



Stealing a Kilted Heart

(Temptation in Tartan #8)

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Category: Historical

Description: "Ye ken... there are other ways fer me tae bring ye pleasure without ruinin' ye."

The looming war with Clan Gordon should be Laird Knox Stuarts only concern. Yet when a fiery healer storms into his castle, she awakens desires he should avoid. His council forbids it. His duty warns against it.

But every glance of hers spurs him closer to ruin...

Fia MacKenzie came to Castle Stuart with one goal: revenge. Seducing the laird seemed like the perfect way to repay her ex-betrothed for his betrayal. But revenge gets complicated when she lands in Knox's bed—and even more so when her heart starts betraying her plans.

When her former fiancé returns, Fia's game goes up in flames—and the ally at his side could destroy everything she's come to care about: Knox.

He was supposed to be a pawn until he became the ultimate prize.

*If you like brawny Highland warriors with a soft heart, and romantic stories depicting the majestic and mysterious Scottish Highlands, then this is DEFINITELY for you.

Total Pages (Source): 38

CHAPTER ONE

O ctober, 1587. Duror village.

One down, one tae go.

Fia MacKenzie's small cottage stood in the fringes of Duror, near Castle Stuart and was—insofar as anything that received Fia's care and attention could be characterized as such—a mess. She hadn't had the time to take care of everything in the house that day, as word had spread fast that Mrs. Findley, the old healer of the village, had finally retired in her old age, too tired to keep the constant stream of patients who needed her help. The old woman had already directed everyone to Fia's door, and so within a single day, Fia had gone from a midwife and someone who occasionally assisted the old woman to a fully-fledged healer herself.

It was a dream come true, but even a dream could prove challenging and after no fewer than seven people asking for her help on her very first day on the job, she was as exhausted physically as she was mentally.

There was still one more thing that needed to be done, though. One dream that needed to be realized.

Her hands trembling with excitement, Fia flitted around the room, sweeping the floor that was already free of dust, rearranging the vials and jars of pastes on the rickety shelf, and hiding away every unsightly little thing—a half-broken cup they could not yet afford to replace, her shawl, which she had patched countless times, a bannock, now hard and dry, that she was saving for later.

“Ye’ll drive yerself mad,” Bane said with a chuckle as he put on his cloak, fastening it around his neck with the same brooch as always; the one Fia had made for him in one of her limited attempts to learn the art of smithing. It ran in the family, but she had no real knack for it, perhaps because despite their familiar bond, they shared no blood. “Calm down. The house is fine.”

“It cannae be fine ,” Fia pointed out. “It has tae be perfect. Everythin’ has tae be perfect.”

“Everythin’ is perfect,” Bane said as he slapped his hand on the top of Fia’s head and gently ruffled her hair. Screeching, Fia shoved him away and rushed to the looking glass, desperately trying to fix the few blonde strands that he had ruined while Bane laughed and headed to the door. “Dinnae fash. Ye’re too good fer Callum anyway.”

Fia didn’t roll her eyes at Bane, but only because she managed to control herself. It was something she had heard plenty of times before. In the year Callum had been courting her, Bane had never once warmed up to him and Fia worried the feelings were mutual. He and Callum had been cordial to each other, but whenever either of them was alone with her, they didn’t hesitate to tell her precisely what they thought about each other.

Callum attributed Bane’s hostility to jealousy, but Fia knew better than that. Bane may not have been a brother by blood, but he was a brother by fate. Life had brought them together so they could become a family, and there was nothing that could convince Fia otherwise.

Bane, on the other hand, attributed Callum’s hostility to the latter being strange and unlikable. Despite Fia’s insistence that Callum was a good, honest man, Bane simply would not believe it.

But he would soon. Now that Callum was coming over to ask for her hand in

marriage, Bane would surely change his mind.

“I’m really nae, Bane,” Fia said, not for the first time. “He’s a good man. I promise.”

“Why is he comin’ here?” Bane asked, voicing the very same question Fia had been afraid to ask out loud for days, ever since Callum had promised her he would go to her cottage. “Why is he nae takin’ ye fer some mulled wine or some ale? That’s what I would dae if I were him an’ wished tae make a lass me wife.”

Fia forcefully swallowed down that familiar by then knot in her throat. She had asked Callum the same thing many times over the span of the last year—why did they always meet in secret? Why did he always refuse to see her anywhere other than at her cottage? Fia had never even visited his cottage in the castle grounds, though not for lack of asking.

“He doesnae like crowds,” Fia said. It was what Callum had told her time and time again, though she also knew he visited the tavern in Duror with his friends and fellow soldiers. Many had seen him there. Fia herself had seen him there one night as she was heading to the old healer’s cottage to help with an injured man. “It’s alright. I dinnae mind meetin’ him here.”

With a sigh, Bane let go of the doorknob and walked over to Fia once more, pulling her into a loose embrace. “Are ye certain ye wish tae dae this? There is still time.”

“I want it,” Fia said, nodding firmly. She had wanted nothing more in her life. “Ye ken I want it.”

“Ye ken what I think.”

Fia didn’t know if she wanted to hear it, but still, she asked, “What?”

Pulling back, Bane placed his hands on Fia's shoulders, squeezing just slightly. "I think that ye simply dinnae wish tae be alone an' ye have settled fer the first laddie ye found when ye could have someone much, much better."

Bane was right; Fia did know what he thought, as he had expressed the same thought before, and just like the last time, Fia shoved his hands off her shoulders and took several steps back, scowling. It wasn't true; no matter how much Bane insisted, none of it was true.

"Dinnae speak tae me as though I were a fool," Fia said through gritted teeth. "I am a grown lass. Dae ye truly think I dinnae ken what I want?"

Bane let her go, one of his hands reaching up to thread through his light brown hair, making it even messier than before. She had the urge to fix it for him, to make sure he looked presentable, but she kept her hands to herself, maintaining the distance between them.

"I think ye ken what ye want," he said. "I think ye ken that ye want companionship, but ye're lookin' fer it in all the wrong places."

"I can take care o' meself," Fia snapped. "I dinnae need ye tae look out fer me."

It was harsher than she intended. The two of them had been looking out for each other for years, even more so since the disappearance of his brother, Tav. Claiming that she didn't need Bane's help was not only hurtful to him, but also entirely false.

It was too late now, though. The words had already been spoken and there was no taking them back.

Anyone else would have yelled at her, Fia knew. Anyone else would have taken offence, perhaps even stormed out of the cottage, but all Bane did was take a few

steps towards her and press a kiss to the top of her head in a brotherly manner. When he pulled back, he seemed more hurt than angry, giving Fia a small, sad smile.

“I ken ye dinnae mean that, so I’ll pretend ye didnae say it,” he said as he drew a deep breath through his nose and released it with a sigh. “I’ll leave ye tae speak with Callum an’ when I return, we will celebrate ye becomin’ the greatest healer this village has ever seen.”

Guilt flooded Fia, her bottom lip trembling as she grabbed Bane’s sleeve and gave it a small tug. Even in times like these, he was never anything but kind.

Apologies had never come naturally to her, and so instead, Fia said, “Thank ye.”

“Shut yer mouth, gnat,” said Bane with a chuckle, as he playfully swatted her hand away. He made his way to the door once more and just as he left the cottage, he looked at Fia over his shoulder. “Give Callum a slap from me.”

Before Fia could yell at him or reach for something to throw at his head, Bane was gone and Fia was suddenly left alone with nothing but her nerves and apprehension for company. As long as she had Bane there, it was easy to ignore the uncertainty, the weight in her stomach at the thought of what was to come. With him gone, doubt began to creep back into her mind, but she decided to simply keep herself busy as she waited for Callum. While she was sweeping the floor, even if there was no dust to speak of, she could think busy herself with something that was not torturing herself with doubt.

It was only minutes later that the knock on the door came and Fia froze, looking down at her dress. Though it was the best she owned, the one reserved for church and feasts, it was still plain—the wool dyed blue, with no embroidery or decorations save for the girdle she wore. That wasn’t what gave her pause, though; rather, it was the thought that she may have soiled it while cleaning.

Why would I wear this an' sweep the floors?

There was another knock on the door, one which somehow sounded more impatient to her, and Fia hurried to put the broom away, taking a moment to dust her dress off before she opened it. At the other side stood Callum, just as she had expected, and Fia's breath was cut short the moment she laid eyes upon him. It was always like this. Every time she saw him, it was like the first time. The excitement never faded, not even a year after he had first started courting her.

Callum stepped inside without a word, giving Fia a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. He must have been tired, she thought. He must have had a rough day, training all day with his fellow soldiers, and yet he had come to her that night just as he had promised.

To Fia, he had always seemed to dominate the space in the small cottage. He was tall and broad-shouldered, his skin covered in battle scars that spoke of his bravery in battle. His grey eyes were always cautious—cold, someone else may have said, but Fia knew they could also hold warmth in their gaze.

Before Fia even had a chance to greet him, Callum pulled her into his arms, wrapping them tightly around her. She laughed at first, letting him pull her flush against him, but when his hands began to wander lower, sliding down her waist, she couldn't help but reach for his wrists, stopping him.

"Callum... come now," Fia said, trying to pull herself out of his embrace with little success. He was holding tightly onto her, clinging to her possessively even as she struggled, and after a few moments, she gave up trying to fight it. "Ye said ye wished tae talk."

"I wish tae dae more than talk," Callum said, in his raspy baritone. It was one of the first things Fia had noticed about him, that voice of his; one of the first things she had

come to like. “I told ye I want ye, Fia. An’ tonight is the night.”

Callum had, indeed, told Fia that he wanted her, but she had also been perfectly clear with him. “An’ I told ye I willnae let ye bed me until we’re wedded. Ye agreed, remember? Ye said ye would make me yer wife.”

Callum hummed thoughtfully, his arms loosening a little around Fia, but not enough for her to slip away. “I did say that, did I nae? Well... perhaps I wish tae see if me future wife can satisfy me first.”

At first, Fia thought Callum must have been teasing her. It was in poor taste, she thought. Surely, he couldn’t be serious. It was only when she laughed and he didn’t that she began to think perhaps he wasn’t teasing her at all.

“What dae ye mean?” Fia asked, once again trying to get out of his grasp. This time, Callum let her, and she took a few steps backwards, putting some much needed distance between them. “Surely, ye jest.”

“Why would I jest?” Callum asked, hands on his hips as he regarded her with those steely grey eyes. “All the lasses dae it. Why dae ye think yerself any different?”

“I simply dinnae wish tae dae such things afore I’m wedded,” Fia said with a small shrug. She didn’t care what other women in the village did, nor did she judge them for their choices, but she knew what she wanted, and what she wanted was to have her first time with her husband. “Callum, didnae ye come here tae ask fer me hand?”

With a sigh, Callum began to pace around the room, fingers combing through his dark hair. When he came to a halt, he did so right in front of Fia, so close that she could feel his breath on her face.

“I came tae have what is mine,” Callum said, his tone dropping into something fake

and sickeningly sweet. “It’s been a year. Ye have nae right tae withhold this from me any longer.”

Fia could do nothing but stare at Callum in disbelief. The man standing before her was nothing like the one who had been courting her. He was not the man she so desperately wanted to marry. He was not the man she thought him to be all this time.

How can it be? Is this who he truly is? Have I been so blind?

“I have nay right? Tae decide what tae dae with me own body? How can ye say that?” Fia asked as she stepped backwards, bile rising to the back of her throat. She couldn’t believe it, even if the evidence was right in front of her. That the past year had all been a lie, Callum had been wearing a mask the entire time and had only now revealed his true self. “Ye said?—”

“Aye, aye... I said many things, I ken,” Callum said, so dismissive that his voice suddenly sounded foreign to Fia. Then, he chuckled to himself, the sound so cold and cruel it was like a physical blow to her stomach. “Dae ye wish tae ken the truth? I wasnae plannin’ on tellin’ ye tae spare yer feelings, but... well, it was all fer a bet. Me friends claimed I couldnae have someone as prudish as ye an’ I wished tae prove them wrong. An’ ye were so easy tae fool an’ so eager tae trust me. Did ye truly think I would ever wed a mere midwife? I’m about tae become the war leader o’ Clan Stewart an’ ye think I would wed a lass like ye? Ye’re beneath me station. Ye’re just a simple lass whose parents abandoned her an’ only has a fool like Bane near her.”

Callum’s words were like a lance to the heart, shattering Fia’s into pieces. She could feel it in her chest, a sharp ache that made it impossible to draw any air into her lungs, more painful than any physical wound. Her hand went up to her chest, fingers curling tightly around the fabric of her tunic since she could not grip her own heart, her eyes wide and brimming with tears as she looked at Callum as who he was for the first time.

“Get out o’ me home,” she said through gritted teeth. “Get out.”

With a roll of his eyes, Callum took a few steps closer, only for Fia to move back. “Ye have one more chance tae give me what I want,” he said.

“Or what?” Fia demanded, fury bubbling up inside her. She didn’t even try to contain it; she had no reason to. Callum had shown her nothing but disrespect and now his threats were far from subtle. “How dare ye threaten me? Ye can try tae take what ye want by force, but be warned that Bane, the one ye call a fool, has taught me how tae fight an’ I willnae let ye touch me without fightin’.”

The nerve o’ him! The mere impudence!

Callum paused for a moment, and it seemed to Fia that he was weighing his options. He was truly considering it, she realized with horror and disgust. He was truly trying to decide if he should take her by force.

“Get out o’ me house right the now!” she shouted, pointing a finger to the door. “Out!”

Callum laughed, but he did head to the door this time, shaking his head as though he was the one in disbelief. “Ye call this a house? It’s only a box with a door.”

Those were the last words he spoke to her before he left, slamming the door behind him. For what seemed like an eternity, Fia simply stared, frozen in her spot, the echo of his laughter and the ghost of his mocking gaze still lingering.

She didn’t know when she sank to the floor, drawing her knees to her chest as the tears began to stream down her cheeks unbridled and quiet. That was how Bane found her, though, a while later; curled up into herself, unable to do anything but cry.

She didn't need to explain anything. He went to her, sitting onto the floor next to her and wrapping an arm around her shoulders to pull her close. It was then that, for the first time since Callum had left, Fia managed to make a sound—a broken sob, one that soon turned into a howl of pain.

Callum had taken everything from her. He had taken her pride, her trust, her love, and he had trampled over it all, leaving nothing but dust behind. He had taken the man Fia loved and had killed him right in front of her eyes.

There was nothing left inside her but that gnawing humiliation, its talons digging into her guts and tearing her apart from the inside. A bet; it had all been for a bet, one Callum hadn't even managed to win.

How embarrassin'! Tae be fooled by a fool!

Fia couldn't accept it. She had been hurt and humiliated, stripped of her pride within moments, but a man like Callum didn't deserve her tears. He didn't deserve the ache that burned inside her, the grief that settled heavy on her shoulders.

What he deserved was to be just as humiliated, just as broken. What he deserved was to watch as Fia proved once and for all that she was neither weak nor small, and that it didn't matter what anyone—especially Callum—thought about her and what she was worth.

One way or another, she would have her revenge.

CHAPTER TWO

Two dozen men waited for his commands. Two dozen men, all of them well-versed in the arts of war and espionage, all of them knowing what was at stake.

Knox Stuart stood in front of them all, hands braced against the large, round table that stood in the middle of the room. For once, they were not in his study, but rather in the meeting chamber, the place his father had favored as a laird before him. With the entire council, as well as several soldiers gathered for his address, it seemed more proper to meet them there. Besides, the importance of their mission could not be overstated.

The Gordon Clan was getting close. Sooner or later, an attack would come, and Knox wanted to be ready. The future of Clan Stuart was in his hands now more than ever before and he feared that even the slightest mistake could set them off-course.

“Thank ye fer comin’,” Knox said, looking up at the men gathered around him. Some of them were older and had been holding the same position in the clan for years—wise men who knew their jobs well. Others, especially the soldiers, were younger and eager to prove themselves. Knox needed them all. He needed the wisdom of the elders and the fire and passion of the youngsters if they were going to face a threat as serious as the Gordon Clan. “I’m certain ye all ken why we gathered here. There have been reports that there is movement within the Gordon Clan. We must be prepared fer any eventuality.”

Next to him, his closest advisor and friend, Magnus MacLeod, stood a little straighter at the mention of the Gordons, his hands curling into fists. Everyone in the Stuart

Clan knew the destruction and misery that the Gordons could bring. Everyone had experienced a side of their cruelty; some, like Knox, more than others.

“There will be a scoutin’ mission tae assess the Gordon forces,” Knox continued, his voice firm and unwavering. His men needed strong leadership in these trying times and no matter how much the thought of an attack unnerved him, he couldn’t let it show. They were all looking to him for guidance, for orders, for a plan of action. “We must ken just how many men they have at their disposal, what their plans are, if they are about tae stage an attack. It will be a small group... good soldiers an’ scouts who can go unnoticed. Stealth is of utmost importance here. If anyone is discovered, the entire mission will be wasted. Dae ye all understand?”

There was a chorus of assent among the men. The elders, those who had experienced the cruelty of the Gordon Clan firsthand, looked among themselves with some unease, but Knox could tell they were all just as eager to get the information they needed. Clan Stuart could not simply sit and wait for the attack to come. They had to prepare their men. They had to know as much as they could if they wanted to, not only win the war, but also do so with minimal losses.

“Me laird... I would like tae lead the charge.”

Knox dragged his gaze to the man who had spoken. It was none other than Callum Fraser, the son of the late war master. His father had been a competent man, one who had brought Clan Stuart to victory many times, and his death had left a vacant spot behind that was yet to be filled. It had already been too long since the man’s death and Knox knew better than anyone Callum wanted his father’s position, but he was not even half the man his father had been. How could Knox give him the rank of war master when Callum had proven himself precisely what Knox despised: power hungry and arrogant, overly ambitious to the point of fault. Callum was nothing like his father, but he could also be so persistent that the only way to keep the peace among his troops was to indulge him without giving him any real power.

He didn't trust Callum otherwise. Any small disagreement could lead to him working against Knox and the clan.

When Knox didn't immediately respond to Callum's request, he continued, "Surely, a man as clever an' capable as yerself can understand I am the best choice fer this. Me faither taught me well an' I have an excellent track record in trainin' an' battle."

How much battle has this lad seen? How can he claim tae be the best choice when so many others are here?

Knox looked once again at his men; at those who had truly fought battles for years, dedicating their hearts and bodies to the clan and their cause. All of them weathered, all of them sporting the scars of those battles. Callum had some of those scars himself, that much was true. He, too, had fought for the people of Clan Stuart, but he couldn't claim to be the one with the most experience in that room.

And then there were those comments, the ones Callum always made in an effort to flatter him. Knox didn't need someone like him to tell him whether or not he was clever or capable. Every other word out of that man's mouth was cheap flattery, rehearsed and delivered for a very specific purpose. Och, how much Knox disliked Callum and the likes of him.

Barely suppressing a sigh, Knox pinched the bridge of his nose as he nodded. It would be easier to throw a bone at him. It would be easier to give him a task and keep him occupied.

"Very well," Knox said. "I will assign some men tae ye. A small party o' half a dozen soldiers. Ye're tasked with comin' up with a plan. Once it is ready, inform Magnus an' we shall meet again tae discuss it further."

The smile Callum gave him was one of complete satisfaction, but Knox wasn't blind

to the way he held himself, standing tall with his chest puffed out with pride. Anyone would be proud to be given such an important mission, of course, but Callum's satisfaction didn't stem from his desire to fight for the clan; rather, it was simply another achievement about which he could brag and which he could eventually use as a steppingstone to get what he truly wanted.

"O' course, me laird," said Callum, bowing to Knox. "Trust that ye willnae be disappointed."

Knox offered Callum a small, tight-lipped smile. It was the sincerest gesture he could offer, which was to say it was not sincere at all, but it seemed to be enough for Callum, who stepped back without another comment.

"Well, with this settled, there is only the matter o' strategy fer the attack, if it ever comes," Knox said. "But ye all ken we are already workin' on this an' will continue tae dae so until we are ready fer anythin' the Gordon Clan can dae. I want everyone tae report everythin' tae me an' Magnus from now on. All the plans, all the strategies, everythin'. I wish tae hear them meself."

There was another round of whispered assent among the men. For the next hour, the meeting dragged on, his advisors and the soldiers discussing strategy and offering solutions to any problem they could think of. By the time the meeting was over, though, and everyone but Magnus and Knox had left the room, Knox was not any more at ease than he had been when the meeting had begun.

"Callum Fraser is a problem," Knox said. Though he wouldn't dare voice those concerns in front of everyone else, he knew he could trust Magnus entirely. The two of them had gone through much together, and Knox trusted him not only with his life, but also with his secrets. "He will dae anythin' tae be named the next war master, but that will only happen once I'm dead."

With a heavy sigh, Magnus laid a hand on his shoulder, giving Knox a gentle shake. “I agree with ye,” he said. “But even then, if I still live, I’ll make sure he doesnae get what he wants.”

Knox couldn’t help but laugh at that. Though Magnus was a rough man, large and imposing and serious more often than not, sometimes he could be unintentionally funny. This was one of those times, Knox thought. There was no doubt in his mind Magnus meant every word he said.

“Good,” Knox said. “He is a snake. Ye can see it too, can ye nae?”

“Och, I ken it,” said Magnus. “He will stop at naethin’ tae get what he wants. Why did ye make him the leader?”

“I had tae give him somethin’ until we ken how tae deal with him,” Knox pointed out. “An’ the council wishes me tae choose a war master, so if I must rush, then I must keep Callum occupied.”

“Aye, I suppose that’s true,” said Magnus. “Dae ye have anyone in mind?”

Knox shook his head. “Nay. Dae ye?”

“Nay,” said Magnus. “Ye also need tae find another healer.”

“Another healer?”

This was news to Knox and not particularly good news. Magnus’ wife, Effie, was the castle’s healer and she was more than competent at her job.

“The demands have grown too great,” Magnus said. “There is only so much Effie can dae an’ if there is an attack...”

Magnus didn't need to finish his sentence for Knox to know what he meant. If Clan Gordon attacked, then there would be many who would need care and attention from a healer. Effie would not be enough on her own to meet such demands.

"Fine," said Knox, nodding. "Dae we ken anyone who could help?"

"Perhaps we could find someone in Duror," said Magnus. "It's a big village. Surely, they have a healer."

"Very well. See that it is done."

The Gordon Clan had already taken too much from them—from him. Their laird, Alistair Gordon, had loomed over Knox's shadow for years. He was responsible for his parents' deaths. He was responsible for so many evil acts that Knox could not even name them all. And now they were about to attack again, threatening everything Knox held dear—his friends, his family, his people.

They wouldn't be getting what they wanted, not if he had something to say about it. He would rather give his own life, sacrifice himself for the sake of those who trusted him and depended on him, than let the Gordons have even a sliver of his land or harm even one of his people.

There was much to be done. Knox was convinced an attack was imminent and with Callum leading the mission, he couldn't rest assured everything would work out. The castle needed fortification and a new healer needed to be found. The men's training would have to become more rigorous than ever, and Knox felt the need to be in control of all those things. Even if it meant sleepless nights and working tirelessly around the clock, he had to make sure the clan had no weak spots.

It was all his responsibility now. Everything rested upon his shoulders.

CHAPTER THREE

It was the kind of cold morning that left the petals of the winter flowers in Fia's garden tipped with frost—the cornflowers and pansies that would soon wither with the first true cold. Inside the cottage, Bane tended to the fire, tossing another log in the fireplace as he brought a cup of steaming tea to her.

Despite the cold, it was a bright morning, sunlight bathing the room golden. Fia knelt before Colin, the young son of the skinner, who had come running to her as she was gathering herbs for her pastes and medicines, wailing as he clutched his knee.

“Ach, Colin, it's only a scrape!” Fia said, reaching up to ruffle the boy's dark hair. “Dinnae fash. We'll clean it an' dress it an' ye'll be good as new.”

The boy sat obediently on the edge of Fia's working bench, idly kicking his legs. His cheeks were still wet with tears and he looked as though he was on the verge of another round of sobbing, but Fia quickly grabbed a small, wooden deer Tav had made for her when she was still a young girl and handed it to him, which seemed to keep his mind occupied enough to prevent him from crying. Then, she gathered everything she needed—clean cloth, warm water, and a healing paste, bringing it to the bench.

The entire time, Bane stood by the stove, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. Fia knew that look on his face. There was much he wanted to tell her, but he had been holding back ever since the night Callum had come to their cottage and had left her heart broken into pieces.

It had already been three days; three days in which Fia's hatred and rage had burned as bright as that first night, like a wildfire that refused to die out until it had consumed everything in its path. She didn't know how much more there was of her to consume; all she knew was that there was no end to it in sight.

"I can see ye starin'," she grumbled as she started to clean the boy's knee. "Dinnae ye have anythin' better tae dae?"

"I could ask ye the same," Bane said. "The past three days all ye've done is curse Callum an' rip out all the weeds in the garden."

Fia couldn't deny that; it was true. The garden had never looked as immaculate as it did now, though in her fury and haste, some of her precious plants had suffered too from her overly enthusiastic hand. It was also true that she had been cursing Callum—a lot.

She couldn't help it. He had wasted an entire year of her life. How was she supposed to simply move past it and not curse him daily?

"Well, perhaps if a lass had done this tae ye, ye would be doin' the same!" Fia pointed out. "Wouldnae ye want yer revenge? I dae. I want tae embarrass him an' humiliate him in front o' everyone who doesnae ken what a snake he is."

Even in front of Colin, Fia couldn't contain her rage. Her voice trembled and her hands clutched the cloth tightly, the knuckles of her fingers turning bone-white in the morning sun. Out of all people, she thought Bane would understand. He had seen the toll this relationship—if she could even call it that anymore—had taken on her. He had experienced every sorrow, every instance of Fia excusing all and any behavior that hurt her, always striving to give Callum the benefit of doubt simply because she loved him so much. And all Callum had done was to betray that love.

Fia didn't simply wish to hurt him, though. Humiliating him in front of everyone who considered him to be the perfect bachelor—and Fia knew there were many who shared this opinion—would not suffice. She had to make sure that as he suffered, she got everything she had ever wanted.

A part of that plan had already happened. By becoming the village healer, she was one step closer to her ideal life. Callum would find out soon enough, if he didn't know already, and Fia hoped he would despise how well she was doing.

“Fia, I'm sure ye can find many a man tae wed who would so much better than him,” Bane said with a weary sigh. “Why even waste time on a man like Callum?”

“Because!” Fia said, unable to come up with a good enough reason at first. “Because he deserves tae hurt, too.”

Behind her, Bane said nothing. Just as she finished patching up Colin's knee, the boy beamed up at her, his smile wide and joyful in a way only a child's could be.

“I'm healed!” he declared, much to the amusement of Fia and Bane, who laughed with Colin's delight. Swinging his legs, Colin shoved the little toy in Fia's hands and then slammed right into her, wrapping his little arms around her waist. “Miss MacKenzie, ye're like a princess.”

Fia couldn't help but laugh once more, ruffling Colin's hair. “Am I?” she asked. “Then ye're me wee knight. Come, let us take ye home, yer maither will be worried.”

Colin looked up at Fia with pride at being bestowed such a title. He took her hand and followed her to the door, saying, “Ye should marry a laird, Miss MacKenzie. All princesses marry lairds.”

I should wed a laird. That'll show Callum.

Fia imagined it, Callum finding out that the woman he had once claimed was so beneath him was marrying a laird. She could see it clearly; his eyes wide, his face a deep shade of red, anger and embarrassment gripping him so tightly he could hardly stand it. There would be nothing for him to do then. There would be nothing for him to say that could make Fia feel inferior to him, nothing that could hurt her.

If only it was that easy tae wed a laird.

With Colin's hand in hers, Fia led the boy to the door, but before she could reach it, there was a knock. When she opened it, a large, imposing man with chestnut hair and piercing green eyes stepped inside without even waiting for an invitation. He was alluring in the same way that a rocky shore was alluring, the beauty of the cliffs and the boulders raw and rough, but he was such a solid and looming presence in the room that Fia couldn't help but take a small step back, startled, putting Colin behind her back.

"Good mornin', Miss MacKenzie," the man said, his demeanor much gentler than his appearance. "Me name's Magnus MacLeod, I come on behalf o' Laird Stewart."

Laird Stewart? What could the laird want with me?

"I'd like tae speak with ye regardin' the position o' the castle healer," Magnus continued, and Fia could have sworn that her heart stopped in her chest. Could it be that he had come to offer her this position? But Fia had only just taken over from the old healer and, as far as she knew, the castle already had a woman who took care of the sick and the wounded. Why would they want her?

"I'll take Colin tae his maither," Bane said, stepping past her to take Colin by the hand. As he left, Fia gestured to Magnus to come deeper into the room and then proceeded to pour him a cup of tea, bringing it to her working bench. The moment they were alone, Magnus continued to speak.

“I’ll make it quick, Miss MacKenzie,” he said. “Our healer is overwhelmed by everythin’ that needs tae be done in the castle. I will ask ye tae nae share this with anyone, but there are also concerns regardin’ an attack, an’ we would like tae be as prepared as we can. Regardless o’ the possibility o’ an attack, we require yer assistance. Naturally, ye will be adequately compensated fer yer efforts.”

Fia hesitated for a moment. This would be a major step for her, changing everything in her life. She could live comfortably. She could have a cottage within the castle grounds and never need anything again in her life.

But this was her fourth day as a healer.

“Mister MacLeod, I only just became a healer,” she said. “Are ye certain it is me ye want?”

“Yer reputation precedes ye,” said Magnus with a small shrug. The cup of tea still stood on the workbench, untouched, and it seemed to Fia as though he was in a hurry. Then again, he most likely was, considering he had mentioned fears of an attack. That, too, was a concern for Fia. Not only did the threat itself mean that they were all in danger, but it also meant she could very well be dealing with severe wounds and dying soldiers if she accepted the position. “We are aware o’ yer skills. Everyone, including Mrs. Findley, claims ye are excellent at yer job. We also ken ye’re a midwife, an’ we dinnae have a midwife in the castle. Yer knowledge would be very valuable tae us.”

Mrs. Findley said that?

It shouldn’t have been a surprise, not when Mrs. Findley herself had chosen Fia as her successor, but it was still good to hear she had her endorsement.

It should have been enough for her. That should have been all the praise she needed,

the only victory that mattered against Callum. But it wasn't enough. She hated to admit it, but she still craved the satisfaction she knew would come from Callum's fury and humiliation, and the offer was too tempting to resist.

If she accepted, she would be living in the castle, just like him. He would have no way of avoiding her or her success, and Fia was more than happy to rub it in his face.

And the laird is there.

Colin's words came back to her then— Ye should marry a laird, Miss MacKenzie. All princesses marry lairds. It had seemed ridiculous in that moment, nothing but the fanciful words of a child, but now it didn't seem so impossible to Fia anymore. So, what if she wasn't a noble girl? So, what if Callum claimed she was nothing but a peasant who lived in a box, that she had no real value? Fia knew that to be false. Callum didn't determine her value; she did. And if she truly believed in herself, nothing was beyond her grasp. Not even a laird.

"I will accept yer offer," Fia said. "As long as Bane can come with me."

She didn't want to go anywhere without Bane. They had spent most of their lives together, as a family, and she would not forsake him now.

"Who is Bane?"

"Me braither," Fia said. "The lad who was just here."

Magnus hesitated for a moment, scratching his chin idly as he thought it through. "Is the lad skilled?"

"Och aye," said Fia. "He's a blacksmith. A very good one."

“Very well,” said Magnus. “Then he’s welcome in the castle. But he will be put tae work too.”

Fia couldn’t help but smile from ear to ear, her stomach tightening with anticipation instead of disappointment. Even if she was angry and heartbroken, at least her skills as a healer and a midwife were being recognized. For now, that would have to suffice, she thought.

And now that she would be living within the castle grounds, she could put her new plan in motion. Suddenly, marrying a nobleman didn’t seem so impossible.

“We’ll send some men tae help ye bring everythin’ ye need,” Magnus said, as he headed to the door. “Let us ken if there is anythin’ ye require o’ us. Take a few days tae make any last arrangements here. We look forward tae seein’ ye, Miss MacKenzie.”

With that, Magnus was gone and Fia was left staring at the door, her mouth hanging open and her eyes wide. She could hardly believe her luck and the fact that she would soon be living in the castle. Even if they gave her the healer’s cottage, it was bound to be much nicer than the cottage she and Bane were living in at that moment.

In the minutes that followed, Fia stayed where she stood, frozen, staring at the door. Everything that had just happened was still difficult to process. Her entire life had changed in a handful of minutes.

When Bane opened the door and saw her like that, he immediately paled as he rushed to her, grabbing her shoulder.

“What is it?” he asked, panic creeping into his tone. “What did he tell ye?”

For a few moments, Fia found it impossible to speak. When she finally had the

words, she said, “He told me tae go tae the castle an’ work there as a healer.”

Bane was just as dumbfounded as Fia was, the two of them staring at each other in silence and disbelief. Then, Bane burst out laughing and Fia couldn’t help but follow as he pulled her into a crushing embrace, lifting her off the ground.

“That is incredible, Fia,” he said, gingerly placing her back down. “When are ye leavin’?”

“We are leavin’,” she said. “I told him I wouldnae go without ye.”

“Ye’re jestin’,” said Bane, but when Fia shook her head, his grin widened even more, though Fia would have thought it impossible. “Me? Livin’ in the castle?”

“Aye,” said Fia. “Did ye truly think I’d leave ye behind?”

“I wouldnae mind,” Bane said. “I would miss ye, but it would be fer the best.”

“Well, I wouldnae leave ye,” she insisted. “So, we’re goin’ together. An’ I have a plan.”

That was the precise moment when Bane’s smile dropped. He knew her well enough to know that whatever plan she was mentioning couldn’t possibly be good news. But Fia’s mind was made up.

“What plan?” Bane asked in a weary tone.

“Remember when Colin said I should wed a laird?” Fia asked.

“Aye,” said Bane, eyes narrowing.

“Well, Callum thinks I am worthless an’ that he is too good fer me, so I’ll prove him wrong,” Fia said. “By marryin’ the laird.”

“Now ye’re jestin’,” Bane said, eyes wide as he looked at her. “Surely, ye must be. Say ye are. Say ye’re nae serious.”

Fia didn’t think her plan was that farfetched, after all. The laird was a bachelor and save for her pedigree, Fia lacked nothing. It was more likely than Bane seemed to think, but even she had to admit it could lead to a world of trouble.

It was worth it, though. Any trouble this could cause was worth it, if only to see the look on Callum’s face.

“I’m serious,” Fia confirmed. “Why? Dae ye doubt me?”

Bane seemed to truly consider the question for a few moments, as though he could neither claim to doubt her, knowing her tenacity, nor could he bring himself to think that her plan had true merit.

“I think it will simply lead tae trouble,” he said, just as Fia had expected. “An’ ye have a way o’ gettin’ yerself an’ me in trouble often.”

“Ach, Bane... when was the last time I got us in trouble?” Fia asked. Surely, she thought, it must have been a long time ago.

“Last week,” said Bane flatly. “When ye almost fought that merchant.”

Fia’s mouth snapped shut. There was no denying that. She had, indeed, almost fought a merchant, but as far as she was concerned, it was not her fault. He had offered unfair prices and wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“That was hardly me fault,” she said with an indignant huff as she made to clean up the room—throw out the cold tea Magnus hadn’t drunk and put away everything she had used for Colin’s injury. Now that the first wave of shock had subsided, she was filled with a restless energy that demanded she move around the room, otherwise she feared she would burst with it. “An’ besides, it turned out fine.”

“Aye, it did,” said Bane. “Because I was there tae threaten him.”

That was also true. The merchant hadn’t feared Fia’s threats, but he had feared Bane’s.

“It may be so,” she admitted. “But ye will also be with me in the castle, so I dinnae see why ye would fash. If anythin’ happens, ye’ll be there.”

Bane threw his hands up in the air in exasperation and his mouth hung open, but he could make no discernible sound. All he could do was stare at Fia in disbelief, but she ignored him, busying herself with her tasks.

This was good for them both, Fia thought. Even if her plan didn’t work, they would still be living in the castle. Sooner or later, Bane would come to see it was the best option for them.

And if her plan worked, well, then no one would dare question her worth again.

CHAPTER FOUR

Castle Stewart towered high above Fia's head as she and Bane reached the gates. It was an impressive structure, with tall curtain walls surrounding the entire building and courtyard, topped with battlements. The gatehouse, right outside of which Fia and Bane had stopped, was reinforced with portcullises and arrowslits, which spoke of the castle's great defenses. The keep, the main part of the entire structure, was just as impressive—dark stone topped with turrets, the kind of place Fia never thought she would even visit, let alone get to live in.

Fia gritted her teeth. Her heart was racing and her palms were damp with perspiration, her nerves getting the better of her, but she refused to show it. In the three days leading up to their arrival, she had been vibrating with excitement, unable to sit still for even a moment. She had hardly slept or eaten, so eager to get to the castle that every moment between her and her goal was as much of a reason to be elated as much as it was a torture. Now that she was there, though, her excitement had quickly turned into fear and apprehension.

What if everything went wrong? What if not only her plan wouldn't work, but she would also fail in her tasks as a healer?

What if she saw Callum and all that pain and shame came flooding back?

Gracefully dismounting the horse, Bane reached for Fia, who had ridden with him the entire way to the castle. That, too, felt shameful—being lowered gently to the ground as the guards watched and laughed among themselves, all because she had never learned how to ride.

It was something to which she hadn't given much thought in the past. She never saw the need to know how to ride, since she never thought she would have to travel that far or have the means to do so. She had long since come to terms with the fact that her life would play out and end in Duror, but now it seemed that everything was changing.

Should I ken how tae ride? Should I ask Bane tae teach me or is it too late now?

She was already twenty-three years of age. Was it even possible for her to learn? She was so unsteady and uncertain on a saddle, even when someone else was steering the horse.

"Is the lassie alright?" one of the guards asked as he approached them. He must have seen Fia swaying on her feet, she thought, as she finally had them planted on solid ground.

"Aye, she's alright," Bane was quick to say, stepping between her and the guard as though his very body was a shield. "She simply prefers tae walk. An' our mare prefers us tae walk, as well."

The men laughed good-naturedly, the tension breaking with ease. As he spoke, Bane patted the horse on the side gently. She was, indeed, an older horse, one that under any other circumstances may have been retired from transporting people, especially long distances. But Fia and Bane couldn't afford another, and so the mare was all they had.

But that may change now.

"I take it that ye are Fia an' Bane MacKenzie?" the guard asked. He was an older man, ruddy-cheeked and plump, and he seemed kind despite the first impression he had made on Fia.

“Bane Graham, actually,” said Bane. “But aye, that’s us.”

The guard looked at them with a small frown for a moment, surely trying to figure out why they would have two different surnames, but he didn’t press. Instead, he called two more guards over—younger, perhaps even more so than Fia—who began to search their belongings.

“I’m sure ye understand,” the man said. “It is fer the good o’ the clan.”

“O’ course,” said Bane. “We understand.”

Fia felt as though someone had stolen her ability to speak. She was never that silent or subdued. She never let Bane take over in a conversation, but now she felt as though she had no other choice, tongue-tied as she suddenly was. That place was affecting her in ways she could have never predicted.

She had expected a certain level of nervousness and awe, but what she hadn’t expected was that tinge of fear that kept gnawing at her insides, making her doubt herself, when only a few hours prior she had been so certain about her skills and her plans.

Suddenly, they were both being ushered inside the castle grounds, the main gate opening to reveal a bustling courtyard where servants and workers went about their day, some of them tending to the courtyard itself, the horses or the building as others carried all sorts of goods back and forth—wheat, barrels of alcohol, fresh meat. Fia had never seen such abundance before. Even in the village market, such riches were unheard of.

She and Bane couldn’t help but stop and stare in disbelief, eyes wide as they took in everything going on around them. Behind them, the guard stood with his hands on his hips, watching them in confusion.

“What are ye starin’ at?” he asked, startling both Fia and Bane. They turned around in unison to look at him, and the guard laughed once again, the sound full and delighted. “First time in a castle? It’s alright... ye’ll get used tae it quickly.”

Fia very much doubted that. How could one get used to such luxury? And this was perhaps nothing compared to the interior of the keep, where the laird and the other nobles resided. She couldn’t help but wonder what that place was like. Surely, it would have rich tapestries and paintings and all sorts of bright, gleaming things.

It was then she decided she had to see it. Sooner or later, she was bound to be allowed inside.

“Follow me,” the guard said, as he pushed through them and made his way around the courtyard and towards the back of the castle. Fia and Bane followed the man closely, both equally concerned that they would get lost if he left their sights. They soon came upon a small, squat building—a little larger than the cottage they had left behind in Duror, but also much newer. There were no holes in the roof, no missing stones in the foundation. The wooden beams seemed solid, strong, not worn out by termites and wind, and when they stepped inside, Fia was delighted to find that the area was divided in three, with a main room and two other rooms that served as sleeping chambers.

Each of them would finally have their own room, it seemed. That alone was a luxury she never thought she would have.

A room o’ me own... I can hardly believe it.

Bane seemed to be just as much in disbelief, looking around him with wide eyes and an awed look on his face. Fia had never seen him like this before. He was often laughing, often playful, often even irritated in that half-hearted way of his that betrayed his vexation as being little more than a show, but he was never stunned

speechless.

“Is this fer us?” Bane asked, turning to face first the guard and then Fia with a bright smile.

“Aye,” said the guard. “The healer’s cottage is right over there, so this is the best place fer ye tae be.”

Fia followed the guard’s pointing finger through the window to see another building, this one much larger if a little older. So, that was where she would be spending most of her time from then on, it seemed. It wasn’t such a bad place to be, Fia thought, especially if the woman who served as the clan’s healer was nice.

But what if she isnae? What if she hates me?

Fia took a deep breath, grounding herself. The more she worried about things that could very well never come to pass, the worse it would be. She had gone there with excitement in her heart and a plan in her mind. She couldn’t let doubt, mostly the result of Callum’s cruel words, get to her after all, and the last thing she wanted was to let him have any sort of influence on her, even now that they were apart.

Everythin’ will work out. We are here. The first step has been taken.

“I’ll leave ye tae settle in,” said the guard, as he headed to the door. “If there is anythin’ ye need, ask anyone in the castle. They’ll ken how tae help ye.”

With that, the man was gone, leaving Fia and Bane alone. For several moments, they only stared at each other in disbelief, before they both burst out in laughter, Fia rushing into Bane’s arms so they could hold each other tightly.

“Can ye believe this?” Bane asked as they parted, taking some time to walk around

the room. It had everything they needed, from a stove to chairs and even some modest decorations. A rug was laid on the stone floor and a fire already burned in the fireplace, which could only mean that someone had lit it to welcome them.

It was more than Fia could have ever imagined.

“I almost cannae,” she admitted, as she ran her fingers over the table that stood under the window. It was clean, with no trace of dust on its surface. In the village, it always seemed to her that, no matter how much she swept, there was always dust everywhere only moments later. “But it’s true, isnae it? We’re truly here.”

“We are,” Bane said. “An’ it is all because o’ ye. Ye ken that, right Fia? We’re only here because o’ ye an’ yer skills. So never listen tae anyone who tells ye that ye have nae worth. Never.”

As he spoke, Bane grabbed her by the shoulders and stared right into her eyes, his gaze boring a hole through her. She knew what he was trying to tell her—he didn’t want her to fall for another man who would be as cruel and beastly as Callum, someone who wanted to demean her and destroy her confidence simply because it amused him.

Bane had always been right in his assessment of Callum. He could always see what Fia couldn’t, blinded by love as she had been. She knew better than that now. She knew that love mattered little when a man was so quick and eager to tear it right from her hands.

She didn’t seek love anymore—she sought revenge, and whatever path would benefit her the most.

“I promise ye,” Fia said with a firm nod. “An’ if I ever lose me head like that again, ye have me permission tae throw me in the dungeons until I come back tae me

senses.”

Bane laughed, giving her a pat on the shoulder. “Well, there’s certainly a dungeon here. Shall I look fer it?”

“Let us hope it willnae get tae that,” said Fia. “I told ye me plan.”

At that, Bane sighed, taking a step back as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Aye, ye did. So ye’re determined tae go through with it?”

“I told ye I am,” Fia said. “An’ I need ye tae help me.”

Bane was quick to shake his head, raising his hands up as he took a few steps backwards from her, as though the physical distance could save him from this. “Help ye? Nay! Ye willnae trick me intae this.”

“I’m nae tryin’ tae trick ye,” Fia pointed out, taking a step towards him for every step he took back. “I’m askin’ ye.”

Just as Bane’s back hit the wall next to the fireplace, Fia gave him that look she knew he could never resist—a frown, her eyes damp, her chin trembling. It was a cheap trick, but it worked every time, ever since she had been a child, and it didn’t fail her now. She saw the precise moment Bane broke, his defenses falling down.

“Help ye how?” he asked. “I willnae dae anythin’ foolish.”

“Foolish?” said Fia with a short laugh. “Nay, naethin’ foolish. Ye only have tae make some... inquiries.”

It truly was that simple.

CHAPTER FIVE

When Fia knocked on the door of the healer's cottage and entered, the place was quiet, betraying no signs of anyone being there. Though it was a cold day, it was also sunny, with no signs of an approaching storm, and the sunlight filtered in through the windows to illuminate shelf after shelf of jars and bottles, their contents more often than not a dull brown or green—though some were brilliant red and orange, while others were deep blue and bright green. There was an entire rainbow on those shelves, each jar labelled meticulously to communicate what was inside it.

The second thing Fia noticed about the place was how clean it was. Just like in her new home, there was no dust and nothing was out of place. The healer had to have been a very meticulous woman, she thought, as she walked farther into the room and began to examine everything on the shelves. There were herbs and pastes there she had never seen before in person, but only knew from the few books Mrs. Findley had in her possession and which Fia had read, first with her assistance and then, once she was confident in her reading skills, on her own.

Books! There must be books here too!

Fia was eager to get her hands on as many books as she could. She was eager to gather much knowledge and show not only to Callum, but also to those people in the clan who had put their trust in her, that she could not only meet, but surpass the expectations. Looking around, it didn't take her long to find a cupboard filled with books and papers, some of which seemed several decades old, and she couldn't resist the temptation to run her fingers over their spines, feeling the weathered leather under the pads of her fingers.

“Is there somethin’ ye wish tae read?”

Fia jumped back and shoved the cupboard shut, her cheeks heating uncomfortably at the sound of a soft, melodic voice. When she turned her head, she saw a woman with hair black as ink and eyes so blue they reminded Fia of the deepest parts of the ocean, tall and willowy. There was something patrician about her, but her hands, when Fia noticed them, seemed calloused, as though she was used to manual labor.

This must be the healer, then.

“Forgive me,” Fia said as she stepped away from the cupboard. She had only been there for a few minutes and she had already made a fool of herself. Not only; she could very well be in trouble for snooping around. “I’m sorry, I didnae mean tae touch anythin’. I just got excited about the books...”

The woman was quick to wave her off.

“I am pleasantly surprised ye ken how tae read. And please, feel free tae read anythin’ ye like. This is yer space too now,” she said as she approached Fia and stopped before her with a small curtsy. The gesture surprised her, and she returned it clumsily, barely keeping her balance as she tried to sink lower than the woman did. It felt right; after all, Fia was certain she was above her in status. “I am Effie. Effie MacLeod.”

MacLeod? Like that man?

“Are ye related tae the man who came tae me home?” Fia asked.

“Och aye,” said Effie with a soft chuckle. “Magnus. He’s me husband. A shame ye met him without me there. He can be a wee... intense.”

He was a little intimidating, to be sure, though she didn't dare say so out loud. Was he not like that, then, when his wife was around? Did she manage to soften his sharp edges? Fia was curious to see them together.

"Well, nay matter," Effie continued as she gestured to Fia to take a seat in one of the chairs near the fire. "Come. Let us discuss yer role."

Fia perched on the edge of the seat, as though ready to flee at any point. She didn't know what, precisely, it was that made her so nervous. All she knew was that she felt as though she was under scrutiny, that all eyes would be on her and that she was afraid that she would fail. Time and time again, she had to remind herself that those thoughts had been planted into her mind by Callum, who wanted to see her weak and lacking all self-esteem. Every time she allowed such a thought to take a root, she also allowed him to win.

Well, he willnae win. I willnae let him.

"I'm sure Magnus has already told ye I require some assistance," Effie said.

"Aye," said Fia with a small, awkward chuckle. "He only told me that there may be an?—"

Fia cut herself short. She didn't know if Effie was aware there was a chance there would be an attack.

"There may be a what?" Effie probed.

Pressing her lips into a thin line, Fia considered her next words. Before she could come up with something to say, Effie spoke once more.

"An attack?" she asked. "Och aye, I ken about it. It's why I asked fer assistance. I

wished tae ensure our men will have all the care they will need.”

Fia let out a sigh of relief. At least she didn’t have to lie about it or pick her words.

“I’ve never treated such wounds afore,” said Fia, but Effie was quick to wave a hand dismissively.

“It daesnae matter,” she said. “I’ll teach ye. An’ there isnae much o’ a difference. A wound is a wound. Ye’ll help me with that, the herb garden, an’ with the pastes an’ the potions. Ye ken a little about that? I’m sure Mrs. Findley showed ye many things.”

“Aye,” Fia said, showing some of her pride in her work as she smiled. “I ken how tae make all basic preparations an’ some more advanced.”

“Excellent,” said Effie. “As I understand it, ye’re also skilled in childbirth. I have assisted a few births meself, but they were all easy births. There are some pregnant lasses in the castle now who may need yer assistance.”

“I’ve been a midwife fer years,” said Fia. “I can help.”

“Good... good,” said Effie as she stood and headed to the workbench, which was far bigger and sturdier than the one Fia used to have at home. “Come. Ye can help me with a few pastes an’ I’ll tell ye more about the castle.”

Fia followed Effie, standing next to her as she laid out several bunches of different herbs, making sure they were all in a neat row. Then, she pulled out jar after jar from one of the cabinets and placed them all on the table, before handing Fia a pestle and mortar and grabbing one for herself.

“So, I suppose this is yer very first time in a place like this,” Effie said as they began

to work on the first paste. “It’s quite empty these days, I’m afraid. Many o’ our men have been sent out on missions.”

“Missions?” asked Fia. “What kind o’ missions?”

“Well, as the laird suspects an attack, they seek more information,” Effie said. She was confident in her movements, every motion practiced and perfected throughout the years, and Fia watched her, observing the way she ground the herbs into a paste. “He an’ Magnus have sent several groups out in the past few days, but ye’ll meet them all eventually.”

Fia couldn’t help but wonder if Callum was one of those men, but she didn’t know how to go about asking. Only a few days prior, she would have been elated to talk about him, to tell everyone in the castle that she was his intended, but now she didn’t even want anyone to know about their connection. The less people knew about it, the better, though there were bound to be a few men who were aware of it, since they had made the bet with him.

She didn’t want to think about it. The less she thought about Callum, the better she felt.

“Who goes out on those missions?” Fia asked, hoping she could get some more information on those who had left the castle. “Are they all simple soldiers?”

“Most o’ them,” said Effie. “Though they are all well-trained. An’ o’ course, their leader. They usually hold higher rank or wish tae it. One of them, an ambitious young man, is the some of our previous war master an’ he is goin’ after the position now.”

It could be Callum. Ach, how I hope it is!

Even if he returned soon, his absence meant that she had some time to adjust to her

new life and to put her plan in motion, but also to make a good first impression before Callum had the chance to ruin it for her.

“I see,” said Fia, trying to keep her tone as casual and flat as possible, even as excitement coursed through her at all the new possibilities. “An’ the laird? Is he a good man?”

“Laird Stewart?” Effie asked. “Och aye, he’s a very good man. Nay one has anythin’ bad tae say about him, especially if he has a glass of good whisky in his hand.”

That’s good. At least he’s kind.

Even if her plan failed, the laird would at least not create any problems for her. But as long as he hadn’t given his heart to another, Fia could mold herself into the woman of his dreams.

“How come he’s nae wedded yet?” she asked, as she followed Effie’s lead and ground the herbs into a fine powder, then a paste. “Surely, a man like him would have many offers.”

“I suppose so,” Effie said. “He never discusses it with me, though. All I ken is that he likes a very particular kind o’ lass, so perhaps he has yet tae find one.”

That was more than enough to capture Fia’s interest. With such a specific preference, it could either be really easy for her to draw him close or very difficult, perhaps even impossible.

“What kind o’ lass?”

Effie shrugged a shoulder. “Graceful, I guess, refined. I would think that most noble lasses would fit this description, but apparently he is very... peculiar.”

There had to be more than this, Fia thought. Perhaps the laird had the reputation of liking such women, but there was something else, something he either wasn't telling other people or something they simply hadn't found out yet.

Or perhaps he is simply strange. Maybe it's the lasses who dinnae want him.

"Alright, now that ye have the paste, we can move tae the next step," Effie said, and from then on, it was all business as she showed Fia the ropes. They still chatted idly, and Fia was glad that Effie was kind and warm although direct and to the point, offering direction and assistance whenever Fia needed it, but also letting her work on her own and trusting the skills she already had. Effie truly seemed to trust her. She didn't think of her skills as useless nor did she consider her to be beneath her because she was a peasant girl. All she wanted to do was help her learn and Fia was happy to listen.

By the time they were done, the sun was setting in the horizon and Effie told her to get back to her new home so she could rest, even if Fia assured her she was not yet tired. Effie wouldn't hear of it, though, and so off Fia went, heading back to the little cottage which had been given to her and Bane. When she opened the door, she found him already there, stoking the flames in the fireplace.

"Where have ye been all day?" Fia asked, leaning against the table.

"I did what ye told me tae dae," said Bane. "I kept askin' people about the laird."

Fia sprang up, too excited now to stay still.

"An'?" she asked. "What did ye find out?"

"Nae much," said Bane with a small shrug. "Everyone simply says he's a very good man. There's also rumors the council wishes him tae wed, so if ye're truly serious

about this ridiculous plan, ye must hurry.”

That was good to know, Fia thought. One couldn’t rush these things, but she would have to do her best.

“What did ye find out?” Bane asked.

“Nae much,” Fia said, repeating his words. “Only that he is fond o’ whisky an’ graceful lasses.”

“Ach... well, ye tried,” Bane said and had just enough time and presence of mind to dodge as Fia grabbed the nearest object—a small pewter saucer—and threw it at him.

“Thank ye, Bane, that is very helpful,” Fia deadpanned, crossing her arms over her chest. Bane wasn’t wrong, she knew that much. She didn’t have the grace or the training of a lady nor did like whisky.

She would have to fake it. She would have to fake as much of it as she could, as best as she could. There was no other choice if the council was pressuring the laird to wed. She would have to make herself appear as appealing as possible, both for him and for the council, as they had no reason to allow their laird to wed a peasant girl instead of a noble woman who could give the clan a powerful alliance.

“Ye may nae believe it now, but I’ll make it happen,” Fia swore. “I will.”

CHAPTER SIX

This is my chance. I must impress him.

Fia and Bane stood right in front of Laird Stewart's study, both of them staring at the door, unmoving. Bane's hand hovered just over the door, ready to knock, but neither of them was certain they were truly prepared. Fia's heart beat wildly in her chest, and she could see the beads of sweat forming on Bane's forehead as he, too, began to stress over their first meeting with the laird.

They both knew that everything depended on it. If, for any reason, the laird disliked them, he could easily kick them out of the castle and send them back to Duror, and neither of them wanted to go back there, although for different reasons. In the single day they had spent in the castle, Bane had become too attached to the luxuries this life offered to go back to the village and to their former habits. Fia could understand that. She, too, wanted to stay there, not only so she could prove herself to Callum, but also because life in the castle was simply nicer and easier. They didn't need to worry about their basic needs being met anymore. They didn't really need to worry about anything.

"I'll dae it," Bane said, but then he still hesitated. It was Fia, in the end, who took the initiative and knocked on the laird's door, opening it once the man called for them to enter from the other side.

Laird Stewart's study was, predictably, opulent, like the rest of the castle. Fia's first intuition that a place like that was bound to have rich tapestries and beautiful paintings and thick carpets had been correct. There was a warmth to every hallway, a

lavish and palatial comfort that no house in the village had, not even those of the wealthier residents. Fia hadn't seen any of the other rooms of the castle, but if they were anything like Laird Stewart's study, with the intricately carved furniture, the shelves upon shelves of books, and the large, imposing portrait of an older man across from his desk, then they were bound to inspire awe as well.

"Miss MacKenzie, Mr.—"

Laird Stewart was standing to greet them, but when he got to Bane's name, he paused, looking uncertain.

"Graham," said Bane and then, almost as an afterthought, bowed. Fia caught a glimpse of him from the corner of her eye and was quick to follow, offering the laird an awkward curtsy. "Me laird."

"Mr. Graham," Laird Stewart said, gesturing to them to take a seat on the two carved wooden and leather armchairs that stood before his desk. He waited for them to be seated before he, too, sat back down, steeping his fingers in front of his face as he peered at the two of them. "I wished tae welcome ye tae the castle personally. I hope yer first day here was pleasant."

"Very much so," said Bane. "Thank ye, me laird. This is an incredible opportunity fer Fia."

The laird's piercing gaze found Fia then, his blue eyes zeroing in on her. For the first time since entering the room, Fia took a moment to examine him and observe as much as she could about him. It was difficult to focus, but she forced herself to breathe, to take her time and, most importantly, to try and appear as normal as possible.

Laird Stewart was a handsome man, there was no doubt about it. His black hair

framed a wide, regal forehead, the ends of it curling just past the beginning of his sharp jaw. He had a strong, aquiline nose and eyes that slanted ever so slightly upwards, but the general gentleness of his features was heavily offset by the numerous battle scars on his skin, which covered much of what Fia could see of his body. He would have seemed intimidating to her had it not been for his kind and warm welcome, but to Fia, at least, the scars he sported only served to make him even more alluring, giving him a mysterious edge.

It would make her task much easier. Not only did Laird Stewart have a reputation—which seemed to be true—of being kind, but he was also very handsome, and so Fia was certain she would have no reason to fake her attraction towards him.

Then again, if he was so kind and so handsome, the matter of his celibacy only became more confusing and complicated. Was he truly so peculiar when it came to the women he liked? Did he only like very specific women, and would Fia be able to fit the bill?

Or was there perhaps a different issue, something she had not yet foreseen?

Knox didn't know what it was he had been expecting when Magnus had told him about Fia MacKenzie, but this was certainly not it. From the moment she stepped into the room, Knox felt as though she had ignited the air around her, like her presence was enough to draw all the oxygen out of the room. He found it difficult to breathe and difficult to talk—two things with which he had never had any trouble at all in the past.

She was a beautiful woman, with long, honey blonde hair that fell in shiny waves down her back, and her eyes, that piercing green that reminded Knox of the deepest forests, held such kindness that he could hardly bring himself to look at her. There was something special about that woman, he knew. There was something that set her apart from anyone else, and all he wanted to do was learn everything there was to

know about her.

He only hoped he was hiding it well.

Dragging his gaze to Fia, Knox gave her a small, but warm, smile. He was Laird Stuart, for God's sake. He could have a conversation with a beautiful woman without losing his head.

“An’ ye, Miss MacKenzie? Did ye speak with Effie?”

“Och aye,” said Fia, her voice trembling just a little. Nervousness, Knox supposed—people were often nervous when they first spoke to him. “We have already established a good rapport, me laird. She is a very kind an’ clever woman.”

“That she is,” said Knox. Then, he proceeded to peer between Fia and Bane, glancing back and forth with a small frown on his face. There was something he wanted to ask, a question that had been gnawing at him from the moment the two of them stepped into the room, but didn’t quite know how to phrase it.

Under any other circumstances, he wouldn’t have asked, but seeing as they carried different last names and Fia had already caught his attention, he simply couldn’t stop himself.

“Dae ye two plan on gettin’ wedded soon?”

The question made Bane choke on air, slamming his fist against his chest as he coughed wildly. Fia, her eyes wide, shook her head frantically at Knox as she reached over and slapped Bane’s back, trying to help him recover.

Knox half-stood from his chair, uncertain of what to do, but Fia waved him off as Bane slowly got himself under control, taking in a deep, shuddering breath. This was

not the kind of reaction he thought he would have gotten from either of them, and it only confused him even further. Were they not a couple? Being nothing more than friends sounded unlikely to him. If Knox had a woman like that by his side, he would do his best to have her.

“Forgive me,” said Knox as he sat back down on his seat. “I didnae ken it was such an... awkward topic.”

“Nay, nay,” said Fia waving her hand dismissively with a chuckle. “It is only that Bane an’ I... well, we’re like siblings. We’re nae bound by blood, but I was taken in by his family when I was younger, so we grew up together. Trust me, me laird, we dinnae have any plans o’ ever bein’ wedded.”

Knox said nothing more on the matter, but he was not entirely convinced. He didn’t want to press either of them—that would be terribly rude of him, after all—but he didn’t really believe that Bane would have never even attempted a relationship between the two of them.

At what age, he wondered, had his family taken Fia in? If they had been young children, then perhaps they had truly grown up like siblings and saw each other as such. But if she had been older, in their teenage years, then he doubted it was so simple.

“I see,” he said. “Well, I simply wanted tae ken that ye were properly welcomed tae our castle. I’m sure ye must be very tired these days, so I willnae hold ye fer any longer.”

Bane stood, giving Knox a bow and heading to the door, but Fia lingered by the desk, glancing at him coyly.

“Me laird, could I have a word with ye?” she asked, and when Knox gestured to her

to sit, she did so as Bane took his leave.

“O’ course,” he said. “Is there anythin’ I can dae fer ye, Miss MacKenzie?”

Perching herself on the edge of her seat, Fia leaned closer over the desk with a small, intimate smile. “I only wished tae thank ye fer this opportunity. It means so much tae me that ye have trusted me with such an important position an’ I can assure ye I willnae fail ye or betray that trust.”

For a moment, Knox looked at Fia curiously, eyes narrowing ever so slightly, before he relaxed in his seat and returned her smile. He had thought perhaps she would try to ask for a favor, maybe a larger cottage or more privileges, but receiving her gratitude instead was a pleasant surprise.

“I’m glad tae hear that,” he said. “But ye dinnae have tae thank me. Everyone has vouched fer ye an’ yer skills. We need ye here in the castle.”

“Still,” said Fia with a small shrug. “This is the first time anyone has ever shown me this much confidence an’ trust. I can only thank ye fer that.”

“An’ I can only thank ye fer agreein’ tae take over the position,” he told Fia as he stood from his chair and walked over to a small side table which held several silver pitchers and cups. “May I offer ye some ale tae express me gratitude?”

“Actually, I would prefer whisky, if that is nay trouble” she said.

Whisky! Who could have thought?

Knox had always been partial to whisky, though he had learnt from a young age to offer women wine or ale. He had yet to meet a woman who shared his taste for whisky, and he was now even more impressed by this lass who had suddenly stormed

into his life and shaken the very foundations of his everyday life.

“Certainly,” he said, putting the pitcher with the ale back down to get the tumbler with the whisky and pour them both a drink. “I am partial tae whisky as well, but it isnae often that a lass shares me preference in this.”

Fia watched him as he poured it in two cups, and he could have sworn there was a shadow of doubt passing over her face, but he simply assumed she was still a little apprehensive in her unfamiliar surroundings. It was no simple task, leaving one’s home, and castle life was much different from village life.

“Here,” Knox said, handing her the cup. Fia looked at its contents dubiously. Knox held his cup up in a toast in an attempt to reassure her it was a fine drink and Fia mirrored him, holding up hers. “Tae a good an’ long stay in our castle.”

Hesitantly, Fia brought her cup to her lips as Knox took the first sip, savoring it. The moment the drink touched her tongue, it seemed to him that she turned a sickly shade of green.

An uncontrollable coughing fit gripped her, so loud and violent that Knox was certain almost everyone in the keep could hear her. Her cough echoed off the walls of the study and her cheeks turned a bright red, much to Knox’s concern, who once again stood from his seat without knowing what to do. Should he offer her some wine instead? Should he beat her back until she could catch her breath?

It wasn’t until she managed to get her cough under control that he relaxed, sinking back into his seat. For a moment, he only watched her, red-faced and frazzled as she was, and then he couldn’t help it; he laughed.

“Forgive me,” said Knox as a hand came up to clutch at his chest. “I didnae mean tae laugh. Are ye alright?”

Fia joined him, laughing softly, much to his surprise. He had to admit that he enjoyed that. Most of the women he knew, the noble girls who had grown up prim and proper, would have paled at this situation, apologizing profusely for causing a scene, but Fia could see the humor in it.

“I’m alright,” she confirmed. “It’s been... a while. I dae like it, a lot, but I dinnae drink whisky often,” she laughed nervously. “Maybe, I’m out of shape.”

“Perhaps ye should drink ale, then,” said Knox as he reached over and plucked the cup from her hands, soon replacing it with a cup of ale. She took a careful sip, chasing the foul taste of whisky down with it, and after that first sip, she seemed to return to her normal color. “So, how did a young lass like ye learn tae be a healer?”

For a moment, Fia hesitated and Knox could tell there was a story behind it. He gave her the time she needed to speak, busying himself with his cup, until she finally explained.

“Me parents were healers,” she said. “I learned much from them as I was growin’ up. But I was merely a midwife a long time afore I was ever a healer and learned details about the healing arts.”

As she spoke, Knox realized she was embarrassed about this. Her cheeks pinked once more and her voice was low, timid, as though she didn’t want to talk about this at all. He didn’t like the deprecating way in which she described her profession, though. Who could possibly be more valuable to society than someone who healed people and who brought new life to this world?

“Merely?” Knox asked with a frown. “Ye say it as though bein’ a midwife isnae one o’ the most important jobs there are.”

“I mean, most lasses ken how tae dae that,” she said with a small, timid shrug. “Every

lass helps with births willingly or unwillingly.”

“Aye, perhaps it is so, but nae everyone is a midwife,” Knox pointed out. “Yer skills are valuable, Fia, an’ I am glad that we have someone like ye in the castle. ”

Knox meant it and he made sure Fia knew that. He valued the people who worked at Castle Stuart.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“ A lright. Show me.”

Bane sat comfortably on a chair near the fireplace, arms crossed over his chest and gaze glued to Fia, who was trying to balance a book on her head while walking. Trying, it seemed to her, was the key word in her situation. She couldn't take a single step without the book falling off her head, and every time she moved even imperceptibly, she felt it slide off and had to steady it with her hands, frantically keeping it in place.

“Dae ye truly think this is the right way tae learn how tae walk?” she asked, exasperated by the multiple failed efforts she had already made. With a huff, she tossed the book to the side and began to pace back and forth, shoulders hunched and head hanging low.

“This is what I've heard some lasses dae,” said Bane with a small shrug. “I'm as new tae all this as ye are. It's nae as though I was raised in a castle!”

That was true, Fia thought. Perhaps it would be more helpful to be coached by someone who had spent their entire life in a castle like this, either among nobles or as a noble themselves, but where could she find such a person? She didn't want to ask any of the maids or servants, and she certainly didn't want to ask Effie, as she hardly knew her. What other choice did she have than to turn to Bane, who could at least watch and critique her as she tried to act like a proper lady?

Their training had hardly even begun, though, and Fia was already frustrated beyond

her limits. Holding a book on her head as she walked seemed not only foolish, but also useless and impossible. Were there truly women out there who could do this, she wondered? Was it some sort of test all noble girls had to pass?

“All ye have tae dae is keep yer shoulders back an’ yer head up,” said Bane as he observed her closely. “Which I suppose is the exact opposite o’ what ye’re doin’ now.”

Fia hardly had the energy to even glare at him. It was more of a hassle than she could have ever predicted, and for a moment, she started to think that perhaps she had made a mistake to think she could win the laird’s affections.

Nay, I cannae think like this. If I think I cannae dae it, then I certainly willnae succeed.

She had to believe in herself. She had already made it so far and could not backing out now, otherwise she would spend the rest of her life wondering if she could, in fact, have charmed Laird Stewart, but had not even tried.

“What if ye simply act the opposite of how ye usually act?” Bane suggested, and though his suggestion seemed entirely genuine, Fia couldn’t help but take offence in it.

“What dae ye mean?” she demanded. “Am I nae good enough the way I am?”

“Ye’re the one who claims that!” Bane pointed out, throwing his hands up in the air. “Ye’re the one who said ye must learn how tae act like a lady, so just... dinnae be yerself!”

“I’m a lady!” Fia said, though it sounded weak even to her ears. “I can be a lady if I so wish.”

“Can ye?” Bane asked and Fia didn’t like his mocking tone one bit. “Show me a curtsy, then.”

Fia couldn’t help but glare at him. They both knew very well that curtsies were her weak spot, the one thing she had never learned to do well.

With trembling legs, Fia took the fabric of her tunic gingerly between her fingers and gave Bane a curtsy—the most unsteady, ungraceful curtsy she had ever had the misfortune of giving. There was something about the act she couldn’t quite grasp—the delicate movements, the grace that seemed to come effortlessly to noble women. Was it something innate, Fia wondered? Was it something noble women were born with, something she would never manage?

Surely, that couldn’t be the case. No one was born knowing such things, Fia reasoned, and so she could learn how to do it too. She would simply have to work harder, since she had had no one to teach when she was a child.

“Excellent,” Bane said flatly, clearly unimpressed by her efforts. “Is this how ye plan tae impress the laird?”

“Why cannae I simply bow tae him?” Fia asked with a sigh as she threw herself in the nearest chair, sinking into it and curling into herself. “It is so much easier tae bow. Curtsies are foolish! Foolish, I tell ye!”

“An’ yet so many other lasses manage tae dae it,” Bane pointed out, entirely unaffected by her outburst. It wasn’t the first, after all—far from it, in fact. “Come, Fia, ye ken ye can dae this. Ye only have tae keep on practicing until it comes naturally, like everythin’ else.”

There was both logic and merit to what Bane was saying, but Fia hadn’t tried to pick up a new skill in years. Aside from healing. Everything she learned regarding that

came naturally to her. She had been doing it for so long and she had a solid foundation of skills. But when it came to learning something new, at first, it seemed almost impossible. There was no instant gratification, no signs of quick improvement, though she was well aware she should not be expecting them from her first try.

“I’m useless,” Fia said, waving a hand dismissively. “What dae I ken about bein’ a lady? I’m a peasant lass, Bane. Everyone kens that. Maybe Callum was right...”

Would acting like a lady even help her? Sure, the laird liked refined women, but in the end, she would still be a peasant girl, regardless of the way she presented herself.

“Ye’re nae useless,” Bane said as he stood and approached her, slamming his hand on the top of her head with such force that her neck almost caved in. “Keep tryin’ the curtsies an’ the walk. And let us see if ye can eat like a lady. They say that’s the most important part.”

“How does a lady eat?” Fia asked as Bane dragged her to the small dining table in the kitchen area. He pushed her into one of the chairs and then proceeded to put some dried meat, cheese, and stew on the table before taking his seat across from her.

“Nae with her hands,” Bane said as Fia reached for a piece of dried meat with her bare hand. Quickly, she snatched it back, but then just stared at the spread before her dubiously.

“It’s dried meat,” she said. “Why would I eat it with a fork?”

“Because that is what ladies dae,” Bane pointed out. “In the village, ye can eat anythin’ ye want with yer hands, but here I’m certain everyone uses forks an’ knives fer all kinds of food, Fia.”

Forks fer dried mea... how dae they even manage that?

Reluctantly, Fia grabbed the knife and the fork and immediately realized that she probably looked even less than refined because of the way she was gripping the utensils. Bane chuckled as she tried to adjust her grip, forcing her fingers to curl around the utensils elegantly. That only served to make her grip unsteady.

“Go on, then,” Bane encouraged her. “Eat.”

I’ve been usin’ a fork an’ a knife me whole life! I can dae this.

It was soon revealed to Fia that eating dried meat with a fork and a knife was, in fact, much more difficult than she could have ever anticipated. It was a tough cut, the fork and the knife slipping against the plate, and by the time she had managed to cut off a piece, she had all but worked up a sweat. Across from her, Bane watched with an amused smile on his face, but Fia knew for certain he wouldn’t be doing much better if he was the one trying to eat that way.

“I give up!” she declared, tossing the cutlery on the table with a weary sigh. “I give up! I cannae dae this anymore.”

“Will ye truly give up?” Bane asked, knowing well that Fia’s response would be negative. She simply didn’t have it in her to give up. No matter how much she complained and whined about a task being difficult, she always saw it through.

Pressing her lips into a firm line, she reached for the cutlery once more, sitting up a little straighter.

“An’ this is a... marriage proposal.”

Knox glared at Magnus from across his desk. The two of them were in his study, though it was already late and they should have both been resting. The letters that had come in that very day had remained unsorted due to more pressing matters to be dealt

with. Now, though, with a cup of wine in his hand and the fire crackling in the fireplace, he had decided he could take a few moments to go through the most important documents before retiring for the night.

He hadn't expected a marriage proposal in the pile of letters.

"A marriage proposal?" he asked. "Are ye serious?"

"Och aye," said Magnus. "Well, a request fer a meetin', at least. They are very interested in an alliance."

"Everyone is," said Knox with a sigh, a hand coming up to pinch the bridge of his nose. The mere topic of marriage was enough to bring forth a pounding headache, even if he knew his council was eager for him to wed. They had made their desires explicitly known, pestering him day after day whenever they had no other important issues to discuss. Now that they all feared an attack was imminent, they had stopped mentioning it, with this offer, they would surely bring it up again.

If it was a particularly good offer, from a clan that could help them both financially and with their forces, the council would consider it very seriously, Knox knew.

"I've had enough o' these noble lasses presented tae me like prized cattle by their families," he said. He brought the cup to his lips and took a sip, then another, before finally making the decision to drain it fully. There was not enough wine in the world to help him deal with this. "An' those lasses... all so concerned with... with appearances!"

"What else would they be concerned with?" Magnus asked, blinking at him in confusion. "That is what they are meant tae dae, is it nae? They're meant tae find a good husband an' secure a good alliance fer their clans. How else would they dae that if they were nae concerned with appearances?"

It was a valid question, but not one Knox wanted to consider. He didn't care about appearances. All he cared about was forging a natural and personal connection with a woman, to find someone who would love him for who he was instead of going after his title and an alliance for another clan.

Of course, that was nothing but wishful thinking. Love had little to do with marriage, he had come to find out. Some lairds and ladies were lucky enough to fall in love after they were wedded, but for most, a marriage was only a matter of business and convenience.

Would he be one of the lucky ones, he wondered? Or would he be doomed to spend a lifetime with a woman he didn't love?

"I can almost hear ye thinkin'," Magnus teased, tossing the letter into the pile of documents that would be inspected the following day. Knox was thankful for it; he didn't want to have to make a decision about this in the middle of the night, when he was already not thinking straight. Most mornings, he was not as resistant to the idea of marriage. It was only at night, late, with a drink in his hand and no one around but Magnus to judge him, that he resented the very idea of it and wished that things were different.

Sometimes, the life o' a peasant is simpler.

"Ye ken what I think about marriage," Knox said.

"I ken," said Magnus, running a hand through his hair to push the strands back. "An' ye ken what I think about marriage."

"Ye were lucky tae find a lass ye love an' who loves ye," Knox pointed out. He didn't know if he had ever seen two people more in love than Magnus and Effie, and though he was happy that they had found each other, he doubted it was a common

thing. Love didn't often occur like that, not in real life. "I dinnae ken if I will be so lucky."

"It's late, Knox," said Magnus, as he placed his cup on the table and stood. "Go tae sleep. We can discuss this on the morrow."

His friend knew him better than anyone. Sleep sounded like a good idea; if nothing else, he would get to rest and maybe feel a little better about the entire situation the following morning.

"Alright," he said, pushing himself off the chair and following Magnus out of the study. Just as he crossed the door, the image of Fia there, in this room, popped into his mind. He remembered the way she had choked on the whisky and then proceeded to laugh along with him. He remembered the warmth and sincerity of her gratitude, the way she seemed so effortlessly beautiful and kind.

That was the kind of woman he wanted—someone who was not pretending, someone who was not wearing a mask. But such women were hard to find.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The day was miserable, thick clouds gathering overhead and heralding the arrival of a storm. Soon, the ground would be drenched in rain and the courtyard would be muddy and damp, but until then, Fia could tend to the herbs in Effie's personal garden. Everyone else knew to stay away, Effie had told her, but she had given her permission to tend to the plants and gather any supplies they needed for the pastes and the medicine, and Fia considered that a great honor.

There was yet another person who trusted her, yet another who saw her worth. In only a matter of days, she had gone from doubting herself to knowing she was on the right path, heading in the direction she always wanted to—the path that would allow her to take care of people, to cure the sick and heal the wounded, and to offer whatever comfort she could to those she could not save.

As she worked on the gardens, a familiar figure approached from the distance. Laird Stewart was there, accompanied by Magnus, the two of them deep in thought as they walked down the very path that led through the gardens. Fia was quick to stand. This was her chance to make another good impression and yet there she was, her hands covered in soil and sweat coating her brow. She was quick to wipe both in a spare cloth, pushing and pulling at her tunic until she looked presentable—at least as presentable as she could. There was only so much she could do without a looking-glass or even some water, right in the middle of the courtyard.

Her training with Bane had gone, if not exactly well, then adequately. She couldn't claim to be a lady yet—far from it, in fact, as she still had trouble walking and eating like one and she certainly didn't sound noble born when she spoke. She tried, she

truly did; yet she forgot herself, always slipping to the familiar patterns of speech she had cultivated through a lifetime in the village. How was she supposed to let go of everything she knew and become a new person overnight?

The progress she had made so far would have to suffice. As Laird Stewart and Magnus walked towards her, Fia made her way to them so that she could walk by the laird at just the right time, making sure he noticed everything about her; the confident way in which she held herself, with her back straight and her chin high, the smile on her lips, the peaceful, refined gait that was so different from her usual hurried one. She was perfectly poised. She was the very embodiment of a lady, moving slowly and with grace.

And then a gaggle of children ran straight into her as they played their game, almost knocking her over in the process. In the short time she had spent in the castle, Fia had managed to befriend almost every small child living there, and now that they knew who she was, they were not shy about asking her to play with them.

“Miss MacKenzie!” a chorus of them shouted. Small hands grabbed at her arms and tunic, dragging her in all directions, and Fia had to steady herself, hands flying out to keep her balance.

“Well!” Fia said, dropping down to the ground so she could be closer to them instead of towering over them all. “Where are ye all runnin’ tae?”

“Angus is chasin’ us!” one of the boys said. “An’ we’re tryin’ tae hide from him. But now that ye’re here, will ye nae play with us? Please? Please, Miss MacKenzie?”

There was another chorus of pleading and Fia couldn’t find it in herself to say no to them. Impressing the laird would have to wait, she thought, as she pretended to consider the children’s request for a moment, before dropping to the ground.

“Then ye better run!” she roared to scare them. “Or I’ll catch ye!”

Delighted, the children screamed as they rushed off into all directions, their feet pattering against the ground. They wouldn’t have long to play that day, considering it would be raining soon, so Fia shot to her feet once more and began to chase them, roaring every time she got close, much to the children’s joy. They loved it and she didn’t care how she looked anymore.

There had been few joys in her life, and children had been one of them. She had always had a knack for caring for them, as well as for entertaining them, and that was one of the reasons why she had become a midwife in the first place.

Fia was glad to see that there were so many children in the castle and that there would soon be more. It meant that no day would be dull for her, that she could always play with them and make sure they were all taken care of.

Jumping around and chasing after the children was far from easy and soon, her brow was coated in sweat once more and her hair fell out of the braid in which she had put it, flying wildly all around her head. She was panting from exertion, her cheeks a bright red and her breath fogging with every exhale, but she didn’t give up so easily. The children were all still laughing, enjoying themselves, and she didn’t want to cut their game short and disappoint them.

It was only when the first drops of rain began to pour that she brought the game to a halt, telling them all to head inside so they wouldn’t risk catching a cold. Just as all the children left, rushing back into the keep, Fia looked up and met the laird’s gaze from a distance, realizing in that moment that he had been staring at her this entire time.

Despite it all, he had a smile on his face.

A walk in the gardens was just what Knox needed, he decided that morning, a while after he had broken his fast and he and Magnus had gone over the correspondence. The news of the marriage offer, or at least the offer of a meeting so that they could discuss an alliance through marriage, still weighed heavily on his mind and he hadn't yet come to a conclusion as to what to do.

His council would want him to consider it seriously, and perhaps he should, Knox thought. With any luck, it would be a woman who would be to his liking, though he feared that may not be the case. He had already rejected a few alliances simply because he couldn't see himself with the woman they had offered him, nor had he liked the way in which it was all arranged. He was quite certain no one had asked those women if they wished to marry him. Rather, they most likely had all been forced to attend meetings and balls, putting on their best selves to be presented to him. The mere thought made Knox sick to his stomach. He knew that he, too, was putting on a role, wearing a mask. They were all pretending during such functions, spending the night drinking and dancing while others pulled the strings. He was part of it all. He had done it plenty of times, willingly even.

But that didn't mean he enjoyed it. If he could go the rest of his life without attending such a ball again, he would be a happy man.

And then, just as he was strolling with Magnus down the path, hoping that the rain wouldn't catch them in the middle of their walk, he saw Fia, walking towards him and looking as beautiful and radiant as ever, with her honey-blond hair pulled back and her green eyes sparkling under the sparse light. She truly was a beautiful woman, Knox thought, with large, eyes and full lips, freckles dotting her cheeks, but it was more than that. It was more than her physical looks he found alluring, even though he couldn't claim to know her.

He only knew what she had told him when he had called her into his study. Their conversation had been pleasant, easy, flowing like water. Knox didn't feel as though

she was trying to perform for him or thought very carefully about her next words, and so he couldn't help but feel at ease around her.

Just as he was about to greet her, though, she was intercepted by a group of children who fell right into her, giggling and shouting. The sight brought both Knox and Magnus to a halt, and Magnus made to get the children out of their path, but Knox was quick to stop him with a hand on his shoulder. He wanted to see where this would go. He wanted to see what Fia would do now that the children had almost knocked her over.

Her response startled him. He hadn't expected her to be annoyed by them, if only because she seemed like such a kind, warm woman, but he also hadn't expected her to fall on the ground next to them, roaring with all her might in the middle of the courtyard, in front of all the servants. Fia, though, didn't seem to care. She was clearly enjoying herself, running around with the children without a care in the world, and Knox found it fascinating. Even as a child, it wasn't often that he could play like that, since his lessons to take over the clan had started early in his life. Seeing Fia with those boys and girls made him feel warm in his chest, the feeling leaving him with a strange ache that wasn't wholly unpleasant.

"Well... I suppose Miss MacKenzie is popular with the bairns as well," Magnus said and Knox hummed in agreement before he turned to look at his friend with a frown.

"What dae ye mean as well?"

"She seems tae be popular in general," Magnus said with a small shrug. "I ken that Effie certainly likes her. The two o' them are becomin' fast friends."

That wasn't surprising to Knox. It wouldn't have been surprising even if he had only known Effie, since she was always good at making people feel at ease and she was well-liked among the people of the castle. Knox couldn't help but wonder, though, if

there were other people who were fond of Fia, too; perhaps some of the men who had already come to know her, all of them vying for her attention when he was not around.

And then there was Bane Graham. Fia had claimed that the two of them were like siblings, but something didn't sit right with him about that. He hadn't pried; it was none of his business. But he wondered how long they had known each other, when Bane's family had taken her in, and whether she had ever been intended for him.

All strange thoughts to have, Knox realized. He didn't dwell for long on the reasons for his sudden agitation, fearful of what he may discover behind those thoughts. Truly, he shouldn't care at all.

"Is there somethin' ye wish tae tell me?" Magnus asked, tactful as always, but Knox knew precisely what it was that he was asking. With a roll of his eyes, he returned his gaze to Fia, who was still tirelessly playing with the children. The more she ran, the more her face reddened and her hair got messy and wild, creating a halo around her head. Even her tunic was soiled as she was tackled to the ground by children a few times, but none of it seemed to matter to her; she was entirely carefree in that moment and for Knox, it was a sight to behold.

"Nay," he told Magnus. "Why are ye askin'?"

"Fer nae reason," Magnus said in that casual tone of his, which he always assumed when he wanted to say more but wouldn't allow himself to do so. "But if there is, ye can tell me."

Knox didn't even know what he was thinking or feeling himself. Sharing any of it with Magnus seemed impossible, as he had no name for it. He only knew that when the first rain drops began to drop and Fia met his gaze, something inside him changed.

CHAPTER NINE

It didn't take long for the rain to subside. That very same night, the skies were clear, the stars shining brightly upon Castle MacGregor while a waxing moon bathed the courtyard in a pale glow. Knox found it impossible to sleep. There was much on his mind. Clan Gordon was on the move, he knew it in the way he knew the path of the wind, the rise of the sun, instinctively. He had no evidence yet as it was too soon for word to have come from his scouts, and yet something in his gut told him Laird Alastair Gordon was preparing for something big.

Why else would he nae negotiate? He doesnae want peace. He wants...

Knox didn't know what Laird Gordon wanted. Clan Stuart and Clan Gordon had had several altercations in the past, battles for land and gold and dominance, which usually resulted in a victory for the Stuarts. Perhaps it was this which motivated him, Knox thought. With him as Laird of Clan Stuart, maybe Laird Gordon thought it was the perfect time to stage an attack, hoping that he could finally have a victory against them, but if that was his goal, then Knox would make sure the man was disappointed.

He could do this, he told himself. He had been preparing all his life for an emergency like this and now that it was on its way, he knew what to do.

Still, the worry plagued him, and the only thing that helped in situations like this was to take a late-night stroll in the castle grounds to clear his head. The crisp, chilly air calmed him, and so did the symphony of soft sounds around him—the breeze, the leaves that rustled as it passed through them, the shuffling steps of the guards as they patrolled the walls. It was better than the deafening silence of his chambers. It

reminded him he was not alone in this.

His feet took him towards Effie's cottage, where the air always smelled of rosemary and thyme and lavender, the scents mixing from the bushes and the flowers she kept there, in her personal gardens. He had always cherished that part of the castle. In the mornings, it bloomed with color, while at night the scents lingered, wrapping around him like a cloak.

Just as he rounded the corner, staring up at the starry sky, he caught sight of a figure from the corner of his eye. Dragging his gaze over, it took him a few moments for him to recognize it as Fia, who was sitting on top of a low wall that encircled the herb garden. In the moonlight, her pale skin seemed to glow, her hair shining golden as it fell in soft waves down her back. She had drawn her legs up, resting her chin on her knees with a cloak draped over her, and when she spotted Knox, she gave a small start before she seemed to recognize him.

Knox made his way towards her, leaning against the wall. With how they were placed, he had to crane his neck to look up at Fia, who seemed uncertain of what to do in his presence.

"Forgive me, me laird," she said. "I'd stand tae greet ye but?—"

Her words were cut off abruptly as her gaze fell down to her body. It took Knox a few moments to understand what it was that she was trying to say, but then he noticed a bare calf where her cloak had ridden up just a little and he realized she wore nothing but that cloak and a nightshift underneath. Immediately, he averted his gaze, glad for the dark that hid his rapidly heating cheeks.

Why is she out here wearin' only a shift an' a cloak?

It wasn't often that the presence of a woman left Knox struggling with speech. He

liked to think he could keep his wits about him whenever a woman was near and past experiences with the fairer sex had been plenty of proof he was right. Now, though, in the soft light of the moon, with just him and Fia there, he found his mind wandering in dangerous territory, his imagination running wild.

It was not only unbecoming of a man of his pedigree, but also unfair to Fia, who had surely gone there for some peace and quiet, only to have Knox disturb her by lusting after her. And yet as much as he tried to avert his gaze, he caught himself staring at her again and again, unable to look away.

He should continue on his walk. He should just run a loop around the castle and head back to his chambers for the night, forgetting he ever even met Fia there.

“Can I stay or are ye expectin’ someone?”

“Who would I be expectin’?” Fia asked with a small, bemused smile.

Knox didn’t answer, as he didn’t want to appear overbearing, but a name bounced around in his mind. Bane. Though they claimed to be like family, Knox didn’t know if he believed that or not. From what he knew after subtly interrogating the maids the two of them, she had not been so young when his family had adopted her. Already fourteen and fifteen years of age respectively, it meant that they hadn’t grown up together like siblings and so he couldn’t help but be a little suspicious of how close they were.

“I’ll be honored tae have yer company, me laird,” Fia added when Knox neither spoke nor made any effort to move. At her words, he smiled at her and sat next to her on the wall, dragging his gaze over to the sky above them.

For a while, they were both silent, but Knox didn’t feel the need to say a single thing. If anything, he feared that speaking would ruin the moment, break through this

strange and quick intimacy that had grown between them. It was a comfortable silence, one he very much enjoyed, tinted with the soft sounds of nature around them.

It was only a while later that he spoke again, as comfortable sharing the first thing that came to mind as he was remaining silent.

“I come here sometimes when I cannae sleep,” he said. “I didnae think anyone else would be here.”

“I didnae think anyone else would be here either,” Fia said. “Dae ye like tae look at the stars?”

“Och aye,” said Knox. “Me faither... when I was a bairn, he would show me all the constellations.”

With a soft hum, Fia raised her hand, tracing invisible lines among the stars as if to connect them. Knox watched the patterns her finger traced, but it was nothing he could recognize.

“That’s the wheat farmer,” she said, so plainly and casually that Knox began to wonder if perhaps there was a constellation he had somehow missed in the lessons with his father. “He takes his cart—” another pattern, this time connecting several stars next to the previous one— “an’ takes his bounty tae the moon. An’ then, there’s the fisherman, with his rod—”, this time her finger traced a large arc that reached close to the horizon, “who tries tae catch the fish from the loch.”

It was then that it became apparent to Knox that Fia was making up the constellations, as well as the stories that went with them. He laughed softly, impressed by her ability to come up with all that—or was it perhaps something her own father had taught her, making up stories for her to amuse her as a child?

“These are nae constellations I ken,” he said.

“They’re mine,” said Fia and when Knox glanced at her from the corner of his eye, he could have sworn there was a faint flush on her cheeks, as though she were ashamed of it. “I used tae look out o’ the window an’ make up stories when I was younger.”

It was a sweet detail about her life, one that sent a surge of warmth through Knox. He could imagine her as a young girl, looking up at a sky full of stars and giving them their names and stories. Even knowing the true constellations, Knox thought he would much rather hear what she had imagined, all the stories that she had to tell.

“What else is there?” he asked, eager to hear more. At first, Fia seemed startled by his question, not expecting it, but then she turned her gaze back to the sky with a smile and traced another pattern.

“I call them the star-crossed lovers,” she said, and Knox could see why she would come up with that name. The constellations she traced could resemble two people if he looked close enough. “Dae ye see how it seems they are driftin’ apart, but can never truly be away from each other?”

Knox hummed, nodding slowly. He was not the kind of man to come up with such stories, to see such beautiful things in the sky, even if he enjoyed looking at them. Knox was practical, a soldier before he was anything else. Even when he inherited the title of the laird, he had always known that deep down, he would be a soldier more than anything.

He liked Fia’s whimsy, the fact that she could find these stories within her and make up a world that belonged to her and her only. He couldn’t deny that it felt special to have her share it with him, but he also wondered if she had ever shared it with anyone else.

Bane, surely, kens.

“Dae ye have a star-crossed lover, then?” he asked, unable to stop himself.

For several moments, Fia didn't speak. She only stared up at the stars, but her expression had shifted slightly, betraying a sense of grief that was palpable in the air between them.

“I thought I did,” she said, her voice trembling just slightly when she broke the silence. “I thought... well, it daesnae matter now what I thought. There was someone I thought I would wed but he was only usin' me tae kill his time.”

Save for that initial sense of grief, there was nothing else to betray Fia's emotions. It was as though she had suddenly turned herself into a still statue, closed off to him.

She was very different from the woman who had been sitting next to him only moments prior. It must have hurt her greatly, he thought, if the mere mention of that was enough to make her raise walls around her so quickly, and so he didn't ask any further questions on the matter.

How could anyone refuse such a lass?

Not only was Fia a beautiful woman, with her large, doe eyes and her full lips, the soft curve of her jawline and the cascade of honey blonde hair, but she was also kind and warm and quite clearly intelligent, if she was capable of coming up with such beautiful stories. She was also a bit... goofy. And Knox adored it, for it made him feel light. Most of all, she wasn't playing a role, trying to obscure her true self to be more palatable to him like so many other women, and it was this honesty Knox appreciated.

He enjoyed her company more than he had enjoyed the company of any noble born

woman who had come to the castle with the intention of a marriage. This was what he sought in his wife—this ease, this openness, this beauty that came from within. Had Fia been the daughter of a laird instead of a peasant girl, he would have already proposed.

The thought startled him. For so long, he had tried to avoid marrying one of the women his council had suggested to him, but he could easily imagine a life with Fia by his side. He could make her happy, he thought, and she could do the same for him. And yet, circumstances would never allow such a thing between them.

Taking a deep breath, Fia raised her hand once more, plastering a smile to her lips that did not quite reach her eyes. “An’ that is the great horse,” she said as she traced another cluster of stars. “It moves the moon from east tae west.”

“Imagine ridin’ a horse o’ stars,” Knox said as he followed the path of her index finger. “Wouldnae that be somethin’ . . .”

“Ach, I wouldnae dae that,” Fia said with a soft laugh, shaking her head. “I never learnt how tae ride a horse.”

Knox’s head whipped to the side, shocked as he was to hear that. He didn’t think he had ever met someone who couldn’t ride a horse, but then he began to wonder if everyone in the castle knew. Could it be that the servants didn’t? Could it be that something which seemed so simple and integral to life to him be completely foreign to some of the people in his own castle?

He had never given it any thought. It was only now, talking to Fia, that he was suddenly confronted with the possibility and the fact that even though they all lived within the castle walls, his experience of reality was vastly different from that of those around him.

“We were very poor, all me life,” she added, lowering her gaze as if ashamed of it. “Me parents were poor an’ the Grahams were blacksmiths, but they had too many mouths tae feed, an’ when everythin’ happened... well... I never thought I would need tae leave the village or that I even could one day, so I never learnt.”

It was the kind of life Knox could hardly imagine. They were from different worlds, that much was true, but now that Fia was there, in Castle Stuart, he could make sure she would live a better life. Anyone who held such kindness in their heart deserved it, and since Knox had the means to provide it, he would.

The first thing he would do, he decided, was take Fia horse riding.

CHAPTER TEN

Knox was seething with rage. His heartbeat pounded in his temples, the first stirrings of a headache already making their presence known, even as he stepped out of his study after a disastrous meeting with the council. Several days had passed and Callum's team had managed to gather no information that was of any use to them, and though other teams were more successful, his was the one which carried most of the burden of the mission. If Callum failed, Clan Stuart would be at a disadvantage, their position so perilous that Knox had half a mind to call everyone back and send them out again in new teams. That would delay them, though, and they didn't have much time to spare.

I should have never trusted Callum with this. I should've sent someone else tae lead.

What was done was done, though, and Knox now had to deal with the frustration and fury that came with the lack of results, while Alastair Gordon was on the move. They had other plans in the works, failsafes and backups, all meant to prevent an attack or at least stop Gordon's forces successfully. If possible, Knox wanted to avoid a battle, as he wished to protect his men from death and harm, but if it came to it, he knew he could defeat Clan Gordon. For months, they had been planning their defense and he was confident they could emerge victorious.

In a quest to calm himself, he decided to go for a ride, and just as he was exiting the keep, he thought it was the perfect opportunity to take Fia with him and show her how to ride a horse. He had been so shocked when she had revealed it to him, astonished by the mere thought of someone never having the chance to learn something that seemed so basic to him. But he enjoyed riding and the sense of

freedom that came with it, the knowledge that he could get anywhere he wished if only he travelled far enough, and he thought Fia may enjoy it as well, once she was acquainted with a horse.

On his way to the stables, he had one of the servants fetch her from her cottage and then continued on his way. When he got there, though, he was surprised to see Bane tending to one of the horses, brushing its fur with a stiff brush.

When Bane noticed him, he gave a small start, dropping the brush as he bowed. “Good mornin’, me laird. Forgive me, I didnae see ye.”

Knox waved a hand dismissively. “At ease,” he said. “I’m only here tae take me horse. Dinnae let me bother ye.”

“It’s nay bother,” Bane assured him. For the first time, Knox allowed himself to look at the other man, really look at him—the solid build of his body, the sandy blonde hair, the hazel eyes, and that perpetual smirk that never seemed to fade. He was a handsome man, even with the scar that ran across his jaw, faint yet long and jagged.

Could he truly trust Fia when she claimed there was nothing between them? The same thought had been plaguing him ever since the night they had spent together in the gardens, when she had claimed to have almost married someone who, by all appearances, was not Bane. He was well aware that none of this was any of his business. Fia was free to love and marry whoever she pleased, and yet the thought still left a bitter taste in the back of his mouth.

Surely, there are more lasses out there like her. This is naethin’ but an infatuation.

Knox had never had time for women or for indulging himself in trysts. There had been a few, of course, but none who had stayed with him for long, incapable as he was to give them his full attention.

“Are ye goin’ on a ride, me laird?” Bane asked, pulling Knox out of his thoughts. “Should I prepare a horse fer ye?”

“Thank ye, but I can dae it meself, dinnae fash,” said Knox as he approached his mare. She gave a soft snort when he petted her head and he liked to think that she was as excited to see him as he was to see her. “I thought I might take Fia on a ride. She told me she doesnae ken how tae ride a horse, so I wanted tae teach her.”

Bane gave him a curious look, and though he seemed quite confused, there was no hint of hostility in his gaze. “Would ye?” he asked. “That is very nice o’ ye, me laird.”

Knox nodded, lips pressed into a thin smile, trying to figure out if Bane meant it or if he was being sarcastic and in fact thought the very opposite. He was on the verge of driving himself insane with doubt over a matter that didn’t even concern him, and yet the more he thought about it, the more he obsessed over the question of Fia’s and Bane’s relationship.

Perhaps I should simply ask him. But he’s already said they’re like family.

They had no reason to lie to him. Had their relationship been romantic, surely, they would have said so. But what if they didn’t even know it themselves? What if their feelings for each other went deeper than either of them realized?

He tried, valiantly, to push such thoughts out of his mind. What good was it, wondering about the same thing over and over? What good was it tormenting himself?

“Ye ken how tae ride, dae ye nae?” he asked Bane instead, who nodded his assent.

“Aye,” he said. “Been ridin’ since I was a wee laddie.”

“So how come Fia never learnt?” Knox asked. “Did she have nae desire tae learn?”

Bane considered it for a few moments before giving Knox a small shrug. “I suppose she didnae find it necessary. An’ she didnae have many chances. We only have this one horse an’ we often lend it out tae others who need it.”

“Surely, bein’ a healer, even a midwife, must pay her enough tae buy a horse, at least,” Knox said. After all, it was a lucrative business—healers were always in demand, even in the smallest of villages, and Duror wasn’t that small.

“Ach, Fia doesnae often receive any payment in gold,” Bane said, much to Knox’s surprise. “Nae everyone in Duror is rich, me laird. In fact, most people in Duror arenae rich an’ Fia never turns them away, even if they cannae pay. Most o’ them pay her in food or fabric or anythin’ they can give her. It doesnae matter tae her as long as she can help them.”

For a few moments, before he could control himself, Knox stared at Bane in disbelief. He and Fia were very poor, that much was evident, and yet even when she could have demanded payment for her services to better her own life and circumstances, she preferred to give her care selflessly to all who needed it. She was truly a good, pure person, more so than anyone Knox had met before.

Something inside him stirred at the knowledge that Fia was willing to go to such lengths for others. Warmth spread over his chest and for a moment, he was struck speechless, the tenderness he felt towards her overwhelming.

“Does it surprise ye?” Bane asked with a small, slanted smile.

“I didnae think...” Knox let his words trail off, staring into the distance. “Nay... nay, I suppose it isnae that surprisin’.”

Bane's only response was an even wider smile, and a pat on the shoulder as he walked past Knox and out of the stables—a gesture that would have seemed too familiar coming from anyone else, but which Knox could now only find reassuring.

“What is this?”

Fia stared at the horse in front of her, a large, black beast whose fur shone under the morning sun. It was a calm creature, standing still where Laird Stuart had guided it, in an empty part of the back of the castle, which was usually reserved for training the men. Now, though, it was empty, save for the two of them and the horse.

“This is a horse,” said Knox, rather unhelpfully. “Surely, ye ken what a horse looks like, Miss MacKenzie.”

Fia had to resist the urge to roll her eyes at him. Naturally, she knew what a horse was; what she didn't know was why that horse was there and why a servant had rushed to her while she was in the healer's cottage, claiming the laird had requested her presence immediately. She had left her chores unfinished, rushing through the castle grounds with her hands dusted with powders and her fingernails caked with remnants of the pastes she was preparing, only to find Knox waiting for her there along with the horse.

“I ken what a horse is,” she assured him. “Why have ye brought the horse here? Or rather, why have ye brought me here?”

“Tae teach ye, o' course,” said Laird Stuart, so casually that Fia couldn't help but wonder if they had arranged this at some point in the past few days and she had simply forgotten about it. But no, it couldn't be; Fia would have never agreed to this.

“That is very kind o' ye,” she said, keeping her responses diplomatic in the face of terror. “But I dinnae think it is necessary. I'm sure ye have many more important

things tae dae other than teach me how tae ride a horse.”

“I have naethin’ else tae dae today,” said Laird Stuart, much to Fia’s chagrin. Why did he have to be so insistent? Why did he even show this much interest in whether she learned how to ride a horse or not?

She couldn’t say no to the laird, no matter how much the thought of getting on horseback terrified her. At least they were in an enclosed space, she thought, and there was nowhere the horse could run off on its own, with her unable to control it.

Maybe this is the right time fer me tae learn. Maybe it willnae be so bad.

Still, she stared at the beast in apprehension, and she was certain that the horse could sense it. It knew her fear; it knew she wanted nothing to do with it and it would soon exact its revenge.

With a determined inhale, Fia approached Laird Stuart and the horse, looking at the mare a little warily.

“It’s alright,” Knox assured her. “Here, ye can touch her.”

As he took her hand, Fia flinched at first, but then let him guide her to the horse’s mane, her fingers combing through the soft hairs. The horse neighed, shaking its head, and Fia was quick to pull back, much to Laird Stuart’s amusement.

“She willnae hurt ye,” he said. “She only wishes tae greet ye.”

Fia let out an awkward chuckle, desperately hoping Knox was right. She petted the horse’s flank gently, following Knox’s lead, and soon, she wasn’t that frightened of the creature.

And yet, she couldn't say that she wouldn't be frightened once she was on the saddle.

As she rounded the horse, Fia came to stand by its side, taking Laird Stuart's hand to let him help her up onto the saddle. Once there, she did her best to appear calm at least, even if her heart was beating so fast that she feared it would jump straight out of her chest. However, even to her, her panic was clear. Her fingers clutched the reins too tightly, knuckles going white under the pressure, and her thighs tensed as she desperately tried to remain seated on the saddle, even as the horse made no effort to move.

"Ye see? That isnae that bad, now, is it? Now try to take a few steps," Knox pushed Fia.

She felt unsteady, unmoored, her feet aching to stand back on solid ground, but she stared resolutely forward and tried to guide the horse on.

It didn't move. Fia tried again, gently commanding it, but once again, the horse remained motionless, munching on a bit of grass it had found by its hooves. Next to her, she heard the laird suppress a chuckle and she turned to him with despair in her gaze, not knowing what to do.

Gently, Laird Stuart took the reins from Fia's hands and began to lead the horse around the training area slowly, making sure to glance up at her to see if she was doing well.

"Hold on tae the saddle," he told her, and Fia's hands immediately reached for the front end, fingers curling securely around it. "An' relax. Ye'll fall off if ye're so stiff."

She tried, she truly did. It was easier said than done, though, and with every step the horse took, she found it even more difficult to relax. Everything felt unsteady. Fia

feared that the moment she would move a single muscle she would tumble off the saddle and hit the ground, and then, if she was unlucky enough, it would also be the moment when the horse would decide to step on her.

“Miss MacKenzie, relax,” Laird Stuart repeated, reaching up to tap her knee gently. The touch was so unexpected that Fia almost jumped off the saddle, and the sudden movement only served to scare her even more, her thighs tensing harder. “I willnae let ye fall. Dinnae fash.”

Laird Stuart spoke so warmly, so sincerely that Fia couldn’t help but trust him. Ever so slowly, she began to relax, letting her body adjust to the natural rhythm of the horse’s gait until she was comfortable enough to release the death grip she had on the saddle. She straightened her back and began to get used to the feeling of it.

Now that she was more comfortable, more attuned to the rhythm of the horse’s gait, she found the ride, if not exactly entertaining, then at least pleasant. There was something calming about riding, something almost meditative in the steady movements of its body, and soon, she cracked a small smile, glancing at Laird Stuart, only to find him already looking at her.

It wasn’t until a little later that she stiffened again, when Laird Stuart said, “Should we head out?”

“Head out?” Fia asked, her eyes widening in terror. “Out where, me laird?”

Laird Stuart chuckled, his shoulders shaking ever so slightly. “Out. Tae the woods. Perhaps we can pass by Duror.”

Fia’s heart skipped a beat at the mention of her village. It hadn’t been long since she had left it, but a part of her already missed it dearly, knowing she would most likely never live there again. As much as the thought of visiting excited her, she didn’t like

the idea of riding all the way there, on her own, on uneven terrain. This was her first time steering a horse! How could Laird Stuart expect her to ride all the way to Duror?

“I dinnae think I’m ready,” she said. “Perhaps another day.”

Laird Stuart seemed to consider this for a few moments, before he took a few steps closer until he was right by the horse. “I’ll ride,” he said. “An’ ye can enjoy the view.”

Before Fia could say anything else on the matter, Laird Stuart was climbing onto the saddle behind her and all she could do was shriek in terror and hold on for dear life as the horse adjusted to their combined weight. It had hardly moved and yet Fia felt as though she had been terribly jostled, almost thrown off the saddle.

Much to her chagrin, Laird Stuart laughed.

“Ye’re all right,” he assured her. “I’m here.”

And there he was, indeed. At first, Fia hadn’t realized just how close they were, panicked as she had been, but now she could feel his chest brush against her back with every breath he took. His arms encircled her torso as he reached for the reins once more and Fia could feel the heat emanating from his body, draping around her like a cloak.

Fia was painfully aware of their proximity as they rode through the courtyard and came up to the main gates. She was certain all eyes were on them, watching her carefully as she shared the saddle with Laird Stuart, and undoubtedly everyone was wondering why they were even together at this time of the day, on a horse no less.

Were they wondering where they were going? Were they wondering whether Laird Stuart had an interest in her?

Does he have an interest in me?

The thought was as daunting as it was exhilarating. This was exactly what she had wanted from the moment she had found out she was going to the castle and it would mean she was one step closer to her goal, but she couldn't help but be a little apprehensive now that she had met Laird Stuart. It was one thing, planning to deceive a man she didn't know; it was another deceiving a man who had sat with her that night, listening to her speak about her life, a man who had welcomed her and Bane in his home.

But then she remembered Callum and the way he had treated her—as though she was worthless, as though she held no intrinsic value—and the memory fanned the flames of her fury, once again making her determined to complete her plan. It wasn't as though Laird Stuart would suffer with her by his side. If she managed to marry him, she would be a good wife to him. She would make sure he had a happy life.

“Are ye alright?” Laird Stuart asked as they rushed past the countryside, down a winding path that led towards Duror. “Ye're nae scared, are ye?”

The truth was that Fia was a little scared. Even when she wasn't the one steering the horse, her nerves always got the better of her, forcing her to stiffen once more and hold onto the saddle for dear life. However, Laird Stuart's solid presence behind her gave her some reassurance that she wasn't going to fall. It was easy to surrender to the feeling of safety when she could feel his arms around her, his chest against her back.

And before she knew it, the village of Duror appeared before them in the distance and her chest tightened at the sight of it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“ T his is me home.”

They were right outside of the cottage, and at Fia’s words, Laird Stuart brought the horse to a sudden halt by the fence. Naturally, it looked exactly the same as when she and Bane had left it, but even though it had only been a few days since then, it felt like a much longer time. Too many things had happened in the short time she had been in Castle Stuart, making the days stretch out and lengthen, and it suddenly felt as though she was returning to a place she hadn’t seen in years, a sudden wave of nostalgia crashing over her.

When that had subsided, though, all that was left was the fear that Laird Stuart would mock her for having lived in such a house, just like Callum had. She remembered his piercing words, the sting that came with them which spread all over her chest, making her feel worthless.

Why did I tell him? I should’ve said naethin’!

“Shall we go inside?” Laird Stuart asked and before Fia could protest, he was already dismounting the horse. The sudden movement jostled her and for a moment, every other concern disappeared from her mind as she desperately clutched onto the saddle to keep herself upright, but she soon realized there was no need for such worry. The moment Laird Stuart’s feet were on the ground, he reached for her, steadying her with a hand on the small of her back.

Hesitantly, Fia let him help her off the horse and the two of them made their way

inside the cottage. It was a gloomy day, thick, grey clouds gathering over Duror, so the first thing Fia did once they were inside was to light up a few candles before she examined her surroundings.

Everything was just as she and Bane had left it. There had never been much in the cottage, but now it seemed even emptier than before, as they had taken most of the things they owned with them. All that remained the furniture and the kitchen and cleaning supplies, things they knew they wouldn't need in the castle. There was a thin layer of dust on the surfaces now that there was no one to sweep and dust daily.

Now more than ever, Fia regretted pointing out the house to the laird. This was no place for a man like him. Seeing this, he would realize Fia was nothing but a peasant girl and then surely, he would have no interest in her anymore. If her true self wasn't enough for Callum, how could it be for a laird?

"Such a cozy home," Laird Stuart said, so quietly that it was as though he was talking to himself. Fia's head snapped up from where she was lighting some more candles, surprised by the comment.

"Cozy?" she asked, blinking a few times.

Laird Stuart glanced around, taking in the worn furniture, the wooden beams on the roof, the old cups that were arranged by the stove. Then, he dragged his gaze over to Fia with a smile, tilting his head to the side.

"Aye," he said. "Dinnae ye think so?"

There was nothing in Laird Stuart's voice or manner to suggest he was mocking her. He sounded entirely sincere and for a moment, Fia managed to see herself and her previous home from his eyes—it was all foreign to him, surely, but he truly enjoyed what he saw. Perhaps it was the novelty of it or perhaps it was the fact that compared

to his large keep, whose corridors were usually dimly lit and empty, cold in a way that a cottage could never be, he truly did find this place cozy and comfortable.

“I’m glad ye think so,” she said, instead of giving him a straight answer. “Would ye like tae sit? I can make some tea.”

She knew there was some left in the house, and so as Laird Stuart took a seat by the window, pulling a rickety chair there, Fia busied herself with getting a pot of water from the neighbors and lighting a fire in the hearth.

People were bound to flock to the cottage now that she had revealed her presence, but she didn’t mind. She only hoped the laird wouldn’t find it tiresome, being surrounded by half the village.

“How was it, growin’ up here?” the laird asked. “This is the Grahams’ cottage, is it nae?”

“It is,” Fia confirmed. “Ach, I couldnae complain. Bane an’ Tav were always kind tae me. Without them, I wouldnae have survived.”

She knew that in her bones. Had Tav not taken her in when her father abandoned her, she would have met her end all alone, in the streets. He and Bane were the only reason why she was still alive and the only reason why she had managed to do so well for herself.

“Tav?” Laird Stuart asked with a frown. “Is that another... brother?”

“Aye,” said Fia, forcing herself to swallow around the knot that suddenly formed in her throat. No matter her successes, no matter how happy her life became, she would never get over Tav’s disappearance. Neither she nor Bane had lost hope yet, but with every passing day, it was increasingly difficult to believe Tav would return. “He... he

was taken in a raid. Bane an' I have been lookin' fer him ever since."

"I'm sorry tae hear that," said Laird Stuart, his voice filled with sympathy. "Has it been a long time?"

"A little over a year," said Fia, once again busying herself with the tea, just so she would have something to do with her hands, something that would distract her from the matter at hand. She brought the two trembling cups over to the window, dragging another chair close to it so she could sit by the laird. "Sometimes it feels much longer."

For a while, they sat there in silence. Fia was used to people not knowing what to say in response to this and so she often avoided the subject entirely, but with Laird Stuart, a part of her felt comfortable enough to mention Tav, no matter how painful it was to think of him. She was the first to break the silence, looking up from the depths of her cup to see Laird Stuart staring out of the window into the small garden and beyond, to the neighboring homes, which were just as small and dilapidated as hers.

"I'm sure this place looks very strange tae ye."

Fia was aware it was her insecurity speaking once more, but she couldn't help it. She wanted Laird Stuart to either confirm her suspicions that he thought less of her now that he had seen the cottage or to reassure her there was nothing wrong with it. Either outcome was welcome, as long as she got a definitive answer, one to which she could cling for the rest of the day.

"It reminds me o' me chambers when I was a wee bairn," said Laird Stuart, much to Fia's surprise. He must have noticed the shocked look on her face, as then he chuckled and shook his head a little, saying, "Well, they werenae quite like this. But they were cozy like this, so it's close enough in me mind. I used tae spend most o' me time with me governess but I remember that me maither would come tae me

chambers every night tae put me tae sleep.”

Fia couldn't help but smile at that. She didn't have many memories from her childhood—it was all a blur, weeks, months, even years bleeding together into a fog of memories that she could never place in a timeline. She was certain about one thing, though; her mother had never put her to sleep. Before meeting Tav and Bane, Fia had spent most of her days alone, with her parents giving her what she needed to survive but providing no warmth or affection. Growing up, she had often wondered why they had even had her when it was so obvious that they never wanted her. She had stopped questioning her parents' behavior after a while, she had stopped thinking about them altogether, pushing what few memories she had to the back of her mind, into hidden crevices.

“She would always tell me a story,” Laird Stuart continued, his gaze growing distant as he stared out of the window once more. “She was a great storyteller, me maither, just like ye, Miss MacKenzie. Me faither was a practical man, but me maither loved her stories. She would never let me sleep without hearin' one o' them an' I would always ask her fer more an' more.”

Fia didn't know what had happened to Laird Stuart's parents, but she did know they were dead. Hearing him talk so fondly about his mother and his memories of her made her chest tighten with grief, her fingers curling tightly around the handle of her chipped cup. She had never experienced anything like that with her mother, but she could tell just how much it pained Laird Stuart to have lost his; how much he cherished those memories.

“How did she die?” Fia asked before she could stop herself, hoping the question wasn't insensitive.

“They were killed,” said Laird Stuart. “Both o' them.”

He said nothing more on the matter and Fia didn't ask. It was not her place, nor did she want to dig up those painful memories for him.

Before she could find something to say to change the subject, there was a knock on the door and it opened to reveal several of her neighbors, who had apparently already noticed her arrival in Duror. There was a chorus of greetings, all of them rushing into the house to ask about her and her new life—at least until they noticed Laird Stuart sitting there, watching them with a pleasant smile on his face.

Fia didn't know how many of them recognized him, but there was one thing for certain; they all knew he was someone important, dressed in such fine clothes as he was.

Laird Stuart stood and stepped towards the small crowd, the smile never waning from his lips. Fia watched him, wondering what he would do, but she could have never predicted he would simply introduce himself.

“Good afternoon’,” he said. “Laird Knox Stuart, pleased tae make yer acquaintance.”

The room was plunged in a stunned silence. Even Fia didn't know what to say, as she had expected the laird to step out of the house and distance himself from the crowd, but he had done the exact opposite, drawing all the attention to himself.

Is he mad? Daesnae he ken they will pester him until we leave now?

Just as Fia thought, everyone descended like vultures upon the laird, some with praise and others with demands, but all of them speaking over each other, trying to make themselves heard. Laird Stuart took it with grace, though, bowing his head ever so slightly as though he wasn't speaking to a group of peasants but rather nobles who had come to see him in his castle.

He moved with a confidence and grace that made even this cottage seem comparable to the great hall of his castle as he reassured them all that he would listen to them, as long as they spoke one at a time. Fia could only stare, dumbfounded, but this was all the confirmation she needed.

Laird Stuart didn't consider any of this beneath him. He was not like Callum, Fia told herself. He was nothing like the man who had humiliated her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was not a ball, but it was not a dinner either. Rather, it was an event in between, not as tedious as a ball and not as intimate as a dinner, with the entire council and the wives of those men invited for the night, along with a few more high-ranking men and their wives or sisters.

It was still a tedious affair, Knox thought.

There were more important things to do as far as he was concerned, but Magnus had been adamant that a gathering like this would be to everyone's benefit. The council was restless, the wives concerned. There was an air of uncertainty and fear permeating the castle and that was the last thing Knox wanted. Whenever doubt crept into his ranks, he had to identify it quickly and nip it in the bud before it could spread among his men, regardless of their station.

And there truly was no better way to do this other than throw a small, yet lavish feast to reassure everyone that everything was under control.

Dressed in a finer tunic than the one he had been wearing that morning for his ride with Fia, Knox sat at the table at the very end of the hall, from where he could oversee the rest of the tables. It had taken them a while to leave Duror earlier that day, since so many of the villagers had wanted to speak with him, but on the way back, he had invited her to the feast, thinking that perhaps she would enjoy it since Effie would be there, too. Up until then, though, Fia hadn't shown up, much to his disappointment.

He couldn't remember a day better spent in recent memory. Knox enjoyed Fia's presence, her company. There was an energy about her that was calming, that helped him to forget about all his troubles even if it was only for a little while. He wished he could always have that calm.

But how? It's nae as if I could wed her.

He was well aware of that, even if his mind resisted the truth. There was no future in which he could wed a woman who was not of noble blood. As the laird of the clan, it had always been his responsibility to marry a woman who could give him a useful alliance, someone who would help him unite his clan with an ally.

And yet, his gaze still searched the crowd for her, for a glimpse of her honey blonde locks or her brilliant smile, anything that would reveal her presence and alleviate the strange ache in his chest.

It was an infatuation, perhaps, one that would pass soon enough. Lust. He was simply dazzled by Fia's good looks and pure heart, but that didn't mean he felt something more for her. It was easy to claim she was unlike anyone else he had met, but surely, there had to be more women out there like her. She couldn't be the only one.

"Ach, there she is!" said Effie, her voice calling from Knox's left, where she was sitting next to Magnus. "I thought she wouldnae come."

Knox's gaze immediately flew to the door, where Fia and Bane stood, both of them looking a little out of place among the rest of the guests. Knox didn't think it was their dress which singled them out; rather, it was the way they held themselves, as though they thought they didn't fit in at all.

He supposed it was a valid concern to have. He had never entered a room where he felt like he didn't belong—he had never even really entered a room without feeling

like he could command everyone in it, capturing their attention and their hearts. He couldn't understand how Fia and Bane felt in that moment or what he could do to make them more comfortable.

Still, he excused himself and stood, weaving his way through the small crowd to get to them. When they spotted him, they both snapped up to attention, their backs straight, bowing to him as he approached.

“Welcome,” Knox said, gesturing to them to come further into the great hall. Their arrival had drawn some gazes, the nobles surely wondering why they were there at all. He could hear the whispers around them, low and conspiratorial, but no one yet dared to say anything to his face. It was nothing out of the ordinary, though; nobles enjoyed gossiping, that much was widely known, and they were rarely fond of outsiders. “Seats have been reserved fer ye but feel free tae walk around as ye please.”

Between them, Knox saw Fia's and Bane's hands tightly clasped, the two of them holding onto each other. Not for the first time, he couldn't help but wonder if they were lying to him, after all.

Neither Fia nor Bane had ever attended such a feast before. Celebrations had been frequent, if not particularly extravagant, in Duror, with everyone gathering around bonfires and chipping in with anything they could spare—food, drink, even decorations, all the villagers coming together to enjoy the evening. There had been plenty of special occasions, as there was little else for them to do, but none of them came close to the feast that was now before her eyes.

It was a small one, Fia knew. Laird Stuart had said so himself when he had invited her, claiming that it was only for his council and a few select soldiers, and yet there was so much meat, so much fresh produce, and the wine flowed freely into the cups of the guests. In Duror, such feasts were only reserved for the holiest of holidays, like

Yule. Any other time, they made do with what they could spare.

“Look at them,” Bane whispered in her ear, bending close so that she could hear him. She didn’t need to follow his gaze to know he was talking about the nobles in the room. “Such indulgence... their clothes alone must be more expensive than our houses.”

There was a hint of bitterness in Bane’s tone. Fia had never much cared for material possessions. As long as she had enough to survive, she could be content. And yet, she couldn’t blame Bane for his comments. Perhaps the clothes the nobles wore were not worth enough to build a house, but they were enough to feed several of the people in Duror who were in need.

Dae they ken? Would they care if they did?

There was one thing for certain; neither she nor Bane could blend in with that crowd. One glance at them was enough to set them apart from anyone else and Fia had half a mind to ask Bane to leave immediately, manners be damned.

Before they could flee, though, Laird Stuart appeared in front of them, welcoming them to the feast, and it was then Fia knew they would be trapped in the great hall for the better part of the evening. Reflexively, she reached for Bane’s hand, the two of them holding onto each other for dear life.

“Good evenin’,” Fia said with one of her awkward curtsies. Despite her lessons with Bane, she had yet to master the skill and her nerves only made her knees shake even more, throwing off her balance. She was not an easily frazzled woman—she had seen illness and death, blood and gore. And yet, being surrounded by these people unnerved her unlike anything else. “Thank ye fer invitin’ us, but?—”

“Fia!” a familiar voice called and Fia’s head snapped to the side to see Effie weaving

her way through the crowd as she approached them. She was waving at her excitedly and Magnus was trailing after her, the two of them coming to a halt right next to Laird Stuart. “I feared ye wouldnae come. How lovely that ye’re both here! Come, I’ll introduce ye tae everyone.”

Fia didn’t know if that was a good idea, but she had no time to protest before Effie grabbed her hand and dragged her off. Refusing to let go of Bane, Fia ended up dragging him along, too, the three of them rushing off in a line towards whoever Effie had put in her sights. Soon, they mingled with a group of women, who were standing in a small circle, laughing and drinking the night away.

Effie introduced her and Bane to them all, but Fia didn’t manage to hold on to any of the names, no matter how much she tried to focus. There was half a dozen of them, and they were all eager to talk, it seemed, which only served to make Fia want to talk even less.

What can I say tae them?

“It truly is a shame Laird Stuart couldnae arrange a larger ball,” said one of them, a young woman with dark hair and piercing blue eyes. “It’s been a while since the last time we had one.”

“Och aye, how long has it been?” asked another, this one older, her hair greying at the temples. “A few months, at least.”

“Dinnae fash,” said Effie. “I’m sure the Yule celebrations will be grand. They will more than make up fer it.”

All Fia wanted was to melt into the shadows, and she could tell Bane wanted the same thing. He was standing right behind her, stiff and silent, and Fia couldn’t help but feel sorry for dragging him along when she could have let him escape this. Still,

she was too selfish to let his hand go. He was the only one who could offer her any support, even in his silence.

It wasn't long before the women's attention shifted to the two of them. The younger woman, upon noticing Bane better, asked, "Are ye husband an' wife?"

"Nay!" Fia was quick to say. She didn't know why everyone assumed that from the moment they saw them. "Nay, he's me braither."

The woman's attitude shifted immediately, even if the effect was barely noticeable. She stood a little straighter, her gaze lingering on Bane, and Fia had to suppress a laugh at the panicked look on his face.

"I've heard ye're both very skilled," she said. "We ken everythin' about Miss MacKenzie, but nae one ever talks about ye, Mr.?"

"Bane," Bane gritted out. "Just Bane."

"Ye ken everythin' about me?" Fia asked, shocked by the news. In retrospect, she should have known everyone in the castle talked. It was only natural that rumors about her would be spread, whether true or false, and she couldn't help but wonder what, precisely, they thought they knew. The idea of people talking behind her back left her in a cold sweat. How many times had Callum spoken behind her back? How many of his friends had done the same?

"We ken plenty," another woman said. She was tall and willowy, with a patrician profile, and though her tone was friendly, there was something about her that left a bitter taste in the back of Fia's mouth. "When I heard we would get a healer from Duror, ye werenae quite what I imagined. Villagers make excellent servants, but when it comes tae a healer..."

The air around them all seemed to go cold, a chill spreading throughout the group. Most of the women shuffled awkwardly, their gazes falling to the floor, but there were also a few who stared openly, as if waiting to see what would happen. When Fia glanced at Effie, she found her red-faced, a muscle in her jaw ticking as she clenched her teeth.

“I can assure ye Miss MacKenzie is a skilled healer.”

Laird Stuart’s voice cut through the silence and every head in the group turned around to stare at him. Fia hadn’t even noticed his presence by her side. He had materialized next to her, his expression stern as he stared down at the woman, who could only smile placatingly.

“I didnae mean tae offend Miss MacKenzie,” she said with an apologetic tilt of her head. “I merely meant that?—”

“I believe Miss MacKenzie is owed an apology, Anne,” the laird insisted, much to Fia’s horror. With wide eyes, she turned to him, shaking her head.

“Nay, nay... ‘tis quite alright!” she, said. It was nothing she hadn’t heard before. That woman wasn’t the first to underestimate her nor would she be the last. “Please, it isnae necessary.”

“I insist,” said Laird Stuart.

He wasn’t even looking at Fia. He was staring resolutely at the woman, his gaze cold, and though at first Fia thought the woman would refuse to apologize, it soon occurred to her she had no choice.

The laird had commanded it.

With a saccharine smile, she turned to Fia, bowing her head ever so slightly. “Fergive me, Miss MacKenzie,” Anne said. “I’m sure yer skills are as Laird Stuart says. I didnae mean tae doubt ye.”

“Miss MacKenzie, allow me tae introduce ye tae some important people,” said Laird Stuart, immediately putting an end to the conversation before Fia could even accept the apology. The woman’s cheeks heated, the skin turning a deep red, but Laird Stuart ignored her entirely. “Ye as well, Mr. Graham.”

Leading them away from the group of women, Laird Stuart walked them through the great hall, putting a great distance between them. It was mostly for their benefit, Fia could tell. She doubted that there was anyone she and Bane had to meet so urgently.

As Laird Stuart whisked them away, Fia and Bane exchanged a glance. It was all they needed to know what the other was thinking, and they were both thinking the same thing.

That man truly cares.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The whisky burned its way down Knox's throat as he tossed back the remainder of it. It was still early in the day, terribly so—in fact, it was hardly dawn yet, but he hadn't slept a wink that night. The fire in his study crackled pleasantly, the flames warming him as much as the alcohol did, but what should have been a good morning quickly turned sour with Magnus' report.

It was that which warranted the drink, and Knox had poured them both a cup without hesitation. It spoke to Magnus' mental state that he, too, drained it, when he usually refrained from drinking strong liquor so early in the day.

“How many camps?” Knox asked, fearing the answer.

“Three so far,” said Magnus from where he sat across from him, drumming his fingers against the armrest. Dark circles shadowed his eyes and he looked pale, but Knox knew he was no better. Both of them had spent countless sleepless nights going over strategies and reports, and it was taking a toll on them both. “Two within our borders an' one right outside.”

“Gordon men?”

“That's what we think.”

“But ye're nae certain?”

Magnus drew in a sharp breath, releasing it slowly. His hand scratched the back of his

head as he spoke. “Who else would it be?”

It was a good question. As far as Knox knew, they didn’t have any other enemies. Clan Stuart wasn’t friendly with all neighboring clans, but there was tentative peace in place even with those they had once considered their enemies—all save for the Gordons.

How many of those clans would support the Gordon forces if it came to it, Knox wondered? How many could Alastair Gordon pull to his side and, could Knox work on arranging some alliances before Laird Gordon could?

But they are already in our lands. An’ who kens how many more will come?

“Who gave the report?” Knox asked, though he was quite certain he already knew the answer. He doubted it was Callum’s group, but even now, he thought perhaps it would be good to give him the benefit of doubt.

“Fergus,” said Magnus. “Rode in the middle o’ the night tae alert us.”

Just as Knox had thought. Fergus wasn’t from Callum’s group, but rather from one of the other few he had sent out in search of Gordon forces. He let out a long sigh, letting the weariness sink in without trying to fight it for once. He was tired; Magnus was tired. He didn’t think there was anyone in the clan anymore who didn’t feel the same weariness in their bones, the same prolonged fatigue that came with constantly being on high alert.

News had spread, naturally, despite Knox’s best efforts to contain the rumors and to reassure the nobles and their wives. Everyone knew by then that the clan was preparing for an attack and Knox could feel the restlessness and the fear of everyone else around enveloping the entire castle. The very air seemed to have shifted, something in it becoming heavy and oppressive, and he could feel it whenever he

passed the servants, the maids, and the soldiers in the hallways and courtyards.

It affected him greatly, more than he would have liked to admit. No matter how much he tried to tell himself they were prepared for this, it was easy to lose faith.

“Stayin’ here an’ drinkin’ all day willnae help with this,” Magnus said, standing up with a decisive inhale. “Come, let us fish.”

“Fish?” Knox couldn’t help but snort at that, the sound as disbelieving as it was inelegant. “Dae ye truly think it’s time tae fish?”

“I think it will clear yer head,” Magnus said. “That’s what ye need, some time tae think about other things.”

“Like fish?”

“Like fish.”

Knox stared at his friend, rather certain that he would soon reveal he was only joking, only to find that he was entirely serious. Magnus gave him an encouraging nod and despite himself, Knox stood and followed him out of the study, his footsteps heavy and dragging.

Perhaps Magnus was right, he thought. Maybe all he truly needed were a few hours to himself, a few hours during which he could do nothing but stare out at the lake and think.

The more he thought about it, the more appealing the prospect became. He had been working very hard in the past few weeks and he deserved a break. If nothing else, Magnus was right—it would help clear his head. Fishing always did. It was one of those activities that calmed him like nothing else, letting his troubles melt away for a

short while.

It was early in the day, too, which meant they could have a good catch. Dawn had just begun to break in the horizon and the lake was close enough to the castle grounds to reach it before the sun was too far up. Just as they were walking through the courtyard, though, Effie's familiar voice called out to them, and Knox turned around to see her there with a basket full of herbs, Fia standing next to her.

As Effie rushed towards them, Fia followed, trailing after her. Effie put the basket down, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Magnus, I was wonderin' where ye went," she said, as she reached into her pocket and pulled out a creased letter. "This came fer ye last night."

"What is it?" Knox asked as Magnus unfolded the piece of paper, perusing its contents. He cursed quietly under his breath when he read it, and Knox, ever curious, tried to read it over his shoulder.

"A disturbance in Duror," Magnus said. "Dinnae fash, I'll go down an' see what happened. Ye can go tae the loch."

"I'll come with ye," Knox said, but Magnus was quick to hold up a hand.

"Nay. Ye'll go tae the loch like we agreed. I'll take a few men with me an' we'll be back afore sunset."

Magnus wouldn't take no for an answer, Knox knew. He had that determined look in his eyes, the one that made it clear no one would stand in his way now that he had made up his mind. Instead of trying to convince him, and since he didn't want to go to the lake alone, Knox turned to Effie instead as Magnus hurried off to gather the men and the horses.

“Dae ye need Fia today?” he asked her.

“Aye,” said Effie, but when Knox narrowed his eyes, giving her a meaningful look, she stammered, “... dinnae need her at all! There really isnae much tae dae today.”

“Excellent,” said Knox, before turning to Fia. “Would ye like tae come tae the loch with me, Mrs. Mackenzie? I’m goin’ tae fish.”

Fia seemed as confused by the invitation as Effie was, glancing between her and Knox. In the end, she nodded timidly, and Knox didn’t know if it was because she truly wanted to join him or because she thought she didn’t have any other choice. Either way, he was glad to have some company.

The ride to the lake was spent mostly in pleasant silence as he and Fia shared the same horse once again. She still didn’t trust her riding skills and if Knox were honest, he agreed with her. Sharing the saddle, though, meant that they were once again very close to each other, with his chest pressed firmly against her back, and the more Knox thought about it, the more he had the urge to shift and move away from her, even if he knew there was nowhere to go.

He was attracted to Fia—there was no doubt about that. He wanted to spend a night with her. More than one night if he had to be honest. He was so attracted to her that a part of him feared the proximity would lead to an embarrassing situation, and so he tried his best to distract himself, thinking about anything other than the woman right in front of him.

Much to his relief, it worked, and by the time they were at the lake, Fia didn’t seem to have figured out any of his internal anguish. Knox helped her off the horse and grabbed the fishing rods they had brought with them, his boots sinking into the mud the closer he got to the bank. The lake stretched before him, a steel grey that reflected the cloudy sky and glimmered under the soft morning sun. It was a chilly day, his

breath fogging in the air in front of him, but it was brighter than the days that had just passed. The rays that pierced through the clouds were not enough to warm him, but they brightened his mood just as they brightened everything else around them.

Just watching the water was enough to bring about a sense of calm in Knox's mind. He stood there for a while, simply staring into the distance, as Fia approached him slowly, coming to a stop next to him.

"Are we fishin' from here?" she asked.

Her words set Knox back into motion and he turned to her with a smile. "Nay. See that shed? There is a boat in there."

He and Magnus had stashed the small boat there, so it would be ready any time they wanted to use it. Knox made his way to the shed, frowning a little as he considered his next steps. With Magnus there, moving the boat had never been an issue, but now that he was alone, pushing it into the lake was a rather difficult task. By the end of it, sweat coated his brow and the back of his tunic was soaked, but at least he had managed to place the boat in the water.

Pulling it closer to Fia by the rope that was attached to its end, Knox helped her step inside before doing the same and putting on his cloak to battle the chill that the sweat on his back only intensified. Then, he rowed them to the middle of the lake, where the waters were deeper and the fish plentiful, and he cast his line with ease, watching as it flew far from the boat.

Fia watched him, too. Then, without saying a word, she stood and cast her own line—only to have it land right in front of the boat. Knox had to bite back a chuckle at that, watching with fascination as the color flooded Fia's cheeks, turning her skin a pretty pink.

“Never done it afore?” he asked. There was no shame in it; he would gladly help her, but Fia pressed her lips into a determined frown as she reeled the line back in.

“I can dae it,” she insisted and once the rod was ready, she tried once again. This time, she sent the line flying with plenty of strength, but her momentum got the better of her and before Knox could do anything to stop it, he watched her stumble on the boat and then fall right into the lake.

“Fia!”

Does she ken how tae swim?

Standing up in a panic, Knox peeled off his cloak and tossed it aside carelessly, ready to jump into the waters. Just as he was about to jump off the boat, though, Fia resurfaced, her head breaking the surface of the water with a gasp.

“Fia!” Knox called once more, hands instantly reaching for her to pull her back up onto the boat. “Are ye alright? Did ye swallow water?”

“I’m fine,” Fia said, her voice coming out in a pained gasp. “Just very, very cold.”

With Knox’s efforts and her assistance, Fia was back onto the boat within moments, shivering from head to toe. She was soaked to the bone, her honey blonde hair sticking to her face and her tunic sticking to her body, the fabric clinging to her skin in a way that left little, if anything, to the imagination.

Knox couldn’t help but stare. It was far from proper, but he had spent several nights wondering what he would find under Fia’s clothes and now that he had gotten a taste of it, it only made him crave more. It was even worse when she rushed to remove her now soaked cloak, which was doing more harm than good, and so revealed to him all the ways in which her dress clung to her; the fabric pressed over the small swell of

her breasts, the curve of her hips, trapped between her thighs.

The fear of an embarrassing situation returned with a vengeance, and this time for good reason. Knox could feel himself harden under his tunic, his manhood taking an obvious interest in the sight of her like that.

It wasn't until a few moments later when he realized neither of them had moved or spoken at all, and it was then he also realized Fia had noticed him staring, her arms coming up to hide her breasts.

Blood rushed to Knox's cheeks, and he immediately sprang into action, unclasping his cloak to wrap it around Fia's shoulders. It was the least he could do, not only to warm her up but to atone for his very obvious ogling.

"Forgive me," Fia said in a small voice, much to Knox's surprise. If anyone should be apologizing, it was him, not Fia.

"Fer what?" he asked.

"Fer scaring all the the fish away fer one. And.. well... fer the state of me clothes."

Knox's brows knitted together as he attempted to decipher Fia's words. Could she truly mean that, could she be apologizing to him for is mistake?

"I'm the one who should be apologizin', Miss MacKenzie," Knox said. "I shouldnae be starin' at ye, but I cannae deny yer beauty."

Fia's gaze snapped up to meet his, her cheeks heating as she wrapped the cloak a little tighter around herself. Perhaps it had been the wrong thing to say, Knox thought, but between his panic when he saw her go under and his arousal at seeing her body, he didn't really know what he was saying at all.

There was one thing he longed to know, though, even if asking would only make their situation even more awkward. “Ye seem tae apologize a lot and tae truly underestimate yerself in many ways. Did a man make ye think that?”

For a moment, Fia hesitated and Knox thought she wouldn’t answer him. But then she nodded quietly, confirming his suspicions.

“Was it the same one tae whom ye were meant tae be wedded tae?”

Another nod, this one even more timid. “He... he always criticized me, me home, me work. He also told me I look like a laddie. I thought... I thought all men might think the same about me. ‘Tis also why I apologized, I guess...”

With a sigh, Knox sat down across from Fia, their knees brushing against each other. “He doesnae sound like a man who deserved ye.”

At that, Fia cracked a small smile, something he took as a victory. “I suppose ye’re right,” she said. “But it’s difficult tae nae believe him sometimes.”

Before he even knew what he was doing, Knox took Fia’s hand and guided it to his manhood, pressing it against his length. “Is this proof enough?”

Fia froze, her eyes widening, but she made no effort to pull back from Knox. She only stared at him, her breath quickening, her chest heaving with every inhalation. He took it as a good sign. And then, emboldened by her reaction, he reached for her and kissed her.

Fia’s lips were a little cold but so soft against his. His fingers tangled in her wet hair, pulling her closer, and in that moment, every concern from the past few weeks finally truly melted away. He could think about nothing else; nothing but Fia there with him, soft and pliant as he kissed her.

And then she moaned, the sound soft and tender, sending a jolt of arousal through him, and that was when Knox pulled back abruptly. He, too, was wide-eyed and panting, shocked by what he had just done.

This was nothing like him. He was always in control of his actions. He was even in control of his thoughts, never allowing himself to stray too far into unwanted territory. What could have possibly possessed him to do such a thing now? He was supposed to be a perfect gentleman, to treat every woman with respect, and yet he couldn't claim to have treated Fia with any respect now.

"Forgive me," he said once more, clearing his throat as he grabbed the oars and began pulling them towards the bank. "I shouldnae have done that."

He dreaded the ride home. He dreaded everything that was to follow, and yet he had no other choice but to spend more agonizing moments with Fia before he could retreat into his study and try his best to avoid her. He didn't dare even look at her. The last thing he wanted was to see contempt in her face, anything that would reveal she now despised him and thought little of him.

He didn't think he could bear it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Ye will never believe what happened.”

Those were the first words out of Fia’s mouth the moment she was back in the castle. She searched for Bane immediately, her heart racing, desperate to tell him what had happened between her and the laird. She had dragged him from the forge back to their cottage so that she could be certain it was just the two of them, with no one around to eavesdrop.

“Why are ye wet? An’ whose cloak is that?” Bane asked, ignoring her. “Come, sit. I’ll light a fire.”

Fia hadn’t even realized she was still wet. She didn’t even know she was cold up until that moment or that she was still wearing the laird’s cloak. Everything else but that kiss had evaporated from her mind. The kiss and the... the other thing. All that was left was the memory of the laird’s lips against hers, the way he had pulled her close.

He had brought her hand to his manhood. The memory sent a new wave of embarrassment through Fia, but she couldn’t deny it was coupled with an arousal so great that she was swaying on her feet. Never before had she felt such a rush of excitement, such a thrill. Even with Callum, whom she had thought she loved, the thought of laying with him had not been as exciting as the few moments she had shared with Laird Stuart.

But then he had apologized and withdrawn, and the ride back to the castle had been silent and awkward in a way nothing had ever been between them before. Doubt

gnawed at her. Laird Stuart had been very clear about his attraction towards her, but then he had dropped her off and disappeared, and Fia couldn't help but worry that he would avoid her from then on.

She couldn't have that, she had to make sure he did not go off her.

When Bane lit the fire, Fia grabbed a chair and dragged it closer to the flames, rubbing some warmth back into her arms.

“Sit,” she told him. “Ye need tae hear this.”

“I'll make ye some tea an' —”

“Bane, sit,” Fia insisted, and it was her tone which finally convinced him to take a seat next to her, looking at her expectantly.

“Well?”

Fia took a deep breath, steeling herself. Now that it was finally time to tell Bane, she found it difficult to speak, but if she didn't share this with him, she was certain she would burst.

“Laird Stuart kissed me.”

Bane, staring at her in absolute disbelief, choked on thin air.

Three days had passed with Knox never once seeing Fia, but he knew he would bump into her sooner or later. At least now he felt more comfortable, more at ease, the memory of that kiss and that touch buried deep in his mind, where he could safely ignore it.

He couldn't say the same about his attraction to Fia. That only grew with every passing day, no matter how hard he tried to focus his energy and attention on other things. Often, at night, it was all he could think about, having Fia for himself. Now that she was sitting down the length of the table at dinner, it was difficult to remember why he wanted to avoid her in the first place.

It had been Effie's request. She had wanted Fia there, and of course, wherever Fia went, Bane followed.

Knox watched the two of them as they chatted. He watched as Bane grabbed the pieces of turnip from Fia's plate and replaced them with some of his potatoes. He watched as she poured some of her wine in his cup.

He watched the little touches they exchanged, so painfully familiar, the two of them moving around each other with such practiced ease, the kind that came after years of living with someone.

Next to him, Magnus was speaking, but Knox hadn't heard any of it. His attention was solely focused on Fia and Bane, and it wasn't until Magnus snapped his fingers in front of his face that Knox dragged his attention to him, gaze still distant.

"What?" Knox asked, much to Magnus' chagrin.

"I said there is an issue with the main gates," Magnus said, slowly this time as though he believed Knox could hardly understand him. "With the chains."

"I can help with that," Bane called from the other end of the table. "Are they gettin' rust?"

"Seems like it," said Magnus. "Ye should look at them when ye have the chance."

“On the morrow,” Bane promised. “I’ll dae it first thing.”

How terribly helpful o’ him.

It was a bitter thought, one Knox wished had never popped in his mind. He couldn’t help it, though. For all the reassurance he had received that there was nothing romantic between Fia and Bane, he was terribly jealous—now more than ever. He had tasted her lips and he couldn’t help but want more. He wanted anything he could get and he didn’t want Bane to stand in his way.

The rest of the dinner passed by in a blur. Knox hardly touched his food, but when everyone stood, he sprung into action, stopping Fia before she could leave.

“May I walk ye back tae the cottage, Miss MacKenzie?”

Fia glanced between him and Bane, and Knox cursed under his breath. Of course, she already had a chaperone for the way back, though she didn’t need one, seeing as they were inside the castle walls.

“I must head out tae the forge anyway,” said Bane before Knox could come up with an excuse. Either it was a blessed coincidence or Bane was removing himself from the situation, which though reassuring, was confusing to Knox. “I’ll see ye later, Fia. Me laird.”

With a bow, Bane was gone and Fia was free to accept Knox’s company. He offered her his arm and a shiver ran down his spine when she took it, the light weight of it a comfort like no other.

The two of them walked in silence for a while in the courtyard, Knox taking the long way around just so that they could spend some more time together. The stars were bright that night; shining pinpricks of light pushing through the sparse clouds. The air

was crisp and Knox was glad to have an excuse to hold Fia close, the two of them sharing their body heat. Once again, the silence that stretched between them was comfortable, nothing like the one they had shared on the way back from the lake.

Still, neither of them had mentioned that day. Knox didn't know whether he should say something or let it fade from memory as much as he could, and so he refrained from bringing it up just in case. He doubted Fia would say anything on the matter anyway. Surely, it was even more uncomfortable for her, since she had been the one to endure his advances.

Then there was also the matter of Bane. Knox tried to hold his tongue; he really did. And yet, just as they were nearing the cottage, his jealousy got the better of him.

"Bane... surely, he must be meeting with a lass, right?" he asked, trying to be casual about it.

Fia shook her head. "Nay, he would have told me."

Knox didn't like that one bit, nor was it the answer he had been expecting. "Right, well, are ye certain it isnae because he is already in love with... another lassie?"

Fia looked at him with a small, confused frown. It took her a few moments to understand what it was he was trying to imply, but when she did, her eyes widened comically and she came to a sudden stop. Then, she hesitated, and Knox could almost see the gears in her head turning as she considered his question.

"He wouldnae," she said, and though she sounded entirely convinced of it, Knox still wasn't.

"How are ye so certain?" he insisted.

“Because... because he doesnae like lasses!”

Immediately, Fia clamped a hand over her mouth as though she was shocked by her own confession. Knox was shocked, too, and he stared at her in disbelief for a few moments, trying to sort out his thoughts as best as he could.

He doesnae like lasses? What does he like?

Lads?

“Och,” Knox said, the thought bouncing around in his mind again and again. He didn’t know what to make of it. He had heard of such cases, but he had never met someone like that before—someone who was attracted to the same gender. It came as a surprise to say the least, and now that he knew the truth, he had trouble coming up with the right thing to say.

Under any other circumstances, perhaps he would have been quick to judge, but Bane was a good man. And even he could admit it, after having spent the entire time he had known him being jealous of him. Besides, Fia adored him and if nothing else, he didn’t want to say anything that would offend her.

It was strange. It wasn’t something Knox had considered before, but he supposed it hardly changed anything. Bane was still Bane and the fact that he preferred the same sex only meant that Knox truly had no competition.

“Please, dinnae say anythin’ tae anyone,” Fia said, grabbing both of Knox’s hands and holding them in a bruising grip. “Promise me ye willnae, me laird. It could be dangerous fer him. An’ promise me ye willnae say anythin’ tae him either, fer he wouldnae forgive me fer it.”

Knox nodded immediately, carried away by Fia’s panic. “O’ course I willnae,” he

promised. "His secret is safe with me, Fia. An' please... call me Knox now."

It felt right. He didn't want this useless formality to separate them any longer.

"Knox," Fia said quietly in the small space between them. It was only then that Knox realized how close they were to each other, sharing the same breath.

All he had to do to kiss her was bridge that small gap, press their lips together once more. He leaned closer and closer, slowly, giving her the time to pull away, but she stayed right where she was, waiting for him.

"Me laird! I'm so glad I found ye!"

A guard's voice startled Knox and he and Fia pulled back from each other immediately, putting a great distance between them. The sudden cold made him shiver, his body already missing Fia's warmth.

"There's been another report," said the guard. "Mr. MacLeod requests yer presence."

With a sigh, Knox pinched the bridge of his nose. It couldn't have been worse timing, but duty called and he couldn't ignore it. It could be an important report. It could be something that would change the tide of the conflict, and his first duty was to the clan.

"Forgive me," he told Fia. "I must tend tae this."

"It's nae problem," she assured him. In the moonlight, her cheeks were flushed and her lips a soft pink, and Knox still ached to kiss them. "I understand. There is nae need tae apologize."

"Ye can walk back the rest o' the way on yer own?"

“Och aye,” said Fia. “Thank ye.”

With one last smile, Knox turned around and followed the guard, but not before he gave one last glance to Fia to hold him over until he would see her again.

“Is this truly somethin’ fer which ye had tae call me?” Knox asked, looking at Magnus from behind his desk. As usual, they were in his study, sharing a pitcher of wine, but this time, Knox would much rather have been with Fia—from whom Magnus had separated him.

“Ye’re the one who said ye wish tae see all the reports yerself,” Magnus said, but the exaggerated innocence with which he spoke those words only made Knox suspect him even more.

“Did ye dae in on purpose?” he asked.

“What?” Magnus asked, scoffing. “Nay. What does that even mean?”

“Ye did it on purpose.”

A short silence stretched between them before Magnus threw his hands up in the air. “What dae ye think ye’re doin’? I see ye, Knox. I ken what ye want, an’ I must warn ye that ye must put an end tae it right the now. If it was just about bedding her I’d nae say a thing, but I believe that’s nae the case.”

“So it was on purpose,” Knox insisted.

“Aye, o’ course it was!” Magnus said, more exasperated than Knox had seen him in a long time. “I didnae want ye tae be gallivantin’ around with Miss MacKenzie!”

“We werenae gallivantin’ ,” Knox protested, although he didn’t know what kind of

word could describe what they were doing. “I was simply walkin’ her back tae her cottage.”

“Aye, is that all?” Magnus asked. “Naethin’ else happened?”

Knox didn’t even need to respond for Magnus to know the truth. The two of them knew each other well enough to have a mental catalogue of each other’s tells, and the moment he had asked the question, Knox had given himself away.

“See?” Magnus asked. “I kent it. Ye cannae hide it from me.”

“So what?” Knox demanded, leaning over his desk to stare at Magnus in a challenge. “What if I wanted tae take her back tae the cottage? What if I wanted tae kiss her?”

Magnus let out a long-suffering sigh as he collapsed back on his chair, all the air seemingly leaving him until he had completely deflated. “As I said, if this was naethin’ but a tryst, I wouldnae say a thing,” he said, shaking his head. “But I’ve seen how ye look at her. Ye’re very fond o’ her, are ye nae?”

Knox could hardly hide it. He was, indeed, very fond of Fia, to the point where he had even considered marriage—if only she had been born a noble girl.

“I am,” he admitted. “But that daesnae mean anythin’.”

“It daes,” Magnus insisted. “Ye ken the council will never allow somethin’ like this.”

Knox knew it well. He never expected his council to agree with such a marriage, and that was why any thought of it he had ever had about it was wishful thinking. Still, the idea clung in his mind like a leech clings to skin and it would not let him go.

“I ken that,” Knox reassured him. “I ken it. Dinnae fash. Let us talk about somethin’

else.”

He didn't want to confront this truth just yet, not fully. For a while longer, he wanted to live in the fantasy that he could have Fia, that the two of them could have their happily ever after. It wasn't only her looks or her wit which attracted him, though those attributes were attractive enough on their own. There was also that warmth about her and that vulnerability that she so often managed to hide, but which she just as often revealed around him. There was something special about it. There was something he could not resist.

And for as long as he could, he wanted to live in the belief that they could have something real.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The air around Knox was filled with the sounds of steel against steel. His calloused hands gripped his sword tightly, the force of each blow reverberating up his arm and rattling his bones. His brow was coated in sweat and the day's chill was almost pleasant on his heated skin.

Across from him in the training grounds, Magnus prepared another attack. Once again, their swords met when Knox parried it, each man taking a few steps back immediately after.

It had been a while since he had last trained with Magnus and he had missed it. Training on his own wasn't as entertaining and training with other soldiers wasn't usually a challenge like Magnus posed. He was one of the greatest soldiers the clan had ever seen, but it wasn't only a matter of skill. He was one of the few who fought him with everything he had, not caring that he was the laird of the clan. Everyone else seemed too meek to Knox, too scared that they would hurt him.

But Magnus was always ferocious in a fight.

"What are ye daein'?" Magnus asked, huffing out a breath. "Ye're distracted. If this was a real fight, I would have killed ye."

It was true that Knox was distracted. It wasn't simply the thought of Fia that kept his mind occupied, though that had plenty to do with the state of his concentration at that moment. What distracted him the most was, in fact, his concern over Alastair Gordon and the forces that had been spotted in their lands. Ever since that last report, they had

received nothing else, neither from Callum's group nor from the others, and Knox had started to become restless, wondering what it was that was keeping them from communicating. He had half a mind to go there himself, to see the camps with his own two eyes and maybe even stage an attack, but that was the impatience in him trying to take over. An attack on the camps would mean taking soldiers away from the castle, and he didn't want to risk leaving it with fewer defenses and no laird when an attack was imminent.

"Again," Magnus said, twisting the sword in his hand. He wouldn't take no for an answer, Knox knew, and so he charged at him, their swords clanging once again in the morning air.

For a while, they traded blows, moving fluidly around each other. After years of practicing together, they could easily predict the other's moves, each of them jumping out of the way just in time to avoid the other's blade and trying to find new and increasingly innovative ways to attack in a quest for victory.

The more vicious Magnus became with his attacks, the more Knox managed to focus on the fight. He had no other choice; it was either that or hurtling towards defeat and no matter how distracted and preoccupied he was, he didn't want to let Magnus win. It was an exhilarating fight. Knox's blood thrummed in his veins and his heart beat fast, adrenaline coursing through him and filling him with excitement.

A cry tearing its way out of Knox's throat, he attacked once more, his and Magnus' swords meeting violently, the force of the blow pushing them far from each other. Magnus laughed, beating a hand over his chest, his cheeks flushed red with enthusiasm.

"That's more like it!" he said, clearly pleased with Knox's renewed efforts.

"If I didnae ken any better, I would think ye're tryin' tae kill each other."

Knox glanced over his shoulder to see Bane there, standing at the very edges of the training grounds, watching, and a strange sense of duty overtook him. He didn't want Bane to feel excluded, even if his concern was unwarranted, considering that he and Fia were the only two people in the castle who knew the truth about him. Still, an image invaded Knox's mind—Bane, apart from everyone else, sitting all alone with no one around to turn to.

He couldn't help but call him over.

"If we had real swords, we would have killed each other a long time ago," Knox teased, turning his grin to Magnus. "Care tae join us, Bane?"

"Me?" Bane asked in surprise, clearly not expecting the invitation. Magnus seemed a little surprised, as well, though he said nothing on the matter. "Would that be alright?"

"O' course," said Knox. "Grab a sword."

It wasn't just the thought of Bane all alone and ostracized which had urged Knox to invite him to train. He also knew he had been unfair to him, constantly accusing him in his mind of trying to charm Fia and enter a relationship with her when he was simply looking out for her and being close to her like any brother would be. There was much for which he had to atone and the least he could offer Bane was his friendship.

After testing a few swords, Bane joined him and Magnus in the small, imaginary circle they had carved out for themselves. A few of the soldiers who were there gathered around to watch, all of them undoubtedly as curious as Knox was to see what Bane could do.

He was a peasant boy. Knox doubted he was very skilled with a sword, but with

enough training, anyone could make a decent swordsman.

His assumptions were promptly proven wrong.

Bane moved like the wind, light on his feet and with a fluid quality to his movements, wasting no time before his first attack. Knox barely had the time to counter it, caught by surprise as he was by the sudden show of skill, but when he did, Bane didn't give him the chance to counterattack or move out of range of his sword. He attacked again with deceptive strength, his sword clanging against Knox's again and again as the two of them danced around Magnus.

It was yet another pleasant surprise. Knox would have never guessed that someone like Bane would be such a worthy opponent, and he caught himself laughing as he took a few steps back to catch his breath, Bane mercifully allowing it.

"Well... why were ye hidin' such skill?" Knox asked, his chest heaving as he drew air into his lungs. "Are ye truly a blacksmith? Or are ye secretly a trained soldier?"

Bane laughed, shrugging a shoulder. "Trained, aye, but I'm nae soldier. I've never had any formal trainin' like ye, me laird, nor have I been part o' an army."

"Perhaps ye should," Magnus said, raising a curious eyebrow. "Ye have talent."

"Would ye consider it?" Knox asked. "Joinin' me army?"

Bane shook his head. "Nay. Forgive me, but me family is a family o' blacksmiths. That willnae change with me."

Knox raised his hands up in surrender, but the thought didn't entirely leave his head. He understood Bane's reluctance to leave the trade that his family had specialized in for years, but at the same time, he would be a fool to entirely neglect such a talented

fighter. There were plenty of good soldiers in his ranks, men who were well-versed in the art of sword-fighting, but there was always room for one more.

For a while, the three of them continued to train, with Bane showing more and more of his skill as they fought. What he lacked in proper technique, he made up for in speed and strength, matching that of Knox and Magnus. In the end, though, Knox managed to disarm him, sending his sword flying in an arc in the air before it landed a few steps away from him.

“I yield,” Bane said good-naturedly, just as the dull tip of Knox’s sword grazed his neck, and then, perhaps from a deep-rooted reflex to protect himself, stumbled back upon feeling the steel on his skin and promptly fell over.

The first thing he did was erupt in laughter, along with everyone around him. Knox offered him his hand, pulling him back up to his feet, and thought that perhaps, even if his secret became known, he wouldn’t have any troubles in the castle.

While he was lost in his thoughts, Bane and Magnus struck up a conversation, but Knox could hardly hear what they were saying. So focused was he on his quest to make Bane feel as comfortable as he could that everything the man said flew right past him, never to be absorbed by his mind.

As he watched him, he noticed that he was staring at another soldier who was just stepping into the training grounds, removing his shirt in the process. It was Arran, a young man with dark hair and eyes, his corded muscles on full display now and his grin as cocky as it was playful when he faced his opponent.

Knox narrowed his eyes. He supposed he could see it. Objectively, Arran was an attractive man.

“Bane,” Knox called, beckoning him closer. Bane glanced at him over his shoulder

and gave a nod to Magnus before approaching Knox, a smile on his face. “Dae ye like... that?”

Subtly, he nodded his head towards Arran, trying not to give anything away, but the enthusiasm with which Bane replied surprised him.

“Och aye!” he said. “Lovely, truly lovely.”

A hum escaped Knox before he could stop himself, as surprised as it was curious. Fia had asked him to say nothing on the matter, but Bane seemed perfectly at ease with it, neither embarrassed nor fearful of what others would say. If anything, he seemed rather excited to have someone to whom he could talk about this.

Daes Fia nae talk with him about lads? Or is it because she’s a lass herself?

If there was one thing Knox knew for certain, it was that it was much easier to talk to another man about women, so perhaps it was the same for Bane. Maybe he was more comfortable discussing such matters with other men than he was discussing them with women, especially when it came to the woman who was practically his sister.

Knox didn’t know if he was the right person for this. He was hardly an authority on what was lovely , as Bane had put it, on a man and he wouldn’t even know where to begin if Bane came to him for advice. But if nothing else, he could listen; he could be there for him if he needed someone to talk.

“Bonnie built,” Bane continued, and Knox found himself making a rather undignified, high-pitched noise of shock, one that he barely managed to suppress, but which Bane didn’t even seem to notice as he gazed longingly at Arran. There was no other way to describe that look he was giving him. Knox could even call it loving. “But it’s quite large, is it nae?”

It was Knox's turn to choke on thin air. It seemed that with every interaction they had, one of them ended up shocked and blushing, and it was now he who felt the heat creep up his face and all the way down to his chest, rendering him speechless for what seemed like eons.

Bane glanced at him with a small, confused frown. "Well... perhaps he's used tae it."

"Perhaps," was all Knox managed to say. On that chilly day, it suddenly felt as though he had been dropped into the flames of a volcano. Everything felt stifling hot and he had begun to perspire, sweat dripping down his temple as he tried his best to push the images Bane conjured out of his mind.

"Are ye alright, me laird?" Bane asked in concern, a hand reaching out to grab his shoulder.

Knox nodded firmly, gritting his teeth to stop himself from making another such undignified sound. "I just didnae ken ye would be so... open about this. Fia made it sound like ye never wished anyone tae find out."

Bane's frown only deepened at that, his confusion evident. "Find out what?"

Knox couldn't say it. He couldn't utter the words.

Please dinnae make me say it.

But the more Bane stared at him, the more Knox realized there was no end to his torment other than coming clean. He only hoped it wouldn't embarrass either of them more than it already had.

"That ye... that ye..."

“Aye?”

Knox leaned closer, dropping his voice to a whisper. “That ye like... ye ken,” his voice was mere whisper, “... lads.”

Bane’s head snapped to the side to stare at Knox, their faces suddenly so close that their noses brushed against each other. They seemed to realize it at the same time. Snatching his hand away as if he had been burned, Bane took several steps back and so did Knox, until they were suddenly too far from each other to even have a conversation.

I’m bein’ ridiculous! He’ll think I’m odd now!

“Listen—” said Knox.

“This isnae—” said Bane at the same time.

“It’s quite alright!” Knox assured him, hands waving wildly in front of him. “It was a surprise, but it’s... truly alright.”

“I was...” Bane said, his voice dropping low until Knox had to strain to hear it, “talkin’ about the sword.”

Knox dragged his gaze over to Arran and then to the sword in his hand. It was one of his own, an old sword with which he couldn’t bear to part and had dulled the blade so he could use it in practice—a beautiful blade indeed, well-balanced and once wickedly sharp, the craftsmanship of which a blacksmith could surely appreciate.

He was talkin’ about the sword!

Of course, he was talking about the sword! Even if he was attracted to Arran, he

wouldn't be so obvious about it! There could be consequences.

Knox cursed under his breath. He had surely made this awkward for Bane and he couldn't blame him if he never even wished to speak to him again, but he desperately wanted to fix it. Taking a few steps forward, he opened his lips to apologize, but he didn't even know how to start.

Now he had done it. The look on Bane's face was one of equal measures of confusion and betrayal, his emotions laid bare for Knox and the whole world to see. Guilt coiled deep in his stomach at the thought that not only had he betrayed Fia's trust by revealing to Bane that he knew the truth, but he had also chipped away some of the trust Bane had for Fia. Surely, Bane didn't trust him either now, not anymore, not when he had spoken about something like this in front of everyone—even if he had made sure no one would hear him.

There were people in the clan who, had they heard this conversation, would have done their best to throw Bane in the street.

"Excuse me," said Bane, already backtracking, walking backwards away from Knox and the training grounds. "There is... somethin' I must dae."

Before Knox could say another word, Bane fled, handing his sword to one of the soldiers standing by. It was then that Magnus saw Knox, standing there, dejected and embarrassed beyond any measure, and paused his practice to walk over to him.

"What just happened?" he asked, glancing between Knox and Bane's retreating back.

Knox sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "When God was blessin' the world with sense," he said, "I was standin' under an awnin'."

"By God's bones, why did Laird Stuart think I feel attracted tae... nae lassies?"

Och nay... how did he find out?

Fia froze where she was bent over the workbench, arranging some tools. The healer's cottage was blessedly empty save for her and Bane, but then again, had there been others there, then Bane wouldn't have started this conversation and Fia would have been all the happier for it. She turned around slowly, swallowing in a dry throat, only to flinch when she saw the rage in Bane's eyes.

She had seen that look once before, when she had strayed too far from home one day and he and Tav couldn't find her. His concern for her, though, had tempered his rage that day. Now, there was nothing to offset it and Fia was about to receive the full extent of his ire.

"Bane—"

"Nay," said Bane sharply and immediately, Fia's mouth snapped shut. She gulped audibly; her gaze lowered to the floor. "Nae excuses. Just tell me the truth."

Fia took in a deep, steadying breath. She didn't even know where to start with this, since she hadn't even planned to tell Laird Stuart this lie. It had just been the first thing to pop to her mind so that she could reassure him there was nothing between her and Bane, and it had simply snowballed from there.

"Laird Stuart was very curious about us," she said carefully, picking each word with intent. "Naye matter what I told him, he didnae believe that we dinnae see each other romantically at all. Ye've seen how he is. If I wanted me plan tae succeed, I had tae tell him somethin'."

"An' so ye decided tae tell him I like... ye ken!" Bane couldn't even finish the sentence, throwing his hands up in the air in exasperation. It was a familiar sight for Fia. It seemed to her as though she brought him to this state often. "Was that the only

solution ye could think of?”

“I didnae mean tae!” Fia protested, but even that was weak. She truly had no good excuse; all of this had come to be because she was too scared to let Knox know the truth but also too scared to do anything that would jeopardize their relationship. Now, she had nestled each lie within another lie, until everything had become so convoluted that there was no way out of it. She had dug herself into a hole, but the worst part was that she wasn’t in there alone. She had dragged Bane with her, and the guilt gnawed at her insides, bringing forth a wave of nausea. “Forgive me, Bane, but it was simply the first thing tae come tae mind. I didnae mean tae say it, but then it was suddenly too late.”

Bane sighed, shaking his head as he began to pace back and forth in front of the cottage door. He started to speak, then stopped, then started once again, but no sounds came past his lips other than a frustrated groan.

“Ye’ve made such a mess o’ things,” he said. “Just as I kent ye would. What if he was deeply religious, felt offended and threw me out of the castle fer bein’ a sinner? Or worse, if the laird had thrown me in the dungeons fer sodomy?! I told ye this was a terrible plan.”

It was true, Fia thought. In her attempts to charm the laird, she may have succeeded, but she had also fallen into her own trap. She, too, had been charmed by him. She had fallen for him and his gentle manner, his handsome appearance, his kindness and generosity. Before arriving at the castle, she had thought it would be easy to make him fall for her while remaining in control, impassive, unaffected by his emotions for her, but in the end, she had been nothing but a fool.

Being favored by such a man was flattering to say the least. Fia had been foolish to think she could have tricked him without tricking herself.

It was also true that she had placed Bane in great danger, without even thinking anything of it. She had never once stopped to think what would happen to Bane if Laird Stuart couldn't stomach the thought of a sodomite in his castle. She had never thought that, devout as he was, he could hate Bane for it, throw him out in the streets, or even have him hanged.

How could I nae think about Bane's safety at all? How could I put him in such danger without a second thought?

Fia truly didn't know what had possessed her, but the guilt she felt now was almost enough for her to drown in it. Tears welled up in her eyes, the thought that she had not only risked Bane's life but that she had also disappointed him weighing heavy in her conscience.

"I ken that," she said as she threw herself in the nearest chair, and she must have looked so pitiful for Bane to let go of some of his anger and approach her, crouching down before her and placing his hands on her shoulders. "I dae now. An' I... I dinnae ken how tae fix it, Bane. I... I think I'm fallin' fer him, me plan be damned. I couldnae care less fer me plan! I never thought I would be but... ach! I'm such a fool!"

"Ye're nae a fool," Bane said gently, though he didn't sound entirely convincing to Fia. "Ye dae foolish things sometimes, but ye're nae a fool. Perhaps it's time tae tell him the truth. Tell him about yer plan an' how ye feel an' be done with it all."

Fia shook her head, terrified and wide-eyed. "Nay," she said. She couldn't get the image of Callum out of her head, laughing at her as though the year they had spent together had been nothing but a drawn-out, elaborate lie. She couldn't forget the humiliation, the despair that came with it.

She couldn't allow herself any more of that humiliation.

“Please... please, can ye simply... just dinnae dae anythin’, ok?” Fia asked. “An’ I’ll dae me best tae stay away from the laird. I cannae tell him the truth, Bane. I cannae. He will hate me.”

She couldn’t tell him the truth, but she also couldn’t keep doing what she had been doing this whole time. Laird Stuart was a good man; he didn’t deserve to be deceived like this. As much as it pained Fia, she knew the only way forward was to forget her plan entirely and pretend none of this had ever happened. With time, the pain of losing him would surely fade, like all things did.

Until then, she would have to avoid him as much as she could, which shouldn’t be a difficult task. She was only a healer and he was the laird. Their paths never needed to cross again.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Undignified as it was for a man of his status, Knox found himself searching for Fia at all times of the day, whenever he wasn't busy with clan matters. Ever since she had first come to the castle, there hadn't been a single day he hadn't seen her, and yet five days had passed without him seeing her at all. He only managed to catch glimpses of her around corners and in the courtyard, but the moment she spotted him, she suddenly always had something to do .

She was avoiding him; there was no other explanation.

It must be because o' Bane. He must have told her what happened an' now she doesnae wish tae talk tae me.

Knox couldn't blame her. She had specifically asked him to say nothing, neither to anyone else nor to Bane himself, and he had almost instantly done the exact opposite. Why did he have to go ahead and speak at all? He should have kept his mouth shut and then none of that would have happened.

I hope I havenae offended either o' them terribly. But how can I even apologize fer it?

Knox thought that perhaps he could give them a gift as a gesture of goodwill and as an apology, but he didn't know what that gift could possibly be. Then, he thought of doing his best to track them both down and apologize in person, but even then, he worried he would only make things worse. A part of him wondered if he should perhaps allow some more time to pass until it was all more or less forgotten and they

could all move on from it, but that seemed like the worst of his options. What if the more he waited, the worse the situation became? What if Bane and Fia were simply stewing in rage, wondering why he wasn't even offering them an apology?

The chaos of his thoughts almost drove him mad. He was constantly distracted, at dinner, in his meetings, and now, in practice, which had earned him a wound on the arm. It was a small one, and not particularly deep, but it warranted a healer's attention, and so Knox made his way to the cottage, hoping he would find Effie there.

But instead of Effie, he only found Fia.

When she saw him at the door, she froze, a small bunch of herbs getting crushed between her fingers. Knox couldn't help but wonder if she was imagining his head in the herbs' place, getting squeezed to death.

"Me laird," she said stiffly, giving him a curtsy. At least she seemed to have gotten the hang of that, Knox thought, as she was now much more graceful than when she had first come to the castle. It didn't escape Knox's notice, though, that she had gone back to using his title, as though he had never given her permission to call him by his first name. "Is there somethin' the matter?"

"Aye," said Knox, clearing his throat awkwardly. "Is Effie nae here?"

Fia shook her head. "She's gone tae the village. Can I help ye?"

Knox hesitated, considering the possibility of waiting for Effie to return, but in the end, he didn't want to risk an infection. The swords they used to train were not particularly clean, and debris had already fallen in the wound.

"I cut meself trainin'," he said, turning so Fia could see the wound that was half-hidden under his sleeve. "I dinnae wish tae bother ye, but I thought?—"

“It’s nae a bother,” Fia said, cutting him off. “Please, take a seat.”

Knox did as he was told, sitting down on a chair near the workbench. He watched Fia in silence as she flitted about the room, getting clean cloth and a few jars and putting a pot of water over the fire to warm it, before she approached him to take a look at the wound.

“Could ye... remove yer shirt, please?” she asked, her voice timid and quiet.

Och, o’ course. She cannae dae it through the shirt.

He didn’t know why the request surprised him so much. He had simply thought that after all that time Fia had been avoiding him, it would be the last thing she would ask of him, but he reminded himself that this was not Fia, the woman he had kissed, but rather Fia, the castle healer. It was her duty to take care of him regardless of what was happening between them.

Swiftly, Knox removed his shirt, bunching it up and holding it in his lap. His fingers toyed nervously with the edges of the fabric, twisting and pinching it as Fia leaned closer and took a careful look at his wound, prodding it with gentle touches.

That first touch after so many days of distance was like a flame against Knox’s skin, igniting his entire body.

Desperately, he tried to shift his focus from Fia’s touch to anything else that could distract him. He gazed around the room, taking in the small details he had seen a hundred times before but never truly noticed—the way the sunlight danced in the glass jars that Effie had stacked on the shelf, the scent of the herbs that permeated every inch of the room, the small, shallow crack in the wood of his chair. None of it was enough to distract him from Fia for long, though, and eventually, he caught himself staring at her as she worked, taking in her bold, striking features.

He had begun to think that his earlier assessment had been incorrect. There was, in fact, no other woman like Fia and though it was a difficult realization to make, now that he could recognize it, he hoped there was something he could do about it.

Is it truly so bad tae desire her? Would the council be so opposed?

After all, regardless of her pedigree, she was a healer and that position came with a certain prestige. If he explained to the council that he had fallen for her, if he tried to make them see that she would make an excellent Lady of the Clan, with her caring and gentle nature, then...

But nay, how would they ever accept this? I was never meant tae wed fer love.

All this power in me hands an' I cannae even decide whom I will wed.

What good was it, having all that influence when he was bound to be trapped in so many other ways? For someone who was in charge of an entire clan, his own freedom was so limited that sometimes he wished he had been born a peasant instead.

When Fia finished dressing his wound, she finally looked up and caught him staring, but Knox didn't avert his gaze. If nothing else, he at least wanted to know if she was still avoiding him and why. Was it because of Bane? Was it because of the kiss? Perhaps it was a combination of the two, and Knox had the urge to apologize for both, but he found himself speechless as he gazed into her bright green eyes. For a moment, it seemed to him as though they were suspended in time—frozen, both unable to utter what they truly wanted to say and yet sharing an understanding so profound and deep that words were unnecessary.

Breaking that silence also came naturally. "Thank ye," he said, and even he was surprised by how soft and warm he sounded. He could neither deny nor hide his feelings for Fia anymore. From the moment he had first met her, he had been doomed

to fall for her.

There was a second when Knox thought Fia would let him kiss her. When it seemed to him that the past few days didn't matter at all and everything between them had shifted, Fia's avoidance and hesitation removed by this simple moment of connection. Her eyes, slightly wide, sparkling in the morning sun, were pinned to him, her gaze dancing between his eyes and his lips.

But then she pulled back from him abruptly, putting so much space between them that Knox suddenly felt the cold draft from the window surrounding him.

Had he been mistaken, after all? But no, it couldn't be. He could tell Fia felt drawn to him, too. He could feel it in his bones.

"That should be enough," Fia said as she began to clean up her working space. "If there is any pain or signs o' infection, please make sure tae tell me or Effie."

With a sigh, Knox leaned back on his seat, simply watching her as she hurried around the room for a short while, before finally giving in and giving up. He put on his shirt once more and stood; it was clear to him there would be no further conversation.

"I will," he assured her as he walked to the door. "Thank ye again, Fia. I hope tae see ye soon."

At those last words, she froze for just a split second, her hesitation almost imperceptible. As she looked away from him, Knox shook his head to himself, concern and doubt creeping into his mind, coiling like a snake around him. Even as he retreated, Fia never once glanced back at him, too absorbed in whatever she was doing at the workbench.

Before he left, he glanced at her once last time and the distance between them seemed

to stretch into the length of the sea.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“ W hy dae we always come tae these things?” Bane mumbled as he and Fia walked into the great hall that night to celebrate the birth of the son of one of the council members.

Fia couldn't help but ask herself the same thing; neither of them was familiar with the man and though some of the other castle workers, like the blacksmith and the marshal, were also in attendance, Fia didn't know why the laird insisted on inviting her and Bane when they clearly didn't blend in with the rest of the crowd. Perhaps in a few years, if they managed to retain their positions for that long, they would be able to walk among the nobles with the same grace and knowledge of customs, but as it were, now they stuck out like a sore thumb, not so much because of their more humble, plainer clothing, but rather because they themselves didn't feel like they belonged there at all.

The entire great hall buzzed with excitement and conversation and laughter, the ladies dressed in colorful garments and jewels that glittered under the light of the chandeliers and the candelabras. The men, too, wore their finest clothes, and though for them it was just another feast, Fia couldn't even begin to imagine how much such clothes could cost and how many mouths they could feed instead of using all that gold for ornamentation. The wine flowed freely around the tables, which seemed to buckle under the weight of all the food placed atop them. The musicians played tirelessly, filling the room with their sweet, lively tunes, and under any other circumstances, Fia may have enjoyed herself immensely, just as she had at the feasts held in the village.

This was not her village, though, and those people weren't her neighbors. More than ever, she was acutely aware of the difference between herself and them, especially when she realized that she and Bane were drawing the gazes of the nobles around them, who openly stared. Never once did they try to hide it. Never once did they stop to think that they were making the two of them uncomfortable, unwelcoming as they were.

But they had been invited there, and so there they were trying their best to brave the storm.

"It's fine," said Fia, swallowing around the knot in her throat. The only lifeline she had was Bane, but with him, too, in such a state, it was impossible for them to calm each other. They only ended up feeding off each other's nervousness, and she could only hope that the whole affair wouldn't last too long.

Maybe we can slip away undetected. Why would anyone even pay any attention now that we have made an appearance?

The nobles wouldn't care about them leaving early. She doubted any of them would even notice, absorbed as they were in their own conversations and their own worlds. She and Bane would only have to be present for a short while, just long enough to honor the council member and his wife, and then they could disappear without a word to anyone.

Or at least it would have been that simple, Fia thought, had Laird Stuart not spotted them right away upon their arrival.

Fia cursed under her breath. She had hoped that Knox would keep his distance after everything that had happened between them, but even now, he was walking towards her with a smile on his face, as though she had never once acted cold and distant towards him.

Did he not care about her behavior at all, she wondered? Did he not mind that she had done everything in her power to avoid him and make it known that she didn't wish to be around him?

Or had she only been fooling herself? Maybe her attempts at avoiding him had not been as clear or as forceful as she liked to think and she was, in fact, too weak and too lovelorn to make it clear that she wanted him to stay away.

When did I start trying tae push him away instead of pulling him closer?

"Welcome," said Laird Stuart as he reached them, giving them both a small bow of the head in greeting. Fia and Bane bowed to him, though deeper, befitting a laird. Fia was only glad that she had managed to get the hang of a curtsy without embarrassing herself anymore. Slowly yet steadily, she was becoming a proper inhabitant of the castle.

Once, she would have marveled at such a thought. She would have worked tirelessly for it, for a chance to become an integral and inextricable part of the castle, but now she didn't know if it was something she wanted anymore. She missed her home, the village, or rather, she missed the simplicity of living there and this feeling that she truly belonged, that she was among her people. She had gone to the castle for all the wrong reasons and she was realizing it more every day.

"Thank ye fer invitin' us, me laird," said Fia as she tried to pull herself together. Thinking about the village and her old life didn't serve her at that moment. She had made her choice and she had to follow through. "It is truly a lovely feast."

"I'm glad ye're enjoyin' it," said Knox. "Please... take a seat, have some food an' wine. The cooks have been workin' all day preparin'."

Days rather, Fia thought. There was no way they could have prepared all that food in

merely a day, but of course, Laird Stuart couldn't know that.

Even as she and Bane took their seats at the very edges of the room, next to some minor nobles, Laird Stuart seemed to be staying close by. He was still milling about the tables, talking to and entertaining his guests, but Fia could feel his gaze on her like a beam of light that always followed her, no matter how she moved.

She couldn't help but fidget under the attention, indirect as it was. She couldn't sit still on the wooden bench, nor could she focus on the people around her, only half-hearing what one of the women at the table was telling her.

"Did ye ken, Miss MacKenzie is from Duror," the woman told another guest, the man who sat across from her and next to Bane.

"From Duror?" the man asked. "How odd fer such a dreary place tae produce such a lovely lass."

"What is the matter with Duror?"

Fia spoke before she could stop herself, drawing all the gazes around her towards her. Bane shifted uncomfortably next to her, his gaze flitting back and forth between her and the man, who was now stammering, trying to come up with something to say.

"Naethin', o' course," he said, raising his hands up in surrender. "I merely meant that it is nae quite as nice as Castle Stuart."

"Aye," said Fia bitterly. "'Tis rather kent that castles are, in fact, nicer than poor villages."

Silence settled heavily over the table, but she couldn't bring herself to care. She had heard so many comments while there. She had received so many stares, so many

questioning looks. She knew she and Bane didn't fit in at all among all those opulent men and women, but she didn't need to be reminded of it every second of every day. Sometimes, it felt as though Callum was still there, lingering over her shoulder, reminding her just how worthless and meaningless she was.

Before anyone could add anything, Knox appeared in her peripheral vision as though he had been summoned or as if he could feel the charged energy at their table. He sauntered over with the confidence and ease of a man who knew he would have the last word in any argument in the room. But just as Fia thought he would try to calm the nobles with soothing words, he instead offered his hand to her.

“May I have this dance, Miss MacKenzie?”

A collective gasp echoed through the table. Fia had to admit that she was just as shocked as the nobles at being asked by the laird himself to dance, but how could she reject him when everyone was watching? There was no avoiding it. She had no choice but to accept the hand offered to her and stand, just as a lively song began to play.

What is he thinkin'!

“I dinnae ken how tae dance,” she hissed as Knox pulled her towards the area cleared for the dancers in attendance. All the dances she knew were the ones they danced together in the village and she had no idea how he expected her to follow him without tripping all over herself.

“That's alright,” he assured her. “I'll show ye.”

Fia cursed under her breath. She was going to make a fool of herself in front of everyone, even in front of Knox himself. If she had the nobles' attention before, it would be even worse now. In her mind, she could already hear their whispers,

ridiculing her behind her back.

She didn't even realize when they reached the dance floor, Knox placing a hand on her waist and pulling her close. Suddenly, she was surrounded by twirling people, flashes of color bursting in the corners of her eyes as the others moved around them. He had pulled her in the middle of the dance floor, where they were bound to bump into everyone else, and Fia could only wish that the ground would open up and swallow her whole before she had a chance to make a fool of herself completely.

"Relax," Knox said in a soft voice. "I've got ye. Dinnae fash."

Knox sounded so confident and so earnest that Fia had no choice but to believe him. His hands were strong where he held her, his chest a solid heat against her body, and she had to admit that even if she felt terribly exposed in front of such a big crowd, Knox gave her a sense of safety and comfort amidst this unfamiliar scene.

Moving with grace, surefooted and gentle in his guidance, Knox pulled Fia along through the small crowd of dancers. All she had to do was let him take the lead as he spun and twirled her around the room, not only confident in his movements but also exhibiting a strength that took Fia's breath away.

He could move her like she weighed nothing, his touch gentle yet firm, his feet moving seemingly of their own accord. Fia could imagine him in a fight, moving with the same grace, the same ease, taking down opponents as easily as he could dance her around the room.

At a particularly vivid part of the motive, Fia suddenly realized how close they were to each other. Their noses almost brushed with every step they took, their breaths mingling; every touch felt like a flame against her body, even through all the layers of clothing that separated them, and his gaze was locked on hers, neither of them able to look away from each other.

It was as though everything else had faded away—the guests, the food, even the room itself. Fia couldn't even hear the music anymore, lost as she was in those intimate moments with the laird.

A pit opened up in her stomach, larger and hungrier than any she had ever felt before. Dread gripped her at the thought that she had been lying to the laird for this long and now they were dancing together, he none the wiser and she drowning in her guilt. She had promised herself that she would stay far away from him. She had promised herself that the plan with which she had come to the castle would be abandoned and that no matter what, she would make sure Laird Stuart didn't fall for her.

And yet now that she was in his arms, staring into the deep blue of his eyes, tearing herself away from him was a herculean task. For the first time in her life, she felt truly desired. For the first time, someone other than her closest family had looked at her and decided that she was worth the effort, that she deserved something good.

I wish I could blame this whole mess on Callum but I cannae... It's all me fault!

"Excuse me," she said, the words tumbling past her lips hurriedly as she pulled herself back from Knox and took a few stumbling steps backwards. As she did, she fell into another dancing couple behind her, making them lose their footing, but she didn't stay there long enough to see if they were ok. Mumbling an apology that was drowned out by the loud music, she fled the room, desperate for some fresh air—and for some distance between her and the laird.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Knox stood in the middle of the dance floor alone, staring at the space Fia had only just occupied. The people around him stared at her retreating back as well and then threw some furtive glances at him, and he knew they were all thinking the same thing—how could anyone leave the laird of the clan like this alone on the dancefloor, especially a girl of such low status?

But that wasn't what Knox was thinking. He didn't care if Fia was a peasant girl. He didn't care if everyone else thought she didn't fit in the castle or in his life. Why should any of the girls with whom he had been presented in the past be any better in his eyes just because they were noble born? Fia had the kind of strength of character that was rare among people, and it was that which mattered to him; not her pedigree, not her lack of wealth or formal education, not even her resistance to this new way of life. All this time, he had been concerned about what other people would say if he pursued her, but that had only driven her away from him.

He was not going to make the same mistake again.

Rushing after her, Knox spilled out into the courtyard. It was dark there, the sky above an inky black, the stars covered by the thick clouds that had gathered over the castle. The only source of illumination were the torches that lined the castle walls, but they were not enough to bathe the entire courtyard in light, and so it took Knox a few moments for his eyes to adjust and see that Fia was quickly walking towards the gardens, her stride long and fast.

He should have known she would be heading there. Running to catch up to her, Knox

felt his shoes sink into the soft, damp ground. The night smelled of petrichor from the rain that had fallen that afternoon, and he knew there was a storm approaching, the air chilling his cheeks as he ran.

He only came to a halt when he saw Fia sitting on a bench by the gardens. There, the air was more fragrant, saturated with the scent of flowers and herbs, and she took a deep breath, her chest rising and falling slowly as Knox watched her.

She hadn't seen him. For a moment, he was reluctant to approach her, to intrude in her moment of calm, but then he couldn't stop himself. He had to talk to her. He had to make her understand that no matter what anyone else said, she was the most precious thing to him.

When he joined her on the bench, Fia didn't give him any sign of acknowledgement, which made him wonder if perhaps she had, in fact, noticed him but had refrained from showing it in the hopes that he would leave her alone. Now that he was there, he wasn't sure what to say to her.

What did one say in such a situation? With how she had been treating him, he didn't even know if she wanted to listen to what he had to say not. Sometimes, Knox thought she had to be feeling the same for him as he did for her, but other times he couldn't help but wonder if he had imagined it all, if he had fallen for her so suddenly and so completely that he had overlooked all the signs and had taken her kindness and politeness as something more than it was.

But no, he couldn't be this mistaken. He knew Fia wanted him just as much as he wanted her. He knew it in his bones and no matter how much she denied it, he knew it to be true.

In the end, he didn't have to be the one to speak. Fia spoke first, her voice wavering with uncertainty.

“Forgive me fer bein’ so blunt, me laird, but what is it that ye seek from me?” she asked, her gaze glued to the far wall. No matter how Knox angled himself, she refused to meet his gaze. “I’m naethin’ but a healer. I’m a peasant lass an’ that is what I will always be. I’m far beneath yer station an’ askin’ me tae dance in front o’ all those people... ye can only imagine what they will be sayin’ about me now.”

It was true that people talked, as much as Knox hated to admit it. Even now that he was gone from the room, whispers were bound to surface, his guests wondering why he had run after her and why she had fled in the first place. He had the luxury to not care about any of those whispers or whatever rumors would end up spreading around the castle. But Fia didn’t. Knox could and would protect her from it all. He would take the blame for everything; he could request that his people and his staff stop talking about her behind her back. He would do anything to have her, sparing no one who got in his way.

“It daesnae matter tae me,” he told her, reaching for her hand and grabbing it tightly between his. It was then that Fia finally turned to look at him, her eyes wide at the sudden burst of passion he had shown. He was more reserved than this usually; he had been trained to keep his composure at all times, after all, but with Fia around him, he found that he could hardly control himself and his emotions. They all poured out of him as though a dam had burst inside him, leaving every thought, every feeling to rush out of him unbridled and unprotected. “It daesnae and it never did. Why should I care what anyone else thinks? All I care about is ye.”

He had hardly finished his sentence before he surged forward and kissed Fia, pulling her close, his lips pressing firmly against hers. At first, she froze and Knox feared she would push him away and reject him, insisting that they couldn’t be together, but then she let out a soft sigh, sagging in his arms.

And he knew he finally had her.

The last thing Fia had expected was that kiss, which shook her to her core. She had an entire speech prepared for the laird, to try and explain to him why he should care about what others said and to point out that they could never truly be together. Not only had she lost all faith in her plan after meeting the laird's council, as she couldn't bring herself to believe that they would ever allow a marriage between the two of them, but she had also abandoned the entire thought, knowing such a marriage would be based on lies and deception and revenge. It wasn't what Fia wanted for him. Despite everything, she had begun to fall for him and she knew that Laird Stuart didn't deserve such treatment.

And she didn't deserve a man as kind and trusting as him.

When he kissed her, though, her attempt to convince herself to pull back from him was feeble at best. The way he kissed her, the way he held her through it all was intoxicating, the brush of his lips making the entire world spin around her. Never before had she felt desire like this; not for Callum nor for anyone else. When Callum had kissed her the first time, she had been filled with joy at being chosen by someone like him, but now that feeling paled in comparison to the sheer passion and need of the kiss she shared with Knox.

It was as though his lips were the flint to the fire that was ignited within her, liquid fire rushing through her veins with every touch. Knox devoured her mouth like a starving man, giving her no chance to breathe or to think about what she was doing.

It was only when she felt the hard press of his length against her thigh as he moved closer that Fia finally convinced herself to pull back from him, pushing a hand into his chest when he tried to follow. For a moment, she was taken by the sight of him like that —his dark hair mussed by her hands, his eyes wild, shining with arousal, his lips slick and reddened. It was easy, tempting, to imagine him in the throes of passion, taking Fia as he so clearly wished, but she had put a stop to it.

No man had ever touched her and no one would until she was married. She wasn't going to change her mind, not even for the laird.

"I... I cannae," she said. "I've never?—"

Knox tilted his head to the side for a moment, as if confused. It took him a short while to realize what it was Fia was trying to tell him, and the surprise at the realization was written plainly on his handsome features, much to Fia's chagrin.

"Did ye think I would be... experienced?" she asked. Was that why he wanted her so much? Was she nothing more than another body to him, someone he could use to pleasure himself?

"I didnae—" Knox said, but then seemed to be at a loss for words. Fia stared at him in shock, her mouth hanging slightly open, but he was quick to continue even as he stammered in his attempt to find the right words. "I didnae mean tae offend ye! Or tae assume! I only thought..."

"Ye only thought that because girls who are nae noble often dae it, I would too," she mumbled. She supposed he had a point; Callum had told her plenty of times that every girl in the village had relations with men and she was the only one who was keeping herself pure as if she was a noble-born. But Fia had long since made up her mind to save herself for her husband.

"It is only natural," said Laird Stuart, leaning a little closer even as he pulled his hips away from her so that his manhood wasn't pressing into her thigh. It was a gesture that didn't pass unnoticed, and Fia was grateful for it. "But I understand, and if it isnae somethin' ye want, then I willnae even consider it."

Relief washed over Fia then. There was no mockery in the laird's voice nor did she detect any sign of him lying. He was the perfect gentleman—much more so than

Callum had ever been. And even though she wouldn't consider laying with him, she was more than willing to kiss him.

With a hand on the back of his neck, Fia pulled him close once more, this time initiating the kiss. At the first contact between their lips, Knox moaned softly, sending another wave of heat through Fia's body. It was difficult to remember why she was saving herself when someone like the laird was so willing to share the night with her. She could imagine all of his moans, his sighs, the way he would look at her as he would sink deep inside her. She could imagine the way he would her kiss all over her body, touching her where she had only dared to touch herself once or twice in her life.

She didn't realize that as they kissed and as she imagined all those things, she was moving restlessly against the laird, trying to get some sort of relief, quiet moans tumbling from her lips. It wasn't until the laird chuckled against her lips and pulled back just enough to look at her that she noticed what she was doing, embarrassment flooding through her and turning her cheeks a bright red.

"Ye ken... there are other ways fer me tae bring ye pleasure without ruinin' ye?" he asked, his hand coming up to cradle her cheek. Fia leaned into the touch, her breath hitching as she met his heated gaze. "Dae ye want that? Dae ye want me tae touch ye?"

Fia had heard of such ways but had never given them much thought. Now, though, she couldn't get them out of her mind. Not only was she curious to see what it would feel like to be touched by a man, but her need for him threatened to overwhelm her and she couldn't resist the idea of him bringing her this pleasure.

Quietly, she nodded and Knox groaned as he leaned in for another kiss, the hand that cradled her cheek now travelling slowly down her body—first to brush against her neck, then to grab onto her breast, his fingers closing around the small swell of it, and

then even lower, down her stomach and finally under her dress. The laird's fingers skimmed over her calf, her thigh, and then, just as he pulled her legs apart with his free hand, brushed against her folds.

Fia gasped, her entire body twitching at that first touch. It was barely there, nothing more than a teasing slide of his fingers over her sensitive skin, but it was enough to stoke the flames of her desire and make her want more.

“Me laird?—”

“Say me name,” he said as he grabbed her and hauled her onto his lap, the movement so sudden she had to suppress a shriek. With her back against his chest and his arm wrapped tightly around her waist as his hand worked between her legs, there was nowhere for Fia to go. “Say it.”

“Knox,” Fia gasped, letting her head fall back against his shoulder. Knox kissed her, swallowing up her moans as he gathered the wetness from her core and spread it around her folds, fingers teasing the sensitive spot over her opening. It was unlike anything she had experienced before. It was nothing like the hesitant, faltering touch of her own hand when curiosity had gotten the better of her. Knox worked her expertly, his touch gentle yet firm, his fingers exploring every inch of her.

“Dae ye ken how long I’ve been thinkin’ about ye?” he asked, whispering in her ear. “Spreadin’ ye on me bed, kissin’ ye, tastin’ ye... I bet ye taste like heaven itself.”

Fia groaned, half in arousal and half in embarrassment. She didn’t know how Knox could appear so composed while telling her such things; though perhaps, if she judged by his shallow breaths, he wasn’t composed at all.

“I wish I could see ye,” he said, just as he pushed the tip of a finger inside her, her hand flying up to stifle a cry of pleasure. “I wish I could see all o’ ye. Ye’re so

bonnie, Fia... ye have nae idea.”

Those words, combined with the relentless attention from his hand, were enough to push Fia past her peak, her orgasm slamming into her like a wave. She could hardly suppress the shout of his name as she convulsed in his lap, her core throbbing with a pleasure that spread all over her body, to the tips of her fingers. It was a relief the likes of which Fia had never known and her body sagged immediately in Knox’s grip as he pleased her through her zenith, until his touch was too much for her to bear on her oversensitive flesh.

Panting against him, Fia stared at the dark sky above her with glassy eyes, hardly registering anything other than the jolts of pleasure that still hummed through her body and the rushed, synchronized rhythm of their breaths. She could have never predicted that a man’s touch could feel so good. She could have never thought that by finally giving in to her desire, she would ensnare herself.

How could she ever live without this now? How could she go on with her life, knowing she could be this close to Knox and not allowing herself to give him anything more than a polite, formal greeting?

It had been a mistake to allow this. Now that she knew his touch, she would always crave it.

Knox, oblivious to her inner conflict, pressed kiss after kiss to her neck and shoulder and Fia didn’t have the heart to push him away. The more they stayed like that, though, the shallower her breath became, panic gripping her.

It was all her fault. She was the one who had put herself in this situation, but now she didn’t know how to get herself out of it.

Just as she was about to pull herself away from Knox, though, her panic threatening

to bubble over, three bells in quick succession rang throughout the castle grounds. Knox stood abruptly, trying to steady her even as he jostled her off him, and stared at the gates, his chest heaving with every breath he took.

It wasn't a bell she had heard before, but judging by the way Knox had paled, his face turning a sickly shade of white as though all the blood had drained from it, it couldn't be good. And when he turned around to look at her, all her worst fears were confirmed.

"There's an attack," he said. "Ye must hide."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It must be the Gordon Clan.

There was no doubt in Knox's mind that this attack was Laird Gordon's doing. No one else had reason to attack the castle. But if it was as he suspected, that could only mean that Callum had completely failed in his mission to gather information.

How could it be that he hadn't sent a single letter all this time? How could it be that the Gordon Clan could be moving right under his nose and he didn't even know?

Rage gripped Knox, the likes of which he had never felt before. This was one of his most important battles as the Laird of Clan Stuart and everything would hinge on this. The Gordons could decimate them with a well-placed attack. Their forces were equally matched in numbers and training, and Knox had relied on the information he received from his spies and his scouts to get ahead of Laird Gordon.

He was clearly not ahead anymore, but he had no one to blame but himself. He should have been firmer with Callum. He should have never allowed him to be the one to lead such an important mission, for he had always thought that his work was always lacking. Falling for his insistence and his stubbornness had been a grave mistake and he had known better than to trust him.

However, regrets wouldn't help him now. He needed a plan, and to meet with Magnus. But first, he had to ensure Fia's safety. If anything happened to her because, he would never forgive himself.

“I need ye tae hide,” he told her, turning around to look at her and grab her by the shoulders. “Me chambers are the safest place in this castle. I’ll have Bane take ye there.”

“Nay,” said Fia, shaking her head. “Nay, I can help. I am yer healer, I cannae hide while the soldiers need me.”

And need her they would, Knox knew. There were bound to be plenty injured and many more dead—not only soldiers, but possibly also women and children and elderly people who would be caught in the fight while attempting to hide or flee. Knox hated the thought of Fia putting herself in danger, but she was right; she was the healer of the clan. Those people needed her. This was why he had brought her to the castle in the first place, to help Effie in case of an attack such as this.

“Alright,” he said, mostly trying to convince himself that this was the right thing to do. Pulling her close once more, Knox kissed her fiercely, trying to pour everything he felt for her into it—the growing feelings, the longing, the desire to keep her safe. She would understand, he knew; they didn’t need to exchange any words. “Be safe.”

“Ye as well,” said Fia and then the two of them parted, she running to the great hall where they would receive the injured and he running to the courtyard for a first assessment of the damage.

The bell still rang in Castle Stuart, the sound almost completely drowned out by the shouts of men, some of whom were in his forces while others were Gordon’s soldiers, trying to breach the walls. Knox’s lungs filled with cold air as he rushed to the gates, his breath coming out in short puffs that fogged just past his lips, his boots thundering against the frozen ground. By the time he made it to the courtyard, the first line of soldiers was already there, forming their defenses, and Magnus was rushing back and forth in the crowd, shouting orders.

“Magnus!” Knox called, catching the man’s attention. He looked around frantically until he spotted Knox and then relief washed over him as he rushed to him, shoving a sword in his hands.

“Where have ye been?” he asked. “They’re about tae come inside.”

“We cannae hold them?” Knox asked.

Magnus only shook his head. So, this is how it would be, Knox thought. The Gordon forces would pour inside the castle grounds and then there would be no hope of ending this as bloodlessly as possible.

Men would die on both sides. But Knox knew that even if they couldn’t hold them, they could still defeat them. Even if he had to fight them all off on his own, with nothing but his sword and a prayer to God, he wouldn’t let them hurt his people.

The courtyard was suddenly bathed in light as his men lit up torches and small fires to illuminate the night. Suddenly, Knox could see the Gordon forces that had scaled the walls and were throwing themselves at his men who guarded the curtain walls, wave after wave of them pouring inside as though they were expendable.

And perhaps for Laird Gordon, they were. Perhaps the lives of those soldiers meant nothing to him and he was willing to sacrifice them all if it meant that he could get inside the castle walls—perhaps he would even succeed, as such ruthless plans often did. But Knox wasn’t willing to sacrifice his men like this. Their lives had value. They were not objects to be discarded.

Behind Magnus, the first wave of Gordon soldiers began to attack, jumping into the courtyard and knocking down the gate and its defenses. Drawing in a deep breath, Knox gripped his sword tightly, planting his feet as he waited for the enemy, his ribs rattling with how hard and fast his heart was beating.

His thoughts kept returning to Fia, who was in the great hall. For now, she was protected and Knox would do anything in his power to keep her safe, but who knew what could happen in the event of a complete takeover by the Gordon Clan.

However, Laird Gordon had no reason to harm her. She was a healer and could be useful to him. Knox had to trust that she would be safe, no matter what.

He wasn't the only one there worrying about someone he loved. All his men had someone to protect, whether a parent, a wife, children or a sibling.

The courtyard was thrown into chaos as the Gordon forces attacked, clashing with Knox's men. Without hesitation, he threw himself into the fight, falling into the first man he found in his path. Around him, Magnus and the rest of his men did the same, battle cries ringing out throughout the entire castle.

Knox swung his sword as he met his opponent, their blades clashing with a clang that echoed around them but was lost in the chaos of the battle. The other man was lithe yet fast, moving with precision, but he was still part of the first wave of soldiers, and it didn't take Knox long to strike him dead. As the other feinted to the left, Knox saw right through his strategy and took advantage of the opening, his sword piercing him right below the ribs and slicing a clean line through his stomach.

He didn't wait to see him hit the ground. Death and battle were nothing new for him, and before his opponent had taken his last breath, Knox had moved on to his next target, attacking with the same relentlessness.

How many lives would be lost, he thought with bitterness. But what other choice did he have if he wanted to keep his people safe? Diplomacy hadn't worked, and now he would make sure Laird Gordon would pay the price.

Working his way through the wave of soldiers, Knox, along with his men, managed

to decimate Laird Gordon's forces. He was bathed in blood, his skin and clothes stained red, his blade dripping crimson as it glinted under the moonlight. His chest heaved with every breath he took; already, he was tired and he knew this wasn't the end, for Laird Gordon was trying his best to overwhelm them with numbers and a part of Knox feared that perhaps it was working.

For a moment, he looked around him and took in the carnage. Bodies from both sides littered the ground, and it was hard to tell which side had suffered the most casualties. Those of his men who still remained standing rushed around, trying to fortify the walls and their defenses, and to prepare for the next attack.

The ground, too, was soaked in blood, puddles of it forming under Knox's feet. His boots sank into the softened earth. The air smelled metallic, and that familiar nausea gripped him as he stood there, waiting, his body trying to fight the stench of death.

The next attack came too soon, Laird Gordon's men giving them no time to recover. The enemy forces poured into the courtyard once more, overwhelming those of the who were trying to guard the gates, and Knox had no choice but to throw himself into the fight once more, sword raised high as a scream was torn from his chest.

Every muscle in his body protested the fight. Every limb ached; every bone felt as though it was going to shatter under the force of his blows. And still, Knox picked his way through the soldiers, attacking anyone who got in his path and killing them swiftly and mercilessly. The faster they were done with this fight, the better it would be. If they could just fight fast and with efficiency, then he knew they could defeat the Gordons.

When a larger man walked into his path, Knox paused for a moment to catch his breath, wiping his bloodied hands on his clothes to stop his sword from slipping from his grip. The man didn't look like the Laird Gordon's other soldiers. He was older, clearly more experienced, with battle scars covering his arms and face, and Knox

knew he held a high rank among Laird Gordon's men.

And still, Laird Gordon was nowhere to be seen. He hadn't yet dared to step foot in the castle and Knox doubted he ever would. He had been there from the start, fighting alongside his men, while Laird Gordon had been hiding behind his forces, too afraid to join the battle.

Knox stared at the man across from him with narrowed eyes, drawing in a few deep breaths through his nose. This, too, would be over soon, he told himself. If anything, it was lucky that the man was engaged with him and not with one of the younger, less experienced soldiers. Knox was certain he had killed his way through his men, just as Knox had done with Laird Gordon's.

The man attacked first, barreling his way towards Knox, who met the first blow with his blade. The force of it reverberated up his arm, all the way through his body, and he stumbled back for a moment, hand flying out to steady himself. He was exhausted. The only thing keeping him going was the thought that if he stopped, his clan would be doomed. He shouldered the weight of every laird who had come before him, every man who had dedicated his life to this clan—many of whom had died in such battles. He thought about all the men before him that had stood there, sword in hand, facing an opponent they didn't know if they could defeat.

Another attack, this one swift and precise, one Knox barely managed to dodge. His heels kicked up a cloud of dust behind him as he slid to the side and another soldier barely avoided colliding with him as he rushed off towards the walls. Knox didn't have the time to see if it was one of his own or an enemy, but it hardly mattered. The man hadn't given him a second glance. There, on the battlefield, it didn't matter so much that he was the laird. He was just another body, just another hand with a sword.

Knowing he had to put an end to this fight before he was completely exhausted, Knox charged at the man, a deep, rumbling growl the only warning before he raised his

sword and attacked. Their blades met again and again, clashing against each other, the two of them evenly matched, in a way Knox had rarely seen. Only Magnus had ever matched him like this. And now, in the heat of the fight, he could see there was already another.

Knox was exhausted by then, while the man had only just begun to fight. When the last blow came, Knox hardly saw it, his opponent's blade flying through the air with a swishing sound and slicing him across the shoulder and chest. For a few moments, Knox didn't register the wound. He was just surprised by how close the blade had come and so he moved backwards, trying to avoid another blow, only to realize that blood and pain both bloomed from his torso, the former dripping and making his clothes stick to his body while the latter radiated all over his limbs.

The ground met his body with a thud as he tilted to the side and collapsed. The pain was unlike anything he had ever felt before in his life. Though he had been injured in the past, no wound had been as severe, as debilitating. Never before had he been forced to watch, helpless, as his opponent loomed over him, raising his sword to deliver the final strike.

In a moment of clarity, Knox realized there was nothing he could do to do to save himself. He would die there, in that courtyard, with no heirs to speak of, and so he could only hope that the clan would go to capable hands. Magnus would have been his first choice, but since he wouldn't be there to suggest it to his council, he doubted he would be the one to take the reins. Whoever they would choose, he hoped he would be a good man.

As long as it isnae Callum. That bastard.

Knox closed his eyes and surrendered to his fate, waiting for death. Only it never came. Instead, a pained gasp sounded above him, and he opened his eyes to see none other than Bane there, his sword having pierced clean through the other man's chest.

Fat drops of blood dripped down from him over Knox's body, and the moment Bane drew his sword out of the man's body, he fell to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been suddenly cut.

Who would have thought I'd be saved by... Bane?

Saved was perhaps a bit of an exaggeration, Knox thought in his last moments of coherence. Bane had killed the man, that much was true, but Knox had lost a lot of blood and the shock from the pain was not helping with his will to live. Distantly, he heard a panicked voice over him, which sounded familiar but which he couldn't connect to a person. His eyes, though open, stared blankly at the sky above, seeing nothing but blurry faces and the orange glow of the flames around him.

And then, just as he drew a deep, shuddering breath, they saw nothing at all.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The great hall was filled to the brim with people. Fia had to step over the wounded soldiers carefully, even as she rushed around the room to help those who needed her the most, trying to stop wound after wound from bleeding. She didn't have the luxury of time to take care of each man individually. Once she had determined there was no threat to his life, she moved on, letting the maids to care for the rest—cleaning and dressing the wounds, and making sure they wouldn't be infected.

The feast had come to a sudden halt and the best the servants could do was push all the tables and benches to the edges of the grand room. Food sat on the tables, piled high on the serving plates, and had long since gone cold and stale. The smell of roasted meat and vegetables was overpowered by the stench of blood, which seemed to seep into every crevice of the room, sinking deep into Fia's clothes.

Never before had she dealt with such devastation, had she seen so many wounded men at once, so many in pain, so many dead.

The only thing that kept her going was the thought that these men relied on her, and so did the entire clan. If she allowed herself even a moment of doubt or rest, she was certain that she would end up breaking down entirely, overwhelmed by the sight of bodies on the floor. Many men brought to her and Effie took their last breath in that room, and the servants couldn't pull them away fast enough. There was only that much they could all do; it was the soldiers who had to lay there while their friends were dying right next to them that Fia pitied the most.

In her panic and rush, she hadn't given much thought to what may have happened to

Knox and Bane. They weren't in that room, and that was enough for her. Surely, if they had been wounded, they would have been brought in just like everyone else, which could only mean that they were still alive and well, fighting outside the keep.

In there, in the great hall, they were safe. That was what she kept telling herself. The keep was the safest part of the castle, allegedly impenetrable, and several men guarded its doors and windows. Fia didn't let her thoughts linger on everything that could go wrong. She only muttered the process of caring for the wounded to herself again and again like a mantra, like a prayer; the only thing that kept her sane in the middle of chaos.

She didn't know how much time had passed since the start of the attack when the doors to the great hall burst open and the room was flooded with shouts. She turned around to see Magnus there, carrying Knox over his shoulder all alone, red-faced and drenched in sweat as he ran as fast as he could. At the sight of them, Fia's blood ran cold. Knox wasn't moving at all. He was only dead weight, his body swinging in the rhythm of Magnus' gait, his arms and legs hanging limp as Magnus carried him. When he found an empty spot to lower him to the floor, Fia saw just how much blood he had on him, and she couldn't help but wonder how much of it was his and how much belonged to other people.

It was as though time had stopped, stretching into a cruel infinity in which she could do nothing but stand there, frozen in horror, her body refusing to move. Everything around her was in slow motion. Her ears buzzed with the sound of blood rushing to her head, and her vision spun as she took a few stumbling steps towards Knox, legs and arms numb with fear.

She could not help him like this, she knew. She could not help him unless she pulled herself together, but the sight of him like that was enough to paralyze her and she had to force herself to take step after agonizing step just to try and reach him.

Somehow, her feet carried her over to Knox and Magnus, and she fell to her knees next to them, her hands hovering right over Knox's body. He wasn't even wearing any armor; Fia cursed under her breath at his foolishness and the rash way in which he had thrown himself into the fight, never once stopping to think that he should protect himself better. But what was done was done and there was no point in blaming him. If there was one thing, she had always known about him, it was that he would sacrifice himself for his people without a second thought. He was determined to take care of his clan, consequences be damned.

All layers of his formal dress had been sliced clean through at the shoulder, the cut extending towards his chest. With trembling hands, Fia grabbed the fabric and tore it the rest of the way, exposing his torso and the wound that was still sluggishly bleeding. In the periphery of her vision, she caught a glimpse of Effie, falling to her knees at the other side of Knox's body, but Fia was quick to hover protectively over him, her instincts getting the better of her.

Effie only wanted to help, but Fia wouldn't let anyone else touch him. Besides, there were many other men who needed Effie's help; Knox was not the only one bleeding out.

"I'll care fer him," Fia said, her voice coming out strained and choked. "I... I can dae it on me own. Thank ye."

For a moment, she glanced up to find Effie giving her a knowing look and a gentle, yet sad smile, before she pushed herself to her feet and drew in a deep breath. She, too, needed to compose herself. But then, once she had gotten herself under control, she turned to the maids, her voice ringing clearly through the chaos in the room, her tone leaving no room for disobedience.

"Quickly!" she called. "Hot water an' cloth! An' horsetail, lots o' it!"

Fia nodded to herself, grateful to have Effie there to give the orders. Her hands moved mechanically, muscle memory kicking in as she took care of Knox.

Within moments, a swarm of maids had surrounded her, handing her everything she needed. Fia cleaned the wound meticulously, wiping away the blood hurriedly to take a better look at the damage underneath. The only good thing about Knox being in this state, unconscious and unmoving, was that she could hurry without fear of him feeling any pain when he woke.

He would wake up. She would make it so.

The cut from his shoulder to his chest was deep, one that would need sewing and plenty of dressing. She didn't have the time to see if there were other wounds that needed her attention; this was the most pressing one, and until she had dealt with it, she could do nothing else.

Though the maids around her whispered among themselves, expressing their concern for their laird, and Magnus was pacing back and forth right in front of her, Fia could neither hear nor see any of them. The more she worked on the wound, the steadier her hands became and the more her body calmed. Even if her mind was still racing, trying to throw her into a panic by conjuring up unfavorable scenarios, her body knew what to do after all these years of training as a healer. In no time, she had Knox's bleeding under control, sewing the skin together, packing the wound with a paste of horsetail and witch hazel, and dressing it with clean cloth. By the time she was done, Knox was still unconscious, his skin a sickly yellow after all the blood he had lost, and she was covered to the elbow with blood, but he was still breathing. Not only that, but his breathing was getting steadier and his heartbeat, when Fia pressed her fingers against the pulse point on his neck, was stronger, his heart beating in a stable rhythm.

It was done. Fia could finally breathe, leaning back as she knelt there on the floor, her

head tilting back to look up at the ceiling. She had never given it much notice before, how the stones stretched so far above that the ceiling seemed to reach the heavens. It struck her as odd that she was noticing this now; with all her energy drained out of her, focusing on that ceiling was all that kept her from breaking down into sobs right in the middle of the great hall. Yet, she could feel silent tears streaming down her face.

He's alive. He'll be alright.

Fia kept repeating those words to herself again and again. And somewhere in the chaos, somewhere in her panic and her fear for Knox's life, she realized that she had truly and utterly fallen for him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When Knox opened his eyes, he reached for a sword that wasn't there. He expected to find a cold, hard ground under his back, a black sky above him, and an opponent with a glinting blade that rushed towards him in a ruthless arc. Instead, he found himself in his chambers, tucked into bed, with his shoulder burning with pain.

His head swam as he looked around, trying to figure out what had happened. He remembered the fight, the way soldier after soldier had come towards him and he had struck them all dead; all save for one, who had almost killed him.

He didn't know what had happened next, but judging by the fact that he was in his chambers, safe and sound, he could only assume they had won the battle. But how many men had lost their lives that night? And how many of them were Knox's good friends?

Is Magnus alright? And Bane?

Knox hadn't expected Bane to fight at all, and yet he had been the one to save him. If anything had happened to him, not only would Fia be devastated, but Knox, too, didn't know if he could ever let go of the guilt.

Fia... what had happened tae Fia?

Trying to push himself up, Knox soon found out that he was not well enough to move. The room spun around him and every muscle in his body protested the movement, forcing him to lie back down. As he moved, though, even as little as he

could, he saw a silhouette sitting by his bed, shrouded in darkness, fast asleep.

Ach, Fia.

Knox wanted nothing more than to reach for her, to pull her into his arms and ask her if she and everyone else was alright, but he didn't have the heart to wake her. She, too, had been in battle. Knox could only imagine how tired she must have been afterwards.

And yet there she was, waiting for him to wake up.

Trying once more to shift in a vain attempt to get a little more comfortable, Knox inadvertently woke her. Springing up off the chair, Fia rushed to his side, perching on the edge of the mattress as her hands made to reach for him before she hesitated. Whether she feared she would hurt him or she remembered their respective stations, Knox didn't know. He also didn't care. With his good hand, he reached for her and brought her hand to his cheek, sighing softly into her palm, and Fia cradled his cheek gently, her thumb brushing over his skin.

In the dim light of the room, he could see that her eyes shone with unshed tears.

"Are ye alright?" Knox asked and Fia let out a sound that was half laugh and half sob, nodding.

"I should be askin' ye that," she said, drawing a smile from Knox.

"I'm fine," he assured her, though perhaps fine wasn't the best word to describe how he was feeling. "Magnus? Effie? An' Bane... is Bane alright?"

"They're all fine," Fia confirmed with a nod. "An' they've all been askin' about ye."

“They have?”

How long had he been in that room?

“Och aye,” said Fia. “Ye gave us all quite a scare.”

“How long have I been asleep?”

“Two days. The battle was two nights ago.”

It was better than he had feared at first. Still, he didn’t have the time to recover fully or to lounge around in bed. He had to meet with his council and discuss their next moves. If Clan Gordon had attacked them once, who was to say that they wouldn’t do it again, and soon?

Once again, he tried to push himself up, only for Fia to guide him gently back down.

“Ye need tae rest,” she pointed out, as if Knox didn’t already know that. “Whatever it is, it can wait.”

“I must meet with Magnus an’ the council,” he said. “An’... an’ I need tae send a better team than Callum’s out. I cannae believe I trusted that fool.”

As he looked at Fia, he could have sworn that a stormy cloud passed over her face, her expression darkening. She said nothing on the matter, though. She only shook her head and pushed him down onto the mattress firmly, her hand taking care to avoid the wound.

“Ye cannae stand,” she said and though she said it kindly, her tone was strict, allowing no room for disagreement. “Ye’ve lost too much blood. Ye wouldnae even make it tae the door like this an’ I’m sure ye dinnae want yer people tae see their laird

like this.”

That was true, Knox thought. The last thing he needed was for his people to lose their confidence in him, thinking that he had lost his edge after the fight. Still, the thought of delaying the meeting didn't sit right with him.

“This was me first big fight as the laird o' the clan,” he said with a sigh, his good hand coming up to pinch the bridge of his nose. Whether his headache was a result of the blood loss and the fatigue or of the thought that he had already made too many mistakes as the leader of the clan, he didn't know. “I should have kent Laird Gordon would attack. I should never have trusted Callum with such an important mission.”

“Ye fought fer yer people,” Fia reminded him. “Without an armor, without anythin' but a sword. I heard Laird Gordon wasnae at the attack. That is the sign o' a laird who is incapable, nae the fact that ye trusted someone with a mission. Ye did what ye thought was best at the time. An' then, when the time came, ye fought bravely.”

Fia's words were like a balm to his aching soul, but even so, Knox couldn't believe her entirely. It was true that he had fought, just as any laird should. It was true that he had not hesitated and thrown himself into the fight for his people, but did that make him a good laird or a good soldier? What good was bravery if he couldn't make the right strategic choices?

“I always fear that I dae the wrong thing,” Knox admitted in a quiet voice. It was the first time he had spoken those words out loud, but they rang truer than any other words he had ever spoken. “There are so many choices I must make... so many people tae protect. The entire clan looks tae me fer guidance an' protection, an' half the time, I dinnae even ken what I'm doin'.”

Fia snorted, her reaction so sudden and unexpected.

“O’ course ye ken what ye’re doin’,” she said. “Just like I ken what I dae when I take care o’ people’s wounds. I dinnae need tae think about it. With ye, when they brought ye tae me after ye were wounded, I thought I’d freeze an’ be useless, but me hands kent what tae dae without me thinkin’ about it. I simply did it. It’s the same fer ye. Ye like tae overthink everythin’, but that doesnae mean ye dinnae ken what ye’re doin’.”

Her words pulled Knox out of his pit of despair for a moment, giving him some much needed clarity.

It was an observation so astute that once again, Knox couldn’t help but push his doubts aside and consider it. It was true that he had been prepared for this role his entire life. His father had raised him by his side, taking him to meetings, explaining strategy to him, and giving him the best tutors to guide him through his formative years. Perhaps Fia was right; perhaps he didn’t need to overthink anything because he already had the foundations necessary for him to make the right decisions.

For a while, they were both silent, Fia watching him as he stared at the ceiling of his bed, his gaze tracing the intricate hunting motifs carved into the dark wood. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet, fond.

“Me faither was a great man an’ a great laird,” he said. “He was taken too soon. He an’ me maither both.”

“I’m sorry,” said Fia, her tone flooding with sympathy. Knox could only imagine what it must have been like for her to be abandoned by both her parents. His may have been long gone, but he had always known they loved him dearly. “I wish I could have met them.”

“They would have adored ye,” Knox said as he reached for her once more and pulled her in for a kiss. Fia sighed softly against his lips, hers soft and dry, her mouth tasting just the barest hint of honey. He, too, wished his parents could have met her. Perhaps

if he had had their approval, he wouldn't have been so reluctant to tell his council that she was the woman he loved.

And love her he did. It had taken a near-death experience for him to admit it to himself, but he couldn't deny it anymore. He adored Fia in a way he had never thought possible. He knew he didn't know her well enough and yet he felt as if he'd known her his whole life. His love for her transcended everything else—their origins, the opinions of others, his duty to wed a powerful woman. Clan Stuart was powerful enough on its own and their allies, those they had already secured, were more than enough. He didn't need to wed a noble-born girl just to gain more power and influence. It wouldn't be fair to him and it wouldn't be fair to whoever would be chosen as his bride, for his heart could never truly belong to her.

“Sometimes I think I will never be even a fraction o' the man me faither was,” Knox admitted through a knot in his throat. It was a thought which plagued him often. Ever since his father's death and his ascension to the lairdship, he went to sleep with that thought in mind every single night, doubting himself and his abilities. “Everyone loved him an' fer good reason. He always kent what tae dae an' he always kept the peace. The years he spent as the laird o' Clan Stuart were the most peaceful years the clan has seen, an' then, when I become the laird, we have our first battle in decades.”

“Knox,” Fia said, once again assuming that stern tone that he had never heard her use before. It reminded him of Effie and the way she spoke when she needed to be heard in a room of stubborn men. “This wasnae yer fault. Ye're nae the one who initiated the attack. Ye're the one who ended it.”

It was a comfort, but a small one. Knox couldn't help but wish he had done something to prevent the attack in the first place—and all those deaths.

“How many men died? Dae ye ken?” he asked a little reluctantly, dreading the answer.

“Thirty-two o’ our own,” said Fia quietly. “An’ many more are severely wounded.”

So there may be more casualties.

“The Gordon forces were decimated,” said Fia then, looking at him straight in the eyes. “An’ it’s all because o’ the army ye have built. It’s all because ye did yer job well.”

As she spoke, she leaned in for another kiss and that, more than any words, was a comfort like no other. If a woman like Fia, someone who was so pure and so kind, could kiss him like this, then that was all the proof he needed that he, too, was a good man.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lord, how did I ever think this was a good idea?

In his study, sitting in his plush armchair behind his desk, Knox stared at the men of his council blankly as they threw suggestion after suggestion at him, never once giving him a single moment to give his input.

He swirled the one of two cups of wine he was allowed a day as he recovered, his head pounding with a headache that had begun the moment his council had mentioned that after the events of the battle, where he had been so terribly injured, he needed to take a wife and produce an heir or two—anything for the clan, they said. It had already been too long, they said. He should already have a wife and a child, if not two, and yet there he was, delaying the inevitable for no good reason.

He had been the one to call the council to his study, thinking it necessary to speak with them after the attack and make sure they had a plan in case they were attacked again soon. At first, they had gone over all their strategies and everything they needed to do to strengthen themselves and the keep, but once that conversation was over, the council had been quick to suggest a marriage.

Knox had half a mind to pretend that he was still unwell. It wouldn't be entirely false, since it had only been less than a week since the battle and he was still tired and sore, even if he could now walk on his own and, if necessary, even move his arm. He had a suspicion, though, that someone in the council would call him out on his lie and so he remained silent as the men discussed the potential mates as though he wasn't even there.

He exchanged a quick glance with Magnus, who was standing by his side, watching the council with narrowed eyes. This entire time, he had said nothing on the matter, but Knox didn't expect him to. He knew the elders appreciated his opinion on matters regarding the army, but when it came to things like this, where they knew he would take Knox's side, they rarely ever asked him.

"Perhaps Miss MacLean would be a good option," said one of the council members. "It is said she is a bonnie lass."

"It is said she is also sixteen years o' age," Knox pointed out, speaking up for the first time. Though it was not unheard of, he didn't want a wife many years his junior. He hardly found it appropriate.

Then again, he didn't want any wife other than Fia.

"Very well," said the man. "Miss Campbell, then. She's a few years older than Miss MacLean."

"Och aye, Miss Campbell would be a fine match fer ye, me laird," said another council member. "But she has many suitors. If we are serious about this, we should send a proposal right the now."

Knox raised his hand with a sigh, bringing the conversation to a halt. The silence that followed was so pleasant that he took a few moments to break it, enjoying it while it could last.

"I'm nae feelin' well," he said. "Let us reconvene once I rest. I need some time tae think about yer proposals. Magnus will call ye once I have made me decision."

The council didn't seem particularly happy at being dismissed like that, without even making the choice of sending a few proposals to eligible young ladies, but they were

not about to argue with him when he claimed that he was not feeling well. After wishing him a swift recovery, the men shuffled out of the room, leaving Knox alone with Magnus.

It was only then that Knox allowed himself to appear energized again, sitting up a little straighter in his chair as he downed his drink. “I willnae wed any o’ them.”

With a roll of his eyes, Magnus took his seat across from him, steeling his fingers under his chin. “Why?” he asked. “Dae ye enjoy sleepin’ with every lass in the castle so much that ye cannae even think about yer duty?”

Those words were well-deserved, much to Knox’s chagrin. Magnus had good reason to think like this. After all, Knox had refused to marry this entire time because he did, in fact, enjoy the life of the bachelor too much to give it up.

He liked the fairer sex. He couldn’t deny it. He was weak around women and he liked nothing more than to have a new one in his bed every now and then.

All that had stopped, though, when he had met Fia. She had changed his entire world and now he couldn’t even look at another woman. None of them held any appeal for him.

Had it not been for Fia, he would have agreed to marry a noble girl, any that the council deemed right for him, at this point. He would have done the right thing, the thing that was best for the clan. He would have married a girl and given the council all the heirs they could want.

But with Fia there, the best choice was obvious to him, even if it wasn’t to anyone else. She was just as capable of giving the clan heirs as any noble-born girl. Save for her humble origins, the council should have no issue with her.

But her humble origins were precisely the problem.

“I’ll wed Fia,” he blurted out before he could stop himself. Magnus laughed, but when he realized Knox was being entirely serious, he sobered up and looked at him with wide eyes, as though the mere thought was horrifying.

“What dae ye mean?” he asked. “Ye cannae dae that.”

“An’ why is that?” Knox demanded. “She is the one I want. I should wed the lass I want.”

“Knox... ye’re the laird,” Magnus said, as though Knox could have somehow forgotten it. “Ye cannae simply wed who ye wish.”

“I disagree,” Knox said, shaking his head. “It doesnae matter tae me if she is a peasant. I’m in love with her, Magnus. Surely, ye out o’ everyone else can understand that. What if Effie had been a peasant? What if ye couldnae have wed her because o’ it?”

Magnus pressed his lips together in a thin line, unable to say anything to that. Knox knew Magnus adored his wife; nothing could have kept him away from her, not even an entire council.

“They’ll never allow it,” said Magnus after a long pause. “Ye ken that.”

“I have tae try.”

Knox was not a fool. He knew there was a very good chance that the council would be entirely against such a marriage and would never agree, but what other choice did he have other than trying to convince them this was the best way to move forward? They would get what they wanted and so would Knox. With some luck and plenty of

determination, perhaps he could manage to convince them in the end.

“Fine,” said Magnus with a sigh, a hand coming up to brush through his hair. He, too, looked weary, exhausted by everything that had happened in the past week, and Knox wished he could tell him he could rest now. Nonetheless, they both knew none of this was over yet. It wouldn’t be over until they had truly defeated Laird Gordon once and for all. “Ye ken I’ll support ye. It doesnae matter what ye decide tae dae.”

Knox nodded gratefully at his friend, reaching over the desk to pat his arm. “Thank ye. Truly, Magnus. I ken there isnae much ye can dae on yer own, but anythin’ ye can tell them will help.”

As he spoke, Knox stood from his chair and Magnus was quick to approach him, eager to help, but Knox only shook his head.

“I’m alright,” he said. “I’ll go fer a ride.”

“A ride?” Magnus scoffed. “In yer state? Ye cannae be serious.”

“I am,” Knox insisted. “Truly, I’m fine. I’ll take it very easy an’ I’ll ask Fia tae come with me, so ye dinnae need tae fash. If anythin’ happens tae me, she’ll be there tae fix it.”

“I dinnae like the sound o’ it,” Magnus insisted, but the simple fact that he was not trying to help him stand anymore spoke louder than his words. “Please, dinnae stray far.”

“I willnae,” Knox promised. “Just tae the woods.”

Magnus still didn’t seem entirely convinced, but he said nothing as Knox left the room, his hand gently rubbing around the wound over his clothes. Now that it had

started healing, it itched all day and night, often keeping him awake, and a ride was just what he needed to clear his head.

And it would be the perfect opportunity for him to finally confess his love to Fia.

On his way to the stables, Knox peeked through the door of the forge to see if Bane was there, and sure enough, he found him over a sword, tempering the steel over a burning fire. To that day, he thought it was a great shame that he insisted on working as a smith when he was so clearly suited to the life of a warrior, his strength surpassing that of many of his own men. Even his skills, a little rough as they were, seemed to be greater than those of many who called themselves soldiers. Knox could certainly think of one off the top of his head; Callum, who could not even begin to compare to someone like Bane, with his raw talent.

Then again, it may be an issue if he's among the laddies all the time.

Perhaps that was why he was so adamant he didn't want to join his ranks, Knox thought. Working as a blacksmith gave him the opportunity to isolate himself from others, to keep his secret safe. There were other smiths in the forge, of course, but Knox had the suspicion it would be much harder to keep his secret from the entire body of soldiers under his command as opposed to a small group of people.

And he had the suspicion that not everyone in his ranks would be as open to accepting him as Knox himself was.

Perhaps it's for the best if he remains here as a smith.

"Ye can come in if ye so please, me laird."

Bane's voice startled Knox. He hadn't realized he had been spotted, since Bane hadn't even turned around, but then he realized that Bane must have seen him on the

reflection of the sword he was making. He was not only capable, but he was also clever—cunning even—and observant. Knox couldn't help but mourn the loss of such skill.

“I didnae mean tae bother ye,” Knox said as he stepped into the forge, lingering by the door.

“It's nae a bother,” Bane assured him. “Are ye well? I ken ye were wounded in the battle.”

Putting down the sword and the mallet he was using to temper the steel, he turned to face Knox, wiping his hands on the apron that hung from his neck. It didn't help; the grime on his skin and under his nails seemed to be stuck there perpetually, something Knox had noticed the first time he had invited him and Fia to a formal dinner. There was no doubt in his mind that Bane had done his best to appear as well-groomed as possible, trying to fit in with the rest of the guests, and though he cleaned up well, that small detail always set him apart from everyone else.

Knox didn't even know if it was something the man himself had noticed. For him, it must have been something to which he had never given much thought.

“I'm well, thank ye,” Knox said. “I'm recoverin' just fine thanks tae Fia.”

“I'm glad tae hear that. Is there somethin' ye need from me?” Bane asked. “I ken ye had a sword brought here tae be sharpened, I can dae it now if ye wish?—”

“Nay, nay,” Knox said, interrupting him with a shake of his hand. “That's nae why I'm here. I merely wished tae thank ye.”

“Thank me, me laird?”

“Aye,” said Knox. “Fer savin’ me life. Had it nae been fer ye, I would be dead now.”

Knox could still remember the sharp chill of fear when he had seen that blade almost reach him. He still remembered thinking that was it for him, that he would not survive to see another day.

“Ye dinnae have tae thank me,” Bane said with a shake of his head. “I only did what anyone would have done.”

“Still, I wished tae tell ye I’m grateful,” Knox said. “Anyone may have done it, but ye were the one who was there. Ye were the one who did it. An’ fer that, I thank ye. An’ if there is anythin’ I can dae?—”

“I’m quite content, me laird,” Bane was quick to say. “However, fergive me... I dinnae mean tae be rude, but if there is one thing I can ask o’ ye, it’s only that ye dinnae hurt Fia.”

Knox was taken aback by the request, though he supposed it made perfect sense. It was only natural Bane would want to protect his sister, the one person he had left who was as close to him as family could be.

“I... I willnae,” he told him. “I mean, I have nae intention o’ ever hurtin Fia. I wouldnae?—”

“That’s all I need tae ken,” Bane said. “She’s already been through a lot. She doesnae deserve tae have her heart broken again.”

Knox nodded slowly, letting the words sink in. He knew what it was that Bane was trying to tell him— if ye’re only looking fer a good time, it’s best tae find it somewhere else. Knox took no offence in the warning. Bane had every right to be suspicious of him. After all, it wasn’t every day that a man of his station married a

peasant.

But Knox was serious about it. Gone were the days when he would have a new woman in his bed every night. Fia had changed all that for him. She had changed his whole life, although he had no idea how she'd done it in such a short time.

"I promise ye right here, right this moment," Knox said, as serious as when taking an oath, "I will never hurt her. I'll give her the life she deserves."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

When Fia had agreed to go on a ride with Knox, she hadn't expected that not even an hour into it, they would be caught in a storm. When they had left the castle, the skies had been mostly clear, only a few clouds gathering in the far distance, but the weather had changed suddenly. Now the sky was the color of steel, a cold grey that seemed to encompass the entire world, and the wind whipped her cheeks as they rode down the path in search of shelter.

As if bein' on a horse wasnae enough!

She should have never agreed to it. In fact, she should have never allowed Knox to go on a ride in the first place. What was he thinking, she wondered, going out like this, when he was still injured? What if something happened to him? What if brigands attacked him? Could he even defend himself?

But Knox had been very convincing when he had told her that he was fine and he had insisted he wanted her company. She had gone along simply because she didn't want to leave him alone. That, more than anything else, would be too dangerous.

The fact that it was a chance to spend some more time with him, just the two of them, was irrelevant—or at least so she told herself.

"There," Knox called as he pointed into the distance with his right hand. At least he had been injured on his left side, the one he didn't favor as much, and he could still ride with ease, but as he pointed, tugging sharply at the reins in his excitement, the horse bucked under them and Fia had to swallow down a shriek of terror.

I'm never gettin' on a horse again.

She didn't know how it could be that Knox always convinced her to go for rides. Even now that she had an idea of riding, which was more than she could have said in the past, getting on a horse frightened her and she never enjoyed any of the rides enough to justify being plunged into that terror willingly. Not even Knox's presence was enough most of the time for her to feel safe, and yet there she was, the knuckles of her fingers turning bone white as she held on to the saddle for dear life.

Following his finger, Fia saw that he had spotted a small cottage in the woods. He steered the horse towards it and they reached the squat building just as the rain began to fall in earnest, sheets of icy drops cascading unbridled around them. Knox helped Fia off the horse, the two of them running through the small garden to reach the door, and he hardly had the time to knock before the door opened and a young woman ushered them inside.

"Come in, come in," she said. "We saw ye from the window an' we hoped ye'd stop. Come... sit by the fire, ye must be freezin'."

The woman, short, with plump, rosy cheeks and a pregnant belly, grabbed Fia by the shoulders and pushed her on one of the chairs by the small fireplace, where a bright, warm fire burned. Knox, a little amused smile dancing on his lips, joined her on the other chair, the two of them trying to rub the warmth back into their limbs.

"Thank ye," said Fia as she took in her surroundings. Apart from the woman, there was also a young man in the house and a small boy who looked just like him—their son, Fia supposed, who couldn't have been more than six years of age. "We are truly grateful, we couldnae have made it back in this weather."

"Dae ye live far?" the woman asked, but just as Fia was about to respond that she meant Castle Stuart, Knox chimed in, interrupting her.

“Just over in Duror,” he said, much to Fia’s surprise. She refrained from showing that surprise on her face, though. Whatever his reasons, Knox didn’t want them to know that he was the laird of Clan Stuart.

“Och aye, that is quite far,” the man said as he walked over to them. “I’m Baird, this is me wife, Caitriona. An’ this wee laddie here is Hamish.”

“Knox,” said Knox with a small bow of his head in greeting. “And this is Fia. It’s a pleasure tae meet ye all.”

“That’s a nice horse ye have, Knox,” said Baird. He was a sturdy man, but much smaller than Knox, with dark hair and bright eyes that he shared with Hamish. “Is it yers?”

“Och aye,” said Knox. “Me pride an’ joy. I raised her meself.”

“Did ye? I’ve raised me fair share o’ horses in me life,” said Baird. “But nae as bonnie as yer mare.”

Fia wondered if the man could have suspected that they were not from Duror just from Knox’s horse, but he didn’t seem suspicious—only a little excited to be seeing such a strong and beautiful horse. Even Fia, who was not particularly fond of the creatures, had been impressed when she had first seen it.

Whatever concerns she had melted away, though, when Caitriona doubled over, bracing herself on the back of Knox’s chair. Her hand cradled her stomach and Fia stood just as Baird rushed to her, only to have her wave them both off.

“I’m alright,” she said, though her expression was pinched, as though she was in pain. “It’s been happenin’ all day, but I’m nae in labor yet. I’d ken if I were.”

“I’m a midwife,” said Fia as she walked over to her and placed a gentle hand on her stomach. Even if she wasn’t in labor as she claimed, she had to be close. She was big enough to be in the final stages of her pregnancy and the baby would be coming any day. “I can examine ye if ye so wish an’ give ye somethin’ fer the pain. Are ye in a lot o’ pain?”

“Naethin’ that I cannae bear,” said Caitriona with a warm smile. “Wee Hamish was worse when he was about tae be born.”

As she spoke, Caitriona ruffled her son’s hair and he beamed up at her as he hugged her leg. The sight flooded Fia’s chest with warmth, the joy that radiated from their little family infectious, spreading over to her. She longed for a family of her own. All she had ever wanted was to raise children, and she had thought she would get to have that with Callum, but now it was the last thing on her mind. After everything that had happened, any hopes of creating a family of her own any time soon had vanished and had been replaced by the necessities and duties of everyday life.

For a moment, she allowed herself to indulge in a vision of her having a family with Knox. She could imagine it with ease, the two of them raising two, maybe even three children—boys and girls who would look like them both, who would run around them in circles, who would listen to Knox’s explanations of the stars and her made up stories of them.

She didn’t indulge in the fantasy for too long. That was all it was, a fantasy that would never come true. Wishful thinking only served to further hurt her already wounded heart.

As the day passed, the storm did not. For a while, both Fia and Knox considered heading back, even in the rain, but there was no telling how long that would take them. It was dangerous, staying out in the cold and the rain for this long, and so in the end, they agreed to Caitriona’s suggestion that they sleep in the small hut next to the

cottage.

It had once been used by the cottage's only servant, before he had passed, and Cairtriona's family could not afford to have another. When Fia entered it, she saw that it was sparsely furnished, with nothing but a bed, a stove, and a chest, but when Baird lit a fire for them and she and Knox sat next to it, warming themselves, it was more than enough.

Their soaked clothes were almost dry by then, but Fia was chilled to the bone and so Knox grabbed the blanket from the bed, wrapping it around her shoulders. She held it tightly around her, trying to battle the chill, and between that and the fire, the trembling of her body slowly subsided.

It didn't hurt that she was sitting close to Knox, the two of them sharing the heat of their bodies. It was necessary, she told herself. It was simply so that they wouldn't freeze.

"I told ye we shouldnae have left the castle," Fia teased, though there was no real bite behind her words.

"How could I have predicted that it would rain like this?" Knox asked with a small shrug. "Did ye see any clouds in the sky?"

"It's more about yer shoulder than about the clouds."

"Me shoulder is fine."

Fia rolled her eyes at him, but she knew that no matter how much she insisted, he would never admit he was still in pain. Knox was proud like that—or rather, stubborn.

“Why did ye tell them we’re from Duror?” Fia asked, curious to know the reasoning. “They didnae seem like people who would take advantage.”

“Och nay,” Knox was quick to say. “I never thought they’d take advantage. I simply didnae wish to put them in any trouble. When people find out I am the laird, they always go tae great lengths tae please me. It’s better fer them tae think I’m a simple man.”

“That’s... thoughtful o’ ye,” Fia said with a small frown. Even though he was arguably the most powerful man in the clan, Knox seemed like the only noble in there who made any sense to her. He wasn’t like the rest of them, looking down on her simply because she was a peasant. Not only that, but he didn’t want anyone to go into any trouble for him just because he was the laird. He simply wanted to be treated as any other man and that didn’t surprise her as much as it confirmed that he was a good and kind man.

“It’s how me faither taught me,” Knox said. “He always told me we have a responsibility tae other people an’ as the laird, I would have tae choose whether I wished tae be one who flaunted their power an’ their wealth or one who truly made a difference in the world. It seemed only natural tae me tae choose the latter, just like he had.”

Fia hadn’t been lying when she had told him that she would have loved to have met his parents. They sounded like wonderful people and if Knox had turned out the way he did, it was surely thanks to them.

“If ye dinnae mind me askin’... what happened tae them?” Fia said, hoping she wasn’t overstepping.

But Knox didn’t seem to mind at all. If anything, though the grief welled up inside him to remember, he was more than willing to talk about them.

“Everyone says it was an accident,” he said. “But I ken better than that. I ken it was Alastair Gordon. He is the one who killed them.”

Fia gasped, a hand coming up to cover her mouth. How terrible, she thought, to have one’s loving parents snatched away like that. She didn’t know what motive Laird Gordon could have had, but nothing could excuse it.

“That is terrible,” she said. “I’m sorry, Knox... it must have been so painful fer ye. It must still be.”

“Often,” Knox admitted. “But I like tae think about them fondly. I’d rather remember them the way they were rather than think about their deaths.”

Fia could understand that. When it came to Tav, she couldn’t even bring herself to consider the possibility that he was dead. To her and to Bane, he was still alive, still trying to find a way home.

“I never think o’ Tav as dead,” she admitted. “I simply... cannae.”

And still, tears streamed down her eyes every time she spoke about him. When he lived in her thoughts, it was easy to convince herself there was nothing for her to cry about, but now that she had said his name, the tears were unstoppable.

“What happened tae him?” Knox asked, his voice quiet, gentle.

It took Fia several moments to gather her thoughts, to force herself to speak about it, but Knox waited patiently.

“He was taken one day,” she said. “There was an attack in our village an’ along with everythin’ else they destroyed an’ took, they also took Tav. I dinnae ken why... it never made any sense tae us. Why would the raiders take a simple blacksmith? What

did they want with him?”

Fia didn't know, and neither did Bane. They could never figure it out. All they knew was that he still had to be alive. They both believed he was still out there.

“I'm sorry,” Knox said. “It's a terrible thing, what happened tae him. And not kenning.”

Fia nodded but was at a loss for words. Every time she thought about Tav, it was the same; the same grief, the same despair, the same questions coming to her mind again and again.

“Forgive me... I find it hard tae talk about it,” she told Knox.

With a sigh, Knox wrapped his good arm around Fia's shoulders and pulled her close, pressing a tender kiss to her forehead. She let her eyes slip shut, wiping the tears off her cheeks with the back of her hand, and in only a few moments, she managed to compose herself again.

For a while, the two of them sat there in silence, simply holding each other. When Fia tilted her head to look at him, though, she saw nothing but love and tenderness in his gaze, and she pressed her lips against his in a soft kiss.

It was like a dam had broken. That one simple kiss was enough to ignite their desire, to pull them ever closer, Knox deepening the kiss by licking along the seam of her lips until she parted them, allowing him inside.

“Let me pleasure ye again,” Knox said, groaning against her lips. “Let me touch ye.”

But Fia shook her head. That wasn't what she wanted anymore. She had kept herself pure this entire time, saving herself for her future husband, but that very day, she had

decided she was going to tell Knox the truth about everything—but first, she wanted to feel him closer. She wanted to have at least one chance to be with him, to belong to him fully.

She didn't want him to pleasure her with his hands like last time. She wanted to be one with him, to be taken like a wife.

“I want ye,” she said. “I want ye completely. I want tae be yers.”

Knox paused for a moment, breath hitching in his throat. “Are ye certain? I dinnae... I dinnae need that. I only want ye tae feel good. If ye have any reservations?—”

“I dinnae,” Fia was quick to say. “It's what I want, I promise ye. Take me. I'm yers.”

It was all Knox needed to hear before he all but pounced at her, tearing off her clothes with eager hands. Before long, she was naked before him and Knox was spreading her over the blanket that he had laid on the floor next to the fire, taking his fill as he stared at her body.

Fia trembled under his gaze. She had never felt this exposed, this vulnerable, but the way Knox was looking at her made her feel so desired, so loved that it didn't matter.

Lowering himself over her mound, Knox pressed his lips right where the seam of her folds began, speaking against her skin.

“I'll make ye scream with pleasure,” he said. “Spread yer legs fer me.”

And so she did.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The crackle of the fire and the sound of pouring rain concealed Fia's moans as Knox dragged the flat of his tongue over her folds, tasting her just as he had told her he wanted to do. Gripping her thigh with his right hand, he threw her leg over his good shoulder, pressing closer and closer and burying his face in her core, giving her pleasure she hadn't even thought possible.

This couldn't compare to the touch of his fingers. Though that, too, had been enough to drive her mad, this transcended even that feeling, making her writhe and tremble under him as he worked her with his tongue and lips.

Fia's hands found their way to Knox's hair, gripping onto the dark strands tightly and drawing a moan out of him. She did it again, just to hear that sound, and Knox went wild with need, licking inside her with abandon, pressing his tongue against her walls.

There was nothing Fia could do other than curl up into herself, her entire body convulsing as Knox entered her like that, the short, rhythmic thrusts of his tongue pulling broken moans out of her. She didn't know, in that moment, why she had ever even considered waiting for marriage. If that was what she had been missing, then perhaps it had been foolish of her.

But no, that wasn't it. It wouldn't have been the same with anyone else, Fia knew. It would have felt good, perhaps, and she would have been satisfied, but she doubted it could ever feel this good if it was anyone other than Knox. A big part of it was the fact that she not only desired him, but also loved him.

“Ye taste divine,” Knox said, taking a break from her core to kiss her thighs, nipping gently at the sensitive skin there. When he bit down harder, hard enough to leave a mark, Fia jerked in his grip, the sharp sting of his teeth coaxing more wetness out of her. “Is it good?”

“Aye,” she gasped, arching into his touch as she tried to get him to pleasure her again. “So good.”

“Ye’ll tell me if ye wish tae stop?”

“Never stop,” she said. “Please.”

Knox smiled up at her as he dived in once more, running his tongue over her folds again and again, his soft sighs travelling as vibrations through her skin. The sensation was one she would never forget, her legs falling wide open as she invited him ever closer. When his tongue found that sensitive spot at the top of her mound, Fia couldn’t help but grind her hips against him, her hands holding his head right where she wanted him as he gave her what she needed and teased that sensitive nub.

“I want ye tae finish fer me,” he said as his hand joined his efforts, one finger sliding inside her with ease. There was no resistance anymore, her core relaxed and dripping with arousal, her walls parting with ease to accommodate him even as he pressed a second finger inside. Even the slight stretch of it was pleasurable as he began to thrust them in and out of her entrance in earnest, curling them in search of a spot deep inside her that, once he found it and pressed against it, had stars exploding behind her eyelids. “Can ye dae that, me love? I want ye all nice an’ open so ye can take me all the way inside ye.”

The rumbling baritone of Knox’s voice reverberated through her as his lips moved against her folds. Fia nodded frantically and after that, Knox said nothing else. He only focused on bringing her pleasure, sinking his fingers inside her to the knuckle

and licking at the sensitive skin around them, the tip of his tongue tracing patterns all over her flesh. When he pressed the pads of his fingers against that spot inside her again, rubbing relentlessly while his tongue worked her sensitive nub, it didn't take more than a few seconds for him to bring Fia to orgasm, her entire body jerking again and again as wave after wave of almost unbearable pleasure coursed through her.

Her core throbbed pleasantly with her climax as Knox worked her through it, her walls clenching around his fingers. He only pulled back when she lay back down, a tingling warmth spreading all over her body from her core, and then kissed his way up her body, stopping by her breasts to suck a nipple in his mouth.

"Ach!" Fia shouted, another jolt of pleasure shooting through her suddenly. She laughed softly, pulling Knox to her and pressing a sweet kiss to his lips as he settled, still clothed, between her legs.

For a few moments, they only kissed, until Knox couldn't take it anymore and began to roll his hips in small, almost aborted movements, pressing his manhood against her thigh. Hesitantly, but also determined to give him the same pleasure, Fia reached for him, grasping him through his clothes and drawing a broken moan out of him.

"Can I dae the same tae ye?" she asked, heat flooding her cheeks. As embarrassed as the thought of even offering made her, though, she wanted to make him feel good.

"Ye dinnae have tae dae that," he said, but Fia was quick to shake her head.

"I want to," she assured him. "Please. Tell me how I can please ye."

Knox drew in a sharp breath through his nose and Fia could feel his manhood twitching where it was pressing into her thigh. He nodded and rolled onto his back, letting Fia move on top of him and undress him slowly, kissing her way down his chest as she did.

She was mindful of his injury, but when it came to exploring the rest of him, she was greedy, dragging her tongue over his heated skin and pressing her fingers into the grooves and swells of his muscles. It was as though he was carved from marble, like the statue of a great hero, but at the same time he felt so alive under her fingers, his blood pumping hot in his veins, that Fia couldn't mistake him for anything other than what he was—a man of flesh and blood.

When she finally had him naked, she understood what it was that had forced him to stop and stare at her. She was enjoying the view, looking at the way his arms and legs bulged with every tiny movement, the way his manhood strained against his stomach, hard and leaking at the tip. Once again, though, she hesitated as she touched him, gently dragging her fingers over his length.

Surely, he must have been with many women, she thought, and all of them had to have been much more experienced than she was. She didn't even know what to do; she needed him to guide her, and she could only hope that he wouldn't mind.

“Ye can touch me,” he assured her, reaching for himself and wrapping his fingers around his length to give it a few lazy pumps. “Like this.”

Fia replaced his hand with hers, gently stroking the silky skin. He was firm in her grasp, more moisture beading at the tip every time she gave him a particularly pleasurable stroke, and Fia dipped her head to roll her tongue over it, tasting him for the first time.

“Heavens!” said Knox, sounding absolutely wrecked. Fia had never heard him sound like that before, so overcome by pleasure, and she wanted nothing more than to give him more of it, to hear him speak like that again. Tentatively, she took the tip of his manhood in her mouth, sucking softly as her hand worked the rest of him, and he writhed just as she had done, hips twitching as he tried to stop himself from thrusting into her mouth.

“That’s it,” he encouraged her as he began to pet her hair, fingers carding through the strands. “Take yer time... dinnae push yerself.”

Fia did as she was told, giving the head soft kitten licks that had Knox bucking underneath her. Every stroke seemed to get him even harder, every brush of her lips over him making him moan, until he couldn’t take it anymore and he wrapped his fingers tightly around the base, pulling back from her.

“I willnae last like this,” he warned her. “An’ I wish tae be inside ye. Come here, let me kiss ye.”

It was a heady feeling, knowing that Knox was close to his peak from her attentions, even if she wasn’t experienced. Fia wanted to touch him more, to bring him to completion, but she also wanted to feel him inside her, and so she crawled up his body, letting him pull her into a passionate kiss as he rolled her onto her back on the floor.

The blanket was warm and soft under her back, the flames of the fire suffusing the air around them with heat, but it was Knox’s touch which felt the hottest on her skin, like a branding iron. As he settled once more between her legs, kneeling there before her, Fia gazed into his deep blue eyes, gasping when she felt the tip of his manhood just about to breach her opening.

“Relax fer me,” he said, as he caressed her thigh gently. “I’ll go slow, I promise. An’ if ye want me tae stop, all ye have tae dae is tell me.”

Fia nodded, reassured by Knox’s promises. She knew he would never hurt her, and so she allowed herself to relax, letting him sink inside her slowly until he was buried in her body to the hilt.

That first thrust stole Fia’s breath away. Just as Knox had promised, he had gone

slow and there was no pain—only a dull pressure that quickly turned into the most pleasurable feeling Fia had felt in her life. The drag of his manhood against her inner walls was maddening, each thrust filling her up completely, and just from that, Fia felt like she finally and truly belonged to him.

“Ye should see yerself,” he told her as his gaze roamed all over her body, taking in everything about her. There were parts of her she didn’t like—her small breasts, her slightly rounded stomach, all the things that Callum had disliked and commented about her, but Knox seemed to love every part of her. None of it was a flaw in his eyes; only another piece of her to love. “Next time, I’ll take ye in front o’ a mirror so ye can see just how bonnie ye are.”

Fia groaned, arching her back to get him even deeper, flushing a deep red when Knox’s gaze was drawn to the point where they were joined, watching as his manhood stretched her folds and disappeared inside her. His strong hands closed around her hips, fingers digging into her skin, and she hoped that there would be bruises there the next morning, reminding her of those moments.

Knox had spoken about a next time as though he was certain there would be one, as though he never wanted to stop being with her. Fia knew better than that; she knew that once she revealed the truth to him, he wouldn’t want her anymore, but at least she could enjoy it while it lasted. She lost herself in the slow, easy rhythm of his thrusts, in the gentle motion of their hips as they ground against each other. She sighed with pleasure every time his pelvis rubbed against her most sensitive spot and moaned his name when his length brushed against that other spot inside her, rapidly bringing her towards her next peak.

Reaching for him, Fia wrapped her arms around Knox’s shoulders and pulled her close. He draped himself over her body, kissing her as he quickened his thrusts, one of his hands closing around her breast to squeeze at her flesh. Never once did Knox look away from her eyes and so Fia forced herself to keep his gaze despite her

embarrassment, green staring into blue.

She was still gazing at him when her orgasm crashed over her, forced out of her by a few hard thrusts. Knox groaned as she clenched around him, his hips stuttering as he followed her, spilling deep inside her just as he leaned down to capture her lips in a heated kiss. Pleasure pulsed all over Fia's body, her zenith lasting for several seconds with Knox still pressing into her, drawing the last of their orgasms out of them both. When he collapsed on top of her, Fia let out a breathless laugh, fingers tangling once more in Knox's hair.

"Was it good?" he asked her in a teasing tone and Fia couldn't help but roll her eyes, even if he couldn't see her from where he lay with his head buried in the crook of her neck.

"I'll let ye figure that out on yer own," she said, luxuriating in the bliss of her afterglow. A comfortable silence stretched between them until Knox pushed himself up and pulled Fia along with him, taking her to the bed so they could get under the covers and properly rest.

Just as they had settled in, though, a scream tore through the air and Knox sat up in alarm, gaze trained on the door—which then flew open, forcing Fia to hold onto the covers to keep herself hidden. Where she had expected to see a brigand or even perhaps one of Laird Gordon's men, though, all she saw was Hamish, his face red and wet with snot and tears.

"Please!" he said, just as another scream rang through the air. "Me maither! She's nae well!"

Fia exchanged a quick, terrified glance with Knox, before she turned to the child.

"We'll be right there," she promised.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Knox stood by the door of the cottage, his clothes askew, his hair all over the place, his hand gripping the door handle as though it could somehow help him process the scene before him. Never before in his life had he been present for a birth and now that it was happening right in front of him, he wished it had never come to this.

How dae lasses dae this?

He, Baird, and Hamish looked in horror as Caitriona paced around the room, every now and then doubling over as she screamed in pain. She was crimson in the face, a vein popping in her forehead, and even her eyes were reddened, the small vessels there bursting. She was soaked in sweat, her tunic clinging to her back, and had it not been for Fia, Knox thought he would have long since passed out just from watching the woman.

“Everythin’ will be alright,” Fia assured her as she gathered everything she needed. Baird had already heated up jug after jug of water and there was a pile of clean cloth on the table, but Fia still flitted about the room, gathering herbs from Caitriona’s kitchen. “I’ve delivered many bairns, Caitriona. Ye can trust me.”

“Och aye, that is true,” said Knox, wishing to be helpful even in some small way. “She is a very skilled midwife.”

“Ye are?” Caitriona asked through a sob as she reached for Fia, grabbing her arm. “Tell me the truth... it’s too soon, is it nae? It isnae time yet.”

“Bairns come whenever bairns come,” was Fia’s cryptic response. “Yers wishes tae meet ye now an’ so it shall be.”

She sounded perfectly calm—at least to those who didn’t know her. Knox, though, could detect an edge of panic in her tone, one which she concealed well, giving no sign that she was concerned about Caitriona and the baby. He couldn’t help but admire her for it. Knox himself was on the verge of a breakdown and he had seen his fair share of battle in his lifetime. But a battle seemed like such a small thing compared to this; so impersonal, violence for violence’s sake. Here, the pain was coupled with life. It was oddly humbling to watch, reminding Knox once again that being a midwife was so much harder than being in battle.

In that moment, Fia was everything to Caitriona. She was a midwife, a sister, a mother. She was the only person who could take care of her, the only one who could safely bring this new life to the world.

As Fia wrapped an arm around Caitriona’s shoulders, giving her all the comfort she could, Caitriona leaned closer and whispered something in her ear, something that he, Baird, and Hamish couldn’t hear. Fia turned to glance at them, her skin just a shade paler than usual, and then looked back at Caitriona, nodding.

“Baird, perhaps ye should take Hamish tae the hut,” Fia suggested. “This is hardly a place fer a bairn tae be. But dinnae fash about yer maither, Hamish. Everythin’ will be fine an’ soon, ye’ll have a wee brother or a sister.”

Knox saw the look Baird gave Fia, but when he saw just how distressed Hamish was at seeing his mother in such pain, he was quick to nod and whisk him away, the two of them leaving the cottage. The moment the three of them were alone, Fia beckoned Knox closer, making him hold Caitriona steady.

“If I die?—”

“Dinnae say that,” Fia scolded her. “I told ye, everythin’ will be fine.”

“If ye truly thought so, then ye wouldnae have listened tae me an’ sent them away,” Caitriona said and by the guilt in Fia’s gaze, he knew that to be true. “I asked ye tae send them away because I ken what could happen. So if I die, tell them... tell them....”

“They already ken,” Knox said. “They dae.”

Caitriona turned her teary eyes towards him, nodding gratefully. Her hand clamped like a vice around his own, to the point where he could almost feel his bones grinding against each other, and he wondered where such a small woman could find such strength. But then again, she was in labor and that, more than anything, had to require a kind of strength he could not even begin to imagine.

“Ye’re early,” Fia confirmed. “But nae by much. I’ve delivered smaller bairns than yers an’ both maither an’ bairn were perfectly healthy. All I need from ye is tae stay calm an’ push when I tell ye. Can ye dae that?”

Caitriona nodded, the hand that wasn’t holding onto Knox coming up to wipe the sweat off her brow. Fia brought over the clean cloth and then knelt in front of Caitriona, her hand disappearing under her tunic as she frowned.

“Alright,” she said. “I can feel the head. Yer bairn’s almost here.”

“I have tae push,” Caitriona said, then immediately curled over again, a scream tearing its way past her throat.

“Nae yet!” Fia said. “Here... hold onto the back o’ the chair. Knox, come here.”

Knox looked at Fia with wide eyes, frantically shaking his head. “Nay.”

“Knox!”

“Down... there?”

“Aye, quickly!” Fia commanded and he had little choice other than to fall to his knees next to her, a wave of nausea washing over him. “Ye’ll have tae catch the bairn.”

“What?” Knox shrieked, his voice suddenly so high in pitch that at first, he didn’t even realize it belonged to him. “What dae ye mean catch the bairn ? I cannae dae that!”

“O’ course ye can, dinnae be ridiculous!”

“I cannae!” Knox insisted. “How fast will the child be? What if I drop it?”

“Dinnae ye dare drop me bairn!” Caitriona shouted.

“He willnae drop the bairn,” Fia assured her and then turned her stern gaze to Knox, hissing through clenched teeth. “Ye willnae drop the bairn.”

“But all the blood?—”

“Ye’ve killed people but now ye mind the blood?” she asked.

“He’s killed people?” Caitriona cried, her eyes wide as she stared at Knox in fear.

“As a soldier!” he was quick to assure her. “I’m nae a killer, dinnae fash.”

“That is what a mercenary would say!”

“I’m nae a mercenary!”

“He’s nae a mercenary,” Fia assured her and Caitriona seemed more open to accept that as the truth when it came from her. “Look at me, Caitriona... are ye ready? Are ye ready tae push?”

Caitriona nodded and with Fia’s help, squatted a little as she gave the first push. Knox tried to keep his breathing calm and controlled, reminding himself that his was perhaps the easiest job in there. All he had to do was grab the baby; he could do that. If he could stomach the violence of a battle, then he could do this, as well. What he could not do was retch, which was all he wanted to do.

As Caitriona pushed, her screams piercing Knox’s ears, Fia guided her through her labor, reassuring her again and again that everything would be fine and that she was doing well. Soon, Knox came to find out just how much blood was involved in the birth of a child, and once again, he had to force himself to breathe, to keep himself from getting lightheaded. Blood had never bothered him like this before, perhaps because it had never come from an innocent woman who was in so much pain. But now Caitriona’s wails as she tried to push her baby out, coupled with the blood and the sheer strangeness of birth shocked him in a way few things in his life had. What if her fears were true? What if she died?

He couldn’t understand how women could go through with this and not only once, but multiple times. The thought that Caitriona had already done this once gave him pause and he couldn’t help but wonder why anyone would choose to go through it again.

But then, just as he began to question everyone’s sanity, the last of the baby’s body – the little feet – fell in Knox’s hands and he cradled the tiny human in his arms. It was a little girl, her wails as loud as her mother’s, so small that Knox could barely believe she was real.

Above him, Caitriona sobbed with relief and joy as Fia took the baby from Knox and

handed it to her. After that, there was a blur of movement as Fia clamped the chord and checked the little girl, making sure she was breathing properly, swaddling her, and handing her once more to Knox, much to his surprise.

“Yer wee girl is fine. Time tae deliver the rest,” she said and Caitriona nodded, bracing herself once more.

“The... what?” Knox asked, but his question was drowned out by another wave of encouragements from Fia’s side. Confused, he stepped back now that Fia hadn’t requested his assistance, watching as the two women worked together to finish the process of labor, with Fia pressing on Caitriona’s stomach as Caitriona pushed.

The sight that followed was one that Knox wished he had never seen in his life. After everything, it was that which made him lightheaded enough for him to seek a chair, collapsing in it as he held onto the baby securely, fearful that he would, in fact, drop her now.

He didn’t know how much time had passed when Fia finally came to him, her hands now clean of blood, and took the little girl from his arms to return her to her mother. Belatedly, Knox realized that his own hands were still coated in blood and several other things which he would rather not think about, and he was quick to go to the basin and scrub them clean.

“See?” Fia said. “That wasnae so bad.”

Knox wasn’t sure if she was talking to him or to Caitriona, but he nodded anyway. But if that was the process by which he was going to have his heirs, then he didn’t know if it was truly worth it—at least until he turned to look at Caitriona on the bed, cradling her newborn with the biggest smile on her face, while tears were falling down her cheeks.

When Fia left to call Baird and Hamish back into the room, she had made sure everything was clean, no traces of blood to be found. Knox watched as father and son barreled through the door, both of them rushing to Caitriona and the new addition to their family, excited to meet her. With a pleased smile on her lips, Fia joined Knox by the chair and he stood, pulling her into his arms to give her a soft, sweet kiss.

“I told ye bein’ a midwife is harder than goin’ tae battle,” he said. She, too, was still covered in sweat, her honey blonde hair a mess on top of her head and her clothes a little stained, but she was beaming with joy and pride.

“Caitriona did all the work,” said Fia bashfully. “I was only there tae help.”

“An’ if ye hadnae been here, nae one o’ us would have kenned what tae dae,” Knox pointed out. “When will ye realize that what ye dae is the most important thing in the world?”

Fia only huffed out a short laugh, shaking her head, before she kissed him again. It was little more than a quick peck, but Knox liked that they could be open with their love in front of others, even if it was only because this family didn’t know who they truly were.

Now, Knox was more determined than ever to let the council know he was going to marry Fia. There was no other woman in the world for him, no one who could make him feel like she did. She was beautiful, clever, compassionate, everything that the Lady of the Clan needed to be in order to be adored by her people. What other clan could claim to have a lady who had experienced firsthand the hardships of its common folk? That would set Fia apart from anyone else, and Knox didn’t care anymore if his council would be against it.

He had already made up his mind. Now all that was left was for him to ask for her hand in marriage.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

With the rush of adrenaline gone and after having returned to her small cottage in the castle grounds, Fia was suddenly thrown into a panic. Her heart raced in her chest, her hands trembled uncontrollably, dropping the cup of tea Bane had brewed for her, the clay chipping off upon impact.

She cursed under her breath. Nothing she did seemed right; even though she had long since decided to abandon her plan, it still haunted her everywhere she went.

Knox would not leave her alone. No matter what she had done, no matter how gently and subtly she had tried to extricate herself from him, he continued to pursue her. His feelings showed no signs of fading and Fia couldn't understand how someone like her, someone Callum had put down time and time again, could have gotten the attention of such a great man as the laird of the clan. She didn't deserve Knox, not even a tiny bit. And she was not selfish enough to pursue him.

She didn't deserve it; she didn't deserve any of it. She was not the brave, honest woman Knox thought she was.

The only way out of this was to tell him the truth, but then he would despise her and he would kick her and Bane out of the castle. She didn't care about herself so much; Knox could do as he pleased and she would suffer it because she deserved to face the consequences. Bane, though, didn't deserve any of it. He had done nothing wrong; it was only Fia, with her foolish ambition and her even more foolish plan for revenge, who had gotten him into that mess.

“Fia... calm yerself,” Bane said as he began to gather the chipped pieces of clay and mop up the spilled tea with a piece of cloth. From the lips of anyone else, Fia would have taken those words, that tone, as harsh and unfeeling. But when they came from Bane, she knew what it was; a way for her to snap out of her panic, to provoke her just enough for her to return to herself.

It didn’t work, though it was usually an effective strategy. This time, her panic felt too deep, bottomless, as though she still hadn’t reached its murkiest parts. She was still sinking into its bowels, still hadn’t reached the bottom, and she didn’t know if she ever would.

“Fia,” Bane called again, but this time his tone was gentler, his hand coming to rest on her shoulder as he crouched down next to her chair so that they were at the same level. It was only then that Fia looked at him, finding him smiling softly at her.

She didn’t deserve that either.

“Come now... what happened? Ye were fine just yesterday.”

“I cannae dae this anymore,” she finally said, gasping as though she hadn’t managed to draw a single breath all that day. “What am I supposed tae dae now, Bane? Knox... Laird Stuart, he keeps bein’ so wonderful. He... he treats me so well an’ I dinnae deserve any o’ it. What am I supposed tae dae?”

Bane sighed, giving her a pat on the shoulder. “Naethin’,” he said. “Eventually, he’ll have tae wed another woman. Everyone in the castle is talkin’ about how the council wants him tae wed, so ye shouldnae have this problem fer much longer.”

The room seemed to darken at that, as if a cloud had passed over Fia and covered the sun completely. Knowing that he was meant to be married to another woman was just as painful, almost unbearable. She had truly fallen for him; her heart belonged wholly

to him. Knowing he would be married to another woman was akin to torture.

But perhaps it's the torture I deserve.

"I see," she said, her voice sounding so weak that she hardly recognized it as her own. But then a thought occurred to her, that unnerved her as much as it gave her sick hope. "But what if that daesnae stop him?"

It was hardly unheard of for lairds to have paramours and if that was what Knox wanted, Fia didn't know how she could avoid him. Was he the kind of man who would do such a thing? Or would he be loyal to his wife, as was expected of him by God?

She supposed it all depended on whether he loved her or not.

"Then perhaps ye should tell him the truth," Bane said. "Wouldnae that be best fer everyone?"

"Nae fer ye," Fia pointed out. "He'll be angry, o' course. What if he sends us away?"

"Then... then we return home," Bane said, with such calm and conviction that it was difficult for Fia to hold onto her panic. If Bane was calm, then it meant he knew what to do, and if he knew what to do, then there was nothing for Fia to worry about. It wouldn't be the first time she had to rely on him, on his guidance, to get through a difficult time.

"But ye like it here."

"I dae," Bane admitted. "O' course I dae. It's very comfortable. But I dinnae need any o' this, Fia. All we need is a roof over our heads, some warm food, an' tae keep lookin' fer Tav. An' I... I have sorely neglected that while we've been here."

Bane sounded so wounded by that, Fia couldn't help but stare at him in surprise. So blind had she been, so concerned with her own problems with Knox, she hadn't even thought much about Tav those past few weeks, overcome by her worries and fears about everything else.

"Bane... I'm sorry," she said as she sank to her knees on the floor next to him, pulling him into a tight hug. Bane hesitated for a moment, but then his arms wrapped tightly around her, the two of them holding onto each other like they did when they were children and the storms chilled them to the bone, even in the safety of their cottage. "I'm sorry... I wasnae thinking... I didnae realize..."

"It's alright," Bane assured her, shushing her gently. "Ye had so much tae think about. It's alright, I promise. And I got distracted as well..."

Pulling back from him, Fia grabbed his face in her hands, staring at him in the eyes. "Dinnae blame yerself," she said firmly, through gritted teeth, hot tears carving stinging paths down her face. "Dinnae think fer a second ye did somethin' wrong. An' dinnae think fer a second that we willnae find Tav. He's out there, I ken he is. An' we'll find him together."

This was what she needed, Fia thought. She had lost her way somewhere along the line, losing track of what was important and what wasn't. As much as it pained her to know that she couldn't be with Knox, as much as the thought of him with another woman wounded her, it was nothing she could change. But what she could do was search for Tav and bring him home. She could help save her brother.

Bane nodded, at least as much as he could with Fia holding his face like that. "Aye," he said, the word coming out choked, as if he had trouble speaking it. "Aye, ye're right. We'll find him."

For a while, the two of them stayed like that, kneeling on the floor in each other's

arms. When Bane pulled back from Fia, she saw that he had been crying, too, but he was quick to wipe the tears off his face with the back of his hand. With a deep breath, he stood and offered his hand to her and she took it and did the same, taking a moment to breathe.

Everythin' will be fine, as long as I have me family.

That night, Fia and Bane once again found themselves at the laird's table, having another dinner that felt too formal for them. She knew, of course, why Knox kept inviting them to such dinners and always tried to find ways to have her near him, but Fia couldn't help but wish she could somehow reject the invitation.

Not only did she find it painful to be near Knox, but she also found the dinners themselves painful. Even now, neither she nor Bane fit in with the rest of the crowd. They neither knew how to speak to the nobles around them, or how to discuss the matters they did, or copy their gestures and mannerisms. Eating with so many utensils had only just gotten easier for Fia, but she still had trouble remembering which was for what function.

Her only solace was that every time Effie sat next to her on such occasions—which was more often than not—she gently and subtly reminded her which utensil to use whenever she hesitated. If any of the nobles around her noticed, they hadn't dared say a thing on the matter. Ever since they had seen how Knox berated those who spoke ill of her or Bane, they had stopped making comments at their expense.

That, at least, was a relief.

The sound of a polite cough caught Fia's attention and she glanced at the head of the table to see Knox standing, a cup of wine in his hand.

"A toast," he said, and all the chatter around the table died down as the rest of the

guests raised their cups to match him. “Tae Miss MacKenzie, who only yesterday delivered a wee bairn an’ saved it an’ the maither from harm. We dinnae ken what may have happened had we nae been caught in that storm an’ Miss MacKenzie hadnae been there tae help.”

Fia’s cheeks burned with embarrassment at being the center of attention. She was far from used to it. In fact, she had spent most of her life bleeding into the background, never once drawing anyone’s attention on her. Callum was the first one to ever notice her, and he had only done it for a bet. Now that the attention was genuine and all these people around the table looked at her with bright smiles—some of them genuine—she didn’t know what to do with herself.

Should I stand? Should I say somethin’?

“Thank ye, me laird,” she said in the end, deciding it was best to keep it short as to avoid any more unwanted attention—or even worse, a blunder. “I’m only glad I was there tae help.”

Knox tilted his head and raised his cup even higher in the air. “Tae yer health, Fia.”

Somehow, the sound of her name was more intimate than Fia had expected. Not only that, but all the kindness he had shown her, all the love, even the hospitality when he hadn’t even known her for more than a day—they all made her plan to win his favor seem so foolish, so banal. Upon arrival, she had thought Knox would simply be a useful tool, a noble like all the others who had scorned her from the moment she had stepped foot in the great hall. But Knox wasn’t like that. He spoke of Fia’s kindness and bravery often, but he was the one who was kind, who was truly brave.

As Knox took his seat once more, Fia’s gaze fell to her plate. Her appetite was gone. All she wanted was to leave the great hall and retreat to the safety of her cottage—not the one within castle grounds, but the one back in Duror, her real home.

Maybe, just maybe, she would end up back there sooner than she thought.

“I’ll wed Fia,” Knox announced and, just as he had expected, Magnus let out a weary sigh and buried his face in his hands. The two of them were in Knox’s study, sharing a drink after the dinner, and Knox couldn’t wait any longer to announce the news.

“So, ye’ve made up yer mind,” Magnus said, leaning back in his seat and downing the rest of his wine. “An’ the council?”

“I dinnae care about the council.”

Knox had given it plenty of thought. He had worried about the council’s opinion for so long, agonizing over what they might say and do, that he had forgotten the most important thing of all.

He simply did not care.

He didn’t care what the elders might say. He didn’t care if they disagreed with his choice or if they were going to put up a fight, desperately trying to convince him to reconsider. He didn’t even care if they tried to sabotage the wedding. Knox had made up his mind and there was no turning back.

“I see,” said Magnus. “Well, in that case, I wish ye two the very best. As long as ye’re prepared tae deal with what’s tae come, I’ll stand by yer side.”

Knox had expected nothing less from Magnus. He had never gone against his decisions or his desires, and he wasn’t going to start now, but it was still good to hear it from the man himself. Knox needed Magnus’ support now more than ever. Without him by his side, he didn’t know how he could ever stand in front of the council and give them the same announcement.

“When will ye tell them?” Magnus asked. “Dae ye want me tae be there?”

“O’ course,” said Knox. “But I should ask Fia first. It would be presumptuous o’ me tae simply think that’s what she wishes.”

“Isnae it?” Magnus asked, and Knox had to ask himself the same question. He knew Fia had to be feeling the same way he did. He knew they shared a deep, profound love, but even so, he didn’t want to assume.

“I dinnae ken,” he admitted. “She... she has been through much. She was meant tae wed a man afore she came here, she told me. But from what she said, he hurt her terribly, left her afore the proposal.”

Magnus leaned closer, his eyes wide with surprise. “Truly? How terrible.”

“It is,” Knox agreed. “I dinnae understand how anyone would leave such a lass.”

“The heart often works in mysterious ways,” Magnus pointed out. “Perhaps somethin’ happened, perhaps he had other issues.”

“Perhaps,” Knox said, but something about it still didn’t sit right with him. He had the suspicion it may have been something far more complex, something he may never fully understand. “It’s such a shame, how much he hurt her. But once I make her me wife, she willnae have tae ever fear a thing.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Fia's heels clicked against the stone floor as she swiftly made her way to Knox's chambers. She had to speak with him that very moment; it couldn't wait any longer.

She had made up her mind. It was time for her to tell him the truth, no matter the cost.

"Halt!" one of the two guards who stood sentinel outside Knox's chambers said, holding up a hand for Fia to stay back. She came to an abrupt stop, surprised by the sudden command, since she was quite certain the guards knew who she was. They had seen her in the castle before. She, too, had seen them, and so she didn't understand what the problem was.

"I need tae speak tae Laird Stuart," she said. "It's urgent."

"Wait here," said the man as he turned around and knocked on the door, entering the laird's chambers. Fia waited there, shifting her weight from one foot to the other nervously, her hands clasped behind her back as she fidgeted with the broken edge of a nail.

It was another reminder of how foolish she had been to think her plan would ever work.

A few moments later, the door opened again and the guard waved her inside without another word. After a moment of hesitation, during which she tried to gather her courage, Fia entered the dimly lit room and spotted Knox by the fire, sitting over a pile of papers with a drink in his hand.

“Fia,” he said, immediately putting his drink down and standing to approach her. Before she could speak, he pulled her into a fiery kiss, brimming with passion, and at least momentarily she forgot why she had gone there.

Right... I must tell him the truth.

“It’s a good thing ye came,” Knox said, once again stopping her right before she was about to speak. “I wished tae talk tae ye about somethin’ very important.”

That wasn’t how Fia had thought the conversation would go. She gave Knox a small, confused frown, but now that he had started talking, it seemed that he couldn’t stop, the words tumbling past his lips as if he had little control over them.

“I’ve given it plenty o’ thought an’... an’ I want ye tae be me wife, Fia,” he said. “Before ye say anythin’, I ken. I ken it may nae be easy, but I love ye. Ye’re the love o’ me life an’ I willnae let ye go simply because some may think ye’re nae a good match fer me. It’s what I want. An’ if... if it is what ye want as well, then I willnae let anyone stand in our way.”

Fia’s heart dropped to her stomach, her eyes brimming with tears. They stung as they fell down her cheeks, and Knox must have mistaken them for tears of joy because he laughed softly and pulled her into another kiss.

She allowed it. She couldn’t bring herself to tell him the truth, not now; not when she could feel the love radiating off him, enveloping her entirely, like a warm summer breeze.

Perhaps he daesnae need tae ken the truth. Regardless of how everythin’ started, me feelings fer him are true.

And Fia was determined to do anything in her power to make Knox happy. It didn’t

matter what it would take. Anything he wanted, she would give it to him. She would atone for her lies in her own way, and she would make sure he was always happy by her side.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, Fia finally reciprocated the kiss, pulling him closer. Knox laughed once again, his hands coming to rest on her waist as he pulled back to look at her, pressing their foreheads together. “Am I tae assume this means aye?”

Through the tears, Fia couldn’t help but laugh as well. “Aye.”

With a pleased hum, Knox picked her up and gave her a twirl in the air, drawing a surprised yelp out of her. When she wrapped her legs around his waist to hold on, though, something shifted between them. Fia saw it in the way Knox’s gaze darkened, getting hazy with lust. Before she knew it, his hands grabbed her rear and he pressed her against the nearest wall, devouring her mouth in a kiss.

Fia couldn’t help but moan into the kiss, her back arching off the wall as her core demanded attention. Knox echoed her moan and Fia could feel him harden against her, his hips twitching restlessly as they kissed, as though he had trouble holding himself back.

But Fia didn’t want him to hold back. She wanted him to give her everything, to take all the pleasure he wanted from her.

“I want ye inside me,” she told him, whispering against his lips, and Knox let out a broken moan in response as he gingerly put her down and then proceeded to all but tear her clothes off her. Fia gasped in surprise. She could have sworn she heard some of the stitches of her tunic rip, but that was far from a concern when Knox grabbed her again and kissed her neck, her chest, pulling her up against him to draw one of her nipples in his mouth. Fia arched into the touch, barely standing on her tiptoes as

Knox teased her breasts, biting and kissing the swell of them. It made her shiver from head to toe, all this attention that was focused solely on her, Knox putting all of his efforts into pleasing her.

With eager hands, Fia tugged at Knox's clothes. She wanted to see him too, to feel him under her hands, to please him like he pleased her. Knox pulled back just enough to allow it, letting her undress him hurriedly until all his clothes were on a pile on the floor beside their feet. Then, she pulled him close once more, dragging her hands all over him—over his shoulders, his back, down the swell of his rear, feeling the strong muscles under her fingers ripple as he moved.

Battle scars, silvery under the dim light in the room, seemed to cover most of his body. Fia traced some of the raised bumps, wondering how he could have gotten so many—how many battles had he fought? How many times had he come close to death and how many more would he have to face? The thought sickened her, and so she quickly pushed it out of her mind. She didn't want to think about such things, not when Knox was so alive, so warm and solid under her hands, ready to give her what she so desperately craved.

Once they were both undressed, he wasted no time before he plunged a finger inside her, the digit slipping with ease past her folds. She was already so wet and eager, that he was quick to add a second finger, pumping them and finding that spot deep inside her that had Fia crying out in pleasure.

She didn't know how he always seemed to know just what she needed. She didn't know how he could be so attuned to her body already, knowing where to kiss, where to press, just what to do to drive her mad.

One leg coming up to wrap around his waist, Fia pulled Knox flush against her, easily accepting the kiss he gave her. His fingers worked her fervently, coaxing more moisture out of her, along with more moans of his name, stoking the flames of desire

that burned in her core. Fia could feel him everywhere around her. She was surrounded by his presence, his touch, his scent, all of it working in tandem to make her lust bubble over, her hips moving on their own accord as they worked to draw his fingers even deeper.

“Ye’re so bonnie like this,” Knox whispered in her ear, the silky baritone of his voice coating her like honey. “So eager... drawin’ me in. Tell me what ye want. Tell me how I can best please ye.”

Fia blushed at the mere thought of giving Knox instruction, telling him how she wanted him most. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment, but her core burned even hotter, demanding her attention. Her entrance throbbed around Knox, her flesh clenching at the thought of having his manhood inside her instead of his fingers, and so she reached between them, taking him in her hand.

The moan he released sent a ripple of lust through her.

“Inside me,” she gasped, hitching her leg even higher, their hands a tangle between them. “I want ye inside me, please. I cannae wait any longer.”

With a growl, Knox spun her around in one swift movement, pressing her against the wall. His hand found her entrance again, fingers slipping inside her once more as he leaned in to whisper in her ear.

“Come fer me an’ I’ll give ye what ye want,” he said, his other hand closing around the small swell of her breast. He groaned as if he was the one being pleased like this, single-mindedly and relentlessly, and Fia couldn’t help but melt in his embrace, letting the sensations crash over her again and again. “Ye’ll be so wet an’ ready fer me that I’ll just push right intae ye, hmm? Ye’ll take me like a good lass.”

She was entirely at his mercy, caught between his hands and forced to take this sweet

torture until she fell apart in them. It didn't take long for heat to spread over her core, the pressure building and building until it finally exploded inside her, her first orgasm ripped out of her by those clever fingers.

Fia pressed a hand over her mouth to muffle her moans, knowing the guards were still outside. If, by some miracle, they hadn't already heard her and Knox, then they were bound to hear them now if she couldn't control herself. But how could she when her pleasure struck her so violently, when her core throbbed and twitched around Knox's fingers, which were still working her through the aftershocks? She couldn't. All she could do was tremble and shake, and let the sensations ever so slowly fade away.

And then, just as she started to come back to herself, she felt the hard length of Knox's manhood against her rear, hot and rigid like a branding iron, and she knew she was nowhere near finished. Her body craved more; her entrance pulsed at the mere thought of Knox pushing inside her, and she knew he was right. She was ready for him, her body offering no resistance.

"Spread yer legs. Let me see ye," Knox said, though he didn't wait for her to do so before manhandling her in the position he wanted her. Fia braced herself against the wall on her forearms, her hips pushing back, and she heard Knox inhale sharply behind her as his fingers traced the length of her spine, dipping into the grooves. "Gorgeous... just gorgeous."

It wasn't long before she felt the blunt tip of his length push against her entrance. Just like he had promised, Knox entered her in one smooth thrust, slowly pushing inside all the way to the hilt, until his pelvis met the swell of her buttocks. Instantly, his hands gripped her hips, the touch as tender as it was firm, holding her in place as he began to thrust in earnest.

There was a rhythm to his movements, but no real finesse. They were both too eager, too worked up, too consumed by lust to care about anything else other than reaching

their completion. Once again, Fia slapped a hand over her mouth to keep herself quiet, but Knox was quick to growl and drape himself over her, his thrusts getting more insistent, more forceful.

“Stop that,” he demanded. “I wish tae hear ye.”

Silently, Fia shook her head, but Knox let his head fall between her shoulder blades, pressing a kiss to the heated skin there.

“I dinnae care who hears,” he said, delivering a hard thrust that had Fia’s walls clenching around him and her body going on tiptoes to take it. “Let them all hear. Let them ken ye’re the only one I want, the only one who can reduce me tae this. Heavens, Fia... ye feel so good, so hot, so tight . Like ye were made just fer me. Dae ye feel how deep inside ye I am?”

Fia nodded, drunk on her pleasure. She could feel him deep inside her, indeed, filling her up completely, taking up every bit of space inside her. Every drag of his length across her walls, every deep thrust had her moaning again, her entrance stretching pleasurably around him, her core throbbing desperately.

When he slid his hand from her hip to her mound, giving her something to rub against as her hips rocked with each of his thrusts, Fia knew she wouldn’t last long. The sensations built and built inside her, the coupling of his wild thrusts with that hand on her sensitive spot and those filthy words in her ear once again bringing her over the edge until she came apart around him.

Distantly, she heard Knox curse as she pulsed around his length. After that, it only took him a few more thrusts before he joined her, spilling himself deep inside her with a grunt, much to her surprise.

They weren’t wedded yet. The thought sparked a sense of apprehension in her, but it

felt so good to have him let go, to have him reach his climax like this and take him in her body that she couldn't bring herself to care.

A few moments later, Knox pulled back with a soft laugh, gathering Fia in his arms. For the first time, she noticed the strain put on her body by the position, the soreness of her muscles, but Knox was quick to soothe her by massaging her shoulders, as though he knew exactly what she needed once again.

"Me bonnie wife," he said, and though Fia was well aware of their reality, of the fact that they weren't married yet and may never be if the council put up enough resistance, she allowed herself to smile, to feel that word warm her chest. "All mine."

"All yers," she told him, turning around in his arms to face him and pull him in a soft, tender kiss.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“T his is preposterous! Tae think we’ve been lookin’ fer a proper bride fer ye all this time only fer ye tae go against us all an’ make such a proposal tae a peasant! Impertinent! Entirely impertinent!”

“That is the laird o’ the clan tae whom ye’re talkin’ like this,” Magnus told the elder, who now stood among the other members of the council, his hands up in exasperation. Knox could only look at them all in silence from behind his desk. Cairn had not been the first to express this sentiment, but as the eldest of the council, he was the one who could express it in such a way. There was no doubt in Knox’s mind that everyone else wanted to say the same things to him; everyone itched for an opportunity to give him a piece of their mind, but seeing as they were addressing the laird of the clan, there was only so much they could say.

“Is it?” Cairn asked. His thinning, white hair was mussed from all the times he had nervously ran his hands through it, his rheumy eyes narrowing as they glared at Magnus. “Because it seems tae me that we are dealin’ with a bairn! This is the only way I can justify this madness!”

“Let us calm ourselves,” Iain, another of the elders said. He was younger, though still older than Knox, one of the men who had barely managed to serve under his father before his death. “I dinnae think it is helpful tae anyone if we lose our composure like this. It is important tae remember that we are here tae resolve this, nae tae make such unwarranted comments.”

“Ye forget I am old enough tae have kent our laird as a bairn,” said Cairn. “I was

workin' with his faither when he was only a wee lad! I was there when our good laird brought him tae our meetings an' sat him on his knee, teachin' him right from wrong!"

"What are ye tryin' tae say?" Knox asked.

"Tryin'? I'm nae tryin'. I will say it outright... yer faither would be ashamed o' ye!"

A collective gasp rippled through the elders. Knox let out a weary sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, trying to calm himself.

He had expected resistance, of course. He had expected that the elders would not be open to the idea of a peasant girl becoming the next lady of the clan, but he hadn't quite expected this. Even for the elders, who had looked down on Fia time and time again, this was far from the resistance he thought he would have to face.

"I'm sorry ye feel this way," Knox said, his voice a little strained, as he tried to keep that comment from getting to him too much. He knew Cairn was frustrated. He knew everyone in the room was frustrated, but if he allowed this to devolve into an argument, then he would never get what he wanted. He had to approach this with tact, even if some of the elders refused to do the same. "But I disagree with ye. I think me faither would want me tae be with the lass I love, an' I love Fia. Naethin' will change that."

"Love an' marriage are two very different things, me laird," another one of the elders said. "Ye may love her while wedded tae a woman more befitting o' yer station."

It was then that Knox lost his temper despite his best intentions.

"I willnae have the woman I love be a... a concubine!" he said, slamming his hands on his desk and sending the cup of wine that rested on it rattling, and the elders

flinching. “Impossible! I will only have one woman in me life, an’ that will be me wife. An’ the only woman I will wed is Fia.”

A collective sigh passed through the crowd of elders, all of them caught between their desire to disagree with him and the knowledge that it would get them nowhere. Silence fell over the room and Knox took a sip of wine to calm his nerves, trying to get himself under control. Despite his best efforts, though, not only was he furious, but he also couldn’t find anything to say that would solve this issue.

He wanted Fia. The elders didn’t even want to hear it.

What happens now?

“If I may...” Iain said, stepping forward with a polite cough. “Perhaps everyone here would be more open tae hearin’ the laird’s... suggestion if Miss MacKenzie proved herself capable o’ such a great position as that o’ the Lady o’ the Clan. It is true that her origins are humble an’ it is true she has naethin’ tae offer our laird other than companionship, but we mustnae disregard her immediately. Our clan is strong an’ maintains strong alliances, even without marriage.”

“Still, a marriage with a noble lass would be preferable,” said an elder.

“Aye, that is true,” Iain agreed, much to Knox’s chagrin. “But imagine what this will dae fer the peasant population. A peasant, marryin’ a laird! They’ll never be happier!”

Murmurs spread through the council and among them, Knox could hear both agreement and disagreement. If Knox heard them all correctly, though, it seemed to him that those who agreed were the majority.

Leave it up tae the council tae turn this tae their favor.

It was a clever move, he had to admit, and he should be thanking Iain for it. Knox didn't know if the man was doing it for his benefit or if he truly believed it was the right way forward, but it was at least the beginning of a solution to their problem.

Of course, testing Fia wasn't something he wanted to even suggest to her. But what other choice did he have? If they could simply get through this together and proved to the council that she was, in fact, more than capable of taking on the role of the Lady of the Clan, then they would finally be allowed to wed without any more dramatics.

And there was no doubt in his mind that she would pass with flying colors.

"Very well," he said, placing his cup down. "It shall be as ye ask. Give me a list o' tasks that ye see fit fer this an' I shall have her execute them."

He could only hope this would be their final obstacle before they could be husband and wife.

Fia was exhausted to say the least. On top of her usual duties as the healer of the clan, she had suddenly been saddled with several more responsibilities after the council decided that the only way for her to marry Knox would be if she proved herself through a series of - what seemed to her -herculean-like tasks. Perhaps for another type of woman, who had grown up in a keep and had been prepared her whole life for the day she would marry a laird and would take on the mantle of the Lady of the Clan, such tasks were simple routine; nothing more than another day of normal duties. For Fia, though, everything was new and foreign, and no matter how much she tried, she began to fear that maybe that role wasn't for her, after all.

She wanted to marry Knox; she wanted that more than anything, and she was determined to do anything in her power to convince the council that she was the right woman for him. But that fear kept creeping into her mind, never letting her rest. Even at night, when she slept, she had nightmares of failing the tasks set for her by the

elders or running out of time to complete them all.

Every morning, she woke up drenched in cold sweat.

So far, she had put out several fires in the keep—settling disputes among the servants, making sure the grain storages were properly kept and the records updated, ordering more supplies from merchants. With Knox busy with other clan matters, it was mainly Magnus who helped her, showing her the ropes and making sure that everything went according to plan, even if Fia was sure that made him less than popular among the elders.

No one had outright forbidden him from helping her. No one had given any orders that she was to figure all this out on her own, but no one else offered any assistance either. Magnus and Effie helped her as much as they could, and in return, Fia made sure she was the best student they could ever have.

But now, her greatest challenge had come. Everything she had done up to that point had gained her some respect among the elders, but nothing could compare to the weight that rested on her shoulders that very day.

Some of the elders of Clan Boyd were visiting Castle Stuart to strengthen the diplomatic relations between the two clans, and the elders of Clan Stuart had made sure to make Fia understand just how important they were as allies. Nothing could go wrong that night, when they would host them at a formal dinner—a dinner Fia had to organize from scratch, from the decorations and menu to the seating arrangements and the musicians they would hire.

It had been nothing short of chaotic. For days, Fia had been rushing back and forth, trying to get everything done with the help of the head housekeeper, Mrs. Wilson. She was a stern woman, ruling the rest of the household with an iron fist, but Fia didn't mistake her strictness and efficiency for lack of warmth. She was the way she

was because she had to make sure everything was perfect, and Fia was quickly learning that if she wanted to get some things done, she, too, would have to be stern.

Only she couldn't bring herself to do it. She had worked hard in her life. She knew the servants in the castle worked hard too, and many of them had become her friends during her stay there. How was she supposed to rule over her friends? How was she supposed to order them around and treat them like Mrs. Wilson did?

That evening, right before the feast, Fia allowed two maids to dress her, simply because she didn't know how to deal with the finicky laces of the dress she was given—or how to do her hair, for that matter, which the maids easily put into an intricate updo. When she looked at her reflection in the looking glass, she could hardly recognize herself. Though Fia had never considered herself unattractive, she had also never considered herself worthy of any special attention. She was just another plainly pretty peasant girl who could never compare to the noble women in the castle and the grace with which they carried themselves. Callum had it many times and she had had to agree. But now, dressed as she was in a deep green dress that brought out the color of her eyes, she began to think that maybe she could finally pass as one of them, at least upon first glance. Perhaps her manners weren't quite there. Perhaps she was not yet great at curtsying or mimicking their walk or the way they spoke, but at least when it came to her appearance, she didn't think she was far off.

“The laird requested that ye wear this,” one of the maids said, holding up a heavy necklace encrusted with jewels. Diamonds encircled a large green emerald that hung in the middle, all the stones sparkling beautifully under the light.

“Me?” Fia asked, her eyes wide with shock. She didn't even dare touch the necklace, let alone wear it. Never before in her life had she seen such an opulent item, something that could have fed several people for years.

How could she ever wear it, knowing of all the hardships peasants faced? How could she ever wear it knowing it was so precious?

“It belonged tae the laird’s maither an’ her maither before her,” the maid said rather unhelpfully. Now Fia was even more reluctant to wear it, knowing its value extended past the material. This was something Knox had inherited from his mother. What if something happened to it? What if she somehow broke it?

“I couldnae possibly wear this,” she said, shaking her head.

“Ach but ye must!” the maid insisted. “Laird Stuart made it clear that ye are tae wear it tonight.”

Fia sighed, considering her options. She didn’t really have a good enough reason to refuse, and perhaps this was even a strategic move on Knox’s part. If she wore a necklace that belonged to his mother, then there would truly be no doubt as to his intentions. In the end, she simply nodded and let the maid drape the necklace over her neck, taking a moment to admire it. It truly was a beautiful piece, the kind of jewelry that she would dream of wearing as a little girl but never thought she would.

Once she was ready, she made her way to the great hall, mustering as much of her courage and confidence as she could. It was still a little early for the dinner that was to come, but she had to see to some final preparations and make sure that everything was according to plan before the elders from clan Boyd rushed into the great hall for the feast.

She had expected to find everything prepared, the servants well-trained in such matters after years of holding such feasts, but when she entered the great hall, she immediately knew something was wrong.

The decorations were all there, just as they had discussed. The room was adorned in

banners and torches and fresh flowers and the tables had been laid out in the exact formation Fia had instructed—but upon counting them, they were one short.

Flagging down the first servant who walked past her, Fia asked, “Why are there only four tables? There were meant tae be five.”

“Five?” the young woman asked, her eyes widening. “But... we thought there would be thirty guests. Three smaller tables an’ one fer the laird an’ the council, is that nae right?”

“Three dozen guests,” Fia said, panic suddenly gripping her. “There are three dozen guests.”

Her hands began to tremble, her skin paling. It seemed like such a trivial thing, a mere table for six guests, that it should have been an easy fix. The servants could simply bring in another table and have it set quickly, before the guests even came into the room.

But it wasn’t the table that concerned her. If there were only chairs for thirty guests, then that could only mean?—

“The food,” she said, gripping the woman’s shoulder. “How much dae we have? Will it be enough fer everyone?”

The young servant faltered, her eyes widening, her lips parting only to close again as she didn’t know the answer to Fia’s question. Fia cursed under her breath, stomach turning at the thought that she could fail her most important assignment yet. If there wasn’t enough food and drink, if she had made such a big mistake, it wouldn’t be something the council would overlook. She would be the one to embarrass them all in front of the delegation.

“I dinnae ken,” the woman admitted. “I shall find out.”

“Nay, nay, I’ll dae it meself,” Fia said as she rushed to the kitchens, looking around at the food prepared. People rushed about the large room, some of them carrying platters and pitchers, others bent over large pots, stirring their contents. There was a flurry of activity, to the point that Fia didn’t even know who to ask, but then, as if by some miracle, she spotted Mrs. Wilson.

“Mrs. Wilson!” she called, waving the woman over. She looked over her shoulder at Fia and she must have noticed her state, for her expression darkened and she rushed to join her by the door. “The food, how much dae we have? There were meant tae be five tables, but there are only four an’.... an’ is there enough food?”

“Five tables?” Mrs. Wilson asked, clearly as bewildered as the servant. “Why so many?”

In the distance, Fia could hear a hoard, their footsteps a loud crash against the stone floors of Castle Stuart. Was it already time for the feast? By the sounds of it, the delegation was already heading to the great hall and Fia was about to embarrass herself and the entire clan in front of them all.

“Mrs. Wilson, please make sure there is enough food fer everyone,” she told the woman. “I must speak tae the laird but I will come back as soon as possible. Perhaps... perhaps we can serve some parritch along with everythin’ else if there isnae enough fer everyone.”

“Parritch?” Mrs. Wilson asked with a shocked gasp. “Are ye mad?”

It was hardly an expected choice for this kind of feast, Fia knew. The delegation would be expecting roasted meats, vegetables, bannocks, everything that would tell them just how rich and welcoming the Stuart Clan was. But if everything else failed,

then porridge was plenty filling and it was one of those things that Fia had come to rely on in her life. There were always oats. There was always something to accompany them, giving them a nice taste without using too many ingredients.

“Trust me!” Fia said. “Parritch will work. Throw some salt in it an’ stir it constantly.”

“Pheasant, venison... an’ parritch,” said Mrs. Wilson, shaking her head as Fia rushed out of the kitchens, running down the halls. It was only when she spotted the delegation heading into the great hall that she slowed down, running a hand over her hair to make sure she looked presentable.

When Knox caught her gaze, Fia widened her eyes and nodded at him to come to her, the gesture as subtle as a bear hiding behind a rose shrub.

Knox excused himself and approached her, and her panic must have shown on her expression, as he, too, looked at her with a certain degree of fear in his gaze.

“What’s wrong?” he asked immediately. “What happened?”

“There is an... issue,” Fia said. “The servants thought there would only be thirty guests an’ I... I dinnae ken what I’m doin’, Knox!”

Her words came out as a whispered hiss, the truth tumbling out of her. She truly had no idea how to deal with this, how to fix any of it, how to make him proud. In her mind, she had already failed. There was not much she could do. Even with the porridge served, the guests were bound to know something was amiss.

“It’s alright,” Knox told her, placing his hands on each of Fia’s shoulders and giving them a comforting squeeze. “It isnae that important, Fia.”

“It is!” she insisted, shrugging him off simply because she couldn’t stand still. She

paced back and forth before him, her nervous energy seeping out of her in waves. “The elders... they’ll ken I failed. They’ll ken.”

“They willnae ken anythin’,” Knox said. “I promise ye. Come now, let us introduce ye tae our guests.”

“But the food?—”

“Mrs. Wilson will handle it,” Knox assured her as he took her hand and began to tug her away, towards the great hall. He sounded so calm, so confident, that some of Fia’s panic couldn’t help but dissipate. “Dinnae fash. Everythin’ will be fine.”

That was more difficult for Fia to believe, but she followed Knox nevertheless. With every step she took, with every step that took her closer to the delegation, her heart beat faster, harder, to the point that she feared if she opened her mouth to speak, it would leap right out of her throat. But then they were there, Knox making introductions she could only half-hear, her ears buzzing with all the panic and excitement of the day.

She was certain she exchanged pleasantries with the visiting council. She was certain she said the right things, spoke the right way, but by the end of it, she remembered nothing of it. There was only the feeling of Knox’s hand on the small of her back, encouraging her and grounding her as they all filed into the great hall, where the servants had only just finished setting up one more table.

There were enough tables and enough chairs, that much she could tell from a quick count. Still, her biggest fear was the food. Would Mrs. Wilson find a different way to make up for what they lacked? Would the cooks manage to bring out more food?

It didn’t take long for her question to be answered. As the servants began to serve the platters of pheasant and venison, the cured meats, the cheeses, the fruits, spreading

the feast over the tables, they also brought out bowls of porridge, just as she had instructed.

When she glanced around the room, her fears were confirmed. Everyone was looking at the bowls with matching frowns of confusion—if not apprehension—on their faces.

Even Knox seemed a little taken aback by it.

As was customary, he stood to make a toast and Fia did her best to melt into the background, to disappear into obscurity before the council members could berate them with those familiar by then glares. Everyone's attention seemed to be on Knox, though, as he delivered his welcoming speech, most of which Fia had missed already, wallowing in her panic.

“... an' I hope ye'll enjoy our cook's specialty!” he said in a bright, cheery tone. “Ye've never had parritch like this, trust me.”

Fia's head snapped to the side, her eyes wide as she took in Knox and the soft, kind smile he gave her. She was pretty sure porridge was far from the cook's specialty, but naturally, the visiting elders didn't know that.

“Thank ye,” she mouthed at him, only for Knox to shrug a shoulder and take his seat next to her. Still, her panic lingered, her hands shaking as she tried to cut a small, proper bite of pheasant and bring it to her lips.

It wasn't until one of the visiting elders dug into his bowl of porridge with such gusto that those around him were quick to follow, praising the taste, that she allowed herself to relax a little. They were none the wiser. If anything, they truly seemed to enjoy it.

And yet, even as the night progressed and the feast proved to be a success, Fia couldn't help but question her abilities. She had almost buckled under the pressure. Had it not been for Knox's charm and Mrs. Wilson's quick work, she wouldn't have made it. Even in this, she needed other people's assistance to complete her tasks successfully.

And not for the first time, she wondered if it would be best if Knox married someone else.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

In Knox's eyes, the feast was a success.

He didn't care about whatever it was that had gone wrong. For a big part of the night, Fia had fretted over it, telling him again and again that she had messed up and the porridge was never meant to be served, that she had made a terrible mistake, that the council would never forgive her for it. But as far as Knox was concerned, none of it mattered.

The guests were clearly having a good time. The men and their wives, those who had accompanied them, at least, all ate and drank and danced, and laughter filled the great hall. The elders of his clan couldn't complain when their guests were having such a great time and everything else was going so smoothly. Besides, even if the porridge had seemed like an odd choice for a formal dinner such as this, it had turned out to be a great success.

It didn't hurt that he had claimed it was the cook's specialty. Knox had no idea if that was indeed the truth, but judging by the guests' appetite and the taste of the porridge itself, he wasn't far off the mark.

Even Fia, once the initial shock of her mistake subsided, seemed to have a good time. Knox paraded her proudly around the tables, introducing her formally to everyone as his betrothed, and though her mannerisms were still a little rough around the edges, her warm heart and authenticity seemed to win everyone over. The guests were all impressed by her, he could tell. They all looked at her with the same satisfaction, with the same approval in their gazes.

Even his own council had begun, if a little begrudgingly, to warm up to her. There was nothing they could complain now. Fia had passed all her tests with flying colors, just as he had expected. Whether they liked it or not, the council would have to accept her as his wife.

As for him, he did his part as best as he could. He made sure to stay by her side all night, stepping in when she didn't know how to answer one of the nobles' questions, keeping her close to him, trying to comfort her with his touch and his presence. It seemed to work. Fia was always calmer when he was near, letting her guard down a little.

It seemed to him that the evening would come to an end without any further excitement when the doors burst open and none other than Callum and his men poured inside the great hall. Knox stood, eyes narrowing as he regarded them all—their faces and clothes dusty, their hair in disarray, their eyes flitting nervously about the room. Only Callum, standing at the front of the group, seemed to have no concern about the fact that he had just crashed a feast.

Why were they even allowed tae enter?

It didn't matter. Knox wasn't pleased with the man, but he wasn't going to make a scene in front of the visiting council.

As Knox hesitated, wondering what to do next, Magnus stood from his seat beside him and rushed to the group. Knox followed him, the whole time throwing reassuring smiles at the guests, who were understandably confused by the soldiers' sudden presence, until he finally reached Callum.

“What are ye doin' here?” Magnus asked him. “Cannae ye see there is a feast?”

“It was urgent,” Callum said. “I wished tae let ye ken we returned.”

“That’s hardly urgent,” Magnus said.

Knox could feel the tensions rise and so he held up a hand, bringing both of them to silence. “It is what it is,” he said. The last thing he needed was for Callum and Magnus to make a scene in front of their guests. “Ye may clean up an’ return fer the feast. But I must say, Callum, I’m nae pleased with ye. All this time an’ ye never sent a letter. There was an attack. Dae ye ken that?”

“I dae, me laird,” Callum said, and though Knox expected him to follow up with an apology, he never did.

In fact, Callum was hardly even looking at him. Rather, he was looking over his shoulder and when Knox followed his gaze, he found him staring at Fia.

No, not staring. Glaring.

With a sigh, Knox beckoned her close, but she seemed to be frozen under Callum’s stare. The man had that effect on some people, Knox knew, but he wished he could tell Fia there was nothing to fear from him.

“I am celebratin’ me betrothal tae Miss MacKenzie,” Knox explained as he tried to herd Callum and the rest of the soldiers towards the door, only to fail miserably. Callum refused to move. He only stood there like a statue, his gaze fixed on Fia. “Now if ye’ll excuse me, we must continue with the feast?—”

Callum pushed past Knox, completely ignoring him. Distantly, Knox recognized that he should be furious, that he should be putting Callum in his place with his own two hands for embarrassing him like this in front of everyone and not only disobeying him, but openly disregarding him like this. He was so shocked by Callum’s actions, though, that he could hardly do anything more than stare in disbelief as he marched up to Fia, his boots thudding against the floor.

“Congratulations,” he sneered, his voice dripping with venom.

Knox exchanged a nervous glance with Magnus, who seemed just as lost as he felt. Silence fell over the room, more chilling than any other Knox had ever experienced in his life. Everyone’s gaze had shifted to Fia and Callum, watching as the two of them stared at each other in silence, tears gathering in Fia’s eyes.

Before Knox could gather his wits about him and demand that Callum leave right that instant, Callum turned around to face him instead, though his finger pointed in an accusatory manner at Fia.

“Dae ye have any idea who she is?” he asked. “All this? All this is a sham! It’s naethin’ but the ploy o’ a desperate peasant wench! She wormed her way intae this castle an’ then used ye, me laird, manipulin’ ye intae marryin’ her! I ken her well. I ken her better than any o’ ye an’ I tell ye that ye all fell fer her tricks. How could a lass like her be fit tae become a laird’s wife? Dae ye ken how I found her when we first met? In rags . In a hut in Duror. She was a hungry wee thing, livin’ on scraps. This is the woman ye wish tae have as yer lady? A runt from Duror who tricked ye all? An’ most o’ all, ye, me laird?”

No one spoke, but Knox could see the way his council and even the guests looked at Fia now, as though they thought her beneath them after hearing all this. The crowd stared, half in revulsion and half in confusion, no one knowing what to do after Callum’s outburst.

But Knox wouldn’t have it. Rage, white-hot and dangerous, burned inside him as he stepped forward, placing himself between Callum and Fia. He didn’t want her to even have to look at that bastard. The pain she felt was written plainly across her features, her beautiful face contorted with a grief so palpable that it settled like a chill in his chest.

“Dinnae ye ever dare speak o’ me betrothed that way again,” he warned Callum, roaring with rage. “Or it will be the last thing ye ever say. Dae ye understand? I’ll have yer head afore I let ye insult me wife! An’ I’ll have ye ken that it is me own decision tae wed her. Nae one has or could influence me.”

Callum said nothing. He only stared at Knox with a murderous gaze, as if the only thing that kept him from jumping at him with a sword was their ranks and the knowledge that if he ever dared harm him, he would have much worse coming his way.

Knox didn’t care. Callum could hate him all he wanted. He could rage and throw a tantrum like a child, but he would never have it his way.

Then, without another word, Callum turned on his heel and stalked out of the room, leaving his group of soldiers bewildered. Slowly, they dissipated, some of them heading to the barracks while others headed to the kitchens, and Knox turned around to face the room.

No one was looking at him. In fact, no one was looking anywhere but at their plates, and soon, the boldest of them excused himself, pulling his wife along. With him making the first step, the others soon followed, mumbling excuses about being tired from their travels and needing to retire. They thanked Knox politely for his hospitality as they exited the room.

Even the musicians had stopped playing and were now waiting to be excused, but Knox only had eyes for Fia.

She was still standing by her chair as if frozen in time, tears streaming silently down her cheeks. Drawing in a deep breath, Knox forced himself to walk up to her, the words catching in his throat once before he managed to speak.

“Is it true? What he said?” he asked. He didn’t even want to entertain the idea, but he had to hear it from Fia’s lips. He had to hear her reassurance that Callum was a fool who only knew how to lie.

But that wasn’t what she said. In fact, she only nodded silently and a fresh wave of tears poured down her face, glinting under the torchlight.

Knox’s heart stopped. Time seemed to stand still, the silence between them heavy and oppressive. If he thought there had been a frigidity in the room before, now it was almost unbearable, spreading into his bones, chilling him to the core.

It was not what he had expected to hear and he could hardly believe it. How could Fia have done this to him? How could she have approached him with anything other than pure intentions when she herself seemed so pure?

“I... I need tae think,” he told her, pulling out of her grasp when she reached for him. It prompted a soft sob out of her, but as much as Knox wanted to comfort her, to tell her it would all be alright, he couldn’t bring himself to do anything other than stumble backwards, eager to retreat to his chambers. “I just... need tae think.”

With that, he was gone, never once looking back at her.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The stones were cold under Fia's body. She sat under the window across the door to Knox's chambers. She rested her chin on her knees, her legs drawn up to her with her arms wrapped around them, her cloak resting over her shoulders, and she looked resolutely forward at the intricate carved patterns on the door rather than the two guards outside it.

They were both restless. Neither of them knew what to do with her, and they had tried to urge her to return to her rooms multiple times, worried that she would be too cold in the middle of the hallway, but she refused to budge. If Knox didn't want to see her, then she would simply wait for him until he was ready.

She had to try and explain everything to him. She didn't expect him to forgive her or to go on with the wedding, but she wanted to at least have the chance to apologize for ever hurting him. It had all been so selfish of her, so foolish, gaining his favor just so she could have her revenge. She wished she could take it all back, but it was too late now. All she could do was wait and hope Knox would listen to her, even if just long enough for her to apologize.

She couldn't even blame Callum for this. It wasn't his fault. Sooner or later, the truth would have come out and though Fia would rather it would have happened in some other way, more privately, more gently, she was glad it had at least happened before the wedding. It would have been disingenuous of her to go on with it when she had been lying to Knox, even by omission, and so in a way, she was relieved this had happened.

At least now her secret was out in the open and everyone knew the truth.

In front of her, one of the guards shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other. Fia could sense that he kept glancing at her, but she was neither willing to move nor speak. As long as Knox was in that room, she was determined to stay out there.

In the end, it was that guard who knocked on Knox's door and disappeared inside. Fia couldn't hear their conversation from where she sat, but a few moments later, Knox appeared at the door and Fia sat a little straighter, her heart skipping beat after beat.

With a sigh, he approached her and offered her his hand, helping her up before guiding her inside the room. Knox closed the door behind them, and it had hardly shut before the words tumbled past her lips.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I never thought it would get tae this. I understand if ye hate me now but I needed tae apologize tae ye," she said breathlessly, hiccupping when she managed to pause for a moment. "Ye have every right tae be furious an'... an' tae send me away, but please, please let Bane stay in the castle. I beg ye. He isnae involved in this."

With another weary sigh, Knox leaned against the door, letting his head fall against it with a dull thud. He closed his eyes, a hand running through his hair before he opened them again to gaze at Fia.

He seemed to be having some trouble with it, as though he couldn't bear to look at her, and that, more than anything else, filled her with such grief that she felt as though her chest was collapsing into itself. It was such a real, palpable proof of his own pain, such a mark of her betrayal that she could hardly stand to be confronted by it.

“I want tae ken the truth,” he said, finally meeting her gaze. “All o’ it.”

What was there for Fia to lose by telling him everything? Half of it had already been revealed, after all, and she wanted him to know the whole truth. She wanted him to understand that she didn’t do it out of evil but out of despair and foolishness.

“When Magnus came tae me cottage in Duror, I thought... I thought it was me chance,” she said. “Ye see, I told ye about a man who hurt me. That man was Callum.”

Knox’s eyes widened ever so slightly in surprise, but he must have suspected something, as he wasn’t as shocked as Fia would expect. It was only natural, she thought, considering how Callum had burst into the room, accusing her of taking advantage of everyone and tricking them. She waited for him to say something, but when he remained silent, she continued, forcing herself to keep her gaze steadily on him.

“He... he kept tellin’ me that he would marry me an’ that we would spend the rest o’ our lives together, but in the end, he revealed it was all fer a bet that he had with his friends. All he wanted was tae bed me an’ then leave me. He never once respected me or wished tae be with me because he said I was naethin’ but a poor peasant lass. That I was far beneath him, so I was a fool tae ever think he could love me. So, when Magnus came tae Duror, I thought it was me chance tae prove him wrong. I thought... I dinnae ken what I thought. I thought if ye fell fer me, if I could marry ye, then I would prove him an’ everyone else who doubted me wrong. I would show them I’m nae beneath anyone. I would show them I’m worthy o’ ... o’ love.”

It may have been in her mind, but Fia could have sworn Knox’s expression softened upon hearing that. It didn’t hurt that it sounded as though the words were being torn out of her, her tone so pained and full of grief that she could hardly recognize her own voice. But Fia wasn’t finished yet. She wanted Knox to know everything.

“But when we were watchin’ the stars, I kent I couldnae dae this tae ye,” she continued. “I wanted tae tell ye the truth. When I came tae ye the other night, I was about tae confess everythin’, but then ye proposed tae me an’... an’ I was so happy, Knox. Nae because I’d prove anyone wrong—I didnae care about that anymore. Because I loved ye... I love ye. Ye cannae imagine the shame I feel fer ever hurtin’ ye, fer ever thinkin’ that deceivin’ ye was a good idea. But I promise ye, me feelings fer ye are real. None o’ it was a lie.”

There was nothing more left in Fia. There was nothing more she could share with him, and she felt as though all the air had left her, her shoulders deflating as she stared at him, waiting for his response. For a long time, he said nothing. He only remained silent, his gaze glued to the floor, his brows stitched together as if deep in thought.

When he finally looked back up at her, he seemed to be unraveling at the seams.

“I believe ye,” he said, much to her relief. “It still hurts an’ I still... I still need tae think about this. But I believe ye an’ I think it took plenty o’ courage fer ye tae come here an’ confess all this tae me.”

Fia didn’t know if she would call it courage. Stubbornness perhaps, and a deep, ingrained need to make sure she didn’t hurt anyone with her actions or, if she did, to lessen the pain as much as she could. But while they were on the matter of deception, there was something else she had to tell Knox.

“There is... there is another thing,” she admitted, and Knox froze like a deer under the eye of a skilled hunter, expecting the worst. “Bane isnae interested in... ye ken... men. I only said it so ye wouldnae fash about him. But I promise ye, he is me braither. I’d never, ever consider him as anything else.”

Knox was stunned at first, frowning as if confused, but then he huffed out a laugh,

shaking his head. Some of the tension between them finally dissipated, and despite herself, Fia found herself chuckling as well, covering her face with a hand to hide her blush.

Another foolish thing to have said, she thought. At least Knox didn't seem to mind so much.

"I see," he said. "But he never said anythin'."

"I asked him tae keep silent," Fia admitted. "An' he did, although he wasnae pleased and insisted I tell ye the truth."

Knox nodded slowly, taking in the new information. "Anythin' else ye'd like tae share?"

"Aye," she said. "I also hate whisky."

This time, Knox laughed loudly, startling even himself. When he took a few hesitant steps forward, Fia froze, wondering what was to come next, but he only took her hand in his and held it tightly, gazing into her eyes.

"Ye're impossible," he told her. "But curse me if I dinnae still love ye."

"The weddin' plans will proceed as scheduled," Knox said the following morning in his council meeting.

Ever since Callum's return, whose mission had yielded no results, Knox had dreaded the moment he would have to be in the same room with him once more—not so much because he didn't want to displease him, but rather because some of the elders considered him an obvious choice for the position of the warleader simply because his father had been such a great and capable man. Yet now the time had come. It

seemed to Knox that he couldn't avoid the man, especially since a proper report of his mission was needed, and so now Callum stood in the corner of the room, cloaked in shadows.

Knox had bigger problems than an entitled, petulant man, though. Immediately after his announcement, the elders all stood from their chairs, protests filling the room, just as Knox had expected. He hadn't come here empty-handed, though. He had cold, hard evidence and he would use it.

"I understand yer frustration," he called over all the shouting, prompting the elders to quiet down one by one and listen to him. "What ye heard last night may have swayed some o' ye but I ken Fia's heart an' I ken she would be the best wife tae me an' the best lady fer our clan. Ye saw how she handled everythin' ye threw at her these past few weeks. Ye saw her resilience, her character, her kindness. Everythin' ye demanded, she did it. Everythin' fer which ye wished, she gave. Why dae ye still insist on bein' against her? So what if she is a peasant lass? She has shown more strength than any noble lass I ken."

Whispers rippled once more through the council. They couldn't contradict his claims, not when everyone knew just how well Fia had done by his side already. The people loved her—the peasants, the servants, the merchants, everyone had a good word to say about her and they had all already accepted her as the Lady of the Clan. The elders may have been powerful in Knox's study; they may have been the authority on war and diplomacy and trade, but when it came to the real world, to everyday matters, it was the people who had the last say.

And the people had chosen Fia.

"This is preposterous," Cairn said, just as Knox had expected. Despite the facts, despite all the effort Fia had put into proving herself, Cairn still refused to see her value, and as the most senior of the elders, Knox had no choice but to listen to him.

An if, in the end, he managed to sway even those elders who were willing to give Fia a chance, then Knox would have a real problem in his hands. “The lass is still a peasant! She is beneath ye, me laird.”

“I dinnae consider her beneath me,” Knox said, with as much patience as he could muster. “I dinnae consider any man or woman beneath me. Why should I? I had the privilege tae be born the son of a laird, but why should that make me better than anyone else? Dae ye think I have more value than ye, Cairn? Ye’re an elder. Ye’ve served me an’ me faither well. Ye’re an indispensable part o’ our clan. But ye consider yerself beneath me?”

Murmurs spread through the crowd once more, once again conflicted. Some of the elders could see Knox’s reasoning, others still considered peasants beneath him, and others still considered him to be the most important man in the keep—and perhaps so it was, in terms of politics and finance. But Knox didn’t consider himself better than everyone else on account of his pedigree.

“It is unprecedented,” Cairn said, insisting while changing tactics at the same time. “Nae other laird has ever wedded a peasant.”

“In our clan, perhaps,” said Knox. “But it isnae unheard o’.”

“That is true,” another of the elders said. “It will attract some... attention, but it’s happened afore.”

“What happens if we dinnae come tae an agreement?” another elder asked and everyone, including Knox, fell silent. He didn’t have an answer to that question and neither did any of the elders, he knew. He wasn’t going to change his mind, so if they refused to allow this marriage, then the only way Knox could think of moving forward was if he stepped down and handed over the lairdship to someone else. But how could he choose between love and duty?

“I think we can all understand what will happen if we dinnae, so I must ask ye now.... are we in agreement?” Magnus asked, taking the lead, and then counted the votes of the elders. Eight of them were—four were not.

That was good enough for Knox.

Relief washed over him when he realized he and Fia could finally wed without anyone trying to stop them. Now he could finally rest easy and focus on the next task—the next war leader, the role that had been left vacant for far too long.

“Good,” he said. “Now, on tae the next matter... a new war leader must be appointed. A decision has already been made.”

From the corner of his eye, Knox caught Callum standing a little straighter, taking a small step forward as if expecting to be called. He was impatient, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, eager to take on his late father’s role, but Knox ignored him. If he was under the impression he would become the next war leader after his performance, then he was truly a fool, Knox thought.

“It wasnae a decision I made lightly,” Knox continued, looking at the elders one by one. “An’ I am sure ye will find me choice more than satisfactory. Some o’ ye already ken who me choice is an’ have expressed yer support. The rest o’ ye may be surprised but ken that I chose this man because o’ his skill an’ talent an’ ye’ll soon see he is the only choice fer this role.”

In his corner, Callum faltered a little, much to Knox’s delight. He deserved to be put in his place, he thought, to realize he was not the man he thought himself to be.

Knox let his gaze rest on Callum for a moment before he dragged it over to the other side of the room. “Malcolm Stuart, please step forward,” he said. “Congratulations are in order. I hope ye will make this clan proud.”

Malcolm, a young man descending from a neighboring branch of the Stuart Clan stepped in from the corner of the room, where he had been waiting in the shadows throughout the meeting. He was a skilled warrior—Knox had fought with him and he knew the strength he carried, not only in his body, but also in his mind. Never before had Knox met such a brilliant strategist.

“I can vouch for his skills personally,” Knox said, tilting his head in acknowledgement when Malcolm bowed to him. “But if there are any concerns, please address them tae me or directly tae Malcolm.”

From the other corner of the room, Callum met Knox’s gaze. Though the man said nothing, Knox could see the hatred in his eyes, the way he barely restrained himself from the clench of his jaw.

Within moments, he stormed out of the room.

Fia could hardly believe the day had come. She had spent so much of her life feeling worthless, so much of it craving love and attention, seeking it in all the wrong places, but now that was all over. If there was one thing she knew, it was that Knox wouldn’t hurt her like that.

She still didn’t know how he had managed to convince the council that she was the right woman for him. When she had asked, he told her it was she who had convinced them with her prowess, but Fia didn’t believe it. Surely, he thought, he must have told them something to sway them.

Soon, she would have to get ready for the ceremony. But for now, she was just outside the castle walls, gathering flowers to adorn her hair, just like she had always imagined as a little girl. Effie had insisted that she take some flowers from the garden, but Fia preferred the wildflowers—their scents, their colors, their untamed nature. Besides, it was a lovely day, a rare sunny morning when the sunlight warmed

her skin, and she wanted to enjoy it.

“They’re very bonnie.”

The familiar voice brought Fia to a sudden halt. Her blood turned to ice in her veins and her heart thumped so fast she feared it would explode. She never thought she would have to endure this again, but when she turned around slowly, hesitantly, Callum was right there.

She hadn’t imagined it.

“What dae ye want?” she forced herself to ask through gritted teeth. “I dinnae wish tae hear any more o’ yer insults?—”

“I came tae apologize,” Callum said and Fia froze once more, wondering if this could possibly be a hallucination. Callum, apologizing? Not in her wildest dreams would she have ever thought it possible. “I see the error o’ me ways. What I did tae ye... it was despicable.”

Fia narrowed her eyes as she regarded him, wondering if he was lying to her. But he had no reason to lie. As wary as she was of him, he could have simply avoided her for the rest of his life, never once offering an apology if he hadn’t wanted to. Besides, she saw no reason to hold any animosity now that she was stepping into her new role, into her new life. She had thrived, even against all odds.

Even against Callum.

“I appreciate that,” she said with a soft nod. “I truly dae. An’ I forgive ye, Callum, but I’d rather we dinnae meet again.”

“I understand,” Callum said, oddly amenable. Fia had never seen him like this before,

not even when he had first began to court her. “I’ll leave ye be, then. Thank ye fer listenin’ tae me.”

With one last nod as farewell, Fia returned to her flowers and didn’t wait to see Callum depart.

That was her biggest mistake. Moments later, a dull pain exploded in the back of her skull, drawing a pained gasp out of her. A pair of strong hands caught her just as she collapsed, and soon she was being dragged away, the castle getting smaller and smaller in the distance.

The last thing she saw before the world went dark was Callum’s face, devoid of any emotion.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“ W hat dae ye mean she’s gone?” Knox asked, his ceremonial dress suddenly forgotten. He was in the middle of getting ready for the wedding when Magnus came into the room, claiming no one could find Fia, and his clothes hung off him half-buttoned, his heart beating a mile a minute.

“We cannae find her,” Magnus said again, his tone carrying an urgency that only served to worry Knox even more. “Effie said she had gone tae pick flowers outside the walls, but she hasnae been seen since. We’ve looked over the whole castle fer her an’ she’s naewhere tae be seen.”

“How can this be?” Knox asked. Could it be that she had gotten cold feet, he wondered? Could it be that she had fled, regretting ever agreeing to marry him?

But no, she had been so excited for this day. She had waited for it with bated breath and Knox could not believe she had simply fled.

She wouldnae dae this. She wouldnae.

Which could only mean that something had happened to her—though what that could be, Knox couldn’t guess. According to Effie, she had been just outside the castle walls, where it was safe. It couldn’t have been brigands; it couldn’t have been an accident either. Someone would have heard her ask for help, Knox knew, and he also knew Magnus would have already sent men to look for her in the surrounding area.

Knox had to reach out for the nearest wall to steady himself. The entire world seemed

to tilt off its axis, his vision going blurry and fuzzy around the corners. Panic, cold as ice, swept through him violently and for a terrible, terrifying moment Knox was convinced he would never see her again—at least not alive.

He quickly pushed such thoughts out of his mind. Nothing could have happened to her, he told himself. The guards would have heard it, seen it; someone would have done something.

And yet, despite the desperate attempt to force his logical mind to take over, his panic and fear didn't dissipate. He was scared for her. He knew she wouldn't have left on her own accord and so he couldn't help but dread whatever it was that had pulled her away.

His knees almost buckled at the thought of what it could have been. The only thing that kept Knox upright was another thought—that Fia needed him.

“There is somethin’ else,” said Magnus.

“What?” Knox demanded, stepping up to him on shaking legs. “Tell me.”

“Callum is gone as well.”

Knox's blood ran cold. What has he done tae her?

There was no way Fia had left with him of her own accord. There was no way she would follow that man anywhere after everything he had done to her.

“We have reason tae suspect he is workin’ with Alistair Gordon,” Magnus added, reaching into his pocket to bring out a pile of letters. “One o’ the men in his group found these. Most o’ them are in code an’ the rest dinnae provide any useful information, but look at this one,” he said, as he picked a letter from the stack and

opened it for Knox. “Doesnae this look like Clan Gordon code?”

Knox’s spies had intercepted plenty of communication from Clan Gordon and as he looked at the symbols on the paper, he thought Magnus was right. It did, indeed, look like their code, and though they hadn’t yet decoded it, it was all Knox needed to be convinced Callum was, in fact, working with Laird Gordon. There was no doubt in his mind. There was no other reason for him to have such a letter in his possession.

Even for Callum, this was a new low, Knox thought. He had known the man was ambitious, that he was willing to do plenty of things to get what he wanted, but he did not think treason was one of them. His father had loved the clan. He had done much to help its people and Knox’s own father. How could Callum to come along and destroy that legacy?

Or was it Knox who simply didn’t inspire loyalty, he wondered?

It was true that he had not chosen Callum for the position of war leader. It had been the wise choice, the one that made most sense, not only to him but to Magnus as well. And naturally, he had expected some sort of pushback from Callum, but it he had never expected this. To go not only against him, but also against Fia, against the clan itself and its people, it was all too much. The betrayal stung like a knife wound, sharp and tender and raw, and the force of it was so staggering that once again, Knox felt as though the floor was sinking under his feet, pulling him under.

His father had commanded respect and loyalty so effortlessly, so naturally, that Knox had always thought it would be the same for him. Now, he couldn’t help but question it; he couldn’t help but question himself as the laird of the clan, to second-guess every decision he had ever made. He didn’t know how Callum could have put everyone in Clan Stuart in so much danger by colluding with the Gordons. He didn’t know how he could possibly stomach the betrayal, the knowledge that his actions could very well be Clan Stuart’s undoing.

He couldn't think of this as his fault, Knox realized. Perhaps somewhere along the way, he could have done something to pull Callum to his side, to show him the right way of doing things, but ultimately, it was Callum who had made this decision, knowing the consequences. It was Callum who decided to put everyone he knew in danger, simply to have his revenge.

Gritting his teeth, Knox looked Magnus in the eye, rage flaring up inside him. "Rally the men. By nightfall, I want us tae be in Castle Gordon."

The siege was inevitable—only Knox had thought it would be his castle that would be under it, not Gordon's. And yet there he was, his men attacking Castle Gordon, pouring in through their defenses and wreaking havoc in their path. Everything around him was on fire. Everywhere he looked, there were corpses and blood seeping into the ground, drenching the earth. Everywhere around him, the clang of steel against steel was deafening, the screams of the fallen soldiers who were injured, lying on the ground in the hopes that help would arrive or crawling themselves through the battle in the hopes of finding help, mixing with it in a wild cacophony.

Death and devastation. Knox would have done anything in his power to stop this before it even begun, but Alistair Gordon had other ideas in his mind, and Callum, the traitor, had helped him with them.

Cutting down anyone in his path mercilessly, Knox looked for Fia. It was the only thing on his mind, the only thing he cared about in that battle. Failure was not an option. He could imagine her in Gordon's hands, frightened and perhaps even hurt, in pain. His rage flared inside him, bubbling over with every passing moment.

He was going to kill him. And he was going to kill Callum, too, with his own two hands.

As he crossed the courtyard and made his way into the keep, Knox had a select group

of men with him. He hadn't thought Malcolm would be put to the test quite so soon, only two weeks after he was given the role of war leader, but now Knox had left him in charge of the attack while he, Magnus, and a dozen more men infiltrated the keep, searching for Fia. It was not an easy task. Out of all the places in a castle, the keep was the most well-protected, but in the chaos of the battle it was possible for Knox to find an entrance at the back that wasn't as heavily guarded, he and his men spilling inside the structure and splitting up to search the place. Knox's feet thudded against the stone floors as he ran, swiftly dealing with every guard who came his way as he moved deeper and deeper into the keep, searching for its most guarded room.

He knew that was where Gordon would be keeping Fia. Somewhere inaccessible, somewhere away from everything and everyone else.

And then he found it. Turning a corner, he saw two men standing guard outside a room, waiting impatiently because they could not join their fellow soldiers in the fight. The moment they spotted him, they both unsheathed their weapons and began to advance, but Knox was ready for them.

His boots left bloody prints behind as he approached the two men with caution. The first to attack was the larger of the two, throwing himself at Knox with a cry, their swords meeting in the air as Knox parried the blow. The other man soon joined him, trying to circle Knox so he could attack him from behind, but Knox blocked his way, keeping him where he was.

The odds were already against him, he wasn't going to let them lessen them.

The sound of steel against steel filled the hallway, the ringing noise echoing off the walls. With a feint to the left, Knox caught the smaller man by surprise, forcing him to leave an opening he immediately took advantage of. Sending his blade in an arc, Knox struck the man down, slicing him from shoulder to hip, but he didn't have time to rest before the other attacked once more, forcing him to step back.

He was a more formidable opponent, their swords meeting again and again with relentless power. But when the man went for what he thought could be the killing blow, he left himself unguarded, too confident in his own speed, and all it took for Knox was one swipe of his blade to strike him dead, watching as he fell to the floor.

And then the way was open.

Falling to his knees in the puddles of blood, Knox looked for the keys to the door and found them on the larger man. He quickly unlocked it, blinking as he tried to adjust to the dim light of the room compared to the bright, fire-lit night outside.

But there Fia was, pacing back and forth. She came to a sudden halt when the door opened.

And there was Alistair, standing right in front of her.

“Laird Gordon,” Knox said, wiping the blood off his blade onto his sleeve. “This is a new low, even fer ye.”

“Is it?” Laird Gordon asked with a humorless chuckle. “I’d say it’s a low fer ye, considerin’ it was yer man who came tae me.”

It was a cruel remark, intended to hurt Knox, and it succeeded. Thoughts of failing as a laird because of Callum’s betrayal had already been plaguing him, torturing him moment after moment, ever since he had found out about it. The more he thought about it, the more he considered all the things he could have done differently—he could have been more patient with Callum, he could have had him learn under Magnus or one of the elders, he could have spoken to him about his performance and his desires. He could have done many things, which may or may not have worked in the end. But instead, he had allowed his anger and his frustration to get the better of him.

There was one thing for certain; he would never make such a mistake again. But no matter how much he blamed himself, he also couldn't help but think Callum could have come to him instead of going to the enemy. He had been the one to throw everything away with his arrogance and his self-centered attitude. The way he had hurt Fia, just for a foolish bet, the way he had betrayed his entire clan for his personal gain, the way he had proven himself reckless and useless time and time again—it all spoke of a man who was bound to betray his own people if the circumstances favored such a choice.

But knowing that didn't make the situation hurt any less.

“Callum made his decision,” Knox said through gritted teeth. “An' it is on him. He decided tae betray everythin' an' everyone he kens. An' if he betrayed his own clan, dae ye nae think he will betray ye, too?”

Letting out a chuckle, Gordon shook his head. “He can try,” he said. “But I ken he isnae loyal tae me anyway. Our alliance is merely one o' convenience. I will hold nay grudge once he decides it is nay longer beneficial.”

“But he will if ye decide so first,” Knox pointed out. “He isnae one tae take such things lightly.”

“Then I shall simply have him killed,” Gordon said, so casually that Knox couldn't help but shiver. “Somethin' ye should have done a long time ago.”

Gordon was an imposing figure in the room, tall and broad-shouldered, with grey eyes that reminded Knox of the steel in his hands. There was no warmth to him. The sneer he seemed to perpetually wear twisted the scar that ran from his brow to his cheekbone, and even Knox, who had seen his fair share of evil men in his life, felt uneasy around him, as though he exuded a strange aura that permeated everything around him.

“I’m nae like ye. I’m nae a monster,” Knox said and then his gaze slid to Fia, who was staring at him, her eyes glinting with unshed tears. “Are ye alright?”

She managed a nod, but before Knox could say anything else, Gordon stepped in front of her, cutting her off from his view. Slowly, Fia backtracked, putting several paces’ worth of distance between her and Gordon, but whether he didn’t notice or he didn’t care, Knox didn’t know. He only knew that Gordon’s gaze never once left him, and he could only be thankful for that. He didn’t want Fia to be his target. If he could keep all of his attention, if he could keep him away from her, then they had a chance.

“How marvelous that ye came here tae save a peasant lass,” Gordon said, making Knox grit his teeth to stop himself from responding. “If only yer faither could see ye no... what dae ye think he’d say?”

“Leave me faither out o’ this,” Knox said in a low, venomous tone. “An’ out o’ yer mouth.”

Ever since that day, when his parents died in what everyone deemed an accident, Knox was convinced it had been Gordon who killed them. He had never had any solid proof, he had never had anything other than this gut feeling and a few coincidences that pointed him the right way, but he knew it in his bones. He knew that he was the one responsible, and no matter what anyone said, they couldn’t change his mind.

Gordon laughed, but the sound lacked any warmth, any mirth. “Ye’ve always been right, ye ken,” he said, as he began to circle him. Knox stood still, watching him from the corner of his eye, waiting to see what he would do. He wasn’t going to fall for his taunts, not when Fia’s life was at stake.

“About what?”

“About yer parents,” Gordon said. “Yer maither, when she died... she squealed like a pig.”

A gasp sounded from the other side of the room, where Fia had hidden herself in the shadows. Momentarily, Knox glanced at her to find her half-lit by the light of a torch, her hand covering her mouth as she looked at Gordon with disbelief and disgust written plainly on her features. When she glanced at Knox, her eyes were shining with tears.

White-hot rage gripped Knox then, all-consuming and blinding. Reality came crashing down upon him, the truth slicing through him like a blade. He had always known; always. But hearing it from Gordon’s lips, finally having this confirmation that he had been right all this time, filled him not only with a need for vindication, but also with unbridled fury, the dam inside him finally broken.

How dared he speak of his mother like that?

A cry tore itself from Knox’s throat as he turned around to swing his blade, his rage guiding him as he tried to strike Gordon down. He was fast, though, expecting the blow, and he blocked it, the clash of their swords drowned out under their wild roars, like two rabid animals trying to tear each other apart. Knox was relentless in his attacks, striking again and again only for Gordon to meet him halfway, always on defense but never once faltering.

“An’ now I’ll kill yer precious wife in front o’ ye,” Gordon said through heavy pants as Knox took a moment to steady his feet, reminding himself that he couldn’t only rely on his rage to win this fight. “An’ ye’ll hear her squeal like a pig, too.”

He’s only tryin’ tae taunt me. He wants me careless. He wants me weak.

Knox wouldn’t give him that satisfaction. He would do anything it took to kill him,

not only to save Fia, but also to avenge his family. After all these years, he would finally have his revenge, and he would know that his mother and his father could finally rest in peace.

Much to his relief, when his gaze searched for Fia, he found her once again in the shadows, where she had been since before the start of the fight. He found her plastered against the wall, trying to make herself as small and invisible as she could, keeping away from Gordon just as Knox needed her to do. The more she remained out of his field of vision, the more she kept herself away from the action, the easier it was for Knox to focus on the task at hand—killing Gordon once and for all.

Another bellow was torn from Knox as he attacked again. This time, he conserved some of his energy, baring his teeth as he tried to corner Gordon, crowd him against a wall. But the man was slippery, making sure he was never pushed against one, and so Knox was quick to change tactics.

If he couldn't get to him, he would let Gordon be the one to come.

It was a risky plan, one that could easily end in his death. But Knox was determined, and so he gave the impression of a tired-out fighter, making mistakes that were small, yet significant. And when he left his right side open, that was when Gordon finally struck, going for the killing blow.

Only Knox jumped out of the way before the blade could slice him, and with a swift twirl behind Gordon, he plunged his blade through his back with a grunt, blood fountaining out of the wound.

The only sound Gordon could make was a soft gasp as his knees hit the floor. Above him, Knox stood frozen, heaving, drenched in blood—some of it his own, some of it Gordon's, some of it from all the other men he had killed that night. So many lives had been lost. So many had been struck dead by his hand.

And then Fia's hand closed tenderly around his shoulder, and he turned around to face her, falling into her embrace.

"It's over," she told him, running her fingers through his bloody, matted hair. "Hush now... it's all over."

It was the truth, but it was still difficult to believe. Adrenaline still coursed through Knox's veins, his heart beating like a drum, and the only thing that kept him from collapsing on the floor, was Fia, holding onto him like that.

Footsteps echoed outside the room then, fast and frantic, and Knox was quick to tear himself away from Fia, putting her behind him. He waited with bated breath, counting the seconds in his head, waiting to see who it was—friend or foe.

When the group of men appeared at the door, the first thing Knox saw was a friendly face.

"Magnus," he said, sagging with relief. His friend was in a similar state, sword drawn, covered in blood from head to toe, but he seemed unharmed, much to Knox's relief. Instantly, Magnus entered the room and grabbed him, pulling him into a crushing hug and patting his shoulder.

"Ye're alright?" he asked, and Knox was quick to nod.

"Ye?"

"Aye," said Magnus. "More than. Look who I found."

Knox looked over Magnus' shoulder at the door and saw Callum there, beaten and bruised, surrounded by soldiers. Two of them had apprehended him, holding tightly onto his arms, his hands bound behind his back.

And Knox still had his sword in his hand.

“I’ll kill ye, ye bastard!” he roared, sidestepping Magnus to get to Callum, but Fia was quick to come in his way, holding her hands up.

“Wait!” she called. “Wait... it isnae worth it, Knox. He isnae worth it. Look around... look at all this blood.”

“What’s a little more?” Knox asked. “He deserves it.”

But Fia wouldn’t hear it. Even as he tried to walk around her, she once again got in his way, stopping him.

“Please, listen tae me,” she said, her hand coming up to rest on his cheek. That calmed him a little, grounding him, bringing him back to his body, but the rage still burned hot inside him. “The humiliation will be a much greater punishment if ye imprison him fer treason. Callum is a proud man. He’d rather die than be humiliated like this.”

Knox glanced between Fia and Callum, watching as the man gritted his teeth. He didn’t know if Fia was right; he didn’t know if it was the right call at all, but her compassion moved him unlike anything else.

Besides, he didn’t think he could ever say no to her.

“Fine,” he said, relenting. “Take him back tae the castle an’ throw him in the dungeons.”

The last thing Knox saw before his men dragged Callum away was his murderous glare, like a promise this wasn’t over.

He could try to escape all he wanted, Knox thought. But he would fail.

With a sigh, he let his sword fall to the floor and grabbed Fia, pulling her into his arms. She was alive, he told himself; she was safe. There was no one left to threaten her anymore, and if there ever was, they would meet the same fate as Gordon. He wouldn't let anyone harm her and live.

"I love ye," he told her, pulling back to press a passionate kiss to her lips, needing to feel the life force within her.

"An' I love ye. An' I kent ye'd come fer me," Fia said, gazing into his eyes. "I kent ye wouldnae let them hurt me."

"O' course," Knox said. "Nae one will ever touch ye, mo ghraidh . Ye have me word."

As long as he lived, Knox lived for her.

One month later

The wedding had to be delayed, much to Fia's chagrin, but today was finally the day. Even now, even after everything she and Knox had been through, she was a little nervous to walk up to the chapel with him, to stand by his side as the priest pronounced them husband and wife.

Would he like the soft pink dress Effie had chosen for her? Would he find it too plain? Would he find it too intricate, too expensive, with its gold embroidery and pure white lace? Would he like the way her maids pinned up her hair, the jewels they had chosen for her?

Fia had hardly had any input in what she would wear that day, too overwhelmed by all the options to choose, but when she looked at herself in the looking glass, she thought Effie and the maids had done a good job. She only hoped Knox would think the same thing, that he would be pleased to see her like this.

Maybe she finally looked like the Lady of the Clan. She may not have felt like one, but as long as she looked the part, she hoped everything else would follow.

"Are ye ready?"

Bane stood by the door, leaning against its frame. He, too, had been dressed in the finest clothes gold could buy, courtesy of Knox himself, and Fia couldn't help but think her brother looked like a prince. It was an odd look on him, though. She was so used to seeing him covered in grease and grime that now he seemed like a whole different person to her.

The only thing that remained were the stains on his fingernails.

Fia rushed to him, pulling him into a tight hug—one that Bane returned with a soft chuckle, patting her back gently. When they pulled apart, he grabbed onto a small strand of her hair and tugged, just like when they were young, only for Fia to slap his hand away.

“What are ye doin’?” she demanded. “Ye’ll ruin me hair!”

“Ye’ll ruin me hair!” Bane repeated in a mocking tone, laughing, and Fia kicked him in the shin for good measure, before she remembered this was probably not how the Lady of the Clan would act. “Ach! Stop that!”

“Ye stop that!” Fia said. “Be nice tae me. It’s me weddin’ day.”

“Aye,” said Bane, his tone impossibly fond. “So, it is.”

For a few moments, they looked at each other in silence, Bane admiring her hair and clothes. Then, he offered her his arm and Fia took it, looping hers around it, before the two left the room to head to the chapel at the edge of the castle grounds.

Never before had she been filled with such excitement, with such anxiety. Her stomach roiled, her chest constricted, her heart beat so fast that she feared it would burst right out of her chest, but her body persevered, her feet taking step after step of their own accord. It helped that Bane was by her side. It helped to have him there, to know she would always have his support.

“There is somethin’ I must tell ye,” he said then, just as the two of them stepped out into the courtyard. He didn’t stop walking, but he also wouldn’t meet her gaze, which Fia found odd. “I will be leavin’ soon. I have arranged fer a travel.”

“Travel?” Fia asked, surprised by the sudden revelation. Bane had never been one to travel, but then again, they had never had the means. Now that they were in a better state, perhaps he had decided to see the world or visit a particular place. “Where?”

“South,” Bane said vaguely, and just from that, Fia knew she wasn’t going to get many answers out of him. She could always tell when he would rather say little, giving her just the information she needed to know, but this time, though she knew not to ask, she didn’t know what it was he was keeping from her and why. “I dinnae ken how long it will take, but I’ll be back. I promise.”

That was all Fia needed to know. As long as he planned on coming back, she didn’t care about the rest.

“Ye’ll write tae me?” she asked, glancing up at him.

It was only then that Bane looked at her, smiling. “O’ course. All the time. I’ll address me letters tae the Lady Stuart.”

The Lady Stuart. How strange.

None of it had yet sunk into Fia’s mind. She knew, of course, that she was heading to the chapel to marry Knox and that from then on, she would be the Lady of the Clan, but that wasn’t enough to truly make her understand the reality of her situation. All her life, she had been a poor peasant girl, someone she never thought would have anything more than a roof over her head and some food on the table. When she had met Callum, she had thought that perhaps her life would get better and she would have some luxuries, such as some new dresses, perhaps a ring or necklace and a feast or two to attend to at the castle, but never in her wildest dreams would she have thought she would be the wife of a laird.

When they reached the chapel, Fia took a moment by the entrance to pull Bane into

another embrace, letting him pinch her cheek as she pulled back. She didn't know if she would ever get the chance to be like this with him again. There were certain things expected of her, certain behaviors, and she couldn't be seen acting like a child.

Ach, who am I tryin' tae fool? The moment I'm out o' this dress, we'll start wrestlin'.

Inside, Knox was already waiting for her, and the moment their eyes met, he beamed at her, his smile so bright it seemed to eclipse the sun. He seemed more beautiful than Fia had ever seen him—the royal blue of his dress, the way his hair was pushed back, revealing the regal forehead, the patrician profile. They had not yet discussed children, but Fia knew it was now her duty—not only her desire—to give him heirs, and she wondered who they would resemble out of the two of them.

She hoped for a boy, a first-born son who would look just like his father, with his inky hair and eyes as blue as the deepest lakes.

Letting go of Bane's arm, Fia made her way to Knox, reaching for his hand. Knox smiled at her and though they exchanged no words, the warmth that radiated from him was enough to calm her nerves, to remind her that no matter how daunting a situation seemed, it was nothing as long as he was by her side. That was all she needed—the reassurance that he was right there with her, never letting go.

After that, the ceremony was a blur and before she knew it, Fia was not only Knox's wife, but also the new Lady of the Clan. She officially held the title now and all the responsibilities that came with it, and the latter were a small weight in her shoulders, one she never thought she would shed.

But it was also one she welcomed, as long as it meant she could be with the man of her dreams.

As everyone gathered at the great hall for the feast—a feast Fia hadn't had to

organize it, as she still didn't trust herself with such important events, and so had let Mrs. Wilson take the lead—Knox stopped her, pulling her aside by the hand. He waited a few moments for everyone else to leave and then pulled her into a heated kiss, his hands clasping around her waist before he dragged them down to her rear, squeezing her buttocks.

Fia laughed, playfully pushing him away. "What are ye doin'?"

"I havenae seen ye in days ," Knox said.

"Ye see me every day, Knox," Fia pointed out.

"Well, I havenae touched ye in days, then."

That much was true. With all the preparations and customs, the two of them had only shared their dinners for the past week, their paths never once crossing again. It was the first time in days that Fia had felt his touch, but as intoxicating as it was, as much as she wanted to feel more of it, she also knew they had a duty; a feast to attend.

"Come," she said, dragging him away, despite his best efforts to petulantly dig his heels in and refuse to move. "Let us go tae the feast an' then, later, I'll make sure we can leave early."

Knox's gaze glinted with mirth and a hint of fiery lust. "Is that a promise?"

"It's a promise," Fia said, and pulled him into a kiss.

But there's more...

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:34 am

Everythin' is terrible!

“Everythin' is great!”

Knox stood by her side at the great hall, looking around with a proud smile on his lips, but Fia still fidgeted nervously with the hem of her sleeve, having convinced herself that everything she had done for the feast was wrong.

It was the first time she had organized something entirely on her own, with no one's help. She had taken the decisions, she had given the instructions, and now everyone in the clan was there, drinking and eating and dancing, but Fia feared they were all pretending.

What if they hate this? What if they hate me?

This time, there was thankfully enough food and tables and chairs for everyone, and Fia didn't have to resort to porridge. The tables were heaped with meats and bannocks, cheeses and pitchers of wine and ale, desserts of all kinds. The musicians were lively, filling the room with their sweet sounds, and the people danced and laughed freely, seeming to enjoy themselves.

“Are ye still concerned?” Knox asked, turning his head to look at her. Fia, of course, couldn't hide from him. He knew her too well and even when she did her best to appear calm, she knew he was well aware of her inner turmoil.

“A little,” she admitted, though it was an understatement. She could see every single detail that was wrong—a banner that was creased, a flower that was wilted, a

bannock that had been baked for too long and discarded on the table. All these little things that, combined, made her lose her mind with concern.

“Everythin’ is fine, Fia,” Knox assured her, not for the first time. “Ye did a great job. I’m very proud o’ ye.”

Fia’s head whipped to the side, her eyes wide as she looked at Knox, who was understandably confused by her reaction.

“Ye truly mean that?”

“O’ course,” he said, a small frown creasing his forehead. “Why would I say it if I didnae?”

Fia didn’t know when the last time was she had heard those words. Tav had spoken them to her, she was sure, and so had Bane, but now they were both gone. Tav was still nowhere to be found and Bane had left for his travels, and though he sent her letters all the time as he had promised, it wasn’t enough for her. She wished he was there with her, by her side, helping her navigate all this. She wished she could see his face, the exact shade of his eyes already fading from her memory.

She nodded slowly, mostly to herself. Of course, Knox meant that. She had no doubt in her mind that he was truly proud of her, that he saw all the hard work she had put into this.

This, too, she had learned, was a kind of diplomacy. Once, in the past, she had thought such feasts frivolous, but now she understood their importance.

Not only were they good for morale, but they also showed off the clan’s power, its wealth. It was a good way to gain allies and a good way to keep enemies in their place.

And that was precisely why Fia was so concerned about her efforts. She needed everything to be perfect. She had to do a good job.

“Come,” Knox said suddenly, taking her by the hand and leading her to the back of the room, much to her surprise.

“Where are we goin’?” Fia asked, glancing over her shoulder to see if anyone was looking at them. They all seemed occupied, though, either with food or conversation or dance, and no one paid them any mind as they slipped away.

Knox didn’t give her an answer. He simply led her out of the room through a side door and Fia suddenly found herself in the kitchens, which were bustling with activity. Knox wove his way through the servants, greeting them all quickly as they passed, and even as Fia tugged at his hand, he never stopped.

“Trust me,” he said. “Come.”

And trust him she did. She stumbled after him, trying to catch up to his quick pace as he left the kitchens through another side door. Suddenly, they were in a small corridor with a door at the end of it, and that was where Knox took them.

It was a cramped room—a storage room, with sacks of wheat and barley in it. There was hardly any light there, save for the moonlight that streamed in through a tiny window on the wall, and all Fia could see was his silhouette and the glint of his eyes as he pushed her against the wall.

Laughing, she shook her head. “What are ye doin’?”

“Makin’ ye relax,” Knox said, instantly reaching between her legs to rub his fingers against her sensitive spot. Fia gasped, her hands closing around Knox’s shoulders, her head falling back against the wall with a soft thud, but she quickly regained her

composure.

“Wait,” she said, pushing him back a little. “We cannae dae this. We must go back.”

“Nae one will miss us,” Knox assured her. “An’ we’ll be back afore they even ken we were ever gone.”

Fia was about to protest, to point out that the laird and the lady couldn’t be gone in the middle of the feast, but Knox kissed her before she could say a thing. That kiss, the way he ran his tongue over the seam of her lips to gain entry and teased her core at the same time had any protests dying in her throat before they could be voiced. Soon, she melted into his touch, body relaxing, wetness gathering in her entrance with every flick of his thumb over her.

“That’s it,” he told her. “That’s a good lass. Open yer legs fer me, me love. Let me inside ye.”

Fia groaned, the words coaxing more moisture out of her as she followed Knox’s request, spreading her legs a little wider. Instantly, one of his fingers plunged inside her, the sudden intrusion sending a jolt of pleasure through her and making her stand on her tiptoes as she clung onto him desperately.

Leaning closer, Knox kissed her neck, her jaw, all the time his finger working relentlessly inside her. “I’ll take ye hard an’ fast an’ ye’ll just sit back an’ enjoy it, alright? Just relax, calm down, an’ let me dae all the work.”

As he spoke, he took a moment to release himself from his confines, and in the dim light, Fia could see that he was already aching hard, as if he had been thinking about this for a long time. Knox wasted no time before he hitched her leg over his waist, holding onto her thigh with one hand as he guided himself to her entrance with the other, pushing all the way in.

Fia clamped a hand around her mouth to muffle her moan. Those days, she didn't need much preparation, their daily—and sometimes more than once a day—trysts keeping her open and ready for him. But the lust and desire never faded, nor did the pleasure that came with their couplings. If anything, it seemed to Fia that the more often Knox took her, the more often he pleased her with his hands and his mouth and his length, the more pleasure she derived from it, her body craving him all the time.

Knox set a punishing pace, hips slamming into her again and again. Every movement had his manhood dragging deliciously over her walls, his pelvis hitting her mound and teasing her most sensitive nub. Just like he had promised her, Knox took her hard and fast, driving her into the wall with every thrust of his hips, and all Fia could do was hold onto him and enjoy it, every other thought driven out of her mind.

Her breath came in short bursts, her chest heaving, her breasts spilling out of her dress as she did. She could feel Knox everywhere—inside her, around her, his hands gripping her buttocks under all her layers, the tips of his fingers brushing tantalizingly against the spot where they were joined. There was no sound in the room other than that of their combined moans, their sighs, their hips as they slammed into each other, and utterly indecent as it was, it only served to spur Fia on, stoking the flames of her desire.

The closer she got to her climax, the louder her moans became and the more she trembled in Knox's arms. He seemed to notice, a satisfied smile spreading over his lips, and he leaned in close to whisper in her ear.

“Are ye close, me love?” he asked, the low growl of his voice sending a shiver through her. “Look at ye, takin’ me in so deep. Ye’re doin’ so well. So sweet fer me... let me hear ye. Let me hear how much ye like havin’ me inside ye.”

Fia couldn't silence herself if she tried. The moans tumbled unbridled past her lips

one after the other and she stared mindlessly at the ceiling, anything that wasn't Knox or the pleasure coursing through her removed from her mind. She was so close she ached for it, her core throbbing, her walls twitching around Knox's manhood, but it was when he hitched her up higher, the movement making him sink deeper inside her as he closed his teeth over the swell of her breast that she finally came with a scream, clamping down hard around Knox.

After that, it was only a matter of a few thrusts for him to spill deep inside her, hips stuttering with a groan as he, too, reached his peak. Then, he held her there for a few moments, nuzzling her neck and laughing softly against her skin before finally setting her down gently.

"How was that?" he asked as he took a moment to right his clothes before he helped Fia with hers, tucking her breasts back in. "Dae ye feel better?"

Fia didn't even have a snappy retort for that. She only collapsed against the wall, wiping the sweat off her brow with the back of her hand. She couldn't understand how Knox could still have so much energy, even going as far as pulling her towards the door already.

"Knox!" Fia protested, his name coming out as a soft whine. "Wait... I'm all messy!"

Knox laughed again, pulling her in his arms to give her a quick peck. "Ye look wonderful, as always. An'... I like the thought o' ye bein' all messy because of me."

Fia couldn't resist the urge to roll her eyes, pushing playfully at him. That man would be the death of her, but it she loved him so.

"Come, me wife," he said. "Let us return tae our guests."

This time, Fia let him pull her along, but she stopped him once again at the door,

placing her hand on his chest for a moment. “I love ye,” she told him. “I love ye so much.”

In the dark, Knox gave her a smile so tender that Fia could feel her heart stop. “An’ I adore ye, mo ghraidh. More than anythin’ in the world.”

The End.

CHAPTER ONE

L owlands Border Town, September 20, 1320

“So, just tae be clear, ye want me tae seduce yer daughter and win her hand. And that, even though ye ken that she doesnae want tae be wed?” Laird Alistair MacDuff sipped at his mead as he pondered the request that had been laid before him. “And the lass has nay inkling that yer plannin’ this?”

“Nay. She’d never accept it.” Laird Bruce Cameron shook his head. “And in truth, nay more would I, save that we need the aid o’ her maither’s clan. These past years, we’ve been supplying border guards and warriors tae the cause o’ defending the Highlands, and we’re in sore straits for defending ourselves. Worse, an outer wall o’ the keep was damaged in the summer storms, and I’ve nae the gold tae repair it.”

Alistair grunted in response. He was familiar with the demands of war, his own clan having supplied two groups of warriors to the Battle of Bannockburn six years before. True, it had been under his father’s leadership, rather than his own, but he had led one team of their warriors into the field, and he remembered it well.

Of course, that had been before his clan had been attacked by their rival, Clan MacTavish. In the past two years, they’d been forced to consolidate their warriors in defending their home. Especially after the battle a year prior, which had resulted in his father’s death and his ascension to the lairdship.

Now, they had few warriors to spare, and little more gold. Though, if the repairs were minor enough, he might help. “How severe is the damage?”

“Tree took part o’ the outer battlements and shattered the postern gate on that side. There’s damage tae the main keep walls as well, broken window shutters and some cracks in the stone. We’ve patched it as well as we can, but we’re in need o’ proper stone masons and carpenters, as well as supplies.”

Alistair winced. Those sorts of repairs were difficult and costly, and could beggar a clan. It was certainly far beyond his means to offer any meaningful assistance in that area. “And yer kin-by-marriage willnae help ye without ye meetin’ their conditions?”

Laird Cameron sighed. “Me late wife’s clan has never forgiven me fer marryin’ the woman I loved when she could have wed a laird with greater standing. So they’ve conditions fer aidin’ me, and Niamh’s marriage is the foremost. Specifically, her marriage tae a Highland Laird such as ye.”

Alistair took another swallow of his drink as he considered the matter. He’d never met Niamh Cameron, not that he could recall, and knew almost nothing about her. Likewise, she probably knew nothing of him, either. With the Autumn Equinox Festival tomorrow, there would be plenty of opportunities to ‘accidentally’ meet Niamh and charm her.

Alistair grimaced. He couldn’t say he liked the idea of seducing a lass into falling in love with him, but that was far less disconcerting than the idea that he might fall in love with her in turn. The first was inconvenient and uncomfortable, but the latter scenario could have dire consequences for them both.

Alistair’s hand strayed to the ring he wore on a cord around his neck. That was the real danger, that he might come to care for the lass, and endanger them both.

On the other hand, sooner or later, Niamh was sure to find out the truth – that their meeting and courtship had been planned. No doubt, she’d be furious. And her anger, in turn, would cool any feelings he had for her as well, leaving them like many

spouses in arranged marriages – coolly civil, but hardly passionate. That, he could live with.

Besides, it wasn't as if the wedding wouldn't benefit him. The feud with Clan MacTavish was a bloody one, and more than one of his kin and council had commented on the need for an heir to secure the lairdship and his bloodline. A wedding would convince them that he was paying at least some attention to their demands.

Alistair steeled himself, then met his fellow laird's gaze. "How soon dae ye wish the wedding tae tak' place?"

Laird Cameron's expression shifted uncomfortably in a blend of relief and sorrow. "As soon as me daughter can be coaxed intae it. Fer our clan's sake, the sooner the better."

Since that matched both his inclination and the needs of his clan as well, Alistair nodded. "I can make it soon, I'm thinking. Unless... is it marriage or aught else she fears?"

"She doesnae want tae wed, but 'tis other things she fears. I cannae speak more o' it though. Ye should ask her about it yerself, should ye have the chance." Laird Cameron shook his head.

"'Tis enough. So long as 'tis nae the wedding itself she's so adamantly afeared o', I can work around anything else."

In truth, it might be better for both of them if she was resistant to the wedding for reasons other than simply having a husband. It would make it easier for them to develop a polite, perhaps even cordial marriage, if she was willing to wed and he was willing to yield to her concerns on whatever truly frightened her.

He considered. Autumn Equinox would be their first meeting. “Say, a wedding by Samhain?”

It would mean a very swift seduction and courtship, swifter than might be expected, but it would also give Laird Cameron enough time to provide proof of the wedding to his kin-by-marriage, and a chance that the repairs might be underway before the full brunt of winter hit Highlands and Lowlands alike.

Alistair knew from his own experience that breached windows and walls in the main keep in winter could be dangerous for the health of the clan folk living there. And if the outer wall were not repaired by spring, it would be an invitation to brigands and enemy troops alike to attack.

“Samhain is acceptable, though ye ken I’ll nae protest if ye can convince her tae come tae the altar sooner.”

“We’ll see.” Alistair considered further. “I’ll dae me best tae bring her tae the altar by her choice, but if somehow she realizes the truth, will ye wish the arrangement annulled, or shall the wedding proceed?”

Laird Cameron winced. “I wish I could say that the arrangement rests on her willingness, but in truth...” he shook his head. “The needs o’ the clan are too great, and ‘tis past time me daughter had someone besides me tae be looking after her safety. She’s seen a score o’ years, and ‘tis best she settles down afore she gets past what most would consider marryin’ age.”

“Then are we calling this a betrothal agreement? So long as ‘tis understood that I dinnae introduce meself tae the lass that way?” Alistair was determined to be clear on the matter. He didn’t want to be accused of overstating or overstepping his position when he started pursuing the lass.

“Aye, though I’d prefer if we kept it a verbal agreement rather than a written one.” Laird Cameron gave him a wry look. “Me daughter is curious as a cat and twice the troublemaker when she’s o’ a mind. A written contract she might find, and then there’s nae tellin’ what she’d dae.”

“Yer word is sufficient fer me, and I’ll trust mine is the same.” Alistair lifted his tankard in a toast to seal the bargain, and Laird Cameron followed suit.

He drained the rest of his tankard and rose from his seat. “If there’s naught else tae discuss, best I seek me bed. I wouldnae wish tae be at less than me best if I’m tae seek out yer daughter and try tae win her heart, and her hand.”

Laird Cameron nodded. He looked weary, and Alistair couldn’t fault him. They were both in difficult positions and forced into doing things they weren’t entirely proud of for the sake of their clans and their kinsmen.

Back in his room, he went over the description Laird Cameron had given him.

‘Look fer a slender lass with hair the color o’ deep autumn leaves and eyes the color o’ summer meadows. She’s slim like a reed, and fair-skinned, save for the dots o’ darker sun-color across her nose, cheeks and forearms, like she’s been sprinkled with fairie kisses. She’ll be unescorted, wearin’ a Cameron tartan, and carryin’ a well-worn satchel.’

She certainly sounded pretty enough, and easy to identify, but only tomorrow would reveal the truth.

Alistair settled into his bed, his mind turning over the different methods by which he might make the best first impression.

Niamh Cameron... I look forward tae meeting ye. And though I ken I can never love

ye, if the fates are kind, then mayhap at least we can have the comfort o' a cordial relationship and the knowledge we saved both our clans.

CHAPTER TWO

The next day...

“Och, I cannae believe ‘tis so late already!” Niamh checked her hair once more, ensuring that the plaits that bound it back from her face were neat and even, then turned and scooped up the parchment list she’d been perusing a moment before. “I’d best be hurryin’ or Grace will be addin’ ‘Cannae be on time’ to me list!”

The thought made her chuckle, even as she folded the parchment and tucked it away. Every year, she and her best friend, Grace, met at the Autumn Equinox Festival to talk and share their respective ‘list of sins’. Though it had long since become a source of amusement between them, for the two girls, it had a second, far more important purpose.

The list was all the things they’d each done over the year to avoid being considered marriageable material. They were both determined to be spinsters – Grace wished to defy her cruel, greedy uncle, and Niamh had no wish to face the expectations that came after marriage.

She was rather proud of her list this year. She’d managed to step on the toes of no less than a dozen hopeful young men at dances, gotten drunk three times, and committed a host of other improprieties that had turned aside the interests of every man her father had attempted to introduce her to.

Now in her twentieth year, she only had a few more years before she would be considered too old to be a wife to anyone – unless some widower who already had

heirs decided he wanted a gentle young caretaker in his later years.

But that was a concern for later. For now, she was going to meet Grace, and the two of them could enjoy sharing their respective lists before they went to explore the festival together.

Grace had said she would be waiting near the minstrel's platform, in the little patch of woodland that stood behind it. With the tensions of recent years, Grace was shy of wandering the fair alone. A single word would reveal her English parentage, and they'd had folk take offense more than once.

It wasn't Grace's fault, and she'd no part of the fighting, and yet, people could be suspicious and cruel. Niamh increased her pace at the thought.

She was so intent on making her way that she didn't see the man stepping out of the smithy stall until she crashed into him.

Niamh staggered, dropping the roll of parchment as she stumbled. Then a firm hand caught her elbow, and she found herself looking up into the amused eyes of the man she'd just run into.

He was tall, and as well-muscled as any of her father's warriors, if not more so. His midnight-hued hair was bound firmly at the nape of his neck in a warrior's tail, leaving a clear view of piercing green eyes and a strong, square jaw. At her appraisal, one eyebrow rose, a small smile quirking one corner of the stern-looking mouth before he spoke. "In a hurry are we, lass?"

Niamh colored. "'Tis nay business o' yers, but I'm on me way tae meet a friend, and I dinnae want tae be late."

"So ye'd rather be rude instead, is that it?"

“I didnae intend tae run intae ye!”

He made a soft noise, like a muffled laugh. “Och, I ken that, but ye’ve neither apologized, nor given yer name or any other courtesy.”

She hadn’t, that was true, but she didn’t feel like admitting it. “Ye’ve scarce introduced yerself either. And ye’ve nae call tae be holdin’ me so close.”

“Well, when a lovely creature such as yerself runs intae me without so much as a ‘by yer leave’, I cannae help being curious and wantin’ tae ken more about her.” His gaze flicked downward. “Och, and what’s this?”

To Niamh’s horror, he bent down and picked up her list, which had not only fallen to the ground, but unfolded as well. He read the first line with a smirk on his face. “Niamh’s list o’ sins, is it?”

“Give that back tae me!” She grabbed for the parchment, but he flicked it out of her reach with a grin. “That’s nae any o’ yer business.”

“Och, and why nae? I could add tae this list o’ misbehaviors.” He pretended to scrawl something in the air. “Is rude tae strangers, mayhap? Or perhaps ‘inclined tae collide with random men’?” He glanced at the list again. “Though, I’ll own yer list seems quite long enough already.”

Niamh felt as if her cheeks were afire, and she was acutely aware of the festival goers who were watching with amusement. “If I give ye me name and an apology, will ye give me back my list?”

“Aye.”

“Very well. I’m Niamh Cameron, and I’m sorry fer runnin’ intae ye.”

He smiled and deposited the folded parchment in her hand. “Yer apology is accepted, though I cannae say I’m sorry for our collision. Be that as it may...” His hand cupped her chin as he leaned closer to her. “Me name is Alistair MacDuff, and I’m very pleased tae meet ye.”

Niamh flushed and pulled away from his hand. “Och, I dinnae recall givin’ ye permission tae touch me in such a manner, sir. And ye’ve taken liberties enough, reading me list.”

Alistair smiled. “Aye... I’ll own I’ve been a wee bit forward with ye, me lady, but truth is, ‘tis been a fair long time since I met such an intriguing lass.”

“‘Tis been some time since I met so bold a rogue, and yet I dinnae see it as a reason fer bein’ uncouth and improper,” Niamh retorted.

One dark eyebrow rose, a teasing smirk tugging his stern mouth. “And yet, yer list would lead me tae believe yer the sort tae like a bit o’ rogue in yer menfolk.”

“Then ye’re fair deceived, fer in truth I’d like nae any sort o’ man at all, and the list...” Niamh stopped before she revealed that particular secret. “The list contains me reasons why I feel nae any sort o’ man should want me.”

“Is that so? Perhaps I should beg another look, fer I didnae see aught that was so objectionable. But then...” Alistair smiled, and Niamh felt her heart skip a bit in spite of herself. “I confess I admire a pretty lass with character and a ready wit.”

“Then ye’re looking in the wrong direction, fer there’s many a fairer lass at this festival, and plenty o’ them with more wit and grace than meself.”

“So ye say, mlady, but I prefer tae judge fer meself. One man’s dross is another man’s gold, and I think ye gleam bright indeed.”

Niamh felt herself blushing under the compliment. “Then yer eyes or yer wits are addled. Or else, ‘tis a joke ye intend to tell.”

“Nay jest. And nay addled wits, nor too much mead and ale, if that’s what yer thinkin’, me bonny lass.” Alistair tipped his head. “But if ye think I jest, then perhaps a wager? Spend the day attending the festival with me, and if I havenae indeed convinced ye by sunset o’ me sincerity, then claim a forfeit if ye like. But if I have, then ye’ll give me leave tae call on ye again.”

It was an intriguing offer, but Niamh shook her head. “Nay. I cannae. I told ye afore, I’m meeting a friend, and I promised tae walk the festival with her.”

“A friend’s a bonny chaperone, since ye think me a rogue.” Alistair stepped closer. “Walk the fair with me, lass. I can promise ye a day ye’ll enjoy, and one ye’ll remember fer many Autumn’s tae come.”

Niamh had no doubt he spoke the truth. But she also feared what his sincerity might mean for her own resolve. She opened her mouth to refuse him.

At that moment, a group of men, some half-dozen at the least, came staggering out of the nearby tavern, cursing and stumbling. The last was shoved from the building by an irate looking man that Niamh recognized as Seamus, the tavern keeper. “Dae yer brawlin’ and boastin’ elsewhere! I’ll nae have broken tables and chairs here, nor knife holes and flyin’ blades in me tavern, making the sensible folk afeared! If ye cannae act like proper clansmen, then dinnae come back until ye’ve regained yer wits!”

“Ye’ll regret losing our coin!” One of the drunken men was a bit more belligerent than his fellows.

“I’ll nae, fer I’ll save more than I’ll lose in nae havin’ tae replace me crockery and furnishins.” Seamus retorted. The tavern door closed firmly in the faces of the

drunkards.

One of the men muttered something to a nearby clansman wearing the tartan of a different clan. Niamh was too far to hear what was said, but the effect was immediate. The second man let out a snarl and made a drunken swipe at the speaker, and the festival lane was soon embroiled in a brawl.

She'd scarcely registered the chaos heading her way when Alistair swept her up and behind him, putting himself between her and the tangled knot of flying fists and barely intelligible insults. Niamh scowled at his back. "What are ye daeing?"

"I couldnae leave so fair a lass in danger o' bein' harmed by these louts."

"There's guards at the festival. They'll have heard the ruckus." Her father's guards were quick and strong, and she was confident they'd arrive to handle the matter before it got too out of hand.

"Aye. But until they arrive, permit me the honor o' protecting ye."

Niamh grimaced. She couldn't say she disliked having Alistair's protection, nor could she deny the tiny shiver of delight that passed through her at the knowledge that he was willing to stand between her and a gaggle of rowdy drunkards.

However, none of that changed the fact that time was passing, and she was surely late to meet Grace. That was vexing enough to cancel any enjoyment she might have felt in being watched over by such a handsome clansman. "If ye'd only left me well enough alone, I'd be far from here and in nay need o' protecting."

Alistair turned. "Are ye so sure o' that? There's more than one place taeday selling food and drink, and I'll wager this isnae the only brawl the festival will see - or has seen already, if the time the guards are taking tae arrive is any indication."

He might have been right, but Niamh wasn't going to concede the point to him so readily. "Be that as it may, I'd nae be at risk o' bein involved in this one if ye hadnae delayed me."

"Mayhap, but ye'd also nae have anyone tae help keep ye safe." He smirked at her.

Niamh glared back. "I never said I was in need o' any such thing!"

As Alistair was about to respond, one of the men staggered out of the melee and slammed into him. Before Niamh could quite understand what was happening, she was backed up against the wall, Alistair's hands planted against the stone on either side of her face. It was only when he shifted his weight to plant a boot against the drunkard's gut and shove him back toward his fellows that she realized how close she'd come to being knocked down, perhaps even trampled.

Alistair gave her another of his crooked half-smiles. "Are ye so sure o' that, lass? If I hadnae been between ye, the fool might have done ye harm. 'Twould be a shame tae damage such a bonny face."

Niamh's cheeks felt hot as coals, her face flushed by her embarrassment and by the sensation of having a man so close to her. Alistair hadn't made any move to straighten, and she could feel the warmth of his breath ghosting across her face, smell the scent of spiced meat and mulled cider he'd consumed earlier in the day. "I..."

Her words trailed off as her eyes met his. Deep, glittering eyes that held a sheen like the emerald she'd seen in one of her mother's rings, many years ago. They were mesmerizing, and Niamh looked away.

Looking down, she noticed a sturdy leather cord about his neck, from which hung a simple ring bearing a tri-corner eternity knot. The ring itself was far too small to fit a hand such as Alistair's. Daes he have another lass he's interested in?

The idea that he might be a rake, and simply toying with her stung more than it should. She raised her head to confront him about it, only to pause as he bent to murmur in her ear. “Ye say ye dinnae want protection, and ye’re angered that I’ve apparently delayed yer meeting with yer friend. But can ye really say ye object tae me company?”

“I cannae say I asked fer it, nor that I welcome it overmuch, yer current protection o’ me notwithstanding.” Her voice was quieter than she meant it to be.

“Why nae let me accompany ye? I dinnae mind having yer friend walk with us. And I’m sure ye’ll nae find me company lacking.” His smile deepened. “Besides, there’s our wager tae be concluded.”

“I’ve said it afore, I never agreed tae any wager.” Niamh hissed the words.

“But ye never refused it either.”

“I...”

Whatever she had intended to say was drowned out by a roar of sound as something happened within the melee. She started to lean forward to see around Alistair’s shoulders, when someone shoved, or fell, into his shoulder.

Caught off guard and off balance, Niamh stumbled, then froze as something brushed her cheek. Her head turned, just as Alistair shifted his weight.

Their lips met, and Niamh’s cheeks flamed crimson and all thought ceased as she tasted the spices on his mouth, felt the soft, slightly rough dryness of his lips, gently caressing her own, light as the edge of a bird’s wing. Then she came to her senses and she jerked backwards. Her hand rose to deliver a stinging slap to his jaw. “You rogue! I never gave ye permission tae kiss me!”

CHAPTER THREE

Niamh Cameron tasted of rose water, honey, and fresh-baked bread, and her lips were softer than any flower petal he'd ever touched. That was the first thing Alistair thought, as he stumbled back from the accidental kiss between them.

His second was that she was far stronger than she looked. The slap she delivered to his left cheek actually rocked his head back and brought a stinging sensation to his face, rather like he'd fallen into a patch of nettles.

He straightened up to find that he was still between her and the drunkards, though the brawl was all but over. Niamh herself was standing with her hands at her sides, her cheeks the hue of fire and her eyes snapping with anger. She looked enchanting, even in her evident fury at him.

Fer a beautiful sight like that, I cannae say I mind the slap, fer all I didnae intend tae kiss her.

He hadn't intended to smile either, but she must have seen his amusement, because her glare intensified. "Ye brute. Ye're a rascal and a knave, so ye are, Alistair MacDuff."

She made to push around him, and Alistair caught her arm. "Me apologies, me lady. I didnae mean tae upset ye. Nor tae kiss ye, though I dinnae regret that so much."

Her color deepened, proving she was not immune to his charm. Even so, she tossed her head and raised her chin, glaring at him until he released her arm. "I can believe

that. But ‘tis all the more proof that ye’re a proper rogue.”

He fell into step beside her as she turned away, following until she stopped and turned to face him once more. “What dae ye think ye’re daeing?”

“I’ve a list o’ things.” He grinned at her. “I’m waitin’ fer a chance tae apologize fer bein’ too forward with ye. I didnae mean tae kiss ye – ‘twas an accident o’ poor timing and clumsiness, and I’ve a wish tae make amends.”

He tipped his head at the grumbling malcontents who were picking themselves up and staggering slowly away from the street in front of the tavern. “Me offer still stands tae watch over ye and keep ye from harm during the festival. Aye, and yer friend, if ye like.”

He had to wonder at her apparent reluctance to let him meet her friend. She might be expected to resist the idea of being escorted about the festival by a strange man, but when he had willingly agreed to have her friend as a chaperone? That was strange.

She raised an eyebrow at him.

“I want a chance tae prove meself as good company. Add then, that I’ve a wish tae spend as much time as possible in yer company.” He smiled at her.

“Yer words are all well and good, Master MacDuff, but I saw the ring ye wear at yer throat. Ye cannae tell me the lass whom that belongs tae willnae object tae ye payin’ attention tae another.”

Niamh winced as Alistair’s face darkened. The good humor vanished from his expression and turned into a brooding scowl, but she fancied she saw a hint of pain in his face as well.

She'd meant the comment about the ring to be lighthearted and teasing, a gentle reminder that his attention might be better focused elsewhere. Still, it was clear from his expression that she'd somehow erred. Indeed, he looked as if she'd struck him, and with something far more painful than a slap.

He tucked the ring back under his tunic with an abrupt movement. "Nay. She's nae... there's nae one tae tak' offense however I choose tae spend me time."

Niamh winced. It was clear that her careless words had inadvertently prodded at some still-tender wound within his heart. She stepped forward and laid a hand on his arm. "Now 'tis me that is sorry. I didnae mean tae remind ye o' something sorrowful."

Alistair shook his head. "Ye didnae ken." A shadow of a smile tugged one corner of his mouth for a moment. "And kennin' that, 'tis nay wonder ye think me a rogue and a rake. Though now ye ken the truth, mayhap ye'll reconsider me offer?"

It was tempting. Brief as that brush of his lips against hers had been, it had been unlike anything else she'd ever experienced. But she knew Grace would shy away if she saw that Niamh was accompanied by a stranger. And even had Grace not been one to avoid strange folk – particularly men – their festival meetings had always been a secret. They would hardly remain so if Alistair accompanied them. The gossip about Laird Cameron's daughter walking the festival with a strange man would reach the castle long before she did, in that case.

She dared not risk the secret being exposed. But even had her encounters with Grace been less fraught with difficulty, it was still a time they set aside to spend with each other. Handsome and charming Alistair MacDuff might be, she'd no wish to have to divide her attention between Grace and another. She'd not make her sister in all but blood feel left out or neglected.

She offered him a smile. "Taeday's too fine a day tae be lost in shadows o' the past.

Shall we make a bargain, ye and I?”

His expression brightened, and some of the lines and shadows from her careless words left his eyes. “What sort o’ bargain?”

“I told ye afore I’m meeting a friend, and she’s far too shy tae want tae be seen with a man like ye, especially as we’re strangers ourselves. So, while I thank ye fer the invitation, I dinnae wish tae dae so taeday. However, I’m fair willing tae meet ye here next market day, if ye will.”

“I dinnae come tae market days often. Me clan isnae the closest, and I wouldnae be here had I nae been passing through from attending tae business elsewhere.”

She’d known he wasn’t from one of the neighboring clans, and his words turned her suspicions to certainty. They also revealed more information.

He was too prosperous to be a farmer, and the colors he wore suggested he was no messenger, so he was either a well-off tradesman, or he was a member of the upper-class clansmen. He’d not introduced himself as a laird, but that didn’t prevent him from being an heir, a secondary heir of a cadet line, a war leader, or a member of a laird’s council.

Charming as he was, she wasn’t sure she dared allow herself to get involved with such a man. Especially if he wasn’t willing to do her the courtesy of permitting her to choose a day for their meeting, when he knew she had a prior engagement at the moment.

She regarded him. “Ye implied that ye might be callin’ on me in the future, if ye won our wager. How did ye plan tae manage that, if ye have nae intention o’ being near me home?”

A rueful expression crossed his face. "Och, ye have me there." He regarded her with a steady gaze, "I'll own, I hadnae thought that through."

"Then 'tis somethin' ye'd best be considering. In the meantime, as I'll have tae refuse yer offer, I'll permit ye tae claim it as a forfeit. And I suppose, if ye manage tae think yer way through the tangle afore ye, then I cannae prevent ye from calling on me."

"Well, if ye're so adamant, then I suppose 'twould be churlish o' me tae press ye, and I've tested yer goodwill enough this past candle-mark." Alistair sighed. "Will ye at least tell me where ye live, then?"

"Laird Cameron is me faither." Alistair blinked. Niamh smiled sweetly at him, then turned and lost herself in the crowd before he could form any reply.

Me faither is the laird. I dinnae ken if that will be deterrent or nae, but it surely surprised him.

CHAPTER FOUR

A listair watched Niamh walk away with a small smirk on his face. He knew she wasn't as indifferent to him as she seemed. He'd seen the blush on her cheeks and heard the slight yearning in her voice. She might not have thought well of him, not at first, but she wasn't indifferent to him.

His hand went to the ring at his throat. He'd forgotten he was wearing his first wife's ring where she might see it. Fortunate that she'd accepted his explanation without question. Wooing the lass or not, there were some things he wasn't ready to talk about.

He'd made enough of an impression to receive her invitation to call upon her. There was no reason he couldn't let things end there for the day. He could enjoy the festival, perhaps find a trinket to present as a gift when he visited and wait for the morrow.

That was the sensible thing to do. He knew as well as any man that, no matter how hurried the courtship was intended to be, there were few women who could be properly wooed in a day. And Niamh Cameron was not one of them.

Even knowing that, he found himself trailing the lass, following her at a leisurely pace as she slipped through the crowd. With his height, he had little difficulty keeping her in sight, the pursuit was made even easier by her gleaming auburn hair – an unusual color and shade, and all the more unusual when paired with her pale skin and slim figure. To say nothing of her well-made dress and the Cameron tartan that served as a sash.

He wondered why she was so set on meeting her friend without an escort. It seemed odd, unless of course she was meeting a man. There was nothing in her demeanor that had suggested she had a lover, and the list he'd caught a glimpse of argued against the presence of a suitor. Still, he wasn't prepared to rule anything out.

If she has a lover already, how should I handle it? 'Twould be almost impossible tae interfere without revealing her faither arranged a contract with me, and she'll certainly resent me fer tak'ng her from a chosen partner – be it a true bond or merely a light-o'-love turn about the village.

On the one hand, it didn't sit well with him to separate the lass from someone she might have a genuine bond with. On the other, her hating him for such a thing could only protect both of them. And surely, she'd understand if her father explained things to her.

Alistair shook his head. He didn't even know that it was a male acquaintance she was meeting. It might be a village girl or a servant that she was fond of. Rumor had it the Lady Cameron had died in childbirth. It wasn't unheard of for a lass raised without a mother to form close bonds to female servants or village women. Anyone who could and would fill the void left by the lack of a mother's love.

If that was the case, perhaps he could convince the woman, whoever she was and whatever station she held, to relocate to MacDuff Clan. That might make the whole process of moving easier for the lass – whenever they reached that point.

Alistair followed Niamh to the minstrel's station, then beyond it. He frowned as she slipped off the main path, heading for a copse of trees a little way back.

What on earth can she be doin' there? Dinnae tell me she's managed tae summon one o' the Fair Folk!

That was unlikely, but a motherless lass would be the sort to tempt such figures, if ever they'd existed and still walked the earth.

Niamh slipped through the trees, into a small clearing. Alistair felt his eyes widen as he spotted a slender, cloaked figure amid the trees. Then Niamh gave a soft cry of delight and darted forward. "Grace!"

The figure embraced her, hood falling back to reveal shining golden hair and eyes the color of the sky. "Niamh! I was afraid you were not coming!"

"And sorry I am tae be late, but there was a bit of a brawl..." Whatever else she said was lost amid the roaring in Alistair's ears.

Now he knew why Niamh hadn't wanted him to meet her friend, and the truth was worse than he'd imagined.

The lass Niamh embraced with such evident joy was very clearly not a clanswoman, but an English lass... and by her appearance, nobility at that.

Niamh felt almost faint with relief when she spotted Grace waiting amid the trees. Her friend was always a bit shy and nervous about being alone when they attended the festival, and with good reason. Not only was Grace blessed with beautiful, fine features and eyes like a robin's egg, but one word from her would inevitably betray her English upbringing.

Niamh had never cared that Grace was English born and raised any more than she'd cared for the fact that her friend was a year younger than she. Grace was Grace, and they'd been friends since the first autumn festival when they'd both escaped their minders to explore the festival together.

Still, for all Niamh didn't care, she knew that there were many clan-folk who would

take offense to an English lass among them. Most would be content to sneer and spit, but some might do her harm. Just as some might attempt to accost her because of her delicate appearance and pretty features. So they always met in secluded locations and walked the festival together.

Grace was the first to step back from their embrace, her blue eyes wide with concern. “You said there was a brawl? Were you hurt?”

“Nay. I wasnae. A stranger I’d run intae was kind enough tae protect me.” Niamh felt the familiar tell-tale heat rising in her cheeks and hurried to change the subject. “And what o’ ye? Did ye have any difficulties?”

Grace sighed. “I am fortunate to have friends among the guards. My uncle grows more strict and more suspicious with every passing year. Indeed, I fear he is near the end of his patience, for he has been hinting that he will find me a husband, no matter what I do to thwart him. Even if he must wed to me to his sworn enemies.”

“He wouldnae really, would he?”

“And why would he not, if they have gold enough to satisfy him? I have done as much as I can, but sooner or later, there will be someone who can be convinced to overlook my apparent flaws.” Grace sighed, melancholy darkening her gaze. “I fear he has an enticing offer on his side, for he does not ask for an heir to my family’s title. He wants to hold the Lancaster name himself, so he is more than pleased for any child of mine to belong to someone else’s line.”

Niamh hugged her gently. “Och, well, we’ll dae everything we can tae prevent that from coming tae pass, ye and I. After all, we’re both in the same situation, are we nae? Me faither is kinder than yer uncle, but there’s nay question that he’s looking fer a husband fer me as well.” Niamh grinned and held up her list. “He’s had nay luck so far, though. I’ve nae met a suitor yet who I couldnae best.”

As she'd hoped would happen, Grace laughed. "You are a proper hellion, as my old nurse would say. If she knew that we were friends, she would say you are a very bad influence as well."

"And if her father kent she was consorting with an English wench, he'd likely die o' shame or see her sequestered fer the rest o' her days." The low growling voice startled both of them. Niamh spun around.

"Alistair?"

Why would he be here? How did he find us so far off the pathways?

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:34 am

A listair strode toward the two women, his gut churning with sullen embers of anger. He'd no idea what the English lass wanted, but the fact that Niamh would befriend such a person – such conduct was perilously close to a betrayal of all the warriors who had fought and died at Bannockburn and afterward.

She should know better, especially when her father was a laird, and one of those who guarded the border between the clans and their English foes.

Niamh appeared too startled to say anything, after her utterance of his name, but the English wench recovered quickly enough to dip a curtsy as he came near. “I do not know what I’ve done to affront you, good sir, but...”

“Ye’re English.” Alistair snarled the words out, gratified to see her flinch, even as Niamh’s expression tightened with anger at his behavior. “And nae a common English lass, at that. Ye’re a lady.”

“My family is of minor nobility, if that is what you are asking. However, if you are concerned about my allegiance...”

“Save yer words. I’ve heard enough English words in me life, and I dinnae need tae hear more, nae even from a pretty lass.” Alistair snapped at her. He rounded on Niamh with a glare that had sent many a man running for the hills. “And ye, ye should ken better than tae be befriending someone like this, when so many Highlanders and Lowlanders alike have spilled blood tae keep them away from the clans.”

Niamh flushed, but she stood her ground and raised her chin in defiance. “That’s

naething tae dae with Grace. She's nae part o' the fighting, and never has been. She grew up nay more than a half-day's ride from me home, and I from hers. We've met here fer years. Why should we nae be friends?"

"Because her faither, braithers, uncles and cousins stand on the field across from ours, and bein' friends with an English noble, be they lad or lass, is akin tae inviting a viper intae yer home." Alistair's lip curled. "Yer faither should have taught ye better."

"And what's that tae dae with our bein' friends? She could surely say the same about me kinfolk fighting hers." Niamh's jaw clenched. "And that aside, I dinnae ken what business it is o' yers. I'm fair certain I told ye I didnae want yer company taeday, and ye said ye wouldnae pursue the matter. Yet here ye are."

Alistair scowled back. "I happened tae be passing and saw ye entering these woods. I was concerned fer what ye might encounter, and 'tis clear I was right tae be." He reached out to take Niamh's arm.

She wrenched away from him. "Keep yer hands off me! Ye've nay right tae decide who I befriend, or spy on who I choose tae meet." Her glare could have set fire to wet wood.

Alistair could feel his own temper fraying. The argument was bad enough, but through it all, the English wench, Grace, kept attempting to step between them. He took a grip on Niamh's arm once again, and Grace stepped forward. "Don't touch her. I do not care who you are, you don't have a right to treat a lass so rudely."

Alistair jerked away from her hand, dragging Niamh with him. "Dinnae touch me, wench! I dinnae care what ye think but touch me again and ye'll regret it." His jaw clenched. "As it is, ye're fair lucky I havenae called fer the guard and reported yer presence here afore now."

“Dinnae dare threaten Grace! Ye brute!” Niamh hammered an ineffectual fist against his shoulder. “Ye’ll unhand me now, or I’ll have me faither horsewhip ye!”

“I’ll nae dae aught o’ the sort, and nor will he. Nae when I tell him...” Alistair bit his tongue. He’d almost revealed more than he meant to. He could feel himself perilously close to lashing out, and it was clear that if the argument proceeded much longer, he’d say more than he meant to. He set his jaw and began to walk away, dragging Niamh with him.

Niamh couldn’t believe what was happening. Only a candle-mark ago, she’d been having a wonderful day. She’d met a handsome, charming man, and been on her way to spend the day with her best friend. Now, somehow, everything had gone wrong.

The handsome man had turned out to have a dark side. Worse, he was trying to take her away from Grace.

Grace stepped in front of him. “Sir, if you think I’ll let you treat Niamh so roughly...”

“And what dae ye think tae dae? Call the guards if ye will.” Alistair’s voice was harsh, and Niamh could hear the contempt in it. “But if ye think they’ll heed the word o’ an English lass over a clansman, then ye’re a fool as well as a viper.”

Grace flinched, and Niamh hissed in fury and kicked Alistair hard in the shin. The man grunted, and his grip loosened just enough for her to pull free and dart back to Grace’s side. “Grace may nae be able tae call the guards, but I can, and I will if ye dinnae leave now. Aye, and have ye sent on yer way with a cudgel, if I see ye again.”

Alistair’s lip curled. “I’d like tae see ye try, and what Laird Cameron would say, tae see ye tryin’ tae drive away yer...”

Alistair’s words paused for a moment, but before Niamh could respond, he continued.

“And he’d be likely tae reward me, if he kent what company ye keep, and the source o’ yer ire.” He stepped closer, and Niamh flinched back. “Ye say yer faither is the laird Cameron o’ these parts. How many o’ yer clansmen has he sent tae defend the borders against people like yer ‘friend’?” The last word was hissed with enough venom to make a snake jealous.

Niamh snarled back; her temper hotter than she’d ever felt it before. “That’s a matter fer me faither tae think on. ‘Tis certainly nae concern o’ yers, and it daesnae give ye a right tae accost me like this!”

“Ye think nae?” Alistair caught her arm again, his eyes burning with a fury that nearly matched her own. “‘Tis clear ye need tae be kept an eye on, if this is the sort o’ company ye keep when ye’re nae watched over. Since yer faither isnae here tae dae the job, I will.”

“And who are ye tae have a say in who I can be friends with?”

Alistair’s jaw clenched. “I have a say because I’m yer betrothed, and I’ll nae have any future wife o’ mine consorting with the enemy.”

“Just because ye happened tae bump intae me...” Her words faltered to a stop. “What did ye say?” Alistair’s expression changed, chagrin sweeping across his rugged features as Niamh stared at him. “What dae ye mean, ye’re me betrothed?”