor had replied. “The man had me daughter and me future son-in-law. Dae ye really think I was going tae sit on me hands and dae naething?”

Edan had sighed and shook his head.

“I would have made the decision anyway, but when we received the ransom note, Effie lost her mind. She’s been in quite a state these last two weeks. The thought o’ losing ye and her sister at the same time, nearly drove her mad.”

He had witnessed Effie’s enthusiasm with his own eyes when they had sat down to eat. It was the first time he had really seen her since their return given that, immediately after the council meeting, Conor had been adamant that Edan visit the castle healer so he could have his injuries looked at.

Guilt had sat heavily in his stomach as it became glaringly obvious that he was

nowhere near as pleased or enthused to see Effie, as she was to see him. And then, there was that incident with Caitlyn. He had not been able to help himself. It was now a natural reaction to jump to her aid. When he had heard her distress, he had suddenly found himself at her side.

Now, as he paced back and forth across the thick rug in his bedchamber, he struggled with the confusion between logical thought and the pull of his heart.

What am I supposed tae dae? Pretend that all is the same? Live a lie? Marry Effie and live in misery?

After a while, it all became too much, and hurrying from his chamber, he strode down the corridor, and thumped on Darach's door.

"Braither." Darach frowned upon opening it. "Ye are nae yersel'."

Edan stepped into the room, and once Darach closed the door behind him, Edan shook his head. "Nae, Darach. I am far from it. Ye've always been the smarter one between the two o' us, and I need yer advice."

"Sit down," his brother gestured to the tall-backed chairs at the large open fire. "I'll get us a drink."

Once settled, Edan poured out his heart, telling Darach everything that had occurred. Even the kiss he and Caitlyn had shared in the inn. Darach wisely remained silent throughout, listening to every word his brother spoke. When Edan finally finished, he felt both exhausted and relieved, as though he had unburdened a great weight from his shoulders.

Eventually, he looked at Darach directly. "What am I tae dae? Am I truly an awful human being fer me dreadful treachery?"

Darach looked at Edan carefully. “Are ye an awful human being fer protecting and taking care o’ Caitlyn while ye were in captivity?”

“That’s nae what I’m asking.”

“Nae. It’s what I’m asking,” Darach said.

“I did what I had tae dae. Like anyone would.”

“Ye both suffered a terrible ordeal, Edan. Ye both thought ye were going tae die. Each day was a gamble o’ whether it might be yer last.”

“Are ye telling me me feelings are nae real? That I’m only feeling this way because o’ what we went through?”

Darach shook his head. “We both ken that isnae the case, braither. Yer feelings fer Caitlyn have been suppressed fer many years. And as much as ye’ve tried tae keep yer distance, and I ken ye have, ye cannae help how ye feel.”

“But surely, it isnae right,” Edan countered.

“The heart doesnae think in right and wrong. In fact, it doesnae think at all. It feels. Ye’ve spent yer whole adult life ignoring yer heart. Sooner or later, it was going tae fight back.”

“If it’s from me heart, surely I’m supposed tae feel good about it,” Edan growled. “This guilt is eating me alive.”

“Ye have had a long fight on yer hands. All these years, ye’ve been protecting Caitlyn as well as yersel’. Ye even let her hate ye fer breaking the betrothal between her and Aengus Lamont, rather than hurting her by telling her the truth about the

man.”

“That was necessary.”

“Perhaps, but only because ye didnae want tae hurt her.” Darach shrugged.

“I hurt her either way. She even told me that I’d made her life a misery since we were children.”

“Well, I cannae disagree with her there.” Darach grinned. “Ye were a torture. But again, ye had yer reasons. Ye were nae always like that. Dae ye nae remember when ye first met her?”

Edan nodded. “I dae.”

While Darach took his glass to refill it, Edan’s mind wandered back to a memory he had revisited many times.

It had taken three days to travel across the glens to reach the MacMillan clan lands. Edan and Darach, as boys of fourteen and twelve respectively, had entertained themselves with games on the journey, but Edan was still relieved when they finally arrived.

Laird MacMillan greeted them warmly and led them into a large drawing room. He was speaking to Edan’s father when a young, pretty lass came rushing in. She was shocked to see the room occupied, and quickly turned on her heels to run from the room. But Laird MacMillan called her back.

“Come here, Caitlyn.”

The young lass turned and shyly walked back, stopping beside her father.

“I’d like tae introduce ye tae me daughter. Caitlyn MacMillan.”

Edan knew, from discussions with his father, that this visit was not just a social occasion. The lairds were arranging a future union with their children to strengthen their clans. They were there to introduce the children to each other, and to build rapport for their future betrothal.

Edan had no idea what to expect upon their arrival, but as he gazed at the shy girl standing so close to her father, his eyes widened, and he felt a strange feeling in his stomach. She was so very pretty. Her face had tiny features, and her hair was long and glossy, hanging down over her shoulders.

So mesmerized was he, that he didn’t realize his father had asked him a question. This made Darach chuckle, and his brother nudged him teasingly in the ribs.

“I beg yer pardon, Faither?” Edan said, quickly recovering.

“I said, why dae ye nae go with Caitlyn and let her show ye around the castle? Laird MacMillan and I have some things tae discuss.”

Caitlyn clearly looked terrified at this suggestion, but Edan knew his father wanted them out of the way. “O’ course, Faither.” Turning to Caitlyn, and wanting to put her at ease, Edan said. “I’ll bet there’s some great hiding places here, arenae there?”

This made Caitlyn smile widely, and then she nodded.

“Why dinnae ye show me and Darach some o’ yer favorites?”

“All right,” she said quietly. Her voice suited her person perfectly, for it was gentle and soft.

Over the next hour, Caitlyn took them to hidden corridors, tunnels, and secret alcoves all around the castle. With Edan's kind approach, she slowly came out of herself, even laughing when he made a joke or two. Darach gave his brother a few knowing glances, but Edan ignored them. He didn't want to frighten Caitlyn, for she was such a delicate thing.

By the time they returned, Edan felt excited. If this was the lass he was going to marry, perhaps his future was not going to be so bad after all. They found their father in the drawing room, but Laird MacMillan was nowhere to be seen. Caitlyn bid her farewells, and flashing Edan a wide smile, she turned and left the room.

"Well, what dae ye think?" his father said. "The castle is a fine place, is it nae?"

"It is, Faither," Edan said emphatically. "The MacMillan's appear tae be very good people."

"I'm glad ye think so. The lass who will be yer betrothed when ye're older will be here shortly. I'm eager fer ye tae meet her."

Edan took a step back, and looked more than a little confused at his father's words. So surprised was he, that he struggled to speak.

"Is Caitlyn MacMillan nae going tae be Edan's betrothed?" Darach blurted, clearly as shocked as his brother.

"Nay, nay," their father said, shaking his head. "Caitlyn is the younger sister. Ye will be marrying Effie. Her older sister."

Edan felt the world shift beneath his feet, and still reeling, he could only stare at Darach. Gone was his younger brother's earlier teasing. In fact, Darach looked crestfallen on Edan's behalf.

It was not long after that, that Edan came to a firm decision. While Effie had been pleasant and as kind as her sister, she was not Caitlyn. She was, perhaps, even prettier than Caitlyn, but that made little difference to Edan. There had been something about Caitlyn that had drawn him in. Perhaps her softness, kindness, or her gentle smile.

But the arrangements had been made, and as a young man, he was powerless to stop them. He had to protect his heart. Allowing himself to get close to Caitlyn would make his life a misery, and thus, instead, he made a determined effort to keep as much distance between them as possible.

“Here, take this,” Darach said, handing Edan the refilled glass. “Ye look like ye need it.”

“Thank ye, braither.” Edan took a sip and then gazed over at Darach. “I have hardly had a chance tae ask ye how ye are.”

Darach smirked. “Far better than ye, braither. Though, yer disappearance did have me worried. When ye and Caitlyn didnae return tae the inn, it was Kieran who noticed first. When we came tae look fer ye, ye were nay where tae be seen. It was only when I asked passersby if they’d seen anything that we came tae discover ye’d been taken.”

“I should have fought harder.”

“We hurried back tae the castle tae alert the laird, and after that, all hell broke loose.”

“Ye would never have found us.”

“Aye, I ken that now, but we didnae ken that at the time. Laird MacMillan had every able person out searching. Kieran took me and a group of his best soldiers, and we searched for days. It was hopeless, o’ course. Anyone we met had nae clue what we were talking about, and in the end, we were forced tae return.”

“I’m sorry tae have put ye through so much trouble, Darach.” Edan sighed.

Darach pinned him with a steady gaze. “Ye are me braither, Edan. Ye ken I would give me life fer ye.”

Edan nodded. “And I fer ye, brother. Thank ye fer all yer efforts.”

“Efforts that came tae naught in the end.”

“But ye still tried,” Edan countered.

“When MacTavish strikes, and he will, his men will be coming up against a lot o’ angry clansmen after what he put the MacMillan’s through.”

“Good,” Edan growled. “He and his army will deserve everything they get.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Several days later, Caitlyn and Effie sat in the castle gardens on a warm afternoon, enjoying the sounds of the wind softly blowing through the trees, and the birds singing above.

“I will admit,” Caitlyn said, “I didnae think I was ever going tae see these gardens again.”

“What was it like?” Effie asked. “The place ye were imprisoned, I mean?”

“The escape is all a bit o’ a blur, but I think they held us in a house somewhere miles from nowhere. We were locked in a single room with nae furniture. Our hands were always bound, and we were made tae sleep on the floor.”

“Och, Caitlyn,” Effie cried, placing her hand on her sister’s arm. “That sounds dreadful.”

“It was.”

“I dinnae ken how ye survived it. Fer a certainty, I would have gone quite mad.”

Caitlyn smiled at her sister. “I think ye might have dealt with it better than I, Effie.”

“Och, nae.” Her sister shook her head. “Though I would have given those guards a piece o’ me mind.”

Caitlyn laughed and nodded. "I can believe that too."

A moment later, Lady MacMillan came out to join them and the moment Caitlyn felt her mother's sweet aroma of lavender, she felt calmer. Safer. "Why am I nae surprised tae find ye two out here?" she smiled.

"Ye ken the gardens are Caitlyn's favorite place, Maither," Effie smiled. "We were just talking about the place she and Edan were captured."

Lady MacMillan grimaced a little. "On such a lovely day? Surely, ye can find something more pleasant tae talk about. Why dinnae ye tell Caitlyn yer plans fer the wedding?"

Effie beamed with delight, and turning to Caitlyn, she gushed. "Och, I think ye will love what I have planned, Caitlyn."

While Caitlyn smiled, she felt her heart sinking, but determined not to allow the feeling to show, she desperately pushed it aside and tried to give her sister her full attention.

"I have decided tae have the wedding in the gardens," she said excitedly. "Now the weather is warmer, it just felt that this beautiful area would go tae such waste if we held the gathering in the great hall."

"That sounds wonderful," Caitlyn replied, doing her best to swallow her envy. If she and Aengus had ever married, it was where she would have wanted to have her own wedding. Of course, her envy had little to do with Aengus.

"Now ye and Edan are returned," Effie continued enthusiastically, "Faither has already begun tae make arrangements, so I am hoping," she pressed her hands to her breast, "that I willnae have tae wait much longer."

“Once Edan gives the word,” their mother added.

“O’ course.” Effie nodded. “I ken he is nae quite himself yet. Nor are his injuries fully healed, but surely it willnae be long.”

“Yer cousins from Glencoe have sent word back that they will be attending, as have Great Uncle James and his wife, Lillian,” Lady MacMillan said. “The castle will be bursting at the seams.”

Effie excitedly bounced up and down on her chair. “I am so excited; I can hardly contain meself.”

Their mother laughed, and Caitlyn smiled at her sister’s excitement. She wanted to be happy for Effie, she truly did. She was her closest companion and best friend, but beneath the smile, Caitlyn was awash with sadness. Soon, she would not only lose her sister, who was her best friend, but she would lose Edan to her. She supposed the only solace from their union would be the fact that Edan and Effie would return to Edan’s clan lands. At least then, she would not have to see them together every day.

A week had passed since they had returned to the castle. Edan felt stronger now that his wounds were healing, but he could not help but notice that Caitlyn was avoiding him. On each occasion he had tried to see her, she had ensured she either swiftly left the room if alone, or kept company close by in the way of her mother, Effie, and even Kieran.

It was beginning to drive Edan mad, and short of breaking into her bedchamber at night, he had struggled to figure out a way to see her. His luck changed that morning, however, when he overheard her telling a maid to fix her a bath.

Waiting until he knew she was in the bathing rooms alone, Edan quietly turned the handle and slipped inside.

“What the devil are ye doing in here?” Caitlyn hissed, glaring at him, while at the same time, pulling her robe tighter around her.

It was clear she was wearing nothing beneath it, for he could easily see the soft shape of her breasts pressing against the cloth. The sight of her form made his groin twinge, which didn’t help at all.

“Ye have forced me hand, Caitlyn,” he whispered back, careful to keep his voice low. He moved across the room to get away from the door, and came to a stop a few feet away from her. “I ken ye have been avoiding me. Why will ye nae speak tae me?”

“Ye ken well, why. Dinnae play the fool with me. I cannae believe ye’ve lowered yersel’ by sneaking in here.”

“Ye’ve given me little choice,” he countered.

“There is naething tae talk about,” she huffed. “What we did was wrong. What we feel about each other is wrong. Whatever is happening between us is wrong, and me heart cannae take it.”

“Can we at least talk about it?”

“Aye, we can talk,” she hissed. “Ye can tell me why ye havenae given me faither or Effie a date fer the wedding yet.”

“Come on, Caitlyn. Ye ken why,” Edan said, slumping his shoulders. “I cannae marry Effie. Nae anymore.”

Her eyes widened at his reply. “Ye are calling it off? But ye cannae. What happened between us was a mistake. Ye cannae dae this.”

He could continue arguing, but standing so close to her in her undressed state, his self-control had waned. Taking one step forward, he grabbed her by the waist, pulled her into him, and pressed his mouth hungrily down onto hers.

For a second, Caitlyn struggled, but only a second. After that, she melted into him, grabbing his shoulders and pulling him tighter into her. His tongue roved about in her sweet mouth, tasting her, relishing her, hungry after such a long gap from the last time he kissed her.

He felt himself harden as her breasts pressed against his chest. He wanted so much to rip that robe off her body and explore every part of her, right there in the bathing rooms. He was just beginning to lose himself in the euphoric feeling of bliss, when the sound of approaching steps alerted him.

Caitlyn quickly pushed him away. “Hide,” she whispered breathlessly. “Ye must hide.”

He stood there a moment longer, just gazing into her eyes with passion.

“Edan,” she cried. “The maid will be here any second.” Shoving at his shoulders, she pushed him behind the vanity screen and tossed some of her clothes over it, so he could not be seen between the gaps.

“This is a good hiding place. I could stay here and watch ye bathe,” he murmured, lifting his eyebrows mischievously.

“Ye are?—”

The door opened behind her, and Caitlyn suddenly shut her mouth and spun around. Edan could see the maid entering through a tiny gap, her hands full of linen towels.

“Now, me lady. Let us get ye intae the bath afore the water gets cold.”

“I’m nae quite ready yet, Milly,” Caitlyn replied, an obvious panic in her voice.

Milly looked at her and seemed confused. Throwing her hand out to Caitlyn, she said, “But, me lady. Ye are undressed and standing there in yer robe.”

“Aye... aye, I ken that. But. Er. There is... I have... there is something else I have tae dae.”

Edan had to try and stop himself from chuckling at Caitlyn’s floundering.

“Dressed in yer robe, me lady?” the maid balked.

“Och, nae. I willnae have tae leave the bathing rooms.”

“But... I am here, and the bath is ready. Will ye nae let me help ye?”

“I dinnae need any help, “Caitlyn blurted.

Milly’s frown deepened with every passing second, and Edan had to press his hand across his mouth to stifle the laughter that threatened to burst forth.

“But, me lady...”

“Please, Milly,” Caitlyn said, steering the maid towards the door and pushing her out of it. “I will be fine. I just want some time alone, is all.”

Before Milly had a chance to answer, Caitlyn closed the door and heaved a great big sigh. Edan stood to his full height, and with the maid now gone, allowed the chuckle to rumble from his stomach.

“That was fun,” he chortled.

“Are ye quite mad?” she whispered loudly. “If ye’re discovered in here with me, there’ll be hell tae pay.”

“I have a big purse with many coins,” he quipped back.

“Edan!” She glared at him.

“Och, will ye settle yersel’, Caitlyn.” He strode across the room. “Ye’re like a heckling hen.”

Taking her in his arms, he bent his head to her, but this time, Caitlyn turned her face away. She lightly beat his chest with her hands.

“Let me go.”

“Och, ye’ll have tae try a little harder than that,” he said with a grin, squeezing her a little tighter.

For a moment, she struggled, but then, without any warning she stopped. Edan smiled and assumed, he being far stronger than her, that she had given up. But a second later, her body jerked as she lifted her leg. Then he felt a sharp pain on the top of his foot.

“Ow,” he grunted, releasing her as he took a swift step back.

Caitlyn remained where she was, her arms folded over her beautifully formed bosoms, and a smug look on her face. “Two can play that game.”

“Ye stomped on me foot,” he blurted. “I dinnae think I have ever lost a battle by being stomped on.”

“I didnae have a sword tae hand,” she came back sarcastically.

Edan couldn't help but throw his head back and laugh at her. “Ye're a feisty one, Caitlyn MacMillan. I can tell ye. I've seen a different side tae ye these last few weeks.”

Caitlyn smiled in spite of herself. “Aye well, these last few weeks have opened me eyes about ye too.”

Edan took a step forward, but Caitlyn stepped back.

“Caitlyn,” Edan crooned.

“Ye have tae go, Edan. Please.”

“I will, if ye let me dae one thing.”

She looked at him warily as he slowly stepped toward her. For a second, he thought she was going to move back another step, but she remained where she was until he finally reached her. He then took her hand gently in his, bent his head toward her, and kissed her tenderly on the cheek.

A soft gasp left her lips.

“Now, I will go,” he growled. “Though it pains me tae dae so.”

With a final glance at her beautiful face, Edan walked to the door and slipped from the room.

The next day, Edan was readying himself in his bedchamber when a knock came on his door. Still naked from the waist up, he called out a bid for his visitor to enter,

expecting to see Darach. When he turned to see Effie slipping into the room instead, he was both surprised and disturbed.

It hadn't gone unnoticed that she had been trying to spend time with him since his return. He had tried to be kind, and had told her that he needed some space. He had lied and made mention that the torture and imprisonment had affected him deeply, and at the time, she had seemed to accept it. It was for that reason that he was so startled to see her standing there in his bedchamber.

"I ken ye wanted space, me love. But I miss ye so much," Effie said, walking towards him. She placed her hands on his naked chest and gazed up at him lovingly.

Before the kidnapping, Edan had felt something for Effie. He could say he loved her in his own way, but it was not at the same level that she loved him. It was more affection and respect for her as a person. It had been the least, knowing he was going to be married to the woman. There was only one lass he had ever loved, and Effie was not that person.

Reaching up on her tip toes, she brushed her lips across his cheek. She trailed kisses down his neck, and across his chest. "Ye ken, if our wedding had occurred when it was supposed tae, we'd be man and wife by now," she purred. Gazing up at him with wide eyes, she continued, "I dinnae mind becoming yer wife before we're actually married, Edan."

He knew what she wanted, but her approach and her words did nothing at all to arouse him. Holding her gently by the wrists, he removed her hands from his body, and took a step away from her.

He sighed heavily. "I cannae dae this right now, Effie. I'm sorry."

She looked at him sadly as confusion danced in her eyes. "Ye dinnae even want tae

kiss me back? Ye havenae wanted tae be near me since yer return. What happened tae ye, Edan? Tell me, please?"

Edan side stepped her and strode to his bed. Grabbing his shirt, he pulled it on and continued dressing. "I'm sorry, Effie. I have tae go. I've arranged tae meet Darach fer sparring," he lied.

Hurriedly grabbing his sword, he strode from the room and didn't look back. The gnawing guilt was growing by the day. He had never wanted not meant to hurt Effie. He would never plan to. But things had changed, and he simply could not live this lie anymore.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A few days after the bathing room incident, Caitlyn found herself in the family dining room alone with Edan at breakfast. It was not long after dawn, and none of the family had yet woken. When she first arrived, Edan was surprised to see her, and only because she was hungry, did Caitlyn stay and eat.

“Why are ye up so early?” he asked, buttering a slice of fresh bread.

Caitlyn hesitated before answering the question. Partly because she was ashamed of the answer, and partly because she didn’t want to explain it any further.

“After everything we’ve endured and suffered together, dae ye still nae trust me?” Edan said, looking a little hurt.

“It’s nae that I dinnae trust ye,” she said. “It’s just....” Caitlyn then took the plunge. “Remember the horrible nightmare I had that night?”

Edan looked saddened. “It’s hard tae forget. Ye scared me half tae death.”

“Nae as much as it scared me.” She dropped her gaze and fiddled with her fingers. “I keep having them. Even now. Even though I ken I am home and safe again.”

“Ye never did tell me what it was about.”

Caitlyn kept looking at her fingers as her heart thumped harder in her chest. Edan reached out and took her hand.

“Ye dinnae have tae tell me, Caitlyn. I just want ye tae ken that I’m here fer ye. I will, now and always, be here fer ye.”

His words were genuine and filled her heart with comfort. She also knew them to be true. If Caitlyn had been captured alone, she knew she would never have survived. Not just because she might have been killed, but it had been Edan’s constant words of encouragement and hope that had kept her from giving up.

Did he not deserve her trust after all he had done for her? He had proven himself time and again. In fact, as she thought about it, she realized she likely trusted him more than she did any other. As much as she had avoided him since they had been back, she had missed that sense of safety she felt when she was near him.

“It’s Laird MacTavish,” she said eventually. “In me nightmare, he comes intae that room and...” But she couldn’t finish the sentence. It was too horrible to put into words.

She felt his fingers tighten around hers. “I get it,” he said. “Ye dinnae have tae say anymore.”

Instead of pulling her hand away, Caitlyn held on to the comfort he was offering. “I just cannae get it out o’ me head. I ken I’m safe now. But nae matter what I dae, I cannae rid the image from me mind.”

For a long moment, Edan didn’t say anything. In fact, he gazed at her with such intensity and sadness, the tension grew uncomfortable.

“Anyway,” she said, slowly pulling her hand away. “There’s naething anyone else can dae about it.”

Edan resumed buttering his bread, and then said, “Perhaps ye should come and spar

with us.”

“Who’s us?” Caitlyn asked.

“Darach, Kieran and mesel’. We spar in the evening. Perhaps if ye joined us, it might tire ye out. Maybe then, ye’d have a better night’s sleep.”

Caitlyn laughed softly. “I think I’d be a little out o’ place. I dinnae ken one end o’ a sword from the other.”

“All the more reason fer ye tae dae it,” Edan countered. “Dinnae worry about nae kenning how. I can teach ye. It’s worth a try tae take yer mind off things.”

Caitlyn considered his proposal for a few minutes. Surely, it couldn’t do her any harm. In fact, perhaps getting out in the fresh air and swinging a sword around might do her the world of good. Besides, she was willing to try anything. Anything that might take the horrible nightmares from her mind.

“All right,” she agreed. “I will.”

This news seemed to delight Edan greatly, and he beamed a huge grin across the table. “Great. I’ll come and find ye after sundown.”

Later that morning, Effie and Caitlyn took a walk around the gardens. Wispy clouds marred a blue sky, and a soft breeze rushed gently through the branches above. Caitlyn sensed a difference in her sister as they strolled together, arm in arm. The last time they had been in the gardens, Effie had been gushing and excited about the arrangements for her wedding. Now, she appeared withdrawn, and even melancholy.

“Something is troubling ye, Effie,” Caitlyn said warily. “What is it?”

Effie sighed deeply. “Everything just feels so different now.”

Caitlyn felt her stomach clench, but she had asked the question, and thus, she had no choice but to continue. “Different in what way?”

“With ye and Edan,” Effie said.

Caitlyn’s heart thumped in her chest, the fear rising within her. Had Effie realized what had happened between them? Had she noticed the sparks whenever she and Edan were together?

“I understand that what ye both suffered was a dreadful experience,” Effie continued. “It was dreadful fer me too, being stuck here at the castle and nae kenning if ye were alive or dead.”

“I’m sorry, Effie.”

“It isnae yer fault, Caitlyn. It’s that monster MacTavish who is tae blame. I was so delighted when ye were both back home and safe. I just assumed things would go back tae the way they were before ye left.”

“I ken,” Caitlyn said uncertainly.

“I suppose, it is I who wanted things tae go back tae normal. But I couldnae have imagined ye would both return so different. How much what happened tae ye, would change ye.”

Caitlyn was surprised at Effie’s words. “Ye think I’ve changed.”

Effie looked at her with shocked disbelief. “Dae ye nae?” she said.

Caitlyn shrugged. "I dinnae really ken."

Rubbing her arm tenderly, Effie said, "It's nae yer fault, Caitlyn. But ye're far jumpier now, and ye just seem tae have gone intae yersel'."

She knew well she was jumpier now. Both her mother and father had mentioned how worried they were about her. They had even suggested seeing the castle healer about a tonic that might help, but Caitlyn had shrugged it off.

As for going into herself, the ordeal had robbed her of her previous ease; her innocence and naivety. But she was not battling those demons alone. Her mind was also consumed with her feelings for Edan, how that affected everyone around her, especially Effie, and the ensuing guilt that followed. None of which she could share with her older sister.

"And Edan is like a different man," Effie continued. "He willnae let me near him since his return. It is like one man was taken and another man was returned tae me." She looked at Caitlyn with a heavy sadness.

"It must be hard fer ye."

"It is. Before ye were taken, we were tae be married. We spent time together, we laughed, we teased each other. I felt like I was important tae him. But now, I just dinnae ken."

"Ye are still important tae him, Effie. But maybe he just needs some time."

Effie did not reply to that, and for a few moments, they continued walking in silence. Effie seemed lost in thought, and Caitlyn, still nervous of what might come of this conversation, determined it was best to remain quiet.

“I just cannae help but wonder what he suffered,” her sister said eventually. “What did MacTavish dae tae him, Caitlyn?”

Caitlyn returned her sister’s gaze. “Terrible things, Effie. Terrible things that I dinnae want tae remember.”

She shuddered as the memory flooded back to her, the dreadful sounds of his torture replaying in her mind. Even though she had an idea that Edan’s indifference around Effie was more than just the result of MacTavish’s dreadful torture, she could not imagine for a minute that Edan, strong as he was, had not been affected by the evil things he had suffered.

Effie looked guilty then. “I’m so sorry, Caitlyn. I shouldnae ask ye tae remember. I should be helping ye tae heal, nae getting ye tae relive it.”

Caitlyn shrugged limply. “It’s all right.”

“Nae, it isnae all right. Truly, I am sorry. I will change the subject this minute. Let’s talk about something else. Anything ye want tae talk about.”

Caitlyn allowed Effie to change the subject, but not without thinking about her part in all of this. She was the catalyst for their capture, and everything had spiraled from that event.

This was all a great big mess, and no matter how much Caitlyn thought about it, she did not know how to fix it. What was she supposed to do now? How was she supposed to act? Every day was a battle to keep up a fa?ade that was slowly exhausting her. But more than all that, she had betrayed her sister and did not have the courage to confess. Instead, the guilt was slowly eating away at her soul.

Edan kept his promise and came to find her after sun down. Caitlyn had slipped into

the library after supper. Watching Effie fawn all over Edan again as they ate supper together was difficult, and she wanted to be alone with her own thoughts for a while.

“There ye are,” he said, striding toward the chair she sat upon. “I was looking fer ye all over. Ye are determined tae keep hiding from me.”

Caitlyn closed the book in her lap, though she had hardly read a single word, and looked up at him. “I wasnae hiding. I just wanted tae be alone a while.”

He gave her a strange look, and then nodded. “I can understand that. But now,” he held out his hand to her, “it is time tae teach ye how tae fight.”

Placing her hand in his, she let him pull her to her feet. “And what if I’m nae good?”

“Then I’ll count mesel’ a poor tutor.” He grinned.

He took her into the gardens, where Darach and Kieran were waiting for their arrival. Great fires blazed around them, contained in large cages. The bright, burning flames cast long shadows across the grassy area, making the men, who were already huge, appear as if they were giants.

“So, Caitlyn, ye want tae learn tae fight like a man,” Kieran teased her.

“Actually, I want tae fight like a woman,” she quipped back.

Kieran and Darach chuckled at her defiant reply, while Edan made a huge grin.

“We’ll start with a wooden sword,” Edan said, handing her the carved wood. “Lift it with both hands and hold it in front o’ ye.”

Caitlyn did as he asked, but Edan shook his head.

“Nae, ye need tae widen yer stance a little. Ye need balance when ye strike.”

“Me stance?” Caitlyn looked at him with wide-eyed confusion.

“Here. Let me show ye.”

Edan strode to where she stood, and coming up behind her, he tucked his body in close. A rush of heat bloomed on her cheeks as she felt him press against her back. From behind, he tapped her legs with his foot. “Stand with yer feet apart at shoulder width.”

Caitlyn opened her legs a little, as instructed.

“Now,” he reached around her and placed his hands on each of her wrists, “ye need tae hold the sword with a strong grip.”

Caitlyn could feel his breath on her cheek as he spoke beside her ear. Her hands trembled a little, but this time, she did not shake with fear. Her heart thumped, and her stomach flipped, and from nowhere, she remembered the way he had kissed her in the bathing room.

“And then,” his voice sounded deeper, like he was enjoying himself a little too much, “ye need tae be fluid.” Using the weight of his body, he pushed her to sway from side to side.

“All right. I think I’ve got it,” she said quickly, while at the same time, stepping forward.

Edan smirked mischievously at her, but Caitlyn quickly looked away, worried the others might see the crackling tension between them.

“Who am I fighting first?” She said, looking from one to the other.

Kieran went easy on her. If he fought her with even half of his strength, she wouldn’t stand a chance. He had always been a good and patient teacher, as well as being highly protective of Caitlyn and Effie. Now was no different, as he told her when to advance and retreat.

Darach was next. Unlike Kieran, who seemed to use his intuition, Darach told her every move he was going to make, and the logic behind it. It had always been Darach’s way, and even when she knew from where he was going to strike, he still outwitted her.

Last was Edan, who had clearly taken much delight in watching her. He had also been calling out instructions and encouraging her as she fought.

“I’m still suffering from me injuries,” he teased. “Ye may overpower me with all ye’ve learned tonight.”

He was trying to make her feel better, she knew that. It was something she was still trying to get used to. After years of him teasing and jibing her, to the point of invoking anger, this new side to his personality still felt strange.

“I doubt that. Even with one hand behind yer back and blindfolded, ye would still likely beat me.”

“Blindfolded, huh?” he said, a smile dancing on his lips. “I’ll bet that would be interesting.”

As the tension crackled between them, Caitlyn knew he was no longer talking about sparring. She was only grateful that night had fallen and the roaring red color of her cheeks, camouflaged by the flickering flames, could be mistaken for all the exercise

they had been doing.

Using what she had learned so far, she attacked Edan with effort. He fought back, but not with all his strength. Like Kieran, had he done so, she would likely have found herself flat on her back.

They locked in battle, and he came in close, his sword pressed against hers, his face only inches away. “Dinnae let me overpower ye, Caitlyn.” Sparks danced in his eyes as he watched her. “Find a way out o’ it.”

Employing an earlier tactic Darach had used, she stepped to the side and twisted her wrists, freeing herself from the stalemate. But while she outmaneuvered him, she did it so swiftly, she lost her balance. Stumbling sideways, she was certain she was about to land with a heavy thump on the grass, but a strong arm grabbed her around her waist. Edan pulled her upright with such force, she slammed against the solid mass of his body.

“Well done.” He grinned.

Breathlessly, Caitlyn stood there, staring back at him. She couldn’t help herself. She beamed a smile, feeling the rush of arousal through her body.

Eventually, it was time to call it a night. The sky was now pitch black above them, and as they gathered their things, Edan came up beside her. “So. What did ye think o’ it?”

“I enjoyed it. And ye’re right. I am quite exhausted.”

“Good.” He lowered his voice a little and gave her a pointed look. “Maybe it will help.”

Edan turned to speak to the others, when something caught his attention. Lifting his head, he looked up into the night sky. “What is that?”

Darach and Kieran both looked up, and then Caitlyn heard what the others must have heard. There was a stiff rushing sound above their heads. But before Caitlyn voiced her own question, Edan swiftly moved to the side and knocked her to the ground.

Shocked at his actions, Caitlyn spun to look up at him, but as she did so, she watched an arrow hit him in the shoulder. A second later, Edan flew backwards onto the grass.

“Argh,” he yelled.

“Och, me god,” Caitlyn screamed.

“Attack,” Kieran bellowed. “We’re under attack.”

Somewhere in the distance, Caitlyn heard the yelling voices of the soldiers on the castle walls. But she hardly cared about that. Scrambling to Edan on her hands and knees, she panicked.

“What dae I dae? What dae I dae?” she shrieked.

“It’s only a wound, Caitlyn,” Edan murmured, trying to hide the agony with a smile. “I’ve suffered worse.”

She could hardly believe that he could joke at such a time. Once more, he had saved her. Shoving her out of the way, he had stood in her place, taking the hit that was clearly meant for her.

Darach dropped to his brother’s side, and noting a piece of paper attached to the arrow, he tore it off.

“It’s a message,” he exclaimed.

“What does it say?” Edan groaned, his words now sounding slurred.

Darach looked intensely down at his brother. “It says, This isnae over yet .”

A little while later, Caitlyn sat beside Edan in the healer’s cottage. The healer, Donal, had given Edan laudanum, and while Kieran and Darach had held Edan down, he had pulled the arrow from Edan’s shoulder. He had bellowed in pain, and soon afterward, lost consciousness.

“We should tell Effie,” Caitlyn said, looking from Darach to Kieran.

Kieran shook his head. “It’s very late, Caitlyn. Edan is nae longer in any danger. I think it best tae wait until morning. We, on the other hand,” he turned to Darach, “need tae go and speak tae the laird. Me men have scoured the outer areas, but they could find nae one. That doesnae mean anyone is safe. Laird MacMillan needs tae be wakened and told of the situation.”

“I’m going tae stay with Edan,” Caitlyn said.

“Very well. But before I go, may I speak with ye outside?”

Caitlyn nodded, and Kieran turned back to Darach. “Stay with Edan. I will return shortly.”

Once outside, Kieran looked down at Caitlyn. “Before I begin, I want tae remind ye of what I said that first night ye arrived home. Dae ye remember?”

Caitlyn did remember, and with that, she knew where this conversation was going to lead. “I dae.” She nodded.

“Good. There isnae any judgement from me, Caitlyn. But it seems very obvious that ye and Edan care fer each other. And I dinnae mean as in-laws. Something happened between ye when ye were imprisoned, didnae it?”

Tired of holding on to this secret any longer, Caitlyn poured her heart out to Kieran, admitting everything that had happened both when they were captured, and since they had returned. Kieran listened carefully, not once showing any disdain at her words.

As she finished her confession, she said, “I am an awful sister, Kieran. I am an awful person. And yet, I cannae help how I feel. I have told Edan that we cannae continue, but I’m terrified he willnae marry Effie now, and it’s all me fault.”

Kieran shook his head. “It isnae anybody’s fault, Caitlyn. Ye didnae go out o’ yer way tae plan this. Feelings are feelings, and there is naething anyone can dae about them. Fer certain, the two o’ ye can deny yer affection, but that will mean three people will live in misery.”

“Three?”

“Ye, Edan, and Effie,” Kieran confirmed. “If Edan willnae marry Effie, and ye then refuse tae admit what the two o’ ye might have together, then that is three miserable people. Ye are denying yer heart.”

“But what about Effie?” Caitlyn cried.

“Indeed, she will be hurt. But yer sister is a wise and warm-hearted lass. I think she will understand. Ye are both so very close. Dinnae let this drive a wedge between ye.”

“I think it already has.”

Kieran shook his head again. “Nae yet. But it will, if ye let it. Ye have tae understand that it is normal fer such a traumatic experience tae have affected ye and Edan so deeply. I believe there must have been something there before, but only ye ken that.”

“Actually, Edan admitted tae me, that he has had feelings for me since we were children. I’ve come tae the realization that he was marrying Effie because it was arranged. I think he loves her, in his own way, but nae the way she loves him.”

“That makes a lot o’ sense.” Kieran nodded. “And, in fact, only adds weight tae me point. Ye have tae understand, Caitlyn. Denying how ye feel is nae going tae make this go away.”

Caitlyn sighed heavily. Kieran had always been a wise man, but she was not certain she could accept what he was saying.

“Put it this way. Is it nae better fer Edan tae break Effie’s heart once, than tae go through with the wedding, and break his own, hers and yers every single day? Think of it. How is that going tae be good for Effie? She’ll be married tae a man who doesnae love her. Would ye want her tae have such a miserable life?”

Put that way, Caitlyn could understand Kieran’s reasoning. She could see how Edan marrying Effie would affect her sister.

“I have tae go and speak tae yer faither,” Kieran said. “But think on me words, Caitlyn. We will talk some more soon. Fer now,” he nodded to the healer’s cottage, “there’s a man in there who needs ye.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The throbbing pain in his shoulder woke Edan from a deep slumber. Blinking his eyes open, his gaze fell upon Caitlyn. Clearly, she had sat with him during the night, and exhausted, had laid her head on the bed and now slept. But even in her unconsciousness, she still held his hand in hers.

His heart welled with love at her thoughtfulness, and he smiled. She had not left him, even being as tired as she was. The smile faded as his thoughts moved to the arrow, and the note that had been attached to it. Laird MacTavish was not giving up, but that had come as no surprise.

In fact, what really surprised him was why the bastard had taken so long to attack. He may have lost his advantage when Edan and Caitlyn had escaped, but Edan had seen MacTavish's seething anger. The man was determined to wreak revenge on Clan Macmillan, and more so, Laird Conor MacMillan.

Swiping the laird from his mind, Edan brought his attention back to Caitlyn. She could not remain there all night. Nor could he, for that matter. They both needed to get some proper sleep in their own beds.

"Caitlyn," he whispered, moving his hand back and forth to rouse her. "Caitlyn."

She groaned as she woke, moving her body slowly, for clearly the unusual and likely, uncomfortable position, had made her muscles stiff. With a great big stretch, she eventually raised her head and looked at him.

Her eyes widened with concern. “Are ye all right?”

“All the better fer seeing ye,” he said softly.

She smiled up at him, and he smiled back.

“I think we should both get back tae the castle. We could dae with some proper rest.”

Once Edan was on his feet, they quietly left the cottage, so as not to disturb the healer. Outside in the courtyard, they could see a pale, thin light glowing in the distance as night dissolved, and the hours before sunrise arrived.

“My god, it’s nearly dawn,” Caitlyn said.

“Aye. Nae sooner will we get intae bed, we’ll have tae rise again,” Edan joked.

As he ventured across the courtyard toward the castle, he realized his body had tricked him somewhat, for he did not feel just as steady on two legs as he had done lying in the bed. Seeing him stumbling a little, Caitlyn wrapped her arm around his waist and steadied him as he swayed from side to side.

“Ye should’ve stayed with the healer,” she said, breathing heavier with the effort.

“I’m fine.”

“Aye. I can see that,” she quipped back.

“It’s just the effects of the laudanum. It’ll wear off soon enough.”

Passing the guards who stood alert throughout the castle, clearly more on edge since the attack, they made their way up to Edan’s bedchamber. Once inside, Caitlyn pulled

back the heavy furs and coverlets and lowered him onto the bed. She knelt down and removed his socks and boots, before lifting his legs onto it.

“I’m nae a cripple, ye ken. The wound is in me shoulder, nae me legs.”

“Will ye just stop complaining and let me help ye,” Caitlyn countered.

“Only if ye stay a while,” he said, patting the space in the bed beside him.

He watched her look dubiously at the spot, doubt flickering across her face.

“I’m injured, Caitlyn. Remember?”

He was not that injured, but he could only hope that stating such a thing would tip her decision. He was delighted to see that it did, and committing herself, she walked to the other side of the bed. Hitching her frock up, she clambered beside him, but while he was beneath the coverlets, Caitlyn remained above them.

For a while, they both sat there and said nothing. The silence was not uncomfortable. They both appeared lost and absorbed in their own thoughts. Edan was thinking of all the ways he had hurt Caitlyn over the years, from the days they were children to then.

Thinking about their many conversations as they had been held captive, Aengus Lamont popped into his head. She had asked him why he had broken the betrothal, and at the time, he had said that he didn’t want to tell her. But things were different now.

“I am sorry fer hurting ye so many times, Caitlyn,” he said. “Fer the most part, it was fer selfish reasons, tae protect me own heart. On other occasions, however, it was necessary.”

“What other times?” she said.

“Aengus Lamont,” Edan said plainly. “I was trying tae protect ye even then, but I realize now, I hurt ye anyway.”

Caitlyn repositioned herself so she was turned toward him. “Will ye tell me now, why ye did it?”

“There’s nae point in keeping it from ye any longer.” He shrugged, and then winced. The laudanum was wearing off, and the wound was painful again.

“Be careful,” Caitlyn said worriedly.

“I’m fine. So, Lamont. I found out, during yer courting days, that ye were nae the only lass in Aengus’s life. Word came tae me that he had a mistress. Nae one tae take gossip on face value, I did some discovering o’ me own. What I found out was worse than I had, at first, imagined. This lass was nae just a woman he saw here and there, but a woman he kept. It also came tae light that his reasoning was likely because she was with his child.”

Caitlyn’s jaws dropped as Edan was speaking.

“Aye. Nae quite the gentleman ye thought he was, is he? I found out, through maids and guards, that he had nae intention o’ sending her away if he married ye. That’s what made me blood boil even more. And so, I had tae dae it.” He shrugged.

“I couldnae imagine ye marrying him, being completely oblivious tae this other life he had, and then discovering that afterwards. Nae only would ye have felt like a fool, ye would have been trapped. Besides,” Edan continued, softening his tone a little, “ye deserve far better than tae be treated like that, Caitlyn.”

“So ye told him he had tae stop coming tae see me,” Caitlyn confirmed.

“I told him that if he didnae stop coming tae see ye, I’d kill him and cause great trouble tae his clan. He was about tae ask yer faither fer yer hand in marriage. I couldnae let that happen. O’ course, I told yer faither everything. I also told Lamont tae blame me.”

“But why?” Caitlyn gasped. “Why didnae ye tell me back then?”

“I didnae want ye tae discover the truth. I didnae want yer heart tae be broken, or fer ye tae believe ye’d been played fer a fool. I kent ye were besotted with him, Caitlyn. It was better fer ye tae blame me, tae be angry with me, than fer ye tae discover he was sleeping around town and country, fathering god only kens how many bastard children.”

“I wasnae besotted with him,” Caitlyn said.

“Och, o’ course ye were. I saw it in yer eyes.”

“Nae, Edan. That’s how I acted when ye were there. It’s what I wanted ye tae think. Ye teased and taunted me so much, I just didnae want tae give ye any more fuel fer yer ongoing fire.”

Her words made him feel bad, but he struggled to truly believe her. “Ye were always so delighted tae see him. Ye used tae wait on him eagerly when he came tae visit. How can ye say ye didnae love him?”

Caitlyn shrugged. “Because I didnae. We had much in common, we got on well, and I respected him. But it was naething more. I didnae feel anything like...” she trailed off.

Edan watched her cheeks redden, as though she was embarrassed with what she was going to say, but he was too curious not to push for the truth.

“Anything like?” he pressed.

She hesitated and seemed to struggle, but eventually, she said, “Anything like I feel fer ye,” she breathed. “Before ye, I hadnae experienced such intense depth o’ emotion, and there are times me heart simply overwhelms me.”

A warm feeling rushed through him and his heart swelled with delight at her words. “I couldnae have put it any better mesel’.”

Caitlyn leaned towards him and brushed her lips against his. It was such a soft and tender kiss, Edan gasped at the delicateness of it. She did not linger, and when she pulled away from him, her cheeks were that same soft pink hue as before.

“I want tae be with ye, Caitlyn. Nae matter what that means. I’ve discovered, I dinnae want tae live me life without ye in it.”

Edan threaded his fingers through her hair, pressed his hand to the back of her head, and pulled her toward him. His lips caressed her cheek, gentle tender kisses on her soft skin. Each kiss eliciting a tiny gasp from her.

“I want ye, Caitlyn,” he breathed. “I’ve wanted ye fer so very long.”

He shifted his weight, ignoring the fiery pain in his shoulder. He trailed kisses down her neck, over her collar bone, until he reached the bouncy skin of her bosom.

Reaching his hand down, he pulled her frock up at the front, slipping his hand beneath it until his fingers felt the soft skin of her thigh. Caitlyn was breathing much deeper now, and bringing his mouth back to hers, he kissed her with the hunger that

he had suppressed for years. While his tongue roved about, tasting, flicking, exploring, his hand moved slowly up her thigh. His fingers made tiny circles on her skin as he moved further, until eventually, Caitlyn opened her legs wider. A silent invitation for him to continue.

When he finally reached the very apex of her thighs, he felt her oozing slickness on his fingers. Caitlyn gasped and a tiny squeal escaped from her lips.

“Och, ye’re so wet, Caitlyn. Ye’re so ready fer me.”

Wetting his fingers with her juices, he found the tiny nub at the top of her folds. Caitlyn jerked at his touch, swiftly sucking in air. His fingertips rubbed back and forth, slowly at first, allowing her to feel every sensation of his touch.

“Oh, god,” she panted. “Oh, god.”

“That’s it, Caitlyn. Feel it. Feel yer body climbing fer me. I want ye tae feel more pleasure than ye’ve ever felt before.”

He felt her grabbing at his clothes as her body tensed and squirmed beneath his touch. Her hips writhed, and sensing she was ready, he moved his fingers faster.

“Oh, oh,” she cried, now panting for breath.

“I want tae taste ye, but nae yet. First, I want ye tae give yersel’ tae me,” he growled.

His manhood was now as hard as rock, and the overwhelming urge to plunge himself into her was nearly overpowering. But he could wait. This was her first time. He knew that. He wanted it to be the first time of many, but for now, he was drinking in all her tiny reactions. It drove him crazy and only made him want her more.

Her body stiffened beneath him, and he knew she was close. Just a little further, and she would feel that exhilarating explosion of euphoria rush across her body. His fingers remained expertly in place, and then suddenly, it happened.

“Oh, me god,” she squealed.

“Och, me love,” he growled.

Beneath him, her body convulsed as she panted and gripped him tightly. Her whole body shook for several seconds, and with a smile, he watched her slowly relax.

“I want ye, Caitlyn,” he breathed huskily. “I want ye so much. Will ye let me?”

She gazed up at him, her eyes soft, her face flushed, and her bosom softly rising up and down. And then, she nodded. “I want ye, too.”

Those words could not have sounded sweeter, and without hesitation, Edan pushed himself up in the bed. Removing the clothing from his waist down, he took Caitlyn by the arm and helped her to straddle him.

“Ye’re in control, Caitlyn. I’ll try nae tae hurt ye too much, but it will hurt a little.”

“All right,” she breathed nervously.

With her legs either side of his waist, she hitched up her frock, and between them, she positioned herself over him. Edan grabbed his thick, throbbing manhood and guided it inside of her.

His eyes rolled back with the soft, warm wetness that surrounded him. “Oh, Caitlyn,” he growled.

“What dae I dae?” she whispered shyly.

With a hand on either side of her waist, Edan gently pushed her down.

“Oh,” she cried, surprised and delighted.

He did it again, bringing her lower onto him this time. The sensation was even more intoxicating than he could ever have imagined. Her slow rise and fall, over and over.

Soon enough, Caitlyn knew what she had to do, and taking control, lowered herself down and then up again at a steady pace. As the tension built, Edan struggled not to thrust himself inside her, but instead, he rose his hips to meet her gently.

With desire in her eyes, Caitlyn moved her hips in time with his, going deeper at each descent. But Edan could hold back no more, and grabbing her buttocks, he pulled her down onto him while thrusting his hips up.

“Ah,” Caitlyn cried.

Her face was a mixture of pleasure and pain, but Edan did not stop. He wanted her so badly. He wanted to be deep inside her at every thrust. As he continued, he could feel her tightening around him, and knew she was rising again.

“That’s it, Caitlyn. Come with me. Come with me, me love.”

With her hands now resting heavily on his muscular stomach, she seemed to lose herself. Her eyes were closed, and she looked like she was in some sort of trance. Their bodies now moved as one, and Edan could feel the tension building, higher and higher. He thrust into her again and again, grunting and panting, desperately wanting their bodies to join in this experience of euphoria.

He held on until he felt her pulsing around his erectness, and when Caitlyn cried out once more, he let himself go fully, roaring with ecstasy as he emptied himself into her. With those final thrusts, he gave her every last drop, and when it was all over, Caitlyn collapsed onto his chest, exhausted and panting, her body slick with their efforts.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

She could hear the strong thud of his heart against her ear. The heart that loved her with all that he had. Her stomach fluttered with the memories of what they had done, and Caitlyn could not help the smile that grew on her lips.

“Are ye awake?” Edan growled.

His voice sounded even deeper, reverberating across the strength of his body as she lay on his chest. Part of her did not want to move from there. She wanted to hear that wonderful strong heartbeat forever, but as the dawn light trickled into the bedchamber, she knew she had to go.

Lifting her head, she looked up at him. He was gazing down at her lovingly, a soft smile telling her how glad he was that she was still lying beside him. She felt his fingers tenderly stroking her hair, and then he said, “I dinnae deserve ye.”

Caitlyn frowned. “Dinnae say such things.”

He shrugged, and then winced, hissing at the pain from his wound. “It’s true. All the years I have tormented ye, I dinnae deserve tae have ye lie beside me like this. That being said, now that I have ye, I’m never letting ye go.”

Caitlyn pushed herself up in the bed, and sat looking down at him. “I’m glad ye ken what ye want, Edan, but I need time. Just a couple more days tae gather me thoughts.”

“I’m going tae break off the betrothal with Effie whatever happens, Caitlyn. I cannae marry her. Nae now.”

“I ken. And I think it’s the best thing we can dae, fer now. But I beg ye, please. Just wait a few days. We’re going tae hurt me sister so much, I ken that. Ye’re her first love and I need time tae think.”

Not long after that, Caitlyn hurriedly left Edan’s bedchamber and crept down the corridors to her own. She was exhausted, and climbing into bed, she closed her eyes. Even with the myriad thoughts flying through her head, even with the guilt, and the fear of how deeply she was going to hurt her sister, her breathing shallowed and soon, sleep overtook her.

It was well into the afternoon when she woke. She might even have slept longer if Effie had not arrived in her bedchamber and roused her from her sweet slumber. Caitlyn was still rubbing the sleep from her eyes when her sister started questioning her about what had happened last night.

“Why did ye nae come and tell me that Edan had been injured?” Effie exclaimed. “I ken ye were with him, fer Kieran made mention o’ it this morning at breakfast. Surely, I ought tae have been told.”

The rude awakening and direct questioning alerted Caitlyn, and with her heart thumping, she found herself taken off guard.

“I... er, it was just,” she floundered. Trying desperately to think of something to say, she suddenly remembered what Kieran had said last night, and blurted it out in hope it would save her. “Kieran said it was too late tae wake ye.”

“Ye should have woken me anyway. I wouldnae have cared. He’s soon tae be me husband. Surely, I should have been told.”

“I’m sorry, Effie,” Caitlyn said, pushing herself up in the bed. “Kieran thought it best tae let ye rest.”

“What were ye doing out with the men at such a late hour?” Her older sister looked at her worriedly. “Ye have been acting so strangely since ye’ve come back. Ye have me worried about ye. I ken ye’ve been through a terrible time, but things have changed so much.”

Caitlyn had no answer for Effie. None that she was willing to give at that time, at any rate.

“We dinnae talk anymore,” Effie continued. “We hardly spend any time together. I miss ye, Caitlyn.” Effie dropped down on the edge of her bed.

That ever-familiar burden of guilt sat squarely on Caitlyn’s shoulders. More so that morning than usual, after what had happened between her and Edan the previous night. Her stomach clenched inside, and she felt like a boulder had been placed upon her chest. She was in love with Edan. She knew that now, but for her to be happy would mean breaking her sister’s heart.

“I’m sorry, Effie. Perhaps I need tae make a better effort.”

“Ye ken I love ye, but it’s difficult enough having tae deal with Edan being so distant. Nae having ye by me side is even harder.”

Caitlyn sighed and nodded. “I understand that.”

“Ye’re more important tae me than anyone else,” Effie continued.

Those words only made Caitlyn feel worse. While Effie held her in high esteem, Caitlyn was betraying not only her sister, but her best friend as well.

“If ye want tae talk tae me, if ye need tae rid yersel’ o’ whatever happened tae ye, ye ken I’m here fer ye. Ye ken ye can tell me anything, dinnae ye?”

While on the outside, Caitlyn nodded in agreement, on the inside, she was screaming at the top of her voice. If only she could tell Effie how she felt. If only she could confide in her older sister as she always had done before now.

Maybe ye should just tell her, and then all this suffering and hiding will end. She’s going tae find out sooner or later. Would it nae be better if she heard it from ye?

Just as Caitlyn was building her resolve to confess everything, a knock on the door interrupted them.

“Come,” Caitlyn called.

The door opened, and Helen, Effie and Caitlyn’s personal maid, entered the bedchamber. “Good day tae ye, me ladies. Yer faither has sent me. He would like tae see ye both in the drawing room when ye’re ready.”

“Thank ye, Helen,” Effie said.

Helen looked at Caitlyn. “Dae ye need me tae help ye dress?”

Caitlyn shook her head. “Nae, I can dae it mesel’. Thank ye.”

“Very well, me lady.” Helen smiled, bowed, and left the room.

Her interruption had been like a divine sign, and convincing herself of that, Caitlyn retreated back into hiding, taking her confession with her.

“Ye see,” Effie said. “That is exactly what I mean.”

Caitlyn frowned at her in confusion.

Her sister threw a hand out toward the door. "Since ye've been back, ye willnae let anyone help ye. Milly told me the other day how strangely ye were acting in the bathing rooms. She said ye refused her help when she offered to bathe ye. And Helen has said that ye willnae let her help ye either. It's like ye're shutting everybody out."

Strangely, Caitlyn hadn't noticed that about herself, but now, as Effie shone such a glaring light on it, she realized her sister's words to be true. Helen had always helped her dress every morning and evening. But not since Caitlyn's return. Was she really shutting everyone out? Had her experience of terror done something more sinister to her than she realized?

Sighing heavily, Effie said, "I will leave ye tae dress. I dinnae wish tae keep Faither waiting." Her older sister stood, moved toward Caitlyn, and kissed her tenderly on the cheek.

"I love ye, sister. Please dinnae forget that." Effie then turned and left the room, leaving Caitlyn alone once more.

While the time spent with Effie and her father that afternoon had not been at all unpleasant, it was ruined by the continuing thoughts spinning around Caitlyn's mind. On no less than two occasions, her father had been forced to repeat a question because her mind had wandered, and while her body was present in the room, her spirit certainly wasn't.

Effie talked about the wedding, and when she and Edan might arrange it. Their father seemed as eager as Effie to know when that might be, which then led to a discussion on Edan's aloofness.

"Ye must understand, me child," the laird had said, speaking kindly to his oldest

daughter. “What Laird MacTavish did tae him has had an indelible effect.” He had glanced toward Caitlyn with a frown, before continuing. “I willnae go intae the details, if only tae save yer sister having to relive it, but I ken the injuries he sustained were grave. Be patient with him. He will come around.”

Effie had apologized, and agreed with her father, while Caitlyn had remained silent. Apart from the fact that she did not particularly want the conversation of Edan’s torture going any further, she feared the guilt she experienced might cause her to confess everything between herself and Edan to them both.

Edan had said he would give her time to think, and that is exactly what she needed. It was later in the day when she sneaked off to the library to be alone. But the hours she sat considering what huge effect her decision to marry Edan might have on Effie resulted in no definitive conclusions.

While her mind argued for the pain she would cause, her heart argued for her own happiness. Her mind told her she would not be able to live with her decision, while her heart told her how much she loved Edan, and that, perhaps, in time, Effie would come to terms with it.

In the end, all Caitlyn got from the constant debate was a thumping headache, and sending a maid to make her apologies for her absence at dinner, she retired to her room to try and rest and get rid of it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Nay! Nay!” Caitlyn screamed, writhing on the floor as MacTavish grabbed her by the throat and pinned her down.

Her hands were bound, but no matter how much she thrashed back and forth, she could not release them.

“Och, I cannae wait tae have ye, lass. Ye’re so young, and fresh, and innocent. I’m going tae enjoy this,” MacTavish drooled.

His stinking breath felt hot on her face, and then, a long thick tongue slipped out of his mouth and ran all the way up her cheek, leaving it wet.

Caitlyn fought as hard as she could, but he had her pinned to the ground, his body weight crushing her, pushing the air from her lungs.

“That’s it, lass. Fight as hard as ye can. It’ll make it more fun fer me.”

Grabbing her frock, he pulled it up and over her knees.

“Get off me,” she roared breathlessly. “Get off me.”

She clenched her thighs together, but he was too strong, and his large hands prized her legs apart.

“Nay!” she screamed. “Nay!”

Caitlyn sat bolt upright in her bed, her heart thumping in her chest, gasping for air, and barely able to breathe. Her whole body shook with terror, and while still in complete dread of her nightmare, somehow, she felt this time, it was far more real.

As the emotion and fear built up, her throat tightened, and the anguish of her fear spilled out of her as sobs burst from her chest. Suddenly, her bedchamber frightened her. She did not want to be alone. Scrambling out of bed, she hurriedly threw on a shawl, and not caring who saw her, Caitlyn ran down the corridor and burst into Edan's room as the tears fell down her cheeks.

Edan, who was sat in a chair near the fire, jumped at the sudden intrusion, but upon seeing the state Caitlyn was in, he launched himself from the chair and ran to her.

“Me god, Caitlyn. What happened?”

But as the uncontrollable emotion poured from her, she could not speak. As though he knew exactly what she needed, Edan swooped her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. He pulled the coverlet back and placed her gently down, before crawling in beside her.

She felt his strong arms wrap around her as she buried her face into his solid chest. For some time, the tears continued, until, after a while, there were no more tears to shed.

Perhaps he had realized what had happened, for even then, Edan remained silent, and instead, rocked her back and forth in a comforting embrace. Only when Caitlyn had fully settled, did she hear his voice.

“Ye are sleeping in me chamber tonight,” he said firmly. It wasn't a question. “Ye can have the bed. I will sleep on the floor.”

“Nae,” Caitlyn cried, grabbing onto his clothes in an effort to keep him from moving. “Dinnae leave me, Edan. Please, dinnae leave me.”

Caitlyn woke later, her head moving with the steady rise and fall of Edan’s chest. His heart thumped in her ear; that soothing, comforting sound, and his arms were still wrapped protectively around her.

Having fallen asleep a little awkwardly, Caitlyn could not feel any sensation in the arm that lay under her body, and very slowly, she turned so she was lying on her back.

“Are ye all right?” Edan murmured.

“I’m fine. Go back tae sleep.”

But clearly, she had disturbed him too much, and Edan shifted his weight, pulling his arm from behind her, so her head lay on the pillow. Bending his elbow, he lifted his head and rested it on his hand. He gazed down at her sadly.

“I’m so sorry, Caitlyn,” he growled. “If I hadnae have been such an arse, ye would never have been outside o’ the tavern that day.”

Shocked at his words, Caitlyn shook her head. “It wasnae yer fault. How can ye possibly believe that?”

“I’ve believed it from the day and hour I woke up in that bloody room. I’ve caused ye so much suffering, and I cannae stop punishing mesel’ fer it.”

She reached up and tenderly stroked his cheek. The gash she had nursed from his torture was nearly completely healed now. One more scar to add to the many he had collected over the years of battles.

“And yet, I believe the complete opposite. I blame mesel’ fer ye being captured with me. If I hadnae ran out o’ the tavern, like a fool, MacTavish’s men would never have had an opportunity tae isolate us and overpower us.”

Edan smiled softly down at her. “What a pair we are.”

Pulling a stray hair from the side of her face, Edan lowered his mouth to hers and tenderly kissed her. Caitlyn let out a low moan as her body reacted to his sensual embrace. Her lips parted, bidding his tongue entry. He roved about inside, tasting her, his tongue lashing against her own. She felt her stomach twist, and a pang of desire bloomed at the apex of her thighs.

Edan tugged at the shawl, moving it to the side. Pulling his lips from hers, he gazed down her body. She felt the soft touch of his fingers trailing over her collar bone, travelling further and further, until he reached the ties of her nightgown. In another second, he had pulled them loose, and parting the garment, he revealed her small, firm breasts and hardened nipples.

“I want tae explore every part o’ ye, Caitlyn. I want tae ken yer body like ye ken it yersel’,” he growled.

When his lips sunk over her nipple, she gasped at the sensation, pleasure flowering across her body like a blossoming rose. He moved from one breast to the other, licking her nipples, and nipping them with his lips.

He sat up fully then, and slowly tugged her nightdress up. “Lift yer behind,” he instructed.

Caitlyn did as she was bid and shifted her hips. He pulled the night gown all the way up to her waist and then looked down at her, drinking her all in as she lay there, open and vulnerable for him. Once more she felt her cheeks burning as he gazed at her so

unabashedly.

Bringing his head down, he dropped tiny little kisses across her stomach, the trail going lower and lower.

“Och, god,” Caitlyn gasped, her hips writhing as her slickness oozed at her arousal.

“I’m going tae taste ye, Caitlyn. I’m going tae make ye feel pleasure ye’ve never experienced before.”

As he reached the very apex of her thighs, she could feel his hot breath on her most sensitive parts, and opening her legs wider, she wordlessly beckoned him in.

“Please, Edan. Please,” she begged.

With his head between her legs, he looked up at her, his eyes raging with desire. She took a sharp breath in when he slipped a finger inside of her. He moved slowly at first, working his hand back and forth. Caitlyn matched his rhythm with her hips, watching him watching her.

She began panting as he moved faster. Faster and deeper, filling her up and reaching a place she hardly knew existed.

“Oh, god,” she cried.

“Ye’re so warm, and wet, and tight. I want tae make love tae ye everyday o’ me life.”

As she lost herself in his rhythm, her head fell back onto the pillow, and her whole body moved in time with him. Suddenly, she gasped, and jerking her head to look at him, she felt a different sensation entirely. With his finger still inside of her, his tongue softly teased the same tiny nub he had caressed the night before.

“Och, Caitlyn, ye taste so sweet,” he groaned.

At first, his tongue moved slowly, matching the steady rhythm of his finger. Back and forth, up and down, lifting her higher into some delirium of ecstasy. She made circles with her hips, gripped the bed clothes around her, and moaned deeply from her throat. But his tongue and finger began to move faster and faster.

Edan groaned with delight, his hot breath dancing on her skin. “Och, aye, Caitlyn. I could feed on ye all night.”

But as the intensity grew, Caitlyn felt her body tense, and as though she were floating, her body seemed to lift from the solid bed beneath her. Higher and higher she climbed, up through the roof of the castle and out into the open sky. She moaned, she writhed, she tensed, she panted, until suddenly, she exploded, like stars bursting from her womanhood, dancing across her body, sparking the very essence of who she was.

“Oh, me god,” she cried, melting into the sweet sensation of her orgasm.

But Edan wasn’t finished with her, and she watched as he ripped his clothes from his body. Once naked, her eyes widened at the sight of his huge hard manhood that sat between his legs, throbbing and aching for her.

Was that in me last night?

It was so large, she couldn’t imagine it to be possible, and yet, she had taken him inside her then, and wanted to do so again now.

Planting his hands on either side of her head, he gazed down at her with utter adoration. “I love ye, Caitlyn. I couldnae love ye any more than I dae in this very minute.”

“I love ye too,” she whispered back.

He flashed a huge smile, and then guided himself to slowly enter her. Inch by inch, he slipped inside.

“Ye are so ready fer me. Ye’re so sweet, and tight, and beautiful,” he growled.

He pressed his hips forward and sunk himself a little deeper. Caitlyn quivered, digging her fingers into his shoulders. As he looked deeply into her eyes, she gazed right back, and as they moved together, it was as though their souls entwined.

Edan’s whole body shook as he moved back and forth, but Caitlyn did not want him to hold back.

“Take me Edan. Take me with all the love ye have fer me.”

He growled loudly as he plunged deeper into her, causing Caitlyn to whimper and gasp. Back and forth he went, thrusting harder and deeper each time. Caitlyn felt herself tensing again, climbing once more to the heavens. But this time, she was taking Edan with her. Their bodies melded together, soaring higher and higher, panting, and groaning, their hot, sticky bodies clashing in beautiful symphony, until they reached the very peak. And in one delightful explosion, Caitlyn’s high-pitched squeal of pleasure met Edan’s roar of ecstasy.

As they lay in each other’s arms, their breathing heavy, and their hearts still pounding, Edan gazed at Caitlyn with a look of bewilderment. “Ye told me ye loved me,” he exclaimed.

“And ye told me ye loved me,” she breathed back.

“Aye. But we both kent I did, and I have done fer years. I just didnae think I would

hear those words from ye so soon.”

“It’s the truth, Edan. I dae love ye. With every beat o’ me heart. I realize now, that I want tae be with ye fer all the days I have left tae live.”

He kissed her forehead tenderly and released a contented sigh. “I cannae wait until we’re together.”

“Nor can I. But I have tae speak tae Effie first.”

He nodded. “I ken that, me beautiful. I just hope I dinnae have tae wait too long.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Out in the far distance, dark clouds began forming, and if the wind didn't turn, they were sure to experience a storm by nightfall. Edan watched the sky from his bedchamber window, where he had spent some of the morning alone with his thoughts.

Parallel to the weather, a storm was brewing inside the castle too, and in more ways than one. Tensions were high as the news of his injury had travelled from the laird to the stable hands. The MacMillan clan had been attacked before, but after his and Caitlyn's kidnapping, there appeared to be more pressure mounting.

Of course, that was not the only storm that was likely to cause immense damage. Now, solid in his decision to break off the betrothal to Effie, Edan had been readying himself for the colossal explosion his news was going to bring. In battle, some men were injured or killed to enable those behind to press forward to victory. Edan supposed it felt something like that. While Effie was not going to die, he was certainly going to cause her a great deal of pain.

It was a little before midday when he met Darach out in the courtyard. The brothers had seen and spoken to each other since his injury, but Darach still asked about it.

"I am healing well, as I always dae," Edan said.

"Be that as it may, braither, ye are nae invincible," Darach replied steadily.

Edan shrugged. "Nae quite, but almost." He grinned.

Darach smiled and shook his head. "One o' these days, yer pride is going tae teach ye a lesson."

"It isnae pride, Darach. 'Tis what comes from being a laird. If I am nae confident in me abilities, how can I expect the men who serve me tae be the same?"

Darach nodded. "I see yer point. But I also worry about ye, Edan. Ye havenae been yersel' since we returned."

"I've had a lot on me mind."

"Caitlyn, by any chance?" Darach lifted a knowing eyebrow.

"Among other things. I have come tae a decision. I realize that I cannae longer commit mesel' tae Effie. It isnae only because o' Caitlyn. The fact is, I ken I will forever be pining fer something else. Fer someone else. And it isnae fair on either o' us. Effie deserves a better husband than that."

"Does Caitlyn ken?"

"She does."

Darach nodded. "And how does she feel about it?"

"It was difficult fer her at first, but she's finally come around tae see the situation fer what it is."

"I see."

Edan came to a stop and turned to Darach. "Tell me, braither. Dae ye think I am making the right choice?"

Darach smiled. "It has never been usual fer ye tae ask me opinion in making yer decisions. Why now?"

"This is hardly a usual circumstance, and besides, we both ken ye have always been the smartest o' the two o' us. I seek yer opinion fer I respect it."

"But me opinion shouldnae sway ye," Darach noted.

"It willnae. But I am intrigued as tae what ye think about it. Ye are me braither and me closest companion. It is ye alone I trust. Ye have always been honest and true. The truth is, I desire tae ken if I have yer support."

"Ye dae," Darach said plainly.

As they continued their stroll, Edan was not surprised at his brother's forthright answer. It was Darach's way. As intelligent as he was, he never did see a reason for small talk. In fact, he had, on many occasions during their life, made mention of men using far too many words to say something they could say in a few.

"Thank ye, braither."

"As I told ye the first time ye came tae me with this problem, the heart doesnae think in right and wrong. The heart feels. As I predicted, it has fought back all the suppression ye have placed upon it."

"I love her, Darach."

His brother smiled widely at him. "I ken. I've kent that from the day ye met her. I dinnae think ye realized it at the time, but as I've watched ye over the years, it's become blatantly obvious tae me."

“Ye never said.” Edan frowned.

“What would the point have been? Besides, I would only have been confirming what ye already kent. The fact of the matter is this, our faither and Laird MacMillan arranged this marriage tae strengthen the clans. Neither o’ them thought about feelings or love. It was a business arrangement. If ye dae marry Caitlyn, that arrangement willnae change. Ye’ll still align the clans. Ye’ll still fulfill yer duty, and thus, everyone is happy.”

“Nae everyone.” Edan sighed.

Darach inclined his head. “True. But then, ye wouldnae be happy if ye married Effie either. One way or another, someone is going tae get hurt.”

Darach stopped and turned to face him. “But here is me logical analysis. On the one hand, ye can marry Effie. Ye’d be miserable, Caitlyn would be miserable, and eventually, Effie would be miserable too, because ye would be unhappy and ye wouldnae be able tae love her the way she needs ye tae. On the other hand, if ye marry Caitlyn, ye will be happy, she will be happy, and Effie, fer a time, will be deeply hurt. The equation, when put like that, is simple, and shows the best outcome fer all.”

Edan raised an eyebrow. “Ye have reduced me future tae an equation?”

Darach smirked with a shrug. “It is the way me mind works.”

Edan placed an affectionate hand on his brother’s shoulder. “I ken, braither. And still, I love ye.”

A little while later, Edan and Darach headed to Laird MacMillan’s study. Edan was nervous of the laird’s reaction, but he had to swallow that fear if he wanted to be with

Caitlyn.

“It is good tae see ye up and well again, Edan,” the laird said, welcoming the men in and gesturing for them to sit. “MacTavish is certainly determined tae kill ye.”

“It was only a flesh wound, Conor. I’ll live.”

Conor chuckled, handing a glass of amber liquid to himself and Darach. “Ye are the same now, as ye were when ye were a child, Edan. Hardy and strong.”

After pouring himself a drink, he joined them and let out a heavy sigh. “Kieran has doubled the guard since the attack on ye. There has been nae more word from MacTavish, but I ken his sneaky tactics. I doubt he’ll announce it when he makes his move.”

“I agree.” Edan nodded. “As I told ye that day I returned. He was determined tae discover yer army’s weaknesses. He fears fer the loss o’ his men, which tells me, he’s perhaps nae as confident in them as he pretends.”

“Dinnae underestimate the man, Edan. That being said, with the union between yersel’ and Effie, we will be stronger than ever.”

Edan took a deep breath in. “It is that subject that brings me here tae see ye. There are things I must tell ye that I believe ye willnae want tae hear. And yet, tell them, I must.”

The laird fixed an intense and curious gaze upon Edan, and then he nodded. “Go on.”

With a clenching stomach, Edan began to speak. He told Conor everything. He started from the moment he and Caitlyn had met when they were children, explaining his disappointment when he discovered it was Effie he was to marry.

“It was me faither’s will, and thus, I went along with it as a necessary arrangement, fer I was still child” Edan said. “Over those years, I distanced meself from Caitlyn fer me own sake and out o’ respect fer Effie.”

He then relayed what had occurred when they were held hostage, how he and Caitlyn had grown closer, and, once Caitlyn reciprocated his feelings, how difficult things had been since their return. He was wise enough to leave out the fact that Caitlyn and he had spent several nights together, and what had transpired on those occasions.

At the end of his confession, Edan said, “I am in love with Caitlyn, me laird. I have been fer a very long time. In light o’ all I have told ye, I cannae, in good faith, marry Effie.”

After listening to Edan’s heartfelt explanation, Conor sighed heavily. “I sensed something like this was going tae happen. Since yer return, I’ve noticed the change in ye, Edan. The fact that ye havenae approached me with another date fer the wedding had me considering if ye still wanted tae go through with it. I’ve also seen a heaviness in Caitlyn that was never there before.”

“I can understand if ye’re angry with me, Conor. Me decision is going tae cause Effie a lot o’ pain, and I would never want tae hurt her,” Edan said sadly.

“I’m nae angry with ye.” The laird shook his head. “Tis better this is dealt with now, rather than ye going ahead with the union and me daughter being miserable fer the rest o’ her life. That being said, ye’re right. Effie will be devastated. It will take her a long time tae come around.”

Conor had always been a level-headed and reasonable man, but even knowing that, Edan had expected a much more explosive reaction from him. The sense of relief he felt thanks to the calm rational response of the laird, coupled with Edan being able to finally unburden the weight from his shoulders, was indescribable.

“I assume ye have yet tae speak tae Effie,” Conor correctly concluded.

“Aye, me laird. I wanted tae lay me cards on the table with ye first. ‘Tis the right and honorable thing tae dae.”

“Well, thank ye fer yer honesty, Edan. Ye now have a job on yer hands, because I can tell ye, Effie willnae react as calmly as I.”

Edan blew out a long breath. “If there were any other way, I would take it.”

The older man nodded. “I can see this has taken its toll on ye. I suppose, I ought tae be grateful, at least, that this wasnae an easy decision.”

“It hasnae been, me laird. But as me braither so profoundly stated earlier. The heart doesnae think, it feels.”

After the meeting, Edan and Darach left the study and walked down the corridor side by side. The relief Edan had felt with Conor was short-lived, however, for now he had to face the woman who had, for most of her life, imagined she would be his wife.

“And intae the lion’s den I must go,” he muttered to himself.

“Are ye going tae speak tae her now?” Darach asked.

Edan nodded. “It is best tae get it out in the open. The sooner it is done, the sooner everyone can move forward. I would never, in me wildest dreams, want tae hurt Effie. I’m doing what is necessary, but there will be nae part o’ me that will enjoy it.”

Darach nodded with a saddened expression. “Now, I must face the woman whose heart I am about tae break.”

Edan found Effie in the drawing room with her maid. While Effie had, seconds before, been intently concentrating on her needlework, his arrival caused her to drop it on the sofa beside her and jump to her feet.

“Edan.” She sounded both surprised and delighted, which, given the distance he had kept between himself and her since his return, was a natural reaction.

“Hello, Effie.”

She moved toward him and took his hands in hers. He remained where he stood as she reached up and kissed his cheek. “I’m so glad ye are here.”

He managed a strained smile. “I wonder if I can speak tae ye privately,” he said nodding toward the maid.

“O’ course.” Effie turned toward the maid. “Helen, will ye leave us please.”

“Aye, me lady.” With a bow toward them both, the maid hurried from the room.

She beamed up at him once they were alone. “Och, I have missed ye so much, Edan.”

Her warm and unassuming smile only made him feel more guilt for what he was about to do. “Effie. I need ye tae sit down with me fer a minute.”

“All right.” Her brow twitched with uncertainty, but she let him lead her to the settle she had been seated on only a moment before.

“There is something we must discuss,” he began, still holding her hands. “I must warn ye, though. ‘Tis nae an easy discussion.”

Effie frowned and looked worried. “Something has happened.”

“Aye,” he replied vaguely. “It is best if I get straight tae the point. I’m afraid I cannae marry ye, Effie.”

“What?” she gawped at him. “But why?”

Edan took a deep breath. “I’ve had much time tae think about things over these last few weeks. A lot has happened, as ye ken, and I have come tae the realization that I dinnae love ye.”

Effie’s mouth fell open in astonishment.

The urge to reassure her was overwhelming, but Eden knew he had to go on. This needed to be said, as much as it was going to devastate her. “Marrying ye would be unfair. Fer the both o’ us. I cannae be the husband ye need me tae be, and I dinnae want tae trap ye in a loveless marriage fer the rest o’ yer life.”

As predicted, Effie jumped from the settle were both sitting on, and raged at him.

“How could ye dae this tae me?” she yelled. “After all this time I have waited fer ye. I have been patient and given ye all the space ye asked fer, and now, ye tell me ye nae longer want tae marry me?”

Edan stood and walked towards her, but Effie backed off. “Get away from me. I cannae look upon ye,” she spat, spinning and turning her back to him.

“Effie. We need tae talk about this. Please. Dinnae make it any more difficult than it already is.”

“Ye think this is difficult fer ye ?”

Suddenly, she spun around and glared at him. With her brows knitted and her mouth

tight and twisted in anger, she scowled, “Is this because o’ Caitlyn?”

Caught off guard, Edan was stunned into silence at her direct question. He floundered, and could not find any words with which to answer her. While he did not speak, it appeared his silence was an admittance in and of itself.

Effie smirked mirthlessly. “I kent it,” she spat. “Ye have both been acting exactly the same. Ye’ve both been distant with me. Ye’ve both changed. Me sister cannae look me in the eye, and neither can ye.”

“Effie, I’m so sorry,” Edan lamented.

Tears trickled down her face then. “How could ye?” she sobbed. “How could ye dae this tae me?”

Edan stood there feeling utterly powerless. Her devastation was nearly palpable as her body shook with grief and anger. He could feel it within himself as his heart ached for what he was doing to her, and yet, there was nothing he could do to make the situation better.

“Dae ye love her?” she cried, her face grimacing.

“Effie, please.”

“Dae ye love her?” she shrieked.

Edan sighed and dropped his head. “Aye, I dae. I am in love with her.”

A heartbreaking sob burst from her chest. “Och, me god.” Turning away from him, Effie ran from the room.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Caitlyn leaned over the table and looked intently at the map spread across it. It was one of many Kieran used. As war chief, it was his responsibility to protect the castle. But though he was clearly familiar with them, Caitlyn had never seen them before.

She had been sitting in the garden earlier mindlessly gazing at the castle walls. The clouds were darkening above her head, and the wind pulled at her shawl as it grew in strength, but she had hardly noticed. It was only Kieran's approach that brought her out of her trance.

"Ye look deep in thought," he had said.

"I'm thinking about that arrow that came over the wall," Caitlyn had replied. "It's been on me mind since it happened, but I just cannae figure it out."

"Figure what out?" he had asked, lowering himself down onto the stone bench beside her.

"How they did it." She had looked at Kieran. "How did they ken where we were? How did they manage tae hit Edan when they couldnae see him?"

"It didnae come from over the wall," Kieran had replied. "Tae have been so accurate, the shooter would have had tae see us, which means, he had tae be standing on the wall itself."

Caitlyn had stared at him. "They were on the castle walls?" she gawked. "But how?"

Surely the guards would have seen Laird MacTavish's men approach?"

Kieran nodded. "Men, aye. A single shooter, nae. One man can easily approach the castle unnoticed if they're good enough."

"Without anyone seeing?" she had said, still struggling to believe such a thing was possible.

"It was dark when it happened, Caitlyn. Dae ye remember?"

Caitlyn had nodded.

"Well, while me men are good, they dinnae have special powers tae see at night. A single shooter could easily sneak past, find a blind spot where the men are nae positioned, and shoot from there."

This had worried Caitlyn greatly. "But if one can dae it, then surely, Laird MacTavish can sneak more men through."

Kieran had smiled and shook his head. "Now, cousin, dinnae be getting yersel' in a tizzy. It would take a great many o' MacTavish's men tae overpower us. He simply cannae get that many soldiers through unnoticed."

Caitlyn had not felt convinced, and clearly, her expression had betrayed her thoughts.

"Right," Kieran had said, standing from the bench. Holding a hand out to her, he jerked his head. "Come with me tae the map room. It will be easier tae show ye what I mean."

With the map spread out across the table in front of them, Kieran pointed to different places outside of the castle walls. "These are the best places for MacTavish tae attack,

if we let him get that far. He'll concentrate on the lower parts of the wall, in hope that his men can climb it, but I have more men in these areas tae ensure maximum defense."

"But what if?—"

A loud clap of thunder outside suddenly made Caitlyn jump and shriek. Kieran placed a reassuring hand on her arm. "Ye're all right, Caitlyn. It's just thunder."

"I hate this weather." She shuddered.

Kieran smiled kindly. "I ken. Dae ye remember what I used tae tell ye when ye were a wee bairn?"

"Aye," Caitlyn smirked. "Ye told me the gods were having a row."

Kieran beamed at her. "It worked, though, didnae it? We used tae pretend tae ken what they were arguing about. Yer best guess always made me laugh. Ye said they were arguing over who got tae use the privy first."

Caitlyn giggled then. "Och, aye. I remember that."

"Who kens? Maybe that's what's going?—"

The door bursting open cut Kieran off mid-sentence, and shocked at the abrupt entrance, he and Caitlyn both spun their heads to look at who had entered in such a hurry.

Caitlyn was surprised to see Effie. She was even more surprised to see how angry she was. Normally easy-going and fun-loving, it was not an emotion her sister ordinarily displayed.

“Here ye are,” Effie growled, staring at her sister. She turned to look at Kieran. “Would ye mind leaving us alone, Kieran? I need tae speak tae me sister.”

A sudden fear welled up in Caitlyn’s stomach as Kieran looked from Effie to Caitlyn and back again.

“Is everything all right, Effie?” Kieran asked carefully.

“I just need tae speak tae Caitlyn,” she repeated.

Kieran raised his hands. “Very well.” And with a final worried glance toward Caitlyn, he moved to the door, closing it gently behind him.

“Whatever is the matter, Effie?” Caitlyn asked, her nerves now on edge.

“Och, I think ye ken very well,” her sister snarled. “Edan has just told me that the wedding willnae be happening. That he cannae marry me. That he doesnae love me.”

“Och, Effie.” Caitlyn took a step toward her. “I’m so?—”

“Dinnae come near me.” Effie held up a hand, making Caitlyn stop in her tracks. “It’s nae the only thing he told me.”

A rush of fear spread through Caitlyn at Effie’s words, for she knew what was coming next. But the fear was mixed with betrayal. She had told Edan to wait. She had asked him to give her a few days so she could speak to Effie herself. This was not how she wanted her sister to find out at all.

“Please, Effie. This is nae how I wanted it tae be. Ye have tae believe me.”

“The thing is,” Effie raged, “I kent. I kent ye were in love with each other about a

week ago. I watched how attentive Edan was tae ye, the soft glances he gave ye, the way he looked at ye. He's never looked at me the way he looks at ye," she spat.

Her older sister paced back and forth, clearly full of heightened energy in her anger. "But I tried tae fight it. I denied it tae myself. I even made excuses fer his behavior. I told meself that it would pass. That it was only because ye had been taken. But ye havenae been prisoners since ye've returned. And it's clear that naething has changed."

Caitlyn felt completely devastated at her sister's words. Her pain filtered through her anger, and crushed Caitlyn's heart. All the guilt that had eaten away at her seemed to mount up all at once, and she felt that same familiar tightness in her throat.

"I'm so sorry, Effie," Caitlyn croaked, battling to hold back the tears. "I never meant fer any o' this tae happen. I didnae want tae hurt ye. Ye ken I love ye so much."

"And ye show that by stealing me future husband?" Effie yelled back. "That is how much ye love me? Me enemies would hurt me less."

"It shouldnae have happened," Caitlyn sobbed.

"But it did, Caitlyn. It did happen. Ye may as well have torn me heart from me chest and trampled on it."

"I'm truly sorry, I didnae ask fer any o' this tae happen. I've hated meself every single day because o' it. What else dae ye want me tae say?"

Effie shook her head. "I cannae talk tae ye about this now. I am so very angry, I fear I may say something I cannae take back."

"Tell me what tae dae. Tell me what tae dae tae make this right and I will, because

believe me it's all I've done. Nae matter how much I think, naethin' comes tae that will make this mess right."

Effie fell silent for a long moment. Staring at the floor, she appeared to be in deep thought. Slowly, she raised her eyes to look at Caitlyn. "Tell me this, Caitlyn. If I asked ye tae, would ye tell Edan tae leave? Would ye send him away and promise never tae see him again?"

Through the tears and pain, Caitlyn could feel her heart breaking into a million pieces. This was to be her punishment? She was to sacrifice her love for Edan to appease her sister?

"Is that what ye want me tae dae?" Caitlyn gasped. "Ye really want me tae send Edan away?"

"Would ye dae it if I asked ye tae?" Effie repeated, pinning Caitlyn with an intense stare.

As much as Caitlyn wanted to comfort her sister, she could not imagine her life without Edan. How was she supposed to live with such heart ache? She had only begun to discover her love for him, and now, she was supposed to give all that up. The tears still flowed down her cheeks, but Caitlyn could not give Effie a reply. It was too much to ask.

Effie waited, but when Caitlyn did not answer her, she nodded. "I see."

Without another word, she turned on her heels and stormed from the room. When the door slammed closed, Caitlyn slid to the floor. Everything she had contained since her return finally overwhelmed her, and alone in her devastation, the sobs wrenched from her body for a long time.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The horses' hooves thundered across the soft undergrowth. Edan pushed his strong beast back toward the castle as the wild, turbulent wind tugged at his plaid. As he had predicted, the storm had arrived, though a little earlier than he had imagined. Thunder and lightning had already spooked his horse, and by the looks of the dark clouds above, rain was bound to burst from the heavens at any moment.

After speaking to Effie, he had needed some time on his own. The heavy guilt had swallowed him whole at the pain he had caused her, and a vigorous ride seemed like a good idea at the time. It was not just guilt he felt. There was anger too. Anger and frustration at the position he found himself in.

He had allowed this whole mess to fly out of control, which was entirely out of character. Edan was a man who maintained his environment at all times. Had he not proven that with how he had treated Caitlyn over the years? To protect himself and his heart, he had kept her at arm's length. He had even pretended to enjoy the misery he had put her through, just to keep himself safe.

And yet, his love refused to be contained. Darach had put it more succinctly than Edan ever could.

“Ye've spent yer whole adult life ignoring yer heart. Sooner or later, it was going tae fight back.”

And fight back, it had. The desires of his heart had grown stronger over time, finally overcoming Edan entirely. He had lost control of his feelings and emotions, and, for

the most part, it had felt good. But not today. He had hurt Effie immensely, and in hurting her, he had also hurt Caitlyn. The sisters had always been close, and knowing them since children, Edan was well aware of the love they shared.

In the process of trying to let Effie down gently, he had also managed to override Caitlyn's wishes. She had been adamant that she wanted to speak to her sister on her own terms, which Edan had felt was entirely reasonable. But somehow, the discussion had got away from him, and Effie had come to her own conclusions. Clearly, she had had her suspicions already, or the suggestion would never have been aired. Caitlyn was not going to be pleased, and thus, Edan had yet another difficult conversation ahead.

Inside the castle courtyard, mayhem ensued as men, women, and children hurried about the cobblestones, securing items the wind was determined to destroy. Carts, baskets, and barrels were all victims of the storm's wild arrival, and as those who dwelled within the castle grounds yelled to each other to make themselves heard over the howling wind, Edan carefully led his horse through the pathway of mayhem to get to the stables.

"Make certain ye batten these stable doors down tight," Edan yelled at the stable hand.

"Aye, me laird," the stable hand yelled back.

With his beast secured, he hurried inside the castle. While the ride had given him some time to let off steam, it had not changed anything. His hurry had little to do with what had occurred. Indeed, there were more conversations to be had, but more than that, with the battering shutters now clattering against the stone castle walls, Caitlyn would be somewhere in the castle feeling utterly terrified. He only hoped she wasn't alone.

Hurrying his pace, he checked drawing rooms, the great hall, the library, and even her bedchamber, but she was nowhere to be found. He was running down another corridor when he saw Milly rushing toward him with her hands full of blankets.

“Have ye seen Caitlyn?” Edan asked worriedly.

The maid shook her head. “I havenae, me laird. Perhaps she is in the library.”

“She’s nae. I checked. When is the last time ye saw her?”

“Och, it was a good hour or so ago, me laird. She was in the garden, but I cannae imagine she’ll be there now with that storm outside.”

Edan nodded and let the maid hurry on with her duties. He stood in the corridor for a long moment, wondering where the devil she could be. Unsure what to do, he retraced his steps back to the great hall. There was a flurry of activity in there too, and Edan spotted Kieran talking to a guard at the far end of the room.

“Have ye seen Caitlyn?” he said, once he had reached him.

“I was showing her the maps earlier,” Kieran said, his face a little grave. “But then Effie came bursting in. She was clearly upset, and wished tae speak tae her sister alone.”

“Damn it,” Edan spat.

Kieran frowned. “What’s happened?”

With a heavy sigh, Edan quickly gave Kieran a recap of his conversations, starting with Conor and telling the laird he was breaking off the betrothal, and then his meeting with Effie and what had resulted from that.

Kieran nodded knowingly. “That explains Effie’s highly unusual behavior. I dinnae think I’ve ever seen her so upset or angry. Try the map room. It’s on the top level o’ the castle on the back east corner. Caitlyn might still be there.”

“Thank ye,” Edan said, about to turn away.

“I’d help ye look fer her, but me hands are tied with securing the castle.”

“Dinnae worry and thank ye.” He then turned on his heels and swiftly left the huge room.

Finding the map room took him a little longer than he would have liked. Having never ventured up there, he had no clue where the stairs to the upper floor where, but after directions from a maid, and once on the highest level, Edan ran down the corridor, finally reaching the only room Kieran could have meant.

He burst through the door, expecting to see Caitlyn, for he could not imagine where else she might be, but the room was empty. It was not a particularly big room. It was also rather cold, given the fire in the hearth was not lit. A map lay across the large table in the middle, and to his left, stood a bench, pressed tightly against the wall.

Ahead of him on the far wall, the rolled ends of maps peeked out of deep boxes that lined the wall from floor to ceiling, similar to a bookshelf. The cubby holes each had labels above, clearly naming the areas the maps covered. Other than a desk and chair in the corner, and the items he had already noted, there was no other furniture in the room.

Where the devil is she?

Still holding the door handle, Edan turned to leave, when he heard the tiniest whimper. Spinning back into the room, his eyes roved about. “Caitlyn?”

There was silence again, but Edan was certain he had heard something, and closing the door behind him, he stepped across the stone floor and rounded the table.

“Caitlyn!” he gasped, rushing toward her.

The table had blocked his view, and now, his heart broke at the sight of her, for the woman he loved was curled up into a ball and tucked into the corner. Her whole body was shaking, though she made no sound.

Crouching to reach her, he scooped her up in his arms, feeling the coldness of her skin against his own. “What are ye doing up here all by yersel’?” he said soothingly.

She didn’t answer as he carried her to the settle, and lowering himself down, he held her tightly, trying to warm her as she remained on his lap. Rubbing her forearms briskly to generate heat, he pulled her tightly into him, wrapping her up in his plaid. He held her there for some time, rocking her gently. Every now and then, he would hear her sniffing. Clearly, she had been crying, but whether that had to do with the storm or her conversation with Effie, he could not yet know.

Eventually, the shaking stopped, and she seemed to calm in his arms. Only jerking a little when loud claps of thunder pierced into the room.

“I’m so sorry, Caitlyn,” Edan said, when he felt she was able to hear him. “I didnae mean fer it tae happen this way.”

“Ye told her,” Caitlyn said quietly, her head still buried into his chest.

“Actually, Effie asked. When I didnae answer, she reached her own conclusions.”

Caitlyn nodded her head, as though that made sense. A moment later, she unfurled her body and lifted her face to look at him.

“She was so devastated, Edan,” she croaked sadly. “Never in me life have I seen me sister so upset.”

“I ken, me love.” Edan nodded.

“Her words crushed me, and I feel like I have destroyed her. I kent I would, but I didnae realize how awful it would make me feel.”

“The guilt has overwhelmed me too, Caitlyn. I would never want tae hurt ye or yer sister.”

“And yet, we have. And deeply. ‘Tis the reason I’ve come tae a decision.”

Edan felt a huge weight pressing down on his heart, for he knew what she was going to say before she had a chance to say it.

“We cannae be together, Edan,” she said sadly. “I ken I said we could, but I just cannae dae it. I cannae live with mesel’ kenning I’ve caused Effie such heart ache.”

Edan nodded. He didn’t agree with her decision, but nor did he have it in him to argue. It was clear, Caitlyn had her mind made up.

“We would never be truly happy. I’d blame mysel’ every day fer hurting her. We’d never have peace o’ it.” Caitlyn straightened herself on his lap. “I asked Effie what I could dae tae make it right, and dae ye ken what she said?”

Edan shook his head.

“She wanted tae ken if I would send ye away.” Caitlyn heaved a sigh. “I couldnae answer her. I couldnae bear the thought o’ never seeing ye again. But then, I saw how heartbroken she was, and I realized she hated us for ruining her future. I can find a

way tae live, even while hating mesel' for what I've done. But I cannae live in a world where I grow tae hate our love. It's the purest thing that has ever happened tae me."

"Ye want me tae leave?" Edan said carefully.

He tried to keep his voice as steady as he could, even as his heart broke into a million pieces at Caitlyn's words. After all they had endured, after saving her from MacTavish, after lowering his defenses and allowing himself to love her, he was going to lose everything he had gained, and more.

"I cannae marry ye, Edan. Nae now. I'm so sorry," she whimpered.

He nodded sadly. "All right, Caitlyn."

Lifting her chin, he tenderly brushed her lips with his, the softest of kisses in their sorrow. But that one touch was all he needed to spark everything he felt for her. If he had to leave, he needed to feel her body against his for one last time.

Prizing her mouth open, he slipped his tongue inside her sweet, soft mouth. Caitlyn tightened her arms around his neck and pulled herself into him, kissing him back, their hunger for each other growing every second.

Moving in his lap, she positioned her legs on either side of his, straddling his thighs. He moved his hands down her throat, tracing a line across the soft flesh of her bosom, and tugged at the ties of her corset. Discarding it, he then tugged at the ties of her dress, all the while still kissing her, his tongue desperate to capture the memory of her sweetness.

Caitlyn kissed him back, at the same time, pulling her arms from her dress. Edan shoved the thin cloth down to her waist, and only then, did his lips pull away from

hers. She gasped as her nipples hardened under the soft caress of his thumbs. His hands molded around the soft, warm flesh, his arousal throbbing between his legs by the second.

Dropping his head, he flicked his tongue over one nipple, and then the next.

“Ah,” she breathed, dropping her head back and pushing her bosoms further into his mouth.

“I love ye, Caitlyn. I will always love ye,” Edan whispered against her flesh.

Tugging her skirts up about her waist, he slipped his hand down the front of her body, groaning when he reached the soft moistness of her arousal.

“Och, Edan,” she gasped.

“Ye’re ready fer me as always, me love,” he said, moving his fingers gently over the tiny nub of her arousal. He flicked them back and forth as she writhed above him, pushing herself up and down with her thighs, moving in time with his motion.

His tongue still worked at her nipple, while his fingers pleased her, and by the strength of her grip on his shoulders and the tremor of her body, he could feel she was close.

“Come fer me, Caitlyn,” he growled.

“Och, God,” she cried, her body tensing and shaking with her rising euphoria. “Och, God.”

And then, it happened. Her entire body seized, she cried out in ecstasy, and a long, low moan left her lips as her body shook.

Swiftly adjusting his clothes, Edan grabbed his throbbing shaft and guided himself into her, growling at the pleasure he felt as her soft, tight, wetness surrounded him. Caitlyn moved automatically with him, knowing what her body wanted, knowing what he wanted, and as she moved down onto him, he thrust up into her.

“Caitlyn” he groaned, thrusting deeply into her, over and over again.

He wanted to lose himself in this woman. He would never have this time with her again, and he wanted to remember every single sensation that travelled across his body in that moment. The ache in his heart, the thump against his ribcage, the throbbing of his arousal, her tightness squeezing him as she rose again, and the soft scent of her beading skin. He wanted to remember all of it. He wanted to carry it with him for all the years he would not spend with her. All the days he would suffer without her.

But even in his desperation to keep his grasp upon her, he could not hold on any longer, and as Caitlyn pulsed around him, her soft cry leaving her lips, Edan gave his final thrusts and exploded inside of her. His roar of pleasure nearly choked him, as the emotion of knowing he was going to have to leave her, rushed through his very being and overwhelmed him. For fear she would see his broken expression, he pulled her into his body and held her there.

A little while later, she lay in his arms as he stroked her hair. The storm still raged outside, but neither of them seemed to notice.

“Are ye sure this is what ye want?” Edan murmured. He had not made love to her to dissuade her from her original decision, but one could only hope.

She didn’t answer for a long time, and then, gazing at him with the saddest expression he had ever seen, she nodded.

“It has tae be,” she whispered, the emotion catching in her throat. “I love ye now, as I will always love ye, but this doesnae change how things are.” Her eyes welled with tears, until they spilled down onto her cheeks.

Edan struggled to control his own emotion, and for fear of her seeing, he once again pulled her into him, pressing her head against his chest.

“Darach and I will leave on the morrow when the storm has passed,” he croaked.

CHAPTER TWENTY

She had not gone for supper last night, and she had refused to rise that morning to bid Edan farewell. She just could not face it. There had been a time, as the dawn broke, that Caitlyn had wondered if she was doing the right thing, or if there might be another way around this. But no matter how much she thought about it, she resigned herself to what she already knew was the truth. Edan leaving was the right thing to do.

Of course, it didn't feel right. The huge hole in her entire being didn't feel right either. In all her years, she had never felt such a sense of loss, a sense of despair, a sense of emptiness. Lying in her bed, the tears had poured down her cheeks, and the sobs had wrenched from her body. It felt like a death, and, in some ways, it was.

It was a death of a future she had imagined would be filled with joy and happiness. The death of a love that had barely begun to sprout its first leaves of life. The feeling was so overwhelming, so incapacitating, there seemed to be no words to describe it. But feel it, she did.

Afterwards, a numbness overtook her, and for hours, Caitlyn lay there, simply staring at the wall. If she blinked, she didn't notice. Nor did she care. There was no reason to care about anything any longer.

Helen had come to her earlier, but she had sent the maid away. She was still staring at the wall when Effie appeared in front of her. Her presence took her by surprise, for she had not even heard her bedchamber door opening. Her sister gazed down at Caitlyn for a long moment, and then, turning behind her, she pulled a stool across the

room and set it beside the bed.

Lowering herself onto it, she took Caitlyn's hand in hers, and said, "Why did ye send Edan away?"

Caitlynn frowned and gazed at her sister in confusion. "It is what ye wanted," she whispered.

Effie looked at Caitlyn sadly. "I wanted tae ken if ye would dae it, Caitlyn. But when ye couldnae answer me, and when I saw the anguish on yer face at me question, it became glaringly obvious how much ye were in love with him."

Caitlyn was still a little confused. "I dae love him. With all o' me heart. But I cannae hurt ye like that."

"I was very angry yesterday. It took me some time tae calm down. But when I did, I realized that I was wrong tae ask ye that. I had a long conversation with Maither, and she helped me tae see the situation far more clearly."

"What are ye saying?" Caitlyn said, now pushing herself up in the bed.

"I'm saying that ye shouldnae sacrifice yer happiness fer the sake o' someone else's, Caitlyn. Even mine."

"But, Effie?—"

Effie raised a hand to stop her.

"I'm nae saying it will be easy. In fact, I'll probably feel despair for some time. It will be hard for me tae see ye together, and aye, perhaps I'll always feel a sense of being betrayed, in a way. But nor could I live with mesel' if I was the sole reason fer yer

unhappiness. I mean, look at ye. Ye look awful. And far more devastated than I.”

Caitlyn heard a laugh coming out of her mouth, before she shook her head. “I cannae dae that tae ye.”

“Listen tae me, sister. Feelings cannae be controlled. I might be hurt, but I dinnae want tae stand in yer way. I love ye, ye ken. Ye have tae follow yer heart.”

Caitlyn could hardly believe what she was hearing, and as scared as she was to feel it, a small flame of hope flickered in her heart.

“Ye would dae that fer me?” Caitlyn gasped.

Effie stood and moved toward the bed. Wrapping her arms around Caitlyn, she hugged her tightly. “Ye are me sister, Caitlyn. I would dae anything fer ye.”

Caitlyn grabbed Effie and hugged her back, her arms crushing her body like it was the last embrace they would ever share. The two remained in their embrace for quite some time, until eventually, Effie released her grip and sat back on the chair behind her.

“Ye should send Edan a missive immediately, and tell him tae come right back,” Effie said firmly.

“How long has he been gone?” Caitlyn said.

“He and Darach left at dawn. Faither told me he bid him and Maither farewell last night, and told them he would be leaving quietly and without a fuss. When we all rose this morning, he had done just that.”

Effie stood from the chair. “Now,” she turned and pointed to Caitlyn’s writing desk,

“wash yer face, freshen yersel’ up, and write him that missive.”

She turned to go, but Caitlyn quickly called her back.

Effie looked at her questioningly.

“Thank ye,” Caitlyn said softly. “Thank ye fer being so kind and wonderful.”

Effie smiled, though it was tinged with sadness. “What are sisters fer?” She then turned and left the bedchamber, closing the door quietly behind her.

In the silence of the room, Caitlyn took a minute to gather herself. Never in all her life, could she have imagined Effie would have given her such hope, and now, with her sister’s blessing, she and Edan could be together after all. She was still reeling when she pushed herself out of bed with excitement bubbling through her body.

She washed her hands and face, and then moved to the writing desk, but as she sat with pen poised over parchment, a thought sprung into her mind.

I dinnae want tae write him. I want tae see him. I have tae see him.

Dropping the pen back into the ink pot, she hurriedly moved to the window and pulled the partly opened drapes back fully. Light streamed into her chamber. The sky was clear, the storm had passed, and by the brightness of the light, Caitlyn knew there were still many hours of daylight left.

It will take longer than one day, but I can stay in a tavern along the way.

With her decision made, and an excited wanting in her heart, Caitlyn hurried around her bedchamber and dressed in clothes to travel. She determined, as she dressed, that she would tell no one she was leaving. No doubt, Kieran, or her father and mother,

would make a great fuss and try and dissuade her. But they did not understand the aching need in her heart. She needed to see Edan and she could not let anyone stop her from doing so.

The heavy cloak she wore floated out behind her as she swiftly moved down the corridor. Avoiding the main areas of the castle, Caitlyn slipped into one of the many hidden tunnels that would bring her out into the courtyard. It was as she travelled with her head ducked low, that she remembered Edan's first visit. This was one of the very tunnels she had taken him and Darach into.

She smiled to herself, thinking how very strange it was that, after all these years of barely being near them, she was now using it to find him again.

The courtyard was a mess with broken branches and much debris spread across the cobblestones. The storm had certainly caused a lot of damage. Pulling her hood over her head, she dashed past those sweeping the ground and clearing the destruction.

Upon reaching the stables, she caught sight of a stable hand.

"I need me horse readied," she said.

The young lad looked a little confused. "Me lady?" he said.

"Quickly, please."

"Aye, me lady," he said, hurriedly spinning on his heels and running into the stable.

A little while later, he walked her mare out, saddled and ready. Using a box the stable hand placed beside her, she mounted the horse and then looked down at him.

"I need ye tae take a message tae me faither and Kieran. Tell them I have gone after

Laird MacLachlan. I will return as soon as I can.”

“Aye, me lady.”

“But dinnae tell them yet. Wait a while. Dae ye understand me?”

The boy nodded.

“Wait fer two hours, and then tell them.”

Again, the boy frowned, but this time, he didn’t say anything and only nodded.

At the gate, Caitlyn lied and told the guards she was taking a small canter around the castle walls, and she would not be going far. Given the fact that tensions were so high after Edan had been struck with that arrow, she imagined Kieran had instructed the guards not to let anyone in and out of the castle without good reason.

Even as they let her through, she knew she was taking a huge risk. She was acting childish and foolish. MacTavish’s men could very well, at that moment, be readying themselves to attack the castle again. But the desire to see Edan was too strong. Her heart overrode her rational thought and told her that she had to see him. She had to tell him face to face that they were to have their happy future after all. She had to feel his arms wrap around her in that safe, comforting embrace, that always made her feel whole.

As she pushed her mare on, the wind tugging at her hair, with her cloak flying behind her, she could feel the excitement and anticipation building in her. She imagined Edan’s delight at her news. She could see his beaming face gazing down at her adoringly.

Indeed, it was not going to be smooth sailing, for as Effie had so clearly stated, she

would struggle to deal with seeing them together. But Caitlyn had already come to a solution. Just because she and Edan were together, did not mean they needed to flaunt their happiness in Effie's face. They could, at least at the beginning, control their affections in her presence. Surely, after Effie's sacrifice, it was the least they could do.

There would be plenty of times they could laugh and frolic together in each other's love. But out of consideration for her older sister, it would be times when they were alone, or out of her sight. Time would make things easier, Caitlyn was sure, but nor was she in any hurry to hurt her sister. Besides, they were both still young. She and Edan had all the time in the world.

After traveling for an hour, Caitlyn stopped to rest her mare. A small stream situated beside a gathering of trees bubbled over stones, sending a soft relaxing sound as it carved its journey through the earth. The beautiful beast Caitlyn had ridden bent her head and drank the clear, cold water, while Caitlyn bent beside her and refreshed herself at the same time. Just as she was pressing her hands on her gown to dry them, an eerie feeling came over her, and she spun her head around to look into the trees beside them.

Taking a long look, she narrowed her eyes, scanning for any movement that ought not to be there, but no matter how hard she tried, she could not see anything untoward. Still feeling a little wary, Caitlyn took the reins and pulled the horse a little away from the stream. Nearing a large boulder, she planned to use to get back onto the horse, she readied herself to mount, when, from the corner of her eye, she saw a rapid movement.

Spinning around once more, she no longer needed to search, for a large group of men came flying toward her.

"Och, God," she cried, hurriedly trying to slip her foot into the stirrup. But in her

panic, her foot caught in her gown, and flustering to free it, she struggled, lost her balance, and toppled from the boulder.

Hardly having a chance to right herself, the men were upon her in seconds, and suddenly, both her arms were grabbed roughly and painfully, holding her in place. A second later, her stomach plummeted, and an overwhelming feeling of sickness and dread swiftly followed, for as the men turned and parted, her eyes fell upon Laird Brendan MacTavish storming towards her with a face like thunder.

Closing the gap, he came to a halt before her, glowering down at her in obvious fury. “Ye have caused me nae end o’ trouble wench,” he spat. “More than that, ye killed one o’ me best men. Ye’ll pay fer that.”

Caitlyn hardly had a chance to open her mouth and speak before she saw his arm lifting. There was something held in his hand, but she could not make out what it was. Swinging widely, he brought his fist against the side of her head, and immediately after the searing pain pierced her temple, Caitlyn’s legs collapsed beneath her, and the world went black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It had been a dreadful couple of days. In fact, Effie could hardly believe what had happened. It all seemed so surreal. As she gazed through the drawing room window at the gardens outside, the same gardens she had imagined her wonderful wedding would have taken place, she now wondered what her future held, and, more so, how she was going to be able to cope with what lay ahead.

Everything had been perfect. Until it wasn't. Edan breaking off the betrothal would have been devastating enough, but to hear from his own lips, that he was in love with Caitlyn, had felt like a dirk to the heart. Losing the man she loved was enough for any woman to take. Losing him to her sister, was almost unbearable.

But Effie had seen the signs, she had just chosen to ignore them.

When Edan and Caitlyn had been taken, she had spent two weeks going out of her mind with worry. All sorts of dreadful imaginings ran through her head. Not least of which was whether they would ever return alive.

When they did return, Effie could not have been more delighted. Delighted, and relieved. Her mother and father had taken her to the side that very evening after dinner. The same evening Caitlyn jumped up from the table with fright, and spilled wine all over her frock.

“Caitlyn has experienced something ye dinnae want tae imagine, Effie,” her father had said. “Something ye cannae imagine. I ken ye are happy she and Edan are home, but things are nae going tae be the same fer a while.”

“It’s going tae tak’ them both some time tae deal with what happened tae them,” her mother added.

“Ye must be patient, kind, and supportive, Effie. What they need more than anything right now, is yer love and affection.”

Which is exactly what Effie had tried to do. She had been kind and careful with Caitlyn, and she had given Edan all the space he had asked for.

But the more the days had passed, the more Effie had become concerned. And then, suspicious. Indeed, she understood they needed time, but both Edan and Caitlyn had not only been avoiding her, but neither of them could look her in the eye when they did see her. Then there were the soft glances they shared, and the time they had spent together.

The final straw had been when Effie had discovered Caitlyn had been out sparring with the men. The same night Edan had been injured and no one had told her. That had been what had forced her to face the fact that something was happening between her sister and Edan.

When Edan had gone to speak to her, to tell her the wedding was off, Effie had been angry. More than angry, for she had felt foolish for not seeing what was really happening.

She had thought, or more so, hoped, that whatever was going on between her sister and her betrothed would dissolve at some point. That Edan would realize he had a commitment to her, and would finally come around to fulfilling that commitment.

She had not been ready for him to break off the betrothal. But once he did, she had known the reason why. It did not diminish the pain. In fact, her desperate attempts at denying what she had seen with her own eyes had made her feel even worse.

But Edan was not the only one at fault. Caitlyn had allowed the bond between her and Edan to flourish. It had taken the two of them.

“Ye look in deep thought,” Kieran’s voice came from behind her.

Effie had not heard Kieran walk into the room, but as she turned to look at her cousin, she smiled sadly up at him, and shrugged. “I suppose I am feeling a little lost at the moment.”

“Under the circumstances, I think that’s only tae be expected, dear cousin,” Kieran said kindly. “A lot has happened in the last two days, and there will be much healing needed fer both ye and Caitlyn.”

“More me than Caitlyn” Effie murmured.

“O’ course. I didnae mean tae diminish yer suffering, Effie. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right,” she shrugged. “Caitlyn will get what she wants. It is I, who will have tae deal with it.”

Kieran frowned and shook his head. “I dinnae understand what ye mean by that.”

“I went up tae see her earlier. I hadnae seen her all morning, and kenning me sister, I kent she’d be devastated at sending Edan away.”

Kieran’s eyes flew wide. “Caitlyn sent him away? I thought he was returning tae his own lands because o’ everything that had happened.”

“Aye, she did. It was me fault. I put the thought intae her mind. When I asked her, last night in the map room, if she would send him away if it was what I wanted, it was more o’ a rhetorical question. I didnae really think she would dae it.”

“And is it what ye wanted?” Kieran asked. As usual, there was no judgement from her cousin. Fair and wise in all of his ways, he had an ability to see things from a range of perspectives.

Effie shook her head. “I suppose I wanted tae see what she would say, but she couldnae give me an answer at the time. While she didnae speak with her words, I saw the heartache written all over her face. And in that moment, as angry as I was, I kent how much she loved him. But when I woke this morning, I discovered, from Faither, that Edan had gone, and the reason fer it. So, I went and spoke tae Caitlyn.”

“That must have been difficult,” Kieran said knowingly

“It was. But I love me sister, and just because I cannae be happy, doesnae mean she should suffer the same. So I told her that she should write Edan and tell him tae come back.”

Once more, Kieran’s eyes flew wide. “Ye are going tae accept them being together?”

Effie looked her cousin dead in the eye. “I am, Kieran. ‘Tis the right thing tae dae.”

Kieran smiled widely at her, and walking a few steps forward, he hugged Effie warmly. She wrapped her arms around him, heaving a long sigh into his chest. It was not going to be easy, but she would just have to learn to live with it. For her own sanity, more than anything else, she had to, in some way or another, find a way to come to terms with it.

Her cousin took a step back, and with a hand on either shoulder, he gazed down at her. “I’m so proud o’ ye, Effie. What you’ve done, and what you’re willing tae dae takes a lot o’ courage, and a lot o’ love.”

“She’s me sister. I want her tae be happy. Besides, Edan is a good man. It’s as clear

as day he adores her. And, she's nae like me. Caitlyn was always the more delicate o' the two o' us. She needs someone as strong as he is tae tak' care o' her."

"I couldnae agree more."

"I think she could dae with one o' yer wonderful hugs too, right now." Effie smiled.

"Where is she, and I'll give her one." Kieran looked about him, as though Caitlyn might magically appear in the room beside them.

"She's in her bedchamber. Come on. We'll go and see her together."

On their way, Effie made light conversation, asking Kieran about any damage that the storm had done to the castle. He told her that, thankfully, there had been minimal damage, and thus, there was nothing that could not be repaired.

"Perhaps I might be able tae take a page out o' nature's book then," Effie said heavily. "No matter what damage the weather brings, the trees and foliage always seem tae rise and grow again."

"That musing is far too wise fer someone o' yer age," Kieran quipped back with a slight smile.

With some effort, she managed to smile back. Kieran was trying to cheer her up, but Effie knew the healing process for her was going to take some time.

Upon reaching Caitlyn's bedchamber, Effie knocked on the door. "Caitlyn, 'tis Kieran and I. Are ye decent? May we come in?"

A second passed with no answer, and so, Effie knocked again. "Caitlyn? Are ye in there?"

Again, there was no reply. Huffing a little, Effie opened the door, and tentatively stepped inside, but to her surprise, Caitlyn's bed was as empty as her room. "Och, she's nae here."

Kieran walked in behind her, and with a sweep of his eyes, nodded in agreement. "Perhaps, after ye spoke tae her, she felt the notion tae leave the solace o' her chamber."

"If anything, she'll be in search o' a messenger tae send her letter tae Edan," Effie concluded.

"Or that," Kieran agreed.

Effie and Kieran stepped out of the chamber and closed the door. They were heading back the way they had come, when Milly came hurrying toward them.

"Me lady. Me lady," Milly panted, coming to a stop in front of them.

"Whatever is the matter, Milly?" Effie cried.

"It's Lady Caitlyn, me lady. A stable hand is only after telling me that she's away on her horse. She's gone after Laird MacLachlan."

"What?" Kieran and Effie blurted together.

"Aye," Milly continued hurriedly. "Me lady told the lad nae tae come and say anything straight away. When I asked him how long ago she had left, he said nearly two hours."

"Oh, me god," Kieran barked.

Spinning on his heels, Kieran left Effie's side and began hurrying down the corridor. Leaving Milly standing there, Effie turned and quickly ran to catch up to him. "What are ye going tae dae?" she gasped.

"I'm going tae go after her. It isnae safe out there. I cannae believe she would be such a fool tae go out by herself after all she's gone through. What the devil was she thinking?"

"I'm going with ye," Effie said, hurrying to keep pace with Kieran's long strides.

"Indeed, ye are nae."

"Indeed, I am," Effie said determinedly. "I'm nae staying here again, nae kenning what is happening, and going out o' me mind with worry. I'm going, and I willnae tak' nay fer an answer."

"We'll see what yer faither says tae that," Kieran barked back.

Once Kieran found her father and mother, he explained the situation.

"Och, me god," Lady MacMillan gasped. "Why on earth would she dae such a thing?"

"I have a lot tae tell ye, Maither, but it will have tae wait," Effie said. "I am going with Kieran and Faither tae find Caitlyn."

"Nay, Effie. 'Tis best ye stay here," her father ordered.

"Father, I simply cannot," Effie said with determination. "I refuse tae remain here again, waiting, wondering, and going out o' my mind. If Caitlyn is safe, I want tae be there tae see it. If we are tae go in search o' her, I am going along as well."

“Nae, Effie,” her mother cried.

“Ye will nae come. I ken how much ye love her but now we need tae concentrate on getting her back. If I, Kieran and Edan have tae worry about protecting ye from that devil on top of everything else, it will make things harder and us all the more vulnerable. I’m sorry, Effie, please understand,” her father said sadly but sternly.

Effie realized she had lost the battle on her hands and had to agree he had a point, no matter how infuriating she found it.

“O’ course, Faither,” Effie replied.

In less than a half hour, Kieran had organized a group of his best men, and with weapons and supplies, the group left the castle. Effie did not think she could stand suffering the torture of waiting around again, but she had no other choice.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

As heavy as his heart felt, Edan had much to attend to when he returned to the MacLachlan clan lands. There was great excitement at his and Darach's return, but he could hardly think or acknowledge the cheers of joy from those around him. Instead, upon entering the castle, he immediately sent for the council, instructing them to meet him in his study.

"Dae ye nae want tae rest a little first?" Darach asked, as the brothers entered Edan's study in preparation for the council's arrival. "Ye've had a tiring few days."

"Nay," Edan said firmly. "It is best tae get this over and done with. There will be time fer wallowing in self-pity later."

"Nay one said anythin' about wallowing in self-pity, Edan," Darach said carefully. "But ye're laden with a heavy burden."

"And I will be laden with the same burden tomorrow, and the day after that," Edan replied abruptly. "Resting now will nae make an ounce o' difference."

Darach fell silent, and Edan felt guilty at the harshness of his words. "I'm sorry, braither. I shouldnae?—"

"Dinnae apologize." Darach shook his head. "Ye have naething tae be sorry about. Ye are still the strong and resilient man ye've always been. Even when yer heart has been smashed tae pieces, ye are still thinking o' yer clan."

“It is me duty tae dae so.”

“Ye are only a man, Edan. A man with feelings. A man who feels pain and anguish. It is allowed fer ye tae look after yer own sanity at a time like this.”

“It is also me responsibility tae ensure the well-being o’ the clan. They need tae ken that their laird is safe and well, fer I am certain, they have been worried after hearing about my imprisonment. They need reassurance, Darach, and that is what I must give them.”

As hard as it was, Edan had to focus on those he governed. Perhaps, in a way, having something other than his broken heart to occupy his mind would serve him, at any rate.

The council members arrived in ones and twos, all seemingly delighted to see the return of their laird. As they entered, they greeted him warmly, offering praise that he had made it back to them safely. When everyone was settled at the long table across the room, Edan stood and addressed them all.

“Much has happened since I left ye, and thus, this meeting might take a little longer than other’s we have had. I ask fer yer patience as we get through this.”

“Me laird,” Samuel, one of the oldest men in the room said. “How are ye now? We heard ye sustained dreadful injuries. Are ye healed?”

There were so many ways Edan could answer that question, but he curbed his bitter heart ache, and gave Samuel the information he explicitly sought.

“Me wounds are healed, Samuel. It is true, MacTavish did torture me fer days.” Gasps and angry murmurs left the men’s lips, but Edan continued. “But with plenty o’ rest, and attention from the healer at Laird MacMillan’s castle, I am back tae me

former self.”

Absently, Edan rubbed his shoulder.

Samuel nodded at his shoulder. “Ye are in pain, me laird?”

Edan shook his head. “This injury was sustained after me capture, but I will tell ye all that has occurred as I go.”

Edan began with the capture, given it was the catalyst of everything else. But the more he relayed what had happened, the harder it was for him to speak. Darach was right. He was only human. And as such, he had endured more in the last few weeks than many men endure in a lifetime.

MacTavish and his cruel tactics had been bad enough, but Edan had sustained much more than physical wounds. Having spent most of his life loving a woman he could never have, he had been given an opportunity he could never have imagined would occur. A ray of hope. A light after years of darkness. A happy future had been within his grasp.

But like the morning mist, it had disappeared as quickly as it had arrived. He loved Caitlyn with every fiber of his being, and would never, in this world or the next, wish he had not had spent with her the precious time they had shared. But in a strange twist of fate, a cruel master if ever there was one, he now felt more devastated than he ever would have if they had remained on the paths they were walking before the kidnapping.

“Me laird?” James said.

Edan looked up at the men across the table, all of whom were looking at him with concerned frowns. For a moment, he felt confused, until he realized, he had stopped

speaking mid-sentence.

“Me braither has experienced a great deal over these past few weeks,” Darach said, stepping up beside Edan. “We are returned now, with further news that there will be nae union between us and the MacMillan Clan. There will be nay wedding.”

Again, gasps and murmurs left the older men’s lips. But Darach did not give them time to question his words further.

“The decision has been made, and Laird MacMillan has been informed.”

“But what o’ the union?” William asked.

“There will be nay union now,” Darach said plainly. He raised his hands to stop anymore inquiries. “We will address this further over the coming days. We have dealt with far too much already, and frankly, I could dae with the rest.”

This statement elicited nods of agreement.

“We will convene again in a few days tae discuss the steps needed going forward. Me braither and I thank ye all fer meeting with us on such short notice.”

One by one, the men stood, nodded respectfully toward Edan and slowly left the room. Darach left with them, no doubt, to organize a meal and a bath for them both.

Edan followed the last few to the door, so he could close it behind them, when Samuel, who walked a little way ahead of him, slowed his pace, purposefully waited for the others to leave, and then turned to Edan.

Samuel had served Edan’s father before him, and was close to his seventieth year. His face was like a map, thin lines trenched into smooth, thin skin that sat taught across

his cheek bones. He had always been kind to Edan, and had been a huge comforting presence when his father had been killed.

“I cannae help but notice that ye are weighed down, me laird,” Samuel said knowingly.

Edan was not surprised that Samuel had picked up his mood more than the others. Their relationship had always been more intimate, given that Samuel had tried to fill the gap his father had left.

“I’m worried about ye, son. I feel like ye are carrying something more that ye havenae yet disclosed.”

Edan sighed heavily. He did not really want to talk about it, but then, nor could he lie to Samuel. The man deserved the truth.

“There is more tae tell, Samuel. Darach told ye that the union willnae longer take place, but he didnae tell ye why. As ye ken, I was betrothed to the eldest o’ the MacMillan daughters. Effie.”

Samuel nodded, listening intently.

“The truth is, from a boy, I have been in love with Caitlyn, the youngest daughter.”

Samuel’s eyes widened a little. “Was she nae the one who was captured with ye?”

“She was. That’s where all this mess began. The more time we spent as prisoners, the closer we became. By the time we escaped, it was evident we both felt something deeply for each other. Me plan was tae break off the betrothal with Effie and still unify the clans by marrying Caitlyn.”

“A difficult decision, I’m sure.”

“It was. And in nay way did I ever want tae hurt Effie. But even if Caitlyn didnae agree tae marrying me, I still had tae call of the betrothal. I just couldnae dae it.”

“Ye’re as wise and kind as yer faither ever was,” Samuel said knowingly.

“Aye, well,” Edan sighed, “that’s nae how I feel in this moment. I’m afraid the pain was too much, and thus, Caitlyn couldnae agree tae marry. She just couldnae hurt her sister. And so, we are?—”

Darach suddenly arrived in the doorway looking utterly distraught. “Ye need tae come now, Edan!” he barked, before turning on his heels and leaving in the same abrupt way he had arrived.

Edan turned to look at Samuel, who jerked his head toward the door. “Ye should hurry.”

Edan nodded, and rushed from the room, hurrying down the corridor in an attempt to catch up with Darach. But his brother was too far ahead. Assuming that he had gone downstairs, Edan took the stone steps on the wide staircase two at a time.

His head jerked from side to side as he strode down the corridor, glancing into each room he passed, until eventually, he stopped dead in his tracks at the drawing room. His jaw fell open at the sight, for once he entered it, he came face to face with two very worried looking people.

Laird MacMillan was pacing, but as usual, Kieran stood perfectly still, stoically waiting for whatever was to occur.

“What the devil is going on?” Edan blurted, looking from one to the other.

His mind worked at seeing them there, and before Conor could even open his mouth, Edan had worked out what was wrong.

“Caitlyn,” he gasped.

“Is she here?” Conor pressed.

Edan frowned. “Nae. At least, I dinnae think so.” Edan turned to Darach. “There has been nae word o’ her arrival, has there?”

Darach shook his head solemnly.

“When did she leave?” Edan pressed. “Perhaps she is still on her way. Perhaps she stopped at a tavern tae rest.”

“She had a half day start on us,” Conor said. “Even with a rest, she would have arrived by now.”

“But we have only been back a few hours. How is it ye managed tae get here so quickly?”

“We rode through the night,” Conor said wearily.

“Why did Caitlyn leave the castle in the first place,” Edan pressed. “Did something happen?”

“We dinnae have time tae go intae all that,” Kieran said, clearly biting down the frustration in his voice. “What’s important is the fact that Caitlyn isnae here. We need tae find her.”

Edan caught himself, and realized immediately that Kieran was right. “O’ course.”

And then, a wave of horror washed over him. “MacTavish,” he breathed.

Edan glanced at Kieran and then Conor, both of whom had the same knowing expressions on their faces. Caitlyn could have come off her horse. She might be injured. She might be stranded somewhere and awaiting help. He would truly like to believe that version of events. But deep down, he knew he wasn’t going to be that fortunate.

“We ken he and his men have been watching the castle,” Kieran said. “Yer injury from the arrow is evidence o’ that. I strongly believe, though it pains me tae dae so, that MacTavish has taken her. There might be another explanation, but it’s the likeliest one.”

“Damn it all tae hell,” Edan bellowed, fuming with frustration. But there was no time for anger, or for fear of what that bastard might do to her.

Spinning toward Darach, he barked out orders. “Get the war chief. I want all the troops Alastair can muster in the next fifteen minutes. Tell him tae meet us at the front gate fully armed and ready for battle.”

Darach nodded, and hurriedly left the room.

Kieran looked at Edan. “Dae ye have any ideas?”

Edan had a strange feeling in his gut, and thus, he followed it. “While I think it is a foolish move, I believe he’ll take her back tae that safe house. It would be stupid, because I ken where it is.”

“Maybe that’s the very reason he’s doing it,” Kieran countered. “He kens we’ll come after her. Maybe it’s a trap.”

“I dinnae care—” Edan began.

“Nor dae I. Nor dae any o’ us,” Kieran cut across him. “If it’s a fight he wants, it’s a fight he’ll get.”

A horrible sensation washed over Edan, and as the anger raged within him, he turned on his heels and stormed out of the room. All those dreadful nightmares Caitlyn had suffered. All her terror and fear. He had told her he would protect her. He had told her he would keep her safe. Now, her worst fears might actually come into fruition, and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Caitlyn floated through the air, the wind tugging at her long locks, and making her dress cling to her legs. A serene feeling, she had never experienced before, seeped through her entire being as she let go fully, and allowed the air to carry her.

Below, she could see lands and fields of every shade of green. Large darker greens became clearer on her approach, and so close was she to the huge trees in the dense forest, she could nearly reach her hand out and touch the leaves on the uppermost branches.

Birds soared beside her, their wings still, flying with no effort. But the birds belonged up there, whereas, she did not. Strangely, that thought did not faze her, and continuing on, she saw her father's castle in the distance. Leaning her arms, she turned toward it, and continued to soar, until she was right above it.

She swooped down into the courtyard, and landed with ease. The castle appeared deserted, for there was not a soul about. A mighty roar came from deep inside the castle, and turning toward the sound, Caitlyn ran inside. The roar came again, echoing down eerily empty corridors.

Following the sound, she ran up the wide staircase and down the corridor, until she eventually came upon her own bedchamber door. Pushing it open and stepping inside, Caitlyn froze at the sight before her.

Laird Brendan MacTavish stood in the middle of her bedchamber. In front of him, in his grip, stood a woman whose head was bent forward, her long brown locks hiding

her face. MacTavish suddenly threw his head back and let out a loud, evil laugh that again, echoed all around the room.

Slowly, he grabbed the woman by the hair, and lifted her head.

Caitlyn gasped, for the woman was herself. She caught the shining glint of metal, and with the flick of his wrist, the laird sliced her throat. She opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out, and when she looked down at her own dress, blood poured from her neck.

Caitlyn woke with a start, and immediately moaned. The pain on the side of her head was intense. She screwed her eyes to relieve it, but it made little difference. There was something strangely familiar about the cold stone floor she lay upon, but still feeling dizzy and disorientated, she forgot, for a moment, what had happened.

Until she went to move her hands.

Her eyes flew open, and looking down, she found herself bound in the exact same way she had been held for nearly two weeks. Her eyes flitted upwards and there it was, the same boarded window she had gazed at, day after day, night after night, pining to be on the other side of it. Praying for her freedom.

“Nay,” she cried mournfully.

And then, everything flooded back into her mind. Her horse at the stream. The men running toward her. Her struggle to mount her mare, panicking. Being grabbed and held in place by huge, strong men, and then, MacTavish arriving, and that sickening blow to her temple. He had captured her again, and she had walked right into his hands.

What an idiot ye are. How could ye have let this happen tae yersel’ again?

Pushing past the throbbing pain in her head, Caitlyn struggled to right herself. It took a great amount of effort, but eventually, she sat herself upright.

“And finally, she rises.”

Caitlyn gasped and spun her head toward the voice she knew so well. There, sat on a chair before the empty hearth, was Laird Brendan MacTavish, an evil grin dancing on his lips as he flipped a dirk mischievously in his left hand.

In a panic, Caitlyn hurriedly pushed herself back, until the wall behind her meant she could go no further. It was pointless, of course. She had nowhere to go. It was just him and her. Edan was no longer there to protect her from the laird’s advances. Of course, he wasn’t. Edan wouldn’t be stupid enough to get himself caught again. She was on her own now, and the fear of what was to come was so overwhelming that, try as she might, she could not stop her body trembling.

“Here we are again,” Laird MacTavish bragged. “Lady Luck has shone down on me fer a second time. Though I will admit, yer escape cost me months o’ planning. But now, I have ye again, and I will dae what I intended tae dae in the first place.”

He furrowed his eyebrows and growled at her, his anger only intensifying her terror. What had she done? Why had she not waited and travelled with Kieran or her father? She had escaped this man’s clutches once, having to murder a man to do so. Now, because of her foolishness, she had managed to get herself kidnapped again. This time, there would be no escape. She would die in that room.

“I will crush yer faither with yer death. Even if I have tae wait a little while longer tae take his lands, I will get great pleasure in kenning I was the one who caused his immeasurable mourning. But, o’ course, nae yet.”

He licked his lips, and Cailyn’s heart suddenly jumped and thumped at a higher

tempo.

“Ye owe me lass. In fact, I still have a scar on me hand where ye bit it.” He lifted his hand to show her, but he was too far away for her to see. “Ye’re going tae pay fer that. Ye’re going tae pay with yer body, and I’m going tae take what I’ve wanted from the start.”

“Please, just kill me now and be done with it,” Caitlyn hissed in desperation.

“Och, that time will come, lass. But not until I am done with ye,” he sniggered.

MacTavish pushed himself up from the chair, and moved towards her.

“Nay,” Caitlyn pulled her legs into her body, as though such an action was in any way going to save her.

MacTavish paced about near her feet, still flipping the dirk in his hand. He was clearly enjoying the power he had over her, and was dragging it out for as long as he could.

“It is a shame yer lover isnae here. I would have liked him tae watch,” he snarled. “It was clear he was in love with ye, even if he was betrothed tae yer sister. What sadness fer ye,” he continued. He stopped pacing and turned towards her. “But I’m nae fool, lass.”

He dropped to his haunches, his eyes slowly moving from her face, down her neck, lingering at the flesh at her bosoms. His lips parted a little and a gasp escaped from his mouth, his desire for her so very clear. His expression was making Caitlyn feel sick. Sick and terrified. But no matter what she felt, she could not stop what was about to happen. Maybe, if he came a little closer, she could grab that dirk and finish him before he had a chance to do anything.

Aye. That is the best plan. I'd sooner die than suffer what he is about tae dae tae me.

Shuffling closer, he grabbed her foot and yanked it so her leg was pulled straight. Caitlyn's heart thumped, she gasped for air as the fear threatened to take her over entirely.

"I have tae wonder if ye're as innocent now as ye were the last time ye were here. Or did that laird take ye fer himself?" MacTavish grinned. "I'll bet he did, didnae he? I'll bet he took ye over and over again."

He pulled her other leg straight and with no warning at all, he yanked both feet toward him at the same time. Caitlyn flew forward, and having no arms to save her, fell flat on her back. In a second, MacTavish had dropped to his knees, and as Caitlyn screamed at the top of her lungs, he grabbed at her skirts and tossed them further up her thighs. No matter how hard she pressed her legs together, MacTavish was stronger, and using both hands, he pulled them apart.

"Get off me, ye bastard," Caitlyn hissed.

Pushing her knees wide with his own, Caitlyn screamed out in terror, when suddenly, MacTavish stopped dead. He turned his head toward the door.

Even in her panic, Caitlyn strained her ears to hear. And sure enough, there were shuffling noises outside the door. A second later, the door burst open with such force, it smashed against the wall behind it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Even though they were many, they had travelled like the wind across country. Edan led the way with Darach by his side, everyone else following behind. The only stops they had taken were to rest the horses.

Half an hour before, they had circled the village he and Caitlyn had rested in when they had escaped. Given the fact that they had been travelling on foot that day, he knew, as he rounded the edge of the woods they had used as cover, that they were quite close by. As they neared the place, Edan had signaled for them to slow, until eventually, they came to a stop.

He signaled for Alistair to come to the front, and when his war chief was beside him, he told him the plan.

“If this is a trap, like we assume, MacTavish will have the outskirts of the house surrounded. Send out yer best scouts and have them report back. Tell them tae hurry.”

“Aye, me laird.”

Alistair turned his horse and headed back the way he had come. Kieran took his place at his side. “What are ye planning tae dae?”

Conor and Darach were close behind, and with his voice lowered, he spoke to all of them.

“We cannae spook him. If MacTavish kens we’re coming, he’ll murder Caitlyn fer

sure. If he thinks he's safe, and has time, he'll..." Edan trailed off, unable to put his dreadful thoughts into words.

The rage had not left him since departing from the castle, but now, his impatience was growing. Every second longer they remained there, MacTavish could be doing the most unthinkable deeds to Caitlyn.

But they could not move. Not until the scouts came back with their report. It was just not a risk worth taking. As horrible as it was to think about, an assaulted Caitlyn was better than her being dead. Though, as he remembered the terrors she suffered in the night, Edan had to wonder if that thought were really true. If MacTavish had his way before they got there, she might wish herself dead.

Ten long minutes passed before the scouts returned. Alistair came back with the report. "As ye suspected, me laird, the periphery o' the house is surrounded in all directions."

"Send yer best men and get rid o' them," Alistair," Edan spat. "I need tae get near tae the house without MacTavish kenning we're here."

"Aye, me laird."

When Alistair left for a second time, another fifteen minutes passed. It was the longest fifteen minutes of Edan's life, and doubting that he had made the right choice, he began to feel edgy.

"Ye're doing the right thing, me laird," Kieran said calmly. He did not move his head when he spoke, and instead, remained looking ahead. Edan wondered how he could possibly know he was growing impatient, but clearly, he was betraying himself in some way. Either that, or Kieran had exceptional skills in perception. The latter would not surprise him, the man was a beast when it came to battle.

Eventually, Alistair returned for a second time. “The outer perimeter is secured, me laird.”

“Good. Have all yer men surround the area. I dinnae want one o’ them tae escape.”

Alistair nodded, and moved away.

Edan then dismounted, and Kieran, Conor, Darach and Effie did the same. “I am going straight fer MacTavish,” Edan said, gripping his sword tightly. “He’ll be in the house. Ye deal with the guards outside.”

Passing his own soldiers, who were now standing guard, Edan approached the house, with the others following close behind. As he had assumed when they were being held prisoners, the house was surrounded by trees, and out of the way of prying eyes, but in this instant, the thick foliage worked in their favor and gave them cover for their approach.

Gesturing for Darach to advance from the left, and Conor and Kieran to advance from the right, Edan watched as a few moments later, the three attacked the soldiers surrounding the house. It was at this second that he made a dash for the front door.

Sneaking inside, the first sound he heard was Caitlyn screaming at the top of her lungs. Not caring a wit if he might be seen, he flew around the corner to discover a guard standing outside the door, just as there had always been when they were being kept in there.

The guard jerked in shock at the sight of Edan advancing, but he was not quick enough to unsheathe his sword. Edan, on the other hand, had his in readiness, and wielding it above his head, brought it down heavily on the guard’s neck, nearly separating his head from his shoulders.

Sliding the bolt open, he thrust his foot against the door with all his might, leaving his hands free to battle. But the sight before him halted him in his tracks, for MacTavish had Caitlyn pinned to the ground with her skirts around her waist. In that second, his anger and rage mixed with a sick feeling in his stomach.

A fleeting thought rushed through his mind. I'm too late. He has taken her. The damage has been done.

With Edan momentarily stunned, MacTavish scrambled to his feet, dragging Caitlyn up in front of him. Using her as a shield with a dirk to her throat, he dragged her across the room.

"Ye will let me out o' here, ye little bastard, or I swear, ye'll watch her die 'afore yer very eyes," he spat.

At first, Edan railed against the idea, but his judgement settled. The dirk was already digging into Caitlyn's throat, for a trickle of blood dripped down her neck. He would just not be fast enough to kill MacTavish without him killing her first. While the laird was giving him no choice, Edan settled his worry, for by now, the guards the laird had positioned outside were already dead. MacTavish was not getting out of this alive.

As MacTavish circled the room, Edan followed closely, his sword poised in front of him, ready to strike at any moment. Caitlyn's eyes were wide with fear, glaring at Edan in a silent plea for help.

"Dinnae worry, Caitlyn. I'll nae let any harm come tae ye. I'm right here."

"Ye're a bit late fer that, lad," MacTavish spat. "Sure, I've had her already."

Edan flinched at those words, and seeing he had hit a nerve, MacTavish continued.

“Och, aye. She was such a sweet and juicy thing.”

The more MacTavish spoke, the angrier Edan got. It was taking him all his strength not to smite him there and then.

“She screamed me name, and?—”

“He’s lying, Edan,” Caitlyn was weirdly calm. “He didnae touch me. Dinnae let him play ye. He wants ye tae strike, so he can kill me.”

By now, MacTavish was backing out of the corridor and nearing the front door, dragging Caitlyn with him. His hand gripped one side of her throat, while his dirk pressed against the other.

“Och, MacTavish is nae fool, Caitlyn. He kens if he kills ye, he has nae more protection. With nae more protection, he’s a dead man.”

“Och, we’ll see about that, lad.” MacTavish glanced behind him and seeing the front door, elbowed it open, and backed out into the front garden. “I have this place surrounded.”

“Dae ye now?” Darach said.

MacTavish turned and gasped at the sight of all his men slaughtered on the ground. Like lightening, Kieran, seeing an opportunity, launched forward, grabbed Caitlyn’s arm, and pulled her free. Leaving MacTavish suddenly looking terrified.

“Och, so ye’re going tae outnumber me now, are ye,” he spat.

Edan advanced, but shook his head. “It’s just ye and me, MacTavish. Nae one else will intervene.”

The laird snorted. “Aye, but if I kill ye, they will.”

“Believe me, ye’ll nae leave this place alive.”

MacTavish stumbled backwards, spinning around warily, as though waiting for the others to move in, but when they didn’t, he swiftly bent down and grabbed a sword that lay at one of his dead guard’s feet.

“So, ye think ye can take me, dae ye lad?”

“I always have. But now, I have even greater want in me tae dae so.” Edan could hear Caitlyn sobbing, but his eyes never left from glaring at MacTavish.

When the laird hesitated to engage, Edan ran at him, yelling at the top of his voice, his sword high above his head. MacTavish blocked him, the sound of clanging metal ringing out around them. Edan struck again, but MacTavish side-stepped the strike and then threw a blow of his own.

Edan saw it coming a mile off, and easily slipped beneath it, before swinging a full arm, and aiming at MacTavish’s leg. The older man wasn’t quick enough to block that one, and when Edan’s sword sliced deeply into his calf, MacTavish cried out, and limped back.

Now hobbling with the pain, he tried to advance again, but he was no match for Edan’s speed. Again he swung low, and sliced the upper thigh of the same leg.

“Ye bastard,” MacTavish screamed.

But Edan did not stop, and weakened now in pain and unbalanced, MacTavish was no longer a threat. Instead of going for the kill, however, Edan sliced at him again and again. He wanted to make this man suffer, just as he had made Caitlyn and himself

suffer. He caught his upper arm, his other leg, his lower arm, his torso, each strike eliciting a scream of pain, until the laird was on his knees.

He dropped the sword as blood poured from his body, pooling at his knees. With a terrifying scream, a scream that contained all his anger, and the frustration and hatred of what the man had made Caitlyn suffer, Edan swung the sword high, and struck him with great force at the neck. The sharp edges sliced through him with ease, removing his head from his shoulders completely.

The strike had to be final. He needed Caitlyn to see that this man was never going to lay a hand on her again. Exhausted, he dropped his sword, and spun around, looking for her. She was standing near the other men, still shaking tremendously.

Running to her, he grabbed her and pulled her into him. "I'm so sorry, me love," he whispered into her hair. "I should never have left ye. I'm so sorry."

He held her for some time, and slowly, her shaking turned to tremors, but still, he knew she would not be fully well for a while to come.

Conor approached then, and though he didn't want to release her, Edan handed over Caitlyn to her father. Holding her against his chest as Edan had done, he murmured. "He'll nae dae ye anymore harm, me darling."

Edan walked away, stumbling a little after the effort of the battle, but Darach and Kieran were there at his side, each taking an arm and supporting his weight.

EPILOGUE

T en days later...

The journey back to the castle had been a blur, and even now, ten days later, Caitlyn remembered little of it. The one thing she did remember was her face pressed against Edan's strong chest, the rest of her wrapped up in his plaid, his left arm holding the reins, and the other protectively holding her body against his.

The soft thump of his heart had soothed her. It had taken a long time for the tremors to finally subside, and then, Caitlyn fell asleep as they travelled. By the time she woke again, she was safely tucked in her own bed. It had taken her a few seconds to realize that she was not in there alone.

She had discovered later that, due to her screaming in her sleep in the middle of the night, Edan had refused to leave her side. Clearly MacTavish had gone from this world, but was still alive and well in her memories. The castle healer had given her a herbal mix to improve the pain in her head and laudanum to settle her, but still, Edan had remained. Having crawled in beside her, he had wrapped his arms around her, and comforted her as she slept.

"Ye must be well rested by now," Edan had said, when she had woken fully.

Caitlyn had yawned. "I still feel a little tired."

He had chuckled then.

She had looked at him with confusion. “Why is that funny?”

“Because ye’ve been sleeping fer nearly two days, Caitlyn.”

“Oh, me God. Really?”

“Aye. Are ye nae starving?” he had gawped at her.

It was only as he asked that question that she realized she truly was. “Aye. I could eat a horse.”

That statement had made Edan chuckle even more.

Once word got out that she was awake, her mother, father, and Effie had come to see her. Edan had made himself scarce, for he wanted her to enjoy being around her family without him distracting her.

There were many hugs and words of affection, but it was glaringly evident that her father had warned Effie and her mother to keep the conversation light, for MacTavish and what had happened to her were not mentioned at all.

Later, Darach and Kieran had come to see her, and it soon became apparent that an agreement had been made between them all, that Caitlyn was not to be left alone. It became even more obvious when Darach was determined to go and fetch Edan before he and Kieran departed.

Once Darach had left the room, Kieran had taken hold of her hand and looked at her sadly. “Ye are the bravest woman I ken, Caitlyn MacMillan.”

“Well, I dinnae feel very brave,” she had answered.

“Ye probably dinnae feel mad in the head either, but I definitely think ye are that too.” He smirked.

Caitlyn had giggled, and nodded. “Well, I must be, leaving the castle alone, and doing what I did.”

“Aye, that’s love fer ye. It makes us dae crazy things.”

She had sighed. “It was stupid and very foolish. Nae just fer mysel’, but fer all o’ ye too. I dragged ye intae a dreadful situation. I could’ve got ye all killed.’

“Och, it’ll take more than a few measly guards tae kill me, little one.”

“Ye ken what I mean,” Caitlyn had said.

“Aye, I dae. But it all worked out in the end. That’s what matters. That madman would have attacked sooner or later, even if ye hadnae left the castle. Ye just accelerated his end. That’s what ye now have tae keep in the forefront o’ ye mind. Ye’ve been through a dreadful ordeal, and it’ll nae be easy tae get through it. But I want ye tae ken, I am here, as I always have been, and always will be.”

“Thank ye, Kieran.”

A little while later, Darach had returned with Edan, and Kieran and Darach had bid her farewell.

A few days after that, Caitlyn had told Edan what Effie had said. She told him it had been the reason she had gone after him.

“I ken. She told me. But I blame mesel’.”

“Ye’re always blaming yersel’,” Caitlyn had countered.

“And I should. I ought tae have stayed. I ought tae have fought fer ye. I kent ye were upset, and I kent ye and Effie had had a dreadful fight. But I should have stayed and given ye a few days. If I had, none o’ this would have happened.”

“Listen. We’re safe now. And like Kieran said, that’s all that matters.”

“Aye. I suppose it is.”

Ten days had now passed since Edan had brought Caitlyn safely home. The first days had been difficult, but slowly, she seemed to be coming out of herself, a little at a time.

Four days after they had returned, Effie had found Edan wandering about in the gardens. His mind had been awash with all the things that could have happened, and in general, he was torturing himself for leaving when he ought to have stayed to protect Caitlyn.

“I have yet tae thank ye properly fer saving Caitlyn,” Effie had said, falling in step beside him.

Edan shook his head. “I have nae right tae accept any gratitude after what I did tae ye, Effie.”

“Well, accept it ye must, fer I am offering it.”

He nodded submissively. “This has been all me doing. If I had just curbed me feelings. If I had just stayed in control o’ me emotions...”

“Then I would have had a very unhappy life,” she said plainly.

Edan frowned at her.

“Darach has told me everything,” she said. “From the day o’ yer very first visit here when ye met Caitlyn, until now. I’ll admit, it was an eye-opening conversation.”

“I never meant tae hurt ye.”

“I ken that. O’ course, I didnae ken, all this time, that I wasnae the right sister, or the woman ye truly loved. But I also ken ye had an obligation. I suppose I ought tae be grateful that ye remained faithful tae our union fer as long as ye did.”

“If we hadnae been captured...”

“Again, I would have married a man who didnae love me.”

He had turned to her then. “I dae love ye, Effie. In me own way. I always will.”

She had smiled sadly. “Aye, but as a companion, a good friend, nae as yer lover.”

“Nae,” he shook his head, “nae in that way.”

“Then perhaps, things have worked out fer the best.”

But he knew she didn’t mean that, he could hear it in her voice.

“Effie, ye dinnae have tae pretend fer me,” Edan said, placing a hand on her arm. She glanced down at it, and immediately, Edan pulled it away. “Sorry.”

“It isnae pretend, Edan. I ken this will take a great deal out o’ me, but as I told Caitlyn before she ran off tae find ye, ye shouldnae sacrifice yer happiness fer the sake o’ someone else’s. Even mine.”

After breakfast that morning, Edan left Caitlyn in the drawing room with Effie and Lady MacMillan, and joined Darach, and Kieran in the laird's study, where the three had been summoned. Edan was certain he knew what the laird wanted to see them to speak about, but wisely, he was going to let Conor do all the talking.

"I had a meeting with the council this morning," Conor said, after handing each of the men a glass of amber liquid. "With everything that has happened in the last week, there was much tae discuss. Joseph wisely offered that there will likely be a meeting called by the lairds tae discuss Clan MacTavish and what tae dae with the lands."

"MacTavish didnae have an heir?" Kieran asked, clearly sounding surprised.

"That is currently being determined," Conor replied. "We ken he didnae have a legitimate one, but God only kens if the man fathered a bastard child. A search is already underway tae find out."

"I'd be surprised tae discover he didnae," Edan spat.

"As would I, but we must dae our due diligence before it is put tae the other lairds. Now," he looked at Edan directly, "as fer the agreement made between mesel' and yer faither. The council are eager tae ascertain if that is still on the table. Under the circumstances, they are aware that they may well have tae wait fer an answer, but I, on the other hand, would like tae ken, Edan."

Edan stumbled a little at the forthright question. "Er, well. I suppose, that isnae really up tae me."

Conor frowned deeply. "What dae ye mean by such a statement? How is yer decision tae marry Caitlyn up tae anyone else?"

"Pardon me, me laird," Edan apologized. "Let me speak with a little more clarity. In

me heart o' hearts, if ye will allow it, I would marry Caitlyn in a heartbeat. However, I feel that I would first like tae speak tae Effie. After all that has occurred, there is a deep want in me fer her blessing. I need her blessing."

Conor's eyes widened as he sat back in his chair. For a long moment, the older man did not speak. Clearly, by the looks of it, he was a little lost for words. No one else deemed it appropriate to say anything either, though Kieran's mouth did twitch with the slightest hint of a smile.

"So be it," Conor said eventually. "Speak tae Effie, preferably sooner rather than later, and return tae me with an answer."

"I will, me laird."

When the meeting ended, Kieran stayed back. Conor wanted to discuss the damage to the castle, and what needed done in way of repairs. Darach and Edan moved down the corridor together, both of them saying nothing for several minutes.

"I will admit," Darach said eventually, "I have never heard o' a man asking the sister fer permission."

Edan threw a glance at his brother and noted the slight smirk at the corner of his mouth. He flashed him a smile. "Yer wit is improving, braither. But ye have a long way tae go yet."

"Then, we can compare me wit tae yer chess playing."

"Another joke!" Edan feigned shock. "Me God, man, ye are full o' surprises."

The brother's chuckled as they continued down the wide staircase. At the bottom, Edan stopped and turned toward Darach. "Well, wish me luck. I am putting me future

in the hands o' a heartbroken lass."

Darach gave a small smile. "I think what ye're doing is commendable. I'm sure Effie will see it the same way."

When the men parted, Edan could only hope that Darach was right. He could just have bypassed her completely, knowing well that Conor would give his blessing, but it seemed more important than ever to ask her.

He found her where he had left her earlier, in the drawing room with Caitlyn and Lady MacMillan.

Remaining at the door, he said, "Effie, can I speak tae ye privately fer a moment, please?"

All three women looked at him strangely, none more than Effie, who, after hesitating, nodded, but frowned and moved from her seat beside Caitlyn.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, moving across the room.

"O' course," Edan replied, trying to keep the tension from his voice.

Once in the corridor with the drawing room door closed, Effie looked up at him. "What dae ye want tae see me fer?"

Edan gestured ahead of him. "Perhaps we could take a walk in the gardens."

"Edan?" Effie pressed.

"Please, Effie."

She huffed a little, clearly frustrated that he would not tell her straight away, but still, she walked in the direction he had suggested.

Once outside, and after a moment or two, Effie stopped in her tracks, turned to Edan and demanded to know what was going on. “Why have ye brought me out here? What is it that ye need tae say tae me alone, that ye couldnae say in front o’ me maither and sister?”

“Can we sit?” Edan said, nodding to a stone bench that stood a few feet away.

Effie moved toward it and dropped herself down. Edan did the same, trying his best to calm the nerves that now raged in his stomach.

“I needed tae speak tae ye alone because I wanted tae ask ye something very important,” Edan said, trying to control the quake in his voice.

One word from Effie, and this could all go terribly wrong. He loved Caitlyn with all of his heart, but with how close the sisters were, and out of respect for Effie, this had to be done right.

“Which is?” she pressed, when he hesitated for longer than a minute.

“All right,” he said taking a deep breath. “How would ye feel if I asked fer Caitlyn’s hand?” The words tumbled out at great speed, as though, by saying them quickly, it would somehow, make less of an impact.

For a second, Effie did not speak. She held Edan’s gaze intently, making his stomach flip with anticipation and fear. But then, she smiled, and only at that moment, did Edan realize he had been holding his breath.

“If it will make me sister happy, then I will be happy.”

Edan suddenly breathed out all at once. “Really?” he gasped.

Effie nodded. “Aye. Really.”

“I have yer blessing?” he asked, as though he could not quite believe her words.

Effie placed a gentle hand on his. “I am grateful that ye bothered tae even consider me, Edan. Ye have always been a good, kind and respectful man.”

“Ye’re a wonderful lass, Effie. Never forget that.”

That same sad smile lined her lips. “Thank ye, Edan.” She took a deep breath in, and then blew a long breath out. “So, have ye decided how ye’re going tae dae it?”

Edan frowned. “Dae what?”

“Ask her?” she pressed, her eyes wide.

Stunned a little at her question, he had to think of the answer. And the truth was, he had been too busy worrying about Effie’s reaction to even consider it. He shook his head. “Nae really.”

“Well then, I have an idea.”

Edan followed Effie’s instructions to the letter. With Darach’s help, he took six candelabras from different parts of the castle and placed them around the small area of the garden Caitlyn favored to sit and read in. Other candles of different sizes were placed on the small lawn.

Supper was had in the great hall, but shortly afterwards, Darach and Edan excused themselves. Flitting Effie a glance as he moved from the table, Edan followed his

brother out, and once out of sight in the corridor beyond, both men ran to the gardens.

Night had fallen, and the half-moon hung in a star-studded sky. Hurriedly, Darach and Edan went around lighting every single candle. It took them ages, but when it was done, the effect was rather magical. Edan had to acknowledge his surprise, for he had no idea Effie was so very creative.

“Now what?” Darach said, when all was done.

“Now, braither. We wait.”

They did not have to wait long, however, for Edan heard the sister’s voices across the still night sky, even when they were not yet in sight. Edan waited, his stomach bubbling with nerves and excitement, until Effie and Caitlyn rounded the corner. When they did so, Effie beamed a huge smile, and Caitlyn gasped, her hands flying to her mouth, and her eyes wide with wonder.

“Oh!” she cried.

“Hello, Caitlyn,” Edan breathed. “Will ye nae join me?”

Effie unlinked her arm from her sister’s and moved away to the trees, Darach following suit, leaving Caitlyn walking toward Edan.

“Will ye sit with me?” he said, gesturing to the stone bench.

Caitlyn could not seem to find words, and with her eyes still wide, the light from the candles reflecting in them, she only nodded, and allowed him to lead her. They sat down together, and taking her hands in his, Edan gazed lovingly at her.

“I love ye, Caitlyn MacMillan,” he said.

“And I love ye, Edan MacLachlan,” she breathed.

“There is naething more in this world I want more, than tae have ye by me side for the rest o’ me days. It’s with this in mind, that I want tae ask ye. Will ye dae me the honor o’ becoming me wife?”

Her eyes glistened, and as the tears welled, the flickering flames of the candles reflected in them even more. “Aye,” a tear escaped and trickled down her cheek. “I would be honored tae be yer wife.”

Edan could feel his own throat tighten, but not wanting her to see his emotion, he bent his head toward her and tenderly kissed her lips. It was the slightest brush. It was a conscious decision. Not only because this occasion required such chasteness, but also, he knew Effie was still beside Darach, and watching on.

Caitlyn threw her arms around Edan’s neck when he ended the kiss, and grabbing him, she hugged him tightly. He wrapped his arms around her, and held her closely, and in that moment, he felt her love rippling into his very being.

But there’s more...

PROLOGUE

Robertson Castle, 1690

“Abigail is gone!”

Billie’s terrified shriek pierced through the silence, drawing all the attention of everyone present on her. She stood right at the grand, carved wooden doors of the great hall, where everyone had gathered to wait for the moment when they would have to head to the chapel for Abigail’s wedding. Her skin was pallid, her brow drenched in sweat.

Hugo looked up from his whisky with a sigh as Abigail’s intended groom, Finnian Chattan, walked over to Billie, demanding explanation. Finnian had been perfectly happy until that moment, chatting idly with the priest about his betrothed, but now his expression had turned stormy and Hugo’s hand came to rest on the hilt of the knife that hung at his waist. He didn’t think he would have to intervene, as Finnian wasn’t foolish enough to cause trouble within the halls of Robertson Castle. It was more of a habit, something he had picked up from spending so much time near his best friend, Domnhall.

Speaking about Domnhall, he was now approaching Billie as well, trying to calm Finnian down in that level-headed manner of his which he had developed since becoming the laird of the MacAulay Clan after his father’s death. He had come to learn quickly that not everything could be solved with brute force, though he still seemed to prefer it over diplomacy.

Soon enough, there would come a moment when Hugo himself would have to intervene, he knew. Finnian was working himself into a frenzy, demanding the guards find Abigail, and as Hugo watched, both Billie and Domnhall seemed to struggle to contain their growing rage towards him. Hugo could see it in the jumping vein on Domnhall's forehead, in the way his blue eyes narrowed and his hand ran through his dark hair, tugging at the wild strands in frustration. Before long, he would forget every bit of patience he had learnt in his time as the laird.

"I'm sure she is only puttin' on her dress," Domnhall said, raising his voice to be heard over the commotion. He turned to Billie, grabbing her shoulders and giving her a gentle shake to pull her out of her panic as a crowd began to gather around them, curious to see what all the chaos was about. "Dinnae fash. Where would she be?"

"Nay one has seen her in hours!" Billie insisted. It wasn't often that Hugo heard Billie panic like this, her voice thin and reedy and desperate. She was always a calm, quiet young woman, but Hugo knew how close the two of them were. If something were to happen to her dear sister, Billie would never manage to recover from the grief and the pain. "Please, we must find her, Domnhall."

Domnhall nodded, perhaps not because he feared for Abigail, Hugo thought, but rather because his wife had lost her composure completely and finding Abigail would be the only thing that would soothe her. After all, there was no real reason for him to be worried; everyone had seen Abigail just the previous night and she had been perfectly fine.

"Your sister isn't one to pressure herself," Hugo said from where he sat, not yet bothering to stand like everyone else. Sooner or later, Abigail would stroll into the great hall and prove to everyone there had never been a reason for this in the first place. "She always takes a long time to dress, no? It's her wedding today. Surely, she'll want to look presentable."

Billie turned those steely grey eyes on him and the look she gave him sent a chill down Hugo's spine. Though of average build, Billie somehow managed to look a little sickly with her pale skin and almost translucent blonde hair, as though the color had been drained entirely from her, and yet no one could say she couldn't be intimidating when she wanted to. The fact that she was rarely brought to the point of anger only served to make those rare moments even more alarming for the objects of her ire.

"It may be her weddin', but she wouldnae be late," Billie said. "She may take her time sometimes, but she kens what is important. She would be here. The weddin' is supposed tae be in thirty minutes."

"Then she will appear in forty," Hugo said with a small shrug.

This was the way with Abigail. She showed up when she wanted to. Time didn't seem to matter much to her, or at least she always failed to keep track of it.

Upon hearing his words, Billie's lips pursed into a thin, displeased line, and she approached Hugo, hands on her hips.

"Even if ye're nae fond o' her, I willnae allow ye tae speak ill o' me sister," she said. "Somethin' is wrong an' ye are jestin' instead o' helpin' us find her."

A weary sigh escaped Hugo's lips as he placed his whisky down onto the table and stood, just as Billie's other sisters, Keira and Evangeline, rushed into the room, summoned by the noise. It was always a strange sight, seeing them all together. Hugo knew, logically, that sisters usually resembled each other, but the four of them shared so many of their characteristics—their fair hair, their light eyes, the delicate features of their faces—that had it not been for their different ages, they could have been quadruplets.

“What is goin’ on here?” Evangeline asked, ready to take over as the oldest of the sisters. “Where is Abigail? The weddin’ will be in a few minutes, we must head tae the chapel.”

“Didn’t you hear?” Hugo asked. “Billie says she has disappeared. It is a big castle, indeed, but I doubt she has managed to disappear. I’m telling you all, she is in one of those rooms, getting ready.”

“Evangeline, dinnae listen tae him.” Billie turned to her sister, grabbing her hand. “Listen tae me. We have every reason tae fash.”

Before she continued speaking, Billie looked around her, gaze shifting over those who were still in the great hall, and then dropped the volume of her voice, speaking so softly that only those who stood nearest to her could hear.

“She didnae wish fer this marriage,” she said. “We all ken that. She wished tae wed fer love an’ she certainly doesnae love Finnian. What if she has done somethin’ foolish?”

Hugo couldn’t resist the urge to roll his eyes then. “Your sister is many things, but she is not that big of a fool,” he said. “And I shall prove it to you.”

“How?” Billie demanded.

“Why, I’ll find her, of course.”

Pushing past the small crowd of people, Hugo stepped out of the great hall, taking a moment to think. Where could Abigail have gone? Most of the guards available were already looking for her and he knew they would receive word the moment they found them, so the fact that no one had returned with her in tow could only mean they had failed so far.

Her chambers, of course, were too obvious of a place; someone would have already checked there only to find them empty. The library, perhaps, or the morning room at the back of the castle, the one no one but her used so often.

Hugo made his way to the library first. He knew Abigail liked to spend her time there, though whether she spent that time reading or doing other things was still a question he couldn't answer. It was no secret Abigail wanted to marry a man for love—it was no secret she loved many men, either. She was a fanciful girl, Hugo had always thought ever since meeting her, though what Billie claimed wasn't true. He didn't dislike Abigail. He only thought that everyone coddled her too much.

When he reached the room, he found it empty, with no sign that Abigail had even been there recently. He went to the morning room instead, but that, too, was empty of people, save for the guards who seemed to have had the same idea as him.

Hugo pulled his long, blonde hair back, tying it at the neck, as he always did when he meant business, and then he began to roam the grounds, not only searching, but also thinking about potential places where Abigail could be. She wasn't often at the stables. She liked the gardens, but they were full of guards who would have spotted her. Sometimes, she went to the kitchens to speak with the servants, but they, too, would have found her had she gone there.

From the courtyard, he looked up at the windows that lined that part of the castle. He could see plenty of movement through them, but no one who even remotely resembled Abigail.

Somewhere at the back of the castle, perhaps.

Hugo didn't know Robertson Castle very well, but he had a good idea of where everything was, and so he went through the list of rooms in his head. There were mostly bedrooms at that side of the building, many of them given to guests.

Her mother's chambers. Didn't she say they were there?

Perhaps Abigail had gone there to find some sort of comfort from the items that belonged to her mother once. As she had never met the woman, there was nothing else Abigail could cling to—no memories, no shared moments she could recall. That room was all she had of her.

If she was as rattled by this marriage as Billie seemed to think, then it wasn't a stretch to think she would have wanted to feel close to a comforting figure.

There was nothing for him to lose, and so Hugo headed there, climbing up the stairs to the second floor quickly. It took him a short while to find the door he was looking for, opening several others in the process. Eventually, though, he approached what he believed was the right one and came to a sudden halt at the sounds that were coming from the other side of it.

Pressing his ear against the door, Hugo listened carefully for any signs of struggle as his hand curled around the hilt of his sword. There was the sound of china breaking, followed by the sound of creaking wood, and he wasted not another moment before he kicked the door open, heart racing in his chest.

Could it be that Billie was right and Abigail was in danger? But who could have managed to infiltrate Robertson Castle, especially on a day like this?

The moment the door swung open; Hugo took in the carnage before his eyes. The room had been destroyed as though a storm had passed through it, broken trinkets and torn books covering a good part of the floor. The drapes were torn, along with one of the tapestries, and there was even crimson smeared on the wall—blood, fresh and still wet by the looks of it.

In the middle of it all stood Abigail, interrupted in the process of throwing a length of

rope out of the window. Hugo's gaze immediately searched for the enemy, swiftly scanning the corners and every nook and cranny of the room where they could have hidden, but found it empty, save for Abigail.

“Mon Dieu!”

Hugo couldn't help naturally falling back into French, his mother tongue, when he was angry, surprised or tired. His father had been Scottish and his mother French, and Hugo had moved to France with his parents as a child to escape war. That was where he had later met Domnhall and they had become best friends.

“What are you doing?” Hugo asked. The sight was so strange that his mind had trouble coming up with a plausible explanation for what his eyes were seeing. “What is all this?”

Abigail froze where she stood by the window, her grey eyes wide in shock. She glanced over Hugo's shoulder as though she expected to see others there, but no one had followed him, not yet, at least. In the end, they were bound to look in that room, too.

“I'm leavin’,” Abigail said calmly, as though it made perfect sense for her to leave on the day of her wedding. “I cannae stay here, Hugo. I cannae go through with this weddin’.”

For a few moments, Hugo remained silent, too stunned to speak. So, Billie had been right after all. Abigail had been planning something foolish and she had been close to executing her plan, too. He had no doubt she would have jumped out of that window had he not forced his way into the room.

When he regained his wits, he groaned, burying his face in his hands. “You cannot be serious. What was your plan? Were you going to climb out of the window? And then?”

What do you think your family would do? Your sisters?"

At least Abigail had the decency to look embarrassed at that, averting her gaze. "I would come back, eventually. I wouldnae let them think I was dead."

"Billie already thinks something has happened to you," Hugo said. "She is just down these stairs, screaming at everyone to find you."

Abigail's expression turned into a mask of guilt, the corners of her mouth sloping downwards at the thought of her beloved sister. Out of the four of them, she and Billie were the closest and Hugo knew that if there was any way he could talk Abigail out of this, it would be by appealing to her love for Billie.

This wasn't a rash decision Abigail had made in the span of a moment, he knew. For all he considered her spoiled and selfish, she was also calm and collected like Billie, thinking things through before she acted. If she had come to the point of trying to escape like this, then it could only mean she had been planning it for a long time.

"I will come back," she insisted. "I promise. But I must leave now an' ye can either try tae stop me, in which case I would rather fall right out o' this window or ye can try tellin' them the truth after I am gone, in which case I will disappear."

"Is there a third option?" Hugo asked with a sigh, since neither of those things seemed particularly enticing to him.

"Let me go," she said. "Tell them... tell them ye came too late. Tell them I was already gone."

"I can't let you leave like this," Hugo insisted. Though he doubted Abigail would jump out of the window like she had threatened, he didn't want to try his luck. She seemed perfectly serious when she said she wouldn't go through with the wedding.

“It’s... it’s dangerous, Abigail, you understand that, no? Who knows what will happen to you out there?”

“Naething will happen tae me,” she said. “Naething worse than what will happen tae me here.”

That is rather dramatic. Surely, death is worse than marriage.

“There are things ye dinnae ken,” Abigail continued when she sensed his hesitation. “An’ I’d explain them, but I must go now.”

That caught Hugo’s attention. He didn’t know what it was Abigail was talking about, but he certainly wanted to. “What does that mean? What things?”

“Things!” she said. “I have nae time fer this. I’m leavin’.”

“Wait.”

Hugo couldn’t believe he was about to do this. It was a stupid plan, so much so that he could hardly believe he had even thought of it, but he couldn’t let Abigail leave the castle alone and stage her own abduction. Perhaps if he went with her, he could persuade her to come back or at least keep her safe until she decided it was time to return on her own.

“I’ll come with you,” he said.

CHAPTER ONE

Three hours earlier...

It was a dreary morning, grey clouds hanging low over the Robertson lands. Abigail had hardly managed to sleep at all the previous night, tossing and turning as thoughts of her upcoming marriage plagued her.

Ever since the king himself had decreed that she was to wed Finnian Chattan, brother of Laird Niall Chattan, Abigail had spent several sleepless nights. It had been two months since then, a quick engagement even by such standards, and somewhere in that time Abigail had begun to while away the hours by coming up with all sorts of ways to escape the marriage.

She could pretend to fall ill and stage her own death. She could forge some documents that claimed she was already married. She could fake a kidnapping, throwing the blame of her escape onto someone else's shoulders.

None of those plans would work, of course. She didn't delude herself into thinking she could escape this marriage, though she wished she could.

With two of her sisters married for an alliance and the other wedded to the man who would inherit the Robertson Clan, Abigail had thought that perhaps she could get what she wanted and marry for love. Their clan was strong because of her sisters' marriages; there was no need for her to find a man with uncountable wealth or sprawling lands. He would have to be a noble-born, of course, or at least have grown up in similar circumstances, but her options would be wider and the choice her own.

The king's order had come out of nowhere, though, and had instantly shattered her dreams of ever finding love. At first, she had tried to be open to the idea, thinking that perhaps Finnian could be a good match for her, like her sisters' husbands had been a good match for them, regardless of the circumstances of their marriages. The fact that it was arranged by the king didn't necessarily mean that Abigail wouldn't grow to love her husband or that he wouldn't grow to love her.

That hope only lasted until the moment they had met. At thirty years of age, he was almost an entire decade older than Abigail, but he was a handsome man, tall and broad, with dark hair and eyes that gave him an air of mystery. He wasn't the kind of man Abigail was usually attracted to, but she had to admit he was objectively handsome.

His looks weren't the issue; far from it, in fact. It was his personality. Finnian could be dismissive at times, but he was also quick to anger, not only towards the servants but also towards Abigail herself. The more time she spent around him, the more certain she became that she didn't want this marriage at all. She could never love a man like that.

She doubted he could ever love her.

When the morning of the wedding came, Abigail left her chambers to visit her mother's. Every now and then, when life was particularly difficult for her, she visited those rooms just to feel surrounded by the love of the woman that had given birth to her, even if she had never known her. She had nothing but those items in the room, left there undisturbed since her death under her father's orders, and a few portraits around the castle to give her a sense of what she had looked like when she was still alive.

It was the only place where she felt truly safe, as though no one could harm her as long as she was behind those doors.

No one else visited the chambers anymore. Abigail had caught her father there a few times in the past, looking at the things his wife had left behind, his eyes shining with unshed tears. A few times, her sisters had come with her to visit the rooms. But all of them had memories of Miriam Robertson to revisit whenever they missed her. They didn't need that place like she did.

On her way to the chambers, Abigail walked by the guest wing. In one of those rooms, her betrothed would soon be getting ready for their wedding, just like Abigail should be doing, but the mere thought of wearing her dress made her stomach churn with disgust. As she passed by his chambers, she noticed that his door was slightly ajar, allowing her to peek inside just enough to see his brother sitting by the window.

Abigail didn't like Niall either, though they didn't know each other well at all. There was something about him that unsettled her, a chill to his gaze and in the way he spoke.

"It willnae be easy tae kill them afterwards," she heard Niall say. Though she couldn't see Finnian, concealed as he was by the door, she could hear his response.

"I ken that. He is the laird o' the clan, Niall. Dae ye truly think I would find it easy?"

Are they talkin' about me faither?

Niall had said something about killing someone. Could it be that they were planning to kill her father?

But what could that possibly get them that they didn't already have? Abigail was more or less a willing bride and everyone had agreed to this marriage. Her father had put up no resistance, even though he had assured Abigail he would find a way out of this marriage for her if that was what she wished. Knowing they couldn't go against the king's desires, Abigail hadn't let her father disobey the man and risk his wrath.

It had struck them all as odd that the king himself would be involved in all this, since Abigail was the last of her sisters and hardly that important, but nobody had questioned it. She couldn't help but wonder if it had something to do with what Niall and Finnian were discussing now—was the king more involved than they thought? Was there a scheme shared among the three men?

“It is important that ye kill Cormac soon after,” Niall said and it was then that Abigail's blood ran cold. There was no more denying that Niall and Finnian had a plan to hurt her family and they were going to use her to get to them. Cormac, her sister Keira's husband, was meant to be the next Laird Robertson through his marriage to Keira. He was supposed to inherit the clan after Abigail's father either stepped down from the position or passed.

They want the clan fer themselves. They wish tae kill me faither an' Cormac an' then take it by marriage right.

Cold sweat drenched Abigail's brow and her heartbeat quickened to a sickening rhythm, fear wrapping like a vice around her and stealing the breath from her lungs. All this time, they had been fooling her entire family. All this time, they were planning to kill people Abigail loved just for their personal gain.

“I will,” Finnian assured his brother. “We have talked about this plan enough times fer me tae ken what tae dae even after ye return home. I dinnae need ye tae hold me hand through it. I can handle it, Niall.”

“I hope that ye can,” Niall was quick tae say. “Otherwise all this effort will go tae waste an' our clan will be ruined.”

“Our clan is already ruined,” Finnian said. “We have nae gold, hardly any land... we willnae last the winter like this. There isnae even enough food. Dinnae fash, I ken I must dae this soon. By the end o' winter, they will both be dead.”

“Winter?” Niall asked with a humorless, hollow laugh. “We dinnae have that much time.”

“Any sooner than that an’ perhaps people will suspect,” Finnian pointed out. “With Abigail as me wife, I will be able tae have Laird Robertson or Cormac send food and textiles tae us.”

“I dinnae wish fer charity,” Niall said.

“Then ye shouldnae have brought us tae this point,” Finnian said, his tone full of malice.

For a while, neither of them spoke but instead fell into an uncomfortable silence. Even so, Abigail had already heard everything she needed to, to know she couldn’t accept this marriage anymore.

If she married Finnian, then her father and Cormac and perhaps everyone else she loved would be in grave danger. Abigail could go to her father and tell him everything she had heard them discuss, but even so, they would have no real proof. It would be the word of a woman who was openly against her upcoming marriage versus the word of a man the king favored. Her family would believe her, of course, but no one else would.

How can I stop him? What can I dae?

She could flee the castle and hide somewhere Finnian would never find her, but that would only cause trouble for her father. He would have to be the one to explain to the king that his daughter had gone on her wedding day, despite the fact that everything seemed to have been going well up until then. He would have to be the one to deal with the rage the king would hold for the Robertson Clan after his orders had been ignored.

Simply fleeing wasn't an option. She needed a better way, something that would keep her father safe not only from Finnian, but also from the King. There had to be something she could do, something to stop Finnian and his brother.

Suddenly, there were steps coming from the other side of the door and Abigail fled quietly down the hallway, reaching the sanctuary of her mother's room. She locked the door behind her, even though she knew it would prove to be a flimsy barrier if her betrothed truly wish to come in, and then she fell to her knees next to the bed.

What can I dae? Anythin'... anythin' but this.

It had been a few days since Abigail had last thought about one of her escape plans, those very same plans that she had thought could never possibly work. They had been nothing but a way for her to entertain herself in the dark of the night, but now they seemed like the only weapon in her arsenal.

Faking her death was not only difficult, but it would also hurt her family too much. Abigail didn't want her father and her sisters to think she was gone. She couldn't forge papers either. That would take precious time she didn't have; let alone skill she didn't possess.

At first, the thought of faking a kidnapping seemed ridiculous to her, but the more she turned the idea in her head, the more convinced she was it would be the only way forward. In the long hours she had spent with these plans, going over them meticulously for lack of anything better to do, she had orchestrated the entire thing and now knew precisely what she had to do to make it seem as though someone had kidnapped her. This would not save her and her family for long but it'd buy her time.

Forgive me, Maither, fer yer things.

Taking a deep, calming breath, Abigail grabbed a few porcelain figurines from the

table, smashing them onto the floor. She didn't care too much about them if she didn't think of their connection to her mother, and so it was quite easy for her to destroy them. However, she knew she couldn't bring herself to smash much of anything else.

She had managed to make enough damage, even cut her own hand to spray some blood and make it believable, when the door was kicked open. Abigail had expected to see Finnian and Niall there, coming to kill her for uncovering their secret, but it was only Hugo.

“Mon Dieu!” he exclaimed upon entering.

Unlike Finnian, he was the kind of man that Abigail found attractive, with his luscious blonde hair and dark eyes, the broad shoulders and the handsome features of his face. Despite that, though, he left a sour taste at the back of Abigail's mouth whenever they spoke. They didn't know each other well, but Abigail had the impression that he didn't like her much.

“What are you doing?” Hugo demanded as he took in the chaos of the room.

“I will explain,” Abigail had assured him and she had headed for the window, hoping that Hugo would cover for her at least for a few hours, even if he refused to keep her secret.

But then he had surprised her by asking her to wait and telling her he would go with her.

“But your plan isn't believable enough,” he said, as Abigail was still reeling from his promise. Why would he want to go with her? He could barely stand to be around her most days. “Have you ever heard of a silent abduction? We must make it seem as though we were truly taken out of here after a fight.”

“How will we dae that?” Abigail asked, trying to push every other concern from her mind. Before anything else, she had to deal with her escape.

Moving closer to her, Hugo pinched her arm before she could do anything to stop him. Abigail yelped, half in pain and half in surprise, but then there were a few seconds when she could do nothing but stare at him in disbelief.

Then, she raised her hand and slapped him hard across the cheek, smirking when Hugo’s head snapped to the side, a pained groan escaping him.

“Why did you slap me?” he all but shouted before he seemed to remember their situation. “I’m not the enemy here!”

“Perhaps,” Abigail said with a small shrug, terribly pleased with herself. “But I always wished tae dae this. Besides, if someone attacked me, I wouldnae simply take it without fightin’ back.”

Briefly, Hugo froze in surprise, staring at Abigail with wide eyes. Then, his lips stretched into a small smile and for a few moments, Abigail couldn’t help but stare at them, her own mouth going dry.

She only snapped her gaze back to the rest of him when he moved, grabbing a china plate from the mantle that had been used as decoration. After a moment of hesitation, he threw it at the wall, the sound of the plate breaking jarring in the quiet of the room.

“We have a plan, then,” he said, and Abigail couldn’t help but return that smile, already triumphant.

CHAPTER TWO

There was little chance that half the castle hadn't already heard them, so Hugo gestured to Abigail to stop throwing things as he headed for the window. He figured it would be best if he went down first and she followed him, so that he could catch her if she slipped, so he began scaling down the wall, keeping his feet planted as he descended.

Once he reached the ground, Abigail followed. She, too, was sure-footed, moving with surprising speed and grace down the rope until she slipped on a patch of the facade that was covered in vines. For a moment, from the way she flailed, Hugo feared she would let go of the rope and land right on him, but she quickly regained her composure and started to move down as smoothly as before, travelling down the length of the rope little by little.

Hugo was there to grab her as she came close, but as he was about to put his hand on the small of her back, Abigail moved and his hand ended up on her rear instead, bringing them both to a halt.

Abigail looked down at him as Hugo looked up at her, both silent, as they couldn't make any noise. Her face was distorted with anger, a vicious frown painted on her features as she kicked at him, missing him almost entirely, save for a gentle tap of her toes against his shoulder.

Hugo had to stifle a laugh, though Abigail was not at all amused. Still, she had little choice but to let him help her down to the ground, and once they were both with their feet firmly on solid earth once more, Hugo turned to look at her questioningly.

“What now?” he asked. “How were you planning to escape?”

Abigail hesitated for only a moment before she said, “Wait here.” Much to Hugo’s chagrin, she started running towards the stables even as he hissed at her to come back. Cursing, Hugo looked around to make sure there was no one there before he rushed after her, watching through the small window to see what she was doing.

She had the stable boy cornered, speaking to him softly as he trembled like a leaf, his face flushing a deep red color. For a moment, Hugo considered intervening, but perhaps that would only make the situation worse, so he stayed put.

“I’m only askin’ fer a wee horse, Lachlan,” Hugo heard Abigail say to the young man. Her voice was a sweet soprano that sounded rather different from the one Hugo was used to hearing from her. “But ye must promise me ye willnae tell anyone ye saw me.”

Hugo saw the hesitation in Lachlan, in the way he made an aborted move, as though he wanted to obey Abigail but then thought better of it.

“Where will ye go?” Lachlan asked. “What if they ask me?”

“Ye’ll tell them ye havenae seen me at all,” Abigail insisted. With a sigh, she grabbed the boy’s hands, clasping them tightly and bringing them close to her chest. “Please... I wish I could tell ye why I must dae this, but there is nae time. If ye cannae help me, then I understand, but I wish ye would. It would be so dangerous fer me out there without a horse. It will take me a long time tae walk tae the next village an’ what if I meet someone dangerous on the way?”

“T-that’s what I fear,” said Lachlan, his gaze flitting between Abigail’s eyes and their clasped hands. The poor boy was on the verge of fainting, it seemed. “Even if ye have a horse, the roads can be very dangerous. There are brigands out there. There are

people who willnae hesitate tae hurt ye, especially if they ken who ye are.”

“I will keep me identity a secret,” Abigail promised him. “An’ I willnae be in as much danger on a horse. Ye ken I ride well. I’ll escape if anyone approaches me.”

Still, the boy was not convinced, not until Abigail leaned close and pressed a soft, lingering kiss to his cheek. “Please,” she said. “Will ye make me beg?”

What is with this girl?

Lachlan babbled something incomprehensible, his face even redder than before. The blush had spread all the way to the tips of his ears that peeked out of his brown locks. A few words from Abigail and a simple kiss on his cheek had been enough to reduce him to this mess, but Hugo supposed he couldn’t blame the poor boy. It wasn’t every day that someone like him had the full attention of such a girl—noble-born, pretty, and terribly sweet, Abigail must have been everything he had ever dreamt of.

“Alright,” Lachlan said, finally relenting. He took a deep breath, nodding seemingly to himself. “Alright.”

As he spoke, though, he didn’t move, at least not until Abigail let go of his hands. For a moment, he stared forlornly at his own, before he buzzed around the stables, getting a small horse ready for her.

“Yer own horse?” Abigail asked.

“Aye,” said Lachlan. “So they willnae suspect I’ve seen ye. I’ll tell them I took her tae me faither tae use fer a while. But ye must promise me tae bring her back.”

“I will, I promise ye,” said Abigail as she threw her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek once more. When she pulled back, Lachlan almost collapsed, as though

his knees were too weak from the kiss to keep him upright. Once again, Hugo had to hold back a chuckle, as he didn't want to give his position away, nor did he want to make the poor boy feel embarrassed for having such an obvious and massive infatuation with Abigail. "Thank ye, Lachlan. I willnae forget what ye did fer me."

Before Lachlan could say anything else, Abigail took the reins and left without another glance. Hugo walked around to the other side of the stables to meet her, so he could remain hidden from Lachlan, and the two of them slipped out of the castle and into the wilderness behind the grounds.

Within minutes, they were down a small path, following it through a wide-stretching forest.

They had only been riding for a few minutes when they realized they had a problem. Hugo was far from a small man, tall and bulky with muscle unlike Lachlan, and though the horse could carry them well enough, it was difficult for both him and Abigail to fit on the saddle. With the way they were sitting, Abigail's back was pressed firmly against Hugo's chest, each step of the horse forcing their bodies to rub against each other.

In front of him, Abigail was stiff as a board and Hugo was not doing any better. He didn't mind the physical contact—quite the opposite, in fact, and that could very easily become a problem, he knew. The last thing he wanted was to become aroused while riding with Abigail. There was no way she wouldn't feel it, and if she had kicked him when he accidentally touched her rear, then she was bound to kill him if she felt his manhood on her back.

Hugo desperately tried to summon any other thought to his mind; anything from what could be happening in the castle now that they were gone, to boring meetings that he had to attend time and time again as Domnhall's right hand.

That's right. Think about Domnhall. That should help.

With growing horror, he realized that it did not, in fact, help at all.

In an effort to distract himself, he decided to ask the one thing that had been bothering him ever since he had come into the late Lady Robertson's room earlier.

"So, you never told me why you had tae leave," he said. "You promised you would."

"Aye, so I did," said Abigail. "I suppose now is as good a time as any."

For a long time, though, she didn't speak. Hugo waited patiently for her, only because it seemed to be a serious matter, something that bothered her greatly.

When she spoke again, she did so by drawing a deep, steadying breath. "I overheard Finnian an' Niall discussing their plans following the weddin'. They wished tae kill me faither an' Cormac, an' make it all seem like an accident, so they could take over the clan an' the land an' the gold."

"What?"

It was all Hugo could say. It seemed impossible that something like this would happen, but Abigail had no reason to lie about it, at least not to him. Perhaps she had misheard them, he thought. Perhaps she had misunderstood.

"Are you certain?" he asked. "Did you hear them well?"

"O' course I did," said Abigail. "I'm nae naive, Hugo, nae matter what ye may think. I ken what I heard."

A chill ran down Hugo's spine as he processed the news. He began to steer the horse

back, before Abigail grabbed his hands and stopped him.

“What are ye doin’?”

“We must go back,” he said. “If what you say is true, then we must warn them. We must tell your faither. We must tell Domnhall and Cormac.”

“We cannae,” Abigail said. “Did ye think I didnae consider that? I wish it would be that simple. But I have nay proof other than what I heard an’ the order tae wed me tae Finnian came straight from the king. Everyone kens I didnae want this marriage. What if the king thinks we are lyin’ just because I dinnae want Finnian as me husband? Can ye imagine what he will dae tae me faither then?”

“What else is there to do?” Hugo asked. What Abigail was saying was true enough but he couldn’t leave everyone unaware of their situation. This meant Finnian and Niall were dangerous, much more so than anyone could have predicted. How could Hugo simply leave when so many lives were at stake?

“I dinnae ken,” Abigail said. “Perhaps we can try tae find some proof. But until then, we must leave.”

“And leave everyone behind?”

“They’ll be safe as long as they think I’ve been taken,” Abigail said. “Finnian an’ Niall need me. They need this marriage. They willnae make a move until they have me, so with me gone, they have nay choice but tae dae naething.”

Begrudgingly, Hugo had to admit that Abigail was right. He had always thought of her as a little too fanciful, a little naive and unaware of the important things that were happening around her, but she was proving him wrong. She was thinking several steps ahead, though he still didn’t think that leaving was the right approach to all this.

“Perhaps I can write Domnhall a letter and explain everything to him,” Hugo said with a sigh.

“I dinnae ken if that is wise,” said Abigail. “It could be intercepted.”

“And yer stable boy could talk,” Hugo pointed out. “Yet you still asked for his help when I could have simply punched him unconscious, no? It would have been very easy. He is but a little thing.”

Abigail gasped as if offended. “Ye will dae nay such thing, ever,” she said, her voice harsher than he had ever heard it before, a stark contrast to that sweet tone she had used with Lachlan. “I dinnae wish fer anyone tae be punched because o’ me, especially nae someone from me clan. An’ especially nae Lachlan.”

“You’re fond of him,” Hugo said. It wasn’t a question. Though she had seemed entirely uninterested when she was leaving Lachlan behind, now she was more than willing to protect him fiercely.

“O’ course I am,” she said. “I am fond o’ many. An’ besides, if someone came tae take me away, he would have come with his own horse. He wouldnae be stealin’ one from the stables. Lachlan would have tae ken where the horse went so he could make up a plausible lie.”

Once again, Abigail was thinking ahead. He had been quick to judge her and now his consideration of her morphed quickly into something new, something that demanded his respect, no matter how reluctant he was to give it.

“How can you be so certain that he won’t speak?” he asked, simply because he hated being wrong. He still thought that a good blow to the head, just enough to stun him for a while but not do any real damage, would have been the better, cleaner option. Now Lachlan was a liability. As much as Abigail liked to think he wouldn’t tell

anyone the truth, Hugo didn't trust him that much. Everyone had their levers. Everyone eventually talked.

"I simply am," Abigail said with a small shrug, as though it was that simple. "He kens I wouldnae ask such a favor o' him if it wasnae important an' he trusts me. He trusts me because I trust him. That is how it is in our clan."

Were the Robertsons and their people truly so loyal to each other? Or was it simply that Abigail was close with her people, so much that they would do anything for her? Hugo didn't know, but either way, he couldn't help but be impressed by her close bonds with everyone.

Humming softly, Hugo leaned a little closer. The discussion had distracted him enough from the pressing matter of his arousal that he could get a little bolder, laughing softly just to see the way Abigail's hair swayed against her neck as it was disturbed by his breath.

"Do you always get what you want, then?" he asked.

He expected her to throw back a scathing remark. He expected to hear anger in her voice, anything that would show that he had successfully ruffled her feathers, but instead she, too, laughed softly.

"Aye," she said. "I dae."

Unfortunately, Hugo couldn't help but respect that as well.

CHAPTER THREE

“ I need tae rest.”

They had been riding for a long time, long enough for them to have already passed the first village on their way, but Abigail couldn't keep going any longer, and she was certain the horse would be grateful for a break, too. With the way Hugo was pressed up against her for the whole ride, her body had gone entirely stiff, muscles cramping as she tried to keep herself as far away from him as possible.

All her efforts were in vain, of course. There was hardly any space on that saddle and no matter how much she tried to avoid touching him, Hugo was always there, plastered to her back. She knew there was nothing he could do either, and so she hadn't berated him for it, but her body needed the break.

“We're in the middle of nowhere and it will soon be dark,” Hugo pointed out, as if Abigail couldn't see the very same, darkening sky that he did. “It would be wiser to keep riding until we find another village and spend the night there.”

“An' risk bein' seen?” Abigail asked. “We might encounter someone who kens who we are. It is best tae avoid villages an' towns so close tae the castle.”

She expected Hugo to put up a fight and insist that it was too dangerous for them to camp in the middle of the forest, but instead, he only stayed silent and rode for a little while longer until they reached a small clearing. They were deep in the forest by then, the trees leaning into each other and creating a thick canopy of leaves over their heads, obscuring much of the dying light of the day. What little fell through the

leaves consisted of dappled, small patches of sun reaching the ground.

It was colder there and Abigail wrapped her cloak a little tighter around her shoulders. At least she had come prepared, which was more than she could say about Hugo. He refused to wear a plaid, too used to his French fashions to even consider it an option, and so he had nothing with which to cover his torso in the cold.

He must have been chilly all the way there, ever since they had entered the deepest parts of the forest and the light had faded, forcing the temperature around them to drop. And yet, he had not complained once about it.

When he jumped off the horse, he helped Abigail off, too, and tied the reins around a nearby tree trunk. Abigail walked around slowly, stretching her arms and her legs to get rid of the numbness in her limbs.

“Stop!”

Abigail froze instantly, her eyes wide as she turned around to look at Hugo, who was rushing towards her at stunning speeds. As she turned on her heel, her boot caught on something and for a moment, she lost her balance, her body threatening to topple over before Hugo grabbed her and pushed her aside. Abigail stumbled forward but soon regained her footing, staying upright.

Hugo didn't have the same luck.

The momentum of his movement pitched him forward and he suddenly disappeared from Abigail's eyes, falling into what seemed like a deep ditch in the ground, which had been expertly covered with twigs and leaves to resemble the forest floor.

Abigail's heart lurched in her chest as Hugo tumbled down. She rushed to the edge of the trap and looked down at him, relief washing like a wave over her when she saw

him stand and brush the dirt off his clothes with nothing hurt but his ego.

Hugo grumbled to himself in unintelligible French as he brushed the dirt that clung onto him, his hands only managing to dislodge that much of it. They would not be clean again for a while, Abigail knew, and she was certain Hugo would not stop complaining about it until he had something else to wear.

“Why did ye dae this?” Abigail asked, placing her hands on her hips. “How will I pull ye out now?”

“What did you want me to do?” Hugo asked, incensed. “Would you rather I let you fall in? What if there was something at the bottom? Spikes or or snakes or?—”

“Snakes?” Abigail asked with an inelegant snort. “Why would there be snakes?”

“I don’t know! Why wouldn’t there be? There are snakes here.”

“But why would the snakes be in the trap?” Abigail asked, throwing her hands up in the air in frustration. “Dae ye nae hear how silly that sounds?”

“Maybe someone could have put them there,” Hugo said.

“Why would anyone?—”

Abigail stopped herself with a sigh before this argument could evolve any further. Instead, she turned around and marched back to the horse, all the while Hugo yelling up at her.

“Where are you going?”

“Stay where ye are!”

“ Ah, oui! Je pensais que je partirais! ”

Abigail rolled her eyes even though Hugo couldn't see her. She was perfectly aware there was nowhere he could go, stuck as he was in that hole, but telling him to stay put was simply a figure of speech, one she didn't think she had to explain to him.

She had half a mind to leave him there.

When she reached the horse, she grabbed her bag and rummaged through it, finding the rope she had stashed there before leaving the castle. Abigail was nothing if not prepared. If life had taught her anything, it was that she had to go everywhere with a full bag.

Hurriedly, she tied the rope around a tree, securing it with a tight knot, and then tossed it over into the hole for Hugo to grab.

Only as she did, the rope caught her foot and she, too, fell inside along with it, landing squarely on top of Hugo, who had stepped forward to catch it.

Hugo landed on his back with a thud and a groan, and Abigail landed on top of him, her limbs thrown in every direction. Her first thought was that now Hugo would certainly be angry about his clothes, and there was nothing she could say or do to appease him until she found him something else to wear.

And yet, Hugo laughed under her, Abigail shaking on top of him along with his chest.

“What is so very funny?” she asked.

“You fell like a rock,” Hugo said, much to her annoyance. She didn't appreciate being compared to a rock. “And now you're in this mess with me. How are you ever going to get out?”

With a grunt, Abigail pushed herself to her feet, planting her hands on Hugo's chest. She had half a mind to kick him again where he lay, just for the satisfaction of it, but instead she dusted herself and grasped the rope to climb out.

I'll show him how I'll get out o' here. I dinnae need his help.

The rope was cutting into Abigail's palms as she gripped it tightly, but she tried to ignore the slight sting. She placed one leg on the earthen wall of the hole, pressing into the soil with her heel, then did the same with the other leg and pulled herself up, only to find that she didn't move at all. For a moment, she paused, acutely aware of the gaze on her back, Hugo watching her as she failed on her first try.

She couldn't let him win. She took a deep breath and tried again, once more making no progress. After placing a foot down, she adjusted her grip, tried again, and that time, too, failed.

Behind her, she could hear a barely concealed laugh and when she looked over her shoulder at Hugo, she found his shoulders shaking with mirth, a hand clamped over his mouth.

With a growl, Abigail let go of the rope and stepped back from the wall, crossing her arms over her chest defensively. "So, perhaps I cannae dae it, but at least I am tryin'," she admitted. "Will ye simply stand there an' watch me?"

Hugo only laughed a little more as he grabbed the rope and easily pulled himself out, before hovering over the edge. He looked at her contemplatively for a while instead of helping her, and her patience quickly ran low.

"Should I help you out or should I leave you there?" Hugo asked, his dark eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Help me out, o’ course!” Abigail said. “Did I nae help ye too?”

“I’m sure there was a moment when you considered simply leaving me there,” Hugo said.

Could he read me mind? How does he ken?

“I would never dae that,” she said. “Ye’d come out an’ chase me.”

“Most likely,” said Hugo. “But you can’t come out, no?”

“I’ll come out eventually,” Abigail pointed out. “As much as ye may wish fer it, ye cannae trap me here forever.”

With a chuckle, Hugo bent down and offered Abigail his hand, finally helping her out of the trap. The force of his tug had her stumbling right into him once more, and for a moment, they both froze, staring at each other. His breath was warm on her skin, his lips close to hers, hovering right above her mouth. They stayed like that for what seemed like an eternity to her, until Abigail cleared her throat and pulled back, putting some much-needed distance between them.

Just in the past few hours, she had been closer to Hugo than ever before. She didn’t remember ever touching him this much, and now the sudden proximity was playing tricks on her. She had always been aware that Hugo was objectively a handsome man, of course. If anything, she was the kind of woman who could appreciate a handsome face, her gaze often tracing the angles of his jaw, the gentle slope of his nose, the prominent cheekbones and sharp cupid’s bow. That didn’t mean she liked him, though. His personality made him entirely undesirable.

Once she was safely away from the trap, Abigail finally let go of the breath she had been holding, even though she knew Hugo was only teasing her and wouldn’t

actually leave her there.

A thin darkness surrounded them by then, the sun quickly setting in the horizon, and she would have hated to be in there once the light was all gone, thinking about all the other creeping things that could be in there with her when she couldn't see them. The forest floor was their home, after all, and she was the one intruding. She wouldn't be surprised to turn around and see some terrible beast crawling up her leg.

What she saw instead was a small gash on Hugo's arm where his shirt had been ripped. Blood coated the fabric, though the bleeding seemed to have stopped. Still, Abigail approached him and took a better look at the wound, grabbing his arm to bring it close to her face.

"Ye hurt yerself," she said. With a sigh, she looked through her bag until she found what she was searching for: a small jar with a pungent paste, perfect for wounds like that.

"How many things do you have in that bag?" Hugo asked, eyes crinkling with amusement.

"It is good tae be prepared," Abigail pointed out. "See? Ye're in need o' it now. If I didnae have it, yer wound could get infected."

"It's only a small wound," Hugo said.

"Ye ken that is more than enough." Abigail opened the jar, but she couldn't get to the entire wound with Hugo's shirt on the way. "Take off yer shirt."

"What?"

"Ye heard me," she said. "I cannae reach yer wound like this."

Hugo hesitated for a moment, looking at her with the sort of doubt she wouldn't expect from a man like him, but then he did as he was told, holding his shirt in his hands as he let Abigail come closer and dab the paste over the wound with a careful finger.

The sight of him shirtless, though, had her blushing once more, heat rising to her cheeks. It wasn't just his face that was attractive; his body, too, was sculpted beautifully, strong and lean, the muscles of his chest and stomach rippling invitingly with every movement he made.

"You don't need to blush like this," he said. Of course, from this close he had noticed the blush, Abigail thought bitterly. "I'm sure you've seen many men nude, no?"

That only served to send more blood rushing to her face, her embarrassment forcing her into stillness. "What are ye sayin'?" she said, so quietly that her voice was only barely audible, even to her. "O' course I havenae."

For a few moments, Hugo regarded her curiously, as though searching for something in her expression. Whatever he saw there made him hum and quickly change the subject, something for which Abigail was eternally grateful.

She knew the kind of reputation she had around the castle, of course. She knew people thought she spent all her time with men, but she had done nothing more than kiss a few of them.

"How do you know so much about healing?" Hugo asked.

"We are a family o' healers," said Abigail. "Me sisters taught me everythin' I ken."

After that, Abigail worked in silence, making sure the entire wound was coated in the paste. Once she was satisfied, she stepped back and Hugo watched her for a moment,

still silent, before he put his shirt back on.

Abigail could never tell what Hugo was thinking. She could never read the man, no matter how much she tried.

“I’ll build a fire,” Hugo said, clearing his throat and breaking the spell between them, as he went around the clearing and gathered some wood for them. When he returned, Abigail handed him the tinderbox she had packed in her bag and then sat down to watch him, pulling some food out for the two of them.

“I havenae brought much with me,” she said, going through her rations. “I thought I’d be alone, so I only brought enough food fer one. But I’m sure we can find more on the morrow.”

There would be a village or a town on their way, surely, and they could find some food. It was better than starving, after all, she thought.

Abigail munched on a bit of dried meat as she leaned back against a tree. “Why did ye come with me?” she asked, just like she had wanted to ever since Hugo made the suggestion in the first place. “Why are ye here?”

“I couldn’t let you leave alone,” Hugo said with a small shrug, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Your little Lachlan was right. It’s dangerous. You need someone to take care of you.”

Abigail said nothing. What was there even to say to something like that? Her cheeks heated, and she was glad for the cover of the night, as it meant that Hugo couldn’t see her blush that time, but he seemed preoccupied with starting the fire anyway, too busy to look at her.

When he managed to get the flames going, they rose up in the sky and Abigail

scrabbled back, frightened for a moment. Every time the flames go a little too close, even if she was safe, she couldn't help but startle, her heartbeat picking up to the point of discomfort.

"Did it frighten you?" Hugo asked, wiping his hands clean as he came to sit next to her. "Forgive me."

"Nay," said Abigail, her gaze still glued to the flames. "Nay, it isnae that."

Of course, Hugo didn't know the story. Abigail looked at him as he watched her expectantly, waiting for her patiently to say something.

If only he knew how difficult those words were to utter.

CHAPTER FOUR

By the time Abigail started talking once more, Hugo had been convinced that she would never tell him what it was that had frightened her. Even as she began to recount the story, she hardly took her eyes off the flames that burned before her, her gaze turning distant and glassy, as though she was once again a child.

“There was a fire when I was a bairn,” she said. “It is the only thing I remember from that age, but I remember it as though it happened yesterday an’ I dinnae think I will ever forget it. Such things never fade from memory.”

Hugo listened quietly to Abigail, resting his chin on his hand. Once again, she paused and her throat bobbed as she swallowed, as though something obstructed it.

The memory itself, he thought.

“Keira saved me,” Abigail said. “Had she nae been there, I would have perished. She saved me life but she was left with scars all over her body. That is why she wears those gloves an’ refuses tae take them off. I’ve tried tae tell her time an’ time again that she is so bonnie, her scars only show how brave she is, but she will never listen. I can hardly bear it sometimes, what I did tae her.”

Hugo was stunned into silence for a few moments, not because the story was so shocking, although he had always wondered about Keira’s gloves, but rather because he didn’t know what to say to make Abigail feel better. He doubted there were even words he could share that would help at all, words that someone hadn’t already offered, but it was so rare that he had nothing to say that it gave him pause. In the

end, he made to reach for her, maybe place a comforting hand on her shoulder, but he stopped himself before he could.

They didn't know each other so well. In the past few hours, they had talked more than they had in weeks and Hugo didn't want to startle her even more by being too forward.

For a while, they sat there, the silence stretching between them like a gaping maw. Hugo glanced at Abigail from the corner of his eye, but she was only staring straight ahead once more, lost in the flames.

"My parents," Hugo said, but then he stopped himself immediately. The words choked him up, dying in his throat before they reached his lips. What was even the point of sharing their story, he wondered? He had never told anyone about this. Why would he tell Abigail? He hardly knew her at all.

"What about them?" Abigail asked.

Hugo shook his head. "Nothing. Forget it."

It was evidently the wrong thing to say. Abigail finally turned to look at him, but now she had a curious little frown on her face, the kind of frown that Hugo was certain always gave her all the answers she wanted.

"Ye began tae tell me," she said. "So it must mean that ye wish tae tell someone. Ye can tell me."

"I don't want to talk about it," Hugo said, shaking his head.

"Surely, ye dae," Abigail insisted. "If ye didnae, then ye wouldnae have brought it up."

“I said I don’t want to talk about it!”

Hugo’s loud response echoed around them in the small clearing, scaring off some birds and a few critters that had come close to them upon smelling Abigail’s food. A moment stretched between them, Abigail staring at him, wide-eyed, her mouth hanging open in shock, before her lips snapped closed once more and she glared at him, her anger flaring.

“Ye dinnae have tae yell at me about it,” she said. “I only wished tae help ye because ye seemed like ye wished tae speak about it.”

“I told you that I didn’t,” Hugo pointed out, shifting so that he could look at her straight on, his own face contouring into a mask of anger. It simmered just below the surface of his skin, making his blood run hot.

“It seems tae me like ye always keep everythin’ inside.”

Hugo couldn’t help but let out a humorless laugh at that. “How would you know? We have hardly spoken to each other. You know nothing about me.”

“I ken enough,” said Abigail, standing up a little straighter, as though her anger were propelling her forward. “I have seen enough o’ ye tae ken that yer hidin’. I thought perhaps ye were tired o’ hidin’ now an’ wished tae unburden yerself, but I was clearly wrong. Ye dinnae have tae yell at me, though. Ye could have simply told me.”

“I tried,” Hugo said, leaning a little closer himself. “And you didn’t listen. Do you ever listen? Of course not, you said it yourself. You always get what you want.”

That seemed to strike a sore spot. Abigail let out an indignant huff, throwing her bag to the side as she tightened her cloak around her shoulders and lay down on the ground, facing away from Hugo.

“I am goin’ tae sleep now,” she said. “Dinnae disturb me any further.”

With that, she stopped talking to him entirely. There was nothing but the soft sound of her breathing and the crackling of the fire to keep Hugo company in the clearing and after a few seconds of glaring at her back, he too lay down next to her, turning around so that they were back to back.

This way, he was staring at the flames, their orange hue burning itself in his eyes. Abigail must have been a little cold so far away from the fire, he thought, but then again, he doubted she wanted to get any closer, considering what she had told him.

For a while, Hugo tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable, not so much because he was on the ground—he was quite used to that when travelling—but rather because he had somehow managed to make Abigail dislike him even more. How were they going to coexist while travelling together? He could hardly keep an eye on her if she despised him and wanted to be away from him.

Abigail had managed to escape Castle Robertson without anyone taking notice. If she wanted to, Hugo was certain she could slip right out of his sight.

He didn’t even know why her insistence had angered him so. He never liked to talk about his parents and he avoided it whenever possible, but he hadn’t thought he would get so angry at Abigail for asking about them. Perhaps he had overreacted, he thought. Perhaps it had been foolish of him, yelling at her like that.

With a sigh, he turned around and tentatively reached for Abigail’s hand. Her breathing had evened out by then and Hugo thought she must have been asleep as he took her hand in his.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, for whatever it was worth now that she couldn’t even hear him.

Without saying a word, Abigail squeezed his hand once and then stilled again. For a moment, Hugo froze, but then he couldn't help but smile a little to himself.

It was just as good as an acceptance.

The first thing Hugo felt upon opening his eyes was a searing pain on his cheek, as though the flames from the previous night's fire had consumed one half of his face. Then he heard was Abigail, shouting hysterically.

"Ye pervert!" she said, her tone dripping with disgust. She was standing a few feet away from him, clutching her cloak tightly like a shield, while she pointed at him accusingly with her other hand. "What dae ye think ye're doin'?"

Hugo had no idea what he had done, if he had done anything at all. He was still half asleep, his gaze blurry with the remnants of a dream he had already forgotten, his lids and his limbs still heavy. His mind tried to come up with a possible explanation for the sudden and rather rude awakening, but it soon came to a grinding halt, the pain on his cheek and the lingering sleep making it difficult to think.

Did she slap me?

He touched his jaw with tender fingers, poking and prodding at the flesh there. Abigail had definitely slapped him. Pain radiated up the right side of his face and he cradled it gingerly, working his jaw open in an effort to relieve some of it.

"What did I do?" he asked, his words coming out whinier than he had intended. He could hardly be blamed for it, though, he thought; no one liked to be woken up like this.

Instead of answering him, Abigail jutted out her chin, pointing to his lap. Hugo looked down and saw his manhood straining against his trousers, and it was then that

he felt the full force of his arousal, which had not ebbed even slightly from the pain of the slap or the shock of waking up like this.

“Ah,” he said, rather dumbly.

“Is that all ye have tae say?” Abigail shrieked. “Ah? That... that thing was pressed against me!”

Hugo had to choke back a laugh at the way Abigail phrased it. There was a novelty to waking up to a woman next to him who was so angry at being desired, though Hugo couldn't claim he preferred it over the activities that such a circumstance usually brought about.

“Forgive me,” he said, placing his hands gingerly on his lap to hide his erection. Though he tried very hard to fight it, he could feel the heat rising to his cheeks, his embarrassment obvious in the light of the day. “Trust me, I didn't mean for that to happen.”

Quite the opposite, in fact. Just the previous day, he had tried so hard to prevent that exact thing from happening while they were riding. He hadn't expected that he would end up sleeping so close to Abigail, though, making such a situation occur.

“Well... it happened,” Abigail said rather unhelpfully.

“So it did. Let us never speak of it again. It will be as though it never happened at all.”

At first, it seemed to Hugo that Abigail would refuse and that she would continue to argue with him until they had another fight, but then she simply relented, letting out a heavy sigh. Her shoulders deflated, falling down from her ears, and she leaned against a tree, nodding slowly.

Hugo was glad for it. People thought he was shameless—and quite right—but even he had his limits.

They spent some time in silence, Hugo waiting at first to calm down before he began preparing the horse for the trip ahead of them. Once he was done, Abigail passed him some cheese and meat, and he took it like he would take an olive branch.

“So,” he said around a mouthful, “what is your plan, exactly? Surely, you don’t think you can hide forever.”

“O’ course nae,” Abigail said. “I’ve been thinkin’ about it an’ I think we shouldnae write tae anyone. It will be best if everyone thinks we’ve both been taken.”

“Do you think they’ll believe it?” Hugo asked. “I mean, I’m not exactly easy to take.”

Abigail gave a small shrug. “They have seen the chambers by now. What would ye think if ye saw that? They’ll see we are both gone an’ they will come tae the conclusion, nae matter how unlikely. Perhaps they’ll think there were several attackers or that they managed tae stun ye an’ take ye along with me.”

Hugo supposed that would have been the explanation he would have reached, too, had he been observing the situation from the castle. A struggle, clearly bloody and destructive, one that could have been caused by someone who knew how to fight. Perhaps they would think the attacker had bested him or that he had been caught by surprise and that had given the enemy the advantage.

“And then?” Hugo asked.

“An’ then we go tae Castle Chattan.”

That was the very last thing he had expected to hear. He could hardly believe his own

ears, and he looked at Abigail in disbelief, but she only shrugged a shoulder.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “What will we do there?”

“We infiltrate it,” Abigail said. “An’ we find evidence o’ the plan. Anythin’ that can help us convince the king that we’re nae lyin’. Surely, there must be somethin’ there. Wouldnae Niall keep documents in his study? Some o’ them might be o’ use.”

Hugo gaped at Abigail, staring at her in silence. He must have heard her wrong, he thought. She must have said something else. There was no way she was actually suggesting this.

“Why are ye lookin’ at me like this?” she asked. “What other choice dae we have?”

“I don’t know!” It was Hugo’s turn to shout hysterically as he began to pace back and forth around the clearing. “Anything but that. It is madness, Abigail. We are going to be killed.”

“Ye dinnae ken that,” Abigail said, which was absolutely false. Hugo knew it very well. She seemed to be the only one who didn’t. “We’ll be careful.”

“I don’t think that will make much of a difference,” he pointed out. “Do you not understand what you’re saying? How are we even going to get inside?”

“We’ll find a way,” Abigail said with such confidence that it was difficult to keep his wits about him and not believe her.

“That is it?” Hugo asked. “We’ll find a way?”

“That is it.”

Hugo could say nothing else. He only stared at Abigail in disbelief, trying to search for any hint that she wasn't serious, but there was none. She absolutely meant every word that she said, and he didn't know what to do to change her mind. Pointing out that they could die hadn't been enough to sway her, even though she hadn't outright rejected the possibility, so he didn't think anything else would work.

He had to admit, though, that if nothing else, her plan was bold. She was not the little girl he had once thought she was.

Still, the plan was mad. Hugo could not, with good conscience, allow her to do such a thing.

"No," he said. "It's too dangerous. You might end up dead."

"Better dead than allowing me whole clan tae suffer," Abigail said, and Hugo was once again stunned speechless.

CHAPTER FIVE

The rest of their day was spent riding and putting as much distance as they could between them and the castle. They were still too close for comfort and Hugo didn't allow himself to be lulled into any false sense of security by the distance they had covered. For all he knew, Finnian and Niall had already sent people after them, and so had Laird Robertson.

However, it was Niall's men that he didn't want to encounter. They were the ones they had to fear.

Though it was a pleasant enough day, chilly but dry, the sky overcast but showing no threat of rain, the travel still exhausted them. By the time the sun began to set, Hugo wanted nothing more than to find a comfortable bed and a warm plate of food, and so he brought the horse to a stop at the next village they found on their way.

It was a small place, but upon seeing it, Hugo let out a sigh of relief. In front of him, Abigail seemed to relax as well, the tension bleeding out of her when she realized they would be spending the night there.

After dismounting the horse, Hugo led Abigail inside, looking around at the place to see if there were any signs of threat. Though people turned to look at them when they entered, none of them seemed to recognize them or pose any threat, so Hugo continued towards the innkeeper, who smiled when he saw them.

They looked less than proper, Hugo thought, what with all the dirt on their clothes, but they still looked expensive enough to warrant good treatment. A man like the

innkeeper could surely see such details—he must have seen all sorts of people pass through his inn and he knew who could afford a bed and who couldn't.

“Welcome,” the man said. He was older, short and stout, with greying hair and warm, brown eyes. “Ye look weary. A room fer the night?”

“Two, please,” Hugo said as he reached for his pouch of gold, which he luckily always had on him, otherwise they would have had none with their quick escape.

For a moment, the innkeeper looked between him and Abigail as though he couldn't figure out why they would need two different bedrooms, but he didn't comment on it.

“I'm afraid there is only one room left,” the man said. “We are small, ye see. We only have three rooms tae spare, an' two o' them are already taken.”

Hugo glanced over his shoulder at Abigail, who was standing right behind him. She seemed anything but pleased, her lips pursed into a thin line, but then she only nodded.

“One will dae,” she said. “I'm too tired tae find another place. Let us spend the night here. Ye can sleep on the floor.”

“How very gracious of you,” Hugo told her with a saccharine smile, his tone dripping with sarcasm. He turned back to the innkeeper and handed him some gold, taking the key offered to him. “We will also need some food an' a bath. And clothes, if you have them.”

“O' course,” the man said. “One moment.”

While he disappeared into another room, Hugo leaned over the counter with a sigh, rubbing a hand over his face. He had been looking forward to spending the night in a nice bed—or at least a bed, as any bed would do at that point—but apparently, his

hopes had been in vain. He had been looking forward to some peace and quiet, too, since it seemed that he and Abigail could hardly spend more than a few hours together without fighting, but that hope had also dissipated.

When the innkeeper returned, he was holding two changes of clothes in his hands, one for Hugo and one for Abigail. With growing horror, Hugo realized that what the man had brought him was a plaid, just as the clothes were thrust into his hands.

“What is this?” he asked.

“Clothes,” the man said with a small, confused frown. “Well, how dae ye say this, vêtements ?”

“Yes, thank you, I know that. I asked for them,” Hugo pointed out. Behind him, Abigail was giggling without even trying to suppress it, and he turned to glare at her for a moment. “I cannot wear this.”

“Why?” the man asked. From the way he narrowed his eyes at him, Hugo feared he was about to start a war between Scotland and France.

Hugo glanced over his shoulder at Abigail once more before he leaned forward to speak softly. “I feel too... exposed, you see?”

“Exposed?” the innkeeper shouted, giving a full-bellied laugh. Just as he had expected—and had tried to avoid—Abigail’s giggles turned into a hysterical laugh. “Nonsense, laddie! Everyone wears these here!”

Something told Hugo that he was not going to win this battle. With a sigh, he nodded once, firmly, and resigned himself to his fate. He hadn’t worn a plaid since he was a child and his father had had him dressed in one, but now it looked like he would have to get intimately reacquainted with it.

With a sigh and one last, tight smile at the innkeeper, Hugo made his way up the stairs, Abigail following close behind. The room they had been given was spacious enough, a large bed sitting in the middle with a window across from it that overlooked the street below, while a dresser and a washbasin stood at the far wall. There was a chair and a small table, too, and Hugo wondered for a moment if he should sleep there instead, but even the floor sounded more comfortable than spending the night curled up in a sitting position.

“I’ll go and find us another horse,” Hugo said. “You can bathe first.”

“Wait!” Abigail called. “The horse is Lachlan’s. What will ye dae with it?”

Hugo had had every intention to trade the horse for another, but now he doubted Abigail would allow it. “I’ll tell them to keep it safe for us. We can take it back to Lachlan when we return to the castle or have someone take it to him.”

That seemed to reassure Abigail and she nodded, all but shooing Hugo out when two women knocked on the door, bringing a tub and water inside. Hugo sighed at the dismissal and left the room, asking the innkeeper for anyone in the village who would have a horse to spare.

After finding another horse and making sure Lachlan’s would be taken care of properly, Hugo returned to the room. He had been gone for a long time, enough for Abigail to have bathed twice over, and so he didn’t bother knocking before he opened it.

He was wrong not to. Abigail stood in front of him in the process of putting on her dress, fully naked. Hugo froze, his gaze taking in the slopes of her curves, dragging over her breasts, her waist, her hips; her nipples, hardened from the chill in the room; her mound, where he could imagine kissing, stroking and li?—

“Get out!”

Abigail's shriek had him scrabbling for the door, hurrying out of the room and closing it firmly behind him. Suddenly, his trousers felt uncomfortably tight, his manhood giving a valiant twitch despite the hot wave of embarrassment that coursed through him. Perhaps he was cursed, he thought. Perhaps he would always be aroused around Abigail because his traitorous body couldn't understand that he did not, in fact, like her, despite her physical appearance.

If only she were more agreeable.

It wasn't long after, that the door swung open and Abigail came out of the room, still fuming. Her face was a bright shade of red and her pretty mouth was twisted in a snarl as she pushed past him, her shoulder colliding with him just to make a point.

For a moment, Hugo watched her leave, only entering the room once she was out of sight. Once again, he seemed to have managed to offend her greatly, though this time, he could hardly fault her for it.

He should have knocked. He had been a fool not to.

With a weary sigh, he undressed and when a servant brought two more buckets, he added some hot water into the tub, sinking into its warmth. It was like a balm on his sore muscles, heavenly after so many hours on the road, and he instantly relaxed, all thoughts wiped from his mind.

Well, most thoughts, at least.

As he bathed, he looked down at himself, his manhood still straining against his stomach as though it hadn't yet understood the situation. Slowly, he dragged a hand down his chest and stomach, wrapping his fist loosely around himself, the touch more teasing than anything else. He wondered how Abigail would touch him, how it would feel if it was her hand instead of his around him, but then he quickly let go of his length as though it had been burned.

He was stronger than this. He wasn't going to pleasure himself at the thought of the very woman who had just yelled at him for seeing her nude. Besides, it was Abigail—Billie's little sister, who would kill him if she knew what he was doing.

Hugo made quick work of his bath, scrubbing himself clean. The wound on his shoulder was already starting to close, though it was far from healed, and he wondered if he should ask Abigail to put some more paste on it or if he should look through her bag and try to find the jar on his own. Neither option seemed particularly appealing. If he looked through her bag, he was certain she would walk into the room at that very moment, demanding to know why he was rummaging through her things. Asking her also seemed impossible now that she was surely mad at him.

He would have to leave that for later. For now, he simply dressed after drying himself off and then headed down for some dinner, wondering if he should try and sit with her or if she wouldn't want to see him at all.

Before he could make a choice, he came to a halt when his gaze fell on her. She was sitting at one of the tables and a man had slid across from her to speak to her. Though Hugo couldn't see his face, he could see hers: eyebrows pinched together, lips curled back, eyes narrowed like a cornered beast.

Anger bubbled up inside him as he approached, stepping behind Abigail and resting a possessive hand on her shoulder. Perhaps she was still angry with him, but he wasn't going to let that man bother her. If she wanted to yell at him later for it, then she could do so for all Hugo cared.

When the man saw him, his grin slid off his face and he straightened up, looking at Hugo as though he was trying to figure out whether or not he could fight him.

"An' who might ye be?" the man asked.

"I was about to ask you the same thing," said Hugo. "What do you want?"

“What do I want?” The man tried to imitate Hugo’s accent and laughed, the sound filling up the room. He was large, tall and muscular, much like Hugo himself, but he didn’t look like a soldier. A farm hand, perhaps, or someone used to some sort of manual labor, but with no real training. “I’m only tryin’ tae have a pleasant conversation.”

“She doesn’t want to talk to you,” Hugo pointed out, letting the mocking slide. “I could tell all the way from there. Is it not obvious to you?”

“I didnae hear her complain,” the man said with a shrug. “If ye’ll excuse us now, I was here first. Find yer own lassie.”

Hand curling around Abigail’s shoulder, Hugo leaned in to press a soft kiss to her lips. It was barely more than a brush, but for a moment, he could have sworn she reciprocated.

When he pulled back, he grinned at the man. “I believe it is you who must find another. Leave my wife alone.”

At that, the man pursed his lips and stood, leaving without saying another word. It was better this way, Hugo thought. It was better if everyone thought they were together, and he would make sure to ask for one room everywhere else they went, even if it meant that he had to sleep on the floor.

Abigail seemed a little shaken by the ordeal, her breath shaky as he peeled away from her and slid into the seat across from her. Still, he was glad to find her smiling at him, as though she had never been angered by his behavior in the first place.

“Forgive me,” Hugo said before she could speak. “I didn’t mean to enter the room like that before. I thought you would be done with your bath, but I should have knocked. I promise you, I will always knock from now on.”

Though Abigail hesitated for a moment, she eventually nodded, and Hugo was thankful that she at least accepted his apologies. They could at least be civil with each other, if nothing else.

And yet, there was more to it now. He had never thought of Abigail as a woman—she had always been the annoying little sister, the one he reluctantly put up with whenever they were around each other. But now that he had started to get to know her better, he had also begun to understand there was more to her than met the eye. She was kind; she was fierce and loyal; and she was devastatingly beautiful. Hugo couldn't deny that he was attracted to her now. He wanted nothing more than to reach out and touch her, trace the contours of her body and bring her the kind of pleasure she had only imagined. He had already tasted her lips, albeit briefly, but he wanted to taste the rest of her, too. He wanted to kiss every inch of her body, to know what she sounded like, calling out his name in the throes of passion.

A serving wench brought them their dinner and Hugo was suddenly snapped out of his thoughts and brought back to reality. Across from him, Abigail watched him curiously, one of her brows slightly raised in a silent question he couldn't answer.

He knew one thing for certain: it was going to be a long trip.