



Sins of a Scot (Bound by a Highland Curse: The Morgan's Clan Stories #7)

Author: *Fiona Faris*

Category: Historical

Description: "What the devil are ye doing? Stop untying the laces!"

Iseabail Mackay is racing against time to save her family, and the key is a magical crystal. So, when she runs into a Highland barbarian flaunting a piece of the crystal she needs, there's no room for niceties.

Her solution? Blackmail, of course.

Owen Sinclair isn't used to being pushed around—especially not by a tiny, sharp-tongued beauty like Iseabail. Yet, when she has the audacity to threaten him, he's forced to obey if he doesn't want his secret revealed.

As sparks fly, Owen realizes he's falling fast, unaware that Iseabail has made a deal with the devil that could leave him with more than just a broken heart...

Total Pages (Source): 35

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:35 am

BONUS PROLOGUE

Two months before...

The tavern was dark and grubby, not unlike its occupants. Owen Sinclair knew he was in the company of dangerous men, but this was the last place on his list before he would return to his father, Laird Madigan Sinclair, with his report. Which, so far, would say nothing at all, for though he had been scouting for information about a possible plot to attack the clan, it appeared it was just another rumor, likely started by some disgruntled tenant.

He had been playing cards with three men who, he had been told, might know something, but apart from losing some coin, he had discovered nothing of interest.

As the evening drew to a close, Owen was ready to call it a night, when one of the men, George was his name, let something slip.

“We need tae get back and check on the lass,” George slurred.

“Och, dinnae talk such rubbish,” John slurred back. “She’s tied up. She’s nae going anywhere.”

All of them had drunk far too much, and while Owen had pretended to keep up with them, much of his ale had been sneakily poured onto the floor beside his feet. It was a tactic he had learned over the years.

At their words, his ears pricked up, for clearly the men he already knew to be

unsavory were far worse than he had originally thought.

“I’d be happy tae leave her tae rot,” Seamus grunted, taking another slug of whisky. “She’s been naething but trouble since we took her.”

“Aye, but then all the effort would be fer naught,” John argued. “We’ll get nay coin fer a dead girl.”

Owen knew this was not his mission, and yet, at the idea of a lass being held captive against her will, he just couldn’t help but get involved. He needed to be careful, however, for by the looks of these men, they would have no qualms in slicing his throat.

“Ye’re selling a lass?” he asked, trying not to let his disgust show.

Seamus eyed him carefully. “What dae ye care?”

Though it made him sick to his stomach, Owen played one of his many roles, and smiling evilly, he said, “I have lots of uses fer a young lass.”

John beamed a grin. “Aye, I bet ye dae,” he chuckled loudly.

“Where did ye get her?” Owen said. “Is she in good health? I dinnae want her if she’s going tae die on me in a month.”

The men, seeing that Owen was serious, glanced at each other across the table. Clearly, they were nervous, but at the same time, Owen had deduced that they were eager to rid themselves of her.

“How much would ye be willing tae pay?” George demanded, or tried his best at least in such a drunken state.

“That depends on what state she’s in. Where did ye get her? Is she a woman o’ the night?”

The men began cackling between themselves, as though Owen had said something funny. When they settled, Seamus looked about him, though there was little need given that they were the only ones remaining in the bar. He then leaned forward and in a hushed whisper he said, “We stole her from her parents. She was out working in the field when we saw her. She’s a fine-looking lass, and we kent, as soon as we seen her, that she’d bring us some good coin.”

“Where is she?” Owen asked.

The men were sketchy with their answer, but in the end, they agreed a price and made an arrangement to meet the following day at noon.

“Ye bring yer coin, and we’ll bring the girl.”

“I’ll nae part with me hard-earned coin until I see her, so ye better hold up yer side o’ the bargain,” Owen said plainly.

“And ye hold up yers,” Seamus returned.

The following day, Owen was standing and waiting at the agreed place when he heard horses approaching. The three men arrived, all looking worse for wear after their drunken night. Seamus clambered down from his horse, and with no kindness, he yanked the lass down who had been riding behind him.

She stumbled when her feet hit the ground, and with her hands bound in front of her, she had no way to stop herself falling flat on her face.

“Get up, will ye?” Seamus said, grabbing at her and pulling her upright.

It was only then that Owen managed to get a good look at her. Shock rippled through his body, though he had to swallow it, for the lass was far younger than he had imagined. She couldn't have been more than four and ten. Her clothes hung on her body, she was filthy, and she shook with terror.

He had already decided that no coin would leave his purse, and playing his part once more, he pretended to look more than interested.

“Bring her here,” he said, “Let me get a good look at her.”

Seamus grabbed her by the arm and pulled her farther away from the others. Owen remained exactly where he was on purpose. The greater distance there was between him and the others, the better chance they had of escape.

The poor lass was terrified, her eyes darting from Owen to Seamus and back again. Owen lifted her bound arms, spinning her around as though he were examining an animal. He nodded, as though he were satisfied, and then, he took hold of her wrist. Turning toward his horse, Owen said, “She is exactly what I’m looking for. Wait there, and I will get the coin I promised ye.”

The lass weighed nothing at all when Owen lifted her onto his horse, putting her to the front of the saddle in readiness. He then pretended to search his saddle bags for the coin he had promised the men.

“Get ready,” Owen said in a low voice, flicking his eyes up to the lass.

She stared down at him, still shaking, and clearly having no comprehension of what his words might mean. From the corner of his eye, he could see Seamus begin to shift from one foot to the other. He was growing suspicious, which is exactly what Owen wanted. He needed the man to take a few more steps nearer to him so he was further away from his own horse.

Exactly as he imagined he might, Seamus did just that. “Hey, what are ye doing?” he called out. “Where’s the coin?”

Owen waited for another couple of seconds, and with Seamus now only five feet away, he suddenly leapt onto his steed, grabbed the reins, and flicked them harshly.

The steed reared, throwing the girl back into his chest, and then the beast galloped at great speed in a direction Owen had already planned out. Behind him, he could hear the bellows of the men, Seamus likely frantically running back to mount his horse.

The men gave chase, but Owen’s steed was fast and powerful, and after a half hour had passed, he could see no sign of them. Still, Owen did not stop, for he did not want to give them a chance to catch up to them, and continuing on, they traveled for a full day.

The girl remained silent for most of the time, even when Owen told her he would not harm her. He supposed, given what had happened to her, that she was hardly going to trust him just because he had run off with her.

Having journeyed for at least fifty miles, Owen found a tavern in a small village and booked a room. He sent a maid out to get the lass some proper clothes, and after an evening meal, they returned to the room.

The girl was terrified, but after telling her she could take the bed, Owen settled himself on the floor, and didn’t move the entire night.

The next morning, he woke feeling stiff and sore. It had been a long time since he had been forced to sleep on a hard wooden floor, but it had been necessary. When he stretched and woke, he found the girl sat up in the bed, watching him.

“Good morning,” Owen said, hardly expecting her to reply after yesterday’s silence.

“Morning,” she whispered.

Owen was a little startled, but smiled. “Me name is Owen Sinclair, son o’ Laird Sinclair, chief o’ Clan Sinclair.”

She looked a little nervous, but eventually she said, “Me name is Catherine.”

“Where are ye from, Catherine?”

“I live with me parents and braither on a farm,” she replied.

It was too much to hope for that she would know her location. She was, after all, just a child.

“Well, ye are safe now,” Owen said. “I’m going tae take care o’ ye, and then get ye back tae yer family, all right?”

She nodded, and as hard as it was for her, she even gave him a small smile.

A few days passed, and when Owen was certain that Seamus, John, and George had not followed their tracks, Owen found the village healer. She was a kind woman, a few years older than Owen. When he told her the story, Jenny was appalled, and tenderly took care of the superficial wounds Catherine had sustained.

When Owen was about to leave again with the girl, Jenny stopped him.

“Why dinnae ye leave the lass with me? She might feel safer with a woman. Besides, I’m sure ye have business o’ yer own tae be attending tae.”

It was a decent proposal under the circumstances, but Owen did not know this woman, and thus, was unsure if he could trust her.

Owen took Jenny to the side and fixed her with a harsh gaze. “I dinnae mean tae be rude, Jenny, fer I dinnae ken yer at all, but I need tae ken yer intentions.”

Jenny looked a little shocked at his harsh tone, and with wide eyes, she cried, “I only want the lass tae be returned tae her family. I can certainly dae that fer ye.”

She did appear genuine, but Owen wanted to make sure she did as she promised. “Very well. But when I pass through this way again in a month, if I discover that ye havenae done so, or that any harm has come tae that child, I swear, I’ll cause ye more harm than ye want tae imagine.”

“I swear, sir. Truly, I will dae as I have promised,” she said, pressing her hand upon her heart.

Satisfied with her conviction, and hoping the fear he had instilled in her would be an added motivation, Owen bid farewell to Catherine, and made his way back to Clan Sinclair.

It was a few weeks later when he discovered he was a wanted man.

Word had travelled across the country, and he was told, by a man he trusted unconditionally, that men from the east were after him. There was now a bounty on his head, though the men did not actually know who he was. He also discovered that the three men he had met were only a small number of a much larger gang.

The warning had gone from village to village. Owen either paid his dues, or they’d take what he owed them with his life. He could ask his father for the coin, but Owen was a man in his own right, and as he had managed to get himself into this mess, it was he who needed to get himself out.

Riding through a village one day, he had stopped into a tavern for a drink. Always

alert, he had heard some men discussing a secret fight being held in that tavern that very night. But it wasn't the fighting that particularly interested him. His ears did prick up when he heard the amount of money the winning fighter would receive.

Wracking his brain and wondering how he was supposed to raise the money he needed to pay this gang, it was as though the gods had led him to this very tavern to give him his answer. He was a fine fighter, and he was certain, he could win. If he could win one, he could certainly win ten, for that was how many he would have to win to gather the money he needed.

As he ordered another pint, he made his way over to these men. It was time he made their acquaintance.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:35 am

CHAPTER ONE

February 1690. The Golden Goose tavern, Sinclair lands...

Tucking a wayward strand of her chestnut hair back into the hood of her dark green cloak, Lady Iseabail Mackay pushed her way through the crowd of people. The Golden Goose was far busier than a tavern ought to be, given the size of the village. Iseabail continued on, as alert as she could be with the many bodies that surrounded her, her eyes flitting from one person to the next.

The bodhran thumped out a fast beat, accompanied by the tin whistle and the fiddle, playing music that had many of the patrons dancing and jumping, making the wooden floorboards beneath her vibrate with the movement. With a drink in hand, she finally found a small unoccupied space, and managed to take a sip of her ale.

No more than a minute later, Iseabail was approached by a burly man, his eyes set firmly upon her while sporting a wide grin.

Och, fer the love o' God, can I nae get a minute's peace?

She was a beautiful woman, there was little she could do about that. Her mother had been beautiful too, before she had died giving birth to her younger sister, who unfortunately had not survived either. Iseabail had only been five years old at the time, but she still remembered her mother's stunning looks.

For the longest time, she had thought her mother was a princess. She had told her that she, too, would grow up to be a beautiful lass, but she had warned her. "Beauty can

be a delight, Issy, but it can also be a curse.”

Of course, Iseabail had not understood what her mother had been referring to at such a young age. But now, as a lass who had experienced far too much unwarranted attention, her mother’s words made a lot more sense.

“And what’s a lovely lass like ye doing here all by yersel’?” the burly man asked, once he came to stand beside her.

“Drinking,” Iseabail replied curtly. And too busy looking fer something far more important than a man like ye.

“Let me buy ye another,” the man offered, not taking the hint by her overly rude behavior.

Iseabail lifted her hardly touched tankard. “I’m fine, thanks. I dinnae need another.”

“Nae yet,” the man drawled, inching a little closer. “But the night is still young,” he smirked.

Aye. Unlike ye.

“Ye really want tae ken what I’m doing here?” Iseabail growled, turning to face him.

Her change of tactics surprised him a little, but he shrugged and nodded. “Aye.”

“Fine. Then I’ll tell ye. I am Lady Iseabail Mackay. Me faither is Laird Hamilton Mackay. Me older braither is Keane Mackay. At this very moment, me faither and braither are being held against their will by Laird Dylan Sutherland because he wants me tae marry him. He says our marriage will end the feud that’s been going on fer three generations between our clans, but we ken that isnae true.”

The man now appeared a little perturbed at her words, but Iseabail did not care, and continued.

“Laird Sutherland is now blackmailing me. I must find an enchanted crystal and bring it back tae him. Ridiculous, right? When I have done that, and agree tae marry him, he will release me faither and braither.”

The smirk had long fallen from the burly man’s face, and he now looked at her with wide eyes. At the same time, he began taking a step back, clearly rattled by her confession.

Och, nae. Ye dinnae get away from me that easily.

Iseabail took a step forward and grabbed the man by his collar. Looking directly into his eyes, she said, “Now, ye will forget everything I have just told ye.”

The man’s pupils dilated for a second, and then he blinked several times, looking at her like she was mad.

“What are ye doing?” he grunted, looking at her hand still holding on to his clothes. “What just happened?”

Iseabail smiled and released him, knowing her powers had worked.

“Och, naething really,” she said, dropping her hand and stepping back.

It had felt good to get that all out, but no one could know why she was there or what she was doing. Her powers had served her well over the years. Having the ability to compel people, to have them do whatever she wanted, had saved her from more difficult situations than she could remember. Both she and her brother had inherited powers from their mother’s side, though their gifts were not the same. While she

could get people to do her bidding, Keane could read someone's mind if he laid his hand upon them.

Their gifts were a privilege neither of them took lightly, nor did they abuse them. She was certain, however, that the quest Laird Sutherland had sent her on had something to do with powers he himself possessed, and she also had her suspicions about the reason he was so keen to get his hands on that damned crystal.

When her father and brother were first taken, Iseabail had felt completely helpless. She didn't know what to do or where to even begin to start looking for the crystal. But she had had to start somewhere. Gathering the council, she had discussed what she planned to do, although none of the men were in agreement.

Every one of them had been against her travelling alone, telling her she was putting herself in unnecessary danger, and yet, she had little choice. She could not bring unnecessary attention to herself. A lady wandering about with a group of guards at her side was hardly going to get anyone to open up to her. She had to remain as anonymous as possible. She had to be able to get in and out of situations quickly.

As terrifying as the prospect was, she had to do this alone.

Behind the burly man, a group of people seem to be hurrying toward a back room.

"What's going on back there?" she asked, standing on her tiptoes and attempting to see behind him.

The man frowned and shook his head. "Och, that's nay place fer a lass as delicate as yersel'. Ye're better off staying in here."

Iseabail looked him directly in the eye. "Tell me what is going on back there."

The man blinked several times and then said, “There’s a fight tonight. There’s much excitement because the strongest man in all these lands is here, and many are eager tae see him.”

“Take me,” Iseabail demanded.

Without hesitation, the burly man led the way, pushing through the people who surrounded them. He passed through a doorway, and then turned into a room. Three wooden steps led down into the huge space that seemed packed from wall to wall with men. There was not one other woman present. But even her presence did not distract them, for they all seemed to be focused on something else. All eyes were gazing expectantly at the middle of the room, where a large space remained vacant. Clearly, the place where the men were going to fight.

While the burly man continued pushing his way forward, Iseabail held back and was about to slip into the crowd, when a bellow came from behind her on the steps. Spinning around, her mouth fell open at the sight of a huge man falling head first towards her. Iseabail froze, stunned by the sight of it, and could only wait for the man to land on her. Suddenly, she felt an arm grab her waist and spin her away. The man landed on the ground with a heavy thud and an even louder groan, only a second later.

The crowd roared with laughter, but Iseabail was far more concerned with turning to see who had saved her, for the man still held her at the waist.

“That was a little too close fer comfort,” he exclaimed, beaming a dashing grin at her.

Well, she imagined, by the shape of his striking blue eyes, that he was grinning, for the man wore a mask that covered the entirety of his face. It was black, like his hair, and made of leather, and quite took Iseabail by surprise. No more so than the size of him, for as he towered above her, she could feel his strong body against her own as

he still held her.

“Thank ye,” she breathed as she righted herself.

“It is I who should be thanking ye,” he growled. “I’m the envy o’ every man in here.”

Iseabail blushed and dropped her gaze at his forthrightness. “That’s nay surprise, given I’m the only woman present.”

He tilted his head to the side and gazed down at her. “I dinnae think that has much tae dae with it, dae ye?”

For the first time in her life, Iseabail felt butterflies in her stomach. She was no stranger to attention, but there was something about this man that unnerved her.

“Well, I must away,” he declared. And spinning on his heels, he disappeared into the crowd as quickly as he had arrived.

As she was still recovering from their intense interaction, the burly man from earlier was suddenly at her side again.

“I cannae believe it,” he gasped, gawking down at her. “That is the very man I spoke o’ earlier. He’s the strongest warrior. It is he who will fight tonight.”

“How can ye be sure he’s the strongest warrior?” she asked, though not really doubting the man’s words.

“I’ve bet every coin I have on him. That’s how sure I am.”

Iseabail was a little surprised at the man’s confidence, but then, she had not seen the masked man fight. She could only hope the one beside her had made the right choice.

Every coin he had was a huge gamble.

The men in the room began yelling at the fighters, but Iseabail could not see what was happening, for every man in front of her was far taller and broader than she was. She then remembered the wooden steps, and slipping behind the burly man, who was far too busy yelling at the top of his voice to notice her absence, she clambered up two steps, and turned to look back into the room.

The man in the mask threw fist after fist, while his opponent, a shorter but still muscular man, blocked each attack and threw strikes of his own. Around them, the men yelled outcries of encouragement, pushing them back into the center of the room when their skirmish ventured into the crowd.

“Mask. Mask. Mask,” the men chanted, seemingly getting more and more excited as the shorter man appeared to wane.

Iseabail found herself completely mesmerized by the masked man, watching his every move, and not at all perturbed by the blood that each of them shed. Evidently, he was the stronger of the two, just as the burly man had said earlier. In fact, now, as she watched him fight, she could understand the reason he had gambled every coin he had.

The shorter man’s legs started to buckle, and he fell against the masked man, grabbing his shirt with such a grip, he tore it clean off his body. Suddenly, Iseabail gasped. Not for the fact that the masked man’s form was huge, with muscles rippling with his every movement. Something far more important caught her eye.

A sparkle of crystal danced in the lantern lit room. The same kind of crystal she had spent weeks searching for. The crystal that currently hung around the masked man’s neck. In fact, so distracted by it was she, she had hardly noticed that the fight was over, and that the masked man had won.

As he paraded around the room, slapping the hands of all those who watched on, yelling out encouragement and congratulations, Iseabail took one last glance at the crystal. She then turned, ascended the steps, and left the room.

I must have that stone, and I ken exactly what I need tae dae tae get it.

CHAPTER TWO

He didn't feel the pain. He was too exhilarated to feel anything but joy and delight at his victory. The crowd was nearly manic at his win, and Owen Sinclair was loving it. It gave him such a thrill, he was more than ecstatic. In fact, he had never felt anything like it in his life. As he breathlessly took in the room, he realized how much he was going to miss all of this, but a promise was a promise, and he could not go back on it now.

Pushing through the excited men, he headed towards Daire, who was hard to miss, given he was nearly a foot taller than all those there. His striking white blonde hair and Viking-like features also made him stand out in a crowd.

Daire grinned broadly and flung his arms around Owen once he managed to reach him. "Well done, me friend," he yelled. "Ye fought well."

Owen beamed back. "Thank ye. It felt great."

"Aye, well, I'm nae sure yer face would agree with ye. That eye will look like a pig's ear in the morning."

"I dinnae care," Owen panted. "Right now, I cannae feel a thing."

They were interrupted when another man approached holding a large leather purse. Handing it to Owen, he said, "Yer winnings, Mask."

It was a name he had been given by all those who had watched his many fights so far,

and if Owen was honest, he kind of liked it. It was mysterious and only added to the persona of his character. He hadn't imagined, when he first donned the mask, that it would become such a feature of his fight, but it had been necessary. No one could know who he was. No one.

"This is great," Owen exclaimed, grabbing the heavy bag. "What a win."

Daire raised an eyebrow and gave him a stern look. "Ye promised," he said.

"Aye, I ken," Owen relented. "Me last fight."

"Yer last fight?" the man balked. "But why? Look at the crowds." He flung an arm out at the gathered men, who were now trying to make their way to the bar. "These fellas would pay tae see ye fight every week!"

Owen looked the man squarely in the eye, and though he didn't really feel his words, he said them anyway. "Me last fight," he said, lifting up the purse.

The man looked crestfallen, but Owen shrugged and then walked past him, closely followed by Daire. They were carried along by the throng of men until eventually, they made it out of the room and headed to the bar.

Daire ordered two tankards of ale and Owen dropped himself onto a stool, relieved to be able to rest and get his breath back.

"Here," he said, handing Daire the heavy purse. "I'll let ye keep hold o' that."

"Why?" Daire smirked. "Are ye too exhausted tae lift it?"

Owen chuckled, shook his head, and took a long draw of his ale. It felt cool and refreshing on his dry throat and, in a matter of minutes, the men ordered another.

“So, dae ye have a plan?” Owen asked.

Daire gave him a steady look. “I’m working on it. I told ye last week, when I found ye at that fight, that I would help ye, Owen. I’ll nae be the man who has tae report tae Madigan that his son was killed in a fight. It was only that ye had this fight already organized that I let yer carry on tonight.”

Owen sighed. “I dinnae have much time, Daire. If I dinnae get this money soon, I’m a dead man.”

“Aye, I ken that. But if ye carry on the way ye’re going, ye’ll be a dead man anyway. Ye’re winning now, but what if one day, ye dinnae? What if, one day, ye’re hit with a fatal blow? What then?”

“Och, that’ll never happen.”

“Dinnae be so cocky. It’s happened tae better men than ye. Besides, ye promised. Tonight was the last fight.”

“I ken, I ken,” Owen moaned. “But I got mesel’ intae this mess. It’s up tae me tae get out o’ it.”

“Nae by putting yer life at risk.”

“I think it’s a bit late fer that,” Owen quipped back.

“Aye, well,” Daire sighed. “Ye will go getting involved in matters ye ken little about.”

“She was in trouble. What was I supposed tae dae? Leave her?” Owen argued.

Daire nodded knowingly. "I ken ye thought ye were doing the right thing, Owen, but now ye have a gang of men after ye fer a great sum o' money. Did it nae occur tae ye that they'd kill ye if ye couldnae produce it?"

Of course, it had. But he hadn't thought about that at the time. He was more concerned about the lass's welfare. On a scouting mission for his father, he had come upon a group of unsavory men in a tavern beyond his own clan lands. At first, he had not understood why they were unsavory, he had just felt it in his gut.

It was only later, when he had been speaking to them for a while, trying to find some information for his mission, that he had truly discovered the depth of their depravity. With many drinks, their lips loosened, and they let slip that they were able to get him a lass if he was interested. Owen could not have known their true meaning, until later, when he discovered these men stole young girls from their homes and sold them to the highest bidder.

Though he had tried to discover where they kept her, they were very tight-lipped on that subject, and in the end, he just agreed to buy her from them. He had promised them his entire savings, but in his heart, he had had no intention of paying. It was only later, he discovered how ruthless this gang really was, and he had been hunted by them ever since. He could have asked his father for help, for he was Laird Madigan Sinclair, after all, and the clan had more than enough coin to pay the men off. But Owen had not wanted to involve him, or use the clan's wealth. This was his mess and he had to clean it up.

In a tavern a month ago, he had heard whisperings of these secret fights, and engaging the men who had spoken about it, Owen had managed to infiltrate the arrangements. The mask had been for his own protection. For a start, there were dangerous men hunting him, but more importantly, he had not wanted his father to discover what he was doing. People knew him as the heir to Clan Sinclair. It would only take one whisper to travel back to the castle, and his father would put an

immediate stop to it all.

But last week, his plan had failed in a big way. Daire Robertson, his father's best friend and confidant, had arrived at the same tavern, and watching the fight, he had recognized Owen immediately, even with the mask. Afterward, he had furiously pulled him aside.

Owen had then been forced to confess the reason he was battling random men in secret fights in private rooms, expecting Daire to understand. And he did, in a way. He just refused to accept that what Owen was doing was the only solution.

Owen had felt dejected when Daire made him promise he would stop, for inasmuch as the fighting was tough, he had discovered he was rather good at it. That ought to have come as no surprise. He was one of the best warriors in Clan Sinclair. He was also one of the best scouts. That was likely the reason he had not yet been caught by these men. He had other scouts across the glen reporting back to him. He had instructed them to keep him informed if any strangers inquired about his whereabouts.

There had been a few reports already, and upon discovering where they had come from, Owen had gone there himself to check. On two of those occasions, he had discovered that the men who were going to kill him, had indeed, been present in the villages. It had been the only way he had been able to get ahead of them. His only saving grace was the fact that they did not know who he was, for he was certain, they would have arrived at the castle directly if they did.

And now, his last fight was over. Daire had come to the tavern to make sure of it. Even the large bag of coins did not make him feel fully satisfied. Of course, it was going to help with the money he owed. He had already gathered quite a bit of coin from the fights he had won, but he was still going to miss it.

“Ye’re pouting,” Daire said, bringing Owen out of his thoughts.

“I am nae,” he retorted.

Daire grinned. “Ye are, too. It’s obvious tae anyone with eyes that these fights are nae just about the money, Owen. Ye enjoy them.”

Owen smiled and shrugged. “I’m nae going tae deny it. They’re exhilarating.”

“Aye, I can see that.” Daire smirked. “So going forward, I’m nae letting ye out o’ me sight. I’ll nae have ye sneaking off and putting yersel’ in any more danger.”

“Ye sound like me maither,” Owen chuckled.

Absently, his hand wandered up to the crystal that hung around his neck. It was not a gift from his mother. His mother had been murdered some time ago, an ever-present wound to his heart, even though a few years had passed. The man who had killed her was dead and gone, but the pain still remained.

In strange circumstances, his father had married again. His wife, Eden, had actually been betrothed to Owen, but Eden and Madigan had fallen in love, and given it had been an arranged betrothal, Owen had gladly stepped aside and was now pleased that his father had found love and happiness once more.

The necklace he now played with had been a gift from his stepmother. A strong woman endowed with gifts from birth, she was aware of many others with such gifts, and while most people used them for good, she had warned him there were others who did not.

When she had tied it around his neck, she had smiled and said, “This will protect ye, Owen. Always wear it, fer then, naeone can use their powers on ye.”

“Even ye?” Owen had joked.

She had smiled up at him. “Even me.”

“So, I can lie tae ye all I like now, and ye’ll never ken,” he had quipped back jokingly.

Eden had raised her eyebrows and given him a knowing look. “I dinnae need me powers tae ken when ye are lying tae me, Owen. I can see it in yer eyes.”

Owen had laughed and then wrapped his arms around her in a warm hug. “Thank ye. I promise, I will never tak’ it off.”

“Good.”

Eden had given Madigan a piece of the same crystal, as well as her father. She wanted the men closest to her to be protected, and her kindness had made Owen feel more than special. She was a good lass, and he was grateful that his father had met such a woman to love him.

The innkeeper had just placed another two tankards in front of himself and Daire, when Owen sensed someone approaching from his left. Turning to look, he noticed the beautiful woman he had saved from being crushed earlier.

“Ye made it out o’ there safely, I see,” he said with a grin.

“I did.” She smiled, the action lighting up her ocean green eyes, and making her even more alluring. “I thought I ought tae come over and thank ye.” She then turned to Daire with a smile. “Nice tae meet ye, too. I see that ye need tae go tae the innkeeper and get yersel’ another drink.”

Daire blinked and then stood. "Aye. I dae, ye are right."

Before Owen had a chance to protest, for two full tankards stood on the bar beside them, Daire had moved past him and headed away down the bar.

The woman sat on the stool Daire had just vacated, and placing her hand on his, she gazed into his eyes. "I must also congratulate ye on yer win. Ye fought very well."

"Thank ye," Owen replied, still wondering what had just happened.

"Ye are very strong," the woman continued. "I'm sure ye are a great warrior."

"I've had me moments," Owen replied, smiling as he enjoyed her attention. She truly was a stunningly beautiful woman. Not that he had any problems attracting attention from the lasses, but he could not compare any others to the beauty this woman possessed. "May I ask yer name?"

"I'm Soirsche," she replied. "And now, ye must tell me yer name."

"Me name is..." Owen hesitated. "They call me Mask."

A strange look of excitement flickered across her face, which was the second unusual thing that had happened in less than five minutes.

"Aye," she smiled, "I can see why. Dae ye ever take it off? I mean, dae ye wear it fer everything ye dae?"

Her flirtatious question was brazen, and yet, Owen couldn't help feeling aroused by it. Nor could he help but wonder what this lass was like beneath her cloak, what those full lips would feel like on his, what her body might feel like beneath his hands.

“That depends,” he growled.

She smiled seductively and then stood up slowly. “Ye must excuse me. It’s very warm and crowded in here.” She fanned her face with a slender hand. “I’d like tae go out fer some fresh air.”

“Then I’ll join ye,” Owen said. “A lass shouldnae be wandering about at night on her own.” As he stood, excitement grew in his gut, for he was certain her obvious invitation involved far more than fresh air.

Pushing through the crowd, he followed her through the main door until they were both outside, but Iseabail did not stop there. She walked around the side of the tavern, where it was far quieter and more private.

Eventually, she came to a stop beside the wall, and taking his hand, she pulled him in closer. “I would like tae ken what ye look like. Will ye nae take the mask off fer me?” she breathed.

Owen shook his head, pulled the mask just above his mouth, and then leaned in and kissed her. She tasted sweet, and her lips were as soft as he imagined they would be. His hand roved beneath the cloak, finding the fine cloth of her blouse, and her firm bosom beneath it. Softly, he brushed his fingers across her hardening nipple, causing her to gasp.

He could feel her hands moving up his chest. They were roving about, but not in any way he had experienced before. In fact, as he continued to kiss her, he was certain she was reaching for something. As her fingers travelled further and further, he realized what she was after. His necklace.

Just as her fingers wrapped around it, Owen reached for his dirk, and in a swift movement, he stepped back from her, spun her around until her back slammed

against his chest, and pressed the cold blade against her throat.

Soirsche gasped.

“Tell me who ye really are and what ye really want?” he growled.

“I dinnae ken what ye mean,” she cried, clearly terrified.

“Ye ken exactly what I mean,” he spat. “How did ye get me friend tae go and get another drink when he had one right there beside him?”

Just as she was about to reply, Owen heard the sound of crunching stones, and turning, he saw Daire rounding the corner.

“What the bloody hell is going on?” he spat.

The lass struggled to get away, but Owen held her fast against him, the dirk pressing deeply into the soft flesh of her neck.

“Stop struggling, or I swear, I’ll slit yer throat,” he hissed. Turning to Daire, he continued. “We’re going tae the castle immediately.”

“What?” Soirsche cried, her eyes flying wide open. “But why?”

Bending his face close to hers, he whispered, “Because ye were silly enough tae try and steal from the laird’s son, Soirsche. If that is even yer real name. Yer seduction very nearly worked. But now, the dungeons are awaiting ye.”

CHAPTER THREE

The man who called himself Mask finally dropped the dirk from her throat, and grabbed her wrists, pulling them behind her back.

“Move,” he barked, pushing her ahead of him.

There was no point in struggling. He was already holding her so tightly that if she did move, she would cause herself a great amount of pain. A moment later, his friend arrived with two horses, and not missing a step, Mask grabbed her by the waist and flung her onto the black beast.

“Me mare,” Iseabail cried. “What about me mare?”

Mask looked at his companion, and then glared back up at her. “Why dae ye care?”

“It is me horse,” Iseabail said. “O’ course I care.”

He heaved a sigh, and then mounted the horse behind her. “We will go and collect yer mare,” he spat.

The three travelled back to the rear of the tavern, and after Iseabail had pointed out her horse, the Mask’s companion untied it and led it beside him.

They left the village then, and as the sounds of the tavern waned, Iseabail began to worry about what might become of her. The man’s words from a moment earlier came back to her, and still reeling from the swiftness of her capture, Iseabail

struggled to get her head around it.

Because ye were silly enough tae try and steal from the laird's son.

She was on Clan Sinclair's lands, and thus, the man who sat behind her on his huge beast, must be a Sinclair. But why the devil would the heir of the clan be fighting in such a dreadful way. His mask now made more sense, however, for clearly, and for whatever reason, he did not want anyone to know his true identity.

It still did not explain why he was fighting. Surely, he did not need the coin. The Sinclairs were a wealthy clan, she knew that much. So why was he doing it?

Dinnae ye think ye need tae be more concerned with the fact that ye are now captured, and thus, can nay longer look fer yer crystal?

Of course, she ought. Her plan had failed miserably, and now, she was a prisoner.

I will be fine. I've got this far. I'm sure I can find me way out o' this mess... somehow.

The moon hung high in the sky, lighting up the trees and fields as they approached the castle. The huge gates loomed up ahead, and with a strange cry from Sinclair's companion, they slowly yawned open.

Several guards stood and nodded at them as they entered the courtyard, and then the gates slowly closed again.

There will be another way out o' here. There has tae be.

Even with that thought, her hope of escape waned when she saw the many guards that sauntered about the huge courtyard. Other people moved about too, some hurrying,

looking as though they had some place to be, others were strolling, while some were stood together in groups talking.

Large fires burned in huge iron baskets stood on tall poles, the fire causing dark shadows on the cobbled ground beneath their feet. The area was busy with noises, and shouting, and children yelling. In fact, as Iseabail looked around about her, it reminded her of home.

The heir of Clan Sinclair, or so he called himself, guided his horse onwards, and eventually, they came to a huge wooden structure that Iseabail recognized as the stables. After he had dismounted, he grabbed her by the waist and lifted her down to stand beside him, keeping a tight grip on her wrist. Two young stable hands hurriedly took hold of the horse's reins and guided the steed away.

"Now what?" his companion asked, once he had dismounted his horse and let the stable hands deal with both it and Iseabail's mare.

"We'll take her tae the dungeons. I have some questions I'd like tae ask her," Mask growled, glaring down at her.

Iseabail gasped and gawked at him. Partly because at some point, he had removed his mask, and she could now see his face fully. He was as handsome as she had imagined he would be, but ruggedly so. Blue eyes pierced into hers as black hair framed the chiseled jawline of his face. The other reason came from the fact that, although she didn't really know what she expected to happen when she arrived at this castle, she had not fully believed him when he had told her the dungeons were waiting for her.

"What?" he spat. "Did ye think I was jesting? Did ye think I might go easy on ye because ye're a lass?" He then narrowed his eyes and gave her a cold stare. "Nae a chance."

Abruptly, he pulled her along with him as they headed towards the towering castle. Iseabail had to trot a little to keep up with his huge, angry strides. As they neared the building, he did not take her in through the front entrance, but entered the castle via a smaller wooden door situated on the side.

Once inside, they turned right and traveled down a corridor. It was dull, with only small lanterns fixed on the wall to light their way. Iseabail was now beginning to grow a little more worried. She had imagined, at some point, that she might have been able to use her powers to get out of this situation, but if this man was going to keep an eye on her, she was stuck. She was simply powerless while he continued to wear that crystal around his neck.

The spiral staircase was narrow, and thus, he went first, Iseabail followed, and his companion followed at the rear. She turned to try and catch his eye, but the stairs were steep and she nearly lost her balance, and thus, she turned her attention forward again. Falling down the stone steps and breaking her neck was hardly going to assist her in escaping.

Once at the bottom, Laird Sinclair's son grabbed her wrist once more and marched her down yet another dull corridor. They rounded a corner up ahead and immediately, Iseabail noticed the iron bars of the cells.

A guard jumped up from his post at their approach, and looking rather surprised, he said, "Is everything all right, sir?"

"Indeed, it isnae," he growled. Nodding to one of the gates in front of them, he said, "Open that cell."

"Aye, o' course," the guard replied, still looking slightly confused.

A piercing screech hit her ears as the guard pulled the rusty gate open. But the second

it was wide enough, she felt herself shoved inside. It came as a surprise to her to see how clean the cell was. Not that she had spent any time in a cell in a dungeon, but she imagined it ought to be darker, colder, and perhaps teeming with rats.

Hearing the gate slam behind her, she spun around, only to discover her captor had stepped into the cell with her.

“Leave us,” he called to the guard.

A second later, the guard and the man who had accompanied them back to the castle seemed to disappear. To where, Iseabail had no idea.

“Now,” he growled, stalking toward her. “I want answers. What were ye doing in the tavern? How come ye ended up watching the fight when nay women are allowed? What dae ye want with me? And what did ye dae tae Daire?”

Iseabail was overwhelmed with all his questions, and could only stare at him. She had no intention of answering anything he asked of her, but even if she wanted to answer, she could now not remember the first thing he had said.

He heaved a sigh. “Let’s start from the beginning. I will tell ye me name, and ye can tell me yers, because I can bet every stitching of clothing I wear, that it isnae Soirsche. Fair?”

Iseabail nodded because, well, what else was she supposed to do?

“Me name is Owen Sinclair, son o’ Laird Madigan Sinclair. And ye are?”

“Iseabail,” she replied firmly.

She did not feel nervous, for as bad as the situation was, she sensed that there was no

danger in this man. It was a strange assumption to make under the circumstances, and yet, her gut told her it was so, and thus, she believed it.

He gave her a long glance. "Iseabail what?"

She shook her head. "I'm nae willing tae tell ye any more than that."

"I'm afraid that just isnae good enough, Iseabail," he said, emphasizing her name. "Ye did something in that tavern. Ye did something tae Daire."

She now understood that Daire was the name of his huge companion. The man who looked like he might be able to rip a man, or woman, in two with his bare hands.

"Are ye a witch?"

"Indeed, I am nae a witch," Iseabail spat. "What a ridiculous question."

"Nae from where I'm standing. Daire had a full tankard of ale, and yet, ye convinced him tae go and get another. Did ye put him in a trance? What did ye dae?"

"I've already told ye. I'm nae willing tae answer any more o' yer questions."

"Och, but ye will, lass. Or would ye like me tae send Daire in here tae beat it out o' ye?"

Iseabail's eyes flew wide, but as she glared at him, she noticed an almost imperceptible movement at the corner of his mouth. As though, he found what he had said amusing. Perhaps she had got it wrong. Perhaps he was a dangerous man after all.

Or maybe, he's laughing because he kens, he'd never dae it, and is only trying tae

terrify ye intae telling him what he wants tae ken.

That sounded like a far better option, and thus, Iseabail grabbed hold of that reasoning with two hands. He had saved her earlier, before the fight had begun. If he was any kind of fiend, surely, he wouldn't have made the effort. Her line of reasoning was a little thin, but it was just enough to keep her from spilling everything.

Earlier, she had unloaded all her worries onto the burly man who had approached her in the tavern, but she had known she could compel him to forget everything she said. Now, apart from the fact that her powers were useless against this man, she also didn't know him and therefore, could not trust him. Somehow, she needed to know from where he had garnered his necklace, and yet, she had little doubt he would refuse to tell her without some information in return.

But if she did answer his questions, she might well end up in this dungeon for far longer than she intended.

“So, ye’re nae going tae tell me?” Owen pressed.

Iseabail stood her ground. “I think I’ve already made that quite clear.”

“Ye ken, it is ye who has gotten yersel’ intae this position. Ye tried tae steal something that belongs tae me. Ye put me friend under some sort o’ spell tae dae it. And I still cannae understand how ye managed tae get into that room tae see the fight.”

He glared at her for another long minute, but Iseabail only looked back at him, her eyes never leaving his, and her resolve as strong as ever.

“Will ye nae even tell me why ye want this?” He tugged at the necklace.

Iseabail stared at the necklace for a moment, but still did not say a word. What she had been looking for was right there, not three feet away. The irony of it was, if he wasn't wearing it, she could compel him to give it to her. But alas, it was not going to come into her possession that easily.

Besides, it still wasn't enough. The crystal she was looking for was far bigger than the one he wore. Laird Sutherland had made that quite clear. He had told her the stone was large and heavy, and thus, the crystal that hung on Owen's necklace couldn't be it. At least not the whole of it, but perhaps it was a small piece broken off it. But if she could discover from where he had obtained it, maybe it would lead her to its source.

"Where did ye get it?" she asked.

Owen burst out a mirthless chuckle and gawped at her in disbelief. "Ye dinnae want tae answer me questions, but ye expect me tae answer yers?" He shook his head. "I'm afraid it's nae going tae work like that, lass."

She already knew he wouldn't tell her, but it was worth a shot. Even now, she could hardly take her eyes off it, and as she gazed at it, she wondered if this man knew how much power truly hung around his neck.

"Owen," a voice said, carrying through the bars.

Both Owen and Iseabail looked across the cell to see the giant Viking-like man standing close to the gate. "I need tae speak tae ye." He nodded, gesturing that Owen come and join him.

He huffed out a frustrated breath. "Fine."

Spinning on his heels, he turned and left the cell. The guard hurriedly locked it once

Owen had left, and then he stood in, what Iseabail assumed, was his usual position. She tried to see where Owen and Daire had gone, but even with her face pressed up against the bars, she could not see them.

If they had left, this might be her chance. For a certainty, the guard was not wearing a crystal, and if she could just get him to come over to her and look her in the eye, she might be able to escape this place.

But then, she heard voices echoing through the empty corridors, and realized that Owen and his companion had not left the dungeon at all.

“She’s saying naething,” Owen huffed. “As stubborn as a mule.”

“What is it yer hoping tae discover?” Daire asked.

“Dinnae ye remember? She put a spell on ye.”

“Dinnae talk nonsense, Owen. There wasnae a spell.”

“Then tell me why ye went tae get another drink when a full tankard sat beside ye on the bar?”

There was silence for a few seconds, and then Owen spoke again.

“Ye see, ye cannae, can ye? Ye only went after she told ye ye should go. And then, when we were outside, she tried to grab this.”

Iseabail assumed Owen was pointing to his necklace.

“What would she want with it?” Owen asked.

“She’s likely a thief. She saw an opportunity and took it. I mean, we ken how easily ye are swayed by the lasses, Owen.”

“Nae,” Owen spat. Iseabail could hear the frustration in his voice. “It’s more than that. I ken it. She was there when I was fighting. I saw her. Ye ken as well as I that nay women are allowed intae those rooms. How did she get in? Who let her in? Did she cast a spell on another poor soul?”

“I dinnae ken, and neither dae ye. I also think this is a fool’s errand,” Daire replied, now sounding a little frustrated himself. “Ye have far more important things tae concern yersel’ with. What if yer father finds out ye have a prisoner in the dungeons? What are ye going tae tell him? Ye sure as hell cannae tell him the truth.”

“I can tell him part o’ the truth.”

“Nae!” Daire barked. “We are lying tae him already. Dae ye nae think I feel bad enough, keeping the truth from him? Keeping from the man I have stood beside fer more years than I can remember, the fact that his son is fighting men in taverns fer coin tae save himsel’? I am his closest friend, Owen, and I am lying tae his very face. How dae ye think that makes me feel?”

Another silence fell, and while Iseabail stretched her neck to hear, her mind began to work.

So, his faither doesnae ken about his fights. What’s more, Owen is fighting tae save himsel’.

But save himself from what?

Who cares? Surely, ye can use this information against him if he willnae let ye go.

Perhaps she could. Perhaps Owen Sinclair's deceit could just be her way out of there.

CHAPTER FOUR

Not long after that, Iseabail heard no more words, and guessing the men had left, she moved away from the metal bars separating her from freedom, and dropped herself down onto the cold stone floor of the dungeon.

Well, this is a fine mess, I have got mesel' intae.

When she had ventured out of her home in search of something that would save her family, Iseabail had not envisioned being thrown into a dungeon. She had imagined many other scenarios, but this had not been one of them. The dangers she imagined she would have to face had been things like robbery, or a threat to her life, or the menacing advances of a man.

Perhaps she had rushed things. She had pushed too quickly, and thus, had been caught out. Perhaps she ought to have wooed Owen, gotten to know him better, taken her time, and only then, attempted to take his necklace.

Well, it is a little too late fer that now, isnae it? What is done is done, and I am now stuck here until I can find a way o' escape.

Besides, if there was one thing she didn't have, it was time. Laird Sutherland would be growing impatient, and she had no doubt that he would be taking his frustrations out on Keane and her father. It worried her that they would be suffering. Of course, worrying was hardly going to help, but it did not stop her mind from imagining the dreadful torture they might be experiencing.

Glancing over at the guard and feeling desperate, she wondered if now might be the time to escape.

Nay! Learn from yer mistakes, Iseabail. Ye might have rushed trying tae get the necklace, but ye cannae rush this. There is still time fer Owen or his huge companion tae return. It is better fer ye tae wait.

She nodded at her assessment and decision, and then sighed heavily. This was the time for patience, as difficult as it was under the circumstances.

Her mind wandered, and she thought about her father and brother. How bizarre that all three of them now found themselves in the same predicament. While she sat in this dungeon, her family were captured in another, miles from where she was being kept. She wondered what might be going through their minds, or if they were thinking about her. If they were, they were likely imagining anything other than her being imprisoned.

Iseabail pushed herself from the floor and moved towards the small window high in the cell wall. At first, she could see little, but as she maneuvered herself, she finally caught the tiniest sliver of the bright moon, peeking between the buildings in the courtyard. Maybe they could see the moon too. Maybe they were looking upon it at this very moment.

“I hope ye are well,” she whispered. “I hope Laird Sutherland has kept his word, and that ye are still alive.”

It had occurred to her that the evil man may well renege on their agreement. The fact of the matter was, how could she know? While she had been searching village and glen for this crystal, her father and brother might already have been dead.

Dinnae think like that! Ye cannae think like that. Ye’ll send yersel’ mad.

It was true, she would. More than that, she would lose the only thing that was keeping her going.

Hope.

Hope that her father and brother had not been tortured. Hope that Laird Sutherland had kept to his word, and that the only remaining family she had was still alive. Hope that she would find that damned crystal before it was too late. Hope that someone, somewhere, would send her in the right direction to discover its whereabouts. Hope was all she had, for none of the things she wished for had any certainty at all.

Laird Sutherland had given her an impossible task. Perhaps that was his intention. Maybe the crystal was simply a ploy to get her away from the castle and her people. With her father and Keane in custody, there was no one to lead.

The council ken well what tae dae, Iseabail. Ye are only torturing yersel' with these ridiculous thoughts. Yer faither's army is great. Nay one, nae even Laird Sutherland, could overcome them without a great battle. Has he nae already tried on several occasions?

Of course, he had. And their army had pushed Laird Sutherland and his men back on each occasion, never letting them cross the threshold of the castle gates. Then again, she would never have imagined her father and brother could have been kidnapped either, but the laird had managed to do that.

"Och, quiet me dreadful thoughts," Iseabail huffed, dropping herself back to the floor and placing her head in her hands.

For a long time, she sat there waiting, her mind awash with those thoughts, only to battle with herself to try and keep a tight grip on the hope that had kept her going up until now. After some time, she began to doubt that Owen and Daire would return at

all. Perhaps she had made a mistake in thinking they would. However, soon after, she heard heavy footsteps, and then she heard the guard jumping to his feet.

“Good evening, sir,” he said.

“Open the gate,” Owen replied.

Iseabail listened to the high-pitched protest of the rusty metal once more, and then, she heard the gate closing again. Still, she did not lift her head. What was the point? He would ask the same questions, and she would give him the same answers.

“I’ve brought ye something,” Owen said, when she didn’t move.

Only then, did Iseabail look up at him. In the dim candlelight, she noticed Owen holding a tankard in one hand, and something wrapped in a thin cloth in the other. Pushing herself to her feet, she approached him tentatively, looking at the tankard with suspicion.

“What is it?” she asked.

“It’s poison,” he drawled sarcastically. “I always find that killing me prisoners off is the best way tae get information out o’ them.”

Iseabail rolled her eyes, and then reached out and took the tankard from him. She didn’t fully trust him, and why would she? But still, she brought the tankard to her lips and took a small sip.

Water. Cold, refreshing water.

As she took another sip, it occurred to her that she had not realized how thirsty she had been until that very moment.

“Here,” he said, handing her the item wrapped in muslin.

Tucking the tankard into her arm, she took it and unwrapped the thin cloth. Inside were two pieces of bannock, still warm.

“Thank ye,” Iseabail said.

“There’s naething tae thank me fer. I was hardly going tae let ye starve, was I?” he snapped.

“I dinnae ken what ye were going tae dae,” she bit back. “Ye’ve dragged me from the tavern and are keeping me yer prisoner fer nay reason at all.”

“Och, ye ken that isnae true. Ye tried tae steal from me. Ye cannae deny that fact.”

“Ye are mistaken, sir,” Iseabail replied, trying to push some conviction into her voice.

A knowing smile danced at the corner of his mouth. “I am nae, and ye ken it. Ye’re here fer good reason, and given that ye’re choosing tae stay here?—”

“How am I choosing tae stay here? ‘Tis ye who is holding me against me will,” Iseabail retorted. “I am hardly here by choice.”

“Och, but ye are, Iseabail.” Owen shrugged. “Ye have chosen nae tae answer me questions, and thus, yer circumstances are yer own doing.” He then turned towards the gate, but before opening it, he looked back over his shoulder. “If ye change yer mind, tell the guard. They’ll send fer me. If ye dinnae...” he paused, looking about the cell, “well, I suppose ye may make yersel’ comfortable.”

The clanging sound of the gate being shut firmly behind him rang through her very bones. Owen then approached the guard who had remained at his post.

“If she decides she wants tae talk, send someone tae fetch me. I dinnae care what time o’ the night it is.”

“Aye, sir,” the guard replied.

With a final glance in her direction, Owen then strode away. The guard moved towards the gate and locked it once more. After giving her a long look, he then returned to his post.

Silence resumed, and in the quietness, Iseabail thought about Owen’s words.

“...yer circumstances are yer own doing.”

That’s how he saw it, but it was not true. In fact, if she had been given any choice at all, she would much have preferred to be safely back in her father’s castle with both her father and brother at her side. Traipsing the country by herself to find a crystal no one had heard of was not her choice at all. This circumstance had been forced upon her, and yet, she could not tell him that, for then, she would need to tell him things she did not wish him to know.

Stuffing one bannock into the pocket of her cloak, she slowly nibbled at the other. Just like the water, she had not realized how hungry she was, and soon, the freshly made bread was devoured. But as she had been eating, her mind had begun to work, and she had devised a plan.

Owen would not return until he was beckoned. He had made that perfectly clear, which meant it was now only her and the guard. She was nothing if not cunning, and having already been forced to try and seduce a man, she knew what she was capable of.

While at times her stunning beauty could be the bane of her life, on occasion, it had

proven quite useful. She had no doubt that this would be one of those very times, though she did not particularly like using her gift, for it drained her power.

Taking the last sip of her water, she left the tankard on the floor, and then readied herself for her performance. The guard would likely be ready for anything, and thus, this had to be convincing. Slipping her cloak off, Iseabail placed it on the floor. Her corset hugged her slender figure, and now, the flesh of her bosoms could be seen. She needed him to be as distracted as possible.

Purposefully not looking at the guard, she placed a hand on her forehead and began to moan. “Ooh, ooh.”

She heard him moving, and continued moaning, only now, she stumbled forward, pretending to feel dizzy.

“What’s the matter with ye?” the guard barked.

“I... I dinnae ken,” she panted. Her other hand was now on her stomach, just beneath her breast. “I feel dizzy,” she breathed. “I cannae breathe. I cannae breathe,” she cried, before relaxing her knees and collapsing to the floor.

“Bloody hell!” the guard cried.

As she lay there with her eyes closed, she could hear the jingling of his keys, and a second later, that screeching sound hit her ears as he pulled the gate open. Another second later, she felt him drop to his knees beside her, and taking her head in his arms, he cried out in panic.

“Miss? Miss?” he said, tapping her face with his fingers.

Iseabail’s eyes shot open and, looking him straight in the eyes, she said, “Let me go

this instant.”

Shocked and bewildered, the man blinked and did as he was bid. Struggling to his feet, he watched as Iseabail pushed herself from the ground to stand directly in front of him.

The guard went to run toward the gate. “I’m going tae sound the alarm,” he cried, clearly now in panic.

“Ye will dae nay such thing,” Iseabail replied calmly. “In fact, ye will stand there, perfectly still, and tell me how tae get out o’ the castle without getting caught.”

The young guard blinked and then frowned. “There are guards everywhere. Ye’ll have tae use the tunnels. They’ll bring ye out on the other side o’ the castle. There’s a small gate at the castle walls with only one guard.”

“Where? Tell me where they are and exactly which way tae go.”

“It’s complicated, so ye must listen carefully,” he said intently. “Go out o’ the cell and when ye reach the corner, turn left.”

That was easy enough. It was the way Owen and Daire had brought her in.

“Travel passed the staircase for about ten feet. There’s a door in the wall that opens intae the first tunnel. Follow that tunnel until ye get tae a point where it breaks away intae three other tunnels. Follow the second tunnel. Continue on until ye come tae the end, and then turn left. Climb the steps, and take a right. Walk a bit more and take another right. At the end o’ that tunnel, take a left.”

I’ll never remember all o’ this.

“At the end o’ that tunnel, take another left, and then follow that tunnel tae the far end o’ the castle. The door will lead ye out ontae the gardens. Move across the gardens until ye reach the wall. Follow the wall tae yer right, and soon enough, ye’ll come upon the guard and the gate.”

For a long second, Iseabail could only stare at the guard. He had said it was complicated, but she hadn’t realized just how much. She had tried to pay intense attention to him, but there had been a lot of directions.

Ye can dae this, Iseabail. Just go ‘afore anyone else arrives.

“Thank ye. Now, forget everything ye have just told me.”

The guard blinked again and suddenly looked bewildered. “What the devil?” He took several steps back.

“Stop, and dinnae move,” Iseabail ordered, and just like that, he stayed in the exact spot.

“I ken I’m going tae get ye intae trouble, but ye must understand,” she said, walking toward him, “that I have tae leave.”

Delving into her purse, she grabbed a handful of coins. When Owen discovered her escape, she had no doubt this guard would likely be punished, even kicked out of the castle, if not worse. He needed something to keep him going.

“Here,” she said, dropping them into his pocket. “I’m sorry. Truly, I am.”

“What is going on? What are ye doing tae me?”

Iseabail looked at him sympathetically. “I need ye tae sleep now.”

As though his soul had left his body, the guard's knees collapsed under him, and he fell in a slump on the stone floor. A second later, Iseabail heard a soft snore leaving his open mouth.

Bending towards him, she unclipped the large ring of keys from his belt. She had no idea if she would need them, but they might come in useful somewhere along her journey. Grabbing her cloak and draping it over her shoulders, she fastened the clasp at her throat, took one last look at the cell, and then hurriedly stepped through the iron gate. Even the screeching sound as it closed did not wake the guard.

Fumbling with the key ring, Iseabail searched for the right one. She tried one after the other, and on her sixth attempt, her heart now pounding in her chest for fear of being discovered while she was so close to escape, the key turned and she locked the cell. If the guard did waken anytime soon, she certainly didn't need him running about and raising the alarm.

"If I am lucky, I may get a few hours head start," she muttered to herself. "Clearly, everyone in the castle has retired, which means, I only have that one guard at the gate tae deal with. Well, that's if I can remember all those darned instructions tae get tae him."

CHAPTER FIVE

Leaving the dungeons, Owen made his way back to the main castle. He could not help but smile at his interaction with the prisoner, for Iseabail was as stubborn as she was beautiful. He had to admit it was difficult to feel animosity toward her, with her striking looks, and yet it was obvious that beneath the gorgeous exterior lay something far more than an ordinary lass.

He was determined to get to the bottom of her actions, no matter how long it took. If she didn't want to talk, she could enjoy the accommodations the dungeons provided for as long as her stubborn little head would let her.

He had been trying to make sense of what had happened since they had returned, but he simply could not get his mind around it. She had denied it, but maybe she was a witch. She had certainly cast some sort of spell on Daire. The man was no fool.

In fact, his integrity far surpassed that of any other man he knew, apart from his father. He was certainly not a man who was easily led, and yet, like a child, he had obeyed Iseabail without question. It was even more worrying that he could hardly remember the incident, nor the reason he had so compliantly done as she had directed.

Something is wrong. Something is very wrong.

Continuing down the castle corridors, he had considered that she might be a spy, sent by the men who were hunting him. The evil gang used women for many nefarious actions, usually against the lass's will. Perhaps Iseabail was being blackmailed to do

their bidding.

And ye've led her right tae yer faither's castle!

Owen then shook his head. "Nay, that cannae be right," he muttered to himself as he ascended the wide staircase. "They would hardly send her just tae steal me necklace."

He was determined that it was the stone around his neck she had been after. She had lured him outside so they could be alone, like the seductress that she was, only to steal something that was of no real monetary value. Or at least, he didn't think it was. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe he ought to speak to Eden and find out whether this stone was indeed, valuable.

But even as he neared his father's study, it still didn't add up. In fact, he was certain she was not unlike Eden. She had to be. How else had she made Daire leave his side?

He found Daire where he had left him, drink in hand, lounging beside the fire in his father's study.

"Well, has she found her tongue yet?" Daire said, as Owen walked in and headed to the dresser.

He poured himself a fresh drink, and then joined Daire at the fire place.

"Nay. She's as stubborn now as she was earlier. She has spirit, I'll give her that. But there are too many questions and nae enough answers."

His father and Eden had retired to their bedchamber before Owen and Daire had arrived back from the tavern. Something Owen was more than grateful for. He still had a few cuts and bruises he would need to tend to before he saw his father. More than that, he didn't want Madigan knowing about Iseabail until he had figured out

who she was and what she was up to.

Daire had been right earlier. Madigan was no fool. He would see through any lies Owen tried to feed him. His father had always been a rather discerning man. He did not particularly approve of Owen's lifestyle, for he was a self-declared rake and proud of it, but nor could he do much about it. Owen was a man in his own right. A man of four and twenty who led his own life anyway he chose.

"I still think ye're looking too deeply intae this, Owen. It was a lass at a tavern who saw an opportunity. She flirted, ye flirted back, she made her move."

"Aye, and if I hadnae witnessed ye being put under some sort o' spell, I could believe that. But I did." Owen looked his companion in the eye. "Yer drink was right there beside us, Daire. Think about it. I can hardly get ye tae dae anything ye dinnae want tae, but that lass made ye go and buy another drink," Owen said determinedly.

"I think there is a bigger picture here that needs yer attention. In fact, I cannae believe that ye seem more concerned with some strange lass than ye are about the men who are trying tae kill ye."

Owen gave him a steady look, and then smirked. "Are ye worried about me murder, or the fact ye'll have tae tell me faither the truth when they find me cold, dead corpse?"

Daire clearly did not find this amusing. "I've told ye already how I feel," he growled. "I despise having tae sneak around behind Madigan's back. But ye have me wrong, Owen. If I didnae care what happened tae ye, I'd hardly be helping ye, would I? These are nae a few thugs from the tavern we're talking about. These are serious men."

"Dae ye think I dinnae ken that?" Owen huffed, falling back into his chair.

The flickering flames of the fire drew his eye, and gazing into it, he let the dancing slivers transfix him. For the most part, he stayed out of trouble. In fact, the most trouble he had ever gotten himself into was making sure one lass he had been with did not meet another he had wooed.

But this situation had been different. He had only been trying to help the lass. Catherine had looked frail, ill, and half starved. God only knows what they were going to do with her, though he had a good idea. It had made him feel sick to his stomach, which was the very reason he had made such a drastic decision. It's not every day a man purchases a lass, only to let her go free.

Of course, he had not simply abandoned her. Instead, he had taken her miles from the men, booked a room at a tavern, bought her clothes that actually covered her body, throwing away the rags she had been dressed in, and made sure she had eaten a decent meal every day for four days. He had also found the village healer, who had dressed the wounds on her frail body.

The healer, a kind old woman, had then taken Catherine under her care until she was fit to go and find the family she had been stolen from several years before. It was only a few weeks later that Owen had discovered he was a wanted man.

He had made a promise that he could not keep, and now, he was paying for it. It had been the spur of the moment thing. The truth was that, at the time, he had had no idea how dangerous those men were. He had only discovered that after the fact, which was the very reason he was doing his utmost to garner the money owed.

“What I suppose I’m trying tae say, Owen, is that we already have one mess tae deal with. Ye’ve only thrown fuel on the fire bringing that lass here. If yer faither discovers there’s a prisoner being held under the foundations o’ this castle, he’ll want tae ken why. Then he’ll want tae question her. She only needs tae mention the fact that she saw ye fighting, and our deceit is blown wide open. Then, how am I

supposed tae face yer faither?”

Daire had a point. Maybe he had acted too hastily. It was a rare thing for a woman to get one up on him. She had tricked him, and he had fallen for it. Maybe, with his ego bruised for being such a fool, his pride had gotten the better of him.

Well, that wouldnae be a first.

The lass had tried to steal from him, but he could have just let her go. Then again, it wasn't the theft that was irking him as much as what she had done to Daire. He returned to the idea that this lass had powers. Before Eden had walked into the Sinclair family, he had lived many years of his life having no idea that there were people out there with such powers. But Eden's arrival had opened his eyes in a big way, for he had discovered there were many with such gifts.

It was that notion that complicated things and made him curious. If Iseabail did have powers, and he could not yet say whether that were true or not, then her wanting his necklace meant something more. Eden had given it to him to protect him from those very powers being used on him. So, had Iseabail wanted to relieve him of the necklace so she could use her powers on him, or was it something else?

Once more, he had too many questions with far too few answers.

He was about to relay his musings to Daire, when the study door opened and both men jumped.

“My, my, ye're both very nervous,” Lilidh declared, beaming from Owen to Daire, and back again. “Anyone would think ye were up tae something.”

While she might be teasing them, Owen felt the guilt well up in him, and hardly able to look her in the eye, he grinned back and quickly turned away.

“Och, Owen,” she giggled, seeing his obvious avoidance. “What have ye got yersel’ caught up in now? Have yer broken another lass’s heart? Is that why yer face is bruised?”

Lilidh Sinclair was his father’s sister, and thus Owen’s aunt, though she was closer to Owen’s age than his father’s. The fact was, his father and his mother had conceived Owen when they were only adolescents themselves, and Madigan was only sixteen years older than his son.

The small age gap had been the reason Owen and his father were so very close. In fact, there were times they acted more like brothers than father and son. That being said, Madigan had always been far more serious than Owen, and while, over the last year or so, Owen had understood the need for him to change his ways, he still was a fun-loving character who liked to push the boundaries.

Lilidh, like his father, was a very perceptive person, and to stop her from pushing any further, he had to do something to change the subject.

“Och, look, Daire. The love o’ yer life is here.”

Daire glared over at Owen, and then pretended not to care. “Ye’re r talking nonsense, Owen. Anything tae get the heat o’ yersel’, isnae that right?”

While he was trying to keep a jovial tone in his voice, Daire was clearly angry, and for good reason. It was obvious to everyone and their mother that Daire was in love with Lilidh. He had been for a long time, and yet, he had never done anything about it. Owen had asked him why many times, but Daire had been adamant that he drop the subject before he found himself with a thick lip.

Owen, of course, had not been able to help himself, and on several occasions, had had to duck from a flying fist coming from Daire’s direction. This time, however, he had

done it only to save his own skin.

“I agree with Daire, Owen. I think ye’re just trying tae change the subject,” Lilidh said, seemingly unfazed by Owen’s comment. “So, tell me? Where did ye get those bruises from?”

“All right. All right,” Owen threw his hands up in surrender. “It appears I made a grave mistake and chose the wrong lass,” he said, pinning the best smile he could muster onto his face.

“Dinnae tell me. She was married.”

“Indeed, she was,” Owen lied. “And guess what?” he gestured to his face.

“Her husband found ye,” Lilidh deduced, sighing while shaking her head.

“Right again.”

Owen threw a glance toward Daire, who watched him intently but did not deny Owen’s story.

“When will ye ever learn?” she said. “Why can ye nae find yersel’ a decent woman and settle down.”

“It will never happen, me dear Lilidh,” Owen said, standing and gesticulating dramatically. “I am a free spirit and I intend tae remain so fer all o’ me days.”

“Aye, well,” Lilidh replied, her eyebrows raised, “if ye’re nae careful, yer spirit might truly be free when someone knocks it out o’ that arrogant arse o’ yers.”

Owen burst into laughter, and then, all three of them were laughing.

When the chortling eventually waned, Owen said, “It is a little late fer ye tae still be up, isnae it?”

“I was a little restless. Besides, I was waiting fer ye both tae return from the tavern.” She then gazed at Daire. “I was actually looking fer ye, Daire. I dropped me earring and it has fallen under me dresser. It is far too heavy fer me tae move mesel’. I wonder if ye wouldnae mind coming tae help me?”

“O’ course,” Daire said, standing as he spoke.

Owen couldn’t help but smile as an unspoken thought ran through his mind.

Aye, o’ course, indeed. Ye’d hardly give up a chance o’ spending time with the woman that ye’re besotted with.

“Well, I will bid ye both good night, fer it is time I retired,” Owen said as he moved across the room. “Though I think I will head down tae the kitchen first. There’s bound tae be something left over from supper, fer me stomach feels like me throats been cut.”

“Ye’re always eating,” Lilidh teased.

“Aye, well, I’m a growing lad,” Owen countered with a wink. Passing them on the way to the door, he gave Daire a knowing grin. “Be good.”

Swiftly, Daire lifted a huge hand and clipped the back of Owen’s head.

“Ow,” Owen said, grinning back at him.

“If ye’re nae careful, it’ll be me who removes yer spirit from yer body,” Daire growled as Owen walked away.

“Aye. But ye’ll have tae catch me first,” he called back without stopping.

As he continued out of his father’s study and down the corridor, he could hear Lilidh giggling at their antics. He didn’t know if his aunt was aware how Daire felt about her, but she was an astute woman. He would be surprised if she didn’t. It was a bit of a shame that neither of them had made any moves toward the other. They were so good together and would make a fine couple.

Their voices faded as Owen reached the top of the grand staircase. He swiftly descended the stone steps, wondering what he might find in the kitchen. At the bottom of the staircase, he took a left, but voices echoing through the corridor up ahead suddenly halted him in his tracks.

Straining to listen, Owen could not make out who they belonged to. They were just too far away. It could be anybody, but he was not about to take a chance of bumping into his father. Lilidh had believed his fairy tale of a skirmish with a disgruntled husband, but he doubted he could explain away his bruises to his father. Madigan would not be so naïve.

The laird had a way of eliciting the truth from him, and Owen knew he would end up blurting everything out. But that could not happen, he did not want Madigan to know what he had done. His father, being the loving, kind, and focused man he was, would immediately procure the money needed to save him and he did not want his father’s help. It was his own doing, and thus, he had to take responsibility for it. He would find the money his own way.

Turning on his heels, Owen ducked under the grand staircase. Lifting a burning lamp from its metal frame, he slipped through a narrow door in the wall. Once inside one of the many tunnels that ran through and under the castle, the tunnels he had spent much of his youth exploring, he ventured forth, the glow of the fire casting long dark shadows on the walls around him.

He knew the way with his eyes closed, and taking lefts and rights, he eventually descended a small set of steps. The kitchen was not far now, and as he could feel his mouth watering at the idea of cold meats and breads, Owen swiftly turned a corner.

“Och, me God!” a woman squealed, as the two crashed into each other.

Lifting the torch high, Owen could hardly believe his eyes.

“What the devil?”

His prisoner, Iseabail, was about to turn and run, when he grabbed her by the arm. “Och, nay ye dinnae,” he growled.

With her now in his tight grip, he pulled her in close. “How? How are ye down here? How did ye escape?”

She did not reply, and only looked up at him with terror in her eyes.

“Fer the love o’ God,” he spat.

His food would have to wait. The tunnels were hardly a place for such interrogation, and thus, he had no choice but to turn back the way he had come, dragging her with him.

“I cannae believe it,” he muttered as he continued. “Ye were locked in that cell. I ken ye were. I saw Kendal lock that gate with me own eyes.”

The lass said nothing as he continued to drag her all the way back to the door he had entered. When they finally ventured out into the corridor, Owen slipped the torch back into its frame, looked left and right to ensure no other was about, and then hurriedly pulled her up the grand staircase.

Good fortune continued to shine upon him, for they met no one in the corridor of the upper floor either, and when he reached his bedchamber door, he slipped inside, pulling her with him, before quickly closing and locking it behind him.

Now that they were secure, he released her. She hurriedly took a few steps back, and once again, looked terrified.

“I’m nae going tae hurt ye,” he said, suddenly realizing what she might be imagining. “I just want answers.”

There was an imperceptible change in her expression, but still, it was clear the woman was shrouded in fear.

“How did ye escape? Tell me? How did ye get out o’ that cell?”

She shook her head. “Ye have tae ken that it wasnae the guard’s fault. Dinnae punish him.”

Her words completely astonished Owen. He had captured her, taken her against her will, locked her in a cell, and all she was concerned about was the guard?

“What?” he blurted.

“It wasnae his fault,” she repeated. “He had tae dae it.”

The conviction in her voice jolted a consideration that Owen had been playing with earlier.

Taking two steps toward her, he said, “So, ye are nae a witch?”

“I already told ye I’m nae,” she retorted.

“Then there can only be one other explanation. Ye are in possession o’ powers, are ye nae?”

Her eyes flew wide at his remark.

“It’s the only way ye could possibly have escaped. It’s the only way ye could have made Daire go and get another drink when he had a full tankard beside him.”

Iseabail continued to look at him, but this time, she appeared conflicted. The fear was still present, but it was evident she was struggling to make a decision.

“Is it true?” he pressed.

“How dae ye ken about powers?” she came back. “Is that why ye wear that crystal around yer neck?”

Owen furrowed his brow, and shook his head. “Ye answer me questions first, and then I will gladly answer yers.”

CHAPTER SIX

I seabail could only stare at him, as he was standing there, waiting, expectation dancing all over Owen Sinclair's face. Clearly, she had taken a wrong turn somewhere in those tunnels, for by now, she ought to be free of this castle and journeying on. Instead, she was standing in this man's bedchamber, being interrogated. Again!

I am back where I started. Well, nae quite. But soon enough, I will be. Perhaps with more stringent restrictions upon me. But dae I tell him the truth?

Well, ye really have naething tae lose. Clearly, he has figured out yer secret. Besides, he has offered tae answer yer questions if ye answer his. Maybe, by telling him the truth, ye might get somewhere. Like discovering where he managed tae find that crystal that hangs around his neck. 'Tis the first clue ye have found, after all.

Iseabail listened to her common sense, and could not disagree with it. It was indeed, the first clue. She had been searching for anything related to the stone for several weeks now, and had found nothing. Maybe her meeting Owen had been fate, or divine providence, or both. She needed to divulge her secrets, for only after doing so would he divulge his. She could think of escape later. For now, she needed to find its source.

With a sigh of resignation, she said, "Fine. Me name is Lady Iseabail Mackay, daughter o' Laird Hamilton Mackay, sister of Keane Mackay."

Owen's jaw dropped as he gawked at her. "Ye are Laird Mackay's daughter?"

Iseabail was surprised. “Ye ken him?”

Nay,” Owen shook his head, still clearly astonished at her disclosure, “but I ken o’ him.”

“Och, I see.”

“But I dinnae understand?” he continued, a deep frown furrowing on his forehead. “What are ye doing on Sinclair lands? More tae the point, what are ye doing wandering around taverns alone? Where are yer guards?”

“Tis a long story—” she began, thinking he had finished with his questions, but he continued.

“And what possessed ye tae try and steal from me? And what about Daire?”

Iseabail raised her hand to try and slow his tirade. “Please. If ye give me a moment, I will explain everything.”

He now paced back and forth, clearly agitated in his confusion.

“Ye may well ken o’ me faither, but what ye dinnae ken, because the council and mesel’ deemed it best tae keep it secret, is the fact that both me faither and me braither have been kidnapped by Laird Dylan Sutherland.”

She watched as he stopped pacing, his eyes flying wide open with a gasp. “What?”

Iseabail shrugged. “It is true. At this very moment, me faither and braither are being held against their will by the laird because he wants me tae find something fer him.”

Owen stared at her intently. “What dae ye mean, something? And why has he chosen

ye? Why nae yer braither?

Iseabail was careful with her next words. Owen Sinclair didn't need to know everything. Just enough to satisfy him so she could then ask her questions in return. In that second, she decided to omit the fact that Laird Sutherland wanted her hand in marriage.

“Laird Sutherland is determined tae take over our clan. He has been trying fer some time, but we have fought back valiantly. As he has advanced, we have kept him at bay, and clearly, he has become both frustrated and impatient. It is those circumstances that have caused him tae take the drastic action o’ taking me faither and braither captive. And I dinnae ken why, he is using me and nae me braither. All I ken is that I must find an enchanted crystal and bring it back tae him.”

Owen lifted his hand to his necklace. “This crystal?” he exclaimed.

“Nae,” Iseabail shook her head, “that is only part o’ the stone I need. Somewhere out there,” she nodded towards the window, “there is a far larger stone.”

“And why does he want the crystal so badly?”

“Because it blocks powers,” Iseabail said plainly.

“I kent it,” he exclaimed, seemingly delighted at her words. “Ye dae have a gift, dinnae ye?”

Iseabail nodded. “As does me braither. We inherited it from our maither’s side o’ the family.”

By his expression, Owen was clearly working through what that meant, and then, coming to the only conclusion he could, he said, “That’s why ye were able tae affect

Daire, but nae me.”

“Aye.” She nodded. “I have told ye what ye want tae ken, now it is yer turn.”

Owen looked at her with raised eyebrows, clearly suspicious of whatever Iseabail was going to ask. After realizing he could not really go back on his word, he said, “What dae ye want tae ken?”

Nodding to the crystal, she replied, “Where did ye get it?”

But he did not answer straight away. Instead, he resumed his pacing, back and forth across the rug he went for what felt like an eternity. Evidently, he was considering her question, and trying to ascertain if he ought to answer it.

Eventually, he turned back to her. “Why dae ye want tae ken?”

Iseabail snarled. “Ye told me that if I answered yer questions, then ye would answer mine. I have been open and honest with ye. In fact, ye’re the only person outside o’ me clan that kens the truth. Ye owe me an answer.”

“Fine. Me stepmaither gave this tae me. She wanted me tae be protected against anyone using their powers against me.”

Iseabail’s brow furrowed. “How does she ken about powers?”

He looked at her intently. “Because she has gifts, like ye.”

It was Iseabail’s turn to be surprised, and she gasped a little at his words.

“She kens many others like ye, too,” he continued. “It is the reason she gave me this necklace in the first place. She is well aware that some people use their gifts fer good,

while others use them fer evil.” He then gave her a piercing look.

“I hardly used me powers for evil,” Iseabail countered. “Ye think telling a man tae go and get a drink is evil?”

Owen shrugged. “If the purpose is tae steal something that belongs tae another, then aye. I dae.”

Iseabail sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Tell me more about this crystal?”

“What dae ye want tae ken?” she asked.

“Everything. Clearly, it’s important tae Laird Sutherland. He’s going tae a lot o’ trouble tae get it.”

The thought of her father and brother suffering flashed through her mind at his words. “This crystal serves two purposes. If it is worn by someone with nay powers, it protects them from anyone who tries tae use a power against them. Thus, me gift is rendered useless while ye wear that stone.” She gestured to his necklace. “However, if the wearer does have power, the crystal magnifies the powers that the wearer possesses.”

Again, Owen frowned in deep thought. It took a few seconds before he glared at her with an obvious conclusion. “Laird Sutherland has powers?” he balked.

Iseabail shrugged. “I dinnae ken fer certain, but it makes sense tae me that he does. It’s the only reason I can think o’ that he wants it. That, or he has someone close tae him with such gifts. But he is an evil man, and in truth, I am nae certain he would give another such power.”

“It would go against nature, o’ course,” she continued. “One who possesses a gift ought nae tae take any more than nature has already given. Nay doubt, there are consequences. Though I cannae imagine Dylan Sutherland cares much about that.”

Owen tilted his head. “Maybe he doesnae have powers. Maybe he just wants tae protect himself from being manipulated by those with powers.”

“But he wouldnae need the whole crystal fer that. Sure, look at ye. I cannae manipulate ye at all.”

Owen considered her words. “Fair point.” He paused and then paced back and forth. “Ye say that what he’s planning tae dae goes against nature, and that there will be consequences. What dae ye mean by that?”

“That he may pay with his soul,” Iseabail said plainly.

“He’ll die if he tries tae use the crystal?” Owen gasped.

“I cannae ken if he’ll die. If I’m honest, I dinnae really ken what might happen. All I ken is, things willnae be good fer him. How that manifests, only the gods really ken.”

Owen looked at her with interest. “Ye still havenae told me what yer gift is, Iseabail.”

She sighed again, and then said, “I can compel people tae dae whatever I tell them.”

Owen’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Anything?”

“Ye asked how I had managed tae get intae that room tae see yer fight, and how I had made Daire leave ye, so I could be alone with ye. That is how. I say what I want, and they dae it.”

Iseabail suddenly remembered the guard. Stepping forward, she gazed at him pleadingly.

“That is why yer guard ought nae tae be punished. He did naething wrong. He would never have let me go by his own will. I forced him tae dae it. Dae ye see?”

Owen nodded swiftly, as though the guard and what he had done was the most of his concerns. “Rest assured, naething will happen tae him. I ken him well, and he is a good man.”

Iseabail heaved another sigh. “Thank the gods fer that.”

Once more, he commenced with his pacing in silence. Iseabail was not sure what was supposed to happen now, but she suspected Owen was deciding that very thing. What was he to do with her? But a plan was already forming in her mind. She would get out of this place, and she knew exactly how she was going to do it.

Eventually, he turned back to look at her. “That is some gift ye have. Being able tae make people dae and feel whatever ye choose.”

She shook her head. “I cannae make people feel anything. They dae as I tell them, but I cannae make someone sad, or angry, or in love. Me gift works on actions only.”

“Still, a woman with yer skills poses danger everywhere she goes. Eden can tell if someone is being truthful or telling lies. She senses a lie as soon as she hears it. But yer gift is far more powerful than that.”

“I have never, ever used me gift fer bad,” Iseabail spat. “And I never will.”

“I only have yer word fer that,” Owen argued.

“What has me life got tae dae with ye at any rate? Ye wouldnae even ken I had a power if I hadnae have told ye,” she countered.

“Still,” Owen said carefully, “I think I would like tae investigate it further, and thus, I’m afraid, ye’re nae going anywhere.”

But Iseabail had an ace up her sleeve. He could not keep her prisoner against her will, and there was not a chance she was returning to those dungeons.

“Ye will come with me tae find the stone,” she said adamantly.

His eyes widened, surprised at her confidence, and then surprise turned to amusement, and he began to chuckle. “Have ye forgotten that yer powers dinnae work on me?”

“Nae,” she shook her head, “I havenae. However, I am well aware that yer faither doesnae ken about yer fighting.”

The laughter halted immediately and Owen glared at her.

Iseabail smiled. “I’m also aware that ye dinnae want him tae ken. So, ye see, I only need tae ask fer an audience with the laird, tae which I am entitled, and yer faither will discover everything ye are keeping secret from him.”

“Ye wouldnae dare,” Owen growled.

“Try me,” Iseabail spat back.

He could do nothing but glare at her, for they both knew she had him over a barrel. His frustration was obvious, and she was certain she could see his mind working to find a way that he could get out of this situation. He couldn’t, and he knew it. But

Iseabail wasn't Laird Sutherland, and blackmail did not feel right in her gut, even if it might be necessary under the circumstances. Perhaps she could make this easier for both of them.

"As an act o' good will, I can offer ye something in return," she said. "Me clan is very wealthy. Our treasury is filled with gold and silver, as well as many coins. If ye come with me and help me find this stone, I will give ye all the money ye need."

He scowled at her, gritting his teeth and tensing his jaw. "How dae ye ken I need yer money?" He threw his hands up and gestured to their surroundings. "Can ye nae see the wealth o' me own clan all around ye?"

Iseabail sighed, realizing Owen's pride was bruised at her offer.

Men and their pride!

"I overheard yer conversation with Daire in the dungeons," Iseabail confessed. "It is evident now, as I think about it, that if ye dinnae want yer faither tae ken ye are fighting, neither can ye ask him fer the money tae help ye. It is why ye fight, isnae it? Fer the money?" She gazed at him with interest. "Who are ye saving yersel' from?"

Once more, his eyes grew wide, surprised that she knew as much as she did, and then his brow furrowed. "That's nae o' yer concern," he growled.

"Maybe nae," she countered, "but if ye help me, I can help ye."

His pride still kept him from accepting straight away, so Iseabail waited. He would have no choice but to accept, and eventually, after more huffing and pacing, he did.

"Fine. I will accompany ye. But only because ye are giving me nay choice."

“O’ course,” she replied diplomatically.

“We will have tae...” he trailed off, his mind working once more with what lay ahead of them. “We will have tae give me faither and stepmaither a good excuse. I cannae just leave fer a period o’ time.”

It was Iseabail’s turn to try and come up with a solution, and after a moment, she came up with a ridiculous idea. A ridiculous idea, and yet, the only one she could think of. “We could tell them we are courting, and that ye are coming tae see me lands.”

Owen raised his eyebrows at the suggestion, but shook his head. “They’d never believe that. Besides, ye have tae remember, Eden can sense a lie. She’ll pick that up in a second. Nae. It needs tae be based more on truth.”

The two took several more minutes to think, and then Iseabail tried again. “Ye are accompanying me back tae me lands. I was robbed, and ye have agreed tae make certain I return.”

He nodded slowly as he considered her suggestion. “Well, ye have been robbed, in a way. Ye’ve been robbed of yer family.”

“And me freedom.”

“And yer peace.”

“And me future,” Iseabail added.

“Aye, that will work. And I will talk mostly. We just need tae keep those things in our mind when we make mention o’ it at breakfast on the morrow.”

“Breakfast?” Iseabail gawped.

“Aye,” Owen said, surprised at her reaction. “Ye’re going tae have tae meet me faither and stepmaither at some point.”

“Then we will also need tae have a story fer how we met. Surely, they are bound tae ask?”

“All right,” Owen said, looking thoughtful once again. “Then... we can say...”

“It has tae be the truth,” Iseabail reminded him.

“Or a version o’ the truth,” he countered.

Over the next few minutes, they then came up with a plan of what they were going tae tell Laird and Lady Sinclair. It was not very convincing, but it would have to suffice.

“While wearing this necklace, Eden willnae be able tae tell if I’m lying or nae,” Owen added. “But in a way, it makes things even more complicated. I still have tae be careful what I say, fer whatever ye reply also has tae be the truth.”

Iseabail nodded. “That makes sense. I am now just terrified I will say something wrong.”

Owen shook his head. “I will try and guide ye as best as I can. In the end, however, we’ll have tae help each other.”

When all that was said and done, Owen opened his bedchamber door, and nodded for Iseabail to follow.

“Where are we going?” she asked suspiciously.

He smirked at her. “Well, ye cannae stay here,” he said, nodding to his bed.

Iseabail glanced over at it, and then blushed at the thought. “Nay, o’ course nae.”

“Come on. We have many rooms here.”

She followed him out and the two travelled down the corridor. A minute later, Owen opened a bedchamber door and gestured for her to enter. “I will tell the maids ye are here. Someone will arrive shortly tae light the fire and bring ye some food.”

He pulled the door over to leave, but stopped when Iseabail began to speak.

“How dae ye ken I willnae run away?” she asked, surprised that he was giving her such freedom.

That smirk danced on his lips again, and with an arrogance she knew he possessed, he replied. “It’s obvious ye need me.”

Without another word, he closed the door, leaving Iseabail feeling frustrated at his bumptiousness. But at least she was not spending the night in a cell. Instead, she had a room of her own, and a comfortable bed. Her worries had abated, for now. Tomorrow would bring with it, its own troubles.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The previous night had been an eye opener for Owen, and this morning, he couldn't help but feel worried. He and Iseabail, or Lady Mackay, as he now knew her to be, had devised a story to tell his father and Eden but, as his stomach clenching with nerves, he worried Eden would see through their veil of lies.

I cannae let that happen. Iseabail has made a valid threat. If I dinnae help her, Faither will discover the lies Daire and I have told him. I cannae dae that tae Daire. He's put himself in a dreadful position fer me sake.

After washing and dressing, he made his way to Iseabail's room and knocked lightly on the door. Her distant voice echoed through the thick wood that separated them.

"Just a minute."

A few seconds later, the door opened and she looked up at him nervously. "Good morning."

"Morning," Owen said quickly, trying to curb his nerves. "Are ye ready?"

"I am."

"Then let's go."

They travelled down the corridor, Owen reminding her of Eden's powers in a low murmur. "If she discovers anything ye say tae be a lie, our plan is ruined."

“I ken,” Iseabail said. “Believe me. It is I who kens what is at stake here more than anyone.”

Of course she did. He had witnessed her genuine distress last night when she had spoken of her father and brother’s kidnapping. Of all the things he imagined she might say, that had not been one of them. It had been surprising enough to learn that she was a noble. But everything she said after that just seemed to get worse and worse.

After he had retired the night before, Owen’s mind had replayed the whole conversation, looking for any holes in her story, but he could find none. She was either a fantastic liar, or everything she had told him had been the truth. He had sided with the latter. It all made sense. Especially when she explained the reason she had wanted to take his necklace.

He was hardly pleased that, without having to use her powers, she had managed to trick him into helping her, and yet, he had had little choice. He had been backed into a corner with no escape, and he certainly couldn’t fight his way out of this one.

They reached the family breakfast room to discover that everyone else had already arrived. Daire glared at Owen when they entered, and he had good reason. Last night, their prisoner was still safely locked in the dungeon. Now, she accompanied Owen as though they were the closest of friends.

By the time Owen and Iseabail had finished their discussion last night, it had been too late to go and speak to Daire. Though, as Owen now considered his companion’s confusion, perhaps it might have been wise to find him earlier that morning. Now, he was going to have to sit there and wonder what the devil was going on.

Eden looked up at their entrance. “Good heavens, Owen, what happened tae ye? And... I see we have a guest.”

Realizing Eden meant the state of his now bruised eye, Owen replied, "It's a long story. And aye, I have brought someone tae meet ye all."

At Eden's words, his father had looked up from buttering his bread. Upon seeing Lady Mackay, Madigan immediately stood from his chair, being the gentlemen he was. Daire quickly followed suit.

"I would like tae introduce ye all tae Lady Iseabail Mackay," Owen announced.

He watched Daire's eyes widen even further, but he ignored the astonishment on the man's face and continued. "Iseabail, this is me faither, Laird Madigan Sinclair, and his wife, Lady Eden Sinclair. Me aunt, Lilidh, and Daire ye have already met."

"It is a pleasure tae meet ye all," Iseabail said warmly.

"And ye, me lady," Owen's father said. "Please," he gestured to a seat, "will ye nae join us?"

Owen pulled her a seat from the table, and Iseabail sat down. Owen sat beside her, and only then did his father and Daire sit.

"Dae tell us, Lady Mackay," Madigan said, "tae what dae we owe this pleasure o' a visit?"

"Actually," Owen cut in before Iseabail had a chance to speak, "I met Lady Iseabail last night in the tavern. Well, actually, Daire and I met her in the tavern, Didnae we, Daire?"

Daire now looked bewildered that he had been brought into the conversation, and clearly not expecting it, he nearly choked on his bread. "Aye..." he spluttered. "Aye, we did."

“Lady Iseabail is in fact, in a little bit o’ trouble, Faither.”

“She is?” Daire asked pointedly.

If Owen’s legs were long enough, he would kick at him beneath the table, but gritting his teeth, while at the same time, pinning a smile on his lips, he only gave Daire a look.

Madigan frowned and gazed at Iseabail with concern. “Dae tell us, Lady Iseabail, what trouble are ye in?”

“Well,” Iseabail began, a slight tremor in her voice, “the fact o’ the matter is, I, er, I have been robbed,” she said, casting a glance to Owen who nodded eagerly.

“Robbed?” Madigan growled. “Good lord! Who robbed ye? What did they take?”

Owen cut in again. “When I met Lady Iseabail in the tavern, she was, well, she was...” Owen struggled to keep his story as true as possible. Whatever he said, Iseabail had to be able to agree to, or Eden would pick up her lie immediately, “nearly knocked across the room by a man.”

“That’s right,” Iseabail said, nodding fervently and grasping onto the truth as tightly as Owen.

“Is that why yer face looks as it daes?” Madigan said, gesturing to the bruising and cuts.

Owen had applied witch hazel last night, and while it had helped, it had certainly not left his face free from any tell-tale signs that he had battled with someone.

“Er, well, I did have tae fight, aye,” Owen said, casting a glance at Daire, who had

now sat back in his chair with his arms across his chest, listening to their story with mock interest.

“The truth is, me laird,” Iseabail said, jumping in to save Owen from having to elaborate, “I feel a little lost. Nae lost, as in, I dinnae ken where I am, o’ course. But I wasnae expecting what happened tae me, and thus, me life has now been turned upside down.”

“Aye,” Owen jumped in, “and seeing that Lady Iseabail needed our help, I have agreed tae help her.”

Eden was looking from Owen to Iseabail and back again. Owen prayed that she wasn’t sensing their huge omissions and creative truths, but by her expression, she seemed both bemused and disturbed. He could only hope her reason for that was the fact that Iseabail had experienced a dreadful ordeal, even though they had not actually mentioned it yet.

“And what help is it that ye need, me lady?” Madigan asked again. “Whatever assistance ye need, we will surely provide.”

“I, er, well, I must journey...”

“Home,” Owen cut in quickly. “She must journey home, and given she has lost her guards, I have offered tae help her.”

“How on earth did ye lose yer guards?” Eden asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Tis a long story, me lady. I am only grateful that I met Owen. I dinnae ken what I would have done otherwise.”

“I have offered tae accompany Lady Mackay back tae... back tae,” he hesitated

again, knowing that Iseabail had to follow on from whatever he was about to say.

“Well, tae the castle, really,” Iseabail said. “That is the final destination, after all.”

Owen could not help but feel impressed with the swiftness in which she picked up his struggle. She was certainly no fool, and so far, it appeared that Lady Iseabail Mackay was far cleverer than she looked.

Daire now appeared completely flabbergasted with everything the two had said so far. His eyes had darted from one to the other as they had spoken, and now, he just gawked at Owen looking utterly bewildered.

“Then I must gather some guards tae accompany ye, me lady,” Madigan said, clearly taking all this in and only seeing the distress of a helpless woman.

“Though I am grateful tae ye fer yer offer, me laird. I dinnae think it necessary. There is a possibility we may meet me own on our travels.”

Owen nearly winced at her words, for surely, there was no possibility at all of that happening. But as his mind worked quickly, he imagined that she might be thinking that the closer they got to the castle, the higher the chances were, and thus, her words were not untrue.

“In fact,” Owen added, “if that is the case, I will then return. I might nae even have tae travel all the way.”

“That’s right,” Iseabail said.

Eden still looked slightly perturbed by their story and Owen was certain she was suspicious. But by the fact that she hadn’t said anything, not in that moment at any rate, Owen could only hope they had succeeded.

“Well, we are both very sorry this has happened tae ye, Lady Iseabail,” Eden said. “Owen is a brave warrior and the best scout we have. If he cannae find yer guards, then naeone can.”

Iseabail then turned to Owen and the two shared a look. “Is that right?” she said, a slight smile growing on her lips.

Great. Now she has even more reason tae keep me close.

“Eden exaggerates,” Owen replied, trying to keep the frustration from his voice.

“Och, it’s nae like ye tae be so modest, Owen,” Eden said with a smile. “In fact, I’m surprised ye havenae bragged about yer many talents tae Lady Iseabail already.”

Madigan chuckled and shared a knowing look with his wife, while Owen could feel his face reddening.

“Well, I am eternally grateful tae ye all, both fer yer hospitality and yer help,” Iseabail said. Looking at Eden, she continued. It has been more than distressing.”

“I can only imagine,” Madigan replied.

Now the worst was over, Owen relaxed a little. They had managed to get through it, as nerve-wracking as it had been. Lady Mackay seemed like a determined woman, and he had no doubt in his mind that if things had not quite gone to plan, she would have made true on her threat to tell his father everything. He just couldn’t let that happen. But it had gone as he had hoped, and now, all he had to do was eat and leave.

The sooner the better. The longer we stay here, the more chance o’ us letting the cat out o’ the bag.

“I see that yer husband and Owen wear the same crystal necklaces, me lady,” Iseabail said. “Where they a gift from ye?”

Owen nearly choked on his tea at her question.

What is she doing? This wasnae part o’ the plan.

“They were, actually,” Eden said amicably.

“They are beautiful. May I ask, where ye found them?” Iseabail continued.

Eden looked at Iseabail for a long moment, and then replied. “I purchased them from a merchant in a village. I believe he sells his wares at the market.”

“Perhaps I may stop by there on our way. I would be delighted tae find similar pieces.”

The breakfast continued with small talk, Iseabail expertly bending the truth when Madigan asked about the wellbeing of her father and the clan in general. Eventually, Owen, worried that the longer they spent there, the more likely it was that they were going to get caught in their web of untruths, brought the conversation back to their trip, and announced that they would be leaving immediately.

“Immediately?” His father frowned. He turned his attention to Iseabail. “Would ye nae like tae rest a while with us, Lady Mackay? Ye have a long journey ahead o’ ye.”

“I am eager tae see me braither and faither again,” Iseabail replied masterfully.

“O’ course,” Madigan replied. He glanced at Eden, who nodded, and then turning back to Owen, he said, “Well, I suppose it is the right thing that ye are doing, son. Are ye certain ye dinnae want tae take another with ye. What about Daire?”

“Nay!” Owen answered far too quickly. “Nay,” he said again, a little slower and calmer. “I’m certain we will be perfectly fine. Like Lady Iseabail said, we may well find her guards on the road when we travel.”

“Very well.”

Later, in the courtyard as the horses were being readied, Daire grabbed Owen by his tunic and dragged him over to a nearby wall. Swiftly looking back and forth to ensure no one was near to hear him, he turned and glared at Owen.

“What the devil is going on? Last night this lass was a prisoner, someone ye needed tae interrogate. Now, ye are taking her home?” he balked in disbelief.

“It’s complicated,” Owen said in hushed tones. “I cannae explain it all now, I dinnae have time. Just know that everything is fine.”

“And what about our other problem?” Daire murmured, flicking a glance to Madigan.

“I cannae think about that right now. Iseabail needs me.”

Daire’s eyebrows flew to the top of his forehead. “Och, does she now? Last night ye were ready to keep her imprisoned until ye got answers. Now, she needs ye? What happened between the two o’ ye?”

“She told me the truth. Truly, it will be fine once we’ve found what we’re looking fer.”

Daire’s brow crinkled even further. “What yer looking fer?”

Owen swiped a dismissive hand. “I swear, I will tell ye all about it when I return. But fer now, we need tae leave.”

The huge man cast a suspicious glance in Iseabail's direction. "Let me guess," Daire snarled. "That fallacy the two o' ye just came up with at breakfast isnae what ye're really doing, is it?"

Owen shook his head. "Nay. It isnae."

"And what if these men catch up with ye on yer travels?" Daire pressed.

"I highly doubt it will happen, but if it daes, then I will have tae deal with it. But they have nay notion who I am, or where tae look fer me."

Daire shook his head. "I think ye're lying tae yersel' Owen. It'll nae take them long tae discover yer identity."

Owen shrugged in frustration. "Maybe ye're right, but truly, I cannae worry about it. What I have tae dae now is far more pressing."

A little while later, Owen and Iseabail left the courtyard on horses, with saddle bags packed for the journey. Owen had hugged his father tighter than usual. Only afterwards, did he wonder why. It wasn't as though he thought he would not return, but then, with the gang of men still after him, and with the uncertainty of the journey ahead, one never really knew.

They had been riding for several hours, and already, Owen had asked the same question numerous times. Each time, Iseabail had seemed to avoid it, but this time, he was not taking no for an answer.

"So, I have agreed tae come with ye, but I didnae agree tae ye ignoring me questions. I will ask ye again. Why have ye brought me with ye? Why is it that ye need me?"

Iseabail gave him a look, and then glanced away again, but she did not speak.

She's more stubborn than I could've imagined, but two can play at that game.

Grabbing the reins tighter in his hand, he pulled back on them and brought his horse to a complete standstill. Iseabail glanced over, and upon seeing him stop, gave him another look of astonishment.

"What are ye doing?" she cried, bringing her horse to a halt and turning back towards him.

"I'm nae moving another step until ye answer me question, me lady," Owen said firmly. "Ye can choose tae ignore me and continue on yer quest alone, or ye can tell me what I wish tae ken."

Iseabail rolled her eyes and sighed as though he was acting like some petulant child. "Fine."

Still, she did not speak for another moment, and then her slight frustration with him only seconds before seemed to dissipate, and dropping her gaze, she looked a little coy. It made Owen immediately suspicious.

Has she brought me out here on false pretenses?

"I told ye last night that if Laird Sutherland uses the stone, it may cause him harm," she began. "But the truth is, I dinnae ken if I am able tae even touch it without it harming me."

Owen's eyes widened at her words. "Ye mean it will kill ye?"

Iseabail looked a little worried, and shrugged. "Truly, I dinnae ken."

Lifting the necklace from beneath his shirt, he said, "Maybe we could test it?"

But Iseabail shook her head. “It’s nae the same. The crystal we’re looking fer is far larger and more powerful. It wouldnae be a true test.”

“I see,” Owen said, now understanding his role a little better. “But it will bring me nay harm?”

“Dae ye have a gift?” Iseabail smiled.

“I’m a great warrior,” Owen countered with a smirk. “And a great scout. Does that count?”

“Aye, yer stepmither relayed that at breakfast.” Iseabail said. “Something ye forgot tae mention last night.”

Owen shrugged and tried to look nonchalant. “I didnae think it was o’ any importance.”

“Aye, course nae.” She flickered her eyebrows up in disbelief. She looked at the necklace again with an almost whimsical gaze. “The fact that I have a guardian with me who cannae be affected by gifts will also be a huge benefit. We dinnae ken what we will face on our journey.”

Her words surprised him a little, and in that second, understanding how vulnerable she truly was, a realization quickly occurred to him.

She’s nae the villain I first assumed. Last night in the dungeon, I thought she was a witch and a thief. It’s now clear that she’s neither.

Owen looked up at the ominous clouds that hung above their heads. “We should get going. It looks like the heavens are going tae open at any moment.”

About a half hour later, Owen's prediction came to fruition, and the rain teamed from the sky like water from a bucket. They ploughed on across the glens, but the rain was so heavy, it was foolish to continue.

"We need tae find shelter," Owen yelled. "Look, over there." He pointed through the trees to a small, abandoned cottage.

Iseabail nodded eagerly, strands of her hair stuck to her face beneath her hood. "Alright," she called back.

The cottage was indeed, abandoned, and once inside, Owen came to the conclusion that no one had lived there for many years. Old bits of furniture lay about; a few chairs, and a small table, nothing that would bring them any comfort. He discovered the remains of a wooden bed in a room at the back of the house, but with struts missing, no mattress, and the wood so rotten it fell apart as soon as he touched it, he doubted it would even be of any use as firewood.

Gathering scraps of other wood from around the cottage, he eventually managed to light a fire in the small hearth in the living area. Iseabail had already collected the saddle bags from the horses and, placing the items on the small table, she was trying to gather something for them to eat.

"Come and stand here near the fire," he said. "Ye're soaked through."

She turned and looked at him. "As are ye," she said, nodding tae his clothes.

"Aye," he smirked, "it's called rain."

Once more, she rolled her eyes, but leaving what she was doing, she moved over to the small fire and held out her hands to warm them.

“I didnae find anywhere tae sleep, so we’ll have tae bed down in here.”

“Both o’ us?” Iseabail exclaimed.

He smiled down at her. “Well, if ye think I’m sleeping in a freezing cold room and leaving ye in here tae hog the fire, ye’ve got another thing coming.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The cottage was hardly ideal. It was cold, water leaked in through holes in the roof, and wind rattled through the wooden blinds. It was certainly a protection against the dreadful weather, but it was a far cry from any accommodation Iseabail had stayed in up to that point.

Between them, she and Owen had secured the rotten blinds as best they could. The wind still howled through the gaps, but it was a little better. There was nothing they could do about the leaky roof, and thus, they made effort to avoid the places where puddles gathered as the water poured in.

With all its faults, the cottage was still far better than having to camp outside, though the idea of having to sleep in the same room as Owen did not please Iseabail at all. But nor could she demand that he sleep in another room where there was no fire. By his earlier comment, her demand would likely be ignored at any rate. Perhaps, on their journey, this circumstance was something she was going to have to get accustomed to.

Yet, he was right. Both of them were soaked through, and even now, as they sat down to eat, Iseabail's clothes were not fully dry. She could only imagine that Owen suffered the same. Given the little firewood he had been able to find, the fire was far smaller than both of them were used to, but, again, it was better than no fire at all.

In the saddle bags, she was able to find meat and bread, and though they had no plates, Owen had found an old discarded tray that had clearly not seen use in years. With a quick wash in the rain, however, it was fully functional again, giving Iseabail

somewhere to lay their food.

As they ate, Iseabail found herself lost in thoughts of how this quest was going to play out. It had been fortune shining upon her when she had come across Owen and the crystal he wore. She now had an ally, of sorts, and certainly a way to protect her when they did finally find the crystal.

If I find the crystal.

I have tae find it.

Tearing apart a chicken leg with his teeth, Owen looked over at her and said, “Isnae it a bit careless o’ ye tae be travelling around alone? There are dreadful people wandering about, ye ken. And there ye are, with nay guards tae protect ye.”

“Ye didnae seem tae care that I was alone when ye met me in the tavern,” Iseabail countered.

“Aye, but I didnae ken who ye were then.”

“Och, I see. So, if I were just a lowly common woman, me safety wouldnae matter.”

“That’s nae what I mean, and ye ken it. Nay lass should be out and about alone, but with what ye’re doing, travelling intae strange places and asking questions, ye should be more wary.”

Iseabail shook her head. “I’ve never needed any protection. Nor have I felt in danger. Me gift enables me tae stop any ill-will occurring, either toward me or toward another. In fact, in all the years I have lived kenning me gift, I have never had any doubt that I could protect mesel’.” She paused a beat. “Until now.”

Owen looked at her carefully, watching her glancing down at his necklace.

“Because o’ this,” he said, touching the crystal at his throat.

“Aye,” she said, nodding. “Ye’re the first man I have met that me powers willnae work on. The first man I cannae defend mesel’ against.”

“But surely, ye kent about this crystal ‘afore,” he said.

“Nae. I didnae. It was only when Laird Sutherland sent me on this mission that I found out about such a thing.” She pierced him with an intense gaze. “Dae ye really think I would put mesel’ at such risk?”

“But ye put yersel’ at risk when ye found out about it,” Owen argued. “Ye have nay guards with ye, and still, ye are wandering about alone.”

“That’s different. I’ve been forced tae take that path so as nae tae bring any attention tae mesel’. I’ve been searching fer this crystal fer weeks. How many people are going tae open up tae me about where I might find it when I have huge guards standing at me side?”

Owen shrugged. “Fair point.”

“Guards will only make me more noticeable. I have tae act stealthily in what I am doing. Naeone can ken. Me faither’s and braither’s lives depend on it.”

For a moment, he didn’t speak again, and then he said, “And are ye nae afraid now, here with me?”

Again, Iseabail shook her head. “Nae. I have already deduced the kind o’ man ye are, Owen. And while ye dae like the lasses, yer nae one tae force anyone against their

will. That being said,” she added, “while I sleep on this side o’ the room this night, ye will sleep over there.” She gestured to the other side.

“As long as I’m in the same room as the fire, I couldnae care less where I sleep,” he replied flippantly.

Iseabail was nearly certain his words were defensive, as though he were almost offended that she didn’t want to lie anywhere near him. It was evident he was used to attention from the lasses. She had heard Daire mention it as well. Perhaps he was a little offended that Iseabail didn’t see him in the same way those other women did.

She could not deny he was a striking man. When he had saved her in the tavern, he had quite taken her breath away. But a lot had happened since then, and she was in no hurry to forget that he had locked her up in a dungeon and accused her of being a witch, even when he knew there were people with powers. Even when his own step mother was one of those people.

Perhaps he had just wanted to make certain she was no danger, but his tactics had been a little too extreme for her liking.

When they finished eating, they cleared up the remains of the food, and with Owen announcing he was going to relieve himself, he took the bones out with him to throw away.

Iseabail used the opportunity of his absence to set up a makeshift bed by laying a thin blanket on the floor, positioning a saddle bag as a pillow, and determining to use the heavy cloak she wore as a blanket when she finally lay her head down to rest.

But she, too, needed to relieve herself, and when Owen returned with more pieces of wood, she moved passed him to make her way outside.

“Dae ye want me tae come with ye?” He smirked. “It’s pretty dark out there.”

Iseabail curled her upper lip and scowled at him. “I’m sure I’ll manage.”

“Please yersel’.” He shrugged, making his way towards the fire with the added fuel he’d gathered. “Scream if ye need me.”

Huffing, Iseabail turned on her heels and swept out of the room, feeling anger rising at his patronizing tone. She had gotten this far without him. She was certain she could manage another ten minutes of her life without his help.

It was dark outside, but her eyes adjusted to it as she ventured a little way from the cottage. At least the rain had stopped. It would have been annoying to get soaked again, after drying off as much as she already had.

Nervously, she turned and looked over her shoulder. It was silly to think that Owen would follow her out, but that irrational part of her messed with her imagination. Of course, he was nowhere in sight, and there was no reason to follow her when he could have had his way with her inside if he were that type of man. Deriding herself for being so paranoid, Iseabail found a suitable place to do what was necessary.

When she returned, Owen had made up his own sleeping quarters exactly where she had demanded, across the room and far away from her. He was already lying down with his eyes closed, his back against the wall, and his body facing into the room. She had no doubt he was still awake. No one fell asleep that quickly. But instead of engaging with him, she moved over to her own blanket and settled herself in.

Finally managing to get herself as comfortable as she was able, under the circumstances, she finally closed her eyes.

“Good night, Lady Mackay,” Owen’s voice traveled across the room.

“Good night,” she replied.

A loud clattering noise disturbed her with such fright that she gasped.

Given the dreadful discomfort of the hard floor, Iseabail had not imagined she would sleep at all, and yet, apparently, she had fallen into slumber. Now, however, she was fully awake with her heart thumping in her breast.

Someone is in the cottage.

Rapid scrambling sounded from across the room, and suddenly, Owen was by her side.

“Dinnae worry. I’m here. I’ll nae let anything happen tae ye,” he whispered.

He crouched in front of her, protectively putting himself between her and whatever might be coming.

“Dae ye have a weapon?” she whispered, grabbing the dirk she had tucked down her sock.

“’Tis in me hand already,” he murmured.

She had rarely drawn her knife in all her travels. There had never been a necessity. Even now, with the fear rippling through her, she knew she could compel the intruder to stop in their tracks. And yet, the terror remained.

They both stayed perfectly still, their eyes focused on the door, waiting for whomever might enter. But after several minutes and little sound, Iseabail was beginning to wonder if she hadn’t been dreaming.

Clearly nae, if the sound woke Owen as well.

And yet, if someone had entered the tiny house, where were they and what were they doing?

“Maybe we should go and check?” Iseabail suggested.

“I will go and check. Ye stay right here,” he said, pushing himself to a standing crouch.

But Iseabail was not so easily ordered about, and scrambling to her feet, she was about to follow when Owen stopped dead in his tracks and remained perfectly still.

Peering around him, Iseabail’s eyes widened, and relief flooded through her body as she looked upon a scrawny black dog that, with its ears pinned back, and its tail huddled between its legs, stood there in the doorway looking both hungry and terrified.

“Och, the poor thing,” she cooed, walking passed Owen to approach it.

“Wait,” he hissed, as she completely ignored him. “It might be dang?—”

But Iseabail was already at the dog’s side, and laying her hand on his head, she spoke quietly to him. “Are ye lost, boy? Ye look hungry.”

When she turned to look at Owen, he was rolling his eyes and shaking his head, clearly not impressed that she had ignored his warning.

“He’s harmless,” she said.

“Aye, well. We ken that now ,” he huffed.

“Maybe he found the bones ye threw away earlier. He obviously hasnae been fed in some time,” she said, nodding to his clearly visible ribs.

Owen approached then, and crouching down beside him, he stroked him gently. The dog shook, though whether from cold or fear, they could not know.

Owen stood again and walked towards the saddle bags. “Come on, pal. Let’s get ye something else tae eat.”

The dog did not move from Iseabail’s side for a moment, until, sniffing the air, he realized that Owen had food. Still, he approached timidly, as though he might earn himself a strike at any second.

“He looks like he’s been beaten,” Iseabail said a little later, when the animal had satisfied his hunger.

“Aye,” Owen said sadly. “There are some wicked people in the world. If I kent who’d done it, I’d be tempted tae give them a taste o’ their own medicine. See how they like it.”

Being a lover of animals, Iseabail smiled at his words. Not at the idea that Owen would take such pleasure in striking another human being, but for the fact that he would defend a stray dog that he barely knew. She was of the firm belief that one could tell a lot about a person by the way they treated animals.

Human beings could fight back, or answer back, but for the most part, animals were defenseless. Being kind to things that were so openly vulnerable said a lot about a person’s character. She might have had to blackmail Owen to help her, but clearly, he had a decent heart.

Ye kent that already.

Of course, she did, but now she knew just a little bit more about him.

Once the excitement was over, Iseabail and Owen began settling themselves down again, but as she sat on the thin blanket that made up her bed, Iseabail realized how frightened she had been when the dog had woken her so suddenly.

The animal now lay close to the fire, clearly in need of the warmth, and as she gazed at it, she lifted her eyes and glanced across at Owen.

“Are ye all right?” he asked, catching her eye.

After such an earlier demand that he must sleep on the other side of the room, Iseabail now felt embarrassed, even hypocritical to ask for what she needed, and instead of replying, she looked away.

“Iseabail,” Owen said, his voice a little softer. “Would ye like me tae come and sleep closer tae ye?”

How he guessed what she wanted, Iseabail did not know. Perhaps her fear was written across her face. Or perhaps, he was far more perceptive than she had originally given him credit for. Whatever the answer, she still felt embarrassed to say yes, and so, shrugging a little coyly, she nodded.

She was grateful he didn’t force her to say it, and a few minutes later, Owen had shifted his own makeshift bed beside hers.

“Now, let’s try and get some rest,” he said, settling himself down just a foot away. “We have a long journey ahead o’ us.”

Iseabail’s head lifted and fell in a slow, easy rhythm. She felt warm and entirely comfortable, and for that slight moment before she awoke fully, she sighed, feeling

like she could stay where she was for a long time.

Flicking her eyes open, however, she suddenly gasped, and lifting her head from Owen's chest, where it lay, she glared up at him. Owen smiled down at her. He was wide awake, and evidently had been for some time.

"Och, me goodness," she said, hurriedly pushing herself off him.

Owen remained with an easy smile on his lips. "Ye were sound asleep. I didnae want tae wake ye."

"I'm sorry. I shouldnae... I mean, I didnae... I'm..."

"Dinnae worry yer pretty little head, Lady Mackay. Ye did naething wrong."

"Well, o' course I did naething wrong," she replied, feeling her cheeks burn red.

"Then what are ye worrying fer?" Owen grinned back.

By this time, Iseabail had pushed herself to her feet, trying to ignore the ache in her hips from lying on the hard floor, and walked several steps away. She spent an overly long time brushing down her frock, doing her very best to avoid Owen's gaze. A gaze that told her that he was highly entertained by her embarrassment.

"We should pack," she said quickly, turning and heading toward the door.

"Where are ye going?" Owen was now up and on his feet. Grabbing his blanket, he began to fold it in some unconventional way.

"I found a bucket yesterday. I put it under one o' the holes in the roof. It means we have fresh water tae drink."

He looked surprised, and inclining an impressive head, he said. “Nae just a pretty face, then.”

Iseabail refrained from snarling, and instead, continued in the direction she was going.

Aye, Mr. Sinclair. I am, in fact, far smarter than ye imagine.

With flasks refilled with fresh water, and saddle bags packed, they readied themselves to venture out to the horses. Owen held back for a moment longer, and when Iseabail turned to see what he was doing, she watched him leave several large cuts of meat for the dog, who remained lying beside the now dead fire.

“I think ye have a wee soft spot for him,” Iseabail said, finding herself rather moved at Owen’s kindness.

“Aye, well. He’s just down on his luck, is all. We all need a wee hand when that happens.”

She wondered, as she made her way out to her mare, if Owen had been speaking more for himself than the dog, yet she could not ignore his kindness. Mounting her beast, she turned to him as he sat upon his.

“Good things always come back tae ye. Yer good deeds willnae go unnoticed.”

CHAPTER NINE

Owen was still trying to figure Iseabail out as they travelled to the village Eden had spoken of yesterday morning at breakfast. Lady Mackay was certainly a wily one, and having already witnessed what she was capable of, he determined to keep a close eye on her.

Not that he was suspicious of her motives any longer. But nor was she one of the usual country lasses he ordinarily associated with. As a noble, she would have been well-educated, but she didn't just have knowledge, she was clever. It was a rare thing in man or woman.

"How did ye happen upon the village where I met ye the other night?" he asked as they travelled. "What brought ye there?"

"It was the only lead I had," she replied. "Even without me guards roundabout me, people dinnae want tae talk about the crystal. I dinnae ken whether it is that they are scared o' it, or something else. Anyway, I finally spoke tae a man who sent me tae these parts. He told me that if I was tae find any more information about it, this would be the best place tae dae it. Clearly, he wasnae wrong."

"I wonder how he kent?" Owen said, more a rhetorical musing than a question.

"From me understanding, there are far more people who ken about this crystal than I first imagined. But somehow, the knowledge o' it has been kept hidden."

Owen cast her a glance and shrugged. "With what it's capable o' doing, ye can

understand why.”

“Aye, I suppose,” Iseabail replied.

They arrived in the village a short time after that, and tying their horses up, they began searching the stalls of the market as they slowly strolled by. They passed men selling vegetables, and women selling bread. There were cloths, and bags, and knives for sale. And as they continued, the traders called out, trying to sell their wares. They hadn’t gone far, when Iseabail nudged Owen with her elbow.

“Dinnae those necklaces look very familiar?” she murmured from the corner of her mouth.

Owen glanced at them as they reached the stall, and then nodded. “Aye. Similar, but nae the same.”

“Close enough,” Iseabail countered. She then stopped at the stall and caught the merchant’s attention.

“Good day tae ye, sir,” she said. “I wonder if ye can help me.”

Owen watched the man smile warmly when he caught sight of Lady Mackay. He couldn’t blame him. She did have the ability to take one’s breath away. But this man was far older than the two of them. In fact, Owen imagined, with his white thinning hair, and the deep lines etched into his ever-progressive forehead, that he was likely an old age. Perhaps sixty, or even more.

“I will try, Miss,” he replied, the smile parting his lips to reveal a jumble of crooked, black teeth with several gaps.

Nodding to the necklaces he had on display, Iseabail said, “Ye have some fine wares,

but I am looking fer something a little more specific.” She turned toward Owen and tugged his necklace from beneath his tunic. “Something a little more like that,” she continued.

The merchant’s smile swiftly disappeared, and looking suddenly nervous, his head jerked from left to right, as though fearing another might approach.

“I’m afraid I cannae help ye, Miss,” he said, lowering his eyes so he didn’t have to look at her. “I think it’s best if ye move on tae somewhere else. Perhaps another here can help ye.”

“Please, sir,” Iseabail said gently, clearly picking up his fear immediately. “We dinnae want any trouble. I’m only looking from where ye got them. Ye’re nae in any danger from us.”

But the old man began shaking his head. “I cannae help ye, Miss. I cannae help ye.”

Owen took three long strides around the table and positioned himself beside the man. It made him jump out of his skin, and in hindsight, Owen’s action likely looked more threatening than he intended, but it was too late now.

“Please, sir. It’s very important that we discover who sold them tae ye. Me maither bought one fer me faither, and he has lost it,” he lied. “He is devastated. Me sister and I,” Owen nodded to Iseabail, “are now trying tae discover where we might find another. Me faither is distraught in case me maither discovers his clumsiness.”

“Ye may remember her,” Iseabail said, playing along with the tale. “A very beautiful woman with long dark hair. She bought three from ye. One fer me braither,” she nodded to Owen, “one fer our faither, and one fer our grandfaither.”

The story seemed to have calmed the man, and a deep frown replaced the panic as he

tried to recall Eden.

“Och, aye. I dae remember her. She was a lovely lady,” he said, nodding and beginning once more to smile.

“She is,” Iseabail said. “But she will be heartbroken when she discovers me faither has lost the precious gift she bought him. Clearly, ye have nay more left, but perhaps ye could tell us where we might purchase another.”

“I dinnae ken if that’s possible,” the merchant said. “I bought all three necklaces from a trader, and I cannae say fer certain if he has anymore.”

“A trader?” Owen pressed, trying to keep the man talking.

“Aye. I only met him the once, and I havenae seen him since. He left tae sail tae Burwick on the island o’ South Ronaldsay. Ye ken the crossing is bad up that way. Well, he went that night and he never came back.”

“Och, nae,” Iseabail said, giving a very fine performance of disappointment. “And ye havenae a clue where he might be?”

“Ye might ask at the tavern at John o’ Groats. Perhaps someone there has seen him. A lot o’ the traders are there, fer it’s the closest tavern tae the shore,” the man continued.

“And what kind o’ man might we be looking for?” Owen asked. “Tall, short? Fat, thin? Fair, dark?”

“He’s a little older than ye, and always wears a brown hat with a feather in the side. He has blonde hair, and I’d say he’s tall enough, but wiry with it.”

Iseabail leaned across the table and placed a hand on the man's arm in a tender gesture. "Thank ye, sir. Ye dinnae ken how much this means tae us."

"Ye might nae find him, mind," the old man said, looking as though he hadn't done enough.

"Even if we dinnae, ye have done all ye can tae help us, and fer that, we're eternally grateful. In fact, I would like tae purchase that bracelet from ye, fer 'tis such a beautiful piece."

"Och, nae, Miss. Ye dinnae have tae dae that."

"I want tae. Please," Iseabail insisted.

For a second, Owen thought the man would protest again, and wondered if Iseabail would not compel him to take her money. But as it happened, the man relented, and a few minutes later, he had wrapped the bracelet in soft cloth and taken her coin.

On the way back to the horses, Iseabail said, "John O' Groats is nearly another day's travel. We'll be lucky if we make it by night fall."

"Perhaps, but at least it's something," Owen replied. "Fer a second, I didnae think the man was going tae talk."

She smiled up at him then. "Aye, that was quick thinking."

"Aye, well," Owen smirked, "I'm used tae having tae spin a yarn or two when necessary."

Iseabail raised her eyebrows knowingly, expressing her lack of surprise. "Aye. I can well imagine."

They were now at the horses, and Owen cupped his hands together, ready to give Iseabail a lift into her saddle. “What’s that supposed tae mean? Sure, ye dinnae ken me at all.”

Iseabail positioned herself comfortably, and then gazed down at him, a smile dancing at the corner of her mouth. “Yer castle walls have ears, Owen. Perhaps ye need tae be more careful where ye and yer giant friend have yer conversations.”

Still frowning, Owen leapt into his own saddle with no effort, and grabbing the reins, he took control of his horse.

What had she heard?

He was still trying to figure that out when Iseabail flicked her reins and guided her mare into a gallop.

“Hey. Wait.”

He could hear her laughing as she rode away, and jerking the reins to follow her, he smiled a little.

Maybe she isnae just as tightly wound as I first thought.

While he had tried to remain jovial, the previous night had been anything but pleasant. Clearly, she was tired, wet, and uncomfortable, and had not been in the greatest form at all. Only after that dog had scared the living daylights out of them both, did he see a small chink in her grumpy armor.

Sometime in the middle of the night, she had turned over and lay upon him. He had woken at the time, nearly terrified as to what he was supposed to do. Should he move her away? Should he stay perfectly still? Ought he to wrap his arm around her and

cuddle her back to keep her warm?

In the end, he had chosen to keep his own arms safely away. That way he could not be accused of trying anything as she slept.

When he had woken again that morning, he had watched the rise and fall of the back of her head, her silky hair draped across his chest, scared to death of moving in case he disturbed her.

No matter what her mood had been the night before, he had to take into consideration what she was going through. Her father and brother were being held captive and she had taken on the task of searching high and low to find the crystal that would save them, alone. Even last night, she had admitted the same. While he had tried to provoke her by calling her careless, he had actually found her explanation unbelievably brave.

She was a noble. She was well within her right to travel with guards to protect her. But as she had said herself, how would anyone open up to her if she did so? And thus, to save her family, she had put herself in grave danger for their sake.

When he finally caught up to her, she was still smiling.

“So, are ye going tae tell me what ye overheard while in the castle?” he asked.

“Och, ye ken what I heard. It appears that everyone kens that ye like the lasses, and they, evidently, like ye back. I can only imagine how many untruths ye have had tae tell tae keep them from discovering each other.”

“That’s only happened a few times,” he defended. “And usually, when one o’ them willnae let go.”

“Willnae let go?” she said, looking a little surprised.

“Aye. They get too attached.”

Iseabail snorted. “Och, dae they now?” Her voice was loaded with disbelief, so much so, that Owen felt he had no choice but to defend himself.

“Aye, actually. They dae. I am the heir tae a great clan, ye ken.”

“Och, I dae ken,” she said, her tone sliding into sarcasm. “And what a catch ye are. I mean, what lass wouldnae want tae be with a man whose bedded all the lasses in the kingdom afore her. It’s every woman’s dream.”

Owen rolled his eyes. “Aye, and I suppose ye’re as innocent as a rose.”

Spinning her head, she glared at him, her expression betraying her astonishment. “How dare ye? I am a lady, and ye shouldnae speak o’ such things.”

As though she had physically slapped him, Owen was stunned at her harsh reply, but realized his mistake. He lifted a hand apologetically, and inclined his head. “I apologize. Ye are right. Please, forgive me.”

Having turned to look where she was going after her harsh reprimand, she jerked her head back to look at him. Owen implored her with his eyes, but Iseabail scowled and turned away.

The damage was already done.

Fool!

For a second, and with the direction their conversation had been going, Owen had

forgotten who he was speaking with, and treating her like the many lasses he ordinarily spent his time with, the words had left his mouth with little thought. But she was right. She was, indeed, a lady, and his words had been utterly rude. Even so, he imagined his deduction was entirely on point. Lady Mackay was likely the most innocent woman he knew.

They continued for several hours with little conversation. He imagined it was partly to do with the earlier quarrel, and partly to do with the fact that they were both now waning after their disturbed and uncomfortable rest the previous night.

Let's hope there are rooms in this tavern we're heading tae.

Darkness had long since fallen when they arrived at the main village of John o' Groats, and the wind was bitterly cold as they ventured toward the pinnacle coast of Scotland.

"God, that wind would cut ye in two," Owen shivered, pulling his plaid tighter around his shoulders.

Iseabail, shivering and huddled into her heavy cloak, cast him a glance. Her nose was red, and her skin pale. "Let's find this tavern and get intae the heat."

The Anchorage was not difficult to find. It was also heaving with people. In fact, as Owen pushed his way through to try and speak to the inn-keeper, he feared they would be spending another night out in the awful conditions of mother nature.

"Dae ye have a room?" he said loudly to the older man behind the bar. He had to shout to make himself heard over the many loud conversations of all those around about him. There was music playing somewhere too, which sounded great, but was hardly helpful under the circumstances.

The inn-keeper waved Owen further down the bar and pulled a ledger from beneath it. Flicking to a page, he eyed Owen. “Ye’re in luck. I have one left.”

“Good. We’ll take it,” Owen replied quickly, nearly worried that someone might come up the back of him and nab it before he had a chance.

“Just the one night?” the inn-keeper asked.

“Aye. Fer now, at any rate.”

A minute later, Owen had the key to the room tightly in his grasp, and battling through the bodies, he found Iseabail surrounded by many men, all giving her much of their attention. She was handling herself well, and knowing what she was capable of, Owen wasn’t exactly worried, but he did feel something else. A feeling that he didn’t experience very often.

Are ye actually jealous?

And examining the feeling, he realized that he was.

Huh!

He waved a hand to catch Iseabail’s attention, and upon seeing him, she excused herself and moved through the crowd toward him.

Owen bent down near her ear and she leaned in closely so that she could hear his words over the surrounding noise. “We were lucky.” He jingled the key. “We got the last room.”

“Oh, thank all the gods fer that. I dinnae think I could have done another night in an abandoned cottage.”

Following the inn-keeper's instructions, Owen led the way to their room. It was on the top floor, in the attic space, which, Owen thought, served them better, for the higher they went, the less noise they could hear from the tavern itself.

A large fire blazed in the center of the room, and both Owen and Iseabail headed directly toward it. "Och, that feels so good," she said, holding her hands out to the flickering flames.

"I will go back down and have food sent up tae us. I dinnae ken about ye, but I'm starving."

Iseabail surprised him with a smile, especially after the cold shoulder she had been giving him all day. "Well, I'm afraid that's what happens when ye give the rest o' the food we had tae a poor dog. But I'm nae complaining. He needed it far more than we."

"I agree," Owen said, feeling glad he had managed to at least do something right so far on this trip. "Right. I'll be back shortly."

When the food arrived, they ate in silence, more because they were both famished. The thick stew was hot and tasty, and the fresh bread that accompanied it was delicious. Afterward, they took their time sipping at their ale, while once more, sitting beside the fire.

"We shouldnae waste the rest o' the evening," Iseabail said. "There are many men down there, though I didnae see any with a brown hat and feather. But he might nae be wearing it indoors. Who kens, maybe the trader is here at this very minute."

"Even if he isnae," Owen nodded, "one o' the local men might kent where we can find him. By the sounds of that merchant, he's likely tae be a regular traveler through these parts. Someone likely kens something."

“Agreed.”

“Fine. Let’s finish these drinks, and then go and get ourselves another one downstairs.”

But they discovered, once they joined the rowdy crowd in the tavern, that most of the men that were there, were not actually locals, but travelers, journeying to and from the Orkney Isles. Worse than that, any of those that they asked about the merchant didn’t seem to have any information that might help them. In fact, most of them had neither heard of him nor had seen him.

“This is a complete waste o’ time,” Owen hissed, as they stood together near the wall beside the fireplace.

“I dinnae ken that it is,” Iseabail replied. “There is a man over yonder who looks like he could be who were looking for. He has a brown hat sat beside him, but there is nay feather in it.”

“The one who has hardly been able tae keep his eyes off ye fer the last half an hour, ye mean?” Owen growled.

Iseabail smiled up at him. “Is that right? Good. That will make this all the easier.”

“Nay, Iseabail. This is nae a good idea.”

But Iseabail had already pushed herself from the wall and was making her way across the room to the man. He watched her every step, and then smiled widely when she came to sit beside him.

Owen, who remained where he was, could only look on and grit his teeth.

There's that feeling again.

He ignored his goading thoughts and kept a steely eye on Iseabail. If that cad laid one finger on her...

For the first few minutes, it appeared Iseabail did much of the listening, as the man seemed to talk on and on. Owen wondered what he might be saying, and not able to help himself, he left his position and maneuvered around the room. He came to a stop a few feet away, hidden behind a group of burly men who were as wide and tall as himself.

"...besides, me room looks out over the ocean," the man drawled. "Would ye nae like tae wake up with that view in the morning?"

"Ye're very presumptuous, are ye nae?" Iseabail came back, clearly holding her own.

"Och, 'tis ye who came over tae me, remember? Surely, I should get a reward fer answering all o' yer strange questions."

Owen gritted his teeth and clenched his jaw.

I'll give ye a reward, all right. It's right here at the end o' me arm.

He clenched his fist, imagining what he wanted to do to this man.

"Ye've been very kind, but I was looking for someone particular, and clearly, ye are nae him. I'm going tae return and find me friend. Perhaps he has had better luck."

"Och, nay ye dinnae," the man spat.

Owen caught the man grabbing Iseabail's wrist, and could no longer help himself.

“Hey,” he yelled, pushing himself through the crowd of men.

“Ye will let go o’ me now,” Iseabail said.

The man released her immediately, but Owen didn’t care. He had laid his hand on a woman who clearly was not interested in him. He wasn’t getting away with that. Pushing the table aside, he grabbed the man by his tunic and pulled him to his feet.

“What the bloody hell dae ye think ye’re doing?” he spat.

“Get yer hands off me before I knock those teeth o’ yers down yer throat,” the man bellowed back.

“I’d like tae see ye try,” Owen spat.

“Ye’re a whippet,” the man growled. “I’ll put ye on yer back in one strike.”

“Prove it,” Owen yelled, and turning on his heels, he dragged the man through the crowd, who had long since quieted at the row, and who now parted to let them through.

“Owen?” Iseabail cried.

But Owen ignored her plea. He was far too angry to listen to her in that moment. Rage danced in every fiber of his being. No man had the right to put an unwanted hand on a woman. This bully needed to learn a lesson, and Owen was just the man to do it.

As they spilled out onto the cobbled street, the crowd followed, and without giving the man a chance to think, Owen swung his fist and caught him across the jaw.

Cursing at him, the man came back, his arms swinging, but his direction was obvious with each attempt. So obvious, that Owen was able to avoid his blows with ease while returning a swift strike of his own before the man knew what had hit him.

The men and women who had gathered around yelled at the tops of their voices, and a whole cacophony of sound rung throughout the entire street. It was nothing but encouragement for Owen, who felt alive and filled with energy as the fight continued, though it was evident, the man could clearly talk better than he could fight.

After several more moments, the man's knees buckled, and though the opportunity lay wide open for Owen to strike him so hard he would not rise again, he controlled his temper, held back his fist, and instead, only sneered at him.

“Put me on me back, will ye? Aye. Ye cannae even stand on yer own two feet. In future, keep yer damned hands tae yersel’. Dae ye hear?”

The man remained kneeling, and breathless and bloody; he could only swipe an exhausted hand in Owen's direction. Then a huge cheer went up from the crowd, and welling with pride, Owen thrust his two arms in the air in victory. It felt just like those fights he had won in the taverns. And this was yet another victory.

Turning back towards the tavern, Owen was enjoying the accolades and pats on the back from those he passed when he suddenly caught sight of Iseabail standing near the doorway of the tavern.

She was not smiling, nor was she happy that he had taught that piece of dirt a lesson. And she did not look as though she were about to congratulate him. In fact, her face looked like thunder, and in that second, Owen knew he had messed up.

Again!

CHAPTER TEN

While everyone around him yelled congratulations, Iseabail could only stand there fuming. With her arms by her sides, she curled her fists into a ball and, shaking with frustration, squeezed her fingers together in anger.

O' all the stupid, idiotic, mindless things tae dae!

She had been handling it. The man was getting a bit pushy, but she had had it under control. No one in the tavern had paid her any mind, and if Owen hadn't come along, she would have slipped away as easily as she had approached the man.

But no. Owen had to make a great spectacle of himself for the entire tavern to see. Which was the exact opposite of what Iseabail either wanted or needed.

When he finally caught sight of her, after relishing in his ridiculous victory, praised by men and women he did not even know, people who had consumed far too much ale, he was still beaming with delight and pride at his accomplishment. That didn't last long though, and a second later, the smile fell from his face. Approaching her, he looked more than confused at her obvious lack of delight.

Is he really so stupid nae tae realize why I am so angry? Well, he's about to find out.

When he was only a few feet away, she launched forward, grabbed his arm, and yanked him swiftly away to the side of the tavern.

"What the devil?" he gasped.

“Och, ye’re in big trouble now, lad,” someone chuckled behind him.

A few in the crowd, who were now making their way back into the tavern, made whooping noises, adding jibes as they went.

“She’s going tae have yer guts fer garters. Look at her face.”

“Aye, she’s nae a happy one,” another chuckled.

“Ye’re sleeping in the barn tonight, lad,” someone else heckled.

Owen winced at their words, and clearly, would have preferred they kept their opinions to themselves. No doubt he realized that their comments were not making the situation any better, and he was right, for Iseabail could feel her rage still building.

She dragged him around the corner, trying to get as far away from anyone as she could, and then with all the might she could muster, she slammed him up against the wall. And it did take all her might, for Owen was huge.

“What the hell is wrong with ye?” she hissed, glaring up at him.

“I dinnae ken what ye’re on about?” Owen shrugged with wide eyes, evidently still completely clueless as to why she was so angry. “I thought ye’d be happy with someone protecting yer honor.”

“I was handling it,” she spat.

“The man had a hold o’ yer wrist, Iseabail,” he argued.

“And a second ‘afore ye arrived, I compelled him tae let me go.”

“I dinnae care. It still didnae give him any right tae put his hands all over ye.”

“And o’ course, the only solution is tae make a big scene, isnae it? Ye needed tae teach the man a lesson with nae a care fer the consequences. Clearly, ye were loving every minute o’ it. Anything tae be in the limelight, right, Owen?”

His confusion turned to frustration as he furrowed his brow and snarled at her. “I did it fer ye, ye ungrateful woman. It had naething tae dae with wanting any limelight.”

“O’ course nae,” she snapped back sarcastically. “I just happened to have met ye as ye were parading around a tavern, lapping up the attention from all the men after winning yet another victory and putting another man on his back. But this isnae the same at all, right?”

“It was naething like the same,” Owen barked back. “Defending a woman’s honor is nae the same as fighting fer money. Dae ye think I wanted tae dae that?” He threw a gesture out toward the street.

“Aye, I dae. And if ye were honest with yersel, ye ken that ye did. ‘Tis a shame that ye’re all brawn and nay brains. Ye’re that dense, ye dinnae even realize what ye’ve done.”

“Nae, ye’re right,” he shook his head vehemently, “I dinnae. Why dinnae ye enlighten me, o’ great and wonderful one?” he snapped.

Narrowing her eyes, she looked at him like he was something she would kick to the side of the road.

“We’re supposed tae be stealthily looking fer this crystal. ‘Tis the reason I’m nae travelling with a hoard o’ guards around me. So naeone kens who I am. Remember? I’ve put me life at risk on this quest, but at least I havenae left a trail o’ me presence.

But ye,” she flung out a hand, “ye decide that everyone in the damned village needs tae ken that we’re here. So well done. Mission accomplished.”

He looked at her with wide eyes, only now seeming to understand why she was so angry. And then, he opened his mouth.

Crossing her hands over her chest, she jutted out her chin and readied herself for his next excuse, for he was bound to give one. He had put them in grave danger, and knowing the man he was, he wasn’t going to handle that too well. He would find anyone else to blame rather than taking responsibility for his actions.

But then, he curled his upper lip and side stepped away from her.

“I’m going tae the room tae clean mesel’ up,” he snarled, and immediately turning on his heels, he left her standing there, seething with so much rage, she now felt like punching something.

Everyone else had returned to the tavern, leaving Iseabail outside. She was alone apart from a couple of drunks, who stumbled across the cobbled streets together. They were singing out of tune, and, she assumed, looked to be heading home.

Taking several deep breaths, she placed her hands on her hips. Her heart thumped, and she was breathless with anger. She needed to calm down a little before she went back inside. Still, she could not get her head around Owen’s stupidity. After all the care she had taken over the last weeks to keep herself hidden and unnoticed, it took one action from an idiot to ruin it all.

And of course, he had loved every minute. He might deny it, he might even excuse his behavior with the reasoning that he was protecting her honor. But the truth of the matter was, Owen Sinclair loved to fight. She had seen it with her own eyes on the first night they had met. What had happened earlier had had less to do with her honor,

and more to do with his own enjoyment.

After a little more time passed, and her breathing was back to normal, Iseabail pulled her cloak back around her, took a deep breath, and slipped back into the tavern, her eyes flicking from side to side, watching those she passed.

Surprisingly, no one batted an eyelid in her direction. A fact for which she was grateful. The kerfuffle was over, and everyone had already moved on to whatever else caught their attention.

Small enough to slip about unnoticed, Iseabail found a table in the corner and settled herself down in a chair beside it. She wasn't sure if Owen would come downstairs again, but at that moment in time, she could not look at him without wanting to put her hands around his throat and squeeze really hard. It would be better for her to stay where she was until she had calmed herself fully.

"That necklace he wears is precious, isnae it?" a small, croaky voice said from beside her.

Spinning to look, Iseabail saw a frail old woman sat at a table just a few feet away. Before the woman had spoken, Iseabail hadn't even noticed her, but she was more astonished at her words.

"I beg yer pardon?" Iseabail replied.

"The crystal," the old woman repeated. "It has powers. Just like ye."

Iseabail's mouth fell open, and she stared at the woman. "I'm afraid yer mistaken, madam. I dinnae ken what ye're talking about. "

The wizened woman smiled, showing off gaps between her blackened teeth. Her face

was lined with deep crevices, each one likely able to tell a different story. White frizzy hair sprung in every direction from her head, and though she appeared to be looking at Iseabail, her eyes were hardly open.

“Life is hard, isnae it, when ye have tae hide who ye are?” the old woman said. “I ken that feeling. I’ve had tae dae it all me life too.”

Iseabail regarded the woman, and then wondered if perhaps, she too, might have a gift.

“The answer is, aye. I dae,” the woman said.

Iseabail gasped. “What?”

“Ye were wondering if I have a gift.”

“How did ye dae that?” Iseabail cried.

The woman beamed another smile and inclined her head, “Because I have a gift,” she laughed lightly.

“Ye can read me thoughts?”

The woman nodded.

“Me braither can dae the same, but he has tae put his hand upon the person.”

“And yer gift?” the woman asked.

Iseabail hesitated, and then realized her hesitation was ridiculous. If the woman could read her mind, there was not much she could keep from her anyway.

“I can compel people to dae as I ask.”

“Och, that is a good one.” The old woman nodded, sounding impressed. “Ye are on a mission, but ye must be careful. Dinnae lay yer hand upon the crystal ye are looking fer when ye find it. It will kill ye, child. It’s very important that ye remember that.”

Iseabail nodded, acknowledging her earlier suspicions. But now, excited that after all her searching, she had met someone who knew something about the crystal, she continued on.

“How dae ye ken about the crystal? Where can I find it?”

The woman shook her head. “That, I cannae tell ye, fer I dinnae ken. There have been many ‘afore ye who have looked fer it, but tae nay avail. It holds a magic o’ its own, and some say, it never remains in one place.” The old woman shrugged. “Old wives’ tales, maybe, I dinnae ken.”

“So ye cannae give me any clue as tae the direction I need tae go?” Iseabail asked, now feeling a sense of disappointment wash over her.

The old woman shook her head again. “I’m afraid nae. But it will kill ye if ye touch it. If ye dae find it, get that strapping man o’ yers tae carry it.” A wide beam lined her papery skinned face once more, but Iseabail did not smile with her.

If I dinnae kill him first.

“Dinnae be too angry with him. He wasnae thinking o’ himself when he challenged that man. He was angered by the way he was treating ye, and only fought him tae try and protect ye.”

Iseabail gazed at the woman in wonder. That was exactly what Owen had said, but

she hadn't believed him. Could this old woman be telling the truth?

"I am telling the truth. What reason have I got tae lie tae ye?"

Again, Iseabail gasped. "Surely, it is rude tae be inside someone else's head like that."

The old woman nodded. "Ye are right. I apologize. Sometimes I forget meself."

Iseabail was working through what she had said only a moment ago, when suddenly, she remembered the crystal around Owen's neck.

"How can ye ken his motivations fer the fight? He wears that crystal, and thus, yer powers dinnae work on him."

"Nae, but I dae have eyes in me head, me dear. I dinnae always have tae use me gift tae see things. I watched the whole thing play out, and he was angry. The man was only trying tae protect ye."

From the corner of her eye, she saw movement, and turning, Iseabail watched Owen approach. His shirt was now clean, a fresh one, she imagined, and he had a look that told her that he was still as angry with her as she with him.

Perhaps she had jumped to conclusions, but he still should have stayed out of it. Whatever his reasons, he had made an unnecessary scene, and perhaps, made them unnecessary targets.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A fter splashing water on his hands and face, Owen changed his shirt, discarding the other one after discovering it was torn. He hadn't noticed the tear earlier, which meant, it must have happened during the fight.

The fight ye should never have had, according tae Lady Mackay.

He was fuming after their quarrel downstairs. Not only had she completely humiliated him in front of all those men, but she had made accusations that were founded on complete falsehoods.

“As if I would start a fight just for the fun o’ it,” he growled, pacing back and forth across the creaking floorboards. “Aye, because I clearly have naething better tae dae with me time, fer God’s sake.”

While he was angry with what she had said about his motivations, he could not deny her other points, though he had not conceded such to her face. His pride simply would not allow it.

But she has a point.

“I ken,” he said, talking to himself. “I just didnae think. I saw what he did, and I acted.”

In hindsight, more Iseabail’s than his own, Owen had realized his mistake, even if it was begrudgingly. Knowing he was in the wrong had not suddenly rid his body of the

anger he felt at her onslaught, however, and still nearly shaking with frustration, he continued to pace back and forth.

“I did it fer her. And dae I get any thanks? Nay. O’ course, nae. She’s too busy pulling me apart. How wonderful it must be tae be so bloody perfect. I’ll bet she’s made plenty o’ mistakes in her life too.”

Now ye’re just being sour.

Of course, he was. But then, he had every right. If she was mad at him, she could have made her point somewhere else. Not in front of every person walking back into the tavern, laughing at him, and making him look like he was a hen-pecked husband.

Only moments before, he had been the victor, but she had swiped that away from him and instead, made him look like an idiot. Besides, he wasn’t just angry at her. He was angry at himself for being so careless. She was right, he had brought the attention of the entire tavern on them, and nor was she wrong about the danger they might be in. He was better than that. He wasn’t known as the best scout in the Sinclair clan for no reason at all.

Ye let yer heart rule yer head.

Owen shook his head at that thought, but it still remained, and for a moment, he had no choice but to consider it because, it was, indeed, yet another truth. He had been jealous when the man had laid his hands on Iseabail. His reaction had been motivated by pure green envy.

And perhaps, a little showy display fer her too.

“Which clearly worked wonders,” he spat sarcastically.

After a little more time, he headed for the door. Iseabail had not returned to the room, and the idea of her being down there alone began to make him uncomfortable, especially given the fact that it was he, who had now made her a target with his antics.

He found Iseabail tucked away in a corner sitting at a table alone. Upon approach, she raised her eyes to look at him, and then quickly looked away.

“I’ll get us a drink,” he said, trying to offer some sort of olive branch, even though he remained a little frustrated. There was no point in them sitting there in silence. At least with a drink in hand, he would have something to do.

When he had battled through the crowd and returned to the table with their tankards, Iseabail seemed preoccupied with looking about her.

“Have ye lost something?” he asked, placing the tankards on the table.

“There was an old woman here nae long ago. But now, she’s away.

“Perhaps it’s past her bedtime,” Owen murmured.

“Nae. Ye dinnae understand. She was telling me about the crystal.”

Owen raised his eyebrows, now more interested. “And?”

“She said she didnae ken where it was, but that it was sought after by many. She also told me that I wasnae tae touch it. That it would be fatal fer me if I did.”

Owen took a moment to let that information sink in. How had the old woman known that they were looking for the crystal? He hadn’t spoken to any woman, and he doubted Iseabail would have either, given the fact that they had been looking for a

man. It seemed a little suspicious.

Owen frowned. "Did ye ask her about it first?"

"That's just it. I was sitting here minding me own business when she began talking tae me. In fact, when I first sat down, I didnae even see her, which I thought was a little strange."

"She just arrived out o' the blue?" Owen looked even more wary.

"Aye. But it's nae as simple as that. The woman has powers and read me mind."

Owen tried to hide his doubt. "Are ye sure it wasnae the other way around? Maybe it was she who was trying tae get information out o' ye."

"I'm nae a fool, Owen. I ken what I heard. Besides, it was she who did all the talking. She gave all the information tae me."

"Then perhaps we should try and find this woman."

But Iseabail shook her head. "I dinnae think she can help us anymore than she did. She was clear when she said she couldnae tell me where it was. Perhaps it is time we tried tae look again fer this trader."

"Aye, perhaps, but nae tonight. I dinnae ken about ye, but I havenae seen anyone fitting the man's description. A man with a brown hat and a feather isnae hard tae miss."

Not long afterwards, Iseabail excused herself to go to the bathroom. Owen remained at the table, thinking upon their predicament. If they couldn't find this man, he wasn't certain what their next move would be. Perhaps they would have to travel around a

bit, asking farther afield.

Iseabail returned, looking perturbed, and hurriedly sat down again beside him.

“What happened?” Owen demanded, knowing by her fearful face that something had.

“It doesnae matter,” she said abruptly.

“Clearly, it does. Tell me.”

She was rattled by something, and with the number of men in this place, Owen already had an idea why. “Someone said something tae ye, didnae they?”

She flicked a glance in his direction and then quickly looked away, clearly shaken.

“Iseabail, will ye talk tae me?”

“Nay. I dinnae want ye jumping intae yet another fight.”

“So, someone has said something tae ye,” he pressed.

“Aye, they did,” she huffed. “But it’s fine.”

“I’m nae going tae let up until ye tell me,” Owen continued. “Or better still, I’ll get up from me seat and go and find the man who challenged ye.”

“Nay!” she gasped. “All right, I’ll tell ye.” Still, she hesitated, and even in her frustration at Owen, he could still see how shaken she was.

“I was just coming out o’ the lady’s room when a man approached me and pushed me back into it.”

Owen's eyes flew open.

"I stumbled backwards while he said some bloody awful things. Things that he wanted tae dae tae me."

"Where is he?" Owen growled, standing from his chair.

"Nay, Owen. Please. It'll be fine. When I tried tae compel him tae leave me alone, it didnae work, and when I looked into his eyes, I noticed that he looked partially sighted. So, clearly, me gift doesnae work on everyone."

Owen now had his fists clenched, and scanned the room for such a man.

"Will ye please sit down?" she begged. "We cannae afford another spectacle."

Slowly, but still raging, Owen lowered himself into his chair.

"I managed tae push past him," Iseabail continued, "but nae before he told me he would come and find me, nay matter where I hid."

Owen was still scanning the room when Iseabail said, "Perhaps it's best if we retire. If he doesnae see me again, he might leave."

As much as he wanted to find this man and punish him for terrifying Iseabail into such a state, Owen knew he had caused enough of a scene for one night. Maybe Iseabail was right, even though it felt to him like they were running away. Something that displeased him greatly.

"Fine," he said. "Grab yer drink. We'll tak' them tae the room with us."

He had to admit it had been a long day, and they were both tired. Maybe an early

night would do them the world of good. He still couldn't help himself from scanning the room as they went. But as they approached the bar, Owen had an idea that was totally unrelated to Iseabail's encounter.

"Inn keeper, I wonder if ye could help us."

The older man frowned and leaned in closer so he could hear. "What is it that ye need?"

"There's a trader that comes through this way. He sells crystal necklaces. Like this one." Owen pulled his necklace free and showed it to the man. "Me maither bought one fer me faither, and like the clumsy fool he is, he has lost it. We've tracked down the merchant who sold it, and he sent us here. But we seem tae be having little luck. The man wears a brown hat with a feather."

The innkeeper shook his head. "I cannae say I ken the man ye're talking about, but I ken there is another merchant who comes through this way selling crystals. I dinnae ken if they are the same stones ye're looking fer, mind."

"Well, it's worth a shot," Owen pressed, eager for the innkeeper to tell them more.

"He's expected on the dawn sailing. He should be here on the morrow." The innkeeper looked a little worried. "This man's said tae be dangerous, mind. If I were ye, I'd be wary about him."

"And what daes this merchant look like?"

"He's a big man, broad as a house with a scar on his neck right here." The innkeeper pointed to just beneath his ear. "If I see ye about when he's here, I'll point him out tae ye."

“Thank ye,” Owen said. “I’m grateful fer yer efforts.”

Owen was about to turn away when he heard Iseabail speak behind him.

“I wonder if I could have some hot water for a bath sent up tae our room please.”

“Aye,” the innkeeper nodded, “I’ll send the lasses up tae ye with a few buckets.”

“Thank ye.”

They climbed the stairs in silence, and upon entering the room, Iseabail said little to him while she arranged the screen in front of the copper tub. Whether it was because she was still angry with him, or the fact that she was clearly shaken up, Owen could not know. Perhaps it was both.

Not long after that, a knock came upon the door. When Owen opened it, two maids stood at the door, both with a bucket of steaming water in each hand.

“For the bath, sir,” the prettier one said.

Owen opened the door wider. “In ye go.”

The maids swiftly deposited their water, and then hurriedly left as quickly as they had arrived.

“I will leave ye tae tak’ yer bath in peace,” Owen said, turning toward the door.

“Nae,” Iseabail said, panic clearly in her voice. She looked more than worried. “I ken, this isnae proper, but...”

“Ye’re frightened,” Owen concluded gently.

“Me gift has protected me so far,” she explained. “I never really felt in danger. But without it, I am powerless. And if that man discovers where I am...” she trailed off again.

Owen nodded. “It’s fine, Iseabail. I swear, I willnae let any harm come tae ye. I will stay. Away and get yer bath.”

“Thank ye,” she murmured, and then turning, she slipped behind the screen.

While Iseabail began undressing behind the screen, Owen found himself wandering over to the wall to look out of the window. He needed some sort of distraction. The idea of her undressing not ten feet away was doing things to him that he needed to control. Across the room, and positioned just beneath the attic window that gave them a view across the water, stood a dresser with a mirror.

As he gazed out across the darkening sky, he caught a movement in the mirror, and glancing down at it, he noticed the angle caught Iseabail just behind the screen. He continued to pretend he was looking out of the window, but instead, as though mesmerized by her, he watched her strip layer after layer from her body.

“Want me tae come and wash yer back?” he said lightly, partly to cut through the silence, partly because he felt the heavy tension of her earlier experience.

“Indeed, I dae nae,” she said firmly. “Amazingly, I have been able tae wash me own body fer many years.”

“Och, well, that isnae quite true, is it?” he came back, watching her lift the shift over her shoulders. She was facing away from him, and inch by inch, the pale skin of her back was revealed.

Soft skin too, he imagined.

She turned slightly, giving him a glimpse of the curve of her breast, and sucking in sharply, he swallowed a gasp as her form took his breath away.

“What dae ye mean?” she said, the confusion evident in her voice.

“Well, I’m sure, as the lady o’ the castle, ye have maids tae dae that kind o’ thing,” he said, struggling to control his desire from spilling into his tone.

He watched her now lift one leg over the tub. She let out a breath, likely because it was so hot, but soon enough, the next leg followed. Then holding onto the sides, she slowly lowered her entire body down. Now all he could see was her shoulders and the back of her head, but it was too late. His groin already twitched with arousal.

“And ye are a maid now, are ye?” she countered.

Owen allowed his gaze to linger just a few seconds more before finally turning back to look out of the window. Watching her undress had been wrong, but it was as though his eyes had been glued to her body. He had simply been unable to look away. She truly was a beautiful woman, and a part of him wondered why she was not yet betrothed or wed.

“I ken plenty o’ maids,” he smiled, “but indeed, I am nae one.”

He could hear her snort at him, and while he could no longer see her, for he had moved across the room and away from the temptation to look at her again, he could imagine her shaking her head and rolling her eyes.

“Ye’re intolerable,” she hissed.

“And yet, ye are stuck with me,” he countered, not caring a wit for her judgement.

“Tell me, Lady Iseabail, why are ye nae yet wed?”

“What?” she gasped.

He frowned at her reply. It was a simple question.

“Married, me lady. Why are ye nae yet married?”

“I hardly think that’s any o’ yer business,” she retorted.

“Ye’re right, it isnae. I was just curious.”

She didn’t reply to that, which left Owen wondering about it. Not just the fact that she wasn’t yet married, but also her seemingly affronted reply. Most ladies might reply that they had not yet found the right suitor, or that they were betrothed to another but were not yet married. Iseabail’s reaction seemed far more abrasive.

Clearly, she’s still mad at me.

He was still a little mad at her, if he was honest. And with that conclusion, Owen moved across the room and laid himself down onto the bed, trying to push the images he had witnessed moments before from his mind.

He closed his eyes and thought about home, wondering if any of the men who were chasing him had turned up at the castle yet?

It has only been a day. They were nowhere near close when ye left.

No, but it was only time before they were. They had already made it across the country. No doubt, they would be asking around for a man who fitted his description. Someone was going to say something. They always did, even in innocence. They would arrive at the castle eventually, and then Daire would have no choice but to tell Madigan everything.

CHAPTER TWELVE

He listened to the dripping water in the tub, imagining it trickling across Iseabail's body. He could see it in his mind's eye, goosebumps rising on her arms, droplets trickling down her throat, her breasts floating in the water, her pert nipples hard from the cold air.

Slipping into a dreamlike state, he imagined kneeling beside her while she remained in the tub. A cloth appeared in his hand, and delicately, he used it to wipe across her pale skin. He grazed it across her shoulders and down the front of her chest. The cloth then fell from his hand as his fingers continued dancing over her bosoms. Catching a nipple with his finger, he heard her gasp as he struck it, over and over again. She arched her back, pressing her chest into his hands, aching for him to caress her, over and over...

The sound of creaking floorboards brought him out of his reverie, and as his eyes flew open, he realized his cock was rock hard and clearly visible, sticking up from beneath his clothes. Iseabail moved from behind the screen, and just as she rounded it, now fully dressed again, he threw himself onto his stomach, stifling an agonizing groan as his full weight landed on his stiff member.

He heard her move across the room, but with his face still in the pillow, he couldn't quite decipher where she was. Then the room filled with the sound of the chair scraping across the wooden floorboards.

She's at the dresser, no doubt about that brush her hair.

After another minute, and now knowing his arousal had settled itself, Owen pushed himself up off the bed.

“I will sleep on the floor tonight.”

It was the chivalrous thing to do, and besides, perhaps after his daydream, it was probably also wise.

Iseabail spun in her chair and stared at him with her eyebrows high. “Ye will dae nay such thing. The bed is large enough fer the two o’ us.”

He was surprised at her suggestion, and smiled.

“Dinnae get any ideas,” she growled. “It’s only that I need ye well rested fer the morrow. We got little rest last night, and one night on the floor is more than enough.”

He flicked his eyebrows and nodded. “O’ course.”

It was sometime later that they both climbed into bed. It was an awkward moment, and Iseabail eyed him carefully.

“I can still sleep on the floor,” he said, lifting his hands in a supplicatory gesture.

“It’s fine,” she said, sounding as convincing as a one-armed juggler.

He waited until she had settled herself, pulling the coverlets over her fully dressed body. Only when she seemed comfortable did he lower himself in beside her. The bed bowed under his weight. He remained outside the coverlets. Partly to appease her worry, partly because he didn’t trust himself as he slept. His daydream had told him enough.

“Good night, Owen,” Iseabail said curtly.

“Good night, me lady,” he replied.

For a while, sleep did not come to him. He imagined it had something to do with the fact that he was lying as stiff as a board, terrified that any movement might bring him too close to her and scare her half to death. But eventually, his eyes grew heavy, and finally, he slipped into a slumber.

Strange dreams marred his sleep, a mixture of faces, old and new. The men who were after him were chasing him, and then, the girl he had saved was there, but she was no longer free. The men grabbed at her, but as Owen ran after them, she turned, and it was not the girl after all, but Iseabail, screaming for her to help him.

Owen fought the men, but then all he could hear was Iseabail reprimanding him for fighting. But still he continued, battling and battling, until, half awake, he realized that he was pushing Iseabail out of the bed.

“Och, God,” he cried, trying to grab her before she fell onto the wooden floor.

In an automatic reaction, for Iseabail still seemed fast asleep, her arm lashed out, in some way, perhaps trying to save herself. Her fist hit Owen in the eye, and he let out a howl. Iseabail was woken at the noise, and upon realizing that she was falling, gasped in fright.

“What are ye doing?” she cried.

“I’m trying tae save ye,” Owen blurted, his right eye closed over with the pain, “but ye thumped me in the eye.”

“Och, me God, I’m so sorry.”

Owen still had a tight grip on her arm, and with a final heave, he pulled her back onto the bed before dropping his head back onto the pillow and lifting his hand to his eye.

For a moment, the two lay there breathlessly, completely bewildered as to what had just happened.

“I’m sorry fer hitting ye in the eye,” Iseabail said, breaking the silence.

“And I am sorry fer shoving ye out o’ the bed,” he returned. “I was having a very realistic dream.”

They both turned to look at each other, and beginning with a smile, the two ended up bursting into laughter. They giggled for a little while and then eventually, things settled down again. Iseabail sat herself up in the bed and quickly pushed herself out of it.

“What are ye doing?” Owen cried.

“I’m getting something tae put on that eye.”

“Och, I’ll live.”

“I’d like to think so,” she said, taking a cloth and dipping it into the cold bath water. “Now here,” she said, sitting beside him on the bed, “stay still.”

While he went to protest, he felt the soothing cold against his eye and decided against it. She was trying to be helpful, even though he didn’t need it, and perhaps, he ought to just let her. It would make her feel better if nothing else.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Ye’ve already said sorry. Ye were sleeping. It’s nae yer fault.”

“Nay, I mean about earlier. Ye were right. I brought unnecessary attention tae us both and it was dangerous. I would never purposefully put ye in danger, Iseabail.”

“I ken,” she said softly. After a moment’s silence, she continued. “Let’s just forget about today, all right? We were both tired, and mistakes are always easier then.”

Owen nodded, feeling all the animosity he had held against her earlier simply slip away to nothing. They were to forgive each other and, as he lay there, her lying partly over his body to reach his face, he found it far easier than he would have imagined.

They rose just before dawn and, with the innkeepers’ words about the dawn sailing fresh in their minds, made their way to the docks in readiness for the boat’s arrival.

A bitter wind blew off the sea that even Owen’s plaid could not protect him from. It cut through to his very bones, and he struggled to stop himself from quaking. Glancing down at Iseabail shivering beside him, he wished he could offer her something more substantial than her thick cloak, but alas, the thin blankets they had brought them would hardly suffice.

“I dae believe that if this boat doesnae arrive soon, I will freeze tae this very spot,” she said, her teeth chattering as she spoke.

“Why dinnae ye return tae the tavern,” Owen said, nodding to the building in sight behind them. “I can wait, and if I discover the merchant, I will come and fetch ye?”

“Nae!” She shook her head firmly. “I need tae be here. I’ve forced ye on this mission so ye can help me. I willnae take the easy road while ye suffer alone.”

“Yer words are noble and I appreciate them, Iseabail, but I think it foolish that both o’

us must suffer out here. Besides, I am the man and thus?—”

“Thus what?” she interrupted. “Ye are the stronger o’ the two o’ us? Is that what ye’re trying tae say?”

It was indeed what he was trying to say, because logically, it was the truth. He stood head and shoulders above her, and was at least as broad again.

“Ye are choosing now tae be stubborn?” He smirked down at her.

Iseabail grinned and shrugged. “Maybe I am stubborn. And o’ course ye are stronger than I. I mean, look at ye. Ye’re built like a house.”

“Aye. Maybe all that fighting has done me some good, right?” He grinned.

She rolled her eyes, but smiled despite herself. “I cannae imagine ‘tis all been from fighting.”

Owen was shaking his head and about to say something else, when he heard a holler from across the water. Turning toward the sound, he watched as the small boat dropped its sails and smoothly headed into the harbor.

“This has tae be it,” he said.

When the ropes were tied and the vessel secured, a small gangplank was laid from the boat to the shore. With eagle eyes, Owen gazed at every man crossing the gangplank, but as the boat emptied, the man they were looking for did not appear. When all had descended, the only one left looked to be the owner.

Owen approached and caught his attention. “We’re looking fer a merchant. A broad man with a scar on his neck here,” he said, pointing just below his ear.

The man recognized the description but shook his head. "I ken the man ye speak o', but I'm afraid I have sorry news. He died on the island a few days back. Someone said he drowned near a river. I'm afraid I cannae tell ye any more than that."

Owen dropped his head and heaved a sigh. "Fer the love o' God."

"Did ye ken him?" the sailor asked.

"Nay, we didnae ken him. We were looking for him because he was rumored tae be trading crystals, like this one." Once again, Owen pulled his necklace from beneath his tunic and showed the sailor.

"Och, right."

"Thanks fer yer time anyway," Owen said, turning back to Iseabail.

"Now how are we tae find it?" she cried.

"Are ye looking fer the crystal itself?" the sailor asked, clearly overhearing Iseabail's words.

Owen turned and took a step closer to the boat. "Aye. We are."

"Well, I can tell ye where he took his wares, and how tae get tae the place. Ye might have better luck there."

Owen cast Iseabail a quick glance, acknowledging her eager nod.

"Thank ye. Aye. We would appreciate that."

The sailor then went on to tell them that the merchant travelled to Brunswick on the

island of South Ronaldsay. He told them that the merchant always headed to the other side of the island where he traded with a woman there.

“I dinnae ken if she’ll be able tae help ye,” the sailor continued, “but it’s all I can tell ye.”

“Thank ye,” Iseabail said. “This is great news. When can we organize tae sail?”

The sailor then shook his head. “Nae fer another four or five days. The water is bad over the next while. Ye’ll nae get anyone tae take ye. It’s just too risky.”

Iseabail looked visibly disappointed, and Owen could understand why. She didn’t have time to waste, and waiting nearly another week was bound to cause her to worry.

“I’m sorry, Iseabail,” he said.

She heaved a sigh. “It’s nae yer fault. Besides, I suppose there is little we can dae about it.”

Owen thanked the sailor once again, and the two returned to the tavern, their earlier excitement now entirely extinguished. They would have to wait it out, while every day, Iseabail would be forced to worry about the fate of her father and brother.

“Come on,” Owen said, resting a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Let’s get some breakfast, and then we’ll decide what to do.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I seabail was more than disheartened as they entered the tavern. The news the innkeeper had relayed to them last night had given her hope that she would be one step closer to discovering where she would find this crystal. Now, that hope had been dashed.

Maybe she ought to be saddened that a man had also lost his life, but she was too concerned about her father and brother's wellbeing to be able to care that the merchant had drowned.

Owen returned to the table looking dejected, and dropping himself down beside her, he said, "The tavern has nay rooms available tonight. We're going tae have tae move on."

Iseabail nodded. "Well, wherever we go, can it be inland, for it is bound tae be warmer than here? I'm still cold even now."

He nodded. "I agree. Besides, there's naething much tae dae here. Fer yer sanity, I'm going tae have tae try and keep ye occupied."

Iseabail looked at him then, and thinking of his consideration of her, a small smile formed on her lips. "Ye think I might go mad?" she said.

"I think we might both go mad. Even if we could stay here, all we could dae is pace back and forth in that tiny room fer a week, waiting for the sea tae calm. If that doesnae send a person mad, I dinnae ken what would."

Plates with eggs and meat with bread arrived a little later, and the conversation was put on hold as they filled their bellies before their journey. Iseabail had no idea where they ought to go next, but Owen was not wrong. Being cooped up in a room for a week would hardly be suitable or productive.

Mounted upon their horses once more, Owen led the way, and they travelled in the same direction they had come, at least for a while. As predicted, the farther inland they journeyed, the warmer it became, and as Iseabail felt the significance of the absence of the coastal wind, she was grateful for the change in weather.

They had been travelling for several hours when a village came into view up ahead. It was nestled down a hill, and looked to be surrounded by open glens all around it.

“We should stop here and rest the horses,” Owen suggested, bringing his horse to a steady stop beside a large group of trees. “Perhaps a walk intae the village will dae us good. Besides, I dinnae ken about ye, but I’m starving.”

“Even after that great big feed this morning?” Iseabail said with a grin.

“Hey,” he said, dismounting and patting his flat stomach with a smirk. “I’m a growing lad.”

Iseabail shook her head. “I cannae imagine ye have much farther tae go.”

With a chuckle, Owen took hold of her by the waist and gently lifted her down from the horse. She held onto his thick arms, and as he slowly lowered her to the ground, Iseabail suddenly felt a little breathless at their proximity.

“Thank ye,” she breathed.

“Ye’re welcome,” he said, gazing down at her.

Their eyes locked, and the two lingered for just a second too long. Feeling a strange sensation in her stomach, Iseabail quickly turned away and took a swift step back. But as she did so, an agonizing pain shot through her ankle.

“Argh,” she screamed, jumping in fright. Something had bitten her; she was sure of it.

“What’s the matter?” Owen cried, his face a picture of astonishment.

Even while Iseabail knew she was injured, she couldn’t help but spin around to look at what might have caused it. In that second, she saw a snake with a zig zag pattern on its back quickly slithering away from them through the grass.

“Och, me God. A snake,” she squealed, now hobbling on her good leg.

“I saw it,” Owen blurted.

Iseabail was now in a great amount of pain, and collapsing into his arms, she hitched up her frock. “Och, god, me leg,” she sobbed.

“It’s all right, Iseabail. Come on. Sit down and let me look at it,” Owen ordered.

But jerking her head back and forth, she searched the grass at her feet, terrified of lowering herself into it. “There might be another one,” she cried.

Owen still held her tightly to him, but he shook his head, ignoring her protestations. “We dinnae have time, Iseabail. If the snake is poisonous, the venom will be travelling through yer body this very minute.”

Clearly still terrified, Iseabail gawked up at him, this information bringing a new wave of fear. But even hearing and acknowledging what he said, she still looked hesitant.

“Ye have tae let me look at it,” Owen demanded.

Still wary, and with her head jerking back and forth as she did so, she allowed Owen to lower her to the ground. The grass was long, perfect for any creatures to lay in hiding, and between the pain and the terror, Iseabail’s heart thumped in her breast.

Dropping to his knees beside her, Owen hurriedly began pulling at the laces of her boot.

“What the devil are ye doing?” she gasped.

But Owen ignored her, and after tossing the boot aside, he grabbed her frock and flung it so it sat above her knee. He then found the top of her stocking, and hooked his fingers around it.

Panic washed over her, and slamming her hand down on his to stop him, Iseabail cried out. “Owen. Wait. Ye cannae.”

He stared up at her then, his eyes focused, his face determined. “Dae ye want tae die, Iseabail?” he growled. “Is yer dignity really more important than yer life?”

“I...I...” she floundered.

Shaking her head, but not really knowing what she ought to think under the circumstances, Owen continued to stare at her.

“I need tae see the wound. Let me help ye, or I swear, it is likely ye will die right here in the grass.”

Iseabail then moved her hand and nodded, allowing him to continue. She hissed as he removed her stocking, the movement seeming to cause her even more agony.

Bending low to her ankle, Owen examined the bite, while Iseabail gasped and panted, trying to look at it from her less than ideal vantage point. Owen's eyes were filled with concentration, and then, as though making a decision, he placed both hands on her leg and lowered his mouth to her ankle.

"Wait!" Iseabail cried, feeling his hands on her body was just a step too far.

Owen jerked his head to the side and glared at her. "What now?" he barked.

"What are ye doing?" she gasped, the pain taking her breath away.

"We have tae get the poison out," he barked.

But Iseabail shook her head. "I dinnae understand. How are ye going tae get rid o' it?"

"I need tae suck the poison from yer leg, Iseabail, and each time ye stop me, yer wasting precious time."

It took a second for Iseabail to comprehend his meaning, and then, suddenly, she realized the danger he was putting himself in.

"Nae," Iseabail cried. "The poison will kill ye."

"Nae, it willnae. Just lay there and try and stay still."

That was easier said than done, for the deep ache running further up her leg was making her writhe back and forth. A second later, she felt Owen's lips on her leg, and the pain only worsened as he sucked at the wound.

She gasped and winced, trying not to cry out. Pushing her knuckles into her mouth,

she had little choice but to endure the agony.

Several times he spat into the grass, but even as she was worried for Owen, her own self-preservation made certain that she did not stop him. Not that she could have if she had tried, at any rate, for he could easily overpower her. Besides, it was clear he was frustrated by her earlier interventions, and she doubted he would let her protestations stop him again.

He continued for a few moments more. The pain seemed to be lessening, but whether that was because he was sucking the poison from her body, or the fact that she was entirely distracted by the sensation of his lips sucking at her leg, she did not know. Even knowing how dangerous the situation was, his lips against her skin was still the most sensual experience Iseabail had ever experienced.

Thankfully for her, Owen could not know what was currently going through her mind, and when he had finished, he hurriedly stood up, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. Taking her hand, he pulled her to stand beside him.

“Can ye walk?”

“Never mind that. We need tae dae something. Ye’re bound tae have poison in yer body now. I cannae lose ye, Owen. Dae something.”

He shook his head vehemently. “I’ll be fine.”

He ran toward his horse, and after mounting it, trotted toward her. Leaning down, he wrapped a huge hand around her arm, and without any seeming effort at all, flung her onto the horse behind him. Without another word, he flicked the reins, yelled at the horse, and headed straight down the hill.

“I need a healer,” he yelled as he entered the group of houses at the start of the

village. "I need a healer now."

A woman came hurrying out of her house, wiping her hands on her apron. "What is it?" she cried. "What's the matter?"

"My friend has been bitten by a snake. I need a healer now."

The woman looked aghast, and even as more people hurried out of their houses, she excitedly pointed further down the road. "Carry on going," she cried. "Go right through the village. The healer's cottage is on the left. The last one 'afore ye leave."

"Thank ye," Owen said.

Again, he yelled at the horse, flicked the reins, and thundered past the shocked faces that all gawked up at him as he continued. The horses' hooves clattered on the cobblestone street, echoing against the surrounding walls of the houses and buildings on either side. And a little after a minute later, the cottage came into view.

Upon reaching it, Owen hardly waited for the horse to stop, and leaping from the beast, he immediately turned and grabbed Iseabail in his arms.

"We need help," he cried, running towards the cottage, carrying Iseabail whose hands were wrapped around his thick neck.

The door to the cottage flew open, and a tall man with white hair came outside, a frown lining his brow.

"She's been bitten by a snake," Owen declared, walking past the man into his cottage without waiting for an invitation. "Help her, please."

"Through there," the older man said hurriedly. "Yes, there," he said, as Owen looked

back to see the direction he ought to go.

They ventured into a room lined with shelves and shelves of brown bottles, clearly filled with tonics and tinctures.

“Put her on the bed,” the healer demanded.

Owen slowly lowered Iseabail down, and hurriedly looked back at the man. “Please, dae something.”

“He needs help, too,” Iseabail cried. “He sucked the venom from me leg.”

The healer looked from one to the other, and nodding, he hurried over to a shelf before lifting several bottles down.

“What did it look like?” he asked, tearing pieces of cloth into squares. “The snake. What color was it?”

“It had a zigzag on its back,” Iseabail replied. “It was brown, I think,”

“An adder,” the healer concluded. “Ye’re lucky. While it’s very painful, the poison willnae kill ye. That being said, nor is it very pleasant, so yer quick thinking,” he looked at Owen, “may well have just saved yer friend here an awful lot o’ pain.”

Iseabail gazed at Owen, who only now, seemed to be calming down from his earlier determination to get her help. She smiled at him, even though her leg remained sore, and he smiled back.

“Me own personal hero,” she said.

“Och, I hardly think?—”

“Indeed, I would agree,” the healer said.

Iseabail couldn’t help smile even wider when she noticed Owen’s discomfort. She hadn’t taken him for the bashful type, but then, she supposed she had never seen him in such a heroic moment.

“Now, lie still and let me see tae ye,” the healer said, dabbing something onto one of the cloths he had readied.

“What is that?” Owen asked.

“First, I am administering Lavender oil behind her ears.” The healer looked Iseabail in the eye. “It’ll calm and stabilize yer heart rate. The more distressed ye are the quicker any venom left in yer body will travel through it. Though, I dae think yer protector?—”

“Owen,” Iseabail said.

“Owen,” the healer confirmed, “has managed tae get most o’ it out.”

“And what about Owen? Shouldnae he have some too?”

The healer turned and handed the bottle of oil to Owen. “It will dae ye nay harm. Just in case.”

Owen screwed his nose up, and took a sniff. “Great, now I’ll smell like all the lasses.”

“Better that than be dead,” Iseabail countered.

“Ye heard the healer... I’m sorry, what is yer name?”

The old man smiled, while pressing leaves against the wound on Iseabail's leg. "Thomas," he said.

"Thank ye, Thomas." Iseabail smiled up at him.

"Ye're very welcome. I'm glad I can be o' some help."

"But ye heard Thomas," Owen repeated. "The poison isnae deadly."

"Nae," Thomas interjected, "but it will make ye unpleasantly ill," the older man confirmed.

"Ye see?" Iseabail said, opening her eyes wider and nodding to the bottle. "Please, Owen. Fer me."

Owen rolled his eyes and shook his head in obvious disbelief that he was about to dab lavender oil onto himself, but when he did it, Iseabail was far more relieved and smiled broadly at him.

"Happy now?"

"Aye. Considerably," she said a little too smugly.

Thomas clearly found their banter amusing for he smiled to himself as he worked. "Ye two make a fine couple," he said. "In fact, it is nice listening tae how deeply ye care fer each other."

"Och, nae," Iseabail shook her head. "We're nae married."

This news seemed to surprise Thomas, and looking from Owen to Iseabail, he inclined his head, raised his eyebrows and said, "Huh."

Sometime later, once the healer had checked Owen over and was satisfied, he had likely managed to avoid poisoning himself, he said, “Now, ye may be out o’ the woods, but I would suggest ye rest here in the village tonight.”

Iseabail’s widening eyes seemed to induce the soft comfort of the old man. “Now, now. There’s naething tae worry yersel’ about. I have applied a poultice o’ plantain leaves that will ensure nay harm will come tae ye. Only, I think it best that ye rest the night. Are ye in any hurry tae move on?”

Iseabail looked past the healer and caught Owen’s eye. Owen shrugged noncommittally and shook his head. They were only wasting time, after all.

“Nae really,” Iseabail replied.

“Good. Then ye should stay. The tavern will have a room, and ye’re in luck, for we have a wedding celebration this night. Ye can stay and enjoy the festivities. We are a small community, and close. I’m sure ye will be welcomed openly.”

“Will ye be there?” Iseabail asked.

“Of course.” Thomas smiled. “I am nae only the healer, but a musician. Without me, there will be nay beat from the bodhran.”

“Then we will definitely be there,” Iseabail beamed, “fer I dinnae want tae miss that.”

When they arrived at the tavern, word had already spread of their arrival.

“So, ye were bitten by a snake?” the innkeeper said, his eyes wide with interest.

“Aye,” Owen said, sporting a knowing smile. “But Thomas fixed us right up and sent us tae ye.”

“And I’m glad he did too. Ye’re in luck. We have one room left. Phillip is me name, and anything I can get fer ye, ye only have tae ask.”

“Thank ye,” Iseabail said, her tone conveying how impressed she was with his kindness.

“Ye’re welcome, miss. Ye’ll find the village is a friendly bunch. And tonight, we have a celebration.”

Owen nodded. “Aye. Thomas was telling us.”

“Well, be sure tae come and join us. We’ll be in the field beyond the main road. There’ll be music and dancing. ‘Tis me niece who’s getting wed.”

No sooner were they in the room, than Owen turned to leave again.

“Where are ye going?” Iseabail asked in surprise.

“I’m away to retrieve yer mare. We cannae leave her out there all night. Ye stay here and rest that leg. I’ll nae be too long.”

Iseabail nodded, and a second later, Owen had slipped out of the room. Dropping onto the bed she lay back and relaxed. What a day it had been. Between dead merchants and near-death experiences, she had had her fill of excitement, and the day was not yet done.

“I dinnae ken if I can take anymore,” she breathed.

As she lay there, she thought about the madness of the last hour, and recalling Owen sucking the poison from her leg, she sighed, allowing herself to remember it now, without the added pain that had accompanied it earlier. It had been the strangest

sensation, and yet, not unpleasant at all. How bizarre that her stomach flipped as she thought about it.

All that had happened since leaving the Sinclair's castle then came back to her, one circumstance at a time, and as she considered all that Owen had done for her, she could hardly fault him. Indeed, he had made a mistake yesterday, getting into that fight, but it was becoming more and more obvious that the old woman had been right. He had done it for her. Just like he had risked his own life for her today, and then hurriedly made sure she got the attention and care she needed.

Perhaps she had judged Owen Sinclair a little too quickly.

Perhaps ye're finally giving in tae what ye felt that very first night he saved ye.

Yes, he had taken her breath away. He had also unnerved her. A feeling she was not at all used to. But then, she hadn't really had chance to think about herself over the last months.

Marriage was hardly a consideration one made when one's clan was under constant attack by a madman. Owen had asked her yesterday, why she was not married. The question had been unexpected, and thus, she had rushed to answer it. Her tone had been rude, and perhaps a part of that was the fact that she didn't want him to know what Laird Sutherland had in store for her. She had told him that it was none of his business, but the truth was, she might have to marry far sooner than Owen might think.

When Iseabail blinked her eyes open, she was at first, a little confused. And then realizing where she was, she yawned.

Owen's voice carried from across the room. "Hello, sleepy head."

Pushing herself onto her elbow, she squinted her eyes and gazed across at him. He was sat in a chair beside the fire, a book in one hand and a tankard sat on the table beside him.

“How long have I been sleeping?”

“A couple o’ hours,” he replied. “I think that snake bite had ye rattled. Thomas said yer body would be in shock.”

“Good grief.” She yawned again. “I cannae believe I slept that long.”

“Clearly, ye needed it.” He stood and placed his book on the chair before striding over to the dresser. Taking the jug, he poured water into a cup and moved towards her. “Here. Drink that.”

Iseabail pushed herself up in the bed and took the offered drink. “Thanks.”

He returned to his chair, sat himself down again, and after giving her a final glance, commenced with reading the book in his hand.

“Have ye eaten?” Iseabail asked.

Owen looked over at her and shook his head. “Nae yet. Are ye hungry?”

She nodded. “I think I could eat. We never did get that meal earlier. Ye said ye were starving. I thought ye would have got something.”

“I was waiting fer ye,” he replied.

Huh!

Iseabail was once more taken back by Owen's manners. Yes, he was the son of a laird, and indeed, he ought to be well-behaved, but he was no ordinary son of a laird, was he? He was a son who kept secrets from his father. Secrets she had used against him.

A slight feeling of guilt rose as she thought about that, but she swallowed it.

“Then let us go eat. I cannae have a growing lad like yersel' starve now, can I?” She smirked.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

They dined downstairs and enjoyed a hearty bowl of stew with thick pieces of fresh bread. Owen had been hungry. In fact, he had been tempted to go down earlier and eat, but apart from the fact that it would be rude to eat without Iseabail, he had not wanted to leave her in the room alone.

Thomas had been very clear that she would be fine, but the fact that she had fallen asleep before he had even returned from collecting the horse had worried him. Fine she might be, but clearly, the snake bite had had some effect on her. He had slipped back downstairs for a tankard of ale, and found a book to read, and since then, had been ignoring the growls of his stomach and patiently waiting for Iseabail to waken.

While Owen sipped at his tankard of ale, he watched Iseabail finish her meal.

“How are ye feeling now after yer rest?” he said.

Isabel must have been hungry too because she nodded while still enjoying the pieces of meat in her mouth. When she eventually finished eating, she looked at him.

“I feel much better, thank ye.” She continued to look at him and then said, “Did I thank ye fer saving me?”

Owen smiled. “Honestly, I cannae remember, but ye’re welcome.”

“Then I’ll say it now. Thank ye. I dinnae ken what I would have done had ye nae been there.”

“It was naething,” Owen said, shrugging it off.

Iseabail opened her eyes wider and gawped at him. “It was hardly naething, Owen. Ye risked yer own life tae save mine.”

He snorted a little. “I hardly risked me life. Ye heard the healer. The adder’s venom isnae life threatening.”

“Maybe, but ye couldnae have kent that at the time,” she countered. “Did ye ken it was an adder?”

Owen shook his head. “I didnae stop it tae ask.”

“Then there ye go. That’s exactly me point. So, ye risked yer own life tae save mine, even after me blackmailing ye tae come with me.”

“I was hardly going tae let ye lie there and die, Iseabail.”

Iseabail smiled. “Why nae? It would have gotten ye out o’ this mess I’ve dragged ye intae.”

“I needed the adventure,” Owen quipped back with a smirk.

“Aye, right.” She cast him a knowing look. “When I met ye, I’d say yer life was adventurous enough.”

And she wasn’t wrong. In fact, he would go as far as to say, too adventurous. But what they were doing was different. While he was fighting to pay off nefarious men, Laird Sutherland clearly had far more reprehensible intentions. This crystal was not something he wanted to add to any collection.

It was clear, the laird planned to use it to gain power, and by what Iseabail had already told him, he imagined part of that was going to involve a possible takeover of her clan. Before she had arrived, he had been trying to save his own skin. Iseabail's quest was far bigger than one man.

“Listen, we’re in this together now, nay matter what happens. What ye are doing is important. And sure, while ye did blackmail me intae coming with ye tae help ye, I’m nay longer doing this out o’ fear o’ what ye might tell me faither if I dinnae.”

Iseabail's eyebrows rose high on her head and she considered him with a look of bewilderment. “Really?”

Owen nodded. “Really.”

He watched her struggle with that information, her mind clearly confused, while at the same time, looking stunned.

“Is it so difficult tae believe that I want tae dae something good?” Owen asked.

Isabel shook her head quickly. “Nae at all. It’s nae that. I just...” she hesitated. “I’m just blown away by yer willingness tae help me.”

“If I were in yer position, I would want someone tae help me,” Owen said.

And o’ course, it has naething tae dae with the fact that she’s a beautiful woman.

He couldn’t deny that had something to do with it. She was both beautiful and intelligent, not ordinarily the kind of lass he would associate with. He had also come to realize that, while she had been forced to blackmail him at the beginning, she wasn’t the villain he had, at first, thought she was. Her family were being held captive. She had no one else to ask.

She still gazed at him in wonder, and after several minutes, it became uncomfortable.

“Right. Come on. Drink up,” Owen said, nodding to her tankard. “We have a wedding celebration tae attend.”

The place wasn't hard to find, mainly because the sound of music and the noise and laughter carried across the town. When Owen and Iseabail rounded the hedge that surrounded the field, a great sight greeted them. Tents had been pitched, and a large fire crackled with many people gathered around it. There were kegs of ale piled in different places, with tables set in random spaces.

Off to the side, another group of people danced on a wooden platform that had been erected for the occasion, while children ran and played, giggling and yelling at each other. The music came from three men playing the fiddle, the tin whistle, and the healer sitting as he had said he would be, playing the bodhran.

“Look, there's Thomas,” Iseabail said in delight.

Owen had already spotted him and nodded. “We should go over and say hello when he's finished his set. For now, though, let's go get a drink.”

“How's the leg?” a woman asked as she poured out two tankards of ale.

Iseabail looked surprised, and the woman grinned. “Naething passes anyone in this place,” she said, nodding in the general direction of everyone. “And o' course, it had tae be ye. Ye're the only ones here who are passing through.”

“It's much better, thank ye,” Iseabail said, taking the tankard from her. “Yer healer is very good at what he does.”

“Och, Thomas. He's the best. He was born in this village. He kens all the best places

tae find his herbs and plants. I dinnae ken what the village would dae without him.”

There were others nearby, and soon enough, Owen and Iseabail were involved in a full-on conversation about everything from village life, to Iseabail and Owen’s clan. They were careful to keep their business to themselves, however. Without needing to discuss it, both of them fended off questions and avoided answers where they could.

A little later, Thomas arrived beside them, and Iseabail beamed a smile up at him.

“And how are ye now?” he asked, looking down at her leg.

He couldn’t see the wound, but Owen imagined it was an automatic gesture that coincided with his question.

“Much better, thanks tae ye.”

“Iseabail slept fer a couple of hours earlier, Thomas,” Owen said. “Is that normal?”

While Iseabail looked a little surprised at Owen’s question, Thomas nodded. “Perfectly normal. Like I said tae ye earlier in the cottage, while ye did a tremendous job o’ getting most o’ the poison out, there will still have been some venom that managed tae get intae her blood.”

Thomas then looked at Iseabail. “Did ye feel better after yer sleep?”

“I did,” Iseabail nodded.

“Good. It was yer body’s way o’ getting rid o’ what shouldnae have been there. But ye’ll make a full recovery.”

“Dae ye have any more tricks up yer sleeve, Thomas?” Iseabail smiled. “Ye’re a

healer, ye're a musician. What else are ye hiding from us?"

Thomas looked from left to right, pretending to be conspiratorial. With a sly grin, he lowered his voice and murmured, "Well, I dae make a mean Elderberry wine."

Iseabail burst into laughter at his antics, and Owen, though a little distracted by his body's reaction to the sound, also let out a low chuckle.

"Now, come." Thomas waved at them both. "Ye must dance."

Somehow, Owen and Iseabail ended up in the middle of the wooden platform, and with much encouragement, seemed to take center stage as the music began.

After her nervous laughter settled down, Iseabail gazed up at Owen who slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her in closer. She smelled of rose petals and jasmine, and only in that moment did he realize that he had not been this close to her before. Perhaps for a second or two when lifting her down off her mare, but not under these conditions.

"Are ye ready?" he said, his voice sounding a little deeper than normal.

"Nae really." Iseabail grinned back. "But let's give it a go."

Owen nodded, and when the music started, they danced a jig together. He twirled and spun her, bringing her back to him each time. The crowd whooped and yelled over the music, encouraging them on with delighted cries. The smile Iseabail wore lit up her face, and light laughter fell from her lips. For the entire dance, Owen could not take his eyes off her, and by the time others had joined them on the dance floor, Iseabail was gazing back up at him tenderly.

They continued until the song ended, and then, breathless and giddy, Owen brought

her back into his arms, and gazed down at her. While all around them were clapping and whooping, he could only look at her tenderly.

Never could he have imagined, that night in his bedroom when Iseabail blackmailed him to go on this quest with her, that he would see her in any other light than a villain. He had imprisoned her, thinking her a threat. Now, the only threat she posed was to his heart.

He had spent a lifetime enjoying the freedom of carefree lasses who didn't want or need him to be anything other than a bit of fun. For Iseabail, he had been quite the opposite. She had needed him for anything but fun, and yet, no longer bound by her blackmail, Owen found himself wanting so much more than to be the man who could hold a powerful crystal.

He suspected, as she gazed back at him, both of them lost in the moment, that this quest had morphed into something she had not expected either. Serious as death itself at the beginning, she had slowly shown parts of herself to him that she had kept well-hidden before.

Taking her hand in his, he wrapped his thick fingers around her dainty ones, even that simple touch evoking stirrings within him. Her slightly parted lips did little to help either, for all he wanted to do was plunge down on them with his own.

I'll bet she tastes as sweet as honey.

His groin twitched at the thought of tasting her, and before he allowed himself to get carried away, he broke the moment. This was neither the time nor the place.

"Let's go and get a drink," he murmured.

"Aye," Iseabail breathed.

After grabbing their tankards, they walked a little distance from everyone else. Selfishly, he wanted her all to himself, and though the night was fun and filled with lots of laughter, his feelings were far deeper than mere entertainment. He was about to turn and speak to her, when, from the corner of his eye, he noticed something that looked out of place.

Turning to see better, Owen frowned at what appeared to be a squabble, but the longer he watched the scene unfold, the clearer things became.

“What is it?” Iseabail asked, clearly now curious why he had stopped in his tracks.

“Something is wrong,” he replied a little absently.

He continued to watch as a much older man seemed to be encouraging a much younger lass to go with him. It was clear, as she shook her head and tried to move away from him, that the lass wanted nothing to do with him.

But the man was not taking no for an answer, and a second later, he lunged forward and grabbed the girl by the wrist, pulling her toward him. That was all Owen needed to see, and placing his tankard on the ground, he began taking long strides toward them.

“Hey,” Owen called out. “Hey, ye.”

The man jerked his head and then glared at Owen, but even as the lass struggled to free herself, the man did not release his grip.

Owen hurried his pace as the man turned and began walking away. Breaking into a run, he was eager to catch him before they disappeared from his sight. The girl clearly looked terrified, and Owen’s stomach churned as he thought about the young lass he had saved only a couple of months before.

The man continued to flee with the girl stumbling behind him, but trying to drag her along only slowed him down, and Owen easily closed the gap between them. Now only a few feet away, he called out.

“I’m talking tae ye,” he spat at the man’s retreating back. “Let go o’ her. It’s clear as day she doesnae want tae go with ye.”

But the man seemed determined, and perhaps, more than a little drunk.

“Bugger off. This isnae any o’ yer business,” he spat back over his shoulder

“I’m about tae make it me business,” Owen barked, keeping pace with the man. “Let her go ‘afore I make ye regret it.”

As though by ignoring him Owen might suddenly disappear, the man continued on, but Owen was growing tired of the chase, and reaching a long arm forward, he grabbed the man’s shoulder and spun him around.

The girl spun with him, nearly tumbling to her feet.

“Get away from us. This is me lass. Go and get yer own,” the man slurred.

“Are ye all right?” Owen said, looking at the trembling girl.

She shook her head, evidently too terrified to speak.

“Let her go now. It’s clear she isnae in agreement tae going with ye.”

The man took two long, drunkenly confident strides toward Owen, even though Owen stood head and shoulders above him.

“Make me,” he spat, his breath stinking of ale.

Owen clenched a fist and readied himself to throw a mighty punch. This piece of scum needed to be taught a lesson, and clearly, talking to him wasn’t working. Behind him, he heard thudding footsteps approach, and a second later, Iseabail was by his side.

“Owen,” she hissed, “this isnae the way.

The man sneered. “Och, it looks like ye need tae listen tae yer woman. Clearly, she controls what ye dae.”

Iseabail spun her head to look at him, and scowling as she spoke her words, she said, “Let go o’ the lass this instant.”

The man blinked at her, and immediately released his grip on the girl.

Iseabail looked at the frightened lass and nodded. “Go. Go now, and find yer family.”

Without hesitation, the girl turned on her heels and ran back to the crowd of villagers. Iseabail then turned her attention back to the drunk.

“And ye, ye vile man. Ye go home and sleep it off. Ye’ll forget about the lass, and ye’ll forget ye ever met us. Go. Be on yer way.”

The man blinked again, and without a word, he turned away from them, heading out of the field, and in the direction of the village.

Only when he was far enough away to satisfy her, did Iseabail turn to look at Owen. She shook her head in disbelief. “God, ‘tis like trouble comes out tae find ye.”

Owen shrugged, and feeling the need to defend himself, he said, “What did ye want me tae dae? The lass was clearly in trouble. I couldnae just ignore it.”

“Aye, I ken that,” she sighed.

They walked back to where they had left their tankards, and, finding a thick log that had long been cut down, they settled themselves onto it. While Iseabail watched the celebrations from afar, intrigued at what was going on, Owen was far too busy gazing at her.

Smiling, but not moving the direction of her gaze, she said, “Ye’re going tae bore a hole intae me skull if ye keep staring at me. What troubles ye?”

Owen shook his head. “Naething troubles me. In fact, I’ve been thinking about yer gift.”

She looked at him then, her eyebrows slightly raised. “Aye, and, what about it?”

“Well, I’m curious,” he shrugged. “I’ve never met someone with a gift as powerful as yers. I want tae ken what it feels like.”

“What what feels like?” Iseabail frowned.

“When ye compel someone,” he replied, shifting his leg over to straddle the log, so he could face her full on. “I want tae ken what it feels like tae be compelled by ye.”

Iseabail gazed at him for a long moment, her eyes sparkling as they reflected the firelight from the village’s activities. Her beauty truly was beyond comparison, for Owen could not think of another he had met that was more striking.

Or perhaps, ye are biased.

Indeed, he likely was.

After a while, she shook her head. “It’s nae something tae be played around with, Owen. Me gift is powerful, and I use it only when I have tae.”

But as Owen slipped off his necklace and placed it in the grass beside his feet, her eyes grew wide.

“What?” he said.

Iseabail glanced down at it, and then looked back at him. “Well, it’s just, without that crystal, ye have nay protection.”

“And?” he pressed, a smile dancing at the corner of his mouth.

She still looked astonished. “I just didnae realize how much ye trusted me.”

Owen felt a little surprised at her words. “Why the devil wouldnae I trust ye, Iseabail? Ye’ve never given me any reason nae tae.”

“I blackmailed ye tae be here, remember?”

Owen shook his head. “I thought we’d discussed that. I’m here by me own free will. There’s naething holding me here but the importance o’ yer quest.”

Iseabail still looked full of doubt, and for a long second, they shared a gaze. Owen did not look away, even for a second, and finding himself a little lost in her eyes, it was only Iseabail’s words that pulled him out of his trance-like state.

“Are ye sure?” she pressed, the lines on her brow furrowing in concern.

“Well, as long as ye dinnae compel me tae strip off and run around this place naked,” he joked.

Iseabail laughed then. “I promise. Naething like that.”

“Very well. Then aye. I’m sure. Come on. Face me, so ye can look me in the eye properly.”

Iseabail copied Owen’s earlier movement and throwing her leg over the huge log, she straddled it. Looking him directly in the eye, she said, “Ye must drink something.”

Immediately, Owen felt a desperate thirst come upon him, and he grabbed his throat, feeling like he hadn’t drunk for days.

“Wow, that is powerful. I thought I would simply feel like I had tae obey, but ye actually make me feel thirsty.” And still feeling the desperate need to quench his thirst, he grabbed his tankard and downed the rest of his ale.

Feeling impressed by her powers, Owen said, “That is definitely some gift ye have.”

She smiled warmly. “Did ye nae believe me?”

He nodded. “Och, I did. I just didnae realize the strength o’ it.”

“Well, now ye ken what it feels like.” She nodded down to his necklace. “Put the crystal back on.”

Owen smirked at her. “Why? Does it mak’ ye nervous when I’m nae wearing it?” He was mocking her a little bit, but she didn’t seem to mind.

She nodded with light laughter. “I’d just feel better if ye put it back on.”

“I want another try. Only this time, ye must compel me tae dae something I already want tae dae. I want tae ken the difference between compulsion and desire. It may prove useful in the future. I didnae feel thirsty when ye compelled it, but what if I had been thirsty already?”

At first, she looked a little wary, but then, she sighed, as though appeasing a child. “Fine. Give me something that ye want tae dae?”

Owen looked directly in her eyes, and leaning forward a little, he murmured, “I want tae kiss ye.”

Iseabail’s eyes widened, her lips parted, and a gasp left her mouth. He was certain she wanted it as much as he. The gazes they had shared, the gentle touches, the moments they had been lost together, had not involved just his feelings alone.

She seemed to be on the cusp of agreeing, but then she shook her head. “I dinnae think this is a good idea.”

He knew her reasons, but he was not going to let her get away without challenging them. “What are ye afraid o’, Iseabail? Are ye afraid o’ me?”

Absently, she shook her head. “Nae at all. In fact,” she looked at him softly, “I dinnae think I’ve felt this safe in a long time.”

Owen smiled. “I’m glad tae hear that. I will always protect ye. Ye ken that, dinnae ye?”

She nodded again. “I dae.”

“Good. Then come on. I want tae ken what happens. And I suspect,” he said, his mouth curling into a smile, “that ye dae too.”

She hesitated for a second more, and then finally relented. “All right,” she breathed, her voice barely a whisper. “Are ye ready?”

Owen shifted himself so he was less than a foot away from her. “More than ye ken,” he growled back.

Her eyes widened at his answer, and then she said. “Kiss me.”

Strangely enough, Owen didn’t feel much different in that moment, for the want of her lips on his had been growing since they had danced. Yet, there was a slight change. He now felt unable to resist his desire any longer. There was an unbearable feeling, as though he might die if he didn’t kiss her.

Slowly, he lifted his hand and cupped her cheek, and even more slowly, he lowered his lips to hers. As he imagined they would be, her lips were soft and tender, and as his stomach clenched, he lost himself in the tender embrace. It started off gently, but the more aroused he became, the more he wanted, and when Iseabail lifted her arms and wrapped them around his neck, he slipped his arms around her waist and pulled her tightly to him.

Slipping his tongue inside her mouth, he roved about, the sweet taste making him only want her more. His tongue explored her, lashing against her tongue and teeth, and now panting, he opened his mouth wider as the passion between them grew.

He was breathless, and yet, he did not want to stop. With his manhood now rock hard, he wanted so much more, and yet, he knew that a kiss was all they had agreed. His hands roamed across her back, pulling her into him even further, forcing her firm breasts against his solid chest. He did not want to let her go, his desire for her felt unsatiable. And yet, he knew that he must.

Reluctantly, he softened the kiss, and slowly, he pulled himself away.

For a long moment, they sat there, breathlessly panting. They could do little else but look at each other, neither able to speak, for Owen certainly had no words. Words would ruin this moment, for there were none that would give any meaning to how he was feeling. He wanted her, he desired her, but the sensation he felt was even deeper than that. He had wanted plenty of lasses before, but this felt different. Different, but by no means unpleasant.

“Perhaps it is time we called it a night,” Iseabail breathed, her eyes flicking across his face, seemingly looking for some sort of reaction from him.

What she was looking for, however, Owen could not know. It certainly wasn’t a reply to what she had just said. Her gaze was too intense.

“I think that’s a good idea,” he replied, his voice loaded with the passion he had felt only moments before.

Reaching down, Owen took hold of his necklace. Bending his head forward, he returned it to his throat once more. He then stood, and offered her his hand.

“Come on. Ye’ve done enough compelling for one night.”

They returned to the tavern in silence. Not an uncomfortable silence, but a quiet that spoke to the depth of whatever it was they were both currently feeling. Reaching their room, Owen felt suddenly nervous as he eyed the bed. After what he had just experienced, surely getting into that bed together was a bad idea.

“I’ll sleep on the floor,” he said.

“Nae, ye willnae,” Iseabail countered. “It will be fine.”

She looked at him as though she were trying to convince him of that, and Owen

couldn't help but wonder if Iseabail was feeling the same nervousness as he was.

"I dinnae mind," he said.

"Well, I dae," she replied. She then looked him directly in the eye. "I trust ye, Owen. Just as much as ye trust me."

And there it was. She had seen right through him, not that he had been trying to hide anything.

When they both eventually settled into the bed, Owen once more remained above the coverlets. With his arms pinned to his sides, he felt more like he was lying in his coffin. Stiff and lifeless. There was not a chance he would fall asleep any time soon, and with that thought, he brought both hands up and tucked them behind his head.

Choosing a spot on the ceiling, he stared at it, but did not see it. His mind was far too busy replaying what had happened. More so, he considered his feelings afterwards, and settling in for a few hours of sleeplessness, his mind whirled with what his feelings meant.

He was a rake, he knew that. There had been many lasses in his bed over the years, but as he lay there thinking, he suddenly realized that from the beginning of their journey together, he had not looked at one single woman with any desire.

How bizarre.

Indeed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was barely light outside when Iseabail woke with a sharp pain in her stomach. Casting a glance at Owen, who slept soundly beside her, she hissed through her teeth, trying to cope with the agony, while at the same time, trying not to disturb him.

Me God, this is excruciating. What the devil is wrong with me?

At first, Iseabail wondered if it might have been something she had eaten the day before. But surely, if that were the case, Owen would be suffering as much as she. She wondered if, given that he was stronger and far bigger than her, that whatever it was might affect her more. She was still confused about her pain when she felt a familiar slick feeling between her thighs, and immediately, with a feeling of utter despair, she understood why she was in so much discomfort.

Och, nae. Nae now.

Another sharp pain spasmed in the lower part of her tummy, and gasping through the contractions, she pushed herself up and bent over. As a low moan left her throat, she hoped her position would ease the pain, but it did little to help her at all.

Beside her, she felt Owen stir, and shoving her knuckle in her mouth, she panted silently, struggling to breathe.

Dinnae wake. Dinnae wake, she prayed silently.

But all the gods seemed to be fast asleep, for her prayers were not answered, and she

felt his huge person move in the bed beside her.

Dammit.

“What’s the matter?” he said sleepily. “Are ye all right?”

“I’m fine,” Iseabail hissed. “Go back tae sleep. Ye’re dreaming.”

The last thing she needed was to have to explain to Owen what was going on in her body. She was already humiliated enough, for surely, her clothes would be stained. She didn’t need his disgust or his mockery of her condition.

Of course, he ignored her words, and only sat up straighter in the bed.

“Iseabail. What is the?—”

“Arrgh,” she cried, bending double and unable to stop the loud moan.

“What the devil?” he exclaimed, moving closer to her. “Tell me what’s wrong?”

“Naething,” she snapped breathlessly. “Please. Go back tae sleep.”

“Are ye injured? Are ye sick? Is it the poison? Tell me so I can get help.”

“I dinnae want tae tell ye. Now please, close yer eyes and leave me be.”

By this time, Owen was now out of the bed, and had moved around to her side. “I cannae sleep when something is clearly wrong with ye. Are ye hurt?”

“Nae, I am nae hurt,” she blurted in frustration. “For the love o’ God, leave it, will ye?”

She could now feel her face redden, for clearly, Owen was not going to give up. Another spasm hit her hard, and bending over double again, Iseabail let out another mighty groan.

“Me God, Iseabail,” Owen gasped, dropping to his knees beside her. “Is it the poison? It must be poison,” he said, and pushing himself up again, he hurried back to his side of the bed and grabbed his boots. Pulling them on in haste, he said, “We must get ye tae a healer immediately.”

“Nay!” Iseabail cried.

Owen was so surprised at the strength of her voice that he spun around and gawked at her. Moving around the bed once more, he could only look down at her in bewilderment.

“It isnae poison,” she hissed, now feeling that she wanted the ground to open and swallow her whole.

“How dae ye ken? Look at ye. Ye’re in agony. This isnae normal. We need tae get ye help. Come on.” He tried to take hold of her arm, but Iseabail pushed him away.

“It isnae poison. It’s...” but she trailed off, for she couldn’t even look him in the eye, never mind face the humiliation of saying what it was.

Owen appeared to be getting more frustrated, and ignoring her protests, he came at her again.

“Ye cannae ken it isnae poison, and I’m nae listening tae this a minute longer. Ye’re so stubborn, ye never let anybody help ye. Well, I’ll nae stand by while ye die beside me.”

“Och, fer the love o’ God, Owen, will ye ever give it a rest.”

Clearly, she had no choice. If she didn’t tell him, she imagined he might well throw her over his shoulder and carry her against her will, which would be even more humiliating.

“It’s me courses,” Iseabail blurted, suddenly wincing again at the pain. Though the spasm was once more agonizing, the humiliation she felt seemed even worse, and her face was now ablaze as mortification washed over her.

“Courses of what?”

Dammit, he will make me say it!

“Me monthly courses, Owen. The courses women have.”

For a second, Owen was completely taken aback and clearly did not know what to say. Of course, the fact that he had made such a drama out of everything, only made the situation far worse.

“Och. Right,” he said, his voice far calmer.

Clearly, he was embarrassed too, for he did not know where to look. His eyes roved about the entire room, anywhere but directly at her.

This is it. This is how I’ll go. “Here lies Iseabail who died of shame.”

For the longest time, neither of them said anything else. Only when the pain returned, did Iseabail do her best to breathe through it, though she could not help but moan.

But then she felt the bed bow, and realized that Owen was now sat a little behind her.

“What can I dae?” he asked. “Watching ye in this state and in this much pain makes me feel completely helpless.”

To Iseabail’s astonishment, he began rubbing her back, and while she would never have asked him to do such a thing, his strong warm hand did seem to ease her discomfort.

“Is that good?”

“Aye,” she sighed. “It is.”

For the next half an hour, Iseabail suffered through more spasms, and entirely surprising her, Owen remained by her side, rubbing her back and telling her that as soon as the sun was up, he would go and find a healer.

She had to admit, it was certainly not what she was expecting. He did not mock her, nor did he appear distressed or disgusted at her current state. Admittedly, Iseabail could not know if this was normal behavior from a man or not. All the times she had suffered her courses before, she had been home at her father’s castle being looked after by her maids.

While Owen had teased her and mocked her with many things over their journey together, her obvious discomfort clearly brought something else out in him. A caring side, for when she suffered her most painful spasms, he shushed her, tried to comfort her, and remained rubbing her back.

Sometime after that, the pain finally died down, and Iseabail spoke to him over her shoulder.

“Thank ye. I think the worst is over.”

“Are ye certain?” he said, his hand remaining in place against her body.

“I am.”

“The sun is up,” he declared, as he pushed himself up off the bed. He then came to stand beside her so she could see him, though she still felt embarrassed even now. “I will away tae find Thomas. If these pains come back, ye could dae with something tae ease yer suffering.”

The following few days, Iseabail had little choice but to persevere the discomfort, though the pain lessened by the day. Owen had managed to obtain some laudanum from Thomas, and thus, some afternoons, she just slept with its heavy effects.

On some occasions when she woke, Owen was not in the room with her, but on the occasions he was, he remained seated by her bed. At times, she caught him gazing at her, at others, he remained, reading a book to himself. But for the time they remained at that village, and for the length of time she continued to bleed, Owen booked another room, giving Iseabail more privacy to deal with her condition.

On the fifth day, her courses were gone entirely. It was on that same evening, eating supper together, that they decided to leave the village early the following morning and make their way back to John o’ Groats. Enough time had now passed, and, according to the sailor they had spoken to, the weather ought to be settled enough for them to travel.

The last few days, however, and particularly when she had been left alone, Iseabail had not been able to help wondering about things that had not been said. For example, the kiss they had shared. She certainly did not want to bring it up, and seemingly, Owen was in no rush to do so either. And yet, she was well aware that something had happened between them.

Iseabail had felt entirely captivated afterwards, and while no words had been said, the gaze they had shared when it was over had spoken volumes.

Of course, she had not mentioned that he was the first man to lay his lips upon hers either. She had felt embarrassed about such a disclosure, fearing that such news might make Owen judge her somehow, or worse, have him ask her why. It was the reason she had pretended, when he made the request to kiss her, that it was of no real consequence, even as her stomach had tumbled.

But indeed, it had been of great consequence, and not only because it was her first kiss.

Her body had reacted in ways she had never before experienced, and all of it had been pleasurable. So much so, she had relived the moment several times in the privacy of her own mind. But with Owen's silence, Iseabail had begun to wonder if it had meant anything to him at all.

As they readied their horses before sunrise the following morning, Iseabail felt a desperate need to clear the air between them.

"I must ask ye something, Owen," she said, after ensuring the straps on the saddle of her horse were tight.

Owen looked at her expectantly.

She could already feel the heat travelling from her neck into her cheeks, but she could not keep quiet about it any longer.

"The kiss we shared," she said. But then she hesitated, for the embarrassment grew too much.

“The kiss ye compelled from me, ye mean,” Owen said, a slight smirk dancing on his lips. “What about it?”

She couldn’t help but wonder if he was making fun of it to cover his own discomfort, but something pushed her on. “Well, we havenae spoken about it since.”

Owen held her gaze, and for a slight second, she saw something flash across his face. But then, it disappeared as quickly as it had made its appearance. “I cannae say I didnae enjoy it, if that’s what ye’re getting at.”

She continued to look at him for another long moment. The truth was, she wasn’t sure what she was getting at. She didn’t even know what she really wanted to discover. Perhaps it had been a mistake to bring it up at all.

“How dae ye feel about it?” Owen pressed.

Iseabail shrugged, unsure of what she ought to say. She couldn’t deny she had enjoyed it either, but whether she wanted Owen to know that, she still wasn’t sure. Besides, if she made too much of it, and he didn’t, it would make her look like a fool. This was now a game of who could be the bravest. But given the fact that they may well be stuck with each other for some time longer, Iseabail wasn’t willing to show her hand. Not yet, at least.

“I dinnae ken.”

Owen nodded. “Then perhaps we ought tae pretend it never happened.”

“Aye,” Iseabail said, sure that he was avoiding the subject as much as she. “And perhaps we can forget about the last few days while we’re at it.”

She blushed just thinking of what they had gone through together, but Owen refrained

from making any comment and instead, only nodded.

Once he had helped her onto her horse, Owen mounted his own and travelling into the mist of the glens as they left the village, they began their journey. There was not much conversation as they ventured on, leaving Iseabail to battle with her thoughts.

Pretending the kiss had never happened did not make it so. And besides, she knew he had felt something. It wasn't just she who had found herself speechless afterwards. Did he truly want to forget about it, or was that just a way for him to avoid having to talk about it? A way for him to hide, like she herself was?

Iseabail couldn't know without asking him outright, and though she was tempted, she kept quiet. If Owen wanted to forget all about it, then perhaps she ought to do the same. They were on a mission after all. A quest to save her family, for her father and brother's lives still hung in the balance.

They arrived at John o' Groats before noon, and headed straight to the harbor. There were several boats docked, and by the looks of the activity surrounding some of them, a few were getting ready to set sail. Clearly, the weather was now safe enough for the boats to travel again.

While Iseabail stood back, Owen went to speak to the sailors to try and discover if he could secure them a place to South Ronaldsay.

He returned to her after a short while. "There is a boat leaving now," he said hurriedly, reaching his arms up to lift her from the horse.

Iseabail removed a bag from her mare, and while she waited once more, Owen took the beasts to the tavern. No doubt he would pay the innkeeper some coin to have them looked after.

When Owen returned, the two hurried toward the boat. There were ten or so men aboard already, and Iseabail was afforded a few strange looks when she and Owen moved among them. They headed to the stern and settled themselves on a small wooden bench to the side.

There then commenced a lot of yelling as several men untied the ropes that bound the boat to the harbor, another tended to the sail, while the man at the rudder steered the boat into the wind, filling the sail and launching them forward. As the boat tacked out of the harbor, the boom swung from one side of the boat to the other, making the vessel lean heavily to the left.

They had hardly left the mainland when the boat lurched up high, only to come crashing down again as it battled against the tide. Iseabail gripped tightly to the woodwork around her, and only as she turned upon hearing one of the sailor's yelling instructions, did she notice the perturbed look on Owen's face.

"Are ye all right?" she gasped.

Owen bowed his head. "I'll be fine."

Clearly, he would not be fine, and evidently, he was too proud to admit it. This crossing was going to take several hours, and they had barely left the shore.

"Look at me," Iseabail said. "Set yer eyes on me."

Owen lifted his head, and as the boat lurched again, his eyes widened and fear crossed his face.

"Keep yer eyes on me," Iseabail said, yelling over the crashing waves and deafening howling wind that whipped about them.

Owen finally looked directly at her, and Iseabail nodded. “That’s it.”

She grabbed hold of his hand, even as their bodies were flung to and fro, and not once did she stop from looking at him.

Even as he gazed at her, his frown burrowed with worry. His fingers clasped around hers, his fear forcing him to tense every muscle in his body. The sensations of the rolling ship lasted for some time longer, but the further out to sea they went, the lesser the turbulence was, until eventually, the boat settled into an easy rhythm of rising and falling.

“Ye must think me a coward,” Owen said sometime later. “I have never been a great sailor.”

“Well, ye cannae be good at everything. It wouldnae be fair fer other people,” Iseabail replied with a smile, trying to cheer him up.

Owen had chuckled a little, but the rising and falling of the boat still perturbed him. Iseabail had moved herself closer to him and now gripped onto his arm tightly in comfort. She rubbed his arm with her free hand, and tried to settle him as best as she could.

“When I was a wee girl,” Iseabail said, “me maither and I would spend days in the forest near the castle. She was a great explorer and always encouraged me tae be inquisitive. Back then, there was nay threat from Laird Sutherland. We were free tae dae as we pleased with nay worry.”

She pushed a stray strand of hair from her damp face, and tugged at the hood of her cloak to stop it blowing down completely.

“One day, we came upon a creature I had never seen before. It was the ugliest thing I

had ever seen. Maither watched with delight as I went close tae it. Bending down on me haunches, I reached out tae touch it. Suddenly, this thing jumped into the air, terrifying me so much, I fell backwards and landed straight intae a puddle.”

Owen chuckled, and Iseabail grinned. “O’ course, me maither found this quite hilarious, and though me pride, and me bottom was a little bruised, she helped me up and dusted me off.”

“What was it?” Owen asked.

“A toad. O’ course, back then, I was only tiny, and so, tae me, this thing was huge,” she regaled. “And from that day tae this, I’ve never gone near one again. Even now, as old and wise as I am.”

Owen smirked. “Whoever told ye that ye were wise?”

Iseabail grinned. “Och, but I am, Owen, son o’ Madigan Sinclair and heir tae the Sinclair clan. I was wise enough tae get ye tae come with me, was I nae?”

He gazed at her then with a strange intensity. It was the same depth she had seen in his eyes after they had shared that kiss. For a long moment, their eyes locked, and Iseabail found herself mesmerized by him. Owen lifted his free hand and tenderly brushed her cheeks with his knuckles. Her stomach flipped at the sensation. It might have been the lurching of the boat, but she was certain it wasn’t. Eventually, when she could take the tension no longer, she dropped her gaze and looked out to sea.

As the crossing continued, Iseabail found herself snuggling tightly into Owen for heat. Nothing could have prepared her for how bitterly cold it was going to be, and sensing her shivering body, Owen wrapped his arms around her and pulled her even closer into him. Her head rested high on his chest, and she could feel his warm breath on her cheek.

At one point, she glanced up at him, and again, he looked down at her with that same gaze.

“It’ll be over soon, Iseabail,” he said.

She only hoped that were true for both their sakes. Owen had struggled so much on this journey, and she could only imagine he could not wait to see dry land again.

“Land ahoy,” one of the sailors bellowed a little time later.

“Oh, thank all the gods for that,” Iseabail breathed.

Pushing herself off Owen, she stretched her neck to see. Peeking through the bodies of the other passengers, and past the sail of the ship, there indeed, was the island they were seeking, and upon seeing it with her own eyes, relief flooded through her. She could not wait to be on land, and find somewhere to get warm, for she could no longer feel her fingers or toes.

The sailors began yelling to each other, readying for the approach when suddenly, the boat seemed to lurch. The sail then lost its tautness and flapped about uncontrollably, which only added to the instability. A great amount of yelling began from everyone on board as the sailors lost control of the small vessel, and from nowhere, great waves crashed across the side, tossing them about like leaves.

“Iseabail,” Owen screamed, grabbing hold of her arm, but as the boat lurched again, she was torn from his grip, flung into the air, and then came crashing down with a painful thud onto the deck.

Thunderous waves washed over her, and Iseabail found herself choking and spluttering, her arms flailing to try and get up as water splashed across the deck, now more than six inches deep. But with the erratic movement of the vessel, she was

instead, tossed back and forth, men now falling around her and on top of her.

A second later, she saw Owen, yanking men off her, and grabbing Iseabail's cloak, he began pulling her up. But again, the boat thrashed, now completely out of control, and Owen fell backwards, while Iseabail was tossed against the side of the boat.

"We're heading for the rocks," someone screamed.

"Man the rudder," another bellowed.

There was utter panic and chaos, and with water in her eyes, and waves crashing down on top of her, Iseabail could hardly breathe. The wind was knocked from her lungs as she was tossed back and forth, and then the boat lurched sideways, and she tumbled over and over, as the boat keeled onto its side.

Still choking in her panic, Iseabail tried to grab hold of something, but as the ship tossed and turned, it jarred her and she found herself flying through the air as though she were weightless. For a second, everything around her seemed to still, then a moment later, she felt herself tumbling, until eventually, she crashed down painfully into the water, and was swallowed up by the raging sea.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“ I seabail!” Owen screamed, watching her fly overboard, only to be swallowed up by the tumultuous waves that had men jumping from the ship.

“We’re going tae hit the rocks. We’re going tae hit the rocks,” someone roared.

Owen no longer cared what happened to the boat, and without a second thought, he threw himself into the water. There were men already thrashing about him, yelling and screaming in terror. It was utter turmoil, and fighting against the tide, he headed for the area he had seen Iseabail go under.

Diving under the water, he tried to see her, but the salt stung his eyes. Besides, there were so many others about him, legs kicking, and pieces of the boat already breaking apart, he could see nothing that was helpful.

With strong strokes, he swam past those around him. Some reached out in panic, trying to grab hold of him, but Owen pushed them off with great strength. He needed to find Iseabail before it was too late.

Spinning his head back and forth, something familiar caught his eyes, but at the sight of it, his heart nearly stopped, for all he could see was a still body being tossed hither and thither. Swimming towards it, he grabbed an arm and seeing her face, her eyes closed, and her body motionless, Owen panicked as despair washed over him.

“Nay”

Wrapping a strong arm around her body, he swam to the rocks with the other, every stroke battling against the raging waves that threatened to swallow them both whole. But he could not let that happen. Iseabail could not die. He simply would not allow it. He had to save her. He had to.

As exhausted as he was when he reached the rocks, he used every ounce of strength he had left to drag himself and Iseabail out of the water. But he would not give up. The terror of what he had experienced left him as he lay her down and shook her.

“Iseabail! Iseabail!” he bellowed. “Wake up. Ye cannae give up on me now.”

But she still remained completely motionless. Bending over her, he grabbed her body and pulled her up into his chest. Holding her tightly, and on the verge of sobbing, he rocked her back and forth.

“Please, Iseabail. Ye cannae leave me now. Nae now.”

A couple of seconds later, she began coughing and spluttering, and looking down at her, Owen watched as water spurted from her mouth.

“Och, me God,” he gasped. “Ye’re alive.”

Iseabail continued to cough for a minute more, and then she took great intakes of breath. Her skin was pale, strands of hair stuck to her face, and her clothes were soaked through, but she was alive.

Owen wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into his chest.

“Thank ye,” he cried, looking upward. “Thank ye.”

In that second, Owen knew what he had been denying to be true. He was in love with

this woman. The idea that he might lose her had nearly killed him, and no doubt, had she not survived, he would not have cared if he did either. But she was alive, and now he had to protect her with his life.

When she gazed up at him, she looked both bewildered and terrified. Turning her head, she gazed about her as other men lay on the rocks, some exhausted and terrified, some barely moving.

“Och, me God,” she gasped. She then began trembling uncontrollably.

“Come on. We need tae get ye inside.”

Lifting her in his arms, he carried her across the rocks, and after struggling over the jagged stone, the terrain beneath his feet changed to grass, and then, a trail that was clearly well walked.

Stumbling, placing one foot after the other, he continued on, until eventually, buildings came into view, and Owen realized they had found a village.

“Let me walk, Owen,” Iseabail said, her lips shivering. “Ye are exhausted. I can walk.”

Gently he lowered her down to the ground, and upon arriving at the first tavern they found, they hurried into it, receiving many strange looks from all those inside.

“The boat crashed on the rocks,” Owen announced.

Shocked faces and gasps came from everyone, and then the innkeeper, a short, rotund balding man, hurried round the bar and upon reaching them, guided them to the fire.

“Stay there and get warm. I’ll get ye blankets and a wee dram.”

A small crowd gathered around them with many questions. Owen relayed what had occurred, and there were murmurings of how many others might have survived.

The innkeeper returned with blankets and glasses of whisky, and worriedly handed them to Owen and Iseabail.

“We’re going tae need a room,” Owen said, wrapping the blanket around Iseabail’s trembling body.

“Aye, o’ course,” the man replied, hurrying away again.

“We have tae carry on the search,” Iseabail protested, her lips quivering as she spoke.

“Iseabail,” he sighed. “Look at ye. Ye’re soaked tae the skin, and ye’re shivering from head tae toe. The search can wait. Ye nearly died. Dae ye nae understand that? Ye need warmth, food and rest.”

Surprisingly, she didn’t argue with him. Perhaps it was the mention of her near-death experience that brought it home to her, but Owen could not know.

The innkeeper returned with a key, and Owen asked for hot water to be brought to the room for a bath.

“I’ll send the maid right away,” he replied.

“Thank ye,” Owen said.

With the heat from the fire and the shot of whisky, Owen could feel his strength returning, but looking at Iseabail, he could not say the same. With his arm around her shaking body, he helped her up the stairs, one slow step at a time. When they reached the room, he was glad to see yet another fire blazing in a large hearth.

“Now, let’s get ye out o’ these wet clothes.”

Iseabail stood before him, trembling with cold, but Owen also imagined, she was suffering shock at what had happened. Almost numb to what was going on around her, she allowed him to undress her, one item at a time. To maintain her dignity, he wrapped the blanket around her when it came to taking her undergarments off, and as she gripped the blanket, her knuckles white with cold, he slipped his hands beneath the covering and untied her shift, letting the soaking garment fall to the floor.

Several minutes later, two maids arrived with buckets of water, and after emptying them into the tin bath, they hurriedly left the room.

“Come on, Iseabail,” he said, guiding her gently over to it.

Leaving the blanket around her shoulders, he held her hand while she stepped, one leg at a time into the bath. Only as she lowered herself in, did he finally toss the blanket on the floor. Even as the hot water surrounded her, she still shivered, but tearing a linen towel in two, he made a makeshift cloth, and kneeling beside her, dipped the cloth into the water and squeezed it over her back as she leaned forward and rested her chin on her knees, hugging her legs tightly.

The shivering calmed after a little while, and turning her eyes to gaze at him, Iseabail said, “Thank ye fer looking after me.”

Owen smiled tenderly at her. “I’m repaying the favor.”

Iseabail frowned.

“I ken ye were trying tae distract me in the boat earlier with yer story about the frog.”

She smiled then, and nodded.

“Well, I can tell ye one thing,” he continued. “Once we get back tae the mainland, I swear I’ll never set foot in a boat again.”

Iseabail rewarded him with a broad grin, and then the smile faded, and she sighed heavily. He could only imagine that her being tossed overboard and nearly dying was playing heavily on her mind, and he wondered how he might now distract her as she had earlier distracted him.

“Did I ever tell ye why I started fighting? Why I needed the money?”

Iseabail looked up at him again and shook her head.

“I’m nae a gambler, and I dinnae usually mak’ deals I cannae honor. But I did find meself in a bit o’ a predicament while on a scouting mission fer me faither. In a tavern one night, I came upon a group o’ rather unsavory men. I spent an evening playing cards with them, trying tae get information, but the more whisky they drank, the looser their tongues became.”

All the while he was speaking, Owen continued soaking the cloth and trickling the warm water across Iseabail’s back.

“One let slip that they needed tae get back and check on the lass, and an argument ensued among them. One was happy tae leave her tae rot, the other mentioned that they wouldnae get coin if they did. Wary that I was going tae embroil meself into something I shouldnae, I just couldnae help meself. When I asked them who the lass was, it quickly became apparent that they were up tae nay good.”

“Who was she?” Iseabail asked, her brow furrowed.

“They had stolen her from her parents, and they were keeping her captive until they could find a buyer,” Owen said, feeling the same heavy feeling now that had infected

him when he had originally heard their intent.

“Och, me God,” Iseabail gasped.

Owen nodded. “So, I had nay choice. I couldnae leave without helping her. I told them I’d be interested, and as much as they were suspicious, they were far too greedy tae follow their gut. That very night, we agreed a price, and then we arranged tae meet the following day. When they arrived, it took all the will I had tae hide me shock, fer she was young, nay more than four and ten. Her clothes hung on her body, she was filthy, and she shook with terror.”

The water was getting cold, and noting bumps rising on Iseabail’s skin, Owen said, “Tis time ye got out o’ that bath. Come on and sit by the fire.”

He grabbed a linen towel and held it up to hide her nakedness from him, and once she was out and wrapped in it, he grabbed the blanket he had tossed to the side earlier and wrapped that around her shoulders. With a gentle grip, he then guided her to the rug before the fire.

“Sit there and get warm,” he instructed.

“Only if ye sit with me,” Iseabail said.

Glancing at the space beside her, he nodded, and then lowered himself down. He reached over and threw another log on the fire. Sparks flew up into the chimney, and a crackling sound danced about them as the flames licked at the new tinder. Darkness had now fallen, and the room was lit only by the light of the fire. His clothes were not entirely dry yet, and now Owen could feel it, he was grateful for the warmth he felt on his skin.

“So? What happened then?” she asked, eager to hear the rest of the tale.

“I told them I had tae have a good look at her before I parted with any coin, and so, they brought her closer tae me. The poor lass was terrified, her eyes darting from me tae the man still standing beside her. I lifted her arms, and spun her around, pretending tae examine me prize, and then looking like I was satisfied, I nodded. I didnae let go o’ her wrist, and taking her with me, I told them I would fetch me coin from me horse.”

“But ye didnae pay them,” Iseabail said.

He shook his head. “I lifted her ontae the horse and pretended tae search in me saddle bags. Clearly, the one who had brought her tae me was getting suspicious, and began walking over tae us. I whispered tae the lass tae get ready, and in a swift movement, I mounted me steed and high tailed it out o’ there. They gave chase, o’ course, but me horse is fast and powerful, and after a half hour had passed, I could see nay sign o’ them.”

Iseabail continued to gaze at him with wide eyes. “Did ye bring her back tae the castle?”

“Nay,” he replied, shaking his head. “We travelled fer a full day, and I found a tavern. Her name, I discovered, when she realized I was there tae dae her nay harm, was Catherine. I clothed her and fed her, and then a few days later, when I knew for certain we hadnae been followed, I found the village healer. She took Catherine in, dressed some superficial wounds, and promised me she would take care o’ her until she was fit tae go and find the family she had been stolen from. It was a few weeks later when I found out I was a wanted man.”

Iseabail snaked a hand from out of her blanket and rested it on Owen’s arm.

“Ye are a good man, Owen. I cannae imagine what that lass might have suffered had ye nae done what ye did.”

“Aye. It’s taunted me dreams many a night,” he sighed.

“Ye have a good soul. Far better than I even think ye ken. Me maither died giving birth tae what would have been me younger sister. Had it nae been fer ye saving me this day, I might have seen them both far sooner than I imagined. Truly, I am grateful fer ye saving me life.”

Iseabail then reached up to him and tenderly kissed his cheek. “Thank ye.”

Taking her hand in his, Owen gazed down at her. “Ye terrified me today, Iseabail. When ye were lying on those rocks, lifeless, I thought I’d lost ye fer good. It made me realize something.”

“What?” she breathed, gazing back at him with the same intensity.

“I dinnae want tae pretend that kiss never happened. ‘Tis the only thing I’ve been able tae think about.”

Iseabail’s eyes widened at his words.

“I ken. I lied,” he continued. “I pretended it didnae matter tae me, but ye’re nay fool, Iseabail. Ye’re bound tae ken it did.”

Iseabail inclined her head knowingly. “I ken that it mattered tae me,” she admitted.

Owen turned toward her then, and cupping her cheek, he lowered his lips to hers. In response, Iseabail pushed herself to her knees, and as the blanket fell from her shoulders, she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Her lips felt soft against his, but as his desire grew, Owen wanted so much more. Slipping his tongue inside her mouth, he roved about, wrapping his around her own,

tasting her sweetness. Desperation rose between them, and panting, he could not seem to get enough of her. When she had compelled him, he had felt like he might die if he didn't kiss her. This time, that feeling was simply evoked from his own desire.

Moving from her mouth, his lips trailed against her throat, Iseabail gasping and moaning in pleasure.

"Ye're so beautiful, Iseabail," he growled against her skin. "I want ye so badly."

Pulling away from her, he tugged at his plaid, and after unwrapping it from his body, Iseabail curled her fingers around the bottom of his tunic and tugged it up, telling him what she desired. Helping her, he pulled it over his head, and heard a soft gasp leave her throat.

Gazing at his muscular form with parted lips, her fingers trailed across his solid frame, and then leaning forward, she laid gentle kisses on his chest.

Owen wrapped his arms around her, and with ease, for she barely weighed anything at all, he lifted her off her knees and softly laid her onto her back. Gently, he tugged at the towel that still remained wrapped around her body, and as her nakedness was revealed to him, his breath caught in his throat.

"Och, me God," he murmured, his voice thick with desire.

His eyes travelled down her body, taking in the slenderness of her throat, the prominent collar bones, dressed in her soft skin, her soft round bosoms and her pert nipples. Taking her all in, his gaze continued over the flatness of her stomach, until he finally came upon the dark-haired apex of her thighs.

"Look at ye," he murmured. "Ye are the most exquisite thing I have ever laid me eyes

upon.”

Iseabail smiled bashfully, and though he could hardly tell, for the heat of the fire had reddened her face, he was certain she blushed at his words.

“I want ye, Iseabail. But nae without yer permission.”

Looking up at him with sparkling eyes full of affection and desire, she nodded. “I want ye too.”

He lay his hands on either side of her, supporting his weight, and then slowly, he lowered his head to one of her pert nipples. Catching it with his tongue, he heard her gasp. He gazed up at her, watching her eyes close as she lost herself, his tongue flicking her nipple over and over again.

He moved to the other breast, and repeated the same, all the while feeling his manhood growing between his legs. He did want her, and now, with her say so, he was going to take her. But first, he had to make her ready for him.

“I need tae ken, Iseabail,” he said, as he trailed kisses across her stomach. “Am I the first?”

He looked up at her again, and though she looked embarrassed, she nodded.

“Very well. Then I want tae ready ye fer me.”

He parted her legs and slipped his fingers down over her soft hair. Immediately, he felt her slickness, which made him growl with delight.

“Och, I can see that ye want me, mo ghrádh geal,” he growled, slipping his fingers inside of her. His thumb found the tiny nub he knew so well. While his fingers slid in

and out of her wet tightness, his thumb caressed the nub that he knew would bring her so much pleasure.

“Oh, me God,” she gasped, her hips writhing in some crazed fashion, pushing herself against him.

Lost in the passion of the moment, Owen was delighted that she had remained innocent and untouched. Proud, in fact, that he was the first man to show her what pleasure her body contained within it.

He continued, stretching her a little more as his fingers slid deeper, back and forth, while his thumb rubbed against her, over and over.

“Och, God. Och, God,” she gasped, arching her back.

She was panting now, and he could already feel her tightening around him. He knew a woman’s body well, and in his expertise, plucked from her the pleasure she had never before experienced.

She was close now, for she was barely breathing, her body tensing, sitting on the peak of her explosion. A few seconds later, he felt her contract around his thick fingers, and from above him, Iseabail let out a delighted squeal.

“Och. Och. Ah.”

Her body spasmed as his thumb continued, wanting to make sure he drained every second of pleasure from her, but then, she suddenly pressed her legs together, and he knew she could take no more.

Kissing his way up her body, he gazed down at the serene smile that danced across her face as she lay on the rug. The fire crackled beside them, their bodies no longer

needing its heat.

“I want tae be inside ye, Iseabail. But I dinnae want tae hurt ye.”

She gazed up at him, a flash of fear crossing her face. But it was gone as quickly as it arrived, and reaching out and gripping his thick arms, she said, “I want ye inside me. Please, Owen. Please.”

While he was scared of hurting her, he had worried that her fear would stop this going further. Her words gave him such delight that he lowered himself to her and brushed his lips across hers.

Steadying himself with one hand, he released his manhood with the other.

“I’ll be as gentle as I can. I promise.”

She nodded, not taking her eyes off him.

Moving his body between her legs, he slowly lowered his hips and guided himself inside of her. Immediately, her warm slickness stretched to accommodate him, and a low moan left his throat.

“Och, Iseabail,” he growled. “Ye’re so warm, and wet and ready fer me.”

Reaching up, she gripped his shoulders as he slowly moved back and forth. He growled and moaned, over and over, as pleasure rushed through him, up his legs and into his groin. Still, he remained slow and steady, fearing that he would hurt her.

But Iseabail sensed he was holding back, and gripping his shoulders tighter, she pressed her hips up and into him.

“I want all o’ ye.”

Thrusting his hips a little further forward, Owen let go just a little more, and as the euphoria built within him, he struggled to hold back much longer. Soon, his rhythm changed, and he pushed himself deep inside of her. His eyes were closed, lost in his ecstasy when he heard a gasp.

He looked down at her, her face pained, but as though she feared he might stop, she pleaded him with her eyes, rising up to meet him.

He was close now; he could feel himself building and building. The crescendo would soon be upon him, and as his hips thrust into her, over and over again, he could feel her tightening around him.

“Och, me God,” she cried, her body trembling beneath him.

His body shook too, as the powerful sensation took him over.

They were both lost now, moaning, panting, and gasping together. Iseabail climbed with him, and once more, her body spasmed as he felt her warmth contract around him. She let out a huge squeal, and Owen followed with a roar as he finally exploded and emptied himself inside her.

Dropping down onto the rug beside her, he slipped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her onto his chest. Their bodies wet with sweat, the two lay there, heaving and panting for air, their hearts pumping from the exertion, and pleasure and euphoria of the deepest connection Owen had ever felt before in his life.

He knew now for a certainty, that he could not live his life without Iseabail in it. He blankly refused. He had not been looking for love, but the gods, catching him unawares, had sent him an angel from heaven.

Holding her close to him, he tenderly kissed the top of her head, and then, he growled. “I’m nae letting ye go, Iseabail. Nae now, nae ever.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I seabail woke the next morning, wrapped in Owen's arms. Her head, which rested upon his naked chest, rose and fell with his shallow breathing as he still slept. As she remembered their wonderful night in front of the fire, a soft smile danced on her lips, and her stomach flipped at the sensations and pleasure he had evoked from her. Sensations she had never before experienced, and had not known her body was capable of.

But as his words returned to her, the smile slowly waned, and her thoughts moved to a darker place. A place where she reminded herself of what Laird Sutherland demanded. Her hand in marriage. While last night she had been lost in euphoric moments that she would internalize for the rest of her life, she had to consider her family.

If she refused to marry Laird Sutherland, surely her father and brother would pay the price. She could not live with that thought, and yet, nor could she imagine her life without Owen in it.

I should tell him.

Nay. Ye shouldnae. It will break his heart.

But surely, he needs tae ken.

But as her mind reasoned right from wrong, her heart once again, halted her.

Ye dinnae ken how this is going tae play out. Besides, dae ye really want tae ruin the little time ye might have together?

Indeed, she did not. It might be her last chance for any semblance of happiness. She could not have imagined their journey would bring about what they had shared, what her heart now felt, how much he meant to her. And their journey was far from over. No. She would listen to her heart. She did not want to waste the little time she might have left with him, nor could she bear seeing the pain he would suffer at her words.

When Owen eventually awoke, sometime later, he pulled her into him and softly kissed the top of her head.

“Morning,” he growled.

Even the depth of his voice now made her body react as though he were a puppeteer and she a marionette. Eliciting excitement through her as he pulled at the strings of her heart and beyond.

Turning her head up to him, she smiled widely.

“Hi.”

Owen gently pulled her up his body so her face was close to his, and raising his lips to hers, he kissed her tenderly. When he pulled away, Iseabail found herself lost in his gaze, and once again mesmerized. Even the turmoil she had battled internally earlier seemed to slip away.

“How are ye feeling?” Owen asked.

“If ye mean am I fit tae continue on, then aye. I’m fine.”

“I’ll admit,” he nodded, “ye look a lot better now than ye did when we arrived yesterday.”

“Maybe that has something tae dae with how well ye looked after me,” she replied with a gentle smile. “I still cannae believe that ye saved me life.”

“I told ye last night. I’m nae going tae lose ye, Iseabail. Nor am I going tae let ye go. In fact, from here on out, I’m nae letting ye out o’ me sight.”

Those words, as wonderful as they were, pained Iseabail greatly, and pushing herself off him, she hid her despair by sitting up and turning her back to him.

“While I would love tae lie beside ye fer the rest o’ the day, we ought tae get moving. We have tae travel tae the other side o’ the island and try and find this woman.”

“I agree. While ye dress, I’ll go down and ask the innkeeper if he kens anything about the merchant or where he might have travelled while he was here.”

Once Owen had left the room and Iseabail was left alone, her feigned easiness fell from her as she once more, thought of what lay ahead. Her father and brother were the most important people in the world to her, and she could not let her selfish desires be the reason for their death, for she had no doubt, Laird Sutherland would keep his promise.

She wanted so badly to be able to tell Owen the truth, and yet, as she had concluded earlier, there was much they yet had to go through together before she could return to the laird with his prize. It would be better to hold onto what she knew, for what they had yet to do was going to be difficult enough.

When Owen returned to the room, Iseabail was dressed and ready to leave.

“I have good news. The innkeeper kent exactly who I was talking about, and has told me the location o’ the woman we seek.”

“How far is the journey? Will we get there by nightfall?”

Owen nodded, expressing certainty. “Och, aye. ‘Tis only three or four miles.”

“Good. Then let’s go.”

They had been trekking over glens for just over an hour, when Owen pointed ahead.

“There,” he said. “That’s the woman’s cottage.”

“How can ye ken?” Iseabail frowned.

“The innkeeper said that I wouldnae be able tae miss it. That it was the only cottage in this area with a trellis up either side o’ the door. That has tae be it.”

Sure enough, the cottage ahead did have roses climbing up the trellis on either side of the front door, and thus, the two continued on, Iseabail with a renewed hope that she would, at last, find some answers to where she might find this crystal.

“Who are ye?” the woman said, after they had knocked on the heavy wooden door.

Her long dark hair was tied in a bun on her head, and suspicious eyes peered out at them. She looked to be a woman in her forty years, and by the wrinkles on her face, time had not been kind to her.

“Good day tae ye,” Iseabail began. She and Owen had already decided it should be Iseabail who spoke to her, thinking it might be less intimidating given she was a woman. “We have travelled far in search o’ ye. I am truly hoping ye can help us.”

The scowl remained on the woman's face, and she grunted. "What is it that ye want?"

"We were told a merchant came tae ye and might have traded some crystals," Iseabail said.

As the door closed even further, showing her reticence to converse, the woman said, "I dinnae ken what yer talking about." Gone was the suspicion now. Instead, the woman looked fearful.

"We're nae here tae cause ye trouble," Iseabail said gently. "We ken that the merchant who came tae see ye is dead, and that ye had naething tae dae with that. I am only trying tae discover where he sourced the crystals he sold tae ye."

The woman still looked fearful, and eyeing Iseabail and Owen carefully, she hesitated. For a moment, Iseabail actually thought the woman was going to close the door on their faces, and refuse to tell them anything.

But then, she seemed to come to a conclusion, and said, "I havenae seen him in weeks. But even when he came tae me, I only bought small pieces from him. I cannae tell ye from where he got the crystals because I never asked him, and he never told me."

Iseabail heaved a disappointed sigh. All their effort had been for naught. The journey across dangerous waters, her nearly drowning, the time they had wasted, was all for nothing.

The woman's face seemed to soften at Iseabail's reaction, and she opened the door a little more.

"I'm sorry I cannae help ye. If I kent, I would tell ye. Ye're nae from the island, are ye?"

It was Owen who answered her. “Nay, madam. We travelled here tae see ye after a sailor told us ye might be able tae help us.”

The woman nodded. “I’m sorry fer yer troubles. Truly, I am. But I dinnae ken where he got his crystal. He was very secretive and was only interested in me trade.”

“Thank ye fer speaking tae us,” Owen said. “We’ll be on our way and will leave ye in peace.”

Iseabail nodded gratefully to the woman, even as the disappointment soaked through her very being, and with Owen’s hand resting gently on her shoulder, he guided her back onto the road.

“I’m sorry, Iseabail,” he said, his voice loaded with sadness.

“Aye, as am I,” she replied. “Every time we think we are close tae discovering something more, we get blocked. It’s like the gods are against us. If I dinnae find this crystal soon, it will be too late. Laird Sutherland isnae a patient man. It’s only a matter o’ time afore he murders me faither and braither in anger.”

Owen didn’t reply, and Iseabail imagined it was because he did not really have an answer to her dilemma. They had followed every lead so far, and yet, after all they had done, they were no closer to finding the whereabouts of this crystal.

Not only that, but they were now back to where they had started. The merchant was dead, the woman knew nothing, and despair raced through her as now Iseabail did not know where she was supposed to look.

Someone somewhere had to know something, but who, and where was she supposed to find them?

“Let’s make our way back tae the harbor,” Owen said eventually. “I dinnae think there is anything more fer us on this island.”

Iseabail nodded in agreement. They had to return to the mainland and once there, they had to figure out what their next move was going to be.

The rest of the journey was made in silent contemplation, at least as far as Iseabail was concerned. Her mind raced with thoughts of her father and Keane, wondering what they might be going through, knowing they were relying upon her alone to free them. It was a great weight upon her shoulders, but she was no longer alone, not that they would know that. She was only glad that she had Owen to help her, for as she thought about it, had he not, she may well have been dead already.

Owen did not speak either, and Iseabail could only imagine it was because he had nothing to say in the way of comfort. Their situation was not quite hopeless, but it certainly felt close.

As they reached the coast, they followed the path that ran along it, and once over the brow of a hill, the harbor and the small village of Brunswick came into view.

“I hope there is a boat available tae tak’ us back this day,” Iseabail said, as they ventured down the track to reach their destination. “I dinnae want tae waste any more time stuck here.”

“Another boat. Fantastic,” Owen growled.

Iseabail couldn’t help smile at his remark. “We could always swim,” she quipped.

“That might be an idea if ye could actually swim,” he returned, giving her a smirk. “Instead, I’m going tae have tae get on another damned boat.”

They were now entering the village, and leaving the grassy terrain behind, they walked the cobbled road that led to the harbor. There were several boats moored up, but only one that seemed to be readying itself to sail, for people were already boarding it, and the sailors were hurrying up and down the deck, clearly getting ready to leave.

“There’s a boat ahead,” Owen said. “The sooner we leave, the sooner we can get back tae looking fer this crystal.”

Iseabail was about to reply when she suddenly felt a strange sensation in her gut. Like they were in danger. Like someone was following them.

Glancing to look behind her, she saw two men walking on the other side of the road. They were only a short distance behind, and both of them appeared to be looking at her. Upon seeing her noticing them, they turned their faces away.

“I think we’re being followed,” she hissed, keeping her voice low so the men couldn’t hear her.

Without looking around, Owen said, “How far back, and how many?”

“Two. They’re on the other side of the road, nae far behind us.”

Owen still did not turn to look. “Are ye certain they’re nae just locals?”

“When I looked at them, they were looking at me, and then quickly turned away.”

Owen nodded, as though coming to some conclusion. “All right. When I tell ye, I want ye tae run as fast as ye can. We have tae catch that boat.”

“But what if they?—”

“Just dae as I tell ye, Iseabail.”

“All right.”

They were still some distance away from the harbor yet, and not able to help herself with the growing worry, Iseabail glanced over her shoulder a second time.

“They’ve got closer,” she whispered.

Only then did Owen turn to look, and upon seeing them, he turned to Iseabail. “We need tae move. Run, Iseabail!” he yelled.

Owen bolted on and Iseabail kept pace as the men broke into a run and chased behind them. The sailors up ahead were yelling at each other, and as they closed the gap, Iseabail was certain they were not going to make it.

“Come on, Iseabail. Faster,” Owen barked.

Her heart thumped in her chest, both from the running and the panic of what was about to happen. They had to get to that boat. They just had to. Automatically, wanting to know where the men chasing them where, she turned to look at them. But it was a dreadful mistake, for in doing so, her foot caught in her dress. Already moving forward at a great pace, she lost her balance, and, unable to right herself, she went flying forward landing painfully on her hands and knees.

The clattering sound of footfalls grew closer and closer, and in no time at all, the men were upon her. Between them, they grabbed at her cloak, spinning her onto her back.

“Argh,” she screamed.

As she panted in panic, one of them clambered on top of her. She saw the flashing

glint of metal, and then felt the cold blade of the man's dagger against her throat. Towering over her, he glared at her. His small beady eyes were too close together, and his lips were pulled thin as he snarled down at her.

"Laird Sutherland is running out o' patience," he spat. "Yer braither and faither will meet a dire fate if ye dinnae stop sleeping with yer lover and find the crystal."

"Get off me," Iseabail screamed. "Get off me."

A second later, she heard a battle cry and lifting her head, she watched as Owen launched himself at the man who stood to the side. Pushing himself off her, the other man went to his companion's aid, and as she struggled to get to her feet, Iseabail watched as Owen bravely battled both men at the same time.

The men were fierce, but Owen was both bigger and stronger, and punch after punch, he fended them off. One flew to the ground and appeared stunned, but with a lucky strike, the other man sliced his dagger across Owen's upper arm, making him cry out in pain.

Still, Owen did not relent, and swinging his fist, he hit the man clean across the jaw. Like his companion, he went down, and as he stumbled, Owen turned and ran towards Iseabail.

"Go. Go," he screamed.

Turning toward the harbor, they saw the boat pushing off from the harbor wall.

"Wait," Iseabail screamed. "Wait."

But the sailors were too busy yelling to each other to hear her. Sutherland's men had now regained their footing and were once again on the move, coming after Iseabail

and Owen, even as they ran to the boat.

“We’re nae going tae make it,” Iseabail panted breathlessly, panicking as she watched the ship move further out into deeper water.

“We have tae,” Owen bellowed, and grabbing her by the hand, he ran at full force toward the harbor wall, pulling her along with him. In that instant, she knew what he was about to do, and terror washed over her.

“Owen,” she screamed as he launched off the wall, dragging her with him.

They crashed into the freezing cold water below, the impact and cold shocking the air from her lungs.

“Kick yer legs, Iseabail,” he yelled, looking at her fiercely. “Ye have tae help me. Kick yer legs.”

The waves crashed against their faces, and with blood pouring from one arm, Owen held Iseabail up with the other. By his face he was pained by any movement, and yet, he still began taking single armed strokes with his injured arm. Even as he tried to hold her up with the other, Iseabail choked, trying with all her might to kick with her legs and keep herself afloat, at the same time, choking on the water that splashed into her mouth.

The sailors now saw their struggle against the waves, and began yelling frantically to each other.

“They’re in the water.”

“Get them a rope!”

“Man the rudder. Bring her about.”

Iseabail strained to keep her head above water, but as hard as she kicked her legs, she kept sinking beneath the surface. The men’s voices dulled as her ears filled with the water she was struggling to fight against.

“Grab the rope,” a sailor yelled.

Blindly, she threw out a hand, but could not see what she was trying to reach for. The sailor pulled the rope back into the boat, wrapping it around his arm, before throwing it back out toward her. This time, it landed just inches away, and thrashing about her, she grabbed it with both hands.

It was only then that she realized Owen’s grip had loosened, and as she turned to find him, his eyes were half closed and he seemed to be slipping away.

“Owen,” she screamed, reaching out to him.

But he was too far, and a second later, she found herself travelling at great speed as the sailors pulled her in. They moved fast, hand over hand, pulling her closer to the ship.

Three men grabbed at her clothing, and struggling between them, they pulled her overboard. It might have been painful, only Iseabail was too cold and terrified to notice. No sooner was she safe on the boat, than she turned back to see where Owen was.

“We need tae go back,” she bellowed.

“We cannae reach him,” a sailor cried.

Iseabail then turned and looked the man straight in the eye. “We are nae leaving this harbor without him.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Through heavy eyelids, Owen watched the sailors drag Iseabail onto the ship. At least she was safe. That's all he cared about. He was too tired to fight anymore. The waves continued to crash over him as he swallowed even more water, and as he was tossed about, like a leaf in the wind, he resigned himself to the fact that this was it.

I cannae fight any longer. The boat is too far away. Iseabail is safe. That's all that matters.

His eyes closed, and he began slipping into darkness, when suddenly, he felt someone tugging at his plaid. Seconds later, more hands grabbed at him, followed by yells and shouts of many men.

"Grab him."

"I've got him."

"Come on, lads. Pull him up."

Flickering his eyes open, Owen saw strange faces gazing down at him with worry, and then he felt the hard boards of the deck.

"I need a blanket," he heard Iseabail demand.

Her voice seemed so far away, and for a moment, Owen wondered if he wasn't dreaming. But then, hands were on him again, and he felt himself being lifted from

the deck and placed somewhere else. After that, a blanket was wrapped around him, and he felt a tender hand brush across his forehead.

“Dinnae leave me, Owen,” Iseabail cried.

When he opened his eyes, he saw her face gazing down at him. She was like an angel, her skin so soft and pure, her eyes sparkling with tears. His precious Iseabail.

“Am I dead?” he gasped.

“Indeed, ye are nae dead, and I compel ye tae stay that way.”

A slight and weary smile grew on his lips. “Ye’re so bossy, woman,” he croaked.

His eyelids fluttered, and once more, he heard Iseabail’s cries.

“Ye have tae stay awake, Owen. Please. Stay awake fer me. I promise I will never take ye on another boat fer as long as ye live.”

He nodded his head slowly, and tried with all his might to fight the sleep that threatened to overwhelm him. But his eyelids grew heavier and heavier by the minute. Eventually, he could fight it no more, and closing them slowly, he let the darkness take him.

Wearily, and with the feeling of a slight ache in his arm, Owen flickered his eyes open. He stared up at a low ceiling, feeling utterly confused.

Where am I? What happened? How did I get here?

Letting his eyes move about him, he noticed that the room was dim and small, lit only by a few flickering candles, and daylight trickling in from a tiny window.

Only upon lifting his head from the pillow did he see Iseabail beside him. She was holding his arm, but sitting on a chair with her head resting on the bed. Clearly, she was fast asleep. In that second, everything came flooding back. The sea, the boat, the sailors, and the men he had fought. The men who had caused the injury he now gazed at, his upper arm well-bandaged.

Gazing back at Iseabail, he sighed deeply, for wherever he was, it was she who had got him there. For a moment, as he had struggled against the raging waves, he imagined he might never see her again, but somehow, the gods had had other plans. No doubt, it was not all the gods doing, though. Iseabail was a force to be reckoned with, and as he thought about it, he wondered if she had not compelled the sailors to help her. He certainly wouldn't be surprised.

After the night they had spent together, something magical had happened between them, and he knew now that his feelings were reciprocated. When she had asked him about that kiss, he had been too much of a coward to tell her how he really felt. He did not want to look like a fool, for he feared she might laugh at him. But he had been more of a fool not to tell her, for during their lovemaking, she had made it perfectly clear that she felt for him as he felt for her.

The sound of a door opening across the room alerted him, and as he lifted his head off the pillow once more, an old woman looked over at him. She wore a scarf that held her grey hair off her forehead, and upon her approach, he noted the wrinkles that lined her face. When she smiled down at him, however, she appeared kind and warm.

"It is about time ye were awake," she said quietly, clearly not wanting to wake Iseabail. "Ye've been out o' it for three days."

Owen's jaw dropped at her words, and she nodded. "Och, aye. But I would say that ye're well rested now."

She lifted a crooked hand and held his chin, moving his head back and forth while she examined him. “Aye, ye’ll be as right as rain. Yer lady friend there,” she nodded to Iseabail, “was terrified ye’d never wake again, but I assured her ye would, and here ye are.”

A hundred questions flew through Owen’s mind, and choosing one at random, he said, “But how? How did she get me here?”

The old woman smiled knowingly. “Och, I have a good idea how. She has quite a way about her, does she nae? Anyway, me name is Ada. And yer both welcome tae stay as long as ye need tae.”

“Thank ye, Ada. I appreciate yer kindness.”

“I have the room tae spare, and besides, even if I hadnae have wanted ye here, yer friend paid me well with a necklace. O’ course, she need nae have bothered. I would have let ye stay at any rate. But she insisted. She was determined that I take care o’ ye.”

Owen gazed down at Iseabail, still soundly sleeping beside him, and smiled. “Aye. She is a good lass. I’m lucky tae have met her.”

Ada gave Owen a long look. “And when exactly did ye meet her?”

“We havenae kent each other long. But in the short time we’ve been together, and the trials we’ve overcome, we’ve got tae ken each other very well.”

“I see,” Ada said.

There was something in the old woman’s tone that made Owen look at her. She was smiling at him, almost mischievously.

“What?” Owen said, desperate to know what was going through the old woman’s mind.

“I just wondered if ye kent how in love with ye she is?”

Owen broke into a light chuckle and shook his head. “Och, I think ye’re mistaken. Like I say, we’ve only kent each other a short time.”

The healer then looked at him even more curiously. “Och, is that right? And yet, I dae believe ye may be even more in love with her than she is with ye.”

Her words took him by surprise, and feeling unable to reply, Owen could only stare back at her in stunned silence. Was he in love with her? Moreover, was she also in love with him? Could that possibly be, even though they had shared so little time together?

Ye have gone through more trials in the last two weeks than the last year o’ yer life. Ye cannae deny the bond that has grown between ye.

No, he couldn’t. In fact, as he thought more deeply about Ada’s words, he had to admit that perhaps this old healer might have seen right through him.

“Dinnae ye worry,” she said, patting his arm. “I have a feeling it’ll all work out in the end.”

Absently, Owen reached for his necklace. It was something he did when considering things, and it had long become a habit. But when he realized it was no longer around his neck, he gasped.

“Och, nae. I have lost it,” he exclaimed. “It must have fallen off when I was in the water. Dammit all tae hell!”

Ada did not appear worried at his outburst, and instead, nodded her head and looked at the table beside him. Owen jerked his head in the same direction, and felt a rush of relief as he saw it sitting there, perfectly safe.

“Thank the gods fer that. I thought it was gone forever.” But then he frowned. “But why is it nae at me throat?”

“Och, well, there is a simple answer tae that, me dear.” She smiled. “I simply couldnae heal ye while ye wore it.”

Owen frowned again, and then, suddenly realized what her words meant.

“Ye have powers too?” he gawked.

Until Eden had walked into his life, he had never known such gifts existed. Not once in all his years had he come across anybody who claimed such powers, and yet, since her arrival, his eyes had been truly opened, for he now knew there were far more people than he could ever have imagined that were blessed with these gifts.

“Me gift is one o’ healing,” she said. “The whole purpose o’ me being, and something I believe I received for a reason. I have spent me life using it for good, as many others I ken dae, too.”

“I will admit, I have only discovered recently that people like yersel’ exist,” Owen replied. “But I realize now, I’ve probably been surrounded by people with gifts all me life and never kent it.”

The old woman nodded. “Aye, we have had tae hide what we ken. For many years, I have worked under the pretense that the herbs and tinctures I use have done the work. But really, the gift is in these.” She lifted her frail hands and turned them back and forth. “It was only when I discovered Iseabail had a gift that I felt safe tae use mine

freely.”

“How did ye ken?” Owen asked.

The older woman laughed and shook her head, clearly remembering something. “As I said ‘afore, she has a way about her. When she first arrived, all panicked and in distress, she tried tae compel me tae help her. At the same time, she offered me her necklace in payment, and thus, I kent she was a good soul.” She looked at Owen with a soft gaze. “She’s a keeper. That’s fer certain.”

“But she didnae compel ye,” Owen said, deducing such by the old woman’s words.

Ada shook her head. “Nae. I kent when I’m being forced tae dae something. I’ve had it done by others who didnae mean well, and ye get a very specific feeling.”

Owen nodded, remembering it well when Iseabail had compelled him to drink.

“Later, when I asked her about her gift, she told me she had tae look someone in the eye tae get them tae dae her bidding. But she was so worried about ye, she didnae actually look at me. We laughed about it later. I could see she was desperate. I also sensed that her heart is good.”

“Aye,” he said, gazing back at Iseabail. “Nearly too good.”

“Well, ye are far better than ye were ‘afore,” Ada said. “That gash on yer arm was very deep, and ye had lost a lot o’ blood. That’s the reason it has taken ye three days tae heal.”

“I cannae thank ye enough,” Owen replied. “Truly. Ye are a good and kind soul, and I will ever be grateful fer what ye’ve done fer both o’ us.”

Ada looked at him and inclined her head. “What did ye mean just then when ye said, Iseabail was too good?”

Owen sighed, and while Ada was indeed, a good and kind woman, he was wary of telling her anything about their mission. He didn’t trust many people, and certainly not after such a short period of time.

Seeing his hesitation, she nodded to the necklace. “Has it anything tae dae with that powerful weapon ye usually wear around yer throat?”

Owen frowned. “What dae ye ken o’ it?”

“I ken it blocks powers. But I have a strange feeling that ye ken a lot more about it than I,” she said knowingly.

After yet another moment of consideration, Owen decided to take the plunge. She was, after all, an old woman. What harm could it do to tell her about what they had been doing?

“We are on a quest,” he began. With another glance at Iseabail, he continued. “I shouldnae really be telling ye this, but Iseabail’s faither and braither are being held against their will by a madman who is determined to get his hands on something far more powerful than me necklace. The crystal we seek is far bigger, and in fact, is where that small piece came from. If she doesnae find it and bring it tae him, her family will die. It was the same man’s men who gave me this injury.”

Ada suddenly looked worried. “Ye ken when ye find it, that Iseabail cannae lay her hands upon it? With her gift, and with the power the main crystal holds, it may well be fatal for her.”

Owen nodded. “Aye, another told us the same thing nae so long ago.”

“I have heard rumors that what ye’re looking fer is hidden behind a waterfall nae far from here. It is hard tae find, and many ‘afore ye have searched fer it. The crystal is very powerful and disguises itself. It takes on the color o’ the water, which is why those who have looked have nae discovered its whereabouts.”

“Well, someone has,” Owen replied, “or I wouldnae be wearing a piece o’ it around me neck.”

“Then maybe it is gone already, and what I tell ye is o’ nay use tae ye.”

“Nay,” Owen said, shaking his head vehemently. “I’m grateful for the information. When we left South Ronaldsay without the knowledge we sought, we had nay idea where else we could look. Now, we at least have a place tae begin.”

“I only hope ‘tis useful,” Ada said with a tinge of sadness in her voice. “By the looks o’ it, that lass has suffered enough.”

It was at that moment, that Iseabail began to stir, and stretching and yawning, she sat up in the chair.

“I’m away tae leave ye two alone,” Ada said. Leaning in a little closer to Owen she added, “I’m going intae the village tae collect some herbs, so I’ll be a while.” She then winked mischievously at him.

He felt heat rush to his face, for he knew exactly her meaning, and as the healer shuffled from the room, Owen turned to look at Iseabail.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“O ch, Owen,” Iseabail cried, jumping from the chair and throwing herself upon his chest. “Ye’re awake. Ye’re alive. I was so terrified that ye wouldnae come back tae me. I thought I’d lost ye.”

Owen wrapped his arms around her tiny frame and held her close to him.

“I’m so sorry I scared ye so much, Iseabail.”

She lifted her head up to look at him. “I’m in love with ye, Owen Sinclair.”

She watched Owen’s delighted smile, and then he nodded. “And I am in love with ye, Iseabail. With all me heart.”

“How are ye feeling?” she asked, pushing herself off him, and taking his injured arm in her hands.

Owen bent his arm at the elbow several times, showing her how well he had healed.

“I dae believe Ada is a witch,” he quipped, raising his eyebrows mischievously.

“Indeed, she isnae a witch at all. She’s like me. She has a gift.”

“I ken,” he replied with a grin. “She told me.”

“I was so scared ye werenae going tae mak’ it. Ada was so good, and told me that

only due tae her gift, were ye likely tae survive. Ye're a madman, dae ye ken that? Only a madman would launch us off that wall and intae a raging, freezing cold sea."

"I had tae dae something." Owen shrugged. "Ye were in danger."

She gazed at him tenderly. "I ken. And thank ye. For saving me life. Again." But then, all the worry she had suffered the last three days rushed back to her, and with a playful scowl, she began her tirade accompanied by mock strikes to his body. "But if ye ever," she struck him, "ever," she struck him again, "put yersel' intae such danger again," another strike came, "I swear tae all the gods," one more strike, "I'll kill ye mesel'."

Owen tried to defend the soft blows, and when she was finished, he was chuckling and nodding.

"All right. I surrender. I will try me very best nae tae put us in such danger again. But ye said it yersel' when we were at the wedding celebrations last week."

"What?" she asked, her eyes wide and eyebrows high on her forehead. "What did I say?"

"Ye told me that trouble just comes and finds me." He grinned.

With a light smirk, she said, "Ye're intolerable."

He was still grinning when he replied, "Aye, and that's nae the first time ye've said that tae me either."

For a long moment, Iseabail stood and gazed at him, a serene smile dancing on her lips. It had been a long three days waiting for him to awake, but now, as he gazed back at her, she had to admit, he looked far healthier than he ought. Thank all the

gods for the powers of Ada. If it wasn't for her, Iseabail was certain the circumstances would have been very different.

"So, tell me," Owen said. "How did ye manage tae get me here from the boat? In fact, where is here?"

"We're in a place called Huna. The boat that saved us was sailing here. I will admit," Iseabail still felt a little ashamed, "I used me gift and compelled them tae help me. First, I compelled one o' the sailors tae tell me where the nearest healer was, and then, once we were docked, I forced all o' them tae help bring ye here."

She sighed heavily. "I did feel a little bad about it, but at the time, I didnae care. I was desperate, and ye needed help."

Owen shook his head. "Ye shouldnae feel bad, Iseabail. I'm sure those sailors returned home that night, proud o' themselves fer doing something good."

She considered his words, and then thought back to that night.

Iseabail had been terrified that they might be too late. His skin had been ice-cold, he had lost so much blood, for the blanket they had wrapped around him was soaked in it, and he had not shown any sign of consciousness for the entire journey.

Maybe she had used her gifts for her own ends, but she had saved a life. Surely, the gods could not be angry with her about that.

She gazed back at Owen warily, and then said, "I have another confession tae mak'."

Lifting an eyebrow, Owen regarded her with amusement, as though nothing she could say would annoy him.

Taking a deep breath, she said, “I sent a missive tae yer fajther, telling him everything.”

That got his attention, and the amusement disappeared as he frowned a little. “But why?”

“Tae begin with, keeping this from Laird Sinclair was eating away at me soul,” Iseabail sighed. “I blackmailed his only son, heir tae his clan, forcing him tae come with me on what I kent would be a dangerous mission.”

“I’ve already told ye?—”

“Let me finish, “Iseabail interrupted him. “I ken ye’re here now by yer own free will, but the thing is, yer faither doesnae ken the truth. He was under the impression that ye were taking me back tae me faither’s castle, Owen. If anything happened tae us, he wouldnae ken where ye are. I cannae bear the thought o’ yer faither and Eden worrying sick about ye if we end up getting ourselves killed.”

Owen shook his head. “We’ve survived so far.”

“Only by luck and the grace o’ the gods,” Iseabail countered. “Even I could nae have foreseen the troubles we have encountered. I kent it was going tae be dangerous enough, but after that attack by Laird Sutherland’s men on South Ronaldsay, the stakes are now considerably higher.”

“I dealt with them then, and I will deal with them again,” Owen said confidently.

Iseabail was beginning to get frustrated at his stubborn and slightly arrogant attitude. He may well have dealt with them, but he also nearly died in the process.

“That is just it, Owen,” Iseabail cried. “By fighting them, ye have now made yersel’

nae only an enemy o' Laird Sutherland, but a target."

Again, Owen shook his head and, looking at her with a determined expression, he said, "I dinnae care. I told ye the other night, Iseabail. I'm nae leaving yer side, nay matter what happens. He can send his whole army after me, and I'll still stand between ye and them."

While his bravery was commendable, and a part of her loved the idea of how protective he was of her, Iseabail knew the strength of Laird Sutherland's forces. Their clan had been forced to deal with attack after attack over the past year, and she had witnessed with her own eyes, the damage the laird was capable of doing.

Owen then grinned at her. "Besides, many men have tried tae kill me 'afore, and, as ye can see," he held his arms out wide, "they havenae succeeded. Dinnae worry about me. I'm a fighter."

"Och, well, we ken that, all right," she quipped.

Owen sighed, and then gazed at her. "So, me faither now kens everything."

"Nae everything." Iseabail shook her head. "I didnae tell him that ye were being hunted by nefarious men who wanted yer head, or the fact that ye were fighting tae raise the coin tae pay them. But aye. He kens the real reason ye came with me. I was honest and told him the truth about me faither and Keane. At least, if we ever mak' it tae Laird Sutherland with this damned crystal, yer faither might ken where tae find ye, if anything does happen tae ye."

Owen smiled then, and inclining his head, he said, "Ye ken, now that I'm awake, I am in need o' something."

"Anything," Iseabail said, nearly kicking herself for not offering him something

sooner. “Are ye hungry? Thirsty? Dae ye want me tae find ye some wine?”

“I’m nae interested in any o’ those things, Iseabail. What I want more than anything in the world right now, is a kiss. When I slipped intae the darkness, I didnae think I would see ye again. Now ye’re here beside me, I want ye in me arms.”

Iseabail smiled and moved closer to him, leaning in to kiss him. But as her lips brushed his, he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her onto the bed with such speed, Iseabail hardly knew what was happening.

“Me God, be careful o’ yer arm,” she cried breathlessly.

“I dinnae care a wit about me arm. Ada has done her job well. Now, I want ye beside me.”

Wrapping his arms around her, he lowered his lips onto hers, and kissed her tenderly. But as Iseabail kissed him back, it was clear he wanted far more than a kiss, and she felt his desire in the desperateness of his embrace.

While his tongue roved about her mouth, arousing her with his passion, he dropped his hand to her frock, tugging at the ties and pulling them loose. He slipped his hand inside of her shift, finding her breasts, and as his fingers circled around the soft flesh, her nipples immediately hardened at his touch.

Clearly, it pleased him, for he let out a deep groan. With the softest of touches, his fingers caressed the fleshy part of her bosom, making circles around and around. Iseabail gasped in shocked delight when he finally reached her peaked nipple. It sent a shooting desire across her body, straight to the apex of her thighs. She moaned as he continued, for once again, he was eliciting pleasure from her that she had not known she could experience.

Dropping his lips from her mouth, Owen perched himself on his elbow and suckled on her other breast.

“Och, me God,” Iseabail gasped, grabbing hold of the covers beneath her. She felt a slickness between her thighs and an ache that brought her hips alive, for she writhed without even having to think about it.

His tongue continued to tease her, while his hand moved over her stomach, and grabbed the material of her frock. Pulling it upwards, she felt the material graze over her knee, and automatically she let her legs fall apart, now desperately aching for his touch.

Her body reacted as it had done that first night they had spent together, and while she had survived on the memory of their lovemaking while Owen had remained unconscious, now she wanted to feel all those wonderful sensations again.

His fingers moved lower and lower at such a slow pace it was agonizing. Iseabail now craved his touch, and panting with the pleasure she already felt, she experienced a desperation within her. Finally, his fingers slipped between her thighs.

Upon feeling her soft slickness, Owen growled. “Och, Iseabail. Ye are so wet fer me.”

She gasped and cried out when he found her aching nub. He began slowly, rubbing her gently, still flicking his tongue across her taut nipple. Iseabail now arched her back, pushing her head into the soft mattress beneath her.

His fingers moved faster as she panted and groaned. It felt more intense the faster he went, and Iseabail felt herself climbing. She panted heavily, her body writhing beneath his touch, her head pushing harder into the mattress, and her body singing with delight. As she climbed, the feeling intensified, and her body began to shake

uncontrollably. Suddenly, an immense feeling of pleasure exploded from her most inner parts, and she cried out.

“Och, me God!”

The sensation lasted for a little while longer, flowering out across her body and down her legs. As her body calmed, she finally felt as though she were floating. Up off the bed, out of this room, and high into the sky above them. At that moment, a serene relaxation washed over her, and a soft smile danced upon her lips.

Eventually, she looked up at Owen, who gazed down at her, his face flushed with delight and desire.

“Ye truly are an amazing woman, Iseabail,” he growled, his voice thick with desire.

“And ye are a wonderful man,” she sighed back.

Her eyes took in his whole face, and a strange feeling washed over her, a feeling that told her that she wanted to remember everything about it. Every line, every crevice, every scar.

“I want ye,” he murmured, the desire raging in his eyes.

“And I want ye,” Iseabail replied, shifting herself in the bed.

But she was aware of his injury, and as much as he had said he was fine, Iseabail worried that what they both wanted would undo all the healing Ada had spent so much time on.

“I dinnae want ye tae damage yer stitches,” she said, kneeling up beside him. “Tell me what tae dae?”

Owen tossed the blanket that covered him to the side, and then pushed his trousers down past his hips, revealing his huge, erect manhood.

Iseabail gasped at the sight of it. Their first night together, she had hardly seen it, and now, with it in full view, she could hardly believe he had fit inside her tiny body.

“Come over tae me,” Owen said, holding out his hand.

Taking hold of him, Iseabail moved back onto the bed.

“Now, put a leg either side o’ me hips.”

Hitching her frock around her waist, she straddled his hips, feeling his huge manhood brush against the inside of her thighs. Thighs that were already wet with the explosion Owen had elicited from her.

Watching her now, he moved his hand beneath her frock, and grabbing his erect member, he guided himself inside of her.

“Oh,” Iseabail gasped, feeling him slipping inside her, and filling her up as she lowered herself down onto it.

Owen reached behind her and with a buttock in either hand, he gently lifted her up and down, while at the same time, moving his hips to meet her. Pressing her knees into the bed, and balancing herself with her hands on his taut stomach, Iseabail moved with him, feeling him filling her. It was intensely pleasurable, and she found herself panting as the two fell into a rhythm.

He did not take his eyes off her, but even with the intensity of his gaze, Iseabail did not turn away. She wanted to drink him all in. His smile, his beautiful eyes, and every inch of his face.

He moved his hips a little faster, and at each thrust, he slipped deeper inside of her. Iseabail once more, felt herself climbing with the friction between them.

Owen's brow now furrowed as he breathlessly moved with her. She watched as he got closer and closer to his peak. It only aroused her more, as she too, climbed higher and higher, nearing that ecstatic explosion he had elicited from her only moments before. Their bodies clashed together as they both reveled in that moment. A moment of connectedness, a moment of utter rapturous joy, a moment of love.

Owen continued to watch Iseabail as her body inched closer and closer to bliss, and teetering on the edge, she cried out once more as she jerked and convulsed. With him inside of her, it made the experience far more intense, the pleasure taking her to an even better place than earlier. Only after that, did Owen fully let go, letting out a mighty roar as his entire body stiffened while emptying himself inside of her.

Exhausted and delirious in her ecstasy, Iseabail fell forward onto his chest. Beneath her, she could hear the strong and rapid thumping of Owen's heart. They were both still breathless and panting, and in that moment, Iseabail felt an immense contentment wash over her.

By the time Ada returned, they were both dressed again. The old woman made them something to eat, and after supper, she relayed to Iseabail what she had told Owen earlier.

"Like I said to Owen," Ada said, looking across the table at them both, "I cannae ken if the crystal will even be there."

"We have tae look," Iseabail replied. "After all we've gone through, it's the best news we've had so far."

The following morning, Iseabail and Owen readied themselves to leave for the

waterfall. When they entered the kitchen, Ada handed them a bag.

“It isnae much, but I’m sure ye’ll get hungry and thirsty along the way.”

Iseabail ought not to have been surprised by her kindness, for the woman had showed nothing less since they had arrived, yet, still, she was astonished at her thoughtfulness.

“Thank ye, Ada,” she gasped. “Ye truly have a heart o’ gold.”

“Indeed, ye have,” Owen added. “I will be certain tae travel back this way and pay ye fer all ye have done fer us.”

The healer swiped a dismissive hand and snorted. “I dinnae want yer coin. Sure, I’m an old woman. What would I dae with a great amount o’ money? If ye want tae pay me back, be kind tae another. That’s all I ask.”

Owen and Iseabail nodded. “We will indeed,” Owen said.

As the two reached the door, the healer said, “And if ye dinnae have any luck, be sure tae come back tae me. Ye’re welcome tae stay as long as ye need.”

Again, they thanked her, and then stepped out of her cottage and into the daylight.

CHAPTER TWENTY

While Ada had said the waterfall was not too far from her cottage, it still took them an hour to get there. It would have taken far less time had they been riding, and Owen made a mental note to try and secure a horse when they returned.

They had found the river, and had been following the trail that ran beside the bank. For some time, Owen wondered if they had not taken a wrong turn, but then, after a little while, Iseabail said, “Dae ye hear that?”

Stopping on the track, he strained to listen, and sure enough, he could hear the faint sounds of thundering water.

“We’re close,” he said.

Not long after that, they came across the waterfall. Iseabail gasped, and Owen could understand her shock, for while the healer had told them where they would find it, she had certainly neglected to mention the size of it, for it must have been thirty feet high. Perhaps the old woman had thought it of little consequence, but then, she was not the one having to climb it.

Water battered down into the river, causing what looked like mist to form on the larger body of water beneath it.

“How are we supposed tae get up there?” Iseabail cried, looking at Owen worriedly.

Owen shook his head. “I dinnae ken, but we have tae try.”

After the initial shock, they continued on, the thunderous noise becoming more deafening the closer they went. The climb up to it consisted of a steep wall of jagged rocks, and upon reaching the foot of it, Owen turned to Iseabail.

“I will go. Ye stay here. It’s too dangerous.”

“Indeed, I certainly will nae stay here,” she argued. “I have come all this way. I’m nae backing out now.”

“But, Iseabail?—”

“Nay, Owen. We will climb it together,” she said determinedly.

Securing the bag across his chest, Owen went first, and while still at the lower part of the rocks, he was able to remain upright. The further they climbed, the more it became apparent they would have to use their hands and their feet. Fearing for Iseabail’s safety, he kept turning back to look at her, checking that she was all right, and didn’t need his help. He did wonder, given her stubbornness, whether she would ask for it, even if she did.

The spray from the waterfall soaked through their clothes, making the climb even more difficult. They were what looked like half way when they came to a plateau.

Turning to Iseabail, Owen said, “I think there is a cave hidden behind this waterfall. Look.”

He pointed ahead toward a darkened part of the rock that seemed to disappear into the rock face.

“All right,” Iseabail nodded. “Let’s keep going.”

Taking the lead once more, Owen moved across the precariously wet rock, taking it slow and steady. Holding on to the rock face, he turned back to look at Iseabail, but she was far too busy keeping a keen eye on her footing. He couldn't blame her. One wrong move and the fall onto the rocks below would certainly be their end.

Rounding the edge, Owen stepped into the cave, and turning back to Iseabail, he offered a hand while she took the final steps to join him.

"God, I dae hope we never have tae dae that again," she gasped.

"We still have tae get back down yet," Owen replied, looking at her warily.

Iseabail shook her head. "Well, let's nae worry about that fer now."

She walked past him and moved several feet deeper into the hollow. It did not go much further, and so, there really were not many places they could look. As he scanned one side, Iseabail scanned the other.

"There," she said.

But even before he turned to look, he could hear the disappointment in her voice. Sure enough, when he turned to face her, Iseabail was standing in front of a hollowed-out place that would be the perfect shape and size for a large crystal. But alas, the hole was just that. A hole with nothing in it.

Iseabail dropped her head into her hands, and to his surprise, she began sobbing. He took two steps and reached her, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her into his chest. He held her there and allowed her to release the despair and frustration she was feeling. He too, felt the same, but it was not his family being held captive and relying on him to save them.

She had suffered so much disappointment on their journey so far, and acknowledging the fact that many others might have given up by now, he admired her tenacity and determination. Indeed, she had plenty of motivation, for the fate of her father and brother lay at her feet, but still, one could only face so many dead ends before despair overtook them.

She finally settled herself, and sniffing, she pushed herself away from his chest.

“Are ye all right?” Owen asked.

It was a stupid question, but he felt like he had to say something. He knew well that she was far from all right, but he could think of nothing else to say.

“It feels like me world is falling apart,” she croaked. “I have spent so long already looking for this damned crystal, and we are thwarted at every turn. I dinnae even ken if me faither and braither are still alive. What if Laird Sutherland has grown tired o’ waiting? What if he’s killed them already in his frustration?”

Owen took a step closer and grabbed her shoulders. “Dinnae speak o’ such things, Iseabail. Ye cannae ken that. Thoughts like that will only drive ye mad. Ye have tae continue tae believe that they are still alive, and that all yer efforts will free them.”

While Owen gazed down at her, Iseabail remained with her head down, but she nodded, as though accepting his words.

“Nae matter what happens,” Owen continued. “I’ll be right here, by yer side.”

She gazed up at him then, her red-rimmed eyes glistening with the remaining tears. “Thank ye, Owen. Thank ye fer everything ye’ve done.”

He gazed down at her, wishing he could take away her worry and angst. “We should

go. There's nay more we can dae here."

Iseabail turned away from him and took the few steps back to the entrance of the cave. Taking a deep breath, she took hold of the rocks at her side, and started the treacherous climb down.

Owen followed, careful of his footing on the wet rocks. The waterfall battered spray against his face as he carefully took side steps, keeping his back tight against the wall. They reached the small ledge, the only part of the rock face that offered more than a couple of inches to step on. Iseabail turned to look where he was, and in doing so, moved her foot closer to the edge.

She gasped, losing her balance as rocks crumbled under her feet, tumbling away before they were swallowed up by the pounding water below.

"Argh," she cried out.

But Owen's hand flew out and grabbed her wrist before she fell. Relief washed over her face, and Owen's heart thumped in his chest as panic washed over him.

"That was?—"

Suddenly, the stone beneath her feet gave way completely, and Iseabail slipped off the edge.

"Argh," she screamed, as her body fell at great speed, only to crash back against the rock face with the tension of Owen's stronghold.

The only thing stopping her from plummeting to her death was the grip Owen had on her wrist. But her clothes were wet, and he could feel her slipping.

“Hang on,” he bellowed.

“Help me,” she screamed. “Oh, God. Help me.”

Trying to get a firm footing so he didn’t fall over the edge and kill them both, Owen bent at the knee and pulled as hard as he could. She dangled precariously above the body of water, the waterfall deafeningly loud as it fell beside them from the great height before crashing into the basin at the bottom.

With all the strength he could muster, while at the same time, having barely any rock to stand on, he slowly pulled her up, inch by inch. The stone at his feet crumbled under the pressure of both their weights, and trying to keep an eye on Iseabail, as well as the loose foothold, Owen heaved her up slowly.

“Please dinnae let me die, Owen. Please.”

“I’ve got ye,” he huffed. “Ye’ll nae die this day. I promise ye that.”

Though he wanted to believe those words with all his heart, the rock beneath him continued to crumble, and he wondered, in those tenuous seconds, whether they might both not see another day. Besides that, his injured arm felt weak and was causing him a great amount of pain.

Iseabail lifted her other hand and grabbed onto his arm, but her fingers slipped against the wet cloth of his tunic. Never before had he seen her look so terrified, and while he wanted to instill her with confidence, he too was scared. Grabbing her with his other hand, now he could reach her better, and he continued to pull. Inch by agonizing inch, she rose a little at a time.

Iseabail turned her head and looked down, gasping at the dreadful drop.

“Look at me, Iseabail,” Owen yelled. “Keep yer eyes on me.”

Her body was now level with the plateau he stood upon, but there was still a way to go. Breathing through the ache in his arm, and grunting with the effort, he gave a final push of determination and brought her level to his body.

Immediately, Iseabail threw her arms around his neck, panting in fear.

“Dinnae let me go. Please, dinnae let me go.”

Owen now wrapped his arms around her body, and holding her tightly against him, he whispered, “Never.”

The two stood there for a long moment, both panting, their hearts thumping against their rib cage. Iseabail held him with a vice-like grip, and while he did not want to crush her with his strength, he too held her securely. But after another moment, Iseabail had still not moved, and Owen realized she was frozen with fear.

“We have tae get down from here, Iseabail. The ledge is breaking away, and I dinnae ken how long it can hold us.”

“I’m too scared,” she replied, her voice trembling.

“I ken. But we havenae any choice. All that effort will have been fer naught if we dinnae move.”

Painfully slowly, Iseabail eventually loosened her grip, but Owen still kept a tight hold of her, holding her against his body.

“We’re going tae move very slowly, all right?” he said in the calmest tone he could muster.

Iseabail nodded, the overwhelming fear still gripping every part of her.

“I want ye tae take a step tae yer right.”

“I’ll fall,” she cried. “I cannae dae it, Owen. I’ll fall.”

Owen shook his head. “Nae, ye willnae. I’m nae going tae let go o’ ye, I swear. But I need ye tae take that step, Iseabail.”

Even as her whole body trembled, she shifted slightly, and feeling her leg moving, Owen kept a tight grip on one arm, while she used the other to balance herself against the wall.

“Good. Now the other leg,” he said, watching her like a hawk.

She didn’t speak, perhaps because she couldn’t, but she did as he directed. She now faced the wall with her two hands against it, while Owen still had a solid grip on her arm.

“All right. Let’s keep moving. One slow side-step at a time.”

And with Iseabail facing the wall, and Owen with his back against it, they slowly made their way down the rock face. When the terrain beneath their feet became a little easier, he let go of her arm, leaving her to climb down herself. Eventually, they arrived at the very bottom, where Iseabail bent herself at the waist, blowing great breaths from her lungs in relief.

Owen placed a hand on her back. “Are ye all right?”

“I am now,” she panted.

He then moved further on and found a soft, grassy part of the river bank. Throwing the bag onto the ground, he nearly collapsed beside it. He had fought many men, found himself in dangerous situations, even battled for his life, but he could not compare any of those circumstances with the terror he had experienced today.

Iseabail's life was at risk, and I cannae lose her.

It was true, and he could not deny it. She had found a way into his heart. Unwittingly, she had discovered a path that no other before her had found. A path Owen did not even know existed.

Several minutes later, Iseabail joined him, still seemingly stunned at their experience.

"We should eat. It'll make ye feel better," he offered.

"I'm nae hungry," she replied quietly.

Owen let that comment slide and dug into the bag, retrieving the parcels of food Ada had packed for them. There was bread, meat, fruit, and wine. Opening the parcels up, he laid them out in front of them both, and leaving Iseabail the option of changing her mind, he tore off some bread and took some meat.

From this perspective, the waterfall looked beyond beautiful. Now they were safely on the ground, it was awe-inspiring, while at the same time, rather serene.

"I like the view from down here much better," he said wryly.

Iseabail slowly turned her head and looked at him. She did not smile, however, and as light-hearted as he was trying to be, he understood why. Survived they had, but she still had a heavy burden on her shoulders.

“We’ll rest here a while, and let our clothes dry out,” he said. “Then we’ll think of a new plan and a new place to start looking. Whatever happens, Iseabail, I promise we’ll save yer faither and braither.”

Iseabail watched as Owen slept soundly. He had laid down to rest, and in doing so, had winced. It was only then that Iseabail had remembered his wound, but when she asked him about it, he had told her he was fine, and that he just needed to rest. It was not long after he had closed his eyes, that Iseabail watched the steady rise and fall of his chest as he slipped into peaceful slumber.

I have been so selfish. I should have waited another day, until he was properly well.

But Owen had told her he felt fine. In fact, he had been as eager as she, to leave the healer’s cottage in search of the waterfall and the crystal, for all the good it had done them. Clearly, he had not been fine at all.

Or perhaps, the strenuous effort o’ saving me caused him more harm.

Gazing down at him, Iseabail admired him, a soft smile on her lips as she drank him in. Now her fear had fully abated, she could think straight again, and at that very moment, her heart was full of love and gratitude for what he had done for her. But the smile slipped as she thought of what lay ahead.

He had said earlier, that they would find a way to save her family, but Owen could not know, because she had not told him, that saving her family involved much more than just retrieving the crystal. There was a final demand, a demand that would separate her and Owen forever.

And yet, what choice did she have? If she did not acquiesce to Laird Sutherland’s wishes, all her efforts would be wasted, for she knew the cruelty of the man. No doubt, he would not hesitate to slaughter Keane and her father, if he had not already

done so.

Perhaps ye should tell Owen. That way, ye dinnae have tae carry this burden on yer own any longer.

But telling him would pain him deeply. Had he not already suffered enough because of her? How could she now, especially after he had saved her life, pain him even more?

He's going tae find out sooner or later.

Yes, he would. And perhaps selfishly, Iseabail would prefer it was later. They didn't have much time together, and she wanted to relish every last moment, not spend it in awkward moments, for surely, if she confessed what she knew, it would cause a rift between them.

Resting her head on his chest, she listened to the soft thud of his heart, allowing his chest to lift and fall beneath her.

"I love ye so much, Owen Sinclair," she whispered. "But I am afraid the gods have made their choice, and me life isnae tae be spent with ye."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Owen woke to Iseabail's soft kisses, and with a smile lining his face, he wrapped his arms around her, and pulled her on top of him.

"Be careful," she said. "Ye have injured yersel' enough fer one day."

He gave a wry grin. "I dinnae mind injuring mesel' a little more."

"Nay. Absolutely nae," she countered, pushing herself up and standing beside him. "I've caused ye enough damage on this journey. I cannae face causing ye anymore. Ye need time tae heal."

He was still smiling when he pushed himself up off the ground. Towering above her, he held her chin between his fingers and thumb and gazed down at her tenderly. "And I'd dae it all again in a heartbeat," he growled, before lowering his lips to hers.

She sank into his embrace, parting her lips and bidding him entry as his tongue roved about the sweetness of her mouth. But Iseabail gently pushed him away, and looking a little flushed, she breathed. "Come on. We have wasted enough o' this day. We need tae return tae the cottage and let the healer take another look at that wound."

Reluctantly, Owen stepped away, and bending to the ground, he scooped up the bag and donned it across his chest. Side by side, they began the journey back to the healer's cottage, Iseabail seeming far more relaxed now after their rest.

"Perhaps there is someone else in Huna. Another villager who can tell us about the

crystal,” she said as they walked. “If Ada kent about it, maybe someone else has some other information.”

He liked her optimism, and thus, kept his thoughts to himself. He doubted anyone else would know anything, though he could not know for certain. Still, surely, they had used all their luck over the last few days? And it would only be luck that would put them in contact with someone who might have more information. The fact that Ada had known anything at all about it was a miracle. He just couldn’t see that their fortune would be so great as to have another miracle anytime soon.

“For now, we should return tae Ada,” he said, diplomatically neither agreeing nor disagreeing with her suggestion. “At the very least, we could both use a decent night’s sleep after today’s excitement.”

“More tae the point, Ada needs tae check yer wound,” Iseabail countered.

“I’m sure it will be fine.”

“Och, o’ course, it will,” she quipped back dryly. “The fact that ye were in pain earlier means naething at all. And dinnae get me started on that daring rescue at the waterfall.”

He cast a smirk in her direction, and seeing it, Iseabail grinned back.

An hour later, they were back in the village and knocking on Ada’s door.

“Och, come in. Come in,” she waved eagerly. “I have news tae tell ye.”

The old woman hurriedly closed the door and looked from Owen tae Iseabail. “Ye didnae find the crystal, did ye?”

Iseabail, looking forlorn again, shook her head.

“Well, sit ye down. I’ll make us tea, and I’ll tell ye what I discovered today,” the old woman said with palpable excitement.

When the tea was made, Ada joined them at the table, and leaning forward, she began. “A man came in fer a healing today. We were talking about the many herbs available in the area, and how nature takes care o’ us. Somehow, the waterfall came intae the conversation, and ‘afore I even mentioned anything about it, he began talking about the crystal that once was hidden in a cave up there.”

Iseabail gasped. “What did he say?”

“He told me that a man has taken the crystal and has begun breaking it intae pieces tae make intae jewelry so he can sell it. He’s turned it intae a business and travels about selling them tae merchants and traders. That’s where yer crystal came from.” She nodded to Owen.

Owen frowned. “But we ken about that man. He drowned on South Ronaldsay.”

Ada shook her head vehemently. “It wasnae the same man. Apparently, yer drowned fella worked for the man who took the crystal. I hear he got murdered by some wicked men who were trying tae get their hands on it.”

Iseabail and Owen shared a look.

“Laird Sutherland’s men?” Iseabail said.

Owen shrugged. “Likely.”

“At any rate,” Ada continued, “this man is now in hiding, probably fearing for his

life. He's very hard tae find, but I dae ken where he was last seen."

"Tell us, Ada. Please," Iseabail said.

"He's holed up in a cottage ten miles south o' here. I will give ye a description o' it, or for a certainty, ye'll never find it."

And with that, Ada continued describing the place Owen knew they needed to visit next.

"There is one last thing ye need tae ken. I didnae want tae tell ye 'afore, but seeing as ye're so determined, I suppose I must. I ken o' Laird Sutherland. I also ken his power. He's an evil man who can create the illusion o' pain with only a look."

Iseabail gasped.

"Ye will be protected," she nodded at Owen, "if ye keep that necklace around yer throat." She then turned her attention to Iseabail. "But ye, me dear, ye need tae be careful. And dinnae forget what I told ye. Ye cannae put yer hands on that crystal. When ye find it, dinnae touch it."

Iseabail nodded, a worried frown dancing on her brow.

"For now," the old woman continued, "ye can bed down here fer the night. Ye'll nae find it in the dark, and besides, ye both look like ye could dae with the rest."

Iseabail insisted that Ada take another look at Owen's wound, and before they retired to bed, she took him into her healing room.

"What the devil were ye at today?" she bemoaned, cleaning blood that had leaked from the laceration.

“Naething much,” Owen replied matter-of-factly. “Just climbing a thirty-foot waterfall, and saving Iseabail from falling tae her death. A typical day.”

The healer cast him a glance and lifted the corner of her mouth in a slight smile. “Ye’d dae anything fer that lass, wouldnae ye?”

Owen nodded. “O’ course. I love her.”

“Aye. Smitten ye are,” she said, now bandaging his arm again. “Well, I’ll admit, I’ve never seen a more suited couple. And I get the feeling, that lass would dae anything fer ye too.”

The old woman then stood, and placing a gentle hand upon his arm, she looked him straight in the eye. “Things are going tae get worse ‘afore they get better. Look after her, Owen. She might nae ken it yet, but she needs ye.”

Owen shook his head. “I dinnae ken about that. Iseabail is a strong, independent lass.”

But the old woman shook her head. “I’m nae talking about strength, dear. I’m talking about this.” And with that, she pressed a withered hand against his chest. “Yer muscles, as big as they are,” she smirked, “are nae what that lass needs. She needs ye tae be strong in yer mind, and soul, and heart.”

Owen felt a little disturbed by her words. Not because he doubted he could be all those things if he put his mind to it, but more the fact that no one had ever needed any of those things from him before. Not in the way Ada was talking about, at least.

“I will try me very best, Ada. I swear that tae ye.” And with all his heart, he meant those words deeply.

The following morning, they both bid Ada a final farewell. They were never likely to see her again, and thus, they thanked her profusely for all she had done for them. Once again, the old healer had packed them food and drink, and offering her blessings and good luck, they left for the village.

Owen was determined not to walk such a distance, and in a short time, he acquired two horses for all the coin he had left in his pocket. Helping Iseabail upon her mare, he mounted his horse, and they got under way.

The journey was short, and just over an hour later, they found the cottage Ada had spoken about. Leaving Iseabail hidden behind a barrack with the horses, he went to scout it out.

Circling the cottage, it was evident the man they sought was not home, and while Owen was tempted to break in and search for the crystal, he decided such an action might well be pointless. If the man was so obsessed about his prize, he was unlikely to leave home without it.

Returning to Iseabail, he reported his findings.

“So, what now?” she said.

“We wait,” Owen replied. “I have a strong feeling the man has this crystal on his person. We have nay choice but tae wait fer his return.”

“And how long will that be?” Iseabail said, sounding slightly frustrated.

Owen looked at her, and then smirked. “I dinnae have me crystal ball with me tae tell ye, Iseabail.”

She rolled her eyes and let out a light laugh.

“We’ll settle ourselves here. We have a good view of the cottage. We’ll see him when he returns.”

The hours ran on, the sun above them crossing the sky slowly as time seemed to stand still. While Owen was used to holing up in places for long periods of time, for he had done so on many scouting missions before, Iseabail was getting more and more restless.

“He may never return,” she hissed, after they had been there for almost four hours. “He could be away fer weeks, and here we are, watching an empty cottage.”

Putting a calming hand out toward her, Owen said, “All will be well, Iseabail. I ken this is hard. I ken ye’re impatient tae help yer faither and braither, but this is the best lead we’ve had so far. There is naewhere else fer us tae be right now. I need ye tae trust me.”

“I dae trust ye,” she sulked. “I’m just tired o’ all this waiting.”

“I ken. But it is the way it has tae be.”

Another hour was just coming to a close when Owen heard movement nearby. Someone was approaching, and immediately, he turned to Iseabail, pressing his fingers to his lips. She nodded with wide eyes of understanding.

A broad man then emerged and headed toward the cottage they had been watching for most of the day. Still, Owen did not move. The man trudged through the surrounding wooded area of the hidden house, walked through the wooden gate of the garden, and headed toward the door. Excitement now swirled around Owen’s belly, for after all the hours of them sitting about, this surely was the man they had been waiting for. The man turned, taking his time to look all around him. He was clearly checking to see that he was alone. After a moment, he appeared satisfied. Only then did he enter,

slamming the door closed behind him.

“Now, we go,” Owen whispered, standing fully erect.

Iseabail stood with him, and the two made their way to the door. But when Owen knocked, there was no answer. Lifting his large fist, he knocked again, only with more force this time.

They heard heavy footfalls on the wooden boards within, and then the door flew open, and an angry face peeked out at them.

“What dae ye want?” he growled gruffly.

Owen opened his mouth to speak, when Iseabail quickly stepped in front of him.

“Och, thank God,” she gasped. “We have been traveling for miles trying tae find someone tae help us. We were robbed on the road, and we dinnae have tae eat or drink. Would ye be so kind as tae help us?”

Bewildered at her lies, Owen watched the man’s face soften, his shoulders relax, and the door open a little wider. But as they stepped over the threshold, he caught the glint of a knife that the man was now sliding back into its sheath.

She was worried we would be attacked. What a clever girl ye are, Iseabail.

“Where are ye from?” the man demanded, as all three walked further into the cottage.

Owen scanned the area and noticed how dusty and filled with cobwebs it was. It did not look like a house that was lived in, and then he realized that this man was only holed up here temporarily.

“We’ve traveled from John o’ Groats,” Iseabail continued, glancing over at Owen uneasily.

Perhaps she was feeling the same discomfort he was, for his gut was telling him that this man was more dangerous than most. Glancing across the room, he caught the man eyeing Iseabail, his lips parting and his expression denoting a lust for her. It made Owen feel sick to his stomach.

“Sit down there,” he growled, pointing to a table that was covered in old books, dust, and clothes.

In the kitchen, the man grabbed cups from a cupboard and poured wine from a stoneware bottle. “I dinnae have much in the way o’ food, but I have wine,” the man said.

While Iseabail’s view of the kitchen was blocked by a cabinet, Owen did not take his eyes off the man for a second. He watched him slip his hand into a drawer and discreetly lift a paper sachet. Powder spilled from the sachet into each of their cups, and swiftly the man returned it to the drawer. But before he had chance to lift the cups, Owen was on his feet, anger racing through his body.

“What the devil dae ye think ye’re playing at?” he barked. “Did ye think I wouldnae notice ye slipping something intae our drink?”

“What?” Iseabail gasped, pushing herself up from the chair.

“Dae ye expect me just tae trust ye?” the man scowled back. “What kind o’ fool dae ye take me fer?”

“And so ye drug everyone ye dinnae trust?” Owen came back, now taking determined strides toward him.

But the man did not back away, and in fact, moved towards Owen to close the gap. By his expression, he was ready to fight, and Owen had plenty of reasons to hit him, not least of which the way he had looked at Iseabail earlier.

“Stop it! The both o’ ye,” Iseabail screamed.

So loud was her cry that both men stopped in their tracks and turned to gawk at her.

With a reddened face, she continued. “We mean ye nay harm. We are nae here tae cause ye any trouble. We ken ye have a crystal ye found in the waterfall past the village o’ Huna. All we ask is whether ye will part with it.”

The man glared at Iseabail like she was mad. “Indeed, I willnae part with it. I found it, and I will be keeping it.”

“I can pay ye,” Iseabail cried desperately. “I dinnae have the coin with me now, but I can go get it.”

He then laughed in her face. “Dae ye really think I’m so stupid as tae believe that?”

Owen then watched as Iseabail looked him straight in the eye. He knew exactly what was going to happen, and waited with eager anticipation. But just as she was about to speak, the sound of their horses neighing wildly seeped into the cottage.

“Something is wrong,” Iseabail gasped.

“I will go,” Owen offered.

“I will go,” Iseabail said sharply, giving him a determined look.

Clearly, she did not want to be left alone with this man, and nor could he blame her.

Now, as he thought about it, he wasn't too keen on that idea either.

"Go," he said to her, jerking his head toward the door.

Nodding firmly, she slipped past the two of them and hurried out of the cottage.

"How much dae ye want fer the crystal?" Owen said, once she was gone.

"Naething ye could afford," the man spat.

"Me name is Owen Sinclair, son o' Laird Madigan Sinclair, heir to the Sinclair clan. Our wealth is very great, and?—"

"Aye, I ken well o' the Sinclair clan. I've been on yer lands many a time selling me wares," the man interrupted, now looking more interested.

"How much?" Owen pressed, seeing an opening for a barter.

"Forty merks," the man growled.

Owen took a step back in astonishment. It was a ludicrous amount of money for a piece of crystal.

Aye, but look at the power it contains. Besides, what are Iseabail's faither's and braither's lives worth? And then there's Iseabail. Her happiness is surely worth every coin ye have, even if it means ye'll nae pay yer debt.

Owen shook his head at the man and said, "Naeone carries that amount o' coin around. But," he continued, halting the man from objecting as he was clearly about to do, "I can get it fer ye. I will make a bond with ye right now, and swear tae it, that me word is true."

Owen removed his clan ring and pushed it into the man's palm. He then turned to the table, and finding a scrap of paper, he quickly scribbled a few sentences.

Signing yer own death sentence by giving all yer savings away, arenae ye?

Turning back to the man, he handed him the note. "If anything should happen tae me, fer if I dinnae return, it will only be because I have been killed, take that ring and that note tae me clan. Find a man named Daire. He will give ye what ye are due."

For a long second, the man eyed Owen, clearly trying to decide whether he ought to trust him or not. But his greed got the better of him, and telling Owen to wait, he moved across the room. After rummaging in a cloth bag, he turned to face Owen with the crystal held proudly in his hand. It was the size of a large stone, chipped on all sides where the man had cut away at it to make the jewelry he sold.

After another moment's hesitation, he thrust it at Owen, and growled. "Take it, and be away with ye. Dinnae dilly on yer return. I will be expecting me money within the month."

Owen nodded, and before the man had time to change his mind, he turned and hurried out the front door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

When Iseabail arrived at the horses, they still appeared to be a little troubled, but looking about her, she could see nothing that could have caused it. She had been surprised, in the cottage, to hear them sounding distressed. She and Owen had traveled that far out into the country that she couldn't imagine anyone else stumbling upon them by accident. Besides, they had the horses hidden well so as not to be discovered by the man they sought.

At the thought of the wretched fiend, she physically shivered, for she had not missed his leering eye as she had rounded the table in the grubby, run-down cottage. In fact, had she not been so desperate to discover the location of the crystal, she would have suggested to Owen that they leave immediately.

And then, there was the incident with the wine.

Thank God for Owen's sharp eye.

They could have been drugged, and with Owen incapacitated, what the man might have done with her afterwards didn't bear thinking about. Another shiver ran through her body as her imagination went to dark places. Shaking her head, as though that might rid her mind of the horrid images, she began looking around on the ground.

Perhaps it had not been a person who had spooked the horses. Perhaps it had been something else, and with trepidation, for she knew the excruciating pain a snake bite could cause, she treaded carefully through the long grass with her eyes wide, searching for a slithering object of terror.

But no matter how hard she looked, she could find nothing.

Perhaps the horses' reaction scared it away, whatever it was.

With the horses now settled, Iseabail turned back toward the cottage. She dreaded the idea of entering it again, but she had to try and convince the man to give her that crystal. He had it; she knew that now. But what could she offer him to part with it? There was one thing she certainly wouldn't be offering him, not in a thousand years. But there had to be something the man wanted.

Just as she reached the gate of the surrounding garden, the front door flew open. Owen appeared, and began taking determined strides toward her. It didn't take long for him to reach the gate.

"Move. Get tae the horses and dinnae turn back," he said sharply.

Iseabail didn't stop to ask why, and spinning on her heels, she hurried back the way she had come. With his long strides, Owen was soon at her side, and taking her by the arm, he pulled her along even faster. His face was like stone, and while Iseabail wanted desperately to discover what had happened in her absence, she realized that this was not the time to ask.

Upon reaching the horses, he still did not speak, and swiftly helping her onto her mare, he leaped up and mounted his own beast.

"We must go now," he grunted, flicking the reins.

Iseabail followed suit, and the two horses galloped along at great speed. They left the little cottage far behind them, traveling over several miles. Still, Owen did not speak a word, and never before seeing him like that, Iseabail was nearly too afraid to confront him.

But the further they went, the more frustrated she got. When Owen had first departed the cottage, Iseabail had done as he had asked. Clearly, something had happened. But they had journeyed some way now, and Iseabail could stand this silence no longer.

“Stop, Owen,” she called out. “We need tae stop.”

He pulled back on his reins and brought his horse to a gentle stop, while at the same time, looking behind him with intense interest.

“What is it? Are ye waiting fer him tae come after us?”

“Better tae be aware o’ the possibility than tae be taken off guard,” Owen replied, while his eyes still roved the glen behind them.

“But why would he come after us?” Iseabail asked, still feeling completely confused. “What did ye dae tae him?”

“Nae half as much as I would have liked,” he growled.

“Are ye going tae tell me what happened?” she pressed.

Owen then turned to face her. After a long and rather intense look, he reached a hand into his tunic. His fist was balled when he withdrew it, and Iseabail, suddenly realizing what it might be, gasped and held her breath.

“Och, me God,” she blurted, when Owen finally opened his hand to reveal the large crystal. “Ye did it,” she cried, nearly shaking with excitement. With her eyes still firmly glued onto the crystal, she continued, “Ye did it, Owen. Och, me God, I cannae believe it.”

Completely forgetting Ada’s words of warning in her exhilaration, she reached out a

hand to touch it.

“Nae, Iseabail!” Owen barked desperately, pulling his hand swiftly back. “Ye cannae touch it. Nae ever, dae ye understand?”

“Aye, aye. O’ course,” she said, nodding as Owen’s firm command reminded her of the healer’s warning. “I just cannae believe ye have it.” She then lifted her eyes to look at Owen. “But how did ye dae it? How did ye get him tae give it tae ye?”

A wary expression flashed across Owen’s face, and then he said, “He didnae give it tae me. I took it from him.”

Iseabail gasped again. Jerking her head behind her, she said, “And that is the reason ye’re worried he’ll come after us,” understanding his urgency in leaving.

“Aye,” Owen said, “that is the reason. Now, we need tae continue on. It’ll be nightfall soon. We need tae find somewhere tae bed down.”

They were too far out to return to the healer’s cottage, and besides, Laird Sutherland’s keep was in the opposite direction to Huna. Dusk was falling fast, and with no sign of any shelter on their travels, they were forced to find a small clearing in a wooded area.

“It’s nae ideal,” Owen said, looking about him when they had dismounted, “but it will dae. Stay close tae the horses. I’ll go and find some firewood.”

After Owen had ventured into the darkening woods, Iseabail made herself useful. Clearing dead leaves from underfoot, she unfurled the thin blanket that was tied to her horse, and placed it on the ground. After that, she rummaged through their bags, seeing what food they had left. It wasn’t much, but it would be enough to sustain them for a night.

A little while later, Owen returned with an armful of kindling and larger sticks. He disappeared no less than three times, returning each time with more firewood. When he was finally done, he arranged the wood carefully and began the tedious job of lighting it.

Iseabail watched him mindlessly, for though her eyes were looking at what he was doing, her thoughts were somewhere else entirely. In two days, they would reach Laird Sutherland's castle. She was more than desperate to see her father and Keane again, and now that she and Owen were in possession of the crystal, the laird would release them unharmed, if he kept his promise.

She ought to have been elated, excited, jumping for joy. Instead, a shroud of sadness wrapped itself around her. Though they had faced dreadful obstacles, and several experiences that had brought both of them close to death, she was certain that all they had gone through had only strengthened the bond between them. That was how she felt, at least.

From a rocky beginning, she had grown to love the man before her. So much so, that she did not want to think of her life without him in it. And yet, they could never be together. That was her reality, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. She had only told Owen part of Laird Sutherland's demands, that he would trade her family's lives for the crystal. But the biggest secret, which she had been holding onto, now ate at her insides.

Ought she to tell him? If she did, what distress would that cause him? They were deeply in love with each other, that much was clear. If she told him, it would break his heart. She knew it would break hers too, but her heart was already on the verge of shattering, knowing what was ahead of her.

For they only had a few more days together. Did she not want to relish the time she had left with him? Selfishly, she did, even knowing that when he discovered the truth,

it may well hurt him even more.

I dinnae want our last days filled with tension and pain. Surely, I want tae treasure the time we have left, and make the most o' it.

Nodding to herself, Iseabail concluded that she would keep her secret. Nothing good would come of her sharing it now. And perhaps it was for the best. Perhaps Owen would understand why she had not told him when the time came. Her heart would break as much as his, and yet, she would forever cherish every second they had spent on their quest.

“Iseabail!” Owen said bluntly.

Gasping, Iseabail was swiftly pulled out of her thoughts, and blinking, she jerked her head to look at him.

“Are ye all right?” He frowned. “I’ve been talking tae ye fer five minutes.”

“Aye,” she replied hurriedly. “I’m fine.”

Owen gazed at her with the same concern. “Ye are thinking about yer faither and braither,” he said, coming to the only conclusion he could, given what he knew.

“Aye,” she lied. “I am.”

“Ye ken it’s in Laird Sutherland’s best interest tae keep them alive and well, dinnae ye? He’s clearly desperate tae get his hands on what we have. He’s nae going tae put that in jeopardy by harming yer family.”

“Aye. I ken that. I just dinnae trust the man.”

Owen nodded. "I suppose I cannae blame ye. But in a few days, this will all be over. Ye'll have yer family back, and ye can return home happy."

She didn't quite know what to say to that, and so, trying to avoid lying to his face again, she said, "It will be good tae see them. It's been so long."

Once the fire was going, they sat and ate the last of the bread, meat, and fruit Ada had kindly packed for them that morning. Later, they shared the bottle of wine, relaxing after yet another stressful day.

"It feels like every day we've been together has been one disaster after another," Iseabail sighed. "And in a few days, we will have tae face the worst challenge o' all."

"Perhaps," Owen replied, taking her hand tenderly in his, "but afterward, all this will be over. Ye can go back tae living yer life again." He bent his head toward her and softly nuzzled her neck. "Maybe then, we will have a chance at a future together."

Iseabail gasped at the sensation, her body tingling and sparking at the soft caress of his lips. Moving her head, she offered her throat willingly to him, inviting his touch. With her eyes closed, she heard Owen shift, and a second later, his lips brushed against hers with the lightest, softest touch.

Her arms slid around his body and slowly, she found herself being lowered backwards. Eventually, she felt her back against the earth, while Owen, propped up on one elbow, lay beside her. Parting her lips, she bid his tongue entry. He roved about inside her, heightening her desire, and eliciting an ache at the apex at her thighs. Their kiss became more desperate, Iseabail grasping his body, trying to pull him even closer, as though his proximity would somehow satisfy her deep, innate desire for him.

"I want ye, Iseabail. I want ye so very much," he growled against her lips.

“And I want ye,” she gasped. “More than anything I have ever desired in me life.”

She felt him tugging at her frock as he continued to express his passion with his fervent kiss. She knew what he wanted, and willingly, she parted her legs to give him access. Owen pushed himself up and positioned himself between her thighs, but to her surprise, he moved further back. Lifting her head to see what he was doing, she watched him smile at her as he lay on the ground, his head settled close to her aching body.

“I want tae taste ye, Iseabail.”

He then moved his head closer. Suddenly she took a sharp intake of breath as a sensation more intense than any other she had yet felt flowered across her body.

“Oh, me God,” she cried, as his tongue flicked against her folds.

“Och, ye taste so sweet, me love,” he growled, his hands holding her thighs firmly at either side of his head.

Her back arched, and she panted as he continued, over and over, exploring her most intimate parts. Never had she known such pleasure, and quickly, she began climbing, her body aching for more.

“Oh, oh, oh,” she panted, her insides tensing, her nipples aching, her whole body losing itself in an ecstasy that carried her to a place of utter bliss.

Owen growled beneath her, clearly aroused at her cries of pleasure. When she thought the sensation could not get any more intense, he pressed himself harder against her, and moved his tongue even faster.

“Oh, me God,” she gasped, pushing her head back against the soft ground beneath

her.

Her ecstasy took over, her muscles tensing and her body shaking. She held her breath, her arms and legs trembled, and as she climbed higher and higher, she suddenly cried out as her body spasmed over and over. Ripples of pleasure ran through her, flooding her very being. She felt as though she were floating. Like she had lifted off the ground and now soared far above the earth. For a long moment, she basked in the serene feeling of utter bliss, but clearly, Owen was not finished.

Moving up her body now, Owen slipped his huge manhood inside of her slowly. With a hand resting on either side of her shoulders, he rocked back and forth, gently pressing himself deeper into her.

“Ye are so soft and warm and tight, Iseabail,” he grunted. “I love being inside o’ ye.”

Iseabail could only whimper, for as she started climbing again so soon, she could find no words. He gazed down at her, his face flooded with utter delight, his eyes boring into her very soul. He was trembling now, thrusting into her, deeper, and faster.

“Oh God,” Iseabail cried, grabbing at his shoulders, pulling her into him even more.

Their hips moved in unison, as though they were one, the tension building between them, higher and higher, so close to the edge. Iseabail never wanted to let him go, and gazing up at him, she drank in his face, his lips, his soft, passion filled eyes. They both panted, a sheen a sweat glistening on their bodies, even in the cold of the night.

“Och, Iseabail,” Owen groaned.

And as she peaked once again, her body spasming beneath him, Owen let out a mighty roar, his whole body stilling as he emptied himself inside of her. Still trembling as he held himself above her, he gave her the most intense look she had

ever seen.

“I love ye, Iseabail. Nay matter what happens, I will always love ye.”

Later, when they were wrapped up together in Owen’s huge plaid to keep them warm, Iseabail listened to his soft breathing as he slept beside her. She was exhausted, but while sleep had come so effortlessly to Owen, she had not been blessed with the same ease.

More than ever now, her heart pained her, and while he slept, she cried silent tears of sorrow. What a great loss she was about to suffer. The only man she had, and would, ever love would be torn from her grasp. It was an unbearable sacrifice, a sacrifice that now caused her physical pain. Her life would never be the same, and in some ways, she wished she had never met Owen Sinclair. But she had, and he had shown her what love truly looked like.

In a few days, however, she would lose him. He would become just a memory. But a memory she swore she would cherish forever and never forget.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Three days after they had found the crystal, Owen and Iseabail made the final stretch of their journey. They were now on Clan Sutherland's lands, and to keep from being discovered, they had made their way through forests and over glens. Anything to avoid the main tracks and roads.

Iseabail had already stipulated that she would have no problem getting through. Laird Sutherland was expecting her, and it was likely any guards on his land would know that. She had tried multiple times to convince Owen that she should continue alone, and once more, she had started the same discussion again.

"Ye dinnae understand. Or perhaps ye dae," she said, "but ye refuse tae listen. Nay harm will come tae me, but I cannae speak fer ye. If ye leave now, ye can return home tae yer family."

"I dinnae ken how many times I have tae tell ye, Iseabail, but I'm nae leaving ye. I dinnae trust Sutherland as far as I could throw him."

"Once he gets the crystal, he will be satisfied. Then, when all this is over, I will send fer ye," she pressed, seeming even more determined than the last time they had talked about it.

He glanced over at her as the horses continued to walk. "Ye dinnae have tae worry about me, Iseabail. I ken that yer concern fer me welfare is the motivator fer yer suggestion, but I'll be fine."

She turned away from him, her eyes set ahead. Clearly, much was going through her mind, not least of which, what she was going to find when they arrived at Laird Sutherland's castle. She had voiced her concerns that her family might already be dead, and Owen understood that likely troubled her more so now, than it had done previously.

He wanted to tell her that her father and brother were fine. He wanted to settle her worry, and tell her that once this day was over, she could go back to her life. But to begin with, he had no idea whether any of that was even true. Her suspicions may well be right, and Laird Sutherland might have broken his word. Knowing that she could not know one way or another, the laird really was holding all the cards.

But even if her father and her brother were safe, could she really go back to her old life? Laird Sutherland already had a great power. With this crystal, he would only become more powerful. From Iseabail's own lips, Owen had heard the terrors he had committed on her father's land. Once he had the stone, nothing could stop the laird from taking over Clan Mackay.

Gazing over at Iseabail once more, he suspected that this entire quest had been to facilitate him to do just that. He also suspected Iseabail knew that too. He had told Ada a few days ago that Iseabail was a strong and independent woman, but in truth, he really had not given her the credit she deserved. He knew men who would not have faced the trials and tribulations she had braved over the last couple of weeks. She was a credit to her father and her entire clan, and he could not be prouder of her.

They had just reached the brow of a hill when Iseabail said, "There it is." There was a sad resigned tone to her voice that hit Owen in his stomach.

He looked ahead, and sure enough, Laird Sutherland's castle stood proudly, fully surrounded by a high wall. The gates were tall, made of huge timber, and guards stood at elevated posts, looking out.

It took no more than a minute for them to spot Iseabail and Owen. Immediately afterwards, the sound of the guard's yelling voices travelled up to meet them.

"This is yer last chance," Iseabail said, piercing him with an intense gaze. "Any moment now, guards will be sent out o' those gates tae meet us. Ye can still go. They'll be too interested in me arrival tae follow ye."

Facing her with a determined look of his own, Owen shook his head. "Nae, Iseabail. I've told ye already. I'm nae leaving yer side. I'll never leave yer side. Dae ye understand me?"

A sad frown lined her brow, and then she said. "If that is the case, then I will remind ye firmly. Dinnae remove that crystal from around yer neck. Ye heard what Ada said. The laird can cause ye a great amount o' pain."

They continued on then, and, as they both knew would happen, four guards came thundering toward them on horseback, meeting them half way.

"What is yer business here?" the lead man barked.

"Me name is Lady Iseabail Mackay. I am here on request o' Laird Sutherland. I am in possession o' something he wants."

The guard nodded immediately, clearly recognizing the name. He jerked his head to Owen. "And him?"

"He is me manservant," Iseabail said calmly. "He accompanies me everywhere. I willnae come and see the laird without him."

The guard scowled at Owen and eventually nodded. "Fine. Follow us tae the castle."

Inside the huge courtyard, their horses were taken by stable hands. Owen had no choice but to relinquish his sword, but the guard assured him it would remain with the horse and be returned when they were leaving. As much as Owen did not like it, not wanting to make this situation any more distressing for Iseabail, he agreed. The same guard then led them towards the castle entrance.

Once inside, the guard took long strides, but Iseabail refused to hurry, and on several occasions, he had to wait for her to catch up.

Good fer ye, Iseabail.

Inside, the castle was little different to Owen's own home. Tapestries and swords hung on the wall, tables and furniture were placed at different areas in the corridors, and large ornate candelabras held many candles to light their way. As they continued down the corridor, servants and maids stood to the side, letting them pass, all bowing their heads respectfully.

All the while they were being led, Owen was keeping a keen eye on the direction they were going. His gut told him that things were not going to go as smoothly as they ought, and thus, he wanted to make certain that if they needed to make a quick escape, he knew the way out.

He noticed several places where small doors were situated, and imagined them to be the entrances and exits of hidden tunnels that ran through the castle, very much like home.

They may prove useful at some point.

After turning down yet another corridor, the guard eventually came to a stop outside a wooden door. Lifting a fist, he knocked firmly on it.

“Enter,” a dulled voice came back.

The guard opened the door and led them in. “Lady Mackay tae see ye, me laird,” he announced.

Laird Sutherland stood from his desk and moved around it slowly, a scowl sitting upon his thin lips. He was a large man, but more rotund than muscular, with a flabby jowl and protruding belly. Similar to his father, though his father was in far better condition, Owen guessed the laird was nearing middle age.

“And who is this?” he demanded, pointing to Owen.

“He is me man servant, me laird,” Iseabail repeated her earlier explanation. “I need protection when I travel, and I dinnae go anywhere without him.”

“That isnae true,” Owen declared. However this was going to go, he wanted to let Laird Sutherland know who he was dealing with. “Me name is Owen Sinclair, son o’ Laird Sinclair from the Clan Sinclair. I have been accompanying Lady Mackay tae ensure her safety.”

In his peripheral vision, he could see Iseabail glaring at him, clearly struggling to believe what she had just heard. No doubt, she had been trying to protect him, but he was no coward, and never had been. It had been necessary to get him inside the castle, but now that he was there, the necessity for pretense was over.

“It was ye on South Ronaldsay,” the laird barked.

“Ye mean where yer men nearly killed Lady Mackay?” Owen spat back. “Fine men ye have, me laird. Attacking a defenseless woman.”

The laird eyed him carefully, before turning back to Iseabail. “Dae ye have what I

sent ye fer?”

“Aye, I dae. But ye willnae see it until I see me faither and braither,” Iseabail replied caustically.

“Ye are in nay position tae be making demands, Lady Mackay,” Laird Sutherland growled.

“Ye are in nay different a position than I, me laird,” Iseabail scowled. “We both want something the other has in their possession. Either I see me family, or ye dinnae set eyes on yer crystal.”

He glared at her for a long moment, but realizing he was being outdone, the laird spun on his heels and looked at the guard who had led them to the study. “Bring them,” he barked.

“Aye, me laird,” the guard swiftly replied.

Once the guard had left, Laird Sutherland turned his attention back to Iseabail. He circled her, leering at her lustfully. He made no attempt to hide his desire for her, and Owen could do nothing but ball his fists in jealous anger.

“So, this is yer lover?” he said, as he continued to walk around her.

Iseabail gasped, and Owen watched her face flush bright red.

“I suppose ye’ve both spent many a night together,” he continued, “frolicking, and flirting, and?—”

“Me laird, what dae ye plan tae dae with the crystal?” Owen demanded.

He had to say something to end the humiliation, for Iseabail was clearly mortified at his words, and by the sounds of it, he was thriving on her discomfort.

“That’s none o’ yer damned business,” he barked back, glaring at Owen. “Ye should mind yersel’, boy. Ye’re only still in this room due tae me good graces.”

“I beg tae differ, me laird,” Owen returned. “Speaking tae a lady in such a manner shows nay grace at all.”

Laird Sutherland walked the few steps towards him, which is exactly what Owen wanted him to do, and glared him in the eye. “I’m surprised ye’ve lived as long as ye have, with a mouth like that. Perhaps me dungeons will nae be empty when Laird Mackay and his son vacate them.”

“Nay,” Iseabail cried.

“Iseabail,” Owen pleaded.

“Aye, Iseabail.” Laird Sutherland growled, spinning to look at her. “The men are talking. Best tae keep yer pretty little mouth shut.”

The condescension in his tone was sickening, and Owen had to use all his self-control not to smash his fist into that fat face of his. Laird Sutherland opened his mouth to continue, when the study door opened once again.

Owen turned to see an older and younger man shoved into the room. Her father was a sturdy man, but while he was tall, he looked weakened, as though he had suffered much. Keane had Iseabail’s fine looks, and was broad and muscular. There was a Viking look about him, with his long blond hair and dark blue eyes. Owen deduced immediately that he was a warrior, for not only did he hold himself in such a way, as though he feared nothing, he was also covered in battle scars.

“Faither! Keane!” Iseabail gasped.

Laird Mackay looked weak, but from a cursory glance, neither looked harmed. Owen was certain Iseabail was feeling waves of relief at that moment, and her face certainly expressed the same. After all her worry of Laird Sutherland keeping his word, her family was, indeed, alive and as well as one might expect. That being said, Laird Sutherland did not need to leave cuts and bruises. He was capable of inflicting pain without leaving a mark, and thus, Owen had to wonder how much they had both suffered while they had been held captive.

Iseabail turned to run to them, but the guard stepped forward and stopped her.

“What a happy reunion,” Laird Sutherland drawled sarcastically. “But warm embraces will come after ye have voiced tae everyone present, the agreement we made.”

Iseabail spun her head and glared at Laird Sutherland before turning to Owen with an expression of utter devastation. Her look confused him, for she appeared terrified, as though she did not want to speak.

“Ye ken our agreement. I dinnae have tae say it out loud,” she retorted.

“I think there are people in this room who need tae hear it, Lady Mackay. Our deal was made between ye and I alone, neither yer faither nor yer lover,” he gave Owen a glowering look, “know it, or so I gather by the way ye just looked at him.”

“Just let me family go. Ye’ve got what ye wanted,” she argued.

“Say it!” the laird bellowed. His anger was palpable as his face reddened and his jowls wobbled in rage.

Taking a huge breath, Iseabail let out a heavy sigh.

“Fine. But I have a further condition.”

Laird Sutherland looked as though he were about to explode, and glaring at her, he waited for her to continue.

“Ye are already freeing me family but ye must swear that Owen and all in his clan will be left alone, too. Nay repercussions will be meted out on them.”

The laird glared at her with such animosity, Owen readied himself to launch forward, for he feared the man was about to strike her.

“Fine,” he growled, clearly not at all pleased.

“Ye have tae swear it in front o’ these witnesses,” Iseabail pressed, gesturing to all present.

“I swear it,” he roared. “Now, get on with it.”

With a timid glance toward Owen, Iseabail said, “We agreed that I would find the crystal fer ye, and,” she hesitated a beat, “... and marry ye, if ye promised tae leave me family and me clan alone.”

At her words, three different things occurred all at the same time. Laird Mackay and Keane both yelled out protestations, Laird Sutherland grinned from ear to ear, and Owen’s jaw fell open in utter astonishment.

Gasping in a great breath, it took all his strength not to step back, for if someone had punched him in the gut, he would not have felt anymore unbalanced than he did in that second. She had kept this from him for the entirety of their time together, and so

numb was he now, that not one thought passed through his mind.

“Nay! Nay, Iseabail,” Laird Mackay screamed. “Ye willnae marry this madman. I willnae allow it. Get away from her. I will never let ye marry her. Never. I will die first...”

All the while Laird Mackay ranted like a madman, Owen could only gawk at Iseabail as his world fell apart around him. They had spent so much time together, she had told him she loved him. He hadn't doubted it then, and even now, he knew that her feelings were true. But all this time, she had kept this part of her deal with Laird Sutherland a secret. The future he had imagined they might share together, the future he had never desired with any other, was crushed, decimated, burned to ashes, all the things he felt his heart experience at that very moment.

And she had known the whole time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Standing helplessly as her father continued to lambast Laird Sutherland, Iseabail could only look with utter hopelessness at Owen, who looked utterly devastated. Perhaps she had made the wrong decision. Perhaps she ought to have told him long before, when she had had a chance to explain the circumstances properly.

It is too late for that now.

Indeed, it was, and while the sick feeling in her stomach expanded, and her heart physically pained her, she wished she could take back her words. She wished she could grab her family and Owen and run from the castle. But they were trapped there now, and she had no doubt at all that Laird Sutherland would never release her.

“Silence,” Laird Sutherland barked.

Stepping towards her father, the laird looked him directly in the eye and lifted his hand. Though he was many feet away, her father yelled out in pain, grasping at his throat as though he were being choked.

“Stop it!” Iseabail screamed. “Stop it. Ye’re going tae kill him.”

But the laird did not relent, and she watched as her father, going redder and redder in the face, fell to his knees as though he were actually dying. Keane grabbed hold of him, yelling in panic, while Iseabail continued to scream for the laird to stop.

“Ye’ve got what ye wanted,” she shrieked. “Let him go.”

“Where is the crystal?” the laird demanded.

“We dinnae have it here,” she cried. “We hid it so ye would keep yer part o’ the bargain.”

“Where is it?” he demanded again.

“I will tell ye. Just let him go,” Iseabail shrieked.

But Laird Sutherland did not release his power, and suddenly, Owen launched across the room and punched the laird in the side of the head, knocking him off balance. As Laird Sutherland stumbled backwards, his eye no longer on her father, the connection was broken, and Laird Mackay suddenly fell into a fit of coughing, as though released from being choked.

Laird Sutherland turned and glared at Owen, his face red with rage. Lifting his hand toward him, he tried to use his power against him, but to the laird’s utter shock, Owen continued forward, showing no sign of pain at all.

Iseabail felt relief wash over her. His necklace is protecting him, thanks be tae the gods.

As Owen raised his fist again, the laird bellowed to the guards, stepping back and out of his reach. The guards came running across the room, but Owen was ready for them. He fought valiantly and was clearly winning the battle, when Laird Sutherland grabbed hold of Iseabail, and looked her directly in the eye.

Suddenly, she screamed in agony as pain she had never before known racked through her stomach. It felt as though she were being stabbed over and over with a dagger.

“All right. All right,” Owen yelled, raising his hands in surrender. “Just let her go.”

Breaking eye contact with Iseabail, the laird spun to glare at Owen.

“There are other ways tae control ye, boy,” he snarled.

Though the pain was no longer there, Iseabail still panted, trying to catch her breath.

“Iseabail?” Owen exclaimed.

“I’m fine,” she said. “I’m fine.”

“Tell me where the crystal is,” the laird demanded.

Owen, clearly in fear of what he might do to Iseabail, told the laird where they had hidden it.”

“‘Tis by the huge oak in the middle o’ the glen,” he blurted.

Not trusting that Laird Sutherland would keep his word, they had dug a small hole and buried the crystal after wrapping it in a little sackcloth. Of course, they hadn’t quite realized how bad things would go, but now, Owen evidently felt like he had little choice. He was doing it to save her, Iseabail knew that. A part of her wished he wouldn’t. After this day was over, her life would hardly be worth living.

“Take them tae the dungeons,” Laird Sutherland yelled. “And get me horse ready.”

Once the four were shoved into the dull cell, and the huge wooden door slammed closed behind them, Iseabail ran to her father and Keane. The three hugged each other, her father even shedding a tear.

“I failed ye, Faither,” Iseabail said. “I’m so sorry.”

“Ye did naething o’ the sort,” he croaked. “In fact, what ye have accomplished is nay less than a miracle.”

“Aye,” Keane nodded as he kissed her hair, “fer sure, we didnae think we would ever see ye again.”

Iseabail turned to Owen. “Well, I cannae take all the credit. I couldnae have done it without Owen,” she said, waving him over to join them.

“Owen, I would like ye tae meet me faither, Laird Hamilton Mackay, and me braither, Keane. He is the finest warrior in our clan.”

“I am honored, me laird,” he nodded to her father, and then her brother, “Keane.”

“And this is Owen Sinclair,” she continued. “Son o’ Laird Madigan Sinclair o’ Clan Sinclair.”

Hamilton looked at Owen keenly. “I cannae thank ye fer all ye have done tae help Iseabail. I dinnae ken how ye managed tae get involved in this, but I am eternally grateful fer ye being there fer me daughter.”

Owen lifted the corner of his mouth and smirked a little. “Well, let’s just say, yer daughter is very resourceful, me laird.”

Iseabail smiled then. She could not imagine what had been going through Owen’s mind since her disclosure, but clearly, he did not hate her completely, as she thought he might.

“Please, call me Hamilton. Under the circumstances, I hardly think such niceties are necessary.”

“How did ye two meet?” Keane asked, clearly wanting to know more.

“As it happens,” Owen said, “yer sister blackmailed me tae help her.”

This remark shocked Keane and Hamilton, and with wide-eyed glances at Iseabail, they then turned back to Owen with curious faces.

He gave a tortured smile then. “But I’m nay longer here against me will. In fact, me choice tae help her was made some time ago.”

“I was actually in search o’ the crystal when I discovered the very same thing hanging around Owen’s neck,” Iseabail clarified.

Owen lifted the necklace that had been, until then, hidden beneath his tunic.

“I’m nae proud tae say that in me desperation,” Iseabail continued, “I tried tae steal it.”

“Iseabail!” Hamilton exclaimed.

She shrugged her shoulders and looked bashful.

“In her defense,” Owen interjected, “Iseabail feared fer yer lives. In fact, she did up until the moment ye were both brought tae Laird Sutherland’s study.”

Iseabail then went on to recount what occurred, from Owen imprisoning her in the dungeons of his father’s castle, to the journey they had taken and all the excitement along the way. She carefully omitted any feelings they shared. She wasn’t sure her father was ready to hear that yet.

But when she was finished, her father looked from Owen to Iseabail and back again.

“And now, ye are in love with me daughter,” he said plainly.

Owen’s jaw dropped, and Iseabail felt her face flush bright red. She was only glad that the cell they were being kept in was not brightly lit, and thus, none of them could see her embarrassment.

Hamilton smiled. “It is very evident, in fact, that the two o’ ye feel deeply fer each other.”

Owen was still struggling to find words to reply when Iseabail nodded. “Ye are right, Faither. We dae love each other. In fact, Owen even saved me life on this journey more than once.”

“Aye, but ye repaid the favor by saving mine,” Owen added.

“And then, ye saved mine again,” Iseabail replied. “So, now, I am back in yer debt.”

Owen was about to say something else when Hamilton let out a low chuckle. They all looked at him as he continued with his laughter. “I think the gods brought ye two together, fer it is very obvious ye are well-suited.”

Iseabail grinned then, and Owen smiled along with her. She was about to tell her father that he was not the first to tell them that, when they heard heavy footsteps approaching from the corridor outside. All smiles dropped from their faces as they turned expectantly toward the door.

The key turned in the lock, and then the door burst open. Iseabail took a step back, and all three men stood in front of her. It made her heart swell with pride that they were so protective.

“And now,” Laird Sutherland declared, taking several strides into the cell, and clearly

more than pleased with himself, “I hold all the power.”

Thrusting his arm out, he opened his hand, revealing the crystal sitting in his palm. The healer’s words returned to Iseabail then, and she wondered if they might see just one more miracle. Ada had told her that she was never to touch it, for it would be fatal to her because of her gift. Would it be the same for the laird? If it was, she only wished, though it was a dreadful thought, that whatever would happen to him would occur sooner rather than later.

“Ye have what ye want,” Hamilton spat. “Now, it is time tae keep yer side o’ the bargain.”

Laird Sutherland sneered and looked at Hamilton derisively.

“Nae all. There is one last piece that is yet to be completed. When I have married yer daughter, and only then, will I let ye all go free.”

“Ye’ll never have her,” Hamilton bellowed. “Dae ye hear? Never.”

But Laird Sutherland ignored him as though he were a child. Instead, he glared through the men and looked Iseabail directly in the eye. She gasped, waiting for the pain to come, but to her surprise, she felt nothing.

“I am the most powerful man on earth,” he growled. “I will have what I want, and there’s nae anything anyone can dae tae stop me.”

With that, he turned on his heels and stormed out of the room. Once again, the door slammed shut, and as they all stood there, silent and shocked, the echoing footsteps faded to nothing.

“We have tae get out o’ here,” Owen said determinedly. “I dinnae ken about ye, but I

dinnae plan tae stay around tae watch that madman dae as he wills.”

Keane shook his head. “There’s nay chance o’ escape. We’ve tried.”

“Aye,” Iseabail added, “but ye didnae have me.”

Keane beamed a broad grin at his sister, and then nodded. “That’s right. We didnae. So, what’s the plan?”

“We should wait until night fall,” she replied. “It’s our best chance.”

“I saw a few small doors on our way in,” Owen added. “That means tunnels. If we could escape through those...”

“Ye mean like I tried tae dae?” Iseabail smirked.

Owen grinned back. “Aye, exactly.”

While Hamilton and Keane looked confused at the inside joke, Owen and Iseabail continued to smile at each other. Maybe, after all her worry, there might be a chance for them in the future after all. It was all her heart desired – to be able to spend her life loving this man for as long as they lived.

“What are ye talking about?” Hamilton asked.

Iseabail finally pulled her eyes away from Owen and, looking at her father, she said, “When I was a prisoner in the Sinclair castle, I compelled the guard tae free me. He also told me the way out through the tunnels.”

“Ye would have made it too, if I hadnae have been trying tae avoid me faither.”

Hamilton now looked even more confused.

Owen looked Hamilton straight in the eye. “All ye need tae ken is that escape is possible. I have great faith in yer daughter’s abilities.”

Seeming to understand Owen, Hamilton nodded. “All right. Then we wait until dark, which, by me estimation, willnae be more than a few hours.”

During that time, Iseabail went into more detail of some of their adventures, sometimes causing her father great distress, particularly when he heard about the waterfall episode. At one point, the key turned in the lock and the door opened. Two guards arrived with bread, meat and water, which surprised Iseabail.

“Och, if naething else, the laird has been keeping us well fed,” her father said upon seeing her amazement.

“I’ll be honest, Faither. I was pleasantly relieved tae see ye and Keane alive at all. While I tried tae keep me hopes up, I ken the kind o’ man Laird Sutherland is, and I was certain he wouldnae honor the agreement.”

Her father frowned and shook his head. “I dinnae ken that he still will. He says that he will let us all go once he has yer hand in marriage, but after all he has put our clan through, I still find that hard tae believe.”

Iseabail nodded. “I agree. With that stone, he is now more powerful than ye can ever imagine. He could well take over any clan he desires. And yet, there is something I have nae told ye about the crystal.”

“What is it?” Keane asked, having listened to their conversation.

“The crystal is indeed powerful,” Iseabail continued. “But Owen and I have

discovered that it is dangerous tae any who are blessed with a gift. We met a very wise healer who herself, possessed a power. She told me nae ever tae touch the crystal, fer it might be fatal tae me.”

Keane’s eyes grew wide. “And ye think it will have the same effect on Sutherland?” he pressed.

Iseabail shrugged. “I cannae imagine why nae. If it would be fatal fer me, then surely, the same applies tae him.”

“And yet, he held it in his hand and looked fine,” Keane said.

A frown danced across her brow. “Aye. I noticed that too.”

“Perhaps it has tae dae with the length o’ time he has it on his person,” Hamilton suggested.

“It’s something we cannae speculate upon,” Owen cut in. “We can only hope that it might debilitate him, but none o’ us can ken fer sure. Me suggestion would be tae put that hope aside and concentrate on the escape.” He looked at Keane. “That being said, I would advise ye nae tae touch it either. It’s nae worth the risk.”

The time passed quickly, and by the tiny window in the cell, it was easy for them to see nightfall eventually overtake the dusk.

“Right, Iseabail,” Owen said, once the stars dotted the sky. “It’s time.”

Iseabail nodded and moved over to the door. She began banging on it with all her might.

“Help us! He’s sick. I’m sure he’s dying.”

Silence hung in the air at first, but then hurried footsteps could be heard in the corridor outside. After the jangle of keys, she heard the key turning in the lock, and the door flew open.

Looking the guard directly in the eye, she said, “Ye will stop and nae move.”

The man blinked and then stood perfectly still. “What have ye done tae me?”

“Ye will be quiet,” Iseabail said.

She then turned to the others and waved hurriedly for them to join her. One by one, they stepped past the guard, who remained perfectly still and silent, each of them scanning up and down the corridor to check no other was coming.

“Now, ye will tell me how tae escape through the hidden tunnels,” Iseabail demanded.

With the others listening to his words, the guard spilled out what Iseabail compelled from him; the corridors, the directions they needed to take, and where they would end up.

“When ye get tae the kitchen, there is a rear door that leads out into the gardens. Cross the lawns and upon reaching the wall, follow it tae the right. Ye’ll come across a small gate that the servants use. There are only two guards there.”

“Is that all?” Iseabail pressed.

The guard nodded.

“Very well. Now, step further inside the cell.”

The man did as he was told.

“Give me the keys,” Iseabail continued.

The guard did so, but the ring was large with many keys attached to it.

“Tell me now, which key locks this cell?” she asked.

He pointed to a dull brass key that looked just like all the others.

“Good. Now step back.”

When the guard did, she grabbed hold of the door and looked at him for the final time. “Ye will forget everything ye have told us. Now, sleep.”

The man’s legs gave way and slumping onto the floor, he was asleep in seconds.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Owen could not deny it. He loved watching Iseabail work. Her gift was powerful, and so far, had been more than useful in their quest. Once again, she had worked her wonders to save them, and as the guard did everything she asked in a trance-like fashion, he realized how she had been able to escape from the dungeons of his father's castle.

Once Iseabail had locked the cell door, imprisoning the guard, the group gathered.

"We should move quickly," Owen said, grabbing a flaming torch from its metal bracket on the wall. "The guards are bound to relieve each other at some point, and we want to be as far away from here as possible when the next one arrives."

"Indeed," Hamilton agreed, gesturing in the direction the guard had told them to go. "Lead on."

Owen turned and headed down the corridor, closely followed by the others. Her father had ushered Iseabail in front of him, and Keane followed at the rear, keeping a sharp eye out for any activity behind them. After passing more cells situated on their left and right, they reached the end of the corridor. Owen approached it slowly, keeping tight to the wall. With a slow movement, he peeked his head around it to check, only for him to swiftly retreat and turn to the others.

"There's a guard at the end of the hall, but he's facing away from us," he whispered. "We need to move as quietly as possible to get across to the opposite corridor."

The other three nodded, none of them breathing a word.

“All right. We’ll go one by one. Iseabail,” Owen said, gesturing for her to come closer to him.

He moved her into a position where she stood by his side but still remained hidden behind the wall.

“When I say go, ye run across the hallway as quickly as ye can,” Owen said, gesturing to the corridor opposite.

She nodded and took a deep breath. Owen leaned his head out again to check, and then waving his hand, indicating for her to go, he heard her hurried but light footsteps cross the corridor. When they stopped, he glanced across at her. She gazed back breathlessly, clearly nervous as they all were.

He followed the same process with Hamilton and then Keane. Then he was there alone. The three waved at him eagerly, and with a final glance, Owen was about to follow when the guard moved on his feet and turned around.

Sharply he brought his head back behind the wall, his heart thumping in his chest. The guard’s footsteps echoed in the corridor, seemingly getting nearer and nearer.

If I have tae put this man down, I will.

He waved at the others, trying to communicate to them to get back from the corner so the guard would not see them. They did as he asked, all the while, the footsteps seemed to be getting nearer.

Until, they stopped.

Owen held his breath, readying himself for whatever might happen next. At least he had the element of surprise, and thus, held the advantage. Straining his ear to hear, there seemed to be no sound at all, but all he could do was wait. Peeking his head around the corner now was too great a risk to take.

What a great escape this will be if we cannae even get out o' this damned dungeon.

The sound of footsteps echoed once more through the corridor, but it took a few seconds for Owen to realize they were getting more and more distant. Taking a huge chance, he jerked his head around the corner. Upon seeing the back of the guard, he wasted no time in using the sound of the man's heavy footfall to cover his own, and hurriedly sped across the small gap separating himself from the others. Iseabail looked both relieved and delighted, but this was no time to celebrate. They had to keep moving.

Further down that corridor, they discovered the secret door to a tunnel, and once more, Owen led the way. Long shadows flickered against the walls as his fiery torches licked at the lint that kept it alight. They reached the end of the tunnel with a choice of going left or right. Owen led them to the right and continued down another tunnel. He took several more junctions, reaching the end of yet another tunnel.

But as he went to venture forth, his mind went completely blank. Was it left or right?

"What's the matter?" Iseabail hissed behind him.

"I cannae remember which way we're supposed tae go."

"Left."

"Right."

Both father and son verbalized their directions at the exact same time.

“Right,” Iseabail said firmly.

Owen looked from one to the other. He had tried to remember all the instructions so far, but so eager to escape had he been that he had let his concentration lapse for just a minute.

He looked intently at Iseabail. “Are ye sure?”

“Aye,” she nodded firmly.

“All right.”

Owen ventured to the right and prayed that the trust he had in the woman he loved would pay off. He supposed, they would find out soon enough.

There were no more turns as they continued, and eventually, they reached another small door. Pressing his ear against it, he could hear distant voices and the clattering of pots. They were exactly where they needed to be. Right beside the kitchen.

Turning back to the others, Owen said, “This will be the most difficult part. We’ve got tae get through the kitchen unseen and reach the outer door. Follow me and stay close tae the walls.”

After they had nodded in acknowledgement, Owen slid the torch into a nearby metal bracket, not unlike the one it had originally been placed in on the wall of the dungeon, and then slowly opened the door. Once in the corridor, he pressed himself against the wall as he had instructed the others to do. Cackles of laughter danced across the air, and he could only assume that sound came from the cooks and maids who were likely preparing supper.

Given it was in the lower part of the castle, large support pillars across the kitchen separated them from the main area. While they were in the shadows at the far side, the hustle and bustle of the well-lit main space had maids and cooks hurrying about. Great big pots emanating billowing steam sat on large fires, vegetables of many varieties were being chopped, and some of the surfaces were covered in flour; balls of dough at the side, ready and waiting to be baked

This truly was a blessing. If the people in the kitchen were busily concentrating on their tasks, their eyes would be less likely to wander over to the less used side of the kitchen.

Even with the odds in their favor, Owen still moved slowly. He didn't want any sudden movement in the shadows catching anybody's eye. As lightly as he could, given his size, he moved gently, step by step, his back pressed against the wall. Glancing behind him, he watched the other three follow suit, and continuing on, they slowly made their way across the room.

The rear door came into view less than a minute later. Coming to a stop again, Owen assessed the situation. Unlike the wall they had been pressed against, the door was in full view of all the workers, and he wondered, as he gazed about him, how they were going to get to it and through it without being noticed.

He was still trying to figure that out when a young child came running into the kitchen. He ran towards one of the older women, clearly a cook, and when the woman bent down and stroked his hair, it became evident that she was likely his mother. After receiving a biscuit, the child ran about the place, and to Owen's dismay, he made a turn and seemed to be heading in their direction.

"Damn it," he hissed under his breath.

But it was too late to go back, for the child drew close, and upon seeing Owen's feet,

he bent his head all the way back to look up at the giant of a man that he was.

Owen smiled and pressed his fingers against his lips. "We're playing a game," he whispered. "Ye cannae tell anyone."

The boy gawked up at him for a moment longer, and then suddenly, he turned on his heels and headed straight for his mother.

"Ma. Ma. There's a bad man," the boy cried.

Glaring at the others, Owen growled, "Run!"

No longer caring about a stealthy escape, Owen launched towards the door. He had managed to open it at the same time he heard the cook screaming for help.

He didn't stop, but looking back, he grabbed hold of Iseabail's arm. "Come on," he barked. "Move it."

While Iseabail kept his pace as they ran, Hamilton, in his weakened state, could not, and the second Iseabail realized that her father was not directly behind her, she pulled herself out of Owen's grip and ran back. Keane had a firm grip on his father, but the two were moving far too slow.

Owen was now in the middle. To his right was the wall and a way to escape. To his left, was Iseabail and her family, struggling to close the gap. He had a decision to make, and he knew what he was going to do before the thought even occurred to him.

A great amount of yelling now came from the door of the kitchen which still hung open, light spilling into the darkness of the night. Just as Owen reached Hamilton, several guards flew out of the door and gave chase. Owen grabbed Hamilton and threw him over his shoulder before spinning around and heading for the wall. Keane

and Iseabail were by his side as they ran, but it was too late.

“We’re nae going tae make it,” Iseabail cried.

And she was right, for suddenly, there were more soldiers hurrying from either side. In a short time, the four were surrounded, and for fear of being killed on the spot, Owen finally came to a stop. Gently placing Hamilton on the ground beside him, he followed Iseabail and Keane’s actions, and raised his hands in surrender.

“Ye tried, son,” Hamilton said sadly. “I can only thank ye fer that.”

While Hamilton’s words were kind and grateful, Owen could only feel angry at himself for letting everyone down. He had taken the lead upon himself, and he had been determined to get them out of this castle alive. He had failed. Now, Iseabail would be forced to marry Sutherland, and there was not a damn thing he could do about it.

“Move,” one of the guards growled, pointing a long spear at them.

The rest of the guards surrounded them, and the group had no choice but to do as they were told. Well, they did have a choice, but it would involve sacrificing their lives. Something Owen was pretty sure none of them were up for.

As they were marched through the castle, maids and servants hurriedly moved out of the way, their eyes wide with wonder. The guard at the front led them down several corridors until they reached a door. Opening it, the soldiers behind shoved them into the room.

It looked like a drawing room of sorts, and while the group of guards, for there must have been ten of them, stood around snarling at them, the one who had led them moved back to the door.

Speaking to all those who remained he said, “Dinnae take yer eyes off them.” He then turned and left, slamming the door behind him.

If Owen had been on his own and if he had had his sword, which he had been forced to leave with his horse when they arrived, he would have made an attempt at battle. Ten to one were not great odds, but he’d faced as many or more in battles before. Perhaps not all at the same time, mind, but he would have taken the chance.

After a small amount of time, the door flew open again, and Laird Sutherland walked in, his face twisted in anger.

“Ye dare tae defy me?” he barked, striding past the guards, who fanned out and stood further back at his presence.

While Owen balled his fists and tried to curtail his anger, his eyes were immediately drawn to the crystal that now hung around the laird’s neck. Someone had made short work of wrapping it in twine to make it secure. A leather strand had been added, and he now wore the large piece of stone as a necklace.

Noticing Owen’s attention of it, the laird smiled. “Aye, lad. I now have what I have been searching fer.”

He took several strides toward Owen and snapping out his arm, he grabbed Owen’s necklace, yanking it from around his throat.

Owen hissed as the leather burned his neck, but gritting his teeth, he glared at the laird. “Ye’re a fool, Laird Sutherland. That stone will bring ye naething but trouble.”

“Nay, boy. This crystal now makes me the most powerful man on earth,” the laird declared dramatically. “And now ye dinnae have protection, me powers will work on ye just fine.”

As though he needed to prove his point, Laird Sutherland then glared at Owen, and suddenly, a searing pain ran through his chest, as though he were being stabbed with a red-hot poker.

“Argh,” Owen cried, certain he had never felt pain like it in his life.

“Stop it!” Iseabail screamed. “Stop it. Please.”

But the laird ignored her, and continued, causing Owen to double over in agony.

“Ye tried tae take what was mine, and now, ye will pay,” Sutherland bellowed.

Thinking on his feet, Owen closed his eyes. Relief flooded through him as the pain ceased, though he was still breathless. The laird only had power over him with direct line of sight, just like Iseabail’s gift. If he could avoid looking at the laird, he could be spared from suffering.

“Grab him,” the laird yelled. “Force him tae look at me.”

A second later, Owen felt hands upon him from every direction. He fought with all his strength, but the pain he had suffered had weakened him.

“Leave him be,” Iseabail screamed again.

The laird took several steps across the room, his hand raised, ready to strike. But Hamilton and Keane hurriedly stood in front of her, and Keane took the blow. In the meantime, the soldiers had grabbed Owen’s arms, legs, and head. One of the soldier’s painfully forced his eyes open with his fingers.

Sutherland stepped back and glared at Owen, but before Owen felt another searing pain in his chest, yelling in the corridor beyond stopped Laird Sutherland in his

tracks.

“We’re under attack. We’re under attack,” the voices yelled, quickly followed by many heavy footfalls outside the room.

Laird Sutherland swiftly headed towards the door, and upon opening it, he grabbed the nearest guard.

“What’s going on?” he barked.

“We’re under attack, me laird.”

“From who?”

“Clan Sinclair, me laird. There are hundreds o’ them.”

Even in his bound state, Owen felt a thrill upon hearing those words. He had no idea how his clan had found them, but a rush of hope ran through his entire being. Somehow, his father had found him, and now, Laird Sutherland would have a battle on his hands.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The laird let the guard continue on. He then turned and stepped back into the room. Looking at the guards that still surrounded them, he said, “Bring them with me.”

Iseabail could not help but feel hope in her heart. Four of them were no match for Sutherland and his clan, but Owen’s father had arrived. She could only imagine her letter had something to do with his arrival, but how he had found them, she did not know. As the guards pushed them down the corridor, following their laird’s long strides, she realized she didn’t really care. They now had a chance.

Several minutes later, they were led into the courtyard outside, where Clan Sinclair stood waiting for them. They had broken through the front gate, and with Madigan and Daire seated on their horses, the warriors of the Sinclair clan, a huge crowd of men, stood behind them, ready for battle.

Sutherland’s men had obviously been pushed back, and now stood in opposition, ready to defend the castle. Laird Sutherland turned and grabbed Owen, pressing a blade to his throat. Upon seeing their laird, his men parted, and Laird Sutherland moved in front of his men. Eventually, he came to a stop and called out to Madigan.

“Ye are surely a mighty force, Laird Sinclair. But are ye really willing tae lose yer only son?”

Madigan gave the laird a steady look, while Daire glowered down at him.

“Ye only have one choice here, Laird Sutherland,” Madigan said, sounding far calmer

than he ought to under the circumstances. “Me clan and I will leave if ye release these prisoners. There isnae any need fer all this bloodshed. Look around ye. We outnumber ye three tae one. Release the prisoners, and we will go and leave ye in peace.”

“What kind o’ a fool dae ye take me fer?” Laird Sutherland spat. “Dae ye really expect me tae believe ye’ll just leave if I let them go?”

“I give ye me word,” Madigan replied. “There is nay greater honor than a man’s word. I am only hear tae bring me son safely home.”

“This son?” Sutherland growled, pressing the dagger deeper into Owen’s throat.

Iseabail gasped, fearing that the madman might actually kill him just to prove a point. But a second later, she felt a solid, warm hand on her arm, and glancing beside her, her father gazed at her steadily. He was trying to convey to her that she should remain calm, but she could not. How could she, when the man she loved might be murdered before her very eyes.

“I think it is plain tae see, Laird Sinclair, that I have the upper hand here,” Laird Sutherland continued.

Madigan still did not flinch, and straightening himself on his horse, he said, “Then clearly, ye dinnae ken me son at all.”

In the blink of an eye, Owen twisted himself in such a way that the laird lost his grasp, and a few seconds later, Owen stood beside his father’s horse.

“Och, thanks be tae the gods,” Iseabail whispered.

“Now, me laird,” Madigan said again. “I will offer ye one final time. Release the

prisoners, and we will leave ye in peace. At this moment in time, I have nay grudge tae hold against ye.”

For the longest moment, a deathly silence fell upon all those present. Everyone was waiting with bated breath to see what Laird Sutherland would do. As far as Iseabail was concerned, he was being given an opportunity to save both himself and his men. Surely, any man with an ounce of common sense would take that offer. But then, Laird Sutherland was a proud and power-hungry man. Pride had been many a man’s downfall, and she doubted it would be much different in this case.

When Laird Sutherland opened his mouth and broke the silence, it was not with a reply to Laird Sinclair, but with a direction to his men.

“Attack!” he bellowed.

Proving her summary of him to be right, the laird had chosen war instead of peace, and the soldiers and guards of Clan Sutherland launched toward Clan Sinclair screaming a battle cry.

Laird Sutherland replied with a command of his own, and his men roared into battle. A second later, a deafening sound of yelling and clashing metal rang throughout the courtyard.

“Och, dear God,” Iseabail cried, as her father grabbed her and pulled her into him.

Keane had secured a sword from somewhere, and just as Laird Sutherland turned toward Iseabail, her huge brother ran in front of her and toward him with his sword high above his head. But the laird lifted his hand, and Keane was stopped in his tracks, for he roared out in pain as the laird used his power against him.

“Nay!” Iseabail screamed, watching her brother suffer the immense pain she herself

had experienced earlier.

Owen came rushing behind the laird, battling men left and right; men coming from every direction to protect their chief. He looked as though he were about to be overpowered, when Daire arrived at his side, and the two men battled back-to-back.

Madigan also appeared, giving Owen a chance to make his way forward, and with his sword held high, he ran toward Laird Sutherland screaming. The laird spun on his heels, and drawing his sword, he and Owen clashed, their swords clanging together, strike after strike. But as strong as Iseabail knew Owen to be, the laird seemed to be stronger. Given his age and level of unfitness, Owen ought to have no problem defeating this man, and yet, Laird Sutherland was overpowering him, strike after strike.

“The crystal,” Iseabail whispered, suddenly realizing the reason. “The crystal is making him stronger.”

She watched in terror as Laird Sutherland pounded Owen over and over, until eventually, exhausted from the strength of the laird’s strikes, he stumbled and fell to the floor. Sutherland did not stop there, and launching forward, he lifted his sword high, ready to implement the killer blow.

Laird Sinclair, searching for his son, saw what was about to happen, but was too far away. Still, he left the man he fought and ran, punching and shoving soldiers in his way to get to his son.

Owen lay there, terrified of what was about to occur, but then, the strangest thing happened. Laird Sutherland seemed to halt, as though frozen in time.

“What is... what is happening?” Sutherland cried.

Suddenly, a panic washed over his face, and his hands went to his throat. His face became redder and redder, and he gasped for air, even though no one was near him. Madigan arrived, and stopped dead at the sight of what was occurring before him, for the man appeared to be suffocating.

“The crystal,” Iseabail gasped. “It is finally turning against him.”

Hearing those words, her father let go of her arm and moved forward. Grabbing a sword from beside a slain soldier, he ran through the battling men without a sound. Coming from behind the laird, he raised his sword up high, bringing it down into Laird Sutherland’s back.

Laird Sutherland actually looked surprised as he fell forward onto the cobblestones beneath him. Final gasps left his lips, and a few seconds later, the man closed his eyes and expired.

Not a second later, Madigan turned to all those battling. “Yer chief is dead,” he bellowed. The clanging of swords faded, and eventually, everyone turned to look at Madigan. “Go home. There need be nay more bloodshed here.”

Slowly, but surely, bewildered men began to walk away. Some lifted the wounded from the ground, but clearly, with their laird dead, they had no more stomach to fight.

Owen was just struggling to his feet when Madigan turned back to see him. As father and son’s eyes met, Owen beamed a smile and Madigan launched forward and threw his arms around him, pulling him to him in a strong embrace.

Iseabail ran to Keane, who now was on his feet after the dreadful pain he had been subjected to, and their father ran toward them, all three hugging each other tightly.

“It is over now, me dear,” her father murmured. “It is all over.”

EPILOGUE

Four weeks later...

Owen's guts were churning as he paced back and forth in his father's study. Daire and Madigan sat looking at him with amused smiles on their faces.

"Anyone would think ye were going intae battle again," Daire grinned.

"Battle would be easier," Owen quipped back.

"Och, yer overthinking this, son," Madigan said. "I'm sure all will be fine."

Four weeks had passed since that dreadful day where he had thought he was certain he would lose his life to that maniac, Laird Sutherland. As a seasoned warrior, he had fought with all his might, but it had soon become apparent that the crystal around his neck had given the laird far more power than he would ordinarily have had.

In the end, however, the crystal had fulfilled the promise Ada had told him and Iseabail. She had warned them that the crystal would be dangerous to anyone with powers, and while it had taken a little time, the stone around Laird Sutherland's neck had indeed proved fatal to him.

When the battle was over, and they had left Clan Sutherland to deal with the fact that they no longer had a leader, Owen had ridden beside his father.

"Thank ye fer coming tae our rescue," Owen had said, now feeling far better than

earlier. “But how the devil did ye ken where tae find us?”

“I received a letter from Lady Mackay,” Madigan had replied. “In it, she confessed what ye two were really doing, and after reading it, I wasted nay time in organizing a search party. On our journey, we came upon a healer in Huna who kindly relayed where ye were heading. We then came upon a rather unsavory character, who gave me a note written in yer hand. Once he relayed tae me that ye were in possession o’ the crystal, I kent where ye would be heading next.”

“And it is a good thing we arrived,” Daire had interjected. “Fer a certainty, had we nae, ye would all likely be dead by now.”

Owen could not disagree, and once more, he had thanked both Daire and his father for coming to their rescue. The Mackay’s and Sutherland’s parted ways after a day or two, for they were all eager to return to their own homes. Iseabail and Owen’s farewell had been an emotional one, and with a tender kiss, he had told her he would see her again soon.

Which was the very reason he now paced back and forth nervously in his father’s study. Under Owen’s direction, his father had invited the Mackay’s to their castle under the pretense of a celebration that they had all survived such a dreadful ordeal. But in truth, Owen had something far more important in mind.

Owen looked from his father to Daire and back again. Both of them clearly delighted in seeing him looking completely unsettled.

“Ye two are enjoying this, are ye nae?” Owen growled playfully.

With a huge grin, Daire nodded. “I cannae deny it. I’ve never seen ye like this, and it is highly amusing.”

“Great,” Owen growled, “I’m glad I can entertain ye.”

“Daire is right,” Madigan said. “The son I ken has always been so sure o’ himself. Never before have I seen ye this nervous, and particularly over a lass.”

“She’s nae a lass, Faither. She’s a lady.”

Madigan raised his hand apologetically. “I beg yer pardon. Over a lady.”

Taking a deep breath, Owen nodded, more to himself than anyone else. He was indeed nervous, but he also knew what he wanted. He was resolute in his conviction, and now that Laird Sutherland was gone, there was nothing or no one to stop it from coming to fruition. Well, except one person.

A knock on the study door caused Owen to spin around, and slowly, Madigan pushed himself up from his chair and moved across the room. Daire also stood and followed the laird. Before opening the door, Madigan turned and gave Owen a look of pride.

“Good luck, son.”

“Thank ye, Faither,” Owen breathed.

Upon opening the door, Madigan welcomed Laird Hamilton Mackay and his son, Keane into the room. Hamilton looked confused when Madigan walked past him to leave.

“Did ye nae wish tae see me?” Hamilton said.

Madigan shook his head. “Yer meeting isnae with me, but with Owen, me laird,” Madigan said, and once he and Daire had left the study, they closed the door behind them.

Hamilton and Keane continued into the room and greeted Owen.

“Good day tae ye, Owen,” Hamilton said warmly.

“How did ye sleep?” Owen asked, gesturing for them to sit while at the same time, moving over to the dresser to pour some drinks. He certainly needed one.

“The room is very comfortable, thank ye,” Hamilton replied.

“Aye, I cannae disagree,” Keane added.

Owen returned to them, handing out glasses of amber liquid. He then lowered himself into a chair, though he perched on the edge of his seat rather than sitting more comfortably, like his companions.

“I am pleased tae hear that,” Owen said. “I am also delighted that we are once more together after what we experienced.”

Hamilton gave Owen a long look, his eyes soft and knowing. “I have a feeling ye havenae brought us tae yer father’s study just tae reiterate yer words from last night at the celebratory feast, Owen.”

No, he had not, and by the look on the older man’s face, Owen was certain the laird knew exactly the reason he was there.

“I have asked ye both here because I have an important question, me laird,” Owen said.

“Me laird?” Hamilton said, raising his eyebrows with a smile, and throwing a glance to Keane. “It must be serious.”

Keane smiled too, and Owen felt his face redden a little.

Taking a deep breath, he said. "I would like yer permission and blessing tae marry yer daughter."

There. He had said it. Now all he had to do was wait for a reply.

Hamilton and Keane shared a glance, and then Hamilton nodded to his son. Leaning forward, Keane said, "Would ye mind if I took yer hand?"

For a second, Owen was a little taken aback, but then, he remembered what Iseabail had said about Keane's gift. Her brother could read a person's mind, but he had to put his hand upon them. Owen had nothing to fear. He loved Iseabail with every part of his being.

Nodding, he put his hand out. Keane took hold of his wrist and then closed his eyes. For a long moment, a silence hung in the room, but then, Keane released him, and glancing back to his father, he nodded. "He does love her."

"Well, I dinnae think we needed yer power tae ken that," Hamilton said with a smirk. "Clearly, Keane sees good in ye, Owen, though ye have proven that also in our time together. Me answer is, aye, ye have me permission and blessing tae marry Iseabail."

"Thank ye, me laird," Owen gushed.

"Hamilton, please. We are soon tae become family."

Later, when the news had been relayed to Madigan and Daire, and the two had congratulated Owen, both families gathered in the family drawing room. Iseabail looked even more beautiful than she had the night before, though Owen imagined it would be like that for the rest of their days together, for every day he saw her, she did

appear lovelier than before.

“I have gathered us here together for a rather special occasion,” Madigan began. Eden stood beside him with a knowing look on her face. “Following on from the celebratory feast last night,” his father continued, “it appears that there is more good news.”

Owen watched as Lilidh, who stood beside Daire, looked slightly bewildered. Iseabail looked pleasantly delighted and expectant, while the rest of them present knew what was about to occur.

“Owen, I think ye have something ye would like tae say.”

Owen nodded at his father, and then walking across the room, he took Iseabail by the hands. She gasped in surprise, her brow bobbing up and down with bewilderment and confusion.

Gazing down at her tenderly, he drank in her face – her soft eyes, her perfect skin, the utter beauty that emanated from her, which still took his breath away. In that moment, it felt like they were the only two people in the room, and as far as he was concerned, they were.

“Lady Iseabail Mackay. It is me honor and privilege tae ask ye fer yer hand in marriage. Will ye please agree tae be me wife?”

Iseabail’s eyes flew open and her jaw dropped, but a second later, delight danced across her face and she nearly jumped for joy.

“Aye,” she cried. “I would be delighted tae be yer wife.”

Owen then wrapped his arms around her, and lowering his head, he kissed her

tenderly. He didn't care that her father and brother looked on. He didn't care that they were now a spectacle in the middle of the room. He had found the only woman who had discovered her way into his heart. The only woman he had and could ever love.

The rest of his life would be spent loving her, protecting her, and caring for her. Once upon a time, he had been a rake. Now, he would only have eyes for one woman, and God help any who tried to come between them.

But there's more...

Eager to learn what happened with Owen and Iseabail ?

Three months later...

Iseabail walked arm in arm with Owen, while all those from the chapel followed behind and headed to the castle. She wore her mother's wedding dress, which had brought a tear to her father's eye when he had first seen her. Apart from some slight alterations, it fitted her perfectly.

Owen too, upon seeing her, had gazed at her in amazement, for the green brocade bodice truly was a work of art. Her father had bought it for their mother as a gift when he had returned from a trip to France.

Iseabail had been taken aback upon seeing Owen in his wedding attire, for it made him look even more dashing – a thing she had not thought possible. Once at the chapel, the pastor had performed the ceremony, and then they had joined all their guests inside to break bread with them.

Now, they were all heading back to the great hall for a huge celebratory feast.

“I have something fer ye,” Iseabail said as they continued to walk. And putting her hand in the pocket of her skirts, she produced his crystal necklace.

Owen's eyes flew wide. “Where did ye find that? I thought I had lost it forever,” he gasped.

“Before we left Sutherland's castle, I searched his body. He had stuffed it into a pocket. I took it and have kept it ever since. I wanted tae give it tae ye as a wedding present.”

She was surprised when Owen did not take it from her, and even more surprised when he shook his head and said, “I dinnae need it anymore.”

“What? But why?”

He smiled down at her as they reached the courtyard. “Dae ye nae ken that I trust ye more than life itself, me love?”

Iseabail felt a deep warmth flower out from her heart, but then, she frowned again.

“But what about others who want tae bring ye harm?”

“I have discovered, in me travels, that those with gifts who wish me harm are few and far between. Fer the most part, people with gifts such as yers are simply trying tae live their lives, or, in the case of Ada, use their gifts tae help people.”

“Still,” Iseabail pressed, “there might come a time—”

“And if there does, I will keep it safe until that time comes. But for now, I am happy to lock it in a chest, fer I never want tae feel that there is anything that will come between us.”

The great hall was decorated with wreaths and flowers, and the once quiet room soon grew loud with the excited chatter of all who entered. Owen and Iseabail positioned themselves at the entrance and accepted the congratulations of every person who passed them.

Eventually, Madigan and Eden, who had been caught up in the throng, entered through the door, and Eden, with a beaming smile, threw her arms around Iseabail. The two had grown very close over the last few weeks Iseabail had been staying at the castle, possibly due to their similar age, but also because the women had much in common.

In fact, Iseabail would go so far as to say that Eden felt like the sister she never had, rather than her mother-in-law. Beside them, Owen and Madigan embraced, and the four swapped congratulations and gratitude.

Soon after that, her father and Keane entered, and with yet another tear in Hamilton's eye, he hugged Iseabail tightly. "I am so very proud o' ye, me daughter. Ye are more than I could ever have expected ye tae be, and I ken yer maither," he raised his eyes upward, "is looking down and smiling upon ye on this great day."

"Thank ye, Faither. I love ye."

"And I love ye too," he croaked.

Keane then grabbed Iseabail and lifted her off the ground in a huge bear hug, causing Iseabail to let out a shriek of laughter.

"I'm going tae miss having ye around," he said with a smile.

"I'm sure we'll come tae visit often," Iseabail said, looking up at Owen for confirmation.

"O' course," Owen nodded, "so much so, ye might get sick o' the sight o' us," he joked.

A little later on, when everyone had arrived, Owen and Iseabail found themselves seated at the top table with the rest of the Sinclair family, for she now was Lady Iseabail Sinclair. As their guests, and family of the bride, Hamilton and Keane, were also seated with them.

There were speeches given from both the fathers with much cheering from the great crowd present, for many had travelled from Clan Mackay to celebrate, and only then,

did the festivities really begin.

Music danced in the air as people tucked into the huge amount of food served, while those at the top table ate and talked amongst themselves.

Lilidh and Daire amused Iseabail greatly, for their friendly rivalry and light banter kept them all entertained.

“I have enough on me plate already, Daire,” Lilidh complained when Daire tried to give her more bread.

“Och, dinnae talk nonsense. I’ve seen a sparrow eat more.”

“Then the sparrows ye see must be the size o’ pheasants,” Lilidh came back.

When Iseabail had first arrived, she had thought the two of them were a couple, but Owen had put her right. He did add that Daire was madly in love with Lilidh, though no one mentioned that for fear of getting a thump. Owen suspected that Lilidh was very well aware of Daire’s feelings, but she had only ever seen him as a friend.

“That is so sad,” Iseabail had said.

Owen had shrugged. “Maybe one day, me aunt will realize what is right under her nose and make an honest man out o’ him.”

A few other things had come to light since she had arrived at Sinclair castle. She had discovered that Owen was no longer a wanted man, thanks be to the gods. At dinner one evening, Madigan declared that Owen no longer needed to be looking over his shoulder.

“What dae ye mean, Faither?” Owen had frowned.

“Yer faither kens everything,” Daire had said.

“Aye, when I received Iseabail’s letter, Daire told me the whole story.”

Iseabail had felt suddenly guilty, and Owen had looked dismayed.

“Owen,” Madigan said, “ye have naething tae be ashamed o’. What ye did fer that poor girl was above and beyond, and I can tell ye, one of these days, she is going tae realize how truly fortunate she was that ye came tae her rescue.”

“I think she kent that well enough at the time,” Owen said sadly.

“Well, the men have been paid, nae that they’ll be able tae spend it,” his father said firmly.

“Why?” Iseabail had asked.

Madigan had gazed down the table at her. “Because, Iseabail, I made certain that the authorities and a few men who would nae be pleased at what they were up to, were informed. By now, those men are either in a dungeon somewhere, or on a ship, probably heading tae France.”

“Thank ye, Faither,” Owen said.

“Well, it wasnae all me. Yer fights in the taverns raised quite a bit o’ coin.” His father gave him a disapproving look. “And Daire also helped.”

Owen had gawked across the table at Daire. “Really?”

Daire had shrugged. “I told ye that ye had tae quit fighting, but at the same time, I also kent yer life was in danger. So unbeknownst tae ye, I had been putting me own

money aside.”

Owen had gasped and then had thanked Daire profusely.

“Yer other debt was also settled,” Madigan said.

“What other debt?” Iseabail had asked.

Owen had spun his head to look at Iseabail, his face a picture of terror.

“The man with the crystal,” Madigan said matter-of-factly. “Sure, were ye nae there when Owen promised tae pay him forty merks?”

“Forty merks!” Iseabail gasped.

A silence fell over the table then, and clearly seeing the amusing side, for it was obvious to everyone that Iseabail had no clue what they were talking about, Daire had chuckled. “It appears we’ve put Owen in hot water.”

“Ye paid forty merks?” she had cried. “Are ye mad? Besides, ye told me ye had taken it from him.”

Owen had shrugged bashfully. “Ye already had enough worry, Iseabail. I just wanted tae get the crystal so ye could free yer family.”

She had been speechless. The meal had continued, as had the conversation. Later, she had kissed him and thanked him for making such a sacrifice.

The music in the great hall had then gotten a little louder as the dancing began, and leading Iseabail to the dance floor, Owen gazed down at her.

“Ye cannae ken how happy I am, Iseabail. After all we’ve been through, I hardly thought we’d survive, never mind get tae our wedding day.”

“We were always going tae survive, me love,” she said tenderly. “We are fighters, and will always find a way.”

“Let us hope our children grow up tae be as resilient,” Owen replied, slipping his arms around her waist.

“Our children?” Iseabail said, pretending to look shocked. “And when was that decision made?”

His lips grew into a broad grin. “Och, I dinnae ken. Probably a minute after I realized I was in love with ye. I think I want at least eight,” he teased.

“Och, is that all? I think we should go for a nice round number o’ ten. Ten would be better,” Iseabail bantered back.

“Or we could double it and go fer twenty,” he said, swinging her around.

Iseabail fell into a fit of giggles, and wrapping her arms around his neck, she pulled herself into him. His lips lowered to hers, and losing herself in his embrace, she let the world around her disappear.

The End.

CHAPTER ONE

January 1706, the King's Dungeons

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

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

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

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

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

concerned, all the better.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Dinnae see how.” Donall frowned at her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER TWO

Two weeks later...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"She's late."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Lady Alayne... yer vow?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Is me wish tae count fer naething?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and down the short corridor to the Great Hall.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER THREE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

killer.” She folded her arms.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER FOUR

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“A letter I received last night.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

wife tae warm toward ye.”

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

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

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

CHAPTER FIVE

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

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

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

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

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

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

in taking her prisoner?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ken.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Why nae?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

dinnae want tae think about that man fer now.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

exhausted tae move.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 2:35 am

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It dawned on him then, what was happening. Somehow, Alayne had gotten the impression that restraints were necessary for bedsport. Or, at least, that he was the sort of man who enjoyed such things. Darren stared at the ropes, then did the last thing he ever would have expected to be doing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She wasn't surprised when he burst into laughter again. "Och, nae wonder..." He took a deep breath, and visibly calmed himself. "I ken what the issue is now. Me apologies if ye thought I was mocking ye, but I didnae realize ye were basing yer assumptions on those two." He tipped his head at her, the sparkle of humor in his

eyes making him look far less fierce, almost boyish. “Ye wouldnae ken, but me sister-by-marriage reads a lot o’ books about that sort o’ thing. She and Daemon like tae... try new things, every so often.” His tone was wry. “’Tis something we all learned quickly after their marriage - dinnae enter a room they’ve taken over unless they’ve answered yer hail. Otherwise, there’s nae telling what ye’ll walk intae. And some things all o’ us are happier tae nae see.”

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

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

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

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

“What?” She didn’t understand.

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

have tae lie tae him.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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