



# The Cruel Highlander (From Enemies to Marriage #3)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** "We are already practically betrothed in everyone's eyes, if ye agree we could be the perfect fake match."

When cruel Laird Aiden is pressured to marry after years of captivity, he picks the one lass that is sure to set him free: Valorie Grant.

With her having already broken off two betrothals to Lairds, Valorie's father is clear: if she doesn't marry the next one, she'll be disowned. And the next one has the reputation of a beast. Albeit a handsome one.

Their betrothal is doomed from the start; but when the cruel Laird wants to claim her, Valorie can do nothing but surrender.

**Total Pages (Source):** 31

## PROLOGUE

“I have had enough! If ye daenae marry the next laird I find for ye, ye will nay longer be me daughter!” boomed Valorie Grant’s father. Valorie shot her mother an anxious look which she returned with a resigned glance. “This is the second laird ye have abandoned; ye cannae keep embarassin’ your clan in this way.”

“Faither, Kenneth and I talked and —” Valorie started to explain, but her father wouldn’t hear her. She had only just returned home, and her father immediately jumped to his own conclusions. Yes, Valorie broke off her latest betrothal to Kenneth, the Laird of Toohey, but there was more to it.

“I daenae care for your explanations, Valorie! Do ye ken how many powerful lairds have asked for your hand? We could be years into a valuable alliance at this point. Ye are our only kin, and the clan is countin’ on ye to make a strategic match. Not only that, but how do ye think this makes me look? That’s two clans now that we can probably consider our enemies! People are always lookin’ for a reason to depose a laird, and ye make me look like I cannae even control me own daughter!”

Therein lay the problem. Valorie didn’t want to be controlled. Not by her father nor any other laird. Something no laird seemed to understand. Valorie appreciated the precarious position her father was in, but she would not marry a man who didn’t listen to her.

She wished for the same from her father as well, but the man commanding Valorie right now was fully Laird MacCrimmon and not the doting father who taught her to hold a sword and ride a horse. As a child, her father had invited her to sit in on

council meetings and train to fight with all the other young boys, almost as if she were a boy herself. But now, Valorie's worth seemed wholly dependent on who she married. She was merely a tool for her father to use and direct.

Valorie knew that her father had a whole clan to consider, but in this one thing, she wanted him on her side. For once, she wanted to have a conversation with her father and not her clan chieftain.

"Darling, ye ken the clan is strong; we can withstand this as we did the first time. Plus, most of those lairds were certainly not an appropriate marrying age," Valorie's mother cut in, commenting on the fact that the majority of lairds who had asked for Valorie's hand were older than even her parents. Valorie suppressed a shudder thinking about some of those lairds who called on her when she first came of age.

"Fine then, what about Laird McLeod? That's two lairds in two years that ye have broken off a betrothal with!" her father continued his tirade.

Regrettably, this fact was true, but her first betrothed wanted an obedient possession, and Kenneth wanted someone else.

"Faither, I told you about Laird McLeod." When Valorie returned home the first time, after only a few weeks away at McLeod Castle, she spent ages explaining why she was compelled to break off the betrothal. Since it was already done, her father was forced to accept it, but she was warned even then. No more missteps.

"Aye, but we will be lucky to find anyone to marry ye now with this reputation!" her father roared.

Two lairds scorned was apparently too many for most people to forgive, but Valorie liked the sound of that. No husband meant one less man who could tell her what to do. That was one less laird who wouldn't listen to her thoughts, her dreams, or her

ideas.

Valorie would be an asset to any laird; she knew that. She was as skilled with a bow as any man and could certainly ride faster than one. She knew how to run a clan, and if she was going to marry a laird, she wanted one who saw that. Someone that saw behind her fair skin and her smile to her strength and her mind.

“Faither, ye daenae understand,” Valorie started to say, growing increasingly frustrated with his lack of care for her side of the story.

“Nay! Ye daenae understand, ye will marry the next laird to ask for yer hand, or else!” her father shouted with finality. Well then.

“Fine, Faither, I understand,” Valorie replied dutifully. Under her breath and with a subtle wink at her mother, Valorie added, “But what if they daenae want to marry me?”

### CHAPTER 1

Aiden Wright, unfortunately, found himself at his least favorite place, a cèilidh. He typically avoided parties and gatherings at all costs. If he was being honest, Aiden avoided leaving the castle entirely, except to lead his men in battle, but on the rare occasion one of his sisters begged for his attendance at their castle, Aiden would make an appearance.

The party tonight was a celebration for Aiden's younger sister Keira and her husband Christian, the Lady and Laird of Doyle. The couple recently welcomed another bairn, which was apparently cause for celebration for nearly all of the Highland clans. Couples danced and chatted happily throughout the large room while Aiden sat at the far end of a dreadfully long table and wished he was anywhere else.

Thankfully, his rather permanent scowl and fearsome reputation kept the majority of guests from approaching him to talk. All he wanted was to sit and enjoy the smooth whiskey that his brother-in-law, Flynn, procured for him. Flynn was married to Aiden's other sister, Astrid, and could always be counted on to find a decent whiskey. Even better, he knew when to leave Aiden to himself.

Aiden spent the better part of the evening swirling his drink and staring into the light, amber-colored liquid. The whiskey was pleasant, aged well certainly, but he had better stored in the cellar at his castle. Another reason to stay home.

Finally, Aiden looked up from his whiskey glass and quickly glanced around the room. Not particularly interested in most of Highland society, he almost missed the radiant young lass in the center of the room.

She was enchanting, standing tall and proud over the ladies near her. Her body moved gracefully to the music that Aiden suddenly heard for the first time all night. Lost in his own mind until that moment, Aiden was drawn into the present by the pale-skinned goddess. A slight sheen of sweat dotted her neck as she spun throughout the room. Aiden had a desperate urge to lick a droplet from her throat.

Aiden continued watching her move, her powerful and athletic figure had no trouble keeping up with the fast beat set by the musicians. Her long, dark brown hair was unkempt from both her lithe dancing and her joyous laughter. She must have been surrounded by comics because her bright smile never dimmed.

The long waves of her hair looked like they had once been tightly braided down her back but were now flying around her as she moved. Aiden's eyes followed her as she threw her head back with a loud guffaw and found that mess of hair strewn across her face. Somehow still maintaining her grace, she worked to corral her tresses without missing a step.

The lass seemed oblivious to nearly everyone else in the room. The dance and her friends captivated her whole attention. What would it be like to be the center of that woman's attention? Aiden could only imagine how her joy and light would feel if focused on him. Aiden thought he might like to find out, at least for the night. It had been a very long while since he had a woman in his bed, and never one so enthralling.

Caught up in the woman's luminous orbit, Aiden didn't notice his sister sitting down next to him. "I would avoid that one," she said smartly into his ear.

Annoyed that he had to drag his gaze from the dancing lass, Aiden curtly replied, "Why?"

"That's Valorie Grant." At Aiden's blank stare, Keira continued, "Laird MacCrimmon's only daughter." Aiden's sister had clearly forgotten Aiden avoided

Highland society as much as possible. He only knew Laird MacCrimmon by name and certainly didn't know his kin. "Surely you've heard about her?"

"I havenae, so why don't ye tell me what I'm supposed to know?" Aiden answered sharply.

"Well, she's got a bit of reputation, ye ken. She just broke off a betrothal to Laird Toohey, nae a year since she ended her betrothal to Laird McLeod. Anyone looking for a serious betrothal is stayin' away. People think she doesnae want to be wed at all."

Aiden returned to watching the lass, Valorie. He rolled her name through his mind; he liked it. He liked it even more that she didn't want to be married. Valorie Grant was becoming more and more intriguing.

Noticing her warning wasn't having the intended effect, Keira continued her arguments, "Ye need to find a bride, Aiden; it's been long enough. Surely there's..."

"I will never get married," Aiden interrupted coldly. There was a reason for his reputation after all, and everyone would do well to remember it, even his sister.

Keira, however, didn't take his tone for the warning it was and continued to argue, "Ye must do this for the clan, Aiden and for yerself. Ye're the laird now, and ye need the company. I hate thinkin' of ye alone in that castle. Ye can't push everyone away."

"Watch me," Aiden replied. He didn't mind the solitude; it was one of his favorite things now. The thought of having another person to care for, to worry about, to protect, sat uneasily in his stomach. He could scarcely protect himself from the horrors of this world; he could not be responsible for someone else. No, marriage and love were not for Aiden, not anymore. Not after what happened.

Aiden's sister, unaware of his inner turmoil, smiled happily at her husband down the other end of the table. Christian was swarmed with guests and his council members but was focused solely on his wife. That singular focus was exactly what Aiden was desperately trying to avoid. A distraction like that would leave both Aiden and a wife open to harm.

Keira rose from the table with final words to Aiden, "Mother said the council is goin' to get you a bride within a month if ye daenae find one soon. Ye need a wife, Aiden, and Valorie Grant cannae be her."

Well, sister, I think Valorie Grant may be exactly what I need.

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Valorie was having a delightful night. The musicians were playing dancing music, the food was delicious, and the company was entertaining. She made her rounds around various groups of people, chatting to all the lairds and ladies as she should, but it was her own choice to do so. Valorie knew most people would have heard about her latest scandal already, but she strode through the room smiling with her head held high.

A few times she had seen her father talking to younger lairds she knew to be unwed, but she wasn't going to let that spoil the evening. It would surely be difficult for him to find a third laird for her to marry. Especially so soon.

Valorie hoped she had at least another year, maybe even longer. Maybe this could be her life, joyous cèilidhs where Valorie could choose who to dance with, what to wear, when to eat, and when to rest. In his anger, her father had not advised on any of those things tonight, and Valorie had never felt freer.

Carefully extricating herself from a conversation about crop yields this season, Valorie noticed her friend, Margaret, standing off in the corner of the room. Margaret



was the only daughter of Laird McMurray, and since coming of age, she was a regular at celebrations like this.

“Margaret, what are ye doin’ over here?” Valorie asked, approaching the younger woman.

“Hidin’, of course. Faither has been relentless tonight in introducin’ me to lairds,” Margaret responded glumly. Valorie had heard rumors their clan was in desperate need of a strong alliance.

“Yer brothers are still unwed as well, right?”

“Aye, but Faither has... different expectations for them,” Margaret replied politically. But Valorie was deeply familiar with the disparity in expectations for future lairds and ladies.

“Of course, he does. Everyone is always goin’ to expect somethin’ from ye, and they will rarely agree. They will try to choose for ye, but ye are the one who has to live with those choices. Wherever ye end up needs to be a place ye can tolerate.”

“I want to help the clan, but Valorie, some of these lairds! I was talkin’ with one, and he drank so much whiskey he fell asleep mid-conversation. I was in the middle of a story and looked up to find him droolin’ at the table!” Margaret whispered passionately, and Valorie roared with laughter.

“That’s nothin’ — my first betrothed was obsessed with these disturbin’ little sculptures that he collected. I found him one night in the dark whisperin’ to the wee things. I swear he took one into his rooms that night!” Valorie confided.

Margaret giggled in response, and Valorie was pleased to have lightened the mood for the younger woman. She knew how terrifying it was to come of age as a laird’s

daughter, and Valorie didn't want anyone else to go through what she did.

The pair spent a little more time gossiping about all the embarrassing behavior they had witnessed from lairds but were ultimately interrupted. One of Margaret's brothers approached with a stern look at Valorie. Putting a firm hand around his sister's arm, he dragged Margaret away.

"Valorie Grant is nae a woman ye should be emulatin', Margaret!" Valorie overheard Margaret's brother whisper harshly as they walked away.

Shaking off the insult, Valorie fixed a bright smile on her face and went to find her most recently ex-betrothed, Kenneth. A surprising friend, of all things. Despite her father's assumptions, the pair had ended their betrothal amicably. Kenneth had his sights set on someone else, and Valorie wanted her independence; neither was truly happy with their arranged marriage.

"Dance with me Kenneth; let's get these tongues waggin'," Valorie quipped when she found him at one of the tables.

"I'd be delighted, me lady," Kenneth laughed and led them into the fray of dancers. Kenneth held her loosely as they moved gracefully around the room.

"My faither will be horrified to see us dancin' together so soon after we called off the betrothal. Don't let him see us!" Valorie joked. Kenneth chuckled, but before he could respond, an exceptionally tall, but harsh-looking man approached them.

"May I?" Without waiting for Kenneth's acceptance, the cold stranger took Valorie's hands and swept her away to dance. Even with his permanent frown, the man was striking. Valorie was tall herself, but this man towered over her with a lean strength. Strong cheekbones and a sharp nose defined his face.

As they spun across the dance floor, Valorie found herself inexplicably drawn back up to his eyes. The dark brown orbs were focused intently on her, seeming to search her face for something. Yet, his eyebrows pressed in, betraying the frown he still wore. They must have looked like quite the pair with Valorie's sunny smile still fixed on her face.

The man's golden hair flopped across the worry lines that marred his forehead. The wrinkles and light dusting of silver hair near his temples did nothing to diminish the man's attractiveness. He was either older than Valorie assumed or had lived an exceptionally worrisome life. Either way, Valorie was fascinated.

On another pass around the dance floor, Valorie forced herself to look away from this man and observe the room instead. She saw her father had stopped his other conversations and was watching the scene with glee. Bitterly she thought, Great, he must be a laird then. An unwed one, I'm sure.

As she continued glancing around the room, she noticed something else. Half the room was openly watching them, and the other half was pretending not to watch. Their emotions ranged from shock, to fear, to her father's pleased grin.

"I knew I had caused some people's curiosity, but this is too much. I apologize for their starin' at us..." Valorie sighed. She paused, waiting for her dance partner to fill in the blank where his name should have been.

"Aiden, and I'm sure it's me they're starin' at. It must be the first time I've gotten off my chair at such an event," Aiden replied in a dangerously deep voice as he pulled Valorie closer. Valorie didn't have a chance to be impressed by his voice when he first cut in on Kenneth, but it echoed in her mind now.

Pressed closely together as they moved, Valorie could feel Aiden's breath lightly against her hair. Aiden held her far more closely than Kenneth had. Despite his

confident dancing, his breath was getting heavy. Valorie felt her chest straining as well but not with exertion. Aiden's closeness was causing her heart to pitter-patter in a way she'd never felt before. Neither of her betrotheds ever caused her to react this way. Embarrassingly, she could also feel her face and neck heating with a deep flush.

They had barely spoken, but the combination of Aiden's gravelly voice and the strong way he held Valorie against him had her desperate for something she didn't entirely understand. She thought he might be affected as well, but his arms were stiff around her. He was a skilled dancer, but Aiden was... restrained. He never let himself just feel the music the way Valorie did.

Before Valorie could tell him to just let go and enjoy himself, the song ended, and Aiden took a measured step away from her.

Valorie turned to walk away, but before she took another step, Aiden reached out and stopped her by the arm, "Lovely dancin' with ye, lass. I'll be seein' ye again soon," Aiden promised with a light caress against her inner wrist.

### CHAPTER 2

Watching Valorie walk away was quite the sight. She seemed to be heading outside for some air, but the way her hips swung made Aiden think she knew he was watching. Before his thoughts could delve too far into the improper, Valorie was out the door. For the best probably.

Aiden took a quick stock of the room with a scowl. Everyone that had been watching them dance quickly averted their gaze when faced with Aiden's ire. For once, Aiden wanted to laugh at everyone's reaction to him, but it served his purposes, so he didn't dare break a smile. Confident that his glare would keep everyone away, Aiden took his seat again at the far end of the table.

Where was Flynn? He could use another whiskey after that dance. Valorie was even more spectacular up close. The way her breasts heaved when he dragged her close had him tightening under his kilt; the long garment was loose around his body, but Valorie threatened to make it indecent.

One person failed to recognize the inherent danger in Aiden. He watched as Valorie's father warily approached his table and sat down. Thankfully for Laird MacCrimmon, Aiden was waiting for this exact conversation. He knew that his dance with Valorie would get the Highland gossip mill churning, but he didn't particularly care what most people thought.

"Laird O'Donnely, I must say I was shocked to see you among the dancers this evening." Aiden was not looking forward to hearing this same comment from everyone he knew, but he was deeply curious to know what Valorie's father thought

of the spectacle. Hopefully, Laird MacCrimmon was desperate enough to save his daughter's reputation that he would ignore Aiden's.

Aiden just nodded in response. Despite wanting this conversation to go well, Laird MacCrimmon's statement didn't call for an answer. Besides, he was keeping an eye on the door Valorie had recently walked through. Would she want to dance with him again when she came back in?

"I saw ye out there with me daughter," the other laird said, pausing. When Aiden simply stared at him, he continued, "Me daughter... Valorie."

This was tiresome. Aiden desperately wanted to roll his eyes. He danced with one woman the whole night; of course, he knew who Laird MacCrimmon was talking about. He wished for the man to just get to the point. Conversations like this were exactly why Aiden avoided leaving his castle for anything besides battle. Men with swords usually didn't drone on the way they did at feasts.

"Aye," Aiden reluctantly responded to the other laird's statement after another long pause. Aiden had been a chieftain long enough to know he would be best served waiting for Valorie's father to propose what Aiden hoped was an alliance. All the better if he came into this from a position of power. Laird MacCrimmon had no need to know that Aiden wanted this betrothal as much as the other laird did.

"Well, if ye have an interest in an alliance between our clans, she is still unwed, ye ken?" There it was. Perfect. Aiden was pleased that Laird MacCrimmon didn't continue his posturing. They both knew why he was over here.

The conversation couldn't have gone better for Aiden. Without having to betray his own interest, the laird had offered up his daughter, and all Aiden had to do was accept. Valorie would probably need to drag out this betrothal a little longer than her others, but as long as it got the council off Aiden's back...

Still watching for Valorie's reentrance to the ballroom, Aiden noticed an older laird heading out that same way. The laird was stumbling outside, but Aiden noticed a determination that immediately put him on edge.

"Excuse me." Without an answer to Valorie's father's proposition, Aiden stood and stalked towards the door.

"Help!" a female voice cried from outside. Aiden broke into a run.

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Valorie desperately needed the fresh air after spinning around the dance floor with Aiden. Her face and chest were hot, and she wished for a cold bath. This changes nothing, she thought determinedly. She had only just gotten her independence back; she would not be ensnared by another laird. Still, Valorie put a little spring in her step on her way out the door to the balcony.

Standing under the night sky, Valorie took a deep breath and leaned gently against the railing. The chill was sobering her thoughts, and she resolved to put the mysterious Aiden out of her mind. But she still felt the lingering effects of dancing with him. She should really find her father and mother and head home, but she was quite happy looking out at the stars over Laird Doyle's vast lands.

"There ye are," slurred a man from behind Valorie. Deep in her thoughts, she hadn't noticed his arrival.

"Evenin', sir," Valorie responded as sweetly as possible as she spun around. She had seen this older laird before but couldn't remember his name. Still, better to not have a drunken laird at her back, no matter who it was.

"I've heard all about ye, ye ken?" He leered at her.

“I’m not sure what ye mean,” Valorie tentatively responded, still maintaining some semblance of a smile.

“Now that ye’ve broken off two betrothals maybe ye’re looking for somethin’ else,” the laird whispered in what he probably assumed was a seductive tone. It only made Valorie shiver in revulsion. Misinterpreting her movements, the old laird leaned even closer to Valorie, nearly pinning her against the railing.

“Maybe ye’re lookin’ for somethin’ a little more... personal?” Valorie scoffed at his forwardness and tried to force him away, but the older man stayed firm. His arms caged around her.

“None of my betrotheds ever laid a hand on me!” Valorie yelled. She hoped someone might hear her, or the laird would finally get the idea and leave her be. The laird just laughed cruelly and pushed himself flush against her. Valorie could feel the entire length of him against her body. His breath was sickly against her face, and Valorie knew she needed to act.

Sinking into all the training her father drilled into her as a child, Valorie vowed she would not let this man take what he wanted from her.

Using the railing behind her as leverage, she replied to the laird’s taunts by jamming her knee forcefully between his legs. With a squeal, he crumbled pitifully to the ground.

Sensing this was her moment to escape Valorie pushed off from the balcony ledge. Mid-step the laird on the ground grabbed her around the ankle. With momentum on his side, the laird pulled Valorie down to the ground next to him. The shock of the fall reverberated through her body, and she lay immobile for precious seconds. That short pause gave the laird the time to roll himself on top of her. Once again, she was trapped against his body.



“Help!” Valorie screamed as loud as she could, determined to be heard this time.

Suddenly, the heavy and foul-smelling weight of the laird was lifted off of her. With a single hand, Aiden pulled him up and harshly shoved him against the wall of the castle.

“We daenae touch women when they daenae want us to. Do ye understand?” Aiden’s measured voice was calm but deadly, Valorie thought. His low and level voice betrayed no anger but was more frightening than a shout. The reddening of the older laird’s face gave away the force with which Aiden held him against the wall. Valorie looked on as Aiden’s forearm bulged, trapping the other laird to the wall by his throat.

“She was askin’ for it!” the older man croaked, struggling for breath. He appeared terrified of Aiden already but searched for some defense for his actions.

“I was nae!” Valorie yelled, bringing herself to her feet. Aiden looked back at her, and the reminder of her presence put him in motion. Still crushing the man against the wall, Aiden used his spare arm to punch the older man right in the face. Aiden let his forearm drop at the same time, and the other laird collapsed to the ground once more. This time the fight seemed finally out of him.

“Do ye understand now, or do I need to repeat meself?” Aiden said viciously, still keeping his voice down, but there was a clear threat in it. With his eyes downcast, the older man nodded meekly. He dragged himself up and quickly scurried off.

Valorie slowly walked to where Aiden vibrated with anger. She felt none of the fear from moments ago, but she approached Aiden like she would a wild animal.

“Thank ye, Aiden,” Valorie said sincerely. “I had it under control, of course, but thank ye,” Valorie joked to her savior in an attempt to lighten his mood. Aiden

barked out a short laugh. His low voice was even more delicious in laughter, and Valorie was determined to hear that sound again.

“I do have a question though,” Valorie said. Aiden nodded to her, still smiling, and she continued, “Why was that laird scared of ye before ye even hit him?” With that, Aiden’s smile turned sad, and he took Valorie’s hand in his.

“Allow me to introduce myself properly, lass. Aiden Wright, Laird O’Donnely,” Aiden said and kissed the back of her hand with a roguish grin. Aiden held her eye as if daring her to argue against his gentlemanliness. She knew who he was, of course. Everyone had heard of Laird O’Donnely.

Valorie couldn’t believe that she danced with and was just saved by the most feared and cruel laird in the Highlands. She understood now why she didn’t recognize him. Rumor was that he avoided any social interactions and barely left his castle, but he must have been dragged here by one of his sisters. Now that she thought about it, Aiden looked strikingly similar to his sister, Astrid.

Still, decorum required that Valorie introduce herself as well, besides Aiden would probably never be that feared laird in her eyes. To Valorie, Aiden was her hero. She looked earnestly at Aiden and said, “Valorie Grant, thank ye again, Laird O’Donnely.”

“That willnae do,” Aiden said seriously.

“Excuse me?” Valorie replied, shocked. She still didn’t fear Aiden, but Valorie didn’t like where this conversation was headed.

On his way towards the door, Aiden winked at Valorie and declared, “Ye owe me now, lass.”

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The next day, Aiden sat in endless council meetings. His councilors updated him on everything from the state of crops to skirmishes along the borders of the clan lands. Normally, Aiden paid closer attention, but the previous night circled in his mind.

Everything from the feel of Valorie in his arms to Laird Campbell crumbling at his feet was plaguing him. Aiden succumbed fully to his rage last night. It wasn't until Valorie spoke up from the ground that he even remembered she was there. When he walked out onto the balcony and saw Laird Campbell pressed tightly up against her, Aiden saw red. Everything from that point on was reactionary.

Why had he reacted so strongly to that laird's actions? When had he ever felt any emotion that fierce? Aiden was staunchly protective of his sisters; likely he was just upset that someone threatened Keira's celebration. Simple.

For him to go from that level of rage to laughter in a matter of minutes though was equally shocking. Aiden couldn't remember the last time he laughed. The sound was unnatural and foreign to his ears, but Valorie brought it out of him.

"Laird?" One of his more loathsome councilors interrupted Aiden's musings.

"Aye?" Aiden responded curtly.

"What do ye think?"

About what? Aiden wondered silently. Best to wait it out and have someone else fill in the blank. It was likely obvious that he wasn't listening, but his councilors were used to Aiden responding curtly or not at all.

"About selectin' a lass to marry? The absence of an heir is yer people's biggest

concern right now. They want continuity and the security that an heir brings,” another of his councilors explained.

Aiden smiled, something that probably scared his councilors more than his ire, and announced, “I have found me bride.”

### CHAPTER 3

“How was the cèilidh the other night?” Valorie’s mother asked as the pair worked together in the castle garden. Valorie had not had the chance to discuss the evening yet with her mother.

Valorie wasn’t sure yet if news of the attack on the balcony had spread, so she had spent the day prior avoiding her mother and father. She didn’t want to give her father any new reason to chastise her. Of course, Valorie knew nothing that happened that night was her fault, but any gossip could be disastrous right now. Valorie was acutely aware of her reputation after ending yet another betrothal.

“I had the best time. Such a joyous occasion for the Doyle clan,” Valorie replied diplomatically.

When neither of her parents sought her out yesterday, either with concern or scorn, she decided to wait and to see if anyone brought it up to her. She had cried out for help, but Aiden was quick to deescalate the situation that night. He dealt with the other laird swiftly and quietly. It was possible no one else heard or knew what had happened.

When she wasn’t worrying about what came next, Valorie was oscillating between seeing flashes of that laird’s cruel face taunting her and then to the strong way Aiden had removed the threat. Both memories kept her heart racing but for very different reasons.

Valorie was struggling to forget the sickly smell of the elder laird as he pinned her

against the railing, but she was equally unable to forget the sight of Aiden's forearm straining against the other laird's throat. Raised to respect strength, the sight was... admirable. Late at night, she chased away the more frightening memories with ones of Aiden.

"Aye. A bairn is always cause for celebration," Valorie's mother said quietly.

Grace Grant had a soft type of strength. At first meeting, Valorie's mother seemed gentle and almost meek, but Grace Grant loved and protected her people just as fiercely as her husband did. The two of them had made Clan MacCrimmon into a feared and respected land.

Valorie's strength was not as quiet, but she admired her mother deeply. When she was young, Valorie could always count on her mother for comfort and advice. As the only child of the laird, she was always a little separate from the other children in the clan. Despite her bubbly personality, Valorie often found herself alone even when in a group of children for lessons or training. She was always just a little bit isolated from the other children.

In moments when the loneliness threatened to overcome Valorie, her mother was always there with a hug and a warm cup of tea. When Valorie was criticized for talking too much and acting too much like a boy, her mother reminded her of all the ways she shone.

Since Valorie didn't reply to her last statement, her mother continued, "I saw ye talkin' with Margaret."

"Aye, she was tellin' me about the lairds her family are pushin' on her. They want her to wed a strong laird as soon as possible," Valorie commented.

Talking with Margaret always made Valorie immensely grateful that Clan

MacCrimmon was as respected as it was. Yes, she was expected to wed a laird, one who she likely didn't love, but at least Valorie had a couple of years as a woman first. Small mercies.

"Mmm, anyone she fancies?" Valorie's mother asked.

Her mother had gotten lucky. Over the years, initial attraction had bloomed into a deep and loving partnership between her parents. They gave Valorie hope, but she still wanted to make the choice for herself.

"Nay, ye ken how they are," Valorie sighed.

"Aye, and what about ye? Any lairds catch your interest?" Valorie didn't respond, not particularly interested in discussing Aiden, but her mother was not swayed, "I saw ye dancin' with one handsome lad."

"Hmm, Kenneth?" Valorie questioned, pretending she didn't know exactly who her mother was asking about. Her mother was accustomed to Valorie's tricks though and merely continued to work in the garden.

It appeared this would be another conversation about her lack of a betrothal. Her mother wanted Valorie to have a choice, but both women were running out of time to be picky.

Sighing Valorie said, "Aye, Laird O'Donnely."

"Mmm."

Valorie rolled her eyes at the lack of response. This was another favorite tactic of her mother. She knew that Valorie would eventually tell her whatever information she sought as long as she was patient. As a child the lack of response drove her crazy, but

now, she counted on her mother's patience. Sometimes, Valorie just needed the space to think through her feelings before speaking.

Unfortunately, Valorie was still unsure how she felt about the laird. She was positive though that she was not looking for another betrothal, regardless of how Aiden made her feel. The way Aiden's forearm muscles tightened as he protected her or the smell of him as he held her close were simply not relevant.

"He was a very skilled dancer," Valorie said tentatively as she continued pruning the Scottish Bluebells in front of her. They were her favorite flower with their delicate lavender-blue blooms. The garden was glorious this year; Valorie loved seeing everything in full bloom.

"Aye, ye made a striking pair," her mother agreed.

That was indisputable. Aiden was striking. But in Valorie's experience, lairds were all the same. She hadn't met one yet that would allow her the independence she so desperately wanted. Valorie wanted a partner not a keeper. There was a world out there to explore, and she planned to see it.

"Aye... Ye ken of Laird O'Donnely?" Valorie was curious to know what her mother thought of Aiden. She truly believed her mother would not let her wed someone dangerous, and Aiden had quite the reputation.

"I do. He's a strong and fair laird from what I've seen. A good man." Interesting. Perhaps her mother knew something that Valorie did not. Or maybe she was just far more optimistic.

"Ye've met him before, then?"

Not looking up from the plants her mother responded, "Aye, briefly." Not a lot of



information to go on.

“People say he’s horrible and cruel,” Valorie prodded.

“Aye, and they say ye’re fickle.”

Valorie snapped back, “So, because I have my own mind, I must wed a beast?” Were her only options old lairds or cruel ones?

“Nay, I simply meant to point out that the opinions of others are not always true,” Valorie’s mother calmly explained.

“Aye, ye’re right, apologies, Mother. But he’s still a laird.”

“And he’s here,” her mother said.

“What!” Valorie exclaimed, looking from her blooms to see a tall figure on horseback approaching the castle. It was hard to tell for sure from this distance, but Valorie recognized the familiar strong body. Aiden was in fact rapidly riding up to the castle.

Valorie and her mother stood, wiping the soil and leaves from their dresses, ready to greet the guest, who was none other than the laird she should probably avoid.

What is he doin’ here? Is he here to inform Faither of the situation from the other night or some other reason?

Valorie watched him approach, fiddling with the fabric of her dress and smoothing out the material. When her mother noticed her fretting, she glanced over at Valorie with a raised eyebrow. Valorie immediately released her dress and forced her hands into a normal position.

Aiden slowed to a stop in front of the women and gracefully dismounted. His hair was windblown from the ride, and it only served to enhance his wild and rugged appearance.

Valorie looked Aiden in the eye with a smile as he strolled towards them. It didn't matter why he was here; she would meet it head on.

"Greetings, lassie," Aiden said to Valorie. He held her eye for several long seconds before turning to her mother with a respectful nod. "Lady MacCrimmon."

"Laird O'Donnely, it's an honor. Please, come inside. Can I ask why ye have come?" Valorie's mother greeted. Valorie was also desperate to know the answer to that question although she attempted to maintain a neutral smile.

"I need to speak with Laird MacCrimmon on some business. We were interrupted the other night." Aiden looked harshly back at Valorie as he said this, seeming to blame her for the interruption. It wasn't Valorie's fault that laird had cornered her!

"Of course, let us show ye inside to Duncan's study."

With that, her mother turned towards the castle, Valorie and Aiden following behind her. Valorie glared quickly at Aiden to her left, but he just smirked, keeping his eyes trained ahead, appearing ever the serious laird.

Valorie's mother led them to the doors of Laird MacCrimmon's study and knocked lightly.

"Aye, what is it, Grace?" Valorie's father called from inside.

With a small smile back to Valorie and Aiden, her mother called out, "Laird O'Donnely is here to see ye, Duncan." Valorie heard fumbling and a crash from

inside as if her father was eagerly rising and making quite a mess while he did. Must he be so obvious? Valorie surely would have made the other laird wait.

Almost immediately the door swung open, and Valorie's father looked around excitedly. When he saw Aiden standing beside Valorie, he smiled and cleared his throat.

"Aye, Laird O'Donnely, come in." With a pleased look at his wife and a chastising one at Valorie, he led Aiden into his chamber and closed the door.

Valorie looked at her mother expectantly. Grace winked and gestured in a 'go ahead motion.' Pleased to have her mother's endorsement, Valorie pressed her ear to the door in an attempt to eavesdrop. She would have done it anyway, but it was nice to not be scolded for it.

Shockingly, Valorie's mother joined her at the door.

"What, I'm curious too!" Grace whispered to her, and Valorie giggled. For too long, Valorie couldn't hear any of what was being said inside the room. She heard the murmurs of talking but couldn't make any of it out.

"Can ye hear anythin'?" Valorie asked quietly.

"Nay," her mother muttered. Shoot. Valorie needed to know what they were talking about; it was almost certainly about her! Aiden had never visited their castle on business before; Valorie surely would have remembered him. Finally, she heard Aiden speaking.

"We dinnae finish our conversation about yer daughter being unwed the other night," Aiden stated.

“What?!” Valorie harshly said, completely forgetting to stay quiet.

\* \* \*

Aiden sat in Laird MacCrimmon’s vast study, swirling a glass of whiskey. Duncan had generously offered it to him upon arrival. It was helping to calm the flash of rage he’d felt upon thinking about Laird Campbell’s hands on Valorie the other night. The reason this conversation had been interrupted at Keira’s was not something Aiden particularly liked to think about.

Aiden was prone to strong emotions around this woman because just as soon as the rage had hit him, it faded into something else entirely, something just as powerful but much more pleasurable. Thinking of those thoughts though was not appropriate for a conversation with Valorie’s father.

The two lairds sat across from each other in the study and briefly discussed clan business before Aiden brought up the real reason for his visit. Valorie.

“We dinnae finish our conversation about yer daughter bein’ unwed the other night,” Aiden said.

“What?!” Aiden heard Valorie’s feminine voice exclaim from the other side of the closed door. Of course, she was listening. Aiden shouldn’t have expected anything less. The thought of her pressed up against the wood had Aiden suppressing a smile.

What was this woman doing to him? He had never had to urge to smile so much around another person. If anything, other people usually inspired additional irritation.

Shaking off that thought, he returned his attention to Valorie’s father, who was pointedly ignoring the interruption from his daughter. Aiden was sure this sort of mischief was quite common with Valorie around.

“Aye, she remains unwed,” Laird MacCrimmon said nervously with a pregnant pause. “Valorie is a bit too... independent for her own good.”

I wouldn't say that, Aiden thought and took a sip of his whiskey and waited for the other laird to continue. Aiden knew Valorie was independent, but he quite liked that about her. Of course, it was what made Valorie perfect for his purposes. Still, he was curious to know what her father would disclose.

“I blame myself,” Laird MacCrimmon said with another lengthy pause, “but Valorie has... ended two betrothals already.”

Oh, I know. Everyone knows.

It was no surprise really, not once you met Valorie. The lass's bubbly personality simply could not withstand the pressure of most lairds. You couldn't bottle up and hide away someone like Valorie. She was meant to see and be seen. But Aiden was not the laird for that either; he had no desire to see or be seen by anyone besides his family. A lass like Valorie would not want to be holed up in his castle with a worried laird watching her every move.

Even more reasons why Valorie would play her part in his scheme perfectly. They were not a good match, and if Valorie didn't already know this, she would realize it shortly.

“I promise ye, I won't let her leave this time,” Aiden vowed, not believing his own words but promising them all the same.

### CHAPTER 4

After her outburst, Valorie did not hear much else of what was discussed inside the room. Her mother had left for the kitchens to prepare some more whiskey for the lairds. Valorie, however, was still straining to listen. Now that she knew for certain the conversation was about her, Valorie was desperate to know what was being decided. Another decision made about her life without her input.

As Valorie thought through all of horrible possibilities, the door that held her weight abruptly swung opened. Without the support of the wood, Valorie stumbled a little, nearly falling into the room.

Before Valorie could truly fall, a strong hand caught her by the arm and helped her straighten. Aiden, of course, stood in the now open doorway. Once again, he was her savior. He looked frustratingly good still — his hair was perfectly mussed, and his face had a slight pink tinge to it from the whiskey.

“Careful, lassie,” Aiden said with an amused look.

“Hmph,” Valorie grunted, smoothing the fabric of her dress haughtily. She was embarrassed to be caught eavesdropping but not willing to admit that to Aiden.

“Hear anythin’ interestin’?” Aiden asked.

Valorie huffed with indignation, “Certainly nae!”

Nothing said in that room was interesting — just two lairds with illusions of grandeur

dictating the life of someone they thought they owned. Still, Valorie had to listen; Aiden and her father were making decisions about her life in that room! Was she meant to just wait around to be called? For the third time, she was left out of the discussion over her betrothal — something that should have concerned just her and her betrothed.

“Lass, will ye come in? We have news that concerns ye,” Aiden said sweeping his arm into the room behind him. Of course, the information was relevant to her now , after the decision had already been made.

Well then. With her shoulders back and not another look at Aiden, Valorie strolled into her father’s study. Aiden had the nerve to chuckle at her as she passed.

“Somethin’ funny, laird?” Valorie asked under her breath.

“Nay, lassie, just somethin’ in me throat.”

Choosing to ignore Aiden now, Valorie walked into the room where she had spent many hours as a child. Her father sat comfortably in his usual corner chair with his own glass of whiskey. Valorie thought of all the days she spent sitting at his feet, learning and playing. He would quiz her on her geography and math. Or if he was working through clan complaints, he would discuss them with her, explaining out loud about how he planned to respond to each one.

“Ye must always remember, lass, everyone in the clan deserves to have their complaints heard,” he would often say to her when she questioned why her father put so much care into each answer.

“Aye, Valorie there ye are. Good,” Valorie’s father addressed her.

“Faither,” Valorie said respectfully in an attempt to gain some scraps of her father’s

favor, favor that he gave so freely to everyone else in the clan.

“Wonderful news, daughter, Laird O’Donnely has asked for yer hand, and I’ve agreed.”

Ye dance with a man one time!

This was Valorie’s nightmare. She had only just ended her latest betrothal. How her father had managed to find another laird to marry her so soon was beyond comprehension.

There must be something wrong with Aiden or his clan that was forcing him to act quickly. Because what about their one dance and the mess on the balcony had brought Aiden here?

Beyond that — would she ever be invited into conversations about her own life? Did no one care to hear what she wanted out of her life? Neither man knew her desires and plans yet they universally decided what her life would look like. Did her father even care about Aiden’s horrid reputation? What if he really was a monster?

Valorie glared between the two grinning men without a word. Let them try and tell her this was cause for celebration, but she would not pretend for their sakes.

“Faither, I will nae...” Valorie started to object, but when she saw her father’s stern face, she paused. It seemed that not everyone in the clan deserved to have their complaints heard, but an idea was forming in her head.

Maybe Valorie needed to try a different tactic. She couldn’t afford to end another betrothal, not with her father’s threat to disown her still fresh in her mind. Aiden might think he wanted Valorie for a wife, but she could certainly change his mind.



“Aiden,” Valorie said sweetly, turning her brightest smile to the young laird, “thank you for considering me as yer wife. But ye are a very powerful laird, and ye must test me to see if I’m worthy of a laird such as ye.” Valorie paused as if considering how to best prove herself to Aiden.

“Perhaps I should make ye a blanket, me laird? Or if that’s not to yer liking, maybe I should weave somethin’ for ye?” Valorie asked. She turned her smiling face to her father; he was watching her out of narrowed eyes. He was already suspicious; she had accepted the betrothal too quickly then. Valorie couldn’t have her father suspecting her next actions.

Aiden shook his head, smirking and replied, “I have heard of Penelope and her suitors, lass. Were ye plannin’ to undo yer work each night as well?”

Penelope was somewhat of an inspiration to Valorie; she had read the Odyssey numerous times, and Penelope was always her favorite. It would have been better if Aiden wasn’t well read, but no matter, Valorie had other ideas.

“Well then, maybe I could come and redecorate your castle? I am quite skilled in decoratin’. Surely, you’d love everythin’ to be... baby blue?” Valorie asked, batting her lashes faux innocently. Maybe she’d make him a matching baby blue léine to wear as a shirt with his kilt. Actually, Valorie would quite like to see him in that color, but that was not the point.

Valorie would be so charming and positive, so sickeningly sweet, that Aiden would beg to send her back to Castle MacCrimmon.

\* \* \*

Aiden was biting his lip harshly in an attempt not to laugh at the lass. Valorie had no choice but to wed him at this point, but she clearly had many layers to her plan to get

rid of him. She was quite cunning. In a battle of wits, no laird would stand a chance against Valorie Grant.

Thankfully, in this instance, Valorie's plan was aligned with Aiden's. It was clear, Valorie already wanted to be rid of him. Their betrothal would last just long enough for the council to move on, and then he would be left to his own devices once more, at least for a while. He would have to play up the abandoned betrothed a little bit, so no one would force another lass on him.

The plan was solid, so what would it hurt to play along with Valorie's games a little? Aiden was deeply curious to see what she would do next. Valorie's attempts at scaring him off were already the most entertaining part of his week.

"Ye ken, ye're right lass. Not just anyone could be the Lady O'Donnely. She would need to be very special indeed. Perhaps a few tests are in order," Aiden announced to the room. He was watching closely for Valorie's response and saw her bristle slightly at the implication.

Aye lassie, let's see ye prove yerself, Aiden thought.

Valorie's father on the other hand looked slightly apprehensive. Laird MacCrimmon would have to agree to his trials, but he was clearly nervous about what might happen. Was he nervous to leave his daughter in the hands of the fearsome Laird O'Donnely, or was he concerned Valorie would not pass his inspection?

Valorie still only looked irritated with a hint of mischief. The lass had plans, all right.

"Laird MacCrimmon, would ye grant me leave to assess Valorie's strengths before we settle?" Aiden asked the older laird, already knowing what his answer would be.

"Aye, I think ye will find she's highly accomplished. I trained her meself," Valorie's

father agreed. Aiden didn't miss the sharp look he gave Valorie, seeming to tell her without words not to embarrass him.

Valorie subtly matched her father's ire. It was simmering below the surface, but Valorie was angry. Aiden knew it was at least partially directed at him, and he couldn't wait for it to burst through. If Valorie was stunning in her joy, he could only imagine what she would be like in her rage.

As soon as her father left the room, Valorie turned to harshly to Aiden and said, "I willnae marry ye, me laird, ye ken that, right?"

Aiden was fighting another smile; Valorie was certainly spirited.

"We'll see, lassie. Ye do owe me. Or have ye forgotten?" Aiden reminded Valorie of the fateful night on balcony. Aiden had no true intention to collect, but Valorie did not need to know that.

"I havenae forgotten, but we'd make a terrible match," Valorie argued vehemently.

At Valorie's declaration, Aiden flashed with anger, feeling desperate to prove the lass wrong.

Not fully understanding his actions, Aiden slowly stalked over to Valorie, never breaking eye contact with her brilliant green eyes. When he stood right before Valorie, his tall frame loomed over her. He brought himself up to this full height and looked down at the lass. Aiden continued to hold her eye until all he could think about was the flecks of gold in them. Ever so slowly he moved his gaze from her eyes down to her lips.

Aiden's gaze seemed to hold Valorie in place, and he watched with interest as she nervously bit her bottom lip. She was still looking right back at him with undisguised

lust in her eyes.

Aiden's lips were hovering right over hers, but they never crossed that inch of space between them. Rather, he simply continued to gaze at the lass. His eyes followed Valorie's tongue as it licked her lips once more. Aiden wanted to follow that path with his thumb, and then if he was so lucky, his own tongue.

“That's nae true. We danced well, dinnae we?” Aiden purred. Valorie's gaze now dropped to his lips as well as if following the sound coming from his mouth. They both held so carefully still, gazing at each other's lips, ripe with anticipation about what was next.

The door to the study suddenly opened, and the pair jumped apart, the moment broken. They were interrupted by a servant coming to clean up. Neither of them had closed that gap and took what they both so desperately wanted.

Now standing several paces away, Aiden stared at Valorie. Before he had arrived this morning, he believed that he must have over-exaggerated Valorie's beauty in his mind. With all of the emotions from the other night, he decided that he was not remembering her clearly. Between the whiskey and the adrenaline, surely some of her appeal was fabricated. But staring at her now, with pink cheeks and her hair unbound, Aiden knew that none of it was an exaggeration.

Valorie was equally as stunning in her day clothes as she had been in her breathtaking dress at the cèilidh. But today, the bright smile that she had worn while she danced throughout the room was replaced by wide eyes and heavy breathing.

If the servant hadn't interrupted them, what would have happened? Aiden played scenarios in his mind, thinking of the way Valorie's plump lips had looked as she bit and licked at them. He should be the only one to ever bite that lip.

The servant quickly gathered up the whiskey glasses and was gone again. Before Aiden could attempt to pick up where they left off, he saw Valorie's expression shutter, the moment truly over. She now wore a sharp mask.

Without a word about what had transpired, Aiden led Valorie out of her father's study, through the great hall, and back outside. Somehow, he still needed to conduct his little assessment, but all he could think of were Valorie's lips.

Exiting the castle, Aiden got a moment's reprieve from thoughts of Valorie to admire the day. Summertime had created the perfect walking weather, and he led the two of them to the gardens where he had admired Valorie, just this morning.

As they walked, Aiden was still mulling over options for his little trials, especially with their near kiss muddling his mind. Aiden glanced over at Valorie and saw a harsh frown marring her face. He wanted to bring back her passion, and if he couldn't do that through lust, maybe he could have her anger again. He decided to have a little fun taunting the lass with his assessment.

"Aye, so, the Lady O'Donnely would need to be clever and kind, brave and loyal, strong but sweet," Aiden paused before adding, "Bonnie, of course."

With that, Aiden slowed his walk and turned to face Valorie. He dragged his eyes over her body in a slow and exaggerated perusal, staring heatedly at her from head to toe, eyeing her tall form and generous curves with clear interest. What had started as a taunt was quickly turning real for Aiden with the memory from the study so fresh in his mind.

Aiden watched as Valorie blushed furiously under his careful inspection, her breath coming in a little faster. She too was clearly still impacted. When he was looking at her face once more, Aiden winked and said, "Aye, nay further testin' needed there, lassie."

“Hmph, and how do ye propose we assess the other characteristics ye mentioned?” Valorie asked breathily. She was putting in a valiant effort to appear unaffected, but Aiden could see the way his inspection was causing her body to react. He only hoped Valorie couldn’t see the way he was affected, just being in her presence.

“I have some ideas,” Aiden smirked.

\* \* \*

“How would ye handle a disagreement between councilors over clan policy?” Aiden asked out of the blue as they passed the bed of Scottish Bluebells Valorie had pruned earlier today.

“Would I need to?” Valorie questioned, surprised by the turn in Aiden’s assessment. Aiden’s visual inspection was a lot more like what she was expecting. What she was not expecting, however, was the way she reacted to his gaze and their near kiss in the study. Everywhere his eyes touched felt singed. Valorie needed to get her reactions under control, and whatever this was seemed like the perfect distraction.

“Aye, if I was out fightin’ or otherwise engaged. Or maybe I’ll just be horribly lazy in my old age,” Aiden said in answer.

Despite the jest, Valorie responded seriously, “Would ye nay just place one of yer councilors in charge?”

Aiden paused, seeming to debate his answer, and Valorie found herself eagerly awaiting his response.

“Nay, I would nae choose a councilor — nae if I had a wife I could count on,” Aiden said finally.

“Hmm,” Valorie replied, fairly shocked at Aiden’s response.

“So, how would ye handle that, lass?”

“I suppose I would hear arguments from both councilors. Then I would ask for input from the rest of the council. It would be best if there was a clear consensus among the other members so as not to put the full blame for the decision on me shoulders. I know how dangerous a jilted councilor can be.”

“Aye, very true there, lassie,” Aiden agreed.

As they strolled side by side throughout the grounds, Aiden continued to test Valorie with various clan scenarios. His idea turned out to be a quiz of sorts, and her answers to these questions would apparently allow Aiden to determine whether Valorie would make a worthy wife to a laird.

Valorie was shocked to find that Aiden’s questions were not at all what she was expecting. When they first reached the gardens earlier, she thought he might be inspecting her blooms since he saw her there that morning. But no, not a single question was about gardening, planning a feast, or running the castle.

Despite abhorring the whole idea of wedding a laird, Valorie was invested in this assessment. She wanted to show that she was just as capable as any laird, if not more so. Valorie would prove to Aiden that she did possess all the traits he listed. Especially now that the test might actually challenge her a bit.

Throughout their walk, Aiden asked Valorie questions about clan politics, battle strategy, and negotiations with other clans. But even more surprising than the topics were Aiden’s reactions. He appeared to be listening intently to all of her answers, nodding along and interjecting thoughtful clarifying questions.

Not once did Aiden immediately disregard one of Valorie's ideas or responses. He pushed her to consider each angle of her hypothetical plans but never laughed at her or her suggestions. He actually seemed curious about her ideas and numerous times praised her ingenuity.

Was it possible that someone else was searching for the same thing that Valorie was — a true partnership?



### CHAPTER 5

“Say one of yer people is unable to pay their tithe this year — what would ye do?” Aiden asked as he walked beside Valorie. He felt the strongest urge to reach out and take her hand in his own, but he refrained. Attempting to remain cold around Valorie was testing the limits of Aiden’s willpower.

Without missing a beat, Valorie responded, “I would waive it.” So would Aiden.

“If you waive the tithe for one, you might have to for everyone.” Aiden countered, despite the fact that he routinely exempted people from having to pay.

“I would hope that me people ken me well enough to ken that I wouldn’t impose a tithe that we didn’t all need to thrive. And if everyone requested an exemption, we would all suffer. But ye aren’t running a clan right if we can’t survive without one person’s tithe for a year,” Valorie elaborated.

Searching for any flaw, Aiden continued to push and asked, “Aye, and if the council tells ye that ye do need that money?”

“I’m sure I could work with the councilors to determine where we could make it up. For one, I ken that the castle could probably go light on luxuries for a while,” Valorie said with finality. Her answer was very similar to Aiden’s own plan that he enacted just last year. He did not need extravagance living alone, and his people all benefitted from his sacrifice.

Another strong answer from Valorie then. Aiden’s little scenarios were having the

unfortunate side effect of endearing him further to Valorie. She was turning out to be incredibly capable. Valorie's responses to his questions were thoughtful and clever. Often, she acted in a way he would never have considered on his own, and on major issues, they were frequently aligned.

Valorie seemed to complement his strengths perfectly. Where he was cold and serious, she was light and joyful. She approached conflicts and situations with grace and kindness. Aiden knew with certainty that his people would love her. She would bring a warmth to his lands that Aiden just didn't possess.

While Aiden was distracted with thoughts of her, Valorie's foot caught on a raised root on the path. Before he could reach out and stop her fall, Valorie tumbled to the ground, landing harshly on her hands and knees.

"Valorie, are ye all right?" Aiden shouted, rushing to help Valorie up off the grass. How had he missed her fall? He should have been paying better attention to the lass and not daydreaming about her.

"Oof, I'm fine, me laird; just a few scrapes," Valorie grunted as she started to right herself. Aiden was having none of that though and reached down to grab Valorie's arm; the least he could do was help her up. Firmly but gently, Aiden brought Valorie back to standing. That was when he noticed her hands.

"Nay, yer not fine! Ye need to see a healer lass; yer bleedin'!" Aiden shouted at Valorie again, looking at the scratches all over her hands. She probably had similar scrapes on her knees as well! Valorie looked down at her hands, seeming surprised to find the cuts covering them.

"Is me laird worried about me?" Valorie taunted. Aiden continued glancing on in concern, not in any mood to joke about it. The lass was hurt under his care.

Valorie turned serious and assured, “I’m fine Aiden, really. It’s just a few scrapes, nothin’ serious. I’ll just clean them off in the river. I had much worse growin’ up.”

“That does not make me feel better, lass,” Aiden said, still hesitant to drop it. He wanted Valorie to at least get some bandages. How did lairds live with this constant worrying? If Valorie was his wife, he’d need to be watchful all the time. Aiden didn’t think he could manage it.

Aiden watched as Valorie made her way to the riverbed and carefully ran her hands through the flowing water to clean off the dirt and blood.

“Yer knees too, lass!” Aiden commanded.

Valorie laughed and taunted back, “Are ye tryin’ to see me legs, me laird?”

“Just clean them off lass, I’ll turn around if I must.” Before she could deny him again Aiden turned to face away from Valorie. He didn’t want to give her any reason not to at least clean those scrapes. “I’m not hearing a lot of splashing, lass! Are ye cleanin’ everythin’ well?” Aiden shouted over his shoulder.

“Aye, Aiden really, I’m fine. Washed everythin’ off — good as new,” Valorie said from right behind him. Turning back around Aiden began a careful inspection of the lass. This was nothing like his heated perusal from before; Aiden was looking for any signs of injury.

“Really, Aiden, I’m fine — continue with yer assessment,” Valorie demanded sternly.

Not truly paying attention, Aiden began his line of questioning again. He asked Valorie something about a battle plan; he couldn’t be sure because all he could see was her red and battered hands.

Aiden needed to stick to the plan. Despite her many strengths, Valorie could never be his wife. Sure, she seemed more competent than most, but so was Aiden, and look at what happened to him.

Aiden was far too confident as a young lad; he was so sure of himself and his ability that he strolled through the world without a care. That naïve confidence had given his captor, Myles, the opportunity to steal him away. Ten years Aiden lived as a prisoner, at least partially because of his foolishness. Could he have somehow avoided the ten years of torture with just a little more concern? Aiden would never know.

If it could happen to Aiden, it could happen to anyone. Besides, there were always accidents. Which meant he would spend his life worrying. Aiden would not have a moment of peace or rest if he cared for someone so deeply as to wed them. Living each day, knowing that at any moment his love could be stolen from him would be unbearable. Look at what had already happened. The lass was assaulted one night and bleeding the next.

Aiden was already failing at protecting the lass. The simple truth was that Aiden did not trust anyone. Not his councilors, not his clan members, not a woman he just met, and certainly not himself.

Valorie was in the middle of another clever answer, but Aiden needed to regain control of the day because he sensed it slipping away from him with every brilliant word out of Valorie's mouth. He was either enraptured by her or fretting over her, and neither were part of his plan.

"Very well, let's move on," Aiden cut in abruptly. He had heard enough.

\* \* \*

Valorie did not understand this laird. One minute, he was listening to each word she

had to say or fretting about a minor injury like a nursemaid. Then the next, he rudely cut off what was likely to be her best answer yet.

Throughout the series of scenarios from Aiden, Valorie had begun to imagine what life would be like as the Lady O'Donnely. Consulting with Aiden on clan issues, standing before the counsel in his place, continuing her riding — it all seemed too good to be true. And in a single moment, she learned that it was.

Aiden's abrupt interruption only proved to show that he was feigning interest in Valorie's responses. Honestly, what laird would actually give up some of his power to his wife? Not one that Valorie had ever met.

Valorie would do well to remember that while Aiden seemed to be different from other lairds at times, he was likely raised on the same ideals. A wife's place was not by the laird's side but at his feet or in his kitchens.

Thankfully, Valorie was saved from having to remain conflicted in Aiden's presence. Skye, one of the castle's servants, approached them swiftly on the walking path.

With a giggle in Aiden's direction, the young woman announced, "Miss, the Lady MacCrimmon asked me to fetch you both for some lunch."

Fighting to roll her eyes at Skye's reaction, Valorie responded, "Aye thank ye, Skye. Tell me maither, we'll be along shortly."

As quickly as she approached, the servant turned around and made for the castle. Valorie was sure that everyone would hear all about the Laird O'Donnely's eligibility as soon as Skye returned.

"Shall we?" Aiden asked, gesturing for Valorie to lead the way. No longer interested in walking beside him, Valorie strode ahead for the doors to the main hall. Lunch

would be the perfect time to get her thoughts sorted.

Back inside the castle, there was a flurry of activity. The few servants they had were moving quickly around the castle, chattering excitedly to each other. Valorie didn't see her parents anywhere, but she left Aiden standing in the great hall to see what all the fuss was about. Valorie found their head servant, Lorna, in the kitchens. She was a portly older woman, who had been with them all of Valorie's life.

"Valorie, there ye are! Congratulations!" Lorna said as she mixed up something in large bowl.

"What do ye mean?" Valorie asked.

"Oh — we heard ye were to be wed! Yer father came to tell us the good news. And Skye saw the lad earlier and told us all about how tall and handsome he is." Skye moved very fast.

"Hmph," Valorie responded noncommittally.

"Is it true, child? Yer finally gettin' married?" Lorna asked, the excitement evident in her raspy voice.

"Laird O'Donnely asked for my hand..." Valorie said warily. That part was true, and it was probably best not to inform anyone of the multiple plans she had in place to get out of it. She hated the lie of omission though.

"Oh, how wonderful, Valorie!"

When Valorie didn't respond, Lorna continued, "Ye ken that I have friends in castles all throughout the Highlands, aye?"

“Aye, I ken, Lorna.” The woman had worked in half the castles over her long life and had friends or former lovers in the other half. She was something of an institution around here.

“That laird is a good one, I tell ye. That’s why we are all so excited for ye. He’s not like the other two.”

Respect for those who served beneath them was the mark of a good man in Valorie’s opinion. For Lorna to say this about Aiden was a ringing endorsement indeed. As one of the oldest clan members, Lorna was undoubtedly a good judge of character. None of the servants had congratulated her on either of her previous betrothals. Kenneth had been kind, too, but the servants likely knew that his heart lay elsewhere.

“Aye, that’s good to hear,” Valorie said, still not completely convinced of Aiden’s merits.

“Och, we’ve heard all about his reputation too, of course, but the rough edges are just that... edges. He’s got a soft center child; I’m sure of it.”

Valorie just nodded. This was the second time she had heard that maybe Aiden was more than he appeared. Was it possible that Aiden was really just as misunderstood as she was? Was the cruel and terrifying laird simply an act?

Lorna waved Valorie off with a towel and said, “I need to get back to work, and ye need to go see that laird.”

“Aye, Lorna.” Lorna was fierce with that towel, and Valorie had no desire to be whacked with it.

\* \* \*

Aiden stood in the great hall of Castle MacCrimmon and waited for Valorie to return. As the servants bustled about the castle, Aiden caught snippets of their conversations.

“He’s a real tall lad,” Aiden heard one say, sounding impressed.

Another voice responded, “Aye, nice and strong too.”

“Good for our girl, Valorie,” a third voice chimed in.

“Aye, I agree.”

So, Aiden had the servants’ approval then. That was never a bad thing. Servants had a tendency to talk, and it was very possible his own servants were to blame for spreading his virtues.

Aiden strived to make his castle and clan good for all because he knew the power that he had as laird was only his because he had his people’s blessing. Maybe people in other clans were starting to hear about it, and Aiden could really make a difference.

Still waiting for Valorie to return and bring him to the dining room, Aiden admired the great hall. Clan MacCrimmon was certainly doing well for themselves by the look of things.

Instead of Valorie, it was Lady MacCrimmon who found Aiden in the hall.

“Oh, Laird O’Donnely, there ye are — come to the dining room. Valorie will be along shortly I’m sure,” Valorie’s mother said. Now that he was looking closer, Aiden could see features of Grace Grant in her daughter. Valorie had her mother’s eyes, but where Valorie’s warm green eyes sparked with mischief, Lady MacCrimmon’s were homey and kind.



“Thank ye,” Aiden said kindly. He had a feeling that Valorie’s mother would be a little harder to win over than either the servants or the Laird MacCrimmon.

“Ye have beautiful gardens,” Aiden complimented.

“Thank ye, laird.”

“Och, Aiden is fine, Lady MacCrimmon.”

“Aye, it’s Grace then,” Valorie’s mother insisted on the informal as well. Before they entered the dining room. Grace stopped, blocking the door, and turned to face Aiden.

“I’ve heard of ye, ye ken?”

“Aye,” Aiden said cautiously, concerned about the direction this conversation seemed to be headed.

“I ken of yer reputation,” Grace paused, and Aiden began to sweat, “but I also ken yer history.” Aiden was sweating in earnest now. “Yer faither was a good friend when we were younger, and I heard about what happened before he passed,” Valorie’s mother continued.

Aiden was not ashamed of his past, but he hated it when someone he barely knew was aware of his most traumatic experiences. He felt oddly exposed standing before Lady MacCrimmon.

How much did she know? Did Valorie know? And if she did, why hadn’t she said anything?

“Valorie doesn’t know; that’s yer story to tell. I’m sorry to even bring it up, lad. But I want ye to ken, I ken ye’re a good man and a fair laird. I’ve seen it meself. And I owe

it to yer faither to tell ye, I will be here for ye in any capacity I can. Be that as a mother-in-law, an ally, or a friend.”

Aiden’s emotions flopped again. Having spent most of his life alone, Aiden didn’t know how to respond to the generosity being offered to him. He barely knew this woman, and she was offering her full support. He suspected Grace Grant was a far better person than he.

“That being said, lad, that’s me daughter in there, and I won’t see her harmed. Physically or otherwise.” Aiden had no desire to see harm come to Valorie either, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t be hurt. That very thought was what held Aiden back from most relationships these days. Friends, family, and lovers could all be irreparably harmed, and you couldn’t always stop it.

Valorie’s mother continued to stare Aiden down though, and he knew he needed to respond to her thinly veiled threat. He wasn’t sure what Grace planned to do if Valorie was harmed, but he was fairly certain he didn’t want to find out.

“Aye Grace, ye have me word, I’ll protect her.” To the best of me ability, Aiden added in his mind.

“Hmm, see that ye do. Now about these tests of yers,” Grace said.

“Aye, just a wee bit of fun. I ken that Valorie is more than worthy,” Aiden explained.

“Aye of course ye do, ye wouldn’t be standing here if ye didn’t. Nae, it’s not that — I have ideas is all,” Grace said with a wink. “Ye should try archery next.”

With that final parting comment, Grace finally turned to enter the dining room. Aiden was still reeling from the emotional turmoil that conversation had wrought when he followed Grace inside. Laird MacCrimmon and Valorie were already seated. Both

smirked at the likely shocked face Aiden wore.

“Did ye have a nice chat?” Valorie taunted with laughter.

Thankfully Valorie’s mother responded, “Aye very nice and informative.” Aiden wasn’t sure “nice” was the word he would use, but he nodded along anyway.

Laird MacCrimmon laughed good naturedly at his wife and addressed Aiden, “Apologies lad, me wife can be a tough lass.”

“Aye, she is certainly something.” Aiden replied.

Valorie’s father stared at his wife with admiration and said, “That she is.”

The love and care between Valorie’s parents were so evident in that moment that Aiden wanted to look away. He felt like he was intruding on something private and sacred just by being in the same room as them. With his embarrassment, Aiden also felt a twinge of jealousy. That kind of love would never be in store for him.

### CHAPTER 6

After a brief lunch with Valorie's parents, she and Aiden headed back outside to continue his testing. Without prompting, Aiden led them directly to the archery targets that Valorie's father had set up years ago for her training and enjoyment. Valorie looked longingly at the set-up; it had been far too long since she had gotten to practice here. Too many laird's hearts to break and all.

"Do ye ken how to shoot?" Aiden asked her shortly while she still gazed at the bows.

What does he have to be upset about? He is not the one being forced into a betrothal he does not want, Valorie thought bitterly. But Aiden's mood had soured during lunch, and he was back to the surly man she first met.

Valorie wanted to snap back at him, but she had plans to enact. She could make this test a little more interesting if she was strategic.

"Aye, I ken how, but I'm not a very good shot," Valorie simpered. She hated playing this role, but she needed to think long-term. It would be worth it in the end.

"Good, let's see it then," was Aiden's curt reply.

Be careful what ye wish for, me laird.

Valorie walked over to where the bow and arrows were lined up and picked up her favorite of the weapons. Its weight was a familiar comfort in her hands, but she pretended to pick up the first bow she saw.

“What should I try and aim for, me laird?” Valorie asked, sweetly. As if she wouldn’t hit wherever she aimed.

“Let’s make it simple and say the bullseye,” Aiden suggested.

Easy. Valorie thought. Despite his confidence in her from before, Aiden did not seem to expect much of her with a weapon. He stood off to the side, looking bored already. Archery was his idea! Regardless, Aiden would regret underestimating her.

Valorie lined up her shot, her right arm pulling the string taut while her left commanded the bow. Valorie looked down the line that the arrow was making and aimed direct to the center of the target. When she was certain she was set up perfectly, she adjusted the bow ever so slightly to aim to the right. The shot would still be close enough to be considered good but not perfect.

Valorie let the arrow fly towards the target. She watched in what she hoped looked like nervous anticipation. In reality, Valorie knew exactly where that arrow was headed. Her lonely childhood left Valorie a lot of time to practice.

The arrow unsurprisingly landed exactly where she aimed, slightly to the right of center but still a decent shot. Now came her acting performance.

Valorie turned quickly to Aiden when the arrow landed. She had a bright, surprised smile on her face and jumped excitedly a little to really be convincing.

“Did ye see that?” Valorie asked Aiden with faux enthusiasm.

“Aye, lass, that was a pretty good shot. Better than some of me men even,” Aiden answered earnestly.

Hmm maybe I need to aim even further off the center.

The goal here was not to impress Aiden too much at first. Valorie would need to adjust the shot to be a little worse; Aiden was clearly too easily impressed.

“Thank ye, lucky shot probably. I never get that close,” Valorie replied demurely.

“Shoot another one then, and we should get a true representation. This a test after all,” Aiden ordered from his spot off to the side. He stood with his arms crossed tightly over his chest and a dull look on his face.

It’s about to get very interesting, me laird, Valorie thought before she responded out loud to Aiden’s direction.

“Of course, me laird,” Valorie said, turning back towards the arrows with a victorious smile. She’d shoot another, maybe two that were even further off the mark, before she made her next move.

Valorie aimed her shot again, dead center, but this time she shifted her aim off of the bullseye to the left. She even wobbled her arm a little as if she could barely pull back the weight of the string. Ridiculous. Again, the arrow flew direct to where she’d aimed.

“It’s okay lass, ye can’t be good at everythin’,” Aiden reassured, looking at the arrow embedded off to the left. Valorie simmered with the urge to prove him wrong, but she would have to be patient — it was almost time.

“Aye, archery was never me best skill,” Valorie conceded. This was true, she was far better with a sword anyway. Maybe she’d suggest a sword fight next, and then she’d really get to have some fun.

“Let’s see one more,” Aiden commanded in his deep voice.

Valorie simpered, “As ye wish, me laird.”

On her third shot, Valorie aimed towards the center of the target but above the bullseye. She didn’t want to hit the exact same spot again and give up her game so close to the end.

Putting on a defeated mask, Valorie turned to Aiden and said, “I guess ye were right.”

“Archery takes a long time to master, lass. I’ve been shootin’ for years.”

Valore brightened, sincerely this time, with a new idea. She walked over to where Aiden stood off to the side and laid her hand on his arm. In her most begging voice, Valorie asked, “Perhaps ye could show me then?”

“Aye, of course lass,” Aiden easily agreed. Perfect. This was all too easy.

Valorie watched as Aiden walked over to the remaining bows that were gathered and tested the weight of each. When he found one that suited him, Aiden stood at the makeshift line that they had set and began to aim his shot.

“It’s all about yer focus lass; ye need to let all the distractions around ye fade away and focus only on yer target,” Aiden instructed, not letting his eyes stray from the mark in front of him.

Valorie eagerly nodded along like this was brand new information and not something she learned as a child. She was nodding like a fool before she realized he wasn’t even looking. With no need to pretend, Valorie dropped the eager smile and sized up Aiden’s movements closely.

Begrudgingly she admitted to herself that Aiden seemed to know what he was doing. He had good form, and his strong arms held perfectly still with the weight of the

string. While Aiden's focus was fully on the target in front of him, Valorie's was on him. He looked good with a weapon. She could just imagine him, sitting atop his horse, leading his clan into battle. Maybe Aiden was right, maybe her focus today was compromised.

"Once yer fully focused and aimed, ye just need to keep control on the bow and let it fly," Aiden instructed as he did just that. Unfortunately for Valorie, he shot a nearly perfect bullseye. Placing the bow on the ground, he turned to her and continued "and that's how it's done, lassie."

"Aye, me laird that was very impressive," Valorie cooed, doing her best impression of other ladies she had seen fawn over stuffy lairds. Although, if she was being completely honest with herself, Aiden was impressive. Visually at least. Any laird worth his clan should be able to shoot straight, but Aiden was certainly impressive to look at.

Out on the sunny lawn today, Aiden's blonde hair was highlighted with streaks of copper and gold, and the dusting of grey around his temples was shining silver. His hair just begged Valorie to run her hands through it. And his arms! The way his arms tensed with his shot and his general mastery over the bow were sights that she'd remember for days. But Valorie needed to focus on the task at hand. The future of her life was too important to risk for good hair and nice arms.

"Could ye show me again, me laird?" Valorie cooed, continuing her practiced voice.

"Aye, I'd be happy to; the Lady O'Donnely should ken how to shoot straight." With that Aiden stepped up to their starting point and continued his instruction, "See the shape me arm makes, lass? Ye want to make sure you hold yer elbow up just so and keep it there. It takes a little bit of strength, but ye could probably manage it."

This laird is testing me patience. Valorie thought. She had been holding the tension of



the string since she was a child.

Aiden let another perfect shot fly, the arrow embedding itself directly at its target. Valorie had seen enough. She did not want to watch Aiden show-off any further; it was her turn.

“I think I’ve got it now, me laird; what do ye think about a little competition?”

\* \* \*

“Aye, lass what did ye have in mind?”

Aiden could barely contain his glee at this point. The lass was playing him wonderfully. He had noticed her trickery from her first shot. Aiden was watching her closely, as he often did, and he saw her line up the bow with perfect precision and then adjust, just slightly off the center.

Valorie’s acting skills were even better than her archery, though. Aiden could only barely hear the falseness in her voice when she complimented his skills. And he knew the excitement and humility after the first shot was rehearsed but only because this lass was not humble. She knew her worth, and she told you. But she was certainly convincing when she played the part. Well, two could play that game. Aiden was all too happy to go along with her little con.

“Hmm,” Valorie paused seeming to consider her bargain before continuing, “If me shots are closer, ye tell me faither ye couldnae stand to have a wife who was a better shot than ye. If yer shots are closer, we continue yer tests.”

“That hardly seems fair lass, I’m quite the experienced shot as ye’ve seen.” Aiden was loving this. Each time he made a disparaging comment, he watched Valorie try admirably to tamp down her irritation at him. Valorie was not a lass that liked to lose,

and she appeared eager to show what she could really do. And Aiden couldn't wait to see it.

"It's just a little fun, me laird. What do ye have to lose?" The fierceness in her voice was barely veiled at this point. The real Valorie was breaking through the mask. As amusing as her performance had been, Aiden liked the witty and honest Valorie, not the simpering act that she was putting on. His past had made Aiden a little desperate for truth, and he wanted Valorie to show him her truest self.

"Aye, all right then. Ye shoot first." Valorie paused at this, her eyes briefly widening. Aiden knew he was messing with her plans, but he maintained a straight, unaffected face as he looked at her.

Valorie quickly recovered and responded weakly, "Nae I insist me laird, I want to watch ye a few more times, plus my hands are a wee bit torn up still from me fall, and I think I need to rest a bit longer. Like ye said it takes a lot of strength to shoot."

The wee liar!

Valorie's commitment to subterfuge was impressive and a little frightening.

"Mmm of course." Aiden was fully focused on keeping the laughter out of his voice now.

Once again, stepping up to the line, Aiden lined his shots up. Valorie didn't need the earlier instruction from him, but the chance to test out the weight of the bow was definitely a coup. His first shot has been slightly off the mark, and that just wouldn't do when competing with this lass. He'd need to be perfect.

Aiden looked directly down the line of his shot and fired off a sharp bullseye. Quickly loading another arrow, Aiden shot again. The arrow landed directly beside

the first one. With his last arrow set up, Aiden turned to Valorie and winked at the exact moment he let the arrow fly.

When the third arrow split the one before it, Aiden looked to Valorie with a teasing grin and one eyebrow raised.

“Yer turn, lass,” Aiden baited.

Valorie, apparently ready to meet his challenge, picked up her bow and with expert precision and speed, fired two shots in quick succession, direct to the center bullseye. Just like Aiden had, Valorie turned to him as she fired her final shot, but instead of winking, Valorie just smiled triumphantly. She was equally as confident that her arrow would fly right where she aimed it.

Aiden stared back at Valorie as her final shot thudded heavily into the target. All three arrows seemed to be taking up the same spot on the canvas; it was a wonder they all stuck. But Aiden didn’t react. He just smirked at Valorie. No shock or awe at her supposed sudden improvement.

“Ye knew then?” Valorie said — her voice was no longer demure, and that familiar rage bubbled under the surface.

Aiden laughed and told her, “Aye lassie, I knew.”

“For how long?” Valorie demanded.

“Since yer first shot,” Aiden admitted. Valorie’s acting skills were impressive, but they were no match for Aiden’s attention on her. The way he watched her, Aiden didn’t think anything would get by him.

“Hmph,” Valorie huffed, annoyed that Aiden had foiled her scheme, “Very well, a

tie,” she said.

“Aye a tie. With no clear winner, it only seems fair to have a final test,” Aiden proposed. His main motivation at this point was just extending the day. For once, Aiden didn’t want to return home to his empty castle. His day out with Valorie was far more entertaining than anything he had at home.

“As ye wish,” Valorie drawled with a mocking bow.

“How about a race with horses? Yer father tells me yer quite the accomplished rider,” Aiden said.

“I certainly am; ye sure ye want to race?” Valorie questioned.

“Aye, I’m sure lass. In fact, how about another wager?”

Scoffing Valorie asked, “If yer that confident — fine, what did ye have in mind?

“Aye, I am that confident lassie. If ye win, ye prove yerself worthy of bein’ me wife. If I win, I have to keep lookin’.”

“Hmm, yer on, me laird,” Valorie nodded and accepted Aiden’s final game with a sly smile. Aiden was positive she had another scheme planned.

### CHAPTER 7

Frustrated with the results of the archery competition, Valorie stomped towards the castle to ask the servants to prepare the horses for the final challenge.

Aiden was left standing in the gardens; he could entertain himself after his stunt out on the lawn. Valorie couldn't believe that Aiden had let her continue her act for so long; he should have told her the ruse was up. Or he could have at least had the decency not to call her on it — some gentleman he was.

Did Aiden have to be so insufferable? Every time he caught her in a scheme or some mischief, he was ridiculously smug. She would have been impressed by his attention if it weren't so irritating!

Feeling like a fool, Valorie looked at Aiden scornfully when she returned from inside. He just chuckled. Aiden seemed to think she was someone to laugh at and not someone who deserved his respect. All day he appeared to mock her — probably thinking she was some silly lass.

Well, Valorie would show Aiden what this silly lass could do on a horse.

With several paces between them, Valorie glared disdainfully at Aiden, who was still smiling. Valorie was not usually this quick to anger, but what could possibly be so funny? Somehow their roles had reversed; it was now Valorie who wore a sharp frown and Aiden who smiled brilliantly.

“Anythin’ ye want to say, me laird?” Like why you’re smiling all the time now

maybe!

“Nay lass, just a lovely day is all.” Aiden grinned wider.

Grinding her teeth in frustration, Valorie took a step away from Aiden. This day had not gone at all to plan. The horse race was her last chance to end this betrothal today. All she had to do was lose, and Aiden could go on and find someone more worthy of being his wife.

If only Valorie didn't abhor the idea of losing to Aiden. His taunts and jests were bringing out Valorie's most competitive side, and she wanted to win. Badly. She had only seen Aiden ride as he approached this morning, and he definitely wasn't at racing speed. But Valorie's horse was strong, and she was an accomplished rider. She could win if she wanted to.

Did she want to, though? Obviously not logically, but Valorie still glared at Aiden across the grass. She was not thinking logically. If he hadn't been so smug about archery, maybe she could stomach losing to him now, but she strongly felt that she needed to prove Aiden wrong. Maybe there was a way she could do both.

“Yer horses are ready!” Skye announced brightly, breaking the tension between Valorie and Aiden, and bringing the two horses towards them.

“Aye, thank ye, Skye,” Valorie responded. “We'll bring them back to the stables when we're done.” With a respectful nod to Valorie and a long look at Aiden, Skye headed back in the direction of the castle.

It was time. Valorie made her way to her horse and stroked its mane lovingly a few times before skillfully climbing on. She would need to shake off the whiplash of emotions she'd had so far today if she wanted to beat Aiden.

There were moments today where all Valorie could think about was Aiden — Aiden's powerful gait, his lean but toned arms, his sharp mind, the smirk he wore when Valorie's latest scheme was revealed. And when she wasn't longing for him, she was raging at him. No matter what, Valorie was consumed by thoughts of Aiden.

What was she doing? She was not usually the lass so caught up over a man. The more accurate question was, what was Aiden doing to her?

"Come on, me laird, or are ye giving up so soon?" Valorie taunted as Aiden still stood on the ground beside his stallion. In an equally graceful maneuver, Valorie watched as Aiden got up on his horse and raised one eyebrow at her. Must he be so athletic? Why couldn't he have been weak and horrid looking? It would have been much easier to stick to the plan then.

"Nay, just thought ye might need a head start," Aiden quipped back.

Valorie laughed darkly and looked haughtily back at him, "I daenae need any advantage to beat ye."

"Hmm, I guess we'll see. Where to?" Aiden asked.

"To the waterfall. We'll ride straight through the fields here and into the forest beyond, just there. Once we're in the woods, follow the stream until ye reach the clearing and the waterfall. Or ye ken, just stay behind me and I'll lead ye right there," Valorie ended her explanation with a wink.

"I think I'll need the directions when I pass ye, lassie."

"We'll see. I hope ye daenae have any issues with losing to a lass."

"I've never had any issues being behind one, certainly," Aiden replied with a wink.

Damn that wink.

\* \* \*

With a loaded look at each other, they were off.

Aiden's horse was a powerful steed that had served him faithfully ever since he re-entered society, both in battle and otherwise, and he loved the feeling of a ride. But the joy of a ride was nothing compared to what he'd experienced today spending time with Valorie.

Aiden was smiling like a fool all afternoon. Everything Valorie did was amusing to him. Her cute little angry huffs and stomps, her elaborate plots, the taunting — it was like following the sun around. Aiden had no choice but to be warmed.

With his thoughts circling around Valorie, Aiden was late to realize that Valorie was pulling away. He knew he needed Valorie to win for his plan, but he was hoping he could at least make it difficult for her!

It became obvious very quickly that wouldn't be an option. While Aiden had been lost in thoughts of his day with Valorie, she was flying away from him. Mere minutes into the race, and Aiden was already struggling to keep up. Valorie and her horse were of one mind as they raced ahead of him. Human and beast joined together in an impressive display of power.

Even on his best day, pushing his horse to its limits, Aiden didn't think he could catch Valorie. But what he had said to her was certainly true, he had no qualms riding behind her and watching. Watching Valorie was becoming one of Aiden's favorite past-times.

Valorie's wild wavy hair was flying back with the wind as her powerful legs



commanded her horse. She bobbed up and down in rhythm with the animal as they traversed through the woods. The horse was perfectly in tune with Valorie's wishes and jumped roots and logs better than he'd ever seen. She was flying.

Aiden could just imagine the brilliant smile that Valorie often wore when she was caught up in the moment. Like that night on the dance floor, Valorie was free as she rode her horse. Freer than he could ever imagine himself being. Aiden didn't have the luxury to let go so fully, but it seemed Valorie never had any problems living in the moment and soaking in everything that life had to offer. If he wasn't careful, it would become one of Aiden's favorite things about her.

As sudden as she took off, Valorie slowed to a canter. Aiden finally saw that dazzling smile again when she turned to face him. She loved to ride as much as he did. With a teasing wink, Valorie led her horse behind Aiden and began circling him playfully.

The wee minx is playing me again!

Aiden should have known that Valorie wouldn't just race to the waterfall. What was a win in the race was a loss to Valorie in her grand scheme to be rid of him. A fact, he should have considered when he made his bargain.

With Valorie riding around him, Aiden slowed his horse as well, and the pair settled into a relaxing pace, riding side by side.

"Ye were riding a bit slow me laird, so I thought I'd come back here and let ye catch up," Valorie teased. Whatever ire she had felt prior to the race seemed to be calmed by the ride. Or by the fact that they both now knew she was the better rider. That was undoubtable.

"Aye, lass I was distracted, enjoying the view."

“Mmm, the forest is quite lovely this time of year with the trees in full bloom,” Valorie commented.

“That’s not the view I was referrin’ to,” Aiden said darkly, shooting a promising look at Valorie.

All day, Aiden was distracted by Valorie if she was in his presence. Even when he claimed to be fully focused on the archery target, he was still in tune with her. Something about Valorie commanded his attention, and after today, it had only gotten worse. Because not only was Valorie beautiful, but she was also kind and funny and clever.

Aiden looked over and smiled warmly at the lass; he was glad to not be racing anymore. It was pleasant to just have this time with Valorie, enjoying the weather and each other. As much as he enjoyed watching her, it was even better to be by her side like this.

\* \* \*

“Aye so ye never had any plans to win, eh?” Aiden asked Valorie as they continued to ride side by side through the woods.

“I told ye, I will never marry ye,” Valorie said lightly but with not nearly as much vehemence as earlier today. She was having fun on this ride — a concept that was somewhat inconceivable to her when spending time with a laird. When she truly thought about it, a lot of today had been fun. Sure, she was often irritated by Aiden, but she was also challenged by him.

Not to mention, there was their moment that morning in the study. Valorie was still imagining Aiden’s soft lips closing in on hers. It took everything she had to focus in on his various assessments and not stare at his mouth all day.

“Why didn’t ye just ride slow then and let me win?” Aiden asked. “I already ken yer an accomplished actress.”

Valorie scoffed, “I thought about it, but then I’d miss out on the chance to prove I’m the better rider.”

“Ye are quite skilled, lassie. Although it could just be yer horse,” Aiden suggested with a faint laughter. Valorie was getting much more acquainted with his laughter, and she liked it.

“Bluebell is impressive, but I trained him. That was all me, me laird; ye ken that.” Valorie was confident of that; Aiden seemed to be more in tune with her than anyone she knew.

“Aye, I do,” Aiden conceded.

“Did I pass yer tests then?” For some reason Valorie wanted not Aiden’s approval necessarily but definitely his respect. He was the first laird she had truly shown herself to, and his opinion of her mattered to Valorie. With the taunts back and forth all day, she didn’t know how he truly felt.

“Ye exceeded every expectation I had, lass,” Aiden said sincerely. Like a young girl, Valorie could feel herself blushing at the compliment as if she had never had the attention of a man before.

“Ye would do well to remember me skill with a bow and arrow,” Valorie joked in an attempt to bring back a lighter mood.

“Aye, lass. That’s not something I’ll be forgettin’ anytime soon,” Aiden said deeply with a long look at Valorie. There was that slow heat stirring again. Every time he gave her that promising look, Valorie grew hot, and she desperately wanted Aiden to

follow through on that promise.

“Hmph. Good,” Valorie huffed, her voice sounding breathy even to her.

Thankfully, Aiden dropped his teasing, and they rode in silence for a little while, enjoying the peaceful quiet of the wood. Just the sounds of hooves stomping through the brush and the occasional tittering of some woodland animal accompanied them. Valorie did love this season in the forest; everything came alive.

“How come ye want to be wed?” Valorie asked suddenly, breaking the quiet tranquility.

The silence continued to stretch on long after her question. It got to the point where Valorie thought Aiden either didn’t hear her or he wasn’t planning on answering.

Valorie had resigned herself to not getting an answer when Aiden said, “I have me own pressures, being a young laird and all. Me faither passed recently, so I’ve only been Laird O’Donnely for a short while. Aye, we are a strong clan, but me people want an heir, and they want one soon.”

Aiden spoke softly, and Valorie could hear his devotion to his clan. She wondered again how this man got his reputation. Everything she had seen of him was far from that cruel laird she’d heard about. Perhaps her mother and Lorna were right, and it was all idle gossip from people with too much time on their hands.

Valorie wasn’t sure how to respond; she could empathize sure, but Aiden was still afforded choices that she wasn’t. Surely, he had the power to delay his people and his council, at least a little. But maybe Aiden wasn’t as free to do whatever he wished as Valorie had once assumed.

“I can understand wantin’ to make yer own choice,” Valorie simply said. That was all

she truly wanted anyway. The freedom to make her own choice about her betrothal and her life. She thought that was a given for lairds, but clearly, they all had their own pressures.

“Aye.”

With Aiden’s short response, they continued to ride easily to their destination. Valorie could see the clearing ahead that opened into the large waterfall. They were slowly approaching what was meant to be the finish line, side by side.

No longer focused on a victory, all Valorie could think was that maybe she and Aiden weren’t so different after all.

### CHAPTER 8

“I guess we both lose,” Valorie said to Aiden with what seemed to be feigned sadness. “Perhaps ye should look for a better bride,” she commented as they rode into the waterfall clearing.

Aiden looked around at the open area that Valorie brought them to. Leafy trees created a natural barrier between the rest of the forest and this little haven. The river they had been following spilled over into a massive waterfall that raged on in the background. Water crashed down heavily, creating a steady soundtrack to the clearing that forced them both to yell a little.

At the bottom of the waterfall was a blue and still lagoon that invited one for a swim. Rocks were scattered along the edges and would be the perfect place to relax in the warm sun that shone through the forest trees above. Aiden could imagine spending a wonderful afternoon here, watching Valorie splash around in the water and enjoying the sun on his face.

“Nay, lass, I think we both win,” Aiden replied loudly over the waterfall with a smirk. Aiden certainly felt like he was winning. He and Valorie were evenly matched across all their competitions, and that was a victory in itself. Aiden didn’t think he’d ever met a lass quite like Valorie.

Aiden dismounted and led his horse to a nearby tree to tie it up for a quick break. Maybe they could enjoy this waterfall a little before they rode back. He watched as Valorie did the same with her horse. Once again, he was struck by the gracefulness of her movements. Her long legs swung off the horse and landed smoothly on the

ground. She was sure to give her horse lots of pats before tying him up next to Aiden's.

Aiden continued to look on in interest as Valorie walked to the waterfall's shining pool. He could see a slight blush staining her cheeks and neck deliciously. Could she tell he was watching her? Did she feel his eyes on her, and that's what was causing her to flush? He wanted to see how far that blush stretched. Did she flush that wonderful pink color everywhere?

Shaking his head, Aiden forced himself to clear that thought. This was still just a business arrangement, nothing more. It couldn't be anything more. And yet, Aiden couldn't stop himself from watching as Valorie splashed some water on her face and neck. Now flushed and wet, it was impossible for Aiden to take his eyes off her.

Valorie's back was to Aiden as she cooled off by the waterfall. Her shapely legs held nearly all of his attention as she bent over again to scoop up a little more water. The sight of Valorie was outshining the beautiful clearing he admired only moments ago. It didn't deserve the label of beautiful while Valorie was in it.

Suddenly Valorie whipped back to him, the water in her hands spraying around her, and she angrily asked, "How do ye mean?"

Surprised by the change in her mood, Aiden just stared back at her for a moment. Before Aiden could get a word in, Valorie continued, "I cannae win! There is nay winning for me! I don't even participate in making the decisions for my life — I never have. Do ye consider that winning? How dare ye do this to me? Take away me choice like ye own me! Everyone else was right; ye are very cold and..."

Aiden had been subconsciously walking towards the lass before she even began speaking, drawn in by her presence. But as Valorie's monologue started, Aiden began to stride towards her in earnest. He stalked to where Valorie stood near the waterfall.

Each step was careful and measured as he held her gaze while she raged on. He was a predator pursuing his prey at that moment, slowly making his way to her while never breaking eye contact.

At the final words he allowed her to utter, Aiden was directly in front of her and used his full height to loom over her head. Aiden was not a perfect man, and he could only take so much of Valorie's ire.

"I wouldn't go on if I were ye," he threatened darkly, interrupting her, and Valorie's eyes flashed at the threat. She raised her eyebrows haughtily, not budging an inch.

Both of them huffed with the emotions coursing through them. Aiden particularly couldn't pinpoint what he was feeling. He flopped between anger at her impertinence, amusement over her stubbornness, and desire over just being this close to her.

What had he been saying about strong emotions?

Anger coursed through Aiden at Valorie's words, but he was equally, if not more, aroused at the sight in front of him. He was finally witnessing that delicious anger from her. It had been brewing since the moment her father announced their betrothal. She was red-faced and out of breath, angrier than she'd been all day. Her previous outbursts were minor compared to the force that stood in front of him now. Aiden watched her chest rise and fall quickly with emotion.

The reactions were far too similar to another activity Aiden was desperate to experience with Valorie. With his mouth and hands, Aiden wanted to cause that same flush, and the heavy breathing, and the feelings that were so all-encompassing that rational thought left her completely.

Valorie, this time, made a threatening move closer to Aiden. She was so close to him now; she didn't need to speak more than a whisper.



“Oh, why? What would ye do?” Valorie taunted by his ear.

\* \* \*

Valorie was taunting a beast right now, and she knew it. She had been watching all day as Aiden held himself taut, never letting himself experience the full extent of his emotions. And now she wanted him to snap. When she had raged at him, he merely smiled or smirked. But now she wanted him to match her passion, and if anger is what it took, then she could get angry. She was angry.

Valorie had got caught up in the competitions and Aiden, but she was not winning. There was no way for her to win in this situation. If it wasn't Aiden, there would be another laird after him. The futility of her life was the main source of her anger, but Aiden was culpable as well.

They stood face to face, mere inches of space between them, and Valorie stared defiantly up at Aiden. If he thought he would be getting a timid lass for a bride, he would be disavowed of that notion shortly. Valorie would not back down from this, not from him. He had the nerve to joke and jest all day when Valorie's dreams were being stolen from her!

Shaking a little in her rage, Valorie inhaled sharply and got a lungful of Aiden's delicious scent. Oh, that scent. Valorie wanted to curl up on a rainy Scottish day with that scent, but Valorie held on tightly to her righteous anger. She could feel her passion shifting to something else entirely, though, the longer she stood this close to Aiden.

“What would ye do, Aiden,” she taunted again in an attempt to stay angry.

“Let me show ye, lass,” Aiden said in a rough whisper. He was so close now that Valorie felt the movements in his breath as he spoke, and it sent shivers down her

back. Valorie was struggling to remember what she had been so mad about. How anyone was meant to think when this man was near was a mystery.

Aiden slowly trailed his fingers across Valorie's arms, leaving behind goosebumps where he went. Again, Valorie was the one who moved, ever so slightly. She brought herself right up to Aiden, desperate to feel what he seemed to be offering her.

The pair continued to stand there, gazing at each other for several long seconds. Valorie felt the heat from Aiden's gaze burning throughout her body. She was hot and aching, and she knew that Aiden could relieve her, but Aiden stood barely moving, just his fingertips lightly grazing across her skin. He was still holding himself back from her. Like that first night on the dance floor, Aiden wasn't letting himself get caught up in the moment.

Well Valorie wouldn't be the only one feeling this way.

Decidedly, Valorie quickly drew her gaze away from Aiden. She turned to walk back towards her horse; she would ride home and leave Aiden behind. If he would not join her in this turmoil that she felt, he would be on his own.

Before she could take a single step, Aiden's hands that had been lightly stroking her now grasped her loosely around the wrist. The same strong hand that saved her on the balcony, "taught" her how to shoot a bow, and helped her up when she fell, now gently kept her in place. Valorie knew she could get away if she tried, but she stayed, suspended between this unfamiliar desire and the safety of walking away.

When she didn't leave, the grip on her wrist turned insistent, and she found herself pulled back to where she started, staring deeply at Aiden. But before she could quip something smart to him, another taunt that would force his action, Aiden's mouth was claiming hers. And it was a claiming.

One minute she was standing there, desperate to feel all of Aiden, and the next, the kiss was exploding against her mouth. Aiden's talented lips sent shockwaves of pleasure throughout her whole body; she felt the effects of him everywhere.

Still holding on to her wrist, Aiden's other hand made its way underneath her loose braid and gripped the back of neck. With the additional leverage, Aiden opened her up further, and she eagerly returned his kiss — his lips moving against her and their tongues tangling together.

Aiden's hand resumed trailing lightly on her arm while the other was now clenched tightly in her hair. Valorie could barely breathe, but she never wanted to break apart from this. The feeling of Aiden's lips against hers was like nothing she'd ever experienced before.

When they finally separated, Valorie's chest heaved, and her breasts had tightened painfully against her dress. The feverish feeling from before was exponentially worse now, but she could finally see Aiden experiencing similar effects. He gazed back at Valorie with a pained expression, seemingly just as desperate to resume.

Valorie was privileged enough in that moment to see Aiden in a state probably few had ever seen, unencumbered and free, lost fully to feeling. She wanted to preserve the look on his face, but even more than that she wanted to kiss him again.

Why did we stop? Valorie thought.

As if they were of one mind, Aiden and Valorie reached back towards each other at the same moment, coming together for a slower, more languid kiss. Aiden held Valorie in a close embrace, his hands wrapped tightly around her back, securing her firmly to his chest.

\* \* \*

Kissing Valorie was an out of body experience. For once Aiden wasn't worried about his clan or his sisters or his life; he was simply feeling. Feeling Valorie's soft lips moving passionately against his. Feeling her tall and strong form pressed tightly to him. Feeling her hands wrapped around the back of his neck. Just feeling.

All day, hell since they danced together at his sister's castle, they had been building towards this moment. Aiden was struck by this lass the first time he saw her, and now, he finally had her in his arms. The taunts, the tests, the arguments, all of that had led them here. If Aiden was anyone else, he would have said it was fate. But he wasn't thinking of any of that right now, not when Valorie was moaning into their kiss.

Aiden was struggling to remember all of the various important reasons he was not supposed to be doing this. But instead, the only thing going through his mind was Valorie. The feel of her, the sound of her, the taste of her — he was enraptured.

Would Aiden ever get enough of this lass? In that moment, he didn't think it was possible. So, he let himself get his fill now. He savored the feel of her against him, the way she whimpered and moaned throughout the kiss.

When Aiden felt Valorie pulling away from their embrace earlier, he simply reacted. He could not stand the thought of separating from her at that moment, not when she was staring at him with such longing. But at the same time, he was held back by logic and his plan. The second that Aiden almost lost that connection with her, all other thoughts fled. The only thing that remained was his need.

Aiden was not used to feeling so fully, so he took his cues from Valorie, who was clearly the type of lass to feel with her whole body. She never held anything back, not in a competition and certainly not in passion. Aiden couldn't get enough of it.

At some point, he would have to consider the consequences of this delicious lapse in

judgement but hopefully not anytime soon. Aiden wanted to stay right here, wrapped up in Valorie, for as long as possible.

Desiring more of Valorie, Aiden walked her backwards, never breaking contact with her lips, until Valorie was pressed up against the nearest tree. He had tried to warn her; Aiden was no gentleman. He used one hand to brace against the rough bark behind Valorie and the other to cradle the back of her neck again, gripping lightly and keeping her right where he wanted her.

Finally, after Aiden felt like their souls had been fused together, Valorie pulled back from him with a confused glance. Was some part of that not what she wanted? Had she enjoyed that as much as Aiden? What was she thinking right now?

Instead of answering any of those questions, Valorie asked, “Did ye hear that?”

Without waiting for Aiden’s response, Valorie ran off quickly into the thicker trees, leaving Aiden standing there, touching his swollen lips, bewildered.

### CHAPTER 9

Somehow the faintest cry broke through the haze of kissing Aiden. Valorie didn't think it was possible for anything to distract her from Aiden's mouth, but a mournful little howl caught her attention. Valorie pulled her face away from Aiden with a confused glance around the clearing. Their limbs were still tangled together against the tree when Valorie heard the cry again.

"Did ye hear that?" Valorie asked, but Aiden just looked at her with a mix of confusion and desperation. She felt similarly. Valorie was certainly desperate for Aiden still; kissing him was not nearly enough to satisfy the desire that had been building between them. In fact, Aiden's mouth on hers had only ratcheted up the tension between them. But she needed to know where that little cry was coming from.

Valorie had always had a soft spot for broken things. Any time she came across an injured animal, no matter how small, she did her best to help them. She took care of a bird with a broken wing, a squirrel who had lost its mother, and even a few stray kittens over the years. Whatever that cry came from needed her help— so the moment with Aiden would just have to wait.

Valorie strained to hear the sound again over her pounding heartbeat and heavy breathing. Aiden had really done a number on her with that kiss.

There it is! Valorie thought as she once again heard the cry breaking through the fog Aiden had put over her mind.

Quickly disentangling herself from Aiden, Valorie ran off in the direction of the

sound without another word. She leaped quickly over downed branches and roots as she followed the sound. There it was again! Much closer now. Valorie slowed her run and quickly spun around to search for the source of that cry.

Focusing on this rescue mission was the perfect distraction to not think about that kiss with Aiden. Valorie would surely spend hours reliving every moment of his lips against hers — dreaming of the way that he had held tightly to the back of her neck as he took what he needed from her lips.

Yes, Valorie knew she would be thinking thoughts of Aiden late at night. But there were more important things happening right now. Although... kissing Aiden did feel very important. Especially in the context of her grand plans. What did their kiss mean? Surely, one kiss did not change everything... even a kiss like that. Valorie didn't have anything to compare it too, but even she knew that was an outlier. It couldn't be normal to feel like that every time you kissed someone — people would never get anything done!

Still, despite what was likely a once in a lifetime kiss, nothing had changed. Valorie had desires that didn't involve being someone's wife. Maybe she could finally see England — or even the rest of Scotland would be nice. A life stuck in someone else's castle was not part of that dream. The further she got from Aiden's lips, the clearer everything was becoming. She needed to stick to her original plan.

The tests had been an utter failure, but Valorie could certainly come up with some other way to force Aiden to end this betrothal. There was still her decorating idea to consider or other ways to encourage the laird to leave her. She had wanted to sort this out today before she was forced to move into his castle, but Valorie would adapt.

Although, their kiss was definitely an added hiccup. Would she be able to resist another kiss like that if she lived with Aiden? Seeing him every day in his kitchens, his dining room, and his study, experiencing Aiden's most comfortable self, he'd

probably smile and wink at her too — Valorie would need to resist in order for her plan to work.

Maybe avoidance would be the best strategy — because something told Valorie the temptation of Aiden Wright might be too much to effectively resist, at least for long. Only one day in and she was succumbing to his charms. How would she fare after a fortnight? Or a month? Valorie shuddered at the thought.

Before any of that though, she needed to find whatever was crying out to her. Valorie scoured the woods around her, renewed in her mission to locate the wee animal and put that kiss behind her. She knew she had to be close now, so Valorie carefully observed every tree, bush, and shrub for any signs of the creature.

There! In a bush off to her right, Valorie saw a flash of white and brown. Quickly, she raced over to the bush. Stuck in the branches was the tiniest fluff ball Valorie had ever seen, still crying out for help. Valorie slowly brought her hands to the bush and the tiny puppy trapped within. The wee animal was still just a young thing; it was the smallest puppy Valorie had ever seen. Its little eyes stared back at Valorie pleadingly.

“Shh, it’s okay baby; I’m goin’ get ye out,” Valorie cooed softly to the animal; the poor thing was shaking and whimpering — not crying out nearly as loud now that someone had found it, though. Somehow the fluffy thing had gotten itself tangled up in the bush and now couldn’t get out. It was all alone out here in the woods; Valorie couldn’t see traces of any other animals nearby.

As carefully as she could, Valorie began removing the branches from the animal’s fur, ensuring that none of them snapped against the little animal. All of the animal’s fluff was really making this difficult; it had gotten so tangled up in the thorny bush.

When the puppy was nearly free, she said sweetly, “Almost there, wee one; I’ve got ye.”



Finally, Valorie managed to get the puppy out of the bush and brought it close to her chest in a cuddle. The baby was still shaking horribly from the experience. How long had the poor thing been alone out here? Maybe if Valorie wasn't so distracted with kissing a certain laird, she would have heard the crying sooner.

“Where's yer momma, wee one?” Valorie asked, continuing to coo and make comforting noises at the animal in her arms. The little puppy needed her; Valorie would not be leaving it behind today. She stroked the animal softly trying to keep the poor thing calm.

“What the hell is that thing?” Aiden's disgusted voice came suddenly from behind Valorie.

\* \* \*

Aiden had a horrible time keeping up with Valorie; apparently, he'd lose in a regular foot race as well as a horse race. Maybe he'd have a chance without any obstacles, but Aiden had no idea how she navigated all the roots and downed trees out here in the woods.

To be fair, Aiden was surprised he was able to make his limbs work at all after that frenzied kiss. Part of his problem too was that Aiden had stood stunned for crucial moments as soon as Valorie fled. His mind and his body did not catch on to what his eyes were seeing, and that was Valorie running away from him. So now here Aiden was, running through the woods like a loon, feeling like he'd been thrown into battle blindfolded, spun around three times, and told to fight his way out.

Still not knowing why Valorie had run off, Aiden was desperate to find her again. During his stumbling trek through the woods, he overthought every moment of their kiss. Had he been too rough with her when he pushed her up against the tree? She certainly seemed to enjoy it at the moment, but maybe he should check? Maybe she

didn't like the way he bit her lip or held her tightly by her hair. He had to say, it was the first time a woman had run from him mid-kiss, but one never knew what they were going to get with Valorie.

One minute they were enjoying the most mind-blowing kiss Aiden had ever experienced, and the next, Valorie was gone.

Valorie mentioned hearing something in the woods, but Aiden had not been able to hear a single thing over the racing of his heart and the pounding in his blood. The woods could have exploded around them, and Aiden was not sure that he would have noticed. An army of enemy clansmen could have approached, and Aiden would still be kissing Valorie against that tree. Was she not as consumed by him? Aiden needed to find her.

Thankfully, as Valorie flew through the woods, she left enough of track to follow that Aiden finally found her. The lass was incapable of not leaving an imprint behind her. She was... lasting. Aiden approached Valorie, ready to question what she had been doing running off like that and how anything had managed to distract her from their kiss.

But then, he saw the disgusting creature in her arms.

Looking at it coldly, Aiden harshly asked, "What the hell is that thing?" The creature was so miniscule and looked like some sort of bog monster the way its fur was matted down and full of sticks and twigs. Aiden continued to glare at it with utter disgust; he hated dogs. He was just barely keeping the memory of the last time he'd seen a dog at bay when Valorie brought the monster right up close to his face.

In one of his more creative torture experiences, Myles had once brought in a pack of wild dogs to devour him. The dogs were starved for days before they were let into Aiden's dungeon — he only knew this because his captor bragged about it after the

fact, but it made them even more blood thirsty in the moment.

Down in the dark and damp dungeons that had become his home, the dogs were left to have their way with Aiden. There was nowhere to escape, but Aiden still tried to scramble to the corner of his cage and fight them off. His body, though, was frail from years of hunger, and he had no weapons of any kind. All Aiden could do was try to protect his face from their jaws.

In contrast, the dogs were fast and vicious. The minute they were let into his cell, the dogs showed no restraint, immediately going for the closest food source, Aiden. It was only after Aiden had been severely injured from the mauling that his captor called the dogs back. He needed Aiden alive, of course, but mauled was fine. Myles would not want to risk losing the bargaining chip that was his prisoner to something so trivial as death.

With the tiny creature in Valorie's arms now so close to his face, Aiden was struggling not to think of sharp jaws biting and tearing at his skin. He often dreamed of that pack of dogs, their drooling jowls, and how quickly they hit bones. The attack would likely be forever imprinted in Aiden's mind, and he had avoided dogs ever since. Successfully, in fact. He didn't let dogs around the castle, and no one in his family had one, so his life since he'd been rescued had been mercifully dog-free.

Valorie, apparently, had a very different experience with the wild animals because she had no qualms about holding the violent little thing and bringing it right up to Aiden's face.

"It's just a baby," Valorie said softly, stroking the creature's small head like it wasn't a killing machine. Aiden just shook his head harshly, trying to stop reliving the angry growls and the sound of teeth tearing flesh.

"Well, let him run off to wherever he has to go then," Aiden scoffed dismissively,

finally getting out of his head enough to respond to Valorie. He was torn between anger and fear, and only one of those emotions would he show to Valorie.

“We have many things to talk about,” Valorie smirked. “Is the big bad laird afraid of a small baby like this?” she teased. Apparently, Aiden was not hiding his fear as well as he thought.

Aiden snapped and pulled Valorie close to him by the arm. “I’m not afraid of anythin’,” he said coldly. A lie of course. Aiden was afraid of many things. Most notably, losing everyone he loved to some horrible fate which was why he kept that list of people very short. Also among his fears — dogs of any kind.

Aiden stared harshly at Valorie, who was so close to him now that he could smell her sweet scent again. The scent that he had fully drunk only a few moments ago in the clearing. Aiden dropped his gaze to her plump lips; they were red and puffy from his ministrations and looked absolutely delicious. Valorie too, he noticed, was watching his lips carefully.

Slowly, so not to startle the monster, Aiden released Valorie and took a step back. Now was not the time to lose control again, not when he was in the presence of a true beast.

“Well, then, she ...” Valorie said pointedly at the puppy once they were sufficiently separated. Valorie had that suspicious glint in her eye that told Aiden he had already lost somehow. “...cannae go anywhere; she’s afraid of everything.”

Aiden glared at the puppy while Valorie continued, “I’ll have her with me for the rest of me — or her — life, so if ye daenae like dogs...” Valorie trailed off, shrugging her shoulders as if to say, ‘what can you do?’

The lass is already working another scheme, how delightful! Aiden thought with glee.

If there was anything better than kissing Valorie, it was her mischief.

Aiden laughed, “I ken what ye’re doing, and ye daenae have to.” Aiden paused and raised an eyebrow at the lass. “I have no interest in gettin’ married. Ye’d have known that if ye weren’t so focused on gettin’ rid of me,” Aiden teased gently.

Aiden watched Valorie blush heavily with his jest, but she said nothing. In truth, Aiden hadn’t wanted to bring up his proposal just yet; he was enjoying watching Valorie attempt to maneuver out of their betrothal. The way her mind worked was equally terrifying and arousing. But since the lass was already working on her next plan, he better fill her in on his.

“I want to get me council off me back, and ye want yer father to stop playing matchmaker. So, I propose we pretend,” Aiden paused to let that sink in. “Ye accept the proposal, and we act as though we are truly betrothed, but we will not ever wed.” Aiden waited, holding his breath for Valorie’s response. When she merely continued to stroke the wretched creature, Aiden continued his arguments.

“We are already practically betrothed in everyone’s eyes, so if ye agree we could be the perfect fake match. A lot can happen in a year lass, and we’d have bought enough time to find a way to end this without getting anyone upset,” Aiden finished with a stern nod.

Valorie looked at him contemplatively for the longest time before she finally nodded. “Aye, but the puppy stays,” she said decisively.

“Absolutely nae.”

“We shall name her Willow like the tree we found her under,” Valorie announced, and that was that.

### CHAPTER 10

The next morning, Valorie cradled Willow as she watched the servants take her things into Aiden's castle. She was officially doing this — moving into the Castle O'Donnely.

Valorie never imagined the solution to her problems would be pretending. But still, yesterday in the woods, Valorie was skeptical. A fake betrothal? Surely people would realize or be suspicious. And yet, with Aiden's mysterious reputation and the apparent desperate position she was in — no one would likely question them. Valorie almost wished she had thought of it herself because Aiden's plan seemed kind of perfect — at least for now.

They would need to come up with a believable story to explain why they were ending their betrothal. She wondered if Aiden would be willing to fake his death because a newly widowed Valorie could remain alone for a while. But he probably wouldn't go for that. Valorie would keep thinking about it.

The coach that she arrived in now sat empty in the front of the sprawling keep. All of her precious few belongings were being loaded into Aiden's castle by Aiden's servants. For all intents and purposes, it was now her castle too.

After Aiden had left her father's yesterday, Valorie spent her last night in her own bedchambers for who knew how long. She bid farewell to Lorna and Skye and the rest of the servants before taking one last nighttime stroll throughout the grounds and gardens that she grew up on. She passed by the archery set up and would probably always think of Aiden standing there with his arms crossed, playing her as she tried to

play him.

All throughout the grounds, actually, she was remembering their competitions and teasing. Aiden was forever ingrained in the memory of her father's castle now. Thankfully, her horse, Bluebell was being brought to Aiden's stables. She could never have left him behind, especially not after he helped prove her riding skills to Aiden so thoroughly.

Still standing in the castle's drive, Valorie watched silently as the last of her belongings disappeared into her new home, and she was left holding just Willow. Sadly, Valorie was used to this part — she had moved away from her home and into another laird's castle three times now, but it didn't get any easier.

There would be a handful of new people to meet, and they would all expect Valorie to act a certain way. New hallways and layouts to memorize, a new bedchamber to get used to. The first couple of nights, Valorie would likely wake up disoriented, not recognizing her new surroundings. That was the worst part — the immediate panic upon waking from not knowing where she was.

Valorie's parents had accompanied her this morning, their third time moving her out. Both of them wore matching pleased grins — her father because he believed that he had somehow successfully married her off, merely days after she called off a different betrothal. She was Aiden's problem now in his mind.

Valorie suspected, though, that her mother's smile was far more scheming. Grace Grant had her own games, and she clearly thought she had won this one — likely because she suspected Valorie had found a true match, and she had a hand in it somehow.

Standing beside the empty coach, Valorie clung tightly to Willow. Besides her horse, Willow would be her closest friend in this castle, plus Willow still needed her — she

was far too young to fend for herself. Valorie turned to say her goodbyes to her parents, once again.

“Let’s make this one last, all right Valorie?” Laird MacCrimmon scolded. His wife playfully slapped his arm and turned to give Valorie a big enveloping hug. Valorie would surely miss her mother’s hugs in the coming days. The first couple of days at a new castle were always lonely, but especially so when your betrothed didn’t even come to greet you.

“Valorie, remember what I said about Aiden,” her mother said pointedly. She finally pulled back from their long hug and tilted her head to look seriously at Valorie. “I love ye darlin’.”

“I love ye too, Maither,” Valorie responded, not commenting on Aiden; she could barely look her mother in the eye knowing the deceit she was hiding from her. Her mother was one of her closest confidants, but she couldn’t know this.

“Faither,” Valorie nodded respectfully to her father. Suddenly, he too pulled her in for a tight hug. It had been far too long since her father had embraced her.

“I really do want the best for ye,” her father said quietly just to her.

“I ken, Faither.” Valorie believed her father meant it, too; they just had very different opinions about what was best for her. Laird MacCrimmon’s ideal life for his daughter included a strong laird and a brood of children, and Valorie’s true dream was freedom.

Finally, her parents climbed back into the carriage and drove off. Valorie stood watching until they were out of sight. As they left, she couldn’t help but wonder how long this betrothal would last and whether her parents would welcome her back when it ended. Aiden mentioned a year, but as he said, a lot could happen during that time.



Speaking of Aiden, he still had not come to greet her or welcome her to his home. In his place, standing in front of the castle, were Aiden's two sisters, Keira and Astrid. The pair of them looked slightly formidable, staring down at Valorie from the top of the stairs, and Valorie took a fortifying breath before heading towards them.

Astrid really was the spitting image of her brother; her golden hair was shining brightly in the sun, just as Aiden's had in the garden yesterday. How Valorie did not make the connection sooner was a mystery. She should have known who Aiden was the moment she met him.

Valorie slowly approached the two sisters with her head up but stroking Willow for comfort. She had only minimal interactions with both of them, but she was sure they knew all about the fickle Valorie Grant. Without Aiden to act as a buffer, she did not know how this more formal introduction was going to go.

"Welcome to Castle O'Donnely, Valorie," Astrid said brightly as Valorie reached them at the top of the large steps up to the front door.

"Aye, thank ye Astrid; it's good to be here and to see ye both again." Valorie smiled at both Astrid and Keira while she said this. Astrid's warm face smiled back at her, but Keira just stared. A long pause followed Valorie's statement as they all looked around to each other, no one knowing exactly what to say or do next.

Finally, Astrid looked sharply at her sister before turning back to Valorie and offering, "I can take ye to yer chambers." Keira, on the other hand, continued to eye Valorie suspiciously. Off to a great start, then.

"I'll go and get Aiden," Keira said shortly, stomping away before anyone else had a chance to move or respond.

"Ignore her," Astrid suggested conspiratorially. "She's always been a bit of hellion."

Valorie, not feeling like she could yet poke fun at the sisters, merely nodded as she followed Astrid into the massive castle.

Castle O'Donnely was enormous; the great hall was nearly double the size of her family's castle, but there was something missing. The clan banners hung proudly on the stone walls, and there were elaborate designs on the tiles below their feet, but the castle felt... empty. No bustling servants, no sounds from the kitchens or the receiving room, the place felt... incredibly lonely. Valorie continued to look around, expecting to encounter some activity.

Astrid, apparently noticing Valorie's inspection, explained, "Aiden is... particular about his privacy. He doesnae like people to have access to the castle. There's only a handle of servants, and they ken to stay out of his way." Interesting. Aiden loved his clan, Valorie knew that, but he clearly kept himself separate. Likely that was part of how he got his fearsome reputation; people often feared what they didn't understand or know.

Was Aiden doing it on purpose to encourage his reputation, or did he merely like the solitude? Valorie wondered.

Again, though, Valorie just nodded. Walking through the castle, she felt the lack of activity acutely. If Aiden turned out to not be a companion, Valorie didn't know how she would remain here a year. Thank goodness for the little puppy in her arms, but how did Aiden survive it? Her father's castle seemed like a small city compared to this.

Up the grand staircase and down to the end of a long hallway, Astrid led them to two doors next to each other.

"Here ye are; these are yer rooms, and Aiden is obviously just there next to ye," Astrid said, opening the door to a comfortable but spacious sitting room. Valorie's

belongings were already stacked up on one side of the room. They looked quite sparse compared to the sprawling room before her.

The sitting room led way into the actual bedchamber which was far grander and more beautiful than the one she had at home. It was filled on one side by a massive four-poster wooden bed and a matching ottoman. The whole thing looked decadently plush with numerous pillows and blankets; Valorie sighed thinking of climbing into that bed after a long day.

Dark shades of brown wood made up the primary color scheme of the room, but there were a few red accents throughout. Valorie's eyes found the candle chandelier next. It hung above the bed, and the arms of it were crafted to look like antlers. On the other side of the room from the bed was a wardrobe with detailed carvings — Valorie would have to get closer to inspect them, but it seemed to depict numerous woodland creatures. It was also massive and would easily fit everything Valorie owned.

Willow gave an excited yip from her arms; clearly the room suited her.

“Someone will be up to put away yer things while ye are out of the room; I'm sure it won't take long,” Astrid informed her, glancing at the small pile of Valorie's things.

“Aye, thank ye, Astrid; I appreciate ye showin' me up here,” Valorie said courteously, scratching Willow behind the ears, who cooed happily.

“Who's that wee one?” Astrid asked.

“This is Willow,” Valorie said smiling at the puppy in her arms. “We found her trapped in a bush in the forest last night.”

“We?”

“Aye, Aiden and I,” Valorie clarified.

“And Aiden agreed to keep her?” Astrid asked sounding equally shocked and skeptical.

Valorie laughed, “Aye, I convinced him.”

Another long silence filled the room; Astrid stood by the door pointedly, looking like she had more to say but deeply uncomfortable with the topic.

Finally, Astrid broke the silence and confessed, “I’m happy Aiden’s found a companion; he’s been alone for far too long.”

Valorie swallowed her guilt once again for the lies. Astrid had welcomed her into Aiden’s home, and here she was lying to Astrid and the rest of Aiden’s family. They all, even Keira she suspected, wanted the best for Aiden, and Valorie was letting them believe she was going to be his bride. Astrid wanted something real for Aiden, and Valorie was only pretend.

Although if their kiss in the clearing was any indication, perhaps it wasn’t as fake as they both claimed. Everything about that moment had certainly felt real. Valorie wasn’t sure it was possible to fake that kind of passion. She knew that she couldn’t.

“Aye, Aiden’s a good man. I’m glad to be here,” was all Valorie could respond.

That part was true at least. Despite the emptiness of the castle, of all the places Valorie could have ended up, Castle O’Donnely was one of the better ones. It was one of the main reasons she accepted Aiden’s fake betrothal. If her first betrothed had offered her a way out with a similar proposal, she’s not sure she would have taken it.

Aiden, while mercurial, had never been truly dangerous to Valorie, only towards

others that threatened her. And now, with their agreement in place, Valorie would hopefully be able to maintain the independence she desperately craved.

“We all worry about Aiden,” Astrid commented quietly as she made her way to one of the sitting room chairs. “He has had a hard life, and we are a little protective of him now. As a boy, Aiden was the sweetest child, a cheeky menace, sure, but he was kind and warm... and ye obviously ken how he is now.”

“Oh...” Valorie said tentatively, flopping down into the chair opposite Astrid. Valorie wrung her hands in the fabric of her dress nervously. She was feeling more uncomfortable with their deception after each moment chatting to Astrid. There was clearly something Valorie was missing here, but she didn’t want to pry further into Aiden’s life or hear something she shouldn’t, so Valorie stayed quiet.

“Ye may ken about the old conflict with Clan O’Donnelly and my husband’s clan, Clan MacKie?” Astrid asked.

“Aye, I’ve heard some things,” Valorie agreed.

“We kept the reason quiet because my father didn’t want us to appear weak at the time, but we suspected Clan MacKie of kidnapping and holding Aiden.”

Valorie blinked a few times and scrunched her eyebrows in confusion. She sat stunned for several long minutes, “Aiden was kidnapped? By your husband?”

“Oh no, no, we suspected Clan Mackie, but Flynn and his family had nothing to do with it,” Astrid clarified a little, not nearly enough to be making sense though, “but yes, Aiden was kidnapped and held for ten long years. We were beside ourselves, not knowing where he was or what had happened. We still don’t know all that occurred during that time, but it wasn’t...pleasant,” Astrid trailed off.

Valorie's eyes were wide with horror. She had no idea, and she could hardly even imagine what Aiden had lived through. Valorie wanted to run to him and provide whatever comfort she could, but knowing Aiden as she did now, that would likely only inspire his anger. She settled for stroking Willow tenderly; maybe the wee thing could give him some comfort if she could get Aiden to warm up to her.

"I'm only tellin' ye because I know Aiden is too stubborn to do it himself, and ye need to know that there are lasting... impacts from that time." Astrid was apparently still speaking. "I think ye'll be good for him, but you'll have to talk to him for any more details," Astrid finished, apparently undeterred even despite Valorie's shocked silence.

"Aye, thank ye for telling me..." Valorie said, staring intently at the fluff ball in her arms. Willow was the only thing keeping Valorie in place at that moment.

Valorie was horrified at the thought of what Aiden had survived, and she was sure it showed on her face. Ten years! She was going to parties and feasts, and Aiden was held somewhere horrible. Her own problems seemed trivial now in the face of everything Aiden had likely experienced. The fact that Aiden could laugh and joke with her, despite his past, was nothing short of a miracle.

Astrid's eyes narrowed when Valorie remained quiet. Aiden's sister said sternly, "Now, he wouldn't want ye to treat him any differently, ye hear? And ye best not pity him." Valorie eyes flashed up to look Astrid in the eye.

"I could never pity him," Valorie croaked harshly, anger and tears equally close to the surface. "I could never pity him," she repeated slower. "Aiden is a survivor — I have always known this. I feel heartbroken and appalled and angry but not pity, never pity."

"Good." Astrid smiled primly at Valorie. "Then ye'll be perfect for him."

### CHAPTER 11

Aiden was not hiding.

He had work to do; that was all. Valorie was set to arrive at his castle sometime this morning while he was holed away in his study, decidedly not hiding. Yes, he was feeling confused, and yes, he was constantly thinking of Valorie's lips and the way she felt pressed up against him, but that had nothing to do with his current location. There were reports somewhere or correspondence. He definitely had something to do. He needed to find something to do.

Still every time he tried to start working on something, all he could think about was Valorie. How was she settling into his castle? Was she thinking of him? Were her lips as pink and plump as yesterday, or did they need his attention?

And this was why Aiden was confused. Mere moments after their kiss, he had told Valorie this was a fake betrothal, and it needed to be fake, but everything about kissing Valorie felt real. Aiden couldn't go searching for her until he stomped out that small part of him that thought he could have something real with Valorie.

Unfortunately for Aiden and his efforts to forget the lass, he was sure that he could already smell Valorie's sweet scent in the castle. His home would never be the same again now that Valorie was here. He already knew her presence had a lasting impact, and he'd probably never get her imprint out when she inevitably left. Because she had to leave, eventually. That was the deal.

Aiden was confused about a lot of things but not that. He couldn't have her —

Valorie's light would surely be stamped out here in this castle with him. Besides, he would never trust himself to keep her safe, not when he couldn't even keep himself safe.

Yet, all of that paled in comparison to the feel of Valorie in Aiden's arms. He was incapable of thinking of anything else. Aiden tapped his fingers restlessly on the desk. He should be welcoming the lass properly, with his tongue and teeth, preferably, maybe right here on his desk.

Breaking him out of his reverie, the door to his study slammed open, and his sister Keira barged in. Would it kill his family to knock?

"It's rude to keep yer bride waitin' brother," she chastised with a suspicious look Aiden. So, Valorie had arrived then; she was somewhere in his castle at this very moment.

"Aye, I'll go see her in a bit, I've got work to do. I do run this clan, ye ken," Aiden responded distractedly, fiddling with the paper in front of him in an attempt to look busy.

"I ken, ye look really busy," Keira drawled, snatching the paper away from Aiden. "Aye, last year's treasury report — a very timely review, brother."

"I'm comparin' castle expenses to this year," Aiden lied. Keira just rolled her eyes, dropping the paper back on his desk.

"What do the council think of yer bride?" Keira asked him pointedly, no longer interested in keeping up the rouse of her visit.

"They were quite pleased," Aiden responded firmly. Frankly, he didn't care, and it wasn't Keira's business, but the council was not entirely convinced Valorie was the



best choice for the future Lady O'Donnely. The one frustrating part of his whole plan was that when they finally ended their fake betrothal, Aiden would have to go to his council and tell them they were right.

"Even with her... reputation?" Keira continued to push.

"Aye," Aiden said shortly, a note of a warning in his voice. Keira just stood her ground and met his glare. Aiden had expected Keira's ire after he had ignored her warning about Valorie completely, but he would not stand to hear slander against his bride.

"Ye ken the council will not be happy if they find out yer tricking them." Keira was entirely too smart for her own good. How her husband, Christian, managed to keep anything from her was a mystery to all.

"Well, it's a good thing I'm not," Aiden said as lightly as he could manage.

"They may even consider taking the lairdship from ye..." Keira warned.

"They can't do that!" Aiden exclaimed, standing quickly and slamming his hand on to his desk. "I've given everythin' — everythin' — to this clan," Aiden argued fiercely. He lost ten years of his life for this clan. And every spare moment of his time, since he was rescued, had been in service to his people.

"Aye, yer right, and that's exactly why ye shouldn't give away yer chance at love for them," Keira said. Aiden didn't respond — he was breathing harshly now, standing over his desk and looming down at Keira. All he could think was that it was a good thing he wasn't looking for love. He had nothing to lose in that regard because love was never in the cards for him.

Keira continued to stare back at him until Aiden finally sighed and took his seat

again.

“I better go; Christian can’t spend too many hours without me,” Keira remarked, nodding her satisfaction to Aiden. She had made her point, annoyingly well in fact. Aiden would just need to ensure that the council never found out about his little plot with Valorie.

“Good luck, brother; I hope ye ken what yer doin’.” Keira said as she left Aiden’s study.

I hope so too, sister.

Sighing, Aiden finally rose from his desk and went in search of his bride and his other nosy sister. He found them in the bedchamber beside his own. The one traditionally given to the Lady of the castle. The one with a connecting door to his own chamber. Somehow, he never considered the fact that Valorie would be sleeping in this room, one door away from him, for an entire year.

Aiden may very well not survive it.

Opening the door slowly, he found Valorie chatting with Astrid in the sitting room. Astrid rose from her chair immediately when she saw Aiden walk in. Seeming to cut off in the middle of a different conversation, Astrid smiled to Valorie and said, “Aye, well, I better be goin’. Valorie, lovely to chat with ye.” With a stern nod to him, she simply said, “Aiden.”

Both of Aiden’s sisters were displeased with him today, then. Was that a new record? As she passed by him, Astrid whispered harshly, “It’s about time,” scolding Aiden for leaving his betrothed alone for so long. His meddling sisters didn’t know how to leave well enough alone.

Now standing alone with Valorie in her bedchamber, Aiden was unsure how to act. He knew that through the doors behind her lay what would now be Valorie's bed. For some reason that was the only thing Aiden could think about — Valorie sprawled out on that bed, ideally beneath him. Her long waves of hair spread out on the pillow and a happy satisfied look on her face.

Aiden stared at Valorie for far too long, imagining scenes of the two of them together in bed. When he finally forced himself back to the present, Aiden realized Valorie was protectively holding the little beast from yesterday in her arms. Aiden went stiff at the sight of the thing. Why she brought that creature into his home was beyond him.

“Aye, welcome to me castle,” Aiden said gruffly.

“Such a warm welcome, me laird,” Valorie teased.

“I had a lot to attend to this mornin’.”

Valorie laughed, “Of course, I'm sure ye're very busy.” Was she saying it like a joke somehow? Why did everyone think Aiden didn't have things to do? He was in fact the laird of a very powerful clan.

Aiden stood with his arms crossed, leaning against the door frame. Better that he had a quick path to escape because either Valorie or that mutt in her arms might cause him to need a hasty exit. Best not to get too close to either.

Turning serious, Valorie gestured to the chair Astrid had just vacated and said, “Aiden will ye sit?” Well, there went his escape route. Aiden looked at the lass warily — what was her scheme now?

“Aye...” Aiden said, slowly walking through the sitting room and taking the chair

across from Valorie.

“I want to talk to ye about somethin’, but please daenae get upset...” Valorie trailed off, looking at him imploringly.

“I cannae promise that lass,” Aiden said shaking his head, but he saw the sincerity in her lovely eyes and added, “but I’ll try.”

Had Valorie already changed her mind about their fake betrothal? Was she planning to leave? Aiden couldn’t imagine his castle without her now that her presence was here. She had somehow permeated through his home already. He’d probably see and smell her everywhere for weeks. Avoiding the lass’s gaze, Aiden’s eyes trailed the room that would forever be hers in his mind.

“Astrid told me a little bit about your past,” Valorie started slowly. Aiden’s eyes snapped to her, flashing with a little rage and a little fear. He carefully searched her face for what she was thinking but found nothing. Aiden’s hands gripped the armrests of the chair tightly; without that anchor, he surely would have fled the room already.

“Aye... and what did she tell ye?” Aiden asked darkly. He was not ready for Valorie to know this about him; it left him too exposed, too raw, in front of the one person who seemed to already bring out his heightened emotions.

“Nothing specific — she just told me that ye were kidnapped and held for a long time.”

“Ten years to be precise,” Aiden snarled, taking his discomfort out on the lass.

“Aye...” Valorie faltered but took a deep steadying breath and continued, “We daenae need to discuss it any further if ye daenae want, but I just want ye to know that I’m here if ye ever do want someone to talk to.”

Aiden continued to watch Valorie closely for an indication of what she thought about all that his sister had apparently divulged. Valorie gazed at him openly, but Aiden did not find the pity or shock or disgust that he had grown used to seeing.

Despite being kidnapped as a boy, Highlanders had no respect for what they deemed weak, and some believed Aiden's time in captivity had left him as such. Many of his councilors certainly thought so, looking at him like he was some damaged thing.

It had created even more pressure for Aiden to wed as of late. His councilors seemed to think a bride was what Aiden needed to finally be healed of his trauma. Or more likely, everyone who knew about Aiden's past could conveniently forget once Aiden was married with a bairn.

They could once again view him as a strong and traditional laird and not something strange and other. That was apparently a side effect of being tortured and then choosing to remain so isolated.

Valorie, though, merely looked at Aiden with care and kindness. Was she not repulsed by him now? She didn't look it — Valorie looked at him as she always had, less mischievous right now, but her caring eyes still met his.

Maybe he could confide in her — was that an insane thought? Aiden had never really told anyone the details of his captivity. His sisters knew some things, and a few nights, deep in the whiskey, he had confessed a couple of horrors to Flynn, Astrid's husband, but no one knew the extent of his torture.

The time with the wild dogs was only one example of which there were ten whole years' worth. And Myles, his captor, liked to get creative. There were still some things Aiden tried to never think about.

"Aye, thank ye lass. That's good to ken..." Aiden said, trailing off. Now was not the

time to unload all of his trauma on the poor lass, but his initial anger over Astrid breaking his confidence had faded.

Valorie did not have the response he was expecting, so maybe it wasn't so horrible that she knew. They were meant to spend the next year in this castle together, and surely some of Aiden's quirks would be noticeable in that time. Especially by someone with an eye as keen as Valorie.

"I see ye brought that creature into me home," Aiden observed darkly, changing the subject and looking harshly at the gnarly thing.

"Who, Willow? She's just a wee thing," Valorie said, making cooing noises to the animal like it was a sweet bairn.

"Well, ye better train her; I don't want her running loose around the castle," Aiden ordered sharply.

"Aye, me laird, she'll be a perfect angel," Valorie promised.

"Hmph," Aiden grunted, highly doubting that. Anything trained by Valorie would be nothing short of mischievous.

"Just come give her a pat; Willow's a wee thing; she won't hurt ye," Valorie cooed. When Aiden continued to stare at them from his chair, Valorie slowly got up and made her way towards him.

"Lass," Aiden warned. "I don't want to touch that thing." If there was a way for Aiden to back away from them further while staying in his seat, he would have done it.

"Oh, you'll see, she's a sweetheart." Valorie did not stop her slow approach. "Just pet

her head a little bit.”

The lass was persistent, Aiden would give her that. With Valorie and the mutt standing right before him, Aiden tentatively reached a hand out over the beast’s head.

He knew logically that this tiny thing was not the same as the feral dogs who attacked him, but his hand still shook slightly. He quickly ran his hand across the animal’s head. Before he could snap his hand back, the creature gave his hand an excited lick.

The rough feel of the mutt’s tongue on Aiden’s palm caused a small chuckle to release from his mouth. He was laughing — about something a dog had done!

Aiden looked up to Valorie in wonder and saw her already smiling back at him warmly. She was inspecting his face closely, so she surely saw the fear turn to awe. Valorie had given that to him. He held her gaze for several long seconds before clearing his throat and looking away from the pair.

“Well,” Aiden cleared his throat again, “I’ll let ye explore the castle for a while, but I’ll expect ye promptly at dinner tonight.”

Not waiting for a reply, Aiden rose from the chair and left, back to hiding in his study it seemed. In terms of clearing up any confusion that had been a disaster of epic proportions.

### CHAPTER 12

Valorie sat slumped in her chair petting Willow after Aiden left. The day had already been an emotional one, and it was barely midday. Between the goodbye with her parents and everything she had learned about Aiden; Valorie was ready for a rest.

Leaning her head back against the chair, Valorie let her eyes close. She still had not fully processed the news about Aiden, and she wasn't sure she could ever come to terms with something so horrible.

When Astrid had first told her, Valorie's initial feelings were horror and sadness, but thinking about it now, she was angry. How dare someone do that to Aiden? Maybe she should have asked more questions because Valorie could not stand the thought of someone out there, alive, who had hurt Aiden.

She could ride and shoot (better than Aiden, some might say), and when she found out who was responsible, Valorie would certainly be willing to take action.

Who would even think to do something like that? And why? What reason could they have had to hold Aiden for all that time, especially when he was so young? Not really all that tired anymore, Valorie stood and put Willow on the ground.

She needed to release some of this energy somehow, so she began walking the length of the sitting room with Willow following right on her heels.

Aiden's reaction when Valorie confronted him was to be expected. She wasn't sure that she wanted Aiden to know every horrible thing that had ever happened to her



even though there really wasn't even much to tell. But whatever reaction he was expecting Valorie to have was apparently absent, and Valorie watched as he quickly accepted her words. She really did just want to support him in whatever way possible.

Despite the jests, Valorie was also closely watching Aiden during his interaction with Willow, and she could tell he was frightened of her. With the added context today from Astrid and Aiden both, his disgust and fear made a lot more sense. There was probably a very understandable reason for his initial hatred. But Valorie also saw the joy in Aiden's eyes when he felt Willow's tentative lick.

Aiden deserved to have joy in his life again; so much had been stolen from him, and if Valorie couldn't punish the perpetrator, maybe she could find a way to bring some joy back into Aiden's world. Valorie's time here was temporary, but maybe, Willow's didn't have to be.

Pacing her bedchamber with Willow by her side, Valorie planned her best scheme yet. She would train Willow to be the sweetest, most lovable, cuddly little pup ever, and when Valorie left, Aiden would still have Willow here to keep him company.

Valorie would also have to use her time here to warm Aiden up to Willow but if today was any indication, that would not be too difficult. Willow was already worming her way into Aiden's heart, and she knew there was plenty of room in that heart of his for sweet Willow.

Valorie bent down and whispered her promises to the puppy, "Yer goin' to be that laird's new best friend, Willow — if I accomplish one thing in me time here, it's goin' to be that. I think yer goin' to be our laird's favorite Willow, just ye wait." Willow wagged her tail and yipped in answer — good, she was in agreement.

Now, what else could Valorie accomplish in this year for Aiden. She'd probably need to give him riding lessons — a laird with his status should surely be a better rider.

Plus, it would give Valorie an excuse to ride Bluebell more which was never a bad thing.

Maybe Valorie should fill this castle with activity again or encourage Aiden to attend more gatherings. Aiden had kept himself isolated for good reason, but maybe it was time to open the doors a little bit. At Aiden's pace, of course, but Valorie couldn't stand the thought of her laird alone in this castle once their fake betrothal was over.

Valorie would have to talk to Aiden about it though — she didn't want to push him too far too quickly, and besides, it wasn't about her. There was no way for Valorie to understand what Aiden had suffered, and maybe a castle full of people was worse for him than the alternative. But Valorie would still do everything in her power to leave Aiden and his home better than she had found it this morning.

Towards that new goal, Valorie spent some time with Willow, practicing some basic training and tricks. Aiden would want a dog he could show off a little, and Valorie would make Willow so perfect for Aiden that he could not refuse.

"Willow," Valorie said to the little puppy, "what do ye say we go and find our missing laird, eh? Maybe show off a little?" Willow enthusiastically jumped up on Valorie's legs with her tail wagging. Even on hind legs, she still only reached Valorie's shins.

"I knew he was yer favorite," Valorie said. "Well come on then; let's go look for him."

Valorie and Willow strolled through the castle until they found the door to Aiden's study. The pair waited in a side corridor until a servant came and brought lunch to Aiden. With the scent of the food wafting by them, it was easy to encourage Willow to follow the servant right into Aiden's study.

“Valorie!” She heard Aiden bellow a few seconds later. Giggling to herself, Valorie hurried off towards the study door as well. As soon as she entered the room, she turned her face to the best frantic look she could pull off.

“Oh, there ye are Willow!” Valorie exclaimed, reaching down to pick up the puppy as she attempted to climb up Aiden’s legs and into his lap. Standing back with Willow in her arms, Valorie faced Aiden.

“I’m sorry, me laird, we were just walkin’ by, and she must have caught a whiff of your food. She ran right in here!”

“Aye, I’m sure,” Aiden said, looking at them both with suspicion. “I do believe I told ye she needed to be trained,” he added.

“Ye did, and we’ve been workin’ on it all mornin’!” Valorie exclaimed brightly. “Would ye like to see?”

Without waiting for a response from Aiden since she had a good feeling she knew what his answer would be, Valorie grabbed a piece of chicken off his plate.

“Come on, don’t let me down now Willow,” Valorie whispered to the puppy as she placed her back on the ground. Valorie held the chicken up enticingly to the little dog.

“Willow, sit,” Valorie commanded, sneaking a glance at Aiden. He was glaring at the piece of chicken in her hand. Maybe she shouldn’t have snatched it off his plate like that...

Thankfully, their little bit of practice paid off, and Willow sat beautifully. “Good girl, Willow!” Valorie cooed, giving the dog about half of the chicken she’d stolen. She turned to Aiden with a huge smile. “See, we are training!”

“I wanted it leave me alone or at the very least learn how to hunt; I daenae care if the thing can sit, lass,” Aiden said looking exasperated already; Valorie was undeterred.

“We are just startin’ out, me laird; daenae worry. She’ll be the best puppy ever. Plus, we’ve got another one.”

“Willow, lay down,” Valorie’s fingers on her free hand were crossed tightly behind her back with this one; Willow was not very successful at lay down.

Amazingly, the little pup made her way to the laying down position, “Oh that’s a very good girl, Willow,” Valorie said, bending down to give her some pets and feed her the last of the chicken.

As Valorie was about to lift Willow back up, she swore she saw the hint of a smile on Aiden’s face. But as soon as she rose with Willow in her arms, it was gone.

“Aye, she’s very accomplished; can I get back to work now?” Aiden asked.

“Of course, we’ll just be on our way. Enjoy your afternoon, me laird.” Valorie replied, strolling back out of Aiden’s office. She was considering the whole thing a success.

These early stages would be all about exposure — she just needed to put Willow in front of Aiden enough times until he was comfortable, and then surely it would be easy from there.

Valorie took a winding way back to her bedchambers because now seemed as good a time as any to start exploring her new home. The whole while, Valorie tried desperately not to think about leaving Willow... or Aiden behind. Already, she was struggling to picture her life without the two of them. How would she feel after a year?

\* \* \*

Back alone in his study once more, Aiden poured himself a tall glass of whiskey. He was not usually one to imbibe midday, but already, he needed a reprieve. The morning was a whirlwind to say the least.

Day one of Valorie in his castle and Aiden was feeling more emotions than ever: fear, lust, joy, anger, wonder, lust again, nervousness, amusement, and lust again.

He'd been prepared for a fight when Valorie brought up his capture, but he was not expecting her kindness or the wonder he found with Willow. Nor was he expecting his reaction just now to their little interlude. The whole thing with the beast smelled of a scheme, but that was the best part.

Lust, however, was becoming unavoidable around the lass. No matter what they were doing or discussing, it was simmering beneath the surface.

In between comments about his kidnapping, Aiden was still noticing the way the plush red chairs in Valorie's new sitting room were offsetting her green eyes wonderfully. While she was focused on the mutt, Aiden was watching her push a stray lock of her wavy hair out of her face.

There seemed to be no helping the way he focused on Valorie. Aiden already knew that in a crowd full of dancers, his gaze would find Valorie, so was it any wonder that when it was just the two of them, his eyes never left her.

Even here, sitting in his office, he was seeing images of Valorie in his mind's eye. Valorie speeding through the woods on her horse, Valorie pulling the string on her bow tight. Valorie spinning joyously on the dance floor. It was all Valorie, Valorie, Valorie.

Leaning his elbows on the desk, Aiden let his head fall into his hands. What was happening to him? He was never this distracted.

Aiden looked up from his hands as the door to his study swung open for the second time today. Flynn, Astrid's husband, now waltzed into the room.

Was everyone in his family planning to stop by today? Should he prepare to have his mother for dinner? Aiden raised his eyebrows at Flynn, who casually took the seat across from him. At least this was already better than Keira's combative stance.

"Can I get one of those?" Flynn asked, gesturing to the whiskey in Aiden's hand. Maybe this wouldn't be bad after all.

Aiden nodded and poured Flynn an equally large cup of whiskey. Flynn took a long drink, nearly downing the liquid in one go. So, this was going to be that kind of conversation, then.

"My wife sent me over as soon as she returned home to our castle," Flynn said with a heavy sigh. "Mind tellin' me why she was so insistent I needed to come over?" he asked.

Aiden too took a hearty sip of the whiskey. This family was going to be the death of him.

"Presumably, it has to do with the lass around here somewhere," Aiden suggested vaguely.

Thoughtfully, Flynn nodded. People often saw only his grumpy persona, but there was a lot of care behind the brooding. "Aye, I would say that is a fair assumption. Why don't ye tell me about her?"

“Valorie?”

“If that’s the woman yer now betrothed to, aye, that’s a good start,” Flynn quipped. Aiden paused; how could he explain Valorie to someone who didn’t know her?

She was a study in contrasts — mischievous and strong but kind and caring, funny and playful but equally serious and intelligent; she was the most dynamic person Aiden had ever met.

“Valorie is... fierce,” Aiden started; it seemed the truest descriptor of the lass. “She’s got a mind more cunnin’ than most of the men leading me troops. Shoots straighter than em’ too,” he laughed, thinking again of their archery competition.

“Everyone talks about her independence and confidence like it’s a bad thing, but I tend to like that about her. She’s all things light and good — funny, kind, absolutely bonnie, obviously...” Aiden trailed off; he needed more whiskey. Pouring both of them another hearty glass, Aiden relaxed back in his desk chair.

“She sounds great, Aiden,” Flynn replied with an amused smile; none of this was amusing to Aiden.

“So why were ye apparently hidin’ from her this mornin’? Astrid came home talkin’ about how ye brought the poor woman here and then abandoned her on her first day. Ye didn’t even greet her parents? The laird that yer supposedly in an alliance with now? And why are ye in here hidin’ from her now?” Flynn asked looking pointedly at Aiden and around at the study.

“Has everyone forgotten that I run this clan?” Aiden asked, exasperated with this assumption again. How did they think anything got done around here?

“Are ye in here workin’, then?” Flynn asked, looking at the whiskey and the lack of

anything else in front of Aiden.

“Nay,” Aiden admitted with a weary sigh. “It’s not like I don’t have things to do though.”

Flynn prodded, “So?”

Releasing the heaviest sigh yet, Aiden confessed to the one person who knew the most about his past.

“Ye ken me, Flynn; ye ken what happened. What could I possibly have to offer a woman like that? A woman so soaked in light when I’m so steeped in darkness. I would just be draggin’ her down with me. Valorie deserves far more than me.”

Flynn stared back at him with his eyebrows harshly pinched together and his lips pursed, looking at Aiden like he was the biggest dobber he’d ever met in his life. Aiden had never seen Flynn look at anyone like that before.

“That’s a load of shite, Aiden,” Flynn growled furiously.

“It’s nae!” Aiden protested. “Besides I’d never be able to properly protect the lass; I couldnae even protect meself! Ye had to rescue me in case ye had forgotten!” Aiden exclaimed.

“That’s not somethin’ I’ll ever forget,” Flynn said, looking imploringly at Aiden. “But ye were a boy, Aiden!” Flynn roared at him. “Myles took ye when ye were a boy,” he restated more calmly. “There was nothin’ ye could have done differently. He was an evil man who outsmarted everyone for years — Ye were not to blame, Aiden,” Flynn concluded fiercely.

“And another thing,” Flynn continued before Aiden could argue all of those points. “I



have never met anyone with more to offer someone. Ye cannae see yerself clearly, Aiden. Ye have a lot of room in yer heart; ye should let someone in.”

Was it really that simple?

### CHAPTER 13

“Miss, there’s a Margaret here to see ye,” one of the servants said, finding Valorie later in the castle’s library. She had been exploring the castle this afternoon after her little visit with Aiden and Willow. Aiden must have stayed holed up in his study because Valorie had been everywhere, and she had not seen him since.

Since Aiden did not deign to give her a tour, Valorie took it upon herself to thoroughly wander and search each room. She had found many interesting things, but this library was probably her favorite.

Hundreds of volumes — in various languages and topics — filled the bookshelves around her. The walls were a lovely deep green, and comfortable, luxurious, chairs filled the room — perfect to read in. Valorie would definitely be spending a good amount of the next year in this room.

“Oh Margaret! Wonderful — yes, we can have tea in here?” The last bit came out a little like a question, and Valorie chastised herself for the uncertainty. She knew better than to allow any doubt to show, especially now as the supposed Lady of the castle.

“Aye, of course. I’ll bring her here and get some tea for ye both,” the servant said. Valorie would need to learn their names as soon as possible.

“Thank ye!” Valorie called to the retreating servant. The library was not a typical receiving room for guests, but Margaret almost certainly was not here on clan business.

“So, another betrothal then?” Margaret joked a few minutes later as she entered the library. The young woman had her eyebrows raised and a slight smile on her face.

“Aye,” Valorie laughed. “How did ye find me anyway?”

“I called on ye at home, and yer mother told me where ye were — so I just took the carriage here instead!”

Valorie laughed again “Well, here I am! Come sit!” Margaret made her way into the library and took a seat in the wide chair across from Valorie, making herself comfortable. The two women had bonded over a shared love of literature, and Valorie watched as Margaret eyed the shelves eagerly.

“Ye’ve certainly found the best room in the castle,” Margaret commented, her eyes still tracing the titles around the room.

Valorie too looked around the room dreamily. “Aye, and on me first day too — I’ve already seen at least ten new titles that I’m dying to get started on.”

“Ye will have to pass along any worthy ones.”

“Of course,” Valorie promised. The two of them continued chatting about the last shared book they had read before Margaret got to the topic she was clearly dying to discuss.

“So — the Laird O’Donnely, eh?” Margaret asked meaningfully as the servant came back to pour them both some tea and set out a few small biscuits to enjoy. Valorie waited patiently for the servant to finish before responding. Everything she said in the presence of the servants was liable to get back to Aiden, at least until they knew her better.

“Aye, Aiden,” Valorie answered after the door to the library closed behind the servant.

“So, what is he like?” Margaret grinned excitedly; she was leaning forward in her seat and looking at Valorie with wide eyes. Clearly there was a lot of interest in information about the mysterious and feared Laird O’Donnely. Valorie could just imagine the other women dying to know more about Aiden — he was obviously handsome, but so few people knew anything about him, aside from his reputation, which only increased their interest. He was the perfect mystery man.

Valorie took a slow sip of her tea, dunking the biscuit a few times, leaving Margaret in suspense. Finally, she cracked a wide smile and began to tell Margaret all about Aiden.

“He was brooding and serious of course, but only at the beginnin’. The fearsome and cruel reputation seems mainly to be idle gossip,” Valorie said conspiratorially.

“With me, he’s been playful and funny. At me Faither’s castle, we spent the day jokin’ and competin’ with each other. Even when he was bein’ utterly loathsome, as he often was, I was still havin’ fun. Can ye believe that? With a laird?” Valorie laughed.

“He’s very smart, and he cares so much about his clan — that was obvious, oh and his laugh! His laugh is amazin’ if ye can get him to laugh, it’s a wonderful sound...” Valorie trailed off when she looked up to see Margaret was now sitting back in her chair, her mouth hanging open.

Valorie cleared her throat a little and said, “I mean, he’s tall and very handsome, of course...” Was that the more appropriate answer? Everything else seemed far more important to Valorie.

“Right,” Margaret paused. “He sounds wonderful, Valorie, really... I was just surprised is all. We are talkin’ about the same man right... Laird O’Donnely?” Margaret asked with a nervous chuckle.

“Aye, Laird O’Donnely, Aiden — He is nae the ruthless or vindictive man that everyone makes him out to be!” Valorie said fiercely.

“I’ve just heard a lot of stories...” Margaret started.

“Aye and they were just that — stories! I’m sure ye’ve heard plenty of stories about me as well!” Valorie argued harshly.

“I certainly have, and they were all true,” Margaret teased.

“Well, they are nae true about Aiden, and ye should really get to ken someone before making assumptions.” Valorie huffed with finality.

“Aye, ye’re right, Valorie. I really was just shocked is all. But ye’re right; I’m sorry,” Margaret apologized, looking at Valorie sincerely.

“It’s all right, Margaret.” The pair sat in a companionable silence after that, drinking their tea. Valorie’s anger had faded with her friend’s apology. She needed to remember too that no one knew Aiden the way she did. Prior to their day together, Valorie had all the same thoughts about the mysterious Laird O’Donnely.

“Ye ken — I’ve never heard ye talk about anyone the way ye talked about Aiden. Actually, I don’t think I’ve ever heard ye so passionate about anythin’ except maybe yer independence!” Margaret noted with a laugh, breaking the silence.

“Aye...” Valorie was unsure what to say; she hadn’t entirely meant to make it so obvious to Margaret what she thought about Aiden, but once she started talking

everything seemed to flow out quite quickly.

It was the first time she had really been able to talk to someone else about Aiden, and there was just so much about Aiden that everyone should know.

“Ye seem happier here though,” Margaret continued, saving Valorie from having to stutter out another response.

“Do I?” Valorie asked curiously.

“Aye, I didn’t see ye with yer first betrothed but at Kenneth’s, at least, ye seemed like ye were lookin’ for a way out. Ye seem... at peace here.”

Did Valorie feel peaceful here? She definitely didn’t feel trapped the way she had with her other betrotheds, but that was probably because she already had an exit plan with Aiden. There was no need to feel trapped when it was only a fake betrothal. That was likely what Margaret was picking up on.

“Mhmm, I like it here,” Valorie answered honestly.

“Will we actually get a weddin’ this time?” Margaret joked.

Valorie did not want to lie to her friend, but she knew this was one secret she needed to keep. So, she laughed good naturedly and said, “It certainly seems that way. Now, tell me what I missed at the feast last night; I’ve been dying to hear about it!”

With the attention finally off Valorie, she relaxed into her chair with her warm cup of tea as Margaret regaled her with all the stories and gossip from the night before. Thankfully, Margaret required very little input from Valorie because she was hardly listening. Fiddling with her teacup, all Valorie could think about was Margaret’s comments.

Was she happy here?

\* \* \*

Aiden couldn't believe this was where he found himself. Standing outside his own library with his ear pressed to the door. The irony was not lost on him that he was now in the exact position he teased Valorie for not that long ago. Now, he was on the outside of a conversation he desperately wanted to hear.

Flynn's words were rattling around in Aiden's head, and he decided he needed to see Valorie. He had come searching for her when he heard her chatting with another young woman.

He was planning on going in, he really was, but then he heard the other woman ask Valorie what she thought of him. And it seemed like the perfect way to clear up everything he was confused about.

If he knew what Valorie thought of him or their kiss, then he could proceed accordingly. Maybe it didn't even matter that Aiden couldn't stop thinking of the lass or that he was desperate to have her back in his arms. If she wasn't feeling like this, Aiden had to know.

Aiden heard bits and pieces of Valorie's response, "He was brooding and serious... with me he's been playful and funny... we spent the day jokin' and competin'... I was still havin' fun... he cares so much about his clan... His laugh is amazin'..."

So, Valorie thought he had a nice laugh? Aiden had never given a lot of thought to whether it was nice or not, considering he never used to hear it.

That first night on the balcony his laugh was rough from the lack of use, but being around Valorie gave him a lot of practice. Aiden did not expect the lass to speak so

highly of him, but even more shocking was what he heard next.

Valorie was... defending Aiden to her friend. Quite fiercely and loudly in fact. That same ire that had been directed at Aiden only a day ago was now in defense of him.

Her friend was commenting on all of Aiden's less than desirable traits, at least the ones he was known for, and Valorie was vehemently opposing her. Hearing it filled Aiden's chest with a warm glow. One that he hadn't felt since he was a boy.

Having the lass on his side as opposed to against him was... unexpected, but Aiden desperately wanted to keep Valorie there. She was a force to be reckoned with, so it was no wonder that her friend backed down and apologized quickly.

The two women sat in silence for a while, and Aiden thought the conversation might be over, but then he heard Valorie's friend again. She must have been closer to the door because Aiden could hear her a lot clearer.

"Ye seem happier here though," the woman commented, but Valorie's response was muffled. "Aye, I didn't see ye with yer first betrothed, but at Kenneth's, at least, ye seemed like ye were lookin' for a way out. Ye seem... at peace here," the woman continued saying to Valorie.

Aiden took a step away from the door in surprise. Was Valorie already happy here? Could he possibly make this luminous woman happy? He needed to hear if Valorie responded, so he quickly pressed his ear back to the wood in time to hear Valorie say, "Mhmm, I like it here."

The other woman joked about whether there would be a wedding this time around, and Aiden listened raptly for the answer.

"It certainly seems that way," Valorie said laughing before she changed the subject



back to Highland gossip.

It certainly seems that way. Was Valorie simply continuing their ruse? Everything else the lass had said to her friend had seemed passionate and pulled out of her, like she was speaking from the heart. Was this true as well then? Did Valorie see them actually getting married?

Aiden was reeling from everything he had overheard when one of his servants approached the library door with a smile.

“Do ye need anythin’, me laird?” the young man asked, still with a bright smile.

“No, no, I’m just passin’ by,” Aiden said coughing lightly. Now the servants would all be talking about Aiden eavesdropping on his betrothed. Great.

Aiden quickly took off down the hallway. Maybe he could get Flynn to come back — there was so much more to consider now.

### CHAPTER 14

After spending the afternoon chatting with Margaret, Valorie was now “expected at dinner” shortly according to her betrothed. Margaret had left a little while ago, and Valorie returned to her bedchambers to prepare for dinner. As she made her way down the long hallway, she overheard two of the servants cleaning up in Aiden’s room.

“Aye, he was standin’ right outside the library with his ear to the door!” one of the male servants said.

“Nay, he wasnae,” came the voice of the young woman assigned to Valorie.

“I saw him meself! He was out there smilin’ to himself when I walked up. And then he made up some excuse about just passin’ by, but he was definitely listenin’ in...”

Not wanting to be the one caught eavesdropping this time, Valorie quietly continued past Aiden’s room into her own, wearing a large smile.

So, me laird was listenin’ in on us — very interestin’.

Maybe Aiden was not nearly as unaffected as he seemed. He kept leaving her alone, but why had he sought her out this afternoon, and why did he listen at the door instead of just coming into the room? It was his castle after all; he could have certainly made use of his library if he wanted.

Valorie mulled over this as she went to bathe for dinner. The bathing chambers

attached to her rooms had a large copper tub, and the young maid had thankfully already prepared hot water for her.

Valorie sighed in pleasure as she stepped into the hot water. The full day she had already experienced weighed heavy on her body and mind. Her head leaned against the rim of the tub, and her eyes closed as Valorie relaxed.

What is Aiden doin'? Valorie wondered, unbidden.

Was he also preparing for dinner? Dressing in something sharp to impress her? Maybe he was also bathing — only one room away from her. And once she had that thought, Valorie could not stop picturing it.

What was Aiden like in the bath? Would he be efficient and speed through the process — soaping himself up quickly and rising from the tub? Or would he take the time to luxuriate and let the day's worries wash off of him?

Aiden was definitely the type to speed through it, Valorie decided. He was far too practical to soak away. But she could probably get him to relax.

The two of them could easily fit in this tub with Aiden at her back. Instead of the lip of the tub, she could lean her head against his strong chest. As she washed herself, Valorie imagined it was Aiden's hands on her skin, taking his time to clean her, dropping soft kisses against her throat and neck as he did so.

Where were these thoughts coming from? Valorie shook them from her mind — Aiden was dangerously ingraining himself in her thoughts, and she needed a clear head for this dinner.

Valorie rose from the bath and returned to her bedchambers where the young maid was waiting to help her dress for dinner. The woman was kind but unfamiliar and

made Valorie miss Skye and the rest of the servants at home.

Valorie had picked out her favorite dress for the night. The skirts were the perfect green color to match her eyes, and the bust fit her curves beautifully.

The thing that she hoped would really catch Aiden's attention was the surprise that Astrid had gifted her this morning. Astrid had brought with her an old sash in their family clan's tartan.

Valorie planned to wear it over her left shoulder, secured with her finest amber brooch, in the traditional way that the wife of a clan chieftain often wore one. Valorie was giddy thinking about Aiden's face when he saw it on her.

The time before dinner dragged on between dressing and primping, but Valorie spent her time thinking about all that had happened that day. Margaret had provided some interesting gossip, but still, the only thing Valorie was thinking about was Aiden.

What had he been doing all day after she saw him? She longed to just be by his side again. Valore had... missed him today, and that was a terrifying realization. Never before had a man had such an impact on her mood, but Valorie was slightly more melancholy today without Aiden.

Finally ready for the evening, Valorie stood in front of the ornate round mirror in her dressing chamber, admiring her maid's handiwork. Aiden would surely be in a state when he saw her.

"Ye look beautiful, me lady," the young maid said from behind her. They had barely spoken throughout getting ready with Valorie's thoughts so consumed, but she planned to rectify that over the next year. Valorie would need some form of connection here, especially if Aiden planned to leave her to her lonesome each day.

“Thank ye, and please, call me Valorie,” Valorie gently told the woman... again.

“Aye, me lady. We are all just so happy that Laird O’Donnely has finally brought a lady here!” the young woman exclaimed. “The castle is in desperate need of some warmth, and the laird always looks so lonely. The tartan looks especially lovely on ye; he’ll be very excited to see ye in it, I’m sure.”

Before she got to know him, Valorie would never have called Aiden lonely. Surely no one who heard the stories about the callous Laird O’Donnely would ever think such a thing either. But now, spending the day in his castle, it seemed that the mysterious and feared laird was really just alone.

Still, Valorie felt another round of guilt at the maid’s excitement. How would everyone feel when their betrothal ultimately ended? Everyone she met today had been thrilled about the betrothal, but what about when she left? Valorie was used to being the villain who ended betrothals, but this deceit felt somehow worse. Staying true to herself and her dreams was one thing, but pretending to be happily betrothed when she had no real plans to get married was something else entirely.

There was nothing to be done tonight though. For the time being, they had made their choice, so Valorie just forced a smile on her face as she dismissed the young woman.

Playing with her hair nervously, Valorie made her way to the dining room for her first official dinner with Laird O’Donnely. She had chosen to wear her hair in loose waves down her back with a simple decorative hair pin holding a few pieces back.

Is this an appropriate hairstyle for dinner? And what about the tartan — will Aiden think it is too much? We were only pretending to be betrothed after all...

Valorie rarely fretted over these sorts of decisions, but everything felt off-kilter right now, not seeing Aiden since this morning was causing her to overthink every one of

their interactions. He was so hot and cold with her that Valorie had no idea what to expect from this dinner with Aiden.

So much had happened since she last saw him, and even more had occurred since she arrived. Between learning about Aiden's trauma, Margaret's visit, and Aiden's apparent eavesdropping, and then, of course, the ever-present memory of their kiss — Valorie was feeling incredibly self-conscious. There were so many unanswered questions and unresolved feelings between the two of them.

Had Valorie ever felt so conflicted about anything? Certainly, neither of her other betrotheds ever had her feeling this way — like she wanted to either be consumed by them or to escape completely.

Unsure of what awaited her in the dining room, Valorie opened the door carefully. Already seated at the long table was Aiden. He was somehow more handsome than ever. Aiden's eyes snapped to Valorie the minute the door creaked open. Candles on the table illuminated his sharp face, adding to his allure.

Will he kiss me again? Another unbidden thought came, the moment Valorie saw Aiden.

Looking at Aiden's face in that moment, it seemed inevitable. They were two forces being inexplicably drawn together. The air between them was ripe with tension as she drew closer towards him.

\* \* \*

Aiden folded and refolded the cloth napkin in his lap three times before he finally heard the door to the dining room opening. His head snapped up immediately with the sound. With the sharpest focus, he watched as Valorie strolled into the dining room. She was breathtaking tonight.

The front pieces of Valorie's hair were pulled back, revealing her beautiful face in full to Aiden, and she wore an elaborate green dress that highlighted the green of her eyes. She walked into the room, standing tall and proud with all the grace of a dancer.

Was that his clan's tartan draped across her shoulder? She looked absolutely perfect wearing his pattern. Especially when she wore it the way a laird's wife traditionally did as she had done tonight. Aiden wouldn't dig into why he wanted to see her in that sash every day, but he most definitely did. Ideally only that sash and nothing else.

The picture of Valorie in his bed, his tartan across one shoulder but otherwise bare, was now permanently seared into Aiden's mind. He would make it his mission to see that sight for real one day.

Aiden's mouth was suddenly very dry despite the ridiculous amount of swallowing he was doing. He reached for the glass of whiskey on the table and took a hearty sip. Of course, Valorie had noticed and was laughing lightly as she took the seat right next to him.

"Are ye all right, me laird?" she asked with a sly smile.

"Nay, I think ye stopped me heart just now, lass." Now it was Valorie's turn to be embarrassed; she dropped her gaze, and her cheeks heated with the compliment.

"Ye look beautiful, Val, really," Aiden continued. He reached out slowly with one hand and lifted her chin to raise her gaze. She met his stare unflinchingly, no longer looking shy at all.

Dinner was already taking a dangerous turn; Aiden needed to refocus, but that damn sash!

"I heard ye had a friend visitin' today," Aiden said, changing the subject before he

did something rash at the dinner table.

“Aye, me friend Margaret,” Valorie paused before laughing. “Hear anythin’ interestin’?” Valorie asked, turning Aiden’s own words from her father’s house back on him.

Aiden nearly spat out his whiskey, and despite his best efforts, he still ended up coughing uncontrollably. The whole while, Valorie looked on and laughed her brilliant laugh. Well two could play that game. Finally getting a handle on the coughing fit, Aiden looked at Valorie mischievously.

“Aye, I did in fact.” Aiden’s smile widened. “Somethin’ about a wonderful laugh? And overall, what a great laird I am — Did I hear somethin’ about my rugged good looks as well? Honestly, I was quite flattered lass; ye dinnae need to speak so highly of me.”

Aiden watched again as Valorie’s face once again heated to that beautiful pink color. He could go on, but for some reason he didn’t want to joke about Valorie defending him to her friend. That felt too monumental to make light of, so he kept those words to himself. Aiden would always have them to turn to in his mind, but he would not tease Valorie for them.

Of course, the lass was not one to back down from a taunt, so she quipped back, “Mmm, I dinnae know lairds such as ye resorted to eavesdropping on idle gossip.”

“Nothin’ ye’ve ever said has been idle gossip, lass,” Aiden said seriously, dropping the jest. He hung on every word out of her lips; Valorie could be talking about counting grains of rice, and he would be entranced.

“Ye obviously didn’t stick around to hear the rest of our conversation then,” Valorie laughed. She seemed eager to change the topic once again, so Aiden followed her



lead. He would follow her anywhere, so letting her lead a conversation was no bother.

“Aye, did yer friend have any scandalous news to share?” Aiden asked.

“Nothin’ as scandalous as our betrothal of course,” Valorie confided.

Laughing again, Aiden joked, “We are quite the pair, the cruelest laird and the fickle lass.” Valorie eyes found his and turned serious.

“I don’t think yer cruel at all, ye ken.”

“Aye, I ken, and I don’t think yer fickle,” Aiden responded, equally as serious. Valorie’s independence had been skewed by the rest of their community into something wrong and reprehensible, and Aiden’s fear and isolation had been warped into cruelty.

Although, honestly, Aiden had encouraged his reputation over the years. When the situation called for it, he could be cruel and ruthless. And other times, he simply did not want to deal with the whining of other lairds. Silence or a well-timed eyebrow raise often got his point across, and the point was that he did not like people, well most people. Valorie had proved him wrong there.

The best part about his reputation by far was that it kept people away from him. Other lairds did fear him either because they misinterpreted his silence for violence or because Aiden had taught them a lesson at one point. But regardless of the reason, it kept Aiden isolated and more importantly, protected. People were far less likely to go against Aiden when they feared him so heavily.

“Hmm, well as long as that’s cleared up,” Valorie said nervously.

“Aye, so how do ye ken Margaret,” Aiden asked. He had no interest in continuing

their conversation, lest Valorie realize how much of his reputation was born out of his fear or how much of it was actually true.

“Oh, I started seeing her at feasts not too long ago, and we quickly became friends when I found her readin’ in the back room one night. She’s Laird McMurray’s daughter,” Valorie explained.

“I ken of him; not one of the closest clans, so I don’t correspond with him regularly. Although, I do think there was a marriage proposal thrown around at some point,” Aiden replied, watching closely for Valorie’s reaction. Aiden was deeply curious to know how truthful Valorie had been earlier when talking to Margaret.

Would she be jealous now? Annoyingly for Aiden, Valorie’s only reaction was the slightest tensing of her jaw; if he did not have her facial movement practically memorized, he would not have noticed it.

“Oh, aye I’m sure ye get lots offers being the charming laird ye are,” Valorie joked, hiding any jealousy well. Aiden still couldn’t be sure.

“Oh, so we can add charming to the list of me many attributes, then. I’m glad there’s so many things ye like, Val.”

Valorie’s warm laugh filled the room again, and Aiden wanted to immerse himself in the sound. He would make it his other mission to hear that sound as often as possible.

Lightness and joy followed Valorie, and now, his home was brimming with it. It was such a departure from the normal silence that the sound echoed throughout the dining room.

Before Aiden could beg Valorie to just keep laughing, the servants brought out a modest meal for the pair. There was plenty of food to spare, but Aiden hated waste.

Almost immediately after the food was set down, Aiden dug in, quickly eating large bites of his stew without thinking. When his bowl was completely empty, he set down his utensil and looked up to find Valorie watching him carefully.

Aiden looked at her, and then quickly down to her still full bowl of stew. In the time it had taken him to finish the meal, she maybe had eaten three bites of hers. Aiden avoided her gaze, fiddling again with his napkin.

Clearing his throat a few times, he attempted to explain with a forced laugh, “I must have been starved; someone fed my lunch to the mutt.”

“That’s all right; I’m just bein’ slow,” Valorie said with a light chuckle that felt equally false. Aiden wanted her full laugh back.

Aiden released a heavy sigh and laid his hand on top of Valorie’s on the table; it was as much for her as it was for him. With her touch settling something in him, Aiden began to speak, but he kept his gaze firmly on the napkin in his lap.

“When I was being held,” another long exhale, “Myles, that’s who captured me, never adhered to a strict meal schedule. Sometimes I was regularly fed and other times not for days. Myles also loved to bring food down and eat it all, just outside my cell.” Aiden paused to look up at Valorie. He was unable to hold her eyes during his confession, but he needed to see her face now.

Valorie was staring at him with kindness and understanding; Aiden searched her face thoroughly and her body language as well. He did not detect a hint of disgust or worse, pity.

“Sometimes, if I’m not remindin’ myself to slow down, I eat very quickly...” Aiden trailed off — that felt like enough revelations for now, Valorie could certainly connect the dots.

Valorie smiled at him, not her usual bright smile but a comforting one. A smile that told Aiden she was here, and she supported him. At least, that's how it felt to Aiden.

"That was very brave of ye to tell me," Valorie started. Aiden didn't feel brave at all; he was bitter and nervous when he thought about his trauma usually. Sometimes he hated the way Myles still had a hold on him. Even in death, he was influencing Aiden. He was not in that cage anymore, but the bars still held him back.

With Valorie's hand still under his, though, Aiden thought maybe he could do anything. Aiden hadn't felt that unbridled confidence since before he was taken, but Valorie filled him with a light airy feeling that had Aiden believing he was invincible. And that was the scariest thought of all.

### CHAPTER 15

“This is yer home Aiden, so I daenae want ye to feel like ye need to be or act a certain way,” Valorie continued after a fairly long pause. She had so many feelings she wanted to express to Aiden that she was struggling to put them into words. Her first thought was clear though. Aiden was a survivor, and the strength of his character was unmatched.

“I’m never goin’ to ken every way ye’ve been impacted, but I am here for ye for whatever ye need. If there are ways that I can help ye or if ye just want someone else to ken, I’m here.” There was so much more to say, but Valorie started there.

“Thank ye lass. With this, I think it’s just nice that ye understand.” Aiden took another deep breath. “With me family, I ken that they feel some guilt for all the time spent captured. I daenae blame them at all; Myles was masterful in his plans, and I was reckless, but I try to keep some of these things from them. The energy it takes to hide my new habits, shall we call them, is...drainin’.”

“I don’t want ye to hide from me,” Valorie whispered. For some reason this moment felt sacred, and Valorie wanted to give it the respect it deserved. “I want ye to be yerself.”

Valorie resumed eating her stew while Aiden watched her contemplatively.

“Aye, that’s a relief Val; thank ye,” Aiden said openly.

Pleased with that result, Valorie smiled into her stew. At the very least, Aiden would

hopefully be able to be himself over this next year. But she chastised herself for not thinking about what her presence in his castle would mean for him. It was obvious that he was used to being by himself, and even if he was lonely, he was comfortable that way.

Valorie's presence could very well disrupt that careful comfort he had created for himself. Aiden had told her, clearly and firmly, he did not want to get married. No matter what she was feeling, or the confusion caused by their kiss and Aiden's lingering looks, he had never wavered from that.

For both their sakes, they needed to stick to the plan. Even with Valorie's reassurances, while she was here, Aiden would never have the same level of comfort that he experienced when he was alone. And Valorie would never have her freedom. Valorie needed to get them both back on track.

In the long silence that followed, Valorie contemplated all she had learned. Aiden was more complex than she had ever imagined, and no matter what he said, he was still healing. And if solitude was really what he needed for that, then that's what Valorie would give him.

She would scrap her idea to fill this castle with people and stay the course of their fake betrothal. Hopefully her time spent disturbing him would not be too detrimental.

Finishing up her stew, Valorie slowly placed her utensil down and fully maneuvered to face Aiden next to her. She wanted to see his face as she said this next bit.

"We'll have to be clever with how we end the betrothal without anyone knowin' the truth. My faither cannae ken what really happened. I'm sure ye feel the same about yer council. Maybe..."

"Do ye hate me so much ye cannae stand the thought of bein' married to me?" Aiden

asked sharply, leaning closer to Valorie as he cut her off. Valorie withdrew her head quickly in confusion.

What was Aiden talking about? This was his plan, and he made it clear that he wanted to be alone at the end of it. He brought her here on the very clear plan that this betrothal was fake; Valorie suspected she was perfect for his purposes for that very reason.

Already twice-betrothed Valorie Grant was not who you went to with a serious marriage proposal. And Aiden Wright thrived on solitude. They were not to be married at the end of this.

“I daenae understand, Aiden. I thought ye dinnae want to be married? I thought ye liked bein’ alone! This was yer idea!” Valorie huffed. “Ye can’t just change the deal without talkin’ to me — we were supposed to be in this together,” Valorie said, exasperated with the back and forth from Aiden.

When it came down to it, was it any shock that Aiden was trying to make decisions for her again? Here she was again, waiting outside the door of her own life. She deserved a say in this decision — it was her life too after all.

Aiden was vibrating next to her with some mix of emotion that Valorie couldn’t clearly read.

“I can always change me mind,” Aiden roared. With one quick sweeping motion, he sent all the dishes on the table scattering to the floor. The ceramic broke loudly the minute it hit the floor — Valorie watched as small pieces were flung throughout the room. At least, they were both thorough in finishing their stew.

Aiden was standing over her now, not once looking at the mess he had made but only watching Valorie. Valorie refocused on him. Her heart kicked up angrily in her chest

like a racing horse, and there was something else too.

Something that only Aiden brought out in her. Something uncontrolled and primal. But still she felt no fear — never fear around Aiden. Not when he'd already proven himself to be a protector above all else.

The tight leash Aiden held on his control was snapping again, but since the result was so delicious last time Valorie thought she might like to let it happen again. So, she just stared back at him, not saying a word. Aiden didn't seem to need any taunting from her this time to make his move.

"I might want ye as me wife," Aiden announced before reaching down to grab Valorie's hips. With strong arms, Aiden lifted her from her seat and placed her on the table in front of him. Aiden now stood between her splayed legs. Heat crept up her face and neck from the vulnerable position.

"I might want to take ye right on this table," Aiden growled, surging to meet her equally desperate mouth. They connected passionately, harshly, angrily — the explosion of another heated argument and the spillover of their unresolved tension.

Aiden's hands still held her tightly around the hips, encouraging Valorie to grind her hips against him. She complied readily. Aiden pulled back roughly, expelling a heavy breath. Before Valorie could question him, he cradled her neck to bring her head to the side, exposing her throat. And then his mouth was back — this time, kissing and sucking a very sensitive spot on her neck. The sensation caused Valorie to cry out.

Valorie held tightly to his hair with one hand and clenched her other on the edge of the table — she was desperate for something steady because Aiden had her spiraling. She wanted him to follow through on everything in that moment.

Thankfully, Aiden was determined — his free hand was moving up and down her ribs



enticingly. Every servant in the castle could walk through the dining room doors right now, and Valorie didn't think she would stop his next move. She didn't think she would stop him from taking her on this table either.

\* \* \*

Aiden struggled wildly with the ties of Valorie's dress. Her words about ending their betrothal had set Aiden off. He didn't understand how she went from comforting him in one of his most exposed moments to talking about leaving him.

Was she just pretending to be understanding of his past? That idea had Aiden frantic to show Valorie she was wrong — he was strong and virile despite what he had endured.

Besides that, the thought of Valorie back out at parties and feasts as an unmarried woman filled him with rage. And the thought of being alone in this castle again made him desperate.

The combination of all of that created the storm he felt now. He would prove to Valorie that she was his, and he would ruin all other men for her.

That was his initial plan, of course, but his plans never seemed to work out around this lass. Because rather than proving something to Valorie, Aiden was simply lost in her. Once again, she had him forgetting all sense and reason.

Aiden explored the curves of Valorie's body with his hands as he attempted to remove her dress — the damned thing had so many ties. She was so soft and fragile underneath his touch, so womanly. The feel of her soft skin on his hands was a unique kind of torture. Aiden wanted to trace every inch of her body with his fingertips.

Aiden clenched his hands at her hips; she would surely have indents from his fingerprints tomorrow. He liked that; he wanted her to wear his marks. Everyone needed to know that Valorie was his, lest someone try and take her from him. No one else could have her.

Surely someone out there coveted this stunning woman in front of him. What if someone did try and take her? Could he protect her? Aiden had so few allies from his years of being alone; was he enough to keep Valorie safe? Flynn seemed to think so this afternoon, but what did he know?

Aiden was quickly reminded of the very real reasons for why he had been avoiding Valorie all day. The world had shown him only horrors, and here he was exposing Valorie to that risk. Life as a laird was neither a calm nor a safe one. Valorie would be at risk every moment she spent with him. Especially if anyone learned how precious she already was to him.

Even if Valorie had no enemies, Aiden certainly did. Lairds he'd snubbed over the years or their daughters. Was anyone from Myles' clan still bitter? He couldn't be sure — he kept on his mind anyone powerful, but people could always slip through the cracks.

Suddenly Valorie's softness was fear-inducing. If he could mark her up so easily, Aiden could only imagine what someone with ill-intent could do to the lass. Instead of his fingerprints on her skin, he envisioned angry welts and bruises, and his desire turned to horror. He felt bile rising up in him at the thought.

When the memories of his past became too mixed in with the present moment, Aiden shook his head firmly and pushed away from Valorie roughly. He couldn't do this. Valorie was too pure, too bright. His own hands on her were a smudge on her light. Aiden was dragging her into his world of horror without knowing with certainty that he could protect her.

“That will be all, thank ye, Valorie. Ye can leave,” Aiden said, devoid of any emotion. None of his fear bled into his tone, and he watched as Valorie’s green eyes flashed with anger again. A small part of him wanted her to fight him on this, to prove to him he was wrong, but as he gazed on, her expression went completely cold. Immediately, Aiden wished for her fire back.

“Well, if that’s all ye wanted,” Valorie said primly, lifting her chin and walking away. Aiden’s eyes trailed her as she strode out of the room; she didn’t glance back once.

### CHAPTER 16

Sitting at the bar at the nearest tavern, Aiden was many whiskeys in, but the drinks were doing absolutely nothing to settle the feelings inside of him. Every second thought was about the lass he left at home. Would she forgive him for leaving like that? And if she did, how would he ever manage to keep her safe and his? Because despite everything, he desperately wanted her to be his.

How was the lass already so ingrained in his mind? Aiden shouldn't care for Valorie; he had only just met her for God's sake. She was so critical to his daily life after what — mere days? That was a ridiculous notion, especially for Aiden. Aiden flagged the barkeep for another whiskey; this was going to be a long night.

Sulking into his drink, Aiden watched as none other than Laird Campbell, the old drunk who attacked Valorie at Keira's castle, walked into the pub.

This should be good.

"Aiden," the older man said, patting Aiden on the back roughly. Laird Campbell was smiling brightly at him, not seeming to recognize the threat that Aiden still posed when he said, "I hear congratulations are in order!" Aiden merely stared back at the other laird, unsure if he was serious. A bit too ironic for Aiden's taste.

Aiden let his silence speak for him again.

"I hope we won't have any more problems," the man said nervously in what Aiden thought might be an attempt at an apology. Laird Campbell reached out, presumably

to shake Aiden's hand, but Aiden simply picked up his whiskey for another long sip. The other man held his outstretched hand for a laughably long time before awkwardly releasing a chuckle-turned-cough and shuffling away.

Turning back to the bar, Aiden rolled his eyes; he also hoped he didn't have any more problems with Laird Campbell, but he would happily end any problems that arose.

Another man sitting at a nearby table piped up, "Och, are ye betrothed to Valorie Grant already?" He had apparently overheard the conversation, and now with Aiden sitting alone, the other man thought it would be a good idea to strike up a conversation. It wasn't.

"Aye, I am," Aiden said with a bit of a bite in his tone. The other man just laughed. Maybe Aiden would be ending a problem tonight.

"Well, good luck with her; I've heard she's a feisty thing and has met with a lot of men too," the man chortled loudly, like he had said something hilarious. He looked around for someone else to join in, but the rest of the tavern was pointedly not looking their way. With a sneer the man ended his laughter.

Aiden wasn't laughing either. Anyone with any sense could see the danger in his posture now. Aiden's shoulders were tense, and his hands clenched his drink so tightly, he worried the cup would have indents from his fingers when he put it down.

Ever so slowly he set a few coins on the table next to his drink and rose. Aiden stalked to where the weaselly man was sitting alone. Other patrons in the tavern were watching him warily now, but Aiden's eyes never strayed from his target. When he reached the table, Aiden moved quickly, grabbing the man roughly by the collar.

"Ye need to respect me bride," Aiden threatened harshly, still holding the man up by his collar. His legs dangled amusingly due to his much shorter stature.

“She’s been betrothed far too many times to deserve respect,” the other man spat in Aiden’s face, and Aiden seethed.

Clearly his reputation was not working as well as he’d hoped because no one should feel comfortable being this bold to Aiden’s face. Especially not about Valorie. Aiden would not hear any talk about her reputation, and quite frankly, he didn’t want to think about her other betrothals ever again. Valorie was his.

Aiden knew he could teach this man a valuable lesson. He pictured it in his mind; he could drop him to the floor and bring his fists to his face... repeatedly.

And it probably would make Aiden feel better to watch this other man’s nose break underneath his fists, but another scene would only bring unwanted attention to himself and Valorie at a time when he was trying to keep any additional attention away from them.

Besides, this drunken man clearly had very little going for him. He was here drinking alone and starting fights with strangers. Aiden was only doing one of those things. And Aiden had Valorie to go home to — that was reason enough to end the fight there.

Thinking of Valorie helped calm the surge of rage that Aiden still felt. He pictured her face now instead, and it soothed his ire. Aiden released the man’s collar, letting him drop unceremoniously to the floor of the pub. With one final, satisfying look at the man sprawled out on the floor, Aiden turned and headed towards the door of the pub.

Aiden was nearly to the door when he heard a couple of people rush over to help the man. The last thing he heard before the heavy pub door closed behind him was someone asking, “Tavish? Are ye all right?”

Tavish. Aiden would certainly remember that name.

\* \* \*

Back in her bedchamber, Valorie went through the motions of a normal night, despite the turmoil she was feeling. She removed the tartan sash and stuffed it to the back of her drawer — she would not be taking that out anytime soon.

Her maid helped Valorie out of her dress — the same one that Aiden had frantically tried to remove at the table only moments before. She dressed in her night gown quickly before reaching up and undoing the hair piece, letting the waves fall naturally. Each action was jilted and contrived, but Valorie forced herself to go through them, and she was shortly ready for the evening.

Yet, Valorie still found it impossible to rest. She attempted to fall asleep, but the nighttime routine was not enough to cause her to forget the swirl of emotions from dinner.

So, instead she paced back and forth in her bedchamber. A mix of both rage and lust were swirling within her. How dare Aiden kiss her like that and then send her away. She didn't ask for any of this — not this fake betrothal and certainly not this passion that Aiden had awoken in her.

Valorie didn't fully understand what her body needed in that moment, but she knew it had something to do with Aiden. And since he had disappeared after dinner, all she could do was pace.

Shortly after Valorie stormed out of the dining room, she thought better of it. Why should Aiden get away with acting like that without a reckoning? Stopping halfway up to her rooms, Valorie adjusted her dress and smoothed out her now wild hair. Turning on her heels, she marched right back to the dining room — only to find it

empty.

No scattered dishes, no remaining candles, and certainly no Aiden. She spent a few minutes scouring the castle for him before realizing he was gone. Wherever he went, he was definitely not in the castle anymore. And so here Valorie was, making the same path through her bedroom; the restless energy needed to be burned somehow.

All of these feelings that Aiden inspired in her were brand new to Valorie. She hadn't let any of her betrotheds even kiss her, and in the short time they were betrothed, no one else had ever sparked the level of desire that Aiden did. That day in the clearing, Aiden was her very first kiss. And whatever happened in the dining room tonight was certainly a first for Valorie as well.

Needing more space to walk, Valorie decided to take a stroll around the castle. Her touring earlier today was mainly focused on the interior rooms, and it seemed like the perfect time for a walk outside. If Aiden could leave the castle in the middle of the night, so could she! Valore threw a tartan shawl over her shoulders, not Aiden's clan's pattern obviously, but otherwise, she was dressed in her night clothes.

The second she opened the door to her bedchambers, Willow's little head popped up from the bed she had made of the comfiest chair in Valorie's sitting room. It was Willow's chair now. The little pup hopped off the chair when she saw Valorie at the door. She trotted right over to Valorie and stared up at her eagerly. Each step of the way out of the castle and through the grounds, Willow was closely beside her. Valorie looked down at the wee thing adoringly and chuckled.

The castle's grounds were beautiful, especially in the moonlight. Valorie wasn't sure who was taking care of them, but they were doing a marvelous job.

She followed a winding path off of the great hall and eventually found the gardens. Nestled between some stunning flowers was an elaborately carved wooden bench. It



looked like the perfect spot to relax for a few moments... and continue seething over Aiden.

Unfortunately, that's not where Valorie's mind went. Instead of her anger, she was now focused on the passion from the dining room. Valorie was remembering Aiden's hands on her body when she noticed him returning to the castle.

The moonlight bathed him in an ethereal glow as he marched quickly towards the castle. At first, he didn't see her sitting there, but Willow yipped excitedly when she caught sight of him. Valorie had never seen a head turn so quickly.

Even from across the gardens, Aiden's stare was potent. He definitely saw Valorie now. Changing course, Aiden now walked briskly towards her, not smiling but not nearly as cold as he had been in the dining room. She trembled, either from the night air or in anticipation. Would she be getting playful Aiden or the cold and cruel Laird O'Donnely that Aiden sometimes pretended to be?

As soon as he was within reach, Aiden grabbed Valorie by the arm and brought her to her feet. The sudden movement caused her tartan to fall from her shoulders. Valorie now stood in just her nightgown, and Aiden tightened his grip on her arm ever so slightly at the sight.

Harshly Aiden dragged his gaze away from Valorie's exposed skin and quickly stormed off. He was still holding on to her arm, so Valorie was helpless but to follow. Willow, of course, trotted along behind them happily, her little legs moving fast to keep up with Aiden's punishing pace.

The nerve of this laird! Valorie thought. Her passionate reflection in the gardens was now utterly ruined, but she would not let him drag her around like this.

Huffing, Valorie twisted the arm in Aiden's grasp, and she used her other hand to

push away from him. He must have been distracted by whatever place he was hauling her to because Valorie managed to break free from Aiden's hold.

Valorie glared at Aiden and yelled, "Ye can't just grab me whenever ye want!" Aiden held her gaze again with that unreadable expression of his. Valorie couldn't believe him. Aiden was out half the night, and he came back smelling like ale and whiskey and somehow still thought he would order Valorie around. Where was the independence that he claimed to offer her?

Aiden couldn't just send her away and then drag her back forcefully when it suited him. That was not part of their agreement, and Valorie would not stand for it.

Frustration and anger welled up in Valorie, spilling over and forcing her to act. She raised her hand to try and slap Aiden across the face, but he was faster than her. Aiden caught her wrist mid strike and grabbed her other one for good measure. With both wrists held firmly in his hands, Aiden pushed her up against the tree behind her.

"What will ye do now?" he whispered.

Aiden transferred both of Valorie's wrists into one large hand and pinned her arms above her head. His now free hand grabbed the back of her neck. Her body shivered at the cold night and his rough touch. Pinned tightly to the tree, Aiden stole a fierce kiss. His lips met hers fervently and she met his with just as much passion.

They were wild for each other, kissing roughly, clanging teeth, biting lips, their anger turning to heat once again.

"Tell me no one else has touched ye," Aiden growled against her lips, pulling back ever so slightly. Valorie's angry passion softened a little at his words.

"No one has. I havenae wanted anyone to... but ye," Valorie breathed back to him.

Aiden growled again before meeting her lips once more. His hand on her neck began a path over her exposed shoulder and up the length of her arm.

“Keep yer arms up, lass,” Aiden groaned, following the same trail on the other side of Valorie’s body now before running the back of his fingers across her ribs. Her thin nightgown did almost nothing to separate his hands from her bare skin.

Aiden had apparently lost his fierce urgency now and took his time stroking every part of Valorie’s body. Valorie, on the other hand, was only feeling more desperate with each pass of his hands over her skin. Aiden was igniting a fire in Valorie’s body under each fingertip.

“Aiden, please...” Valorie whined, unsure even of what she was asking for, but she needed something, and she needed it from Aiden.

“I’ve got ye lass,” Aiden whispered roughly into her ear. “Widen those pretty legs a little more for me.”

Valorie complied immediately — her legs widening without making the conscious decision to do so. She was only sensation, lost in Aiden’s mouth and his teasing touches that were finally getting more insistent.

Aiden hands were now making a slow path up her legs, underneath her thin nightgown. His hands continued to scorch each patch of skin they uncovered until his fingertips met her throbbing center.

“Oh!” Valorie exclaimed at Aiden’s first gentle touch. That was it, the spot she desperately needed him.

“Aye, has anyone touched here lass?” Aiden asked with another growl, stopping his movements while he waited for her answer. Valorie vigorously shook her head no.

“Good, because ye’re mine,” Aiden ground out before returning to kiss her passionately.

Aiden’s fingers slowly and teasingly touched Valorie from outside of her underclothes, but she needed more. With a quiet whimper, Valorie began to move her hips in tandem with Aiden’s fingers, building up to something momentous. The feelings were so powerful that Valorie struggled to keep her hands where Aiden had placed them above her head.

Noticing her squirming, Aiden chuckled darkly at Valorie, “Do ye need somethin’ lass?”

“Aiden, please,” Valorie begged again. Valorie was desperate for him to continue, but he took his hand away completely now. She whimpered at the loss.

Bringing one hand up to her chest, Aiden stroked his thumb over her taut nipples. They were hard and pressed tightly against her nightgown, and even Aiden’s simple touch against them sent a shock through her body. Surging forward he caught one in his mouth and sucked through her nightgown, causing Valorie to arch off the tree.

Aiden finally brought his fingers back to her center, slowly sliding one hand beneath her underclothes. His other hand was still stroking and tweaking her desperate nipples.

“I’m goin’ make ye feel so good, lass,” Aiden promised before finally stopping his teasing. His fingers quickly found the perfect spot and picked up their rhythm.

Valorie couldn’t hold herself back now and was moaning loudly into the night. She could no longer hold her arms up anymore, and she brought them around Aiden’s neck. Her sounds and her hands only seemed to spur Aiden on because he kept that perfect rhythm but groaned, pained, as his mouth found her neck again.

The combination of sensations had Valorie teetering right on the edge of something. Aiden's mouth was on her neck, sucking and softly biting, one hand still on her breasts and the other stroking her core deliciously.

"Let go for me, lass," Aiden grunted, seemingly as desperate as she was. Aiden's deep voice in her ear, the one she admired from that very first night, sent Valorie over the invisible edge. She cried out as she hit a heavenly peak, her body tightening and finally releasing.

"That's it," Aiden whispered as Valorie shook in his arms. He continued with light touches as the explosion inside of her subsided. Valorie sighed heavily, relaxing into Aiden's arms. Her head was limp; she was sure she would have collapsed by now if he wasn't holding her up.

That was... Valorie didn't even know how to properly describe what that was. Those feelings and that sensation were not in her vocabulary.

All Valorie could think was that Aiden had successfully ruined every other man for her.

### CHAPTER 17

Aiden stood there holding Valorie, feeling like nothing would ever be the same again. He'd felt a cataclysmic shift watching her shatter beautifully in his arms. When Aiden fled the castle this evening, he never expected to end up here, but he would be forever grateful that he got to experience that moment with Valorie. And that it was her first of the kind.

The moment Aiden spotted Valorie in the garden; he was crazed. The adrenaline from the near fight at the tavern was still pumping through him. And that, combined with the flimsy piece of material Valorie called a nightgown, was enough to turn him practically feral.

Aiden needed to hear from her lips that she was his. He needed to hear her begging for him, and only him, to bring her over the peak for the first time. And it had been glorious.

Valorie in the moonlight, crying out for him, was something out of a fantasy. In a million dreams and daydreams, Aiden could never conjure up something that perfect. Aiden only hoped he would be so lucky to see Valorie like that again and to be the one who brought her to that ecstasy. He would happily bring her pleasure like that every day if she let him.

Aiden was forever enraptured by the lass. They were connected now in a way that Aiden didn't think he could ever disentangle from. The woman in his arms was irreparably a part of him, no matter what happened with their agreement.

Cradling Valorie's head against his chest, Aiden stroked her hair softly. Valorie let out a content sigh as she relaxed into him. That sound topped any other that he'd ever heard the lass make — even better than her laughter or the sweet sounds she'd made while he took her over the edge. That sound meant true comfort and ease.

There was no other place Aiden wanted to be...ever.

A soft bark interrupted the moment, and Willow jumped up on their legs, excitedly. Valorie started laughing in his arms, and Aiden couldn't help but join in.

The puppy seemed to be carrying something in her mouth, but Aiden couldn't tell what it was out here in the dark garden. Still stroking Valorie's hair, he said softly to her, "Let's head back inside for some light, so we can see what the puppy has brought us."

Valorie responded with a hum in the affirmative and drew herself away from Aiden. Immediately, he missed having her in his arms, but Aiden forced himself to lead them all back to his castle. Their castle.

Standing back in the kitchens with Valorie and Willow, Aiden took another look and saw the puppy had seemingly brought them a note.

What is this? Aiden wondered. As he began to read, his face scrunched up in anger. This note, or more accurately this threat, was not what Aiden was expecting to find.

"What does it say?" Valorie asked, bending down to scratch Willow behind the ears.

"If ye marry her, ye're both dead," Aiden read aloud, unsuccessfully containing the rage in his voice. Who could have possibly sent them a note like this? And how did they get so close as to put it in the dog's mouth?

While Aiden was otherwise distracted... someone had managed to get on to his castle grounds and threaten Valorie. Aiden felt his body tightening in fear at the thought of something happening to her. Not now, they couldn't have her now.

This was everything Aiden had feared from the beginning. He let himself get close to the lass only for someone to try to rip her away. She was his! Aiden wanted to roar, but any anger he was feeling was only masking the fear that ate away at him.

Aiden was in a spiral of fear and what ifs, but Valorie just laughed bitterly, "It's a good thing we arenae gettin' married then."

Aiden shook his head harshly to remove that thought; he couldn't think about why that thought was sending him deeper into a spiral right now.

It's what he wanted from the beginning, but now, with Valorie in his castle and after having her in his arms, Aiden did not want to think about her leaving. That felt like it was no longer an option. Not after everything in the garden.

Besides, they had other things to worry about right now. So, Aiden shook his head once more to clear those thoughts fully. Once the threat was removed, he could worry about what everything with Valorie meant. Now was the time to prove he really could protect the lass.

"Who would send somethin' like this?" Aiden asked aloud, but Valorie merely shrugged.

Aiden thought through major players in the Highlands, but no one was fitting in his mind. He had his enemies sure, but this felt personal towards Valorie — why else would it have been phrased that way, 'if ye marry her...'

Whoever it was needed to have been nearby — Suddenly, Aiden remembered Laird



Campbell from the pub tonight. The old drunk had seemed happy for him and Valorie, but could it have been him?

He certainly had the means to follow Aiden home from the tavern to deliver this threat. And that night on the balcony, he made it clear he had some kind of twisted interest in Aiden's bride.

"What about Laird Campbell? I saw him at the pub tonight. He might have followed me here," Aiden thought aloud.

Valorie shook her head no before saying, "Then there's nay problem; he cannae hurt ye or yer clan."

That didn't mean it wasn't him. All Valorie was saying was Laird Campbell wasn't someone to worry about. Unfortunately, worrying about things was one of Aiden's greatest strengths.

So, until he had Laird Campbell standing before him, Aiden would be worrying. It had to be him though; it was too coincidental that Laird Campbell had been at the tavern tonight.

Was that man far more cunning than Aiden was giving him credit for? Maybe the congratulations and the false apology were all to throw Aiden off suspecting him.

If so, maybe there was something to be concerned about here. If he had managed to get that close to Aiden to deliver this threat, then this man was capable of anything.

Aiden would certainly be spending the night working on this, but Valorie did not need to. He looked over at the lass as she released a big yawn. A bit of smug pride interjected Aiden's concern for a moment as he thought about the fact that he was the one who tired her out like that.

“Go to sleep lass; I’ll take care of this, whatever it is.” Valorie stared at him for several long moments, opening and closing her mouth a few times with thoughts that never made their way out. With just a small nod in his direction, she left the kitchen and made her way to her bedchambers.

Aiden had to forcefully stop himself from asking her to go to his rooms instead. He wanted her somewhere that he could check on her tonight, and selfishly, he just wanted her in his bed. But more than all of that, Aiden wished for her to be comfortable, so he said nothing.

To Aiden’s surprise, Willow did not follow the lass upstairs. There wasn’t a time over the last few days that Aiden could remember seeing the pup without Valorie close behind or leading her along.

But tonight, the dog looked up at Aiden with big puppy eyes and whined. Carefully, with no sudden movements, Aiden reached down and picked up the animal.

Almost immediately, the little thing sighed happily, no teeth or claws to be found. Aiden gently carried her into his study with him, and as he took a seat at his desk, he placed Willow on his lap.

Even more pleased with this position, the puppy licked Aiden’s hands excitedly, wagging her tail. And within no time at all, Willow had fallen asleep in his lap. Her little head was resting against his leg, and Aiden could feel her soft breaths on his thigh.

“Maybe yer nae so bad,” Aiden whispered, softly stroking Willow’s fur.

\* \* \*

Valorie once again found herself in Aiden’s castle late at night, unable to sleep. After

she had left Aiden and Willow in the kitchens, Valorie had made her way to her bedchambers alone. She stripped off the now filthy and tattered nightgown and cleaned the remnants of her passion off of her.

Down in the kitchens, Valorie was so close to telling Aiden the truth since she was finally being honest with herself. But instead, she ran from that conversation like a coward.

All her life, she envisioned herself as brave, an adventurer, someone who broke the norms of highland society, but when it came down to it, she was just scared. Scared that Aiden didn't return her feelings, scared that she would never feel the same way about anyone else.

Being held in Aiden's arms after he brought her that earth-shattering pleasure, Valorie could not stop thinking about her life with Aiden. She was starting to think she wanted more than a limited betrothal from him. She was starting to think she wanted everything. And she had the opportunity to tell him. But instead, she'd made her bitter snide remark and left the room.

Now, alone, without even Willow to comfort her, Valorie kept reliving every moment of their evening together. The fight, the pleasure, the gentle way Aiden held her against him and softly played with her hair. It all repeated in Valorie's mind.

The contrast between that gentleness and the intense way he brought her over the edge or the harsh way she had seen him handle Laird Campbell that first night was part of what made him Aiden.

Someone who could just as easily be soft and gentle as he could fierce and strong, Valorie had seen so many sides of Aiden... and alone in her bedchambers, she could admit that she liked them all.

The dreams Valorie had for her life were still important and true, but she found she could no longer picture traveling the world or being free without Aiden by her side. What would be the point of all that if he wasn't there with her? Not having Aiden was starting to feel like the true cage.

Besides, Valorie knew for certain she'd never find another man anywhere who made her feel like Aiden did. And she didn't just mean the pleasure — it was all of him. The way he challenged her and pushed her to be the very best version of herself. The way he could seemingly read every expression on her face or scheme in her mind. How he made her smile just by being nearby.

And of course, the way Valorie was still so achingly desperate for him.

Aiden could bring her over the edge like that every day, and Valorie would still want more of him. She wanted him now — only hours after the garden, Valorie still imagined his hands on her body. And his mouth, oh God, that mouth against her skin. Her lips, her neck, her chest — everywhere he put his mouth tonight was permanently seared in Valorie's mind.

Valorie would not have been surprised to find a brand on her skin the way she could remember every detail of where he touched her. She would remember those spots in her mind forever, she was sure of it. Even when this fake betrothal was up, and she was sent back home, she would still be marked by Aiden.

That was the crux of the issue as she wrestled to fall asleep. Valorie was forever changed by her time with Aiden. What would it be like when she tried to fit this new version of herself back into her old life? Would she even fit anymore?

Beyond Aiden, there was the strange note to consider. To be fair, in the mess of her thoughts, this one got very little attention. It seemed to Valorie an idle threat from someone who was just trying to scare them. But was it possible that someone was

trying to hurt Aiden again? Because that idea was unacceptable to Valorie.

At some point, with all of these thoughts flying through her head, Valorie fell into a fitful slumber. She wrestled with the blankets all night, waking up a number of times and struggling to fall back asleep with each one.

When the dawn finally came through the curtains this morning, Valorie was particularly disoriented. It felt like her mind had never stopped running, even when it was feigning sleep. All her thoughts and concerns held on to her while she was unconscious, and she slept little all night.

Even now, groggy and exhausted, Valorie's mind still apparently had the energy to think. Her young maid came into the room quietly and helped Valorie dress in a simple sheath dress for the morning, but there was only so much that could be done for the state of her hair and the bags under her eyes.

As Valorie tried to decide what was next for her day and her life, she heard a soft knock at her door. She rose slowly from the sitting room chair she was slumped in and made her way to the door. There on the other side of the door was the source of her racing thoughts. Aiden.

\* \* \*

"Val," Aiden paused, probably taking in Valorie's disheveled morning look. "Would ye like to have breakfast with me?" Aiden asked holding out a hand to her and seeming shy for the first time since she'd known him.

For a few blissful moments as she looked at Aiden's small smile, all the worries from the night before quieted. "I would love to," Valorie said back with a smile. Taking Aiden's offered hand, they walked hand-in-hand down to the dining rooms.

The dining room was set once again, for breakfast this time. Had it really only been last night that Valorie had stormed out of here in anger? The changes in the way she felt didn't make sense in less than one day's time, but she knew they were true. Although, if Valorie was continuing to be honest with herself, her feelings had started to change long before last night.

Aiden led them back to the same seats as dinner but continued to hold on to her hand, lightly stroking the top of it with his thumb. It was... nice, domestic, and Valorie was still smiling. She could envision a million mornings like this, just being together and happy.

Before any food was brought out, one of the servants entered the room warily and waved Aiden over. With a grin and a longing look, Aiden took his hand back and walked over to the servant.

The servant whispered something into Aiden's ear and gave him a letter. Valorie watched as Aiden's face turned horrified as he looked over the letter. Was it another threat?! With a flare of panic in Valorie's direction, Aiden made his way back to the table.

"What is it, Aiden?" Valorie asked. He didn't say anything until he was sitting back down again with Valorie's hand in his.

"Lass, a coach has arrived to take ye back to yer faither's castle." Another long pause. "He has fallen severely ill," Aiden finished, looking at her with concern.

Valorie's mind was blank after those words came out of Aiden's mouth. Something between her ears hearing the words and her mind processing them was off because Aiden wasn't making any sense. Her father was fine! He'd been perfectly healthy only days ago! Valorie shook her head fiercely; no, that couldn't be true.

“Lass, there was a letter from yer maither,” Aiden said holding the letter still in his hands, “and they want ye to come home immediately.”

Valorie ripped her hand out of Aiden’s, instantly missing his warmth, and raced back to her bedchambers to pack her things. If her father was ill, she needed to be home. Everything with Aiden would just have to wait. They had at least a year together, after all.

### CHAPTER 18

Before Aiden followed the lass up to her rooms, he went into the kitchens and asked the cook to package up some of the food from breakfast for Valorie to take with her.

The lass still needed to eat, and Aiden would do everything in his power to make this easier for her. Maybe he should pack food for her whole family? Aiden turned back around to tell the cook to make more.

What else could he do? Aiden was a practical sort of person, so he thought through the actions that would have helped him. He decided a bottle of whiskey was in order, so he made his way down to the cellar and left his favorite bottle with the cook to pack up.

Heading back through the dining room, Aiden made his way to the library. He knew the lass liked it in there, and so he picked out some of his favorite books for her, only those with a happy ending of course.

Aiden had no idea how long Valorie would be at her parents' castle — maybe this would be a drawn-out process, and she would need things to keep her occupied and her distracted.

Oh! Aiden had another brilliant thought — the lass loved flowers, so he made his way out to the garden. Being back here brought back all of the memories from last night, and Aiden swelled slightly despite himself.

This garden would forever hold memories of Valorie; there was no way to separate



that tree from her moans or these flowers from her skin in the moonlight.

Quickly, so as not to get distracted further by memories of Valorie, Aiden cut a few blooms to send home with her.

There that should do it, Aiden thought. Hopefully one of those things would be helpful to Valorie while she was gone.

Finally, Aiden made his way to Valorie and her bedchambers. He opened the door slowly to find Valorie racing around her rooms, looking for all the things she might need.

Two of the maids were in the room trying to help but unsure how because Valorie was frantically opening up the chest and then the wardrobe and grabbing things out at random. And as soon as she snatched whatever her hands touched first, she moved on to the next thing, leaving the doors open behind her.

Aiden, moving warily, entered the room and started straightening up behind her; he heard her muttering lists and plans to herself as she tried to get organized. What could Aiden possibly say to help her? Was there anything that would be a comfort to her?

At the back of her wardrobe, crumbled into a ball, he found the sash in his clan's tartan. Discretely he tucked it into the bag she was packing — he liked the thought of her having some piece of him with her while she went through this, and some small part of Aiden hoped it would bring her comfort as well. Just one more small thing that he could do for her hopefully.

How has everythin' gone to shite so fast? Aiden wondered.

Aiden was up half the night writing correspondence to potential allies to see if anyone knew anything about the threat they had received. Between that and planning some

additional security measures for the castle and Valorie, it was nearly light by the time he made his way to his bedchamber.

Plus, he paused outside of Valorie's rooms for far too long. He was straining to hear if she was okay, if she needed him, but all was quiet.

Then this morning, upon seeing Valorie's sunny face, Aiden was renewed. They would figure everything out together — together they could do anything.

This threat was just a minor blimp where they were concerned. Valorie's palm in his was some sort of cure-all because nothing seemed all that bad holding her hand.

Of course, Aiden's joy was short lived. They hadn't even had a chance to enjoy a slow morning together before the carriage arrived with a note from Valorie's mother. Aiden was horrified when he read her words. Valorie's father had taken a sudden turn for the worse, and she needed to be home immediately.

Losing his own father recently, Aiden knew some of what Valorie was feeling, and he wished he could take the pain away from her. Aiden would suffer through rounds of torture at Myles' hands if it meant he could protect the lass from this, but there was nothing else he could do.

So, Aiden helplessly followed Valorie as she flew across her rooms. It was obvious that she cared for her father deeply, despite everything that had happened between them and everything she said.

Aiden knew Valorie looked up to her father, so for her to see him ill today would certainly be tough. Laird MacCrimmon may have had different ideas for Valorie's life, but he loved her fiercely — that was very clear to Aiden in the little time he'd been around him.

“Let me see the letter,” Valorie demanded, stopping suddenly in her tracks and spinning to face Aiden. Aiden nearly ran right into the lass but managed to stop himself from knocking her over.

“Val, I told ye everythin’ in it,” Aiden hedged; he didn’t want Valorie to see her mother’s hasty scrawl or read the emotions through the page. It had been enough for Aiden to read it; she did not need to.

“Let me see it!” Valorie stomped her foot with her demand this time.

“Aye,” Aiden said sadly, handing over the letter reluctantly. He watched as her eyes quickly scanned the page, filling slightly with tears as she read on.

“Do ye want me to go with ye, Val?” Aiden asked as she hastily wiped the tears from her eyes and stuffed more of her belongings into a bag.

The lass hadn’t mentioned anything of the sort, but Aiden would go with her and stay however long she needed. His small gestures were just that, small. But if he was there with her, maybe there would be more ways he could help.

Besides, Aiden wanted to be with Valorie. Wherever she was, whatever she was doing, Aiden wanted to be there.

“We daenae have to pretend we care when it’s just the two of us, me laird. I’ll be all right,” Valorie snapped. Aiden was starting to regret hiding that sash in her bag, but it was too late now.

Valorie scooped up her things and stormed past him out of the room. He watched from the window of her bedchamber as she entered the coach and sped off.

\* \* \*

The time between Aiden's announcement and racing back out of his castle was a bit of a blur to Valorie. She knew she had stormed through her rooms, grabbing this thing and that. She also knew she probably scared the two young maids half to death with her snapping and crazed movements. But the contents of the bag she carried with her were a mystery to Valorie.

Aiden's face when she shut him down was maybe the one thing Valorie remembered perfectly. His concern and care had immediately shuttered to show a face full of hurt.

The moment she walked away; she regretted hurting him like that. They had things to discuss, but none of this was Aiden's fault. He was sticking to their agreement, and she was the one who was getting carried away. She couldn't fault him for that.

As much as Valorie wished Aiden were with her right now, the distance was probably for the best because Valorie was confusing things in her mind.

The simple act of stepping up into her father's coach seemed to sap all the remaining energy Valorie had, and she collapsed into the nearest seat. Already in the carriage, Valorie found a large basket and another bag.

What is this? Opening up the basket, Valorie found nearly enough food for a month. It looked like the cook had cleared out a big portion of their stores and sent them off with Valorie. How did this get here? Did Aiden do this? When did he even have the time?

In the other bag were an assortment of items: a bottle of whiskey, probably eight different books, a bouquet of her favorite flowers, and a note from Aiden.

Just a few things that I thought might bring you comfort or joy during this time — Aiden.

Valorie's eyes welled up again at the thought of Aiden preparing this bag for her. It was unexpectedly sweet, and Valorie continued to regret her cruel parting words. Aiden wasn't offering to accompany her out of some misplaced sense of duty — he truly wanted to support her through this, and that idea sent a jolt of warmth through Valorie's chest, right to her heart.

The joy was short-lived however as Valorie's thoughts turned back to her father. She sat in the back of his coach, worrying her fingernails between her teeth.

She could only hope that she was fast enough leaving Aiden's and getting back to their castle. With only the sparse information in her mother's letter, her mind was circling all the possibilities. Would she be too late? There were so many things left unsaid between her and her father.

Desperately, Valorie tried to recall their parting words from the other day, but all she could think of was their hug in front of Aiden's castle. She tried to remember the exact way it felt to embrace her father, in case that was the last time she ever got to do so.

More memories were flooding Valorie now: the scent of her father's particular soap, his booming laugh, the secret little smile that was reserved just for her mother.

She never told him, but her father was influential in shaping the woman she was today — all of the lessons he taught her over the years and the training he provided her created this young woman who wanted more for her life.

Valorie stared out the small window of the coach as these thoughts ran through her mind. Despite the turmoil she was feeling, Valorie glanced around in confusion, peering out the window. She realized that she no longer recognized the road they were on.

This did not seem like the way back to her father's castle; none of the surroundings seemed familiar. How long had they been off track while Valorie was in her own mind?

Banging on the door of the coach, Valorie tried to get the attention of the coachmen but to no avail — they needed to get back on the proper route home! Finally, the man turned his head in her direction, but instead of coming to see what was wrong, the coachman shot her a glare and picked up the pace.

Something was not right...

\* \* \*

Back at his castle, Aiden once again paced the length of Valorie's bedchambers. He had not left this room since Valorie raced off. Being in her space, with Willow following him closely, was the only thing providing Aiden with any measure of comfort right now. His hair was a disheveled mess from running his fingers through it countless times as he walked the same path over and over again.

Aiden should be with Valorie! The lass was distraught and alone in a time when there were active threats against them. Aiden had promised, he promised Valorie's mother, that he would do everything in his power to protect the lass. And yet, when she needed him the most, Aiden had just let her walk out.

Valorie was riding alone in that coach right now because of Aiden. She would show up to her father's castle to face one of the hardest challenges life has to offer, alone. And what was Aiden doing? Nothing.

Valorie's parting comment to him had stung; Aiden thought things were shifting between them, and in that moment of hurt and surprise, Valorie had managed to storm off. It wasn't a sufficient excuse; Aiden should have stormed off after her!

What was he talking about — he could still follow her; Aiden knew exactly where the lass was headed.

With renewed purpose Aiden broke his pacing and instead took determined steps out of Valorie's bedchambers and to the stables.

If he was quick, maybe he could even intercept her carriage on the way to her parents' castle. Surely, Aiden on a horse would be faster than the carriage. Then Valorie could have Aiden by her side when she saw her father.

In the stables, Aiden took one look at his horse and Valorie's and immediately started saddling up Bluebell. The horse had already proven it was significantly faster than his steed, and maybe the horse could provide the lass some support since Aiden was failing so miserably at that.

Aiden swung himself up on the horse, ready to race off, when he heard a soft cry from the ground. Willow stood at the base of the horse without an ounce of fear and looked at Aiden pleadingly, still whimpering.

"All right, all right, ye can come with me," Aiden said to the dog, quickly jumping off the horse and scooping up Willow. What was one more animal along for the ride? With Willow tucked underneath his arm, they sped off towards Castle MacCrimmon.

I'm comin' Valorie, Aiden thought.

### CHAPTER 19

Valorie forced herself to remember each step that led her to sitting here in this carriage. The woods surrounding them were still unfamiliar, and the coachman was ignoring all of Valorie's attempts to get his attention.

Valorie's memories of the morning were foggy already from her emotions, but she needed to figure out what was going on.

It was definitely her father's coach that she was sitting in. Upon a quick inspection, Valorie recognized the slight tear in the fabric on the door.

When she was a child, she had accidentally sliced through it with a short sword. She had been trying to show off for her father, but the quarters were a little too small even for that sword.

Valorie's father didn't yell or punish her for it. He had just laughed kindly and told her to keep practicing, and that maybe one day she could wield a sword inside of a carriage. Thinking of that memory sent another pang through her chest, but it was only one of the thousands that were racing through her mind.

Valorie remembered falling off her horse as a girl and her father patching her up but encouraging her to get back on. Or when she finally shot her first bullseye on purpose and her father had the whole castle celebrate that night.

Her favorite memory though was when her father had gifted her Bluebell as a foal. Valorie was finally old enough to ride seriously, and her father wanted her to have a



horse that she could train and grow up with.

Focus, Valorie, she chided herself. Ye'll never get back to yer father if ye don't sort out what's goin' on with this carriage.

Back at Aiden's, Valorie had forced Aiden to let her read the note from her mother. She needed to make sure there was nothing additional in there that Aiden was keeping from her or anything he thought was unimportant.

Besides, Valorie thought that maybe her mother's words would provide some comfort to her. In reality, seeing her mother's hasty scrawl and emotional words had only made Valorie feel lost. But because of that inspection, Valorie knew the letter had definitely been her mother's handwriting. So, it was her father's coach and her mother's handwriting. But something was still off.

The coachman!

Now that she thought about it, Valorie realized she didn't recognize the coachman. In her rush to get home to see her father, it barely crossed her mind, but where was Stewart?

Their usual coachman had been with the family for years and wasn't nearly old enough to retire. Surely her father would not have let him go and hired someone new so soon. So, who was driving this coach? And where was he taking her?

As Valorie tried to think of a way out of this situation, because it was becoming increasingly clear that she was not headed home, the coach stopped abruptly. Valorie looked around; they were in the middle of the woods!

The door to the coach was ripped open, and before Valorie could even get a scream out, someone grabbed her by the arm and forcefully pulled her out of the carriage.

With the step up to the carriage and the force with which she was pulled out, Valorie's feet missed the ground, and she ended up in a heap in the dirt. The man who pulled her out stood over her and leered at her prone body. It was not the coachmen but rather another man she didn't recognize. So, two strange men then.

Not one to miss any opportunity, Valorie used her position on the ground to sweep her attacker's legs out from under him. As soon as he started to fall, she pushed herself up to stand again.

Valorie popped up from the ground, ready to run off, but two more large men appeared. One was the coachman reappearing, and then there was another whom Valorie swore looked familiar. The two of them stalked towards her together, and while she tried, desperately, to run off and escape them, their longer strides easily caught up to her. It wasn't like with Aiden in the woods — she didn't have the element of surprise on her side, and these woods were unfamiliar to her.

One man she could fight off, two if she had a weapon, but in her current situation, unarmed, the two men quickly immobilized her. Besides, the third was already picking himself up from the ground.

With one man grabbing tightly to each arm now, Valorie was sufficiently captured. For good measure, the third man walked behind them, just in case Valorie somehow slipped their grasp. It was unlikely though because their meaty hands dug into her biceps painfully, probably leaving behind fingerprint sized bruises.

Still, Valorie tried everything she could think of to escape. She kicked out her legs, trying to connect with either of the men beside her. She attempted to let her body go limp in the hopes that the extra weight would cause them to slip up. She tried to twist her body and arms out of their grasps.

But it was all useless; their grip on her arms was firm. Through all her wriggling, the

men just continued to walk her forward, and all Valorie managed to do was tire herself out.

Valorie was still convinced she recognized one of them but could not place him. Hundreds of scenarios were racing through her mind. Was this related to the threat Aiden had received? Maybe this was some enemy of his — could it be someone related to Aiden's capture?

Was her father even ill, or was that all part of this scheme to get her alone? Valorie was sure that carriage was her father's, and the note was written by her mother, so maybe the carriage had just been intercepted and taken over by whomever that coachman had been.

Which brought all the worries about her father back. If he was as ill as her mother said, Valorie may miss her opportunity to see him again.

Valorie needed a plan — she had no idea what was happening, but it couldn't be good. No one kidnapped someone for non-nefarious purposes. Her heart raced in her chest, but she was equally determined. She couldn't let her fear stop her from acting; if the moment came to escape, she needed to be ready.

Maybe Valorie could convince these men to let her go? Or maybe she should wait until she had more information? They seemed to be taking her somewhere specific, and Valorie was filled with dread at the possibilities.

"Where are ye takin' me?" Valorie asked the brutes. A slight tightening of the grip on her left arm was the only answer she got.

"Ye won't get away with this! Me parents or me betrothed will be lookin' for me," Valorie exclaimed, still doing all she could to try and wiggle out of their hold. The men just looked at each other over her head and laughed.

They all but dragged her through the forest to an abandoned cabin. Valorie took note of their surroundings the best she could, in case she should somehow escape this, but she could only do so much with the never-ending trees and shrubs that surrounded them.

As soon as the two men opened the door, the first thing Valorie noticed was the smell. It was a damp and musty smell, like something wet had been left sitting in the cabin for months. Valorie scrunched up her nose, but her captors just continued to drag her beside them.

Inside the small house, it became clear that no one had been there for a long time. It looked like it had once been a hunting cabin but was left abandoned years ago. The wood in places was rotted through or collapsed in, letting a small amount of sunlight into what was otherwise one dark, damp room.

Towards the back there was another door, also suffering from years of unuse — Valorie was sure to take note of it as another potential exit for her. There were no windows, but if she had to, she could probably kick out some of the rotting wood panels.

A few menacing tools hung on the wall, and the sight of them sent a shiver down Valorie's spine. Were those for her or just a relic of the old cabin?

In the middle of the room sat one chair already adorned with ropes.

I bet I can guess where I'm about to be, Valorie thought looking at the one piece of furniture in the whole place.

Unsurprisingly, the two men pushed her into the wooden chair and made quick work of tying her ankles and wrists to the chair with rope. The ropes were tight against her, and the knots felt like these men had experience with this sort of thing.

When they had secured Valorie firmly to the chair, the men left without a word. She was alone in this abandoned cabin in the middle of nowhere. Valorie still did not know what she was doing here, and the possibilities in her mind were becoming increasingly dark. She almost wished the men had stayed because sitting here alone was causing her mind to wander and her anxieties to increase.

Immediately after the carriage stopped, Valorie had the adrenaline of the fight to keep her going and focused, but now all of that energy was fading from her body and fear was filling its place. How would she ever get out of this? Did anyone even know where she was?! Her parents must have been expecting her home, so at some point they would realize she was missing, but how would they ever find her?

Valorie could be nearly anywhere in the highlands at this point. The carriage had traveled long enough that there was no way to know for certain which clan's land she was on. And her parents would have even less information about her whereabouts. They could search for days and never find her. The idea of remaining trapped here, alone, set Valorie's heart racing, and her body broke out in a cold sweat.

"Why are ye doin' this?" Valorie shouted at what she thought was an empty cabin.

"Because yer mine," a voice from behind her said.

### CHAPTER 20

Aiden and Willow leaped over streams and roots as they raced off. There was a road of course, but Aiden had been studying maps of the Highlands his entire life and felt confident in this shortcut through the forest. Bluebell was proving herself once again, speeding through the woods in no time at all. It was still too slow for Aiden.

Was Valorie already at her parents' castle by now? Had she already been in to see her father?

Hopefully, Valorie would be comforted by his presence, Aiden did not want to make this time any more stressful for the lass. He could just be there with her, holding her hand or embracing her when it all became too much.

Maybe Aiden could help Laird MacCrimmon also. He wasn't a healer by any means so not in that regard, but Aiden could surely help manage the clan while everything was sorted. He would assess when he arrived and see where he was best suited. But his priority was Valorie — she would always be his priority.

When Aiden and Willow arrived at Castle MacCrimmon, Aiden found the place in unrest. No carriage sat at the front entrance, but even from outside, he could see servants racing around, and he heard shouting coming from inside the large castle doors.

“Valorie,” Aiden whispered and quickly dismounted Bluebell. He left the horse just standing there and raced inside, following the sounds of crying. He paid no attention to the servants or any other distractions he came across.

Willow was still tucked under Aiden's arms, crying softly at all the commotion. Aiden raced through the halls of Castle MacCrimmon until he found himself at the door to Laird MacCrimmon's study — the one he sat in not that long ago and started this whole thing with a simple statement. Laird MacCrimmon's gleeful face filled Aiden's mind — how would he look today?

Pushing open the door without knocking, Aiden stopped abruptly at the scene in front of him. Laying on the carpet in the middle of the study was Valorie's father. His red blood stained through his white léine and onto the carpet underneath the shirt. Aiden remembered thinking to himself what a nice rug that was when he first arrived, and now, the whole thing was rather gruesome.

Valorie's father was suffering from what looked like multiple stab wounds. That gleeful look was gone from his face, and his eyes were closed. Thankfully, Aiden saw his chest rising and falling slowly.

Good, good, Aiden thought as he watched Laird MacCrimmon take another labored breath. A man was bent over him trying to stop the bleeding with some plaid shawl he must have been wearing, but so much blood had already been lost. Aiden could see it spilled on the rug.

Willow barked at the sight in front of them, and everyone turned towards the door. Aiden's eyes now found Valorie's mother. Grace Grant stood off to the side, looking absolutely wrecked at the sight in front of her; her hand was covering her mouth, and tears flowed freely down her cheeks. She was just short of sobbing.

Aiden let Willow down from his arms, and she immediately ran over to Valorie's mother. Little Willow curled herself up around Grace's feet and cooed a little. It would have been adorable if Aiden could wrap his head around what the hell he had just walked into.

Aiden followed the dog over to Valorie's mother. She had shown him unexpected kindness when they met, and he wanted to return the favor. Aiden's arms circled Grace in an embrace. She stepped right into his hug, burying her face in his shoulder and finally letting loose a sob. Aiden continued to hold her, lightly rubbing her back in support until her sobs subsided, and Valorie's mother stepped back.

Grace smiled a watery smile at Aiden and turned her attention back to Laird MacCrimmon on the ground. There was no change — he was still unmoving besides the slow but stable breathing.

Aiden was still shocked by the crisis he had walked into, but there was one question on repeat on his mind.

Where is Valorie? Aiden wanted to shout but managed to compose himself outwardly. Inwardly, Valorie's name was like a chant inside his mind.

“What happened?” Aiden asked the room at large.

The man leaning over Laird MacCrimmon turned back to where Grace and Aiden stood to answer him. That was when Aiden finally saw who it was. He had been so distracted by Valorie's parents that he somehow missed the face — Valorie's most recent ex-betrothed was in the room with them as well.

Laird Toohey, or Kenneth, was the one trying to staunch Laird MacCrimmon's bleeding. Aiden recognized him from his sister's feast that first night he saw Valorie — they had been dancing quite happily together when had cut in on them.

What in the world was he doing here, and where the hell was Valorie?! Was she also facing stab wounds somewhere else? Why was no one saying anything about Valorie?



Aiden's anger was quickly trumping his fear at the sight of Kenneth. Did Valorie's ex-betrothed have something to do with all of this? Did Kenneth harbor some unrequited feelings for Valorie still? Aiden could understand that certainly, but if Kenneth had absolutely anything to do with this he would be answering to the full weight of Clan and Laird O'Donnely.

"What are ye doin' here?" Aiden barked before Kenneth could answer the first question.

Kenneth calmly replied, "There's somethin' ye should ken."

\* \* \*

Valorie sat tied to her chair, desperately trying to get a glimpse behind her at the speaker. The voice, like one of the men who dragged her here, was oddly familiar to her. Ever so slowly, the man made his way into her line of sight.

Tavish.

It's Tavish?! Valorie screamed in her mind. How had she been captured Tavish of all people?

Valorie's first betrothed strolled casually to stand in front of her chair. He wore the slimiest grin on his face and casually held a bloody knife in his hands. He looked particularly gruesome and large standing there. His tall muscular frame blocked out the tiny sliver of light coming into the cabin through the old wood, bathing Valorie in darkness.

"Ye should have married me back then," Tavish said ominously. He sounded like he was purposely trying to deepen his voice — probably why Valorie hadn't immediately recognized it.

He sounds like a dobber, Valorie thought, but Tavish kept talking in his silly attempt at sounding more masculine. She didn't know why he would bother — his warrior-like frame was intimidating enough. Was he trying to sound more like Aiden? The thought had Valorie swallowing a laugh. Although now was certainly not the time; she did not think Tavish would take well to her laughing.

The more Valorie watched Tavish, the more the situation became serious again.

Tavish was... unhinged; something in his face and his movements was off. He was no longer wearing the mask he had worn during their betrothal and out in polite society.

Tavish, when she had known him, was charismatic, bordering on manipulative, but he was capable of getting what he wanted out of people. Right now, Valorie didn't think Tavish could convince anyone of anything, not without violence at least.

In this abandoned cabin in the woods, Valorie was seeing the man underneath it all, and he had the bloody knife to prove his intentions.

"I want that alliance, Valorie, yer faither's support, and yer dowry. They were promised to me, and I want them," Tavish raved, his monologue getting increasingly erratic. But the more that Tavish spoke, the more Valorie was beginning to connect the dots.

In the time since Valorie had ended their betrothal, she had heard rumors about Tavish's clan. The clan was deeply in debt from what Valorie heard, and very few people still trusted Tavish, their laird. Valorie knew from her time with him how self-indulgent he could be, and she had a very good idea of where all the money was going.

Tavish loved to possess things. He wanted the rarest sculptures and the most beautiful

fabrics; he wanted decadent foods and famous art pieces. Clan McLeod had once been one of the richest, but it seemed Tavish's spending was outpacing the clan's earnings. Tavish needed to own everything. His figurine statues were his favorite, and Tavish had some weird obsessions with collecting them all.

Now, apparently, he wanted to own Valorie.

From the beginning, Tavish had seen her as just another one of his possessions, a thing to be owned and kept, which was a leading factor in why Valorie had left him in the first place, but in doing so she had made herself even more rare. Even more of a delicacy. A man like Tavish was only more intrigued by things he was told he couldn't have.

Tavish twitched a little, fiddling with the knife as he continued his tirade, "Besides, ye can't be missin' from me collection of statues."

Not the statues again, Valorie thought, fighting to roll her eyes at Tavish.

"Ye'd get to be Aphrodite," Tavish leered at Valorie, "the only one I've yet to acquire, but now that ye're here, we can remedy that." He seemed to think somehow capturing her like this meant she was his. He didn't want a woman; he didn't even want Valorie — Tavish just wanted a doll that he could show off and say was his.

"Tavish, let me go. This is crazy!" Valorie screamed; she had heard enough of his explanations.

Tavish shook his head and made a tsking sound. He reached into the bag he had with him and pulled out a gag.

"If ye can't be quiet, I'm goin' to have to force ye to," Tavish warned with a chastising look like one would give a misbehaving dog. Valorie was not playing the

role of obedient possession well enough for him apparently.

“Ye’re a lunatic, Tavish! I never even liked ye!” Valorie screamed again, twisting her wrists and ankles in the ropes helplessly.

“Ye should start gettin’ used to me then,” Tavish paused dramatically, “because we’ll be wed soon.” Another pause. “The priest is already on his way,” Tavish concluded, checking a pocket watch he’d brought.

Could Tavish really do this? Would a priest even marry them if Valorie objected? Could she object when Tavish was swinging that knife around?

Valorie tried to reason with him, “Tavish — let’s talk this through!”

“I won’t let Aiden steal ye from me. I’m the only one worthy of ye,” Tavish raved, and as an afterthought, he added, “That other fool ye were betrothed too wouldn’t even commit to this revenge. Clearly, no one else is good enough.”

Kenneth?! Is he okay? Valorie already had so many concerns racing through her mind, so she might as well add her friend to the list. She knew Kenneth was not involved, but she hoped desperately that Tavish had left him alone.

With that parting comment, Tavish turned to leave. He left her there, tied up in the wooden chair, the gag digging into her mouth. As the door shut behind him, she heard an ominous locking sound. Valorie was once again trapped.

### CHAPTER 21

“I never agreed; Valorie is my friend of all things,” Kenneth was explaining to Aiden. “But Tavish looked so completely crazed, so I acted as if I supported his goals to find out his plan and try to stop him.” Kenneth looked imploringly at Aiden before continuing.

Aiden did not nod or otherwise interact with Kenneth’s explanation. He was still reeling from the news that Valorie had been kidnapped.

Kidnapped right from Aiden’s castle! Aiden could feel his veins popping out the longer he stood here listening to this story and not rescuing Valorie. If he didn’t desperately need this information from Kenneth, he would have raced off ages ago. But Valorie needed him informed and at his best.

“I found out he was planning to keep her somewhere in the forest to the east of his castle. He was planning to stay on clan lands, but that’s all he told me!” Kenneth said. It was not a lot to go on, but Aiden knew the Highlands well, and he was determined.

“Why did ye come here?” Aiden asked.

“I didnae ken she would be in yer castle, so I came to warn her and her parents,” Kenneth still calmly explained. How the hell was he so calm during all of this?

Aiden’s heart had been beating out of his chest since the moment he arrived here and saw the castle in disarray. And since he learned Valorie was taken, he might as well have been hysterical.

Tavish had apparently approached Kenneth with a plan to get Valorie back. He wanted revenge before she humiliated both of them by marrying another laird, Aiden in this case. In Tavish's unstable mind, he thought that he was owed a marriage with Valorie, and that he was cheated of it when she left him. Aiden couldn't imagine ever thinking of a woman that way.

Valorie did not owe Aiden a single thing, and Aiden certainly didn't consider her something that he owned. Maybe, if Aiden were lucky, he could have some of Valorie's time and affection; he certainly wanted whatever she'd give him. But Valorie did not owe it to Aiden simply because he asked her father for her hand.

In the end, it seemed all of this really was about Valorie. The threat and everything that had happened since was all Tavish. He had apparently been at the tavern that night too. He could have just as easily followed Aiden home to leave his little threat with Willow.

Was Tavish watching them from the woods? Did he see the way Valorie was so thoroughly Aiden's? Maybe that's what set him off even further. Aiden could not stand the idea that another man had seen Valorie like that, especially one that now likely held her captive.

Aiden remembered Tavish's words from the tavern. He had no respect for Valorie, and he was clearly unhinged. He could be doing anything to Valorie at this very moment.

In Aiden's mind, Valorie's capture began to merge with his own. He saw flashes of Valorie being attacked by wild dogs or beaten harshly. Valorie was the one being starved for days and forced to watch as Myles ate a feast in front of her. It was Valorie now who didn't see the sun for years at a time. Aiden shook his head with his eyes tightly closed.

Nay, nay, nay! Aiden thought. Myles is dead. Myles does nae have Valorie. Myles cannae hurt us.

Aiden repeated the words like a mantra in his head. Tavish was not Myles, and at the very least, it seemed that Tavish wanted Valorie for himself, so surely, he wouldn't harm her irreparably, right?! Aiden needed to believe that in order to get through this. So, it became his truth.

Still, Aiden could not stop seeing images of Valorie being tortured in his mind — he needed to find her!

“Clearly ye weren't fast enough,” Aiden snapped, responding back to Kenneth finally. The other man had apparently come to warn Valorie, but it was already too late. “What happened to her faither?” Aiden added.

It was Valorie's mom who answered now, her voice shaky, “Before Kenneth got here, Tavish showed up,” she paused looking to her husband. “He was crazed; Kenneth is right. He started screamin' about how we needed to honor the terms of his betrothal to Valorie and give him the dowry he was owed.”

Grace gulped heartily before she continued, “He said that he would soon be our son-in-law, and we needed to show him respect. Duncan tried to subdue him, but he had a knife. They fought wildly before Tavish managed to...” Grace's tears picked up again as she tried to get the rest of the story out.

“He managed to stab me,” Valorie's father croaked from his spot on the ground. He seemed to be coming to now that Kenneth had stopped the bleeding. “That piece of shite stabbed me. While I lay here bleedin', he turned on Grace.” Valorie's father looked to his wife in apology, but she just waved him off, smiling through her tears now. “He forced Grace to write that letter to ye. Stole me carriage too.”

It was a masterful plan, honestly, and if Aiden hadn't followed after Valorie, Tavish might have gotten away with it. But Aiden would do everything in his power to get Valorie back.

"Aye, well ye seem like ye'll live," Aiden said abruptly, scooping up Willow, "and I need to find yer daughter," Aiden announced and stormed back out of the study and Castle MacCrimmon altogether.

Bluebell stood waiting right where Aiden had left him thankfully, and Aiden quickly hopped up on to the horse. He was infinitely grateful he had chosen Bluebell now because the horse raced off faster than Aiden could have hoped. Still not fast enough, but it was all he could do. With Kenneth's vague directions to the forest Tavish had mentioned, Aiden raced through the wilderness.

He easily found Clan McLeod land and knew he was to the east of the castle, but otherwise, Aiden was riding blind. Aiden quickly made it to the area, but the forest was thick here, and it was blocking out the sun. Aiden had no other directions beyond the general area.

Where are ye, Val?! Aiden thought desperately; he felt like he was riding in circles through the woods at this point, but he needed to find her! It was Aiden's job to protect her, and she was stolen from him before he ever really had her in the first place.

Aiden's eyes scanned the forest desperately, but in his mind, he was thinking of all the ways he had already failed Valorie, all the actions he regretted. From that very first evening, he had known she was special. No one had ever captivated Aiden that way, and yet he still kept her at arms-length.

Even when Aiden's body was screaming out that this was the woman for him, he shut Valorie down. Time and again he pushed the lass away when all he truly wanted was



to hold her close. Would he ever get the chance to do so again? Aiden had to believe he would; he didn't think he would survive it if something happened to Valorie.

When Aiden's thoughts threatened to overtake him, Willow started barking and crying from his arms. She was trying to wriggle her way out of his arms.

"Willow, hush," Aiden said to the puppy. He was still racing through the woods, but he tried to calm her down with soothing pets and murmuring. Nothing was working. The dog was getting increasingly agitated and tried to escape Aiden's arms.

Not wanting the puppy to hurt herself by jumping off the horse, Aiden dismounted and placed Willow on the ground. He really did not have time for this, but Valorie would kill him if he let anything happen to the pup, and Aiden was operating under the assumption that he would be seeing Valorie again very soon.

The moment Willow was on the ground, she darted off into the woods.

"Willow! Come back here!" Aiden chastised as he took off after the puppy.

God damn it, Willow!

Willow was just as skilled through the woods as Valorie because Aiden struggled to keep up with the little thing. Every once in a while, he'd catch the flash of her brown and white fur and know he was still on track.

Ultimately, Willow brought them to a small wooden shelter in the woods. House was a strong word for the dilapidated structure in front of them.

"Willow," Aiden whisper-shouted, "Is Val in there? Can ye smell her?"

The dog simply looked back at Aiden, wagging her tail and whining a little more.

Had they found Valorie?!

“Ye shouldnae be here,” a voice said from behind Aiden.

\* \* \*

From inside the cabin, Valorie sat with her head hanging down. She was exhausted. The fear and uncertainty of sitting alone in the cabin was fraying Valorie’s already low energy. She was losing sense of how long she had been here. Had it been hours already, or was her mind so warped from the stress that it only seemed that way?

Valorie felt her stomach gnawing at her a little, but she had missed breakfast when she raced out of Aiden’s castle, so that wasn’t definitely proof of the time passing. The sliver of light into the cabin was so minor that it wasn’t helping Valorie tell the time at all, but at least it was still daytime.

Valorie’s overwhelming feeling now was exhaustion. If she had known she was going to be kidnapped today, she would have tried to get more sleep last night.

Last night. Was it really only last night that Valorie had been with Aiden in the garden? She felt like she’d lived ten different lives since then. And this one, here in the cabin, was definitely the worst of them.

When Tavish had first left her here alone, Valorie was desperate to escape. She would not marry that man! But she was weary now, her limbs felt heavy, and all she wanted was to close her eyes. Just for a few moments.

A soft cry woke Valorie from her dozing. Disoriented still, she shook that off as wishful thinking until she heard it again!

Willow?! Valorie thought. Could that really be Willow?

With the possibility of her puppy out there, Valorie renewed her efforts at escaping.

Rubbing her wrists nearly raw against the rope, Valorie tried to get the strands to loosen, even the smallest amount. Her hands were tied together behind her back, and with just a little more wiggle room, Valorie thought she would be able to undo the tie with her fingers. She just needed to stretch the rope a little further, but each motion rubbed the ropes painfully against her skin.

“Come on, just a little more!” Valorie whispered to herself; she was so close, but her wrists were aching, and she thought she felt a few drops of blood fall into her hands.

Finally, she had just enough room to get one finger through the knot and start to loosen it.

Aye ! Valorie cheered in her head.

The whole while, Valorie was watching the door. She had no idea how much time she had or what was going on outside that door. Was Willow alone out there with Tavish? And when would this priest arrive? Valorie was racing against some clock that she couldn't see, and the stress had her heart racing.

“Please, come on!” After what felt like years, Valorie was able to loosen the knots enough for the rope to fall off of her wrists.

“Aye!” Valorie exclaimed behind the gag, a little too loudly, “Shite,” she said a lot quieter. The words were distorted and muffled, but still, she waited with bated breath for several long seconds to see if Tavish had heard her shout.

When she remained alone in the dark cabin, Valorie breathed a sigh of relief. With her now free hands, Valorie removed the gag from her mouth and made quick work of the ropes around her ankles. Thankfully, the rope burn on her ankles was much

less, and she was able to comfortably stand from the chair.

“Willow?” Valorie shouted, “Help!” She rushed to the door, flinging it open wildly. The sun momentarily blinded her after being held in the dark cabin, but when her eyes cleared, she struggled to take in the scene in front of her.

Tavish, still with his bloody knife, was threatening a man that Valorie assumed was the priest. Somehow Tavish had convinced him to come out here to the middle of nowhere under the pretense of a wedding, but the priest seemed to be protesting now finally.

Tavish was becoming increasingly crazed as Valorie watched — he shouted profanities and threats while waving around the knife. He was pointing it back and forth between the priest and someone else.

“Aiden?” Valorie cried out.

### CHAPTER 22

Aiden let loose a relieved sigh when he caught sight of Valorie running out of the abandoned cabin. She was heading towards him and Willow.

She's okay; thank God she's okay, Aiden repeated in his mind.

Aiden scanned every inch of her, searching for signs of injury. She had bruises forming on her arms, and there were red and angry burns on her wrists and ankles. Her wrists particularly looked rubbed raw. Aiden recognized those injuries as being from a rope. He was all too familiar with the wounds caused from captivity.

Aiden locked in on those injuries and the few scrapes on Valorie's knees, seething. The only thing that calmed him slightly was the pride he felt at seeing her here. Somehow, she had managed to escape the ropes she was tied with. Valorie was fierce, and Aiden knew he would never meet another woman quite like her.

A drop of blood welled on Valorie's wrist, and Aiden was back to anger. He breathed out heavily through his teeth, trying to control the rage he felt towards Tavish. Tavish had done this. He had taken Valorie from Aiden's castle, and now Aiden found her, bruised and bleeding.

Caught up in his anger and at finally seeing Valorie whole, Aiden was distracted. It was the moment Tavish needed to turn the tables on them. In that small space of time, Tavish let the priest go and launched towards Aiden, still wielding his knife.

"Go!" Valorie yelled to the priest who stood off to the side still, shocked. "Go run

and get help!” Valorie didn’t even watch to see if the man followed her orders but instead leaped onto Tavish’s back to slow his attack. There was Aiden’s lass again, showing her strength.

Tavish twisted wildly, trying to shake Valorie off him — before he remembered the weapon he wielded. Aiden watched in horror as Tavish turned his body and cut into Valorie’s arm with his knife.

It was a small cut and not that deep, but Aiden watched the blood well up on her arm, and he lost all sense of himself.

That is me bride! Aiden wanted to shout. Seeing her passive injuries was one thing, but watching it happen live sent Aiden over the edge into his fury.

He had been willing to be reasonable with this man until that moment, until Tavish made that particular choice. There would be no peaceful resolution now that Aiden had watched Tavish mutilate his woman in front of him.

Valorie was Aiden’s. Not in the sick ownership way that Tavish wanted her but, in the way, where Aiden devoted himself to her service. Valorie was Aiden’s to protect and to cherish and to care for, and Aiden was not one to let violence against those in his care go unanswered. Tavish had made Valorie bleed twice now — her wrists from his ropes, and now, he had stabbed her!

The moment the knife had come into play again, Valorie jumped off Tavish’s back and scurried a few feet away from them.

That’s me girl, Aiden thought. Valorie’s instincts were spot on. Tavish mistakenly kept his eyes trained on Valorie. For once Tavish’s sick obsession with Valorie was working in their favor. His singular focus on Valorie caused Tavish to forget about the active threat against him, Aiden. Because while Tavish watched his woman,

Aiden stalked towards his prey.

Aiden reached out and grabbed Tavish's knife-wielding wrist harshly, applying pressure and bending it out of place. Tavish cried out in pain, and the maneuver had its desired effect. The knife fell from Tavish's grip, clanging loudly against some rocks on the forest floor.

Tavish struggled wildly, trying to find some way to bend down or use his other hand to pick up his lost knife, but Aiden held firm on to Tavish's one arm. It wasn't enough to soothe Aiden's rage; he kicked Tavish right in the kneecaps and watched as his legs crumpled beneath him. Aiden used that moment to release Tavish's wrist and push him away.

Tavish's body hit the ground heavily, and he lay there unmoving for a few beats of Aiden's heart. Staring at the man prone on the ground, Aiden took his first deep breath in hours.

With Tavish momentarily subdued, Aiden picked up the lost knife and turned his gaze to Valorie. She was already watching him. Willow stood protectively in front of her, and Valorie held a small piece of her dress to her arm to stop the bleeding.

Aiden's eyes zeroed in on that arm, the one that this man had cut into. Aiden was tempted to turn back around and really make Tavish regret ever touching his woman.

Sensing Aiden's attention on her wound, Valorie removed the piece of fabric from her arm, and when no new blood welled up, she looked at him as if to say 'see, I'm fine.' Aiden wasn't convinced. He continued checking her injuries; her wrists were no longer bleeding either and she was still standing. When they got back to their castle, Aiden could fix her right up.

"Aiden, look out!" Valorie called to him suddenly. Aiden spun back around to find

this foolish man slowly making his way back towards Aiden. He had a crude rock in his hand but was otherwise unarmed.

“Tavish, ye don’t want to do this,” Aiden said, warning the other man to stay put and let this end here.

“She is mine!” Tavish roared as he attempted to tackle Aiden to the ground. Aiden held firm against the attack. Tavish was strong, but Aiden had far more to fight for. Tavish was injured and crazed as well — two things that did not serve one well in a fight.

Tavish kept trying to get his arms around Aiden, or bludgeon him with the rock, but Aiden broke each hold and blocked all of Tavish’s attacks. After Aiden pushed off the latest attack, he once again stood a few inches from Tavish.

“Tavish, I’m tellin’ ye, ye need to stop this,” Aiden said, offering the man one last out of this situation. He did not take it. Instead of answering, Tavish took one last lunge towards Aiden, but Aiden still held onto the knife, and with Tavish’s final attack, Aiden ran the knife right through Tavish’s chest.

Tavish groaned, looking down at his chest in shock. He quickly fell to the ground again, clutching at the large wound, but Aiden knew nothing would stop that wound from being fatal. He watched as Tavish’s hand fell away, and the man groaned one last time before his breath stopped altogether.

Aiden looked down at Tavish’s body, wishing it had not come to this. Tavish deserved some punishment, but Aiden rarely looked forward to killing someone. In the end though, Aiden would always protect Valorie, and Tavish made it clear that he would not stop until Valorie was his. So, Aiden was forced to stop him.

“Oof,” Aiden let out a light groan as Valorie jumped up on him, wrapping her legs



around him and kissing all over his face. He was a little sore from the fight, but Valorie's kisses were a balm to all maladies, and Aiden already felt lighter.

"Thank God ye came," Valorie said, between kisses.

"I'll always come for ye Val," Aiden said earnestly, holding her up against him. Aiden's hands rested on the back of her thighs, and he squeezed her tightly to him. She was back where she belonged, wrapped up in Aiden's arms.

Aiden let himself sink into the embrace, resting his head against Valorie. Several deep breaths later, she let her legs fall and slid down the front of Aiden's body.

"And ye too, Willow!" Valorie said, bending down and giving the puppy just as many kisses. Willow wagged her tail and accepted her praise. The little puppy looked immensely proud, and Aiden felt the same way towards her. Without Willow's keen sense of smell, they may never have found Valorie. Willow had truly saved the day, and Aiden would be forever grateful to the puppy.

"Aye, ye were a very good girl, Willow," Aiden said, joining in to give Willow plenty of affection.

Valorie turned her head and saw Tavish's body lying there. Aiden lamented that she had to see all of that, he should have shielded her from the violence, but his strong woman just shook her head sadly and said, "Please take me out of here, Aiden."

\* \* \*

The moment the fight was over, Valorie's last burst of energy faded from her body. Aiden nearly carried her back to the spot where he'd left his horse.

"Oh, Bluebell!" Valorie exclaimed making sure to give the horse just as much

attention. “Thank ye for saving me too, buddy!” Valorie said to her horse.

Aiden chuckled, “Aye, he got me here fast as possible; ye’ve got some loyal animals, lass.”

Valore smiled brightly. “We do.” Aiden’s answering smile was beautiful.

“Take me home, Aiden,” Valorie said. All she wanted was a hot bath and a chance to finally get some sleep. She still couldn’t believe that Tavish had been behind her kidnapping, and now he was dead. Valorie mourned any loss of life, but she was not particularly sad that man was no longer walking the Earth.

When Valorie realized Aiden had made no move to get on the horse or leave, she looked over at him. He was staring at her with a mix of sadness and resignation.

“Ye want to go home?” Aiden asked.

“Aye, I want to go home; take me back to yer castle.” Instantly, Aiden brightened again, and Valorie hid a small smile and chuckle. Perhaps he thought she wanted to go back to her father’s — did that mean he was pleased to have her with him?

“Wait!” Valorie exclaimed. “My faither! Is he all right?”

“He will be, lass. He was alive and taken care of when I left him. Yer father is a strong man,” Aiden paused. “But Tavish was there. They fought, and Tavish stabbed yer faither. That’s how he got the carriage and yer maither’s letter.”

Valorie’s mouth was open in horror. Her father was stabbed?! And her mother was threatened?

“When I left, yer faither was awake again. Kenneth had managed to stop the

bleeding, and yer faither seemed to be doing much better,” Aiden said, continuing with this horrible tale.

“Kenneth was there?” Valorie asked because it seemed like the least devastating detail. She knew from Tavish that Kenneth had been somehow involved, not in her kidnapping, but he at least knew about it.

“Aye, he came to warn ye and yer parents, but he didn’t know ye were at my castle. He was a little too late to stop Tavish, but he probably saved yer faither, and he told me where I needed to go to find ye when I arrived.”

There were so many things Valorie needed to process from this day.

“Why were ye at me parent’s castle?” Valorie asked — it was that last little detail she didn’t understand.

“After ye left in the carriage, I paced around yer rooms worrying about ye. But I wanted to be with ye, so I got on Bluebell and raced over there. I was hoping to catch ye on the way, but instead, I found yer faither’s castle in chaos,” Aiden explained.

“Thank ye, thank ye Aiden for chasing me then and coming for me now. Thank ye,” Valorie said sincerely. Without Aiden, she feared to think of what might have happened. She got out of the ropes, but would she have been able to escape? Valorie would never know, but thankfully, she didn’t need to.

“Oh! The carriage!” Valorie exclaimed. Her father probably wanted that back and her things!

“It’s all right. Val, I’ll have someone come and get it tomorrow; let’s just get ye home,” Aiden said.

“But all the things ye packed for me!” Valorie was starting to tear up again. She had barely cried while Tavish held her captive, but everything was bubbling over now that she was safe. Aiden’s sweet gesture, the fear for her father, and then for herself, the exhaustion, and the aches in her body, the relief at being found and being back with Aiden, all of it was falling out from her eyes now.

Aiden didn’t say a word, just bundled her up in a massive hug, stroking her back and hair tenderly while he made soothing sounds. Willow, too, came in for the cuddle, rubbing up against Valorie’s legs. Even Bluebell stuck his muzzle into the group, and it was enough to have Valorie release a small laugh. She was safe. And she was with her family.

“Someone will get all the things tomorrow,” Aiden promised Valorie.

“Aye, thank ye for all of it, Aiden, truly.” Valorie would have to come up with a way to show him how much all of his actions today had meant to her.

The grand rescue, of course, but all the little things too. The care package when he thought she was heading home to her sick father, his level of care and concern, and just the general comfort he provided to her meant more to Valorie than she thought she’d ever be able to express. But she would certainly try. In whatever time they had left, Valorie would show Aiden how much she appreciated him.

“Aye, yer welcome, Val; let’s get ye home.”

### CHAPTER 23

Back at the castle, Aiden ushered Valorie into the kitchens. Willow, of course, came along for the journey.

“I’m fine Aiden,” Valorie complained. Aiden’s hand was on the small of her back, leading her into the kitchens. Under normal circumstances, her whine could get Aiden to do whatever she wanted, but in this instance, Aiden stayed firm.

“I need to clean out yer cuts lass; ye were stabbed!” Aiden exclaimed; the woman was trying to give him a complex. Valorie wanted to just bathe and head right to sleep without cleaning or covering any of her many injuries.

Valorie just sighed and continued to let Aiden lead her into the kitchens. Aiden would probably never stop worrying completely, especially where Valorie was concerned.

“I just want to see ye well, Val,” Aiden added, sincerely. He knew he was being a bother, but he wouldn’t be able to rest until he saw Valorie’s wounds cared for himself... then ideally, again tomorrow by someone with a little more expertise.

Valorie had paused on their way to the kitchens; Aiden’s light pressure on her back was no longer moving them forward anymore. Valorie laid her hand gently on his arm as she turned to face him fully.

“I know I keep sayin’ it, but thank ye Aiden — thank ye for savin’ me, and thank ye for takin’ care of me now.” Aiden let out the breath he didn’t realize he was holding. Somehow, he had found a woman so fierce and independent but who also didn’t feel

weighed down by Aiden's concern. Now, he just needed to convince her to stay.

Please stay, Aiden thought to himself. Aiden wanted this life with Valorie. He could do without the kidnapping, but he wanted the slow moments and her schemes and the laughter she brought into his life.

"I wouldnae have it any other way, Val," Aiden said. It wasn't everything he wanted to tell her, but it was enough for now. Valorie closely watched Aiden's reaction and was apparently pleased with what she saw because she nodded her head and continued into the kitchens.

Lifting Valorie up to sit on the countertop, Aiden said, "Let's get ye up here so I can take a look." He brought over a bowl of water and a cloth — he could at the very least clean these wounds for her.

Aiden held Valorie's leg by the heel of her foot, and as carefully as he could, Aiden took the wet cloth across her ankles. She winced a little at the contact, and Aiden slowed his movements even further. "Sorry, lass," Aiden whispered; the last thing he wanted was to add any more pain to the day.

"I'm all right, Aiden, really," Valorie said. "Because of ye," she added, quietly. Aiden looked up from the wounds on Valorie's ankle, and they shared a small smile. Returning his attention to her injuries, Aiden continued cleaning one ankle and then the next.

"These were not too bad, thankfully," Aiden remarked as he finished up her other ankle.

"Aye, I..." Valorie paused and took a deep breath. "I was mainly rubbing my wrists to try and get them free, and then I was able to just untie the ropes around my ankles." Aiden's hand still on Valorie's heel tensed at hearing the lass talk about her captivity,

but he too forced himself to take another deep breath.

“Ye were spectacular escapin’ like that, Val. I was so proud when I saw ye outside of that cabin,” Aiden confessed.

“I was so tired, but I heard Willow, and I knew I needed to keep tryin’,” Valorie said, and Aiden immediately bent down to give the puppy some more attention; she really was the best girl. Aiden whispered it into her little ears as he pet her.

When Aiden looked back up, Valorie’s grin once again lit the room. Aiden might as well blow out all the candles.

“What?” Aiden asked.

“Nothin’, me laird,” Valorie answered. “I was just successful is all.”

Sensing he going to enjoy where this was headed, Aiden asked the follow-up, “Successful at what, lass?”

“Gettin’ ye to open yer heart to Willow,” Valorie said with her scheme smile on.

“Oh? And was your kidnapping all part of your master plan, also?”

Valorie laughed, “Nay, but it apparently helped the cause.”

“Let’s keep the kidnapping out of it next time, Val,” Aiden said with a chuckle as well. No part of him thought he would be laughing about today this soon, but Valorie made it easy.

“No promises,” Valorie said, smirking.

“All right, let me see these wrists.” Aiden turned his attentions to the more severe injuries now. Her wrists were still angry and red with some dried blood surrounding each of them. Aiden felt pride and horror in equal measure. He was sick to his stomach at the sight of Valorie so battered, but when he thought about all she had done to get free, he couldn’t not be proud of her.

Even more gently than he had with her ankles, Aiden took Valorie’s hand in his and started to wipe away the dried blood with the cloth in the other.

Valorie was putting on a brave face for him, but he could tell the motion was stinging on the wounds, so Aiden was slow and measured. He took frequent breaks as well, pretending like holding her arm up was tiring him out. Aiden saw Valorie roll her eyes at this, but he kept doing it anyway. Aiden didn’t care how long this took as long as he could minimize her discomfort.

Finally, Valorie’s wrists looked clean enough by Aiden’s standard which were very high to be fair. He took thin strips of cloth and wrapped her wrists to try and keep any more dirt from getting in the still healing wounds.

Aiden could see Valorie fading, so he began the process for the stab wound on her arm. It was not as deep as Aiden feared, but he was still careful to clean the wound thoroughly. He also wrapped a strip of cloth around her bicep.

With a soft tap on Valorie’s arm, Aiden said, “Yer all cleaned up, lass. Thank ye for humorin’ me.”

Valorie smiled a sleepy smile, “Nay, thank ye Aiden. Ye were right.”

“Hmm, say that again, Val — I’m not sure I heard ye.”

With a laugh, Valorie repeated, “Ye were right.”



Looking at Valorie's sleepy smile, Aiden felt fully calm for the first time since that note had arrived this morning. Valorie was safe and back home with him. All was well.

\* \* \*

Outside of the doors to their separate bedchambers, Valorie paused, nervously playing with a strand of her hair. Willow stood at their feet, looking between the two of them.

Aiden had insisted on carrying her up here after Valorie wobbled a little getting off the counter in the kitchens. She let it happen, a little because she was weary but a little more because she loved being in Aiden's arms, and she wanted to know what it would be like to be carried by him.

It was glorious.

Aiden had one strong arm underneath her legs and the other behind her back. Valorie had happily existed, cradled in his arms with her head leaning against his chest.

Now, though, she stood on her own two feet, delaying.

"Can I stay with ye tonight?" Valorie finally asked, looking down at the floor. Aiden's tender care in the kitchen had filled some hole in Valorie's chest. His slow cleaning began to feel like a caress, and with each touch of the cloth, she thought about how much he had already taken care of her.

After that level of care and the trauma of the day, Valorie didn't think she could be alone tonight. Thinking of laying alone in the dark in her still unfamiliar bedchambers had Valorie's heart starting to race and her hands shaking slightly. She shoved them behind her back as she stood there, hoping Aiden didn't sense her fear or nerves.

“Aye, I’d like that,” Aiden replied, lifting Valorie’s chin so she was forced to meet his eyes. He was smiling brilliantly at her. “Ye’re always welcome wherever I am.”

Valorie pushed down any sadness she felt over that statement. If her eyes watered a little, it was just due to the day’s horrors and not about the fact that she would not always be where Aiden was. Their time together had an end date on it, but Valorie would take what she could get for now. With everything that had happened, Valorie never got to tell Aiden that she wanted everything from him, and she just did not have the energy tonight.

Instead, Valorie smiled at Aiden and followed him and Willow into his bedchambers. Willow seemed pleased that she didn’t have to pick between the two of them tonight.

“Aye, these are me rooms,” Aiden said, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand.

Valorie looked around the grand room. The setup was fairly similar to her own, just in reverse. But where her color scheme was mainly red and dark brown, Aiden’s rooms had a lighter wood color throughout and a lush green as the accent. Valorie’s eyes flew from one part of the room to another. It suited Aiden. The whole room gave off a calm, woodsy aura.

“I redecorated a little bit when I took over as the laird; yer rooms were more my parents doin’,” Aiden told her, watching closely to see what she thought of his space.

“It’s beautiful, Aiden. The colors are lovely, and they’re perfect for ye,” Valorie complimented. It was apparently not the right thing to say because Aiden turned from her, clearing his throat a little.

Willow was making herself at home in the big bed. Staring at the bed that Aiden slept in every night, Valorie felt her palms start to sweat. What was she doing? She’d never shared a bed with a man before. Valorie wrung her hands together and then against

her dress trying to dry the moisture.

It was then she realized she was still in her filthy dress from this morning.

Okay, practicalities first Valorie, she thought to herself. Once she was bathed and changed, she could worry about the bed again.

“Could I take a bath first?” Valorie asked Aiden, who appeared to be looking for something in his wardrobe.

“Oh, aye, let me get one of the maids to fill it up for ye,” Aiden replied, turning back with a polite smile. It wasn’t his true smile, but Valorie let it go for tonight.

“Thank ye.”

Shortly thereafter the bath was warmed and ready for Valorie. With her wrists and upper arm wrapped in cloth there was little she could besides just soak in the tub, but the warm water was still healing. Valorie let everything wash off her in hopes of getting some rest tonight. If she could leave it all behind in this tub, maybe she’d finally rest.

After what felt like a rebirth, Valorie rose from the bath.

“I had one of the maids bring in a nightgown for ye,” Aiden called from the other room. “I had nothin’ to do with the choosin’,” he added shyly.

Valorie laughed when she saw the nightgown waiting in the dressing chambers for her. It was one of the more... revealing nightgowns she owned. Her mother had packed it for her “just in case,” and Valorie never anticipated needing it, but apparently Aiden’s maids had their own schemes as well and were trying to push their laird and lady together.

Valorie pulled the thin garment over her head and admired herself a little in the mirror. If Aiden had liked the one she had been wearing the other night in the garden, he was going to lose his mind over this. The thought caused Valorie to smirk at herself in the mirror.

Summoning every ounce of confidence she possessed, Valorie strode into the bedchamber with her head held high. The second she stepped into the room though, she stopped.

There, already lounging on the bed, was Aiden. He had one arm bent behind his head and a knee up. And he was staring. Valorie had never felt the force of his gaze as strongly as she did right then. His eyes had already traced every inch of her and were on their second pass. Valorie squirmed under the attention.

“I should have told them to bring a different one,” Aiden said under his breath.

“Ye donnae like it?” Valorie teased.

Aiden laughed, a dark, hungry laugh. “Oh, I like it, lass; that’s not the problem.”

Valorie blushed deeply but pushed herself to continue taking small steps into the room. Aiden’s eyes never left her. They continued to trail over her legs, her stomach, her breasts, and her arms, but his eyes never strayed from her body. Besides his eyes roaming over her, Aiden didn’t move. She saw his muscles clench, but otherwise, he stayed put. She would have to go to him.

Now standing next to the bed, Valorie fiddled with the blanket on top, refusing to make eye contact with Aiden now that she stood so close. That didn’t mean she couldn’t still feel his eyes on her though. His gaze burned into her skin until Valorie finally lifted her head and met his stare. Aiden lifted an eyebrow in challenge, and that was all it took for Valorie to finally climb up into the bed.

Now that she was here though... Valorie had no idea what to do. She laid rigidly on her back with her hands by her sides. Aiden, finally moving now, rolled over onto his side. He looked down at Valorie with his chin resting against his fist and broke out in a booming laugh. Valorie swatted him in the chest, and he fell dramatically on to his back, still cackling.

“Come here, lass,” Aiden said pulling Valorie onto his chest with a chuckle. Valorie went easily and nestled into the expanse of his torso, her head fitting perfectly against him.

“Goodnight, Aiden,” Valorie said on a content sigh.

“Goodnight, Val,” Aiden replied, and Valorie let her eyes close. As she drifted into sleep, she thought about how quickly sleep had come for her like this. How comfortable and easy it was with Aiden’s arms wrapped around her and his heartbeat in her ears.

### CHAPTER 24

The next morning, Aiden had a plan. He was lying awake in his bed staring at the ceiling. Blessedly, Valorie's head was still laying across his chest. He was slowly running his fingers through her long curls, the way he'd been doing since he woke up hours ago.

Valorie had fallen asleep against Aiden almost immediately after she took her bath, but with visions of that nightgown swimming around in his head, Aiden had been up far longer. He had lain perfectly still so as not to wake the lass, but all he saw was Valorie walking out of the dressing chambers. Even when Aiden closed his eyes, the image was seared on the inside of his eyelids.

When the maid had walked in holding that scrap, it was barely enough fabric to be called a nightgown, Aiden almost sent her to get another one. The servants were just as meddlesome as his sisters apparently, but an even bigger part of Aiden wanted to see it on Valorie. And if that was his only chance, he was going to take it.

It was worth it. Aiden may be tortured by the sight of Valorie in that fabric for the rest of his life, but it was still worth it.

Aiden looked down at the woman in his arms; the sun was shining through the curtains now, and she looked like some angel that was sent down just for him. What he did to deserve it, Aiden would never know, but he wasn't going to question anything when he got to hold Valorie like this.

Some of the blankets had fallen during the night, and Aiden was treated to the

nightgown in the light of day. Aiden's hand trailed a light path on Valorie's back across the top hem of the garment. Her skin was so smooth underneath his fingers, and the nightgown was highlighting every curve and dip of Valorie's body.

The thing was distracting him again. He had a plan damn it, a scheme of his own for once. Taking a deep breath, Aiden forcibly removed his hand and his eyes from the nightgown.

Aiden wanted today to be special for Valorie. He could never fully remove the impact yesterday would have on the lass, but Aiden could certainly do his best to create little moments of joy for her every day after. And he was particularly proud of his idea for the day.

A short while later, Aiden felt Valorie stirring in his arms.

"Good mornin', Val," Aiden whispered against her hair. Valorie hummed sleepily back to him. "I have a surprise for ye today,"

Valorie perked up on his chest. "Oh?"

Chuckling, Aiden responded, "Aye, but ye need to get up first."

Valorie was quick to jump up from the bed, and the sudden movement caused her nightgown to shift, just a little, but with the lack of material to begin with, Aiden clenched his jaw tightly at the sight. This woman.

Oblivious to Aiden's turmoil, Valorie bounded to the dressing chamber to finally take off that cursed garment. The moment she was out of view, Aiden released the heavy breath he was holding. Rising from the bed, Aiden's excitement for his surprise returned, and he quickly readied himself. There were a few last-minute things he needed to take care of before they would be ready to go.

\* \* \*

Valorie had never slept better. None of the fear or stress from the day before had bled into her unconscious mind while she slept on Aiden. Something about being with Aiden was just... safe. Valorie knew that no matter what happened, she was protected as long as he was by her side.

As Valorie prepared for the day, she tried to guess what Aiden's surprise was going to be. Maybe an archery day or a repeat of all their competitions from that first day at her father's. Maybe they were going to travel somewhere. As she thought of more and more possibilities, Valorie realized she didn't really care what it was; she just wanted to spend the day with Aiden.

When Valorie was ready for the day, she headed down through the great hall where Aiden was already waiting for her. He was dressed casually in his clan's plaid, and it did nothing to give away their destination. Tucked under one arm, he carried Willow, so at least the puppy would be with them for the day.

"Mornin' again, Val," Aiden said with a smirk as Valorie approached him.

"Aye, mornin'," Valorie replied hesitantly. Aiden was too chipper.

Keeping up his new happy persona, Aiden asked, "Are ye excited?"

"Not as much as I would be if I knew what we were doin'," Valorie hedged, but Aiden just laughed and led Valorie out the front entrance to the keep.

Outside, Bluebell was already saddled up with a suspiciously large pack attached to his back. Valorie narrowed her eyes at Aiden, trying to ascertain his plan. He just smiled. Valorie stomped towards Bluebell, but Aiden reached out a hand to stop her. He had a small piece of cloth in his hand.



“Cannae have ye guessing where we are headed, lass,” Aiden said as he reached to tie the cloth over Valorie’s eyes. With one last suspicious glance at Aiden, Valorie let him blindfold her. He carefully guided her to Bluebell, and with Aiden’s help, she mounted the horse. A few moments later, Aiden swung up behind her.

“All right, lass I’m goin’ to have to lead here,” Aiden said taking the reins from her hands.

“So, what am I supposed to do?” Valorie questioned. Aiden laughed from behind her, and she could feel his chest rumbling against her back.

“Just enjoy the ride, Val.”

“Hmph,” Valorie grunted in response.

They rode in silence for a little while. Valorie was quiet because she was trying to see if she could figure out where they were headed based on the turns she felt. Thus far, she still had no idea.

What Valorie did realize was how little she thought about yesterday. Valorie knew she would have moments when the fear sank in, but right now, riding fast through the woods with Aiden at her back, all Valorie felt was joy and excitement. She could feel a broad smile across her face, and her leg was bouncing a little in anticipation.

Finally, Aiden slowed Bluebell to a walk and then stopped him completely. He swung off the horse and then reached back up to help Valorie down. When she went to take the cloth off her eyes, Aiden stopped her once again.

“Just a few more minutes, Val; I want to get everythin’ set up,” Aiden said, placing Willow in her arms. Valorie didn’t have the heart to tell him she could already tell where they were by sound alone.

“Set up?” Valorie asked, continuing to play along.

Through his laughter, Aiden replied, “Good try, lass.” Valorie felt him walk away from her, and then she was alone with Willow.

She stroked Willow’s soft head a few times as she listened to Aiden fiddling around her and the heavy sounds of the waterfall. Valorie only knew of one waterfall in the area, and she had a strong suspicion that they were back on her father’s lands at the waterfall clearing.

When Aiden finally returned to her side, Valorie heard him take a deep inhale before slowly removing the cloth from her eyes. As she suspected, they were back in the waterfall clearing where they kissed for the very first time, but everything else Valorie found when the blindfold was removed took her breath away.

Aiden had set up a waterside picnic for them. A massive blanket was laid out by the lake with a few pillows and more than enough food and beverages for the two of them. After taking off the cloth, Aiden had gone over to the set-up and was fiddling with the pillows and the arrangement of everything. Valorie walked over to him and laid a hand on his arm to stop his adjustment.

“It’s perfect Aiden,” Valorie told him.

“Aye?”

“Aye,” Valorie confirmed firmly, lighting up Aiden’s face.

“I’m glad,” Aiden said.

Valorie let Willow out of her arms to wander and play in the clearing and took her spot on the blanket. She lay on her back as Aiden took a seat next to her. Staring up at

the blue sky, Valorie thought about how lucky she was to know Aiden. With a twinge of sadness, Valorie considered what her life would be like without him in it. It seemed unbearably dull.

Aiden, who always seemed to keep a close eye on her, noticed the shift in her mood.

“Everythin’ all right, Val?”

“Aye, this is really lovely, Aiden; thank ye,” Valorie responded. She didn’t want to ruin this perfect day with talk about their future, so instead, she soaked up the sun and Aiden. Valorie didn’t know how many days like this they would get, and she wanted to take advantage of every moment.

### CHAPTER 25

Aiden had eventually lain down next to Valorie on the blanket, but he was still keeping a close eye on her face. Something about his gesture was making her somber, and Aiden was determined to fix it. Besides, the profile of Valorie's face, bathed in sunlight, was all Aiden wanted to look at anyway.

“Thank ye for saving me... again,” Valorie said. With a bit of relief, Aiden assumed that her mood was just due to everything that had happened, but he wished the waterfall was doing more to cheer her up.

When Aiden didn't reply, Valorie turned onto her side to look at him. She was looking at Aiden with adoration, and he did not know how to respond to it. Aiden wasn't a hero — he was inherently selfish. He wanted to keep Valorie for himself just as much as Tavish did, except Aiden would sooner cut off his own arm than see Valorie hurt.

Aiden guessed that was the difference; he would always do everything in his power to see Valorie happy and safe. And while he wanted her, desperately, Aiden would walk away if that's what she wished. Aiden would pine for her from afar for the rest of his life, but he would leave her alone if she asked it of him.

Aiden still had doubts that he would always be able to protect Valorie, and she would never be completely safe from harm, but when Aiden had thought Valorie might be lost, he realized he would rather have her with him for whatever time he managed to get than never have her at all.

Neither of them knew what the future held, but the outlook was bleak without Valorie in his life. And no matter what the next day brought, Aiden wanted to spend today with Valorie and the next day and the day after that.

Aiden had let Myles' hold on him stretch too far. Aiden's own fear and trauma had him pushing everyone away as a form of protection. He thought that if he kept himself alone and separate, he would be safe, but that had not been a life. Aiden was simply existing before her, but with Valorie, he was finally starting to live.

Emboldened by his realizations, Aiden inched closer to Valorie, and with each movement, he let go of some of his fear. The woman lying next to him was fierce and strong, and Aiden was not the same boy he once was. He didn't need to be alone in order to be safe. Together, they were a formidable pair; together they could do anything.

Finally, Aiden lay directly in front of Valorie. They were so close together now that he could see all the little freckles on her cheeks and nose. Once again, Valorie had a challenge in her eye, and this time, it was one Aiden wanted to meet head-on. He was ready for her.

Aiden surged forward, grabbing Valorie by the back of the neck and taking her lips in a heated kiss. Valorie's hands found their way to Aiden's back, squeezing and scratching him as they continued to share a deep kiss. Their lips moved in tandem together, their passions aligned.

They lay side by side on the blanket, their arms wrapped tightly around each other. Aiden felt Valorie's breasts rising and falling heavily against him, and he pulled back slightly to give himself space to fully worship her body with his hands. Now with access to the front of Valorie, Aiden caressed her neck and arms and breasts, running teasing touches across every part of her that he could reach.

With the sounds of the waterfall filling his ears, Aiden felt a swelling underneath his plaid from kissing and teasing the lass. It had not gone unnoticed; with the extra space between their bodies now, Valorie's shy hand was caressing him with a slow and steady motion. Aiden gently stopped her hand; she didn't need to do this for him. He was happy just to be here with her. After yesterday, Aiden did not want to push her.

Sensing things were going too fast, too quickly, Aiden pulled back completely from Valorie, putting a few inches of space between them again on the blanket.

Valorie looked him in the eye and announced, equally determined and sad, "I daenae care that our time together is limited; I want to experience this with ye."

\* \* \*

"Limited?" Aiden asked Valorie, shaking his head at her. "I will never leave ye, lass. Nothing about this is limited or temporary to me. I want ye for life," he growled.

"Come here, Val," Aiden said, and Valorie went easily, snuggling back into the circle of Aiden's arms and burrowing into his embrace. Half of her body lay on top of his and she squirmed a little, not wanting to crush him, but Aiden held her tightly in place.

"I donnae want this to be limited either Aiden — I want everything with ye," Valorie said quietly.

"Good."

Valorie lifted her head off Aiden's chest and tilted her face up to his. When he just stared at her in wonder, she reached behind his head and pulled him in for another passionate kiss.

Kissing Aiden felt like coming home, like finally taking a deep breath after being underwater, like that first taste of freedom. Valorie knew without a doubt that this is where she was meant to be. No far-off land or adventure would ever measure up to this feeling right here. Valorie was greedy now that she had Aiden for real. She wanted it all, she wanted to travel and experience the world, and she wanted to do it with Aiden.

Desiring more of Aiden, always, Valorie deepened their kiss, opening her mouth and letting her tongue tangle with Aiden's again. He followed suit, fully immersing himself in their kiss.

"Valorie," Aiden groaned against her lips. Valorie's body filled with heat knowing that she caused that sound to come out of his mouth. Aiden was desperate for her, and it was a heady thing.

Slowly, Aiden reached his hands down towards the hem of her dress. He held her eye the whole time, giving her ample opportunity to change her mind, but she wanted this.

Still moving slowly, Aiden began to lift the dress up Valorie's body. She had to lift herself off him at times, but she was still wearing the simple sheath she put on this morning, so at least there were no intricate ties for Aiden to struggle with. Valorie lay on top of him now in just her undergarments, flushing heavily under his close inspection.

"I want to see all of ye, Val," Aiden said, and Valorie heartily nodded. He flipped them over, so Valorie lay on her back staring up at him. She watched closely as Aiden slowly removed the rest of her clothes. She had never been this exposed to a man before, and Valorie fought the urge to cover herself, but as soon as she saw the hungry look in Aiden's eyes, she relaxed.

Rising up to his knees, Aiden used one hand to remove his shirt and quickly took off his plaid as well. He was apparently no longer moving slowly because Valorie barely had time to admire his naked form before he surged back to kiss her again.

Aiden rocked himself against her, and Valorie cried out at the first feel of him bare pressed against her. He felt impossibly large, but Valorie had little time for nerves once Aiden started kissing and sucking on her neck while also teasing her taut nipples.

“Aiden,” Valorie moaned into his ear.

“Ye’re beautiful, Val, absolutely stunning like this,” Aiden told her, and despite already being completely bared to him, this comment was the one that caused her to flush deeply.

“I have been wonderin’ how far that blush of yours goes,” Aiden said, admiring and stroking the heated flesh across Valorie’s chest.

When Valorie started to squirm underneath his attention, Aiden smirked and resumed his teasing. He brought his fingers back to her center now, stroking that one spot that drove her crazy.

“I need ye, Valorie,” Aiden groaned before rising up on his elbows and looking down at Valorie. Looking back at him, Valorie was ready too. She wanted to share her first time with Aiden. She ran her hands over his abdomen, admiring the way the muscles there were strained.

“Aye, Aiden, please,” Valorie agreed when Aiden positioned himself at her entrance.

Ever so slowly, Aiden began to slide his length inside of Valorie. She cried out at the first feel of him, stretching her. Aiden paused, with just the smallest amount inside of



her, to check in, but she whined in his ear, “More, Aiden; I need ye too.”

Aiden continued filling her, and she felt each bit of him until he was fully sheathed inside of her. Aiden let out a deep groan as he leaned back down for another kiss.

Valorie was desperate for more, first with Aiden’s teasing touches, and now, he was just holding himself inside of her for several long moments as they kissed. Valorie tried to buck her hips, but Aiden let out a dark laugh and kept her in place beneath him.

“Aiden, please, I want everythin’,” Valorie cried out.

“Not yet, lass, have patience,” Aiden responded before capturing one nipple in his mouth and taking the other one between two fingers. The sensation had Valorie’s back arching against the blanket, and she finally started to feel some friction, letting out a low moan.

Aiden too moaned at the movement, and it seemed to spur him into action. He pulled back from her breasts and finally started to move inside of her, increasing his pace and hitting the spot inside of Valorie that made her vision blur.

With each thrust, Valorie got closer and closer to the edge. She was meeting Aiden’s hips, and both of their breaths were coming in heavily now.

“Val” Aiden chanted as he kept up his strokes. Valorie could feel herself right there at the edge already when Aiden reached down and started stroking her core again.

“Aiden!” Valorie cried out as she finally found her climax. Her shakes and moans seemed to set Aiden off as well, and he came deep inside of her, groaning out her name.

Aiden collapsed on top of her on the blanket. Valorie could feel his heart racing in time with hers, and they both fought to catch their breath. Aiden lifted his head to kiss Valorie one more time — a slow, passionate kiss.

When they separated, Aiden rolled over on this back and pulled Valorie back on top of him. She sighed into his embrace as he ran gentle fingers through her hair and across her back. Valorie felt complete, laying on him like this. The waterfall today was the best surprise she'd ever had, and she couldn't wait for more days exactly like this.

Realizing there was something she still needed to say, Valorie took her head off Aiden's chest and met his eyes.

"I love ye Aiden," Valorie whispered to Aiden; she forced herself to hold his gaze and was rewarded with the most beautiful look she'd ever seen. Aiden was looking at her with such devotion, Valorie thought she might burst at the seams.

"I love ye too, Val," Aiden said back to her with another kiss.

### EPILOGUE

Valorie stood in the garden outside of their castle and admired the scene in front of her. Everyone was here today. Her parents stood with Kenneth, laughing loudly together over by the rose bushes. Her father was looking very dapper today, in his clan's plaid. He had made a full recovery from his wounds and was doing better than ever.

When Valorie caught Kenneth's eye, he waved to her with a big grin. He had become an even better friend since everything had happened.

Both of Aiden's sisters, their husbands, and their mother were here as well. They were all trying to wrangle their broods of children. The little things were running about the garden and the castle itself, and one of them always seemed to be missing.

Margaret, accompanied by one of her brothers, beamed at Valorie from the other side of the garden. Valorie briefly hoped that it would be Margaret's day soon; she deserved all the love that Valorie had found. Margaret's brother, however, was the one guest who looked like he'd rather be anywhere but here, but Valorie didn't care.

Everything was perfect. It was the wedding of her dreams.

Valorie glanced to the side at her new husband standing next to her; he was giving her the look he only ever wore for her. She pulled him in for another kiss as husband and wife, and she couldn't imagine anything better.

Valorie once again admired the new ring on her finger and the matching one on

Aiden's. The piece of metal, with no beginning and no end, marked the eternal vows they made in front of the priest and their family and friends.

After everything that happened with Tavish and then by the waterfall, Valorie and Aiden's betrothal became a whole lot more real. She officially made her home in Aiden's chambers, and they were turning the other suite into a studio for Aiden and a reading room for Valorie. Aiden had since found a love of painting with Valorie as his muse, and Valorie just wanted to be in whatever room Aiden was in.

They were practically inseparable now. Aiden kept his promises, and Valorie was at nearly every council meeting (she was honestly getting a bit bored of those), and Aiden consulted with her on all things clan related.

When they weren't running the clan, they practiced archery or sword fighting although Aiden would never truly strike at Valorie, so she ended up winning every spar.

And when they wanted to get away, they took the horses and Willow back to their spot at the waterfall. It had become their favorite place to relax and enjoy each other. They spent many hours just lying in the sun or splashing around in the water.

They had a trip planned for next year sometime, and Valorie was finally going to get to see some of the world she had always dreamed of with Aiden by her side.

Aiden pulled Valorie towards him and kissed the top of her head, his arm now looped around her waist.

"Have I told ye how beautiful ye look today, Valorie?" Aiden asked against her hair.

"Aye, only about a dozen times," Valorie replied with a laugh.

“Hmm, not nearly enough then,” Aiden commented, “Let me rectify that; ye look absolutely stunnin’ Val, I’m the luckiest man alive to get to call myself yer husband.”

Valorie turned in Aiden’s arms and gazed up at him — to think she once thought he was harsh looking. There was nothing harsh or cold in Aiden’s face now; he looked at her with love and warmth, the same way Valorie imagined she looked back at him.

“And I’m the luckiest woman,” Valorie said with a smile.

Valorie’s parents were approaching them now, but they seemed to be bickering a little. Valorie watched as her father handed something to her mother, shaking his head but still wearing the proud look he had on all day today. Valorie’s mother was flashing her scheming smile.

“What was that about?” Valorie asked when her parents stood before them.

“Yer faither bet me that ye’d find a way to leave Aiden as well; I told him he was wrong, of course,” Valorie’s mother confessed.

Aiden released a full belly laugh, and Valorie lightly swatted him for encouraging them. Valorie just scoffed in response; her mouth open in shock.

Until she looked over again at her new husband...

“I could never leave this one,” Valorie said, pulling Aiden in for a passionate kiss.

The End?

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:38 am*

Three years later

Aiden gazed over at his wife and their two-year-old son, Rory, in wonder. Aiden had never quite understood how he had gotten so lucky, but he was thankful for every day for his family.

### CHAPTER 1

“I hate ye, I hate ye so much,” Keira sobbed, her fury evident in her tone. “I do nae want to marry ye anymore. Do ye listen to me? I will nae marry ye. I wish to return home this instant!”

“What did ye say? Ye wish to return home?” Eric scoffed as if what she had said amused him. Keira could sense he was getting angrier with every passing minute, but she was not going to back down. She was not going to stay quiet any longer. She had never learned to do that, and she would not start now.

“Aye! Break off this betrothal and take me home. I will nae stay with ye in yer miserable castle for another minute,” she shouted again, making sure he could hear the anger in her voice.

“Ye wish to break off our betrothal, Keira?” Eric asked, his tone dangerously low. Keira felt chills run down her spine; at that moment, he looked dangerous. A man who could hurt her. She knew something was not right. In fact, something about this man, the one her father had arranged for her to marry, was extremely wrong, and Keira needed to escape. She knew she needed to return to her castle, to the O’Donelly clan, as soon as possible.

“I do, aye,” she replied, “take me home.”

In the flash of a second, Eric moved towards her, closing the distance between them even though she continued to back away. Before she could understand what was happening or shield herself from the hit, his palm landed right across her cheek, pain

shooting through her face and scalp at the touch as she fell back from the force of it, her head hitting the wall. She slumped on the floor, spots dancing in her vision; she was struggling to remain awake.

He had slapped her. The man she had once been ecstatic about marrying had slapped her. This was the last thing Keira could have imagined. In the past two months, she had known him and even though he had slowly broken her, she could have never expected him to hit her.

“Ye will leave me? Ye will go home?” he asked, his tone turning sarcastic as he walked towards her pushing her onto the ground. He sat down in front of her on his knees, and all Keira wanted to do was run away. Every fiber of her body was telling her this man was going to hurt her more, and she did not wish to take the pain. No one in her life had ever raised a hand to her. Tears ran down her cheeks, and she quickly wiped them away, not wanting to show weakness.

“Eric, why are ye doing this to me?” Keira tried to hold her sob, knowing perfectly well that she was at this man’s mercy. She knew nothing could be done.

“Because ye are supposed to be wife very soon, and yet ye wish to break off this betrothal. I do nae like that, Keira. I do nae like a lass raising her voice at me,” he shouted, making her recoil further away. His hand shot out and grasped her long, blonde hair. His touch was harsh and extremely painful, warning Keira there was no escape. She could not physically fight off Eric since he was much stronger than her, and if she tried to run away, he would only catch her and make her suffer even more.

“I will raise my voice at ye whenever I wish to. Do whatever ye can and just leave me be,” she shouted at him furiously, but this time, a sob managed to escape her. Her words did not affect him and his stone-cold heart since he slapped her again, pushing her head toward the wall. She knew it would only make him angrier, but she no longer cared. There was no way she was going to succumb in front of a man who was



nothing but a coward.

As her head hit the wall again, she saw black. For a few seconds, the world was spinning, and she felt a sharp pain throbbing through her head. She felt as if she could no longer breathe.

“Ye are my betrothed, and ye will stay here in this castle with me forever. Forget all about going home,” Eric said, his voice returning to normal even though his words were just as cruel. “Do ye understand?”

“I understand,” she sobbed, just wishing to get rid of him.

“If ye even so much as talk about leaving again, I will kill ye, and perhaps then ye can leave the walls of this castle.”

Terror ran through her veins at his words, and she stared at him with widened eyes. “Kill me?” Keira stuttered.

“Aye, first I will kill ye, and then I will kill yer father for raising a daughter so disobedient. Then both of ye can leave my life,” he replied calmly as if he had not just threatened to murder her. Keira did not know how her life had reached this point. She did not know how a man who was once charming to her had turned into a barbaric monster.

He laughed slowly and turned around to leave the bedchamber. Keira heard the latch settling into place, indicating that he had locked her inside, but she waited for his footsteps to disappear entirely before breaking down into tears. Gut-wrenching cries tore out of her as she realized what had just happened.

It had only been two months since she had come here to live with him in the Gilmor Castle. He was the laird’s son and the only heir to the lairdship but had assumed all

responsibilities since his father had been sick for a while now. Keira couldn't help but think about the man she had met at her betrothal; the man had been nothing like the Eric she knew now. The Eric who had just hit her.

“Faither, how could ye do it?” Keira questioned her father.

“Ye have to get married sooner or later, Keira, and if an arranged match can work for Astrid, it can work for ye too.”

“Where is he?” Keira whispered to Aiden and Astrid, her brother and sister, who stood just by her. Although, before anyone could reply, she heard approaching footsteps and turned around.

“Me lady?” a pair of warm brown eyes met her gaze as Keira looked at the man staring at her with a smile on his handsome face. He was young, no more than a couple years older than her, and still youthful, but he was rather tall and quite lean, which made him look older.

“Aye?” she finally replied when she finished appraising him, realizing he must have been doing the same thing.

“I was merely wondering if the legends of yer beauty were true. I think I will nae have to wonder any longer,” he said, and Keira smiled at his flirtatious comment, immensely pleased.

“I think ye are nae allowed to flirt with a woman on her betrothal feast,” she replied, still not certain if this was Eric.

“I think ye are when ye are her betrothed.”

Keira scoffed as she came back to the present, still lying on the floor with blood

oozing out of her head. She had been confident that Eric would never keep her at Gilmor castle without her will. He would never be unkind to her because he had simply seemed like a man who did not know anything beyond kindness. He had appeared charming to her and her family, and no one could have suspected the kind of person he had turned out to be.

After he had brought her to his castle, the first few days had been bliss when he had dazzled her with attention. Although suddenly, he started to pull away from her until she needed to beg him to spend time with her. She was extremely lonely. She had never liked his maither, and his faither was sick. He was an only child, and hence Keira had felt abandoned. She had realized that she could not live a life like this. He had turned cold towards her.

He never touched her until today. She was terrified of asking anything from him, and Keira had never been afraid of anyone in her life. He had broken her feisty spirit, and that was something she could not forgive him for.

The only thing she knew was that she needed to escape. She did not know how she would do it or even if she would make it out alive. Living in this castle with Eric was killing her a little every day, and she would rather die trying to escape than die at the hands of a cruel, brutal man. A man who did not deserve her at all. Keira knew she needed to do something and do it fast, or else her life here would just fade away day after day.

She touched the dried blood on her forehead and wondered how many bruises and pain she would have to endure until she could finally be free. If she would ever be free.

### CHAPTER 2

#### ONE MONTH LATER

A loud sound suddenly reached her ears as Keira woke up from an already uncomfortable sleep. Eric had left her bedchamber only a few hours ago. She knew her face was sporting two huge bruises, and there must be cuts and gashes all over her body.

He never touched her sexually, never even came close to her in an intimate way but hitting was another thing entirely. He believed as his betrothed, she was already his property. Although he fancied himself as an old-fashioned man and would only come close to her once she was his wife. Keira just had to make sure she'd never be that.

Everything hurt, but she was still trying to get whatever little sleep she possibly could just to escape Eric, even for a few hours. Hitting her had become a custom, a routine. She felt as if she had become the source of his venting, a human being he could be unnecessarily brutal with to take out his frustrations.

Although something else had woken her up. She sat up in bed, trying to understand what was happening, when her gaze landed on the faint orange light coming into her bedchamber through the partially shut window.

Fire.

She immediately stood up, her feet bare in the cold, and wrapped a plaid around herself. The fact that it was the colors of the Gilmor house made her recoil, but she

did not have much choice.

“What is happening?” she whispered to herself and quickly walked towards the window. Her window faced the backside of the castle, and as she opened it, she was met with towering flames that had overtaken the building. A loud, violent cough quickly overcame her as she inhaled the rapidly rising smoke. Her eyes watered, and her vision turned blurred. Keira backed away in horror and immediately ran towards the door, praying for it to be unlocked.

Eric had stopped locking her up lately since he was now certain that she would not be going anywhere. He had broken her so much that she believe there was no point in attempting to escape his cruel grasp. She tried to open the door and breathed a sigh of relief. It was indeed unlocked, and when she stepped out, she found the castle in chaos. She could see servants running from one end to the other, some carrying buckets with water and others just simply trying to escape from whatever calamity had struck.

“Wait,” Keira shouted as she noticed a servant running, and the young man immediately stopped. There was terror in his eyes, and Keira knew something was wrong.

“What is happening?” she asked, praying for it to be just a fire and nothing else. For some reason, she could sense it was an attack. It was not just her instincts telling her so. She was sure a man like Eric would have enemies.

“The MacPherson clan has attacked, and their soldiers have breached the gates. We are all going to die,” the servant cried out.

“Is it just the soldiers or has their laird also come with them?” she asked, hoping it was just the soldiers.

“Laird MacPherson is here too. I saw him with my own eyes in the forest. The man looks as murderous as everyone says he is,” the servant told her, his voice almost drowning with fear.

Keira’s blood froze at the news since she knew perfectly well what it meant. The MacPherson clan was the strongest, most violent clan in all of Scotland. They were both rich and powerful, and their soldiers were the most well-trained soldiers one could come across. They were ruthless fighters and Eric’s biggest enemies. Their laird, Christian Larsen, was supposedly a fighter and a ruthless one at that. There was no one in the entire kingdom who could match him. The man was dangerous, and Keira knew he should never find her. Eric had only threatened to kill her, but Christian would kill her in truth.

They had been trying to attack the Gilmor clan for the last month now, and every time they did, Eric would take his frustrations out on her. The beating that night would be severe. Keira still did not know how she was alive yet.

Although, this time, the MacPherson clan had invaded the castle walls and had set the place on fire. She knew what this meant. If Eric made it out alive, she would die at his hands.

Now is my chance to run. They’re too distracted to notice.

Before she knew what she was doing, she was running downstairs and out of the back gate of the castle, trying to make sure no one saw her. She knew since everyone was running out, a crowd would have formed outside in the forest, which meant she would need to run in the other direction to remain unnoticed.

Every inch of her body hurt due to Eric’s beating, but she had no choice. As she stepped into the forest, filled with soldiers and fires erupting left and right, she knew she could escape. She could feel it in her bones.

Keira smiled weakly to herself as she continued running, knowing that all she needed to do was somehow get lost in the forest so no one would be able to find her. She was ready to die in the forest or become a meal to the wolves rather than suffer a life with Eric or be found by someone from the enemy clan. She just needed to run.

“God, help me,” she whispered, navigating through the thick smoke all around her. She tried her best to keep her plaid wrapped tightly around her. Running was becoming difficult for her with every passing second as her legs were starting to hurt, and she struggled to breathe.

Tired and coughing, without being able to see well through the smoke, she ran directly into something. As she tried to clear the smoke with her hand, she saw it was someone. The tallest, most muscular man she had ever laid eyes on. A sudden burst of orange flames erupted somewhere close to her, but Keira could not look away from the piercing blue eyes trained on her face.

The man was not dressed in battle armor but simply in a tunic and his kilt, which was enough to tell Keira that he was from the MacPherson clan. Her kilt slipped through her fingers and fell to the ground as he stared at her curiously, trying to understand who she was. His face remained impassive and emotionless. He was beautiful. Keira knew men were not supposed to be described as such, but she had never seen someone who looked the way this man did. Despite the chaos and the running and the flames around her, all Keira could see was this man.

His gaze moved away from her eyes and slowly moved all over her face. Keira couldn't help but feel self-conscious, suddenly feeling the loss of the kilt over her as she noticed him looking all over her hands and exposed flesh. She immediately understood what he was staring at. Her bruises. She could sense that it was exactly what he was looking at as his eyes suddenly turned wild. Keira feared him, yet she did not once think of backing away or running. He already had a strange pull on her.

He extended his hand towards her, his index finger falling short just short of her face as if he had wanted to trace her scar, the scar given to her by Eric. His hand dropped back to his side, balled tightly into a fist as their eyes once again met. Hers curious, his still raging.

“Who did this to ye?” he asked, his voice heavy with anger. Keira would have flinched if anyone else had used such a tone, but she didn’t flinch now. Not with him.

“I need to go,” she whispered, afraid to tell him who had been behind the bruises. She knew she was beyond help anyway. Whomever this man was would not be able to do anything for her. He was an enemy of Eric’s, and in the honorary sense of the word, she was Eric’s prized possession. He would never help her. She only needed to escape, get as far from Eric and this castle as she possibly could.

“There is nay where to go. Tell me who did this to ye,” he asked again, his words restrained as if he was fighting to conceal the anger in his tone.

“It does nae matter,” she replied, running her hands over her arms as a sudden chill overtook her. She turned silent as he picked up her kilt from the ground and wrapped it around her shoulders once again. “I need to go.”

“I asked ye a question. Do nae make me ask again,” he said, his words sounding both urgent and furious, but Keira was not going to give him a name. She was not going to tell someone from the enemy clan that Eric had done this, because then she’d have to tell him she was his betrothed too. She was sure they wouldn’t take this kindly.

“Why do ye care?” she asked back angrily, looking around to make sure her absence was still unnoticed. The man was becoming a hurdle to her escape. “Move. I need to leave. Now.”

“Nay, ye do nae,” he said as if he was deciding for her.



“I said move. I must leave before the battle is over. Ye do nae understand!” she said, clearly frustrated. She pushed against him, but he was built like steel, entirely unmovable.

Before she knew what was happening, he removed his kilt and wrapped it around her, over the plaid she already had on to protect her from the biting winds. She noticed he was wearing breeches underneath. His colors wrapped around her arms. She suddenly felt warm, but not yet safe. She would not be safe until she was as far away from Eric as possible.

“There is no where to go,” he replied. “Ye are coming with me.”

He suddenly picked her up in his arms as if she was weightless, and Keira knew that to him, she most certainly must have seemed weightless. He threw her over his shoulder as if she was a bag of wheat, and she realized what was happening. This man, whoever he was, was taking her away with him. A man she did not know was trying to kidnap her, and Keira could not let this happen. This was her only chance to escape. She could not flee from Eric, only to be captured by a stranger.

“Let me go,” she shouted, kicking with all her might at his thighs and hitting her fists on his back, but he acted as if none of it had an effect. He was built like steel, and his skin felt as if it was pure muscle. He might truly not feel a thing.

“Stop it,” he said when she continued hitting him as he walked with her on his back. Keira could see the battle unfolding in front of her, and she did not know what was going to become of her. The smoke only kept increasing as it filled her lungs, and she was beginning to feel dizzy. She knew if she were still running, she would not have been able to make it much further.

“I need to go,” she shouted, a cry escaping her throat. “Ye do nae understand. I really need to go. This is my only chance. Please let me go.”

“Ye are safe with me, fox,” he whispered as if coaxing a child. Keira only felt insulted and began to hit him harder. The smoke kept making her dizzier, and she was beginning to lose sense of what was happening around her.

She noticed when the handsome stranger suddenly stopped walking and instead placed her on a horse before mounting himself. Keira had no strength left in her body to run away or fight anymore. She was both exhausted and dizzy, and the smoke surrounding them made it even worse.

“I am nae safe. Let me go,” she whispered to the man, who simply looked at her with patience in his gaze. He still did not loosen his hold on her.

Before she could say much else or hear what he was saying, her vision began to darken as things around her started spinning faster and faster. As the man began to move away from the forest and the burning castle, Keira saw Eric. His brown eyes were on her as he watched her ride away with the stranger. Keira knew she was away from him.

She was away from the danger that her betrothed brought to her, but she did not know if the man she was with was safe or just another Eric. She knew she could not trust him, but as her senses began to get even more muddled, she had no choice but to close her eyes against the darkness and hope for things to work out in her favor.

She would not die today.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:38 am*

“Where am I?” Keira whispered as she slowly sat up in bed, her body still hurting. The battle. A large man who had picked her up as if she was weightless. Eric’s cold eyes as he stared at her before she fainted. Had she fainted? Keira couldn’t make sense of what was happening, or where she was.

Her memory returned as she realized that she was not home, and she could not be at Eric’s castle. Her bedchamber there never had a burning fire, and Eric had refused to provide her with anything warm to cover herself, leaving her entirely miserable in the cold.

The blanket on top of her had indeed kept her extremely warm, and she felt protected. The feeling reminded her of home, but as she stared at the bedchamber, she knew this was a place she had never been before. The bedchamber was large and lavishly furnished, and from what she could tell, she was inside a castle. But whose castle? Fear gripped her chest as she remembered the man that had taken her. Who could he be?

Keira slowly moved her body to turn around, wanting to look at the other side of the bedchamber as well. Even turning around from one side to the other while sitting up required a considerable amount of strength. Just as she turned around, her gaze landed on the lit fireplace giving the entire bedchamber an orange glow even though it was dark outside. Had an entire day gone by? She could not tell.

As she looked to the side of the fireplace, a small shriek escaped her lips as her eyes once again met the piercing blue eyes she had encountered in the forest. The handsome warrior who had brought her here. Keira’s mouth went dry at the very sight of him. The fact that he was still staring at her in the same way as he had done

earlier was not helping at all.

He was dressed in a plain white shirt which was thin enough to reveal the hardened muscles on his chest and stomach, making him appear almost god-like perfection. It felt as if he was not real but molded right out of marble. His strong thighs lay open leisurely as he leaned forward on the sofa he was seated on. His breeches strained against the muscles on his thighs, and his arms were flexed enough for her to see how strong he truly was.

Although, his most striking feature was still his eyes. They were as blue as the sky on a stormy night, and, set against his olive skin, they looked extraordinary. As if God had given them to him to make him appear more heavenly than human. His long, black hair that framed his square jaw was messy as if he had been running his hands through it for a while. Keira had never imagined someone this brutal could be this handsome. He was a warrior through and through. The strength his body emanated made him appear almost terrifying, yet Keira could only find herself drawn to him.

“Who are ye?” she asked, trying her best to not appear meek. She knew it was not easy to look strong in front of a man who was twice her size, but she would not succumb to yet another man. Eric had broken her already, and she was tired. She was not going to sit quietly as whoever this man was did whatever he wished to do with her. She needed to go.

“Why did ye bring me here? I told ye to let me go,” she asked again but knew her question would go unanswered yet again. He was silent still.

“Will ye please say something?” she finally said, softening her voice, but he remained impassive, simply staring at her with an intensity she had never experienced before. She could not see anger or hatred in his gaze, just something she could not put a name to.

“Please let me go from here. I never wanted to be here. I need to go back to Eric,” she

said. She knew she had no intention of returning to Eric, but it was a possibility that this man could be far worse than her betrothed. He looked deadly dangerous and could crush her with one hand. Keira knew she needed to look out for herself.

“Did Eric do this to ye?” he finally spoke, and his question stunned Keira. She did not know what it was about her bruises that had him so interested. She did not understand why he even cared. It was all he seemed willing to talk about ever since their first encounter.

“Does it matter?” she asked, not wishing to reply.

“Did Eric do this to ye? Aye or nae?” The apparent dominance in his voice told her that he demanded an answer and would not go without. Fear inched through her body and emerged into her eyes at his tone as she nodded.

The immediate anger on his face appeared like a flash, but he quickly concealed it behind an excellent mask that showed no emotion. Keira did not understand why he would be angry. He certainly did not know her enough to care about what had happened to her or if Eric had hurt her or not, but his expression and obvious concern told her otherwise. Who was this man, and what did he want from her?

Keira immediately backed away towards the head of the bed as she watched him stand up, fear taking hold of her entirely. She knew this man was stronger than Eric and far bigger, and if he would hit her, she would not be able to survive. She could not go through this again. He must have noticed her reaction since he immediately stopped in his tracks, concern rising to his face. He held up his hands as if to tell her that he was not going to come towards her.

Her heart continued to beat wildly in her chest, but she calmed slightly as she watched him move towards a table at the back of the bedchamber from where he picked up a tray filled with different kinds of food. He took slow, measured steps towards her with the tray in his hands and placed it on the bed through his extended

hand while he himself remained five paces away.

Keira knew he was doing it all to make sure she felt safe and comfortable, and her breathing calmed down entirely. As she looked at the tray in front of her, she realized that she hadn't eaten properly in quite some days. Eric had not cared much about her meals or what she ate, and she was often neglected by everyone in Gilmor castle, which had led to her losing a lot of weight.

"Eat," the man said to her as he backed away entirely and sat back down on the sofa by the fireplace. Keira continued looking at him, not sure if she should eat. It was impossible for her to begin trusting him this quickly, but she could not help feeling slightly safe in his presence. As if he would protect her no matter what.

"I asked ye to eat," he ordered, his tone just as commanding as earlier. Keira did not know what it was, but everything about him demanded obedience, and she did not like that. She could not deny him either.

"Will ye let me go, please?" she asked again, her mind thinking of ways to escape. She needed to escape.

He looked at her as if she had lost her mind, and she could not blame him. After she had told him that it was Eric who had given her these bruises, the fact that she wished to return to him would sound insane to anyone, but Keira knew she had no choice in the matter. She needed to find a reason to escape, and all she could tell him was she needed to go Eric. Keira could not tell this man her identity or who her father was. She did not know if she could trust him with this information.

Without replying, he simply stared at the food and then back at Keira as if silently asking her to eat. Not wishing to deny him, she slowly pulled the tray towards her and took a bite from a random plate. As food touched her lips, she realized how delicious it was and how long it had been since she had eaten properly.

Without thinking that he was still staring at her, she began to eat leisurely, feeling stronger with every bite. She knew she had gotten weak in the time she had spent at Gilmor Castle. She needed to regain her strength and think about leaving this place. Although for that, she first needed to know who he was and where she was.

“Will ye tell me now?” she asked, finally gaining courage.

“Tell ye what?” he asked back.

“Who are ye?”

“Laird MacPherson, but ye can call me Christian.”