



Highlander of Silence

Author: *Eloise Madigan*

Category: Historical

Description: "Whoever hurts ye, dies."

Ruthless and cold, Laird Braden terrifies everyone without even a word. Until an English spitfire falls right into his arms

Lady Roselyn would do anything to delay a forced marriage even flee to Scotland to teach The Silent Laird how to speak. But she only has one month. After that, she must return to London and wed the man her father chooses. No matter how the Laird's gaze sets her world on fire

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The door was half open, and Braden could hear voices, low voices, whispering to one another.

“Nay, ye cannae... please,” his mother was saying.

Braden stepped forward, knowing what was about to happen. It was always the same. His heart was beating fast, his brow clammy. He had heard his sister crying in her crib, and was awoken by the cry in the night, the sound of a struggle...

“I can do what I want, lass. Wouldnae he have done the same? But hold yer tongue, or it’ll be worse for ye – and yer bairns,” another voice said.

This, too, was always the same. The unidentified voice, the stranger beyond the door – a man, his face covered by a hood, a cloak wrapped around his shoulders.

“Nae the bairns, please – leave them be. What threat are they to ye?” his mother said, and the stranger raised his hand.

Braden had reached the door now, and through the narrow opening he could see his mother kneeling on the floor of her bedchamber. The stranger had his back to the door, leaning over a body. His father’s body. Braden staggered back, stifling a cry, as his mother noticed him standing by the half-open door.

“Please, he’s only a bairn. Ye daenae need to do this. I’ll send him away. He will nae trouble ye,” Braden’s mother said.

She caught Braden's eye for just a moment, and the look she gave him urged him to flee, flee before the hooded figure turned.

He opened his eyes, his heart beating loudly in his chest, even though the dream was familiar. He sat up, catching his breath.

Tis' only a dream, he thought, even though the dream was one of startling regularity.

It was always the same – the defining moment of his childhood played out, and the identity of his father's killer remaining a mystery.

Braden had witnessed that dreadful scene just as his dream had repeated it. The sight of his father's body lying in a pool of blood had never left him.

Water, I need some water, Braden thought, climbing out of the unfamiliar bed and feeling in the darkness for the jug of water on the bedstand.

At least the inn on the border with England offered that. He had considered not making the journey south, but he couldn't deny his sister anything. He was to meet her former tutor, Roselyn, the daughter of some English Duke, and bring her back to Scotland.

He poured a cup of water from the jug and drank a deep draught before rising from the bed and crossing to the window. The room was small and poky, with low beams, and uneven floorboards.

Dawn was breaking, and Braden pulled back the drapes, revealing the rolling countryside of the lowlands. It was a contrast to the soaring peaks, and deep lochs of his highland home, and the journey south had taken several days on horseback.

I should be on my way. For the first time since he left Scotland, he welcomed the

distraction of having to meet with the Duke and his daughter. He should arrive at their estate by noon, he hoped.

He pulled on his Zeusches and fastened his belt. The landlord had appeared suspicious of him the night before, passing a comment about “northern visitors,” and giving Braden only a meagre supper of bread and cheese. Now, with his few belongings packed, Braden made his way down the rickety staircase to the taproom, where the landlord had just rolled up several barrels from the cellar.

“Leaving so soon, are you? Don’t you want some breakfast? I can have the cook prepare some porridge. We’re close enough to the Scottish border for that,” he said, but Braden shook his head.

He waved his hand dismissively, taking a purse of coins from his pocket and tossing them onto the counter. The landlord nodded.

“Very well, I wish you a safe journey.” he said, but Braden merely waved his hand dismissively again.

Yer inn was filthy, yer supper pitiful, and I doubt yer cook knows one end of a spurtle from another. Porridge? The English cannae make porridge .

He offered the landlord what he considered to be a polite half-smile as he made his way out of the taproom and into the stable yard.

His horse, Zeus, was munching from a pail of oats, and Braden nodded to the stable hand, who patted the horse’s rump.

“A fine beast, all ready and saddled for you, sir. I’ve brushed him down, and he’s been well fed,” the boy said, and Braden nodded.

At least someone knows what to do around here.

Giving the boy a gold coin, Braden mounted Zeus and charged out of the stable yard.

It felt good to have the fresh morning breeze in his face, and the sun was now rising on the horizon, casting its rays across the wide-open moorland beyond.

Braden had never been to England before, and he was not eager to remain there for long. He did his sister a favor. Though, deep down, he was a little curious as to what an English lady would think of someone who...well, someone like him.

“They willnae let you be the Laird for long if something doesnae change. I cannae speak for you all the time,” Kenna had told him on numerous occasions.

“Let me try, at least. Let Roselyn be yer tutor, Braden. She was a dear friend to me, and I know she can help ye,” Kenna had said.

The invitation had thus been issued, and to Braden’s surprise, the Duke’s daughter had written back to say she would be delighted to help Braden in any way she could. Braden had hoped the tutor would refuse – she would be uprooted from everything she knew, and brought far into the north, where life was very different after all. But she had accepted.

Braden looked out across the rolling English countryside, the moorland now giving way to farms dotted amongst pleasant woods and rolling dales.

She’ll nae last a week. She’ll say tis’ too cold, too wet, too lonely.

He came to a crossroads and took the road south, following the instructions his sister had given him.

She had been sent to England by their uncle, who had wanted an education for her. Kenna had returned full of knowledge, and ideas far different to those of her contemporaries.

“I was well taught,” Kenna always said.

Now, where am I going? Abbey Estate.

Braden wondered what kind of welcome he would receive from the Duke and Duchess, whose loyalty to the English crown was well known. But Kenna had found a warm welcome at Abbey Estate, and she had spoken fondly of the Duke and Duchess, as well as of Roselyn, whom she had often described as the sister she had never had.

“I think back to my time in England with such fondness,” she had said, as she had seen Braden off from the castle the previous week.

But as he rode along the valley towards the manor, Braden could not help but feel a sense of foreboding, and he was only too glad to arrive at the gates, dismounting and tethering Zeus to a hitching post.

Tis’ a fine house, he thought, as he gazed up at the timber fa?ade, the red brick, and neat windows, a far cry from the rambling turrets and battlements of his own highland fortress.

The manor was surrounded by gardens, and a pleasant perfume hung in the air, the fragrance of late spring blossom. A gardener was tending to a rose bush, and as Braden approached, he looked up suspiciously. The journey had been long and hard, and Braden assumed he was not looking his best.

“What do you want?” he demanded, and Braden nodded towards the manor as he

kept walking.

“Won’t you speak?” the other man asked following him, but Braden ignored him.

The gardener rolled his eyes, but he kept up with him. He led him up a flight of steps to the main door and knocked loudly. It was opened by a manservant, who looked Braden up and down curiously.

“Yes?” he said.

“Good luck with getting a reply from him, he didn’t answer my question either – he looks like a northerner to me,” the gardener said, and the manservant’s expression now relaxed.

“Ah, yes – you must be the guard that will accompany Lady Roselyn to Scotland. You’d better come this way. You should have something to eat before you start your journey,” the manservant said, and he beckoned Braden to follow.

Braden nodded, following him as the other man led him into the manor. It was a fine dwelling, comfortably furnished, and very different from his castle in Scotland. No draughts blew through the rooms, and there was a light, airy feel to the house.

The pleasant smell of baking hung in the air. Braden was instructed to wait in the hallway, and a moment later, a man, whom Braden could only assume to be the Duke, appeared from a door.

“You’ve come from Scotland – to escort my daughter? Here, come this way,” he said, and Braden nodded.

Braden followed the duke into a large room, where a fire burned in the hearth, already tired of meeting people. Back in Scotland, he didn’t need to talk to anyone.

Not that he would...

“Here. Please take a seat and wait, my daughter will be with us in a minute, and a maid should be here to take care of you soon. I must say, it’s all rather strange, this business of teaching the laird to be a laird. I can’t quite understand it. But as long as I know she’ll be safe,” the Duke said, and again, Braden nodded.

“Well, at least the guard Kenna sent does look very fearsome. I shall trust you with my daughter’s life, young man, you know what that means, right?”

Braden nodded again. He hadn’t thought he’d ever liked a duke, but at least he could respect this one.

The Duke looked at him curiously, narrowing his eyes with a searching look.

“Well, what’s wrong? Why won’t you speak?” he asked, and Braden resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Of course Kenna wouldn’t have mentioned anything about...his condition.

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“D on’t you remember any of it?” Roselyn asked, as Matilda slammed the lid of the harpsichord shut with an angry exclamation.

“No, I don’t. I don’t really care to remember it, Roselyn,” she said, scowling at Roselyn, who sighed.

“Ask Grace to play. She was always better than me— perhaps she can remember it. I’m going outside. It’s far too nice to be stuck indoors all day,” Matilda said, and without waiting for a reply, she left the room, slamming the door behind her.

The three sisters had been sitting in the upstairs parlor of Abbey Estate. It was an expansive room above the dining hall, where a harpsichord stood in the corner, and a merry fire burned in the hearth. It was spring, but the days could still be cold, and when evening drew in, they would be glad of the fire. Grace was sitting in a chair by the hearth, and she looked up at Roselyn and shrugged her shoulders.

“You won’t change her, Roselyn. She never wanted to learn any of it, she’s not going to suddenly show interest now,” Grace said.

“I think I can remember how to play the piece, but I’m not sure,” Grace said, and she rose to her feet and crossed to the harpsichord, opening the lid, and began to play.

The sound was jarring, and Roselyn covered her ears, trying to stifle a laugh, pleading with her sister to stop.

“Well done, Grace. You remember the melody. But you’re hammering the keys. You need to be a little bit softer with it. Here, let me remind you,” she said, and Grace rose to her feet, allowing Roselyn to sit down at the keys.

As her fingers traced their way across the keys, a beautiful, melodic sound filled the room, and Roselyn smiled, looking up at Grace, who giggled at her own attempt compared to her sister’s.

“I hope they’ll have a harpsichord for you to play in Scotland. We’ll miss you playing it here. Even mother can’t play as well as you,” Grace said, as Roselyn concluded her piece.

Roselyn smiled – there was a lot about Scotland she was curious about, and the presence of musical instruments was just of those curiosities.

“The ways of the Scottish clans are very different from our own, Roselyn,” her father had once told her, and the Duke had expressed some misgivings about Kenna’s arrival, even as the laird’s daughter had proved herself a diligent student.

Roselyn had taken in several young women like Kenna – the daughters of aristocrats in need of education. But Kenna had been the only one from north of the border, and Roselyn had always been fascinated to learn more about the highlands, imagining the rugged country of mountains and lochs, a romantic landscape of adventure.

“I won’t be gone forever, Grace. I’ll be back in a few months,” Roselyn said, rising to her feet.

“And do you really think you can help the laird?” Grace asked, as she followed Roselyn out of the room.

Roselyn was unsure. She had accepted the invitation as much to get away from

Abbey Estate as to help her friend. The time spent in Scotland would surely not count as part of her father's ultimatum, and on her return, a new opportunity might present itself, certainly one more palatable than Baron Wesley. Roselyn needed a change, and teaching the laird would certainly be that.

"I don't know, Grace – but I can try. Besides, it's better than waiting here to be told whom I should marry," she replied, and her sister nodded.

"Absolutely, but I hope... well, you don't think father would make me marry Baron Wesley, do you? I know I come across as naive and romantic, but I won't marry just for the sake of it. I want to fall in love, and I want the man I marry to return that love," she said, looking suddenly fearful.

But Roselyn shook her head.

"You've still got some years to go yet, Grace. Don't worry – I doubt father will forget his threat, and I know the baron won't, either," she replied.

They were descending the stairs to the hallway, and their father now emerged from one of the lower rooms, beckoning Roselyn to follow him.

"You've got a visitor, Roselyn. It must be your guard from the north, come to escort you to the highlands," the Duke said, and Grace clapped her hands together in delight.

"Oh, how exciting. You're really going, Roselyn. Can you believe it?" she exclaimed, and Roselyn's eyes widened.

Kenna had written to tell her she would send someone to escort her, but that letter had only arrived a few days earlier. Roselyn had believed herself to have plenty of time to get ready before the guard's arrival.

“Goodness, I hadn’t expected...” she began, and her father raised his eyebrows.

“He’s a strange sort. He doesn’t speak much – if at all. Maybe our accent is too sophisticated for him to understand – or he’s too embarrassed to use his thick Scottish accent here. Perhaps it’s better that way,” Roselyn’s father said, and she followed him from the hallway.

Upon reaching who would be her escort, Roselyn found herself in the company of a tall, muscular, handsome man, who rose to his feet and bowed. His expression was serious and he looked like a warrior, with all the scars she could see on his chest and legs. He was the most fierce man she had ever seen, and his gaze was intense; so intense that she felt weak to the knees.

She had never had trouble meeting a man’s gaze, if anything, she loved challenging them, but she found herself tearing her eyes away from his green ones or else she felt she might burst with...something. Why was that?

The man was dressed in a kilt and open shirt, his shoulders covered with a long red cloak. Roselyn recognized the McGraham tartan – the same as Kenna had worn, and the man now held out his hand to her.

“You must be my guard then,” Roselyn said, placing her hand in his, and the man nodded seriously, not breaking the eye contact with her as his lips touched the back of her hand.

“You see – he doesn’t reply. You’ll find your journey north somewhat difficult, I fear,” said the Duke, but Roselyn barely noticed anything but the tingles the man left wherever his hand – or lips – touched her.

She is bonnie.

And his big hand almost consumed her own. Braden wondered if he was generally too big compared to her, but he quickly shook his head. This was Kenna's friend. She was to be his tutor, for God's sake. And she was a duke's daughter. No, he'd better keep his thoughts at bay. Though, the rosy tint in her cheeks made him eye her suspiciously.

Roselyn gently removed her hand from his and smiled politely, but her eyes didn't meet his again. Interesting .

"I'm afraid we hadn't expected you so soon" she said with another smile, apologetic this time. "I'm sure your journey here must have been very tiring. I will ask a maid to prepare the guests chamber for you. And when you wake up and break your fast in the morning, I shall be ready for our travel."

She turned on her heels to go, Braden assumed, do exactly as she promised, and he took in her feminine figure as she walked away.

This is going to be a long night.

"Goodbye, Roselyn, I'll miss you terribly. You'll write, won't you?" Grace said, as she embraced Roselyn the next morning.

"As often as I can. But it won't be for long, Grace. I'll be away for a few months,

then I'll return. How difficult can it be to teach the laird how to communicate properly?" Roselyn replied.

With the corner of her eye, she caught her guard frowning. His mood had changed tremendously since last night, and he had been brooding while Roselyn had been saying her goodbyes. Would it kill him to smile a little? They were to travel long together!

"Goodbye, Roselyn, my dear. I'll write to you. It's a strange business, but if you're certain you want to go..." Roselyn's mother said, bringing her back to her senses, and she nodded.

"I'm certain, mother. I want to see the highlands, and I'm looking forward to seeing Kenna again, too," Roselyn replied.

Her mother kissed her on the cheeks and clasped her hands in hers.

"Come back to us... ready for what comes next," she said, as the Duke stepped forward.

"Goodbye, Roselyn. Remember what I said. This doesn't change anything – One month, whether in Scotland or not. Do you understand?" he said, and Roselyn smiled.

"And what if I find a man to marry in Scotland?" she asked, and her father raised his eyebrows.

To that, her travel companion smirked. He was capable of having other facial expressions than brooding then.

"You won't," her father replied.

Matilda was standing at the top of the steps, and now she came to bid Roselyn goodbye, embracing her awkwardly and sighing. “I suppose you’ll come back with all sorts of new ideas to impart. You’ll be insufferable,” she said, and Roselyn laughed.

“You always think the worst of me, Matilda. Practice the harpsichord – you’ll have plenty of time to learn something new,” Roselyn replied.

She turned to find her guard watching her. Her escort was a curious man, sometimes looking amused, sometimes staring intensely, sometimes serious and lost in thought. But in all of these cases, he somehow managed to seem completely unfazed. Or maybe it was because he had yet to utter a word that he gave that impression.

Roselyn couldn’t say she was equally unfazed by him though. His hair was dark, extenuated by a neatly clipped beard, and his eyes were striking – a bright, cat-like green. With his height and body, he looked like a predator himself. Roselyn’s heart beat faster at the thought, and she decided she couldn’t deny he was a very handsome man.

One that seemed too contained in their English manor, and too eager to be back at the Highlands.

“Shall we set off?” she asked, and the guard nodded a little too quickly, holding out his hand to help her onto her horse.

Roselyn was not a confident rider. She had spent more time with books than horses, and whilst she could boast many skills, horsemanship was not amongst them. In this, Matilda was her superior, and she knew her sister would be watching with glee to see her fail to mount the steed. She took the guard’s hand, trying to lift herself into the saddle with the stirrup, and failing, much to Matilda’s mirth.

She really wished she could use one of her father's coaches, but Kenna had explained in her last letter that it would slow them down significantly. Also, she wanted to make it on her own. This was her adventure. If she wanted to prove to her father she didn't need to marry some gentleman from the ton to survive, this seemed like a good start.

"You need to pull yourself up, Roselyn. You'll never get on like that," Matilda said.

Roselyn did not look back, but tried again, reaching over the horse's saddle, and hauling herself up with some difficulty. But as she did so, she lost her balance, and instead of righting herself on the horse's back, she fell backwards with a cry. The guard caught her in his strong arms, and she found herself looking up into his handsome face, the flicker of a smile playing across his lips.

"Oh, goodness me," she exclaimed, as he set her down on the ground.

Matilda was in fits of laughter, and even Grace was giggling, though she herself knew nothing of horsemanship.

"Allow the man to help you, Roselyn. Don't be so proud," the Duke said, and Roselyn allowed her escort to help her into the saddle, where she found her balance and sat clinging to the reins.

"I'm quite all right. Let's go," she said, knowing Matilda was still laughing at her.

The others bid them goodbye, and Roselyn and the guard – whose name she did not yet know – set off along the track through the valley, leaving her familiar home behind, as Roselyn struck out on this new adventure. She had never journeyed further north than the border, and apart from the occasional visit to Lincoln to visit her godmother, Roselyn's world had been confined to the valley and its immediate district.

Thank goodness I've brought something to read with me. I fear my silent friend won't be very good company, she thought to herself, but she couldn't help glancing at the guard, and wondering what he was thinking about.

In the end she didn't touch her book. She gave in her curiosity and as they rode, Roselyn tried to make conversation, pointing to places she knew, or interesting flowers or birds.

"I do so love the wildflowers blooming in the meadows – look at all the primroses growing there," she said, pointing to the carpet of yellow flowers growing beneath the trees in the woodland they were now passing through.

The man nodded, though he did not appear particularly interested in admiring the flora and fauna of the valley. His eyes kept darting left and right, as though ever on guard against attack, though there were times when Roselyn felt his gaze linger on her.

Whilst she tried to keep her gaze fixed resolutely ahead, she could not help but wonder if he was as impressed with her as he was with him. Well, not that she was that impressed.

It was just that, all the English gentlemen looked like children compared to him; small and frail, while he was big and rough and mysterious and...oh what was she thinking about? She blamed the dizziness from the travel.

It wasn't like a warrior like him would regard a spoiled English lady like that either. And it would kill her father to know she entertained such thoughts for someone who was not their peer.

He's just your guard, she scolded herself, tearing her eyes off him and hoping her blush was not obvious.

At the end of the valley was a village – the furthest extremity of her father’s estate. The name of the village was Abbeyford, and an ancient church stood at its center, surrounded by cottages, with an inn opposite the church. As they passed through, several of the villagers came to greet them, and Roselyn smiled, nodding, as they rode by.

“God bless you, Lady Roselyn. I’ll never forget your kindness to Eve,” one of the women said.

Roselyn smiled warmly at her. She had taught many of the village youngsters to read and write, and she always felt like she did something important for those girls.

“Is she doing well?” Roselyn asked, as they passed by, and the woman nodded.

“She’s teaching her sister now, my lady – and all thanks to you,” the woman called back, and others said the same.

Roselyn was glad to have helped the villagers, and as they took to the moorland road heading north, she felt certain she could help the laird, too.

“What’s your laird like?” she asked, turning to the guard, who just shook his head and kept his gaze straight ahead.

Did that mean that the laird was cruel? Impolite? That she didn’t really want to know?

“All right...I guess I’ll find out soon enough. Are all the Scottish so...quiet?” she asked, giggling. “If that is a case, I’m sure they won’t like me much. Am I driving you crazy with my questions? I could stop. I guess I’m just...curious.”

The man’s face changed, and looked serious for a moment, before turning to her and

holding her gaze, shaking his head no . Roselyn blushed.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude. But I’m intrigued, that’s all. I want to know more about your way of life,” she said, hoping he hadn’t misunderstood her.

The guard shrugged, waving his hand dismissively. Roselyn sighed – this was going to be a very long journey indeed. At least the man was easy to look at.

They rode on in this way for much of the day, pausing to eat a simple meal of bread and cheese around the noon hour. The guard refused to sit down, standing by the horses, as Roselyn sat by a spring of water. The sun was high in the sky, and she felt warm, taking off her riding cloak and lying back to look up into the sky. She watched the clouds drifting by, her eyes closing as she yawned. A hand shook her awake, and she looked up at the man, who was shaking his head.

“What’s wrong? I was only dozing. It’s warm, and we’ve had a long ride this morning. Where will we stay tonight?” Roselyn asked.

Kenna’s letter had said little about the man, merely telling Roselyn she was sending someone to escort her to the north that was sure to keep her safe. Roselyn had trusted her friend’s words, but she knew the potential danger of such trust, and was curious as to the man’s motivations. The guard pointed along the path, his hand going to his sword hilt.

“Are we in danger?” Roselyn asked, sitting up and glancing around her.

They had met no one since leaving the village that morning. The road north was lonely, and it was known to be the haunt of robbers and highwaymen. But the woodlands appeared peaceful, and the noise of the water gushing in the stream was the only sound she could hear.

“I don’t think there’s any danger,” she said, but the guard was listening intently, and now he hurried to the horses, untethering them, as though he intended for them all to make a hasty escape.

Roselyn scrambled to her feet, picking up her cloak and throwing it around her shoulders. Her heart was beating fast, and she looked at the man in astonishment, even as he beckoned her to mount and ride.

“But what’s the matter? What are you worried about?” she asked.

But no sooner had she spoken the words when another sound filled the air – the sound of a crying child. It was distinct – the shrill cry of someone evidently in distress. Roselyn looked around her in surprise.

“Did you hear that? A child – it’s crying. We’ve got to help,” she said, hurrying to the edge of the trees, even as the guard grabbed her by the arm firmly and gently pulled her back.

She turned to him, her arm tingling at his touch, and he shook his head, pulling her away.

“But we’ve got to help the child,” Roselyn insisted, stopping him.

She was not about to ride away and leave an infant crying in the woods. It was probably lost, and the sooner it was reunited with its parents, the better. She pulled away from him, stepping into the trees and calling out to the child, who continued to cry, even as she could not see it.

“It’s all right, you can come out. No one’s going to hurt you,” Roselyn said, taking a few steps forward into the trees.

The child was nowhere to be seen, and yet its continued cry echoed over the otherwise silent woodland. Roselyn glanced back towards the guard. He was still standing by the horses, glancing from left to right, an anxious expression on his face.

“It’s just a child. We need to find it,” she said, looking around her, and calling out again in the hope of attracting its attention.

It was then she saw it – a child of no more than five years old, dressed in rags, standing between two large oak trees. It was rubbing its eyes, screaming at the top of its voice. Roselyn hurried forward, snatching up the child, even as the guard came running towards her, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

“There, there, my dear, it’s all right. We’ll find your mother, then you’ll be safe. Oh, but what are you doing?” Roselyn exclaimed, as the guard grabbed her by the hand.

She was holding onto the child, but now she let the little one on the ground again before turning to her escort. She was about to berate the guard for his strange behavior, when a sudden cry caused her to startle. Two men – each with drawn swords – had emerged from behind the oak trees. Bandits. They struck out at Roselyn, knocking her to the ground.

“Your money. Now!” one of them cried, as Roselyn rolled onto her back, dazed by the blow the bandit had struck her.

She was about to cry for help, but the guard now leaped forward, his sword clashing with that of the bandit, knocking him to the ground, even as the other attacked him with a roar. Roselyn scrambled to get up, seeing no sign of the child, who had disappeared into the trees. The bandit lying on the ground had drawn a dagger, and he lunged at Roselyn, just as the guard struck out at him with his sword. He fell back, dead, and the other bandit charged at her escort, flinging himself onto his back. Roselyn screamed.

“Help us! Someone, help us!” she cried, but the guard spun around, throwing the other man to the ground, and drawing the dagger from his belt, he stabbed him through the heart.

The bandit’s piercing scream echoed through the trees, and then all was still, the silence of the forest returning, as Roselyn scrambled breathlessly to stand. She stared at the guard in astonishment – he had just fought off two armed bandits, strong men, who now lay dead at her feet. He shrugged and tossed the dagger aside, cleaning his sword on a patch of moss and beckoning for Roselyn to follow him.

“But I... you can’t have... who were they?” she stammered, and the guard shrugged, gesturing for her to hurry.

Roselyn had no desire to remain in the presence of the dead, and glancing down at the motionless bodies, she hurried to where the horses stood by the side of the stream. The guard held out his hand to her, gesturing for her to mount.

“Please, won’t you say something? Can’t you say anything?” she said, but he just shook his head again, looking uninterested.

Roselyn climbed onto the horse’s saddle, glancing fearfully around her, half expecting a dozen more bandits to emerge from the trees. But as they rode on, and she looked at his face pondering the dreadful event, Roselyn could not help but feel a sense of admiration for the handsome man that had rescued her from certain death.

She owed him. And she’d find a way to return the favor. A way that would probably include more time spent with him. Something she wasn’t opposed to in the least...

Braden suppressed a smile. Roselyn kept stealing glances at him, no doubt impressed by what had happened with the bandits. Braden had seen such deceptions before – the crying child, used to lure an unsuspecting traveler to its aid, only for them to be set upon.

The two men lurking in the trees must have been watching them for some time, but they had underestimated Braden's skill with the sword. His youth had been spent practicing swordsmanship and archery in far more dangerous situations than this one, and he was skilled in both – two bandits presented little by way of a challenge.

Well, you don't need words to woo a lass after all. He smirked as they made their way north.

The return journey was longer with Roselyn in his company. Traveling south, Braden had pushed Zeus, urging the horse on, and covering many miles in a day. But Roselyn wasn't a skilled rider, and that slowed down their progress. Not that he minded. Her company was...pleasant, to say the least.

They overnighted at inns along the way, and they talked while they rode – or, rather, Roselyn talked, and Braden listened.

"I would like to help you find your voice, and not just teach the laird the things he needs to know," she had told him, and Braden had pressed his lips into a thin line, shaking his head. There was little chance she could do either.

Speech was in his power, and yet there was something that stopped him from using his words. Something that has stopped him from speaking for many years now...

“Daenae say anythin’ of what ye saw, Braden. No one can know.”

Tis’ a sorry thing, he thought to himself, as they rode onwards across the moorland.

The mountains loomed tall ahead of them, and despite it being spring, their tops were still covered with snow.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Roselyn exclaimed, as they came to the top of a ridge marking the border of the McGraham clan’s territory.

From the ridge, the vista opened up to reveal a loch stretching for many miles along a wooded glen, with mountains rising to great heights, their craggy peaks looming high above. Braden was relieved to be home. He had spent his childhood away from this place, but had always prayed it would be his, and having taken his rightful place as laird, he guarded his inheritance with a sense of pride.

“Are we nearly there?” she asked, and Braden nodded, pointing towards the far end of the loch, where the ancestral home of the McGraham clan stood on a rocky outcrop.

In the sunshine, it did not appear as the grim fortress it seemed in winter. Flags fluttered on the turrets, and the keep rose tall and strong, protruding from the mountain behind, as though forged alongside it in the creation of the world. He smiled to himself at the thought of Roselyn discovering the truth about her escort – would she be angry?

“It’s a remarkable place – look at the water, so clear and blue, and the mountains, standing out so vividly against the sky.”

Braden suppressed a smile, pointing up to the sky, showing her a few dark clouds in the horizon. He beckoned Roselyn to follow, and together they rode down the hill from the ridge, taking a path through the woods leading to the castle.

What does she think of me? Of course, she's grateful I saved her. Perhaps she also feels sympathy for me, her mute guard.

He was looking forward to seeing his sister, even as he wondered what Roselyn's attempts to teach him would be like. She had done what she could on the journey, coaxing him to speak, and trying to teach him to move his lips. But the matter was not as straightforward as that...

He had dreamed the dream the night before. It was not a nightmare, because it was always the same. During it, Braden knew he was dreaming, and yet there was nothing he could do to prevent the events unfolding as they did. Try as he might, the identity of the stranger eluded him, and Braden knew it always would.

I'll never know the truth, he thought, as he turned to Roselyn, who had stopped to admire the view across the loch.

"I wonder how cold the water is. Do people swim there?" she asked.

Braden suppressed another smile – this was the most he had felt like smiling in many years - and with a swift movement, he leaped down from his saddle, pulled off his shirt and breeches and leaped into the water with a splash.

He was wearing only his undergarments, and Roselyn looked at him in astonishment as he waved to her from the water, beckoning her to follow.

A proper English lady would never follow.

The journey north had been a chance for Braden to observe Roselyn. She was a serious young woman and rarely made jokes. There were times when she smiled and almost clapped excitedly when she learned something new, but any humor she might have was hidden behind a veil of formality.

He wondered if her attitude would remain the same during their lessons.

“What are you doing? You’re quite mad,” she exclaimed, as he waded out of the water.

She blushed as Braden stood before her, even as he knew she was looking at the scars covering his body. Braden had suffered many injuries in his youth – fighting with other boys and warding off marauding bandits who would attack the village at night. His torso was covered in scars, and he stepped forward, holding out his arms and arching his back to dry himself in the sunshine.

Come on, lass – come down from the horse, ye’re nae in England now, he beckoned her again to join him.

For a moment he saw a glint in her eye, she seemed uncertain to make the decision. Could a part of her want to join him in the water? Of course, propriety won as she closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head.

“What a spectacle. I’m not coming anywhere near the water,” Roselyn said, shaking her head, even though it sounded like she was trying to convince herself more than him.

When she opened her eyes again, they immediately landed on him, and he could see them following a few droplets down his chest, causing her to blush again.

Braden shrugged, and now he dived beneath the surface of the water, holding his

breath as he swam back towards the bank. There was an overhang there, and he emerged beneath it, keeping out of sight of Roselyn, who now called out to him with alarm in her voice.

“Where are you? Are you all right down there?” she cried.

Braden shook his head mentally. He heard her dismount, her footsteps on the stones, and again she called out to him.

She’ll be wadin’ into the water before long.

Braden took a deep breath, and swam out again, staying below the surface for as long as he could.

With a great splash he emerged, and Roselyn gave a cry. She had taken off her shoes, and was holding up her dress, stepping into the water, as though about to attempt a rescue.

“You devil, where were you? I was worried about you,” she exclaimed, and Braden tried to hide a smirk.

If he had to be honest, a part of him enjoyed Roselyn calling him devil . Maybe their lessons wouldn’t be so boring after all.

He leisurely pointed towards the overhang of the bank, as Roselyn scowled at him and returned to the loch side, the hem of her dress wet.

She’s very bonnie when she’s angry.

Now completely out of the water, Braden pulled on his breeches and wrapped his shirt around his shoulders. The sun was warm on his back, and they continued their

ride along the loch, meeting no one until they came in sight of the castle.

Roselyn was not speaking, and Braden cast the occasional glance towards her, suppressing a smile at the thought of the indignant look on her face as he had emerged from the water.

It felt good to be home, and Braden looked up with pride at the castle over which he was laird. Up close, it was even more impressive, built on a rocky outcrop, with battlements stretching out from the mountain side, and the keep rising high above them.

A small village had grown up around the castle walls, and it was market day, with many of the villagers selling their wares. Several of them bowed as he and Roselyn passed, and she looked at him suspiciously as they approached the castle gates.

“You’re very well liked for a guard,” she said, and Braden shrugged his shoulders, pointing up ahead.

Their presence had been sighted, the gates were opened, and several clansmen hurried to provide an escort.

“Hail our noble laird, and our honored guest,” one of them said, bowing to Braden, who slipped down from his horse and held out his hand to Roselyn.

“You!” she exclaimed, and Braden smirked.

Roselyn was embarrassed, to say the least – she couldn't believe she mistook the laird for her guard. He must have thought her a fool! She averted her gaze to save herself some of the humiliation.

She had assumed the laird was just her escort, all right, but that was not the worst part. She had drooled over the man that would become her student in a few hours. Most indecent!

Damn Kenna and her cryptic letters, couldn't she have just mentioned she sent her brother himself to escort Roselyn to Scotland? But the laird - her whole family thinking he was just a guard!

He should have told her something. Wait – could he? What exactly did Kenna expect her to do here? She stole a glance at the laird from the corner of her eye.

He nodded seriously at his people's welcoming words but said nothing. Interesting. She had to find out what she was expected to do once and for all.

She was about to ask him to have a word in private when another man's voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Braden, my old friend – back from yer long journey, and bringin' with ye a beautiful young woman, I see” one of them said, grinning at Roselyn, who returned his gaze with a glare. Men were the same everywhere in the world, it seemed.

Well, almost all men. If she had to be fair, Braden didn't seem to be the sort of man she avoided. The way he protected her and the way he stole glances at her...

Roselyn shook her head to clear her thoughts.

"Yes – my laird brought me here to work with him" she said, putting some emphasis on his title both to get used to it herself and to show she was displeased with him not trying to correct her along their journey.

Braden stared at her intensely, the right side of his lips lifting ever so slightly for a moment in a lopsided smirk that she might have missed if she had blinked. Was he...amused?

"Our laird always has the best taste," the one who had called Braden his friend said, slapping Braden heartily on the back and still grinning.

Roselyn scoffed at the man's flirty manner. "Is that so? Does that apply to his friends, too?" she challenged him, and the man laughed kind-heartedly.

She turned her gaze to Braden who was looking at her an unreadable expression, but he nodded slightly before he threw a warning look at his friend. Was he...defending her again? The friend must have taken the hint because he acted the perfect gentleman now. "Tis' only a bit of fun, lass – are all the English like this? But forgive me, my behavior was indeed inappropriate. Allow me to properly introduce myself. I'm Calder Kendrew, the laird's man-at-arms. Well, his brother in anything but blood, too, but it's a long story," he said, and Roselyn nodded.

"It is a pleasure to meet you" she said stiffly.

"It's all right, lass. No need to lie, ye'll just have to get used to me," Calder replied, and she resisted the urge to laugh at that. She couldn't imagine how the quiet and

serious laird was friends with someone so open and mischievous like Calder.

She still did not know the full story behind the laird's upbringing, but she was more curious than ever now.

"I'll make no promises, but I will try," she said, teasing the man back, and Calder laughed. From the corner of her eye she saw the laird return to his usual brooding self. Was it something she had said or...?

"Aye, as ye please, miss," he said, and Roselyn fake-glared at him.

"Lady Roselyn," she corrected, and she hid a smile as the others laughed as well.

"Ye're certainly a feisty one – I'm surprised the laird kept ye tame on yer journey north," Calder said.

The others laughed, but the laird looked angry, and he shot his friend a warning look, raising his one finger as if to stop him or silence him, to which Calder nodded.

"What was that about?" Roselyn asked, and Calder smiled.

"He wants us to treat ye with the respect ye deserve. Come now, lads – let's stable these horses. They'll need new shoes after their long journey, I'm sure," he said, and beckoning to the others, he led the horses through the castle gates.

She turned to Braden to thank him, but he looked straight ahead seriously, as if avoiding her gaze. Before she could try to get his attention, a cry of delight came from the castle gates.

Kenna appeared, hurrying towards them. She had not changed in the years since Roselyn had last seen her – the same fiery red hair and rosy cheeks – and she threw

her arms around Braden, before turning to greet Roselyn with a smile.

“They told me ye’d been sighted along the loch road. Oh, how happy I am to see ye both. Welcome, Lady Roselyn – our honored guest,” she said.

Roselyn had missed Kenna. She was one of the few students she could call her friend after the tutoring ended. “It is great to see you, Kenna. I just wish I had taught you how to write clearer letters. Really, I thought the laird was just my guard. How embarrassing!” she exclaimed, and Kenna blushed, while Roselyn turned to Braden.

“I do apologize for that, my laird,” she said but Braden just made a dismissive motion with his hand.

“I’m very sorry, Roselyn. To be fair, Braden was the best guard ye could have while travelling here. I was going to send ye another escort, but Braden thought ye would be safer if ye were to travel with him. Also...he wanted to get to know ye before the lessons began,” she said, glancing at Braden, who nodded.

The laird signed to his sister, and she signed back to him.

“What does he say? And how do you understand?” Roselyn asked, curious about the way the siblings had found to communicate. If the laird really couldn’t speak at all, she would have to learn some of the signs, too.

“He says he was glad to have yer company, and glad to have been able to protect ye. We’ve developed these signs ever since we found each other again– tis’ easy enough to understand once ye learn,” she said.

Roselyn thought back to the naivety of her encounter with the child in the forest. Braden had warned her against it, and if it had not been for his skill with the sword...

“Yes, well, there’s that, I suppose. We were attacked by bandits,” Roselyn said, and Kenna stared at her in horror.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, but Braden waved his hand again as if it was nothing.

“Well, I am glad he insisted to escort ye after all. Ye’ll nae find a finer swordsman in all of Scotland than my brother,” Kenna said.

Roselyn smiled. She had been impressed by the swordsmanship of the laird. He had saved her from a terrible fate, even as she had walked headlong into danger.

Braden had taken it all in his stride, dismissing the matter with bravado, but in the days following the incident, Roselyn had been glad of his company, knowing he would protect her, come what may. Also, the way his body worked was mesmerizing. Not that she would share that with Kenna – or anyone else.

“Well, he is a skilled swordsman,” Roselyn replied, glancing at Braden, and giving him a small smile.

“The road north can be a treacherous one, and many dangers lurk along it. If ye hadnae had Braden with ye, I fear... well, it doesnae matter now, does it? Come into the castle and I’ll show ye to yer chambers,” Kenna continued.

At the mention of her chambers, Roselyn remembered just how tired she was from the travel, and she followed her happily, all the while stealing glances at the big man next to her. What was he thinking? If he could speak, would he tease her like Calder?

No – she doubted that. He seemed much more...noble? And well, he respected her, she could see as much. She found herself wondering what his voice would sound like. She suddenly wanted to hear him calling her name...What was she thinking?!

“It’s a beautiful place,” Roselyn said, as they made their way through the castle gates and into the courtyard, as a way to distract herself.

The keep towered above them, and soldiers kept guard along the walls, where the banners of the clan fluttered in the breeze. There were women and children, too, and all manner of livestock – chickens, pigs, and cattle. A fire was burning by the well, and the smell of roasting meat filled the air.

“Aye, tis’ a remote place, far beyond most jurisdiction. We pay our dues to the court, but tis’ in such disarray – with the king dead, we have little to fear from outside control,” Kenna replied.

She led Roselyn up a flight of steps to the double doors of the keep, ushering her inside, as Braden followed. She glanced at him to find him watching her intently, and blushed.

“We certainly had quite an adventure, didn’t we?” she said, and he nodded, holding her gaze before turning and signing to his sister, who laughed.

“He said he didnae care much for England,” she said, and Roselyn laughed too.

“I can’t blame you, it’s certainly quite different to Scotland,” she replied directly to Braden, who nodded and let out an exasperated sigh as he rolled his eyes. Roselyn was sure that this meant he’d had enough of England to last a lifetime. She smiled to herself as they kept walking.

The corridors of the keep were dark, lit by flaming torches in sconces on the wall. They passed the doors to the great hall, through which Roselyn could see long trestle tables, and a dais, with the laird’s chair behind a high table.

Banners were hung from the walls, and a formidable collection of weaponry was

mounted amongst them. It was a far cry from the gentle, pastoral setting of Abbey Estate, and whilst Roselyn missed her family, she felt glad of this new adventure.

“Ye’ll get used to it. Though nay one ever gets used to the winters. They’re long and cold, with snow lyin’ on the ground for many months. Tis’ a bitter place then, and the nights are long. But in midsummer... well, there’s nowhere I’d rather be,” Kenna said.

“How do you communicate with your brother?” Roselyn asked, for she was keen to learn a means of signing to the laird, even as she fully intended to have him speaking as soon as possible.

“The signs, ye mean?” Kenna asked, as she led Roselyn up a winding flight of stone steps.

Roselyn nodded. They had once had an elderly servant at Abbey Estate – Jenkins was his name. He had been deaf, and the other servants had used a form of sign language to communicate with him. Roselyn, too, had learned the basics, and it had not been difficult to make him understand her.

“Yes, what signs do you use? Does everyone know them?” she asked.

Kenna nodded, and she made a sign with her hand, to which Braden responded.

“I daenae need to sign – he can hear me, but for him to reply, tis’ best to sign. I just asked him to show ye the sign for “good day” – watch how he does it,” Kenna said, and Braden tapped his index finger with the back of his other hand.

Roselyn nodded. She would learn more of the signs in due course. But it was speech she intended to help Braden gain, and now she addressed him directly.

“I’m here to help you speak, then you won’t need to make signs anymore,” she said, and the laird went back to his brooding self, shrugging.

“He hasnae spoken since... well, there’s time for all that. Here are yer chambers,” Kenna said, and she opened a door off the passage at the top of the flight of steps, revealing a large room, furnished simply with a bed and washstand, and with a window looking out over the loch.

The room was nothing like Roselyn’s comfortable bedroom at Abbey Estate, but her bags had been placed there, and a vase of freshly cut flowers had been placed on the washstand to welcome her.

“How lovely,” she said, and Kenna smiled.

“We’ll leave ye to yerself until dinner. Ye’ve had a long journey and ye’ll be tired. I’ll send one of the servants to help ye unpack yer things,” Kenna said, and nodding to Roselyn, she left the room, followed by Braden, who stole a glance at Roselyn as they left.

She sat down on the bed with a sigh, exhausted, her mind filled with images of Braden.

Why does he have to brood so much?

The room was warm, and the earthy scent of the forest wafted through the open window. She lay back on the bed and yawned, closing her eyes, trying to shake away any thoughts for her student, and drifted into a gentle sleep. She was awoken by a tapping at the door, and the tentative call of a young voice.

“My lady? I’ve been sent to help ye unpack yer things. May I come in?” the voice called.

Roselyn rose to her feet and crossed to the door, opening it to reveal a young girl of perhaps sixteen or seventeen, who looked at her nervously.

“Come in, it’s quite all right,” Roselyn said, and the girl looked relieved.

“Thank ye, my lady. My name’s Elena. I’ll be helping ye whilst ye’re here,” she said, entering the room as Roselyn stood back.

“It’s very kind of you,” Roselyn replied, for she had not known what the domestic arrangements at the castle might be.

There were servants, of course, but even just a few hours at the castle had made her realize just how different the life of the Scottish nobility was to her own.

Elena set about unpacking Roselyn’s things, arranging them neatly in a wardrobe in the corner. Roselyn sat back down on the bed, curious to know more about the laird, and the place she would call home for the coming months.

“I heard yer journey was somewhat eventful, my lady. Bandits on the road...Thank God my laird was there with you,” Elena said, concern in her voice.

“Yes – he was very quick to protect me. But what kind of man is he? A good man?” Roselyn asked, and the servant nodded.

“Oh, aye, my lady – the best of men. Ye’ll get used to him. The castle is a far better place with him as laird, than... well, I shouldnae speak ill of my betters,” Elena said, looking suddenly embarrassed.

But Roselyn pressed her. She wanted to know more about the laird, and the circumstances of his childhood.

“It’s all right. You can speak freely. I’m a stranger here, and I know nothing of what’s occurred in the past – save from what Kenna told me when first I knew her,” Roselyn replied.

In truth, Kenna hadn’t told her much. In fact, Roselyn was sure she never mentioned a brother living with her. But then again, they didn’t have much time for chit-chat. The laird’s sister had been her charge, and they had spent far more time practicing Latin than sharing their histories. Bonding over poetry had been the beginning and the theme of their friendship.

“Well, it was my mother who was a servant here when it happened – when the old laird was murdered. Nay one ever knew the truth of what happened. There were rumors, of course, but the truth was never known. The laird – Braden, I mean – was sent away by his mother. That was whispered back then at least. Why would my lady do that, I daenae ken.”

“But it was a big surprise when my laird returned one day with Kenna. At first, they hadn’t recognized each other, can ye believe it? After all these years...They had just saved a puppy together and Kenna invited the kind man for dinner to thank him for the help. His mother knew who he was the moment she laid her eyes on him, of course.” Elena went on.

Roselyn remembered some of this now. Kenna had told her a little of that fateful night – how she awoke the next morning to the news that her father was dead, and her brother had gone missing.

“And the day he ceased to talk?” Roselyn asked.

The servant sighed. “My laird has never spoken since his father’s death, or so I believe. But we’re used to it by now. Ye’re here to make him speak, though, are ye nae?” she asked.

Roselyn nodded. She did not know how she would do so, but she was determined to try. Something was holding back Braden's words, and it seemed certain the trauma of his father's death had something to do with it.

"Thank you for telling me these things, Elena. I suppose I should get ready for dinner, or whatever happens next?" Roselyn replied, and the servant smiled.

"I'll help ye, my lady, daenae worry," she said, and Roselyn felt glad to have learned more about the laird, even though how she would help him speak remained a mystery.

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“ I should have warned her ye would be her escort,” Kenna said, as she and Braden sat in the great hall, waiting for their guest to arrive.

Braden just shrugged.

I liked how she was with me. Would she have been so open had she known I was the laird she’s supposed to tutor?

Kenna shook her head, just as the piper began to play, announcing the beginning of dinner.

“At least she wasn’t mad at me. But she looked mortified! I felt so bad,” she whispered.

Braden couldn’t pay attention to his sister. Roselyn was nowhere to be seen, and he wondered if she really was angry with them and just had a great way of hiding it.

After all, Kenna’s letter had meant she addressed a laird so informally. He assumed she was very embarrassed at that. The English and their propriety!

She’s prim and proper too. It’s hard to see her laugh or joke, but... what if there’s another side to her?

Calder entered the great hall and hurried to take his place at one of the trestle tables.

Braden signed to him, beckoning him to the high table.

“I’m sorry I’m late, my laird – I was shoein’ the horses. Ye rode Zeus hard these past few days,” Calder said, and Braden nodded.

A fine horse, and a fine companion on the road, he said to himself, as Roselyn now appeared in the open doors of the great hall.

Calder was still speaking – something about horse’s hooves and new shoes – but Braden’s gaze was drawn to Roselyn, and he ignored his friend.

She looked stunning, standing in a shaft of sunlight in the doorway, now dressed in a simple linen dress, with a shawl around her shoulders.

Braden could hardly take his eyes off her. She could not be expected to know the traditions of the clan – the piper at dinner summoning the castle to eat – nor the necessity of apologizing for being late.

None of that mattered, and Braden was quite taken aback by the sudden force of his feelings. He was staring at her, entranced by how bonnie she looked. When she caught his eye, an apologetic look coming over her face. Braden beckoned her forward.

“She’s very bonnie,” Calder whispered, echoing Braden’s thoughts, and Kenna glared at him.

“Enough of that, ye two. Make her feel welcome,” she hissed, as Roselyn approached the high table.

“This is yer place,” Calder said, pointing to the chair next to Braden, and Braden nodded, rising to his feet, and pulling the chair back for Roselyn, who sat down and

smiled.

“I got lost coming downstairs. There are so many corridors and passageways. I found myself in a long gallery of portraits, then in the kitchens,” she said, as a servant hurried to pour her a cup of ale.

“Our guest would prefer some wine, please,” Kenna said to a servant, as Roselyn looked uncertainly at the fermenting liquid in her cup.

“No, it’s quite all right – we make cider from the apples in our orchard. I’ll try it,” Roselyn said.

But Braden shook his head.

Aye, the English visitor must be made to feel at home. The poor lass cannae drink that filth – tis’ nothin’ like cider, he thought to himself, and signaled the servant to bring a bottle of wine from the cellar.

Roselyn looked surprised, as though she had not expected there to be wine in such a remote and lonely place. Braden bit back a smile.

She must think we’re barbarians. The lawless Scots, with their chaotic life and unchecked aristocracy. Oh, she’d be surprised of exactly how unruly we can be.

He tried to hold in a smirk as a dusty bottle of wine was hastily brought forth, preventing his thoughts from going further down that lane.

But life at the castle was not the uncivilized chaos an Englishwoman might think it to be. The Scots traded regularly with the French, and Braden had entertained visitors from across Europe at the castle – all of whom were offered wine from his cellar.

“Thank you, that’s very kind of you,” Roselyn said, as the wine was poured, and platters of roasted venison were brought to the tables.

The smell was enticing, and Braden ate hungrily, glad to eat a hearty meal, after life on the road and the journey north. They had stayed in a number of inns, the landlords treating them with suspicion and providing them with meagre fare to dine on.

But at the castle, Braden was laird, and he had ordered an abundance of food to be served that evening. He had just summoned the next set of dishes to be brought, signaling to the servants, who knew precisely what he was communicating, when his mother appeared at the door of the great hall. Braden rose to his feet, glad to see his mother, who had been resting at the time of their return.

“Mother, come and eat,” Kenna said, as their mother made her way between the trestle tables, where the other members of the clan rose out of respect for her.

She was a tall, graceful woman, dressed in black, and wearing a long, flowing veil from her hair. Braden went to greet his mother, kissing her on both cheeks.

She gave a weak smile – she had never truly smiled since that awful night, all those years ago, when Braden had seen the terrible look in her eyes as she implored him to flee.

“Braden, how glad I am to see ye,” she said, and her eyes glistened threateningly. Was she about to cry?

“They arrived this afternoon – Roselyn, too, mother,” Kenna said, as though correcting Braden for not having introduced their visitor.

All in good time, he thought to himself, turning to Roselyn, and holding out his hand.

Roselyn stepped forward, curtsying to Braden's mother, who nodded.

"Tis' a pleasure to have ye here. Kenna spoke so highly of ye in the past, and I hope... well, perhaps ye can help Braden now," she said.

How can she help me? Silence... it becomes familiar. I cannae speak, nae now.

He knew Roselyn's task was an impossible one, even as he did not dare say so to his sister.

"I hope so, my lady," Roselyn replied, glancing at Braden, and smiling.

She was pretty when she smiled. She was pretty when she did not, but in her smile, her face became radiant, and Braden could not help but think her very bonnie. The journey north had given him ample time to study her, and it surprised him to think of her as being unmarried.

She was not even betrothed, but Braden felt certain it would not be long before she was – how could any man resist such beauty? The thought put him in a foul mood. As they had ridden north, his gaze had often lingered on her, and he had even imagined what it would be like to kiss her.

She would probably think me very forward if I were to do so, a barbarian indeed.

"Ye've made a long journey. I hope we've made ye welcome here?" Braden's mother continued, and Roselyn nodded.

"Very welcome, thank you," she replied.

"Yer uncle's still away, Braden. He'll be back within the week, but he sends ye his greetin' – tis' business with northern clans he conducts," she said.

Braden nodded. He appreciated his uncle's help ever since he took over the lairdship. Even though they didn't really know each other very well, he'd always been there with his advice...And Braden was thankful he had raised Kenna the way he did after his father was murdered.

His uncle had also married his mother to protect her from other lairds that would see marrying her as an opportunity to claim their clan.

Braden's mother took her place at the high table, and the feasting continued. There were raised pies, perch and char from the loch, and dishes of vegetables and sweetmeats. Everyone ate their fill, but Braden noticed that Roselyn was more reserved in what she ate, and he signaled to Kenna to offer her something more to eat.

"Oh, it's quite all right, thank you. I've eaten enough," Roselyn replied, smiling at Braden, who nodded.

She's a slip of lass – she needs to eat soemthin' more than a slice of meat and a sweetbread .

Braden had eaten his fill and then more, enjoying the feasting, and seeing his fellow clansmen again.

"Will ye start yer lessons tomorrow, Roselyn?" Kenna asked, and Roselyn nodded, glancing at Braden, who just shrugged. Truly, he felt bad for Roselyn, knowing she'll waste her time at an impossible task.

Also, he had intended to go hunting the next day and had no intention of confining himself to the four walls of the castle. Braden was not the sort of man to stay idly inside. He had no interest in books or learning. How could he have done? His education had been with the sword and bow, and the moors and the mountains had been his study. The same was true of Calder.

“I think so, yes. There’s a lot to do, in a short space of time,” Roselyn replied.

“Ye made me work so hard when I was yer tutee at Abbey Estate. We were up with the lark and awake with the owls. But I’ll always be grateful to ye, Roselyn. Ye taught me so much. It was the makin’ of me,” Kenna said, and Roselyn smiled.

“I’m glad to hear it. Do you remember anything in particular you enjoyed? Perhaps the laird might like to study other things, too – once his speech returns,” Roselyn said, glancing at Braden, who nodded.

Ye’ll be lucky, lass. Ye’ll nae have me learnin’ Latin or playin’ the harpsichord. I could teach ye to fight with the sword, or train ye with the bow, though, he thought to himself, wondering what Roselyn would look like with a bow in hand, or a sword at her side.

The thought of it was amusing, if a bit arousing, to picture proper Roselyn wild at practice. He was thankful his sister was now answering Roselyn’s questions, trying to shake away the thought of how alluring the woman would be shouldering a bow and arrow or raising a sword in the heat of battle.

“I remember readin’ Chaucer and The Canterbury Tales. The characters were so vivid,” she said, and Roselyn smiled.

“Yes, it’s a wonderful set of tales. My favorite’s “The Squire’s Tale.” What a wonderful romance it is,” she said.

Braden did not understand such things. What he knew, he had learned from others, and he was not about to be taught lessons from The Canterbury Tales or the annals of Latin texts. The castle had a small library, but Braden rarely set foot in it, and he had no intention of neglecting his important duties as laird for mere reading.

“Oh, aye, I remember us readin’ it together. It was just wonderful,” Kenna said, smiling at Roselyn, who seemed to lose something of her formality when discussing such things as literature and learning.

He had not yet gained the full measure of Roselyn, it seemed.

“I think I’ll go to bed,” Roselyn said, after finishing a second glass of wine.

Braden rose to his feet, offering his hand to his guest, and when she smiled and took it, a shot of electricity rushed through him.

Damn her.

He needed a distraction. He signed to his sister, and Kenna, too, rose to her feet.

“I’m to show ye to yer room. Tis’ even easier to get lost in the castle when tis’ dark. My brother looks forward to seeing ye again in the mornin’ and beginnin’ yer lessons,” she said, holding out her hand to Roselyn and directing her to the opposite side of the table.

Roselyn removed her hand from him, and he instantly missed her touch. Then, to his surprise, Roselyn waved to say goodbye. He had used that wave several times in her company that day. He felt touched that she had noticed and bothered to repeat it to him. Braden, too, made the sign, watching as Kenna led Roselyn from the great hall.

There’s certainly more to her than meets the eye, he thought to himself, wondering what the coming days and weeks would bring.

“ I hope we didnae make ye feel uncomfortable tonight,” Kenna said, as Roselyn followed her through the maze of corridors and passageways, lit only by the burning flames in the sconces along the walls.

Roselyn shook her head.

“Not at all. I enjoyed the feast. I must say, I wasn’t expecting it. And to be served wine, too,” Roselyn replied.

She had been surprised by the feast, and the food she had been served. Her father had warned her about draughty castles and spartan rations, but conditions in the keep were comfortable, and the feast had been abundant.

“I’m glad to hear it. Tis’ never easy welcomin’ guests from the south. But we’re nae as barbarous as one might think,” she said, laughing, as they came to Roselyn’s chamber door.

“It would appear so” Roselyn teased Kenna, but then added “I’m very tired. I’ll sleep well tonight. Thank you for everything.”

Kenna smiled, her face illuminated by the flickering flame of a torch burning by the door.

“Elena will bring ye whatever ye need. I’m so glad ye’re here, Roselyn, and I’m sorry again for nae conveying my messages better through writing,” she said jokingly.

Roselyn shook her head and laughed as well before bidding her friend goodnight, closing the door behind her.

The moment she was alone, her mind drifted back to the laird again. His eyes, his touch... Once again she wondered what his voice might sound like, but it seemed that the whole clan was used to his lack of speech.

She had caught Braden casting the occasional sideways glance at her - just as she had seen him do on their journey north. She smiled at the thought, knowing a new woman would be a rarity in such parts.

They're probably all looking at me, she thought to herself, though she found herself wishing Braden's glances meant something more than mere curiosity.

Stop it, Roselyn! You're to teach him things, not...not deflower him!

She blushed and snickered at her own thoughts. Never would a woman be heard of "deflowering" a man. Let alone a man like that. All the girls must have thrown themselves at him, so tall and dark and brooding. Even if she did try to seduce him – which she would most certainly not – it would not be "deflowering," all right.

She suddenly felt a pang of jealousy for any other woman that might have touched the laird before and shook her head. She was treading into dangerous waters, and she should be careful. In fact, as of now she forbid herself of thinking about the laird at all.

She undressed, with very focused movements, and she slipped into her nightgown. Climbing into the bed, Roselyn could hear an owl hooting in the trees beyond the castle walls, and she lay beneath the blankets, listening to the sound of distant voices in the courtyard below – the guards calling to one another at the change of the night watch.

How strange to be here – miles from home and thinking about seducing the – NO! I will not do anything of the sort with the laird. She scolded herself again.

Roselyn yawned, turning over, and closed her eyes. The bed was comfortable, and warm and suddenly the tiredness of the day became very evident to her.

It was not long before she was asleep, her dreams filled with soaring mountains and deep lochs, the romance of the highlands enveloping her in a comforting embrace. Braden was there too, and some sort of deflowering was taking place, but she'd never admit that, even to herself.

Suddenly, the dream was interrupted, and she awoke with a start, sitting up, as a sound in the corridor caused her to let out a cry of surprise. A dog was barking – loud barking, and pawing and scratching at the door.

“Who’s there? What’s going on?” she exclaimed, for the chamber was filled with sunlight.

She had slept all night, and morning was breaking across the loch. No reply came from outside, but the barking continued, and the dog leaped against the door with an excitable yelp.

Roselyn rose from her bed, hurrying to the door as she pulled her shawl around her shoulders. The dog barked even louder, evidently smelling her presence, and Roselyn had no choice but to open the door, finding herself face to face with a large, fluffy dog.

The creature leaped up at her, slobbering over her and licking her face. It’s beautiful golden coat was all muddy and it was impossible to stop him clambering all over her.

“Oh, get off me, you great brute,” she exclaimed, though she could not help but laugh

as the dog barked again, its tail wagging, as she allowed it to run into the chamber.

It leaped straight onto the bed, and Roselyn was horrified to see muddy paw prints all over the blankets, even as she hurried to pull the dog away.

“I don’t know where you’ve come from, but you can’t do that,” she exclaimed, even as the dog leaped down from the bed and ran straight to the window, putting its paws on the sill and barking at a bird hovering outside.

Roselyn laughed again, and was about to go in search of Elena, when a familiar figure appeared in the doorway. It was the laird, and he clapped his hands twice, which made the dog come running to him. It sat obediently at his feet, looking up lovingly at Braden, who smiled for the first time Roselyn had met him and patted the dog on the head.

Roselyn would have eyed him suspiciously, asking perhaps why he hadn’t done that sooner, but she was still be flushed from her indecent dreams. She focused her gaze on the dog instead and tried to make some small talk. Anything to get that bloody dream off her mind.

“Is he yours?” she asked, and the laird nodded.

He kneeled and patted the creature’s head, ruffling its ears and making a fuss of it. Roselyn suspected he had let it loose with the deliberate intention of waking her up. She wanted to be cross with him, but she loved dogs, and the sight of this one brought back happy memories of home.

Roselyn and her two sisters had always had dogs, and she was only too pleased to have the company of Braden’s now. She kneeled, ruffling the dog’s mane, and the laird smiled again. Two times in a day. If he continued like this, it was obvious what her dreams would be about tonight. She shook her head and blushed once more. What

had gotten into her?

“What a beautiful creature,” she said, as a way to distract herself, even as the dog turned and licked her face.

The laird laughed, rising to his feet, and gesturing for Roselyn to follow him.

“What? Now?” she asked, and he nodded, making as if to walk away, and beckoning her to follow.

Roselyn was not dressed, and she held up her hand, wanting him to wait, as she closed the door and hurriedly changed out of her nightgown and into a dress. The laird was waiting for her as she emerged, and she blushed under his gaze.

His eyes are always searching, she thought to herself, following him along the corridor, the dog ambling at Braden’s side.

It was later than she had imagined, and the castle was busy with servants and clansmen, hurrying back and forth, nodding, or bowing to the laird as they passed. He was certainly well respected, and Roselyn could not help but admire the manner in which he ruled over his clan.

“There ye are, Braden. I was wonderin’ where ye’d got to after breakfast. I see ye’ve met Apollo, Roselyn,” Kenna said, emerging from the great hall and ruffling the dog’s ears.

Roselyn had been wondering about the creature’s name, and she smiled at Kenna, who now looked suspiciously at her brother.

“I think we’re taking him for a walk,” Roselyn said, and Kenna nodded.

“Aye, but be careful what ye agree to – a walk with my brother isnae a gentle stroll by the loch. Daenae take poor Roselyn on one of yer treks up the mountain, Braden. Remember, she’s nae one of us,” Kenna said, but the laird merely shrugged.

“I’ll happily walk – I like to walk,” Roselyn said, for she often walked long distances with her sisters in the valleys around their father’s home.

Sometimes, they would go off for a whole day at a time, exploring the ruins of the abbey, or getting lost in the woods and fields.

“Aye, well, daenae allow him to lead ye too far,” Kenna said, as Braden rolled his eyes at his sister and took off.

Roselyn followed him out of the keep and into the bright morning sunshine. It was a beautiful day, and she felt pleased to be out in the fresh air. Apollo was tugging at the rope around his neck, and Braden hurried off across the courtyard. The castle gates opened for him, and the guards saluted as they passed.

“I’d like to walk by the loch,” Roselyn said, but Braden had already taken a path leading up a slope through the woods, and Roselyn followed, remembering Kenna’s words, and wondering just how far he intended to take her.

They walked on for some time, following the course of the path as it rose steeply through the trees. The laird would occasionally glance back, beckoning her to follow him. He had untied Apollo from his lead, and the dog ran ahead, evidently knowing where he was going. Roselyn was out of breath – the mountain path was far steeper than the gentle slopes of the valleys around Abbey Estate.

“Can we stop for a moment,” Roselyn said, pausing to catch her breath, but the laird merely beckoned her to follow him once more, raising his index finger, as though to suggest their destination was only a short distance further.

Roselyn followed, gasping for breath, before the path suddenly emerged from the tree line, opening out onto a rocky crag, from which there was a sweeping vista of the glen. The sight was breathtaking, even if Roselyn was now breathless, and she smiled at Braden, who now took a seat on a rock, gazing out at the view. Roselyn sat down next to him, and Apollo came to sit at their feet. To her surprise, the laird pulled a small flask from his pocket, pulling out the stopper and offering it to her.

“What’s this? It’s not... oh,” she said, as the aroma of the whisky struck her.

She thought she saw him bite back a smile, but he soon took a sip himself and offered it to her again. Roselyn did not wish to appear churlish, though she was far more used to drinking wine than whisky. She took the flask and sniffed at the spirits within, which made her eyes water. She took a sip, and the liquid hit the back of her throat, a burning sensation which caused her to splutter.

“Goodness me, how awful,” she exclaimed, and the laird gave her a rare, amused smile, shaking his head.

He replaced the stopper on the flask and put it back in his pocket. Roselyn was still grimacing from the taste of what she had drunk, but she took a deep breath, not wishing him to think her entirely incapable of enjoying his pursuits.

“It’s a wonderful view. Everything we see is yours, I suppose. I’m glad you brought me up here. It was quite a climb, but worth it,” she said, stroking Apollo’s soft fur.

The laird made a gesture towards the loch, and then to the distant mountains beyond, sweeping his arm in an arc, as though to suggest the extent of his authority.

Roselyn now took the chance to begin their first lesson. She had been thinking about how to do so, and now she turned to him, holding up her hand and mouthing the words she wanted him to repeat.

“Say ‘It’s all mine.’ Now you repeat it,” she said, waiting for him to respond.

It was not the words themselves she needed to teach him. Braden understood what she was saying, but he could not articulate the words. His speech had been impaired, and Roselyn felt certain it was because of something in the past – the trauma of his father’s death. The laird shook his head at Roselyn, who repeated the words.

“Form them with your mouth: ‘it’s all mine’, like that,” she said, and she made an exaggerated attempt to demonstrate what she meant.

The laird looked at her with a mischievous glint in his eye, and Roselyn felt the blush rising in her cheeks – what was he thinking? She did not know if he understood or was merely reluctant to do as she suggested. Again, she formed the words, trying something different, as Apollo rolled onto his back in the sunshine.

“Try to say, ‘the sun’s shining,’ ‘the sun is shining’ like this,” she said, mouthing the words.

This time, Braden opened his mouth, but no sound emerged and instead, he merely shook his head and sighed. Roselyn had patience, and she knew it would take time to teach him properly. This was only the beginning, and if the matter had been so simple, she would have had no reason to be there.

“It’s all right. We’ll keep trying. Perhaps a word at a time. Can you say ‘castle?’” she said, exaggerating the word with her mouth as she spoke.

But Braden shook his head, unable to form the word, even as Roselyn smiled.

“Never mind. Let’s leave it for now. I’m quite happy enjoying the view,” she said, gazing out across the loch.

A gentle breeze was blowing, and the sun reflected on the crystal waters below. Roselyn was glad to be there, and despite the challenges ahead, she knew she felt certain the laird could be made to speak – all that was needed was time and patience, both of which she possessed in abundance.

I never thought I'd enjoy his company so much.

There was a side to him that appreciated beauty, and as they sat together in silence, with the wind blowing through the heather, and the sparkling waters of the loch below, Roselyn was glad to be in Braden's company, and eager to know more about him.

Braden was surprised to find himself enjoying the morning with Roselyn. He had been glad to see her affection for the dog, who had been his companion for quite a few years – he had been the reason he had come back, actually. Apollo was a good and faithful friend, and to see Roselyn fondling his ears and smiling at him brought Braden pleasure.

He had feared the Duke's daughter would be too cautious to appreciate the affections of a dog, but it seemed Apollo had brought out her lighter side, and as they sat on the rocky outcrop, looking out across the glen, Braden could not help but feel pleased to be in Roselyn's company.

What a beautiful smile she has, and the way she sits - so composed, as if for a portrait. Though if she thinks she can make me speak, she'll be surprised.

Roselyn was merely doing what others had tried, and failed, to do before. In the village, his adopted parents had tried to coax speech from him, and the local priest had sat for many hours, forming words, and trying to get Braden to repeat them.

"Ye can do it, Braden, just say the words," he would say, but despite his gentle patience, Braden had kept his promise.

He could not speak. No, more than that, he would not speak, and no amount of coaxing, cajoling, or threatening, would make him do so.

"I'm sure we can find a way to practice the words – the basics, at first. Just one word,

then another, then another. Oh look, what's that over there?" Roselyn asked excitedly, as they sat gazing out at the view before them.

Tis' only yer lips I see, he thought to himself, for as she had formed the exaggerated shape of the words, the only thing on his mind was what it would feel like to kiss her.

But his thoughts were distracted by Apollo, who was chasing a butterfly and barking. Braden liked to bring Apollo up here. From this vantage point, he could see across the full extent of his lands.

His jurisdiction extended from one end of the loch to the other, and beyond the high mountain pass to the moorland, stretching almost to the sea in the west. But it was here, at the top of the long, winding path he liked to sit, and it was rare for him to bring company.

Roselyn was different though, and he had wanted to show her a sight he knew she would find impressive.

One word – I'll never utter another word, lass, he thought to himself, shaking his head.

The thought of speaking no longer came naturally to him. He could not imagine uttering a single word, let alone holding a conversation. He could communicate perfectly well without the necessity of words, and he had Kenna and Calder to speak for him when something more nuanced was required in speech. They understood him, and, in time, he felt certain Roselyn would, too.

"But I want you to teach me the signs you use with Kenna. I want to talk to you as they do," Roselyn said.

Braden nodded.

I'd like that. I'd like to speak to you, he wanted to say, and he pointed at the dog, making the sign he used to refer to Apollo.

Roselyn repeated it, and Braden nodded. She was a fast learner, and it did not take long before he had taught her the signs for everything they could see around them – the trees, the mountains, the path leading back down the hill.

“And what about the sun?” Roselyn asked, pointing up into the sky.

Braden made a circle with his fingers, and extended his hands to indicate the brightness, and covered it to indicate clouds. Roselyn nodded, and now she signed all the things she had learned, beginning with Apollo. It pleased Braden to think he had taught her something, even as he knew she would not be able to teach him in return.

Tis' far harder to learn to speak than to make signs. Especially when ye daenae want to.

Roselyn was kind, and his sister's intentions were honorable, but Braden had no desire to speak, and no intention of making himself do so. After they had named all the things around them, and Roselyn had repeated the signs several times, they made their way slowly down the mountainside, following the course of the path, with Apollo leading the way.

As they continued down the mountainside, they came to a place where a stream ran across the path. It was dry now, but there were days when it was impassable, and the water gushed so heavily as to cover the rocks.

Should I show her the waterfall?

There was a waterfall around a curve in the stream, where the water flowed over a cave opening back into the rock. It was a place where Braden often went, hidden

away, and the only place he ever allowed his voice to be heard. There, behind the gushing flow of water, he would speak, his words echoing all around him. Only Kenna knew of the cave – though she knew nothing of what Braden did there – and now he beckoned Roselyn to follow him, still allowing Apollo to lead the way.

“Where are we going?” she asked, as they clambered along the edge of the stream.

Braden turned to her and smiled, pointing ahead, and making the sign for rain, which he hoped was obvious for her to understand.

“There’s no rain,” she replied, furrowing her brow, but Braden shook his head, and now the waterfall came into view, gushing over the rocks, as Roselyn let out an exclamation of delight.

“Oh, it’s beautiful, Braden,” she said, hurrying forward and standing on a large rock, where the spray created rainbows in the sunlight streaming through the canopy above.

Bathed in this spectrum of light, she looked truly beautiful, and Braden watched as she twirled with her arms open, enjoying the coolness of the spray.

She’s certainly a bonnie creature. I wonder... should I show her the cave? he asked himself, but decided not to.

The cave behind the waterfall was the only place he allowed himself to speak. There was a ritual to it, and it was the only place he could truly express the thought and words in his heart. He had found it quite by chance, and the first time he had spoken into the cave had been a remarkable revelation.

“I’m nae afraid of ye,” he had said, voicing the words he would speak in his dream, if only the stranger’s face was revealed.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Roselyn said, and now she slipped off her shoes and sat down on the rock to bathe her feet in the crystal-clear water.

Braden sat next to her, and he, too, pulled off his boots and put his feet into the water.

“I hope you’re not going to throw yourself in again like you did yesterday,” she said, and Braden smirked, cocking an eyebrow, challenging her.

Why? Would ye like to see me without my shirt and breeches again, lass?

Braden could have sworn Roselyn could read his mind, because she blushed and looked away from him.

But Braden was content to sit next to her on the rock, watching as Apollo leaped into the water. As he emerged, he shook himself off, causing Roselyn to let out a cry.

“Oh, Apollo, really, did you have to do that? I’m all wet,” she exclaimed.

Her dress was soaked, and Braden could see the outline of her figure beneath the material. She had a slender figure and small, petite breasts. His eyes lingered as he imagined what it would be like to hold her in his arms.

Daenae think such thoughts. What would she say if she knew ye were thinkin’ that? he scolded himself, even as part of him enjoyed the prospect.

He had been surprised not to find Roselyn married or betrothed, and he wondered if she, too, was surprised at his lack of attachment. Braden found it hard to talk to women. Signs were useful, but for the cultivation of romance, something more was needed.

His position as laird had meant the occasional tryst was forthcoming, and there were

women amongst the clan who did not require words to show their affection. But as for making a true romantic connection, Braden often found himself at a loss. It was not that he did not wish to be betrothed, to marry and have children. As laird, he knew his duties well enough. But the matter of finding the right woman had so far eluded him.

“I’ll have to use my shawl to dry myself with. Where can I go?” Roselyn asked, and Braden pointed to his eyes across the water, promising not to look if she was to remove her dress in his presence.

She nodded, and Braden turned away, listening to the rustle of her dress. But as he turned – and he assured himself it had not been by design – he realized he could see Roselyn’s reflection in the water. She was taking off her dress to wring it out, and in the stillness of the pool by which they were sitting, he could see her outline perfectly revealed.

His eyes grew wide, and he could not help but stare. She was, as he had imagined her to be – slender. Her back was turned to him, and he could only admire how her figure became a little wider around the hips. She used her shawl to dry herself off, stretching out her arms in the sunshine, as Braden forced himself to stop watching.

She’s a bonnie creature, make nay mistake, he told himself, aroused by the sight of her naked form.

“I’ll have to put the dress back on wet. It won’t dry properly, but it’s not far back to the castle, is it?” Roselyn said.

Braden shook his head, not daring to turn to her, even as his eyes remained fixed on her reflection in the water. She was beautiful, and he imagined what it would be like to take her in his arms, to hold her, to kiss her.

“You can turn around now,” she said, and Braden turned, cursing himself for blushing lightly at the thought of what he had seen.

What fortune brought me such a sight, he said to himself, even as he would never purposefully have spied on her.

“Are you all right? You’re quite flushed,” Roselyn said, as Apollo bounded past her and leaped back into the pool, shattering the mirror stillness of the reflection.

Braden nodded, and Roselyn took several steps back, shouting at Apollo not to splash her again. Braden clapped his hands together, and Apollo swam to the edge, clambered out, and promptly jumped up at Braden, who was immediately soaked to the skin. Roselyn laughed.

“It’s your turn now,” she said, and Braden smirked.

His tunic shirt was soaked through, and he pulled it off, not caring if she saw the scars on his body. To his satisfaction, Roselyn blushed, and her eyes still on his torso as they walked towards the path.

Aye, I’ll let ye look, he thought as they left the waterfall behind and made their way through the trees.

The sun was at its midpoint, and Braden was hungry as they reached the castle. The guards at the gate saluted as they passed, and as they entered the courtyard, Kenna came hurrying to meet them.

“He didnae make ye walk all this time, did he?” she exclaimed, glowering at Braden, who shrugged.

“No, no, not at all. We had a delightful time – we walked up onto the ridge, and then

your brother showed me a waterfall. We even had time for a short lesson, too,” Roselyn said.

Kenna looked at Braden in surprise, and he shrugged again, signing to her as she spoke.

“You are a fortunate favorite – he shows nay one his waterfall. But... ah, he’s sayin’ an honored guest should be shown the very best places,” Kenna said, and Braden nodded.

He had enjoyed the company of Roselyn that morning – more so than he had expected. Braden had seen a different side to his guest.

“Well, I’m very grateful to you. And to you, Apollo – though you got me rather wet,” Roselyn said, patting the dog’s head.

If only I could make her wet too, Braden said to himself, trying to hide his arousal at the thought of Roselyn’s reflection in the pool. Apollo barked. He was hungry, too, and thankfully enough to distract Braden, who called him to follow them into the keep.

Aye, a very pleasant day, he thought to himself, the lingering memory of Roselyn’s reflection imprinted on his mind.

Roselyn had enjoyed her walk with Braden up the mountainside. The view across the glen had been like nothing she had ever seen before, and the waterfall was a magical, otherworldly place – despite Apollo’s best attempts to spoil it. That evening, only Kenna and Roselyn ate together, as the laird was out hunting with Calder.

“Does he ever remain inside?” Roselyn asked.

“Aye, but when the snow comes, and the mountain passes become impassable, he’s confined to the castle. So in the summer, he spends as much time as possible outside. I dinnae want to invite ye here in the winter though– ye’d have nae lasted a week,” Kenna said, pushing aside her empty plate.

Roselyn smiled. She was used to harsh winters. The border country received its share of snow, and there were times when Abbey Estate was all but cut off from the outside world. But she understood how a man like Braden wouldn’t enjoy having to stay in one place.

“When will he and Calder return?” she asked, but Kenna shrugged.

“When their bellies rumble, I suppose. They’ll follow the stag across the moorland for miles,” Kenna replied.

Roselyn had seen a stag in the distance that afternoon on the mountain above. She had climbed to the top of the keep, looking out across the glen, and up to the towering heights above. It had been a magnificent sight – the monarch of all it surveyed.

“And will they catch it?” Roselyn asked.

The laird’s sister laughed. “They’ll try, but... well, tis’ nae as easy as they might like to think,” she said, and Roselyn laughed.

She had enjoyed her walk with Braden, but the thought of stalking a deer for miles made her sad. Such a majestic creature hunted for sport...Perhaps she could talk to Braden about it the next day.

She was hoping to begin her lessons with Braden properly the next morning. He had not managed to utter any words so far, but Roselyn had learned several dozen signs, allowing the laird to communicate with her at the most basic level.

I’m sure we can make progress, she said to herself, as she wished Kenna goodnight and made her way upstairs to bed.

A lot had happened since her rude awakening that morning, and Roselyn smiled at the thought of Apollo shaking himself off after emerging from the pool by the waterfall. She had been soaked to the skin, and her still damp dress hung drying by the window. Elena had offered to wash it, but Roselyn had instructed her to just hang it up to dry.

“It got perfectly well cleaned,” she said, and Elena had laughed.

Roselyn pulled back the drapes across the window. Dusk was falling, and she lit a candle to place by her bedside, taking out several of the volumes she had brought with her to read. Lying in bed, she flicked aimlessly through the books, her mind wandering as she thought back to the events of the day. She wondered if she had been naïve in her assumption as to how easy it would be to teach Braden to speak. He seemed unable to form the words, and no amount of repeating them seemed to help.

We'll need to do something different – a different approach, she said to herself, wondering if reading the words would help, rather than repeating what she herself had said.

An owl hooted outside her window, and Roselyn wondered if Braden and Calder had returned from their hunting adventure. She pictured Braden striding through the forest with Calder at his side. She had not known what to expect from the laird, but she had now seen him as he truly was. Even without his speech, he commanded respect, and there was a strong and noble air about him. She was yet to see any vulnerability, but the knowledge she had gained about his past suggested he was haunted by memories of his father's death, and she remained certain this was the reason he no longer spoke.

And until he comes to terms with what happened, perhaps he never will, she thought to herself, realizing it might not simply be a case of teaching Braden to speak, but of helping him realize he could.

Yawning, she put down her book and snuffed out her candle. A thin shaft of moonlight shone through a gap in the drapes, and Roselyn lay awake for a while, pondering the matter of the laird's speechlessness. She felt certain she had come to the correct realization, and now she found herself wide awake, mulling over what she knew, and what was still to be discovered.

I wonder if he'll tell me – if anyone will tell me. His mother must know who killed his father? Or does she? Why does she keep it secret? And what does Kenna know, I wonder? Dare I ask Braden? Roselyn thought to herself, and now she got out of bed and wrapped her shawl around her shoulders.

Her mind was racing with possibilities, and she decided to make her way downstairs in search of Elena, keen to learn more about what the girl knew of Braden's past. If she was careful in the way she broached the subject, perhaps the laird would be willing to speak – if only he would trust her with his secrets.

Yes, I'll ask Elena. She's already told me a great deal, but I'm certain she knows more, Roselyn said to herself, but in the kitchens, where the other servants seemed astonished by Roselyn's appearance, she was told Elena had already gone to bed.

"She rises early to do the fire, my lady," one of the other servants said, and Roselyn thanked them, feeling somewhat foolish for making such an unusual request.

But when Roselyn had an idea, she found it hard to let it go, and now she made her way out into the castle gardens, wanting to walk in the moonlight and think through what now seemed so obvious. It was in the laird's childhood where the origins of his lack of speech lay, and if the mystery surrounding it could be unlocked, so could his tongue be loosened.

And then he'll have peace, Roselyn told herself – it all seemed so simple.

The castle gardens were formed from an ancient courtyard – the original part of the castle, with walls towering on three sides, and the side of the mountain forming an unscalable height on the fourth. All manner of plants grew there, including fruit and vegetables for the kitchens, and plants and flowers, many of which were now in bloom. The moon cast its silvery light on the granite walls, and Roselyn followed the course of the paths marked out between the beds. She was lost in thought and was surprised when she heard a voice in front of her.

"Who is there?" the person said, and a startled, Roselyn looked up to find Calder grinning at her.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was just..." she stammered, but the laird's friend laughed.

"Tis' all right, lass – ye can do as ye please. If ye wish to wander through the gardens at night, tis' yer choice," he said, glancing over his shoulder.

Roselyn now noticed the laird himself sitting by the far wall on a seat cut into the rock. He looked up at Roselyn and nodded as if to greet her, as Calder walked away, humming to himself with a smile on his face.

Roselyn felt embarrassed. She had not meant to be caught wandering in the castle gardens, even as she had every right to do so. But it was late, and she felt certain the laird would think it odd to find her here – just as she found it odd to find him there, too.

“I just came outside to take some air. I couldn’t sleep,” she said, by way of an excuse, and Braden beckoned her to sit with him.

She did so, smiling nervously at him as she sat down. He pointed over the castle walls, made a sign suggestive of hunting.

“Kenna told me you’d been hunting. Did you catch a stag?” she asked, and Braden shook his head.

He shrugged, not looking disappointed, and grinned at her.

“It must be quite remarkable to follow such a creature for so long – to see its movements and its kin,” she said, and Braden nodded.

Her own father liked to hunt, but he did so with hounds, following foxes or rabbits. This was something different, and whilst Roselyn had no interest in her fathers’ pursuits – she found them somewhat distasteful – she found the thought of watching the stag quite fascinating. Killing it was another story, but she couldn’t bring herself to say so to the laird just now.

The laird nodded again, and made a movement with his hands as if he had almost caught the creature. Roselyn smiled. He had a way of communicating through his

movements –Roselyn knew she needed to learn more. Kenna knew how to interpret Braden’s movements, but Roselyn found it hard, even as she was determined to learn more.

“I wish I could understand more of what you were trying to tell me,” she said, as the laird looked at her.

He smiled and shrugged, rolling his eyes, and sitting back with a sigh.

“I don’t like to second-guess you. I want to help you speak. I was thinking...” she began, but her words trailed off.

It seemed like an imposition to speak of his childhood. She did not know how he would react to her assumptions. Braden looked at Roselyn, cocking his head to one side, waiting for her to say more.

“Well... I was just... I’ve been thinking about why you can’t talk, and I wondered if it was something to do with your past. It can happen, I suppose – the thought of something from the past, keeping you silent,” she said.

Braden gave no sign of agreement, but he looked suddenly sad, as though her words had brought back a memory he would rather forget. Roselyn felt suddenly guilty. She had a habit of voicing her thoughts, even when they were not welcome – her sisters always said as much.

“I don’t need your opinion, Roselyn,” Grace would say, whenever Roselyn ventured to offer her advice.

“I’m sorry if I’ve said the wrong thing. It was just a thought – nothing more. I wasn’t... prying,” she said, and Braden shook his head.

He looked up at her and forced a small smile to his lips, as if to reassure her. Roselyn felt an instinctive need to comfort him. There was something so forlorn in his expression, as though he was carrying a terrible burden – a burden preventing him from speaking of everything that tormented him. Roselyn could only imagine what terrible trauma prevented his speech, and now she reached out to take his hand in hers.

“I realize it’s not going to be easy. Perhaps I was naïve in thinking it would be. When Kenna spoke of you before, I thought it was just a matter of teaching you. But it’s not, I realize that now. There’s something holding you back. But it doesn’t have to. Our past doesn’t define us – it shouldn’t, at least. You don’t need to learn to speak, but you need to want to,” she said, and Braden nodded.

This was his vulnerability. The mighty laird, strong and noble, his body scarred with the marks of a hundred battles, and yet there was an innocence about him, as though he was forever trapped by memories of the past.

Roselyn smiled at him, and Braden shook his head, pointing up into the sky, where the moon hung like a disc of wax over the mountain tops, and the stars made for a canopy of twinkling lights. There was a sweet scent in the garden, a perfume, heady and intoxicating, and the air was still warm from the heat of the day.

“I won’t pry, I promise. I just want to help. That’s all,” Roselyn said, still with her hand clasped in his.

He smiled at her, and to her surprise, he raised her hand to his lips, kissing it gently, as a shiver ran through her. She had not expected such an act, even as she found herself smiling at him in return, their eyes meeting in a gaze of understanding.

“Do you... I don’t know, I’m sorry. I wish I could understand,” Roselyn said, but Braden now leaned forward, slipping his arm around her waist, and drawing her into

his embrace.

Their lips met in a kiss, and Roselyn gasped, caught up in the intensity of his passion. As their lips parted, it was as though Braden had said everything he had wanted to say, and Roselyn's eyes were wide, as she stared at him in astonishment. It was entirely unexpected, and Braden had given no indication of his feelings for her, even as Roselyn realized her own were confused.

She barely knew him, and yet there was something between them – the shared experience of the journey, the beginning of communication, their walk on the mountain and to the waterfall. Had Braden been able to speak, perhaps Roselyn would have realized why he did this... But she wasn't entirely sure she would have known why she was letting it happen.

As his arm tightened around her waist, and his other hand came behind her neck, keeping her in place as he deepened the kiss, Roselyn could think no more. For the first time in her life, she let herself feel, rather than think, and brought her own arms behind his neck. Encouraged, Braden lifted her and brought her into his lap, biting her lower lip for entrance which she gladly granted. As his tongue teased hers, exploring her mouth, Roselyn couldn't help making a noise that sounded awfully similar to a moan.

Braden smirked on her lips, but that sound that had come from her was enough to bring her back to reality.

"I think I do understand," she said when she pulled away, feeling almost speechless herself, as Braden gave a small smile.

Roselyn was conflicted as to what to do. Rising to her feet, she felt suddenly embarrassed in his presence, and nodding to him, she hurried back across the gardens, pausing at the door into the kitchen and turning to find him still sitting by the wall,

watching her as she fled.

I can't... but... oh, I don't know, she exclaimed to herself, and hurrying inside, she fled to her chambers, where she locked herself in, not knowing what to do or think.

“ Y e kissed her?” Calder exclaimed, as Braden touched his lips softly where they still burned from Roselyn’s kiss.

Braden nodded. And then she ran away, he added to himself, rolling his eyes and shaking his head, as he made the appropriate sign for his friend to understand.

Calder laughed. “Aye, I’m sure she did – the innocent English lady, the rose beset by a thorn. What a thing to do, Braden. She’s a pretty lass, I know, but... she’s nae going to be interested in ye, is she? Or were ye just havin’ yer fun with her?” he asked.

I wasnae just havin’ fun. She’s different... but I cannae make her understand, can I? Perhaps I shouldnae have kissed her, Braden told himself, even as the memory was a pleasant one.

He shrugged. He had not intended to kiss Roselyn. But finding himself alone with her and hearing the things she said had aroused unexpected feelings in him. He had thought her bonnie, but there was more to her than that – a great deal more. She had come to understand him, even as it was difficult for him to admit what she had realized for herself.

The memory of his father’s murder, the words of his mother, the trauma of that childhood moment... they were all reasons why he did not speak, and the reason he would continue to remain silent. But Roselyn had realized that, and, in her kind and gentle way she had shown her understanding. That had meant something to Braden, and the only way he had of expressing that was to kiss her.

“She’ll nae look at ye the same way now. Did she kiss ye back? Or did she just flee in horror?” Calder asked.

Braden was uncertain. Certainly, Roselyn had fled, but through fear or embarrassment, Braden was uncertain. She had kissed him back, if only for a moment, and had not immediately pulled away. He hoped he had not upset her, and knowing they were to start their lessons that morning, he feared there could be an awkwardness between them, one he had not intended.

Why does it have to be so difficult? he asked himself, shaking his head, as Calder laughed again.

“Well, on yer head be it, Braden. She’s a pretty lass, but I’d be wary of her if were ye. Daenae fall in love with someone ye’ll lose. She’ll go back to England and never give ye a second thought,” Calder said carefully.

Braden hated it when Calder was right, but this was one of the rare instances. An English lass like her wouldn’t settle for a brute like him, even if there was growing something between them. Also, Braden couldn’t condemn her to spend a life with such a dangerous and difficult man, she deserved some English aristocrat that would treat her gently. Could it be that he was infatuated with her just because his title didn’t mean much when she was around? Maybe if he stole another kiss he could make some sense of it all...No! That would only embarrass her more.

Also, he knew enough of the English to know that even a simple kiss could be Roselyn’s ruination, were anyone in the ton to find out about it.

Braden had no intention of marrying anyone, not even Roselyn – he was sure she would certainly not desire it anyway. The kiss had been a moment of madness, even as the memory was a pleasant one. He would brush it aside, and hope Roselyn would do the same, too. But try as he might, Braden could not rid himself of the growing

feelings he had for Roselyn, and as he waited for her that morning – their first lesson to take place after breakfast – he could not help but wonder what the kiss meant to her.

“Are ye all right, my lady? Ye look like ye’ve nae slept a wink,” Elena said, as she helped Roselyn to get dressed.

Roselyn sighed. She had not slept, tossing and turning as she mulled over the kiss and what it could mean. Having returned to her chambers, she had got into bed, pulling the blankets around her, as her lips tingled at the memory of what had occurred. She did not know why the laird had kissed her – it was hardly appropriate, and yet...

“I was thinking something over. I’ve had a lot on my mind,” Roselyn admitted.

She could not help but feel a sense of desire for a repetition of what had just happened. She had fled in embarrassment, unsure of her feelings. But as night had turned to dawn, and still she could not sleep, Roselyn had found herself not so much perturbed by Braden’s kiss, as strangely enchanted by it. There had been a sense of romance there – the moonlit garden, the scent of the roses, his tender touch...

“Ye look very tired, that’s all. Will ye nae rest a little longer?” Elena asked, but Roselyn shook her head.

She had work to do. Her first lesson with the laird was to take place in a few minutes, and she wanted to visit the castle library to find some books to help with his learning. Roselyn was still uncertain how she would teach Braden to speak, but she was determined to do so, and she would not let her feelings get in the way of the job she had to do.

“No, it’s all right. I’ll go to the castle library now, and then I’ll go to find the laird. We’re to have our first lesson this morning,” Roselyn replied, and Elena smiled and

nodded.

“I hope ye can teach him to speak, my lady. Tis’ a noble thing ye’re doing. We all hope to hear him speak,” Elena said, and Roselyn smiled.

“I hope so, too,” she replied, for if the laird could speak, perhaps she would understand what the kiss had meant...

Having readied herself, Roselyn went to the castle library. It was in the most ancient part of the keep, a large, vaulted hall with dusty shelves of books lining the walls, and a large hearth, above which was displayed the arms of the clan, along with numerous swords and pikes arranged in rounds.

There was no one there, and Roselyn hurried to choose several books, hoping the laird could be taught to read from them out loud. It was just one of the ways she intended to teach him and having found several suitable volumes – a book of poems, an illuminated psalmody, and a history of the Scottish clans – Roselyn made her way past the great hall and towards the laird’s chambers.

“Roselyn, there ye are. I was just lookin’ for ye. Do ye have everythin’ ye need?” Kenna asked, appearing from the great hall as Roselyn hurried by.

Roselyn turned to her and nodded.

“I think so, yes. I’m sure your brother will soon take to reading, and then to talking, too,” she said.

“I hope so – otherwise ye’ve had a wasted journey,” she said, but Roselyn shook her head.

There was nothing wasted about her journey north, and having seen Scotland for

herself, she had already fallen in love with its towering mountains, deep lochs, and lushly forested glens. She was glad to be there, and glad to have made the acquaintance of the laird, too.

“Not at all. I want to help. I’m certain I can,” Roselyn replied, for she was still convinced it was something in the laird’s past preventing him from speaking.

What it was or what it meant, remained a mystery, even as Roselyn hoped to discover the truth for herself.

“I’m certain ye can, too –I’ll let ye get to yer lesson. Daenae let Braden distract ye – or Apollo, he’ll be there, I’m sure,” Kenna said, shaking her head, as she went off laughing to herself.

Roselyn heard Apollo long before she reached Braden’s chambers. The dog was barking excitedly, and when the laird opened the door, Apollo leaped up at Roselyn, trying to lick her face as Braden pulled him away.

“Goodness, he’s certainly enthusiastic, isn’t he?” Roselyn exclaimed, smiling at Braden, who looked somewhat embarrassed.

She decided then to make no mention of the kiss. There was no reason to. It had been an unexpected moment for them both and could now be put in the past. Roselyn had a job to do, and she was pleased to see the laird had set up a table and chairs by the window, ready for their lesson.

“I trust you slept well, and I hope you’re ready for our lesson,” Roselyn said, sitting down at the table, as Braden sat opposite her.

She was trying to be his tutor, but there was something about the way he looked at her – the lingering memory of the kiss they had shared. She tried to dismiss the

thought, even as she could not help but find him attractive. He was handsome and rugged, his beard now trimmed, his eyes bright...

“We should begin,” she said, knowing she was blushing at her own thoughts, and imagining his, too.

He gave her a knowing smile and nodded. She set down the three books in front of him, uncertain as to his ability to read or write. She had brought parchment and a feather quill with ink. His signing was still unfamiliar to her, though there were certain obvious signs she could understand. But if the laird could write – even at a basic level – a dialogue could be maintained.

“I’ve brought some books – poetry, the psalms, and a history of the clans. It might be easier for you to read out loud, rather than speak. Like this,” Roselyn said, taking the book of poems and opening it at a random page.

To her surprise – for she had been in a hurry and had not looked properly at the volume – they were love poems, and she blushed as she read the words, wondering if Braden could read them, too.

“Ah, well, perhaps if I read it to you, and you could try to read it back,” she said, glancing at him, as he looked at her with interest.

The laird nodded.

“The minstrel played his tune of love, a minstrel’s tune he played. It was a story of a love, a love that was forbade. But love is true when love is found, amidst the mountains green, and by the loch, and in the glen, a lover’s tune is played,” Roselyn read, pausing, and glancing up at Braden, who was listening with a keen ear.

He smiled at her with a twinkle in his eye, urging her to continue.

“The minstrel was a wandering bard, his song heard far and wide, he wandered with a lover’s ear, to play a lover’s tune. And when at length a maiden fair didst tarry by the brook, the minstrel sat down at her side, and played his lover’s tune. Oh maid, sang he, the lover comes, to take thee far away, where love grows fair, and love is joy...” she read, feeling suddenly embarrassed, as she looked up to find Braden hanging on her every word.

She had not meant to dedicate the lesson to reading the romantic accounts of a bard and his lover’s trail through the mountains. Instead, she pushed the text towards Braden, wondering if he could understand the words on the page.

“Won’t you try to read it?” she asked, but Braden shook his head.

He looked down at the page, his eyes skimming across the printed letters. Did he understand what he was reading? Roselyn pointed to the first line.

“The minstrel played his tune of love, a minstrel’s tune he played,” she read, looking pointedly at Braden, and willing him to repeat the words.

But he looked up at her blankly. Roselyn realized it was going to be far harder than she had anticipated, and now she took a piece of parchment, dipped the quill in the ink and wrote the words on the page. Braden watched her, his head cocked to one side. She formed the letters in a large, sweeping style, handing the quill to him, in turn, and wondering if he would be able to write it as she had.

“Can you write the letters? Just copy them as I’ve done. If you can write them, perhaps then you can read them,” Roselyn said.

Braden took the quill, and to Roselyn’s immense surprise, he now began to write quickly and neatly on the page. She stared at him in astonishment, and now he turned the page to her to read.

“Is this why Kenna enjoyed your lessons so much? Because of the love poems?” she read his words out loud, blushing, as Braden smirked.

Roselyn raised her eyebrows at him. She had assumed he could not read or write, and that was what she intended to teach him. But if he could write like this, he could read, too, and now she wondered how she could possibly go about teaching him to speak, if reading and writing were not the barrier she had assumed them to be.

“You can write? Oh, but that’s wonderful. We can communicate far more easily than with signs,” Roselyn exclaimed, urging him to write in response.

He scribbled again on the piece of parchment.

“Kenna thinks you can get me to speak. But it is not as easy as that,” he wrote, and Roselyn nodded.

She had thought as much – the trauma of the past preventing him from speaking. Roselyn felt sorry for Braden, and now she urged him to write again.

“But I’m curious. You could speak when you were a child, couldn’t you? When did you stop speaking?” she asked.

There was no point in holding back her questions. Roselyn was curious to know whether she had guessed correctly as to the impediment of his speech. He nodded, scribbling again on the parchment.

“When my father died,” he wrote.

Roselyn was uncertain whether to push the matter further. There was so much she was curious about, and she wanted to know the truth, even as she felt it was not her place to ask.

“I’m so sorry about what happened to your father. He was murdered, wasn’t he?” Roselyn asked, for she remembered Kenna telling her as much, though Roselyn’s sister had not wanted to talk further about the matter than the merest details.

Braden nodded.

“I saw it,” he wrote, and Roselyn’s eyes grew wide and fearful.

“Oh, how dreadful for you. For a child to see such a thing. You must’ve been terrified, and your sister, too. I can’t imagine...” Roselyn said, her words trailing off.

She imagined what it would be like to witness something so awful for herself. Roselyn had been blessed to grow up in a place of safety. Her parents had always taken care of them, and she had never known the threat of danger or feared for her life. But this was something quite different, and the thought of it was too terrible to comprehend.

“I don’t like to think about it,” Braden wrote, and Roselyn nodded.

This was the first true conversation they had had, and it felt strange to think they could now communicate, even as they had managed previously with signs.

“I understand, I won’t ask anything more, it’s...” she began, but before she could apologize further, Apollo began to bark viciously, and Braden caught him by the collar as the dog raised his hackles as footsteps approached the door.

Soon it opened, and a short man with gray hair and a long beard entered the room. He looked at Roselyn in surprise, even as Apollo continued barking loudly.

“Can ye nae control the beast, Braden?” the man chuckled.

He showed no deference to the laird, and Braden shushed Apollo, trying to keep him quiet.

The man turned and looked Roselyn up and down.

“Ye must be the tutor – the English lass?” he asked, and Roselyn nodded.

“I am Lady Roselyn Burton,” Roselyn said. “And you are?”

“Donald Craig – uncle to the laird,” the man said, glancing at Braden, who had now managed to calm Apollo.

“We were just in the middle of our lesson. So if you excuse us,” Roselyn said, and Donald’s eyes narrowed.

“Ye’re tryin’ to get him to speak? Aye, Kenna said as much. I doubt ye’ll succeed. Braden hasnae spoken since he was a child. Ye can try, of course,” he said, shaking his head.

Roselyn glanced at Braden and gave him a reassuring smile. She was patient, and she would do whatever it took to help him. They had made progress that morning – their first true conversation, and now Roselyn knew they could easily communicate whenever they wished.

The thought filled her with delight, and she was eager to discuss all manner of things with him. But the matter of his past was a difficult one, and Roselyn knew it would require tact if she was to learn more about the reasons he had stopped speaking.

“I intend to try,” Roselyn replied.

She looked over at Donald. He was a man who appeared certain of his own authority,

even as it was his nephew who held the title. She wondered where he had been, and what life would be like at the castle now he had returned. She would ask Elena about him – servants always knew the truth about their masters.

“Aye, well, we’ll see. But Braden cannae sit here all day. He has work to do. Daenae ye, Braden?” Donald asked, and Braden nodded.

He glanced at Roselyn and smiled, and she returned his smile, hopeful of repeating their lesson the following morning.

“We can keep writing back and forth, and practicing our reading,” Roselyn said, as Braden rose to his feet.

“Come now, Braden. We have much to discuss,” Donald said, and nodding to Roselyn that she should leave, he opened the door for her.

Roselyn took up the books they had been using and left the room, glancing back at Braden.

Roselyn returned to her chambers without meeting anyone. Elena was there, having just made the bed, and she greeted Roselyn as she entered the room.

“I’m sorry, my lady, I was nae expectin’ ye back so soon,” she said, as Roselyn put down the books and went to look out of the window.

“I wasn’t expecting to be back so soon, either. But the laird’s uncle appeared, and it seemed they had business to discuss,” Roselyn replied.

She was interested to see Elena’s reaction to the mention of Donald. She made a face.

“Donald is very demanding of our laird. He knows there’s much work to do so it’s

common for them to discuss business for hours,” Elena said.

“Where’s he been? It seems he’s just returned. I find it odd to think he and Braden’s mother are married,” Roselyn said.

She would not dare voice such an opinion elsewhere, but with Elena, she felt it safe to share her own. Elena nodded.

“They wasted little time – they were married soon after the death of Braden’s father. I agree, my lady – tis’ a strange thing. Donald treats the laird as his own son, and lauds it over him as such, too. I think maybe he did it to protect his brother’s family. Any laird could have tried to marry our lady and claim our clan if they wanted. At least that’s what our lady says too” she replied, and Roselyn nodded.

“I wonder... I hope Braden... the laird... doesn’t defer too readily to his uncle,” Roselyn said.

“He’s strong, my lady. The laird has an inner strength, even if outwardly he’s silent,” Elena said, and Roselyn nodded.

It was that inner strength she had had recognized and been attracted to. Braden was a remarkable man, and Roselyn knew she was only just beginning to discover what he was truly like. With the possibility of conversation now existing between them, she could only hope to know him better in the coming days and discover just what it was that held him back from speech.

I want to understand him, she thought to herself, the memory of their kiss lingering, and the hope of it occurring again foremost in her mind.

Braden had not expected his uncle's return for some days.

"She'll nae get ye to talk, Braden. I daenae know why Kenna insisted on bringin' her here. An English lady in a Scottish castle – tis' nonsense," Donald said, as he sat down at the table, in the place where Roselyn had been sitting just a few moments previously.

I'm glad she did. Braden thought to himself, for he was not about to dismiss Roselyn as idle company.

He had enjoyed the lesson that morning, and how Roselyn had glowed when she realized his ability to read and write. It was his mother who had taught him, though Braden rarely set foot in the library. And it had been years since he had written anything before he returned. It was nice to see he hadn't forgotten most of it, though. And that he could use it to communicate with Roselyn more easily.

Will she ask me about the kiss, though? What does she really think about it?

Roselyn had seemed oblivious to the memory of the kiss, and Braden had been unable to tell whether she was embarrassed or merely attempting to behave with the detachment of a tutor. Kenna had told him of Roselyn's formality, but behind her facade, there was a very different woman. She had proved herself humorous and fun. She often smiled, and Braden had noticed the way she looked at him – was there something there?

I wonder... but nay, there cannae be. Donald's right, an English woman in a Scottish castle, far from home. She'll do her job and leave. Though I will nae speak, Braden said to himself.

He had not spoken since that fateful night, the night of his father's murder, and it would take more than the gentle persuasions of a pretty English woman to make him do so. His uncle cleared his throat.

"Braden? I have news for ye," he said, and Braden looked up from his musings in surprise.

He signed to his uncle, questioning him, and his uncle's eyes narrowed, and he shook his head.

"I returned at first light this mornin' with a person ye'll want to meet," he said.

Braden looked at his uncle curiously. He really knew very little about Donald. Braden had grown up away from the castle, and whilst he knew his uncle had been diligent in his duties as laird, there were some who said he had acted with impunity when it came to power. Braden knew his uncle had relished the responsibility of being laird and relinquishing that honor had been a wrench, but still, Donald had taken care of Braden's mother and sister, as well as keeping the peace – for that, he owed him a debt of gratitude.

And who might I want to meet? Nae a friend of yers, Braden thought to himself.

"Tis' the man who killed yer father," his uncle said.

Braden's eyes grew wide with astonishment. His uncle spoke in such a way as to make the matter sound ordinary, almost mundane, but Braden could hardly believe what he was hearing. He shook his head, signing to his uncle in disbelief.

It cannae be. After all these years. Nay one knows who killed my father. Tis' a mystery. I... nay... I... he stammered to himself, confused by his uncle's words, even as Donald now smiled.

"Aye, I didnae tell ye where I was going. But I've been followin' all manner of different leads. Tis' certain, though. The man who murdered yer father resides in the dungeons. Will ye see him? I know we've a long way to go if we want to trust each other, we don't really know each other after all, but I wanted to do this for you, for my brother...for our family" he said, as Braden continued to stare at him in astonishment.

Braden did not know what to do. He was astonished, his hands trembling, as he rose to his feet, staring at his uncle, who continued to smile. Braden shook his head, raising his hands, and banging his fist down on the table in anger.

"Aye, a wicked man, Braden – a bandit and a robber. Didnae I always say it was a robber – someone broke into the castle that night, found yer father and mother asleep in bed and killed yer father for his gold? I found the wretch in the far north, hidin' in a cave. He's a wanted man – he's killed dozens of men, in just the same way as yer father. But come and see him, Braden, see the face of the man who murdered yer father," Donald said.

Braden thought immediately of his dream – the hidden face, now to be revealed. He had thought so long about the face of the man, his back turned, leaning over his father's body. What would his mother say? He looked at his uncle, signing to him, but Donald shook his head.

"She doesnae know. I've told ye, and ye alone. Yer sister knows nothin' of it, either. I told the guards on the gate the man was a sheep rustler and of nay consequence. But ye and I know the truth. Come now – come and see the man. I can see the desire for revenge in yer eyes. Daenae hold back, Braden," his uncle said.

Braden's anger was rising. He clenched his fists, breathing heavily. He thought about what he would do. Would he kill the man on sight? He rose to his feet, and his uncle walked to the door.

"Come now. He's in the dungeons. I'll show him to ye," he said, and Donald led Braden from his chambers.

The castle was quiet, the clansmen busy about their duties, and Braden and his uncle made their way down a narrow flight of steps to the dungeons. The way was lit by burning torches in brackets on the wall, and as they reached the cells, the jailer came to meet them, his keys jangling in the gloom.

"A sheep rustler, laird, there's nay need to trouble ye with him. He can go in the stocks in the courtyard. Let the women throw rotten eggs at him," he said, but Braden shook his head.

"The laird wants to see the man himself. I'll take the keys. Ye're dismissed," Braden's uncle said, and the jailer looked at them both in surprise.

"But... tis' my responsibility..." he said, even as Donald snatched the keys from his hand and pushed the jailer towards the steps.

"Come back later. Leave us," Donald snarled.

But Braden was not listening. He pushed past the jailer, making his way along the dimly lit passageway, where the smell of damp hung heavily in the air. Several of the cells were occupied, their pitiful occupants cowering in corners, but at the far end, Braden could hear footsteps pacing up and down. He paused, hardly daring to step forward.

This was it, the moment he had waited for ever since that fateful night. There would

be no more dream, no more hidden face, no more mystery as to the identity of the murderer. Taking one of the flaming torches from its bracket, Braden held it aloft, stepping forward, as his uncle pointed towards the cell.

“He’s in there. Look at him: see the face of evil,” he whispered, pushing Braden forward.

I can hardly bear the thought of it... what that man did to us, Braden thought to himself.

He stepped forward, holding the flaming torch above his head. Shadows flickered on the wall, and the image of the man came into view. Braden did not know what he had imagined the man to be like, even as he had thought the matter over a thousand times, willing the figure in his dream to turn and reveal himself. The man standing before him was tall with a long, straggling beard, and his eyes were wide and bloodshot. He was dressed as a simple peasant, well-built and muscular, his sleeves rolled up to reveal cuts and scars across his arms. Braden stared at him.

“This is him, Braden – Mulden MacCulloch – the man who murdered yer father,” Donald said.

The bars of the cell separated Braden from the murderer, and it was all Braden could do to stop himself from rushing forward and grabbing the man through the bars. But he held back, looking at the face, connecting it to his dream. In his nightmare, the murderer remained with his back to him, leaning over the bloodied body of Braden’s father. But there was something not quite right about Mulden’s appearance, as though he should have been taller, his shoulders broader...

Is it really him? The man in my dream? This one seems bigger, but then I was smaller then, and I was lookin’ up – perhaps I’m nae remeberin’ any of it properly. If only I could see clearly, Braden said to himself, even as his uncle laughed.

“How does it feel to see him, Braden? Will ye kill him? Will ye have him hanged? Tis’ yer choice. Ye could run him through,” Donald whispered, but Braden shook his head.

He was angry, but he would not kill a man in cold blood, not without evidence. He did not know what to believe, or who to believe. Surely his uncle had followed some lead or the other, but could he really be so sure that this man had killed Braden’s father? It had happened so long ago. The man had an evil look about him, and the way he looked at Braden made it seem as though he had something to hide – but to punish him on rumor and speculation? Braden shook his head, turning away, but his uncle caught his arm.

“Tis’ the man, Braden. Can ye nae see?” he said.

I cannae see. I dinnae know the truth. My dream... tis’ nae the man I thought it was. Tis’ a lie, Braden said to himself, pulling away from his uncle, who let out an angry cry.

“Tis’ the man who killed yer father, Braden. Does that mean nothin’ to ye?” he demanded.

Braden was angry. He had thought his uncle’s extraordinary revelation would reveal the truth. But it had only made him more confused. This man, Mulden MacCulloch, was not the man who appeared in his dreams. He had not revealed himself as such, and Braden was certain he was not the man who had killed his father, even as it might have been a relief to think so.

He could have taken his anger out on the man, punished him for his father’s death and have him killed to satisfy his need for revenge. But Braden would not see an innocent man punished, however wicked he might appear.

Tis' nae the man who killed my father, Braden told himself, and pushing past his uncle, he marched back along the passageway and up the stone steps, emerging into the courtyard, where he blinked in the brightness of the sunshine.

Cursing under his breath, he made his way to the stables, where he found Zeus being brushed down. "Ye wish to ride him, my laird?" the stable hand asked, and Braden nodded, wanting only to ride out along the loch and be alone with his thoughts.

The horse was soon saddled, and Braden mounted, riding out of the stables and across the courtyard at a gallop, sending a group of clansmen scattering as he charged past and out of the gates. He was very angry. Angry at what had happened in the past, and what could still not be resolved in the present. He would never know the truth about his father, whatever his uncle might believe about the man in the dungeons. The identity of the murderer – the back of whom remained turned – would forever be a mystery.

One I cannae solve. One I'll never know the answer to. Tis' useless trying' to find what nay one can ever know, he told himself, as now he slowed the horse by the side of the loch, looking out over the waters to the mountains beyond.

The fair weather had continued, and Braden watched as swallows swooped across the surface of the loch, and a salmon leaped from the water, its silvery scales catching the sunlight. He sighed, slipping down from the saddle, and sitting with his back against a large stone. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts, mulling over everything his uncle had said and done. Perhaps he should ask his mother to take a look at the man who was supposed to be his father's murderer.

She'd know the truth – she must have seen the man's face, he said to himself, even as he feared his mother could not bear to look on the countenance of the man who had brought such suffering to her life.

He pondered the matter for a while, still wondering if he dared ask his mother to identify the man in the dungeons, but it was just as he had made up his mind to do so that he heard footsteps approaching, and turning, he found a familiar figure standing amidst the trees.

“ B e sure to be back by nightfall, lass,” the guard on the gate said, and Roselyn nodded.

“I won’t be long. I’ll be back in plenty of time. It’s not... dangerous, is it?” she asked.

The guard shook his head. “Nay, lass. But keep yer wits about ye – there can be strange goings on in the forest at times,” he said, and Roselyn looked at him curiously.

“I don’t understand. What sort of things?” she asked, but the guard would say no more.

These were superstitious people, and Roselyn now decided she would not pay attention to such warnings. The woods held no more danger than the journey north, and on a day like today, when the sun was high in the sky and the birds were singing in the trees, Roselyn could find no cause for alarm.

She followed the path through the village, greeted by several women who were poking at a fire, over which a piece of meat was roasting, before coming to the loch side, where she made her way into the trees.

The path wound past banks of wildflowers, and a heady scent hung in the air. Roselyn paused to pick some of the blooms – purple coneflowers – some for her chambers and some for Elena, who had been unfailingly kind since Roselyn’s arrival

at the castle.

Perhaps I'll teach her to read, too, Roselyn thought to herself, reflecting on her lesson with the laird.

He could read, and he could write – there was no impediment there, and Roselyn felt certain he could be coaxed into speaking. Whatever barrier remained, she felt determined to overcome it, and as she walked, she thought of ways to broach the matter of the laird's past again.

He doesn't need to be held back. she said to herself, even as the fact of such a trauma surely remained with a person their whole life long.

The thought of what Braden had witnessed was terrifying, and she could only imagine what would have become if she or her sisters had experienced something similar.

Time and again, Roselyn compared her own upbringing to that of Braden, knowing there could be no comparison with the terrible things he had witnessed. In this, Roselyn felt a great sympathy for the laird, and she wanted only to help him, even as her feelings towards him were confused.

She had thought a lot about the kiss they had shared, and still felt embarrassed for having pulled away so hurriedly. It had seemed the right thing to do, but the more she thought about it, the more she realized there had been no reason to do so.

Why shouldn't I kiss him? If I want to kiss him, I can, she told herself, smiling at the pleasant thought of doing so.

This thought was foremost on her mind, when, rounding a corner of the path, she saw the laird himself, sitting by the loch side, with his back to a large rock.

His horse was there, grazing at the grassy bank, and the sound of Roselyn's footsteps caused Braden to turn. Roselyn blushed, embarrassed at the thoughts she had just been having, even as the laird smiled at her.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were here. Though why should I? I was just... walking," Roselyn stammered, feeling foolish in her embarrassment and the obviousness of her words.

He nodded, beckoning for her to come and sit with him at the water's edge. She had the flowers she had picked in her hand, and Braden now rose to his feet, disappeared behind the rock, and returned with a flower just the same as the ones she held in her hand. Roselyn smiled, touched, as he handed it to her with a slight bow of his head.

"For me? How kind of you. I picked these as I walked. Aren't they beautiful? The forest's so full of life, and there's such a beautiful scent in the air," Roselyn said.

The laird nodded. Roselyn wondered what he was thinking. If only she had a piece of paper and a quill. He signed something to her, but she did not understand, and he looked suddenly frustrated.

"It's all right. It doesn't matter. I think we understand one another well enough, don't you?" she said, and again, he smiled, shrugging his shoulders as he picked up a stone and skimmed it across the water.

Roselyn watched as it splashed, remembering the moment Braden had stripped to his undergarments and waded into the loch on their journey north. It made her blush to think of it, though the memory was a pleasant one. She thought, too, of the waterfall, and how Apollo had splashed her.

"Have you swum?" she asked, as though inviting him to repeat what had occurred before.

He shook his head, lying back in the sunshine and closing his eyes. Roselyn did the same, enjoying the warmth on her face, and listening to the waters lap at the side of the loch.

They did not need words to find contentment in one another's company, and the more time she spent with Braden, the more her feelings for him grew.

What a beautiful place this is. It's so peaceful, Roselyn thought, almost falling asleep next to Braden in the warmth of the sunshine.

She had nearly fallen asleep when she was startled by a tongue, wet and slobbering, licking her face. She opened her eyes with a cry, finding Apollo standing over her, his face right up close to hers. The dog barked, and Braden, too, looked up in surprise.

"Oh, Apollo, really, it's too much," Roselyn exclaimed, laughing, even as she tried to push the dog away.

Braden was shaking his head, and he made a low clicking sound, causing Apollo to sit back on his hind legs, looking up eagerly at his master, who now rose to his feet.

"Where did he come from? Has been here the whole time?" Roselyn asked, for she had not seen any sign of the dog as she emerged from the trees.

Braden shook his head, pointing back to the castle and laughing. It seemed Apollo had escaped and followed his scent to the loch in search of Braden.

Roselyn smiled, fondling the dog's ears, as Apollo barked again. She could not be angry with him. Braden threw a stick for him into the water, and Apollo leaped in with a splash, causing Roselyn to shriek as she was once again sprayed with water by the dog, who seemed intent on playing the same tricks on her as Braden.

“Oh, call him off, Braden,” she cried, but as she did so, Apollo leaped out of the water, sending a shower of spray over them both.

Braden turned, putting his arm up as though to shield Roselyn from the worst of the spray, even as she fell backwards onto the bank. Braden fell, too, landing at her side, as the splash of water landed on them both.

They were both soaked, and Braden glanced at Roselyn apologetically, even as she began to laugh. There was no point in being angry, and she smiled at Braden, who was now lying at her side.

“Goodness me, he loves the water, doesn’t he? I should just go in with him and save him the bother, shouldn’t I?” Roselyn said, gazing into Braden’s eyes, as he smiled back at her.

“I hope you won’t mind me saying this, but I was sorry our lesson was cut short this morning. I enjoy the time we spend together,” she said, and Braden nodded, tapping his chest, as though to say he felt the same.

They were lying next to one another on the bank, their bodies parallel, their legs touching, and Braden reached out, brushing the hair from Roselyn’s cheek.

Her heart was beating fast, the memory of the kiss they had shared now foremost in her mind. She smiled at him, feeling no fear at his touch, as his fingers traced a trail to her lips. He leaned forward, kissing her gently. Roselyn sighed, closing her eyes, as their kiss became more and more desperate.

Her hands tangled in his hair, pulling him closer still, and his travelled from her face down her arms, to reach her hips and keep her in place. A moan escaped her at the firm touch, earning her a growl from Braden. As their lips parted, he continued to leave kisses down her neck, and Roselyn was suddenly very aware of a strange ache

between her legs.

Before she could pinpoint exactly what her body was asking for, they were interrupted by the barking of Apollo.

“Oh, really, Apollo, come now, enough,” Roselyn exclaimed, the moment lost by the sight of the dog bearing down on them.

Braden gave an exasperated sigh, pushing Apollo away, as Roselyn rose to her feet. She knew they would get no peace, even as she glanced at Braden, who was smirking.

The kiss had not been planned, but Roselyn was not about to feel embarrassed. She had enjoyed it, and she was only too happy to think Braden had wanted to kiss her again. Apollo now leaped up at her, barking, as she reached down and threw a stick for him into the undergrowth.

“I’m sorry... he just... we’ll never have any peace,” Roselyn said, as Braden laughed.

He waved his hand dismissively, touching his fingers to his lips, as Roselyn blushed. She did not entirely understand the meaning of the kiss, but she had enjoyed it, nonetheless, and hoped it could be repeated, even as she did not know how Braden himself now felt.

Apollo returned with the stick, eager for the game to continue. Roselyn took the stick, following the dog, and threw it back into the undergrowth, calling for him to fetch it.

Isn’t it extraordinary? She thought to herself, her lips still tingling from the memory of Braden’s kiss. It had seemed entirely natural – the manner of his gesture, his touch, the way he had brushed back her hair, and then...

It was... delightful, she told herself, feeling a sense of the utmost happiness as to what had just passed between them, and the thought of what might happen next.

But a man like Braden had surely had many lovers in the past, and Roselyn knew she could well be just one of the many women whom he had sought to seduce.

Don't get caught up in over thinking the possibilities, she told herself, as Apollo came bounding back to her through the trees.

It was fine to enjoy the moment – the romance of the Scottish landscape, the passionate kiss of the laird. But it would not last, and Roselyn knew she was foolish to think of herself as anything more than a diversion for Braden, who could not even make his intentions understood.

Roselyn sighed, shaking her head, even as she knew the moment had been a pleasant one. She had now made her way deep into the undergrowth, beyond the sight of Braden, who had remained by the loch. The trees were dense here, and it was hard to see much further than her immediate surroundings.

“Apollo? Where are you? Bring back the stick. I'll throw it for you, but we must go back,” Roselyn called out.

She could see no sign of the dog, and she peered through the undergrowth, struggling to determine which direction she had come from. The trees loomed over her, blocking out the sun above, and making the forest seem foreboding. Apollo had stopped barking, and Roselyn looked around her, confused as to which way to go.

“Apollo? Are you there?” she called out, but there was no reply, even as a sudden movement to her left startled her. A hand grabbed her, dragging her down to the ground as she fought desperately with her assailant. “Help,” she cried out, as a wild, bearded face loomed over her...

Braden had not intended to kiss Roselyn, but gazing into her eyes, and seeing her pretty smile, had brought forth the feelings he had harbored ever since he had first set eyes on her. He was falling in love with her and kissing her had been a way of showing those growing affections. Had she enjoyed it? She had not fled as she did before, nor had she seemed embarrassed, even as he dismissed himself as ever being worthy of her affections.

She's an English lady, the daughter of a duke. She's bound to have any number of men wantin' her hand in marriage. Why would she think twice about a silent Scottish laird? Braden asked himself, shaking his head, as he sat down by the loch and sighed.

Roselyn had gone into the woods to play with Apollo, the dog having interrupted them at just the moment when their kiss might have turned into something more. Braden allowed his mind to wander, picturing Roselyn's reflection in the pool by the waterfall, and the touch of her lips against his. She had tasted sweet, like honey, and Braden found himself wanting only to kiss her again.

But watch how she leaves ye – she'll nae stay here. She'd nae marry ye, he told himself, shaking his head, as he picked up a stone to skim across the water.

The thought of marriage had been playing on Braden's mind, even as he had resisted it. It was Kenna who had planted the seed, reminding Braden it was his duty to produce an heir.

“Anythin' can happen, Braden – think of what happened to our father,” she had said,

and Braden had taken her words to heart.

He knew he had to marry, but so far, he had met no one whom he could imagine spending the rest of his life with. Until now. There was something different about Roselyn – not only the fact of where she came from.

She had intelligence and wit, and the strength of character necessary for the role of mistress of the clan. In Roselyn, Braden could see all the qualities necessary for the wife of a laird, even as he feared she would refuse. It was one thing to share a kiss, but quite another to share a romance. Braden found it difficult to tell what a woman was thinking or feeling, and Roselyn was no exception.

She doesnae want to marry ye. She might kiss ye, but tis' all. Daenae think too much of what might be, he said to himself, even as he knew his feelings for Roselyn were growing stronger with every passing moment.

He looked around him. The flowers she had picked, and the one he had given her, were lying neatly on the bank, close to Braden. He smiled, picturing the look on Roselyn's face when he had presented her with the flower. But where was she? He had heard Apollo barking, but now there were no sounds coming from the forest, and rising to his feet, he approached the undergrowth, peering through the trees and seeing no sign of either Roselyn or the dog.

Tis' strange – she was here.

Apollo could never be kept quiet, and as Braden made his way through the undergrowth, he found himself becoming increasingly concerned.

Where is she? She cannae have just disappeared, he said to himself, as his search now became more desperate.

The trees grew thick here, tall, and straight, blotting out the sun above. The forest was dark and foreboding, and Braden's hand went to the hilt of his sword, sensing danger, as he glanced around him. A sudden cry echoed through the trees, and to Braden's horror, he now caught sight of Roselyn, locked in a struggle with a man.

The bastard. – Braden recognized the man from the dungeon. He drew his sword, and charged forward through the trees, as the bearded man looked up in surprise.

He had Roselyn in a tight grip, choking the life from her. She was struggling, trying to fight him off, even as he dragged her to her feet, trying to pull her away into the undergrowth.

Braden had controlled his anger in the dungeons – he had even felt a certain sympathy for a man accused with no evidence.

But that sympathy was gone, replaced by a pathological rage at the sight of the woman who had trusted him to protect her now so savagely used. As Braden charged towards him, the man let go of Roselyn, allowing her to scramble back, falling to the ground, her dress torn, as the bearded man made to defend himself.

“Yer woman did nae put up much of a fight,” he snarled, circling Braden, who now lunged at him with his sword.

The man drew a dagger from his belt, holding it, jabbing it forward, as Braden swiped at him with the flat of his own weapon. The man leered at him, his mouth open and toothless, his straggling beard covering an evil face.

Again, Braden lunged at him, but the man caught him, striking at Braden with the dagger. Braden felt a sharp pain in his arm, but with a cry, he pushed the man backwards, his sword falling to the ground as he struck out, knocking the man to one side. The villain fell, striking his head against a rock, and rolled onto his back,

motionless, his eyes wide and staring.

Dead, and good riddance, Braden said to himself, as blood oozed from a wound to the man's head.

He picked up his sword, breathless from his exertions, and kicked the dagger away. His arm was smarting, and he raised his hand to the wound, finding it covered in blood, as Roselyn now came hurrying to his side.

"Oh, Braden... I'm so sorry. I didn't think... he came on me so unexpectedly. I... I was so frightened. He was trying to drag me away. I don't know who he was. If you hadn't come... oh, I was so foolish," she exclaimed, as tears rolled down her cheeks.

She noticed his injury now, taking out a handkerchief and offering it to him. It was only a flesh wound, and Braden held the handkerchief to his arm, staunching the flow of blood.

"Did he hurt ye, lass?" Braden asked.

"No, he... oh... Braden, you spoke," Roselyn exclaimed, staring at Braden in astonishment.

For a moment, the danger was forgotten, and Braden, too, stared at Roselyn in return. He had not intended to speak, nor did he know what had prompted him to do so. His eyes grew wide with astonishment, as Roselyn stared back at him. Braden could not understand what had brought about this extraordinary transformation.

"I... I spoke," he said, and Roselyn nodded, stepping back, and taking his hand in hers.

"I always thought you could, but... oh, I don't understand... to hear your voice. It's

like... how?" she asked, but Braden did not know.

Speech had suddenly come naturally to him. There had been no conscious decision on his part, no question of whether he would or not. He had just spoken, as though he had always spoken. He had made a promise long ago, and yet...

"Aye... I daenae know. But with ye... tis' different. Ye brought it out of me. I was worried about ye – I'm still worried about ye. That man... well... I just saw him in the dungeons. My uncle brought him here. He said he murdered my father. But... oh, I should've run him through there and then," Braden exclaimed, cursing himself for not having acted earlier, and feeling confused as to why the man had been set free, or been allowed to escape.

Roselyn looked at him in surprise.

"I still... after all this time. You didn't need lessons. You didn't need me to teach you to speak," she exclaimed, but Braden shook his head.

She was right. He had not needed lessons to help him speak. He had always been able to do so. But he had needed someone to bring out the possibility of speech, and Roselyn was that person.

It was she who had caused him to speak, and in doing so, she had accomplished what she had come to Scotland to do. The sight of her in the arms of that wicked man – the knowledge of the danger she was in – that had roused Braden to action. He had wanted to protect her, and his concern for her made him speak, even as he wondered what would happen now.

"I... I needed ye, Roselyn," he said, and she looked up at him and blushed.

"Then... I'm glad to have been here," she replied.

The bleeding from his arm had stopped, and now he dropped the handkerchief to the ground, slipping both his arms around her and drawing her into his embrace.

He wanted only to protect her, and now he glanced at the body of the man he had just killed, who lay sprawled on the ground. He shuddered to think what might have happened, and he pulled Roselyn into a tighter embrace, terrified at the thought he might have lost her. He then started to lead her away.

“I’m sorry. I should’ve protected ye,” he whispered.

“You couldn’t have known. No one could’ve known. But you came to my rescue again. You were fearless,” she said, and Braden smiled.

“And ye were brave, too, lass. Ye tried to fight him off,” he replied.

They were conversing as though they had always done so, as though speech was entirely natural to Braden. But with every word he uttered, he wondered if it would be his last. Would he continue to talk? And what of the others?

“But he was too strong, and I don’t know where Apollo went. He was in the undergrowth, and then the man seized me. It was terrible. I’ve never been so frightened,” she said, and Braden kissed the top of her head.

“Tis’ all right, lass. I’ll nae let anythin’ happen to ye. I promise,” he whispered, and Roselyn looked up at him and smiled.

“I’m just glad... well, that you were here,” she said, and now he leaned forward and kissed her, as she clung to him, their lips pressed together in the passionate embrace of a danger faced together.

Braden knew he cared for her, and now that he could speak, he wanted to show her

how much he cared for her.

“Ye’re beautiful, Roselyn,” he whispered, as their lips parted.

She smiled at him as he ran his fingers through her hair, kissing her again, his hands running down the length of her back, pulling her more tightly into his embrace.

“I... I didn’t know. It was so hard. I’m sorry about the other night – running away as I did. I didn’t mean to. But I wasn’t sure how you really felt,” she said, but Braden shook his head.

“I felt... what I felt when I first set eyes on ye. I felt somethin’ – but I cannae describe it,” he said.

He had never admitted as much to any woman, because he had never been able to admit as much. Speech had always eluded him, the possibility of words, rather than signs, holding back his true feelings.

He felt something for her, and he wanted her to know it. But the words sounded strange – all his words. To hear himself speak was like hearing another person speaking. It was distant, and almost otherworldly, as though it was not meant to be, even though it was.

“Did you really? Back in England? And on the journey north? I never realized... well, why would I? You couldn’t speak, and I couldn’t understand your signs – not all of them, at least. But... I felt something, too,” she said, and now he kissed her again, caring nothing for how it seemed, or what others might think.

Their kiss was passionate and prolonged, their arms around one another, caught up in the sensuous passion of their act.

“Then I hope ye’ll stay? Even though it seems yer work is done,” he said, as their lips parted.

Roselyn looked up at him and smiled.

“I couldn’t imagine leaving now,” she replied, smiling up at him, as he kissed her again.

A sudden shout interrupted their kiss, the sound of a search party calling out for them.

“I daenae want the others to know,” Braden whispered, and Roselyn nodded. They would keep his speech a secret, as Calder and Kenna now came into view, accompanied by a band of clansmen.

“There ye are, Braden – we’ve been lookin’ for ye both. A prisoner’s escaped from the dungeons, it’s nae safe, and... oh,” Kenna said, seeing the body of the man himself lying dead further away in the woods.

Roselyn shook her head. “If Braden hadn’t found me...” she shuddered, glancing at the dead man. She was still shaken by the attack, but Braden’s voice and kisses had been...a pleasant distraction, to say the least.

“Oh, how terrible.” Kenna’s voice brought her back to reality. “Tis’ a wicked thing – he overpowered Uncle Donald in the dungeon. He’s a bandit, a sheep rustler,” Kenna said, as Calder rolled the lifeless body of the man onto his front.

“Tis’ all right, men, we’ve found him. Take the body back to the castle and bury it in the common grave. He deserves nae prayers,” Calder said, and several of the clansmen came to take up the body and carry it away.

Braden was now using signs with his sister, even as Roselyn wondered why he did not want to speak as he had spoken to her. She had been shocked to hear him speak, as happy as she may be to finally hear his voice. And even more shocked that he

didn't want to share it with his family.

It was Kenna's wish to hear him speak – she would be overjoyed, and surely the rest of the clan would be, too. But Roselyn had no intention of breaking her promise to the laird. It could be their secret, for now, and she would allow Braden to make up his own mind when to speak again. Part of her feared it was just a passing moment, that without the imminent threat of danger, Braden would again be silenced.

“Let's get back to the castle. Ye must be exhausted, Roselyn,” Kenna said, taking Roselyn's arm in hers.

But Braden stopped them, pointing into the trees, raising his hand to his eyes, as though looking for something.

“Apollo,” Roselyn said, and now the others began to call out.

Roselyn had thrown a stick for him just before she was attacked, but there had been no sign of him since then; he had not come running at the sound of Braden's voice, though there was no reason why he should. He had never heard it before, and perhaps the sound had even scared him away.

“Apollo?” Calder called out, and the others repeated the cry.

But a moment later, a yelp was heard in the distance, and Braden hurried forward, pushing through the undergrowth as the others followed behind. They found Apollo with his leg caught in a root, struggling to free himself. Roselyn bent down, stroking the dog's mane, as Braden pulled up the root, sending up a shower of earth as he did so. Apollo leaped free, yelping at the pain in his paw.

“The poor creature,” Kenna exclaimed, and Braden now lifted Apollo into his arms, nodding as he led the way back through the trees.

The others followed, and it was not long before they emerged onto the path, where the sunlight streaming through the canopy brought a welcome relief.

“How did the man escape? Did you say he was a prisoner in the dungeons?” Roselyn asked.

“Aye, that’s’ right – he overpowered Donald. The jailer was elsewhere, and somehow, he escaped without anyone else seein’ him,” Calder replied, shaking his head.

Roselyn glanced at Braden, who was still carrying Apollo over his shoulders. The laird looked angry, and it seemed he did not believe the explanation. Roselyn remembered his words about the man ...

There’s more to it than this. He can’t have just been a sheep rustler or a bandit. Braden said he murdered his father, Roselyn thought to herself, astonished that a man like that had so easily escaped.

They had come in sight of the castle walls now, and Roselyn was glad to think she would soon be safely inside. She had been terrified in the forest, and had it not been for Braden’s bravery, Roselyn knew she would now be dead, or in the hands of that wicked man. She shuddered to think of his intentions, for if he had been capable of murdering the laird’s father, he would have been capable of murdering Roselyn, too.

“Ye should go and rest, Roselyn. I’ll send Elena up with hot water for ye to bathe in. Rest now, and then have somethin’ to eat,” Kenna said, and Roselyn nodded.

Braden had set Apollo down now, and the dog was limping across the courtyard, whining as it went.

“The poor creature – we should bandage his leg,” Roselyn said, glancing at Braden,

who nodded, and made a sign as though to say he would do so soon.

But as he caught Roselyn's eye, he winked at her, a look of understanding passing between them. It seemed Braden had every intention of speaking again, though he would not do so in front of his sister and the others.

Roselyn thought back to the kisses they had shared, and the passion of their embrace. He had told her he was in love with her and had proved as much by his actions in rescuing her. They exchanged a further glance, and he nodded, smiling at her, before she followed Kenna into the keep.

"I'm so sorry about what happened to ye, Roselyn. We were supposed to take care of ye. If yer father discovers what's happened..." Kenna said, looking anxiously at Roselyn, who smiled.

"It's quite all right – there's no harm done." she said, even as Kenna continued to look at her with a worried expression.

"Still, we can only apologize. Ye will nae want to leave, will ye? My brother... he's still got so much to learn," Kenna said, but Roselyn shook her head.

Even as she knew the truth about Braden, she was not about to leave the castle behind. The laird could speak, but for now, he would speak only to Roselyn, and she was keen to hear more of what he had to say.

Apollo barked, and Braden cursed under his breath, trying to hold the dog's paw at the same time as bandaging it.

Why cannae ye keep still, Apollo .

Braden had brought Apollo to his chambers. Calder had wanted to discuss the

dangers of sheep rustlers and bandits, but Braden had dismissed him, wanting only to be alone. He was sitting on the floor by the hearth, holding Apollo in his arms, and now he wrapped the bandage around the dog's leg, as Apollo let out a loud yelp.

"I'm tryin' to help ye," Braden said, catching himself as he spoke.

Again, he had not meant to do so, even as the words had come naturally to him. Apollo, too, looked at Braden in surprise. He did not recognize his master's voice, and Braden smiled at the expression on the dog's face – a look of confusion, despite him having been Braden's constant companion since he found him.

"Aye, ye didnae expect that, did ye?" Braden said, smiling, as he ruffled Apollo's ears.

Apollo barked again, struggling free of Braden's grip, as footsteps on the corridor announced a visitor. Apollo's hackles rose, and Braden knew what was to come. The door now opened without the visitor knocking, and Braden's uncle stood before him.

"I heard about what happened in the forest with the bandit. I'm sorry, Braden, but it seems justice was served," he said.

Braden rose to his feet, pointing to the wound on his arm, now dressed by the castle's healer. His uncle shook his head.

"A flesh wound for a life – tis' a fair exchange, considerin' the crime the man committed. He killed yer father, Braden," Donald said, but Braden shook his head.

Despite the man's wickedness in attacking Roselyn, Braden still did not believe he was the one responsible for the murder of his father. The bandit was not the man in his dream – the man with his back turned, waiting to reveal himself. Braden did not know who he was – it was a question he would go on asking himself. But he knew it

was not that man.

Tis' nae him. I know it, he said to himself, even as his uncle looked angry.

“Do ye doubt me, Braden? Tis' him. I know it. I tracked him over many miles. I discovered he was a murderer. When he overpowered me in the dungeons, it was like.... Well, he might've killed me, just as he killed yer father – my brother. I saw the murderous look in his eyes. I knew he was capable of it,” Donald said.

But again, Braden shook his head.

“Listen to me, Braden, ye have to accept the truth,” Donald said.

Braden had heard enough. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts. The claim about the bandit, the rediscovery of his speech, his growing feelings for Roselyn – he signed to his uncle, dismissing him with a wave of his hand.

“Ye're a fool, Braden. And daenae think that Englishwoman can be yer savior. She'll nae teach ye to talk,” he said, and turning on his heels, he marched out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Braden sighed, lying back on the rug in front of the hearth and staring up at the ceiling. Apollo came to lick his face, and Braden ruffled the dog's ears, smiling at him, as he recalled Roselyn's kisses.

“But she did save me.”

The water was warm and inviting. Roselyn sank down in the tub, enjoying the sensation and yawning, as she rested her head and sighed.

“Are ye feelin’ any better now, my lady?” Elena asked, and Roselyn nodded.

Her aches and pains were easing, although she had several bruises on her arms and legs, and the castle healer had tended to a wound on her neck. Roselyn knew she was lucky to be alive, even as she felt safe now behind the castle walls and with Braden to guard her. He had saved her – not once, but twice – and she would be forever in his debt.

“I am, yes. Much better,” Roselyn replied, and the servant smiled.

“What a terrible ordeal for ye, my lady. Ye must’ve been so frightened,” Elena said, shaking her head.

“I didn’t really have much time to think. He just grabbed me. I screamed, and then... well, the laird came to my rescue,” Roselyn replied.

“Ye were lucky he was close by. Tis’ nae safe out in the forest. I wouldnae walk there alone now. Nae after what’s happened to ye,” Elena said, as she folded Roselyn’s dirty dress.

“But the man’s dead now. He was a bandit or a sheep rustler, or something,” Roselyn replied.

She was not about to tell Elena the apparent truth about the man who had attacked her – that he was the murderer of Braden’s father. She knew to keep it to herself, just as she knew to keep the secret of Braden’s speech, too.

“Aye, but... tis’ still a worry, my lady. Men like that – they’d think nothin’ of hurtin’ an innocent woman. Ye had a lucky escape,” Elena replied.

Roselyn was about to try to reassure her when a rustle at the door caused them both to look up. A piece of parchment slipped beneath it, and Elena hurried to pick it up, holding it out to Roselyn, who now climbed out of the tub and stood in front of the hearth, wrapped in a toweling robe. She took the piece of parchment curiously, unfolding it to reveal just a few simple words.

“Come to my chambers tonight,” it read, signed with a “B.”

Elena looked at Roselyn curiously, and Roselyn smiled, tossing the piece of parchment into the flames and watching it curl and catch fire.

“The laird merely asks if I’m well,” she said, not wishing the servant to know where she intended to go that evening.

Her heart was beating fast, and she thought back to the moment they had shared by the loch and in the woods. The first kiss had been tender and tentative, the second, passionate and reconciliatory.

But what of the next? Would there be a next? She imagined what it would be like for them to be alone together once more. Would Braden speak? Roselyn hoped so, for it was through speech he had told her of his true feelings, and she had shared hers with him, too. There had been no holding back, and with the power of speech, it seemed anything was possible.

“He’s kind like that, my lady. But I feel so sorry for him, trapped inside his own mind. He can write and make signs. But tis’ very different to actually speakin’ yer mind. There must be so many things he wants to say,” Elena said, and Roselyn smiled.

“I’m sure he finds ways to express himself,” she said, thinking back to her amazement at hearing Braden speak for the first time.

It had been so sudden and unexpected – to him, as well as her. But what had caused him to speak, and would he still be able to when they met that night? Roselyn was filled with trepidation, and whilst Elena exhorted her to rest for the remainder of the day, Roselyn’s thoughts were turned to Braden, and what, if anything, he would say to her that night.

“I didnae think ye’d want to eat with us in the great hall. Braden isn’t, either. He’s shut himself up in his chambers and will nae come out. I’ve brought ye some broth. Tis’ a pretty dress ye’re wearin’ – I’m sorry yer arms are bruised,” Kenna said, setting down the tray for Roselyn on the table.

Her gentle knock had come just as Roselyn was readying herself for her evening with Braden. She had put on a dress she had not yet worn at the castle – a gift from her parents on her previous birthday.

It was red, with a lace trim, and she had chosen a matching shawl to wrap around her shoulders. Roselyn smiled at Kenna Roselyn was glad of her company. She reminded her of Grace and Matilda, a young woman striking out on the path of life.

“Bruises heal. I’ll be all right,” Roselyn said, thanking Kenna for the food, even as she knew she would not eat it.

She felt strangely nervous at the prospect of spending the evening with Braden. They

had spent so much time together already, but this was different.

Braden could speak, and they would no longer have to rely on signs or written words to communicate. It was as though they were meeting for the first time, and Roselyn was unsure what to say, or what Braden would say to her.

“Aye, but tis’ a far cry from life in a quiet corner of England. Ye must think us barbarians,” Kenna said, but Roselyn laughed.

“One bad apple doesn’t spoil the whole batch. There are bandits in England, just as there are in Scotland. Besides, nothing terrible happened. I’m just a little shaken, that’s all,” Roselyn replied.

Kenna smiled, putting her hand on Roselyn’s arm, and shaking her head.

“Ye’ve been a blessin’ to us, Roselyn – and to Braden, especially. I know he cannae say it, but he appreciates what ye’re tryin’ to do. I can understand him better than most, and it’s the truth,” she said.

Roselyn was touched by these words, and she hoped Braden would eventually reveal his ability to speak to his sister, as well as to the other members of the clan. Kenna deserved as much, and Roselyn intended to make the suggestion to Braden that evening. There was no reason for him to hold back. He had the power of speech, and he could use it for good – she felt certain of that.

“What would it mean for you if he did speak?” she asked.

Kenna pondered for a moment, a smile coming over her face.

“I understand his signs – we’ve worked them out over the past few years. But to hear him speak, it would be like how things used to be. The last time I heard him speak

was on the day our father was murdered. I was so little I think I actually have no memory of his voice, I've just made it up because I wanted to feel close to him. I know ye're tryin' yer best, Roselyn. But if he speaks, it'll be a miracle," she replied.

Roselyn nodded. The miracle had already occurred, even as Roselyn was not about to break the laird's confidence. But she would plead with him to speak with Kenna, even if he uttered not a single word to anyone else. If anyone deserved it, it was her.

"I'm sure he will – but only when he's ready," Roselyn replied, and Kenna shook her head.

"I pray it's before... well, our poor mother. I think she blames herself. She carries so many secrets, so many burdens. But I shouldnae worry ye with such things. Ye need to rest, Roselyn," she said, but Roselyn shook her head.

She wanted to help. She had come to Scotland to help Braden, and now she believed she could help Kenna, too.

"It's no burden. I want to help. When you came to England, I fear I did little other than teach you Latin and Greek, and the rudiments of literature and history. But perhaps I neglected to teach you those things I should've done. We could've talked a little more openly," Roselyn admitted.

Kenna smiled. She looked grateful, and she sat down on a chair by the hearth and sighed.

"It wasnae easy after our father died. Braden ran away, and I was our mother's only companion. When she married my uncle... well, I thought it was strange, as did so many others. But he took care of us, even if my mother could never be in love with him. It makes me wonder if I'll ever find a match of my own. A caring man like my uncle, or a passionate love, like the one my parents shared," Kenna said.

Roselyn had wondered about this. Kenna was an attractive young woman, and there was no doubt she could marry any man she pleased. But something held her back, and it seemed her mother's experiences at the hands of her uncle had made her feel she could not imagine such a life for herself. Roselyn felt sorry for her, for surely any woman deserved the happiness of marriage, should she choose it.

"You've just not found the right one for you, not yet. But cast your net wide. Look beyond the confines of the clan, and perhaps... well, these things take time," Roselyn replied.

"Have ye ever been in love?" Kenna asked.

Roselyn blushed. She could not very well tell the truth about her and Braden. She was in love, even as she had no one to admit it to.

"I... yes, I have," Roselyn said, and Kenna looked at her curiously.

"But what happened? Did ye nae marry him?" she asked.

"It didn't go according to plan," Roselyn replied, and Kenna nodded.

"I suppose... if I did fall in love, I'd like a strong man," Kenna said.

Roselyn smiled knowingly.

She knew she was giving the very advice she herself needed to hear. She had held back in her feelings for Braden, uncertain if he felt the same. But now she knew, and it was the most wonderful feeling she had ever experienced.

"I know, but tis' hard. I wouldnae want to change things between us. We've known one another for sometime – since he returned here with Braden," Kenna said.

Roselyn smiled, leaning over and taking Kenna's hand in hers.

"If it's meant to be, it will be," she said, and Kenna smiled.

"Aye, ye're right. But I should get back to the great hall. They'll be wonderin' where I've gone. I hope ye sleep well tonight, Roselyn. Ye're a true blessin' amongst us. Braden knows it, too," she said, rising to her feet.

"And ye are a blessing too – to us and to Calder, or whichever man is lucky enough to have your hand," Roselyn reassured her.

The two women embraced, and Kenna left.

Roselyn waited a few moments, listening for the sound of Kenna's retreating footsteps, before opening the door again and slipping out into the passageway. The castle was quiet, the clansmen eating dinner in the great hall, and Roselyn met no one, not even a servant, as she made her way through the winding corridors and passageways to the laird's chambers.

I just hope he'll speak, she thought to herself, standing nervously outside his door.

The door opened a moment later, and Braden stood on the threshold, dressed in breeches and a white linen shirt unbuttoned over his chest. He smiled at Roselyn and stepped aside, beckoning her to enter. For a moment, it seemed as if he was not going to speak, but as he closed the door, he cleared his throat, smiling at Roselyn, and inviting her to sit.

“I didnae like to call out, in case it was nae ye,” he said, as she sat on the chair by the hearth he had indicated.

A rug had been unrolled there, and on it was a set a meal – bread and cheese, dried fruits, and a raised pie. There was wine, too, the same she had drunk on the night of her arrival, along with cups and cutlery. Apollo was sleeping next to the rug, sprawled out to catch the warmth of the flames. Roselyn smiled.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d speak again,” she said, and Braden looked at her curiously.

“Why did ye think that? I spoke before, didnae I?” he asked.

“You did, but... I wasn’t sure what prompted you. Was it the danger? Was it seeing me in danger?” she asked, but he shrugged and sat down opposite her on the rug.

“I daenae know. I cannae explain it – even to myself. Tis’ like... I daenae know,” Braden said, and Roselyn smiled at him.

It was enough to know he could speak – she did not need to know why, even as she

hoped it was something to do with her own influence. Certainly, she could not claim to have taught him, but if she had helped in some small way, or been the reason for his speech to return, that was enough to satisfy her.

It felt strange to think of herself as the only person who had heard Braden speak since he was a child. But his voice itself was not childlike. It was the voice of a man, deep and pronounced. It had an authority to it, and Roselyn could not help but be attracted by the tone of Braden's speech.

"You don't have to explain it. But I'm glad to have heard you speak. I feel privileged to be the one who first did," Roselyn said, and Braden smiled.

"Apollo heard it, too. I was bandagin' his paw, and I spoke to him. He looked at me in surprise. I suppose he'd never heard his master's voice," Braden said, looking over at Apollo, who now raised his head from the rug.

Braden was sitting by the hearth, and Roselyn slipped down from her chair to join him. He poured two cups of wine, handing one to Roselyn and smiling.

"Do you drink wine?" she asked, and he laughed.

"Nae usually. But I knew ye liked it. Will ye eat?" he asked, and Roselyn nodded.

He had gone to some lengths to prepare for their evening together, and Roselyn was touched by his thoughtfulness. No other man had ever treated her in such a way. At home, under the watchful eyes of her parents, Roselyn had known only the arrogant swagger of would-be suitors, who believed they needed to do little more than present themselves to win her affections.

But Braden was different. He had not assumed those affections, even though they had been there from the start. Even on the journey north, she had found herself attracted

to him, and grateful to him for saving her. Having done so again, there was no doubt in Roselyn's mind as to Braden's feelings for her, and she was only too glad to be in his company now.

"You're very kind. I'm not sure what I've done to deserve all this," Roselyn replied, as Braden cut a piece of the raised pie for her, before refilling her cup.

He smiled and shook his head.

"Ye didnae need to do anythin' – but ye've done a great deal for me. Ye came here. That's enough," he said.

Roselyn did not entirely understand, but she was grateful for Braden's words, as now they ate together in front of the fire, and Roselyn found herself entirely at ease in his company. There were no more barriers between them, and it felt to Roselyn as though they had known one another their whole lives long.

"I don't feel like I've done anything. But it's kind of you to say so. It's you that's done so much for me. You protected me – on the journey here, and in the woods. I was... scared. But I'm not scared now, not with you," she said, and he smiled at her.

"I'm glad. It still feels strange – to talk, I mean. I've been so used to usin' signs, with the clansmen, with Calder, with my mother and sister," he said.

"Speaking of Kenna... She came to see me this evening. She told me how she longs to hear you speak. That's why she invited me here, to teach you. Won't you speak to her?" Roselyn asked.

Braden pondered for a moment, sighing, before finishing his cup of wine.

"I daenae know. If I speak, I cannae go back. Do ye see what I mean? Tis' one thing

to talk to ye, but quite another to talk to them. Until today, I didnae think I could speak, either. It's going to take some getting' used to. I know Kenna wants me to speak, and I will, just nae yet," he said, and Roselyn nodded.

She would not force the matter, but she hoped Braden would find it in himself to do so – that he would want to do so – and now she smiled at him, as he edged a little closer to her across the rug. They had finished eating, and Braden tossed Apollo the last of the raised pie, shaking his head, as the dog devoured it.

"He must be glad to hear your voice," Roselyn said, and Braden shrugged.

"Aye, perhaps. But tis' why I keep silent with the others. I daenae know if my voice is welcome," he said.

A sudden shadow passed over his face, and Roselyn wondered who he was thinking about.

"Donald?" she asked, and Braden nodded.

"My uncle is a strange man. I've known him all my life, and yet... I daenae really know him at all. Tis' a strange thing. He brought that man here – the bandit – but why?"

"But you didn't believe him? You didn't believe the man who attacked me was the same man who killed your father?" Roselyn asked.

Braden shook his head. "Nay, lass. He couldnae have done. I... I have a dream, ye see," he said, looking suddenly uncertain.

Roselyn reached out and took his hand in hers. "What sort of dream?" she asked, and he looked up at her and sighed, shaking his head, as though torn between keeping the

matter to himself and revealing a vulnerability.

“Tis’ a dream, the dream of what happened that night. The night my father died,” he said.

Roselyn squeezed his hand, edging closer across the rug. “It’s all right, you don’t have to tell me,” she said, but he shook his head.

“Nay, lass, I want to. I’ve never been able to speak of it before. Nae to anyone. Tis’ too complicated for signs,” he said, and Roselyn nodded.

She would not push him, but it seemed he needed to speak, and now he could. “I understand,” she said, placing both her hands in his.

He took a deep breath, glancing around the room, as though making certain no one else was there.

“Tis’ a dream I’ve had ever since the night my father was murdered. Tis’ a repetition of what I saw. I wake up, and I can hear voices, and a cry – the murder of my father. Kenna stays sleepin’, but I get up and go to the door of my parent’s chambers. It’s standin’ ajar, and through it I can see my mother, and the figure of a man, standin’ over the body of my father. He’s dead, lyin’ in a pool of blood. I watch for a moment, and then my mother sees me. The figure doesnae turn, but the look on my mother’s face urges me to flee, even as the figure turns toward me,” Braden said, shaking his head, with a look of rage on his face.

Roselyn was astonished. He had kept this burden in his heart all these years, and only now had he found the power to relieve himself from it.

“It’s all right. What do you see?” she asked, but Braden shook his head.

“I daenae see anythin’ – as the figure turns, I wake up. Tis’ the end of the dream. But it wasnae a dream. It was real. The look on my mother’s face... I fled. She told me never to speak of what I’d seen, and I didnae speak of it, nae to anyone,” he said, shaking his head.

He looked up at Roselyn, who moved closer to him, slipping her hands around his waist, and embracing him. She wanted to comfort him, to let him know he was no longer alone.

He was no longer the helpless child in his dream, caught up in the terror of what might have been had the figure turned and seen him. But she knew, too, how fearful he must have been on that night, and how powerful the recurrence of such a trauma surely was.

“But now you have, and I’m glad. I can’t fully understand what you’ve suffered, but I’m glad to be the one you now confide in,” she said, resting her forehead against his.

“I trust ye, lass. When my uncle came to tell me of the man in the dungeons today, I believed I’d see the figure in my dream. But somehow it wasnae him; I know it wasnae him. Daenae ask me how, but I do,” Braden replied.

Roselyn nodded. She was uncertain what to say, even as she knew it was enough just to listen. He sighed, still resting his head against her forehead, and now their lips met in a kiss. She clung to him, and he to her, caught up in the desire to comfort him, to be close to him, and receive the reassurance of his touch. As their lips parted, he smiled at her.

“You can tell me anything. I’ll listen,” Roselyn whispered.

“Tis’ enough to tell ye these things. My dream... it’ll only continue. Until I know the truth it’ll be the same,” he said as he now brought his lips to hers once more, drawing

her closer into his embrace.

The fire was burning low, its embers flickering, casting shadows on the walls, and now they lay together on the rug, their lips pressed together. Roselyn's shawl fell away from her shoulders, exposing her neckline, as Braden brushed the hair gently from her cheek.

He kissed her again, and Roselyn lay back, as he traced a trail with his lips across her neck and along the hem of her dress.

Despite her innocence, in Braden's company, she had no fear. She trusted him. He pulled at the shoulders of her dress, exposing her breasts and his hand, warm and sensuous to the touch, caressed her skin. Roselyn gave a deep sigh, entirely caught up in the delights of the sensation.

"Ye drive me crazy, lass," he murmured, as he pulled off his shirt, exposing his chest. Roselyn fumbled with the belt of his breeches. She wanted to feel closer to him. Wanted to feel all of him.

He was aroused, and as he lay naked at her side his hands searched out the ties of her dress, exposing her body to the warmth of the fire.

"Ye're perfect," he said softly, as he brought his lips to her breast, tracing a trail down over her stomach, and she gasped at the touch of his fingers against her groin.

Roselyn had never known such intimacy. It was a whispered secret between married women, a duty, or so she had been told. But this was different – the intimacy they shared, the words he had said and now expressed through touch and sign. They did not need words to express their feelings.

They could show them, and now, as Braden bit the side of her neck softly as he

continued working with his fingers, Roselyn gasped. A sudden warmth rose in her, a tingling, pleasurable warmth, filling her with ecstasy. She ran her hands through his hair, and he looked up at her and smiled.

“Do ye like this, lass?” he asked, and it was all she could do to nod, and gasp in response.

The feeling was growing stronger now, rising in her, and with a sudden shudder, she gave way to it, letting out a cry as she did so. Braden rose to kiss her, bringing his lips to hers. His arms slipped around her, as now they lay together on the rug in front of the heart. Roselyn closed her eyes, allowing the last of the sensations to course through her, astonished at what she had just felt – a feeling like none other she had known before.

“I never thought... I never knew,” she said, as he brushed the hair back from her cheek.

“I’ve thought about it ever since I first laid eyes on ye, lass. I desired ye. Ye’re the most beautiful creature I’ve ever laid eyes on. Everythin’ about ye –” he said, and he kissed her neck once again, holding her closely in his embrace.

“I feel the same, and I can’t imagine feeling any differently,” she replied, as he rolled onto his side, and slipped his hand into hers.

“And what would yer parents say? Would they approve of ye courtin’ a Scottish laird in a distant land – a place fraught with danger?” he asked.

Roselyn smiled. She knew just what her parents would say about such a match. Her father would not approve. He would still be determined for her to marry a man of his choosing – Baron Wesley, or one of the other terrible matches he had paraded in front of her. But Roselyn no longer cared for such opinions. She had fallen in love with

Braden, and nothing else mattered but that.

“They let me come here, but they expect me to return, too. I’ve got to, but that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t come back,” she said, and Braden smiled.

“They’d be shocked to see ye on the arm of the guard sent to escort ye,” he said, and Roselyn laughed.

“I’m sure they would. But they’d soon know the truth. You could tell them yourself, couldn’t you?” she replied.

Roselyn felt certain her parents could be convinced of Braden’s merits. He was a powerful man, the laird of a great clan, with wealth and influence. But Roselyn knew her father’s prejudice against the Scots, and while he might eventually be convinced, it would take time and persuasion to do so.

“To speak? I daenae know... perhaps,” he said.

Roselyn felt suddenly disappointed. If he was not willing to speak, then how would anyone ever know of his feelings for her? Could a mute man marry? He would be unable to pronounce his vows or speak the words of assent. He ran his fingers along her cheek, touching her lips, and now he leaned forward and kissed her.

“I hope... well, I hope you’ll speak to more than just me and Apollo. In time, I mean. It doesn’t have to be right away. But little by little, you’ll grow used to it again. I’ll help you,” she said, and he smiled at her.

“I know ye will, lass,” he said.

He yawned, stretching back on the rug resting his hands behind his neck. Roselyn was unsure of what to do. Should she return to her chambers? What did he expect of

her? She made to put on her dress, but he stopped her, catching her arm.

“I should probably go. Elena might come to my chambers before bed,” she said, imagining the uproar if the servant discovered she was gone.

“I told her she could have evenin’ off – well, I signed to her,” he said, and Roselyn laughed.

“You planned all of this, didn’t you?” she said, and he nodded.

“I wanted us to be alone. I wanted us to talk. Will ye stay here with me tonight?” he asked, glancing towards the bed.

Roselyn smiled and nodded. She could think of nothing she would like better than to spend the night there with him. After what had happened in the forest that day, she knew she would feel safe in his arms, and did not like the thought of returning to her chambers alone.

“I’ll stay. I want to stay,” she said, as he rose to his feet and crossed over to the bed, pulling back the blankets.

The candles around the room were guttering, and it was dark outside, the fire burning low. Apollo was fast asleep, his ears pricking up occasionally, before lolling back to sleep. The bed was inviting, and Roselyn slipped between the sheets as Braden blew out the candles around the room, leaving only one burning at the bedside.

“I’m glad ye want to, lass. I hoped ye would. I hoped... well, I didnae know if ye truly felt the same. Words are nae quite the same as gestures,” he said, slipping into bed and putting his arms around her.

Roselyn knew this to be true: a kiss, an embrace, the closeness of another. Those

things could say far more than words, and it was through signs that they had fallen in love with one another, not words.

“But I do feel the same. Though I’m not certain what it means yet,” she replied.

He kissed her, pulling her closer into his embrace, their foreheads touching on the pillow. “Do ye need to be? Cannae we just enjoy the moment,” he whispered, kissing her again.

She felt protected in his arms, and he was right: why did they need to know for certain what the future held? It was enough to be content in the present, and as she fell asleep in his arms, Roselyn knew there was nowhere else she would rather be, and no one else whose arms she would want to have around her.

Braden opened his eyes. He could hear a sound – voices, distant, but raised. He sat up, seeing his sister asleep in the bed next to his. It was dark, but a shaft of moonlight shone through the drapes at the window, illuminating the room in a silvery light. The sound came again – the voices, and then...

“Help me...” a voice said, and Braden scrambled out of bed, hurrying across the cold, flagstone floor, and out of the room he shared with his sister.

He was in the apartments where he had grown up. A fire was burning in the hearth, and the door opposite his own was partially open. It was from there the sounds were coming – sobbing, and a voice.

“Forget it, tis’ nonsense. Leave him,” the voice said.

It was somehow familiar, and yet he could not place it, even as now it grew more forceful.

“Please, nay, ye cannae...” another voice replied, and Braden recognized it as that of his mother.

Fear gripped him, and his heart was beating fast. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. He stepped forward, a shaft of light coming through the open door. And that was when he saw it – his parent’s bedroom, a body lying on the floor. It was his father, lying in a pool of blood. His mother was there, kneeling at his side, and standing with his back to Braden was a figure he did not recognize.

“He’s dead, there’s nothin’ ye can do for him,” the figure said, as Braden’s mother clutched at the lifeless body before her.

“Nay... he cannae be. What wickedness... tis’ too awful,” she exclaimed, her hands trembling.

It was then she noticed Braden, as he stood wide-eyed and fearful at the door. The figure standing over the body had not noticed him, and Braden’s mother looked at Braden imploringly. It was as though she feared a similar fate for him if the figure standing over the body should see him.

“Ye should go,” she said, addressing the stranger, even as Braden knew the words were meant for him.

But he could barely take his eyes off the lifeless body of his father, terrified at the sight of death.

“Aye, for now, but ye know what’s going to happen, lass,” the stranger replied.

Braden let out a cry, and the figure turned...

“Braden, wake up,” Roselyn was saying, and Braden opened his eyes, sitting up in bed to find Roselyn holding up a candle next to him, looking at him anxiously.

“I... the dream,” he stammered, as Roselyn set down the candle and put her arms around him.

“It’s all right, I thought as much. You were talking in your sleep. It was as though you were describing what you saw: the room, the open door, the body of your father, the figure standing over him. I didn’t wake you because... well, I thought you might have found the answer you were looking for. But then you started crying out in

horror. It was terrible,” she said, as she stroked the back of his head.

He clung to her, fearful in the moments between sleeping and waking. But it had been the same as always – the figure turning, but not revealing itself. There had been no change, no clue as to who it might be. In this, Braden felt certain it was not the man he had killed in the woods, the bandit who had attacked Roselyn. This man was still to be revealed – a stranger, and yet...

“I knew him. At least, that’s how it feels. I recognized the voice, but it was nae a voice I could place. But I know him, that’s all I can say,” Braden said.

Roselyn sat back, taking his hands in hers. He was glad to have her comforting presence. She was a reassurance to him, and now he lay back down with a sigh.

“It won’t always be a mystery. You’ll discover the truth one day, I’m sure,” Roselyn said.

She was trying to reassure him, but with every passing day, Braden feared he would never discover the truth about his father’s death. It was shrouded in mystery, and would remain so, as long as the identity of the figure in his dream remained hidden.

“I daenae know, perhaps. But for now...” he said, yawning and closing his eyes.

Roselyn lay down next to him, slipping her hand over his chest and kissing him on the cheek. He put his arm around her, drawing her into his embrace, and as he fell asleep, he knew something had changed. He had spoken, and Roselyn was the person he had spoken to. Why it was her, or what it meant, remained a mystery, but Braden knew he would be forever grateful to her for what she had done.

“For now, we can just... enjoy the moment,” Roselyn said, even as her heart told her there was still a great deal more to come.

Roselyn awoke as the sun came through the window, casting a shaft of light across the bed. Braden was still fast asleep, lying on his back. She thought back to the moment of his dream, how he had described in such vivid detail what was happening, even as the final piece of the puzzle eluded him. It had been terrifying to witness, but surely even more terrifying for Braden to experience. Roselyn could not imagine how it must feel to be so close and yet so far from the truth. If only the figure would reveal himself.

But that's never going to happen, Roselyn told herself, slipping from between the blankets and hurriedly dressing herself.

She was wary of being discovered – a servant might come to wake the laird, or even Calder or Kenna. Roselyn looked down at Braden, still fast asleep. She glanced over to the hearth, thinking back to the moment of intimacy they had shared the previous night – what would happen now?

I suppose... well, it's up to him, she told herself, wrapping her shawl around her shoulders and preparing to slip out of the room.

Apollo woke up, raising his head sleepily and cocking it to one side. Roselyn raised her fingers to her lips, and the dog lay back down obediently. She smiled, opening the door quietly and checking there was no one in the passageway beyond. The coast was clear, and closing the door behind her, Roselyn made her way quickly back to her own chambers. But as she approached, she saw Elena knocking at the door.

"My lady? Are ye awake?" she said, and Roselyn cleared her throat.

"I'm here, Elena. I just... went out to take the early morning air," she said, hoping Elena would not notice she was wearing her best dress.

"Oh, I'm sorry, my lady. I was given the night off. I went to stay with my mother,

and I've only just returned. I should've come earlier," Elena said, looking as though she expected to be chastised, but Roselyn shook her head.

"Of course not, Elena. you were with your mother. I know how important that is," she said, as she let them both into her chambers.

"Do ye miss yer mother, my lady?" Elena asked, following her inside.

Roselyn smiled. She and her mother were close, but she had given little thought to the distance separating them since she had arrived in Scotland.

"I do, but I'm gown up now, and... well, one day I'm expected to marry and move away. This isn't so different. I miss my sisters, though. Grace and Matilda. I wonder what they're doing, if they're happy, what they hope for. We were always close, and I miss confiding in them, I suppose," Roselyn replied.

She would have told her sisters about Braden. They would have seen a change come over her and would have known something was different. A sister could always tell. Roselyn wondered what they would have said, or what advice they would have given her.

Or what advice I'd have given them, she thought to herself, for she was not the only one of the three to have succumbed to romantic inclinations.

Both Grace and Matilda had been feted by suitors, but neither of them was yet to make a match. They were all of them, Roselyn included, strong willed, and it would take a certain kind of man to equal them. In Braden, Roselyn believed she had found such a man, and she was eager to tell her sisters, and her mother and father, the truth, even as she knew their courtship could not immediately be made public.

But is it a courtship? she asked herself, as Elena brought hot water for her to wash

with.

She had made no mention of her dress – discreetly ignoring it, or else not noticing the unusual circumstances. Roselyn wondered if the laird made a habit of entertaining other women in his chambers, and she felt a sudden sense of vulnerability regarding her position.

“Elena, I... has the laird ever... courted?” she asked.

She did not know precisely the correct word to use. Did a laird court? Were marriages arranged, or did he simply choose the woman he desired? The servant looked up at her and smiled.

“Has he ever been romantically involved, do ye mean?” she asked, and Roselyn nodded.

She was curious to know, even if it meant knowing that she was one of many. She felt torn between her heart and mind, caught up in the excitement of the affair, but fearing she might be hurt if she gave herself entirely to a man who would not do the same for her. He had only just begun to speak, and it felt to Roselyn as though there was still so much she did not know about him, even though they had spent so much time together.

“I was just curious, that’s all. Is the laird expected to marry?” she asked.

Elena nodded. “Aye, it’s expected of him, but he’s never courted anyone. But I’m just a servant, my lady, what do I know? There may have been women, I suppose. But in a place like this, everyone soon comes to know yer business. I was once sweet on the son of the blacksmith in the village. We used to meet by the loch and walk into the woods. He kissed me there. I was the happiest lass in the world – but for a short while. Someone had seen us, they told my mother, and that was the end of it. He

married a farmer's daughter not a month since. I was heartbroken, but my mother wouldnae allow it," Elena said, shaking her head sadly.

Roselyn smiled sympathetically. She knew what it was to have others know your every move. Had she met Braden back in England, her sisters would soon have discovered the truth – however much she tried to hide it. But to hear that the laird had courted no other women in the past was a cheering thought. She had expected Elena to recount his past conquests, revealing his promiscuity. But in her answer, Elena had suggested Roselyn was different, and that Braden's actions – and now his words – truly meant something.

"You'll find the right man for you, Elena. I'm certain of it," Roselyn said, and the maid laughed.

"Aye, perhaps, but tis' nae easy in a place like this. How I dream of going far away from here, my lady – to England, perhaps, and findin' a man there," she said, swooning for a moment, as Roselyn smiled at her.

"Perhaps you will. Why not? You don't have to remain a maid forever. You're only young. You've got your whole life ahead of you," Roselyn said, but Elena shook her head.

"Forgive me for sayin' so, my lady, but tis' easy for a woman like ye to say such things. Ye had yer learnin' and yer ambitions. But for someone like me, tis' impossible. I cannae leave here, and tis' foolish to think I can. But I'll be all right. I've got my mother – I'm sure she'll find me a suitable match. I know she's anxious to," Elena replied.

Roselyn felt sorry for her, and guilty for making such assumptions. She realized her own life had been one of privilege. Her father had encouraged her to learn, enabling her to do so, when most women did little more than embroider and learn a smattering

of French. In this, she was blessed, and had used the opportunities afforded her to her own advantage. But things were different for the likes of Elena, and her prospects were limited by the circumstances in which she found herself.

“I’m sorry, Elena. I didn’t think about it like that,” Roselyn replied, but the girl shook her head.

“Tis’ nae yer fault, my lady. But we live very different lives. Ye find yerself in a place where things are different, people are different, expectations are different. Are ye thinkin’ of stayin’ here?” Elena asked.

It felt strange to be confronted by such a question, but Roselyn now realized she was faced with a choice – to stay or go. The laird had talked. Her reason for traveling north had been realized. And yet, Braden’s speech had nothing to do with any lessons or practical coercion on Roselyn’s part.

She had not taught him to speak, even as he had come to do so. Had it been her mere presence? Or was there something more? To stay or go, that was the question she now faced, and she felt torn between the possibilities now open to her. With her task completed, the time had come to return home, and yet her heart had found its place amongst the mountains and lochs, caught up in her growing affections for the laird, who was master of the beauty surrounding her.

“I... I don’t know... perhaps,” she said, and Elena smiled at her.

“Ye should think about it, my lady. Tis’ clear ye’ve found a place here. Tis’ nae every Englishwoman who can say that of our highland realms, but ye seem at ease here, and especially in the company of the laird,” she said.

Roselyn blushed. It seemed she had made her feelings for Braden obvious, and she smiled, shaking her head, even as she knew it to be true.

“Oh, I don’t think so. He’s got far more important things to be thinking about,” she replied.

But as she finished getting ready – keeping up the pretense of having spent the night in her bedchamber – Roselyn could not help but feel her choice was already made, and her heart and mind had found their place, not in her old home, but here.

Roselyn was gone when Braden rolled over and opened his eyes, but the memory of the previous night now returned. He smiled to himself, his thoughts lingering over the intimacies of their encounter, and he sat up, glancing across the room to where the leftovers from the meal and empty wine cups provided a tangible reminder of what had passed between them. Apollo barked.

“Aye, and ye can keep yer thoughts to yerself, too,” he said, grinning, as Apollo leaped onto the bed, barking, as he sniffed at Braden’s face, licking him.

Braden pushed him away, throwing back the covers and getting out of bed. He had enjoyed his evening with Roselyn, even as the inevitability of the dream had soured the night. But she had been entirely understanding, and Braden had felt no sense of judgement on her part, or fear as to what the dream could mean.

But the face remains a mystery, he said to himself, sighing, as he went to the window and peered out over the courtyard below.

It was another bright, sunny day, the waters of the loch shimmering in the early morning light. Several of the clansmen were practicing their swordsmanship, whilst a patrol of archers manned the walls. The gates were open, and a market was gradually opening up around the walls of the keep, with several of the villagers plying their wares. It was just another day in the glen. Except for Braden. A great deal had changed – he could speak, and still it surprised him to do so.

“Speak out loud, speak my thoughts, speak when I want to,” he said, glancing down

at Apollo, who still flinched at the sound of his master's voice.

It seemed Braden was not the only one who would have to get used to this strange new way of being, and he wondered what it would be like when the rest of the clan heard him speak for the first time. Just then, a knock came at the door, and Apollo barked excitedly, rushing to the door, and scratching at it. It was Calder, and as he entered the room, Braden wondered what to do.

"I've just returned from a patrol along the loch – there were reports of bandits on the high pass through the mountains, but I found nothin' untoward. Tis' probably someone fearin' the sight of riders after what happened with the prisoner in the forest. Is Roselyn all right? I'm surprised she didnae demand to be escorted south immediately," he said.

Braden signed to him, nodding, as Calder sat down on a chair next to the hearth, glancing towards the empty cups and half eaten meal. He looked up at Braden inquisitively.

"Were ye entertainin' last night?" he asked, and Braden blushed, shaking his head.

But Calder raised his eyebrows, evidently not believing him.

"Ye were, were ye nae? And who might it be? Come now, let me think, the same lass who found herself in yer company under the moonlight? Yer tutor, aye..." he said, grinning, as Braden shook his head.

"Aye, well, so what if tis' her?" he exclaimed, forgetting himself for a moment, even as Calder stared at him in astonishment.

He rose from his chair, his eyes wide, and he pointed at Braden, who now realized what he had done. "Ye spoke, Braden... ye spoke," he exclaimed, and Braden sighed.

“Aye, I spoke. I know I spoke,” he said, as Calder continued to star at hm in disbelief.

“But tis’ remarkable. How can ye... what happened? What changed? Did she teach ye?” he asked, and Braden sighed.

He had not meant to speak in Calder’s presence. He had not wanted anyone else to know the truth. Braden did not know why he had begun to speak. It had not been a conscious choice, even as he knew something had changed. Roselyn had not taught him to speak, but she had given him the ability to do so. He had wanted to speak to her, to make himself and his feelings understood. But as for speaking to Calder and the rest of the clan...

“She didnae teach me, no, but I wanted to speak to her. I wanted... I daenae know, Calder, I daenae know what’s happened. But I warn ye, daenae mention a word of this to anyone,” he said.

Calder smiled. “Tis’ ye who need to hold back the words, Braden – tis’ ye who spoke,” he said, and Braden smiled.

“Only ye, Roselyn, and Apollo know the truth. I daenae want my mother or Kenna to know. Nae yet, at least. Promise me, Calder,” he said, and Calder promised.

“But I still daenae understand how it happened. Did ye just start to speak in her presence? Was it something she said? Or something she did?” he asked, raising his eyebrows and grinning.

“I daenae know, Calder. I was just so worried about her. Afraid that bastard had hurt her... I needed to make sure she was all right. I just spoke,” he said.

It was the same as asking how he breathed or moved. It just happened, and there was no real explanation behind it. One moment, Braden had found himself unable to

Speak, and the next, he had done so. He had never lost the ability to speak, but had chosen not to, and now, albeit to his own surprise, he had chosen to do so.

“But tis’ a miracle. I never thought ye’d speak again. None of us did. We thought Roselyn’s arrival meant nothin’ to ye, that Kenna was foolish for bringin’ her here. But it seems she had quite the effect on ye,” he said, smiling again.

Braden shook his head. He knew what Calder was thinking, as his friend glanced again at the empty cups and half eaten meal. He thought back to the night before, to the ease of the conversation, despite it having been so many years since he had last spoken.

Roselyn had drawn it out of him. She had given him back the power of speech, and the desire for it, too. He enjoyed talking to her, the intimacy of their conversation and the deepening of their relationship.

“Aye, I think she did, and I’m grateful to her for that, though I suppose she’ll leave now,” Braden replied.

This was his fear, despite all they had shared. Roselyn had come to Scotland to teach him to speak, and now he had spoken, her job was done. She would return to England, forgetting all about him, and continue her life as it had been. But Braden knew he could not continue his own life in the same spirit, forgetting the things they had shared.

His feelings for her were growing stronger by the day, and the more time he spent with her, the more he desired her. She was the first person he had spoken to since the events of that awful night, and in Roselyn, Braden had found someone who understood the pain he had carried ever since.

“Do ye want her to leave?” Calder asked.

Braden shook his head. He did not want Roselyn to leave. Quite the opposite – he wanted her to stay. How it would work and what would happen were questions he was yet to answer, but Braden’s mind was made up. He wanted her to stay, and he wanted to discover what might be between them – if she was willing.

“Nay, I daenae want her to leave. But I cannae force her to stay. She has to make the decision for herself. We’ll see, I suppose. Do ye think she would?” Braden asked, but Calder only shrugged.

“I daenae know. Tis’ a long way back to England. She’s nae of our way of life. She’s nae a highland lass, is she?” he asked.

Braden shook his head. He did not know why that should matter, even as he knew he would be asking Roselyn to give up a great deal if she were to stay, and to accept a way of life very different from her own.

He sighed, crossing to the window, and looked down at the courtyard below. More traders had arrived, and the market was busy. Roselyn herself was there, talking to Kenna, and Braden watched her, smiling at the sight of her, his thoughts returning to the intimacies they had shared.

“Nay, she’s nae a highland lass, but that doesnae mean she couldnae embrace our ways. She seems... at ease here, as though she belongs,” he said, still watching his sister and Roselyn together.

They had become firm friends, and Braden was only too happy to think of Kenna helping persuade Roselyn to stay. But if she chose to leave, there was nothing he could do to prevent it, as Roselyn looked up and caught his eye. He smiled at her, holding her gaze, as Kenna continued talking.

“Then ask her to stay. Ye can do so, now ye’ve found yer voice,” Calder said, and

Braden smiled, still holding Roselyn's gaze and imagining what she would say if he did so.

"And the things they sell – tis' a disgrace, some of it. I wouldn't feed it to the dogs," Kenna said, shaking her head.

Roselyn turned to her, having been distracted by the sight of Braden watching her from high up in the keep. "Oh... yes, I'm sure," she said, though she had not really been listening.

Kenna turned and asked her, "What do ye think? Should Braden stop the market or nae?" she asked.

"I... well, it provides a livelihood for many, doesn't it? They're only trying to make a living," she said, and Kenna sighed.

"Aye, I suppose so. But when ye see some of the stalls. Look at that one – entrails and carcasses – it turns my stomach," Kenna said, and Roselyn smiled.

There was still a great deal to get used to. Things were different in Scotland, not just the accent, but the way things were done, and the way lives were lived. A stall selling entrails and carcasses – the word they used was "Haggis" – was not something she had come across before, even as the stallholder had assured her the dish, a delicacy, no less, had originated in England.

"Tis' a mixture of offal and spices, my lady," he had said, offering Roselyn some to try.

She had been pleasantly surprised at the taste, even as Kenna had been swift in her condemnation.

“Tis’ disgustin’ – I gained a taste for English food when I was with ye, and tis’ English food I prefer,” she said, shaking her head and holding her nose, as they moved on from the stall, the stallholder giving them a cheerful wave.

Roselyn glanced up at the laird’s window, but Braden was gone, and she wondered when she would see him next. Part of her felt guilty for keeping the secret of Braden’s speech from his sister, but she had made a promise, and it pleased her to think she was the one to whom Braden had uttered his first words. She had done nothing to help him do so – not practically or through her lessons, at least – even as she hoped their deepening relationship might have been reason enough.

He spoke because he wanted to speak to me, she told herself, as she and Kenna toured the rest of the market.

There were other stalls selling food – roasted chestnuts, raised meat pies, heather honey, and sweet cakes made with dried fruit and berries – along with those selling leather goods, pottery, and other crafts. The villagers were plying their wares, trying to make a living as best they could.

“Would you return to England?” Roselyn asked, and Kenna nodded.

“I’d go tomorrow, aye. I miss it. Tis’ such a barbaric place, this one,” she said, and Roselyn smiled.

She had seen nothing to make her think Braden’s realm was a barbarous place. Peoples abided by the law, and despite her ordeal in the forest, Roselyn felt entirely safe and at ease there. They were gentle people, not given over to violence or degenerate ways, and Roselyn could happily have remained there, even as she knew her job was done.

“And I’d stay here if I could,” Roselyn replied.

Kenna looked at her in surprise.

“Ye’d stay here? But why? I was worried ye wouldnae even come, and now ye speak of stayin’ here,” she said, and Roselyn nodded.

“It’s the romance of the place – the soaring mountains, the crystal-clear loch, the deep forest, and... the people,” she replied, for the landscape was secondary to the contentment she had found in Braden’s company.

He was the reason she would stay – the reason she wanted to stay.

“I’m glad ye feel that way, Roselyn. We feel the same about ye. But could ye really stay here? What about yer parents? They’d never allow it, would they?” she asked, and Roselyn sighed.

It was a dream, of course, one she could only linger over in her thoughts, even as she knew Kenna was right. Her parents would not allow it. They would speak of their responsibility towards her, their intention of finding her a husband and making certain she was provided for.

To remain in Scotland would elicit an envoy north summoning her home by way of threat or promise. Her father had made clear his intentions for her, and it would not be long before the One month he had given her to find a suitor would pass. On returning to England, Roselyn knew she would find arrangements had been made, and suitors suitably entertained. Her parents would make introductions, and Roselyn would be expected to show swift and decisive action in securing a match. Her Scottish romance would soon be forgotten, as would her feelings for Braden. But it was a dream she clung to, a pleasant thought, amidst the worries of future sorrow.

“They wouldn’t allow it. They’d tell me I was being ridiculous. My parents want a future for me. They want certainty, but I can’t give them that. They want me to

marry, but I don't want to marry anyone they've chosen for me. If there was certainty here, perhaps... but their opinions are the same as yours, Kenna. They think everything north of the border is barbarous and, given that opinion, I hardly think they'll allow me to stay," Roselyn said, shaking her head sadly at the thought of having to leave what she now held dear behind her.

They walked together across the courtyard, making their way up a set of steps onto the battlements, from which they could look out over the loch, towards the mountains beyond. It amused Roselyn to think Kenna would gladly swap all this for her own life back in England, whilst Roselyn felt just the opposite.

"And could ye find certainty here?" she asked.

Roselyn glanced back towards the keep, looking up at the window of the laird's chambers, a smile coming over her face. "I could, yes. Though I'm not yet certain of it," she said, knowing she sounded somewhat mysterious.

Elena's words had given her hope. She was not just one of many women to have beaten a path to the laird's bed. What had passed between them had meant something, and in his actions and in his words Braden had revealed his feelings for her. But the possibility of a future with him was not enough to make such a radical change. She had to be certain, even as she felt unsure of Braden's position.

He was the laird, and the expectation was surely for him to marry a member of the clan. He was not free to make his own choices, and Roselyn knew there would be many obstacles to overcome if she was to be accepted as mistress of the clan. She felt torn between two worlds – that of parental expectation and hopeful longing.

Oh, but it's impossible, she told herself, even as Kenna smiled.

"I think I know what's in yer heart, Roselyn. Ye want to stay, and yet ye daenae

know if tis' possible with Braden," she said.

Roselyn blushed. She had not realized her feelings for the laird were so obvious, even as there was no point in denying them. She did want to stay, but she had to be sure Braden wanted her to.

"It's not easy," she said, and Kenna put her hand on Roselyn's arm, giving her a reassuring smile.

"Ye'd have my support, Roselyn. Both of ye. My brother – well, he cannae say what he wants, but I can see he wants ye to stay," she said.

Roselyn returned Kenna's smile. She was grateful to her for her support, even as she felt guilty for keeping back Braden's secret. He could say what he wanted, and that was part of the reason for her confusion. Braden had not said what he wanted, not in so many words, and Roselyn still felt confused as to his true feelings towards her.

"That's kind of you to say, Kenna. You've been a dear friend to me since I arrived here," Roselyn said, and Kenna embraced her.

"And ye've been the same to me. I only pray that ye comin' here hasnae been in vain – that he'll talk. Tis' a dream, I know, and perhaps I'm foolish to hope for it. But tis' what I long for," she said, and Roselyn smiled, taking Kenna's hand in hers, and returning her reassuring smile.

"I know it's not been easy for you. Nor for Braden, either. Losing your father came as a terrible blow, but the words are there, I promise you," she said, not wanting Kenna to give up hope on that she knew to be true.

Kenna nodded. "Aye, and if anyone can bring out his speech, tis' ye. But I should return inside. I havenae seen my mother today. She's been terribly quiet recently. I'm

worried about her. I'll see ye later," she said, and she hurried off, leaving Roselyn standing alone on the battlements.

She looked up again at the laird's window, thinking back to the night they had shared together. She could only imagine what her mother and sisters would say if they knew what had happened – an unmarried Englishwoman sharing the bed of a Scottish laird...

They'd be horrified, she said to herself, even as she knew she felt no shame in what she had done.

If she and Braden were to be together, nothing else mattered, and as she returned inside, Roselyn's mind was made up.

Braden was pacing up and down, lost in thought. He was trying to remember something more about his dream, some detail he had missed. The events were always so vivid, and yet the picture was never complete. But something had changed. The power of speech had given rise to a new possibility. If he could speak, perhaps he could remember, too.

And that's what I need to do, he said to himself, for he knew he would find no rest until his father's killer was brought to justice.

It had seemed odd to Braden to have his uncle bring a suspect to the castle after all these years. The bandit had been a wicked man, but he had not been the murderer, and the more Braden thought on it, the stranger it seemed.

Why did he bring him here? What was he tryin' to prove? he asked himself.

A knock interrupted his thoughts.

It was Calder, returned from the midday meal, and he was eager to discuss the strange occurrence of the bandit and the accusations against him. "It was a strange thing – I daenae know what kind of man he was. Where did he come from and why? Yer uncle brought him here, makin' claims against him. But for what reason? Tis' all anyone's talkin' about," Calder said, sitting down on a chair by the hearth.

Braden nodded. He could not understand it, either, even as his uncle had always vowed to find his brother's killer and bring him to justice. "I swear on my life," he

had said, when Braden was still a child. And yet that promise had never been fulfilled, and the capture of the bandit had only made things stranger.

“Tis’ playin’ on my mind, too. I just daenae know why he brought him here. What reason was there for it?” Braden replied.

Calder shrugged. “The passin’ of time – he grows older, he wants to be avenged,” he said.

“And then there’s my mother, too. She seems withdrawn. More so than usual. I daenae know, tis’ like somethin’ hangs over us. A danger lurkin’ somehow... I daenae know,” Braden replied.

He had tried not to think about it, but he had felt it ever since he had returned from escorting Roselyn north, as though something had changed in his absence. There was danger in the air, a brooding foreboding, and the arrival of the bandit had only added to his sense of discomfort.

“I feel it, too – tis’ as though, I cannae trust those I once trusted. Furtive looks, whisperin’ between the men. I wonder...” Calder said, pondering, as Braden sighed.

If he was to ask Roselyn to stay, the castle was no place for her to live, not with such uncertainty hanging in the air.

“Ye think they plan rebellion? But who would lead them? Do I face a known enemy? Do we have a spy in our midst? I’ve tried to ignore it, but these are dangerous times, Calder,” he said, shaking his head in confusion.

“Tis’ still strange to hear ye talk; I daenae think I’ll ever get used to it,” Calder said, and Braden laughed.

“Aye, well, let the others think I cannae speak. Tis’ dangerous for such change to come about so suddenly. They think I’ll never speak. Let them think it a while longer. We should bide our time, Calder. Danger lurks, but I cannae fully understand it. Tis’ a secret we must keep,” Braden said, and his friend nodded.

“We’ll keep our council together, Braden, just as it always was,” he replied, as a sudden knock came at the door.

Roselyn had been standing outside, listening in astonishment to the voices coming from within. She had gone to Braden’s chambers to tell him she intended to remain in Scotland.

She wanted to express her feelings for him, to tell him how much he had come to mean to her, and to thank him for allowing her to be the one to whom he had first spoken. But as she had approached the door, she had been startled by the sound of Braden’s voice and Calder’s reply. They were speaking as though they had always spoken – of a danger threatening the clan, and of keeping their council, just as it always had been...

They’ve always spoken to one another, she said to herself, her eyes growing wide, and her anger rising.

Roselyn was astonished, and tears welled up in her eyes as she realized she had been played for a fool. Braden could speak, he had always been able to speak, and yet he had chosen to conceal it for his own ends. Roselyn had been taken in by him – as had everyone else – and he had used the revelation of his words to seduce her.

The wicked man, she exclaimed to herself, her hands trembling, as she raised her fist and knocked hard on the door.

Fighting back the tears, she waited for him to respond, hoping to shame him. She had

been about to give him her heart, to confess her love for him, and tell him she wanted nothing more than to remain in Scotland and by his side.

But hearing him speak, after everything he had said about keeping the matter to themselves, was like a dagger to her heart. They had shared such intimacies together, and with the power of speech, Roselyn had believed Braden to be sincere in expressing the words in his heart. The door opened, and Braden stood before her.

“I’ll be back later, laird,” Calder said, slipping past them, and Braden waited until he was gone, smiling at Roselyn, who was trying hard to maintain her composure.

When the sound of Calder’s footsteps had disappeared, Braden breathed a deep sigh. “It’s nae easy, lass,” he whispered, shaking his head, as he beckoned her into his chambers.

Roselyn could not believe his audacity. He was still keeping up the pretense, playing her for a fool. But Roselyn was no fool, and she was not about to be treated like one.

“I came to tell you I’m leaving,” she said, and Braden turned to her in surprise.

“Leavin’? – but ye cannae leave,” he said, sounding hurt, as he stared at her in confusion.

He, too, it seemed, had assumed she would stay, and yet having learned the truth, Roselyn could not do so. He had always been able to speak – the conversation she had overheard with Calder had proved it – and now he was pretending once again. It was pathetic, and Roselyn had had enough.

“I’ve got to. I need to go home. I can’t stay here forever. Besides, I’ve finished my work. You can speak. That’s why I came here, isn’t it?” she said.

She would not give him the satisfaction of knowing why she was leaving. He could guess as to the reason, if he wished, but she would not tell him. Roselyn would remain magnanimous, and Braden could be left wondering.

She no longer cared, even as she fought back the tears, angry at how close she had come to being a laughingstock. He and Calder were laughing at her, talking about her behind her back, and now she wondered just what Braden had told him of their night together.

“Aye, lass, I can, but only just. It was ye who brought it out of me. I daenae know how ye did it, but I’ll be forever grateful to ye for doing so. But... must ye go? Ye daenae have to. I’d hoped ye’d stay here for a while,” he said, but Roselyn shook her head.

“I was only ever coming here for a few months at the most. I thought we’d need longer, but it seemed we didn’t. I can go home now. I miss my sisters,” Roselyn replied.

The laird looked at her in confusion, but Roselyn was not about to be taken in by his continued act. She felt humiliated. Her feelings for Braden were very real, but it seemed he had merely lusted after her, and had used his apparent speechlessness to his own advantage.

“I understand, but tis’ all very sudden, Roselyn. After last night, I thought ye’d want to stay. I hoped ye’d stay,” he said, but Roselyn shook her head.

She would have stayed. She would gladly have given herself to him. She had fallen in love with him, but her feelings were based entirely on a lie. He was not speechless, and he and Calder had made her a laughingstock.

“Well, that was last night. I’ve had time to think, and I want to go home now. I don’t

want to stay here any longer,” she said, and Braden sighed.

“I’ll miss ye, lass,” he said, and Roselyn fought back the tears.

“Yes, well, we knew it wasn’t going to be forever,” she said, as Apollo came and sniffed at her hand.

He whimpered, and Braden gave a weak smile.

“He’ll miss ye, too. Please, will ye nae think twice about it?” he asked, but Roselyn shook her head.

Her mind was made up, as much as it broke her heart to admit it. She felt sad at the prospect of leaving, but she could not bring herself to remain, even as her heart and mind were torn. He appeared so sincere in his words, yet in overhearing him speaking to Calder, Roselyn had realized he was nothing but a liar. They had always spoken, and all this nonsense about a dream and a promise never to speak of what he had seen had been nothing but a lie.

“No, it’s no good. I’ve made up my mind,” she said, and Braden sighed.

“Very well, lass, but ye’ll be missed. I know Kenna will miss ye, and Apollo, too, and Elena – ye’ve touched the lives of us all. But mine especially. Ye brought out the best in me,” he said.

A tear rolled down Roselyn’s cheek, even as she remained stony-faced.

“Yes, well, I’m glad to have done so. But I can’t stay here forever. I’ve got to go,” she said, and taking a deep breath, she turned, just as Braden caught her by the arm.

“Has somethin’ changed between us? When ye left the bed, I was still asleep. Did I

do somethin' wrong? I'm sorry if..." he said, staring at her with a confused look in his eyes.

But Roselyn shook her head. He had done nothing wrong – not then, at least. She had truly believed his words, or what she believed to be his first words, even as her belief had been proved false.

Everything he had done, everything he had made her feel, every word he had uttered – it had all been right, and yet he had betrayed himself through his words, too. She could no longer trust or believe him, even as she still cared for him.

"No, but it doesn't matter now. We both have our own lives to lead, don't we?" she said, and reluctantly, he nodded.

"Aye, I suppose so, lass. I just wish ye'd reconsider. Do ye really mean to leave now? Tis' a dangerous journey south. Will ye nae allow me to accompany ye?" he asked.

Roselyn had given little thought to the practicalities of what she was doing. In her mind, she needed only to get away, to escape from his deception and all it entailed. She shook her head, determined to refuse any offer of help he intended to give.

"No, thank you. I don't need an escort. Send me in a carriage. There's one here, isn't there? Have it take me to the nearest town, then I can go on from there," Roselyn said, but the laird shook his head.

"But ye cannae go alone. Ye know what a treacherous journey tis' south. I cannae allow ye to go alone. I daenae understand, Roselyn. Why are ye being like this? What has happened?" he asked.

Roselyn looked at him defiantly, drawing herself up, and refusing to be taken in again by his lies. "The bandit – he brought danger. There's more to this than you're telling

me. I'm afraid, and I refuse to remain here any longer to await whatever fate might befall me," she said.

He looked at her in surprise, hurt, it seemed, by her refusal to trust him. "Didnae I save ye from the bandit?" he asked, and she nodded.

"You did, but more may come. What danger lurks around us? What do you fear?" she demanded, for she had overheard much of the conversation between the laird and Calder.

They had spoken of an impending danger, one set to engulf them all – a hidden danger lurking in the shadows.

"I... I daenae know, lass. Tis' a feelin' I have. But, well, I cannae say for certain. The bandit was just one man, but tis' more to it than that. Who killed my father remains a mystery, and I cannae rest until I know the truth," he said.

Roselyn shook her head.

"Then danger hangs over us all, and I can't stay here to wait for it to find us. I was terrified when the bandit seized me. You came to my rescue then, but perhaps next time..." she said, her words trailing off.

She would have trusted him with her life – she had trusted him with her life – and yet, in her anger, she couldn't help but speak these thoughts aloud.

"But if ye daenae think tis' safe here, tis' nae going to be safe on the journey south without an escort," he said, but Roselyn had heard enough of his protests.

She wanted to leave, and that was that. "I need to get my things ready," she said, and pulling her arm away from him, she left the room.

To her annoyance, Braden followed her, and he continued his questioning, even as she entered her own chambers a few moments later. Elena was there, folding linen, and she looked up in surprise as Roselyn entered, the laird following behind.

“My lady, I—” she began, but Roselyn interrupted her.

“Elena, please help me pack my things. I’m leaving for the south this afternoon. Quickly, now, I want to get going as soon as possible,” she said.

Braden had fallen silent, and he looked at Roselyn with a sorrowful expression. It angered her to think he was still keeping up this pretense of being mute whilst Elena stood before him, even as the servant now hurried to do Roselyn’s bidding.

“I’m sorry to see ye go, my lady. The things ye said earlier...” Elena said, glancing at the laird.

“Well, that was then. But it doesn’t matter now,” Roselyn replied.

She busied herself helping Elena with the packing, and Braden stood by the door, a mournful expression on his face. If she had not known better, Roselyn might have thought him genuinely remorseful at seeing her go. But what she now knew had tainted anything she might have thought about him, and she could feel nothing but a sense of shame at having been so easily fooled.

She had given herself entirely to him, caught up in the passion of all they had shared. But behind her back, he was laughing at her – another conquest to be boasted about and discarded at will. What had he really planned to do with her?

“But must ye go today, my lady? Tis’ a dangerous road south, and without an escort I’d fear for ye,” Elena said, but Roselyn shook her head.

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll be quite all right. I don’t need anyone fussing over me. I can take care of myself. I’ll have the carriage driver, and when I arrive in the nearest town, I’ll engage someone to escort me,” she said.

Braden shook his head, signing to Elena, who looked worried.

“But, my lady, tis’ many miles to the nearest town, out of the glen, and far across the moorland. Can ye trust any escort ye find? Tis’ a wild country beyond our borders, and a lone woman...” she said, but Roselyn had heard enough.

She was not about to be cowed into changing her mind, nor would she accept any help Braden offered her. She wanted to leave, and that was that. With the packing finished, she turned to find Braden still watching her. He had a sorrowful expression on his face, but it seemed the sorrow was entirely for himself, and Roselyn was not about to be taken in by it.

“I’m ready to leave. Have the carriage made ready,” she said, her tone haughty, as she folded her arms and fixed him with a defiant look.

He shook his head and sighed, signaling to Elena to leave them. “Will ye nae reconsider, lass?” he asked, but Roselyn shook her head.

“No, I won’t. I’m leaving, and that’s that,” she said.

Braden shrugged, beckoning her to follow him. He led her along the passageway and down the stairs to the great hall. Servants were directed to Roselyn’s chambers, the laird signing to them, pointing to Roselyn, who nodded.

“Are ye leaving us, my lady?” the servant asked, and Roselyn nodded.

“I am, yes. Bring my bags as the laird instructs,” she said, and the servants hurried

off.

At that moment, Kenna and Innes emerged from the great hall, looking questioningly at Braden, who signed to them.

He can't even bring himself to speak to his own mother and sister, Roselyn thought to herself, shaking her head, as Kenna looked at her in surprise.

"Ye're leavin' us? But I thought..." she said, but Roselyn shook her head.

"I've had a change of heart. I want to go home. I miss my sisters and my parents, and I was never meant to be here for longer than a few weeks in any case," she replied.

Roselyn knew Kenna would be confused. Only that morning, they had spoken of the possibility of Roselyn remaining in Scotland, and Roselyn had even hinted as to her growing feelings for Braden. But all that had changed, and Roselyn had no desire to remain there any longer. It had all been a fantasy, too good to be true, and despite her feelings for Braden, Roselyn felt betrayed.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," Kenna said, glancing at Braden, who stood with his gaze averted.

Innes shook her head. She looked terribly sad, as though she bore the weight of the world on her shoulders, and Roselyn wondered what cruel reason Braden had for keeping his speech from her.

She was his mother, and she had suffered terribly in the aftermath of her husband's death. Was Braden really playing her for a fool, too? Perhaps they were all of them sworn to secrecy, each believing themselves to be the only one to whom Braden spoke. It seemed a terrible possibility, but a possibility, nonetheless.

“I intend to leave immediately. I’ll make the journey to the nearest town, then go on from there. I’m to have a carriage take me,” Roselyn said, glancing at Braden, who nodded.

“As ye wish, but tis’ such a shame. I’ll miss ye, Roselyn. We all will,” Kenna said, reaching out to take Roselyn’s hand in hers.

“And I’ll miss you, too,” Roselyn said, for she would miss Kenna.

The two of them had grown close, and she had come to see the laird’s sister as her own. Kenna reminded her so much of Grace and Matilda, and it had been a pleasure to see how she had grown and blossomed since last they had met. But even such closeness was not enough to keep her there, not when she felt such betrayal at the hands of Braden and Calder.

“I have to go now,” she said, as two of the servants hurried past with her bags.

Braden led her outside, ordering the carriage to be brought from the stables, as a group of clansmen looked on in surprise. No one was expecting Roselyn to leave. In the short time she had been at the castle, she had made an impression on everyone – the English lady, arrived to help the laird with his speech, all of them hoping she would succeed. As they waited for the carriage, Braden’s uncle appeared from the smithy, holding a newly forged sword, and he paused, looking with interest at Roselyn, who only wanted to be on her way.

“Are ye leavin’ us, lass?” he asked, and Roselyn nodded.

“I am, yes. I’m going back to England. I can’t stay here any longer. I miss my family,” Roselyn said, and Donald looked at her in surprise.

“Is that so? Well, ye go with our thanks, though tis’ a shame ye havenae succeeded in

yer task of helpin' my nephew to speak," he said, glancing at Braden, who remained resolutely silent.

"No, well, it hasn't worked. I'm obviously not a good enough tutor," Roselyn said, even as Kenna protested.

"But Roselyn, ye are, and if ye stay, there's plenty of time. I wasnae expectin' a miracle. But if ye stayed, perhaps more could be done, the two of ye..." she said, but her words trailed off as Braden raised his hand for silence.

For a moment, Roselyn thought he would speak, but he merely shook his head.

"It seems the laird will let ye go without further explanation," Donald said.

The carriage was now brought round to the front of the keep. It was an ancient, rickety vehicle, its cart covered by taught willow curves and a tarpaulin, drawn by an old mule. Roselyn looked at it skeptically.

"I hardly think..." she said, but Braden shrugged.

"Tis' all there is, I'm afraid. We daenae have much need for carriages. Ye could ride, but tis' a dangerous road alone. Will ye nae allow Braden to escort ye?" Kenna implored her, but Roselyn shook her head.

Her mind was made up, and the carriage, as old and rickety as it was, would have to do. Her bags were loaded on, and the driver was given instructions to take her to the nearest town – a two-day journey south.

As Roselyn climbed beneath the tarpaulin, she looked out, catching Braden's eye. He looked sad and forlorn, even as Roselyn could feel no sympathy for him – he had brought this on himself. She had imagined all they could be together, and it was her

dreams he had destroyed. His own intentions were uncertain, but Roselyn no longer wished to wait for them to become clear.

“Goodbye,” Roselyn said, and as the carriage trundled out of the courtyard, she sat back with tears in her eyes.

Braden did not know why Roselyn had left. He felt hurt and confused. One moment, she had been at his side, in his arms, caught up in the passion of new feelings and emotions, and the next...

She flees back to England without so much as an explanation, he said to himself, watching as the carriage drove through the gates.

He did not believe her earlier excuses. She had hardly mentioned her family since arriving, and he could not believe a sudden wave of homesickness had overtaken her.

She had spoken of fearing danger, and whilst Braden, too, sensed such a looming possibility, he had tried to keep Roselyn safe, protecting her from the bandit, and keeping close to her in an effort to reassure her. None of it made any sense, and Braden felt forlorn, fearing he had done something he should regret, even as he did not know what it could be.

"I'll miss her terribly," Kenna said, shaking her head.

"Runnin' away before she's even attempted the job she was brought here for. Tis' the English way, though – they're afraid of hard work. She was like a fish out of water," Donald said, and Braden shot him an angry look, signing his displeasure, even as he would gladly have told him to keep quiet.

He had not liked the way his uncle had looked at Roselyn. There had been something in his eyes, a longing, perhaps, or a desire to possess her. Perhaps it was Donald

himself who had caused Roselyn to flee, and now Braden sighed, sorry to think of her leaving, just as he had discovered his true feelings for her.

Do I go after her? Do I tell her the truth? he thought to himself, still standing on the steps of the keep, long after the carriage had disappeared.

But there was little point in longing. Roselyn's mind was made up, and it seemed the life of the castle and the clan would continue, even as Braden sank into a deep depression. Kenna slipped her arm into his, smiling at him reassuringly.

"Come now, brother. Daenae cast such a long shadow across yer face. I daenae know why she's left, either. But tis' little point in mournin' her now. Enjoy the memories of what ye shared, and daenae dwell on the things ye cannae change," she said.

But Braden did dwell on those things. His sister did not know of the intimacies he and Roselyn had shared, for if she did, she would surely find the excuses Roselyn had made for leaving very flimsy.

They had been intimate with such passion, and as he had held her in his arms, Braden had known Roselyn was unlike any other woman he had ever known. He had fallen in love with her, and he had hoped she felt the same way about him. It was Roselyn who had brought forth his speech, and whilst Braden knew she had come to Scotland to do just that, he had hoped she would remain, and so too, would his voice.

But perhaps I'll never speak, he thought to himself, for he no longer felt able to, trapped instead by his memories of the past, memories Roselyn had begun to unlock.

"Yer sister's right, Braden. Daenae dwell on what cannae be. Let her go, tis' for the best," Donald said.

Braden scowled at him. He did not need his uncle's advice in matters of marriage and

matrimony.

“We do what we must to survive, Braden,” his mother had told him, on the day she had entrusted him to the care of his adopted parents.

Braden had always wondered what she had meant by those words, as though she had been warning him, not only of his own peril, but of hers, too. Now, he glanced at his mother, who was staring resolutely ahead, as though lost in thought. Braden shrugged, signing to his sister, and pointing along the glen.

“Tis’ nae a safe road, Braden. I fear for her,” Kenna said, shaking her head.

Braden, too, was fearful. Many dangers lurked in the forest – bandits, outlaws, robbers. A lone woman, even in a carriage with a driver and horse, was a vulnerable target, and it would take only one wicked heart to seize the advantage.

I should go after her, Braden thought to himself.

“I’m ridin’ that way myself today,” said Donald, as though knowing what Braden was thinking. “I’ve some business in the south. It’ll nae take me long to catch up with the carriage. I can keep watch from a distance.”

Braden knew Roselyn would be angry if he followed her. She had made her feelings clear, even as it had upset him to see her change of heart. He nodded, glad to think his uncle would be absent for the coming days, and signing to him, he made a show of thanks.

“I’ll see to it nay harm comes to her,” said Donald, “but I’ll keep my distance. She seems to want nothin’ more to do with us, Braden. Ye, at least.”

He was twisting the knife, but Braden was determined not to rise to his challenge, and

turning on his heels, he marched back into the keep, waving his hand dismissively.

He felt angry, not only with himself, but with Roselyn, too. She had offered no explanation, save the one he did not believe, and it made Braden wonder if some other party was involved in forcing Roselyn's hand.

Calder, perhaps? Has he said, somethin' to her, or one of the other men... I daenae know, I daenae understand, but why... what did I dae to her? Nothin' – I was honorable, and yet she grows angry with me... well, let her go... nay, I daenae mean that, but... why? Braden thought, cursing himself for allowing Roselyn to slip through his grasp, and lamenting all that could have been.

Roselyn brushed the tears from her eyes, glancing back as the carriage wound its way through the village and took to the path leading along the loch. The keep was soon the only thing visible, towering above the trees, and Roselyn wondered if Braden was there now, locked in his bedchamber, lamenting her departure.

She had been resolute in her determination, even as she knew it had cost her dearly. She had been ready to give everything to Braden, and yet he had betrayed her, forcing her to make a decision she would not even have considered a few hours earlier. She was not homesick, nor was she afraid of whatever danger awaited them, but to hear Braden talk to Calder, to hear him speak as though they had always spoken.

He lied to me, she told herself, and if he could lie to her about such a monumental truth, he could lie about anything.

Roselyn could not trust Braden anymore. Her heart was breaking, and she wondered if she would ever recover. Fresh tears welled up in her eyes, and she took a deep breath, turning to face forward, and calling out to the carriage driver to make all haste southwards.

“We’ll have to overnight on the road, my lady. We’ll never reach Longtown before nightfall. Tis’ a two-day journey at least,” the driver called back.

“Very well, so be it,” Roselyn called back.

She was trying not to feel afraid, even as the trees seemed to loom over them, growing denser on every side. They were soon deep in the heart of the forest, far from the safety of the village and the castle.

Roselyn remembered the journey north, and how she had felt safe and reassured in the company of Braden, even as she had assumed he was a mere servant. But this was different, and as they traveled onwards, Roselyn was feeling increasingly nervous.

“Tis’ a difficult road for the carriage to take, my lady – tis’ why the laird and mistresses always ride on horseback,” the carriage driver said, looking back at Roselyn, who sighed.

They were making slow progress. The wheels of the carriage kept getting stuck in the ruts on the road, or bogged down in the mud, and the horses were struggling.

“Do you suggest we abandon the carriage and ride?” Roselyn asked, but the driver shook his head.

“And am I to return to the castle empty-handed, my lady? Am I to tell the laird his carriage lies many miles along the loch side, given over to whoever wishes to take it? I’m sorry, my lady. I cannae do that,” he said, and instead they struggled on.

It was growing late in the day, and the shadows were lengthening. They stopped by the side of the road, and the carriage driver made a fire, for the evening was cool. Roselyn made her way down the bank from the road to the loch, looking out across the water, where the sun was setting behind the mountains on the far side.

What a beautiful place, Roselyn thought to herself, for even the sadness she felt at Braden's betrayal could not lessen the sense of awe she felt at the beauty of the landscape.

It had become her home, and she was sad to think she would be leaving it behind. England, the valley, Abbey Estate, her family... it was another world, one she would need time to get used to again.

It was as though she was torn between two worlds, the one she was leaving, and the one she was returning to. Neither of them felt like home now, even as she had been so close to making a choice of one over the other.

I'd have given him everything. I'd have given him my heart, she said to herself, as tears welled up in her eyes.

She picked up a stone and skimmed it across the water, watching as the ripples spread out across the surface. Her thoughts lingered on Braden, even as she had tried hard to put him out of her mind. For all his show, she did not imagine he was giving her a second thought.

He and Calder would be laughing about it, reminding themselves of the ruse they had played, and planning who next to take advantage of.

He couldn't even explain himself, Roselyn thought to herself, though she was beginning to realize she had given him little opportunity to do so.

Roselyn knew she could be a formidable woman who did not suffer fools gladly. When she perceived she had been wronged, that was that, and she would not entertain the possibility that she could be wrong.

She had not told Braden her real reason for leaving, and he could not possibly know

she had overheard him and Calder talking of keeping one another's counsel.

But that's what they were doing, she reminded herself, even as the merest hint of doubt entered her mind.

Taking up another stone, she dismissed such thoughts as idle, reminding herself she owed Braden nothing, and would not be yet another of his conquests.

I'm better than that, she told herself, as the carriage driver called out to her from the top of the bank.

"The fire's going strong, my lady. I'll warm some milk and honey if you wish," he called out.

Roselyn nodded, scrambling back up the bank to the road, where a small fire was burning next to the carriage. The sight was cheering, for the shadows were lengthening, and the woods growing darker. Roselyn shivered, despite the day having been warm, and pulled her shawl tightly around her shoulders.

"How long until we make camp for the night?" she asked.

The carriage driver, whose name she had discovered was Duncan, thought for a moment.

"We could go on a little longer, my lady. Tis' best to make as much progress through the forest as we can. Tis' a place I'd rather nae bed down in. The further we are from the castle, the more lawless it becomes. When we emerge, it's into farmland and pasture – tis' safer there, but out here..." he said, glancing through the trees.

Roselyn shivered. It reminded her of the encounter with the child in the woods as she and Braden had ridden north. Roselyn had been fooled by the child's appearance,

naively assuming there to be no danger.

But with darkness gathering, she felt nervous, knowing anyone could be lurking, waiting for their chance to strike. Duncan handed her a cup of warm milk, mixed with honey. It was pleasantly reviving, and it was not long before they were back on their way, following the road by the loch side, the carriage trundling rhythmically along.

“How much further?” Roselyn called out, for the carriage driver had told her he knew a place they could stop – a dell beside a flowing stream, a short distance off the path.

“Another hour, perhaps, my lady,” he called back.

It was dark now, and Duncan had lit a lamp which swung rhythmically from the central curve of the carriage, illuminating the tarpaulin interior. Roselyn had wrapped herself in a blanket. The night was growing cold, and she shivered, thinking back to the warmth of her chambers at the castle.

She pictured Braden and the others in the great hall, eating dinner. A fire would have been kindled in the hearth with a hundred candles illuminating the scene. The food would be plentiful, and the great hall would be filled with laughter and conversation.

Even as the laird remains silent, Roselyn told herself, sighing as the carriage jolted over a rut in the road. Roselyn slid to one side, catching hold of one of the curves to steady herself.

“I’m sorry about that, my lady. Tis’ nae easy to see such.... Woah, there,” the carriage driver exclaimed, and Roselyn was once again thrown forward, almost falling out of the carriage, as they came to a sudden halt.

Peering through the darkness, she could now make out an object lying across the road. It was a great tree trunk blocking their path. There had been no wind to speak

of, but it seemed the entire tree had fallen, its foliage-clad branches creating what seemed to be a great hedge, rising as though in a maze, blocking out the stars above. The carriage driver climbed down with a sigh.

“Can we get through?” Roselyn asked, peering through the gloom, her eyes adjusting to the darkness.

Duncan approached the fallen tree. He made a feeble attempt to move it. But the mighty tree could not be moved, and even if the horses were somehow attached to the trunk, there would be no possibility of pulling back the tree.

The road was blocked, and they could not hope to take the carriage through the trees at night – or perhaps even in the day. Roselyn felt despair. She had wanted to get away as quickly as possible, to leave Scotland behind and never return. But now she was thwarted, and they could not hope to do anything now with darkness setting in. She realized they would have to spend the night by the roadside.

“We’ll never move it. In the morning, we’ll have to untether the horses and abandon the carriage. I can only hope it’ll still be here when I return,” Duncan said.

Roselyn felt sorry for him. It was her fault he had been taken from his duties at the castle and ordered to accompany her. He was a smithy by trade, and rarely left the confines of the village.

“But can we really stay here all night?” Roselyn asked, still not having climbed down from the carriage, wanting only to stay close to the light.

“Well, I suppose I could walk on a little. I think there’s a cottage a few miles further along the road. I could bring back help. But I shouldn’t leave you, my lady,” Duncan said, but Roselyn shook her head.

Neither choice was favorable, but the thought of bedding down in the middle of the forest, vulnerable to attack, was less preferable than remaining awake for a few more hours whilst Duncan went to summon help.

“I’ll be all right. I’d rather keep my wits about me than fall asleep out here. You go. I’ll be all right. Bring back help as soon as you can. Tell them who we are, and that we need horses and strong ropes to help move the tree. Something needs to be done – this is the only way in and out of the glen,” Roselyn replied, for she had heard Kenna say as much after her arrival.

She and Braden had ridden north along this road, and she vaguely recalled the cottage Duncan spoke of. A woman there had given her a cup of water and appeared extremely deferential to Braden, a fact Roselyn had found odd at the time, believing him to be only a servant.

“Very well, my lady. But keep yer wits about ye, as ye say. If anythin’ happens, scream – scream for all ye’re worth. Tis’ a still night, and a wonder the tree fell at all. It must’ve been its time. We all have one. I’ll be as quick as I can,” he said, and Roselyn watched the outline of his figure scrambling over the fallen tree.

She listened for as long as she could hear his footsteps, knowing herself safe until then. But at last, all was still, and Roselyn was alone. She pulled her shawl tightly around her shoulders, glancing out of the carriage, the front of which was open to the night sky.

The horses were standing patiently in the stirrups, occasionally stomping their hooves or whinnying, the sound echoing through the trees. The fallen trunk was still settling, the branches creaking and the leaves rustling. Roselyn shivered.

It’s not for long. We’ll soon be at the cottage, or help will arrive, she thought to herself, trying hard not to think about the comforts of a warm bed and hearth – the

things she had left behind her at the castle.

But her consolation was to remind herself of why she had left. She would not give Braden the satisfaction of his joke, even as she was beginning to question the haste of her departure. Roselyn knew she was headstrong, and when she felt wronged, she tended to act impulsively. But this was different, and she had hardly given Braden the chance to explain himself.

But I heard them talking. The way they spoke, they were like old friends, she said to herself, even as she knew that was just what they were, whether Calder and Braden had always spoken to one another or not.

But Braden had promised her he would keep his speech a secret, and she had believed him, swearing herself to the secret, even as he had broken his own word. That was the reason she had left, but out here, in the dark forest, all alone, it seemed a rather feeble excuse.

I was angry, she told herself, trying to justify her behavior.

Braden had played a trick on her when he had not revealed his identity when they first met, but this one felt like a betrayal, and he needed to realize he was in the wrong. He could not be allowed to treat women in such a way, even as Roselyn was beginning to feel she had been too hasty in her departure. She had not allowed him to explain, even as it had surely been difficult for him to do so, given he had only just begun to speak again.

To me, perhaps, but not to Calder, she reminded herself, folding her arms, as though Braden was standing before her.

An owl hooted in the trees above, and Roselyn startled, feeling angry with herself for being scared. There was nothing to be scared of, or so she told herself, and she

remained sitting, waiting for Duncan's return.

He won't be long, and once they move the trees, we can be on our way, Roselyn told herself, looking forward to the prospect of a warm bed in the cottage and a hearty breakfast the next morning.

It was around an hour or so later she heard the sound of horse's hooves, and then footsteps approaching the carriage. With a sigh of relief, she leaned out from beneath the tarpaulin, trying to make out the figure approaching her, surprised to find them coming from behind.

"I was beginning to give up hope, Duncan. Didn't you bring anyone back with you to help?" she called out, but no answer came through the darkness, only the approaching figure, and the sudden sound of a dagger being drawn.

Braden was restless. He had retired early to his chambers, refusing to eat in the great hall with his mother and sister.

“Are ye broodin’ over her leavin’ ye, Braden?” Kenna had asked, but Braden had dismissed her with a wave of his hand, not wishing to be the subject of speculation.

He felt embarrassed at having allowed his feelings to get the better of him. He had thought Roselyn felt the same for him as he felt for her, but in doing so, he had entirely misread the signs.

She had not fallen in love with him, nor had she had any intention of remaining in Scotland. As far as Roselyn was concerned, her job was done, and she was returning to England without giving Braden a second thought.

‘Tis’ the last time I fall in love, he vowed, for Braden had no intention of allowing his heart to be broken again.

He had not meant to fall in love. At first, Roselyn had been an interesting diversion – an English curiosity. But the more time they had spent together, the more he had come to see her as something more, much more.

He had never allowed himself to fall in love before. It had seemed a weakness, a vulnerability, even as having done so he was loathe to admit he had no wish to repeat it, if only to spare himself a broken heart.

Daenae let her get to ye, he said to himself, drawing back the drapes across his chamber window and looking out across the darkening loch beyond.

He wondered where Roselyn was now – how far her carriage journey had taken her south. There was no doubt they would be forced to overnight in the forest, and it made Braden nervous to think of Roselyn out there alone.

It was her choice to leave, he reminded himself, even as he knew he should have been more insistent on accompanying her.

There were many unknown dangers in the forest – and many known ones, too. Not only bandits and outlaws, but madmen and wild animals. It was not a safe place for a woman, even entrusted to one of his men.

Ye should've been more forceful. Ye shouldnae have let her go alone, Braden said to himself, and now he thought he should have been more forceful in other ways, too.

He had not fought for her or pleaded with her. The power of speech was his, and yet he had failed to use it in the very moment of his need. What was the point of speech, if not to speak the truth of one's heart? Braden cursed himself for holding back, and now he felt resolved to follow Roselyn and persuade her of his feelings for her.

She had seemed cold and distant, even as her reasons for leaving seemed to belie the passions they had shared – or so she had claimed. She had given no indication of being unhappy, and yet there had been a sadness in her eyes, far deeper than any homesickness or fear of danger. It was as though she had hoped in something and lost it – hoped in him, perhaps.

But what have I done? I've done nothin' but speak, unless... he said to himself, suddenly fearing it may not have been in waking she took offence, but in experiencing his dream alongside her.

Perhaps that was what had scared her – had he said something while he was sleeping? Had he revealed something she should never have heard? He thought back to the night before, to the dream, and to what he had seen. But it had been just the same as ever, and he was still without the answers he needed.

I'll never discover the truth, he thought to himself, sighing as he paced up and down in front of the hearth.

Apollo had been asleep, but he looked up now, barking, as Braden sighed.

“Aye, and ye did nothin’ to persuade her to stay. If she will nae find a reason to stay in yer big brown eyes, she’s hardly going to find them in mine, is she?” Braden said, and Apollo lay down and whimpered.

But Braden knew he could not remain at the castle – not whilst Roselyn was out in the forest alone. He would not scare her, but keep watch from afar, ready to act should danger arise. In the morning, he could decide whether to speak to her, and with his mind made up, Braden hurried from his chambers, closely followed by Apollo.

“Where are ye going?” Kenna asked, meeting him on the stairs.

The clansmen were filing out of the great hall, and dinner was over. Braden signed to her, pointing towards the door of the keep, and making the movement of a horse and rider.

“Ye’re going after her? Tis’ about time, Braden. Ye were a fool to let her go. I know how ye feel about her, and tis’ surely the same way she feels about ye. Whatever passed between ye, daenae let her go without a fight. Make her see how much ye care for her. I know tis’ difficult without words, but by yer actions...” Kenna said, and Braden nodded, blushing, as he realized how easily his sister had discerned his

feelings for Roselyn.

But tis' true, and why deny it? She could be mistress of this clan, and... my wife, he said to himself, and now he hurried out of the keep to the stables, where the stable hands soon had Zeus saddled, and Braden was galloping out into the night.

Kenna was right. He had been a fool to let Roselyn go, and now he was determined to find her and tell her so.

"Duncan? Is that you? This isn't amusing," Roselyn said, calling out through the darkness as the figure approached.

Still, he said nothing, and Roselyn shrank back, fearful it might not be Duncan at all. "So... tis' ye, and all alone, lass," a voice came from the shadows, and Roselyn let out a cry of fear as the figure of Braden's uncle, Donald, appeared in the flickering light of the candle hanging in the carriage.

He smiled, peering inside and looking from left to right. Roselyn's heart was beating fast. She was terrified, and she shrank back, not knowing what he intended to do to her, or why he had followed her.

"I... why are you here? Did you follow us?" she demanded, and Donald laughed.

"Follow ye? Nonsense, but I'm concerned now I find ye. Where's the carriage driver?" he asked.

"He's gone. But he'll be back soon. The tree across the road – we can't go on without help. He's gone to the cottage along the way. He'll be back any moment," Roselyn replied, hoping her words might dissuade Donald from whatever unpleasantness he had in mind.

Roselyn had never liked him. It was the way he looked at her: an unpleasant smile, a lascivious look, the intent of a man desirous of those things he should not desire.

She did not trust him, the incident with the bandit having roused her feelings against him. There had been something strange about it, and in his reaction, too. In all these things, despite his apparent surprise, it was as though he knew about them – the fallen tree being no exception.

“Aye, the fallen tree. Tis’ a strange thing for a mighty oak to fall when the wind doesnae even disturb the water of the loch. Still, nay matter. Ye and I shall have a little talk until the carriage driver returns. If he returns,” he said, raising his eyebrows, as he climbed onto the buckboard, leering into the carriage at her, as Roselyn eyed him warily.

She was ready to fight – to strike out at him and cry for help. His sudden appearance had unsettled her. He had surely been following them, and had bided his time, waiting until she was alone.

Or making sure of it, Roselyn said to herself.

“Ye left in such a hurry today, lass and I was curious. Did ye and Braden have a disagreement?” he asked, edging forward into the carriage, almost within touching distance of her.

Roselyn was trapped. The carriage had only a front opening, the rest of it covered by the taut tarpaulin. The lamp cast flickering shadows from above, the darkness beyond seemingly impenetrable. Roselyn and Donald were all alone, and he had her in his power.

“I told you, I just want to go home, that’s all,” she said, and Donald laughed.

“One moment ye spend the night in the laird’s chambers – aye, I know all about that, lass – and the next, ye flee. I can only assume somethin’ happened, or perhaps ye discovered somethin’ ye werenae expectin’ – somethin’ unpleasant,” he said.

Roselyn did not know if Donald knew of Braden’s dreams, or even if he could speak, but she knew she did not trust him, and despite her feelings towards Braden, she was not about betray his confidence, even as he had betrayed her.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I just want to go home. I want to go back to England, and back to my family. That’s all,” she said, and Donald laughed.

“Aye, but ye see, I cannae allow ye to do that. Nae when I think ye know more than ye’re tellin’ me lass. Ye see, I think ye discovered somethin’, a truth about Braden. Tis’ his dreams, aye? Ye heard him in the night, caught up in the throes of a nightmare and he spoke a name – ye heard that name,” Donald said, and his voice now became soft and menacing.

He advanced again, creeping on his hands and knees towards her, causing her to cry out in fear.

“Please, no, I don’t know anything about it. He didn’t. He doesn’t know. He dreams, yes... a terrible dream about what happened the night his father died. But that’s why he doesn’t speak. You know that. And besides, why does it matter to you? Don’t you want to know who killed your brother?” Roselyn asked, even as a terrifying thought now occurred to her.

Why should it not be him: Donald? A jealous brother, the desire for power, a heart filled with longing for a woman he could not have for himself...

“Tell me what he said. Tell me,” Donald said, and to Roselyn’s horror, he held the dagger up to threaten her.

“I don’t know, he didn’t tell me. He doesn’t know. Don’t you think he’d take revenge if he did?” she asked.

Donald’s eyes narrowed.

“Or perhaps he bides his time, and perhaps ye flee because he told ye the truth. Ye overheard it, didnae ye? Ye know,” he said, staring at Roselyn, who was now terrified, shrinking back, as he raised the dagger threateningly.

“I don’t know,” she cried, and now he seized her, dragging her forward, their faces almost touching.

“Or perhaps he talked. Aye, that’s why ye’re leavin’ isnae it? But that’s when he told ye. Aye, nae in his dream, but in his speech. He told ye the truth, lass. He spoke and told ye what he saw that night. The figure of the man in his dream – he turned when the power of speech returned, revealin’ himself, and ye know the truth,” Donald snarled.

Roselyn shook her head, even as she was surprised to think Donald knew nothing of Braden’s speech – he seemed to know everything else. She tried to push him away, but his grip on her grew only tighter, the dagger pressed to her neck, as she fought feebly against him.

“Please, I don’t know anything. I don’t know who killed Braden’s father, and I don’t want to know. I just want to go home,” Roselyn said, as tears rolled down her cheeks.

There was a glint of madness in Donald’s eyes, as though he had been seized by the possibility of her knowing the truth and would now stop at nothing to discover it.

“But I cannae let ye, nae when ye know what happened here all these years ago. Ye see, I daenae believe ye know nothin’ of the matter. I think ye know it all. Ye came

here to bring Braden's speech out of him, and ye've done so, lass – all too well. But ye kept it a secret when ye discovered the name, and now ye flee, and I cannae allow that. I've kept Braden silent all these years, but ye? Nay," he said, tracing the tip of the knife in a trail down her neckline.

Roselyn was trembling with fear. She shook her head, not knowing what to say or do. Braden had said nothing, even as she now had little doubt as to the culprit. Why else would Donald follow her if not to silence her when he himself was the murderer.

"He didn't speak. I wasn't able to teach him to do so. I wasn't good enough," Roselyn replied.

"Ye were good enough for his bed. He took ye into his confidence, and tis' ye he spoke to. He fears danger, and he's sent ye away with the secret, knowin' who killed his father, even if he were to suffer... an accident," Donald said, pressing the point of the knife more firmly into Roselyn's neck.

"Then it's you, isn't it? You're the one who killed Braden's father. You're the one in his dream," Roselyn stammered, and Donald laughed.

"Ye know tis' me. Ye know tis' I who killed Braden's father, ye know I'm the figure in his dream. He told ye as much, and I cannae allow ye to leave here knowin' it," he said.

Roselyn was horrified. He was admitting the murder – he was the murderer.

The dream, the years of speechlessness, the suffering Braden had endured was all because of Donald. But Roselyn knew he would kill her too if he believed she was the guardian of the secret on Braden's behalf.

"Please, I don't want to tell anyone. I just want to go home. That's all. I don't intend

to tell anyone. That's why I left. If I'd stayed, would the danger to you have been all the greater? No one in England could possibly care about a long dead laird and the disputes of a northern clan," she said, hoping to appeal to his sense of reason, even as reason seemed entirely lacking.

Braden's uncle smiled, lowering the knife a little, his hot breath on Roselyn's face, their eyes locked together.

"Perhaps ye're right, lass, or perhaps ye're a liar, and what of years to come? What if Kenna seeks ye out, and then yer tongue loosens. Nay lass, I cannae take the risk. Ye know more than ye're lettin' on, and I cannae allow that," he said.

"No... I won't tell anyone. I don't have any reason to. I came here to help, not to get mixed up in all of this. It's all a mistake, I didn't mean to fall in love with Braden. I didn't mean any of it, and it doesn't mean he told me anything. When he spoke he—" she began, her eyes growing suddenly wide with horror as she realized what she had just said.

Donald let out an angry roar, throwing her back into the carriage and looming over her with the dagger held high above his head.

"So he did speak, ye little liar. He spoke to ye, and ye listened to him. When did he first speak? Or has he always spoken?" he demanded.

Roselyn had been a fool. She had broken Braden's confidence, and now she would pay the price for doing so. She had lied to Donald, and he would surely never let her go. There was no sign of Duncan or anyone else. She was alone and tears rolled down her cheeks, as she feared what Donald was capable of. Shaking the thoughts away, she wiped her tears and straightened her back, to appear as unaffected as possible. She had to protect Braden's secret. Even if he wasn't who she thought he was, she couldn't let a crazed man hurt him.

“He only wrote to me a few things. About looking for the murderer. He has no idea it was you. He trusts you,” she said calmly, and then stopped talking altogether.

Donald looked down at her, his eyes wide and bloodshot. There was a madness there, one she could only fear, knowing he would never allow her to leave the glen alive. “Quit yer lying, will ye? Ye were the one who gave him the power of speech. Ye coaxed it from him. But why else would he speak but to reveal the truth about that night? He fell silent then, I threatened his mother as such. She implored him to say nothin’, just as I told her to. Had he spoken, I’d have had nay choice but to kill him. I thought about it, but how to do so...” he said, as though talking as much to himself as to Roselyn.

The thought of that dreadful night filled her with horror. She imagined the fear in Braden’s mother’s heart – the loss of her husband and the threat against her child. What mother would not do anything she could to protect her offspring, even if it meant silencing them for the rest of their life?

That threat had hung over Braden his whole life long, but the truth would set him free. Roselyn now realized Braden had trusted her. It did not matter whether he and Calder had always spoken or not – and how did she know whether they had? That trust was theirs, and in speaking, Braden had taken the greatest of risks, trusting her with a secret not even his sister knew.

What a fool I was, she said to herself, as Donald now held the knife over her.

“And who else might he speak to now, I wonder?” said Donald. “Calder? Kenna? His mother? Aye, she knows the truth, but she values the lives of her children over her own. Tis’ remarkable what a threat can achieve.”

Roselyn felt sickened by him. He had created an elaborate web, silencing Braden through his mother – the woman Donald purported to love – and keeping himself as

the power behind the throne. He saw Braden as a mere puppet, kept silent by the horror of the faceless man in his dream.

“You’re nothing but a wicked coward, a pitiful excuse for a man. All these years, you’ve—” she began, but Donald struck her angrily across the face with the back of his hand.

“That’s enough. Ye should never have come here, Roselyn. An Englishwoman in Scotland? Ye should’ve stayed where ye belonged,” he said, and now he raised the dagger, ready to strike her.

She screamed, but as Donald brought the knife down on her, a sudden movement caused the carriage to lurch to one side. Donald let out a cry, dragged backwards as Roselyn looked up in astonishment. Braden was there, and was dragging his uncle backwards, his sword drawn...

Braden had approached the carriage cautiously, dismounting some distance back along the road when he had seen the flickering lamp illuminating the tarpaulin. As he had approached, he had heard voices, assuming them to be those of Roselyn and Duncan, the carriage driver.

But as he had come close, his hand on the hilt of his sword, creeping low in the darkness, he had realized who was in the carriage with Roselyn. It was his Uncle Donald, and as Braden had listened, a terrible tale had unfolded. He thought back to his dream, imagining himself back outside the door of his parents' bedroom, watching the figure with his back turned. Could it really be Donald?

He's admitted it – listen to him, boastin' of what he's done. And my mother, too. Tis' too awful. All these years, and yet... he said to himself, even as he knew it had been obvious the whole time.

Why should it not be his uncle? Donald had every reason to be responsible for the murder. He was a man hungry for power, and in the aftermath of Braden's father's death, he had slipped effortlessly into his new position as laird. There had been nothing to prevent him from doing so, no challenge to his authority, and Braden was sent away, never to return.

Even then, he had held power – far more so than he ever would have done had Braden's father still been alive. Donald was the power behind the throne, and as Braden listened, it all made sense. He was threatening Roselyn, telling her he would kill her if she revealed the truth Donald believed Braden had told her. He had known

it all along, and yet he had held back, knowing the consequences if the truth had been revealed.

But I said nothin' – I didnae know the truth of it, either. When I spoke, it was nae to say who killed my father, and yet the sight of the bandit, made me realize... I've been so stupid. I knew it was him, I just didnae have the proof, Braden said to himself, still listening as his uncle continued to threaten Roselyn.

She sounded terrified, and Braden knew he had to act. She had defended him to his uncle, but her slip of the tongue had brought about an even greater rage in Donald – the revelation of Braden's speech enough to make him raise the dagger to strike.

But as he did so, Braden leaped forward through the darkness and into the carriage. Roselyn screamed, and Braden caught hold of his uncle's arm, pulling him backwards as Donald let out a cry.

"Braden!" he exclaimed, falling backwards from the carriage, as the two of them rolled onto the ground.

The horses were startled, and the carriage jerked forward as Braden and his uncle wrestled on the ground. Braden knocked the dagger from Donald's hand, as his uncle aimed a blow at his face, knocking him sideways.

"Ye bastard," Braden cried out, no longer holding back the voice his uncle had silenced for so long.

Donald appeared so surprised at the sound of Braden's voice, he was momentarily stunned, and Braden struck out at him, once, twice, three times, revenging himself for his father's death. Donald let out a cry, struggling with Braden, who was overcome with such anger he would gladly have killed his uncle there and then.

“Ye knew... ye spoke,” Donald said, the two of them struggling in one another’s arms.

“I didnae know, but I do now. I know what a treacherous bastard ye are. An eye for an eye – ye deserve the noose,” Braden replied, striking his uncle again, as Donald let out a cry.

“Yer father took everythin’ from me. He deserved what he got,” Donald snarled, but these words only served to enrage Braden further.

With a cry, he lashed out at Donald, striking him again, as the sound of horse’s hooves could now be heard in the distance. Braden rolled onto his side, hauling his uncle to his feet, and throwing him back against the carriage. Roselyn had climbed down now, and she, too, grabbed at Donald, holding him back, as Braden held his sword to his uncle’s throat.

“Tell me why I shouldnae run ye through with my sword? I should kill ye now. Tis’ all ye deserve,” he said, but Roselyn stayed his hand.

“Braden, no, don’t give into your anger. Think of your mother and sister – let justice be done. Your dream, Braden, you can see the face in your dream now. You can have peace,” she said, imploring him to stay his hand.

Braden loosened his grasp, and his uncle breathed out deeply, staring fearfully at Braden, even as he continued to hold his sword to his throat.

“I could kill ye, Donald – remember I didnae,” he said, as shouts now echoed through the trees.

But as he loosened his grip, his uncle lunged at him, grabbing the hilt of the sword, struggling with him, the flat of the blade across Braden’s chest. Donald had a

murderous look in his eyes, seized by a madness, his mouth foaming, and he cried out, struggling with the sword, as Braden pushed him back.

With a cry, Donald fell on the sword, rolling lifelessly onto his back, as Braden, too, fell back. Roselyn was at his side, the two of them now staring at the body lying limp before them.

“He gave you no choice,” Roselyn said, as voices sounded through the trees.

“My laird? Where are ye? Braden?” Calder’s voice called out, and Braden glanced at Roselyn, who gave a weak smile.

“It’s over now, Braden, you can talk,” she said, and in a loud voice, Braden called out through the darkness.

“We’re over here. Hurry now, Calder, we need ye,” he called out, and a moment later, Calder and several other clansmen came into view, their swords drawn, holding up lamps in their hands.

It felt good to have spoken, even as the clansmen exchanged astonished looks with one another. Calder stared at Braden in surprise.

“What happened here?” he asked, staring down at Donald’s lifeless body.

“We discovered the truth, that’s what happened,” Braden replied, directing two of the men to take the body away.

They looked surprised, glancing at one another, but it was Roselyn who now spoke.

“He admitted it all to me – how he killed the laird’s father, and threatened his mother with Braden’s death, should she not keep him quiet. His silence began then, but now...” she said, and Braden smiled.

“I’m released. Did ye hear that, men? Yer laird speaks, and tis’ an order I give ye. Take this man – the man I once called my uncle – back to the castle. See he’s buried and forgotten,” Braden said.

The men nodded, still looking at one another in astonishment. But they did Braden’s bidding, hauling Donald’s body away.

“Ye did what ye had to do,” Calder said, but Braden shook his head.

“I might’ve spared him. Tis’ an eye for an eye, but... nay, he killed my father, he took away my speech, and he’d have taken away all I hold dear now, too.” Braden replied.

“I understand. And ye’ve done a great thing, Roselyn, tis’ because of ye he speaks. Nay one else has ever coaxed it from him,” Calder said.

Roselyn stared at Braden in astonishment, even as he looked at her curiously. Surely, she realized it was she who had brought forth his voice?

“But I...” she stammered, and Braden shook his head.

“Tis’ because of ye, Roselyn. I’d never spoken – nae since that night. But ye brought it out of me,” he said, and Roselyn shook her head, clutching at her cheeks, as though in some awful realization.

“But I... I heard the two of you speaking,” she said, glancing at Calder, who nodded.

“Aye, I was as surprised as anyone. When he spoke, I was entirely taken aback. I couldnae believe it,” he said, and Braden laughed.

“Aye, the look on yer face. And to think of all the years we’ve known once another,

never to utter a single word. Tis' remarkable," he said, and Calder nodded.

"But now ye can speak, and ye should speak. The clansmen know, and so did yer un— Donald. Ye cannae keep it a secret now," he said.

He had no reason to hold back. His speech had returned, and he wanted to use his words for good. Braden wanted to be understood, and now, with nothing to hold him back, he wanted to tell Roselyn how he felt.

"And I will, but for now..." he said, glancing at Calder, who nodded.

"I'll see Donald's body safely back to the castle. I doubt yer mother will shed many tears over the man who murdered her husband," he said, and nodding to them both, he went off, calling out orders to the clansmen, and leaving Braden and Roselyn alone.

"Will ye walk with me, lass?" Braden asked, for there was a great deal he needed to say.

Roselyn was astonished, and quite overwhelmed. Not only had Braden appeared to rescue her, he had revealed her previous assumptions to be untrue.

He and Calder had not spoken their whole lives long, and whilst she had overheard them doing so, it had not been the result of a deception. She felt ashamed – jumping to conclusions and making up her mind without being in possession of the facts. As Calder walked away, Braden looked at her shyly.

“I’m so sorry for what’s happened here tonight, Roselyn. Ye shouldnae have been caught up in it. I know ye wanted to leave, but please, will ye let me explain?” he said.

Roselyn nodded. He had saved her. Had he not come after her – and she still did not know why he had done so – Donald would have killed her to silence her. She owed Braden her life, and an apology, too.

“I will, yes. But I need to say I’m sorry. I misjudged you. I thought, well, it sounds so foolish now. I overheard the two of you talking, and it seemed to me as though you’d always talked. I thought you had lied to me,” Roselyn said, feeling her cheeks flush red, realizing how foolish she sounded, as Braden looked at her and smiled, his face illuminated in the flicker of the lamplight.

He shook his head, and Roselyn felt tears rising in her eyes, knowing she had entirely misjudged him. It was not the first time she had jumped to conclusions, or failed to see the other side, and she could only feel embarrassed at having so nearly lost

everything on a whim.

“I spoke to Calder, aye, but it was only the first time I’d done so. He was as surprised as ye. But Calder and I have shared a great deal over all these years. We grew up together. We daenae need words all the time. I’m sorry if ye misunderstood: but what ye said about feelin’ homesick and being in danger, was that true, too?” he asked.

Roselyn shook her head. She had feared returning home, knowing her father would have some dreadful suitor in mind, and life would once more be dull and predictable.

She had dreaded the thought, even as her stubbornness had prevailed. As for being in danger, Roselyn had never felt as safe as she did in Braden’s company, and with him having rescued her again, she knew there was no one else whom she could rely on to protect her as he did.

“I wasn’t homesick, and the danger, well, it’s passed, hasn’t it? None of it matters any more – not to me. But I can’t imagine you’d want me to stay. Not now,” she said.

Roselyn felt certain he could not forgive her. And why should he? She had failed to see the truth in his feelings for her, and when he had asked her to stay, she had rejected him. Roselyn did not deserve a second chance, even as he took hold of her hands, and smiled.

“Do ye really think I’d tell ye to leave, lass?”

“Roselyn, thanks to you I can speak, I can tell ye the truth about how I feel. Nay more signs and symbols. I can say it to ye out loud, Roselyn. I’ve fallen in love with ye – I love ye, and I want to be with ye. I want ye to stay,” Braden said, and Roselyn’s heart skipped a beat.

She felt the same way about him, even as she had buried her feelings beneath the

anger she felt towards him, trying not to admit how painful it had been to tear herself away from him. Sighing, she raised his hands to her lips, their foreheads touching, and she smiled at him, their lips meeting in a kiss.

“Are you sure ye want to say those words? They’re powerful – it’s a moment in time to say I love you,” she said, and he kissed her again.

“But I cannae stop myself from sayin’ it, Roselyn. I love ye, and I’ll say so a thousand times. But, do ye love me?” he asked, and now she slipped her arms around him, resting her head on his chest.

She had never uttered those words before, never told anyone she loved them, not in this sort of way. Love was, as she had told him, a powerful thing, and not to be entered into lightly.

But it was not something to be prevented, either. Love came, and love went. It came unexpectedly, and without warning. But Roselyn knew she was in love with Braden. When it happened, how it had happened or why it happened, she did not know. But love was hers, it was theirs, and now she looked up at him and smiled.

“I do, yes. I love you more than words can say, and I didn’t need your words to know you loved me, either. I saw it in your actions, in what you did for me tonight, in your forgiveness. I’ve seen it in everything you’ve done, the moments we’ve shared, the person you are. I know you love me, and I love you, too, more than I can possibly tell you,” she whispered.

“Then show me,” he whispered, as their lips met in another kiss.

C alder and the others had left, and there was neither sight nor sound of the carriage driver. The woods were dark, but Roselyn did not feel afraid, there in Braden's arms, as they lay back together in the carriage. He kissed her, their arms around one another, their kiss becoming more passionate as they were caught up in the moment of their shared expressions of love.

"Tell me ye will nae go back to England?" he said, their foreheads pressed against one another, their arms around one another, as Braden pulled at the sleeves of her dress, exposing her breasts.

"I promise I'll not go back to England. I want to stay here with you. I want to stay here forever," she replied, and he kissed her on the neck, pulling her more closely into his embrace.

"I never want to see ye go. I had to come after ye. I was like a madman possessed," he said, as she pulled at the buttons on his shirt and felt him stiffening against her.

"And I was a fool to leave. I don't know what I was thinking. I was already beginning to doubt myself, and—" she stammered, but his lips silenced her, pressing against hers with a passionate intensity, their bodies entwined, caught up in the moment of their pleasure.

He planted kisses along her neck as she pulled at the buttons of his shirt, exposing his chest, and running her hands across his torso. He pulled at his breeches, exposing himself, and Roselyn took him in her hands, causing him to gasp as he stiffened, his

face flushed with pleasure. The skirts of her dress were pulled back, his hands now searching her out, their lips meeting, caught up in one another's passion.

Roselyn pulled at her dress, exposing herself fully to his touch, his tongue now trailing over her breasts and across her body, causing her to shudder with delight, her eyes rolling back, as his stiffening length began to rub against the center of her pleasure.

She held his head, bucking her hips, his tongue bringing her to ecstasies she had never known before. He slipped his hands beneath her thighs, lifted and then entered her, causing her to cry out.

"Braden..." she gasped, as now he brought her legs over his shoulders, the carriage creaking and buckling as his length pressed into her, their lips meeting in a frenzied passion.

She had hold of his arms, gazing up into his eyes, his rhythm growing stronger. But it was a rhythm she shared, knowing she could control his passion, as she slowed their pace, allowing the pleasure to flow through her, the sensation of his touch sending shivers down her spine.

He was breathless, his eyes closed, towering over her, before bringing himself to bear down on her again. This time, Roselyn allowed it, giving way to his rhythm, enjoying the sensation and the hold she had over him.

"I will show ye what ye mean to me," he whispered, pausing for a moment, before sinking further down, allowing his fullness to press into her, their bodies as one.

"Yes, please," she replied, looking up at him, as she raised her arms above her head, lying back and allowing him to bring them to the climax they both desired.

His rhythm grew stronger, his gaze more intent, staring into her eyes, their lips growing closer. He was breathless now, his hands clasped under her thighs, his hips bucking, and with a sudden cry he gave forth, finding his release.

The heat building in her loins gave way, and, with a shudder and cry of ecstasy, Roselyn, too, gave forth, her whole body flooded with the ecstasy of her climax. Breathless, they collapsed, their lips pressed together, their arms around one another, before lying back together, as Roselyn slipped her arms around Braden's neck.

"I love ye, lass," he whispered, and Roselyn smiled.

"And I think you've just shown me, as well as told me," she replied.

EPILOGUE

Roselyn and Braden made a triumphant return to the castle. Duncan, the carriage driver, returned at first light, finding Roselyn and the laird asleep. He was filled with remorse when he discovered what had happened, having got lost in the dark and spent the night wandering in the forest.

Braden forgave him at Roselyn's insistence, and the carriage driver returned them to the castle, where there was much by way of a story to tell. Calder and the other clansmen had arrived there at first light, bearing Donald's body with them. He had been buried without ceremony and the full story was explained.

"I cannae believe it," Kenna kept saying, shaking her head, though it was not clear whether she was referring to her uncle's responsibility for the murder or Braden's speech.

The laird did not hold back, and the whole castle soon knew he possessed the power of speech once again. But it was Innes, his mother, who shed the most tears.

"I never thought I'd hear ye speak again, Braden," she said, embracing him, as tears rolled down her cheeks.

She had borne a terrible secret, crushed by the weight of what she knew and could not tell. She had done it all to protect Braden and Kenna, but the price had been a heavy one, and in marrying Donald, she had martyred herself for the sake of her children. But all that was behind her now, and for the first time, Roselyn saw a smile on her face.

“Ye see what ye’ve done, lass – ye see the good things ye’ve done,” Braden said, and Roselyn smiled.

“It was you who did it, Braden,” she said.

She had been welcomed as part of the clan, and with Braden at her side, she was acclaimed as mistress, even as one question remained to be asked.

“Will ye walk with Apollo and I this afternoon, lass? There’s somewhere I want to take ye,” Braden said, after Roselyn had rested that morning, and Elena had insisted on her bathing and changing into fresh clothes.

Roselyn agreed, happy to be in his company, and that the ordeals of the past hours were over. She had meant what she said in the forest – she loved him, and she would remain in Scotland, even as she knew her parents would have something to say about it.

She and Braden now walked up the steep path through the forest, turning off at the point where the stream flowed, and came to the waterfall, where Apollo promptly leaped into the water.

“Will he ever learn?” Braden exclaimed, as the dog shook himself vigorously on emerging from the water.

“Oh, Apollo, you’re getting me all wet,” Roselyn said, but the dog did not seem to care, leaping into the crystal-clear pool and swimming towards the waterfall.

“Shall we join him?” Braden asked, pulling off his shirt, and Roselyn smiled.

“What if someone sees?” she replied, glancing over her shoulder, but Braden laughed.

“Few people know about this waterfall, and fewer still come here. Besides, if they do, they’ll only see two people in love – what harm is there in that. Come, lass, I want to ask ye somethin’ – swim to the waterfall with me,” he said, and he leaped into the water, emerging with a great splash, as Roselyn took off her clean dress.

“I’ll be in trouble with Elena,” she called out, as Braden beckoned her into the water.

Despite the warmth of the day, the water was icy cold, and as Roselyn jumped in, she let out a cry. Braden laughed, striking out strongly across the water, as Roselyn followed behind.

Reaching the waterfall, he climbed out, holding out his hand to her and pulling her up onto the ledge. He was dripping wet, and he threatened to shake himself off, even as Roselyn gave him a warning look.

“Oh, come now, lass, ye’re wet already,” he winked, but with a sudden movement she pushed him back into the water, laughing as he splashed about, grinning at her as he emerged from beneath the surface.

“Ye know I’ll get ye back for that,” he said, clambering back out.

She gave a shriek as he made to chase her, and ducked beneath the falling water to find that the rock space opened up into a cave, where the walls sparkled in the reflection of the sun through the falling water, and a thousand rainbows danced in the spray. It was beautiful, and Roselyn was quite taken aback by it.

“It’s beautiful. I didn’t realize it was here,” she said, as Braden slipped his hand into hers.

“Aye, lass, tis’ a beautiful place, and even fewer know of it than of the waterfall itself. I often used to swim here in my youth, and even now. I wanted to show it to ye,

because tis' a special place for me and I want to ask ye a question here," he said, and to Roselyn's surprise, he kneeled before her, looking up into her eyes with an imploring and hopeful expression on his face.

"Braden, I—" she started, but he shook his head, causing her to fall silent.

"I wanted to ask ye this last night. I came after ye because I wanted ye to know how much I love ye. I wanted to show ye how much I love ye... and I want to do so forever. Marry me, Roselyn," he said, the last words almost lost in the rush of the waterfall.

But Roselyn did not need time to think. She knew her answer, and her answer was yes. In Braden, she had found the man she would marry – a most unexpected man, but a man who filled her with such happiness and hope for the future, a man she had fallen in love with in the most unexpected way.

He did not need words to express his love for her – he had shown her, and as he rose to his feet, she threw her arms around him, kissing him, as he embraced her.

"You have shown me how much you love me, and I hope I've shown you, too. My words are the same as yours. I love you Braden, and I can't imagine my life without you. I love you with all my heart, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I came to Scotland thinking I had a job to do – but the rest..." she said, as he ran his fingers through her hair, their foreheads resting against one another's.

"And ye did yer job admirably, lass – ye've brought out the best in me, but I suppose we cannae know for certain until yer parents give their permission," he said, but Roselyn laughed.

Her parents would give their opinion – she was certain of that – but as for objecting...

“Well, my parents can’t possibly object now. They wanted me to marry, and that’s what I’m going to do. They’ll be surprised, I’m sure, but let them be,” she replied, and leaning up, she kissed him once again, caught up in the happy moment of betrothal, and knowing only the happiness they now shared.

“Oh, what a steep climb. Are we nearly there yet?” Matilda exclaimed, pausing to catch her breath.

Roselyn turned to her and smiled. It was the day of the wedding, and the wedding feast and Roselyn, Braden, Kenna, Innes, Calder, and Roselyn’s family – her mother, father, and two sisters – were making their way up the mountainside to the waterfall.

This was where the ceremony was to take place, presided over by one of the clansmen, a party of whom had gone ahead of them to make preparations. It had been strange for Roselyn to see the arrival of her family in Scotland, and even stranger for them. But she was glad they were there, and her parents had given her their blessing, despite their initial surprise at her desire to marry the Laird of the McGrahams.

“Nearly, but it’s no different to walking the valley at home, is it?” Roselyn said, for in the months she had now spent in Scotland, she had become used to the steep climbs and soaring cliffs.

Matilda gave her a withering look, but it was not long before they arrived at the waterfall, where garlands of flowers had been hung from the trees, and the clan, in their kilts and tunics, were waiting with a guard of honor. A piper was playing, and as Roselyn and Braden entered the clearing, a cheer went up from the gathered assembly.

“Step forward laird, and take the arm of yer wife to be,” one of the clan elders said.

He was to conduct the ceremony, and Roselyn and Braden were to pronounce their

vows before their family and the rest of the clan. Braden offered Roselyn his arm, smiling at her, as the piper's tune came to an end. Silence fell around the water's edge, but a sudden movement caused Roselyn to startle.

It was Apollo, and he leaped into the pool, causing a great splash and cries of dismay from Matilda and Grace, both of whom were soaked. Roselyn and Braden could not help but laugh, even as Apollo climbed onto the bank and shook himself.

"Tis' always Apollo who steals the thunder," Braden said, but as the elder now beckoned them forward, it was Roselyn and Braden to whom all eyes now turned, and as they pledged themselves to one another, promising fidelity and love their whole lives long, no one could deny the love they shared, and their love expressed in word and deed.

The End?

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Surely that's an exaggeration."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The youngest lass spoke up then, her eyes flashing as she protectively shielded her

elder sister. “And why would we ever agree to that?”

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

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

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

When I secure her hand in marriage. Nae if.

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

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

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

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

“And yer sister, tis the one I’ll be marryin’. I’ll discuss the matter with her, or nae at all.” He smirked at her. “I’ll nae have ye sayin’ the amendment o’ the contract isnae valid for the same reasons ye dismissed the first - that the lass in question dinnae see

or agree to it. We'll settle the matter between ourselves, and yer husband can have his say later...if it comes to that."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Isobel huffed and she followed behind them, her eyes on the swell of her belly. "I'd be able to handle any 'discussions' that were needed if I dinnae have to be mindful of me condition. But ye ken, little one, ye could let yer mother shoot an arrow now and then."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His admiration was joined by a spark of irritation. "Miss Knox, I ken I made meself clear. We're to be wed, or there will be war between our clans. And make nay mistake lass..." He stepped closer, using his height to loom over her. "I've never lost a war and I'll nae lose to yer kinfolk either."

The small step she took back revealed that he'd made an impression. Nevertheless, she was quick to rally and respond. "I daenae ken whether tis blackmail or threats

ye're after makin', but neither's a good way to win a bride. Did nay one ever teach ye that, me Laird?"

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

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

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

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