



Never Kiss a Highlander

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Category: Historical

Description: Finn Mackay is anxious to make his place in life. But as the third brother in his family, he feels as though any one of the clan's warriors could fill his job. When the Clan Chief of the Mackays offers the Second in Command position to Finns brother, Craig, as a newly married man, he turns it down.

Finn is on a mission to deliver that information to The Mackay and offer himself in his brothers place.

Lady Alison Mackay knows that her duty as a daughter of the Clan Chief is to marry for alliances. She has agreed to the very strange request put into the betrothal agreement, but since she doesn't trust men anyway, she doesn't care.

Or does she?

Her pull to the new Second in Command, Finn Mackay is a strong one. When they are caught in a compromising situation in the dark stables the night before her wedding, a switch in grooms is the only solution. One caveat. She demands independence. He demands control.

Let the battles begin.

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Chapter One

October, 1662

Finn Mackay was again taken aback by the sight of Castle Varrich, set high on a hill, rising before him as he grew closer to his destination. The area surrounding the castle was covered with rolling hills of deep green and wet grass from the recent rains. Late autumn flowers were wilting, a sure sign that soon the weather would be colder as winter set in.

The majestic castle, overlooking the Kyle of Tongue and Village Tongue, always impressed him with its position. It would be almost impossible for another clan to attack without being seen for miles from the ramparts, making it one of the safest holds in the Highlands.

He patted the pouch tied to his waist where the note from his brother, Craig, sat. The message that thanked the Clan Chief for the offer to make him his second-in-command. As a newly married man, and Craig's wife just now settled at Dun Ugadale, and expecting a bairn, Craig would not be accepting his offer.

It was Finn's job to deliver the message and then talk Laird Foster Mackay into allowing him to step into Craig's place as his second-in-command. It was not the first time one of the Mackays took a brother's place.

Finn's brother, Chieftain and Laird Robin Mackay, had been betrothed to Lady Lorena Gunn, but in love with the Mackay healer, Helena Ross. Craig Mackay was the one who delivered the news to the Gunn laird that Robin would not be honoring

the betrothal, but, to avoid a major conflict and possible war, he was there to offer himself in Robin's place.

It had been a bad start to that marriage since Lady Lorena felt insulted and rejected, and Craig had made it known he was only marrying her to save his brother. Now they were so happily married that Craig behaved like a besotted fool, imitating their brother Robin with his wife, Helena.

Finn shook his head. That was not for him. Marriage was fine; he actually had no objection to it once the right lass presented herself, but his brothers had lost control of their senses when it came to their wives.

Control was everything to him, and he shuddered every time he remembered the one time he'd lost control and what had followed.

He pushed all of that to the back of his mind so he could do what he came for. He wanted this position. As the third brother at Dun Ugadale, he was needed at his brother's side, of course, but his duties could easily be replaced. Craig was the one who Robin relied on for most of the major decisions.

Finn felt the need to prove to himself that he was not just the "youngest Mackay brother," but a man who could take control of clan warriors, see that they were trained properly, go into battle alongside his laird, and help make strategy decisions.

The sun was just making its descent when Finn arrived at the castle. "Who goes there?" a voice called from the ramparts, interrupting his thoughts.

Finn placed his hand over his eyes to block out the setting sun and looked up at the guardsman staring down at him. "Finn Mackay, brother to Laird Robin Mackay."

"Weren't ye just here a bit of time ago?"

It had only been a fortnight since Finn and his brothers, along with Craig's wife, Lorena, had left Castle Varrich where they had gathered with the other chieftains for a clan gathering. It was then that the Clan Chief offered the second-in-command to Craig. With both his sons dead, he said he wanted a well-trained warrior, which he was sure the brother to Laird Robin Mackay would be.

"Aye. I am carrying a message for the Clan Chief. Would ye let down the drawbridge?"

No one answered, but it didn't take long for the creaking of the chains to announce the drawbridge was descending. Finn trotted across, the sound of his horse's hooves vibrating in the air.

He arrived at the outer bailey and jumped from his horse. A guardsman met him with his hand out. "I'll take the message to my laird. I'll have the stable lad take care of yer horse and ye may wait in the great hall for the laird's answer."

Although he would have preferred to present the message to the laird himself, and at the same time offer his services in his brother's place, he handed the piece of parchment to the man and, since he was familiar with the keep, headed to the great hall.

He found a sweet lass finishing up her chores from the evening meal. She stopped and placed her hand on her hip giving him a very saucy smile. "Weren't ye here only two weeks ago? With yer two handsome brothers?"

Finn placed his hand on his chest and offered her the smile that tempted many a lass to lift her skirts. "Ach, lass. Ye hurt my feelings. Are ye saying only those two big oafs are handsome?"

She sauntered closer to him with more of an obvious sway to her hips. "Nay. I dinna

say that. But it appears yer head is big enough without me adding to yer opinion of yerself.”

He leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest and grinned “Ye best forget my two brothers, lass. They are both besotted with their wives.”

She licked her lip. “And ye? Are ye besotted with yer wife as well?”

“Nay. No wife for me.”

The lass picked up the last of the trenchers on the table she’d been cleaning. “My name is Brenda if ye find yerself looking for some company.”

Just then the man who had taken the note from him shouted, “Brenda, ye are no’ paid to stand around and flash yer charms at visitors. Get back to the kitchen.”

Instead of acting embarrassed, Brenda flicked her hair over her shoulder. “Ach, James, yer just a jealous mon.”

He shook his head as he reached where Finn sat. “I’ll bet the lass was so busy trying to get ye into her bed she dinna offer ye food and drink.”

Finn grinned. “Nay. But she is a bonny one.”

“Aye, and a jealous one. If ye get involved with her, ye need to watch yer back.” He placed his hands on his hips. “Do ye remember where the laird’s solar is?”

“Aye.”

“We doona let outsiders wander the keep, but the laird said ‘twas all right to send ye up and make sure ye had something to eat.” He nodded as he stuck out his hand. “My

name is James Mackay. If ye head up to the laird's solar, I'll have the kitchen send up a meal to ye."

Finn nodded and jogged to the staircase, taking two steps at a time. He followed the stone walkway to the laird's solar and knocked.

"Enter."

Laird Foster Mackay was a man approaching his sixth decade. His first wife had died in childbirth, taking the bairn along with her. His second wife gave him two sons and a daughter, the youngest being no more than five summers when the second wife passed.

Satisfied with two sons to follow him, Foster had remained unmarried.

The laird had lines of sorrow on his face and pain in his fading blue eyes. His shoulder length, light brown hair was beginning to show streaks of gray. Within the past year he'd lost both his sons in battles, which was a major surprise to The Mackay since his sons had been the best trained of all the warriors.

One son was cut down and bled to death on the battlefield and the other son died of an infection from a slash on the arm. When they were here a few weeks ago, Finn had heard the man was being badgered by his council members to take another wife since the only child left to him was his daughter, Lady Alison.

He refused, stating he didn't have the heart to take another wife and raise more bairns. Craig had told Finn after his conversation with The Mackay that it was this situation that had encouraged the laird to offer a second-in-command to Craig.

If he could step into his brother's place, he saw this as an opportunity to make a life for himself outside of the two brothers he dearly loved but felt overshadowed by.

The laird waved to the seat in front of his desk.

He sat back and studied Finn for a moment, then tapped the piece of parchment lying on his desk. “I assume there is a reason why yer laird sent ye with this instead of having a messenger deliver it?”

Finn nodded. “Aye, laird. I am here to convince ye to take me in place of my brother.”

The Mackay crossed his arms over his massive chest. He was once a formidable man but his sorrows had taken some of the life out of him. “And ye and yer laird feel as though I would need some convincing?”

Finn shrugged. “Ye offered the spot to Craig.”

“Aye. That I did.”

Unsure what to say next, Finn just waited for the laird to continue. “I offered it to Craig because he has already been acting second-in-command for yer laird. I doona have time to train a mon.”

Finn tried hard to not take that as a rejection. Instead, he decided if he was to be considered for the position, he had to fight for it. “I am just as effective as my brother. I am in on all the decisions, training, and strategy.”

The laird shrugged. “Yet ‘tis Craig he turns to more than ye.”

So there was a spy at Dun Ugadale, giving information to The Mackay.

“Craig was recently at one of our borders for more than a moon and Robin and I, together, made many decisions that benefited the clan.”

“Such as?”

He would not be so easily dissuaded from his goal. “We took on twenty new trainees to strengthen our forces. I personally chose the twenty and supervised their training.”

The laird nodded for him to continue.

“The council wanted Robin to honor the betrothal agreement between him and Lady Lorena Gunn. Robin fought against them, and I still believe he made the wrong decision.”

Foster frowned. “Didn’t yer brother Craig step in and take Mackay’s place?”

“Aye. But ‘twas no’ the honorable thing to do. We were lucky to avoid a war with the Gunns over that.”

“So yer brother Craig took Robin’s place, and now ye want to step into his place here. Is that something yer family does? When one doesn’t want to honor a commitment, a brother takes o’er?”

Growing irritated at how the questioning was going and resenting the inference that he and his brothers were not honorable men, Finn leaned forward, his voice tight. “Craig made no commitment to ye about this position.”

“That is true. But yer brother, Robin, dinna honor a betrothal agreement.”

“As I said, I counseled him against that.”

The laird sat silent for a moment, continuing to study Finn. “So ye doona think it was a wise decision for The Mackay to make e’en though I understand ‘twas a great deal of feeling on his and his wife’s part. Ye doona believe in love?”

“Nay,” he answered quickly. “My brothers are both halfwits over their wives. They lack control. ‘Tis dangerous.”

The laird seemed surprised by his answer but was apparently ready to move on.

“There is currently a betrothal agreement between my daughter, Lady Alison, and the first Sinclair laird’s son. I want the match for two reasons. One, it will join the Mackays and the Sinclairs. Along with the connection yer clan has with the Sutherlands through Robin’s marriage, it will make the northern clans the most powerful in the Highlands.

“A second reason is since I no longer have an heir, and doona wish to marry again to produce one, The Sinclair’s son will take over the lairdship with Lady Alison as his advisor when I die. Hopefully, he and my daughter will produce many sons to continue the line.”

Almost shocked into silence, Finn took a deep breath and studied the man. “Excuse my disrespect, my laird, but with all the Mackay sons from yer chieftains, why no’ chose one of them to become Clan Chief upon yer death—that we hope willna be for a long time?”

He waved his question away as a small matter, making Finn consider that the man might be losing his faculties. “I doona want to cause conflicts among my clans,” the Clan Chief said, “and it was part of the agreement with The Sinclair.”

It took a bit of mental chewing to swallow what the man had planned for his succession. He could see more issues among the Mackay chieftains than what The Mackay considered a good way to avoid conflict by handing such an important position to another clan.

While Finn continued to dwell on this, Foster said, “My question to ye is, would ye

have a problem swearing yer fealty to Sinclair when the time comes?”

Without hesitation, Finn said, “Nay.” There was no doubt that Sinclair would have a problem with the entire mess the Clan Chief had arranged, but he still wanted the job as second-in-command.

The laird stood, as did Finn. He stuck his hand out and Finn took the older man’s grip. Not as strong as it used to be, he noted. “Welcome to Castle Varrich, Finn. Get something to eat, get settled and we’ll meet back here tomorrow morning at first light.”

Lady Alison Mackay stared out the window of her bedchamber at the setting sun. One of the Mackay brothers had arrived a while ago and, since he hadn’t left, she was assuming he would be here in the morning.

She couldn’t tell completely which brother it was, but she had reason to believe it was Finn Mackay, the youngest of the three brothers.

And the handsomest.

He’d heard her da vehemently arguing with the council about taking another wife. That was what had led to her betrothal agreement.

Then when questioned by the council members about the lack of a strong second-in-command, Da had said he planned to take one of the Mackays from Dun Ugadale as his second. She had thought he would offer it to Craig Mackay, but she was certain it had not been him who had shown up.

Not that she cared much what was going on at Castle Varrich, her home her entire life. She was merely weeks away from her wedding to Archie Sinclair. Her perfect match.

He didn't want her, and she didn't want him.

The one time they'd met when their fathers worked out the betrothal, Archie let her know he had no intention of giving up his lemman when they married. The woman would share his bed and Alison would be settled in the bedchamber next to his at the Sinclair keep.

When it was necessary for him to plant a bairn in her—which was precisely how he'd said it—he would visit her bed until successful.

When the time came to move to Castle Varrich after her da passed away and he became the new Mackay laird, the trollop would be moving with him. Once Alison produced a few heirs, she could do what she wanted.

A bit taken aback at his brutal honesty, she made it plain that he could keep his lemman because she wanted the kind of marriage where he could do what he wished and the same for her. She would never listen to the orders and commands of a husband.

He agreed, reminding her of the duty to produce a few heirs before she took up with another man. She had assured him she was only too happy to have the kind of marriage that was truly one arranged for the benefit of their clans and she would not cause problems with his mistress.

Mistress!

She'd learned a very valuable lesson on what happens to a foolish woman who trusts someone with her heart. It was something she would never do again. In fact, she had felt quite happy with their conversation. If he had a woman he loved that much, he would never turn his attentions to her.

It did cross her mind what her da thought about Archie Sinclair and his lemman, but she was sure the man would not be crass enough to bring the woman to their wedding in a fortnight.

She was happy, her betrothed was happy and her da was happy.

Then as she'd had time to think it over, she realized what an indignity she'd been presented with. Although she had no desire to find love in a marriage, a bit of respect would have been nice.

She sighed and walked away from the window. If everyone was happy, why did she feel cheated?

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Chapter Two

As arranged, Finn had met with the laird at first light in his solar. After sending a note off to Robin so he knew that Finn would be staying and to have his belongings sent, he joined the rest of the clan folks in the great hall to break his fast.

The laird sat at the dais with a bonny lass alongside him, speaking to a young man at her side. Based on her looks, she was no doubt the daughter they had discussed the night before. He remembered briefly meeting her when they'd visited a few weeks ago. She seemed either shy or proud when they spoke at the time.

Foster waved him over and he joined those at the head table. "Craig, I want ye to meet my daughter, Lady Alison, and my second wife's nephew, Brennan."

Lady Alison merely dipped her head and returned to her food. The lad was all smiles, food dripping from his mouth. He appeared to be about ten summers.

After taking the seat on the other side of the laird, Finn reached for sausages, eggs and cheese on the platter between him and the laird, placing the items on the trencher in front of him.

A young lass poured ale into the mug sitting in front of him. It was a different maid from the night before, but she smiled at him and asked if there was anything else he needed. It was obvious she didn't mean food or drink.

"Sorcha, get back to work!" Lady Alison snapped.

Both the young lass and Finn looked over at her. The lass flushed and after dipping to Lady Alison hurried off.

The laird ignored the entire exchange, so it was obvious his daughter's display was nothing unusual. A bit of a shrew, that one.

Once the meal had ended, Mackay leaned over to speak with Finn. "I want ye to go to the lists and make an assessment. We have two trainers right now, but, with neither of my sons there each day to make sure everything is as it should be, we must determine what needs to be done to make us strong again."

Thinking of some of Robin's troubles, he asked, "Are ye having problems at your border?"

The laird took a sip of his ale. "There are always problems at the borders, as ye well ken, but I believe there is a group inside our border who is causing problems with the smaller villages. We've had some reports of bothies burning and pillaging going on. The clan members who have family in the outlying area are concerned.

"As ye ken from the meeting of all the chieftains I had a few weeks ago, we need to be vigilant and make sure these small groups that we all seem to be experiencing are kept from banding together."

Finn nodded and, once he finished his food, stood. "If ye will excuse me, laird, I am headed to the lists. Who are your two top trainers, so I can speak with them before I start?"

"Albert Mackay, and James, who ye met when ye arrived yesterday."

Finn gave the laird a nod and left the great hall. The men were indeed training, but there was a good deal of sloppy swinging of swords and distractions. If these fools

took the lack of skills he witnessed into a battle they would kill themselves or each other.

He was stunned that the Clan Chief had let his men become so lazy. This was another sign that The Mackay had almost lost interest in his clan. Finn would not be surprised, if, once Lady Alison was married, the Clan Chief would turn over all duties to his son by marriage.

He walked up to James. "I'm Finn Mackay from Dun Ugadale. I will be working with the laird."

The man he assumed was Albert Mackay nodded and reached out his hand. "I am Albert Mackay." Finn turned to James. "I remember ye from yesterday."

He looked at the two men. "Yesterday I was told to find the laird's solar, which I did." He looked at James. "Ne'er allow a visitor to roam the keep by himself." He held up his hand as the man began to protest. "I ken ye recognized me from our prior visit, but 'tis still no' something that should be done."

James nodded and Finn continued. "The laird told me that ye two are the trainers. I'd like to take the time to assess each mon's skills. Ye will watch me and then apply whate'er ye haven't been doing with small groups of men."

Both men seemed to take his instructions well, which eliminated any problems he might have with taking over as second-in-command and assuming the duty of overseeing the training.

"How many warriors do ye have?"

Before James was able to answer, a great deal of shouting erupted from the men on the lists as they stopped training and smiled at Lady Alison who was strolling by the

lists, with a basket of flowers over her arm. She dipped her head and smiled at the men like it was an afternoon garden party.

Finn turned on his heel and marched over to the lass. She lost her smile and her hazel eyes bored into him. Everything about the stance of her curvy body made it obvious she was not happy to see him.

The lass was truly a distraction with her long blonde hair tickling her face from the slight wind. She raised her chin and stared at him.

Placing his hands on his hips, he glared back at her.

She sighed. “What is it, Mackay?”

“Ye cannot stroll by the lists when the men are training. They doona need the distraction.”

She tilted her head and gave him a tight smile. “I have been called many things in my life, Finn Mackay, but a distraction has ne’er been one of them.”

“I doona care what you’ve been called before. Ye are a distraction now and could cause one of these men injuries.”

Her face flushed. “Are ye ordering me no’ to walk by the lists in my own castle?”

“Aye. Now ye have the right of it. Doona walk anywhere near the lists when the men are training. I canno’ believe ye dinna already ken that.”

She leaned forward. “I doona take orders from anyone, Mackay.”

He also leaned in, until they were almost nose-to-nose. “Aye. Ye will take orders

from me when it concerns the safety of my men.”

“They are no’ yer men.”

“Aye. They are. And ye will obey my orders. If ye have any doubt in yer brain, ye can speak with yer da. Our laird.”

He became aware that all the men who had been training along with James and Albert had been watching the exchange between him and the laird’s daughter. It was not the best way for him to introduce himself to the men.

“We will discuss this further after the evening meal.”

The lass looked angry enough to spit. In fact, she reminded him of a hissing kitten who wanted to strike with its nails. Instead of continuing the exchange, she pulled her basket of flowers closer to her body, turned and stormed off.

The nerve of that man, telling her what to do. No one gave her orders. She did know it was not a good idea to walk that way back from her garden after she’d collected almost the last of the fall flowers, and she rarely did. But being ordered by the man like she was some bairn was outrageous!

Finn Mackay was a bully. She knew the type. Always in control, always shouting orders and demands. Well, he might be her father’s new second-in-command, but Lady Alison Mackay was not one of his warriors.

Even though he’d angered her with his surly attitude, she couldn’t help but feel a strange attraction to the man. When he stormed over to her, his muscles flexing, his strong legs eating up the distance between them, fluttering began in her lower parts.

His dark brown hair, shorter than most men, along with his crystal clear blue eyes

mesmerized her to the extent that at first she didn't understand that he was chastising her.

She was prepared to smile at him until she realized that the sound of his deep voice carried to the lists where the men watched them. She narrowed her eyes and lifted her chin. She hated that she noticed his handsome face as he ordered her about.

His blue eyes deepened as his annoyance grew. She hated the man but he brought out feelings that were new and strange. Anger she knew, but not this.

'Twas best to stay as far away from Finn Mackay as possible. She would be married in a fortnight.

Married to a man who had no interest in ordering her about. She huffed. Her betrothed, Archie Sinclair, had no interest in her at all. That was what she'd wanted, she reminded herself. He would live his life—with his lemmann—and she would live hers.

Alone.

Continuing to feel restless after her encounter with Finn Mackay, she returned to her bedchamber to add to the pile of clothing she would bring with her when she moved to Castle Sinclair Grinigoe.

She picked up a chemise she'd begun folding and sat on the bed. Would she truly be happy with a husband in love with someone else who he did everything with except marry?

She remembered the story of Laird Robin Mackay breaking his betrothal with Lady Lorena Gunn and how the woman had felt rejected.

But Robin's brother, Craig, had stepped up and married the lass and, from what she'd seen when Craig and his wife were here a few weeks ago, they both seemed very happy.

Would she be happy? Bah. Happy was for fools because it could disappear in a flash. She would be well provided for, have a place of honor in the Sinclair clan as well as her own clan when Archie took her da's place.

Her mind wandered. Would she be respected by the staff at the Sinclair keep who she would be dealing with should they know about her husband's preference for his mistress?

She shook off the somber thoughts.

Children. There would be little ones to cuddle, nurture, and watch grow into strong lads and bonny lasses. Yes, her life would be full.

She continued to fold her clothes.

Finn found himself glancing across the dais during the evening meal watching Lady Alison. The woman was a shrew and it was a good thing she would be marrying soon because she drew his attention too much.

How could someone so difficult to get along with be so bonny? The perfect pale skin of her beautiful face with her hazel eyes drew him to her too many times. Besides a warm and welcoming smile—never for him—those lips were made for kissing.

If Sinclair could temper her down and move that passion she showed when angry into the bedchamber, he would have a hard time getting out of bed each morning.

"She's bonny, eh?" James said who sat alongside him and most likely watched him

ogle the lass like an untried lad.

Finn took a sip of his ale. “Aye. ‘Tis too bad her temper comes along with it.”

James shook his head. “‘Tis strange, that. Lady Alison is generally verra easy to get along with.”

Finn nearly choked on his drink. “Easy? My encounter with her at the lists today was anything but easy.”

“Aye. Maybe so, but ye did come on quite strong with the lass.”

He felt his stomach muscles tense at the criticism. “‘Twas verra foolish of her to parade herself in front of the men like that. Injuries and death can result from distractions.”

“I agree. I’d ne’er seen her do that before. She generally takes a different path from her garden to the keep.”

“Hopefully her wedding is soon and the distraction will leave with her. Let her husband keep her busy in bed instead of getting herself in trouble.”

James shook his head. “Nay. ‘Tis not well known, but I caught wind of the fact that part of the betrothal agreement was that Sinclair will continue to have his lemman in his bed and Lady Alison in the bedchamber next to his. It seems that Lady Alison will only be used to beget heirs and then hand Archie the Clan Chief when her da dies.”

“Nay, nay!! What say ye?” Finn jumped to his feet, but, realizing he had drawn attention to himself, he quickly sat down. “I doona believe the laird would allow such a thing.”

James shrugged. "I doona understand it, either. No one besides those involved kens about it except me and now ye. The laird let it slip one day when he had enjoyed too much whisky and then said 'twas no' something everyone should ken since it would embarrass his daughter."

Finn looked over at Lady Alison as she smiled and spoke with one of the maids. Aye, at ease she was a near perfect specimen of womanhood. He looked back at Finn. "Why would she allow that?"

James shrugged. "But doona repeat the story."

"Nay. I doona think anyone would believe it anyway." He took the last sip of his ale. "Why did ye tell me, then?"

James just smiled at him. "I have my reason."

Finn left his seat and walked over to where Lady Alison sat. She looked up at him and immediately scowled. He didn't know whether to laugh or scowl back. He decided to merely hold out his hand. "Lady Alison. I believe we have a conversation to finish?"

At first he believed she would refuse, but then she smirked and, after standing and shaking out her skirts, took his hand. His eyes flew to hers. A strange feeling slid up his arm. Her eyes had grown wide also, and they both stood and stared at each other for a moment.

Then he shook his head and gave her hand a tug. She stepped away from the table and joined him. He placed her arm in his and they walked out of the great hall.

"'Tis quite chilly out, lass; do ye prefer to speak somewhere else? Mayhap yer da's library?"

She raised her chin. “I prefer no’ to speak with ye at all, but since ye made an announcement at the dais back there I had no choice.”

Finn sighed. He really wanted to keep this pleasant. He never had a problem with the lasses, but this one was proving a challenge. He decided to allow the woman her pride since she would be leaving in a short time anyway.

Just thinking about what James had told him concerning her marriage soured his stomach. But ‘twas no’ his business.

She led him to the laird’s library next to the man’s solar. He waved at a comfortable looking settee for her to sit. After glowering at him—did everything he do and say cause her anger?—she took the seat and he sat next to her.

“I doona want problems between us, Lady Alison. I apologize for speaking to ye in the manner I did back on the lists, but, frankly, ye scared me. I’ve seen men seriously injured both on the battlefield and off the battlefield from being distracted.”

“Then ye need to take a stronger stand with yer men. If they are so easily distracted then ye are no’ doin’ yer job.”

Finn ran his fingers through his short hair. “It happens I agree with ye, lass. However, I have just arrived and haven’t had a chance to even assess the men, never mind fix all the problems.”

“Then I suggest ye get yer men to a point where they are no’ distracted by someone passing by.”

He hadn’t intended to, but nevertheless his voice rose. “Ye are no’ just a distraction, lass. Ye just have to walk by and any mon with red blood would be pulled from his duty.”

She sat silent, her mouth in a very small 'O' shape. After a moment, she cleared her throat and rose. "If that is all ye need from me, Mr. Mackay, then I will be retiring. I have a great deal to do to prepare for my wedding."

He grinned. "Aye, yer wedding."

She placed her hands on her hips. "What does that mean?"

"No'hing." He stood, preparing to leave, feeling as though he'd been able to impress upon the lass that she was not to go near the lists when the men were practicing. At least he thought that was what had been decided. He found her distracting himself.

Lady Alison studied him for a moment, then shrugged. "A pleasant evening to ye, Mr. Mackay."

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Chapter Three

It had been a hard and stressful day getting the men to accept him, and then assessing the warriors and correcting their problems.

Luckily Finn had the support of James and Albert which made it easier to handle his assignment as second-in-command. He'd sensed some resistance to him. Finn got the impression that the laird had let the training go, much as he had everything else once he'd lost his second son.

He couldn't help but wonder if that was why the laird had agreed to the outrageous betrothal agreement for his daughter. 'Twas difficult when a man lost the desire to live.

It had taken Finn a long while to come to grips with the tragedy he'd caused when he'd lost control. He'd passed through a time when he'd lived in a very dark place. He'd never forgiven himself, and vowed to never lose control again.

What he needed before the evening meal was a long hard ride to clear his head. He walked to the stable and had the stable lad prepare his horse, Morag. The animal needed a workout since he'd been lazing in the stable since his arrival at the castle.

It felt good to race from the stable to the wide-open fields, the wind blowing in his face. As much as he loved Dun Ugadale, he always enjoyed the wide open spaces surrounding Castle Varrich, the up and down hills making a ride exciting.

A rider was just coming toward him as he crested a hill. A small rider, and all alone.

As their horses drew closer, he realized the rider was a woman.

Lady Alison Mackay.

Out alone, no escort, racing over the hills behind her.

They reached each other and she pulled up alongside him. “What the devil is wrong with ye, lass?”

Her smile dimmed. “What did I do now, Mr. Mackay? Am I riding too far east? Has my dress blown up and showed my legs? Did I no’ finish the evening meal to yer satisfaction?” She was panting, her breasts moving up and down, in a delightful way, Finn noticed.

He pulled his eyes from there and rested on her face. Her scowling face. “Where is yer escort?”

“Do ye ne’er have anything to say to me except complaints?”

“‘Tis no’ safe for a woman to be riding all around without a guard.”

Just thinking about what could happen to her if she was set upon by brigands was enough to have him breaking out in a sweat. “Does yer da ken ye are wandering around by yerself?”

She straightened her shoulders and lifted her cute, little chin. “My da doesn’t tell me what to do.”

“So ye’ve always taken chances like this?”

“It matters no’ to ye, Mr. Mackay. Ye are no’ my da or my husband.”

“Aye, yer husband. ‘Tis what, two or so weeks until ye have him telling ye what to do? Protecting ye from yerself?”

A strange look came over her face. “I am certain the mon will no’ be too interested in what I do or doona do.” With those words she turned her horse and headed back to the stable.

Finn shook his head and, not wanting the lass to travel back to the castle by herself, he turned and followed her. She stopped and swiveled in her saddle. “Doona follow me. I am no’ a bairn.”

He huffed. With those curves there was no’ a chance that he would think her a bairn. Neither would any other man who might decide to pull her from her horse and have his way with her.

“I will be following ye until ye are safe within the castle walls.”

She leaned forward. “Why are ye vexing me so? Every time I do something pleasurable there ye are making sure I doona enjoy myself.”

Before he could stop himself, he said, “Anytime ye are seeking pleasure, lass, I will be happy to oblige.”

She looked a tad confused at first, and then she must have realized what he meant, and her face flushed. “I shall ignore that, Mr. Mackay.” She turned her back on him and rode off.

As promised, he followed her until they reached the castle. He couldn’t believe what he’d said to the lass. Not only was she The Mackay’s daughter, but she was also betrothed to another.

Aye, to another who didn't plan to make sure she was pleased as a wife should be. Then he chastised himself. 'Twas not his issue what the laird had worked out for his daughter.

All those lovely curves would be used as a brooder and then cast aside. He jumped from his horse and before he was able to help Lady Alison from her mount she jumped off.

"Very well done, lass," he said.

She placed her hand on her chest, bringing his eyes to those breasts again. "Doona tell me ye said something nice to me, Mr. Mackay!"

His reaction to her annoyed him. Better to keep her angry with him until she was married and off to her husband's keep. He rested his forearm on his horse's back and grinned at her. "'Twas the first time since I arrived that ye did something worthy of my compliment."

"Ach!" She pointed her finger at him. "Stay far away from me, Mr. Mackay, if ye value yer life." She stomped off, her hips swaying in a delightful way.

Aye, that was exactly what he wanted. To be far away from her and the temptation she was.

Alison growled as she entered the great hall, then proceeded up the stairs to her bedchamber.

She couldn't remember when a man made her as angry as Mackay did. Anyone at the keep would say she was an easy to get along with lass. True, she held herself away from people, mostly the men.

Her lesson as a young lass had been a hard one, and since then she didn't want anything to do with men. Which was precisely why she agreed to the betrothal agreement with Archie Sinclair.

While it might cause her some embarrassment with him so openly displaying his lemmann, she preferred that to another broken heart. She was willing to sacrifice her pride for her independence.

She spent time cleaning up before going downstairs for the evening meal. With any luck the arrogant Finn Mackay would have stumbled over his ego and damaged a body part. She grinned. The one most important to all men.

Her eyes went immediately to the dais where the object of her annoyance sat in deep conversation with her da. Why did the man have to be so handsome? And why was his smile, which he never turned in her direction, so appealing?

She'd had to chase away kitchen servers from falling all over him when they served the food. The chamber maids gathered together and giggled when he strode by, no doubt looking for something to add to his list of things to chastise her about.

Once settled next to her da, she glanced in Finn's direction again to see him staring at her. She patted her hair. "Is something amiss, Mr. Mackay? Have I dirt on my face?"

He had the nerve to grin at her and then turned his attention back to her da.

She huffed and looked at one of the kitchen servers. "Brenda, place the food on the table and return to the kitchen." God's bones, he was turning her into a shrew.

'Twas an accident that she heard the conversation between her da and the cursed man. The words floated over her until she heard Finn mention her.

She looked over at him. If he was going to talk about her, she would know what about.

“I doona think ‘tis a good idea to allow the lass to wander outside the castle walls. ‘Tis dangerous times, and a lass could find herself in trouble.”

Her da nodded. “Aye. I haven’t been too dutiful with my daughter of late. ‘Tis why I am happy to have her married off and someone else’s trouble instead of mine.”

Finn looked over at her, surprise and something that looked like pity in his eyes.

Alison sucked in a breath. Trouble? Since when did she become a problem to her da? He’d always doted on her, spending time teaching her games and how to read and do her numbers. However, since her brothers died, he’d become a shell of a man.

Such wonderful news. She was going from a man who considered her a problem to a man who didn’t want her. Again.

She glanced down at her food, which no longer held appeal, and fought the tears that threatened. She would stab herself with her eating knife before she would show such weakness in front of Finn.

She raised her chin and pushed her trencher away. “I wish ye a good evening, da. I am feeling a tad tired this eve.”

“Aye, daughter.” He immediately turned back to Finn and they continued their conversation.

Mayhap she wasn’t permitted to leave the castle now, but she desperately needed fresh air. A walk inside the walls was just what she needed. Were she not so worn down with gloom, she would defy both her da and the arrogant Mr. Mackay and leave

anyway.

The air was downright cold. Winter was not far off. She wrapped her arms around herself and rubbed them with her hands. If she wasn't afraid of running into Finn, she would return for her cloak.

Although cold, the night was clear, millions of stars gazing down on her.

Her thoughts wandered as she walked. What would her life be like at Castle Sinclair Grinigoe? Would she be happy?

She huffed. Nay. She reminded herself she no longer sought happiness. All she wanted was to be left alone. This match with Sinclair was exactly what suited her.

"A tad chilly tonight to be strolling, eh, lass?"

That voice, like honey sliding down her back, immediately began her heart thumping. She turned to see Finn staring at her, his hands behind his back, a slight smile on his face. One of the few he'd ever cast in her direction.

A tart remark formed on her tongue, but she found she hadn't the heart for bickering tonight. Instead, she shrugged. "I find I prefer the cold. It makes me think of hot mulled wine, a warm fireplace and my comfortable dressing gown."

Finn reached out and tucked a wayward strand of her hair behind her ear.

She shouldn't allow him to touch her. He was the one who made her da call her "trouble." She closed her eyes, wanting ... she knew not what. Just something to make this feeling of sadness go away.

"Are ye looking forward to yer marriage?"

Alison huffed. Then realizing who she was talking to, and not wanting more pity from him, she smiled. “Aye.”

His not looking convinced made her wonder if he’d heard about the conditions of Sinclair accepting the betrothal. The ultimate embarrassment.

She took a deep breath. “I believe I will retire for the night.” She stepped away. “Good eve.”

He reached out and touched her arm, stopping her. “I dinna mean to chase ye away. Even though ‘tis cold, ye seemed to be enjoying the night air.”

She felt herself soften, even though she wasn’t quite sure why. When they spoke like this with no animosity, she found he was most likely a nice man. One who, no doubt, had no problem filling his bed.

“Do ye enjoy looking at the stars, lass?”

“I do. Someone once told me there is a huge black cover over the earth and small holes in it make the stars.”

He smiled. “And do ye think so?”

She shook her head. “Nay. It seems like a bairn’s story to me.”

It had truly grown quite cold and, even though she and Mackay were not at odds with each other for a change, she really did need to return to her bedchamber. “I believe I will seek my bed now. It does grow cold.”

He nodded and stayed where he was as she made her way into the great hall and then up to her bedchamber.

Another long night of no sleep, most likely.

Finn watched Lady Alison walk away from him. The woman annoyed him and challenged his control but at the same time he was fascinated with a lass who was willing to enter into a marriage with a man who intended to keep his mistress. He shook his head.

Either the woman had no pride—which he knew was not true based on the few times they’d interacted—or she didn’t care enough about marriage and what it meant.

When he’d first spotted her staring up at the stars, he’d had planned to apologize for what she heard her da say, but changed his mind when he grew closer and saw her face.

She had let her shield down and looked too vulnerable. An apology could only make things worse. She might not be able to protect herself right now. That made him wonder why he thought those words. As if the lass was in the habit of protecting herself.

His thoughts wandered away from Lady Alison and he considered how his day had gone with the training. ‘Twas definite that the laird had let things slip with maintaining his warriors training. Losing two sons so close together was certainly difficult, but strong warriors had to be a priority for a Clan Chief.

After a few more minutes, he grew chilled himself and headed back to the keep.

The Mackay waved him over. He was still at the head table, looking like he was hanging onto a mug of ale.

“Join me in my solar for a whisky, Finn. There are a few things we should discuss.”

Finn followed the Clan Chief up the steps to the bedchamber level. At the end of the hall, Finn opened the solar door for the man and they both entered.

“Pour me a whisky, lad.”

Finn went to a small table against the wall and poured them both a whisky. He walked over to where the laird sat near the fireplace and handed him a glass before settling on a chair next to him.

The laird swirled his whisky, studying it for a few moments. “I believe I have made a mistake.”

Finn immediately sat up, hoping this was not the way The Mackay planned to send him home. “What is that, laird?”

“I dinna do right by my daughter.”

Relief flooded him at not being told to pack up and leave.

“Why is that?”

The man rubbed his eyes with his index finger and thumb. “This is no’ for e’eryone to ken, but I allowed my only daughter to become betrothed to a mon who has no respect for her and who will make her miserable.”

He took a sip of his whisky and continued. “She was satisfied with the arrangement, so I dinna think too much about it at the time.”

Although he knew what the arrangement was that the Clan Chief spoke of, he feigned ignorance. He said nothing, but waited for the laird to continue.

He pounded his fist on the desk in front of him. "I allowed my daughter to marry a mon who intends to keep his mistress right in his bed and only visit Alison when he wants to plant a heir in her."

It sounded even worse when the laird said it than it had when he'd heard it from James. He was curious as to why the man permitted this, but 'twas not his place to question him, so he remained silent.

The laird shook his head. "I am verra sorry I allowed this." He seemed to slip into a morose mood, just staring at his drink.

Finn cleared his throat. "Did ye want to discuss something else, my laird?"

The Clan Chief looked at him, almost as if he forgot he was there. "Nay, ye can seek yer bed. We can speak in the morn."

"Aye." Finn rose and left the room. Thoughts of Lady Alison and her impending marriage had him tossing all night.

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Chapter Four

His first two weeks as second-in-command had come to an end. Finn was quite pleased with how the warriors had taken to his training. They were almost at a point where they were prepared to handle an attack or join any one of the Mackay clans' warriors to defend its keep.

Thinking of attacks made Lady Alison come to mind. They'd had a few more altercations, but for the most part she had remained busy with other women in the keep preparing for her wedding.

Word had it that the Sinclairs were on their way. The wedding was to take place in two days. Finn had been happy that Lady Alison had been kept busy and away from him. His draw to her was much too strong for a man who needed control and a woman who refused to be told what to do—and was preparing for her wedding.

“Mr. Mackay, can ye help move some of the furniture to prepare for the wedding?” Lady Alison, who had lost a bit of weight since he'd arrived, walked up to him as he sat in the great hall enjoying an end of the day ale.

The lass looked anything but happy about her wedding, but he had promised himself he would never let her know he was aware of what her soon-to-be husband had made part of the agreement.

“Aye. I can help out.” He downed the rest of his drink and stood. It was the first time they had any sort of interaction since the night they'd stood under the stars and he'd touched her briefly.

He followed her to a room in the basement. She waved at a grouping of chairs and tables stacked against the wall. “We will need these moved upstairs. I realize as second-in-command this is no’ one of yer jobs, but everyone else is busy right now.”

“‘Tis no’ a problem, lass. I doona mind helping.”

She nodded and began to walk away.

“Where do ye want them, Lady Alison?”

“Oh, I apologize. I feel a bit dimwitted of late. We will need them in the great hall.”

He had the strongest urge to pull her into his arms and kiss her until the well-hidden passion he knew was inside her shattered the shell she had erected.

Although they hadn’t spoken much, he’d watched her as she grew more and more solemn as it came closer to her wedding. She needed not a man who would bed her only for bairns, and then discard her for another woman, but one who worshipped her body, brought the pleasure to her that she deserved.

Someone like him.

That idea terrified him. Lady Alison was not a woman who could be controlled. He’d witnessed enough clashes with her and others in the keep to prove that she was a very independent lass.

For him, control was everything.

He dragged, carried and pushed furniture for a couple of hours. As it grew close to supper, he stopped in the kitchen and got a mug of ale.

Lady Alison was right behind him. “That is an excellent idea,” she said as she grabbed her own mug and filled it from the ever present jug on a table in the corner.

“Lady Alison.” Maude, the castle cook walked over in their direction. “I need ye to let me ken which of the two cakes I showed ye drawings of for the wedding feast.”

Lady Alison’s relaxed smiling demeanor changed. Her body grew stiff and she placed her mug of ale back on the table. “If ye show them to me again, I will let ye ken. I doona ken why ye canno’ pick it yerself.”

“‘Tis yer wedding, lass. A verra special day for ye.”

“Aye, I ken that.” Lady Alison walked to where Maude had pointed at two drawings on the table. Without even really studying them, she said, “this one.”

Maude smiled brightly. “I ken ye would pick that one. ‘Tis my favorite, also.”

Lady Alison gave her a tight smile and left the kitchen. Finn picked up her mug of ale and followed her. “Lady Alison,” he called to her.

She turned back and sighed. “What is it, Mackay?”

He held the mug out. “Ye forgot yer ale.”

Some of the tension left her face. She smiled. “Thank ye.” She reached out and took the mug, drinking the entire thing.

“Do ye want to talk about it?” He knew he was taking a chance because they didn’t exactly have a friendship, but, with no one here for the lass, no sisters, no mam, and a da who called her “trouble,” mayhap she was desperate enough to talk to him.

She slumped. “Ye ken, doona ye?”

He thought about pretending he didn’t know what she was talking about, but he respected her too much. “Aye.”

“Am I a fool for agreeing to this?”

He took her by the elbow and headed toward the library, next to the laird’s solar. Once they were in the room, he turned to her. “Can I ask ye why ye agreed to the terms of the betrothal?”

Even though this was not his business, as it grew closer to her wedding, he watched her lose weight, grow paler, and tense. If he could offer no more than someone to listen to, then he would do that.

And forget about the strong attraction he felt for the lass.

“This may come as a surprise to ye, but I doona like to be told what to do.”

Finn snorted. “Aye. I ken that.”

She continued. “Also I doona want a husband who I could love.”

Finn’s eyes grew wide. “That is something I thought all lasses wanted. I ken laird’s daughters generally doona have a say in who they marry, but to purposely want and chose someone who ye willna love seems a tad strange.”

He almost laughed at the words that had come out of his mouth. Here he was a warrior, strong, brawny, and a survivor of many clashes and battles, and he was spewing nonsense about love.

To his surprise, Lady Alison's eyes filled with tears. "Love is only valuable if it lasts. But it doesn't." With that statement, she left the room.

Alison hurried to her bedchamber, angry with herself for bringing up the subject of her marriage—to Finn Mackay of all people. She hated showing weakness and that was precisely what she had just done.

Would he use the weakness she showed against her? She didn't trust the man; then she huffed. She trusted no man. They say one thing and then they do something different. At least Archie Sinclair told her right out, even had it put into the betrothal agreement, that his lemmann was the most important woman to him.

The evening meal was merely a repeat of all the meals since Finn Mackay had arrived. He and her da had their heads together, discussing weapons, methods, which men were getting better and those who needed more work.

"Ye ken, 'tis bad manners to discuss these things during the evening meal. That sort of thing should be done in yer solar."

Finn looked over at her and grinned. "Aye, laird, yer daughter is correct. 'Tis bad manners."

"Doona say that ye and me agree on something!" Alison said, with a smile on her face. Probably the first one all day.

Her da huffed. "Daughter, we are discussing important things. If ye want to talk about wedding dresses and other such nonsense, then find one of yer lasses to chatter with."

Duly chastised, she sat back and studied her supper. Things were bad enough with her da when her brothers died, but, since Finn Mackay arrived, 'tis like he'd taken the place of his sons, and she was shut out.

She pushed her chair back to leave the table and Finn said, “Nay, lass. I wish to speak with ye after we finish.”

“Let her go,” her da said, waving a dismissal at her. “I want to ask ye about an important matter. When we’re done here, we’ll retire to my solar.”

“Then if ye will excuse me,” she stood and left the table.

As she reached the staircase from the great hall to the bedchambers, one of the guardsmen entered the great hall. “Laird, the Sinclairs have arrived!”

Finn watched Lady Alison continue to the bedchambers upstairs after the announcement of the arrival of the Sinclairs was made. “I will leave ye to greet yer visitors,” Finn said and stood.

The Mackay placed his hand on Finn’s arm. “Nay. I want ye to meet The Sinclair.”

“‘Tis a family matter, my laird. ‘Tis probably better if I allow ye and Lady Alison to greet the guests and I will meet The Sinclair tomorrow.”

“Nay. Stay here.” The laird looked around. “Where did the blasted lass go now?”

“I believe she retired to her bedchamber.”

The laird waved one of the lasses over. “Go upstairs and tell yer lady to make haste and come down here to greet the Sinclairs.”

The lass dipped and headed to the staircase. Finn poured himself another ale, wishing it was whisky. He had no desire to meet the man who was going to treat Lady Alison like a broodmare.

The Sinclairs entered with a great deal of fanfare. The Sinclair marched in first with his oldest son—the groom, Archie Sinclair—behind him. The other three sons followed them side-by-side. It looked as though they were going into battle instead of a wedding.

Finn almost choked on his ale when a woman, dressed in the best of clothing, jewelry and hair ornaments, walked in behind the three sons, moving past them to join the oldest Sinclair son.

He smiled at her, took her arm in his and patted her on the hand. She looked around, obviously unimpressed by the room.

Finn felt his blood begin to boil. The man not only had the nerve to bring his whore with him to his wedding but strutted her alongside him in a show of defiance.

What the bloody hell was wrong with The Mackay? Had he lost his mind that he would allow such disrespect toward his daughter?

Was the conversation they'd had about the strange betrothal agreement a farce? He seemed genuinely upset by what he'd agreed to. Yet, after that he continued to dismiss his daughter and acted as though her wedding was something good, not outrageous

The laird stood and greeted his visitors. "I doona ken where my daughter hurried off to, but I sent one of the lasses to fetch her.

"While we wait I will have the kitchen send in food and drink for ye."

Archie Sinclair stepped forward. "My companion is quite tired from the journey. Please have one of yer maids bring her to my bedchamber and have a hot bath and a meal sent up to her."

It was impossible for Finn to stay in the room. In fact, after greeting The Sinclair he intended to stay as far away from the wedding party as he could without offending his laird.

Once the introductions were made, Finn bowed to The Sinclair. “If ye will excuse me, laird, I have a meeting with my trainers.” Before anyone could object, he strode off, flexing his hand, eager to use it to smash Archie Sinclair in the face.

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Chapter Five

It was the night before the wedding. Finn had worked his men so hard that they were all complaining and seeking the healer for cream to put on sore muscles. He hadn't seen Lady Alison since the night the Sinclairs had arrived.

Archie Sinclair and his three brothers had shown up at the lists twice for "practice." Finn was certain they expected to beat his men into the ground, but he'd gotten a great deal of satisfaction watching his men do it to them.

He took his meals with the warriors and left as soon as he finished. He had been forced into a meeting with Mackay, Laird Gilbert Sinclair, and his four sons. They discussed the new alliance between the two clans and what it meant for the other Mackay chieftains.

Never had he found it so necessary to use his well-honed control to keep from jumping across the table and beating Archie Sinclair into the ground.

Guests continued to arrive from the other Mackay clans and Finn spent time with his brothers and their wives.

"What is wrong with ye, brother?" Craig said as they shared a whisky with Robin and their cousin, Logan, who had arrived from another of the Mackay clans.

"Nothing is wrong."

Robin leaned forward, his forearms braced on his legs. "Are things no' going as well

as ye hoped?”

“Everything is fine.” He downed the rest of his drink.

“We’ve seen more of the Sinclairs than we have of ye since we arrived. ‘Tis almost as if ye were hiding.”

Finn stood. “Nay. No’ hiding. Just busy. I’m off for the night.” With those words he left his family looking back and forth at each other.

Too restless to sleep, he walked outside, the cold night air just what he needed. Truthfully, he had no idea why this marriage bothered him so very much.

If The Mackay and Lady Alison were both fine with the strange arrangement, it shouldn’t trouble him at all. The wedding was the next day, Lady Alison would be off to her new home and things would settle down for him.

After wandering around for a while, he decided to ride into the village and drink until he would be able to sleep. Then rise with the sun, observe the wedding and drink for the rest of the day.

He didn’t even really like the lass. She was too independent, too insistent on having her own way. ‘Twas just that he hated to see any woman get herself married to a man such as Archie Sinclair.

Would ye really care if it was just any woman?

Probably not, if he was honest. There was something about Lady Alison and the unleashed passion he knew was in her that troubled him.

Although he thought she might be too independent, the right husband could learn to

control that.

Somone like him.

‘Twas time to head to the village and get these stupid ideas out of his head. As expected, the stable was dark and empty. He struck a flint and lit a candle. Before he reached Morag’s stall, he heard the faint sound of sniffing. He stepped farther down and three stalls later Lady Alison stood, leaning her head against her horse, crying.

All the muscles in his body tightened and he had the urge to smash his fist into something hard. Like Archie Sinclair’s face.

She must have heard him because she looked up and quickly wiped the tears from her face. “What do ye want, Mackay?”

“I came to get my horse.”

She sniffed, a slight smile on her pretty face. “Going for a ride in the dark?”

“Going to the alehouse in the village.”

“Maybe I will go with ye.”

He leaned against the stall wall, crossing his arms. “The night before yer wedding? I thought all brides had a lot to do.”

She snorted. “Everything has been done except the vows.” She looked away. “Did ye see her?”

He knew who she was speaking of, so there was no reason to act like he didn’t. “Aye.”

“Is she prettier than me?”

He pushed off the stall wall and walked up to her. He reached out and ran the back of his hand against her smooth, still wet, cheek. “Nay.”

She looked off into the distance. “He wants her more than he wants me.” She huffed. “For truth, he doesna want me at all.”

“He’s a fool.” His hand cupped the back of her head, using his index finger and thumb to rub her neck. “Ye can always change yer mind.”

“Nay. ‘Tis all set.” She closed her eyes and he gave into the craving he felt and realized he had felt for a while. Bending his head, he carefully placed his lips on hers, not sure if she would bite them, or kiss him back.

She kissed him back.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. The warmth from her body took away the chill from the night air.

She pulled back and looked him in the eye. “I want ye to make love to me. Just once I want someone who will no’ consider it a chore.”

“Nay, lass. Yer husband will be expecting a virgin.”

She leaned in closer until their lips were not even an inch apart. “He expects no’hing from me. I doona even ken if he will realize it, since he will be rushing to get it over with so he can return to his lemman.”

As the candle he had set down flickered, her hazel eyes darkened and she licked her full lips. “Please doona make me beg, Finn.”

His body reacted to her scent, the passion on her face, the feel of her breasts pressed up against his chest. The hardened nipples teasing, tempting him. The raspy, raw sound of his name on her lips pushed him over the edge.

Knowing he was courting disaster, he pulled her roughly, almost violently to him. His arms wrapped around her, his large hand covering her backside, pulling her against the part of him aching with need. As it had been almost from when he had first seen Lady Alison.

His tongue nudged her lips and she opened to him, a slight moan escaping her mouth as he plundered. His hand slid between the two of them, covering her breast, teasing the nipple begging for his touch.

He knew he should stop. She might not care that she didn't come to her husband as a virgin, but just the little bit of time he'd spent with Archie Sinclair told him the man's pride would not survive that discovery.

He made the attempt to pull back, but she wrapped her arms around his neck and would not let go. "Please, Finn. Just once I need to be wanted for myself and not for what I can do for the two men who made this agreement."

He groaned, unable to resist any longer. He'd wanted this for a long time even though he kept telling himself he did not.

His fingers reached up to her bodice and quickly unlaced it, then pulled it down, releasing her plump breasts, the dusky rose nipples stiff with wanting.

His hands encircled her waist, lifting her up to sit on the ledge behind her, her pale lush breasts at his eye level. He moved between her spread legs and took one breast into his mouth, suckling like a babe.

“Aye,” she groaned, throwing her head back.

All the passion he knew was in the lass came pouring out. She ran her hands over his chest, down farther to his buttocks.

Her hand moved around his body and gripped his cock through his plaid. Finn almost exploded in her hand. His mouth moved to her other breast, her moans driving him on.

‘Twas definitely not the best place to take the lass’s innocence, but there was no stopping either one of them. ‘Twas like a campfire of dry wood when a fire striker met it.

“What the devil is this?” The shout in the air stilled them.

Finn pulled Alison down and shoved her behind him to block her from the view of Laird Gilbert Sinclair, Laird Foster Mackay, Archie Sinclair, and Finn’s brother, Laird Robin Mackay.

“Aw, shite.”

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Chapter Six

Once Finn assumed she had righted herself, he pulled her forward and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “‘Tis my fault, my laird.”

“It doesna look that way to me,” The Sinclair said. “The lass looked like she was verra much a part of this activity.”

Her da glared in her direction. “Remove yerself, daughter. Stay in yer bedchamber until I send for ye.”

She looked up at Finn, who gave her a curt nod.

Once she was gone, the men all followed The Mackay into the keep, past the great hall and into his solar.

Finn leaned against the wall next to the door, his arms crossed. He knew what he’d done was a mistake. Unfortunately, his cock hadn’t cared. Especially when Alison practically begged him to make love to her.

She was distraught and turned to him. As an honorable man, he should have turned her away and marched out of the stable with his—and her—honor intact.

The fact that he’d been lusting after her practically since he’d arrived, he chose to ignore. The woman was a pain in his arse, always getting herself into trouble, or trying to.

He no doubt had saved her from a horrible marriage and a life of misery. He was certain The Sinclair would break the betrothal.

If the man didn't, then he was prepared to grab Alison and return to Dun Ugdale with her. Even though they had been interrupted, as far as he was concerned, she was still his, a pain in his arse or not.

"Finn, ye and me will have a private conversation after we deal with this, but I want ye to stay now."

Finn nodded.

Archie threw the first dagger. "Yer daughter is a whore, Mackay."

Finn roared and jumped over two chairs to get to Archie. They flew to the floor in a crash of chairs and bodies. He got in two good punches before Robin pulled him off.

"Stop it, brother. Ye are in enough trouble already," he shouted as he pushed him back to the wall where he'd been standing before he attacked the bastard, Archie.

"Nothing will be solved by fighting," Foster Mackay said." He turned his attention to Finn. "As yer laird, I order ye to stay exactly where ye are until this is finished."

Finn nodded.

"How long has this been going on?" The Sinclair asked Finn.

Finn ran his hand over his hair. "Lady Alison is a virgin." He had no idea why he said that since he didn't intend to let Archie marry her. Perhaps he wanted to make sure her reputation was not sullied.

There wasn't much more to say with all of them there, so Foster dismissed everyone except The Sinclair and Archie Sinclair, then turning to Finn said, "Wait until I send fer ye, Finn."

The summons from the laird came quicker than Finn had expected.

This time the only one in the room was The Mackay. As Finn went from his bedchamber to the solar, he'd noticed the sounds of orders shouting in the great hall and preparations being made to leave. Hopefully, it was the Sinclairs.

The Laird didn't look happy but waved to the chair in front of his desk. He folded his hands and said, "What do ye have to say for yerself, Finn?"

Expecting this question, Finn took a deep breath. "First I want to say that I am sorry?—"

"—For what ye did or that ye were caught?"

He wanted to smile, but decided 'twas not the best thing to do. "Both."

'Twas not his place to tell the laird that his daughter had been crying. She was a very proud woman and might stab him with her dagger if she knew he told her da that.

He cleared his throat and continued. "I admire Lady Alison a great deal and I believe I have feelings for her. I agree that I should have kept my hands off her since she was betrothed to another mon." He shrugged. "Sometimes these things happen."

He knew that was a very poor excuse but there wasn't really anything else he could say. They went too far and got caught. Hopefully it saved Alison from a bad situation.

"The Sinclair broke the agreement. I might add that I did not attempt to discourage

him from doing that. Ye might believe I don't pay attention to what is going on around me, but I kenned my daughter was unhappy, but I coudna see a way out of it for her."

He was tempted to tell the laird he actually did them a favor, but kept that idea to himself.

"Ye do understand that ye must marry Alison?" the laird said.

Finn shivered for a moment. Life with Alison would most likely be difficult, but he knew this was the result of their actions.

"Aye, my laird. 'Tis my privilege."

He swore the laird snorted. "Since we are all set for a wedding tomorrow, prepare yerself to stand before the priest in the morning."

Of course that made sense, it was just that it all happened so fast he didn't have time to think about it.

"Aye, laird."

"Go tell one of the servants to fetch my daughter. And then return."

Finn did as he was told, then returned to the solar.

If it had been possible for the floor of the stable to open up and drop her through, Alison would have paid any price. That thought kept going through her mind as she paced in her bedchamber, going back and forth, the skirts of her gown swishing as she turned. What a mess!

Yet, deep down inside, she knew there was very little, if any, sorrow in her predicament.

Would her da dismiss Finn? Would The Sinclair break the betrothal agreement? Or given the lack of regard Archie Sinclair had for her—how little he actually cared—there was a good possibility that he would just shrug and continue with the wedding.

The wedding that she now knew she could not go through with. Just the slight bit of passion she'd experienced with Finn told her she could not have passion-free marriage. She might not want to fall in love, but she would need more of what Finn had done to her.

It had been almost two hours since the catastrophe. She was anxious to know what was going on, but at the same time she didn't wish to face any of the men who had walked in on them.

What were they all doing in the stable, anyway?

A soft knock drew her attention. She opened the door to Brenda, looking wide-eyed at her. Apparently her disgrace had been spread around the keep. "Yer da wishes to see ye in his solar."

The muscles in her stomach tightened and she nodded. The walk to her da's solar felt like she was going toward her execution.

She was relieved to see only her da and Finn in the room. Da sat behind his desk, his arms resting on the wooden surface. Finn stood as she entered, then sat in a chair in front of the desk. At least she was not going to be given her punishment and lecture in front of all the men who had been in the stable.

Her da took a deep breath. “There will be a wedding tomorrow, as planned, daughter.”

She jumped up. “Nay, Da. I can’t marry Archie Sinclair. I will jump from my window if ye make me.”

He shook his head. “Ye can stop the dramatic threats, Alison. Ye will be marrying Finn Mackay here.”

She looked over at Finn who stared straight ahead, not looking at her.

“I doona think he wants to marry me, Da.”

Her da waved his hand in dismissal. “It doona matter. He took advantage of ye. The Sinclair has withdrawn the betrothal agreement and the family is packing up to leave as we speak.”

“As much as I willna marry Archie Sinclair, I doona understand why they would break the agreement since he showed up for his wedding with his mistress!”

“Ye agreed to it, daughter.”

“Aye, and I was a fool.”

Finn leaned forward toward her da. “May I have a private word with yer daughter, my laird?”

He placed his hands on his desk and pushed himself up. “Aye. But the door will remain open.”

Alison flushed and tamped down the desire to point out that the damage to her

reputation had already been done. And witnessed by a group of men, and most likely spread throughout the keep. And soon the entire Mackay clan would know.

Once her da left the room, Finn turned toward her and took her cold hands in his warm ones. "I am sorry for this mess, Alison."

"Since it keeps me from marrying that horrible mon, I can't say that I'm sorry. However, I doona wish to marry ye. Not anyone. Now that the agreement is broken, why can't we just forget it all and let me be?"

He leaned back and blew out a breath. "'Tis no' possible, lass. Yer da would ne'er allow it. Plus there is the matter of my honor."

"Yer honor? Why does it always come down to what affects the mon? Da says I agreed to the betrothal agreement, but I was verra much pushed into it. Now that it is broken, I would prefer to remain single and live my life the way I want to. No mon will have me now. I am free."

"Nay, lass. I want ye. And it's not only a matter of honor. As long as ye do what you're supposed to do, we can get along quite well."

"What I am supposed to do? Ye mean what ye tell me what I'm supposed to do?"

"Aye. As yer husband, there are certain things I canno' allow ye to do."

"Like leave the castle walls, doona ride anywhere without yer permission?"

He nodded. "And stay away from the lists."

She actually growled. The benefit of him ordering her about is what caused her dislike of him and would no' diminish. At least she had no cause to worry about

falling in love with the arrogant oaf and getting her heart broken.

Rather than hitting him over the head with something heavy, she stood and took a deep breath. “I am retiring for the night, Mr. Mackay. I will see ye tomorrow morning in time for me to receive my life sentence.”

He rose and reached out as she swept by him, but she pulled her skirt close to her body and left the room.

“Ach, life would be so much better with no men in it,” Alison whispered through gritted teeth.

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Chapter Seven

No sooner had he left The Mackay's office than his two brothers and cousin stopped him as he headed into the great hall, which was now busy with the Sinclairs packing up to leave.

Good riddance.

Robin threw his arm over his shoulder. "Come to the bedchamber I've been assigned to for a wee visit."

"Nay, Helena must be sleeping by now."

He pulled him along. "As Chieftain, I was given a bedchamber with a sitting room."

Craig held up a jug of whisky. "I think ye can use some of this."

His cousin, Logan, smirked. "We can all use some."

Once they were settled on chairs in Robin's sitting room with drinks in their hands, Craig said. "I guess we ken now why ye were out of sorts since we arrived."

Finn tossed the drink down and ran his hand over his hair. "The only good thing about this mess is Lady Alison willna have to marry Archie Sinclair."

"The only good thing?" Logan said, refilling Finn's glass. "Ye're getting a bonny wife who ye seem to care about."

“And has a hard time keeping yer hands off,” Robin added.

Finn stood and placed his hands on his hips. “Part of the betrothal agreement between Archie Sinclair and Lady Alison was he was allowed to keep his lemman who would continue to share his bed after they married. All Lady Alison was going to be to the bastard was a brood horse.”

“Surely ye jest!” Craig said.

“Nay. Ye might not have noticed but the woman with them was her.”

“He brought his mistress to his wedding?”

“Aye.”

Robin blew out a low whistle. “I’m thinking we need to keep our eye on the Clan Chief. For him to make such a poor decision regarding his own daughter, I doona feel a lot of confidence in his future judgments.”

“I think losing one son after another affected him more than any of us realized,” Craig said, swirling the brown liquid in his mug.

“So with yer obvious desire for Lady Alison, why do I feel ye are no’ happy with the outcome of yer lack of discretion?” Robin asked.

Finn accepted another mug of whisky from Logan. “The lass doesna use great judgment when it comes to her safety. Over the last couple of years, The Mackay had allowed her a great deal of freedom. Ye all ken how I feel about keeping control.”

Craig rolled his eyes. “Aye, we do. Are ye ne’er going to forgive yerself for that, brother? Ye were a foolish young mon.”

“Nay. I willna forget it and I will ne’er allow Lady Alison the freedom she’s used to. Because of that, we’ve had several clashes that make me concerned that we are walking into a battlefield tomorrow instead of a marriage.”

“Doona worry so much, cousin,” Logan said. “Keep the lass busy in bed and give her a few bairns to take care of and she won’t have time to get into trouble.”

The thought of Alison all to himself in a comfortable bed, with those wonderful curves for his hands to run over, would be enough to keep him from sleeping tonight.

He drained the rest of his whisky. “I’m off to bed. Things will be bad enough tomorrow since not everyone will have heard about tonight. ‘Twill no’ be good to show up with the results of drinking too much whisky now.”

His brothers and cousin waved him off. He left the keep and walked to the warriors’ sleeping quarters. The Sinclairs were still packing up, and he ignored the few jeers he heard from their men.

If he was going to get into any more trouble tonight, it would be to deliver the well-earned beating Archie Sinclair deserved.

He’d lost his control when they’d all assembled in The Mackay’s solar after the debacle in the stable.

Archie Sinclair had the nerve to call Alison a whore which had taken Robin jumping him and dragging him off the man. Even his well-developed sense of control was lost in that moment.

He lay on his bed, his hands behind his head thinking of all that had happened that day. He’d woken up ready to watch Lady Alison Mackay throw her pride away and marry a man who had no respect for her or the vows they were about to take.

Now he was the man to stand with her as the priest wrapped their hands together and spoke the words that would bind them for life.

Thinking back to the events, he realized, had he not wanted to lose himself in drink, he would not have gone to the stable, would not have discovered Alison crying, and would not have lost control over his lust.

Twice tonight he'd lost control. That's what women could do to you. He flipped over and punched his pillow, trying to convince himself to fall asleep.

It didn't work as it never did when he'd tried it before. He could not force himself to sleep, especially with his wedding tomorrow.

Wedding.

Most likely most of the guests and family had heard about the scandal resulting in a switch in grooms tomorrow. He was all for throwing the lass on the back of Morag, riding to the village and finding a blacksmith to marry them over the anvil.

Easy. Fast. No judgment. And then off to bed.

He groaned. Thinking of bedding his wife drove him even further from sleep.

Same wedding.

Same bride.

Different groom.

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Chapter Eight

Alison stared at her reflection in the mirror. She was definitely torn. Her wedding day. Wrong groom.

Nay, the right groom.

Truth be told, the best choice for her would be no groom.

She wasn't even sure she liked her intended husband. He was too bossy. Too confident, too ready to tell her all the things that were wrong with her.

Also, she didn't trust him. But she trusted no man. They only disappointed you. As long as she could hold her heart close, she would be fine.

A knock sounded at her door. Her cousin, Mairi, from the Mackay clan near the Sutherland border, stepped into the room. She was to be her witness, but since she had only arrived the previous morning—and with all the disruption that had occurred since then—they'd hardly had any time to speak.

"You look beautiful, Alison." Mairi held her hands over her mouth as she observed her cousin. "Your groom will be most satisfied with you."

Alison smirked. "Which groom? The one who left or the one who stayed?"

Mairi stepped farther into the room. "I admire yer sense of humor, cousin. I doona ken if I would be as calm as ye are after yesterday."

She snorted. “If ye could see my insides ye wouldn’t be so impressed with my state of mind.”

They clutched each other’s hands. “I doona ken the full story, and I thought leaving ye alone last eve was a good idea, but we have a bit of time before ye are expected downstairs. Did ye wish to speak of it?” Mairi said.

Alison let go of her hands and walked away. “‘Tis no’ something to speak of. Finn Mackay and I have no’ gotten along since he arrived. However, there is no mistaking the attraction we have for each other.

“Last eve I was in the stable, feeling quite sorry for myself, when Finn stumbled upon me. He attempted to console me, which quickly turned into something we had been fighting for some time.”

“What about Sinclair? Ye said ye were feeling sorry for yerself. Dinna ye care for the mon?”

She snorted. “I hated the mon. Part of our betrothal agreement was my assurance that I understood he would keep his lemman.”

“Nay!”

“Aye. No’ only that, but, when they arrived, she was with him and he instructed the maid to place her in the bedchamber he had been assigned.”

Mairi just stared at her cousin, her mouth hanging open. “And yer da allowed this?”

“He made sure I agreed to it in the betrothal agreement, but he dinna seem to ken that the witch would come to the wedding.”

Mairi placed her hands on her hips. “He should have thrown them out.”

“Da has no’ been the same since my brothers died. I think he was just happy to be rid of me.”

Her cousin ran her hand down Alison’s hair. “Ye could have come to stay with us instead of being tied to such a horrible mon.”

“I thought I was fine with the arrangements until he showed up with her . Then it all seemed to be real. I would be sharing my husband with another woman who would occupy his bed while I slept in another room.

“Nay!”

“Aye.” She smiled. “That was Finn’s reaction to it. He was so upset I kept waiting for him to throw me over the back of his horse and ride away.”

“Instead, he managed to save ye anyway.”

Another soft knock caught their attention. One of the maids entered after they bid her enter. “My lady, yer da has asked that ye come downstairs.”

Mairi slipped her arm into Alison’s arm. “Come. Let us start this wedding.”

Alison took a deep breath as she reached the bottom of the staircase. There were about fifty people gathered, a much smaller group than the night before. Apparently plenty of Sinclair clan folk had already departed from the bizarre wedding.

Mairi walked with her to where the priest, Finn, and his brother Robin stood in front of the kirk in the outer bailey. Both men dressed in formal Mackay wear turned toward her.

Her breath caught in her lungs. Finn looked so handsome, so impressive, so much in control, compared to how she was shaking as she reached him.

He offered a warm smile and held his hand out. “Ye look beautiful, lass.”

She accepted his hand and licked her lips. He closed his eyes slightly and then turned them toward the priest.

At the proper time, they placed their palms together and the priest wrapped their hands with a piece of Mackay cloth.

Finn looked directly into her eyes as he repeated his vows. She, however, was unable to maintain the intimate contact with him.

Eventually the priest blessed them, offered a prayer for fertility and declared them husband and wife.

‘Twas a subdued group who left the kirk and returned to the keep. Her da had no’ spoken to her since his announcement the night before that the wedding would still take place this morning. With a different groom.

“‘Twill no’ be so terrible, Alison,” Finn said as he bent to speak into her ear as they strolled to the keep. “I believe we will get along well.”

“Aye. As long as I obey yer commands.”

He drew in a deep breath. “I doona mean to make them sound like commands, wife. I am merely concerned about yer safety. ‘Tis dangerous times.”

She nodded. He could wrap his orders in any sort of “caring” cloth he wanted to, but she knew what they were. Commands. Orders. Demands. Rules.

They took their seats at the dais, Mairi on her side and Robin next to Finn. Once they all settled in, and the food started to arrive from the kitchen, her da, Robin, Craig, and Finn became involved in a deep conversation.

She wondered if her da would take the time and effort to speak with her sometime today. So far, he'd said nothing since he ordered her to marry Finn.

She shivered, once again feeling the embarrassment at being caught half undressed in Finn's arms the night before her wedding to another man.

A man who brought his mistress with him to his wedding.

Since Finn was now her husband, she assumed he would take on the laird's position when her da died, which had been intended for Sinclair.

She knew nothing about it at all because, being a woman, whatever animosity between them and the Sinclairs that may have come from the broken betrothal agreement, that information would not be passed along to her. Women held no status, had no control, and had no use.

Including when their men wanted them to be married off.

The food had been consumed and the tables pushed away for dancing. "Are ye feeling better, Alison?" Mairi touched Alison's hand.

"Aye. 'Tis always better when these things are o'er. 'Tis the anticipation that causes the most anxiety."

Finn turned from her father and leaned in close to Alison. "We need some time together before the raucous group in the corner begins to demand the bedding ceremony." He nodded toward the warriors toasting the bride and groom and each

other.

Her eyes grew wide and she shook her head. “Nay. I doona want that.”

“Alison, I am the second-in-command and head trainer for the warriors. Do ye think we will get away without it?”

“Merely tell them nay.”

He chuckled. “They have consumed much ale, wine and whisky. There won’t be telling them nay.” He stood and held out his hand. “Come.”

She linked fingers with his and he walked her off.

“Where do ye think ye are going with the lass?” One of the warriors shouted. Immediately mugs began to pound the table.

Finn raised his hands, a smile on his face. “We are only going for a walk.” He tugged Alison’s hand. “Hurry.”

“‘Tis too cold to walk outside. We can go to my bedchamber.”

He stared at her. “Ach, too much temptation, sweetheart. I really want to talk, but, with that distraction, I’m afraid verra little conversation will take place.”

She felt her face flush, which only made her husband of a few hours chuckle.

“We shall use the library next to my da’s solar.”

With them both taken up with their own thoughts, it was a quiet walk to the library. Once they arrived, Finn placed his hand on her lower back, immediately bringing

heat radiating from that spot to the rest of her body. He reached behind her and closed the door. “At least there is no bed here.”

Again her face flushed. But this time, with the memory of Finn’s large warm hand on her back, she began to understand a bit about how desire worked. She’d never experienced that with Archie Sinclair. But then, the man had never even kissed her. Not that she had wanted him to.

Finn waved to a chair. “Can we sit?”

“Of course.” She took the comfortable chair facing another one just like it.

Her husband didn’t sit right away but stood looking at her until she became uncomfortable. “Why are ye standing over me, staring?”

“Most likely because I doona really ken what to say.”

She raised her chin. “Mayhap ye wish to apologize?”

His brows rose. “Apologize for what? If ye’re referring to the kiss we shared that ended with us?—”

“Nay.” She frowned. “I’m thinking ye might want to apologize for all the demands ye’ve made of me since ye arrived.”

Finn placed his hands on his hips. “The only demands I made upon ye was to keep ye from killing yerself, or, in the case of parading past the lists, one of my men.”

She pointed her finger at him. “I was merely returning to the keep after collecting flowers from my garden. I think ‘tis yer responsibility to keep yer men under control.”

He growled. “I am always in control.”

“Aye. That is the problem. Ye feel as though ye need to control everyone.” She pointed her finger at him. “Ye are an arrogant mon, Mr. Mackay. Ye think ye always ken what’s best for everyone. Ye are no’ always right, ye ken.”

“Perhaps ye can tell me, lass, what I spoke with ye about that was no’ necessary to protect yerself.”

She jumped up. “‘Tis was no’ yer right to tell me what no’ to do.”

“As yer husband it is my duty and job to protect ye, even from yerself.”

She pointed her finger at him. “I was no’ yer wife when ye ordered me around like a bairn.”

Finn ran his hand over his hair and took a deep breath. “Alison. I dinna ask to speak with ye so we could argue.”

Finn studied his wife’s demeanor which told him this wasn’t going how he’d planned. He wanted to spend some time with her alone since they hadn’t had a chance to speak since the brief time the laird had allowed them after she’d been ordered to marry him.

He knew once the bedding ceremony began, it would end with them together in bed, naked, which would make any kind of discussion on his part impossible.

He took complete responsibility for his actions. He was the one with experience, and Alison an innocent miss. He should have known better than to let their kiss go as far as it had. For as infuriating as the lass made him, the lust he felt for her was frightening.

What was truly frightening was that he'd lost control again. Twice now the woman had done that to him. When he'd attacked Archie Sinclair and when he let his lust for her consume him.

However, he had no idea how he would have sat this morning and watched his Alison marry the bastard Sinclair.

His Alison.

It hadn't taken long for him to make a claim on the woman, even if they hadn't yet shared a bed.

Just as the blame for the event that led to their marriage should fall on his shoulders, the fact that they were already arguing was his as well. Mayhap he did sound a tad overbearing, but, from what he'd seen since he'd arrived, no one seemed to have control over the lass's actions.

He had many things to do both as second-in-command and now heir to the laird. He could not spend his time worrying that his wife was in trouble and endangering herself.

Give her a bairn to worry about, he told himself.

All the time he'd been musing, Alison had been staring out the window, her arms crossed, her body tense. This would not do. He wanted to spend this time making amends with her so when they did retire for the night the only thing on their minds would be a proper wedding night.

He walked up to her and wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her to his chest. With his other hand, he moved her long, curly hair from her back to her shoulder exposing the soft, silky skin on her neck.

She shivered as his lips touched her. He nibbled on the spot, then soothed it with small kisses. “So soft.”

With a slight moan, she leaned back against his chest. His hand moved up to cup her breast, his thumb circulating over her nipple, feeling pleasure as the nub tightened and she pushed herself harder against him.

He closed his eyes, telling himself he needed to get this conversation over with so they could return to the great hall, finish the celebration and retire to their bedchamber.

Finn turned her body, his arms encircling her. “I doona want to argue because I think we can make a good marriage.” He leaned in and pressed his lips to her hair and mumbled. “We will have many bairns. Strapping sons and bonny girls.”

“I doona wish to argue, either. But I also doona want to be told what to do.” She leaned back and looked into his eyes. “I can defend myself.”

He grinned. “Aye? How can ye defend yerself?”

“Doona laugh at me, Mackay. I am excellent with arrows. I also carry a sgian dubh with me.”

“Ach, lass, that scares me even more. If someone gets close enough to ye for ye to stab him, he would be able to grab it off ye and use it to cut yer throat.”

Seeing her expression change, knowing she was about to argue the point, he cupped her face and took her mouth in a completely possessive kiss. There was no better way to stop a lass from speaking than to keep her lips busy.

A pounding on the library door broke them apart.

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Chapter Nine

“‘Tis time for the bedding!!” A few voices carried the message through the door, and most likely to the great hall.

“Aye,” he shouted back. He winked at Alison. “‘Twill be fine, wife. I will make sure no one but myself sees yer naked body.”

Instead of reassuring her, she blanched, but, before he could say anything more, a group of women barged through the library door, grabbed her and dragged her up the stairs to the bedchamber floor.

“Time for another drink, Mackay.” His cousin, Logan, slapped him on the back and the group moved him downstairs.

Foot stomping, mugs banging on the tables and a great deal of cheering greeted them. He looked at the dais where Robin and Craig sat, grinning at him with their arms crossed.

It was annoying to remember how both his brothers managed to avoid the bedding ceremony at the behest of their wives.

However, their positions in the clan gave them the standing to throw the men out of their rooms. He, on the other hand, instead of status, had rowdy, drunk warriors to contend with, who had no intention of missing the highlight of the celebration.

They tried their best to get him drunk, most likely hoping he wouldn’t be able to

perform and they could tease him about it the next morning. He sighed, just about ready to race them upstairs since he doubted any of them could, at this point, more than stumble after him, when one of the lasses came downstairs announcing the bride was ready for her groom.

He was half carried, half pushed up the stairs. The women outside the door, just as enthusiastic as the men, opened the door.

Alison sat on the bed, her face as pale as new milk. She had curled herself up, with the bedcover pulled all the way up to her chin.

The men started to strip his clothes off, tossing them in every direction as Alison's eyes grew wider by the second.

Once he was stripped down to his skin, he backed up until the back of his legs hit the bed. He sat and held his hand up to stop the shouting. Finally, he was forced to let out a loud whistle to gain their attention.

"This is as far as the ceremony goes, lads. My wife and I would like some privacy."

"Nay!" one of the men yelled. "We have to put ye into the bed."

"Aye, how do we ken if the bride is ready for ye?"

Finn pointed to the door. "Out! All of ye. 'Tis no matter but mine. Besides, ask yer ladies there who prepared Lady Alison." He looked over at the group of women, not as upset as the men because they'd gotten a good look at his body, very prepared to consummate his marriage.

One of the older women walked toward the men. "Let's go, lads. The mon is correct. Ye don't need to take a look at his wife." She pushed a couple of the men toward the

door. "Come on, now."

Reluctantly, with a great deal of grumbling, they made their way out of the room. Once the door was closed, Finn hurried across the room and barred it.

When he turned back, Alison was sitting in the same position in the bed, except the bedcovers were now over her head.

"Would you like a whisky or glass of ale, now that the crowd has left us?"

She lowered the bedcovers enough that he could see her eyes. But nothing else. She nodded her response.

It was going to take some time to get his new wife to relax. The last bit of frenzy certainly hadn't helped.

"Um, do ye have something ye can put on? I think 'tis rather chilly in here." He almost missed her mumbled words, but realized she was correct. His nakedness, while quite normal to him and other men, would make her uncomfortable.

"Of course, lass." He walked over to the bundle of clothes the men had just stripped off him and dropped his liene over his head.

Once he was covered, he said, "Why doona ye join me o'er here by the fire."

She shook her head. "They took all my clothes."

"This is yer bedchamber, is it no'? Just tell me where yer sleeping gown is, and I'll fetch it for ye."

"In there." She pointed to a wardrobe next to a trunk with a pitcher of water and a

bowl sitting on it.

He rustled through a few things and then pulled out the filmiest sleeping gown he could find. Apparently still flustered from the bedding ceremony, she didn't notice how visible her body would be in the garment.

Well, he was certainly not going to point it out to her. He brought it over to her and she shimmed into it. "Thank ye, I feel better now."

He held out his hand. "Come join me by the fire for a drink and it will relax ye."

She smiled at him, took his hand and climbed from the bed. He was staggered. He'd spent so much time snipping with the lass that he never really studied her.

The woman was stunning. Her near naked body was perfect. Lush breasts with rosy nipples, a definite curve at her waist and generous hips. At the apex of her firm legs, a silky thatch of blonde hair drew his eyes.

His eyes moved up to take in her wavy blonde hair that fell over her shoulders and rested on her back and breasts.

He actually had to shake himself to remember what he was going to do. The fire. He was bringing her to the fire. To warm her up. He, on the other hand, was so warm an ice cold bath in the loch sounded good just about now.

Or a quick drink and then to the bed.

He gave her a small glass of whisky and settled in the chair next to her. They stared at the fire and sipped the drinks.

She smelled of flowers, sunshine, and all things woman. He kept taking quick glances

at her glass which she seemed to be holding onto like a lifeline.

“Alison. Are ye nervous?”

She took a deep breath, bringing his eyes directly to those beautiful breasts that he wanted to cup, squeeze, rub. He closed his eyes. He had to get control.

“I am a bit nervous. I haven’t had a mam for a long time, to teach me, and, as much as I tried to listen to the maids whisper among themselves, I ne’er really kenned what they were talking about. I just heard a lot of giggling.”

He ran his hand over his hair. Should he tell her, or show her? He was all for showing, so maybe, if he went slow, it would not frighten her.

Then he remembered this was Lady Alison, the woman who had no problem standing up to him. She rode horses like a demon with no escort, claimed to be proficient with the bow, and bragged about her sgian dubh . He was certain—once he broke through her initial fear—all the passion he’d sensed in her in the stable would take over.

Certain of himself now, he took the glass out of her hand and, placing his hands on her shoulders, turned her toward him. “Wife, ye are truly the most beautiful lass I’ve e’er seen.”

Her face flushed and, before she was able to question or dispute him, he covered her plump lips with his, starting out slow and thoughtful. It didn’t take long for her to demand more.

He was willing.

Chapter Ten

Alison found his nearness overwhelming. A feeling she was not at all familiar with. She always had the upper hand when it came to dealing with people. Especially men. She didn't trust them and never would. Her heart could not take another beating like it had before.

Before her brain had cleared enough from seeing Finn Mackay in all his naked glory, she was sitting in the sleeping gown and sipping whisky. The sleeping gown he'd brought to her was the one that her cousin, Mairi, had made for her and presented when she'd first arrived.

Embarrassed to even touch the thing, she'd stuffed it into the back of her wardrobe. It seemed quite suspicious that Finn just happened to pull that one out.

And then he took her glass out of her hand and kissed her.

Her heart hammering in her ears, he covered her mouth with his. Warm, soft, exploring. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

The thin garments they wore felt like nothing at all. She could feel the heat and muscles of his chest. The liene was opened at the throat, giving her a glimpse of his strong chest, covered with soft, dark hair, very much like the hair on his head.

Finn's kiss grew more solid, more possessive. He nudged her lips with his tongue and when she opened, it slid in, touching all the places in her mouth that she had no idea were so sensitive.

She felt a loss when he drew back, but then his mouth moved from her lips to her neck where his teeth grazed her earlobe, nipping at it, then soothing it with his warm, wet tongue.

Not wishing to have everything done to her and not respond, Alison slid her hands up Finn's chest and played with the ends of his short hair.

Her husband's kisses grew more demanding, more masterful. He was in charge and let her know by his actions. He moved her body how he wanted it, he plundered her mouth over and over. She felt as though she was spinning, causing her to cling to her husband's shoulders, hanging on.

He pulled back and, before she could even take a breath, his large hands slid underneath her sleeping gown and within seconds it was going over her head.

Instead of feeling chilled—the fire must have been doing its job—she was warm, very, very warm.

“Ach, sweetheart, we would be much more comfortable in the bed.”

Unable to even form words, she merely nodded, and he swept her up, the sleeping gown dropping to the floor.

Naked in his arms, he carried her to the bed and gently laid her down. Any embarrassment she felt before had vanished. Finn studied her as he removed his liene and climbed in next to her.

He seemed to be as fascinated by her breasts as she was with Finn's man part. It was long and thick and jutted out from his body. She knew what that was for, but she should have asked to see it before she was ordered to marry.

This object would not fit.

Finn fondled her breasts, pulled at her nipples and, when she thought she could take no more, he covered one of her breasts with his mouth.

It felt as good as it had in the stables and she was sure that sound was her moaning. Her breasts grew heavy and the area between her legs warm and wet. He released her breast with a pop sound, bringing a “nay” from her. Before the word was barely out, his arm went around her body and pulled her against him.

The sensation of rubbing her already stiffened nipples against his muscular chest with soft, scattered hair kept her heart wildly thumping and her lungs gasping for air.

After a few more mind-numbing kisses, he flipped her on her back and, leaning over, brushed the now damp hair from her face. “I have wanted you in this position almost since I arrived at Castle Varrich.”

Alison’s brows rose. “I doubt that, husband. Ye did no’thing but order me around.”

“Aye, but that doesna mean I dinna desire ye. And ye deserve a mon who wants ye in his bed more than anyone else.”

Knowing he was referring to Archie Sinclair, he had managed to sooth her rejection and bring more fluttering to her stomach and more warmth and wetness to the area now aching for his touch.

“And ye’re married to me by accident.”

“Nay, wife. ‘Twas meant to be,” he growled. “Too much talk.” He ended that statement with another soul searching kiss.

Her hand wandered down to his man part, feeling it for the first time, enjoying the feel of something so very odd. Soft and hard. A bit of moisture on the tip.

Finn let out a low whistle through his teeth. “Are ye sure ye want to do that, lass? As good as it feels, it might bring an end to this before ye have yer pleasure.”

“It feels so strange.”

His laugh sounded as if he was strangling. While he kept his mouth busy, softly speaking in her ear in Gaelic phrases, sucking on her skin, kissing all over her face, she ran her hand over his strong, smooth back muscles.

Not since her brothers had died, had she felt protected. Learning how to use the bow and the sgian dubh didn’t help as much as she’d thought it would. Her world as she’d known it, as the only daughter and sister, had practically disappeared.

She felt as though she’d lost all the men in her family, especially when her da decided to marry her off to a man who didn’t want her. She doubted her brothers would have allowed it. But the da she’d grown up with was as dead as her brothers.

Now she had a strong, virile man who had vowed to protect her. Except his protection came at a price.

“Stop thinking, lass. I can hear yer brain mumbling.” Finn slid his fingers down her sensitive body to the wet, warm folds between her thighs. “This will keep yer mind from wandering.”

No truer words had ever been spoken. Once his large finger slid through the folds of her swollen woman’s part, she began to feel as though she needed something those fingers would do.

“Relax, m’eudail. I ken ye’re needing something, but if ye tense up it will take longer. I will ne’er leave ye wanting.”

She had no idea what he meant, but, since he promised to bring her pleasure, she had to trust that he would. Trust. The one word she intended never to use again.

Her thoughts came right back to the activity Finn was doing with his finger. He slid it into the opening between her legs and she nearly shot off the bed. Then he added a second one. “Ye’re so tight, lass.”

“Is that bad?”

“Nay. But ‘twill take some time to get ye ready for me.”

“Doona stop what ye were doing.”

Finn smiled. “No’ a chance, wife.” Once again he covered her mouth, caressing it more than kissing it.

‘Twas no surprise that Alison responded so well to his attentions. Based on their confrontations he’d already determined that the lass had passion inside her. What a waste for her to be tied to a man who didn’t want her.

As his fingers worked, she began to thrash around, moaning and begging. He knew she was close, so he spread her legs and climbed between them, placing his cock at the entrance to her lush body.

He started to slowly enter her while still working the stiff flesh begging for his attention. “I am close to something, Finn,” she panted.

“I ken, mo chridhe, just relax.” He barely got the words out when she tightened the

muscles in her legs and let out with a keening sound. He pushed forward until he reached her barrier.

He closed his eyes, almost in pain as he waited for the ripples teasing his cock to stop, not wanting to interfere with her pleasure by causing pain.

She collapsed and, as soon as she did, he surged forward.

“Ouch.”

“I’m sorry, lass, but there won’t be any more pain, just pleasure.”

A lone tear slid down her cheek which he licked away, then took her face in his hand and kissed her gently. She closed her eyes and moved her hips against him.

That was all the invitation he needed. He began to slide in and out, growing faster as her breathing increased and she continued to press against him. Wanting to give her more pleasure, he reached between them and used his thumb to rotate against the stiffening flesh.

His heart pounded as he thrust over and over, her thrashing and moaning driving him to a place he’d never been before.

Soon he let out with a shout as he poured his seed into her just as she began to milk him, having experienced another climax.

He rested his forehead on hers as they both attempted to calm their breathing. After a minute or so, he rolled off her sweat-covered body and pulled her next to him.

It had been quite a while, and perhaps not ever, that he’d had such a release. And to think it had come from his own troublemaking, little wife.

“That was quite nice, husband.”

Finn grinned at her with surprise. “Only nice, Alison? Mayhap I will have to try harder the next time.”

She poked him in the chest. “Nay. ‘Twas more than nice, I just wanted to see that smile of satisfaction on yer face disappear.”

“What will we do now?” Alison asked.

“Go to sleep.”

She rolled over and propped her hand on her upraised hand. “Aye, I agree. I’m weary myself, but what I meant was, how will we go on with this marriage? We ne’er even had a chance to speak since we went from forced marriage to wedding.”

He shifted so his body rested the same way on his side. “Is that how ye feel, lass? Forced?”

“Wasn’t I?”

He shrugged. “No more than I was. But considering that right now ye could be laying in a cold bed by yerself on yer wedding night had things turned out the way they were planned, mayhap forcing ye was a good thing.”

She reached out and pushed a short damp lock of hair from his forehead. “What about ye? Do ye feel forced?”

He rolled to his back, resting his head on his linked fingers. “I wasna happy with the arrangement ye da had worked out for ye with Archie Sinclair.” He turned his head to gaze at her. “Ye deserve so much more.”

Smirking, she punched him lightly on his side. “Like ye?”

“Aye.”

Alison flopped onto her back and placed her hands on her chest. “I doona want to be told what to do.”

“I doona want ye to put yerself in danger.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Nay. Ye canno’.”

“I have my weapons.”

“Ye have no weapons against a mon who wants to hurt ye.”

She gave a deep sigh. “I believe we should sleep now, husband. I am tired and I doona want to ruin what we just did by arguing.”

He leaned over and kissed her briefly on her lips, still swollen from his kisses. He was ready to have her once again, but no doubt she was sore.

Never having bedded a virgin before, he just realized it was his job to make sure she was comfortable for a night’s sleep.

He threw off the bedcovers and strode to the trunk where the bowl and pitcher with water in it stood. He took one of the linens next to it and dipped it into the water.

He turned back to the bed, and she watched him. “What are ye doing?”

“Taking care of my wife.”

Once he settled next to her, he reached down and cleaned her up. He looked at Alison and she was smiling. “Well done, husband.”

He tossed the cloth in the pile of clothes to be sent to the laundry room, then settled in alongside her. “Now ‘tis time to sleep.”

She yawned and rolled to her side. “Aye.”

Finn pulled her to him, wrapping his arm around her waist, pulling her next to him all tucked in for the night.

Within minutes they were both asleep.

Chapter Eleven

Alison woke to a cool, empty place alongside her on the bed. With his duties as second-in-command, Finn most likely rose early every day.

She looked at the slight stream of sunlight coming from underneath the window covering. She threw the bedcovers off and winced as she stood, a tad sore from the night before.

She flushed at the light blood stain on the bedclothes and assumed the maids would change it. What she wanted more than anything was a bath to soothe her, and then a ride on her horse, Bonnie-Bay. It would be nice if Mairi joined her, but she knew early morning was something her cousin rarely saw.

She requested the bath, and, although she had intended to soak for a while and enjoy it, she found herself too full of energy to spend time there.

After drying off, she quickly dressed and headed downstairs. She stopped at the great hall to grab an apple for Bonnie-Bay and a piece of warm bread and a chunk of cheese for herself.

She spent some time with Robin, Craig and their wives as they were getting ready to leave. Robin explained that he had left a lot of problems at Dun Ugadale that needed his attention.

“I apologize for no’ spending much time with ye,” she said, feeling a tad guilty about almost ignoring Finn’s family.

“No’ to worry, Alison, ye and Finn must come for a visit when ye get a chance,” Helena said.

After hugs, congratulations, and promises of a visit, she headed out of the keep and waved at Old Kilmead, who had been in charge of the stable since Alison had been a lass. He walked up to her, an odd expression on his face. “Good morn to ye, Lady Alison.”

“Good morn, is Bonnie-Bay ready for our ride?”

He took off his cap and rubbed his ever disappearing hair. “Well, lass, here is the thing. I have been given orders that ye are no’ allowed to ride outside the castle without an escort.”

Her jaw dropped. “An escort? I ne’er had one before.”

“Aye, ye did. When yer brothers were here to watch o’er ye.”

She placed her hands on her hips. “It’s been over a year since they died. I haven’t had an escort since then.” Suddenly an idea popped into her head. “Who gave ye this order?”

It was not necessary for her to wonder at his answer. “Finn,” they both said at the same time.

“Ye can get my horse ready. I will be having a word with my husband .”

She stomped away and headed directly to the lists. The men were already busy with their training. On the other side of the area, Finn stood, instructing a young lad in the proper way to swing his sword.

She cupped her hands alongside her mouth. “Finn!”

Several men turned in her direction, one of them almost slicing off his training partner’s ear.

Her husband called a stop to the training and stormed over to her. “What the devil are ye doin’, lass? I’ve told ye before ye are no’ to come near the lists when the men are training.”

She poked him in the chest. “Who gave ye the authority to order Old Kilmead no’ to let me ride my own horse outside the castle?”

“I’m the only authority needed. I am yer husband, and I doona intend to let ye put yerself in danger.” He leaned forward. “Yer da has been remiss in protecting ye.”

Alison drew herself up. “I am able to take care of myself. I doona need ye going behind my back and giving orders.”

“Nay, lass. As I said before, yer little dagger will only make it easy for a mon to take it from ye and slit yer throat. And for yer bow, do ye think yer attacker will just wait while ye draw your arrow to hit him in the chest?”

Her eyes narrowed. “No one has troubled me before.”

“Not ‘before,’ lass, the word is ‘yet.’”

Alison stomped her foot. “I told ye before we married that I willna have my independence taken away.”

“And I told ye I willna allow ye to put yerself in danger.”

They glared at each other until Alison growled and swung around, almost tossing herself to the ground. The sound of Finn's laughter followed her back to the keep.

The warriors piled into the great hall for the nooning meal. Alison had been helping in the kitchen since two of the maids had both come down with an ague.

She wiped her forehead with her wrist and lifted another tray to carry platters of cold meat and stewed vegetables.

The first man she spotted was Finn. He was standing near the great hall door, hands on his hips speaking with her da. She gritted her teeth, still wanting to break something heavy over his head.

He turned as she drew near to the dais. He quickly left her da and took the tray from her. "Ye are the Lady of the Manor, wife, ye shouldna be carrying trays or working in the kitchen."

She followed him as he carried the tray the rest of the way to the table. "Aye, I am the Lady of the Manor, so 'tis my responsibility to see that everyone is fed. We have two sick kitchen maids."

"I will help ye."

They turned from the table and strode side by side to the kitchen. She grinned at the big oaf and said, "And think ye 'tis okay for the second-in-command and future laird to work in the kitchen?"

He looked over at her with a surprised expression. "I hadna given that a lot of thought. Of being the future laird." He placed his hand on her lower back as they entered the kitchen. "I am hoping no' to have to assume those duties for some time."

Future laird .

Finn thought about that as he continued to help Alison and the one maid who wasna sick deliver all the food to the great hall.

Although he knew that was part of the marriage agreement he and The Mackay had worked out, he still found it hard to believe he was the third son of his clan, hired here as the second-in-command and now had a much different life awaiting him.

As well as a wife who was determined to put herself in danger in the name of independence. He'd known her brothers Bryan and William. He also knew The Mackay for all his life, and was certain among the three men Alison would never have the type of independence she expected.

The best way to keep the lass close to home was to get her with a bairn. If she had one or two clinging to her skirts she would no' have the time to get into trouble.

Once they finished their meal, he leaned back on his chair and said, "What say ye we travel to the village this afternoon?"

Her face lit up, making him feel a tad guilty for refusing to let her ride earlier in the morning. Making concessions was a part of marriage, so mayhap he could take a morning or two and go with her for her ride. James and Albert could certainly handle the training.

"I would love that," Alison said.

He congratulated himself for thinking of a way to calm his wife down and maintain control. If anyone had the ability to have him lose control it was his wife. He had already felt the pull between them and had no intention of letting it go any further.

He'd thought once he'd bedded her, he would feel satisfied and be able to concentrate on more important matters than keeping a woman happy outside the bedroom.

That hadn't happened. If anything, he craved her more. A voice inside said that was not a good thing to let his wife know.

They walked side-by-side to the stable. He'd sent word to Old Kilmead to have their horses tacked and ready to go. Once they reached the horses' sides, he lifted Alison to Bonnie-Bay and then jumped on Morag.

Alison had already reached the drawbridge when he joined her. They trotted out, horse hooves clattering on the wooden bridge as they rode away.

Once they reached the bottom of the hill surrounding Castle Varrich, they gave their horses their heads and raced along. He looked over at Alison who looked back at him.

Her bright smile almost caused him to tumble from his horse. Her plaited hair had blown free and she held her body in tense concentration.

Memories of the night before warmed his body and had a part of his body growing, almost making the ride uncomfortable.

The Village Tongue sat only a short distance from the castle, so they didn't really give their horses a full run. But they were still breathless when they guided their mounts to the stable.

Finn lifted Alison from her horse and placed his hand on her lower back as they headed to the green where vendors had set up for the day.

He reached over and pulled her closer, linking their fingers together. It appeared Alison knew every vendor in the green.

Including the men.

Not that he cared, of course. She was just a friendly lass and everyone seemed to like her.

Including the men.

“Lady Alison!” A large man, long, flowing, red curly hair, a bright smile on his face strode up to her. He threw his arms around Alison and pulled her into a ferocious hug.

Bells went off in Finn’s head and he closed and opened his fists as he studied them.

“Brendan, I am so happy to see you. It’s been so long.” Alison grinned at the man, raising Finn’s irritation.

“And I am happy to see ye, lass. I thought ye’d be gone by now to Sinclair Grinigoe.”

Alison flinched and said, “Nay. I dinna end up marrying Archie Sinclair.”

The man spending too much time clasping his wife said, “Then ye are free? I put my name in to be chosen as yer husband.”

Finn had heard enough. He pushed his way between his wife and the man. “Lady Alison is no’ free, and I would appreciate yer taking yer hands off my wife .”

The man looked at him with raised eyebrows. “Yer wife? Are ye saying this lovely lass that I’ve had my eyes on for years is yers?”

“Aye. And step back if ye doona wish to lose a few of yer teeth.”

The man raised his hands and stepped back. “‘Tis sorry, I am. Lady Alison and I have

been friends for many years. When I left to visit my family last month she was betrothed to that bastard, Sinclair. As much as I am sorry to find her married, 'tis glad I am she escaped that fate."

Finn immediately calmed down. It didn't stop him from pulling Alison against him and wrapping his arm around her in a very possessive way. He glanced at his wife, and she gave him a look that he knew meant trouble for him later. But it didn't matter. He was no' going to stand there and watch another man place his hands on his wife.

Alison took a deep breath, and it was obvious she was trying to keep from knocking one of his teeth out. "Finn, this is Brendan Mackay, who has been my friend all my life." She turned to the man. "This is Finn Mackay, my husband."

They barely nodded in each other's direction, but Finn kept his arm around his wife.

"I doona ken why ye are not married to Archie Sinclair, but 'tis happy I am that ye are not. Best of luck with yer marriage to ... Finn Mackay." With those nebulous words, Brendan nodded in Finn's direction, and turned away, heading toward the baker's store.

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Chapter Twelve

Brendan Mackay had walked barely three or four steps before Alison rounded on Finn. “How dare ye threaten my friends.”

“I dinna threaten yer friend. Tis no’ happy I am that he had his arms around ye. Ye are a married lass, and I will no’ permit another mon to handle ye.”

“Handle me? I doona believe I am hearing this.” She poked the arrogant oaf in his strong chest. “The mon has been my friend since we were bairns; I hadn’t seen him in a while.”

She studied him for a minute. “Ye were jealous.”

He flushed and sucked in a deep breath. “I am no’ jealous. I’m just protecting what is mine.”

“Protecting what is yers? Am I merely a possession to ye, then? Like yer horse?”

By this time, Alison’s “friend” had disappeared into the baker’s store. Finn took her elbow and marched her forward. “I could use an ale.”

Just to show her independence, she would love to deny him, but she was thirsty herself. “Verra well. But I’m no’ going for an ale because ye ordered it.”

The man had the nerve to smirk.

They settled at a table near the back of the room. Alison traced a small circle on the table while they waited for their drinks. “Ye seemed to look around the room and then took this table all the way in the back. Why is that?” she asked.

Finn leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. “‘Tis safer at the back of the room. I prefer to watch what’s going on and who is coming and going. Now lass, I’m giving ye a suggestion, no’ an order. Ne’er turn yer back on the door.

“Also check where back doors and windows are so ye can escape quickly if ye need to.”

She decided if they were to have a peaceful marriage, she would have to make some concessions and so would he.

She took a sip of her ale and studied him. “‘Tis a good idea. I can see the wisdom in it.” After a moment, she asked, “Why are ye so determined to control everyone?”

His eyes narrowed. “Are ye referring to yer ‘friend?’” He shook his head. “I’m no’ wanting to control everyone. I just doona want another mon holding ye in his arms.”

She laughed, then sighed. “He wasna holding me in his arms, we were hugging each other, which is what old friends do. But with ye arrogant ways, ye probably doona have friends to ken this.”

He grinned. “I have plenty of friends, but we doona go around hugging each other like a bunch of lasses.”

Finn took a sip of his ale. “Why are ye so determined to put yerself in danger?”

Apparently it was now Finn’s turn to ask questions. Of course he’d never answered hers, though.

“I am no’ putting myself in danger?—”

“Doona start off yer answer that way.” He paused for a moment. “Let me change my question. Why are ye careless about yer safety? Riding outside the castle walls alone is dangerous for a woman—even a mon—when it would take verra little effort to ask for someone to ride with ye.”

She looked to the other side of the ale house and gave his question some thought. “Why do I do things on my own? When William died of an infection from his wound right after Bryan was killed on the battlefield, the entire castle went into mourning.” She shook her head. “Losing his sons changed my da,” she said, looking down to her lap.

“He dinna care about anything. He spent a great deal of time in his solar drinking. Then things began to fall apart in the keep. Tenants were having problems that needed their laird to straighten out. Da stopped holding court so fighting erupted between those who had issues.”

“Had yer brothers been his second-in-command?”

“Aye.” She took the last sip of her ale and placed the mug on the table. “However, to get back to your question, no one was what you would say ‘in charge.’ Albert and James kept the warriors in line, but they dinna have time or the authority to take over the laird’s jobs.”

“That was when ye decided ye could take care of yerself?”

She sniffed. “I have learned the hard way no’ to trust anyone. Especially men.”

“I have a feeling there is a story behind that.”

Alison shrugged. ‘Twas no reason to keep it secret. What had happened to her was not an unusual story.

“Blair Mackay, one of our warriors, and I developed a love for each other.” She smiled softly. “Or so I thought. We had promised each other to marry as soon as he gained permission from my da.”

She flushed slightly. “We had been intimate, but always stopped before it was too late. Both of us had grown frustrated but held onto our promise to each other. Then, before Blair had worked up enough nerve to speak with my da, he was shipped off to one of the Mackay borders.”

She smiled again. “He met another woman, married her and had a bairn before he returned with his family in tow.”

“I would say I’m sorry, lass, but then ye would no’ be married to me.”

That statement gave her pause. She studied him for a moment. Did he really mean that? Was he truly happy with their marriage?

From that day forward, she had trusted no one, especially a man. She held her heart close, and she’d found the best way to do that was to be independent, trusting only herself.

Despite the feelings she was beginning to develop for Finn, she would never trust him enough to hand her heart to him to stomp on.

Finn took her hand in his. “I would ne’er hurt ye, lass.”

She huffed. “Ye might no’ intend to, but ‘tis no’ a promise ye can keep.”

“I hope one day ye might feel as though ye can trust me.”

She couldn't help the tears that flooded her eyes. Even though she'd stopped caring for Blair Mackay a long time ago, some days she still felt the pain of that betrayal.

Finn waved the server over to refill their mugs.

“Ye might no' have noticed, husband, but ye ne'er answered my question. Why do ye always feel as if ye must control everything? Ye ken that's no' possible.”

He shook his head. “Nay. I don't wish to control everything; I just have the need to control myself.”

She smiled at the server as she refilled their mugs. “I feel as if there is a story behind that, also.”

Finn hesitated and then shook his head. “Nay. I was just born that way.”

The pain was still too raw even after ten years to be able to share the story of when he'd lost control, and how it ended in tragedy.

Since he was not prepared to share the stories of his weakness, after Alison had spoken of hers, the rest of their time at the alehouse was strained silence.

“‘Tis close to the evening meal; we should probably head back,” Finn said, downing the rest of his ale.

Alison nodded and stood. With his hand once more on her lower back they walked quietly to the stable. He again helped his wife onto her horse and they rode back to the castle.

“My lady, where have ye been?” One of the kitchen maids greeted them when they stepped into the great hall.

“My wife and I were at the village. What seems to be the problem?” Finn asked.

He could tell by the stiffening of Alison’s shoulders that she resented him answering the maid for her.

“Maude is now sick as well as the other two kitchen lasses. We need someone to cook.”

“Do ye mean to tell me that no one has started the evening meal?” Finn asked.

The lass shook her head. “Nay. We were looking for Lady Alison for the past hour.”

The three of them hurried to the kitchen.

“What has been done so far?” Finn asked.

Eli, the young lad who took care of the bread for the keep, wiped sweat from his forehead with his arm and placed four loaves of bread on the work table. There were already six loaves there. He waved at Alison. “We have bread.”

Alison turned to Finn. “I ken it’s no’ your job, but I need help.”

He nodded. “What do ye want me to do?”

She seemed surprised that he asked her. He had no problem giving up control in the kitchen. ‘Twas apparently not a place where he was comfortable.

Alison turned to him. “We need meat, but there is no time to cook a stew.”

He shook his head. “Nay. I will grab a few of the warriors and we will catch fish. It cooks faster.”

She looked at him with a slight smile. “How do ye ken that?”

He grinned back. “Years of eating while traveling as a warrior. How do ye think we feed ourselves?”

“I guess I ne’er thought about it. Will ye do that?”

“Aye, lass.” He turned and left.

Alison was still surprised that Finn had offered to help with cooking. If he thought he was going to take control, he was in for a surprise as well. Although, she thought, he did ask her what he could do.

She kept Brenda and Sorcha, the two kitchen maids left, busy cutting vegetables. Once Finn returned with three baskets of fish, she had Eli help with Finn preparing the catch for baking.

“Brenda, you and Sorcha check to make sure there is fresh butter and cheese to serve with this.”

She looked over to where Finn was busy frying fish since he said it would be faster than baking. She smiled when she remembered how he asked her if they could switch how they cooked the fish. Mayhap she was winning the control game they’d been playing.

Once the fish was all cooked, the few kitchen staff members worked quickly to place all the food onto platters and carry out to the great hall.

Poor Finn got a lot of kidding because he was right there with the rest of them serving. Alison had no idea how strong the man's confidence was until he just blew off their teasing.

Once all the food had been delivered, Alison sat on a bench in the kitchen, waving a towel back and forth across her face, creating some cool air.

Finn walked in and sat alongside her. "Ye did a great job, wife."

She shook her head. "Well, I must admit I ne'er expected ye to help in the kitchen."

He bent and gave her a quick kiss. "Beware. I will always do the unexpected, lass."

Chapter Thirteen

Finn had to admit to himself that helping in the kitchen when things were so chaotic left him with a good feeling. 'Twas obvious, for as much as she would never admit it, Alison had walked into a mess. But being who she was, she planned to deal with it all herself. She actually looked surprised when he offered to help.

Mayhap a bit of compromise on his part would work. They were married and will spend the rest of their lives together so it made sense to keep from bickering all the time.

But making up from a good fight was a nice thing, too.

James caught him as Finn was entering the great hall to have his own evening meal. Alison would be joining him once she cleaned up.

“Finn, we might have some trouble ahead.”

They sat together at the table, and one of the very worn-out looking kitchen maids poured them both an ale. Finn took a sip and turned to James. “What trouble are we facing?”

“We’ve been getting reports of trouble along our border with the Sinclairs.”

Finn nodded. “I was expecting as much, but I dinna think it would happen so soon.”

“Because of the betrothal?” James asked.

Finn finished his ale and tucked into his plate that another maid placed in front of him. "Please bring a plate for Lady Alison; she will be joining me in a few minutes."

He turned back to James. "Aye. The Sinclair's self-importance has taken a blow. Add to that the fact that the younger Sinclair thought he was set to marry a woman who would eventually hand him a Clan Chief position when The Mackay died. Retaliation was inevitable."

Alison crossed the great hall and took the seat next to Finn. She looked weary and gave him and James a slight smile before she turned to her food. Not wanting to continue the conversation with James since Alison had joined them, he said, "Meet me in the laird's solar in a half hour. I want to speak with the laird first."

Alison looked up at him. "Is something amiss?"

He didn't believe women should be troubled with problems that men could handle. His wife had enough to keep her busy until all the maids had recovered from their illness.

"Nay." He patted her hand. "Doona fash yerself. 'Tis nothing that ye need worry about."

With those words, he pushed his finished plate away and stood. "I will see ye in our bedchamber later." He gave her a wink and strode away from the table and up the stairs to the laird's library where he generally hid after the evening meal.

Alison watched Finn stroll off after pushing aside her questions about something being amiss. Her da dinna trouble himself about many things since her brothers died so it was quite possible that Finn was handling something significant that her da should have dealt with.

The glow she'd felt when Finn had helped in the kitchen dimmed with his refusal to discuss what she knew was something amiss. Apparently, her husband was happy to involve himself in her crises, but didn't want her help or even advice on problems he faced.

Mairi strolled into the great hall and headed directly to Alison.

“Where have ye been, cousin? I ha’ent seen ye since the wedding.”

Alison felt guilty because she had almost forgotten her cousin was even here, so wrapped up she'd been in enjoying the newfound pleasure in the marriage bed and the latest crisis with the sick maids.

Mairi took the seat next to her. “I’ve been sick. I understand there are several maids also no’ feeling well.”

“Why dinna ye send for me?”

Her cousin smiled. “A new bride? I was quite sure ye had other things on yer mind.” The smile she gave her had her cheeks turning red.

She raised her chin. “As much as my enjoying what all wives do, I was busy in the kitchen with the absent maids.”

“Aye. I imagine things were difficult. One of the maids was kind enough to send for the healer who told me about all the others being sick. I’m just glad ye dinna visit me, or ye might have caught whatever this is.”

“Did Beatrix give ye her mixture for the ague that tastes like piss?” Alison smiled.

Mairi nodded her head. “Aye. But, for as awful as it tastes, it does make one sleep a

lot, which Beatrix said is the best thing for the ague.

“Do ye want to go for a ride in the morn?”

Her cousin grinned. “How early in the morn? Ye ken I’m no’ one to rise with the sun.”

Alison shook her head. “We can wait until mid-morn. I will most likely have to assume kitchen duties, so I won’t be able to enjoy my ride until then, anyway.”

One of the maids brought a trencher of cheese and bread, and, after finishing her supper, she returned to the kitchen. All the staff was gone home except for Eli who lived in the basement with the others who worked for the keep. “Eli, ye put in a long day; I think ‘tis time ye found yer bed.”

He nodded. “Aye, my lady. I am about to retire, I just wanted to make sure the bread was ready for morning.”

Alison placed her hand on his shoulder. “Ye are a verra dedicated lad, Eli.”

Eli’s cheeks grew red and he said, “Thank ye, my lady.”

Alison trekked up the stairs to her and Finn’s bedchamber. She was finding it hard to place one foot in front of the other. She slowly removed her clothes and dropped them to the floor. Even though she was sweaty from her work in the kitchen, she opted for the jug of warm water to clean herself up instead of having a bath brought up.

She tugged on her night shift and collapsed on the bed. She must have fallen asleep because the next thing she knew Finn was crawling in beside her.

Naked.

As was she. He must have taken her night shift off without her even awakening. She tried to remember why she was annoyed with the big oaf, but couldn't recall. Before she could put some thoughts in proper order, he was on top of her, his hands everywhere.

He cupped her face with his large, rough hands and covered her mouth with a lover's sense of possession. Their tongues tangled and she ran her hands down his muscular back, his muscles rippling.

Finn covered her breast with his warm mouth, sucking like a babe. When he left one breast and continued with the other, his deft fingers tweaked the nipple he'd just left.

She had no intention of laying there like a lump of unbaked bread. Her hand slid down his chest, tugging slightly on the curly hairs. Eventually, she found her prize and grasped his cock with her hand.

Finn moaned and cupped her bottom with his hands, kneading the plump flesh and pulling her closer to him.

"Ye are so beautiful, Alison. I can ne'er get enough of ye." He mumbled some more words in Gaelic.

His hand moved to the swollen wet area between her legs. She moaned. "Aye, husband. That feels good."

He smiled at her and nibbled on her lips. "Ach, wife, if it only feels good I must work harder."

Which he did and set Alison to more moaning and urging to work his fingers harder.

He complied again.

Her head moved back and forth as she tensed, pushing hard against where Finn was working the stiff piece of flesh they both knew would break her apart.

Within minutes, she let out with a loud moan and pulled his body closer, covering his mouth with her hot one.

Finn brushed the hair back from her forehead and studied her face. “Ye are even more beautiful when ye break apart in my arms.”

He climbed between her legs and, with one quick thrust, pushed into her. “Alison, mo chridhe, ye make me crazy with wanting ye.”

Alison pressed up against him, moving her hips so she was able to rub the part of her body that brought her the pleasure she craved again.

“Wrap yer legs around me,” Finn said, his voice deep and his lungs fighting for air.

Once she did, her body immediately felt the pressure against Finn’s body that she was searching for. “Aye, Finn. ‘Tis perfect.”

After a few slow, teasing back and forth movements, he picked up speed and was soon thrusting into her with a vengeance.

“Aye, aye, husband. ‘Tis getting closer.”

Within another minute or so, another wave of pleasure rolled over her the same time Finn let out with a shout as he stiffened and poured his seed into her.

Chapter Fourteen

The Sinclair slammed his mug down on the desk and glared at his four sons. His anger was directed more at Archie. “Ye caused us to lose the coin and land that was part of the betrothal agreement.”

Archie glared right back. “‘Twas a small matter when ye consider I was to be Mackay Clan Chief.”

“Aye, and allowing yer whore to remain in yer bedchamber was the stupidest thing I’ve e’er heard,” Miles, Archie’s younger brother, said.

Archie glared at Miles. “The Mackay lass agreed to it.”

“Apparently, she intended to receive her pleasure with Finn Mackay. As The Mackay’s second, he would be there to take care of her. Ye could have produced an heir that wasna a Sinclair.”

“Enough!” The Sinclair shouted at his sons. “All of that is o’er with. I want what I was promised. The land was perfect to add protection to our castle. In case of an attack I doona expect The Mackay to take up arms on our behalf. The old mon is undependable and, when Mackay takes over once he’s dead, we will be lucky if he doesn’t attack us. He wasna fond of ye,” he added, looking at Archie.

Archie scowled, but remained silent.

“And the coin,” Gilbert reminded them. “We need a plan,” he said as he tapped his

finger on the desk.

“A plan for what?” David, the third son, asked.

“To get what is due me. The Mackay should have offered that before we left.”

“We’re going into battle with them?” Archie asked.

The Sinclair reached out and smacked his son on the head. “No wonder ye lost the betrothal. Ye should have left yer whore home and paid some attention to Lady Alison. ‘Tis no’ surprised I am that she sought the attentions of Mackay.”

Archie rubbed the side of his head. “What is the plan?”

The Sinclair sat silently for a while and then said, “We grab the lass. Hold her until they agree to stick to the terms of the betrothal agreement.”

A full minute of silence followed as the four brothers took in the information. Archie broke the quiet. “How would we do that?”

The Sinclair sighed. “Do ye think one of ye might come up with a way to grab the lass? Do I have to do all the thinking for ye?”

He’d always known his sons had inherited their mam’s intelligence, which was none. He should have thought of that before he married Vernie all those years ago. When his father made the agreement, all Gilbert had been interested in was the lass’s substantial duckies and large arse.

But very little of a brain had come with her.

“One of ye will go to Tongue and make friends. Tup the lasses and get information

on the castle, and how to get in. Get to ken one of the maids and find out what the Mackay lass does all day. Does she go for rides? Spend time alone? Think fer a change.”

The four all looked at each other. “Who will go?”

“Miles and David will go. I doona think anyone from the village will remember either one of ye from the short time we spent there.”

The two brothers nodded at each other.

“Let me make myself clear. Doona attempt to grab the lass yerself. Come back here with the information ye gather and we’ll come up with a plan.”

Gilbert knew his sons would not be able to work out their own plan, and he didn’t want to mess this up. If The Mackay or Finn Mackay learned about this, they’d never get another chance at that land without going into battle. A battle they would surely lose with the strength of the Mackay clan.

“When should we leave?” Miles asked.

“An hour ago,” Gilbert said.

Both sons looked at him with a blank expression. He sighed. “Just go now.”

They stood and left the room. He turned to his other two sons. “We doona want to hurt the lass while she is here. You two figure out where we will hold her that she will be comfortable but unable to escape.” Gilbert waved his finger at them. “Doona attempt to tup the lass.”

They nodded.

“Aye, go about yer business. Archie, get yer arse out to the lists and watch those men. I doona want to go into battle with the Mackays—or anyone for that matter—but we must be prepared.”

Gilbert leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Too late now, but he would give up the huge duckies for a brain.

“What sort of problems are we talking about,” Foster Mackay asked.

Finn and James sat facing the laird in his solar. Finn nodded at James. “A few of our men who do regular visits to the borders have run into bandits. They believe these men were actually Sinclair clan members looking to cause trouble without being identified.”

The Mackay thought for a minute. “I doona think The Sinclair is that lacking in good sense. Keep an eye on that situation, but I doona think ‘tis something we need to be too concerned about.”

Finn wasn’t as sure about that as the laird seemed to be. He remembered the look on Archie Sinclair’s face when he stood with the others as they stumbled on him and Alison in the stables.

It seemed it was just fine for him to drag his mistress to his own wedding, but his bride must be pure. Finn still regretted not beating the man to a pulp.

Control. It was all about control.

“Do ye expect any sort of retaliation from The Sinclair?” Finn asked.

“Aye,” he said. Make sure the ramparts are well covered and, without raising any questions among the staff, make sure they are aware of anything out of order.”

Chapter Fifteen

Alison awoke to an empty bed. She'd only slept with Finn for a few nights now, yet she felt abandoned when she awoke alone.

She dressed quickly, anxious to see what was happening in the kitchen. The few maids and Maude, the cook, had returned to their duties, but the few who were not sick had caught whatever it was the others had so the kitchen was once again missing staff.

The kitchen seemed to be in working order.

“Good morning, my lady,” Maude said, always cheerful.

“Thank ye, and the same to ye, Maude.”

She took a mug of ale and a piece of warm bread with butter. After finishing that, she headed to the stable to take a morning ride.

That was a treat for her since she hadn't done it the past few mornings since she'd had to see to the morning meal. After grabbing an apple for her horse, she left the keep and headed to the stables.

Old Kilmead smiled as she entered the building. “Good morn, Lady Mackay.”

It took her a minute to realize by marrying Finn she had gone from Lady Alison to Lady Mackay. It didn't seem so odd since she'd been a Mackay all her life. If things

had worked out the way they'd been planned, she'd be Lady Sinclair right now.

And living at Castle Sinclair Grinigoe as Archie Sinclair's wife. She shuddered thinking about the way he strode around the keep, like a rooster looking for a mate, yet he had a mistress he didn't need to impress.

He certainly had not impressed her. Even if she had to butt heads with Finn for the rest of her life, it was better than being married to that man.

"I ken it's been a few days, but I hope ye have Bonnie-Bay ready for me.

"I do, my lady. I just have to send for someone to ride along with ye."

She told herself not to take out her anger on the old man. He was only doing what he was ordered to do by her arrogant husband.

"I doona wish to disturb anyone and take them from their chores. I will be fine by myself." She moved to take the reins of Bonnie-Bay from Old Kilmead.

"Nay, lass. I have orders from yer husband to make sure ye doona ride out by yerself."

"I'm my lady's escort." The voice behind her was familiar and brought warmth to her body parts and a frown to her face.

"Doona ye have work to do, my lord?"

He took the reins of Morag that Old Kilmead handed him, telling her the stable master knew that Finn was coming to escort her.

Although she resented having an escort—especially one ordered by her husband—she

was pleased to see Finn had taken time from his busy day to ride with her.

He grinned as he lifted her by the waist and settled her in the saddle. “No more complaints about an escort?”

‘Twas her time to compromise, but not completely. She raised her chin. “Nay. But doona think ye can continue to go behind my back and give out commands and orders.”

He jumped on Morag and they turned their horses in the direction of the wide open fields and raced down the hill in the cold, early morning air.

She could tell he was holding his horse back so they could ride together since she’d seen the power of Morag. Besides the pleasant air, the leaves on the trees turning bright yellow and orange—a sure sign winter would be on its way—cheered her.

Glancing over at her husband, she felt a jolt of happiness. When it was announced by her da that she was marrying Finn, although she rebelled, she felt a wonderful sense of relief.

After the intimacy they’d had in the stable, she knew she would never have been happy to spend the rest of her life with Archie.

However, since that time, she had grown to actually be, if not happy, at least content with Finn. Aye, he was arrogant and controlling but she had to admit most, if not all of his orders had to do with her safety.

No one had cared about her safety since her brothers died. But, she told herself, there were ways she had to keep him from taking over her life.

“I always jump the hedges there,” she called, hoping with the wind he heard her.

He nodded, so apparently he was not going to try to talk her out of it. She eyed the distance between them and the hedges and grinned as he continued to ride beside her.

With a smooth jump, she sailed over the hedges, Bonnie-Bay taking a soft landing. She rode a bit more and turned to see Finn fly over the hedges. He waited for her to go first, most likely thinking she couldn't do it.

"I have no problem doing that jump," she said with a frown.

"I dinna think ye did. I just wanted to watch my wife's arse as she did it."

Not sure if he was serious or not, she grunted and they walked their horses to a small pond so they could give the animals a rest.

Before she could hop from the horse, Finn had his arms around her waist again and lowered her to the ground, sliding her smoothly against him.

Various parts of her body came alive, and she had the urge to rub herself against him. He must have known her thoughts because he smiled at her and leaned closer. "'Tis nice and private here, wife. And the grass is tall."

Her heart began thumping and she looked up at him. Aye, she knew from the look in his eyes what the man had in mind. A slight annoyance would be good. She smiled brightly. "Aye, 'tis nice. Mayhap we can collect flowers."

He pulled her against him and growled. "Let's get the horses settled and we'll see about collecting flowers."

They led Morag and Bonnie-Bay to the edge of the pond, rubbed them with the tall grass, and fastened their reins to a tree. Finn turned to her. "Flowers?"

Her heart was beating so loud he must have been able to hear it. “Aye.” Her voice was scratchy, just as parts of her body were.

Finn hoisted her up, and she wrapped her legs around him. He bent his head and touched his lips lightly to hers, moving them back and forth. If there was air in her body, she didn’t know how to access it.

“Hold onto my shoulders.”

She did as he asked, and he unlaced the front of her bodice, spreading them apart, exposing her breasts to the cool air and warm sun.

He stared at her as he gave one nipple a lick. She sucked in a breath.

“Ye like that, lass?”

“Aye.”

“Should I do it again?”

“Aye.”

This time he took her breast into his mouth and fed on her like a bairn. Everything inside her tightened and the area between her legs grew moist and swollen. It amazed her what this man could do to her with so little effort.

He eased her to the ground, and her dress fell to her feet. Were she not so muddle-headed by Finn’s attentions, she might have been a tad disturbed about being stark naked in the field she’d ridden past so many times.

Almost as if he read her mind, Finn said, “As I mentioned before, the grass is nice

and tall.” But just to be sure, he scooped her up into his arms and laid her gently on the ground. He quickly removed his clothes and laid alongside her.

Finn was always so pleased with how responsive Alison was to his touch. He was also amazed that this beautiful, passionate woman was willing to sell herself into a cold marriage.

He ran his hands over her body, loving the dips and curves and how she moaned as he fondled her breasts, which, he’d learned, were very sensitive.

No shy maiden, her hand wandered down his chest, tugging on the short hairs and ending at his cock which he thought could not grow any more.

He was wrong.

“Ach, Mo Chridhe, ye handle me so well.” He slid his hand over her belly and touched the warmth waiting for his cock.

Alison was already moaning and tossing about. With a smile on his face, he slid down her body, hooked his arms under her knees and raised her, his mouth equal to where she needed help.

He licked, the moistness on his tongue like honey.

“Ach, Finn, that feels so good.”

She no sooner got those words out than she jolted and her entire body shuddered. She shoved her fingers into his hair and tugged until he felt as though he would be bald when they returned to their horses.

“Aye, Finn. Doona stop.”

He pulled her closer and sucked the stiff piece of flesh just begging for his lips, bringing her to more jolts and trembles, until she finally collapsed and released his hair. He took a quick look at the grass to see if fistfuls of his locks lay there.

It appeared his hair had made it. With a quick movement, he climbed up her body and thrust into her wet warmth. He groaned and worried that he would not be able to last long. Something about this woman and the way he affected her was like no other.

He had almost begun to think marriage to Alison would be a good thing.

Not lasting as long as he would have liked to, he gave one final thrust and rolled off, then pulled her close and tucked her against him.

“I’m thinking it would be a good idea to put our clothes back on,” Alison said, with a yawn.

“Aye. ‘Tis private here, but ye ne’er ken who might wander by.”

Now that they had cooled down, it seemed quite chilly, so they dressed and headed back to the horses, hand-in-hand.

Once they reached the keep, they went their separate ways to their own duties. Alison was surprised to feel a sense of loss once Finn bent and kissed her and strode off to the keep to grab something to break his fast before heading to the lists.

Like a silly, giggly lass, she stared at him until he took the stairs two at a time before disappearing into the great hall.

His strong back, brawny shoulders and muscular legs kept her attention much too long.

She needed to get her mind back on her duties. Just because Finn could make her feel so very good did not mean she could trust him. Or allow him to control her.

Feeling more herself, she walked around to the garden to take note of the herb garden. She entered the kitchen and grabbed a mug of ale, a chunk of bread and an apple. After she was through with the garden, she had decided it was time to do the inventory of meat for the coming winter.

She finally stopped thinking of her husband.

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Chapter Sixteen

“How long does it take yer dimwitted brothers to get information about the Mackay castle?” Gilbert slammed his hand on his desk, staring at Archie and Enoch, his youngest son.

Archie shrugged. “I doona ken.”

Gilbert sighed. “I dinna expect ye to ken, I was only saying out loud what I’m thinking.”

There was a knock on the door of the solar. One of the warriors from the front gate poked his head into the room. “My laird, Miles and David have returned.”

Gilbert rubbed his hands together. “Aye, now we can begin to plan.”

The two brothers entered the solar, smiles on their faces. “We found a way to grab the lass.”

Gilbert nodded.

“Finn Mackay has ordered that she canno’ ride from the castle by herself, which she always did before she married the bastard,” Miles said.

“Go on.” Gilbert was losing patience. He wanted this over with, and the land and coin belonging to him. With the small river that flowed through the parcel, it provided much needed water to his own land, and the coin would provide necessary repairs to

the castle and some of his tenants.

“Each morning she goes for a ride. We watched for a few days, and it’s the laird who accompanies her all the time.”

David took up the tale. “According to one of the maids in the kitchen, Lady Mackay doesna like having an escort, but puts up with her husband.”

Miles smiled. “Aye, they are known to take a tumble in the grass before returning to the castle.”

Gilbert held his hand up to stop whatever else they were about to say in order to think about what he could do with that information. “We must find a way to make her leave the castle by herself.”

“The morning ride is out because every day we watched them he was with her. It would have to be a reason that she ignores his orders.”

The laird thought for a moment. “The lass is verra independent and stubborn her da said when we were there for the failed wedding.” He glared at Archie.

“The Mackay said Archie would need to take her in hand. So we need to come up with a reason she would leave by herself.”

“From what the serving lass we met in the ale house said, Lady Mackay is one of those who is the first to help,” Miles said.

David leaned forward. “She is quite fond of this lad, Eli, who works in the kitchen. If she thought he was hurt or in danger, I’m sure she would no’ wait for an escort to help.”

“And how do ye plan to snatch both the lad and the lass? Mayhap ye can grab the laird while yer there, too.” Gilbert said with disgust.

“If we give Finn Mackay reason to leave the castle when they generally take their ride, I’m sure Lady Mackay would go anyway,” Archie said.

“Aye. For once ye have a good idea. The four of ye ride to Castle Varrich, create some sort of ruckus that would cause Finn to forget the ride and leave before then.”

“Once ye grab her, get her back here as quickly as possible. Finn Mackay could probably knock all four of ye to the ground. Whether he cares for the lass or no’, he would consider her his property.”

“Where will we keep her when we return? We doona want to give her a chance to escape because, as independent as she is, I’m sure she would no’ sit in a room, wailing about her fate,” David said.

“We decided on a locked bedchamber, with one of ye outside the door at all times. She’s a clever one,” Gilbert said.

“She is a bonnie lass as well as strong and clever,” Miles said.

Archie stretched in his chair. “Aye. Mayhap I should have bedded the lass the night before the wedding instead of letting Mackay get a taste of her.”

Gilbert glared at his son. “If ye weren’t so stupid as to bring yer whore with ye to the wedding, this entire thing might have turned out differently. The Mackay lass needed wooing, not watching ye parading yer lemmen around the room.”

Archie said nothing, but slumped in his chair, a scowl on his face.

Gilbert stood. "We fetch the lass as soon as possible. Be ready to ride at first light."

Alison's plans for the day were to do a complete inventory of what the keep had in the way of stores for the coming winter.

She decided to just grab some bread and perhaps a boiled egg if Maude had any from the kitchen and get to work. 'Twas strange that before she married Finn she had little interest in the keep and left all the management to Gilly, who had been with them for years and did both kitchen duty along with Maude, and supervised the maids.

Now she felt as though this was her home, and not somewhere she lived until a man came along, married her and took her away. She had a husband and with the activity they did on a daily basis, there would one day be a bairn, hopefully, soon.

Then she would have a family, where things would be much like they were when she and her brothers were children, racing around the keep, going off on 'adventures' and coming home dirty and happy.

Just as she reached the bottom step, Finn came striding by, looking, if not angry, at least concerned. "Good morn, husband. Is something amiss?"

He nodded and continued to walk as he said, "A problem with one of the horses."

She walked alongside him, almost running to keep up. "What sort of problem?"

"A mare is giving birth, and she is having a difficult time. Old Kilmead sent for me because he kens I've dealt with this before at Dun Ugadale."

Now she was skipping and running out of breath. "I have dealt with this before, too. I'd like to come along and see if I can help."

He stopped so fast, she walked into him. “Ye have experience in this?”

“Aye. A few years ago we had the same situation. Ask Old Kilmead, he was there too.”

“Come along. I’m sure I need all the help I can get.”

They entered the dark stable and the sound of the poor horse’s deep breathing and groaning. Old Kilmead knelt next to her, speaking softly.

As they grew closer, Alison could see the animal covered in sweat.

“How long has she been laboring?” Finn asked.

Old Kilmead leaned back on his heels and wiped his forehead. “Going on three hours. It looks like the foal needs to be shifted, but my hand is too big and I’m afraid I’m going to hurt her.”

Both men turned to Alison. “I remember ye doing this a few years ago, lass.”

“Aye. Since my hand is smaller, I have a better chance to turn the foal without hurting the mother.

“Move back and let me take a look.” She crawled over and took Old Kilmead’s place. She ran her hand over the suffering animal and spoke softly to her.

“I need more light. The gloomy weather outside makes it seem like evening.’

Finn fetched a couple of torches from the wall and lit them. He handed one to Old Kilmead who raised it above the animal’s head. Finn held the other one and came close to her hands.

Once the animal calmed down and accepted Alison, she allowed her to put her hand inside and feel the foal. “Aye, she needs to be turned. If the mother has been in labor for three hours, we need to get the foal out immediately.”

By now Alison was sweating, afraid to lose the mother and baby. The mother continued to groan, and it appeared she was no longer helping with the birth.

“The foal needs to come out front hooves first, and then the nose. This one doesn’t need to be turned too much. Right now I’m concerned about the mother.”

Finn moved closer with the torch. Alison inserted her hand inside the mare and gently turned the foal. One of his hooves seemed to be stuck and she had to push back a bit and then turn again.

She expelled a sigh of relief as the foal slid into her hands. After she quickly cleaned the foal off it began to breathe. Not long after the placenta slid out.

Alison turned her head to look at Finn. “We saved her.”

Finn smiled at her. “Nay, lass. Ye saved her.”

He stood and reached out to take her hand but she shook her head. “Nay. I need to wash up.”

“’Tis no matter. Let me help ye.”

She smiled at him and he gripped her sticky, dirty hand. After making sure everything was well with the mother and foal, Finn and Alison left Old Kilmead to take over.

They headed to the kitchen scooped out a handful of soap and went to the small pond behind the keep.

“Ye did verra good, Alison. I’m proud of ye. I doona think I would have been able to do it because my hand is too big, too. It appears ye have many talents.”

“Well, ye helped me in the kitchen and I helped ye in the stables. It seems we are a team.” She waited for him to say ‘nay’ because in a team no one has control.”

He waited for a minute and said, “Aye, wife. We are a team.”

Finn and Alison lay side-by-side in their bed, holding hands as they slowly recovered from another enthusiastic bout of love making.

She looked over at her husband. For good or not good, she was beginning to have strong feelings for the man. So far he had not shown any indication that he would abandon her and find another woman to warm his bed. But she wasn’t yet ready to trust him.

“Husband, do ye intend to take a mistress?”

Finn sucked in a breath so quickly he began to cough. After he recovered, he said, “Why would ye ask that?”

She shrugged. “Archie Sinclair had a mistress. When my cousin Mairi was here for the wedding, she mentioned two of her friends’ husbands tired of them after a year or so, and found some of the maids to warm their beds. She said it was well known that lairds do that.”

He laughed. “First of all, nay, I would no’ take a mistress. With yer enthusiasm in the bedchamber, I would ne’er have the strength to bed another lass.”

When she opened her mouth to speak, he held up his hand. “And, I wish to add, I donna take my vows lightly, whether it’s fealty to my laird, or loyalty and respect to

my wife. Also, one day we will take a trip to Dun Ugadale, my family home, and ye can witness my brothers' marriages."

He grinned and said, "If either Craig or Robin's wives found someone else in bed with her husband, I'm afraid murder would take place."

Her eyes grew wide. "Yer brothers would allow their wives to control them so much?"

"Nay," he said quickly and forcefully. "My brothers have the control. 'Tis their feelings toward their wives that make them no' want another woman."

His words warmed her inside, but she had to probe further. "What if ye change yer mind?"

"Like the mon ye were counting on marrying, who wed someone else?"

For the longest time just thinking about that had caused her pain and heartache. Now she felt nothing. She turned again to Finn. In a flash she realized he would ne'er do that.

Her husband was an honorable man, and would not break her heart. Trust? Did she actually trust him?

She smiled.

"What's putting that lovely smile on yer face, lass?"

She shook her head. "No'hing." She narrowed her eyes and waved her finger at him. "Doona think I'll e'er love ye, ye ken."

The big, arrogant oaf actually laughed. “Doona fash yerself, wife. ‘Tis no’ love I’m looking for. I only want ye to obey what I say and doona put yerself in danger, and ne’er deny me your bed.”

After a few minutes, she said, “Why do ye feel as though ye need to be in control all the time? Think me that there is a story behind that.”

He closed his eyes as if remembering a painful event.

“‘Tis no’ important.”

She shifted in the bed, resting her head on her upraised hand. “I told ye about my broken heart, why doona ye tell me yer deep, dark secret?”

Finn stared at his wife for a minute. Aside from his brothers who were there at the time, he’d never discussed what happened that eventful night.

He sighed, realizing if they were to have as good a marriage as he’d hoped they would, she was right that he should share his heartache with her.

“Years ago, when I was an arrogant youth,” he continued after she snorted. “I was in the ale house with my brothers and a verra close friend. Mitchell and I fostered together. He was almost like another brother to me.”

He stopped, not sure he could continue, but knowing finally sharing this with another person, particularly one he intended to spend the rest of his life with, would most likely cleanse his soul.

She touched his cheek as if knowing this was very hard for him. “Go on.”

“We got into a scrabble with some warriors from another clan who were passing

through. I'm sorry to say I threw the first punch, and we all quickly drew our daggers.

He sighed again. "In my youthful confidence, I didn't pay as much attention as I should have. One of the other warriors slammed into me and I fell on Mitchell, stabbing him with my dagger." He stopped, swallowing a few times.

"My best friend died right there. Bled to death in my arms."

She placed her hand on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Finn. That must have been horrible for ye."

He huffed. "No' as horrible as it was for Mitchell."

After a few moments of silence, he said, "The reason that entire thing happened was because I lost control."

"Ye said ye were a youth."

He shook his head. "That was no' an excuse. As a trained warrior, I should have had more control. I should have kenned that Mitchell was that close to me."

"And ye've blamed yerself for it all these years."

"Aye!" His jaw tightened as memories flooded him. "If I had more control and dinna start the ruckus, Mitchell would be alive now."

"Mayhap. As warriors, ye ne'er ken when yer end is coming. However, it was Mitchell's choice to join the fray. Also, he could have been more aware of where ye were, too."

He reached out and touched her soft cheek. "Thank ye for listening and no'

condemning me.”

“Finn, we all make mistakes. Some results are more serious than others, but, since we canno’ change the past, we canno’ let that hang o’er our heads for the rest of our lives.”

He smiled and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Then ye are telling me that ye no longer feel ye canno’ trust a mon?”

She smirked. “Is that what I said?”

Chapter Seventeen

David Sinclair rolled off the plump alehouse maid and attempted to catch his breath. The lass wore him out more than any other he'd bedded in a long time.

He and his brothers had been at the alehouse in Tongue for a few days, watching Lady Alison and Finn to see when they normally rode out in the morning.

What they'd needed was a plan to get Lady Mackay to defy her husband's orders and go by herself.

The last time the brothers had all been together, with them sharing the lass in the bed now, they'd been close to coming to a decision on how they would finish up the assignment and head for home.

He grew restless to have the snatch over with and return to Sinclair Grinigoe. He glanced over at the flushed lass, her hair a mess. Now that he'd had his fill of her, he was anxious to leave her bed and meet with his brothers downstairs. But, like all the lasses, she wanted to cuddle and talk.

He let his mind wander as she blathered on about things that didn't concern him.

In the time they'd been at the alehouse, they'd shared drinks and meals with some of the villagers. So far, none of them had been at the castle when the wedding disaster had taken place, so they didn't recognize any of the brothers. They did, however have quite a bit to say about the ruin of the bride, even though most had defended her. It seemed Lady Alison was well liked in the village.

Like most people in small towns, they were free with their information.

When the lass finally took a breath, David slapped her on her fine bare arse and climbed from the bed. “Thank ye, lass. If I ever come though this way again, I’ll be sure to look for ye.”

Suddenly modest, she sat up and covered her naked body with the bed covers while he dressed. “Ye’re leaving?”

“Aye. My brothers and I need to move on.”

“Oh.” She looked disappointed, but he’d been through this before. He didn’t understand why every lass he bedded seemed to believe he wanted to keep her forever.

As if he would marry a woman who allowed any man who came through Tongue to tup her. He shook his head and, before this could go any further, he leaned over, kissed her on the forehead and left.

Completely forgetting her as he reached the bottom of the stairs, he headed to where Miles, Archie and Enoch sat at one of the tables finishing up bowls of stew.

“Get yer belly filled,” Archie said as David drew out a chair. “We’re about to move out.”

He waved at one of the maids to bring him a mug of ale and a bowl of stew. “Then the plan has been made?” he asked Archie.

“Aye. There is a verra small village about thirty minutes north of here. At first light tomorrow ye and Enoch will go to the village and set a few fires. Try no’ to kill anyone or force one of the lasses as is yer way because I doona think Da can get The

Mackay to agree to no retaliation from grabbing the lass if some of his clan people are killed or assaulted.”

David nodded as he shoved bread into his mouth. “I say we go tonight before it gets dark. The earlier we do this the better.”

“’Tis a good idea,” Archie said. “Miles and I will wait in the woods near where the Mackay woman rides every morning. With Finn gone and how stubborn Lady Alison is, ‘tis no doubt she will go on her own.”

Once we grab her, we’ll head directly to Castle Sinclair Grinigoe. I suggest once the fires are good and set ye send someone from the village to alert the laird. He no doubt will send Finn since The Mackay has just about given up any of his duties. Just make sure ‘tis verra early since Lady Alison takes an early ride.”

“Will that seem strange that the mon setting the fires is sending for the laird?”

Archie sighed. “With the chaos no one will be sure who set the fires, and there isn’t anyone at that small village who kens any of us. For all they ken, ye are men riding through the village and stopped to help.”

Alison looked out the window of her bedchamber. ‘Twas a cloudy day, but she would wear her warm cape so she wouldn’t miss her morning ride.

She was still amazed that Finn greeted her every morning to keep her from riding alone. What had seemed to be a chore for him when he first joined her, it was apparent he actually enjoyed the riding, and it gave them time to discuss things that they never seemed to get around to when they retired to their bedchamber each night. Once they settled in, they reached for each other and no conversation ever took place.

She arrived at the stable with no Finn in sight. Old Kilmead limped out and said, “I’m

afraid there's no riding today, my lady. There is a fire north of here and yer husband took a group of his men to deal with it. He said he was sorry and would make up for it tomorrow."

She refrained from behaving like a spoiled child, as much as she wanted to stamp her foot. "Is there no one else who can accompany me?"

"I'm afraid no' since, as I said, Finn took some of the men with him and the rest are on the lists."

She chewed her lip and thought about her ride. It was truly the best part of her day. As much as she enjoyed her husband's company, there was no reason why she could not go by herself. She and Finn had been riding the same area for weeks and it was truly a safe one.

"Would you please tack my horse, anyway. I will take a short ride by myself."

The man rubbed his chin. "I doona ken about that, my lady. Yer husband was sure stubborn about ye no' going alone."

She fumed. 'Twas time to take over and make Finn, as well as all the employees, know that, as Lady of the Manor, she had some say in what she could and could not do.

"I am sorry to put ye in the middle, Old Kilmead, but I insist you tack my horse, or I will do it myself. I promise I will go no farther than my husband and I do every time we ride."

The man stared at her for a minute, then shrugged and headed into the stable.

She took a deep breath, having won that battle. Mayhap she and Finn should speak

more about the things he ordered her not to do. They talked the other night about his need to control, and mayhap now that he told her the story of the time he'd lost control, and then assuring him he needed to let it go, he might no longer feel that he had to control everything.

With a sense of freedom, she took off and headed down the hill to the area she knew so well.

Finn stood looking at the burning bothies and frowned. "This makes no sense."

Aside from a few small fires, and one bothy, it appeared there was no other damage.

"I thought so, too," James said. "No one was injured or killed, No lass was tupp'd, no one is missing, the fires dinna really destroy anything and nothing was taken, according to the villagers."

"'Tis almost like it was a distraction to get us to leave the castle," Albert said, shaking his head. "Think ye we are being attacked while we stand here?"

Finn thought for a minute, then raced to his horse.

"Where are ye going in such a hurry?" Albert called as Finn hopped onto Morag and headed for home.

He'd gotten lazy. Since they'd heard nothing from the Sinclairs in all this time, he thought they had accepted what had happened. He'd even grown careless on their rides in the morning, more concerned with finding a place for him to tup his wife than about their safety.

He hated the thought of this carelessness, but he had a strong feeling he now was paying the price.

Chapter Eighteen

Alison found little pleasure in her ride. She'd gotten so used to having Finn by her side and teasing him and racing him that this morning's outing left her with little enjoyment.

As she rode, she blushed as she spotted various places where she and Finn had found pleasure with each other. Even the jump over the hedges brought her no joy. Blast the man, he'd ruined her morning rides.

Thinking about the chores that awaited her back at the castle, she turned her horse around to end her ride and return home. She came to a halt as two riders approached. One of the men looked familiar, but she wasn't sure.

Once they grew closer, she recognized Archie Sinclair and quickly turned her horse back toward the village. They were definitely up to no good and somehow she believed it involved her.

She could hear them getting closer and pushed poor Bonnie-Bay harder. Within minutes, she was lifted from the horse's back and settled on Archie's lap.

She elbowed him, punched wherever her fist landed, kicked back with her foot and attempted to scratch his face. She tried to reach for her dagger, but it was underneath her.

“Sit still, lass, or we will stop and tie ye up and it won't be pleasant.”

“What do ye want with me? I’m married. ‘Tis o’er, Sinclair.”

“Nay. No’ o’er until we get the promises yer da made in the betrothal agreement.”

“‘Twas broken! By ye! I married Finn Mackay. Ye have yer lemman. Leave me alone.” Once more she shoved her elbow into Archie’s middle and shifted in an attempt to get her dagger.

Was The Sinclair angry enough to kill her even if her da did hand over whatever it was in the agreement that The Sinclair wanted bad enough to abduct her? Or were they just going to hold her until they received what they wanted?

She had never known what her da had gotten out of the betrothal agreement that seemed so very one-sided. From the little bit of the agreement that she had seen, The Sinclair would be getting land and the lairdship for Archie. She didn’t see in the agreement what it was that The Sinclair was giving in return.

It was another reason she felt as though her da was willing to enter into any agreement to get rid of her, or mayhap he was indeed suffering from a mental decline after her brothers had died.

Every so often, she saw her old da, who seemed clear and even energetic. She had overheard her father talking to James and Albert at the evening meal one night about the restoration of the Stuart monarchy a couple of years before and how the Highlanders felt the need to be fully aligned. Mayhap that was the boon Da received from the betrothal.

All of that didn’t matter, however, with the predicament she was in. Finn would be furious when he found out she left the stable by herself and then got abducted.

She calmed herself since it was not likely she would escape from the two Sinclairs

and she would waste her energy trying. 'Twas better if she waited to see where they were taking her and try to escape from there.

“Where are ye taking me?”

Silence.

“I asked, where are ye taking me?”

Silence.

She jabbed Archie's middle with a strong jolt from her elbow, catching him by surprise. He grunted and raised his fist to hit her when the other Sinclair said, “Nay. Da will no' be happy if ye harm her.”

Archie leaned down and said softly to her. “I doona care what my da says; if ye hit me again, I will blacken yer eye and tell my da ye fell.”

So the men were under orders not to harm her. 'Twas also interesting that, had she married this man, not only would she be sleeping in a cold bed, but she would also most likely be visiting the healer on a regular basis since she wasn't very good at keeping her thoughts to herself.

She grinned. Not like Finn who kissed her objections away. Blast, she missed the man. Even though she knew he would be very angry with her, there was no doubt that he would rescue her.

She trusted him.

Deciding maybe it was better being sweeter than she wanted to be with Archie, she said, “So where are ye taking me?”

To her surprise, he answered. “Castle Sinclair Grinigoe.”

“Can I ask what yer purpose is? As I mentioned, I am married to Finn Mackay and we are verra happy.”

Were they very happy? Aye. She was, anyway, and was pretty certain her husband was as well. Did that mean they loved each other?

Before she could dwell on that, Archie said, “When ye played the whore for Mackay and forced me to break our betrothal agreement, we lost things that my da wants.”

She huffed. “I did no’ play the whore, but then ye would ken all about that since ye have one of yer own.”

Despite whatever warning Archie had received, he punched her on her back, taking her breath away and bringing tears to her eyes. Apparently the brother—name unknown—didn’t see what Archie did, but she knew she would be suffering a bruise on her back.

“Then I am to be yer hostage until ye get what ye want from The Mackay?”

“Aye. Now I want ye to shut yer mouth since yer blathering is giving me a headache.”

After a while she realized she needed to stop to take care of her needs. “I must take a break.”

“No breaks. We intend to reach Sinclair before dark.”

She shifted around. “No’ possible, unless ye wish me to piss on yer lap.”

“Ye do that and I’ll strip yer clothes off and let ye ride naked the rest of the way.”

She had no doubt this monster would do it. “I would freeze to death!”

He shrugged. “Then stop asking for things.”

“This is the first thing I asked for. Doona ye have any feelings in ye at all?”

“No’ for ye. I lost the entire Mackay clan because of ye.”

She wanted to say that he didn’t have to break the agreement, but she was very glad he had. Marriage to this monster would have given her a lifetime of misery.

After a few more minutes of suffering, she decided that knowing the type of man Archie Sinclair was, she had to be sweet and submissive to get what she wanted.

“May we please stop for only a minute so I can take care of my needs?” She smiled all the time, her jaw so tight she considered a couple of her teeth would break.

Archie gave her a quick nod and held up his hand to signal to the other Sinclair that they were stopping.

He jumped off the horse but made no move to help her down. She slid off the animal and remembered for the first time her horse Bonnie-Bay. The animal was so well-trained she was certain she’d found her way back to the stables.

Archie walked her toward the bushes. At least he had enough understanding to allow her to go farther into the woods without accompanying her. But not without a warning. “If ye try to escape, I will hunt ye down and the beating ye will get will be only where my da can’t see it.”

With a sigh of relief, Alison squatted and relieved herself. Once that problem was taken care of, her rumbling stomach reminded her that she'd missed breaking her fast.

She joined Archie and they walked side-by-side to the horses where the other Sinclair waited. When they reached the animal, she said, "I dinna break my fast. I need food."

"'Tis no' my problem, lass."

Before she could protest, he lifted her by the waist and practically tossed her onto the horse. Had she not grabbed the pommel, she would have slid to the other side and landed on the ground.

He climbed behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist and they continued the journey.

Finn rode like someone possessed from the small village back to Castle Varrich, his heart thumping so loud he thought it would jump out of his throat. As much as he prayed Alison was home and safe, he had a very strong feeling that the fires were set to send him and some of his men away from the castle.

Since there didn't appear to be anything amiss at the castle, he didn't dismount but rode directly into the stables. Old Kilmead wandered out from the back of the stables, looking guilty.

"Where is Lady Mackay?" He didn't mean for the words to come out as a bark, but given the look on Old Kilmead's face, it apparently had.

The man swallowed a few times and waved toward the hill he and Alison rode down every morning. "She went off for her ride e'en though I told her ye said not to do it."

He wanted to blast the man but knew 'twas not his fault. His wife was stubborn and

independent and took every opportunity to defy him. This time he was certain she'd run into trouble.

He turned Morag toward the hill and rode at a speed he was lucky didn't cause him to tumble over the animal's head.

A race around the area they generally rode in produced no evidence of his wife. Realizing he needed help to continue his search, he headed back to the keep.

Once he arrived at the stable, Bonnie-Bay wandered out, her saddle still on her back. "Did ye find yer wife, Finn?"

"Nay." He shook his head, thinking the man would have assumed that since his wife's horse had returned without her.

"I need a fresh horse. Take care of Morag and tack another one for me." He walked off to the keep. He would need to get a few men to help him search, although, since the questionable fire, he had a sick feeling that Alison had been taken.

"Finn!" Albert came rushing toward him, waving a piece of parchment. "This just came for ye. A messenger brought it."

Finn grabbed the parchment and read it. He looked up at Albert. "The Sinclair has abducted Alison."

Chapter Nineteen

“I want what’s due to me. If ye hadn’t allowed Finn Mackay’s hands all o’er ye, we wouldn’t have canceled the betrothal agreement,” Gilbert Sinclair said, glaring at Alison and pounding his fist on the table in the great hall where he sat with a mug of ale in front of him.

Alison was feeling weak and dizzy and didn’t have the strength to argue with the man. She was tired and her stomach was queasy. The ride from Castle Varrich to Castle Sinclair Grinigoe had been arduous.

She had to fight Archie every time she needed to stop. He grouched and complained and made plenty lurid remarks about her and women in general. She hated him more with each mile they rode.

They’d arrived at the Sinclair keep a short while ago, and after being literally dragged from the horse and up the stairs to the keep to appear before The Sinclair, she only wanted a warm drink to settle her stomach and a place to sleep.

Despite the blow to her back from Archie that still pained her, she didn’t feel concerned for her safety. The Sinclair had made it clear she was being held hostage to get The Mackay’s attention and hold true to the contract they’d both signed.

‘Twas tradition that, if a betrothal agreement was broken, the groom’s family was expected to keep the dowry. She’d had no idea if they kept it or not, since she had never been allowed to know very much about what was agreed to, except that she was to permit his lemming to remain in his bed.

As grateful as she was to be married to Finn and not the horrible man who hit her and dragged her around like a sack of flour, in this instance, it had been The Sinclair who had broken the agreement.

The man waved over a maid walking through the keep, looking quite leery, which was understandable since it was late. “Get some food and drink for our guest—he smirked at her—and my sons.” He pinched the maid on her arse and then patted it.

“Sit down, lass.” The Sinclair pointed to a chair next to him at the table.

She hated the thought of being that close to the man, but she just wanted a drink and a bed. She didn’t think with her stomach feeling queasy she wanted food, even though earlier in the ride she had been hungry.

Tomorrow she would consider her situation and think about escaping.

The group remained silent as they waited for the food. Archie and his three brothers poured glasses of whisky until it became apparent they were getting drunk, which disturbed her.

Eventually, the maid brought out bowls of stew, bread, cheese and pasties. Archie and the other Sinclair brother who had accompanied them dove into their food, shoving bread and stew into their mouths, wiping their messy mouths with their shirt sleeves.

The other men whose names she didn’t even know continued to drink.

Once Alison had sipped the ale and eaten a bite or two, she was so tired and worn out that her head began to ache, along with the muscles in her body. She sat back and waited for the men to finish eating, hoping it would not take long for someone to show her to a bed.

“Did ye send the message to The Mackay?” The Sinclair asked, pouring more whisky into his glass.

Archie nodded. “We paid a messenger in the alehouse to bring the note to The Mackay after we left. But Finn Mackay and his two trainers were at the fire we set, so I doona ken when he received it.”

Alison felt her head drooping onto her chin. When no one offered her a bed, she folded her arms on the table and rested her head there. Within minutes she was asleep.

It seemed like only a few minutes had passed when one of the Sinclair brothers nudged her. “We have a bedchamber for ye, lass.”

She stood and stumbled behind the man, across the great hall and up the stairs.

They arrived at the bedchamber floor. He opened the third door and waved her in. “Don’t think about escaping. I will be sleeping on the floor in front of yer door. We also nailed the windows shut, but it’s a long drop to the ground anyway.”

She nodded and turned to the bed. The door closed, and she heard a lock turning from the outside. She removed her shoes and climbed into the bed. Most likely she should worry about tomorrow, but she would do that tomorrow.

“My laird, ye are going to have to go with us to see The Sinclair; this is no’ something I can handle for ye. I doona ken what ye negotiated with the mon, and ye have to decide what ye want to give him for cancelling the betrothal.”

“They canceled it, I doona see why I have to bend to his demands.”

Finn held his temper. “They are holding my wife until we appear at The Sinclair

castle. I can sneak in and rescue her, but I think 'tis best to see what he is demanding."

Every day it seemed the laird removed himself from life a little bit more. Since Finn and Alison had married, it had become worse. There were days when he dinna recognize maids that had been at Castle Varrich for years.

Finn didn't know himself the full extent of the betrothal agreement, and had no interest in it beyond how his wife was to be treated. And he had no idea what The Mackay would be willing to give The Sinclair to appease him.

"I do no' feel as though I am suitable to negotiate in yer stead. I strongly recommend that ye travel with us."

If the laird refused to go, then Finn had decided he would travel to the Sinclair castle and get his wife. He would find a way because he wouldn't trust the Sinclairs when they learned that The Mackay would not meet with them.

"Have them come here," The Mackay said.

Finn sighed, losing his patience with the man. Once he got his wife back, it appeared the actual running of the keep and clan would fall on his shoulders. "We can suggest that, but, considering my wife is being held there, I want to get her home and let ye and The Sinclair do whatever ye need to do."

The Mackay sat in silence for a while. Just as Finn thought the man would refuse again, he said, "Aye. I will go with ye."

They left the following morning. Finn, The Mackay, Albert, James, and about fifty warriors. Finn hated how frail The Mackay looked, but he still felt having him with them was the only way to straighten this out without shedding blood.

Finn knew The Mackay warriors could flatten the Sinclairs easily. But he wanted to maintain the alliance with them to keep the Highlands strong, if The Sinclair's demands were not unreasonable.

By the time they arrived, The Clan Chief looked terrible. Finn felt a tug of guilt at making the man go with them, but he still thought it to be the best choice.

Once they made themselves known to the guards on the ramparts, the drawbridge descended, and their party moved forward.

Archie and Gilbert, the Clan Chief, stood in the bailey as Finn and his group arrived.

"I would have yer weapons," The Sinclair said.

"And I would have my wife," Finn responded.

"Yer wife is safe. She is being treated well. But The Mackay and I need to talk and negotiate now."

Finn walked forward and drew his sword. "I will see my wife now."

All the warriors in the keep, both Sinclairs and Mackays, drew their swords.

The Sinclair held up his hand. "There will be no fighting. The Mackay and I need to talk. I suggest ye settle yerselves at the table in our keep, and our maids will bring ye food and drink. Yer guards can stay here in the bailey."

Finn shook his head. "There will be no talks until my wife is brought down here."

Archie and one of his brothers looked at each other in a way that had Finn's muscles cramping. "I doona care how many guards ye have, if she is no' presented forthwith, I

will remove one of yer heads before ye take another breath.”

Archie stepped up and Finn pulled his sword out again. “Yer wife was healthy when we brought her here, but it appears she has taken ill.”

Finn roared and jumped on Archie, taking him to the ground. James and Albert pulled him off and The Sinclair shouted, “Our healer says she is suffering from an ague.”

“Take me to her,” Finn growled.

The Sinclair nodded at another son.

“Follow me, Mackay,” he said. The man turned and walked toward the staircase. Finn followed. Then, allowing for the fact that this could be a setup, he turned back to where The Mackay, James and Albert stood. “James, come with us.”

The man joined them and the three climbed the stairs. They strode down the corridor and stopped in front of a bedchamber door. “She is in there.”

Finn nodded, unlocked the door, and stepped into the room. Alison was lying in a bed and appeared to be sleeping. There was a young maid with her.

She looked peaceful and didn’t appear to have any injuries. He walked to the bed and sat on the mattress, dipping it so she rolled toward him.

She slowly opened her eyes. “Finn,” she sighed, reaching out for him. “I kenned ye would come for me.”

Chapter Twenty

Alison had just been dreaming about the man sitting on her bed. She felt so sick and hadn't been out of bed since they'd arrived. The little bit of food she'd eaten had come right back up when she retired to the room.

"How long have I been here?" she asked.

"About two days. We received a message from Laird Sinclair only hours after ye were discovered missing."

She folded her hands under her head. "I'm sorry I went for my ride by myself when ye told me no' to."

"About that. I am disappointed that ye put yerself in danger, but it seems it was all planned."

Alison frowned. "What do ye mean?"

"There was a small fire started in one of our outlying villages. We had no idea how bad it was until we got there. 'Twas verra small, no stealing, no killing, no injuries. As happy as I was no' to see suffering, it seemed odd to me."

"A way to make me go by myself," she said. "Apparently there are those who kenned that I doona do as ye ask."

He nodded. "Aye, I am afraid so."

A small tear drifted down her face. "I won't ever do that again. I ken ye have my safety in mind, and no' just controlling me."

She'd had time to think while lying in bed feeling sick. For a while she'd had a fever, but presently she felt cooler.

As she'd thought about her predicament, she knew in her heart that, even though she'd rode out on her own against Finn's wishes, there was no doubt in her mind that Finn would come for her.

Because she trusted him.

She'd finally accepted that Finn would ne'er hurt her, e'er leave her, or take on a mistress. He'd be there for her.

"I am sorry, lass, that ye still feel as though I am trying to control ye. I've given it some thought, and I realized I only need to insist on ye obeying my orders when it comes to yer safety. I doona want to even think about living without ye, Alison."

And, with a sigh, he continued, "And ye were correct; I need to leave the past behind. I cannot control everything, and I need to stop trying."

"I love ye, Finn Mackay," she said.

"And I love ye, Alison Mackay." He bent and kissed her gently on her lips. She pulled him closer, causing the kiss to go deeper, sealing their love for each other.

Finn held her cheeks in his hands. "Ye are beginning to grow warm again, lass." He turned to the maid who had been sitting there, assuming she was left there to keep Alison from trying to escape.

“Can ye fetch the healer? I’d like to speak with her, plus my wife seems to be developing another fever.”

“I’m no’ sure I’m supposed to leave her.”

Finn smiled. “’Tis fine. Yer laird is right now speaking with The Mackay. All is well.”

Still looking doubtful, she stood. “I will leave the door open.”

“Archie said his da wanted something from the broken engagement. Is that what they are speaking about?” Alison asked.

“Aye. Yer da wanted me to come by myself to meet with The Sinclair, but I doona ken what he is willing to pay for the broken engagement.”

Alison huffed. “Archie broke the betrothal.”

“And I thank God every day that he did,” Finn said, running his finger down her cheek.

She cupped his face with her hands. “Me as well.”

Finn rested his foot on his knee. “I think after we return home after this, I will be taking over many of yer da’s responsibilities.”

“He is growing weaker, is he no’?”

“Aye. He had a hard time this week remembering two of our maids that have been there for a few years.”

Alison shook her head. "I could see this coming for some time now."

"I ken," he said.

The door opened and the maid returned with another woman. Older, plump, and with a smile on her face. Her ruddy cheeks and bright eyes made one like her upon seeing her for the first time.

"Ach, I see our patient is awake." She moved closer to the bed. "How are ye feeling, Lady Mackay?"

She took Finn's hand in hers. "Many times better since my husband is here."

The woman looked at Finn. "And a fine looking mon he is."

He grinned and Alison nudged him with her elbow. The healer looked at Finn. "My name is Camy Sinclair, the clan healer."

"Finn Mackay, Miss Sinclair. "I believe my wife is starting another fever."

Camy began to tsk and felt Alison's head. "Aye."

"They said downstairs that Lady Mackay is suffering with an ague," Finn said to the healer.

"Aye. She arrived no' feeling well and then started with the fevers. She's had two since we put her to bed."

He narrowed his eyes. "Did she arrive with any injuries?"

The woman hesitated and then said, "Aye, when we undressed her, we found a bruise

on her back.”

Finn nodded and Alison was certain he knew immediately who would have caused the injury.

A soft knock at the door caught their attention. Another maid entered. “Laird Mackay, The Mackay requests yer presence downstairs.”

Finn looked at the healer. “I trust ye with my wife. She means e’erything to me.”

The woman nodded. “Yer a good mon, Mackay. I am verra pleased Lady Mackay married ye.”

He had no idea if the healer knew about the broken betrothal and why it happened, but he thought that was what she was talking about. Staff are great gossipers, and it seems likely she knew all about it.

He gave her a quick nod and, after kissing Alison on her cheek, left the room.

“The lairds await ye in the solar.” The maid who had arrived to tell him he was needed waved him toward the staircase.

She walked ahead of him, not speaking.

His thoughts returned to Alison. He’d never been so scared in his life when she went missing and then received the message from The Sinclair that they had her.

His first thoughts were to lead a few hundred warriors to The Sinclair holding and wreak havoc. Then he came to his senses and realized that was probably the easiest way to get Alison killed.

She looked all right for someone with an ague, and the healer seemed to know what she was about. As soon as this meeting was over, he was taking his wife home.

He knocked on the solar door. "Come."

He entered to see The Sinclair, The Mackay, and Archie sitting at a table. The Sinclair waved him over.

Finn sat next to The Mackay and crossed his arms over his chest.

"We dinna receive what we were due in the betrothal agreement," The Sinclair said.

When The Mackay said nothing, Finn leaned forward. "Yer son broke the agreement when he refused to marry my wife ." He nodded in Archie's direction.

"I dinna want to marry yer whore. I had to be sure my son was my son."

Finn forgot all about control and jumped over the table, landing on Archie. He got a few good punches in before The Mackay ordered him to stop.

Both men climbed to their feet, and, glaring at each other, took their seats.

"If any other insults are made or even alluded to about my wife , this meeting will be o'er and ye can expect the Mackay clans to attack within hours." Finn barely got the words out with how tight his jaw was.

The Sinclair turned to his son. "Keep yer mouth shut or I'll toss ye out of the meeting."

Archie gave a quick nod and slumped in his seat like a lad.

“I want the piece of land that was part of the betrothal,” Sinclair said.

The Mackay motioned to Finn to move closer. He whispered in his ear, “I’m no’ sure what piece of land he speaks of.”

Finn closed his eyes and held in a groan. The Mackay was fading fast. “Did ye bring a copy of the agreement with ye?”

“Aye.”

Finn let out a sigh of relief and took the parchment from him. He unrolled it and studied it for a minute. He leaned back to The Mackay and said, “It’s on the border between ye and the Sinclairs. It appears he wanted it because of the water. A small lake that fills from one of yer lochs.”

The Mackay nodded. “Aye. Give him the land.”

Finn cleared his throat, but he was certain that the laird heard their exchange. “The land is yers. Laird Mackay will sign it o’er to ye.”

“That is no’ all.”

The Sinclair took out a document and laid it on the table. After waiting for a few moments, most likely to build up tension, he tapped it with his finger. “I just came into possession of this. ‘Tis worth a great amount of coin.”

Finn didn’t see any reason to respond since it was up to The Sinclair to tell them what he wanted and what was in the document.

“I will take five hundred merks.” The laird sat back after making that announcement and crossed arms over his chest.

Finn pushed back his chair and stood. “We shall be leaving now. I will take my wife with me. We can share my horse unless ye care to offer one to us that will be returned.”

“Doona ye want to see what is on the document,” the Sinclair laird said.

“No’hing is worth five hundred merks,” Finn said. He looked over at The Mackay who studied the other laird. He nodded to the parchment. “I will see what it says.”

“Are ye prepared to turn over five hundreds merks?” Finn said.

The Sinclair shoved the paper across the table. His father-in-law picked it up. He read it very slowly and then said, I will have the merks delivered to ye and take this with me.”

“I have yer word?” The Sinclair said.

“Aye.” The Mackay pushed back his chair. “Gather the men, Finn.”

Still completely stunned at what just happened, he stared open-mouthed at the two men, then stood. “I am no’ leaving without my wife.”

He turned to The Sinclair. “I would like to have the use of one of yer horses. I doona ken if my wife is strong enough to ride by herself but we would make better time if we are no’ sharing a horse. I want her home in our own bed to recover.”

The Mackay walked very slowly from the room, looking broken, tucking the paper in his pouch.

Finn hoped the laird would one day share with him what was on that paper that was worth five hundred merks. ‘Twould probably empty their coffers.

“Smiling gleefully, The Sinclair said, “We can lend ye one of our carts. It will take ye longer to return home, but I believe Lady Mackay would be more comfortable.”

“Thank ye. I would like that.” Finn headed upstairs to the room where Alison was. She was sleeping again and the maid watching her said, “The healer gave her another draught to help her fever and make her sleepy.”

Since it would take some time to prepare the cart for her and for the two lairds to work out whatever exchange they needed to do for the land and money, Finn nodded at the maid and returned downstairs.

‘Twould be a long trip, so he went to the kitchen. The cook was still in there and he asked for food for the trip. It would take a couple of days to travel to Castle Varrich with Alison using a cart, so most likely they would stop for the night at least once, so the men would have to do some hunting.

She was most accommodating and said she would have the packed food ready when they left and she would make up trenchers of food for him, James, Albert, Finn, Alison and The Mackay straightaway.

As was the practice, the warriors who traveled with them would provide their own also by hunting.

He didn’t know exactly why but he was itching to leave the place and get Alison settled in their bed in their own bedchamber. The healer here seemed quite nice, but he would feel safer for his wife once they were home.

Chapter Twenty-One

Alison was feeling a little bit better, but still weak when Finn came into the room where she was staying. “Good morn, lass. We will be leaving on the morrow. I have arranged to have a cart so ye can rest on the trip.”

She frowned. “Wouldn’t it be faster if I rode a horse?”

He shook his head and sat alongside her. “Nay. The healer thinks it would be too hard on yer body. We could wait a few days?—”

“Nay,” she said. Tears filled her eyes. “I want to go home. To our home.”

He stretched out alongside her on the bed and pulled her into his arms. “Do no’ fash yerself, my love, we will take the cart.”

She nodded and wiped away the tears.

Finn placed his hand under her chin and turned her face to his. “The healer mentioned a bruise on yer back and seemed reluctant to say it. Were ye injured on the ride here?”

“Aye. Archie tossed me onto his horse when they grabbed me. Of course, I gave him a hard time and, eventually, he punched me on the back.”

She could feel Finn’s entire body tense. “Is that all?”

“Aye.”

He nodded and brushed her hair back from her face. “I want ye to eat and sleep as much as ye can today. Even riding in the cart, it can be an arduous trip back home.”

“Is that an order, husband?”

He grinned. “Since we’re talking about yer safety, aye, ‘tis an order.”

She yawned. “I doona think I will have a problem with that order since that’s what I want to do anyway.”

Finn kissed her lightly on the lips, but she wanted so much more. He smiled as he pulled away. “Get yer rest now, wife. We can continue this when ye’re feeling better.” He pulled the bedcover up and quietly left the room.

Finn had one chore to complete before they left. James and Albert were preparing the cart since they would leave tomorrow first light. The cook had promised she would have food packed for them before they left. Aside from The Sinclair and his sons, everyone in the keep seemed accommodating and pleasant.

The healer had even said she would send a bit of sleeping draught to make Alison’s trip easier.

He hadn’t seen his father-in-law since the meeting with The Sinclair. When he inquired, he was told that he had returned to the bedchamber he’d been assigned and stayed there.

Finn pushed the mystery out of his mind. He stopped and asked one of the guardsmen where Archie Sinclair was.

“He’s at the lists right now, Mackay. If ye want to see him, go into the outer bailey and ye’ll see them on the right side of the keep.”

The morning was bright with sunshine, and Finn dearly hoped it would continue for their trip on the morrow. With using the cart he figured it could be a two day, or possibly three day, trip instead of the full day and part of the evening it took them to arrive here.

He touched the top of his sword as he made his way to the lists. Hundreds of men were practicing. It didn’t take him long to spot Archie swinging his sword at one of his brothers.

“Archie Sinclair!” Finn called out.

His voice carried over the clash of swords and men’s grunts. Most of the men stopped to stare at him.

Archie wiped the sweat from his forehead. “What do ye want, Mackay.”

“A challenge.”

Buzzing began with the crowd of warriors. Archie smiled brightly and strode up to him. “A challenge, eh? Ye think ye can beat me?” He laughed and turned to his men who laughed with him.

“Aye, I do.” Finn removed his shirt and, like the other men, also his kilt which left him naked. The best way to fight.

Archie smirked as he approached him, strutting along, smiling at his men.

The two of them circled each other with shouts and taunts coming from the Sinclair

men. Now was when Finn had to use his well-honed control, even though it was hard to control his rage. The idea of Archie harming Alison made him want to remove the man's head from his shoulders, but that would make their departure a bit difficult.

To defeat the man he had to be careful of every move.

“Do ye enjoy the whore in yer bed?” Archie shouted as he circled Finn.

Knowing it was his way of distracting him, Finn shoved down the extra rage. “No whore in my bed, but there is sure one in yers.”

They began to strike, the men appearing at first to be evenly matched, but, as the fight continued, Archie began to make mistakes, resulting in Finn slashing him on the arm. The man jumped back and looked down at his arm.

A mistake.

Finn continued to come at him and struck him on the leg, now leaving the man bleeding from two cuts. Finn had to fight himself to keep from killing the man, but Archie's injuries kept him from continuing effectively and within minutes, Finn had him flat on his back. He brought the tip of his sword to Archie's throat.

“If I dinna believe killing ye would interfere with whatever deal yer da and The Mackay worked out, ye would have been dead already.”

“What's yer problem, Mackay? Ye got the lass as yer wife.”

“Aye. My wife . And ye had the nerve to punch her in her back while holding her captive on yer horse. Doona think this is over. Were I to see ye again with my sword handy, ye will be dead.”

With those words, Finn turned, dressed himself and headed to the keep.

He couldn't leave this place soon enough.

Within minutes, he knocked on The Mackay's bedchamber door. "Aye."

Finn entered. The man was still in bed. "Are ye ill, my laird?"

"Aye. Sick in my heart."

Finn drew up a chair. "Do ye wish to talk?"

"Nay. I canno' right now." He turned to Finn. "How is my daughter? Is she recovering? I'd like to leave here as soon as possible."

"She is recovered enough to leave tomorrow. The Sinclair has offered the use of a cart to bring her home in."

The laird nodded. "Aye, 'twill be good to be home again." He remained silent for a minute. "When we get back to Castle Varrich, I will be turning over all the Clan Chief duties to ye."

Although Finn wasn't that surprised at the laird's words, he wasn't quite sure he was ready.

Almost as if he read his mind, the laird said, "Ye're ready, Finn. I already spoke with the council and they agreed. We will have a loyalty swearing event upon our return."

He pushed away the feeling of panic. Aye, he could do this. He always knew that. It was just that the assumption of the laird's duties came sooner than he'd expected.

The next morning, he bundled Alison up and carried her to the cart. The men were already on their horses, ready to go. Finn would like to never lay eyes on this place again.

Once she was settled, he reached down and kiss her lips. “We will be home soon, love. Just let that draught the healer gave ye do its work and take a nice sleep.”

The trip was long and Finn knew the men didn’t like traveling at such a slow pace, but Alison came first. She wanted to go home, and going home she was.

Upon their return, as promised, there was a loyalty swearing event where the men of Castle Varrich knelt before Finn and swore their allegiance to Finn Mackay, the new Clan Chief of the Mackay clan.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Six weeks had passed since the day Finn had taken over the lairdship for Clan Mackay. There were some difficult moments, but the person he turned to most of the time to discuss problems was Alison. She was smart, fair, honest, and hard when she needed to be.

He had no problem sharing control, and Alison said more than once that, not only did she love him, she knew in her heart he would never abandon her.

The laird had sent James with a hundred warriors to Castle Sinclair Grinigoe to bring the agreed upon amount of coin and the deed for the land they'd agreed upon. Nothing further was said about it.

He'd just stripped off all his clothes and climbed into the bed, exhausted as usual. Alison rolled to her side, propping her head up with her raised-up hand. "Are ye too tired tonight, my laird?"

He grinned and pulled her close. "Nay, ne'er too tired for my wife." He took her in a very possessive kiss, thanking God every day that they'd misbehaved in the stables and were forced to marry.

She pulled back and drew circles on his chest, tugging at the short hairs. "Before we start, there is something I wish to tell ye."

"Aye?"

She grinned. “Ye’re going to be a da in about six months.”

He shook his head and gave her a soft smile. “I thought my life could no’ be any more perfect.”

That was the last they spoke until the next morning.

Finn arose, washed and dressed and studied his sleeping wife. The soon-to-be mother of his bairn.

He left his bedchamber and, as soon as he hit the bottom of the staircase, one of the maids approached him. “My laird, The Mackay wishes to speak with ye. I was sent to find ye.”

“Thank ye.” He took the stairs two at a time to return to the bedchamber floor.

The room smelled like death. Ever since the laird had turned over the lairdship to him, the man had rapidly deteriorated. ‘Twas almost as if he had completely given up on life.

“Ye wished to see me, my laird?”

He waved Finn over. “Aye, pull up that chair.” He nodded at the wooden chair against the wall.

“There is something I need to show ye before I die.” He held up his hand as Finn opened his mouth to dispute him.

“Nay. I ken my time grows near.” He stopped for a minute seeming to catch his breath. “My daughter is well taken care of as well as my clan. The council tells me ye are doing a wonderful job.”

Uncomfortable with the praise, since he knew how many mistakes he'd made and all the times he almost messed up, he nodded.

The laird reached over to his side and pulled out the document that Laird Sinclair had shown to him the last time they all sat together.

Without saying a word, he handed it to Finn. "Read it."

Finn ran his eyes over the parchment, his mouth growing dry as he continued on. When he finished, he looked up at the laird. "Yer sons were about to lead an insurrection against the king."

"Aye. I canno' believe they would have been so foolish. If they'd been caught, and if anyone found this letter between them and other members of the group, they would have been hanged for treason."

He looked out the window at the rare sunny weather. "We also would have had our lands, coin, and resources taken from us. The clan would have eventually been absorbed by other clans. This king, and his followers, are too strong."

"I wonder how the Sinclair got this," Finn said, nodding to the paper.

"Blackmail I'm sure. He's known for having many sources to gather information for him. He, obviously, did no' have this at the time of the original betrothal agreement or he would have asked for much more."

There wasn't much for Finn to say. William and Bryan had made a terrible choice. The restored king had been on the throne for two years already.

The laird continued. "I've wondered since I saw this if my sons were not killed in battle by our own men if they were aware of their involvement in this potential disaster. I always wondered why both of them, excellent warriors, would be brought

down in battle.”

The laird took a deep breath and turned to him. “I ask a favor of ye, Finn.”

Finn nodded.

“Doona tell my daughter about this.”

Finn ran his hand down his face. “We doona have secrets from each other.”

“Good. Good,” the laird said. “I agree, but there is no reason for their sister to ken how close they came to bringing us all down. She admired them so much. It would be devastating for her.”

He thought of the bairn she was carrying and how this information might harm her. “Aye, in this instance, I will no’ tell her about this.”

“I have one more request. As soon as ye leave this room, burn that document.”

Finn nodded as The Mackay drifted off to sleep. Finn left the room, burned the document and headed to his bedchamber to see if his wife was awake.

She was just opening her eyes as he approached the bed. “Good morn, wife.”

She smiled at him and his heart almost burst with love. “Good morn, husband.”

He sat alongside her on the bed. “The sun is shining, my love. Do ye wish to take a ride?”

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Here's an excerpt from *Never Marry a Highlander*.

Prologue

"I am your brother. Since I would fight to the finish to save yer life on the battlefield, why wouldn't I help ye out with the most important matter of yer life?" Craig MacKay sat across from his brother, Laird Robin MacKay as they shared a jug of whisky.

"Yer speaking of tying yerself to a woman ye don't ken that well—and doona even seem to like—for the rest of yer life." Robin stared at him; his shoulders slumped in defeat. Very unlike him, who as laird for the past four years, was a strong, fair, and powerful man and clan chieftain.

Robin had been forced to sign a betrothal agreement with Lady Lorena Gordon, widowed sister of Laird David Gunn. The wedding was in five days and since the soon-to-be bride had threatened to kill herself rather than suffer what her brother had planned for her if Robin didn't go through with the wedding, it had left him no choice.

"I've told ye before. Marriage means no'ing to me. I never expected to marry, and if I took yer place, I would marry the lass, bed her, and then continue on with my life just as before."

Robin took a sip of whisky. "Even though I want verra much to have ye step up, I must tell ye that yer idea of marriage will no' work. Women want attention, caring, ye need to listen to them, agree with what ye can."

"Who made ye such an expert on marriage?" Craig asked. He waved his hand at his brother. "I shall ride to Clyth Castle at first light. I will convince The Gunn that

taking me in yer place is in everyone's best interest."

His brother's demeanor changed from crushed to hopeful. "Do ye really think Gunn would allow it?"

It had torn his heart these past couple of weeks watching his brother accept the pending marriage to Lady Lorena when he was in love with Helena Ross. Once she'd learned that Robin had signed the betrothal agreement, she left for Dornoch Castle where she had lived most of her life and before she visited them at Dun Ugadale to assist her sister with the birth of her first bairn. Robin had been unlike himself since she left, and Craig had come up with the idea of taking his place.

"Aye, The Gunn will allow it because ye ken how charming I can be. I get the impression he wants Lorena off his hands and an alliance with the MacKays. He'll get both whether he marries her off to ye or me."

"If ye think ye can do this, I am riding in the opposite direction to Dornoch Castle the minute ye leave."

Craig stood and stretched. "Aye. 'Tis the best of ideas. Once my wedding is o'er, I will drop Lorena off here and continue with the search for the brigands who have been stealing from us and harassing our people."

Robin looked for a moment as if he would say something, but then thinking better of it, walked up to him and gave him a brother's hug. "Thank ye, Craig." With a bright smile he left the room and Craig poured himself another whisky.

So, he was to be married. He lifted a glass in a toast to himself.

Chapter One

September 1661

Craig, his cousin Giles MacKay and the six guards he brought with him approached Clyth Castle, the MacKay banner flapping in the wind as they rode. It was a typical Highland late summer day, but this one without rain. They'd had a dry trip from Dun Ugadale.

Giles looked around the area, taking in the hills and the brooch itself, and turned toward Craig. "Looks safe enough. I can think of a few things I would change."

Craig laughed. His cousin, who was as close to him as his two brothers, was always looking for problems and issues before they arose. It made him an excellent guardsman and someone Craig always wanted to go with him on trips.

"Who goes there?" A guard above them called down as they grew close to the castle wall.

Craig looked up, wanting to roll his eyes at the man's question since they obviously flew their banner. "Craig MacKay, brother to Laird Robin MacKay and Giles MacKay, cousin to The MacKay."

The guardsman waved him on, and they entered the outer bailey. The area was filled with vendors and crofters, along with clansfolk who moved from vendor to vendor, examining their goods.

Knox Gunn, the laird's son strode toward them, as tall and rigid as always. Craig couldn't actually say he liked the man, since he really hadn't spent much time with him, but he looked like someone he would want to be on his side of a battle. "We were expecting yer laird." He looked around Craig as if Robin hid behind him. Craig slapped Knox on his back and moved him forward. "I understand that. However, I need to speak with yer da."

Knox drew away. "I hope ye're not planning on causing problems. The wedding is in two days, yer brother should be here verra soon."

Craig placed his hands on his hips. "About that..."

"Did I just see The MacKay ride in?" Laird David Gunn walked to where the men stood. and frowned "Where is yer brother?"

Craig glanced at his cousin and decided that he was probably looking for trouble. Nevertheless, his playful side came out that charmed the lasses so much. "I would say right about now Robin is in the middle of his wedding to Miss Helena Ross."

Knox growled, and Craig remembered that when the Gunns had visited the MacKay clan a few weeks before, Knox seemed to have feelings for Helena. Laird Gunn withdrew his sword as did Knox and the five guards standing behind him. Craig heard the sound of his men drawing their swords. Craig raised his hands. "I doona come to just give ye bad news." He paused for a minute, then said, "I am here to take my brother's place."

Gunn stared at him, and if he was surprised, it didn't show on the man's face. As a good laird and warrior, The Gunn kept his thoughts to himself, and likewise from his face. He waved toward the keep. "We shall discuss this in my study." The men all returned their swords to their scabbards and followed Gunn and his men.

Craig realized he could be headed to the dungeon, but considering how adamant Gunn appeared when he'd requested a match between his sister and Robin, he was almost certain the laird was interested in hearing what Craig had to say.

At least he hoped his instinct was correct. He had no problem with him and his men fighting their way out of the keep if it was only Gunn, Knox and the guardsmen surrounding their laird, since the MacKay warriors were well-known for their success in battle, but taking on all the warriors at the Gunn fortress, getting away would be challenging.

They all trooped up the stairs and down another corridor to a large room at the end.

Comfortable chairs surrounded a hearth with a small fire burning. Even though it was near the end of the summer, the older castles were cold even then.

Gunn's men and Craig's guard stood along the wall. Craig, Giles, The Gunn, and Knox sat in wooden chairs surrounding a well-worn table. "Now what is this about ye taking the place of the laird in the agreement we made."

Craig leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. "I am no' one to e'er expect to have this issue, but it seems Laird MacKay is in love with another woman. I ken, as does he, that his duty is to his clan, but seeing the misery of my brother, I offered to take his place."

The Gunn stared at him, and then shook his head. "I doona understand foregoing yer responsibility for something as foolish as love. He could have made this lass his leman and carried forward on our agreement."

Giles stepped in. "Miss Ross is no' the leman type. She is currently residing at Dornoch Castle, under the protection of the Sutherland Laird. She spent almost her entire life there, being raised by her aunt. If The MacKay made the lass his leman—which I ken he was no' likely to do—it would have brought down the rath of the entire Sutherland Clan."

Silence reigned for a few minutes while Gunn sat and stared at his fingers splayed on the table in front of him. He looked up and said, "Why should I agree to this?"

"Do ye want to find a husband for yer sister?"

The Gunn nodded.

"Do ye want an alliance with the MacKays?"

The laird folded his hands and leaned forward. "Aye. I ken all that, but breaking a

betrothal agreement is an insult. How do ye plan to make up for that?"

Craig shrugged. "I am no' authorized to offer any recompense except to marry yer sister."

The Gunn was not stupid. He had to know if he sent Craig away with threats of a coming battle, it would be a foolish move. He might feel slighted, but he also wanted an alliance with the MacKays and turning down this offer was no' the best idea for him or his clan.

"This turn of events must be given time for me to consider it."

"If ye wish me to speak with yer sister, I am happy to do that. If she accepts my offer, it might ease yer mind."

The man actually threw his head back and laughed. "I care no' about Lorena's feelings or thoughts in this matter." He thumped his chest with his thumb. "She is my possession and I decide what happens to her. She will do what she is ordered."

Any slight dislike Craig had for the laird turned into a very strong dislike. Robin had told him the lass had been beaten by her brother as well as her dead husband, Avery Gordon. How a man could take his fists to someone who is in their care and protection went against everything Craig believed in. He also knew that The Gunn had told Robin if he didn't marry Lorena he would marry the lass off to a brutal laird in a small clan in the lowlands. A man who already buried two wives who both died in 'accidents.'

The laird stood. "I expect ye to stay until I make a decision."

Craig nodded. "Aye. My men and I will stay outside the castle."

"Nay," Gunn said. "Ye will stay in the castle. I will have a maid prepare a bedroom

for ye and yer cousin."

He really didn't care for the sound of that. It was almost as if they were being held prisoners. Craig shifted in his chair, making sure his dirk was close to his hand. "We will stay outside the castle. There is no reason to deny our request. We arrived here of our own free will with an honest offer. We have no intention of fleeing and do no' wish to be treated as prisoners."

Knox leaned over and spoke to his father, low enough that Craig didn't hear him. The man continued to stare at Giles and Craig. "Verra well. Ye can stay outside the castle until I decide."

Craig nodded. "I would request time to speak with Lady Gordon."

Lady Lorena Gordon stared at herself in the looking glass in her bedchamber. She'd seen the MacKays ride in a little while ago. So this was it. She was to marry Robin MacKay and spend the rest of her life at Dun Ugadale. There were no regrets in leaving Clyth Castle. She'd never been happy here.

Bluidy hell , she'd never been happy anywhere. When her mam and da died after their carriage slid off a bridge, plunging them both into the swollen river below, she'd lost the one person who had ever cared about her.

Her mam may not have been overly attentive, but at least she knew who she was. Once she collided with her da in a corridor when she was about seven years and he didn't know her and shoved her away in annoyance, complaining about bairns running around loose in the castle.

Her brother, David, now the laird, had been away fostering most of her life and when he returned to take over their da's duties, he immediately began looking for a

husband for her. 'Twas the cook who reminded him Lorena was only ten and three years.

David was nice to her on occasion, but most times ignored her also unless he was in a foul mood and then she would feel his fists. She had learned soon after his return to stay out of his way.

She had foolishly high hopes when she did marry at the age of ten and six, but her husband was brutal. The best thing he'd done for her was to die after only two years of marriage.

What was it about her that made her so unlovable? She never asked for much. Like all young lasses, she liked the attention of the guardsmen, of finding a coin or two in her brother's study to buy something shiny when the vendors came around and speaking with the village girls.

It was right before her marriage to that beast Avery Gordon that the girls she'd been gossiping and shopping with found out she was the laird's sister. "We thought ye were one of the castle maids," Kiley said. She narrowed her eyes and studied Lorena. "Ye doona look like the laird's sister!"

"Nay. We have different mothers. I think David looks like his mother and I've been told I look like mine."

Kiley laughed. "It must have been quite annoying to yer da to have two bairns and neither one look like him."

Lorena smiled at herself in the looking glass, remembering the good times she'd had with the village girls. Once she returned from her marriage, she didn't have the desire to search them out. She knew they were probably happily married with maybe even a bairn or two.

She didn't want to see their happiness. Not that she begrudged them their husbands, but she knew in her heart that kind of happiness would never be hers.

Now she was once again being shoved off onto a laird who not only didn't want her but was in love with another woman. She'd heard the stories when she had visited Dun Ugadale with her brother. Mayhap she should do as she told The MacKay and jump off the bridge into the river where her parents had drowned.

She laid her head on her folded arms and cursed the one tear that slid down her cheek. 'Twas just one more in a stream of them she'd cried over the years. Just as she sat up and wiped her cheeks there was a knock at the door.

This was it. 'Twas time to do her duty and marry another man who would also ignore her while he pined for a lost love.

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