



The Highlander's Kilted Affair

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Category: Historical

Description: "What the devil are ye doing in me room in the middle o' the night? Ye should be with me brother..."

If Evelyn Sinclair were to write a pre-wedding manual, it would be short. One sentence, actually. Never, under any circumstances, kiss a handsome stranger the week before your wedding. Because he might turn out to be your fiancé... or his twin brother.

And you might not know which one you've kissed...

Having a passionate encounter at a ball is not unusual for Benedict Gunn. But kissing his brother's betrothed? That is a first.

Vowing he won't let this come between him and his brother, Benedict is determined to stay away... until he can't.

Duty and desire rarely go hand in hand, and Benedict and Evelyn will have to make the hard choice of deciding which path to follow.

Falling for his brother's bride, secrets were kept where hearts collide...

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

Total Pages (Source): 30

CHAPTER ONE

Mackay Castle, the wedding of Laird Cathal Mackay

“We are surely going tae be hanged for ruining this wedding, Yvaine,” Evelyn Sinclair hissed at her younger sister. “We shouldnae be here.”

“Och, will ye stop fretting,” Yvaine replied evenly. “Dae ye nae remember why we came? We’re supposed tae be having some fun. Besides, our clan was invited. Ye ken that. If Faither had accepted, we’d have come here with him.”

They were slowly moving through the many people who already filled the corridor. Laughter and boisterous conversations met their ears, the women giggling, and the men guffawing. Tankards spilled their contents as the merrier guests hardly seemed to care where their drink ended up, and a faint trickle of music danced on the air as the sisters made their way to the great hall of Mackay Castle.

Evelyn brushed her long, dark blonde hair behind her ear and moved closer to her sister as they continued to maneuver through the crowd. “Aye, well,” she whispered. “There was never a chance o’ that happening. He’s nae the same anymore, so distant and secluded. He can barely look us in the eye, never mind anybody else.”

Yvaine looked at Evelyn sadly. “He did lose his wife, Evelyn.”

“And we lost our maither,” Evelyn countered. “But it has been a year already. He cannae mourn forever.”

“It isnae the same fer him. Ye ken that he blames himself. She was murdered tae punish him, and he cannae get past that.”

Evelyn could hardly argue, and perhaps her anger for her father’s lack of affection masked the sadness she felt for him and for herself. Their mother and father had adored each other, anyone with eyes had seen it. After her mother’s murder, her father, Laird Donald Sinclair, had not been the same.

She did try to understand how hard it was for him, but she and Yvaine had lost someone precious too. They had needed him over the last year. They had needed his love and support as they dealt with their own feelings of grief. But he had not been there for them. A part of him had died with his wife, and Evelyn had wondered, over the last months, if he would ever return from the darkness that still surrounded his being.

The further into the castle they ventured, the more her nerves grew. This was not something she or Yvaine would normally do. Holding integrity in high esteem, they didn’t break the rules. Evelyn fingered the necklace at her throat. It was a gift from her mother, and thus, more precious to her than anything else she owned. Yvaine was right. Their clan had been invited, but her father had declined, and thus, none of the Sinclair clan were expected to be there. More than that, though, Donald Sinclair did not know his daughters had sneakily left the castle that evening and travelled the couple of hours to attend the wedding feast of Laird Mackay.

It had been Yvaine’s idea.

The previous afternoon, the sisters had been walking in the gardens of their father’s castle. Yvaine had been trying to cheer Evelyn up, but there was nothing she could say to lift her spirits.

“Life isnae fair,” Yvaine had said. “What Faither is making ye dae isnae fair either.”

Evelyn had shrugged. “We need the alliance. What am I supposed tae dae? Run away? I have nay choice, Yvaine. I have tae marry him.”

“But ye havenae even met him. Faither is being cruel.”

Evelyn heaved a huge sigh. “I will meet him in a few weeks when we travel to Laird Audor Gunn’s castle,” she had murmured, a little frustration creeping into her tone.

The sisters had walked for a little while longer, when Yvaine had suddenly gasped, spun to look at Evelyn, and blurted, “I have an idea.”

Evelyn had tilted her head, raised her eyebrows, and looked at Yvaine knowingly. “Ye cannae convince him. I’ve tried. He willnae listen.”

Yvaine shook her head. “It’s nae about Faither. It’s about Laird Mackay’s wedding.”

Evelyn frowned then. “What about it?”

“We should go,” Yvaine had blurted excitedly. “As a rebellion against yer destiny, we can sneak out and go tae Mackay Castle. I’ve heard it’s going tae be a huge affair. Laird Cathal Mackay is our ally, and besides, it will only take an hour or so tae reach them across the border o’ the clan lands.”

At first, Evelyn had been appalled. “That is a crazy idea. What if we get caught? What if Faither finds out? What if someone sees us?”

While Yvaine was someone who ordinarily would never go against her father, or anyone else for that matter, she surprised Evelyn with her answer. “Who cares? What possible punishment could be worse than forcing ye tae marry a man ye dinnae even ken? Ye deserve tae have a little fun and forget about everything. A final revolt before yer life is nae longer yer own.”

Evelyn had still been unsure. They would be taking a huge risk. But upon seeing Yvaine's eagerness and knowing that even suggesting such a thing went against her character in every way, Evelyn had realized her sister was doing this for her. She was willing to risk getting into trouble just so Evelyn could have one night of freedom.

"All right," Evelyn had finally agreed.

Once in the great hall, Evelyn's nerves settled a little. Perhaps it was the joyous atmosphere of laughter, or the sight of people dancing to the thump of the bodhran drum, the fiddle, and the tin whistle.

"Ye see," Yvaine smiled, handing Evelyn a drink, "are ye nae glad we came now?"

"I am," Evelyn replied. "But if Faither discovers it, I'm going tae tell him it was all yer idea."

Yvaine burst into laughter. "And I will tell him it was yers."

The two sisters giggled at each other, and feeling a little more relaxed, they began to mingle with the other guests. Evelyn discovered that people had travelled from across the country to attend the wedding. Laird Mackay was a good man with a fine reputation. Unlike many other lairds, he was neither bloodthirsty nor power mad, which, she supposed, was one of the reasons her father had allied with him many years before.

Evelyn and Yvaine had just left from conversing with a young lass, when Yvaine found herself grabbed by a hand. Evelyn watched as a tall and handsome man jerked his head toward the middle of the room.

"Come and dance with me?" he yelled over the music and boisterous noise of the gathering.

The question was asked while he pulled Yvaine along with him, and thus, she hardly had a chance to refuse. But she was laughing as she went, and watching her go, Evelyn smiled widely at her sister having such fun.

Feeling a little out of place, given she was now left to stand by herself, Evelyn carefully threaded through the crowd and made her way to the back corner of the room. Picking her spot, she stood and watched the guests having fun with laughter and rowdy conversation. But even as she was surrounded by such gaiety, a sadness slowly washed over her as thoughts of her future arose in her mind. Her father had arranged her marriage for the betterment of the clan. They needed this alliance, she knew that, and that had been the reason that she had not argued or fought his decision.

Self-sacrificing as always, Evelyn knew she had to put the clan before her needs and desires. Her mother's murder had been a punishment. A dreadful circumstance that Evelyn did not want repeated. Marrying Laird Ardor Gunn would ensure that, and thus, what choice did she really have?

“What’s a pretty young lass like yersel’ doing standing alone in the corner?”

Evelyn had been too lost in her thoughts to see anyone approach, but at the sound of that question, she turned her head and lifted her eyes. A handsome man stood there smiling down at her. A little taken aback at his forwardness, Evelyn did not know what to say in reply, and thus, stood there gawping at him.

“Cat got yer tongue?” he drawled, his mouth forming a lob-sided grin.

“I, er, nay. It’s just...” Evelyn floundered.

“Ye’ve never spoken tae a man ‘afore?” he joked, taking a step toward her.

Still not certain of her words, and feeling caught off guard, she nodded and shook her head at the same time.

This elicited a deep chuckle from the man's throat. "Is that an aye or a nae? I cannae tell with yer head bobbling about like it's nae attached tae yer neck."

"O' course, I've spoken tae a man 'afore," she said when she finally found her voice.

"Just nae such a handsome one." He grinned widely.

She couldn't tell if he was joking or just arrogant, but this interaction did not feel particularly pleasant, so she deduced the latter. Not wanting to be rude, her mind scrambled to find a way out of her circumstances.

"So here ye are, a beautiful lass, and here I am, a handsome man, both alone at the ball. I declare that such a circumstance is a tragedy."

"I'm sure there are plenty o' lasses here who would be delighted tae have the pleasure o' yer company," Evelyn replied carefully, hoping the man would take the hint to find another lass to pursue.

The man took another step closer, his arm leaning on the wall beside her as he towered above her. "And what about ye?" he growled huskily. "Would ye nae like the pleasure o' me company?"

"That's nae what I meant," she said quickly. "It's just, ye ken, there are many lasses here."

"Indeed, there are," he growled again. "But I'm nae talking tae any o' them. I'm talking tae ye. Dae ye nae find me handsome?"

Evelyn nodded just to placate the man, but her heart was thumping with fear and anger at the same time. “Ye are, indeed, a very handsome man.” Her words sounded shaky, and she felt her hands tremble with ire. Who daes he think he is tae speak tae a woman like this?

He chuckled again. “Ye’re a nervous wee thing. But very beautiful. I’ll bet those lips are as soft as heather.”

Unconsciously, Evelyn gasped. Could this man be any more rude?

By his raised eyebrows as he waited for her answer, he clearly did not think his behavior rude at all, which was concerning. Perhaps if she just answered him, he would be on his way. If he thought she lacked experience and was not as flirtatious as other lasses he had, no doubt, harassed, he might just leave her alone.

She huffed. “I’ve never been tempted tae kiss a man who isnae me husband.”

His eyes widened at that remark, and clearly surprised, he seemed lost for words. And yet, he still did not leave. Her plan had not worked as she hoped it might, and now stumped, Evelyn could not think of another way to be rid of him. Maybe she was going to have to be as rude as he, and simply walk away.

The man grinned mischievously down at her. “Maybe I could?—”

“I dinnae think the lass is interested,” a deep voice came from somewhere behind the leering man’s shoulders.

Pushing himself from the wall, the persistent pest turned to look behind him. Evelyn struggled not to gasp again, for the man stood there was not only the most handsome man she had ever seen, he was also huge. He was a great wall of a man, nearly as tall as he was broad, with blonde hair. He had the look of a Viking and his piercing green

eyes were currently locked in some kind of battle with the man now standing facing him.

“I dinnae think it’s any o’ yer damned business,” the man growled.

“It is when ye’re making the lass feel uncomfortable,” her savior, may the Gods bless him, growled back. “And, clearly,” he nodded toward Evelyn, “ye are.”

“We were just talking.”

“Nay,” the huge man replied. “Ye were talking. She was terrified. Now, move on, before I move ye on.”

For a second, the arrogant pursuer stood his ground, clearly too proud to do as he was told. The huge man then straightened his shoulders and puffed out his chest. The action made him look three inches taller.

“Fine,” the other man submitted. Trying to maintain his dignity as he shifted, he said, “She’s a prude anyway.”

Evelyn looked mortified, but relief flooded through her as he turned on his heels and stormed away.

Her savior watched the man go, before turning back to her. Taking a step forward, he gazed down at her with concern. “Are ye all right?” His tone was now far gentler than only seconds before.

For a moment, Evelyn was too lost in his swirling green eyes to answer. He was striking, as though the gods had carved his face by their own hand. Her own face flooded with heat again at what had transpired, and suddenly, she felt the need to escape. She wanted to be anywhere but there.

“Ye must excuse me,” she said hurriedly. “I need a breath o’ air.”

Before he had chance to reply, she darted around him and moved quickly out of the great hall.

Hurrying down the corridor, avoiding the eyes of those merrily celebrating around her, she rushed around a corner. That corridor was far quieter, and with no other people around, she tried the handle of the first door she came to. Evelyn, looking about her and realizing it was a library, stepped inside and closed the door quietly behind her. Leaning her body against it, she took in a deep breath.

Pushing herself off the door, she paced back and forth in the room. The experience had unnerved her, and try as she might, she could not rid her mind of what might have happened had she not have been saved. Either she’d have been forced against her will, or she’d have ended up scratching the oaf’s eyes out.

But all is good now, Evelyn. Ye are safe. Ye need tae calm yersel’.

Yes, she did. She also needed to go and find Yvaine. It was getting late. They still had an hour or so to travel, and as fun as sneaking away to the Mackay’s wedding had been, she did not want her father to discover they had left.

Straightening her dress, she turned to walk towards the library door, when it opened, and the huge, handsome stranger stepped inside. Upon discovering her, he frowned with concern. “There ye are. Are ye all right, Miss?”

Evelyn automatically stepped back. “I am fine. Thank ye.”

He shook his head. “Ye didnae look too fine when I found ye. MacKinley is a rake at best, but he has the awareness o’ a snail.”

A trickle of laughter fell from Evelyn's lips, and, at the same time, the tension that had wound in her body seemed to ease.

"I apologize. I didnae even thank ye fer yer intervention. So, thank ye. He certainly is a persistent man." And a halfwit.

"Aye," the huge man rolled his eyes. "That's putting it mildly." He paused for a second, before looking at her carefully. "But I can understand his interest."

Evelyn's eyebrows went up.

"Nay, please." He lifted his hands in surrender. "I'm naething like him. I'm merely observing the fact that ye are a very beautiful lass. That's all."

She felt her face flush and dropped her gaze at his words. In stark contrast, she did not fear this man like she had the other. His words were kind, and even the way he looked at her was different. His gaze was gentle, whereas MacKinley had leered at her like she was something to eat.

"Thank ye," she breathed, feeling as though it was good manners to acknowledge the compliment.

He took another step toward her. It was slow and measured. He still watched her carefully, as though he was gauging how his approach might affect her. "I couldnae help overhearing some o' yer conversation," he said in a tender tone.

"Really?" Evelyn replied, now feeling a little breathless. Perhaps it was the way he was gazing at her. Perhaps it was the fact that he was indeed, a striking specimen of a man.

"Aye," he said, taking another step. He was now only a few feet away. "I heard ye

tell MacKinley that ye've never been kissed 'afore."

Another wave of heat washed over Evelyn, and again, she dropped her gaze. "I only said that tae be rid o' him," she breathed.

"Is that right?" the man said softly.

Evelyn felt his finger under her chin as he lifted her head. She looked up at him, her heart thumping like a drum in her breast.

"So, ye have been kissed 'afore?" he continued, his eyes gazing into hers as though he were searching her soul for the truth. Could he see? Could he tell that she was lying?

"I, er. Well." Evelyn flustered. She then shook her head. "The truth is, I have never been kissed."

He took one more step forward and closed the gap between them. "That is a tragedy," he whispered. "Wouldnae ye like tae ken what it feels like?"

Evelyn gazed up at him, her nerves mixing with fear and desire.

"Ye can say nae," he said. "The door is right there. I willnae stop ye from leaving."

But Evelyn did not want to leave. Sparks were flying between them, her heart thumped, her stomach squirmed, and the desire for the man before her was growing by the second.

"I dinnae want tae leave," she breathed.

The man nodded, and then she felt his huge hand resting gently on her slender neck.

A second later, his lips were upon hers. As his tongue slipped inside her mouth, exploring, tasting, entwining with hers, she opened her mouth wider and grabbed his tunic to pull him in closer.

Her heart thumped, and breathlessly, she gave herself to him. Their lips clashed together, their tongues roving hungrily as though neither had eaten for days.

His other hand, which had sat upon her waist, now climbed higher and higher, and Evelyn suddenly gasped when his fingers cupped her firm breast. Her nipple hardened, and upon finding it, the man growled as Evelyn moaned.

“Are ye sure ye’ve never been kissed ‘afore?” he whispered, his hot breath dancing upon her lips.

Evelyn could hardly speak, and while a small whimper left her lips, she shook her head. Threading her fingers through his hair, she caressed his neck, and felt a scar just below his left ear. I wonder where he got that?

It was the strangest thought under the circumstances, but the thought left as quickly as it had arrived as the man continued to speak.

“Then ye must never have been touched ‘afore either,” he said huskily, caressing her nipple and making it peak even harder.

“Oh, God,” she gasped.

Evelyn was feeling a lot of sensations she had never experienced before. Apart from her heart thumping so hard she thought it might burst from her rib cage, her stomach clenched and twisted, and she felt a moistness at the apex of her thighs.

“I wonder what ye taste like?” he growled again. “I would love tae be the first tae

taste ye.”

At first, his words did not make any sense. He had tasted her... But the more she thought about them, however, the more she realized what he meant. The man was indeed handsome and huge, and under any other circumstances, she would have been delighted.

Life isnae fair. Imagine if I were nae betrothed tae be married. Imagine if I had the chance tae be with a man who excited me as much as I am excited in this very moment. But ye are betrothed, Evelyn. What the devil are ye doing?

As that thought flew through her mind, Evelyn quickly stepped back. She watched the surprise on the man’s face, and then she blurted, “I’m sorry.”

Seconds later, she spun on her heels, grabbed the door handle, and ran from the room.

And as he had promised, he didn’t follow her.

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CHAPTER TWO

Three weeks later, Gunn castle...

Benedict Gunn sat in a high-backed chair next to the roaring fire in his brother's study, swirling the amber liquid around in the glass he lightly held in his hand. Audor, his twin brother, and laird of Clan Gunn, remained at his desk, examining rent payments.

"I still dinnae ken how ye can dae it," Benedict said. "Marrying fer an alliance is one thing. But marrying a woman ye've never even met is a different thing entirely."

Audor lifted his head and cocked an eyebrow. "We cannae all have romantic liaisons in the library, braither."

"Fer all that came o' it," Benedict huffed.

"Ye are pining fer her," Audor chuckled. "In fact, I'd go as far as tae say ye're obsessed. I still cannae believe ye didnae catch her name. I tell ye, Benedict, ye are losing yer touch."

Absently, Benedict brought his fingers to his lips as he remembered that kiss. His mouth had been too busy doing other things. Asking her name had not been important at the time. He supposed there might have been a chance afterward to do so, but it had ended as quickly as it had started, and then, she was gone.

"Obsessed is a bit o' a strong word," Benedict countered.

“Aye, maybe ye’re right. I mean, it’s nae like ye’ve been talking about her non-stop since it happened, right?” Ardor said, giving him a smug look.

Benedict could hardly deny it. In fact, he had been on a mission ever since, trying to discover who the lass was. Anyone he had spoken to had no idea who he was talking about, and other than being able to describe how beautiful she was, he really had nothing else to go on. It was like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

“I’m sure ye’ll meet up with her again,” Audor said. “She cannae be from such a distance if she was at Laird Mackay’s wedding.”

“Och, come on, Audor. Did ye see how many people were there? Did ye speak tae some o’ them? I spoke tae nae less than five people who had travelled from the far coast in the east.” Benedict shook his head. “It is hopeless. Nae one kens who she is, nor dae I have any clue where tae start looking.”

“Then I’ll just have tae find ye another pretty lass tae take yer mind off this one.” Audor grabbed the papers he had been examining and shuffling them together into a neat pile, he placed them on one side of his desk. Standing, he moved to the dresser and poured himself a drink, and then joined his brother at the fire.

“Besides,” he said, lowering himself down in a matching chair, “me wedding will occur shortly. I’m certain there will be plenty o’ lasses tae choose from there.”

“Aye, I’m sure that will make it all better,” Benedict replied sarcastically, giving his brother a knowing look.

Audor smirked at him, before taking a sip of his drink and turning his gaze to the flickering flames of the fire. “I may have tae be away again in a couple o’ days. If that is the case, I’ll need ye tae cover fer me once more.”

Benedict gazed at his brother. “Can ye nae tell me anything about what ye’re doing?”

“I’ve already told ye. It’s safer if ye dinnae ken. It’s safer if nay one kens right now. That’s why I’m nae telling the council. The only people that ken I’m away are ye and Killian.”

“Aye, only because he’s the only one who can tell us apart,” Benedict replied.

“Believe me, braither. It’s fer the best.”

By Audor’s tone, Benedict knew not to push the subject any further. He wished he could help him with whatever it was he was doing, but if Audor wouldn’t let him in on his plan, there was little he could do about it. If there was one thing Audor was good at, it was protecting his clan.

Loyal to a fault, he had always been an honest man, though he had been thrown into his lairdship far too young. Seven years had passed by so quickly, but not so quickly that either Benedict or Audor would ever forget the murder of their parents. They had only been three and twenty when it happened. Grown men they might have been, but neither of them was ready or had the experience to take control of the clan. And yet, they had been given little choice.

With their father gone, Audor had taken the lairdship and had been thrown into responsibilities he knew little about. The council had, of course, supported him completely, and now, seven years later, and at the age of thirty, his brother was a respected laird across the land.

“How long will ye be gone fer this time?”

Audor shrugged. “It’s hard tae tell, but?—”

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation, and once Audor had bid the person to enter, they both turned to see Killian striding into the study. While he was the twins' cousin, he looked nothing like either of them. His hair was short and black, his eyes were a deep blue, and the many battle scars across his body made him look more than intimidating.

When Killian's parents were murdered, he had been just a boy six years old. Being his brother's son, Laird Darragh Gunn, Benedict and Audor's father, had taken him in and raised him as his own. Cousins they might be, but they were as close as brothers. Besides, it was not just family ties that bound them. They had all sustained the same wound. A wound that could not be seen with the naked eye. A wound that was deep and painful. Each of them had lost parents to murder, and while Benedict and Audor did, on occasion, speak about it, Killian remained closed down.

He was the best warrior in the clan. But Benedict knew that each battle took much more out of him than it might another man. After a drunken night where Killian, with loosened lips, had spoken of his pain, he had confessed to Benedict that he saw each and every enemy as though they were the one who had killed his parents.

His cousin hid his pain well, though. On the outside, he was easy-going and fun to be around. He liked the lasses and had bedded more than Benedict could number. He had always wondered, though, if that, too, had something to do with the burden he carried.

"A rider has informed me that Laird Sinclair and his entourage have been spotted on the hill," Killian said, getting straight to the point. "Yer bride will likely be at the castle in the next half hour. We will meet them at the gates."

"And good day tae ye, too, Killian," Benedict teased.

Killian gave Benedict a playful scowl.

“Thank ye, Killian. Get a drink. Come, join us.” Audor gestured to a chair.

After filling a glass, Killian dropped himself down beside the brothers. “Are ye nervous?” he said, looking directly at Audor.

Audor shook his head and frowned. “What is there tae be nervous about? I’m getting married, nae going intae battle.”

“I dinnae ken,” Killian shrugged with a smirk, “some men might tell ye it’s the same thing.”

The men laughed at that comment.

“I’d be more worried about what yer future bride looks like,” Benedict added. “Ye’ve never met her. She might resemble a moose.”

Audor snorted at that comment, but Killian shook his head. “I think ye may be wrong there, Benedict. From what I’ve heard, both the Sinclair sisters are bonnie wee lasses.”

“Och, well. That’s all right then. She might nae have a brain in her skull, but at least she’ll be a pretty charm on yer arm,” Benedict sniggered.

“Aye, well. At least I ken where me sweetheart is, which is more than ye can say fer yers.”

Killian chuckled at that comment, and threw a knowing look at Benedict. “As usual, yer braither is right.”

“Aye. And doesnae he ken it?” Benedict growled playfully.

The men finished the last dregs of their drinks, and then Audor stood. “We should make a move here. I dinnae want our guests arriving without a proper welcome.”

When the three were out in the corridor, Killian continued the conversation. “Ye’re getting a rare privilege, Audor. Nay one has seen Laird Sinclair since his wife’s murder. In fact, I hear he hasnae left his castle since it happened.”

“Aye, it’s a sad affair. But it’s the reason this marriage is going ahead. Laird Alisdair Keith wanted an alliance with Clan Sinclair, even though he’d been a rival for years.”

“Aye, I ken,” Killian said. “When Sinclair refused, Keith had Mary, his wife, brutally murdered. He is not a man.”

Killian sounded angrier than he ought, under the circumstances, but Benedict could only imagine it was the fact that yet another parent had been murdered that angered him.

“Well, Laird Keith hasnae stopped there. He’s been relentless in his attacks ever since, which is why Laird Sinclair and I agreed tae this alliance. Our clan will get lands and coin, and he will get the support o’ our larger army.”

“I just hope ye ken what ye’re doing, braither,” Benedict said with a sigh.

“Why are ye so against this alliance?” Audor asked firmly.

They were now making their way down the wide stone staircase, and at the bottom, Benedict came to a stop and looked his brother in the eye. “Fer a start, ye’ve never met this lass. God only kens if yer even going tae like her, never mind, having tae spend the rest o’ yer life with her. Second, ye’re only thirty. There’s still time fer ye tae actually find someone ye might fall in love with. And third, once ye’re married, I’m nae going tae have ye at me side when we’re at the taverns and looking fer

lasses.” Benedict grinned.

Audor smiled, shook his head, and then continued walking. “I understand yer concerns, Benedict. And I appreciate ye looking out fer me. But this is a good deal fer our clan. Besides, Laird Sinclair is a fine laird. He needs our help, and I intend tae give it.”

“Ye can always get a mistress if things dinnae work out,” Killian offered.

“Nay!” Audor and Benedict barked at the same time. They both glared at Killian, who seemed to shrink under the visual attack.

“All right,” he said weakly, raising his hands in surrender. “It was only an idea.”

“Ye should ken me braither better than that, Killian,” Benedict growled.

“I dae,” Killian countered. “I just thought it was something tae consider.”

“Ye’re a fool tae think he would even consider it.”

“Clearly,” Killian said a little sarcastically.

They were now out in the courtyard and making their way to the gates. The huge wooden barriers stood open, guards standing alert as they watched the approaching horses and carriages. There were a great deal of them, but Laird Sinclair led the convoy on his horse

“He looks old,” Audor said quietly.

Benedict caught sight of Laird Sinclair. He had only met the man once, and it had been some years ago, but Audor was right. The man looked like he had aged twenty

years. He supposed the death of a beloved wife would do that to a man.

“I’m sorry,” Killian murmured. He was stood at Benedicts left, while Audor remained at his right. By the low tone, Killian clearly did not want Audor to hear him.

Benedict turned and spoke to Killian in equally low tones. “Ye should ken better, cousin. Audor is a loyal man. He values integrity nearly more than any other quality.”

Killian looked subdued. “I ken. I just wasnae thinking.”

Benedict placed an arm on his shoulder. “Listen. Dinnae worry yersel’ about it. Audor willnae hold it against ye.”

“Well,” Audor said. “It looks like I made a good deal after all.”

Benedict and Killian both looked up, for following on behind Laird Sinclair, was a horse and trap with two lasses sitting upon it.

Benedict’s jaw fell open at the sight of them. In fact, he could hardly believe what he was seeing. Could this be? There before his very eyes, was the lass he had kissed in the library. The lass he had been searching for ever since. The lass he had not been able to get out of his mind. She sat next to an equally pretty lass. The only trouble was, he didn’t know which sister was which.

Had he kissed the sister of his brother’s betrothed, or had he actually kissed Lady Evelyn Sinclair, the lass his brother was about to marry?

CHAPTER THREE

As the carriage entered the gates of Gunn Castle, Evelyn's mouth dropped open. Three weeks had passed since the Mackay wedding, and even knowing she was to marry, she had not stopped thinking of that tender kiss in the library.

Her Viking man had been on her mind for weeks, distracting her so much, even Yvaine had noticed. When her sister had asked her if something was wrong, Evelyn had dismissed Yvaine's concerns, telling her she was distracted with her upcoming wedding. The truth of the matter was, she had been reliving the experience, pining over what she could not possibly have, and yet, unable to stop herself.

Now, however, as she was helped down from the vehicle, she struggled not to gawp at the two identical men standing before her. Two identical men who looked exactly like her Viking man. But which one was it? Which one had stolen her heart in the small amount of time they had spent together?

While her father and the men conversed up ahead, the entire party made their way into the castle. Evelyn's heart thumped in her breast. What was she supposed to do? Surely, whichever one of them it was, would give her some inclination that he recognized her, wouldn't he?

They were led into a large drawing room, where the brothers, for clearly they were twins, and another man, welcomed them warmly.

"Me laird, we are so pleased ye have arrived safely," one of the twins said.

“Thank ye, Laird Gunn,” her father replied. “It was, indeed, a long journey, but we are glad we made it in good time. May I please present tae ye, me daughter, Lady Evelyn Sinclair.” Her father gestured toward her. “Yer betrothed and future wife.”

Laird Gunn took a step toward her. “Good day tae ye, Lady Sinclair.”

Those piercing green eyes gazed at hers, but there seemed to be no recognition at all. It was worrisome to say the least. Still reeling from shock, and seemingly too frozen to speak, Evelyn remained silent, struggling to form a sentence. A few seconds passed, and then, a sharp dig in the back of her leg made her jump. Yvaine, who stood a little behind her, had clearly given her a swift kick to nudge her out of her stupor.

“Good day tae ye, me laird,” Evelyn blurted.

Her father, who stood a little to the side and now behind Laird Gunn, after his approach toward her, scowled in her direction. Clearly, he was not pleased with how she was behaving at this first meeting. She had made it clear, one way or another, that she didn’t really want to marry Laird Gunn, and no doubt, Laird Sinclair likely imagined her behavior was some sort of protest.

“Let me please introduce ye tae the others,” Laird Gunn continued, seemingly not fazed at her lack of reaction. “This is me braither, Benedict. As ye can see,” the laird smiled kindly, “we are twins.” Benedict smiled and nodded toward her. His green eyes met hers, but still, not a flicker of recognition. “And here, we have our cousin, Killian Gunn. He is me advisor and most fearsome warrior.”

Killian nodded to Evelyn, and with a weak smile, Evelyn nodded back. “A pleasure tae make yer acquaintance.”

She looked from the laird to his brother and back again, but neither of them gave any

inclination that they knew who she was. But she was not a fool. One of them had kissed her in the Mackay's library. It was an experience she was not likely to ever forget, nor was the striking man's face. The problem now remained. Had she kissed her betrothed, or had she kissed his brother?

This could only happen tae me, fer God's sake.

"I am certain ye are all exhausted, and could dae with some rest before supper," Laird Gunn continued. "I will have ye shown tae yer bedchambers where ye can settle in."

Not long after that, Killian took their father to his bedchamber, and Evelyn and Yvaine were shown to their room by a kindly maid.

"I will have some tea and bread sent up tae ye, me ladies," the maid said, before she closed the door and left the sisters alone.

"What the devil has gotten intae ye?" Yvaine blurted, the second the maid was gone. "Ye just stood there when the laird was speaking tae ye. Faither wasnae pleased."

Evelyn moved over to the huge bed and dropped herself onto the furs that lay upon it. Getting married was going to be a difficult enough. For the entire journey from her father's castle to her new home, her stomach had been twisting in knots at the prospect of meeting a husband she was destined to spend the rest of her life with. Her stomach was still in knots, but now, it was for an entirely different reason.

Yvaine dropped herself down beside her sister and took her hand. "Maybe it'll nae be as bad as ye think. He seems like a nice enough man. Besides," Yvaine grinned, "he's so handsome. I really ought tae be jealous."

"It's nae the wedding," Evelyn murmured, her mind still racing with her dilemma.

“Then what is it?” Yvaine frowned.

Evelyn turned and looked at her sister. “Dae ye remember when we went tae the Mackay’s wedding, and ye were swept onto the dance floor?”

“Aye.” Yvaine nodded.

“Well, a man came up to me when I was stood in the corner. He was an arrogant, leering rake.”

“Oh, God, Evelyn. What happened?” Yvaine looked panicked. Clearly, her mind went immediately to the worst thing that could have occurred.

“I was fine, Yvaine. It wasnae like that. The reason naething happened is that another man came along and saved me. I was so embarrassed, I ran to the library. He found me there, and wanted to see if I was all right. We ended up...” Evelyn hesitated.

“What? Ye ended up what?” Yvaine pressed, desperate to know.

“He kissed me,” Evelyn said finally.

“Och, Evelyn. Ye’re allowed one little fling before ye’re married. Who’s tae ken? I’ll bet the laird has had his fair share o’ the lasses before ye arrived.”

“The thing is,” Evelyn continued slowly, “the man was strikingly handsome. He was also tall and broad with piercing green eyes.”

It took a few seconds for her sister to come to the only conclusion available, and then suddenly, Yvaine gasped, her eyes flying wide. “The laird?” she cried.

Evelyn dropped her gaze and began fiddling with her fingers. “I dinnae ken.”

“What dae ye mean, ye dinnae ken?”

“He didnae tell me his name.”

Her sister’s hand flew to her mouth as she gasped again, and a second later, Yvaine started laughing.

Evelyn gawped at her sister. “This isnae funny.”

But Yvaine continued to giggle. “It is, a wee bit,” she tittered. “I mean, only ye could get yersel’ intae such a mess.”

“Aye well, be that as it may, now, I dinnae ken who I kissed. It could have been the laird, or it could have been Benedict, his brother. I looked both o’ them in the eye earlier, but neither o’ them gave anything away. What am I supposed tae dae?”

Evelyn caressed the necklace at her throat. If only her mother had been there. Though, if she were, would Evelyn tell her what had happened?

O’ course, ye would. Ye told yer maither everything.

And she had. Their mother had had such a soft and tender way about her, always kind and concerned for everyone else’s well-being before her own. Evelyn was determined that it was for that very reason, the fact that her mother had been such a gentle creature, that her father had taken her death so badly.

“This marriage is so important tae the clan, Yvaine. Dae ye think a silly kiss could ruin this alliance if it were discovered it was Benedict I kissed, and nae the laird?”

Yvaine took Evelyn’s hand in hers. “I am certain everything will be just fine. But tell me this. What was it like? What did it feel like to kiss him?”

Evelyn had replayed the scene in her mind so many times, she didn't even have to think about the answer. "It was heaven, Yvaine," Evelyn breathed. "That's how it felt. Like I had left this earthly plane and floated to the most wonderful place anyone could imagine."

Evelyn turned to look at her sister, but was surprised to see her looking sad.

"Whatever is the matter?" Evelyn said.

Yvaine shrugged heavily, the sadness clearly affecting her entire person. "I just think that all these sacrifices ye make fer everyone but yersel' will make ye miserable yer whole life."

"It was good enough fer Maither," Evelyn replied gently.

"It was different fer Maither, Evelyn. She and Faither were head over heels in love. Ye are being asked tae give up yer life. What happens if ye did kiss Benedict? What happens if that feeling of heaven ye had, was with a man ye can never be with? What happens then?"

Evelyn didn't know what would happen. She had no answer for her sister. More than that, Yvaine's very valid point had not yet occurred to her. While she was worrying about ruining the alliance, Yvaine worried for Evelyn's heart. Yvaine's questions sat heavily in Evelyn's stomach.

There was a buzz in the great hall when they went down for dinner. Clearly, word of their arrival had spread quickly. At the high table, Laird Gunn stood and pulled her chair out, smiling as he gestured for her to sit in the chair beside his own.

"I trust ye are well rested, me lady," he said kindly, as he pushed the chair into the table once she was seated.

“I am, thank ye, me laird.”

“Please, we are tae be married. Call me Audor.”

“Then ye must call me Evelyn,” she replied.

He nodded. “Very well, Evelyn.”

Perhaps, given his kindness and that soft smile, it had been Audor who had kissed her. He was being more than pleasant, though that could just be because they were soon to be husband and wife. It was only when Benedict came and sat on the other side of her that Evelyn began to feel the nerves tightening in her stomach. She, this slight and slender thing, was situated between two huge men, one of which, she had already kissed. But which one?

Her father sat on the far side of the laird, while Yvaine sat beside Benedict, and Killian sat beside her at the end of the table. When everyone was settled, Audor stood and gave a riveting speech about the upcoming alliance between the clans. He told those present how the benefit of having an alliance with such an esteemed laird as her father could only bring greatness to their clan, and that he looked forward to the day he could call Evelyn his wife.

A great cheer and round of applause filled the room when he had finished, and after that, music began as food was served. Audor was in deep conversation with her father, leaving Evelyn feeling a little at a loss as to what she was supposed to do.

“Dae ye like venison, me lady?” Benedict asked, as a plate of dark meat was placed between them. He lifted several slices with a fork, and laid them on her plate. “Here, try it.”

Evelyn smiled and thanked him. He then topped up her wine, and offered her the

bread bowl.

“How was yer journey? I hear it is many miles from yer faither’s castle tae here.”

“It is,” Evelyn said, trying to distinguish if his interest and kindness was simply him being courteous, or if it was Benedict she had encountered in the Mackay’s library. “But we rested overnight, and with me faither’s lead, we made it in good time.”

“I’m sure there are few places ye venture without yer faither with ye.”

It was a strange thing to say, and Evelyn was alerted, but he said nothing more to her after that.

Benedict leaned forward to catch her father’s attention. “Are ye looking forward tae yer daughter’s wedding, me laird? We have planned a grand affair.”

Benedict continued. “Did ye attend the Mackay’s wedding, me laird?”

Evelyn held her breath at his words.

Laird Sinclair shook his head. “I am afraid I was unable tae make it. I sent me apologies tae the Mackay’s ahead o’ time.”

Benedict sported a wicked smile, and glancing from Evelyn to Yvaine and back again, he said, “And what o’ ye ladies? Did ye attend?”

“Indeed, we didnae,” Yvaine said, a bit too quickly. Evelyn winced at her sister’s faux pas, and hoped her father had not noticed her obvious lie.

“That is a shame,” Benedict replied, looking directly at Evelyn. “I dae think ye would have enjoyed it.”

There was a playful teasing in his tone, and his eyes sparkled mischievously. It was him. It had to be him. And yet, Evelyn could still not be certain. How could she truly discover that it had been Benedict in that library?

A moment later, however, she got her answer. Turning away from her, Benedict began speaking to Killian, and twisting his head a little, his hairline moved. Evelyn could hardly breathe, for there on his neck, and directly below his left ear, was a scar. The very same scar she remembered discovering when she had kissed him back so passionately.

Och, me God! What am I tae dae? I kissed the wrong braither.

Before she had a chance to think further, Benedict turned back to her and with a half-smile, he said, “So, dae ye like reading? Would ye like me tae show ye our library after dinner?”

While Evelyn’s face flushed bright red, his eyes danced with delight and his smile beamed knowingly at her.

“Ye must excuse me,” Evelyn stammered. “I need some air.”

CHAPTER FOUR

After the Sinclair's had been led from the drawing room to be shown to their bedchambers, Benedict had found himself in somewhat of a quandary. He had watched Lady Sinclair with a careful eye, and like any other who knew the brothers, it was evident she had not been able to tell them apart. In fact, by her wide-eyed terror, he had imagined she was suffering with some panic at her discovery that the man she had kissed was a twin. The fact that it was the twin of the man she was to marry, she did not know. Yet.

At their introduction, he had purposefully given nothing away. Apart from the fact that he had been in as much shock as Lady Sinclair himself, it had neither been the time, nor the place. However, it would come out sooner or later, and there was not a chance Benedict would allow his brother to hear it from anyone other than himself. They did not keep secrets. Unfortunately, Audor was occupied, so he had asked Benedict to wait until after dinner when his brother had asked to talk to him in private.

Supper had been entertaining so far. He had enjoyed watching Lady Sinclair squirm when he had mentioned the Mackay wedding, but asking her about the library had obviously tipped her over the edge, and flustered and flushed, she had excused herself.

"Is she all right?" Audor asked, when he noticed Lady Sinclair leaving the great hall.

"I'll go and check on her," Benedict replied, pushing himself from the table and hurrying after her.

He followed from a distance at first, wondering where she might go. If she ended up in the library, he would not be able to hold back his amusement. Instead, she made her way outside. He continued his stealthy pursuit, until Lady Sinclair found the ornate gardens at the side of the castle. It was only then, that he showed himself.

“What a beautiful evening,” he declared, making her jump with fright. But instead of the ordinary reply to such a statement, the beautiful lass scowled at him.

“Why are ye torturing me for a mistake I didnae even ken I was making?”

Benedict smiled widely. “It is fun tae see ye blush so delicately. Besides, I didnae want ye having tae wonder fer too long, which braither ye had actually kissed.”

“Ye kissed me,” she hissed.

“I dae nae recall hearing any complaints. And whether ye realize it or nae in yer inexperience of these things, ye kissed me back.”

“Be that as it may,” she continued, clearly ignoring his very valid point, “ye didnae need tae tell me in front o’ everyone. I was so embarrassed. And what if me faither had discovered it?”

Benedict then felt a little guilty. As fun as it had been, he would not want her getting into trouble with her father. From what he had seen so far, Laird Sinclair was not a man that would have taken such a thing lightly.

“I apologize,” he said, his hands raised, and truly meaning his words. “I suppose I didnae really think about that. It was just a little fun.”

“Fer ye, maybe. Nae so much fer me.”

“I am sorry. Truly. I promise tae mind me actions in the future.”

His genuine apology seemed to calm her annoyance, but clearly agitated, she paced back and forth over the small lawn. “Ye dinnae ken what this is like fer me. Our time together in that library was the wildest thing I have ever done. It shouldnae have happened. I was as betrothed tae be married then, as I am now. But I dinnae ken,” she said, “I just got caught up in the moment.”

Benedict tried not to smile. He, too, had got caught up in the moment, and what a moment it was. He had recalled the soft tenderness of her lips many times in the last three weeks, and being so close to her again, he struggled not to advance. The thing was, he had no excuses this time. Before, he could at least claim ignorance of the lass’s identity. If he kissed her now, even with the sweet scent of honeysuckle making the moment perfect, he would be betraying his brother’s trust.

“I beg ye, please,” she said, turning to face him with a pained expression. “Ye cannae tell yer braither. I fear it may put this alliance at risk, and after what our clan has suffered, I cannae begin tae imagine how I would live with meself fer causing such a disaster.”

Lady Sinclair did not need to expand on her words. Benedict was well aware of the loss the Sinclair Clan had suffered, as well as the continuous attacks from Laird Keith. The man was relentless. Besides, he had to take some responsibility for what had happened between them as well.

What she didn’t realize was, Audor would likely not care one way or another. It wasn’t as though he were in love with this lass. The alliance would bring their clan more wealth and lands. And yet, Benedict was certain Audor’s motivations were deeper than that. He suspected his brother felt sorry for the old man.

But clearly, Lady Sinclair was worried, and so, Benedict nodded. “All right. I willnae

tell him. Yer secret, our secret, will remain between us.”

Relief flooded her face, and a deep sigh left her body. “Thank ye. Ye dinnae ken what that means tae me.”

He then gestured toward the castle. “Perhaps we ought tae return. We dinnae want tae give anyone any ideas.”

“Aye, o’ course.”

The evening continued without any further disturbance. Mindful of his promise, Benedict refrained from any more teasing, and instead, tried to put Lady Sinclair at ease by telling funny stories of him and Audor growing up. The hour grew late, and the Sinclairs eventually retired, expressing their exhaustion after their long travel.

Benedict, himself, was tired, and after a night cap with Audor and Killian, he announced his retirement too. Audor walked him to the study door. “Ye still need tae talk tae me, braither?” he said quietly, so Killian could not hear.

Benedict swiped a dismissive hand. “It can wait.”

Audor frowned. “Are ye sure?”

“I am. Good night, braither,” Benedict said, turning away and walking down the corridor.

“Good night,” Audor called after him.

She lay there, sprawled in his bed, completely naked in all her glory. His lips tenderly kissed the soft skin of her stomach, moving lower and lower. She gasped and moaned, writhing beneath him, but he took his time. He wanted her to feel every

sensation; his hot breath on her body, his lips.

His chin brushed the tiny hairs at the apex of her thighs, and moving his body lower to reach her, he grabbed her soft buttocks. Moving his mouth even lower, his tongue flicked out, and suddenly ? —

Benedict was dragged awake by a loud disturbance in his room, and still shrouded with sleep, he blinked his eyes open to see Audor striding across his bedchamber.

“What the devil are ye doing?” Benedict groaned, his dry throat making his speech husky.

“I am sorry tae waken ye, braither, but I must leave,” Audor said, standing at the side of the bed.

He pushed himself to a sitting position. “Now?” he cried. “But it’s the middle o’ the night.”

“Aye. I ken. I have tae leave immediately. I have received word, and I must meet a scout who has information that is important fer me.”

“Will ye nae let me come with ye, Audor? I dinnae ken what ye are doing, but this is madness,” Benedict said.

“Nae,” Audor said firmly. “I need ye here. This news has come at a most inopportune time, given the arrival of the Sinclairs. I need ye tae take me place. I was supposed tae be spending time with Evelyn over the next couple of days. Taking the time tae get tae ken her ‘afore the wedding.”

“Then, surely it makes more sense fer me tae go and meet the scout, and fer ye tae stay here.”

Audor shook his head firmly. "I have told ye, braither. Nae one else can ken what is going on. Nae yet. It's fer yer own safety. Trust me. I will be gone nae more than a week. Ye stay here and stand in fer me. Lady Sinclair willnae ken the difference. She doesnae ken us well enough."

"Nae one kens us well enough," Benedict confirmed. "Killian is the only one who can tell us apart."

"Which is why he is the only other who kens o' me leaving. Here, take this." Audor pulled the clan ring from his finger and gave it to Benedict.

"But what if ye need it tae prove who ye are?" Benedict said, hesitantly taking the ring from his brother's hand.

"I'll be fine. Put it on."

Benedict did as he was asked. It felt strange on his finger, although it was. Not the first time he had worn it, and immediately, he felt like a fraud.

"Promise me ye will spend some time with her, Benedict," Audor said firmly.

"I will. I will." Benedict nodded wearily.

"Good. I have arranged a horseback ride with her tomorrow. Dinnae go too far."

"Are ye me maither now?" Benedict drawled sarcastically, eyeing his brother with a slight smirk.

Audor gave a weak smile. "It's fer everyone's safety. Now, I must away."

And as quickly as he had entered, Audor left Benedict's bedchamber, his cloak

flowing behind him. Benedict, now wide awake, sat thinking about their conversation. He wished Audor would confide in him. His brother was worried about his safety, but Benedict had a dark feeling that it was Audor who was in the most danger. He kept stating that his discretion was for the safety of the clan, and thus, whatever he was doing, had to be dangerous. But he refused to answer Benedict's question, and Benedict knew his brother well enough to know that he would tell him if he could.

His thoughts then moved to the promise he had made. He had to pretend to be his brother in Audor's absence. It was not the first time, but still he couldn't help but wonder if Audor would still have asked him if he had known what had already happened between Lady Sinclair and himself. He would do anything for his brother, but spending time with Lady Sinclair was going to be torture.

This lass had not left his mind for weeks, and now, there she was, under the very same roof. Only, he could not have her. Conflicting emotions arose. Indeed, it would be torture, but after the dream he had been having before Audor had woken him, another part of him could not help but feel just a little bit excited.

CHAPTER FIVE

Their father was already in the family dining room when Evelyn and Yvaine arrived. The rectangular table, laden with bread, meat and fruits, was far smaller than the huge table in the great hall, but it gave the room an intimate feel.

“Good morning, Faither,” Yvaine said, sitting down beside him.

Evelyn sat opposite her sister on the other side of the table, and offered the same greeting.

Laird Sinclair returned their greeting, and began asking how they slept when the dining room door opened, and Audor and Killian walked in.

“Me laird,” Killian was saying to Audor, “please remember ye have a meeting with one o’ the villagers tomorrow.”

Audor and Killian shared a look, before Audor nodded, and settled himself at the head of the table. Evelyn could not help but think their interaction unusual. Apart from the fact that such a thing ought not to be discussed in front of them, Audor had given Killian the strangest look, as though there was some hidden meaning behind it.

“Good morning,” Audor said to all at the table.

He then cast his eyes to Evelyn. There was something in his gaze that irked her. Had Benedict told him what had happened? Had he broken his promise? And where was Benedict, anyway?

“Good morning, me laird,” her father said, acknowledging Audor’s greeting. “I hope ye dinnae mind, but I rose early this morning and wandered around yer castle. I must admit, ye have the most comprehensive library I have ever seen.”

“Thank ye, Donald. Aye,” Audor smirked a little and flashed a glance at Evelyn. “I enjoy the most wonderful adventures in the library.”

Evelyn tried not to gasp, for in that very second, a shocking realization came to her. He isnae Audor . The smirk, the flash of delight in those piercing green eyes, coupled with his comment, gave her no doubt at all that it was Benedict sitting at the head of the table, and not the laird at all.

“Did ye all rest well?” Benedict asked.

“We did, Audor,” her father replied. “Yer hospitality kens nae bounds. I have been waited on hand and foot since we have arrived.”

“I am glad tae hear it,” Benedict said. He began buttering a slice of bread, and then looked at Evelyn. “I have arranged a horse ride fer us. It will give us some time tae get tae ken each other. Dae ye ride?”

“I dae, me laird ,” Evelyn said, emphasizing his title. But Benedict neither flinched nor appeared perturbed by her tone. The same could not be said of Yvaine, who frowned and gave her sister a reprimanding look across the table.

“I must apologize fer the absence o’ me brother,” he continued. “Benedict had tae leave us on some clan business.”

“Where is he away tae?” Evelyn asked pointedly.

But before Benedict had a chance to answer, Killian, who sat beside her, said,

“Clearly, yer sister thinks that is a very inappropriate question as she is kicking me under the table as we speak.”

Evelyn looked at Yvaine with wide eyes of surprise. Her sister was now a deep shade of scarlet, but her embarrassment did not stop her scowling at Killian.

“That is quite enough,” Donald growled, clearly displeased at both of his daughters. “Ye are guests. Act as such.” He then turned his attention to the man he thought was the laird. “I wonder if I can have a missive sent back tae me clan, me laird. They will be eager tae ken we arrived safely.”

“O’ course. I will arrange that fer ye after breakfast.”

Evelyn arrived at the stables sometime later. Benedict was already there, waiting upon her and standing beside two horses.

“Lady Sinclair,” he said, as way of a greeting.

“I thought we agreed last night that we were going to use our Christian names,” Evelyn said.

She watched Benedict falter for a second, and then he smiled. “O’ course, we did. Please forgive me oversight.”

Oversight, indeed. He cannae remember the conversation because it wasnae him who had it. Is he really going tae pretend he’s Audor fer the whole time we’re together?

“Evelyn,” Benedict said, clearly wanting to start again, “let me help ye ontae yer horse.”

When they were both mounted, Benedict led the horses out of the castle gates, and

onto the track beyond. As they continued, Evelyn had an idea. Turning to him, she said, “We should make a wager. We will race until we reach the edge of the woods,” she nodded to a dense group of trees a small distance away, “and whoever wins gets tae ask a question the other has tae answer.”

By his smug smile, it was obvious that Benedict felt this was no contest. But Evelyn had always been a great rider. From a child, she had been besotted by horses, and had learned to ride nearly before she could walk. As she had gained confidence, the guards had challenged her to races, and by her teens, she was outrunning them every time.

“All right,” he said confidently. “Are ye ready?”

“I am,” Evelyn replied.

“Then, on three.”

Benedict counted down, and then, they were off. Evelyn had learned a technique that had worked for her many times before, and pushing her feet into the stirrups, she lifted herself off the saddle and leaned forward and down, bringing herself close to the horse’s mane.

With her hair streaming behind her, and the wind tugging at her frock, she pushed the beast as hard as she dared, feeling her legs burning with the effort. Too busy concentrating on pushing on ahead, Evelyn did not look back. She knew Benedict was behind her, but she did not know how far. Panting with the exertion, the tree line loomed ever closer, and with a final push, she pressed the horse as fast as she could.

The trees now towered above her, and for fear of not being able to stop, she slowed the beast down, and came to a halt just before them. Breathless from the effort, she turned to see Benedict arriving swiftly behind her. He was grinning from ear to ear,

his expression a mixture of delight and amazement.

“My God, woman, ye can ride,” he chuckled, when he brought his horse to a standstill beside her own.

“Ye’re nae mad that I won,” Evelyn said.

“Nae at all,” he panted, still grinning. “It’s always a pleasure tae be positively surprised. I tell ye this, Evelyn, ye might look delicate and elegant, but ye ride like a mad soldier.”

Benedict jumped from his horse with ease, and approaching Evelyn, took her by the waist and gently lifted her down to the ground. Both of them were still out of breath, and for a moment, only stood there, gazing at each other. Benedict took a step toward her, and lifting his hand, he took something from her hair.

“Even nature is attracted tae ye,” he said softly, handing her the leaf he had plucked from her wild strands. “Is yer faither nae displeased that ye always wear yer hair down?”

Evelyn shook her head. “Me maither always wore her hair down. Me faither preferred it that way.”

A strange sadness washed over her at the mention of her mother. She had thought of her often on the journey to Gunn castle, but now she was there, it finally hit her that her mother would not be there to see her marry. It didn’t matter that it was an arranged marriage, or that she felt nothing for the man she was going to marry. She would still have liked her mother to be there to see it.

Shaking her head to rid the thoughts from her mind, Evelyn said, “Ye owe me an answer.”

Benedict shrugged and nodded. “That I dae. What is yer question?”

Without hesitation, Evelyn said, “Where is Benedict?”

Benedict’s eyes flew wide, and he took a step back, as though he had been struck. Clearly, he was surprised at her question, but Evelyn deduced he was not answering immediately because he was trying to form an answer. Eventually, he said, “Ye want tae ken where my braither is?”

He was deflecting, but she was determined that he was not going to ignore the answer she was making him give. “Yes, I’m curious, I hope that is nae rude?” she repeated.

“Well,” he said, clearly struggling, “Benedict is in a place he never imagined tae be. But he was needed, so he had tae obey his laird’s request.”

Evelyn tilted her head and looked at him, waiting for more.

“I cannae tell ye any more than that, Evelyn.”

Evelyn played with the necklace at her throat. He hadn’t lied to her, and she admired that fact. It was a rather convoluted answer, but, it was still the truth. It did make her wonder where Audor was, and why he had not simply told her and her father that he had to go away. Surely, that would have been the better option. But she did not know the man, and thus, could not understand his reasoning in having his brother stand in for him.

“That necklace must be important tae ye,” Benedict said. “Ye fiddle with it all the time. Who?—”

A scream echoed through the dense woods, making both of them jerk their heads and look toward where the sound had come from.

“Someone is in trouble,” Evelyn said.

Without hesitation, she rushed into the woods and headed toward the scream, jumping over small bushes, and avoiding trailing branches. By his panting and the noise he made breaking through the trees, Evelyn knew Benedict was right behind her.

The scream got louder, and she changed direction, her eyes searching ahead, trying to discover who it was that was in trouble. Less than a minute later, the scream came again, and Evelyn’s eyes flew wide at the sight before her.

“Och, my God. It is a child.”

Benedict and Evelyn came to a sudden halt beneath a tree. Above them, a small child of no more than five, hung precariously at a great height. Clearly terrified, the child was crying uncontrollably, which, to Evelyn, made the situation worse, given the only thing stopping him from falling was his tunic that had caught on a small branch above him.

“We have tae help him.”

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:16 am

CHAPTER SIX

“M aaa’,” the boy blubbered.

“Dinnae move,” Benedict bellowed. “We’re going tae get ye down.”

“I want me maaaa...” he sobbed.

“We’re here now tae help ye, dinnae fret. But we need ye tae stay really still,” Evelyn called up.

Not wanting to waste any time, Benedict turned to Evelyn. “I’m going tae climb up and grab him, then I’ll hand him tae ye. All right?”

“What if he falls?” Evelyn whispered.

“Then ye better be ready tae catch him.”

Benedict grabbed hold of the trunk and started to climb. The branches looked thin, and he didn’t trust that they could hold his weight, so, for as long as he could, he tried to avoid them. Using his own weight as leverage, he heaved himself further and further, until eventually, he was only feet away from the boy.

“Grab me hand,” he said.

But the boy shook his head. “I cannae. I’ll fall.”

“Nae, ye willnae. I willnae let that happen. Come on, lad. Grab me hand.”

At that moment, the boy's tunic began to tear, and Benedict feared the worst. “Grab me hand now,” he bellowed.

So shaken was the child by Benedict's tone of voice, he threw his hand out. Benedict grabbed his tiny arm just as the tunic tore completely.

“Argh,” the boy yelled, as he swung in the air, secured only by Benedict's grip.

With one arm around the tree trunk, holding on for dear life, and the other holding the boy, Benedict panted, “I've got ye. Ye're all right. I've got ye.”

He pulled the boy into his body, and held him close to his chest. “Get ready,” he called down to Evelyn.

“I'm ready,” she called back.

Climbing down was difficult with one hand, but as he neared the bottom, Evelyn stood with her arms held out, ready to take the boy. Carefully, Benedict lowered him down to her, and when she told him she had a firm grip on the lad, he finally let go. Only then, did he jump the six feet to the solid ground beneath.

“Well, that was exhilarating,” he declared, brushing himself down.

While Evelyn had the boy wrapped up in her arms, he was still sobbing. It had been a terrifying experience, and his tears were now likely relief, more than anything else.

“Where dae ye live, lad?” Benedict said, once he had got his breath back.

Between the sobs, the child told them his cottage was not far from where they were.

“Good,” Evelyn said soothingly. “Then let us get ye home tae yer mammy.”

“Nae,” the boy cried. “Me kitten.” He pointed up at the same tree Benedict had just rescued him from.

“Och, nae,” Evelyn said, turning to Benedict, “He was trying to save his kitten.”

Before Evelyn even asked, Benedict knew what he had to do, and returning to the same tree, he began the same steady climb. The kitten was a few branches further up than the child had been, and as he stepped on a branch to reach it, it snapped beneath his feet, causing Benedict to slip and fall several feet down the trunk.

“Och, God. Be careful.”

Aye. Easier said than done.

Benedict tried again, but once more, the branches were too weak to hold him, and in the end, he clambered back down the tree. “It’s nae use. I cannae reach the kitten. The branches are too thin tae hold me.”

He watched as Evelyn put the child down gently. “Ye wait here a moment, darling,” she said kindly. She then moved directly toward the tree.

“What are ye doing?” Benedict barked. “It’s too dangerous, Evelyn. I dinnae want ye going up there. We’re lucky we got the boy down without injury.”

Turning away from the boy and, at the same time, pulling Benedict close, she whispered, “I have nae intention o’ leaving a tiny child crying when I can dae something about it.”

By both her expression and her tone of voice, Benedict knew Evelyn was determined.

Clearly, she was not taking no for an answer, and Benedict found himself surprised at her tenacity. But how were they going to make this work? Looking about him, he noticed a few large logs; dead branches and tree trunks that had fallen over many years.

“All right. But we’re doing this me way.”

Leaving Evelyn with the boy, Benedict went and found as many logs as he could. Disappearing into the nearby trees, he grabbed them one by one, and then dropped the huge branches on the ground beside the tree. Each time they landed with a heavy thud. With enough gathered, he lay three logs together, side by side. He took the next three and lay them on top, this time going across. The final three, he lay on top of the others, going in the same direction as the first layer. When he had finished, he had made a platform of sorts.

“And how is that going tae help us exactly?” Evelyn said, frowning at his creation.

“The only way I’m letting ye dae this is if ye climb ontae me shoulders.”

Evelyn’s mouth fell open, and her face bloomed red. “Absolutely nae,” she declared. “Ye’ll be able tae see right up...” she trailed off, realizing the boy was listening.

“I told ye,” Benedict said, trying hard not to smirk. “We’re doing this me way. I’m nae having ye risk yer life. Ye climb ontae me shoulders, or the child doesnae get his kitten. That’s the deal.”

At hearing that, the little boy sobbed even louder. Benedict watched Evelyn as she struggled with the decision, but before she agreed, he knew what she was going to do. She had a huge heart. Her actions had made that clear. And as she had so succinctly said earlier, she wasn’t going to leave a child crying when she could do something about it.

“Fine,” she relented. “But ye keep yer eyes forward.”

Benedict chuckled. “I’ll dae me best.”

“Ye’ll keep yer eyes forward,” she barked, clearly already embarrassed at what might happen.

“O’ course I will, I’m a gentleman,” Benedict said. He was still smirking, which clearly did not fill her with confidence.

“A real gentleman would nae state he’s a gentleman. Ye cannae look,” she said, as she walked toward him.

Benedict had positioned himself near the tree trunk. It would give Evelyn something to grab hold of. “Aye, I ken. Ye’ve said already. Now, come here. I want ye tae walk up my thighs.”

“And then what?” Evelyn said.

“Then ye’ll have tae climb up on me shoulders. Use the tree trunk tae steady yersel’. After that, ye’ll have tae turn around.”

“I’ll fall.”

“Nae ye willnae. I willnae let ye. I’ll have a good hold of yer ankles. Ye’ll just need tae balance.”

“Och, is that all,” Evelyn replied with sarcasm.

Benedict grinned. “Come on. We can dae this.”

“And ye’ll nae look up me frock?”

“Och, fer the love o’ God, woman. Can we just get on with it?”

With a deep breath and an expression that conveyed she was not at all convinced that this was going to work, Evelyn slipped off her boots. Unlike Benedict’s, her hands were tiny and hardly went halfway around his wrists. His great big hands tightened all the way around her wrists, and then leaning back, he caused the tension needed for her to begin.

Carefully, Evelyn placed one foot just above his knee, and pushing herself off the ground, pulled against him and placed the other above his other knee.

“That’s it. I’ve got ye. Keep going,” Benedict instructed.

Letting go with one hand, she hitched her frock up on one side, so her knee could reach his shoulder. “Dinnae ye dare look,” she panted.

“I’m more concerned we’re both going tae end up flat on our faces. Will ye concentrate?”

“I am concentrating,” she huffed back.

She let go of his other hand and grabbed the trunk, while Benedict now raised his arms above his head and kept a tight hold of her waist. He could feel her trembling, but she did not stop. What they were doing was dangerous enough. She was far braver than some soldiers he knew.

“Ye’re doing grand. Now, hold on to the trunk, and pull yersel’ up.”

“All right,” Evelyn replied, a slight quake in her voice.

Benedict felt her weight shift, and having no choice but to let go of her waist, held out his hands. Partly, he was offering them in case she needed to grab hold of him for balance, partly, he had them there just in case she lost her footing and fell.

Once more, she hitched her frock up, and one by one, her feet pressed into the large muscles of his shoulders. Now came the tricky part. She had to turn around from this position.

“Keep yer eyes ahead,” she panted. “Dinnae ye dare look.”

“Here’s me worrying about ye falling and breaking yer neck, and all ye care about is if I see something I shouldnae.”

“I mean it,” she growled.

Benedict grinned. “Well, there’s nae much ye can dae about it from up there.”

“What?” she cried.

“Naething. Never mind.” It took all his strength not to burst into a chuckle.

Eventually, Evelyn had herself turned the right way. Benedict took a tight grip on her calves, and then stood fully erect. “All right. Are ye ready? We’re going tae move.”

“I’m ready,” she called from above.

Very slowly, and keeping close to the trunk, so Evelyn could keep her balance, Benedict moved toward the platform he had created. With effort, and a burning in his thighs, he stepped onto the platform and positioned himself as close to the tree as he could.

“How is that?”

“Ye need tae go more tae yer left.”

Benedict took a step to his left.

“A bit more,” she called down.

He took another step.

“Aye. That’s perfect. All right, little pussycat. Come on.”

Evelyn stood on her tiptoes and reached up, while Benedict continued to hold her as fast as he could. He could hardly believe this had worked, but he was pleased that it had.

“I’ve got it,” she said with a steady voice, as her feet lowered fully down to his shoulders again.

“Good. Can I look now?”

“Dinnae ye dare!” Evelyn spat.

Benedict couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Just get me down from here,” she begged.

Taking careful steps, Benedict clambered off the platform, and once back on solid ground, he called up to her. “I want ye tae jump.”

“What?”

“I want ye tae jump. I promise, I’ll catch ye.”

“This isnae a game. I cannae just jump,” she cried.

“Then ye’ll be stuck up there a while, and I definitely will look,” Benedict teased.

“Nae!”

“Then jump, woman.”

“All right.” Her voice sounded as quaky as it did before.

“On the count of three,” Benedict said, releasing his grip on her calves. “One, two, three.”

He felt the pressure leave his shoulders, and a second later, Evelyn was in his arms. Breathlessly, she gazed up at him, her face red from the effort. As he held her like a husband might a bride, he felt completely proud of her, and their eyes locked. At that moment, he didn’t care that this woman was marrying his brother. Nor did he care that he was supposed to be playing a part. His stomach churned and the desire for her rose, and all the reminiscing he had done about that night in the library returned.

She’s yer braither’s bride. What the devil are ye doing?

His conscience roused him out of his stupor, and feeling suddenly guilty, he grappled for a way out of the situation. He had to ruin this moment. With a wide smirk, he said, “I always wondered what there was under a woman’s frock.”

Evelyn’s face bloomed bright red, and still smiling, Benedict gently lowered her to the ground.

“What is under a woman’s frock?” the young boy asked.

“Och, me God,” Evelyn looked even more mortified. This sent Benedict into peals of laughter, but clearly, by her dark scowl, Evelyn was not at all amused. “Here.” She handed the kitten to him, and the lad squeezed it so hard Benedict wonder if he’d kill it. “It’s about time we got ye home.”

With the boy home safe, and after many grateful thanks from his mother, Benedict and Evelyn made their way back through the dense wood.

“Well, I dinnae think that could have gone any better,” Benedict said. “Ye’re a brave lass, Evelyn. I ken men who wouldnae have pulled that off.”

“We only managed tae pull it off because ye are so strong, B-Audor. Thank ye for helping that wee boy. Ye’ll be his hero forever now.”

“We’ll both be his heroes,” Benedict replied, gazing down at her with a smile. “I couldnae have done it without ye.”

“Or without looking up me skirt,” she quipped back with a grin.

Benedict burst into laughter again, and they continued walking until they reached the horses. He lifted Evelyn onto her horse, and then mounted his own beast. There was no race back to the castle, which was a relief. There had been enough excitement for one day. Too much, in fact.

There was a moment there, where Benedict’s common sense had gotten away from him. A moment where he had nearly lost himself completely. Perhaps it would be wiser and safer for both of them if he stayed away from Evelyn Sinclair. He did not want a broken heart. Evelyn had gazed up at him with desire in her own eyes, but given the fact that she thought he was Audor, her affection had not even been aimed

at him.

Protect yer heart, Benedict. Before it is broken intae a thousand pieces.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“A re ye absolutely sure?” Yvaine gasped, gawping at Evelyn.

“I am absolutely certain,” Evelyn replied.

“But how can ye tell? They both look identical. And anyway, it doesnae make any sense. Why would Laird Gunn go off without telling anyone and leave Benedict standing in fer him and courting his own bride?”

“I dinnae ken. I didnae ask. If this is the ruse they want tae play, I will go along with it.” Evelyn shrugged as she brushed her hair before bed. “But I can tell ye without a shadow o’ a doubt. The man I spent the day with was Benedict Gunn. Nae the laird.”

It had certainly been a crazy day, and as the sisters continued to ready themselves for bed, Evelyn reduced Yvaine to tears of laughter when she told her all about it. But when all the laughter was over, and they were settled beneath the coverlets, Evelyn’s mind wandered to a part of that afternoon that still made her heart flutter when she thought about it.

He may well have been playing the part of his brother, but when Benedict had held her in his arms after she had made that terrifying jump, something had happened between them. Something that should not have happened. But just like that evening in the library, she had been swept up in the moment. Lost in the soft gaze of those beautiful green eyes.

Benedict had felt it too. She was certain that was the reason he had made that remark

about what was under her frock. He had been as lost as she, and realizing that whatever it was they both felt simply could not be, he had swiftly brought them out of their stupor.

It was evident that he had kept her promise and not told Audor about their time together in the library. If he had, perhaps the laird would have thought twice about leaving his brother to take his place while he was away. But now, she was faced with a dilemma. How was she supposed to spend this time with Benedict, and at the same time, control her feelings, which were clearly growing ever stronger? Maybe it was for the best if the two of them saw less of each other until Audor returned.

It appeared Benedict must have come to the same conclusion as Evelyn, for she did not see him for the entirety of the next day. Evelyn and Yvaine filled their hours wandering around the castle and the castle gardens.

In the afternoon sun, they sat together in the ornate gardens. Evelyn read a book she had taken from the library, and Yvaine worked on her needlepoint.

“I am going tae miss ye so much when ye are married,” Yvaine said, out of the blue.

Evelyn turned and looked at her sister with a feeling of sadness. “And I will miss ye, dear sister.”

“What Faither is making ye dae isnae fair. In fact, I think it is wrong,” Yvaine said with an unusual harshness to her tone.

“He’s doing what’s best fer the clan, Yvaine. Ye ken that.”

“And what about ye? What is best for ye? He hasnae considered that, has he? Nay,” she continued, answering her own question. “He’s too swallowed up in his own grief tae even care about his daughter’s feelings.”

“Would ye prefer that Laird Keith destroy our clan entirely?” Evelyn said kindly. “Perhaps Faither is thinking about us. Perhaps this is the only way he feels he can protect us. He’s already lost Maither. I dinnae think he could take it if he lost his daughters too.”

Yvaine didn’t reply for a long time. Evelyn understood her sister’s concerns, and she, more than anyone, did not want to go through with this wedding. But her sacrifice would protect the clan. Maybe it would protect Yvaine and her father even more.

“I suppose ye have a point,” Yvaine said sullenly. “I just hate it.”

“I ken, me dear,” Evelyn said, placing a comforting hand on her sister’s arm. “I’m nae overly thrilled about it, either. But this is bigger than ye or me. We have tae remember that.”

At dinner that evening, Benedict sat in the chair Audor would usually occupy at the high table. While her father and Killian sat to Benedict’s left, Evelyn sat at his right, with Yvaine seated beside her.

“Good evening, me laird,” Evelyn said, once she was settled.

“Good evening,” he said, looking at her, and then gazing at the others at the table, extending his greeting to them all. “I apologize fer nae being present today. I have had business tae attend tae.”

While Evelyn suspected his main business had been to avoid her, her father nodded knowingly. “Ye have nae need tae apologize. Ye have a heavy burden on yer shoulders. Many dinnae realize just how much work being a laird requires.”

“Indeed,” Benedict said.

Yvaine raised her eyebrows at Evelyn, her expression showing her disbelief. In return, Evelyn widened her eyes at her sister, wordlessly trying to tell her to mind herself. Benedict could not discover that they knew who he was.

As the food was served, Benedict said, "I will be absent again tomorrow. I am needed in the village tae deal with some issues. Naething o' great importance, but things that need addressing. I am afraid it will be another day I willnae be able tae spend with Evelyn."

She knew what he was doing. He was finding ways to avoid her that didn't look obvious, which, under the circumstances, Evelyn found rather touching. He was the laird , after all. He need not explain himself.

"Perhaps, if I am nae being too presumptuous," Donald replied, "it might be fitting if Evelyn goes with ye. As yer bride, it would be good fer her tae meet the people in yer charge. She will have tae get tae ken them sooner or later. Ye will discover, me laird, that me daughter is rather adept at getting people tae trust her."

Evelyn was a little taken aback at her father's compliment. It had been so long since she had heard one from him. Of course, his timing could not have been any worse, and given the fact that his point was a valid one, she had no way to argue with it. Nor, it seemed, did Benedict.

"I, er," he floundered for a second, and then apparently came to the same conclusion as Evelyn. "O' course, me laird. What a splendid idea."

Once more, Evelyn and Yvaine shared a look. This time, however, her sister was beaming with delight. Yvaine only wanted Evelyn to be happy, and perhaps she thought her sister spending time with him would do just that. But Evelyn had not expressed her deeper feelings to Yvaine. Nor had she told her how she feared them.

“Ye are nae pleased?” Yvaine whispered with a frown.

“This isnae the place tae explain it,” Evelyn whispered back. She glanced over her shoulder, but the men were talking among themselves, and thankfully, paying no attention to them.

“But ye like him,” Yvaine argued.

“Which is exactly the problem,” Evelyn hissed.

Yvaine continued to frown, until eventually, the realization hit her, and her eyes flew wide. “Och.”

“Exactly,” Evelyn said.

“Och, Evelyn.” Yvaine looked suddenly sad.

Evelyn grabbed her sister’s hand and held her tightly. “This isnae the time or place, Yvaine. We will talk later. Please, smile. I cannae have anyone else kenning.”

Yvaine pinned a weak smile on her lips. “All right.”

Only once Evelyn was satisfied that Yvaine understood what she needed to do, did she turn around and continue to eat, attempting to join in on the conversation.

Killian seemed to be highly entertained about something, and was regaling Donald with some story.

“...he met her at the Mackay wedding, and he hasnae stopped talking about his mystery woman since. Ye would have thought he might have asked her name.”

“I’m sure the laird isnae interested in hearing about me braither’s pursuits, Killian,” Benedict interrupted hurriedly.

“Och, I dae. I’m rather intrigued now,” Donald replied.

Evelyn could hardly believe what she was hearing, and holding her breath, she looked at the worried expression on Benedict’s face.

“As are we all,” Killian continued with a wide grin. “Benedict hasnae stopped searching fer her since the wedding, but he has nay idea who she is. Instead, we have had tae listen tae him pining fer her fer three whole weeks.”

While her father was engrossed in the story, Evelyn was speechless. Benedict had been pining for her? He had searched for her?

At that very second, Benedict caught Evelyn’s wide-eyed stare.

“Me braither,” he said bashfully, clearly trying to play the circumstance down, while at the same time, covering his own reaction.

Yvaine nudged Evelyn’s elbow and gave her a huge grin, but Evelyn was uncertain how she ought to react. Quickly remembering that it was Benedict sitting beside her, she closed her mouth, for it had been gaping open with shock. Since that breathless encounter in the library, he had not left her mind, but she had no idea he had experienced the same.

“Well, perhaps when Benedict returns from his travels,” Donald said, “he can regale us with more details. Perhaps we can all search fer her, so he can court her.”

Upon hearing her father’s words, Yvaine, who had been taking a sip of wine, suddenly choked on it, and began coughing and spluttering. Gone was the grin, and as

Evelyn patted her back, her sister now looked terribly worried.

Killian appeared behind her, offering her a napkin. “Are ye all right, Yvaine?” His face was marred with concern.

Evelyn could not help but note that this was the first time he had actually been kind to her. From the moment they had arrived, the two had taken a distinct dislike to each other.

But Yvaine could not answer. She was too busy gasping for air in between her hacking coughs. It took a few moments, but when the redness finally drained from Yvaine’s face, Killian returned to his seat. The sisters shared another worried look, but neither spoke a word.

“Are ye all right, Yvaine?” Benedict asked, leaning forward to speak to her.

“I’m fine, me laird. Thank ye.”

Benedict nodded, and then glanced at Evelyn. His expression was a mixture of worry and embarrassment. But then, he flashed her a smile, and clearly swallowing whatever it was he was feeling, took on playing his part of the laird once more.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Benedict was waiting in front of the stables when Evelyn approached. She looked no less beautiful that day as any other day, garnered in a pretty deep green gown. As difficult as it was, he forced himself to swallow the desire that arose at the sight of her.

“Good day tae ye, me laird,” she said as she approached.

“I thought we were using our Christian names?” he teased with a smile.

She smiled back and nodded. “Forgive me oversight,” she quipped, repeating his words from the day before.

As they rode their horses out of the castle and headed toward the village, Evelyn said, “Were ye nae at the village yesterday?”

Benedict frowned. “Whatever gave ye that idea?”

“Well, at breakfast the other morning, Killian made mention o’ it. He said that ye needed tae speak tae a village member.”

He searched his brain for such an occurrence, and then remembered Killian’s words. They had agreed to say such a thing in front of everyone simply to assert that he was laird. It was a stupid suggestion, as far as Benedict was concerned, but Killian had said it was imperative to keep up pretenses. Now, of course, the lie had come back to bite him.

But what was he supposed to say? He couldn't tell her he had been to the village. If he had gone yesterday, it would be nonsensical that he was returning today. Besides, the welcome from the villagers, for they always welcomed Audor so enthusiastically, would certainly give it away. He expected they would be delighted to see him when they arrived. Their reaction would give Evelyn reason for suspicion if they greeted him with the same delight two days in a row.

So, what am I supposed tae tell her?

By a miracle, an idea came to him. He had already deduced she was a smart woman. He could only hope that she would believe him. It was her intelligence that was making this pretense all the more difficult, and Benedict feared that sooner or later, he was going to slip up somewhere and blow the deceit wide open.

"The villager came tae the castle," he said, as confidently as he could.

"Och, I see."

He was listening to see if he could hear any suspicion in her voice, but there was no detectable inflection of disbelief. He had gotten away with it this time, but clearly, he would have to be more careful in the future.

As they arrived at the village, they were approached by the people who happened to see them. Benedict dismounted and carefully lifted Evelyn down from her horse.

"Me laird, 'tis lovely tae see ye," an older woman gushed.

"Me laird, me laird," a young boy cried, jumping up and down on the spot.

More villagers gathered, and Benedict smiled and greeted them all. While he had expected it, it felt strange receiving such adoration. It was usually his brother getting

such attention, the people only knowing the brothers apart by Audor's clan ring, which Benedict now wore.

It was not difficult to act like Audor in this situation. Benedict was as fond of those that made up the clan as his brother. He greeted small children, and smiled warmly at the older women. Most of the men were absent, likely working on the land.

Evelyn found that she, too, received much attention, especially from the young children. They gawped up at her, clearly astounded by her beauty. Benedict could sympathize. She did have the ability to take one's breath away.

The children followed them through the village for a little while, and then, soon enough, they were called away by their mothers. He watched Evelyn take in her surroundings, and upon passing a small stall selling jewelry, he noticed as she fingered a pendant with a deep green stone. She did not linger, however, and they continued on.

Leading the way, he headed to the blacksmith. After lying to everyone the night before, stating that he had some things to deal with in the village, he and Killian had been forced to come up with some ideas after Laird Sinclair's suggestion that Evelyn accompany him. He could hardly visit the village just for the sake of it.

After dinner last night, they had spent a full hour trying to think of something. Being the very organized person Audor was, there were no real matters to attend to, pressing or otherwise, and for a while, both men were completely stumped. When they finally managed to come up with a scenario, albeit, far from perfect, Benedict had slumped back in his chair with a glass of amber liquid.

Looking over at Killian, he had shaken his head. "This lairdship malarkey is exhausting."

Arriving at the blacksmith's yard, he and Evelyn could see the burly man working from where they stood. Thomas, busy as always, wielded a huge hammer and was striking a piece of metal that glowed red from being in the fire.

"Good day tae ye, Thomas," Benedict called out loudly, trying to make himself heard over the racket.

Upon hearing his name, Thomas halted in mid-swing, his hammer high in the air, and looked out into the courtyard. When he saw Benedict, he looked a little surprised, but smiled warmly all the same.

"Good day tae ye, me laird," he said, dropping the hammer and stepping over several tools that lay round about him. Once out in the yard, he offered a burly, blackened hand. Benedict took it and shook it firmly.

"It is some time since I have seen ye in the village, me laird."

The statement made Benedict grateful that he had not told Evelyn he had come to the village yesterday. That was the problem with lying. One always needed to keep a track of what one had said.

"And yet, it is always a joy fer me when I come," Benedict said diplomatically. "I am here tae ask ye tae visit the castle. Many o' our horses need yer attention, fer worn shoes and their hooves."

Thomas frowned again and looked even more surprised than he had a moment earlier. He knew as well as Benedict that it was usual for the stable hands to come to him with such requests. Clearly, he was struggling to understand why his laird was there, doing such a menial task.

It had been the only thing Killian and Benedict had been able to come up with. It was

risky, but they had not been able to think of anything else.

Before Thomas had a chance to protest or question him, Benedict opened his eyes wide, and then glanced at Evelyn, who still stood at his side. It was a silent plea to go along with what he was doing.

Thankfully, Thomas was quick in his understanding, and dropping the frown, he smiled, and then nodded, as though a laird doing a servant's messages was the most natural thing in the world.

"O' course, me laird," Thomas said, with a swift recovery. "I can visit on the morrow, if yer request isnae urgent."

Breathing with relief, Benedict continued the farce. "There isnae any urgency, Thomas. The morrow will dae well. While I am here, I ought tae introduce ye. This is Lady Sinclair, my betrothed." Turning to Evelyn, Benedict continued. "Lady, Sinclair, this is Thomas Smith."

"It is a pleasure tae meet ye, Thomas," Evelyn said kindly.

Thomas looked a little bashful, and gazing down at her, replied, "I believe the pleasure is all mine, me lady."

"Good. Well. Thank ye, Thomas," Benedict said quickly. The farce was over, and now, they could be on their way. "We will leave ye tae yer work."

"Farewell, me laird, me lady."

Evelyn smiled and waved goodbye, and then, Benedict led her back onto the main street of the village. As they neared The Golden Gill , a tavern situated on their left, Benedict turned to Evelyn. "How about a little luncheon?"

Evelyn smiled. “Luncheon sounds grand.”

“Good.”

Again, he was welcomed warmly by the innkeeper and his wife, both delighted that the laird had graced their establishment with his presence. Once more, he introduced Evelyn, and once more, she was welcomed with warm enthusiasm.

After ordering a meal, they settled at a table near a window. The innkeeper hurriedly served them tankards of ale, and promised they would not have to wait long for their food.

“Ye are surrounded by good people,” Evelyn said wistfully. “Which, in me experience, is the sign o’ good leadership.”

“A laird is only as good as the people he serves,” Benedict replied. It was something Audor would likely say, and Benedict agreed with such sentiments.

She gazed up at him with a soft smile. “Then the man who leads these people must be good as well, if nae only by association.”

Her wording was a little strange, but Benedict nodded. “I have found they have made me a better man.”

“I’m sure they have,” she agreed.

She still gazed at him, her eyes glistening, that soft smile expressed with ease and contentment. And as much as he knew it was dangerous, he couldn’t help but gaze back at her with the same tenderness. His reaction to her in that moment was the very reason he had deemed it wise to stay away, and yet, as though powerless against an invisible force, she pulled him in.

Arriving at the table with their steaming food, the inn-keeper broke the moment.

“Enjoy yer meal, me laird,” James said cheerfully. “This one is on the house.”

“Nay, nay,” Benedict protested. “I willnae hear o’ it,”

“Please, me laird. It isnae every day we have the privilege o’ cooking for the laird and his soon-tae-be bride. It is our honor.”

“And ye have a living tae make, James,” Benedict replied.

“One meal will hardly deprive us, me laird.” The innkeeper gave them a warm smile, before turning and leaving them to eat.

Benedict shook his head and determined that he would leave some coin, no matter what the innkeeper said. When he turned to speak to Evelyn again, he found her smiling broadly at him.

“What are ye smiling about?”

She shrugged lightly. “I just think ye have a good heart. That’s all.”

He felt a little embarrassed at those words, having not heard them from any other before. So much so, he did not know how to respond, and instead, changed the subject.

“Well, James’ wife has outdone herself, for this looks delicious.”

Evelyn looked at her food and frowned. “What is it?”

Benedict could hardly believe his ears and looked at her with wide eyes. “Ye have

never had Scotch Pie before?”

She shook her head. “I cannae say that I have.”

“Lord, woman, ye havenae lived. Ye must try it. It is quite delicious.”

But Evelyn hesitated, and as amused as he was at her curious expression, he lifted his fork, dug into his own pie, and then offered it to her. “Here. Try mine.”

She looked a little wary as he held the fork out to her, but eventually, she opened her mouth. His gut clenched as she did so, and gazing at those soft sweet lips he remembered tasting, he moved his fork slowly towards her.

It felt like time had stopped. Like they were the only two people in the whole world. And as her lips wrapped around the fork, Benedict had to stop himself from physically groaning.

He knew she felt something too, for her eyes were wide, and never left his for a second. Her cheeks reddened, but still, she did not look away from him. As though in slow motion, he pulled the fork back, watching it catch the soft skin of her lips. The desire grew at every second, and now, his body was reacting in a place far lower than his gut.

“It’s delicious,” she breathed. “Thank ye.”

“Aye, well,” Benedict replied, clearing his throat, and breaking the tension. “Ye may eat yer own, fer I am too hungry tae give ye anymore o’ mine.”

He grinned at her, and she giggled at his teasing. This was now the second time he had resorted to humor to break the spell she seemed to put him under. It was becoming a bit of a habit.

“I will take it as my first gift,” she said, tucking into her own meal.

“What dae ye mean, yer first gift?” Benedict frowned.

“Well, I have never been given a gift ‘afore. Not from anyone outside o’ me family, at least,” she said with a shrug.

While he struggled to believe her, he also knew she was not lying. He had seen her in a lie, and her expression was not the same.

“How is that possible?” he asked, digging his fork back into his pie.

“I dinnae ken, I suppose... Oh,” she said, halting her sentence suddenly.

Benedict looked up to see Evelyn peering out of the window of the tavern.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, watching her brow work into a frown.

“There are men out there wearing Clan Keith colors.” Bringing her eyes back to him, she continued. “Why would any o’ the Keith Clan be here in the village?”

It was now Benedict’s turn to frown. “They wouldnae,” he said, standing hurriedly from the table. Moving to look through the window, he searched the street for the men she spoke of, but they were no longer there.

“They’re away,” he said.

“Well, they were definitely there. I would ken those colors anywhere,” she huffed knowingly.

Of course, she would. Their clan had been battling Clan Keith for over a year. And

besides, it was that same clan who had murdered her mother.

“Are ye all right?” he said, placing a hand on her arm as he sat down again.

“I’m fine.”

Giving her a long look to make sure she actually was fine, he eventually nodded. “I will call a gathering of the council when we return to the castle. This needs tae be addressed.”

When their meal was over, and they had thanked James and Martha for their hospitality, Benedict and Evelyn left the tavern and walked back through the main street towards their horses.

“Was that all ye needed tae dae?” Evelyn asked.

Her question caught him off guard, and he frowned down at her.

“The blacksmith,” she said as way of explanation. “Yer only reason fer coming tae the village was fer the blacksmith?”

“Well,” Benedict shrugged uncomfortably, “aye.”

“And there was nae one else in the castle that could have come and given him the message?” she said again, a smile dancing at the corner of her mouth.

As he had feared she might, Evelyn had figured out his ruse, and there was nothing he could do about it. Anything he now said in his defense would make him look guilty.

“Perhaps I just wanted tae show ye the village,” he countered.

“Aye, but I wasnae originally supposed tae come with ye,” she came back. “In fact, as I think about it, I have tae wonder if yer nae trying tae avoid me.”

She was smirking now, and he knew she was trying to tease him. The problem was, she was not wrong.

“Never,” Benedict said lightheartedly. Maybe the best way to deal with the circumstance was simply to keep things light and playful. “Who in their right mind could possibly want tae avoid such a lady as ye, Evelyn?”

She blushed, as he knew she would, and he smiled broadly at her light embarrassment. As they continued on, they passed the stall she had stopped at earlier. The pendant she had eyed, was still there, but he continued moving.

Once they reached the horses, he feigned a gasp. “Och, I need tae go back,” he declared. “Wait here. I’ll only be a moment.”

Hurrying back to the stall, he purchased the pendant, and with the excitement of delight dancing in his gut, he made his way back to the horses.

“I have something fer ye,” he said. Taking a step toward her, he opened his palm and showed her what he had bought.

Evelyn gasped. “That is fer me?”

She brought her fingers to her throat, taking hold of the pendant that sat at her neck. For a moment she looked thoughtful, and then she said, “Me maither gave me this necklace. When I touch it, it reminds me of her, which, I suppose, is why I frequently touch it.”

“It’s very beautiful,” Benedict replied. “May I?” He gestured to it.

Evelyn nodded, and then, Benedict reached forward and, moving her hair to the side, carefully took the necklace from around her slender throat. Holding the delicate jewelry in his large hands, he then slipped the green stone pendant onto the chain.

Gazing at them as they sat in his huge palm, he said, “the two pendants go very well together.”

He looked at Evelyn, whose eyes were still wide with astonishment. She, too, was gazing at the necklace, and by her delighted smile, Benedict knew he had made a good choice.

“Everyone deserves a present, Evelyn. I am pleased that I am the first person tae gift one tae ye.”

“I dinnae ken what tae say,” she said breathlessly.

“Ye dinnae have tae say anything.”

Benedict could feel the familiar twisting in his gut, that growing desire he battled with every time he was near her. She gazed up at him with that same desire, and once more, sparks crackled between them.

“May I?” he asked again.

Wordlessly, Evelyn nodded. Her wide eyes watched him as he stepped close. She pulled her long hair from the back of her neck, while Benedict tied the necklace around her throat once more. His fingers grazed over the soft skin, and he felt Evelyn shiver.

The necklace was now attached, but Benedict did not move his hand. Instead, he held her gently, while at the same time, gazing down at her, his heart thumping with

excitement, his thoughts wild with what he wanted to do with this woman.

He had promised himself he would stay away, but like a siren, her call reeled him in. It was a silent call, of course, but his heart heard it loud and clear. The moment crackled with tension as she gazed up at him, and he gazed down at her. And then, he seemed to have no control over his actions, for his mouth lowered to hers, and he kissed her with as much desire as he had had that night in the library. Her soft lips beneath his only fed his want of her, and slipping his tongue inside her mouth, he roved about, tasting her sweetness.

He could easily remain there for longer, but wary of being in such a public place, he fought against his longing.

“Ye cannae ken how much I want ye, Evelyn,” he growled against her lips.

“Oh...” She floundered for a second, as though she had forgotten his name, and then said, “Audor.”

Benedict slowly pulled away, still gazing at her with fire in his eyes. He nearly didn’t care that he was torturing himself. Or that Evelyn thought she was kissing his brother. He just couldn’t help wanting to be near her.

“We should be getting back,” he panted, not really wanting to go back to the castle at all.

“Aye,” she whispered breathlessly. “I suppose we should.”

Once mounted on their beasts, they both appeared to be lost in deep thought, and thus, the journey back to the castle was strangely silent. What might be going through Evelyn’s mind, Benedict could not know. He did, however, know what was going through his own.

How am I supposed tae continue this pretense? How can I spend these days with her, without telling her how I feel?

But to tell her how he felt, would be to tell her who he was, and all things considered, what would be the point? She was going to marry Audor. At that very moment, Evelyn was under the impression that he was Audor. For the sake of his brother, and the alliance, her discovering his identity could be detrimental. Besides, it wasn't fair on her.

Nae. Ye will remain silent. Ye will also be a better man and stay away from her. Naething good can come o' this. Nae fer ye, or fer her.

Once they arrived at the castle, Benedict saw to it that Evelyn was taken care of by the stable hands. "I must find Killian," he told her, before hurrying away.

Killian was in the armory taking stock of the weapons, but seeing the seriousness on Benedict's face at his approach, his cousin frowned.

"What ails ye, Benedict?" he said.

"We spotted Clan Keith's men in the village. We need tae summon the council immediately."

CHAPTER NINE

After sending two servants ahead of them to gather the council, the two men travelled hurriedly through the castle. As he went, Benedict thought of the day he had spent with Evelyn. His mind whirled with confusion and contradiction. He wanted her, but could not have her. He should stay away from her, but he couldn't stand it when she was not beside him.

Things were not going to get any easier. She would marry Audor and become a permanent resident in his life. He would be forced to look upon her every single day. Look, but not touch. It was going to be utter torture.

So, what am I tae dae?

As they continued to stride down the corridor, Benedict couldn't hold this anxiety to himself any longer. Killian had already helped him navigate the issues that had arisen in Audor's absence. Perhaps he could help him with this too.

"I've a confession tae make," he blurted.

Killian jerked his head toward him, but the men continued walking. "What confession?"

"Ye ken the lass I met in the library at the Mackay's wedding?"

"The one ye havenae shut up about," Killian teased.

But Benedict was in no mood for joviality. “Aye, her. Well, I ken who she is.”

“What?” Killian exclaimed. “How? When?”

“I found out the minute Evelyn Sinclair arrived,” Benedict replied.

It took a second, but then Killian came to a sudden standstill and spun toward his cousin. His mouth fell open with a loud gasp, and with wide eyes, he stared at Benedict. “It was Lady Sinclair?”

“Shh,” Benedict hissed. “Nae so loud. Dae ye want the entire castle tae ken?”

Killian was stunned, an acceptable reaction under the circumstances.

“It gets worse,” Benedict said, as he moved forward, and the men began walking again. They rounded the corner and headed towards Audor’s study, where the council had been instructed to meet. “I kissed her today.”

“Ye did what?” Killian barked. “Are ye mad?”

“Very likely,” he replied. “I’m in trouble, Killian. Big trouble. I dinnae ken what tae dae.”

When they entered the study, Killian hurriedly closed the door behind him and turned to Benedict. He lowered his tone and gave Benedict an intense look. “All right. How bad is it?”

Benedict sighed. “I cannae get her out o’ me head.”

“Bloody hell,” Killian breathed. “Well, this is a mess.”

“I ken. And the burden lies with me. Evelyn has nae blame. She didnae ken who I was in that library, and she doesnae ken she was kissing me today. She thinks I’m Audor.”

For a moment, Killian didn’t say anything. With his gaze lowered, he furrowed his brow, clearly in deep thought about the circumstances.

“Right,” he said a few seconds later. “Here’s what ye’re going tae dae. First and foremost, I think it’s best if ye stay away from her.”

That was the obvious answer. The answer Benedict knew was the solution, but had struggled to implement so far. Maybe now, having Killian watching him and having some accountability, he would get a handle on his previous lack of self-control.

“Audor will be back soon,” Killian continued. “When he gets here, ye need tae tell him.”

Of the two things mentioned, the latter was what Benedict feared the most. He wasn’t afraid of his brother. They had always been close. But that was the point. His fear lay in how Audor would look at him when he discovered what he had done; Audor’s disappointment in Benedict’s treachery. Guilt wrapped around him like a heavy cloak, and dropping his head, he heaved a sigh.

“He’ll understand, Benedict. It’s nae like ye sought her out. Ye didnae ken who she was until she arrived here.”

Benedict shook his head, feeling angry at himself. “But I kent who she was when I kissed her earlier. I’m lying tae her and betraying me braither at the same time. Besides, what am I supposed tae dae with these feelings?” He thumped his chest. “They’re driving me mad.”

Killian didn't seem to have an answer for that, and both men stood there in silence. Killian, clearly trying to figure out a solution to the problem, and Benedict, tortured and frustrated with the circumstance he found himself in.

A knock at the door broke the silence.

Killian looked at Benedict as he was about to turn and open it. "We'll keep this between ourselves. Let's get this council meeting over, and we can talk about it later. And dinnae forget," he nodded towards the door, referencing the council members beyond it, "yer meant tae be Audor."

"How could I forget?" Benedict snarled.

After the older men had entered the room and settled around the table, Benedict stood, as his brother might, and addressed them all.

"I've gathered ye here because I have some worrying news. I was in the village earlier today and Lady Sinclair spotted men wearing Clan Keith colors."

There were frowns of concern from all the men present, then James Finley spoke up. "This is worrying, me laird. Especially with yer upcoming betrothal tae me lady."

James Finley was the oldest of the group. He had been a close friend and confidant of Benedict and Audor's father, and had been instrumental in helping the brothers come to terms with his death.

All the council had been of great support, but James had been there the most. He had sat with them for many nights afterward, relaying stories of their father's bravery and courage. While Benedict and his brother's tears were shed privately, James had been the listening ear they needed in their time of grief.

“Did she see how many o’ them there were?” James continued.

Benedict shook his head because, of course, it had not been he who had seen them at all. “I’m afraid nae, James. Perhaps a handful. It was a fleeting glance. But nae matter the number, there shouldnae be any o’ Laird Keith’s men anywhere near here. In fact, I cannae understand how they have managed tae get ontae our lands unnoticed.”

“They are a sneaky lot, me laird,” William Kerr offered. “And ‘tis impossible tae guard every inch o’ the borders.”

Benedict nodded. “Indeed, William. I am also o’ the mind that their presence has much tae dae with the arrival o’ Laird Sinclair and his daughters.”

He had deduced that the moment Evelyn had spotted them, but he had not wanted to cause her any unnecessary concern by mentioning it.

The men murmured in agreement. “Laird Keith has been relentless in his attacks o’ Clan Sinclair,” Angus Gunn said. “He’s an arrogant man. It wouldnae surprise me tae learn he’s sent men tae follow them.”

“But tae what end?” William countered. “Surely, they willnae attack the Sinclair’s on our land. That would be madness.”

“I’ve always thought o’ Laird Keith as a man who isnae sound in mind,” James murmured.

“Be that as it may,” William replied. “I cannae believe he would mount an attack. He cannae bring an army through unnoticed. A few men, perhaps, but nae more.”

“He may nae be here tae attack at all,” Angus said.

“Then what is our response?” Benedict said. “I dinnae want tae jump tae any conclusions, but it’s clear they’re nae here for anything good.”

“We need first tae establish if there is any threat tae the clan, me laird,” James said. “I would suggest we send scouts intae the village and beyond. It will be prudent tae discover where they are, and how many.”

The rest of the council nodded in agreement.

“I would also send more guards tae the borders. ‘Tis a preventative measure and a discouragement fer any others that might approach,” Benedict said.

Once more, the men murmured an agreement.

“Very well.” Benedict turned to Killian. “Ensure that is done as quickly as possible, Killian.”

“Aye, me laird,” he replied.

He turned back to the gathered council. “I thank ye fer yer time, gentlemen. We will meet again when the scouts return tae discuss our next move.”

Even as he spoke those words, Benedict knew that Audor would have returned by then. The next time the council met, they would be speaking to the real laird, not his stand-in.

The council members stood and, one by one, they left. Only James Finley lingered.

“Yer braither has been away fer several days, me laird. If he doesnae return soon, he may miss the wedding.” The old man’s eyes twinkled, and a soft smile danced at the corner of his mouth.

Did he know?

Benedict returned his gaze and deduced that James certainly had his suspicions. “I’m sure he will be back by then, James. He is me braither. The wedding cannae occur without him. If necessary, we shall wait a few days.”

James smiled widely. “Indeed,” he replied. And with a knowing nod, he turned and left the room.

For the next three days, and, after further discussion with Killian, Benedict avoided Evelyn wherever possible. Of course, he still remained present for the meals of the day, but other than that, Killian had come up with a list of things that Benedict had been able to use to excuse his absence.

Being away from her, however, did not stop him thinking about her. In fact, his obsession became, for the most part, worse. She was like an elixir, something he needed to feed the craving that was driving him slowly mad.

Even his sleep was being affected, and waking up wearily that morning, he had arrived for breakfast, stayed for an acceptable amount of time, and then hurried off to Audor’s study, where he spent the rest of the morning hiding.

For fear he might go entirely mad, Killian had arrived with a plan for them both to do some training that afternoon, and thus, he and Benedict were now in the castle gardens wielding shields and swords. Benedict was grateful for the distraction. He needed some kind of release to rid himself of the pent-up energy that swirled within him.

“I wonder what Audor is doing,” Killian said, as he unsheathed his sword and readied himself.

“If I kent, I’d tell ye,” Benedict replied, doing the same. “I could hardly believe it when that missive arrived from him yesterday. He told me he was only going tae be a week. Now, God only kens when he’ll return.”

“It’s just a few more days,” Killian said.

“Aye, a few more days where I have to hide out in my own home so as tae avoid making this mess even worse,” Benedict growled. “I dinnae ken how much longer I can keep this fa?ade going.”

As though thinking about Evelyn had conjured her up, she and Yvaine came into view some distance across the garden. They settled themselves beneath a tree, both clearly wanting to watch the men spar.

“Och, that’s just great,” Benedict huffed.

“What?”

Benedict jerked his head in their direction. “It appears we have an audience.”

Killian clearly found it funny, and with a smirk, he said, “Try nae tae think about it.”

“Aye,” Benedict drawled back. “Easy fer ye tae say.”

“Ye’re doin’ everything ye can, Benedict.”

“I ken. But how am I supposed tae keep this up? Audor is going tae be away for even longer now, and my lack o’ attention towards his daughter is making Laird Sinclair suspicious.”

Killian raised his eyebrows and shrugged. Clearly, he had no answer, and with no

solutions, the two abandoned thinking about it and began to train.

Lunge after lunge, their swords clashed together, the sound of metal ringing across the air. When Killian attacked, Benedict defended, stepping back to avoid each swipe. But when the opportunity arose, he switched and instead, attacked Killian, forcing his cousin back with a heavy assault.

A soft wind blew across the gardens, and while Benedict was doing his best to ignore Evelyn's presence, he did put on a good show. Every woman liked the sight of a strong man. But as Killian advanced again, the wind blew stronger, lifting Evelyn's dress and revealing her legs. He couldn't help himself. His eyes veered from the battle and he found himself transfixed, even as she hurriedly pulled the material down again.

A second later, Killian's sword caught him on his upper arm.

"Argh!" he yelled, dropping his sword and grabbing the wounded area.

"Bene—"

Benedict glared at Killian, who quickly recovered. "Audor. I'm so sorry. I expected ye tae block the blow."

And Benedict should have done, but his attention had been focused elsewhere.

Killian had since dropped his sword and was by Benedict's side. "We should get ye tae the healer."

"I'm fine," he growled. "I dinnae need the healer." But even as he said that, he watched blood trickling through his fingers and soaking into the sleeve of his tunic.

“Dinnae be a fool, cousin,” Killian said, taking him by the arm and leading him across the garden. “Come on. Let’s get that wound looked at.”

CHAPTER TEN

Evelyn knew he was avoiding her. She also knew why. The kiss they had shared in the village should never have happened, and yet, it had felt blissfully delightful. The whole day had been wonderful, and Evelyn had recalled it several times since. The villagers had welcomed Benedict warmly, clearly believing him to be their laird, and Benedict had reciprocated, knowing them all by name, even though he wasn't.

Watching him interact with them had warmed Evelyn's heart, and had only made her desire him more, which was hardly ideal, given the fact that she was marrying his brother.

And then, there was the gift of the pendant.

Not surprisingly, her father hadn't noticed, but Yvaine had spotted it the moment she lay eyes upon her sister. Evelyn had not been able to stop herself gushing at receiving such a beautiful gift, and had told her sister everything that had occurred, including the tender kiss. But while Yvaine had been delighted and excited, Evelyn had reminded her that nothing could come of it.

Since then, Benedict had tried to hide his lies as he made excuse after excuse to her father, why he would not be available to spend any time with her. It had been days now, and though she knew it was for the best, her heart had not stopped aching.

Her father was growing suspicious, and beginning to question Benedict's avoidance. Not knowing, of course, that Benedict was not Audor, the laird had made mention of Benedict's lack of attention on a couple of occasions.

“One has tae wonder if Laird Gunn is having second thoughts,” he had said the other day, once Benedict and Killian had left the Sinclair’s to finish their breakfast alone.

“I’m sure he’s just very busy, Faither,” Yvaine had said, casting a quick glance at her sister.

“Aye, Faither,” Evelyn had added. “Ye said so yersel’ only last week. A laird has much tae dae. I’m sure Audor isnae any different than yersel’ in that regard. He loves his people and has tae spend many hours making certain that all is well across his clan lands.”

But their father’s expression remained the same, even as the sisters tried their best to alleviate his fears. Clearly, their reasoning did little to help, and with a face like stone, he had only grunted at their words.

That morning at breakfast, the same had occurred, and once more, their father had made mention of the laird’s lack of attention. “Perhaps it is time I had a quiet word with yer future husband,” he had growled.

“Faither, please,” Evelyn had said, throwing her arm out and laying her hand on his. “From what I have noted, Laird Gunn is a decent and honest man. I dinnae think, if he had had a change o’ heart, that he would keep such a thing from ye.”

Laird Sinclair had given Evelyn an intense look. After a few seconds, he had nodded abruptly, removed his hand, and stood from the table. “I ken ye are yet young and still a little na?ve, Evelyn. But a man who has lived as long as I, kens when something isnae right. And something isnae right. I can feel it in me bones.”

He had stormed from the room with a determined stride, leaving Evelyn and Yvaine to share a worried glance.

In the afternoon, after their father had retired to his bedchamber for a nap, Yvaine suggested they take a walk around the gardens. Evelyn gladly agreed. Perhaps some fresh air would take her mind off the gnawing feelings that had been eating away at her for the last few days.

A part of her was glad Audor had not yet returned from wherever he had gone. While she could not stop the wedding from occurring, these days of him being away gave her some reprieve. On the other hand, it also let her heart and mind wander, and the desire she felt for Benedict was only growing by the day. Perhaps this delay in the wedding was not a good thing. While she was still free, the temptation to stray was an enticement she struggled to fight against.

As they wandered across the lawns at the front of the castle. Evelyn lifted her hand. "Och, look," she breathed excitedly, pointing to Killian and Benedict readying themselves to train.

"So much for a distraction," Evelyn murmured.

"Pardon?" Yvaine said.

"It doesnae matter." Evelyn shook her head.

"Come, we should watch them," her sister exclaimed.

But Evelyn was uncertain. "Maybe this isnae such a good idea, Yvaine."

"Och, dinnae talk such nonsense. In a few weeks, ye will be married. Ye are yet still yer own person until then. Surely, there isnae any harm in sitting here beneath this tree, watching two men spar."

Evelyn gave her sister a knowing look, but Yvaine just beamed a mischievous smile

back, and taking her sister's hand, she pulled her to the ground to sit beside her.

"I honestly dinnae ken how ye are dealing with all o' this, Evelyn," Yvaine said a few minutes later, her tone now somber. "I ken yer heart is breaking, even if ye're pretending it isnae."

Evelyn took a deep breath in and then sighed. "Sometimes, life just isnae fair, Yvaine. Just like Mother being taken from us."

"I miss her so much," Yvaine replied sadly.

"As do I," Evelyn replied. "I have wished so many times that she was here tae see me getting married. But, alas. It isnae tae be."

The sisters sat and watched as the men fought. Both were huge men, and both fought with great strength, but Evelyn only had eyes for Benedict. She watched his muscles ripple with each strike, from the solid calves of his legs to what she could see through his shirt of the taut mass of his huge shoulders.

This is hardly helping ye, Evelyn.

And yet, she could not pull her eyes away. In fact, the more she watched him, the more she realized how attracted to him she really was. A soft wind caught the bottom of her frock, carrying it high in the air.

"Och, good lord," she cried, grabbing it with her hands and pressing the skirt back onto her legs again.

At that same second, a loud cry came from the men, and glancing over, Evelyn watched Killian rushing to Benedict's side.

“He’s hurt,” Evelyn gasped, pushing herself to her feet.

Yvaine swiftly stood, and watching the men hurry away, the sisters followed quickly behind.

“Are ye all right, me laird?” Yvaine called out as they caught up to them.

“I am fine,” Benedict growled, clearly annoyed by all the fuss. “Please. It is only a slight cut. The healer will mend it.”

But as Evelyn caught his eye, her face a picture of worry, Benedict’s gaze softened. “I’m fine, Evelyn. Truly.”

Upon reaching the healer’s cottage, and stepping inside, it quickly became evident that the old woman was not home.

“Ye see. She’s nae even here,” Benedict said, sounding somehow vindicated. “I will bandage it mesel’.”

“I ken how tae dress it,” Evelyn said quickly. “Please, me laird. “Will ye nae let me help ye?”

Benedict and Killian shared a glance, though Evelyn did not understand the look that passed between the men.

“I’m sure the laird kens well how tae take care o’ his own wound,” Killian said.

“Och, that is such nonsense,” Yvaine retorted. “Look where it is on his arm? It makes far more sense tae let Evelyn take care o’ it.”

“I appreciate yer concern, Miss Sinclair,” Killian bit back, “but it may be a bit much

fer me lady tae have tae deal with.”

“Me sister has seen far worse,” Yvaine came back.

While this was going on, Evelyn was already searching the shelves and gathering alcohol, rags, and cloth bandages.

“I am sure we can cope with it,” Killian retorted.

“Are ye too proud tae accept a little help?”

Evelyn could take the racket no longer, and glaring at both of them she said, “That is enough bickering, both o’ ye. I can hardly hear mesel’ think. Out!”

While Yvaine and Killian did as they were bid, the argument continued once they were out in the courtyard. They could still be heard inside the healer’s cottage,.

With the cottage peaceful again, Evelyn turned to Benedict.

“Now. Let me take a look at it.”

Towering over her, Benedict slipped out of the plaid that diagonally crossed his body. He then pulled his shirt loose from the waist, and grabbing it with two hands, peeled it off himself.

Evelyn’s eyes grew wider and wider as more of his body was revealed. His solid stomach, his huge chest, and eventually, once he had pulled the tunic over his head and discarded it onto a nearby chair, the full breadth of his shoulders. Hardly able to control her reaction, she could only stand there with her mouth hanging open. Her eyes traced across the mass of the man, moving upwards until she reached his eyes.

They were gazing down at her with amusement, along with the smile at the corner of his mouth. Evelyn quickly turned away, feeling the heat rush to her cheeks.

“Let me guess,” he said confidently. “Ye’ve never seen a naked man ‘afore?”

“Nae one like ye, at any rate,” Evelyn murmured, hurriedly pretending to organize the already organized items she had gathered.

“Please. Sit,” she said, still struggling to look at him.

Benedict did so, and to keep her eyes busy, she took a long look at the injury on his upper arm. It wasn’t a huge gash, but it was certainly deep enough. After dabbing the alcohol on the rag, she gently wiped the cut, and heard Benedict hissing through his teeth.

Her eyes flew wide as she looked at him. “I’m so sorry.”

Though the pain was evident on his face, he shook his head. “It’s fine.”

His eyes softened as he gazed at her with the same desire she had seen several times already. Standing so close to his nakedness, Evelyn felt a little breathless herself, and slowly, she gazed back at him, feeling the same fire in her belly that Benedict always seemed to ignite when he was anywhere near her.

Getting back to her job, she lightly dabbed the wound again. “I can see yer nae stranger tae a wound,” she said, clearly seeing the white lines of scarring dashed at different places across his body.

“Aye. And they’ve all been a lot worse than this,” he said, nodding down at the gash. “Killian has worse scars than I. He’s the best warrior we have.”

“Aye, I can see that,” Evelyn said, smirking and nodding towards the window where he and Yvaine were still apparently arguing. As she cleaned the wound, she continued. “The two o’ ye are very close. I ken ye are cousins, but he’s very protective of ye.”

“Aye. He’s a good man considering all he’s suffered.”

Her hands kept working, but Evelyn cast him a glance. “What dae ye mean, suffered?”

“Killian’s parents were killed when he was only a boy of six.”

“Oh, God,” Evelyn gasped.

Benedict nodded. “Me parents took him in, of course. He grew up with me and... me braither.” Evelyn tried not to react at his hesitation, for she was certain he had been about to say Audor before he managed to stop himself. “And he’s been here ever since. By relation, he’s me cousin. In reality, he’s far more than that.”

“He’s lucky tae have ye and yer braither,” Evelyn said, pressing a clean piece of cloth against the wound.

“Aye, well. We’ve been there fer each other. When our parents were killed, Killian was there for us too.”

His words felt heavy on her heart, and resting a hand gently on his shoulder, she gazed at him with the sadness she felt. “I’m so sorry that happened tae ye.”

Benedict gazed back at her sadly and nodded. “It is what it is.”

It was evident, due to his somber tone, that Benedict did not want to talk anymore

about it. Having bandaged the wound, Evelyn wondered how she could change the subject, while at the same time, not sound too insensitive.

Her eye caught a potion sitting on the shelf to her right, and lifting it down to show him, she said, “Dae ye ken, this potion is the closest I’ve ever been to actually being drunk.”

He raised his eyebrows and looked at the bottle in her hand. “That bottle?”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “Well, obviously nae this bottle. We have a healer at our castle too, ye ken,” she said mockingly. “But I’ve never been drunk ‘afore. I’ve always wanted tae see what it was like, but I’m too scared o’ what might happen. I’ve seen so many people make utter fools o’ themselves, and I dinnae want tae dae that.”

He seemed surprised at her confession, and then a mischievous smirk danced at the corner of his mouth. “Every person should get drunk at least once in their lifetime, it’s like a right ‘o passage. In fact,” he continued, growing a little more excited, “we will go tae the village tonight and dae that very thing.”

“I couldnae,” Evelyn cried, now feeling terrified.

“Och, come on, Evelyn. I’ll be right there beside ye. I promise. I’ll nae let ye make a fool o’ yersel.”

As tempting as it was, she still eyed him suspiciously.

“Hand on heart,” he said, placing his hand against his naked chest.

The sensible part of her was swiftly overtaken with an excitement that rushed through her body, and Yvaine’s words returned to her.

“In a few weeks, ye will be married. Ye are still yer own person until then.”

While it ought to feel wrong, Evelyn ignored her usual disciplined conscience, and throwing caution to the wind, nodded her head eagerly. “All right. I will. But only if we keep it a secret. I cannae have me faither discovering what we’re doing.”

He rewarded her impulsive decision with a wide grin and a nod. “Ye’re on.”

After dinner that evening, during which her father had been dismissive at best, Evelyn and Yvaine waited eagerly in their bedchamber for Benedict’s arrival.

Yvaine appeared even more excited than Evelyn felt, and nearly skipping around the room, she could not contain her delight. “This is just perfect,” she cried, her eyes dancing with the thrill of it all. “Ye cannae ken how proud I am of ye doing this, Evelyn.”

“Aye, well. Let’s just hope Faither doesnae hear of it,” Evelyn replied. She was nervous and excited, and yet, now, as she waited to leave, her nerves seemed to be getting the better of her.

“And what if he daes?” Yvaine replied. “He can hardly say anything if yer betrothed takes ye out tae the village. He hasnae stopped complaining about the laird ,” she emphasized those words with a smirk, “nae spending any time with ye. He would be a hypocrite if he did so now.”

“But he’s nae the laird though, is he?”

“Faither doesnae ken that,” Yvaine countered.

Evelyn took a deep breath in. “Let us pray tae the gods that he never discovers it.”

A light knock on the door made both sisters jump, and then Yvaine beamed another delighted smile. “He’s here.” Turning to look at Evelyn, she lowered her voice and said, “Are ye ever going tae tell Benedict that ye ken it is him?”

Evelyn shook her head. “I cannae. If I tell him, then he’ll ken that all those moments between us, that kiss in the village, those soft gazes we’ve shared, all of it will have all been for him, and nae Audor. I will be admitting tae betraying his braither. Then what will he think o’ me?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Benedict led Evelyn to the waiting horse and gently, but with ease, for it felt as though she weighed nothing at all, lifted her up onto it. A second later, he was sitting close behind her with the reins in hand.

“We couldnae have taken two horses?” Evelyn said, sounding a little breathless as they left through the castle gate.

“I’d like us tae get home this night, Evelyn,” Benedict teased. “The idea of ye trying tae steer a horse in a drunken state doesnae bear thinking about.”

“Ah, I see,” she replied. While he could not see it, Benedict could hear the smile in her voice.

As they continued, however, he had to wonder if his decision to travel on one horse had been a good idea. Pressed so close against her, there were ruminations in parts of his body that might cause him embarrassment if he was not careful. And yet, he could not help himself. With the reins held in one hand, he slipped the other around her waist, pulling her even closer into him. He heard her gasp, and could only smile at her reaction.

“Are ye afraid I might fall?” she asked tentatively.

“Something like that,” he growled back.

And then she surprised him by snuggling further into him. Her soft scent caught in his

nostrils, and his groin ached at her closeness, and yet, as torturous as it was, he did not want to let her go.

But ye will have tae soon. When yer braither returns, ye will have tae let her go forever.

Benedict pushed that thought from his mind, as if ignoring it might make it untrue. When Audor came home, he would indeed, need to take a step back. But at that very moment, he was not there, and thus, Benedict was going to take the opportunity of being near Evelyn, no matter how foolish his actions were.

The Golden Gill was far busier than the last time they had been there, and upon arrival, Benedict found himself being welcomed warmly, and loudly, by all those present. When he had finished greeting all who approached him, as well as introducing Evelyn to those who had not yet met her, he threaded his way through the tavern in search of a table.

“Here, me laird,” Charles Gunn said, waving them over. “Please. Take mine.”

“Thank ye, Charles. ‘Tis very good o’ ye.”

Soon afterwards, James battled through the throngs with a tankard of ale in each hand.

“Can I get ye any food, me laird?” James asked, as hospitable as he always was.

“Nae this night, James. Just make certain ye keep them coming.” Benedict nodded to the tankards.

“Aye, me laird.” James grinned, before turning away and battling back through the crowd again.

Looking at Evelyn, Benedict lifted his tankard. “Yer first challenge.” He nodded to her drink. “Ye have tae finish yers ‘afore I can finish mine.”

Evelyn’s mouth fell open, and Benedict burst out a hearty laugh.

“There isnae a chance I can dae it,” she gasped.

“Och, come on. Ye have tae give it a try.”

Grabbing her tankard in her hand, Evelyn looked at it fearfully, before looking back at Benedict.

“Are ye ready?” he challenged.

“Nae really,” she replied with wide eyes.

“On three. One, two, three.”

While his eyes did not leave from watching her, he brought the ale to his lips and began to drink. She struggled, as he knew she would, and he watched as trickles of the ale spilled out at the side and dribbled down her chin. Seeing her gasping and staring at him, he slowed down a little to give her a chance. But he knew he would beat her no matter what. It wasn’t exactly much of a challenge.

When he slammed his tankard on the table, Evelyn was still drinking, but her tankard was tipped right back, and she was nearly there.

Eventually, gasping and choking a little, she slammed her own tankard on the table.

“That’s it, lass,” he bellowed while still chuckling.

At first, Evelyn was clearly appalled as well as mortified, but noticing that no one around her seemed to care, least of all Benedict, she began laughing too.

A moment later, James arrived with two more tankards.

“Och, lord,” she moaned.

“Again?” Benedict said, though he had no intention of making her do it again.

“Nay!” she exclaimed.

He laughed at her then and shook his head. “All right. I’ll let ye drink this one a little slower. Ye might be a fine rider, Lady Sinclair, but ye cannae beat me at downing yer ale.”

When that tankard was finished, James was swift in bringing another, but Evelyn sat back in her chair, and waved her hands towards it. “I dinnae think I can drink another one right away.”

“I thought ye wanted tae get drunk?”

“And I dae.” She pressed a hand against her forehead. “I’m already a little tipsy.”

“Then dance with me,” Benedict said, standing from his chair and holding his hand out.

Evelyn grinned, and after a second’s hesitation, she grabbed his hand and allowed him to pull her to her feet. There were already many people dancing, body’s swirling and swaying to the fast beat of the bodhrán, the fiddle, and the tin whistle. Benedict pulled her in close, and the two danced about the wooden floor, feeling the vibration of everyone’s movement traveling through his feet.

At seeing their laird dancing with his betrothed, the floor cleared, and the villagers formed a circle around them, clapping and whooping in time with the music. Evelyn laughed heartily, throwing her head back, clearly losing herself in the music and the atmosphere.

Benedict could only watch her in delight. It was the most relaxed he had ever seen her. She was letting go and really living. There was a moment when everything seemed to slow, and he could barely hear the music or the people around them. He could only gaze at her, at her beauty, her full heart, her sparkling eyes, and her soft laughter. This moment was something he would hold with him forever. A cherished memory of their time together. A time they would never have again.

Breathlessly, they returned to the table, where, to his surprise, Evelyn downed her tankard in a far shorter time than earlier. He could only stare at her in amazement, and when she caught his expression, she slammed the tankard on the table and began laughing again.

“I was thirsty,” she giggled.

“Aye, I can see that,” he countered with a smirk, which only set her off to a new fit of giggles.

For a while, they watched the villagers dance, but when Benedict looked back at her, he noticed Evelyn playing with her necklace. His pendant was still there, beside the one her mother had given her.

When she caught him looking at the necklace, she shrugged apologetically. “I cannae help it.”

Benedict shook his head. “Nae one has said nae tae, Evelyn.

“I ken. I suppose I am afraid that one day, I’ll forget me maither altogether. It terrifies me that I’ll forget her scent, or her beautiful blue eyes, or the softness of her hair. What if I forget what she even sounded like?”

“Ye willnae. I promise ye that. Me parents have been gone seven years now, and I havenae and willnae forget them.”

“Her death changed everything,” she replied. “Ye see me faither as he is now; cold, distant, mostly angry with the world and all those in it. But he wasnae always like that. He used tae laugh, and smile, and have fun.”

“I cannae imagine what it feels like tae lose yer wife,” Benedict said.

A sweeping and strange feeling washed over him, for in that second, he realized that perhaps, in the not-so-distant future, he may well experience a pain that would be akin.

“Aye. Me faither adored me maither. She was his everything. He loved me and Yvaine too, o’ course, but he worshipped me maither.” She took a long draw on her ale, and then sighed. “Laird Keith did more harm that day than he could ever imagine. Or,” she shrugged, “perhaps he kent what murdering me maither would dae tae me faither. I just want the feud tae end. He’s already taken so much from us.”

“That is why were are aligning the clans,” Benedict said. “I promise ye, Evelyn. Once ye have Clan Gunn tae back yer clan, Laird Keith willnae bother ye any longer.”

He wasn’t entirely certain that his words were true, but he imagined that would be the result. Clan Gunn’s reputation was known far and wide. Only a fool would come up against them. But it would take Laird Keith to be an idiot if he tried to battle against Clan Gunn and Clan Sinclair.

They drank one more tankard of ale, and while Benedict was not affected at all, it was evident that they had accomplished what they went there to do, for Evelyn was indeed, merrily inebriated.

The journey outside was funny, though he tried not to laugh as she swayed from side to side, struggling to put one foot in front of the other.

“This is harder than it looks,” she slurred. “In fact, I can hardly feel my face.” She then started pinching her cheek to make her point. “Look. I can feel naething at all. Is that normal?”

Taking her in his arms, he swallowed a chuckle and lifted her onto the horse. She sat there for a moment, gazing down at him, her head slowly bobbing from side to side like it wasn’t attached to her neck.

“Ye’re a really handsome man. Dae ye ken that?” she rambled, taking hold of his cheeks with her hands.

Lowering her face towards him, Benedict knew what she wanted, but taking her hands gently in his, he shook his head slowly. “This isnae the time, Evelyn.”

“But why?” she whined.

“Because ye’re drunk. Now. Let’s get ye back tae the castle ‘afore yer faither discovers we’ve been missing.”

Yvaine opened the bedchamber door when they arrived back, and looking a little taken aback at her sister’s state, she gasped.

“Hello, Yvaine,” Evelyn exclaimed loudly with a grin.

“Shh, Evelyn,” Yvaine hissed. “Ye’re going tae wake the whole castle.”

“Ye cannae wake the castle, silly. It’s nae alive.”

Benedict grinned at Yvaine and shook his head. “Yer sister has had a good night.”

“Aye, I can see that,” Yvaine said, slipping herself under Evelyn’s other shoulder and helping him steer her towards her bed.

Once they sat her down, Evelyn swayed from side to side, while Yvaine gazed at her sister worriedly.

“She’ll be all right, Yvaine,” Benedict said. “Just let her sleep it off.”

“I dinnae need tae sleep it off,” Evelyn protested loudly. “What am I sleeping off at any rate? What are we talking about?”

Yvaine grinned widely up at Benedict. “She did have a good time.”

“We had a great time. In fact, it’s the happiest I’ve seen her since yer family arrived here.”

“Good,” Yvaine said. She gave him a strange look, and then, dropping her gaze, she turned to help her sister.

“Good night, Evelyn,” Benedict whispered as he slowly left the room.

“Night,” she drawled back, already sounding half asleep.

With a smile on his lips, Benedict slowly closed the door behind him and made his way to his own chamber.

A faint knocking disturbed him from his slumber, and upon waking, Benedict wondered if he was hearing things. Sitting up in bed, he cocked his head sideways and strained to listen.

Tap, tap, tap.

There's someone at me door. But who the devil is it at this time o' night?

Why dinnae ye get out o' bed and find out, ye eedjit?!

Throwing the coverlets off, he padded across the wooden floor and warily opened the door. He could hardly believe his eyes when he saw Evelyn stood there, wrapped in a shawl.

"What the devil are ye doing here?" he hissed.

"I had tae see ye."

"Ye ken it's the middle o' the night, dinnae ye?"

The sound of voices echoed through the corridor from a little distance away, and, thinking it might be the guards, and fearing they would see her, Benedict grabbed Evelyn by the wrist and dragged her into the room.

"What are ye doing here, Evelyn?" Benedict repeated.

Looking a little coy, she dropped her gaze and shuffled from one foot to the other.

"Ye didnae want tae kiss me earlier because I was drunk."

"Evelyn," Benedict began.

“Nae, please. Ye must listen tae me. I’ve slept a while, and I’m nae drunk any longer. ‘Tis me who wants tae kiss ye. ‘Tis the feelings o’ me heart that have brought me here. Nae the liquor.”

Her eyes sparkled as she looked up at him with nervous anticipation. It had taken some will power earlier to stop himself from kissing her, but he simply refused to take advantage of her in the state she was in. Now, however, it was clear Evelyn was indeed, sober. Nor could he deny, by her words or her actions, that she was of sound mind.

“This isnae a good idea.

“It’s only one kiss,” she said, the plea in her voice evident.

He knew what he was going to do before he took her face in his hands. He just couldn’t help himself. She was an elixir for his soul. A soothing tonic for a wound no one could see. A satisfaction for his craving.

Taking a step forward, he placed his huge hands on the soft skin of her cheeks and lowered his lips to hers. As the times before, she opened up to him, yielding to his desire, and yet, even her lips could not satiate his hunger. Breathlessly, their tongues roved, and flicked, and explored, she appearing as hungry as he.

Her arms snaked around his body as far as they would go, while he pulled her into him, feeling the warmth from her dancing on his skin. Her hands clawed at him, trying to pull him even closer, but their bodies were pressed tight with not a breath between them.

With his lips clashing against hers, and the sparks between them nearly bursting into flames, Benedict could feel his heart racing, his gut clenching, and his groin aching for her. He wanted her in that moment. In fact, he had never desired her as much as

he desired her now.

What about Audor?

Even in the throes of passion his mind would not let him have this moment. And as much as he wanted to push the thought of his brother from his head, the guilt grew from one second to the next.

Eventually, he could stand it no longer, and slowly breaking free from Evelyn's embrace, Benedict took a step back. "My God, woman. That's one hell o' a second kiss."

If only her passion was for me, and nae Audor.

"Third," she gasped breathlessly, gazing up at him with fire still dancing in her eyes.

Benedict laughed nervously, for clearly, Audor had kissed her before he left. He would know that if he was Audor, and quite swiftly, he found himself on the back foot, scrabbling to try and correct himself.

"Och, aye. There was that time..." he rambled vaguely, hoping to god he was right.

"Nay," she said softly, a slow smile dancing on her lips. "The first time ye ever kissed me was in Laird Mackay's library on the eve o' his wedding. And, while we are discussing it, me faither can never ken I was there."

A cold sensation ran through the entirety of Benedict's body as he realized she knew who he was. Stunned to silence, he could not even move, and instead, stared at her with wide eyes.

"When?" he said finally. "When did ye ken?"

“I’ve kent from the beginning, Benedict. I’ve been able tae tell ye and yer brother apart from the first night we arrived. Almost immediately.”

“But how?” he blurted, completely astonished. “Nae one else can.”

She smiled at him. “I’m going tae keep that as my little secret.”

Still reeling, the next question seemed to fall from his mouth. “Why didnae ye say anything? Why didnae ye tell me ye kent?”

Evelyn’s smile faded then, and she dropped her gaze. A silence fell between them. A silence that Benedict neither understood, nor wanted to continue.

“Evelyn—”

“It would make it all real,” she breathed. “If I told ye I kent, it would make how I feel about ye, and how ye feel about me, real. And... and I didnae want tae face the truth because... well, because...”

“It’s all right, Evelyn,” Benedict said, taking her hand in his.

He led her to the bed and pulled her to sit down beside him.

“I ken exactly what ye mean. I dae. Me heart has ached fer ye, as yers has ached fer me. I’ve been battling me feelings all this time.”

She gasped and gazed up at him. “As have I.”

Benedict nodded.

Lowering his lips to hers, he kissed her once more. The guilt from earlier still

lingered, but in that moment, he pushed it away. His heart won the battle over his mind, and all he wanted was her. His yearning for her had grown stronger than ever, from the moment they had shared in the library to now, and no longer able to fight against his desires, he ignored the thoughts of betrayal until they disappeared from his mind altogether.

Slowly pushing Evelyn back on the bed, his hand worked at the strings on her frock, while his mouth devoured her. Breathlessly, she kissed him back, her evident want of him parallel to his own desire. Sliding his hand into the material, he cupped her breast, finding the pert nub of her nipple. Evelyn gasped as he tenderly stroked it, his nimble fingers hardening it even more.

“I want ye more now than I’ve ever wanted anyone, Evelyn,” he growled against her lips. But she seemed too lost in what he was doing to be able to reply.

Moving his lips from hers, he trailed kisses down her throat. “Yer skin is so soft. I want me lips over every inch o’ ye. I want to taste ye, and show ye how I feel about ye.”

Reaching her bosom, he flicked his tongue over her pert nipple, and growled with delight at Evelyn’s gasps. Her fingers gripped his tunic as he continued, pushing him and pulling him as she writhed with pleasure.

While his tongue still teased her nipple, he reached down her legs and pulled her frock up over her knees. The skin of her thighs felt like silk beneath his fingers, and with the lightest touch, he caressed the inner part, all the way to her apex. Automatically, Evelyn opened her legs, granting him silent entry.

When he felt the soft moistness on his fingertips, his stomach flipped, his manhood hardened even more, and a low groan left the depths of his throat. “Oh, Evelyn,” he growled. “Ye’re so ready fer me.”

She whimpered as his fingers found the tiny nub, he knew would bring her so much pleasure, and slowly, he caressed it as she continued to writhe beneath him.

“Oh, God,” she panted, grabbing at his clothes and moving her hips in time with his rhythm. “Oh, God.”

“Oh, aye,” he growled, his tongue making circles around her nipple, before flicking it. Benedict moved his fingers faster, listening to her panting and whimpering above him. He could feel her body tensing, and knew she was so close. Soon, she would explode with a sensation she had never before experienced, and he reveled in the fact that it was he who was going to give it to her.

“Oh, oh, oh,” she panted.

She sucked in a deep breath, and for a second, he felt nothing, as though she were teetering on a precipice, waiting to fall. And then...

“Oh, me God,” she squealed.

Her body spasmed beneath his touch, and even though he was hard as a rock, Benedict was far more delighted that he had brought her to the peak of such ecstasy.

CHAPTER TWELVE

She couldn't remember when she had last had it, but upon waking that morning, Evelyn discovered her necklace was gone. She had pulled the covers and pillows off her bed, but to no avail. It wasn't there.

"Did ye still have it in the tavern?" Yvaine asked, helping her sister search the bedchamber.

"I dinnae ken," Evelyn replied in a panic. "Och, Yvaine. What am I tae dae? What if I cannae find it?"

"All right. Try nae tae fret. I'm going tae help ye look."

The sisters searched the bedroom, but after a half hour of tearing the room apart, they were still empty-handed.

"What am I tae dae?" Evelyn cried.

A frown of concern danced on Yvaine's brow. "Where are all the places ye went?"

"We went tae the tavern, and then we came back tae the castle. That's it."

Of course, it wasn't it, but Evelyn could not bring herself to tell her sister about last night. What she and Benedict had done was wrong, even though it had felt so very right. In fact, she had never felt sensations like it in her life.

“Then we’ll retrace yer steps through the castle,” Yvaine said calmly. “We’ll nae be able tae go tae the tavern. Faither will want tae ken our reason fer doing so, and he cannae discover what happened last night.”

“All right. But first, I want tae go and find Benedict. Perhaps he might remember when I last had it. Ye go down fer breakfast. I dinnae want Faither getting suspicious. Tell him I’m still sleeping or something. I’ll join ye as soon as I can.”

Evelyn then spent the next hour searching the castle high and low, being careful to watch out for where her father might be. She knocked on Benedict’s bedchamber, but got no answer. She ran to the great hall. He wasn’t there either. She went to the library, the laird’s study, she even went down to the kitchen, but there was no sign of either Benedict or Killian anywhere.

Where the devil is he?

Eventually, Evelyn gave up looking, and instead, went out to the stables. From there, she retraced the exact steps she and Benedict had taken last night. With her eyes peeled, and concentrating hard, she covered every inch of the courtyard, and then, the corridors of the castle.

In desperation, she asked passing maids if they had heard of anyone finding a necklace with two pendants, but the answer was always the same.

“I’m afraid nae, me lady.”

It was nearly lunchtime when Evelyn met up with Yvaine again.

“Well?” Yvaine said, asking a question she already knew the answer to.

Evelyn shook her head. “I cannae find it anywhere. I’ve walked the exact steps we

took last night from the stable to the castle. I've asked the maids. And I've searched high and low for Benedict, but I cannae find him."

"Ye mean, Audor," Yvaine said knowingly.

"Nae, Yvaine. I mean Benedict. I told him last night that I kent who he was."

Yvaine's face dropped. "Och, me God. What did he say? Where ye drunk? Did ye forget what ye were doing?"

Evelyn shook her head, but minded her words. "Actually, I wasnae drunk."

"And what did he say?"

Evelyn lifted her shoulders. "He was surprised, as ye can imagine. And then he wanted tae ken how long I'd kent, so I told him."

Yvaine smiled. "And dae ye nae feel better now that he kens?"

"I'll feel better when I find me necklace," Evelyn replied bluntly. "I need ye tae dae something fer me, Yvaine."

"Anything. Ye ken I'll always dae anything fer ye," Yvaine said, gazing at her sister intently.

"I need ye tae distract Faither this afternoon. I'm going tae take a couple o' guards and return tae the tavern. I willnae be able tae rest until I've found me necklace."

Her younger sister now looked doubtful. "Are ye sure that is a good idea, Evelyn? Why dinnae ye wait until ye can find Benedict?"

“Because I dinnae ken where he is. Nor have I seen him for the entirety o’ the day. I cannae wait ‘til night falls. I need tae go now.”

Yvaine relented eventually, and, safe in the knowledge that her sister would keep their father busy while she was away, Evelyn gathered a couple of guards and left through the castle gates.

While the guards slowly rode their horses, following closely behind, Evelyn walked beside her mare, her eyes scanning the ground as they went. Her job was to find her necklace. Their job was to keep her safe.

It was a long and slow process, and the further they went, the more worried Evelyn became. She didn’t know what she would do if she couldn’t find her necklace. Benedict’s pendant was indeed beautiful, but more importantly, the necklace was the only thing she had left of her mother. She couldn’t lose it. She just couldn’t.

They had been walking for nearly an hour, when Evelyn felt a strange shiver tingle up her spine. Immediately, she looked up and around her.

“Something feels wrong,” she said. “I think we’re being followed.”

Jared, the older of the two guards nodded. “Aye. I feel it too, me lady. There’s someone nearby. I think we’re being watched.”

“Maybe we should head back, me lady,” Peter said warily.

“I think Peter’s right, me lady,” Jared agreed.

“But the village is just?—”

But before Evelyn was able to finish her sentence, manic screams came from the trees

at either side of them, and six men thundered out onto the track, all of whom, wore Clan Keith colors, their swords high in the air,.

“Argh!” Evelyn screamed, scrambling to climb onto her mare. But the horse was spooked with the sudden appearance of the men, and trotting in panic, the beast wouldn’t stay still for her to get a grip on the reins.

Laird Keith’s men advanced, but jumping from their horses, Peter and Jared positioned themselves protectively in front of Evelyn. After a moment’s hesitation, the battle began, the clash of metal deafening as the guards fought valiantly to protect her.

“Get the lass,” one of the attackers bellowed, while continuing to fight.

Terrified, Evelyn turned and began to run. She darted into the trees, not caring the direction she was heading. She just had to get away. If they caught her, she had no doubt she would suffer her mother’s fate.

Crashing blindly on, branches slashed at her arms and face, but she did not stop. She could not stop. Even as her heart pounded, and it hurt to breathe, she had to continue. She could hear the men panting behind her. They were getting closer and closer, and to avoid them, she darted to her right and tried to change direction.

It did little to slow them down, however, for when she turned to look over her shoulder, there they were, not twenty feet behind. Turning back in the direction she was going, Evelyn felt something catch her feet, and a second later, she screamed as she flew in the air and landed heavily on the moss-covered ground.

Her leg was cut, but she didn’t care. She scrambled to her feet and turned to run, but tripping over that branch had lost her precious time and they were now almost upon her.

Run, Evelyn. Ye must run faster.

A second later, she felt a firm hand on her back, and suddenly, she felt herself launched forward once again having received a heavy shove from behind. Tumbling head over heels, she rolled to a final stop, but immediately tried to get back on her feet. The men towered over her, snarling angrily down at her.

“Leave me be,” she screamed. “Leave me be.”

They each grabbed one of her arms and yanked her to her feet, but Evelyn was not giving up. She thrashed them as hard as she could, punching with her fists, and kicking her legs, but it was no use. They were too strong. In one swift movement, the larger of the two grabbed her by the waist and tossed her over his shoulder. The other one grabbed her wrists and bound them tightly with rope.

“Let me go. Let me go,” Evelyn screamed, thumping the man’s back with her balled fists. But it was useless. Without even flinching, he continued walking back the way they had all ran.

“Help me,” she yelled. “Somebody help me.”

But her cries floated out into the forest, lost in the branches that swayed back and forth in the soft breeze.

I am going tae die, just like me maither.

Once they reached the horses, Evelyn was even more disheartened upon noticing Peter and Jared lying unconscious on the floor. At least, she hoped they were unconscious. Now, there was no hope. No doubt they had battled bravely, but there had just been too many of Laird Keith’s men.

“Grab the horse,” the man carrying her yelled at the others.

“Nay Nay! Let me go!” Evelyn screamed kicking her legs wildly.

She felt someone grabbing her legs, but still she battled. If she was going to die, she wasn’t going to do it quietly.

“Get off me, ye beast,” she yelled, pummeling the man’s back again.

“Someone get hold of this witch ‘afore I kill her,” he growled.

She then felt hands all over her body. “Dinnae touch me,” she screamed, still fighting against them.

Eventually, it took three of them to haul her to the horse, and with another holding it steady, they threw her over the horse’s back.

“Tie her down, and gag her while ye’re at it,” the man who had carried her ordered. “I’m nae listening tae that all the way back.”

As the men continued to struggle to tie her to the horse, Evelyn heard thundering hooves approaching. Clearly, there were more of them coming. How many did they need to capture one woman? Laird Keith was taking no chances, but Evelyn couldn’t escape from the men he had sent. He hardly needed to send reinforcements.

What did it matter? Her life was over.

She would never see her father or Yvaine ever again. She would never again lay her eyes on Benedict again either. Her sweet, Benedict. The affection between them had only just started to grow, but whatever could have been was to come to an abrupt end, and there was not a damn thing she could do about it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Breakfast had been an awkward affair.

Given that neither Evelyn nor Yvaine were present, Benedict had been forced to make conversation with Laird Sinclair, who was not the most forthcoming man at the best of times, but that morning appeared even less sociable. Of course, it didn't help that Benedict could not stop thinking about the laird's daughter.

Killian had tried to help, but in the end, Benedict was relieved when he was finally able to excuse himself.

When he and Killian arrived at Audor's study, Killian gave him news of what the scouts had reported.

"They searched the village and the surrounding areas, Benedict," Killian had said, "but there was nae sign o' these men ye saw. If Laird Keith's men are on our land, their camp is well hidden."

"And what o' the villagers? Have they seen anything?" he had said.

Killian had shrugged. "They don't seem to have seen anything."

"Where more guards put on the borders?" Benedict had pressed.

"Aye. As ye instructed."

For a moment, Benedict had been at a loss as to what to do. He had no doubt that Evelyn had been certain of what she had seen the day they had visited the village. He trusted she knew what Keith Clan colors looked like. She had certainly seen them often enough.

Abruptly, he had stood from the desk. “We should go and see the villagers ourselves and ask more questions. I cannae take a chance on this, Killian. If they’re out there, then the Sinclair’s are in danger, and we need tae be ready tae defend them.”

The cousins had spent much of the day in the village, talking to the locals to see if they had seen anything suspicious. Some told them they had seen nothing strange, while others had made mention of a few faces that were definitely not local.

Of course, while he was trying his best to listen, he was distracted. After their shared experience the night before, how could he possibly keep Evelyn from his thoughts? Sleep had taken a long time to come after he had walked her back to her room. Partly because he had replayed their time together over and over in his head, and partly because the guilt he had managed to repress had returned with a vengeance.

“I dinnae think we can get anymore done here, Benedict,” Killian said, after they had spoken to nearly everyone who had been available.

“Aye, I suppose ye’re right. It feels like a waste o’ time, for we’ve learned naething new.”

Killian shook his head. “I dinnae think it was a waste o’ time. The villagers need tae see their laird trying tae protect them. It’s his job.”

“Then he ought tae get his arse back tae the castle and dae it,” Benedict huffed.

“Are ye all right?” Killian was looking at him intently, and clearly worried.

“I’m fine,” he spat. “Me braither has vanished off the face o’ the earth, the clan is on the brink o’ an attack, and me love life is in the latrine. Apart from that, everything’s just wonderful.”

Killian smirked. “Well, that’s all right then. We should head back.”

“So,” Killian said, as they travelled back to the castle. “Ye were at the tavern with Evelyn last night.”

Plenty of villagers had mentioned it as they had questioned them, so Benedict was ready for this conversation. He knew Killian would bring it up sooner or later.

“Aye. The lass told me she’d always wondered what it was like to have one too many drinks, and that she wanted tae find out.”

“And ye, in yer infinite wisdom, kenning how deeply yer heart pines fer her, decided it was a good idea that it was ye who should take her,” Killian drawled sarcastically.

“She got what she wanted.”

“And did ye?” Killian threw him a glance.

Benedict was considering how to answer that, when a bone-chilling scream set them both on alert. He didn’t think about it. He just pushed his horse forward at a gallop. Killian did the same, and the two thundered down the track at the fastest speed their horses could carry them.

Less than five minutes later, a group of men wearing Clan Keith colors came into view, but it was not the sight of the men that terrified Benedict. It was the fact they had Evelyn bound and thrown over a horse. She was fighting with all her might, but there were too many of them.

“Bastards!” he yelled.

Killian threw him a glance, a shared look of knowing that, no matter how many of them they were, the two were about to advance into battle.

“We’re outnumbered,” Benedict yelled, as they continued their approach.

“That’s never stopped us ‘afore,” Killian growled back breathlessly. “Let’s get the bastards.”

Launching themselves from their horses, the cousins drew their swords. Holding them high in the air, they ran at the men screaming an attack.

Benedict punched the first one so hard, he flew backwards. The next came at him wielding a sword, and a thrashing battle commenced. The sound of clashing metal drowned out anything else, as he fought one after the other, but from the corner of his eye, Benedict noticed that Evelyn had pushed herself off the horse, and was struggling with the ropes that bound her.

Killian had disabled two more and ran towards her, and knowing she had Killian by her side, Benedict turned to concentrate all his attention and strength on the remaining two. Seeing the carnage that surrounded them, the panic and fear evident on their faces, they turned and ran into the woods, leaving their horses behind them.

Relief flooded through Benedict, but there was no time for celebration, and turning, he ran over to where Evelyn and Killian stood. He expected her to be quaking with fear, but as delicate as Evelyn Sinclair appeared, she had a hidden strength about her, for she was not fearful, but angry.

“...and they came out of nowhere,” she was saying to Killian.

“Evelyn,” Benedict breathed, throwing his arms around her and not caring a wit what Killian might think about it. Pushing her back from him, and searching her body, he continued. “Are ye injured? Did they hurt ye? Are ye all right?”

“Benedict, I’m fine,” she said determinedly.

Killian flinched and gawped at him.

“Aye, she kens.” Benedict nodded. “She’s kenned all along.”

“Killian!” Evelyn suddenly shrieked.

Benedict jerked his head to discover her pointing at Killian, and when he looked at where she was pointing, Benedict’s eye’s flew wide too. “Ye’re injured.”

Clearly, Killian had been too busy fighting and saving Evelyn to notice, but when he looked down at the blood soaking into the side of his tunic, he simply said, “Och.”

“We need tae get ye back tae the castle,” Evelyn said hurriedly.

“I’m fine,” Killian said, waving a dismissive hand. “Besides, I think those two,” he jerked a head towards the two guards, “need more help than I.”

The two guards who had accompanied Evelyn, and had evidently been knocked out, were only now, coming round from their unconscious state.

“Get back tae the castle,” Benedict said to Killian. “I’ll help the guards.”

“Indeed, I willnae,” Killian replied stubbornly. “We dinnae ken if those two ran off tae more o’ there clan. They could be on their way back here with reinforcements. And if ye think I’m leaving ye here fer ye tae have all the fun, ye can think again.”

Killian was smirking, but Benedict didn't smile back. "Then at least get up on yer horse. If ye collapse from bleeding, it'll save me having tae lift yer hefty lump ontae it."

"This is all me fault," Evelyn said, as Benedict walked towards the guards who had now managed to get themselves onto their feet. "I'm so sorry, Killian."

Killian was brushing off her worry, when the guards approached Benedict.

"I'm so sorry, me laird. They came out o' nowhere. There wasnae any warning," Jared said.

"We tried tae fight them off, me laird, but they were too many," Peter added.

Both men looked ashamed and disappointed, but Benedict couldn't fault them. Six against two was an unfair fight by anybody's standards.

"It isnae yer fault," Benedict said calmly. "Get yersel's together. We need tae head back tae the castle before they return."

"Aye, me laird," the men replied in unison.

By the time they reached the healer's cottage, Killian's tunic was soaked in blood, and Benedict was worried. Helping his cousin off the horse, Killian protested.

"Ye are making a fuss over nothing. I feel fine."

"Killian, please," Evelyn said, hurrying to his other side.

Benedict ignored Killian, and upon entering the cottage, called Dara over.

The older woman hurried towards them, her face a picture of concern. “What happened?”

“He’s been injured, Dara,” Benedict said. “Sword, we think.”

“Get him on the bed,” the old woman ordered.

Dara had been the clan’s healer for as long as Benedict could remember. When he was a child, he recalled her being a pretty woman, but the years had taken their toll, and now white hair sat on her shoulders, where red had been before, and the lines on her face and hands betrayed the many years she had served those around her.

“This is all me fault,” Evelyn repeated, hovering by the bedside as Dara cut into the tunic.

“Are ye the one who stabbed him?” Dara asked, lifting sharp blue eyes to look at Evelyn.

“Nay, but?—”

“Then it isnae yer fault,” Dara said plainly.

“He was injured because he was helping me,” Evelyn countered. Turning to Killian, she said, “I’m so sorry, Killian.”

“Lady Sinclair, will ye please stop fussing.” He smiled. “There’s nae need for all this guilt. I’ve had worse injuries sparring with Benedict.”

By now, Dara had cleaned the wound and was inspecting it closely. No one said a word, waiting for her to make her verdict. Eventually, she stood from bending, and turning to Killian, she said, “Ye’ll live. It looks worse than it is. It’s a gash, and it’ll

need attention, but it isnae deep.”

Smiling up at Evelyn, Killian said, “Ye see. I’m fine.”

Evelyn’s frown betrayed that she was not entirely convinced, but Benedict did notice her shoulders seem to relax a little. It had not been her fault, everyone else in the room knew that.

The guards said the attack had come from nowhere, and he believed them. What he didn’t understand is what they wanted with Evelyn. Had they been taking her to kill her, as they had her mother? Or did Laird Keith have other plans? If so, what?

Perhaps he thinks kidnapping Evelyn will put a stop tae the alliance.

That could be it, but then, Laird Sinclair had another daughter to offer. It would be no great task to put Yvaine in Evelyn’s place. Nay. It doesnae make sense. There’s something else. I just cannae think what.

Darkness had already fallen when the three entered the castle. Immediately, they were met by a very concerned looking Laird Sinclair and Yvaine.

“Och, Evelyn,” Yvaine cried. “We were so worried about ye. Where have ye been?”

Benedict watched Evelyn struggle with her answer. Clearly, she did not want her father to know where she had been, or why. He was about to step in when he realized he did not know what story Evelyn had given them before she had left.

“I... I was just out for a ride,” Evelyn began. “Sure, I told ye, Yvaine, that I was going tae get some fresh air.”

“Fer five hours?” her father barked.

“It’s me fault,” Benedict interjected, now he knew the situation. “Killian and I were riding and came upon Lady Sinclair. As it was a fine day, we decided tae show her the clan land that she will soon rule over with me. I’m afraid time got away from us. Forgive me, me laird.”

He watched Yvaine’s eyes darting from Evelyn to himself, before looking to her father. Like everyone else, she was wondering if he would believe the story. For a moment, Laird Sinclair did not reply. He was either trying to make the story fit in his head, or struggling to find something to say.

Eventually, he spoke directly to Benedict. “I understand ye dinnae yet have children, me laird. I am certain, that time will come fer ye and me daughter. It is fer this reason that ye cannae understand a man’s fear when his child leaves a place o’ safety and doesnae return fer hours.”

“I apologize, me laird,” Benedict said sincerely. “In hindsight, I ought tae have thought about that. I assure ye, it willnae happen again.”

“Well, thank goodness ye are returned,” Yvaine said quickly, grabbing Evelyn by her arm and walking down the corridor. “Ye must be starved.”

Benedict, Killian and Donald were left standing in an awkward moment. Benedict would have preferred to speak to Evelyn, but he could do that later. Now, he ought to smooth things over with her father.

“Will ye nae join us in the library fer a drink, me laird. I have a great whisky I think ye might enjoy.”

Donald nodded. “Aye. I think after the last couple o’ hours, I could dae with one.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was much later when Benedict heard a faint knock on his bedchamber door. Before he even opened it, he knew who it was.

He closed the door again once Evelyn stepped into the room, and for a moment, all he could do was look at her. For the last hour, he had considered how lucky they had all been that day, and not because Donald had bought their story.

If he and Killian had stayed in the village just five minutes longer, Evelyn would have been taken. She could have been assaulted, tortured, even killed. Those thoughts had been accompanied by horrific images that had tormented him for some time. The idea of losing her had taken his breath away, and determined to protect her, now more than ever, he had decided that from that day forth, Evelyn was not to leave the castle again.

“Are ye all right?” he asked, taking hold of her hand.

“I’m fine,” she answered a little too quickly.

Benedict nodded. “Ye’re a strong woman, Evelyn, but what happened tae ye today had tae be terrifying. I was terrified, and it wasnae me being flung ontae a horse with me hands bound.”

“Ye were terrified ye were going tae lose me. And if anything, at the time, that thought terrified me too.”

He pulled her into a tight embrace and held her there for a long moment. “I cannae lose ye, Evelyn,” he whispered into her hair. “I just cannae.”

“I’m right here, Benedict,” she replied into his chest. “I’m nae going anywhere. I promise.”

After another moment, he stepped back, and placing both hands on her small shoulders, he looked down at her intently. “What the devil were ye doing out o’ the castle alone?”

“I wasnae alone. I took two guards with me.”

“Aye, fer all the help they were.”

“It wasnae their fault,” she defended.

“I ken that. Ye still havnae answered me question.”

Her hands went automatically to her throat, and before she even said a word, he knew what she was going to say.

“Yer necklace?” he blurted.

Evelyn frowned worriedly. “I lost it at some time last night, and I cannae find it anywhere. Yvaine and I scoured the castle, and nae one had seen it. So, I decided tae retrace our steps back to the village, for all the good it did me. Now, it’s lost forever,” she croaked.

“Evelyn,” Benedict soothed, “ye havenae lost it. Look,” he said, striding across the wooden floor. Upon reaching his bedside cabinet, he pulled open a drawer and retrieved the necklace.

Evelyn's eyes lit up as she ran across the room to him. "Och, Benedict. Ye cannae ken how worried I was."

He looked down at her and smiled. "I found it in me bed this morning. I would have given it tae ye after breakfast, but ye didnae arrive. After that, Killian and I had tae go tae the village."

Stepping forward he draped the necklace around her throat and fastened it at the back. Lowering his lips, he brushed the soft skin of her neck, and listened to Evelyn moan at his tender kisses.

"Ye have nae idea how much I yearn fer ye when ye are nae near me. And then, today, when I thought I might lose ye, it scared me tae death," he murmured against her neck, his voice loaded with fear.

Evelyn stepped back and gazed up at him. "But I am here now. Ye saved me, remember? I'm safe. I'm here, right beside ye."

"Where I want ye tae be always," he growled.

Lowering his lips to hers, he kissed her. It was a kiss loaded with all his innermost fears and feelings. He kissed her like it might be their last, and clearly feeling his turmoil, Evelyn kissed him back just as passionately.

He had battled with himself for days, the guilt eating away at him, knowing the depths of his betrayal. And yet, how could he deny what he felt in his heart? The very idea of losing Evelyn had caused him physical pain. As wrong as it felt, the attack had brought the strength of his feelings to the fore.

He didn't want to spend another day without this woman. He wanted her by his side, always and forever. Confessing his betrayal to his brother would be a dreadful ordeal,

and yet, one he was willing to face.

Benedict pulled away and looked down at her. "I've fallen in love with ye, Evelyn," he said breathlessly. "I want tae be with ye always."

Searching her eyes, he could see the same doubts he had and was experiencing. And yet, he had to know if her desire was as strong as his own.

"If ye want what I want, I will speak tae Audor when he returns. Is that what ye want too?"

Evelyn took hold of his face and pulled his lips back to hers. Her kiss was the answer, and with the love he felt from her as they clung to each other, she confirmed what he had known all along.

As their passion grew, so did their want of each other, and without words, Benedict began tugging at her clothes. Each item fell to the floor, and she soon stood there in only her shift. Slipping his arms around her body, he lifted her with ease and lay her on the bed, lying himself down beside her.

"I want ye, Evelyn," he growled, his lips trailing down her neck once more. As he brushed the soft skin of her throat, his fingers pulled at the string of her shift, releasing her breasts from the thin material. His soft descent continued until his tongue found her pert nipple.

"Ah," she gasped, thrusting her body toward him.

He moved from one to the other, delighting in the sounds that fell from her mouth. "Ye are everything I could've imagined," he growled. "Ye have cast yer spell upon me, and I am bound tae ye."

He tugged at her shift, pulling it up until it rolled about her waist. After flicking his tongue over her nipples one more time, he began kissing the flatness of her stomach. She threaded her fingers through his hair as he moved lower and lower.

“I want tae taste ye, Evelyn,” he said, shifting himself between her legs. “I want tae taste every last drop o’ ye.”

When his tongue reached the apex of her thighs, he could already feel the heat of her arousal. “Och, ye are so ready for me, me darling.”

With a leg over each shoulder, he traced his tongue along her soft folds.

“Oh, me God,” Evelyn gasped.

“I havenae even started yet,” he breathed.

And then with no warning at all, he found the small nub of her womanhood, and with determined strokes, he flicked his tongue over it.

“Ah! Ah!” she cried.

“Och, Evelyn. Ye taste so sweet,” he growled, his tongue lashing her over and over again.

Above him, Evelyn writhed and panted and squirmed with pleasure, her body climbing at his every touch. He had already brought her to her peak before, but he was desperate to do it again. The sounds that left her lips were like a sweet elixir that only aroused him more.

He moved a little faster now, his tongue licking her, over and over. She was getting close. He could hear her breathless panting and her whimpers. He could feel the

tension building in her body, the twisting and writhing becoming more dramatic as every second passed.

And then, that silence, that stillness, that frozen moment in time where she teetered on the very peak of pleasure.

“Oh, me God,” she squealed, her body falling into spasms of delight as she jerked over and over again.

When it was over, Benedict gazed up her body, satisfied that he had pleased her. She gazed back, but her eyes pleaded with him.

“What is it?” he growled. “Ye want it again?”

“Nay,” she whispered. “I want ye.”

Benedict pushed himself onto his knees and held her gaze. “Are ye sure that is what ye want, Evelyn?”

His manhood was rock hard, and her words were music to his ears, but he needed to know that she knew what she was asking for.

“It is. I want ye, Benedict. Please.”

“Ye are sure? Ye ken what that means...” he said again. If she showed him doubt for even a second, he would refuse, no matter how much it would kill him.

But she nodded, expressing utter clarity in her decision. “Surer than I have ever been in me life.”

“All right.”

He began positioning himself above her, but before he went near her, he gazed down at her lovingly. “I will try nae tae hurt ye, Evelyn. I promise.”

A flicker of fear danced across her face, but again, she nodded.

Placing his hands either side of her body, he pinned his eyes on her, and once he had guided himself into her, he began slowly rocking back and forth.

“God, Evelyn, ye feel so good,” he growled, feeling her surrounding him. She was soft, and, warm, and wet, and tight. His stomach lurched at the feeling as he moved slowly deeper inside. She stretched around him, welcoming him in, but as his own pleasure built, Benedict struggled to hold back and his body began shaking.

“It’s all right,” Evelyn whispered. “Please. I want ye tae make love tae me.”

Thrusting his hips a little more, a rhythm took over him, and as sweat broke out over his body, he felt himself sinking deeper and deeper. The pleasure took him over, and he thrust harder and harder.

Evelyn whimpered beneath him, and the sound of pain made him hesitate, but she shook her head, telling him not to stop. Losing himself inside her, her soft, warm body swallowing his manhood, Benedict could feel himself climbing higher and higher. His thrusts grew fast, and strong, and intense, and when she started to move with him and respond, he reached his peak, a great wave of ecstasy washing over his entire body.

He stilled, roaring as he emptied himself inside of her, and with their eyes locked again, he gazed down at this beautiful woman, feeling his heart overflowing with love for her.

Later, Evelyn lay with her head on his chest. By her shallow breath, Benedict knew

she was sleeping. He was not surprised. She'd had a hell of a day. But now, she was safely wrapped in his arms. If he had his way, he would not let her out of his sight, but at least she had agreed to remain in the castle. It was the only way he could keep her safe.

She had nearly been taken from him, and it had shaken him to the very core. In fact, the fear had only solidified the depth and intensity of his feelings. Over the course of the previous days, guilt had gnawed at him, but today, he had experienced a clarity that had not been present before. He loved this woman. He was in love with this woman. He wanted her beside him for the rest of his days. He had never felt those emotions for any other before, and the concept was both terrifying and invigorating at the same time.

There was one thing he knew for certain. He would slaughter any man who made an attempt to take her from him again.

"I cannae lose ye, Evelyn," he whispered into her hair. "I just cannae."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

She awoke to a gentle shaking, and when she finally opened her eyes, Benedict was gazing down at her.

“It is past dawn, me love. ‘Tis time ye returned tae yer own room ‘afore yer sister awakes and notices ye missing.”

Wrapping her arms around his huge chest, she sighed. “Och, but I dinnae want tae leave ye.”

“I ken,” he growled with a smile. “I dinnae want ye tae go either. But it must be this way, fer now.”

Evelyn pushed herself up and looked at him. “It is the way it has tae be forever, Benedict. This thing between us cannae continue.”

He frowned at her then. “I dinnae think ye understand how much ye mean tae me.”

“But I am tae marry yer braither,” she argued.

“Aye. About that. I had a long think after ye fell tae sleep last night, and I truly want tae speak tae me brother about us.”

Evelyn’s eyes flew wide. Partly from fear, partly from excitement. “But surely, he will hate us fer what we’ve done.”

Benedict shook his head. "I dinnae think he will. Ye dinnae ken Audor like I dae. I'm nae saying he willnae be angry, but when I express how I feel about ye, when I tell him I cannae live without ye, he will understand."

But Evelyn felt conflicted. The union to Audor was so much more than just a marriage. The repercussions rippled out far beyond her and her happiness.

Shaking her head, she said, "I'm nae sure this is a good idea." She halted from saying more, for she did not want to hurt his feelings.

"Dae ye nae want tae be with me, Evelyn?" he asked, his brow furrowed with concern.

"O' course, I dae. Ye ken I dae. It's just..." She hesitated.

"Ye are worried about the alliance," Benedict replied knowingly.

"How can I nae be worried about the alliance. 'Tis the real reason I am here. This whole union is the basis tae forge an alliance for the protection o' our clan."

Benedict sighed. "I ken. And I cannae tell ye how things will work out. I only ken what me heart desires, Evelyn."

She ought to have been excited. Under any other circumstances, hearing those words fall from Benedict's lips would have thrilled her to the core. She would have jumped with glee at the prospect of spending her life with the man who had stolen her heart. But how could she, when so much rested on her union with Audor.

"I should go," she said, glancing at the rising sun through the window.

This time it was Benedict that looked a little saddened.

“I ken,” she said with a smile. “It’s nae like I want tae. But unless ye want our business spread across the lands when the maids arrive and find me here,” she joked playfully, “I need tae go.”

With a soft and tender kiss that made her departure even harder, Evelyn eventually crept from the bedchamber and hurried down the corridor. The distance between the rooms was not far, and yet, Benedict’s words ran over and over in her head as she went.

I’m going tae speak tae me braither about us.

I cannae tell ye how things will work out. I only ken what me heart desires...

But what if it didn’t work out? What if Audor refused? What if Audor agreed, but the alliance was nullified? What if her selfishness was the undoing of her clan, and without the protection of Clan Gunn, her own people were destroyed by Clan Keith?

Breathe, Evelyn.

Reaching her bedchamber, she silently turned the handle and crept into the room, closing the door as quietly as she could. As she turned to sneak across the room, a gasp escaped from her lips, for Yvaine was sitting up in her bed with her eyebrows raised and a soft smile on her lips.

“And whose bed did ye sleep in?” she said. “Like I have tae guess.”

Caught off guard, Evelyn hurriedly tried to think of an excuse, but it was no use. She had been caught red handed. Besides, Yvaine knew her too well. Her sister would see through any lie she tried to tell her. And by her words, she had already come to her own conclusions.

“I didnae think ye would be awake yet,” Evelyn replied sheepishly.

“Well, I am. And now, ye may come over here and tell me everything.” Yvaine grinned.

Evelyn moved across the room and slid under the covers of her bed. She had managed to get a little bit of sleep, but nowhere near enough. However, as tired as she was, she was still excited, and pulling the covers up over her body, she gazed over at her sister.

“When did ye ken?” she asked.

“Och, I’ve had me suspicions for a while.” Yvaine shrugged. “I just didnae realize it was as serious as it obviously is.”

“I’m sorry I’ve been keeping secrets from ye, Yvaine.”

Yvaine smiled excitedly. “Well, now I’ve discovered yer love affair, I want tae ken everything,” she gushed. “I assume yer were nae just sleeping in Benedict’s bed.”

Evelyn felt her cheeks bloom with heat, and pressing her hands against the soft skin of her face, she giggled and shook her head.

“Was it the first time?” Yvaine pressed.

Evelyn looked embarrassed and shook her head again.

“Really?” Yvaine gasped excitedly with a huge grin.

“Well. It was the first time in that way, ye ken...” She trailed off, for the awkwardness would not let her continue. “But we had been together in other ways

‘afore last night.”

“And? What was it like?”

Evelyn dreamily recalled her feelings, the pain, but then the delirious delight.

“He kens exactly how tae please me,” she said wistfully. “I never want it tae end.”

Those words changed her soft smile to a thoughtful frown, for her future was now so uncertain. She had never been overly enamored with having to marry a stranger in the first place, but given the circumstances, she had accepted it for the good of the clan.

Now, her heart had been captured by a wonderful, strong, and handsome man. A man who was not her betrothed. She wanted to be with him more than anything in the world. But it was complicated.

“I’m sorry I havenae told ye the truth, Yvaine. I have hated keeping things from ye. We’ve always told each other everything.”

“I understand,” Yvaine said kindly.

“Dae ye?”

“I think so.” Her sister nodded. “I think a part o’ ye has kept it from me because if ye said it out loud, it would all be too real.”

Evelyn was surprised at her sister’s insight. In fact, she had said nearly the same words to Benedict the night she told him that she knew who he was. Yes, speaking it out loud would make it all too real, but it was more than that.

“It’s nae just that it will be too real. I think me main reason fer keeping it such a

secret is because it's been so wrong. Guilt has led me tae keep secrets. What we've been doing is so bad that, as much as my heart sings when I am with him, I cannae truly be happy."

"I dinnae see it like that, Evelyn," Yvaine replied, surprising her sister. "Yer heart chooses who it desires, and there's naething ye can dae tae stop it. If ye hadnae have been forced tae marry Laird Gunn, then what ye and Benedict feel fer each other would be completely normal, wouldnae it?"

"That's nae the point," Evelyn countered.

"O' course, it is. Dae ye really think Audor wants his braither tae be miserable fer the rest o' his life? Dae ye think he would want Benedict tae have tae live in this castle, having tae see ye every day, knowing ye're another man's wife? His braither's, on top of it?"

She didn't really know the answer to those questions. She wanted to believe that Audor would want his brother to be happy, but not at the expense of betrayal. "I dinnae think it's that simple, Yvaine. We're being disloyal tae Audor."

Yvaine sighed. "I dinnae ken the laird all that well, but from what I have seen o' him, I dinnae think that's true. In fact, I think ye and Benedict should speak tae Audor when he returns. Perhaps he will understand."

"Ye sound just like Benedict. He said exactly the same this morning. He said he was going to speak tae Audor about us. But I'm nae so sure." Evelyn shook her head worriedly. "What if us being together ruins the lives o' everyone else around us? What about the alliance? What about Faither?"

Yvaine jumped off her bed and came to sit beside Evelyn on hers. Taking her sister's hand in her own, Yvaine looked at her intently and said, "I think it's time ye were a

little bit selfish, sister. Ye've always put everyone 'afore yersel'. Now, ye need tae think o' yer own happiness."

"At the expense of the safety of our clan, Yvaine?"

But even with that remark, Yvaine did not waver. "There are other ways tae form an alliance, sister. Clans form alliances all the time without the need fer a union. And ye would still be marrying intae the clan, I suppose."

Evelyn was just about to reply when a soft knock sounded on their bedchamber door.

"Just a minute," Yvaine said, hurrying to grab her shawl. When she had wrapped it around her shoulders, she moved to the door and opened it.

"Father," Yvaine said, the surprise evident in her voice.

Evelyn took a sharp intake of breath, and her heart began thumping in her breast. Thank God she had returned to the bedchamber when she did, but what was her father doing there at their door? He had hardly spoken to them in any proper manner in nearly a year, never mind visiting them for any special reason.

He kens. He must. That is why he is here. He has discovered the truth about Benedict and I.

With astonishment, she watched as her father bent and kissed Yvaine's cheek. By her wide-eyed expression, Yvaine was clearly surprised at their father's spontaneous affection too.

"Come here, me dear," the laird waved at Evelyn. "I want tae see ye."

Pushing the covers back, Evelyn slipped from the bed, and padded across the wooden

floor and into her father's open arms. Wrapping them around her, he held her tightly into his broad chest for a long moment.

As surprised as she was, Evelyn sank into him, wrapping her arms around him, and feeling the love that emanated from him. It had been a whole year since he had embraced her so warmly, and only in that moment, did she realize how much she had missed it.

"I ken why ye were afraid tae tell me, but now I ken," he said softly.

Och, me God, he kens.

"Ken what?" Evelyn gasped, taking a step away from him.

"About the attack yesterday, Evelyn."

She released the breath she had been holding, and her shoulders sank. As much as she tried not to make it obvious, her father clearly noticed her relief. The only good thing was, he mistook it for something different.

"I ken ye kept it from me, Evelyn. And I understand why. But Laird Gunn told me what happened this morning just before breakfast. He is calling a meeting with the council tae discuss the next steps."

Her father gazed down at her lovingly. "He told me how valiantly ye fought. I ken I havenae been the best faither this past year, but I am so proud o' ye."

"Killian and..." she stopped herself, for she nearly said Benedict, but quickly recovering, she continued. "Killian and Laird Gunn were the men who fought hard, Faither," Evelyn replied.

Her mind whirled a little, partly due to her father's contrast in demeanor, and partly due to the fact that Benedict had told her father what had happened. He hadn't mentioned this morning that he was going to do it, so why had he?

Perhaps he was given nay choice.

Perhaps, but some warning might have been nice.

"It has been a difficult year since yer maither's passing, and Laird Keith has made our lives hell," her father continued. "I'm grateful fer what ye are doing fer our clan, Evelyn. I'm sure ye hate me fer arranging this marriage."

"I dinnae hate ye, Faither. How could I?"

He dropped his head and heaved a sigh. "I would never have put ye through this if I could have avoided it. But we are in desperate need o' an alliance, and a marriage tae a laird is the only way. This alliance is the only thing that will keep our clan safe. We are just nae strong enough tae fight off Clan Keith alone."

"Ye did what ye had tae dae, Faither," Evelyn said, his words weighing heavily upon her heart.

He nodded, looked from Evelyn to Yvaine and back again, and then said, "Well, I should leave ye tae get dressed. Perhaps ye will join me later when ye've had breakfast?"

The sisters nodded, and then watched their father leave the room. With a final glance and a smile at them both, he closed the door gently behind him.

Neither Evelyn nor Yvaine said a word for a whole minute after his departure. Evelyn could not know what her sister might be thinking, but she certainly knew her own

thoughts. Before her father arrived, she was on the cusp of listening to Yvaine's advice. But now...

"Naething has changed, Evelyn," Yvaine said, as though she had read her mind.

"I ken that, which is why I have tae go through with it."

"Evelyn," Yvaine gasped.

Evelyn looked at her sister sadly. "Ye heard what Faither said. The alliance relies on me marrying a laird. And Benedict isnae the laird." She could feel her throat tighten as she continued. "It is the right and proper thing tae dae, and thus, I must dae it. With all things considered, the safety o' our clan is far more important than me happiness."

Saying the words hit her harder than she could ever have imagined. All her hope of being with Benedict was now smashed to pieces. She would never know love in her marriage. She would be forced to spend her life with the brother of the man she wanted to be with. Benedict would be there, not a heartbeat away, but she could never have him. As her heart shattered into a thousand tiny pieces, Evelyn gasped for air, and then suddenly burst into tears.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Before breakfast, Benedict had spoken to Killian in Audor's study about the attack. There needed to be another council meeting, but more importantly, he realized that Laird Sinclair had to be informed about what had happened to Evelyn.

"He has a right tae ken," Killian had agreed, "but we lied tae his face yesterday."

"And I will have tae apologize fer that, but he needs tae ken that his daughter is in danger. Fer all we ken, Laird Keith's men might be here fer them all. Donald has a right tae protect himself and his family."

Killian had agreed, and they had both left the study in search of the laird.

They found Donald in the library, where, Benedict had heard, the man spent much of his time.

When he had finished explaining the truth of what had really occurred the day before, Benedict had said, "I think it best fer ye and yer family tae remain inside the castle until further notice, me laird. I highly doubt Laird Keith's men would attempt tae enter the castle grounds, and thus, ye and yer family are the safest if ye remain within these walls."

Still looking bewildered and terrified at the news that his daughter had been attacked, Donald had started towards the door. "I need tae go and see her."

"Me laird," Benedict had said quickly. "Please be gentle with her. She was terrified

tae tell ye because o' the loss o' yer wife. She didnae want ye tae be upset 'afore her wedding."

He had to say something to protect Evelyn. In hindsight, he wished he had gone and spoken to her first, but it was too late for that.

"Aye, o' course," Donald had replied quietly.

With a nod at them, the laird had then opened the door and left the room.

The council meeting only reaffirmed what Benedict already knew. They still had no idea how many of Laird Keith's men had managed to infiltrate their clan lands, or where they were located. It was agreed that larger groups of scouts were to be sent out, and a more thorough search done. If camps were found, the scouts were not to engage, and to return to the castle to report their findings.

With little more to be done until those facts were discovered, the council meeting ended with Benedict feeling less than satisfied, although he agreed with the decisions that had been made.

"Ye're frustrated," Killian stated when the older men had left the room.

"O' course, I'm frustrated," Benedict grunted. "Ye saw what I saw, Killian. In fact, ye were injured. Those men were nae here just tae scout out the land. They were sent tae take Evelyn."

"And now ye're worried that they'll try again."

"If they dare, they'll have me tae deal with." He hit his fist against his chest. "I've already told Evelyn that she's nae permitted tae leave the castle. She agreed wholeheartedly. Yesterday frightened her half tae death, even if she tried nae tae

show it.”

Killian nodded. “Ye’ve done all ye can dae, fer now. I cannae see them trying tae attack the castle. We are too many. It would be a pointless sacrifice.”

“I agree. Yesterday was an opportunistic attack. Clearly, they’ve been watching the castle. They probably couldnae believe their luck when they saw Evelyn leaving with only two guards.”

“Everything will be fine, Benedict,” Killian said, turning toward the door. “I’m going tae organize the scout parties. I’ll keep ye informed if I hear anything untoward.”

When Killian left, Benedict settled himself back at the desk. What had started as him hiding away in the study had become much more than that, and out of boredom, he had been going through the paperwork his brother usually dealt with. It had interested him so much, he had found himself, on occasion, rather intrigued by it all.

But as he read the leases and war plans in front of him, he found his mind wandering. He couldn’t help but wonder what Donald had said to Evelyn, and even more so, how she had reacted to him knowing she was attacked. He imagined she would be angry that he had not warned her that her father might be coming, but it had not occurred to him that the laird would go directly to see her.

Fool!

Donald had been right yesterday when he had mentioned Benedict not having children. Not only did he not know how Donald must have been feeling yesterday when Evelyn had been missing for so many hours, he also had not known a father’s love. Donald had been clearly pained earlier, but his first thought had been Evelyn. As distant as the older man might have been with his daughters, it was evident he loved them very much.

An hour had passed when Benedict heard the study door opening. It had to be Killian. Anyone else would have knocked.

“Did ye send the scouts?” he said, without looking up.

“And what scouts would they be?” Audor replied.

Jerking his head up, Benedict could hardly believe his eyes, and yet, it was indeed, his brother standing there before him. Jumping from the chair, he rounded the desk with open arms.

“Och, ye have nae idea how good it is tae see ye, braither,” Benedict exclaimed, embracing him with a strong hold.

“Well, if ye feel anything like me, I think I have an idea,” Audor replied warmly.

Once they released each other and parted, Benedict looked him up and down. “Are ye well? Was yer mission a success?”

“Never mind that,” Audor replied. “What news o’ the attack? I returned immediately when I discovered it.”

Benedict was shocked. “Ye heard about that? It only happened yesterday.”

Audor smiled mirthlessly. “There’s nae much I miss, braither.”

His words hit Benedict in the gut. If that were true, what else did he know? Did he know about himself and Evelyn?

Who could possibly have told him? Everyone at the castle thinks ye are he.

Someone didn't. How else had Audor heard about the attack?

"I'm sure ye have already done everything that is needed tae deal with it," Audor continued. "I trust ye implicitly, Benedict. Even on me return, I didnae worry fer a second that the clan was in danger kenning that ye were here and in charge."

Benedict dropped his gaze. The guilt washed over him like a wave in a storm, crashing down on him and nearly taking his breath away.

I trust ye implicitly, Benedict – well, ye shouldnae. I'm a wretch.

Audor gazed at him for a long moment. "Are ye all right? Something is bothering ye. Has something happened?"

With every fiber of his being, Benedict wanted to confess. He wanted to open his mouth and let it all pour out, to rid himself of the guilt that had been eating away at his soul. And yet, it was as though he had been struck dumb. Like his mind had been wiped clean of all the words he knew, for he had no idea where he ought to begin.

The shame he had experienced while Audor was away had been nothing in comparison to the battle that was raging in his soul in that moment. He had been so confident when he had told Evelyn he would talk to Audor about their love, and yet, now that his brother stood before him, all he could feel was disgrace at the wrongs he had committed behind his back.

"It has been a difficult few days," was Benedict's only reply.

"Then sit, braither." Audor gestured to the chairs beside the fire. "We will drink, and ye can tell me all that has occurred in me absence."

Benedict did most of the talking, while Audor listened with interest. He was careful,

of course, to omit all the occasions he had spent with Evelyn, but his brother clearly noted that.

“And what of Lady Sinclair?” Audor said. “I ken I put ye in a difficult position, Benedict. I’m also sorry that me journey took me away from me duties for longer than I had anticipated, but I am sure ye compensated fer me absence.”

Aye, I did that all right.

“Lady Sinclair is fine,” Benedict said shortly.

Audor gazed at him, one eyebrow lifting on his forehead. “I’m sure she is. But how did it go? Did she believe ye were me?”

Benedict had thought she had, right up to the second she told him she hadn’t. Which happened to be the entire time.

He shrugged. “There is nae reason she shouldnae. I didnae dae anything ye wouldnae have done.”

Apart from betray ye and sneak around behind yer back.

“And so, ye spent some time with her,” Audor pressed, clearly wanting far more than Benedict was willing to give.

“O’ course I did. Just as ye requested. In fact, we had several adventures.”

Benedict then went on to tell him about the boy they had found stuck in the tree. Telling the humorous story, he couldn’t help laughing, and soon enough, Audor was laughing too. He was careful to omit the parts where he teased her about looking up her frock, though. He was certain his brother would not have appreciated that part of

the story, and besides, he didn't want to give away too much.

When Audor seemed satisfied that Benedict had done right by Evelyn, he asked about the attack of the previous day. Again, Benedict gave him the details, specifying that he was certain it was an opportunistic attack, and that he didn't believe there were more than a few of Laird Keith's men on their clan lands.

"Be that as it may," Audor said, when he had heard the full report, "I want tae call the council again. I ken ye have met with them already, but there is something further I wish tae discuss with them."

An hour later, the council were back in the study and having welcomed Benedict home, which felt more than bizarre, the meeting commenced.

"I apologize fer bringing ye back here again in such a short period o' time, but I have had a little time tae think," Audor began, once everyone was settled, "The threat is imminent, and with that in mind, I think it prudent that we hurry things along."

"What dae ye mean by hurry things along, me laird?" James asked.

"The wedding, James. I think it's in ours and Lady Sinclair's best interests, that we dinnae wait for another week. Laird Keith is evidently putting us under pressure, and without the alliance, he kens he still has a chance."

Benedict had not been ready for his brother's words, and swallowing a gasp, he cast a glance in Killian's direction. Killian replied with raised eyebrows and a concerned gaze. As Benedict's mind whirled with the fact that he may very well lose the only woman he had ever loved, the conversation continued on around him.

"That will take some preparing," Angus said. "Any guests that were arriving will need tae be informed."

“I cannae imagine it will be any great hardship,” Audor replied. “Those that cannae make it on such short notice, can arrive later. I’m certain the celebration can continue over several days. They may miss the ceremony, but there will still be an opportunity for them to celebrate the union.”

“Has Lady Sinclair been made aware o’ this?” William asked.

“Nae. It is the reason I have called this council meeting. I want tae hear yer thoughts on the matter.”

“I cannae disagree with ye, me laird,” James said. “Bringing the wedding forward will solidify the alliance, and thus, will likely deter Laird Keith from making any more attempts on Lady Sinclair’s life.”

“We hope,” Angus murmured.

“Ye dinnae think this will work?” Audor said, addressing him.

“I dinnae ken, me laird. He is here in our lands at this very minute.”

“We cannae ken that,” William countered. “We ken his men are here. The laird may well be sitting in his castle on his own lands.”

“Ye are right, we cannae ken. But then, by that reasoning, we cannae ken if he is or isnae here, can we?” Angus argued. “I only wonder if the wedding will make any difference. Would it nae be more prudent tae gather Keith’s men up and imprison them?”

“The scouts are already out looking for them,” Killian interjected. “There isnae any more we can dae until we hear back from them.”

“I understand yer reasoning, Angus. However, I think we can dae both,” Audor said. “We will continue tae hunt Keith’s men, and at the same time, still bring the wedding forward.”

The older men around the table nodded, all seemingly in agreement.

“We are agreed then?” Audor said.

“Aye,” the men murmured together.

“Very well, then I will send orders out tae make the arrangements.”

After the meeting, a couple of the council members lingered. Seeing his brother occupied with their concerns, Benedict saw an opportunity to slip away, and catching Killian’s eye, he jerked his head, requesting that his cousin follow him out of the study.

They moved down the corridor in silence, and rounding a corner, found a small alcove, where Benedict finally came to a halt.

“What am I tae dae?” Benedict hissed, when Killian stopped beside him. “Am I tae stand back and let this wedding go ahead? Me heart and mind are torn. If I interject now, the alliance will be broken.”

Killian frowned, and pacing back and forth with his hand on his chin, he appeared to be in deep thought. Eventually, he came to a halt again. “I think ye need tae discuss this with Lady Sinclair. Tell her what Audor plans tae dae, and see what she says. After that, ye need tae speak with Audor.”

“And if she sides with her faither, and wants the wedding tae go ahead because o’ the alliance?” Benedict pressed.

“Whatever happens, Benedict, I think Audor needs tae ken what has happened. Nae fer Audor’s sake, but fer yer own. This guilt has been eating away at ye fer days. I just dinnae think ye can carry this burden any longer.”

Benedict heaved a sigh and dropped his head. Killian was not wrong. Even talking to Audor earlier had been the most uncomfortable conversation he had ever shared with his brother. How could he continue by his brother’s side while holding on to such deceit?

“Ye are right,” Benedict admitted. “But first, I need tae speak tae Evelyn.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The book lay on her lap as Evelyn gazed out of her bedchamber window. She had been sitting and reading for a while, if one could call sitting in a dazed state reading. In fact, she was certain she had tried to read the same page more than three times.

But how could she really concentrate now? Her father's words had brought her whole world crashing to the ground. The hope she had experienced at a chance for happiness was now dashed into a thousand pieces. She was going to have to marry Audor, and there was not a thing she could do about it.

After her tears earlier, Yvaine had sat with her for a long time. Evelyn had remained silent. Not only was there nothing to say, but she also did not have the energy to engage in conversation. Wisely, Yvaine had not spoken either, as though she knew Evelyn needed to just sit there in her silence with her sister's comfort.

Nevertheless, while she did not speak, Evelyn's mind would not quieten its chatter.

It isnae fair. None o' this is fair.

Fer the first time in me life, I have felt love. And yet, fate, being the cruel master it is, has dangled a future in front o' me that I cannae have.

I will never love again. I can never love again. It isnae possible tae love another, when me heart is bound so tightly tae someone else.

While Yvaine had gone down for breakfast, after much encouragement from Evelyn,

for her sister did not want to leave her, Evelyn had stayed in the bedchamber.

It was just too difficult to look upon Benedict under the circumstances. How could she sit at the same table as the man she could never be with? It would be torture, and suffering enough already, Evelyn chose to remain alone. Later, Yvaine had returned with some bread and meat. That same plate still remained on the dresser, untouched.

She had been sitting at the window now for several hours, gazing across the rear gardens and beyond the wall. Soon, this would be her home. A home where she was married to a man she neither loved nor cared for. But that wasn't the worst part.

Not only would she be married to a man she didn't love, she would be forced to live with the man she did love by her side. She would have to see him every single day. Somehow, though Evelyn could not begin to imagine how she was to manage it, she was going to have to swallow her feelings, suppress the aching of her heart, and learn to live with the fact that they could never be together.

It would have been better fer Laird Keith's soldiers tae have taken me and killed me.

Dinnae say such things. Ye dinnae mean them.

Of course, she didn't, and yet, would death not be a blessing when faced with a lifetime of heartache?

A soft knock came on her door, but Evelyn did not respond. She didn't care who it was. She did not want to see anyone. After a second knock, the door opened slightly, and her father's voice carried across the bedchamber.

"Evelyn? Are ye in here?"

The fact that it was her father was surprising. This was now two visits in one day.

Perhaps he had returned because she had not joined him after breakfast, like he had asked earlier. But what was she supposed to tell him if he asked about the reason for her absence? He just wouldn't understand her feelings. Besides, he was too concerned with the alliance to care about how she felt.

"I am here, Faither," she said, closing the book she had hardly read.

She stood to face him as he moved further into the room, eventually coming to a stop a few feet away.

"Where is Yvaine?" he asked, looking around the room.

"She is at the bathing rooms with the maids."

"Ah, I see. Well, I have exciting news," he said eagerly. "Now that Benedict has returned, the laird wants tae bring the wedding forward."

For a second, Evelyn was stunned. She gazed at her father blankly, while her mind attempted to assimilate the information.

Audor is back?

When did he arrive?

The wedding is going tae be sooner?

Her mind raced as those thoughts tumbled over each other, and struggling to unpack them all, Evelyn did not react. Clearly, Audor had only returned this day, or her father would have mentioned it earlier. It was also likely he who had decided the wedding should be brought forward. He had heard about the attack and was now hurrying things to enable the alliance to be put in place.

She had thought she would have more time. But evidently, her time with Benedict had now come to an abrupt end, which sent a panic through her entire being.

Her father seemed to take her silence as permission for him to continue, and then said, “The laird thinks it is fer the best. After the attack yesterday, he is determined to confirm the alliance between the two clans, and the sooner ye are married, the better.”

At least she didn’t have to pretend to look excited. It wasn’t as though her father expected that from her. And yet, her silence and blank expression clearly worried him.

“Are ye all right, me dear?” he asked, taking a step forward and pressing a large hand onto her arm in comfort.

“Aye,” Evelyn stammered. “Aye, I am fine.”

“I ken this is all happening so quickly?—”

“When?” Evelyn blurted. “When is the laird arranging the wedding fer?”

“It will take place in three days,” her father said.

Evelyn sighed heavily. “I see.”

“I’m sorry, daughter. Truly, I am. But this will protect ye and yer sister when I am nae longer here tae dae it.”

His words surprised her, for Evelyn had not imagined her life without her father in it. But then, she supposed, as the cycle of life occurred, he would leave them at some point. And of course, he was right. The alliance would not only protect herself and Yvaine, it would protect the entire clan. Marrying Audor was the right thing to do.

She knew that. Well, her mind knew that. Her heart had an entirely different opinion.

“Thank ye fer telling me, Faither,” Evelyn replied, feeling like she did not know what else to say.

“I have sent word tae our clan. They will likely nae arrive on the day o’ the ceremony, but the laird has ensured me...”

But even as Evelyn nodded in all the right places as her father continued, she was hardly listening to his words. He spoke of the attendees, and that the celebrations would continue, and yet, she didn’t care. Her life was soon to be bound to a man she would never love, thus breaking both hers and Benedict’s hearts. They could never be together, and no matter how strong their bond was, it simply could not be.

Once her father left, Evelyn could only stand there in stunned silence. Before he had arrived, she was still trying to come to terms with the fact that she was going to have to marry Audor. Now, she was reeling with the news that the wedding would be in three days.

I am trapped. I am trapped and I will never be free.

Suddenly feeling the walls of her bedchamber closing in, Evelyn grabbed her shawl and ran from the room. Hurrying down the corridor to the main staircase, she ran down the steps. Her heart thumped, her throat felt as though it were closing over, and she could hardly breathe. Passing maids who gave her strange looks, she continued running until she reached a rear door, and bursting through it to the outside, she took in a great gasp.

Gulping the air in as though it was the only thing that could save her, Evelyn took a second to catch her breath, lifting her face to the heavens, as though the sunlight itself was her sustenance.

After a moment, and seeing others mingling about, Evelyn ventured onward. She wanted to be alone. She needed to be alone. The wind tugged at her shawl, but the afternoon was pleasant as she continued walking towards the gardens at the rear of the castle.

She didn't want to be found. She wanted to lose herself among the decorative hedges and shrubbery. She wanted to lose herself forever. If she could have, she would have run out of the gates and never stopped running, but she would never get passed the guards. No one was to leave the castle now. The threat of Laird Keith's men on Clan Gunn lands had everyone on alert.

Finding a stone bench in a secluded area where no one from the castle could see her, Evelyn dropped herself down and fought the tightness in her throat that threatened to overwhelm her.

The last time they had been together, she had told Benedict that she wanted to be with him. Now, that choice had been taken from her. But how was she supposed to explain that to him? How was she supposed to tell him that, to protect her clan, she had to deny her heart, push aside her feelings, and marry his brother?

He had promised her he would tell his brother what had happened between them, but surely, if Audor was bringing the wedding forward, that could not be the case.

Unless, he did tell him, and Audor has dismissed it.

What difference did it make now? Clearly, the decision had been made. Her father did not come to tell her she was marrying Benedict. Audor had brought the wedding forward, and she was marrying him.

"Evelyn?"

She gasped at the sound of Benedict's voice, and looking up, she could only stare at him as he stood there, just a few feet away.

"Evelyn, are ye all right?"

"How did ye ken where tae find me?" she blurted.

"I saw ye walking in the garden from an upstairs window," Benedict replied, pointing back to the castle. "What are ye doing out here alone?"

Evelyn sighed. "I just needed some time tae think. Me faither just told me that Auditor has brought the wedding forward. Now, I am being forced tae marry even sooner than I wanted."

Benedict came and sat beside her with a heavy frown. "But, I thought..." he trailed off when Evelyn began shaking her head.

"I cannae dae it, Benedict. I have tae marry yer braither."

"Nae. Ye dinnae," Benedict said, with evident agitation in his voice.

"I have nae choice. 'Tis the only way tae protect me clan," Evelyn retorted.

Benedict jumped from the bench, before turning to face her. "Nay, Evelyn," he barked, shaking his head. "Ye cannae live yer life fer everyone else. Ye are a strong and determined woman with a heart o' gold, but ye put everyone and everything 'afore yersel'. 'Afore us. Does what we have mean naething tae ye at all?"

"O' course it does," she cried, feeling the agonizing pain pinch her throat as her emotion built. "But it doesnae take away from the fact that I have tae marry a laird fer the alliance tae be put intae place."

“An alliance can be agreed if we marry too, I am sure. I cannae believe ye have changed yer mind on this. Can ye nae see what ye mean tae me? Can ye nae see that I want tae be with ye fer the rest o’ yer life?”

Evelyn’s heart was already broken, but the pain of losing him was now overwhelming. She didn’t want to spend another minute without him by her side. As the tears threatened, she tried to battle them, but she knew she would lose that fight. The pain was devastating, and the desolation readied itself to crash down on her soul.

“I cannae let me braither marry the woman I love,” Benedict said, pacing back and forth. “I just cannae dae it. How can ye even think about marrying him?”

“I’ve already told ye. I have nae choice!” Evelyn retorted, the tears welling in her eyes.

“Ye are going tae sentence us both tae a life o’ misery. A life where I’ll have tae look upon ye every day, kenning I can never be with ye. Kenning I can never hold ye or touch ye. I ken ye dinnae want that, Evelyn. I ken it in me heart,” he thumped his chest with his fist, “that this isnae what ye want.”

Of course, it wasn’t what she wanted, but what else was she supposed to do? The safety of her entire clan rested upon her shoulders. It was too much to ask, and yet, her father was asking it anyway. The arranged marriage had been bad enough at the beginning, when she had no connection to any other.

Benedict dropped to his knees in front of her, and searching her face, he gazed up at her. “I love ye, Evelyn. Ye ken that by now. Dae ye nae love me?”

Tears now trickled down Evelyn’s cheeks, and she could barely speak. If she told him how she felt, their situation was only going to be harder. And yet, she couldn’t hold it in.

“I dae love ye,” she whispered through her tears. “I dae, with all me heart.”

Benedict gently took hold of her cheeks and kissed the tears that trickled down them. “I’m nae going tae leave ye, Evelyn,” he breathed. “Whatever happens, I promise yer clan will be safe. I’ll make sure o’ it. But I need ye. I need ye by me side.”

He then lowered his lips to hers and kissed her tenderly. Evelyn responded, and throwing her arms around his neck, kissed him back with all the fervor her heart felt in that moment. She loved him, she could never deny that. How they were going to be together, she didn’t know. She just knew, like Benedict, that she could not live without him.

Scooping his arms under her legs, Benedict lifted her from the bench, and with little effort at all, carried her a few feet away, beneath a nearby oak tree. He gently lowered her onto the grass, and then lay down beside her.

“I cannae lose ye,” he whispered, kissing her neck. He repeated the same phrase, the sound of his agony evident in his tone as his lips traveled down her throat.

Evelyn felt him tugging at the string of her blouse, and a second later, she felt his fingers caress her breasts. Gasping as the pleasure shot through her body, she arched her back, pushing herself into his touch.

He found the pert nipples that ached for his caress, and as he caught them between his fingertips, she cried out.

His lips then enveloped her nipple, while his hands travelled down her body and pulled at her frock. She knew what he wanted, and reaching down and grabbing the other side, she pulled her dress up around her knees.

Parting her legs for him, she felt his gentle caress travelling up her thigh. He traced

slow circles that made her ache for him even more, and writhing around as the passion between them built, he finally found the moist apex of her thighs.

With his tongue still lashing her nipple, he rubbed the tiny nub that sparked so much pleasure through her body.

“Oh. Oh,” she cried.

“I love ye, Evelyn. I want tae spend the rest o’ me life pleasing ye,” he growled, as his fingers moved faster and faster.

She grabbed his tunic, writhing beneath his rhythm, feeling herself climbing, higher and higher. Her whole body felt like it was floating as she climbed nearer and nearer to that place of delightful bliss. A place no other had ever taken her. A place she only ever wanted to go with Benedict.

Panting and tensing, she arched her back as the tension grew. She was so very close. So close.

“Oh, aye,” she cried, desperate to feel the crashing explosion that would send her over the edge.

With his fingers moving on the perfect spot, ecstasy flooded through her entire body. “Oh me God,” she squealed.

Every part of her spasmed as the ripples of delight washed over her. Even as the waves of pleasure continued, Benedict positioned himself over the top of her, and as she gazed up at him with all the love she felt, she opened herself wider to welcome him in.

Gently, he entered her, and the pleasure began again as he slowly moved back and

forth. She felt herself stretch for him, surrounding him with her warmth and softness.

He looked down at her adoringly, his face a picture of euphoric pleasure. And then Evelyn found herself climbing again. As Benedict moved faster, she climbed higher. She watched his face redden as he, too, climbed with her. They were lost in this moment, in perfect rhythm with each other in all things. This was how she wanted it to be. Them together forever, lost in each other's love.

Benedict thrust his hips faster and deeper, and as Evelyn felt herself tightening once more, she grabbed his arms and held on tight. They were to soar into the heavens together, and as she reached the cusp of pleasure, her eyes widened, she held her breath, and suddenly, she squealed at the feeling.

A second later, Benedict roared as he emptied himself into her. He stilled, his whole body shaking as he hung there above her. And for that moment in time, their eyes locked, their bodies entwined, wrapped in the soft warmth of their love. She knew she could never be with any other man for the rest of her life.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Never in his life had he wanted someone so badly, and in that moment, as Benedict lay beside Evelyn on the grass, holding her in his arms after their lovemaking, and never wanting to let her go, all the fear he had felt about telling Audor his feelings for her seemed to dissipate. He loved her, he knew that. And after her tearful confession, he now knew that Evelyn loved him just as deeply.

He was certain of it before her words earlier, but her expression only solidified it in his heart and mind.

They lay there for some time, neither of them speaking, both gazing up at the swaying branches of leaves that danced on the soft breeze above their heads. It was a moment of bliss, but more than that, it was a time of connection. He was certain Evelyn felt it too, for she seemed as lost in the moment as he was.

Words were unnecessary. Their love for each other shone out of them like beacons. He felt it soaking into him, as though it leached from her body and into him. Right now, they were the only two people in the entire world, and feeling a sense of completeness, Benedict did not want to move from the contented blissfulness that enveloped them.

After some time they brushed themselves off, and straightening their clothes, he looked down into her eyes, and smiled. "I love ye, Evelyn."

"And I love ye," she replied softly.

He bent and gave her the lightest of kisses, before taking hold of her hand.

“Come on. Let’s go back.”

They left the gardens, but Benedict did not let go of her hand. He now did not care who saw them. He knew what he wanted, and he was determined to get it.

“I am going tae tell me braither that he cannae marry ye,” Benedict said, as they walked back to the castle. “I cannae bear the thought o’ losing ye, Evelyn, and I will fight fer ye, if that is what it takes.”

“Dae ye want me tae come with ye? Perhaps if he sees us together, he will understand.”

Benedict shook his head. “Nay. This is something I must dae alone. When I have told Audor me wishes, we will go and speak tae yer faither together.”

Benedict bent and stole another kiss before they entered the castle. Once inside, he turned and gazed down at her with a tender expression. “I will see ye soon.”

And then he turned and headed towards Audor’s study.

Evelyn had terrified him earlier, and as he walked through the corridors, he recognized how that fear had solidified how deeply he wanted her for his wife. Audor would surely understand that, wouldn’t he?

The sweet scent of her clung to him as he strode through the corridors, and his stomach clenched as the pleasure of making love to her lingered. This time had felt different. He didn’t know how to explain it, but it had felt deeper, more intense, as though they had made a pact with each other never to let go.

He had seen it in her eyes. The desperation to be with him, the desire, the love. Something had happened between them in the garden, and while he felt it in his very being, he could not put the feeling, or meaning into words. Somehow, he just knew they were now inseparable. No matter what happened, nothing could part them. Nothing and no one.

Upon reaching Audor's study, Benedict paused. Gazing at the door for a long moment, he took a deep breath. Whatever happened next, he would not leave this room without his brother's agreement to him marrying Evelyn. But even in his determination, the nerves bubbled in his stomach.

Opening the door, he stepped into the room, and found Audor where he imagined he would be. Sat at his desk, buried in papers.

"Ah, braither," Audor said amicably when he looked up to see who had entered. Waving a welcoming gesture, he continued. "Come in."

Benedict ventured forth, the twisting sensation in his gut growing even more intense. While he wanted to be with Evelyn more than anything in this world, he now had to confess the treachery he had committed behind his brother's back. There was no way out of it if he wanted Audor to understand his feelings.

"More o' Laird Keith's men have been spotted, and thus, I have assigned even more guards to the walls and outer perimeter o' the castle," Audor said, standing and moving toward the dresser.

"Good," Benedict replied, settling himself into a chair beside the huge fireplace.

Grabbing two glasses, Audor poured out smooth amber liquid from a large flask. "I must commend ye, braither, on the fine job ye have done with the village, and those in the clan in me absence. Ye would have made a fine laird."

Benedict took the offered glass, and while his brother sat opposite him at the fire, he said, “That was always yer place, nae mine.”

“Ye ken that isnae the case, Benedict. When father passed away, either one o’ us could have become the laird.”

“But ye wanted it far more than I, braither,” Benedict countered.

“Aye. And ye gave it tae me just like that,” he said, clicking his fingers. “Nay argument or dispute. I will always be grateful fer yer graciousness.”

Benedict nodded and took a sip of his drink. His mind was a rush of thoughts and, though he wanted to tell Audor his reason for being there, he suddenly felt at a loss as to where to begin. Did he start with his feelings, or the fact that he wanted to marry Evelyn? Should he begin from the very start, explaining his betrayal, or ought he just get to the point more quickly?

The sound of Audor’s light chuckling pulled him out of his thought process.

“I imagine ye are here because ye want tae talk tae me about something,” Audor said knowingly. “But when is it that ye are planning tae speak?” He chuckled. “Or are we tae sit here all day in silence?”

Taking a swig of his whisky and a deep breath, Benedict eventually said, “There is something I need tae confess tae ye, Audor.”

“Does it have anything tae dae with the fact that ye’re in love with me betrothed?” Audor smirked.

Benedict’s face fell, and with his jaw open, he gawked at his brother in astonishment. “How?” he blurted. “How did ye ken? Has someone told ye?”

Audor shook his head, an easy smile sitting on his lips. “Ye told me,” he said. “I only had tae listen tae ye yesterday speaking about yer adventures with Evelyn. Yer love fer her is obvious.”

Benedict was speechless, and quickly replaying his conversation with Audor yesterday, he struggled to find any part of it that had betrayed his feelings. He had been more than careful to omit the fun they had had with each other, telling his brother only of Evelyn’s bravery and determination.

“I cannae remember saying anything that would have told ye,” Benedict gasped.

“Och, braither. We are twins. Have ye forgotten that fact? I think a part o’ me sensed it. The other clue was yer eyes. They sparkled when ye spoke o’ her. All the while ye were careful tae keep yer affection from yer voice, but yer feelings shone out of ye in other ways.”

So, all his effort had been for naught. It mattered not that he had refrained from telling him more. Audor knew him too well. He shouldn’t really be surprised. They were twins after all, and this certainly was not the first time one of them had known what the other was feeling or thinking without having to speak. Besides, love is a powerful emotion, and how he felt for Evelyn was indeed, powerful.

“I’m sorry, Audor,” Benedict sighed, dropping his head.

“I dinnae want ye tae be sorry. It’s nae like I’m in love with the woman. I hardly ken her.”

Benedict flashed him a surprised look.

“Well, it is true,” Audor said. “It is ye who have spent the time with her, nae I. Besides, this arrangement was always more o’ a contract than a relationship.” Audor

settled back in his chair and smiled. “So, tell me everything. From the beginning.”

Benedict could still not get over his brother’s lack of reaction, and gawking at his laid-back expression, he said, “Ye’re nae mad at me?”

Audor shrugged and shook his head. “Why the devil would I be mad at ye?”

“I betrayed yer trust,” Benedict said.

“Actually, ye did exactly as I asked ye tae dae. I left, and ye were put in a position where ye had tae pretend tae be me. How can I judge ye for falling in love with a woman that I asked ye tae entertain?

“It’s nae the same, and ye ken it,” Benedict snorted, still feeling completely bewildered.

“Listen, Benedict. We’re the only family we have left. We have each other, and that is it. We’ve been there fer each other fer these last seven years. Naething or naeone will ever change that.”

A long pause hung in the air as Benedict considered the depth of Audor’s statement. They’re lives had been flung into chaos when their parents had been murdered. Still young, they were grappling with their own sense of who they were. Suddenly, they were forced to grow up in a very short period of time. Since then, they had been there for each other through any trial or tribulation that had been thrown their way. Nothing had ever come between them, and nothing ever would.

“So?” Audor smiled, looking slightly amused.

While Benedict could not have imagined that circumstance would be so easy, nor could he deny his relief. At the same time, the shame and guilt he had been plagued

with over the last couple of weeks, also seemed to dissipate, and clearing his throat, he began.

“Well, the first thing ye must ken is, I had already met Lady Sinclair ‘afore she arrived at the castle.”

Audor looked confused. “How?”

“Ye remember the lass I met in the library at Laird Mackay’s wedding?”

Audor’s eyes flew wide open in astonishment. “Nay!”

Benedict couldn’t help but laugh at his brother’s expression. “Aye. The very same,” he chuckled.

“Me God,” Audor chuckled with him. “What are the chances?”

“Aye,” Benedict said wryly, remembering the acrobatics he and Evelyn had performed in the last two weeks. “What are they, indeed? And, by the way, dinnae mention this tae anyone, fer her faither doesnae ken she was there.”

He then spent some time going into the full details of what had happened after the Sinclair’s had arrived, and how he had wanted to talk to Audor about it.

“But then, ye had tae leave so urgently, I didnae get the chance tae speak tae ye. Perhaps, had ye nae gone away, things might have been different,” Benedict said.

But Audor shook his head. “I dinnae think that’s true, braither. Sure, ye were besotted with Lady Sinclair even ‘afore she arrived. Dinnae ye remember how desperate ye were tae find the mystery woman from the library?”

Benedict shrugged. "Aye, maybe ye're right."

He then continued the story. He confessed their first kiss, and how, afterwards, he had spoken to Killian about what he ought to do. He had tried to stay away from her, but his heart had not let him.

"I am ashamed tae say that I battled through the guilt o' betraying ye, braither."

"A woman will dae that tae a man," Audor said wisely.

"It doesnae mak? it right," Benedict said heavily.

He felt his face redden when he got to the part of them making love, although he rushed through it. Clearly, Audor found his brother's embarrassment amusing, which hardly helped.

"I have just spent some time with Evelyn in the garden. She is determined that she has tae marry ye. I argued the fact that I couldnae lose her." Benedict looked Audor directly in the eyes. "And I cannae, Audor," he said passionately. "I've never felt this way about another lass, and I ken I'll never feel it again. I have tae have her in me life. I simply cannae live without her."

Audor looked at Benedict for a long moment. "Then it will be," he said simply.

For a second, Benedict was stunned at his brother's blasé reply. "But what about the alliance? What about our agreement tae stand by the Sinclair clan?"

Audor nodded and rubbed his chin. "I will speak tae the council. It willnae take too much tae convince them tae agree tae the alliance without the marriage."

"Ye think they'll agree tae it?" Benedict said excitedly.

“Ye forget, braither.” Audor smirked. “It is I who make the decisions around here.”

Audor placed his glass on a nearby table and pushed himself up from the chair. Taking a step forward, he opened his arms wide. “Let me be the first tae congratulate ye on yer upcoming wedding.” He beamed.

Benedict stood and the brother’s hugged tightly.

When he had left Evelyn in the corridor earlier, he had only distantly hoped that this would have been the result of his talk with Audor, and yet, as he felt his brother’s warm embrace, feeling his support and intense backing, he could not have been happier.

Things were going to work out. He would marry the woman of his dreams, and the alliance would still be agreed. Now, he could hardly wait to tell Evelyn.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

When Benedict had left her to go and speak to Audor, Evelyn had been certain she did not want to be around anyone in the castle. If she had to wait for the outcome of Benedict's meeting, she wanted to be alone.

They had shared something that day that she did not fully understand, but what she did know was the fact that they had both felt it. It was neither voiced nor acknowledged, but whatever had happened between them was now a shared experience, and something that had brought them closer than ever.

Evelyn had sensed it as they had made love to each other, but even afterwards, in the aftermath of their passion, that same feeling of a joining had occurred. It felt surreal, and given it was something she had never felt before, she struggled to truly comprehend it.

Ye dinnae need tae comprehend it. Just feel it, Evelyn. That is all ye need tae dae.

It was when she was wandering back to her bedchamber, with a mixture of worry and bewilderment swirling through her body, that Yvaine had discovered her.

"Och, Evelyn," her sister had soothed. "Are ye all right? Ye are still upset from earlier."

But Evelyn had shook her head. "Actually, I'm nae. Something else has happened since that has taken up all my concern."

Yvaine's frown had deepened. "Tell me."

On the way back to their bedchamber, Evelyn disclosed that their father had visited her again while Yvaine had been bathing. She relayed the return of Audor, and the fact that the wedding had now been brought forward, and would be going ahead in three days.

Yvaine had stared at her in disbelief. "What? I cannae believe it."

"The laird and the council made the decision. They fear if I dinnae marry soon, Laird Keith's men will try and attack again."

"But the castle is locked down so tightly, surely nae one who isnae supposed tae be here could get through."

"Never mind that," Evelyn said, "I have yet tae tell ye the rest o' it."

Evelyn then relayed her conversation with Benedict in the garden. She skipped the part where they had made love in the grass, and went right onto telling her the fact that Benedict was speaking to Audor that very minute.

Upon reaching the bedchamber, Yvaine closed the door excitedly behind them. "Och, Evelyn, this is wonderful news."

"Nae yet," Evelyn countered. "Neither of us really ken how Audor is going tae react tae it. Benedict is determined he will convince his brother, and yet, I am nae as certain. Besides, there is the alliance tae consider. Even if Audor allows it, what will happen tae the alliance?"

Yvaine took hold of Evelyn's shoulders and looked her in the eye. "One thing at a time, dear sister."

“That is easy fer ye tae say,” Evelyn huffed. “This burden doesnae rest upon yer shoulders.”

Yvaine looked a little hurt by her words. “I would gladly take the burden from ye if I could, Evelyn.”

Evelyn felt guilty then. Her words had been harsh and unnecessary. Clearly, her worry was numbing her mind, and making her act in ways she would not ordinarily. This circumstance was no more Yvaine’s fault than it was her own. She was hardly being fair, especially after all the support Yvaine had given her since she had been told she was to marry a stranger.

“I’m sorry,” Evelyn blurted, looking at her sister pleadingly. “I didnae mean tae be so cruel. I’m being unfair. Ye have done so much fer me, Yvaine. I have just had tae deal with so much this last week.”

“Ye have.” Yvaine nodded with a sad smile. “Which only reaffirms my words this morning. Ye need tae think about yersel’ fer a change. I ken faither wants tae protect the clan, but I am certain there are other ways o’ doing it other than selling his oldest daughter intae slavery.”

“Och, Yvaine, ye are being dramatic.”

“Am I?” Yvaine said, her tone implying that her words were not so ridiculous. “What else would ye call it? Ye are the bargaining chip tae keep our clan safe. That sounds very much like slavery tae me.”

Evelyn had not really thought of it like that, and she felt Yvaine’s viewpoint was a little exaggerated. She had been around this castle many times in the couple of weeks since they had arrived. She knew the strength and wealth of this clan. With that in mind, it was evident that she would hardly be deprived of a full and bounteous life. It

would just happen to be with someone she did not love.

“I still think it’s a little dramatic, but let’s nae argue over such menial things. Me mind is consumed with what might be going on in the laird’s study at this very moment. Even if Benedict convinces Audor tae let us marry, there is still nae certainty about the alliance.”

“Have a little faith, sister,” Yvaine said, trying to calm her.

“I dinnae have the sanity fer faith,” Evelyn countered, now pacing back and forth.

“Well wearing the rug tae a thread isnae going tae give ye a different answer tae what will be decided. Come,” Yvaine said, taking hold of Evelyn’s hand. “Sit down.”

Yvaine guided Evelyn to a chair and then discovered the book she had been reading earlier.

“I will read tae ye. If naething else, it will pass the time.”

“I’ll hardly be able tae concentrate on it,” Evelyn sighed.

“Ye dinnae need tae concentrate. Just sit there, gaze out o’ the window, and let the words wash over ye.”

Evelyn smiled at her sister, and once Yvaine settled down, she began to read. Evelyn did as she was told, and gazing out of the window, thought of how lucky she was to have Yvaine in her life. She had done nothing but take her side in all of this, no matter how much Evelyn had crossed a line. And now, she was doing her best to keep her occupied, or to save her from going quite mad. Or both.

It was an hour and a half later when a faint knock on the door halted her.

“Just a moment,” Yvaine said, jumping from her seat and hurrying to the door.

“Ah, ‘tis ye,” she said, opening the door wider.

Evelyn watched as Benedict strolled into the room, his eyes scanning it before they finally fell upon her as she sat by the window. She gazed at him for a second, and he gazed back, and then, he beamed a huge smile.

“Me braither will allow us tae marry,” Benedict declared. “He is talking tae the council this very minute about the alliance still going ahead.”

“Och, Benedict,” Evelyn cried, rushing across the room toward him. She ran into his arms, and felt them wrapping around her in a strong embrace. Pressing her face into his chest, she felt his love soaking into her as relief washed through every part of her being.

Eventually, she pushed herself away from him. “I can hardly believe it,” she gasped, gazing up into his eyes.

“Ye cannae ken how happy I am. Truly. It was probably the most terrifying thing I have ever had tae dae, but Audor hardly seemed tae care.” Benedict smiled. “He wants me tae be happy. He wants us tae be happy.”

Reaching up to him, she kissed him with all the delight her heart held. Feeling his soft lips against hers just seemed to seal everything they had believed in, fought for, and desired. Her wishes were to come true after all. She would marry Benedict, and she would have him by her side for the rest of her days.

A cough from her left reminded Evelyn that Yvaine was still in the room, and, laughing and feeling a little embarrassed, she pulled herself away.

When she turned to look at Yvaine, her sister was beaming with delight too. Evelyn ran to her and hugged her tightly. “Thank ye, Yvaine. Thank ye fer supporting me and being me closest friend as well as me sister.”

“I’ve only ever wanted ye tae be happy, Evelyn,” Yvaine sighed. Looking from Evelyn to Benedict and back again, she continued. “And truly, ye two make the most wonderful couple.”

“Now, we must speak tae yer faither,” Benedict said, holding his hand out to her.

A pang of fear rippled through her, but Evelyn grabbed Benedict’s hand and held it tightly. With this wonderful man by her side, she was capable of anything. Besides, if Audor had said the alliance would remain in place, surely, her father could not disagree to their union, could he?

They found Donald in the library.

Benedict still had hold of Evelyn’s hand when they entered, and when Donald looked up from the book he was reading, he smiled.

“Ah, me laird. Evelyn. This is an unexpected pleasure.”

“Actually, me laird. I am Benedict.”

Donald’s eyebrows flew to the top of his head, and looking from Evelyn to Benedict, he floundered. “But... why are ye with...? What is going on here?”

“I am in love with yer daughter, me laird,” Benedict began. “And if ye will give me a chance, I will explain how we have come tae this point.”

Still completely astonished, and looking more than wary, Donald gestured for them

both to be seated. Once the three were settled again, Evelyn sat nervously beside Benedict as he professed his love for her. He began by telling her father how their love had come about, though he didn't speak of their first meeting in the library, which Evelyn was grateful for.

He did, however, have to confess that it had been he, not Audor who had been present in the castle for the whole time, but for reasons he could not disclose, he could not tell him why Audor had been away.

“The conclusion, me laird, is this. I love Evelyn with every part o’ my being. I love her and she loves me. I want tae marry her, which is why we came tae see ye. I am here tae ask yer permission fer yer daughter’s hand in marriage.”

Donald had listened carefully to every word, and Evelyn had watched his expression change from confusion, to interest, and eventually, to understanding. Gone was the frown, and now, he gazed at her with a soft smile.

“Faither, I am so sorry, I didnae want things tae go this way. I ken how important the alliance is—“

“Me darling, I want ye tae be happy. I always have. I want ye tae be with whomever yer heart desires.”

“And about the alliance,” Benedict said, “Audor has agreed tae honor the alliance, even if it isnae he who is marrying Evelyn.”

Donald’s face lit up with surprise and delight. “Are ye certain?”

It occurred to Evelyn in that moment, that her father was going to allow her to wed Benedict even without the alliance. She couldn’t believe she had doubted the depth of her father’s love for her.

He then looked at Benedict. “Yer braither is a very good man. I will go find him and I will thank him dearly. And fer someone who isnae the laird, ye have done a fine job in keeping yer clan and mey family safe. I applaud yer bravery and yer determination. Ye have more than proven yersel’, Benedict. And with that said, I would be delighted tae have ye marry Evelyn, and tae welcome ye intae our family.”

He then stood from his chair and opened his arms to Evelyn, who hurriedly ran into them. Holding her close to him, he murmured in her ear. “I only ever wanted ye tae be happy, me dear. And I can see it how happy ye are in yer face.”

Afterward, Benedict and Donald shook hands, and the latter went to look for Audor.

When evening fell, everyone met in the family dining room, and Audor confirmed that the council had agreed that the alliance would be honored, much to everyone’s delight, as Audor’s brother and heir would be marrying Lady Sinclair, so the bond was still very much in the family.

“We have much tae organize, as I am still determined that this wedding should go ahead earlier,” Audor said.

“That shouldnae be too hard,” Killian said.

“Och, what would ye ken about weddings?” Yvaine said drily. “Ye wander about all day twiddling with yer sword.”

Evelyn stifled a giggle.

Killian was about to retort when Audor said, “The threat is still very real. More o’ Laird Keith’s men have been spotted, and because o’ that, it is imperative that everyone remain on high alert.”

“But, surely, we are safe in the castle,” Yvaine said worriedly.

Audor smiled kindly at her. “We have the largest army o’ any surrounding clan, Yvaine. I swear, nae harm will come tae ye here. Be that as it may, I must ask that none o’ ye leave the castle grounds. Nae fer any reason.”

“I agree,” Donald nodded sternly. “I can speak tae the sneaky tactics Laird Keith uses, and when he strikes, it may nae be an obvious attack. Everyone must be wary o’ anything strange or unusual.”

Special attention was given over the following two days, as the castle was a hive of activity. Food was gathered, the kitchens busily prepared stored meat for the feast, maids and servants helped with decorating the grand hall and the gardens. Yvaine assisted the seamstress with Evelyn’s wedding dress. The days flew by, until at last, the night before the wedding arrived.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Evelyn was moved into a room of her own, and after hugging Yvaine goodnight, she retired to her bedchamber. But while she was readying herself for bed, she heard a light knock on the door. Wrapping herself in her shawl, Evelyn opened it to find her father standing there.

“Hello, me dear. May I come in?”

“O’ course, Faither.”

Once they were both sitting beside the crackling fire, Evelyn looked at her father expectantly. She had no idea why he was there, and yet, he was clearly there for a reason.

“Are ye nervous?” Donald asked, cradling the whiskey she had given him.

“About marrying Benedict?” Evelyn asked with surprise.

“Well, ye ken, that, and...” he fumbled, “... the duties o’ a wife.”

“Well, Benedict isnae a laird, faither. I hardly think me duties will come tae much.”

Donald shook his head. “Nay, nay, child. I dinnae mean those duties. When I say duties, I mean...” He hesitated again, his face going redder and redder.

It was only as she saw his embarrassment that Evelyn suddenly knew what her father

meant. “Och, ye mean...” It was she who hesitated then, feeling the heat in her own cheeks.

“Aye.” Her father nodded eagerly, clearly relieved that Evelyn had managed to understand what he meant.

For a moment, he didn’t speak again, and then he muttered, “God, I wish yer maither were here. She would be so much better at all this than I.” He heaved a sigh, and keeping his eyes on his glass, he said, “There are some things ye need tae ken, Evelyn. Ye are an innocent lass, and thus, there are things ye dinnae ken.”

Och, me God! Is he going tae try and tell me about coupling?

“When a man lays down with a woman,” he began, still not able to look her in the eye, “it can be strange. The first time, ye... ye,” he flipped his right hand over and over again while he tried to find his words, “when ye, well, when ye lay together fer the first time.”

This is torturous! And I cannae even tell him I ken what it’s like. He still thinks I’m innocent. I cannae take that away from him.

“Faither, I’m sure I’ll be fine,” Evelyn said hurriedly, praying for this humiliation to end.

“Ye’re a strong and determined lass, Evelyn, and I’m proud o’ ye for all ye’ve achieved. I just want ye tae be ready.”

“Ready?”

“Fer yer wedding night,” he pressed. “The first time can be, well, it can be a little painful, and?—”

I cannae take anymore!

“Faither,” Evelyn jumped up from her chair, “I’m sure all will be well. I need tae get plenty o’ sleep, and I must insist that ye retire yersel’,” she said, pulling him to his feet and ushering him to the door.

“Aye, aye, o’ course,” he replied, sounding more than a little relieved.

Upon reaching the door, Evelyn opened it, and continued guiding her father through it. “I love ye,” she said, quickly pecking him on his cheek, “and I will see ye tomorrow.”

Just as Evelyn was about to close the door, Donald turned to her. “I have just one more thing I would like tae say.”

While Evelyn nearly dreaded the words that might fall from his lips, she pinned on a sweet smile and let him continue.

“I’m sorry for being so... so distant over the past year, Evelyn. Truly, I am. Benedict seems tae adore ye, and ye dinnae ken how glad that makes my heart. I only want ye tae discover the same love yer maither and I shared.”

Evelyn’s heart melted at his words, and noticing her father’s eyes glistening, she stepped forward and flung her arms around his neck.

“I love ye, Faither,” she whispered into the soft skin of his neck. “I’ve always loved ye. I ken ye miss Maither terribly. I miss her too.”

She took a step back and gazed up at him. “And ye havenae been a bad faither. Ye’ve been a grieving faither. If I am honest, before I met Benedict, I didnae really understand how ye felt. Now, I ken how crushed I would be, how utterly devastated I

would feel, if I lost him.”

Donald nodded and swiped an escaping tear from his cheek. “Good night, me dear. Sweet dreams.”

“Night, Faither,” Evelyn replied, before slowly closing the door.

Evelyn remained perfectly still at the sound of creaking floorboards in her bedchamber. It had taken her ages to fall asleep with the excited thoughts of what tomorrow would bring, but she was now aware that someone was in her room. There had been no knock, for it would have wakened her, and now, as her heart thumped in her chest, she was terrified that one of Laird Keith’s men had managed to sneak into the castle and was here to try and take her again.

The footsteps grew closer, but Evelyn had a plan. She had brought a tankard of water to her bedside which now stood half empty. It was hardly a great weapon, but if she could at least stun the man, she might have a chance to escape.

She could hear him near the bed now. His footsteps came closer and closer. Her heart thumped harder and harder. She held her breath as she sensed him getting closer still.

Peeking through one eye, she targeted the tankard.

Any second....

Now!

Flinging the covers back, she grabbed the tankard, and with all her might, lashed her arm out towards the approaching fiend.

“Ow. Bloody hell, Evelyn.” Benedict hollered.

“Och, my God,” she cried, hurriedly pushing herself up in the bed.

Staring up at him, Benedict stood there, his soaking wet hair dripping water onto his tunic, holding her arm with his other hand. He looked like a drowned rat. He was frowning down at her, but at the state of him, Evelyn could do nothing but burst into a fit of giggles.

“Ye think this is funny?” he growled, a smile dancing at the corner of his mouth. “I’ll show ye funny.”

And with that, he clambered into the bed and rubbed his wet hair all over her face.

Evelyn shrieked and giggled even louder, while at the same time, trying to fight off his hairy attack.

Grabbing her by the waist, he pulled her on top of him as he rolled onto the bed, and the two fell into hysterical laughter.

“Remind me never tae wake ye up unexpectedly,” Benedict said, rubbing his arm unconsciously.

“I am sorry,” Evelyn said. “But ye scared me half tae death. I thought ye were one o’ Laird Keith’s men.”

Benedict shook his head. “There’s nae a chance o’ any o’ those men entering this castle, Evelyn. I’m here and I’ll always protect ye. Ye’ve naething tae worry about.”

Evelyn smiled at him, then bent her head and tenderly kissed his arm where she had hit him with the tankard.

“There are other places that hurt too,” Benedict said with a slow smile.

“Och, is there now?”

“Aye,” he said. “It hurts here.” He pointed to the base of his neck. Evelyn, knowing what he was doing, only smiled as she crawled up his body and tenderly brushed a kiss against the stubbly skin.

“And here.” He pointed to his chin. She moved a little further and kissed his chin.

“And here.” He pointed to his cheek.

She brushed her lips tenderly against his cheek.

“And here,” he growled, pointing to his lips, his breath a little shallower now.

When Evelyn pressed her lips on his, Benedict wrapped his arms tightly around her and pulled her down onto him. He opened his mouth and slipped his tongue inside hers, flicking, and lashing across her teeth and tongue.

“I want ye so badly,” he breathed, between his passionate kisses.

“And I want ye,” Evelyn replied breathlessly.

“Good.”

Rolling onto his side, he gently lay Evelyn on the bed beside him. His lips trailed down her neck while he untied her nightdress. A second later, his lips were on her breasts, soft, light kisses, making her nipples ache and peak.

“Ah,” she gasped.

Benedict sucked on her pert nipple, making her writhe beneath him.

“Och, Evelyn. I am going tae take great pleasure in delighting ye fer all the day’s o’ our lives,” he growled, moving from one breast to the other.

Evelyn could barely formulate words with the sensations that danced around her body. Her stomach clenched, her breasts ached, and she could feel her soft moistness growing hotter. It ached for his touch too, and writhing her hips, she wanted to feel his hands on her.

“Make love tae me, Benedict,” she gasped. “Please.”

He trailed his tongue around her breast once more, and then, gazing up at her, he shook his head.

“I cannae. Nae now. If yer faither finds me in here, he’ll kill me.”

“What dae ye mean? Why?” She roused herself from her ecstasy and gave him a wide-eyed look. “What time is it?”

“It was dawn when I arrived, me darling.”

“What?” she gasped, pushing herself up in the bed.

“Aye, indeed.” He grinned. “In fact, I’m certain—” He stopped for a second and tilted his head toward the door. “Is that the maids already?”

“Nae, it isnae? Is it?” Evelyn gasped, suddenly feeling mortified.

Benedict grinned again. “Och, but it is.”

“What are we tae dae?” Evelyn began panicking. “They cannae find ye here.”

“It’s all right,” he said calmly, dropping a quick kiss on her lips before clambering out of the bed. “This room has a secret door.”

Leaving the bed, he moved across the room, and with a little effort, he shoved the dresser to the side. Behind it stood a door about half his size. He winked back at her over his shoulder. “It’s a secret tunnel.”

Their own castle had plenty of those, so Evelyn wasn’t entirely surprised. What she could not understand was how Benedict planned on fitting through that tiny door.

“Ye’re twice the size of that door. Unless ye chop yer legs off...”

She stopped as she heard the nearing voices of the maids’ chatter. Leaping out of the bed, she reached the dresser just as Benedict was folding his huge frame through the small exit. It took some doing.

He glanced back with a beaming grin. “I love ye, me darling. I’ll see ye soon.”

Evelyn quickly closed the door, and with all the strength she could muster, shoved the dresser back against the wall, just as the maids knocked on the door.

Launching herself back across the room, she threw herself into bed, and pulling the covers up over herself, lay her head on the pillow.

“Who is it?” she groaned, as though she had just woken.

“‘Tis the maids, me lady. It is time fer ye tae get ready.”

“Come in,” she called out in her feigned weary voice.

Evelyn didn’t rise as they entered. She was too busy trying to settle her breathing. But

once she appeared more like someone who had just woken up, rather than someone who had just moved a piece of furniture that weighed more than herself before leaping across the room and into bed, Evelyn finally rose, and let the maids get to work.

There seemed to be so many of them; one readying her clothes on the bed, another fixing the fire, yet another seeing to the bed pan, another opening the drapes. It was chaotic to say the least.

“Please, me lady. Will ye sit so I can brush yer hair?” a dark-haired maid about her age said.

Evelyn nodded, and moving towards the small table fitted with a mirror, did as she asked. Her mind was still on Benedict rushing from the room, and she could not help but smile as she recalled their earlier antics. It still felt a little surreal that, in less than a few hours, she would be his wife. Things had happened so fast, and yet, she could not be more grateful in how they had turned out.

The maid behind her produced a small glass bottle and handed it to Evelyn. Smiling at her through the mirror, she said, “I have a tonic fer ye, me lady.”

“What is it fer?” Evelyn asked.

The maid looked about her, checking to make sure no one else was listening, and then lowered her voice. “It’s tae help with the nerves, me lady.” She smiled. “It has a little whisky in it too.”

Admittedly, Evelyn didn’t feel very nervous, but then, the day had only begun. Perhaps later, when she arrived at the chapel, those nerves might just kick in. Evelyn took the bottle and placed it in the pocket of her housecoat.

“Nae, me lady. Ye will have tae take it now. There will be nowhere fer ye tae carry it later,” the lass urged.

“Och, o’ course,” Evelyn replied, forgetting she was about to be donned in her wedding gown. How anyone who was getting married could forget such a thing, she didn’t know. Perhaps she was nervous after all. Uncorking the lid, she tipped the tonic down her throat and swallowed it. The sour after taste made Evelyn screw up her face.

“It’s good stuff, me lady.” The maid grinned.

Some of the maids had already left, but a few moments later, the same maid started calling to the others. “Go now, and ready Lady Sinclair’s bath. We still have much tae dae.”

The other maids nodded and, muttering to each other, gathered items of clothing and hurriedly left the room.

Evelyn was about to ask if the maid had seen Yvaine yet, when she suddenly began feeling rather woozy.

“Och, me head,” she said, lifting her hand to her forehead.

“Are ye well, me lady?” the maid said, looking at her intently through the mirror.

But as Evelyn looked back, she noticed a strange expression on the woman’s face. It was not quite concern, but more like she was watching to see what was about to happen.

She then left from brushing Evelyn’s hair and walked directly to the dresser that covered the hidden door. Huffing and puffing, she began pushing it the same way

Benedict had done not half an hour earlier.

“What on earth are ye doing?” Evelyn slurred. Her voice sounded strange, and following the earlier wooziness, she now began to feel faint.

The maid ignored her, continuing to shift the dresser with great difficulty. Once it was finally out of the way, she then opened the door. Immediately, two men squeezed through the tiny space.

“What the devil is going on?” Evelyn cried, trying hard to speak clearly, but failing miserably.

A second later, they were looming toward her, only, they too, now looked blurry.

“Wait,” she gasped, feeling suddenly ill. But just as she was about to call out again, her eyelids dropped, and her world went black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The tunnel was far too narrow for Benedict's huge frame, and maneuvering himself through it was challenging enough as his broad shoulders knocked off the rough walls. At one point, he was forced to turn sideways and crouch to get through. It had been ages since he had used this particular tunnel, and now, he remembered why.

While he had not wanted to leave Evelyn, especially given how aroused he was after their steamy moment, Benedict had also not wanted the maids to see him. Frankly, any other time, he would not have cared. He was the laird's brother, and thus, ordinarily did whatever he wanted. But maids talked, and gossip spread through the castle like wildfire.

His concern was not for himself, but for Evelyn and Donald. The last thing he would want, was Donald discovering the fact that he'd been in Evelyn's room on the morning of their wedding.

Evelyn had not disclosed their intimate times with him, and he had made certain not to do so either when he had spoken to Donald in the library the day before. Clearly, the laird assumed that Evelyn was still innocent, and for both Evelyn and her father's sake, Benedict wanted to ensure it remained that way.

The tunnel came out in a corner of the kitchen, and squeezing through the small door, while at the same time, trying to ensure he was not seen, Benedict made a quick exit into the main part of the castle. Time was running on, and he was yet to ready himself. Before he had left to see Evelyn, he had ordered a tin bath to be brought to his bedchamber. By the time he returned to it, the water would be freezing.

He was striding through the corridor, heading toward the main staircase when he met Killian. His cousin greeted him with a beaming smile.

“Ye’re up bright and early this morning,” Killian said.

Wary in case his cousin was fishing, Benedict replied. “I’m up bright and early every morning, cousin.”

“Aye,” Killian grinned, “but it’s nae every day ye get married., is it?”

“And yer point?” Benedict asked, feeling slightly amused at his cousin’s nonsensical statement.

“I’m just saying. Yer getting married.”

“I ken. I was the one that asked, remember?” The man was acting strangely, and Benedict couldn’t understand why. “What has gotten intae ye, Killian?”

His cousin shrugged then. “I dinnae ken. I suppose, given it has been mysel’ ye have come tae fer advice over the last while, I feel even more connected tae this whole situation. As if I helped in some way.”

His words hit Benedict so suddenly, that he halted right there in the corridor, and turning to him, he looked his cousin in the eye. “Ye are absolutely right. And I dinnae think I have truly thanked ye fer all ye’ve done fer me,” he said. “So, from the bottom o’ me heart, Killian, I thank ye. I’m nae sure I could have got through this mess without ye.”

“Ye’re welcome, cousin.” Killian slapped his shoulder. “I’m only glad it worked out for the best. The other option doesnae bear thinking about.”

“Which is why I’m nae thinking about it.” Benedict smirked. “Right. I’m away. I need tae ready mysel’. I dinnae want tae keep the woman waiting.”

“I’ll come and help ye with yer outfit in an hour.”

“Thank ye. That will dae well.”

Benedict continued on to his bedchamber with Killian’s words in his head. He had been so consumed with his own heart and mind, he had hardly considered anyone else’s feelings.

That’s what desperation does tae ye.

It gave him a warm feeling inside to imagine that Killian felt so connected to his union. His cousin had been a bulwark from the storm of his emotions. Fear, doubt, guilt; all of them had weighed heavily upon him, but Killian had been there, standing by his side, offering the best words of advice he had been able to come up with. He had been essential given the circumstances, as Benedict could never have turned to his brother for advice this time.

As promised, Killian arrived an hour later to help Benedict straighten his plaid and don his dirk and sporran, the brass clasps of which were intricate at best. Killian himself was dressed in his best garb, and looked far more handsome than usual.

When the two were ready, Killian turned to leave. “I’ll meet ye at the chapel. I am away tae check all is well with everything else.”

“Thank ye. I’ll see ye shortly.”

With Killian gone, Benedict gave himself one more glance in the mirror.

“Probably the first and last time ye’ll look this smart,” he said to his reflection.
“Right. Let’s dae this.”

He left his bedchamber and strode down the corridor. Upon reaching the large stone staircase, he noticed Audor waiting at the bottom. At the sound of Benedict’s footsteps, his brother turned toward him.

“My God,” Audor said, looking up at him admiringly as Benedict descended.

“Och, be quiet, will ye. Ye’re embarrassing me.” Benedict grinned.

“Well, it’s nae every day I get the chance tae dae that, so I’m taking the opportunity,” Audor replied playfully.

Once Benedict reached the bottom, the two brothers faced each other. Audor gave him a satisfactory nod. “Faither would have been proud, braither.”

“And maither would have been teary,” Benedict countered.

“Indeed.”

In sync with each other’s thoughts as they always had been, the brothers took a moment to remember their parents and acknowledge their absence. These important occasions always brought it home more impactfully. There had been a few times before hand where they had both felt it deeply, but none as important as this.

Audor took a steep breath in, and releasing it in a long sigh, he slapped Benedict’s upper arm.

“Well, braither. Let us get going. Everyone is at the chapel waiting.”

As they walked from the castle towards the chapel, Audor said. “Perhaps we ought tae play a little trick on Evelyn. We should swap places.” He grinned.

“Nae a chance,” Benedict replied. “Besides, I think we’ve done enough swapping fer a lifetime.”

The priest was standing outside the chapel doors as they approached, and smiling warmly at them both, he greeted the brothers respectfully. As was custom, the ceremony would take place outside the chapel, and then he and Evelyn would go in to greet their guests as newlyweds.

“The chapel is already full,” Father McKensy said. “I dae hope ye are nae expecting any more guests.”

“Only me bride, Faither,” Benedict quipped back. “In fact, she ought tae be here?—”

Benedict halted speaking when he saw a very worried Killian and Yvaine rushing up the hill towards them.

Elbowing his brother, Benedict growled, “Something is wrong.”

Audor looked round to see the two approach, and then muttered, “Och, dear God.”

“What is it?” Audor demanded, once Killian and Yvaine were in hearing distance.

“She’s missing,” Yvaine cried breathlessly. “Evelyn is missing. Me faither is frantic with worry. We’ve searched the castle and cannae find her anywhere.”

Benedict looked at Killian. “Where have ye checked?”

Killian looked deeply worried. “Everywhere, Benedict. I’ve had the guards search the

stables, the barns, the gardens, the kitchen. We've checked the bedchambers, all the rooms, in fact, everywhere. She's nowhere tae be found."

Without waiting another second, Benedict left them all standing there, and bolted back toward the castle. His long legs took huge strides as panic drove him on. He could hear the panting of those following, but they were still some distance behind him.

Upon reaching the castle, he turned towards them as they caught him up. "We need tae split up. She has tae be here somewhere."

At this point, Donald, who looked terrified, ran out into the courtyard where they were gathered.

"Benedict and I will take the bedchambers," Audor declared. "Killian, round up some soldiers and check the courtyard and all the outer houses. Also, order them tae search the kitchens and basement. Donald. Yvaine. Ye check every room on the main floor."

With instructions given, everyone ran in different directions. Upon reaching the staircase, Benedict launched up them two at a time. Once at the top, he didn't waste a second, and immediately headed into the first bedchamber on his left.

"I'll take the right side," Audor called, before disappearing into a room.

The brothers opened door after door, running inside while calling out Evelyn's name. They moved furniture, opened wardrobes, and looked under beds.

"Evelyn. Evelyn," Benedict cried. "Yell if ye can hear me voice."

But each time he stayed perfectly still to try and hear any sound, the only reply was silence.

It took twenty minutes to complete the task, and eventually, the brothers met at the end of the corridor.

“Nae joy,” Audor panted breathlessly.

Benedict looked up at the ceiling. “What about the servants’ quarters?” he said, referring to the upper floor of the castle.

“I cannae imagine she would be up there,” Audor said doubtfully.

“I couldnae imagine her nae being at the chapel tae marry me this morning, and yet, she wasnae there. I’m nae leaving a room unsearched,” Benedict retorted.

Audor nodded with an expression of understanding, and the brothers climbed the narrow staircase and followed the same search in each room. Less than twenty minutes later, they met at the end of the corridor, both of them looking perturbed.

“Come. Maybe one o’ the others have found her,” Audor said, with hope in his voice.

They hurried back down stairs to where they had left the others, but they could see no one. They were about to venture into the great hall when Killian rounded the corridor. His face was like thunder, and tightly held in his grasp was a dark-haired maid.

“What the devil is going on?” Audor demanded.

“She was found trying tae sneak out o’ the castle with a bag o’ her belongings,” Killian growled.

At that moment, Yvaine and Donald came hurrying around the corner.

“Please, me laird,” the maid whimpered. “He has me son.”

“Who has yer son?” Benedict barked.

“Laird Keith,” she blurted. “I had tae dae it, dinnae ye see? They were going tae kill him.”

“What did ye dae? Where have they taken her?” Benedict barked.

Audor took a step forward, gesturing to Benedict to remain calm. It was easy for him to say. It wasn’t the love of his life that might be murdered at any second. If she was still alive at all.

“We’ll get yer son back,” Audor said calmly. “But first, ye have tae tell us what happened?”

The maid then relayed how she and her son, Sammy, had been on the way back from the village the day after the attack, when men had run from the trees and grabbed them.

“They dragged us ontae their horses and then took us to a house. When we got there, a huge man was inside. He took hold o’ Sammy and pressed a dirk tae his throat.” A sob escaped from her as she hurriedly continued. “He told me he was Laird Keith. He also said that if I didnae dae as he asked, he’d slice Sammy up slowly, and send me the pieces.”

The maid then burst out crying.

Audor gave Benedict a stern gaze, and looked back to the maid.

“What did ye have tae dae?” he asked.

Sniffling and trying to control herself she said, “He gave me a bottle. He didnae tell

me what was in it, but he said it wouldnae kill Lady Sinclair. He said it would only make her sleep. After I'd given it to her, I was tae open the door tae the hidden tunnel."

"How did he ken about the tunnel?" Benedict demanded.

The maid looked at him sheepishly.

"Ye told him," Benedict growled.

"He had me son," she cried defensively. "I'm sorry, me laird. Truly, I am. But what was I supposed tae dae?"

"Where is this house?" Donald demanded from behind her.

The maid spun and looked mortified when she saw Evelyn's father.

"I can draw ye a map. It isnae far. They havenae been gone long. I'm sure the laird will still be there," she babbled.

Audor looked at Killian, and barked, "Gather the soldiers. Tell them tae meet us at the gate in fifteen minutes."

"What about Sammy?" the maid cried.

"We'll find yer son, and we'll bring him back tae ye. After that," Audor growled, "I'll decide what I'm going tae dae with ye."

As one of the guards grabbed the maid and took her away, Yvaine stepped forward. "I'm coming with ye."

“Indeed, ye are nae,” Donald bellowed. “I already have one daughter lost. I’ll certainly nae mak’ it two.”

“But, Faither?—”

“Ye will be needed here, Yvaine,” Benedict said. “When we return, Evelyn will need ye.”

Without another word, Benedict swiftly strode passed Yvaine and headed to his bedchamber. He had to change. He had to dress fer battle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

She was laughing as her horse pounded across the plain. Benedict could not catch her, no matter how hard he tried. Pushing her horse on, the distance between them grew until she could barely hear his voice anymore.

But then, the clouds above grew dark and ominous, and Evelyn found that she was no longer on the plain. Instead, she rode through a dense forest, battling through trees with branches that cut her arms and face. But even as she pulled on the reins and called for her horse to stop, the beast continued on relentlessly.

Looking behind her, Benedict was nowhere to be seen. She cried out his name, but he did not answer. She was alone in a dark forest, with eerie sounds, and branches that seemed to grab at her body.

“Halt,” she screamed at the horse, but it continued on.

Up ahead, the forest opened out into a clearing, and without a word from Evelyn, the horse came to a sudden stop, throwing her headlong over the front of it. For a second, she was flying; weightless in the air, her arms and legs flailing. And then she hit the ground with a sickening thud, and everything went black.

Her head was thumping when Evelyn started to rouse. The pain was making her feel nauseous and she squeezed her eyes tight to alleviate the sensation. It did little to help. The throbbing continued. She wanted to press her hands against her head, but when she went to move, she realized that she couldn't.

Blinking her eyes open, she gasped at the sight before her. She was no longer on a forest floor, and there was no horse in sight. Instead, she was sat in a small room, clearly no longer inside Gunn Castle. To her left, a small fire crackled. Immediately in front of her sat Laird Alisdair Keith with a smirk dancing on his lips. Apart from their chairs and a dresser, the rest of the room looked bare, as though the place was not lived in at all.

He regarded her with slight amusement. “Ah, she is eventually awake,” he growled. “Perhaps I put a little too much laudanum in that whisky.”

Looking down at her predicament, Evelyn noted that her hands were tied to the arms of the chair she sat upon, and trying to move her feet, she realized they too, were tied to the legs.

Struggling to understand how she had managed to get there, a vague memory washed over her. She was sitting at the dressing table in her bedchamber getting ready for her wedding. One of the maids had given her something to drink. And then, two men emerged out of the hidden tunnel.

The maid. I need to warn them. The maid is working with Laird Keith.

Clearly, however, she was going nowhere. Nor was she warning anyone.

Benedict had promised her that no harm could come to her inside the castle. Evidently, he did not know Laird Keith very well. Nor was he aware of the lengths the man would go to, to get what he wanted. And now, there she was. Trapped. A prisoner, powerless to stop whatever plans he had for her.

She had thought having to marry Audor had made her feel trapped, but that was nothing compared to this. Her father’s refusal to agree to an alliance with Clan Keith, even though they had been foes before, had caused nothing but trouble. Laird Keith

had killed her mother to get back at her father. Now, the laird was clearly going to kill her too.

Perhaps she had wished this upon herself. Had she not said, just the other day, that being dead would be better than living without Benedict?

Maybe the gods heard me. But just the first part.

As terrified and helpless as Evelyn currently felt, she was determined not to show it. There had to be a way out of this, she just needed to figure out what that way was. She would not let this laird see her fear. She would not give him that satisfaction, and so, jutting her chin out defiantly, she glared right back at him.

He smirked back at her false display, and then said, “I have waited a long time for this.” Leaning forward, he tenderly caressed her cheek.

His touch made her skin crawl, and without thinking about it, Evelyn spat in his face. Immediately, he raised his hand and slapped her hard across the same cheek he had only seconds before caressed.

“Argh,” she cried, as the searing pain sparked across her skin. Her cheek now throbbed and felt like it was on fire. But even as the burning continued, Evelyn’s anger raged with it.

How typical of the man to strike a woman when she had no ability to defend herself. He had done the same to her mother.

Gone was the smirk, and now, the laird scowled at her as he wiped his face with a scarf. “Clearly, I have been given the wrong reports about ye, Lady Sinclair. I was told ye were a delicate angel. Ye are more like a wild animal.”

“At least I’m nae a murderer, or,” she nodded down at herself, “a kidnapper,” she spat. “And what a brave man ye are, striking a defenseless woman. I’ll take as many strikes ‘afore yer grubby hands touch me. In fact, I’d sooner die than have ye anywhere near me.”

He smiled then, and cocked his head to look at her. “Ye’re a feisty one, I see.”

A gasp caught in her throat at his words, for it was the same affectionate phrase Benedict had used to describe her on more than one occasion. But when he had said it, she had relished his words. They had been warm and playful. In fact, she relished all the words that left his beautiful lips. She just needed to figure out how she was going to get out of this mess so she could hear his voice again.

“But whether I touch ye or nae, isnae yer decision tae make,” the laird continued. “Nor will it ever be. I will touch me bride whenever I so desire.”

Evelyn’s eyes flew wide and her mouth fell open.

His bride?

So stunned was she, she had no retort. In fact, it felt as though her whole body was frozen in time. It took several seconds of the laird sneering at her expression for Evelyn to be able to even consider his words.

Since awakening, she had been under the impression she would be meeting the same fate as her mother. But the laird actually planned on marrying her? Why? Why did he not want to kill her?

After the shock, came the anger, and snarling at him, Evelyn spat, “Ye can go tae hell. I’ll never marry ye.”

“Again, me lady, nae yer choice.”

The laird pushed himself up and moved across the room to a dresser. After pouring himself a drink, he came back, but stood, looking down at her.

“All this could have been avoided if only yer faither hadnae have been so stubborn. Yer mother didnae have tae die. If he had given me what I asked fer, she would still be alive. So, ye see, yer maither’s blood isnae upon me hands. It’s upon yer faither’s.”

“He would never have agreed tae an alliance with ye. Ye have always been rivals fer years. Why on earth would he dae such a thing?” Evelyn barked.

“I’m nae talking about the alliance, Lady Sinclair.”

“Then, what are ye talking about?” Evelyn cried, feeling completely confused.

“Our marriage.” The laird said simply, as though she ought to know to what he was referring.

With her head still throbbing from whatever was in that drink, Evelyn could not piece it together. This man had done nothing but cause their clan pain and grief for over a year. And now, he wanted to marry her.

“Ye’re nae making any sense.”

He crouched down and looked up at her. “Then let me spell it out fer ye. I asked fer yer hand in marriage two years ago. But yer faither refused. He told me that there was nae way on God’s good earth that he would allow his daughter tae marry a man like me.” The laird snorted. “Like he ever had a choice. So, yer faither needed tae be punished fer his insolence.”

The laird stood to his full height again. “I am a man who gets what I want, Lady Sinclair. I always have and I always will.”

Slowly, the pieces began to fall into place, and Evelyn realized that her mother’s death had not only been caused by her father’s refusal to make an alliance with Laird Keith. Clearly, the horrible man had demanded Evelyn’s hand. Her mother had been murdered in revenge for her father’s refusal.

“Ye murdered me maither because me faither wouldnae give me hand in marriage?” she gasped.

“Och, now ye’re getting it. Nae too bright, are we?” He sneered. “It was the best way tae make yer faither pay. That, and a warning that, until I got what I wanted, I would continue tae make his life a misery. Like I said. I’m a man who gets what he wants.”

Me maither was murdered because o’ me. This is all me fault.

Her mother had paid the ultimate price for her father’s refusal. If she had known, if he had told her, maybe she would have gone along with it just to keep the peace. Had she not done the same with Laird Gunn?

But Audor was never yer faither’s rival. Nor is he a cruel and sadistic man. Yer faither was trying tae protect ye from this monster... And he lost me maither in the process.

“Now I have ye,” the laird said, “yer faither will never see ye again. Ye are mine, and ye will remain mine.”

“Ye cannae dae this,” Evelyn cried. “Ye cannae just take me without giving me a chance tae at least say goodbye.”

“Had yer faither agreed tae our union in the first place, it wouldnae have had tae happen like this, Lady Sinclair. Yer faither only has himself tae blame. As fer ye, I’m sure ye’ll get over it.”

As the laird downed the remaining dregs of his glass, Evelyn’s mind whirled with ideas of how she could escape. There was no chance she could loosen these ropes. They had been tied so tightly; she was starting to lose feeling in her fingers.

Perhaps there was another way out of this. She eyed the fire. A much harder way out of this. She was so close that if she toppled herself into it, she would be scarred for life.

And be in excruciating agony.

But would it not be worth it? The laird would not want a scarred and hideous looking wife.

Nae. But he might kill ye instead.

But that would be no worse than spending the rest of her days as his wife. Clearly, he had no reservations about raising a hand to her. And then, there were the other things he would do with his hands.

Urgh!

She shivered and felt sick to her stomach at the very thought of it. If she did not take her own life now, she would certainly do so in the not-so-distant future.

“I am here with only a few men,” he said. “I couldnae take the chance o’ being seen. Laird Gunn has scouts everywhere after me useless men failed in their attempt at grabbing ye the first time. More soldiers will be arriving within the hour. We will

leave then.”

Evelyn did not reply. She was still contemplating throwing herself into the fire when Laird Keith sat down opposite her again.

I should have taken the chance when I had it.

“Tell me. Does yer betrothed ken ye are lying with his braither?” He smirked, grazing his eyes up and down her body.

The action made her cringe, and a shiver ran up her spine, yet, she could not hide her astonishment at his words.

“Och, aye. I ken far more than ye realize, Lady Sinclair. I will admit, I am a little disappointed tae discover ye’re nae the innocent I first thought ye were. But only a little. Does yer faither ken yer a brazen wench?”

“Ye are lying,” Evelyn retorted, trying for bravado. “Ye ken naething at all.”

“Och, I think ye’ll find I ken quite a lot about what goes on in that castle,” he drawled, clearly enjoying himself. “The maids there are easily swayed.”

Then her abduction made sense. Not that she had had much chance to think about it since she had woken. But the maid who had given her that drink was clearly working for Laird Keith, though, for the life of her, Evelyn could not imagine why. Audor was a good and honest laird. He treated all those who worked at the castle with dignity and respect. Why would someone be so disloyal? Why would she turn her back on her own clan?

For the next half hour, Evelyn was forced to listen to the laird espousing his great power and wealth. If nothing else, he was full of himself, and his arrogance seemed to

know no bounds as he recalled how he had plundered villages on his travels, and taken whatever he desired.

Just like he had taken Evelyn. Only, rather than her being an item of great value, like gold, or silver, she was a human being with a mind of her own. It was clear, as she listened to him, however, that he did not see her that way at all. She was just another item he had acquired. It made her worry about what he might do to her once he grew tired of her.

Ye will have ended yer life by then.

Nae. He's nae worth me life. I will fight. I will escape. I dinnae ken how, but I will. Me mother didnae die in vain. Me faither has suffered enough. I willnae let him hear o' me demise as well.

The laird was on yet another story of how wonderful and fierce he was, when sounds outside brought him to a halt.

“That will be me men. And about time,” he growled. “The sooner we get out o' this place, the better.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Donald, Killian, and Audor were already on their horses in the courtyard when Benedict joined them. A huge crowd of soldiers were also mounted on their horses and ready for battle, lined up as far back as the eye could see.

“Did ye get the map? he demanded.

Killian dug into his tunic and pulled out a piece of parchment. Leaning down to show Benedict, he said, “From what I could get out o’ her, the place is about an hour away.”

Benedict examined the crude drawing, with its patches of trees, and hills depicted as small raised lines.

“Dae we ken how many are there?” he asked.

It was Audor who replied this time. “She says she only saw six or seven men, but we ken there are more than that on our lands. Sure, was it nae six men who ye battled that day o’ the attack?”

“We killed all but two o’ them,” Killian said.

Audor looked thoughtful. “I still cannae imagine that’s all there is. But we have more than two hundred soldiers with us. They’ll be nae match fer us.”

By this time, Benedict had mounted his horse. “Good. Then let’s get moving. God

only kens what he's doing tae her," Benedict spat.

Audor gave him a pained glance, and then led the charge out of the castle gates. Benedict, Donald and Killian followed, and the sound of more than eight hundred hooves on the soft ground thundering behind, although Benedict hardly noticed. He was far too angry. In fact, the rage had not left him since the maid's confession.

He understood that Audor wanted to do things right, but that traitorous woman had led Keith directly to Evelyn. Granted, the fact she was being blackmailed with the life of her son gave her some leeway, and yet, Benedict's rage was so much, he struggled to care. Now, he needed someone to vent his anger upon, and when he got his hands on Laird Keith, he would tear the man from limb to limb.

He had thwarted the laird's attempt once before. That day, he had been filled with rage at what could have happened to Evelyn. Now the laird had succeeded, Benedict could hardly contain himself. Laird Keith had made a colossal mistake. A mistake he would soon find himself regretting.

But as the entourage continued further over the glens, his mind began to taunt him. He should never have left her. He should have put a guard at her door, not that such a thing would have been much use, given they had used the secret tunnel. He should have stayed with her.

On her wedding day? How were ye tae ken this would happen? This isnae yer fault.

But Benedict could not accept that.

This is me fault. I promised her I would protect her.

On and on his thoughts went, with no relief. He had thought, being in the castle, that she was safe. He had imagined they were all safe. Little did he know the lengths

Keith and his men would go to, to get what he wanted.

After riding for a half hour, Killian, wielding the map in his hands, yelled over to Audor. “We are closing in.”

Audor raised his hand and slowed his horse. As the signal was noted by those behind him, the huge gathering of soldiers slowed, and came to a final stop.

Killian handed over the map for Audor to see. “We’re here,” Killian said, pointing at it.

Audor then took several minutes to examine it intently. Once he seemed satisfied with his assessment, he handed the map back to Killian. Looking at Benedict, Killian and Donald, he said, “We ride in quietly from here.” Looking directly at Killian, he continued, “Tell yer men tae keep their eyes peeled. We cannae let the laird ken we’re coming. I cannae risk what he might dae.”

Audor threw a pained glance toward his brother, but Benedict was too dead set in his rage to care. He was furious at himself, furious at Laird Keith, furious at the whole damned situation.

They continued on slowly, as Audor instructed, and fifteen minutes later, Benedict spotted the roof of a house through the trees.

He pointed towards it. “That has tae be it,” he said to Audor, who now rode beside him.

Again, Audor lifted his hand to halt the men.

Waving Killian forward, he said, “We’ve found the house.” And pointing it out to Killian, he continued. “We cannae ken how many o’ Laird Keith’s men are here, but

it certainly isnae a great number. Even if it is twenty, we outnumber them twenty to one.”

“And if it’s more?” Donald said warily.

Audor gave the laird a steady look. “Me men are the best warriors in a hundred-mile radius, Donald. Believe me, we’re going tae get Evelyn back.”

Donald nodded, though his expression was more worry than certainty.

Audor then spoke once more to Killian. “Send three groups tae surround the house. Tell them that if they come upon Clan Keith’s men, they dinnae hesitate. Kill them where they stand. The laird and his men shouldnae be on this land. They ken the consequences. I want an end tae this.”

“Good,” Killian growled, before turning back to address the troops behind them.

“I want Keith,” Donald spat. “Dae ye hear? I want him. The man murdered me wife, and...” he hesitated. “And he might well have done the same tae me daughter,” the man croaked. “He’s mine.”

Audor and Benedict shared a look, before turning their attention back to Donald. While Benedict would have loved to be the man to slaughter the laird, he could hardly compare his wounds to Donald’s. The man had the right and deserved the chance to avenge the death of his wife. He had suffered greatly since her demise. It was only right that Laird Keith die by Donald’s sword.

“Very well,” Audor said. “So be it.”

“Benedict?” Donald growled, looking directly at him.

Benedict nodded. “Aye, Donald. I hear ye. But if ye lose yer chance, and I get mine, I’m taking it.”

Donald nodded. “That’s fair. But rest assured. I willnae.”

They watched Killian and most of the soldiers split off into three groups, heading to surround the house on all four sides. A group of about twenty soldiers remained with Audor and the group, and moving down the hill, they approached the trees that surrounded the house.

At the tree line, they dismounted and continued on foot. All with their swords drawn, ready to smite any man that they might meet.

After creeping through the wooded area for nearly ten minutes, and not coming upon any of Clan Keith’s men, the house came into view.

Silently, Audor ordered the soldiers to halt, while he moved a little closer to get a better look. When he returned not a minute later, he whispered, “I can only see two men on guard at the front. I imagine there are likely several more inside. The men on guard will be an easy and silent kill. It’s those inside I worry about.”

“Let me deal with them,” Benedict growled.

“We’ll all deal with them,” Audor replied. “This battle is a joint venture, Benedict. Everyone here wants the laird dead and Evelyn returned tae us.”

“Right, let’s go,” Benedict said, waving the soldiers forward.

Benedict slipped through the trees and moved around the right-hand side of the house followed by four soldiers. The idea was not to alert Laird Keith of their presence. They didn’t want the laird to react by killing Evelyn before they had chance to get to

her.

The guard paced back and forth in front of the house, and as he turned to start pacing the other way, Benedict launched out of the trees, grabbed the man by his mouth, pulled his neck back, and brought his huge sword across the soft flesh of his throat. The man went down with hardly a sound, and looking up, Benedict watched as Audor used the exact same move on the other one.

Killian and the other soldiers were bound to be somewhere close, and as though thinking about him had conjured some connection, Benedict heard the whistling sound Killian used to alert them of his presence.

“We’re good tae enter,” Benedict said to Audor and Donald when the three met at the front door.

Audor turned to the men with them.

“Remain here and ensure naeone, and I mean naeone, gets through this door.”

The men nodded, and forming a wall, they stood facing out into the trees, ready for whatever might come their way.

Benedict tried the handle of the front door and was surprised that it gave way under his touch. It creaked slightly as he pushed it open, but he ventured forward anyway.

Immediately, a guard stepped out of a room to his right, and without thinking about it, Benedict lifted his sword before the guard had a chance to reach him. He struck the guard across his body, slicing into his clothing and through to his flesh with ease.

Clearly, the other guards heard the ruckus, and two others suddenly appeared. Audor and Benedict battled them side by side, and soon enough, three of Laird Keith’s men

lay dead at their feet.

Without a word, Audor pointed through the house. He touched his ear, silently relaying that he had heard voices. Benedict and Donald nodded, and followed him down the narrow corridor.

Just as Audor was about to open the door, the sound of battle came from outside. There was a great roar of many voices. Far more than the few men they had left to guard the house. Clearly, the rest of the army had found Keith's men and were taking care of them.

With another nod to Donald, Audor grabbed the door handle, and flung the door open.

Evidently, they had not been quiet enough, for as the men piled into the room, they were met with Laird Keith, standing against the far wall with a dirk at Evelyn's throat. Benedict gasped, and yet, while this was hardly an ideal situation, he was relieved to see her alive. A quick scan of her body told him that, from what he could see, she remained unharmed. They had managed to get there in time.

"Stay back or I'll slit her throat," Alisdair spat.

"Ye're nae leaving this house with Evelyn, Alisdair," Audor growled. "Look at the situation. Ye're outnumbered three tae one."

"And ye think I'm going tae just release her and let ye kill me," the laird barked. "Dae ye think I'm stupid?"

"Listen," Audor said, nodding to the window. "Yer men are being slaughtered. Me army is with me, and they are fierce and many. There's nay escape."

“Just let her go,” Donald bellowed.

“Ye only have yersel’ tae blame fer this, Donald,” Alisdair spat back. “This is all yer own doing.”

Benedict watched Alisdair jerking about as he spoke, and then he noticed a small trickle of blood running down Evelyn’s neck. He was pressing the dirk against her so forcefully, he had already cut her.

The situation was a stalemate. They couldn’t approach for fear he would kill her, and he, not being a fool, would not let his hostage go, for he knew what would happen to him if he did.

Benedict caught Evelyn’s eyes as she gazed at him with a terrified expression. He wanted to tell her it would be all right, but instead, an idea came to him.

Looking at her intently, he moved his eyes swiftly down to the ground several times. At first, she seemed confused, but then, he saw the realization on her face. Imperceptibly, she nodded. And then, a second later, she twisted her neck, and letting her knees fold beneath her, she collapsed onto the floor.

Alisdair suddenly looked confused, but Donald wasted no time. Seeing his opportunity, he launched forward. Alisdair did not have time to unsheathe his sword, and yet, that didn’t stop him from battling back.

At that moment, Killian burst through the door, but Audor held him back. They were giving Donald what he wanted, but Benedict still remained ready to strike if the opportunity arose. Evelyn remained on the floor, trapped behind Alisdair and her father battling in such a small space. He wanted so badly to get to her, but he would just have to bide his time.

Twisting around the room, Alisdair thrust his dagger, and caught Donald in his side, the dirk plunging into the flesh.

“Argh,” Donald cried out, but recovering, he punched Alisdair hard, knocking him off his feet. The man stumbled and tumbled to the floor. A second later, Donald towered above him. Raising his sword, he screamed, “This is for Mary.”

And then he plunged the sword down into Alisdair’s heart, killing the man instantly.

Staggering towards Evelyn, Donald grabbed his daughter and hugged her tightly. “I’m so sorry, me dear. I’m so sorry I didnae protect ye.”

Donald then stumbled back against the wall, and sliding down it, collapsed as blood gushed from his side.

“Faither!” Evelyn screamed.

Immediately, Killian and Audor were at Donald’s side, while Benedict ran to Evelyn, grabbing her and holding her close to him, even as she continued to wail.

“It’ll be all right, Evelyn. It’ll be all right.”

In truth, and by the amount of blood he saw trickling from Donald’s wound, he had no idea if it would be all right. And yet, he had no other words. Wrapping her in his arms and feeling her safely in his embrace, relief flooded through his body.

She was alive.

She was safe.

She would never be taken from him again.

He would never allow it.

EPILOGUE

One week later...

It had been an epic battle that day, and just as Audor had instructed, there were no prisoners. His men had done him proud, for every single one of Laird Keith's men were slaughtered. While they had not seen many on their approach, Laird Keith had obviously sent for reinforcements, and more of his men had arrived after Audor, Donald and Benedict had entered the house to rescue Evelyn. That had been the loud sound of battle they had heard.

There were many killed, and it took several days to bury them. Those who had run and tried to escape had been hunted down and killed, for Audor was determined not to leave one single man of Clan Keith on his lands. Not then, and not ever.

Donald's wound had been tended to, if only superficially, before they could get him back to the castle and seen by the healer. The wound was deep, and not able to ride back, word was hurriedly sent back to the castle that they needed a carriage to transport him.

While Evelyn had sat with her father and waited for the carriage to arrive, Audor, Killian and Benedict had moved through the house. All the soldiers were dead, as was their leader, but there was one more thing that needed to be done. They had to find the maid's son.

They had discovered Sammy in a room at the rear of the house unconscious and almost gone. The three had stood there solemnly gazing down at the tiny frame of a

lad and took him immediately to the infirmary where thankfully he woke up six whole days later. They all thought Sammy was gone.

Only then, did Benedict feel truly sorry for the maid. He had been too consumed with rage and worry to acknowledge the predicament she had been put in. Wanting her son to live, she had done as she was told, believing that Laird Keith would keep his word and almost losing her son in front of her eyes. Those six days of torture, praying that Sammy would open his eyes, was a high price to pay for her betrayal, and later, he told Audor that the near death of her son was a punishment enough for her crimes.

Donald was hurriedly taken to the healer, and stripping his clothes, Dara immediately got to work. No matter how many times she was encouraged her to get some rest, Evelyn would not leave her father's side. She was not alone though, for upon hearing the news of her father's wound, Yvaine had rushed to be with her family.

While the sisters sat at their father's bedside during the night, Benedict had remained with them, settled in a chair across the room. There was no longer a threat, and yet, he just could not leave Evelyn on her own, even now that they were back inside the castle walls.

Perhaps he was still on alert. Perhaps he would remain on alert for some time. But being so close to losing her had triggered an overprotectiveness in him.

"Ye need tae rest yersel', Benedict," Killian had said when he came to see how Donald was doing.

Benedict had sat with his arms defensively crossed over his chest. "I can rest in this chair."

"Look at ye. Yer eyes are hanging out o' yer head. Dinnae be a fool. After a few hours o' sleep, ye can come back. Sure, I can stay here and keep an eye on things if

ye like.”

“I’m nae leaving,” he had replied firmly.

Clearly, Killian had seen his determination, and knowing he would not persuade Benedict, he had refrained from pushing him any further.

On the third day, Donald had been well enough to be moved back into the castle, and into his own bedchamber. While Evelyn and Yvaine settled in the room with him, and fussed over him, Benedict left their side. It was Donald’s private space and it felt too much of an intrusion.

But he had then seen Evelyn. He needed to see her. He needed her soft embrace to ease the pain he felt at what he had suffered not knowing if he would ever see her again. In one of the drawing rooms of the castle, she had sat on a chaise lounge, and he had lay with his head in her lap. Tenderly, she had stroked his hair, her gentle caress soothing his troubled soul.

“How is yer faither doing, me love?”

“He’s recovering, slowly but surely. He makes a bad patient though, fer we can hardly get him tae stay in bed.” She grinned down at him.

Benedict had given her a smile. “Yer faither is a warrior. Staying still fer so long is likely driving him mad.”

“He’s driving me mad,” she had laughed lightly.

He had gazed lovingly into her eyes. “Ye cannae ken how delighted I am tae hear ye laugh again. There was a moment there, when I kent ye’d been taken, when I thought I would never hear it again.”

“Well, I am here now. Safe and sound.” She had brushed her fingers through his hair. “The threat is gone, Benedict. Ye need tae try and come tae terms with that. I’m nae longer in any danger. In fact, naeone is in danger any longer. And yet, ye are guarding me like I’m tae be snatched at any second.”

“It’s only because I love ye, Evelyn,” he had murmured.

“I ken that,” she had said kindly. “And I love ye too. But I’m here, by yer side. And naething or no one can hurt me again.”

A week had now passed since the battle, and with Donald moving about, if only for limited periods of time, Evelyn and Benedict finally got to spend some time together.

They were wandering around the gardens, hand in hand, when a servant hurried over to them. “Laird Sinclair would like tae see ye in the laird’s study, sir.”

“Thank ye,” Benedict replied. But as the servant turned and hurried away, Benedict frowned. “Why does yer faither want tae see me?”

Evelyn smiled up at him. “Perhaps he wants tae thank ye fer rescuing me.”

Benedict shook his head. “He’s already done that, several times over the last few days. Something doesnae feel right.”

Perhaps he, too, had been affected by the mood across the castle, because Benedict’s mind whirled with dire thoughts.

“What if he’s changed his mind? What if he’s going tae tell me that I cannae marry ye?”

Evelyn frowned and shook her head. “Why on earth would he dae that? He has nae

reason, Benedict. If anything, me faither sees ye as a hero.”

“I’m nae a hero. Yer faither is the man who slaughtered the laird. Besides, Audor and Killian were there too. They did as much as I.”

“I have an idea,” Evelyn said playfully. “Why dinnae ye go and see him and find out?” She grinned.

Benedict smirked down at her, and then taking her cheeks in his hands, he lowered his face and softly kissed her lips.

“Fine. I will come and find ye when we’re done.” He turned and walked away, and then, turned back to her. “Dinnae go too far,” he warned.

Evelyn laughed a little. “I willnae.”

Even with Evelyn’s words of encouragement, Benedict still could not imagine any reason Donald would need to see him, and, while making his way through the corridors, that niggling doubt returned.

I dinnae care what he says. If he tells me he has changed his mind, then we will run away. We will elope. I will marry her without his permission. I have already nearly lost her once. There isnae a chance I’ll lose her again.

Upon reaching Audor’s study, Benedict took a deep breath, and then entered.

“Ah, here he is,” Donald said cheerfully.

All right. Maybe I’ve got this wrong. The man looks far too happy tae give me bad news.

“Come in, Benedict,” Audor encouraged with a gesture. “Come and join us fer a drink.”

When the men were settled, Donald once more, thanked the brothers for all they had done to rescue Evelyn.

“After all these years of battling that fiend, it was the two o’ ye that have finally given me release from the oppression o’ his threats toward me family. I will never forget that.”

“Well, Donald,” Audor replied, “that was the entire purpose o’ the union in marriage and the alliance. We were always going tae be there tae protect ye.”

“Aye, well, the union is the reason I wanted tae speak tae ye, Benedict.”

Benedict stiffened slightly, readying himself for an argument. He wasn’t losing Evelyn, no matter what.

“As ye ken, Evelyn is me oldest daughter, and o’ course, I dinnae have any sons. When ye marry Evelyn, the Sinclair name will eventually fade with her lineage.”

Donald took a deep breath, for his wound was still severe enough to cause him problems. “I propose then, if ye will agree tae it, that ye take the Sinclair name when ye marry.”

Benedict’s eyes widened at the suggestion. In all the scenarios he had imagined as he made his way to his brother’s study, he could not have imagined this one.

“It means then, after my demise, that ye will become the laird o’ Clan Sinclair.”

Even more stunned, Benedict sat there for several seconds, unable to speak. Looking

from Donald to Audor, he noticed his brother's wide grin, and wondered if the two of them had already discussed this in his absence. Whether or not they had, Audor was clearly pleased at Donald's suggestion.

"Donald," Benedict gasped, completely astonished at the lairds' offer. "I hardly ken what tae say."

"Well, it would please me greatly if ye would accept." Donald beamed at him.

Touched by the offer, Benedict nodded. "I would be honored, me laird. It would be a great privilege tae take the Sinclair name. Thank ye."

"Nay, Benedict. Thank ye. By doing me this honor, ye will keep the Sinclair lineage alive fer a little longer."

PROLOGUE

T orridon Inn, 1765

It was a habit they couldn't easily shake, even when there seemed to be no danger. Aaden and Gilchrist sat at the far end of the common area of the inn, their backs against the wall and nothing else between them and the rest of the patrons, like they always did in such establishments. One could never know where an enemy might lurk, though an inn in a small town was hardly the place to attract any serious threats.

The room smelled of ale and wine, the wooden tables sticky with spilled residue that the serving wenches' tattered rags could never clean entirely. The storm outside, the one which had forced them to pause their trip back home to Castle McDowell, still raged. The sound of the raindrops on the roof of the inn were so thunderous that not even the lively conversation inside was enough to fully drown it out. Although the room didn't seem so crowded to Aaden at first glance, every table seemed to be occupied, some of them only by lonely travelers and others by groups of people.

"Here's tae a successful job," Gilchrist said, raising his cup of wine in a toast. "We willnae want fer naething now that we have reached this agreement."

"We willnae want fer food, at least," Aaden pointed out. The Bairds, with their fertile lands, had been perhaps the most important allies for Clan MacDowell to secure and now that Gilchrist had managed to make this deal with them—food in exchange for manpower and security—there would be no concerns about their resources throughout the winter. "Ye did well. The role o' the laird suits ye."

Laughing, Gilchrist sipped his wine slowly, savoring it as though it was one of the bottles he imported from France and not what it truly was, which was closer to vinegar.

“I must still adjust,” Gilchrist said. “An’ there is still much tae dae. This may be the most important deal we have made so far, but it willnae be the only one.”

Despite what his friend claimed, Arden couldn’t imagine a better laird for the McDowell Clan. Ever since marrying Kyven McDowell, the daughter of the clan’s previous laird, Gilchrist had spent most of his waking hours working towards the betterment of their lands and their people, putting everyone else before himself.

It showed a little in the weariness in his eyes, the lids weighed down by several sleepless nights. Aaden hoped that now, at least, with the clan’s food for the winter secured, he could rest for a while and focus on his new family.

“Ye must adjust soon,” Aaden said, “‘afore the bairn comes, for there will be less time after.”

“Och aye,” said Gilchrist, and the mere mention of his unborn child brought a new warmth to his face, a brightness that eclipsed his exhaustion. “There are still a few months left, but I wish it were sooner. I wish tae meet me son.”

“Or daughter,” Aaden reminded him.

“Or daughter,” Gilchrist agreed with a smile. “An’ besides, it’s already getting tiring fer Kyven. I’m sure she is impatient tae give birth.”

“She is gettin’ big, isnae she?”

“Dinnae tell her that,” warned Gilchrist, with the kind of serious tone he usually

reserved for battle plans. “She is already angry she cannae see her feet an’ she will only continue tae grow. One wrong word an’ she’ll cut off yer head hersel’.”

Aaden laughed at the warning, imagining Kyven, pregnant as she was, trying to chase him around the castle. She could rope someone else into doing it, though; Aaden had no doubts about that.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said. “Though I’m sure if yer wife heard ye say that about her, she’d have yer head.”

“She’d be provin’ me point, then,” said Gilchrist. “An’ she wouldnae harm me. She loves me. Ye would understand if ye found a good lass fer yersel tae wed.”

This again, Aaden thought. Though he had always been adamant that he would never marry, it didn’t stop people from trying to change his mind. Gilchrist had been lecturing him on all the joys of marriage ever since he had married Kyven, and he wouldn’t take no for an answer. At most, he stopped bringing it up for a while, only to mention it again when Aaden had been lulled into a false sense of security, thinking he was safe from another such talk.

“Ye ken what I think about that,” Aaden said. “I like me freedom too much.”

That seemed to be the wrong thing to say. Gilchrist’s features arranged themselves in that serious look he got whenever there was something urgent to discuss, brows furrowing together and lips pursing into a thin line.

“Marryin’ Kyven didnae make me a prisoner,” he said. “As marryin’ a lass willnae make ye a prisoner. It gave me the biggest joys o’ me life. What will ye dae, Aaden? Will ye stay alone yer whole life?”

“I’m nae alone,” Aaden pointed out. He had Gilchrist. He had other friends. He could

easily manage without a wife.

“Ye ken what I mean,” Gilchrist insisted. “Ye need someone. Ye cannae keep everyone away.”

Aaden’s jaw tightened at Gilchrist’s words. His friend had always known Aaden liked women, but for a while he had thought it was a way for him to find some comfort after his father’s death, a way to drown his sorrows. Now that Aaden hadn’t changed at all, though, Gilchrist had begun to pester him once more.

Aaden didn’t want to talk about his father or the reasons behind his reluctance to marry. He had made peace with both those things. Losing his father in that ambush had been one of the most painful moments of his life, but there was no bringing him back. A wife couldn’t fill the void he had left behind. All Aaden could do was keep his memory alive and move on as best he could.

Still, he could understand why Gilchrist was so insistent. He worried, just as Aaden worried about him, no matter how well he was doing. It was in their nature to worry about each other.

“It’s alright,” he assured him. “I write me maither often, so I still have family. An’ I have ye.”

It was only part of the truth, but it would have to be enough for Gilchrist, as it was all Aaden was willing to share.

“With yer maither?” Gilchrist asked, surprised. “Are ye gettin’ tae ken her better, then? Will ye go an’ see her?”

“I cannae see her,” Aaden said.

“Surely, ye can. Where is she now?”

Aaden sighed, delaying his response by taking a large sip of wine. In the end, he looked at Gilchrist in the eye and said, “She is a courtesan. Where dae ye think she is?”

It wasn’t true, but it was the story everyone had been told. His father had never revealed his mother’s true identity to anyone but Aaden himself, and Aaden didn’t intend to expose her like this, not even to his friend.

Aaden had seen what love did to people. He had seen how his father had wilted before everyone’s eyes, loving the woman he could never have. What he knew of his mother told him that she, too, had never stopped grieving their lost love, spending her years yearning after his father.

It wasn’t that Aaden didn’t believe in love. He had seen it first-hand. Love was real and it was painful, and he was never going to go down that path of self-destruction. He would rather spend his life with a different woman every night, never once risking falling in love.

What he had said seemed to be enough to silence Gilchrist on the matter, at least temporarily. He gave Aaden a sympathetic look and a pat on the shoulder before he drained his cup and stood.

“We should sleep,” he said. “We must wake early on the morrow an’ head back.”

“Aye,” said Aaden. “But I think I’ll stay a while longer.”

His gaze scanned the room, looking for any women he could bring to his room before the night was over. Gilchrist didn’t need to ask why. He only gave him a roll of his eyes, though his smile was fond.

“Alright,” he said. “Good luck with yer hunt. I’m very glad I dinnae have tae dae this anymore.”

With that, he was gone, heading up the stairs to the room he had secured for the night, as Aaden returned to his search. He could speak to one of the serving wenches, he thought. They were both young and pretty, and they always fell for his charms.

But then again, who didn’t?

He let his gaze roam around the room for a while longer and that was when he spotted her: a young woman with long hair as dark as the night and a pair of blue eyes that pierced him like an arrow when they met his own for a brief second. She was sitting with another young woman, the two of them talking animatedly and paying him no mind, but Aaden wasn’t going to be discouraged by something as insignificant, not when that woman was the most beautiful creature he had laid his eyes on.

He could wait and so he did, sipping the rest of his wine slowly as he watched them, waiting patiently for the right moment. That moment came when the woman’s friend stood and left the room, but she remained, idly sipping her drink as she looked around her.

Taking his chance, Aaden stood and walked over to her table, sliding into the seat her friend had only just vacated.

“Good evenin’,” he said, his smile so bright it could outshine any candle in the room. “What is such a bonnie lass doin’ here alone? It’s very cold, after all, an’ they say it’s easier tae warm up when ye have another next tae ye.”

It was a bit bold and a bit silly, but every time Aaden used that line, he usually received at least a chuckle in return. He was good looking enough for his conquests to

need little coaxing, finding him charming in his audacity.

This woman didn't seem to, though. The glare she gave him sent a chill down his spine. It was colder than the rain outside the inn, as if she would have liked nothing more than to kill him where he sat.

"I was enjoyin' me own company until ye disturbed me," she said, her melodious voice carrying so much irritation that the contrast was dizzying. It was fine with him, though. Aaden liked a challenge, and he wasn't going to back down that easily. In the end, the reward of bedding her would be worth it.

"May I offer ye a drink, then, as an apology?" he said, already raising his hand to call for the serving wench when the woman stopped him.

"Thank ye, but nay. Ye see, I have this rare ailment. I cannae accept drinks from strangers without bein' nauseated an' vomitin' all over them."

Charmin' lass.

Pursing his lips in distaste, Aaden leaned a little closer over the table to rest his head on his hand. "Is that truly a way tae get a man's attention?"

"Aye, me biggest goal in life is tae get a handsome man's attention," the woman said with a roll of her eyes. She all but slammed her hands on the table and stood, pushing back her chair with a scraping sound that made Aaden recoil. "An' it obviously worked if ye're here, tryin' tae steal me affections."

The woman walked off, but before she could get too far, Aaden followed her. Perhaps he should simply accept defeat, but it wasn't often that a woman rejected him. In fact, he couldn't remember a time when it had happened. Some of them were difficult, but by the end of the night, they always ended up in his bed.

“Are we headin’ tae me chambers or yers?” he asked, deciding that boldness was the way to go with this woman. She, too, was bold, after all, having no regard for what was polite.

The woman came to an abrupt halt and turned around to look at him, giving him a smile that was all teeth. “Ye should certainly wait fer me in yer chambers,” she said, and then turned around just as swiftly, once more heading for the door.

Aaden couldn’t let it go just yet, though. It intrigued him, how feisty she was, how quick to respond, the insults tumbling one after the other out of her lips. Aaden had never met such a spirited woman before and something stirred inside him, a kind of insistent, irresistible desire for more.

He caught up with her just past the door, grabbing her arm to stop her and pull her close, their bodies flush together. Leaning even closer, lips brushing over the shell of her ear, he whispered to her.

“I can give ye pleasure like ye’ve never had ‘afore,” he said. “I can take ye tae places ye’ve never reached.”

The woman turned her head so that their lips were almost brushing. Just when Aaden thought he finally had her in his grasp, she said, “The only place ye can take me is hell, I’m sure.”

Aaden couldn’t help but laugh at that, even if it was at his own expense. As the woman made to leave once more, he let his hand glide down her arm and then laced their fingers together, stopping her once again.

Suddenly, she spun around, the glare returning in her eyes. “Dae ye even ken me name?”

For a moment, Aaden wracked his brain, trying to remember if she had told him. In the end, he only shrugged. “Ye can tell me while ye moan mine.”

In a flash, the woman had him pinned against the wall, a small, sharp blade pressed to his neck. The speed and strength behind the movement caught Aaden by surprise enough for him to get trapped by this woman who was much smaller than him, his heart racing behind his ribs, the breath caught in his throat. Under the moonlight, her features were just as sharp—a small, straight nose, prominent cheekbones, and a high, regal forehead, all of them blending together to leave an impression of danger.

Aaden would be lying if he said he wasn’t more intrigued than ever.

“Perhaps yer depraved words work fer other lasses, but I’m nae them,” the woman hissed, lips curling back to bare her teeth. “I would never share yer bed, even if ye were the last man in the Highlands.”

In the distance, Aaden heard a voice, something that the woman heard as well. Her head snapped to the side, fingers tightening around the handle of her blade.

“Lilith!”

Over the sound of the rain and the thunder, Aaden couldn’t hear what the voice was calling, but it seemed to have an immediate effect on the woman. Just as quickly as she had attacked him, she pulled back and was gone, her quick footsteps disappearing down the street. Aaden didn’t try to pursue her this time. Instead, he let his head fall back with a sigh, fingers tracing the skin where she had pressed her blade.

Perhaps he hadn’t heard her name, but he would never forget that face—the face of the first woman to ever reject him.

CHAPTER ONE

MacEwan Castle. One year later.

The castle was just as Aaden remembered it, though it had been very long since he had last stepped foot on MacEwan land. It towered over the hill, stretching up to a grey sky, a colossal structure of stone that was as majestic as it was intimidating. Like all castles, it did not only speak of wealth; it also spoke of power.

When he reached the castle gates, Aaden handed the paper he had been clutching in his hand all the way there to one of the guards, who proceeded to have the door opened for him. Riding inside, the few memories Aaden had of the place rushed back to him. There was that oak he had climbed as a child, falling from the lowest branches and scraping his knees. There were the stables where he had first learned to care for his horse, and the kitchens where the maids would give him apples and sweets in secret.

He wondered how many of those maids still worked there. He wondered if any of them would remember him now that he was grown, now that his face was covered by a short beard and he would no longer be looking up at them with wide, mischievous eyes.

Despite everything, Aaden had missed the place. He only wished he could have returned under different circumstances.

The invitation he had handed to the guard outside had come as a surprise. He never expected to return to this place, given that his uncle didn't want to even look at him.

He knew there was only one reason why he would ever call Aaden there; it meant he wanted something from him and whatever that was, it couldn't possibly be good.

After jumping off his horse and passing the reins to the stable boy, another servant came to fetch him. Aaden followed the young man inside and soon found that even all those years later, he didn't need a guide. He remembered where everything was, the details slowly coming back to him.

Still, he doubted his uncle would allow him to roam freely around the castle. If anything, Aaden was surprised that no guard was following him, but then again, there was no real danger for Ruadh. His uncle was the laird of the clan and as long as Aaden was in there alone, he was powerless, even with all the weapons he carried around his waist.

Weapons, he noted, that no one had taken from him.

They came to a halt in front of a large door that Aaden identified as leading to Ruadh's study. The servant announced him, and Aaden walked in to see his uncle there, sitting behind his grand desk, surrounded by all his riches: colorful tapestries, thick rugs, heavy, dark furniture that had a presence even more imposing than the man's own.

Naturally, Ruadh had gotten older since Aaden had last seen him, but the change was startling to Aaden. He must have been in his early sixties, his face lined by the passage of time, his stature shorter than Aaden remembered—though that was perhaps because Aaden had been a child last time they had been in the same room. Even so, his eyes were just as blue and the black of his hair persisted even at his age, the only traces of grey appearing at his temples.

There was no warmth in his greeting when he acknowledged Aaden.

“Sit,” Ruadh said, gesturing towards the chair by his desk, but Aaden preferred to stand. When he didn’t obey, Ruadh simply shrugged. “As ye wish.”

“Why did ye call me here?” Aaden asked. He had no desire to pretend there was any love lost between them. Ruadh hated him and no matter what Aaden said, no matter how politely he behaved, the man would never change his mind. “Why now, after all these years in exile?”

For a few moments, Ruadh was silent, simply observing Aaden as if seeing him for the first time.

“The last time I saw ye, ye were only a bairn,” he said instead of answering the question. “It truly has been a long time.”

“The last time I saw ye, ye were a coward who sent me an’ me faither tae exile,” said Aaden, teeth gritting together.

There was nothing else Ruadh could do to him and so Aaden didn’t feel a need to hold back his venom. The man deserved much more than that, but Aaden would have to be satisfied with the little he could get now that he had finally confronted the man after so many years.

His scathing words earned him a glare, but nothing more than that. Ruadh was calculating, chilling in his cruelty. He would not lose his temper because of a mere comment, but he would make sure to retaliate sooner or later.

“Ye ken very well why I had tae send ye tae exile,” he said.”

“There were other ways,” Aaden insisted. “Ye didnae have tae send me faither away from his home. Ye didnae have tae send me away from me maither.”

“What would ye have me dae? Allow her bastard son tae live under the same roof as me own son?” Ruadh asked. There was an edge to his voice now, his cruelty seeping through the cracks. He stood too, the two of them glaring at each other over the desk. “Ye should be glad I didnae kill ye an’ me traitor o’ a braither.”

“He was as good as dead an’ ye ken that,” Aaden said. “Ye ken he never recovered from what ye did tae him.

Ruadh’s eyes narrowed as he looked at Aaden. He circled his desk and came to stand in front of him, leaving nothing but a few scant inches between them. “Yer faither tried tae steal me wife from me. Yer faither was a traitor tae his own braither. An’ yer maither..., yer maither spread her legs fer him, did she nae? An’ here ye are.”

Aaden could have killed his uncle that very moment. Perhaps he should have swung at him least, punching him for speaking about his mother like that, but that would have only caused him more trouble. He was already in plenty of trouble as it was, since Ruadh had called him there.

“Where is she?” he asked instead. “I wish tae see her.”

“Dinnae forget this, Aaden,” Ruadh said as he headed back to his chair, sinking in its plush leather. “Janice is me wife an’ me son’s maither. She is naething but an aunt tae ye. Ye will dae well tae forget she ever birthed ye.”

“Ye could have let her marry me faither,” Aaden insisted. “Ye could have let them be happy. Ye kent they loved each other but ye still married her.”

“I willnae entertain this any longer,” Ruadh said, effectively putting an end to the conversation. Aaden knew there was nothing to say to provoke him into discussing it further.

“Fine,” Aaden spat. “Then perhaps ye wish tae tell me why ye invited me here. Surely, it wasnae so ye could see me.”

That drew a laugh out of Ruadh, a short, humorless sound. “It wasnae an invitation. It was an order. With me brother gone, ye must repay his debt.”

“There is nae debt tae repay,” Aaden said. “Any debt he owed ye, he paid by spendin’ all his life in grief.”

Another laugh, this even colder than the last. “Ye’re as insolent as ever, I see. But that’s alright. I will teach ye what it means tae have honor. Listen carefully. Ye are tae wed Lilith Stewart, the first-born daughter o’ Laird Stewart. Evander wishes tae marry his youngest, but her faither willnae wed her if Lilith isnae wed first.”

Aaden could hardly believe his ears. That was why Ruadh had called him there? What could have possibly possessed him and make him think he would do such a thing for him.

“Why should I care if yer son wishes tae marry this lass?” he asked. “An’ why dae ye need me? I’m sure the first-born o’ Laird Stewart will have many suitors.”

“Och aye,” Ruadh said. “They both dae. The young one, Freya, she wishes tae wed Evander. But Lilith doesnae want any o’ her suitors. She is said tae be... difficult.”

Aaden couldn’t wrap his head around any of this. The most he could do was stand there in disbelief, mouth hanging slightly open as he tried to figure out what else Ruadh had planned for him. Surely, a marriage wasn’t the only thing he had in mind, especially to the first-born daughter of a laird.

“Why doesnae Evander wed Lilith?” he asked. “Surely, that is the wisest option fer him. Why would ye want me tae be the laird o’ the Stewart Clan when ye could make

him?”

“As I said, Lilith is difficult,” Ruadh repeated. “Evander wants a softer lass. An’ if ye think ye will have any real power, I’d suggest ye reconsider it. Perhaps ye would become the laird once her faither dies, but ye will dae as I say.”

That, of course, was only natural, Aaden thought. Ruadh would never relinquish the power he could have, even if he didn’t marry his own son to the heir. He was a cunning man. He would do anything to find a way to exert control over another clan, so Aaden was hardly surprised he had planned something like this. “An’ how will ye enforce that? Why should I follow yer orders?”

For a moment, Ruadh hesitated. Then, he drew a deep breath and raised a hand to comb it through his hair. “Because I have yer maither,” he said. “An’ if ye dinnae obey me, I will kill her.”

He has her imprisoned.

“Where is me maither?” Aaden said, taking a few steps towards the desk before going still once more. “Where are ye keepin’ her?”

“In a place only I ken,” Ruadh said calmly. “An’ ye will never find her.”

Rage coursed through Aaden’s veins, his face turning an ugly shade of red. He was trembling from head to toe, fists clenched tightly by his sides as he glared at Ruadh, the anger having no place to go. What could he do? He couldn’t kill the man and get out of there alive. He even doubted he could get as far as killing him. Even though there had been no guards outside his door when Aaden had first walked in, that didn’t mean there were no guards outside now, waiting for their laird to give the word. His uncle was no fool. He knew Aaden would be enraged by this and he had certainly made sure to have protection nearby.

“Why are ye doin’ this?” Aaden asked, his voice barely a whisper. “What will ye gain from this?”

“Gold, o’ course,” Ruadh said. “I will receive the dowry fer both weddings. An’ then, with time, power. Imagine it, me son an’ me nephew married tae the two Stewart lasses. It’s an alliance that will never break. An’ dinnae act as though ye will receive naething out o’ this. Ye will be a laird one day. In name only, perhaps, but ye’ll still live a nice, comfortable life. An’ ye’ll have a bonnie wife. They say Lilith Stewart is a very bonnie lass. She’s certainly more than a bastard like ye deserves, so ye should be grateful I am givin’ her tae ye.”

Before Aaden could say anything else, Evander entered the room. Though it had been years since they had last seen each other, Aaden recognized him immediately, and by the way the other paused by the door, looking at him with clear surprise etched on his face, he recognized him, too.

They looked alike, the two of them. They both shared their mother’s golden hair, the bow of her lips, the shape of her eyes. They even shared some resemblance through their fathers, inheriting their common feature: a strong, straight nose.

“Cousin,” Evander said, lips stretching into an easy smile. “When did ye come tae visit?”

Cousin.

Naturally, Read hadn’t told Evander about their true relation. Evander still thought they were only cousins, not half-brothers, and as much as Aaden wanted him to know the truth, he would keep Ruadh’s secret for the sake of their mother.

“Just now,” Ruadh said before Aaden could respond. “I was tellin’ him about Lilith an’ Freya. Aaden has agreed tae wed Lilith.”

Aaden didn't remember ever making such a promise, but what other choice did he have? Ruadh had his mother. He could kill her at any moment and then Aaden would have lost the only real family he had left. He couldn't let him touch her. He couldn't let him take her life, too, after everything else he had taken from her.

"I saw Freya a few months ago when I went tae a clan meetin' at Stewart Castle," Evander said, coming to stand next to Aaden. "I already ken she wants me. She tried everythin' in her power tae get me attention an'... well, she did. I would have kissed her, too, had it nae been fer her meddlin' sister. She kept trailin' after Freya, remindin' her tae be proper. But that's alright. I have been writin' tae her ever since an' I've done me best tae make her fall fer me."

"I'm sure it wasnae difficult fer ye," said Ruadh. "These lasses are so easily swayed by sweet words."

"They truly are," Evander said, and both of them laughed, the sound filling the large room. They had a similar laugh, deep and booming, like a solid thing. "All I had tae dae was promise her I would love her forever an' she was ready tae believe anythin' I told her."

Aaden looked at the two of them with disgust as he took a few steps back, putting some space between him and his brother. He didn't want to be there. Had it not been for his mother, he would have never even come.

"Lilith is very bonnie, ye ken," Evander said, echoing his father's prior words. "But ye should be careful. They call her the Snow Lass because she's so frigid. Nae one has managed tae get tae that cold heart o' hers."

"Ye will both visit Stewart Castle soon," Ruadh said, interrupting his son. "Laird Stewart is acceptin' the suitors, so Aaden, ye can go an' charm Lilith while Evander speaks with the laird about Freya's hand. An' ye are nae tae fail. It will be most

beneficial tae all o' us if Lilith chooses ye."

Aaden's first instinct was to refuse, but he had no choice. There was no point in arguing now, not when both he and Ruadh knew he would do as he was told. His uncle had him under his control now. There was nothing Aaden could do as long as he kept threatening his mother.

Looking between the two men, Aaden couldn't help but wonder how everything had come to this. He, who never wanted to marry, was now being forced into this marriage. The only good thing about it all was that there would be no love involved. That gave him some peace of mind, at least.

Besides, he was Aaden MacEwan, the womanizer. How difficult could it be to seduce this girl?

CHAPTER TWO

R uadh's POV

Seeing Aaden after all this time was nothing but jarring, but Ruadh knew how to keep his emotions to himself. The boy looked so much like Evander, so much like the mother they shared that Ruadh's self-control had almost slipped upon laying eyes on him. He resembled both Janice and his traitor of a father, a cruel reminder of their betrayal.

Janice was always meant to be his. Love had little, if anything to do with it. She had been promised to him and his brother never had any right to steal her.

Watching Aaden and Evander as they rode north towards Castle Stewart from the window of his study, though, was a good reminder that, in the end, Ruadh had gotten what he wanted. He wasn't a weak, docile man like his brother. What he wanted, he took either by persuasion or by force and this time, it would be no different.

"Forgive me, me laird, but may I ask why ye decided tae invite yer nephew here after all these years o' exile?" one of his chieftains, Bram, asked. He was near Ruadh's age, but where Ruadh's hair was still dark, Bram's had turned a silvery grey. The two of them had grown up in the castle, but Ruadh couldn't claim they had been brought up together, despite being of similar age and status. To him, friendships had always been an elusive thing.

"I have me reasons," Ruadh said, his gaze never once leaving the pair of horses and their riders until they had disappeared down the path.

“It only seems strange tae me that ye would invite the son o’ the traitor here tae hand him a bride an’ a clan o’ his own,” Bram said. The other four men of his council mumbled their agreement, though none of them expressed their concerns quite as readily as Bram. “His faither conspired against ye.”

“Aye,” another of his men, Athol, said. He, too, was an older man, though he still retained much of his younger strength, towering over everyone else in the room. “What if he turns out tae be a traitor as well? What if he conspires with an enemy clan like his faither did? He may even use Clan Stewart tae achieve his goals if he marries the Stewart lass.”

“Dae ye take me fer a fool?” Ruadh asked, his patience quickly draining, having to explain himself to his council. They didn’t know everything about Aaden. Ruadh had never told them what his father had truly done. He had never told anyone about Aaden’s true origins and he never would. Doing so would only humiliate him in front of everyone’s eyes. “We are in a dire position an’ ye ken that better than anyone. We need power. We need gold. An’ Clan Stewart has both these things.”

“Why willnae ye wed Evander tae Lilith Stewart, then?” asked Bram. “She is the heir. She is the one yer son must wed.”

“Evander doesnae have the taste fer lasses like Lilith Stewart. The younger lass, Freya... she can be manipulated. She is better fer Evander,” Ruadh said with a small shrug. What he truly meant was that his son didn’t have the strength to control or even charm a woman with such a reputation, though he would never admit that to his council. As much as he liked to brag, Evander’s success with women was limited to those who were meek and easily impressed. A woman like Lilith Stewart was bound to reject him if not bite off his head.

“But this is a matter of strategy,” Bram pointed out. “It matters little if he desires her.”

Ruadh's patience was wearing thin. He wished he didn't have to spell everything out for his men, but if they refused to think for themselves, then he had to do it for them.

"Once I have the gold from both arrangements, I will have Aaden and Lilith killed, an' then Evander can take the lairdship with Freya by his side."

Ruadh spoke casually, the murder of his nephew and of his young bride leaving no impression on him. He had been planning this for a long time. In fact, this wasn't the first time he would attempt to kill Aaden. While his brother lived, Ruadh had kept his promise to let Aaden live, but since his death, he had seen no reason to hold up his end of the bargain. Ivor was dead. He could do nothing to save his precious son.

It was only bad luck that Ruadh hadn't managed to. With Aaden under the protection of Clan MacDowell, any attack on his life was easily thwarted, as any direct assault would be too dangerous. The MacDowell Clan was too powerful and the last thing Ruadh wanted was to risk going to war with them because of their protégé. But once he was in Castle Stewart, perhaps Ruadh would finally manage to get rid of him. There was no one there who would strive to keep him safe and alive.

"Ye'll kill them both?" Bram asked, raising a curious eyebrow. "Isnae that..."

Bram didn't finish his sentence, but Athol did it for him. "Cruel?"

"Aye, I suppose it is," Ruadh said, unbothered by the accusation. It was true, after all. His plan was cruel but also necessary. "But what other choice dae we have? Aaden cannot be allowed tae take control of the Stewart Clan. Evander must become the laird an' the only way fer him tae dae that is if Aaden an' Lilith are dead. Her faither willnae suspect a thing. He doesnae ken about me braither's betrayal. All he kens is that Aaden is me nephew an' naturally, I will be devastated tae lose him, as he will be devastated tae lose his daughter. Then, Evander will wed Freya as a way fer both our clans tae move forward. It will be a joyous occasion after all the grief."

The five men in his council looked at him with doubt clearly etched in their features, Bram and Athol more so than the other three. Ruadh had made up his mind, though, and he would do anything to convince his council it was the best way forward.

“Well? Why are ye starin’ at me?” Ruadh asked, spreading his arms wide as a smile stretched over his lips. “Dae ye have any better ideas?”

No one spoke for several minutes, but then Bram said, “We will find a better idea. I dinnae think this is a wise plan, me laird. Lilith Stewart... she’s an innocent lass. We cannae simply kill her!”

“I agree,” Athol said, standing from his chair. “Besides, we cannae be certain her faither willnae find out the truth. We cannae risk this. It is better if Aaden weds Freya an’ Evander weds Lilith. This is how it should be.”

Frustrated, Ruadh slammed his fist on his desk, the tray that held his cup of wine and the pitcher rattling with the force of it. “I already told ye that Evander is tae wed Freya. That decision is final. Naething ye can say will change it.”

Athol and Bram exchanged a glance, seemingly not knowing what else to say that could make Ruadh change his mind. Ruadh hoped that was the case.

“Is there anyone else here who disagrees?” he asked his other three men as he raised an eyebrow in a silent challenge.

There was only a moment of hesitation before all three men shook their heads. “He is the son o’ a traitor,” one of them said. “An’ we must dae what we can.”

“But the lass?—”

Ruadh held up a hand, stopping Bram before he could say another word. “Tragic

things happen every day. Her death is necessary or I wouldnae even consider it. Dae ye think o' me as so cruel?"

There was no response from Bram or anyone else.

"Besides," Ruadh continued, "three out o' five are in favor. We shall proceed with the plan an' by the end o' it all, ye will all see this was the only way."

"Aye, me laird," the men said in a chorus, much to Ruadh's pleasure. Now that he had the support of his council as well, there was only one thing left to do—put the plan in motion.

"Evander will be sendin' us letters often. I have instructed him tae send us updates on Aaden an' the Stewart lass." Once again, Ruadh looked out of the window, though Aaden's and Evander's figures had long disappeared beyond the horizon. There was nothing but the stretch of the valley below them, the green of the forest that spread towards the north. "Soon, it will all be done soon."

He would finally have everything he had worked so hard to get; not only gold and power, but also revenge. The bastard spawn of his cheating wife and his traitorous brother would finally meet his end.

CHAPTER THREE

It was an uncharacteristically balmy day, though the sky was a steely grey. Still, it was the perfect opportunity for Lilith to practice her archery and she stood near the edge of the courtyard, away from any wandering guards and servants, throwing arrow after arrow at the three trees she had used as targets ever since she was a child. It was a finicky job—despite the comfortable temperatures of the day, there was a breeze that she had to account for as she fired the arrows, her mind tasked with a series of complex calculations each time.

She liked the challenge, though. This was the only way for her to perfect her shooting.

Behind her, Freya sat with one of their maids, painting. The poor girl, Fiona, was being subjected to a relentless questioning, too, Freya asking her question after question about boys. It sounded like torture, to Lilith at least, so perhaps she was only projecting. Fiona, after all, was answering quite willingly, she and Freya giggling.

“All the lasses here love Cameron,” Fiona said and Lilith couldn’t help but snort in amusement as she readied her next arrow. It didn’t surprise her at all to find out Cameron Baxter, a young yet accomplished warrior of the Stewart Clan, was popular among the maids. He was handsome, kind, and most importantly, hopelessly oblivious. A girl could kiss him on the lips and he still wouldn’t know she was interested in him or even how to speak to her.

Then again, he wasn’t interested in them. He only seemed interested in the one woman who saw him as nothing but a friend—Freya. Ever since Lilith could

remember, he had stared at her with such longing that she couldn't help but feel sorry for her sister's lack of interest.

"Cameron?" Freya asked, sounding surprised. "But he's so..."

Meek? Timid?

"Lamblike," was the word Freya settled on, much to Lilith's amusement. Her sister didn't seem to understand that the very thing she didn't like in Cameron was precisely what women like Fiona wanted. Not all of their maids had begun their service in their castle. Many of them had served other, much more cruel lairds before. They knew what it was like to be in their mercy, in the mercy of their sons and their men.

"He is kind," Fiona said. "An' that is enough."

"Who is?"

Cameron's voice startled all three of them, and Lilith, along with Freya and Fiona, turned around to see him approach along with their father, Thomas. Fiona bowed at him as Lilith walked over to them, trying to suppress an amused smile.

"Faither," Freya said, completely ignoring Cameron's question. "Takin' a walk without me?"

With a chuckle, Thomas laid a gentle hand on Freya's shoulder. "Ye seemed busy enough tae me. But nay, I came tae tell ye tae prepare fer the suitors. They will arrive in a few days an' I want ye tae be on yer best behavior."

Lilith knew his words were meant for her and her only. Freya, always the perfect maiden, didn't need to be reminded to act like a lady. It was only Lilith who seemed

to have a problem with it, as though there was a strange fault in her blood that destined her to be an embarrassment to their family. It was how it had always been—her beautiful dresses stained by grass and mud when she was a child, the pale skin she was instructed to keep unmarred always covered in cuts and bruises and uneven, red splotches from the sun that never quite seemed to turn into a proper tan. She didn't fall from trees or play in the mud anymore, but her hands were rough and calloused from her archery and her needlework was, according to her governess at least, atrocious.

She was lucky to have a father like Thomas. Someone else may have tried to beat her into submission a long time ago, but Thomas not only indulged her, he often even encouraged her. This was the only matter on which he insisted there was no other way and Lilith had to do as she was told.

She had to entertain the suitors. She had to choose one of them.

“Will Evander MacEwan come?” Freya asked, suddenly thrown into a frenzy of activity as she stood and gathered her painting supplies, tasking Fiona with holding half of it. She already seemed to know the answer to her question, though she still waited for their father to speak, lips stretching into a wide grin.

“Aye, I have received word that he will come,” their father said.

“I must find a dress,” Freya said, gathering what was left of heir paints and rushing off, Fiona following close behind. As she left, Cameron turned to look at her with such sorrow that Lilith couldn't help but feel sorry for him. Out of all the women, many of whom would happily throw themselves at his feet, Cameron had fallen in love with the one who never even spared him a

glance.

Ever since meeting Evander MacEwan, Freya had decided he was the man she wanted to marry, despite Lilith's warnings that he didn't seem genuine. Like Freya, Lilith had only met him once, but where Freya saw charm and appeal, Lilith saw an overconfident, philandering boy.

With Freya gone, though, Lilith could tell her father precisely what she thought about this whole charade. The only reason why she held her tongue in front of her sister was because she didn't want to dampen her excitement.

"Faither, ye ken what I think about this," she told him, placing her bow by her feet to rest her hands on her hips. "I've told ye 'afore, I dinnae wish tae wed."

This was far from the first time they had had this conversation and it showed in her father's weariness. Lilith was just as weary of it. She didn't want to argue with him, but what choice did he leave her when he insisted that she had to marry?

She couldn't claim there were no good men out there. Cameron was a prime example of a good man who could make a very good husband for Freya, if only she was perceptive enough to notice him. Most of the men she had met who could be potential partners, though, were nothing but mindless, controlled by their appetites, or cruel, only wishing to subjugate their wives, and Lilith wasn't interested in either of those things. Besides she, too, would make a terrible wife. Though she knew men were attracted to her appearance, she also knew she lacked the mild-mannered, sweet disposition of a proper lady. The only reason a man could want her was her status as the heir of a powerful clan or her beauty.

"An' I've told ye that this isnae negotiable," her father insisted, but then his tone softened as he closed the distance between them, placing both hands on her shoulders. "Ye're all grown now. Ye must find a husband, Lilith. I willnae always be here?—"

“Faither,” Lilith chastised, but Thomas only shook his head.

“Listen tae me,” he said. “I willnae always be here. When I’m gone, I wish tae ken that ye have someone by yer side, someone who makes ye happy. Dae ye ken what I fear with ye?”

“What?” Lilith said, indulging him.

“That ye’re so independent, ye’ll end up alone.”

Lilith couldn’t help but roll her eyes. She appreciated her father’s concern, but she didn’t understand it. For one, he was neither that old nor ill and so he had no reason to think that he would be gone soon. Even when old age took him, though, Lilith would still have Freya. She would still have her clan. They were all she needed in her life.

She had thought her father, at least, would understand. He knew what it was like to have loved and lost. He understood that pain better than anyone.

“I promise ye, I’m nae alone now an’ I willnae be alone in the future,” Lilith said. “Dinnae fash, Faither. I am content.”

With a sigh, Thomas let his hands fall from Lilith’s shoulders and looked over his own at Cameron, as if he was silently asking for his help. Cameron, though, only gave a small shrug. Out of all the people her father could have asked for vocal support in a private matter such as this, Cameron was perhaps the least useful.

“Well?” Thomas prompted. “Tell her somethin’.”

“What should I tell her, me laird?” Cameron asked. “I fear Lilith has already made up her mind.”

Lilith only smiled at her father. “See?” she said. “He understands.”

Much to her chagrin, her father’s expression hardened, the way it always did when he had to force something on his daughters—reluctantly and with great effort. “There is naething else tae be done. The suitors are comin’ an’ ye must choose one o’ them. Surely, ye’ll find one who is tae yer likin’! There will be so many lads here. Ye can have anyone ye want.”

Lilith had to resist the urge to roll her eyes once more, but she supposed it could be worse. Her father could be forcing her to marry someone she didn’t want at all. At least now she had a choice, no matter how small.

An’ if I’m lucky, perhaps I can avoid a husband entirely.

How she would do that, Lilith didn’t yet know. She didn’t have much time to find out, what with the suitors already being on their way to Stewart Castle, but perhaps there would be a chance for her to delay any betrothal until there was no interest left from the other side. Surely, not many suitors would be willing to wait so long, even for the Stewart heir.

“Fine,” she said in the end, a heavy sigh escaping her lips. “I will welcome the suitors, Faither.”

If anyone could handle a room of rowdy suitors, it was her.

CHAPTER FOUR

The road to Stewart Castle had been long; too long, in fact, for Aaden's liking. For two days, he and Evander had been travelling north, spending the night in small towns where Evander got himself acquainted with the local women and Aaden tried to come up with some sort of plan to get out of this mad situation his uncle had put him in.

If only Aaden had the luxury of time. He, too, would have found a nice girl or two to spend his nights with and he was certain he would have had more luck than Evander, though he had managed to have his fun as well. Perhaps philandering was in their blood after all, even if Evander wasn't as successful in his pursuits as Aaden.

At least they would soon be reaching Castle Stewart and then Aaden would be too busy with Lilith Stewart to pay Evander any attention. Still, it was a miserable day, a light rain falling from the grey clouds above ever since dawn, enough to irritate him but not enough to delay their travels. Through it all, Evander had not stopped talking since they had left the inn.

"We should visit that town again on the way back," he said, his tone almost wistful. "Ye rarely see lasses as bonnie as those."

Is that all ye think about, cousin?

Ruadh's influence seemed to be the only thing that had helped Evander get to where he was, courting the daughter of one of the most powerful lairds of the area. Had he been born anything other than his father's son, Evander would surely have spent his

days drinking and bedding women with little ambition for anything else. Or perhaps a harder life would have taught him a lesson or two. As it was, he was too spoiled, too coddled. He had never had to work for anything.

However, Aaden was glad to find out he didn't seem to share his father's cruelty. He was a rude and cocky fool, but he held no malice in his heart. If anything, he always bore a smile.

"Did ye bed one o' them?" Evander asked, despite Aaden's prayers that he would finally stop talking. "A lad like ye, I'm sure ye have plenty o' lasses offerin'. Ye should have joined me last night. One o' the servin' wenches had her friends there. I could have spared one or two fer ye."

Aaden turned to give Evander a tight-lipped smile. "How very generous o' ye."

Evander scrutinized him for a moment, as though he was trying to come to a decision. "I never ken if ye mean what ye say."

For a few moments, Aaden was silent, contemplating whether he should tell Evander precisely what he thought of him or if he should rather hold his tongue. In the end, the desire to make him shut his mouth won.

"It isnae proper tae speak about lasses like that," he said with a weary sigh. "A gentleman doesnae talk about his conquests."

Laughing as though Aaden had told him a joke, Evander looked at him in disbelief. "Dae ye truly think that? What does it matter? They were naething but maids an' farm lasses, they're lucky tae spend a night with me. Dinnae fash, I willnae talk about Freya like this... well, nae in front o' her, at least."

Aaden wished he could simply disassociate himself from Evander, but everyone

would know they were cousins. If he was going to be acting like this while the two of them tried to court the sisters, then Aaden feared Evander would cause a problem for him. What if Lilith heard him talk like this about her sister? What if rumors began to spread about Evander's behavior? Some philandering was excused, of course, but this gathering was meant to lead to a betrothal, and he had to at least pretend to be loyal to his future wife.

Is this how Gilchrist thinks o' me when he sees me with a different lass every night? Does he think I'm a fool like me cousin?

The thought unnerved him more than he wanted to admit. He didn't want anyone to view him like that, let alone his best friend. Maybe he needed to apologize for all the trouble he had put Gilchrist into, having to make excuses to strange women for Aaden's libertine behavior.

"Ye must be kind tae her," Aaden told him, pinning him with a serious, firm gaze. "Dae ye understand? She may be receptive tae yer advances, but I doubt she is a fool. An' even if she is, she will surely have others around her who willnae be fooled by ye an' who will wish tae protect her. Prove tae them ye are worth their trust."

"I dinnae think I need any advice from ye, cousin," Evander said, not unkindly but rather as a matter of fact, as though he truly believed it. "Freya is already in love with me. An' she's a bonnie lass who can give me the heirs I deserve. That is all that matters tae me. Just fer that, I will treat her like a goddess."

"While beddin' others without her kenning?" Aaden asked, raising a curious eyebrow.

"I have needs," Evander said. "What does it matter if I bed others? Everyone does. What matters is that she will need fer naething. I will give her bairns, I will give her dresses an' jewels an' gold, I will give her pleasure... it's more than many others

would give her.”

Aaden didn’t even know how to begin to argue with that logic, so he simply remained silent. He never had had any intention to marry before this precisely because he enjoyed women too much. If he was going to marry, he would be faithful to his wife and he hadn’t yet met a woman who made him want to settle down with her.

Even so, if he managed to marry Lilith Stewart, he supposed he would have to leave his philandering ways behind.

In the distance, the castle rose up over a hill, visible now that they had rounded a corner in the path. Aaden thanked his luck quietly that they had finally almost made it to the castle, so he wouldn’t have to put up with Evander’s conversation much longer. He only needed to make it there without strangling the man—something that was easier said than done.

“Look,” he said, pointing up ahead. “There’s the castle.”

Evander followed the path that Aaden’s finger traced into the distance. He hummed softly, taking a good look at the structure, and then turned to look at Aaden once more.

“Impressive, even from here, is it nae?” he said. “It’s even more impressive inside. When I came back home after visitin’ the first time, it seemed like we hardly own anythin’.”

“Och aye. The Stewarts are prosperous.”

Aaden himself hadn’t yet visited the Stewart Clan but he knew enough about them to know that they were both rich and powerful. It was no wonder his uncle wanted the two of them to marry the laird’s daughters. An alliance with the Stewart Clan would

be just the thing he needed to strengthen the MacEwans, to bring in more riches and power than ever before.

Still, he couldn't help but think there was more to the plan. Ruadh could claim Freya was the better option for Evander all he wanted, but the truth of the matter was that he would never relinquish the power that came with marrying the first-born. For all he claimed he would rule from the shadows, Aaden wasn't fool enough to believe him.

Whatever happens, I must tread carefully. Ruadh always has more planned than he reveals.

"Say, cousin... I never found out why ye had tae leave the castle," Evander said. For a moment, Aaden feared Evander was trying to dig up the truth, but then he began to doubt he was that cunning. He was probably simply curious, the way he was about many things. "I mean, I ken yer faither was a traitor. Everyone kens that. But ye were only a bairn. Surely, me faither didnae have tae exile ye."

Aaden couldn't help the laugh that bubbled out of him, bitter and disbelieving. "Is that what he told ye?"

"What dae ye mean?" Evander asked, a frown settling over his handsome features. "Is that nae what happened?"

There was a split second in which Aaden considered telling Evander the truth. He could imagine the satisfaction of it, the shock on Evander's face as he realized that they were not only cousins, but also half-brothers; that they shared the same mother and that Ruadh had made him and his father suffer out of jealousy.

Would he support his faither? Would he understand that our maither never loved Ruadh? That Ruadh forced her intae somethin' she never wanted?

In the years they had spent apart, Aaden couldn't know if Evander favored his father or his mother. From what he had seen, his relationship with Ruadh was picture-perfect. He had Ruadh's love, his support, a warmth that he seemed to hold for no one else, but that didn't mean that he was necessarily estranged from his mother.

In her letters to Aaden, the few he had received from her, she had never once mentioned Evander, though that was perhaps more for Aaden's sake than anything else.

"It must be the truth if yer faither said so, dinnae ye think?" Aaden said, his tone betraying his true opinion on the matter. "Surely, he wouldnae have lied tae everyone, especially tae ye, his precious wee laddie."

Evander did not take kindly to his comment. With a scoff, he gave his horse a gentle kick and rode ahead of Aaden, putting plenty of distance between them. For the first time ever since they had left MacEwan Castle, it was blessedly quiet, the only sounds in Aaden's ears the breeze and the songs of the birds, the soft rustle of leaves. He had begun to fear he would never know such peace again.

As the seconds passed, though, a wave of guilt washed over him as he observed Evander, riding ahead. There was no denying that Aaden was bitter. It was difficult to be anything but, considering his undeserved exile and the years he was forced to spend away from his own mother, while Evander reaped all the benefits of being her legitimate son. It wasn't his fault, though. For all his flaws, this wasn't something Evander had caused.

In the end, he was just a boy. A misguided, spoiled boy, even at his twenty-six years of age. Even with only three years separating them, Aaden couldn't help but feel at least a little responsible for him. Still, he didn't make an effort to catch up with him or to apologize for his comments. It was better to leave Evander alone, allow him to stew in his anger for a while. Perhaps something would come out of it, after all.

Perhaps it would help lift the veil over his eyes, show him who his father truly was.

CHAPTER FIVE

The great hall of Castle Stewart was filled with suitors from all over the land. There were few assemblies that required the presence of so many important men, Aaden thought, as he and Evander entered the hall ushered in by a servant. The castle, the little he had seen of it, at least, was a testament to the riches of the clan, dark stone rising high as if aiming to touch the clouds. Inside, though, it resembled a home more than a fortress, warm and lived-in, with colorful tapestries covering the walls and large fires burning to keep the chill of the day out.

A deer's head hung from the far wall of the great hall, undoubtedly hunted by one of the clan's lairds—perhaps even Thomas Stewart himself. Beneath it, there was a large painting of a man Aaden didn't recognize, surrounded by more such portraits of men, women, and children depicted in their finest garments. Whether it was a show of wealth or evidence of a loving family, Aaden didn't know.

Next to him, Evander sighed, a hand coming up to pinch the bridge of his nose. "I didnae think there would be so many others here."

"Uncle did say Laird Stewart had invited the suitors," Aaden reminded him. "What did ye expect? Every clan wishes tae wed intae Clan Stewart. They'd be fools tae miss this."

"Aye, I ken that," Evander said through gritted teeth. "But I dinnae like tae share."

"Clearly."

Aaden gave him an amused chuckle as Evander turned to glare at him. It was interesting to see how riled up he got with the tiniest provocation, though it could prove to be a mistake fatal to their mission. Aaden couldn't allow him to show too much displeasure, especially towards the sisters and their father.

“Ye should be more concerned, cousin,” Evander said, his usual smirk returning, mirth coloring his features. “Ye are the one who has the difficult task. I already ken that Freya wants me, but what will ye dae with yer Snow Lass, who sends all her suitors away?”

“Och, I wouldnae fash about that,” Aaden said, grinning from ear to ear as he turned on his heels and began to walk backwards towards the crowd of men. “Watch an’ learn, cousin.”

Aaden had his own tricks—If there was one thing he knew other than courting women, it was causing chaos. As he walked, he picked his target: a young man with a large build, but not so large that Aaden couldn't easily take him on if it came to it. He was right in his path and as he reached him, Aaden bumped hard into him with substantial force. Startled, the man swung around and glared at him, clearly expecting an apology.

The apology never came. Instead, Aaden only kept the grin on his face, raising his eyebrow in a silent challenge.

He expected the fist that came hurtling towards his face and he ducked just in time to avoid it, but the man who stood right behind him wasn't so lucky, the fist meeting his jaw with a sickening crunch. It was so crowded in the room that the men stood close enough for several of them to be jostled, confusion rising among them as they tried to figure out what was happening. It was closely followed by fury as each of them took offence, all thinking someone else was at fault, and the entire great hall filled with punches and insults. In the chaos of the fight that rippled through the crowd, Aaden snatched the first opportunity to step out of the crowd, grabbing a bouquet of flowers

that one of the men had dropped on his way.

Evander had taken no part in the fight, knowing better than to find himself in the middle of it. Instead, he stood by the door, mouth hanging open in disbelief as he took in the scene before his eyes, seemingly unable to believe how quickly the men had resorted to violence.

“Savages,” he said when Aaden came to stand next to him once more. “All o’ them, savages.”

Just as Aaden had suspected, he truly wasn’t a cruel man. If anything, he was probably eager to avoid any sort of fight.

Just as Aaden spun around towards the door, it opened to reveal three youngsters—two women and a man Aaden recognized as Cameron Baxter—and an older man, all of them halting by the entrance to stare at the suitors in the great hall in horror. The fight had only just begun and there was no telling when it would stop without intervention, but the older man, presumably the laird of the clan, leaned over to whisper hushed commands to Cameron, who called for the guards and spilled into the room along with them, trying to separate the men from each other.

“Ye’re in me home!” Laird Stewart yelled, following his men into the room without a glance at either Aaden or Evander, his features arranged in a scowl. “Control yourselves!”

The ruckus was defeating, each man shouting obscenities or moaning in pain as fists met bone. Still, Aaden couldn’t hear any of it over the rush of blood to his head at the sight of the two women. They both had the same delicate features, the same dark hair, though the youngest’s flowed down her back in curls, their eyes slightly different shades of blue.

Aaden knew one of them already.

He cursed softly under his breath. Had he ruined his chances before the courting had even begun?

There was a moment when time seemed to stop. The two of them looked at each other, Aaden's breath catching in his throat at the flash of hunger he saw in her gaze. It disappeared just as quickly as it had come, though, and was instead replaced by recognition, much to his chagrin. He had hoped that she wouldn't remember him.

"Ye," Lilith Stewart said, pointing an accusatory finger at Aaden. She looked as though she was about to claw his eyes out and Aaden let out an awkward, half-hearted chuckle as he took a step forward, parting his lips as if to say something—only nothing came to mind.

They had only met once but Aaden hadn't stopped thinking about her ever since that night at the inn. She haunted his dreams, those piercing blue eyes staying with him even all this time later. He could never forget that face. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Next to him, Evander shifted uncomfortably on his feet. "Ye ken each other?"

"Nay," Aaden said before Lilith could confirm it. She didn't claim otherwise, even though Aaden hadn't been certain she would play along. "But I am very glad we ken each other now. Aaden MacEwan, me lady. Clan McDowell's Chieftain."

To say Lilith was unimpressed would be an understatement. Her expression didn't change at all as Aaden introduced himself and bowed to her, and she didn't even bother to offer a curtsy in return. She only looked at him and the flowers in his hands in disdain, one corner of her lips lifting in a mocking smirk.

"Are these nae the flowers that grow outside our castle walls?" she asked her sister. "Perhaps Mr. MacEwan thinks that is all I am worth? A few hastily picked flowers?" Her gaze sought out the rest of the men, some of them still fighting behind Aaden,

others panting to catch their breath as they were separated by the guards. “An’ this? This is who we are meant tae entertain an’ welcome tae our home?”

Aaden didn’t miss the way the youngest, Freya jabbed her elbow right into her sister’s ribs. With a smile, she walked over to Evander, her cheeks heating as she approached, much to Aaden’s disbelief. How could Evander have such an effect on any woman, even one as young as Freya, he didn’t know.

At least she truly seemed to be taken by him. His cousin hadn’t lied about that. His job would be easy, while Aaden would somehow have to convince Lilith that he was a better man than the one she had met in that inn a year prior.

How will I dae that?

Perhaps Freya’s fascination with Evander would prove helpful to Aaden. If what Ruadh said was true, then Freya couldn’t wed if Lilith didn’t find a match first and Aaden was confident that out of all those men in there, he was the most reasonable option. Perhaps he could make an ally out of her. Perhaps he could convince her to help him.

Behind them, the shouting had lessened to a few angry jabs every now and then as the men calmed down and yet still tried to blame each other for their behavior. For a moment, Aaden looked at them over his shoulder, pleased with his work. Not only had he created a diversion, bringing everyone away from Lilith, but he had also managed to put himself above them by not participating in the fight. Surely, Laird Stewart had noticed that he and Evander were the only two who hadn’t started punching the moment spirits ran high.

When Aaden tore his gaze from them and looked back at Lilith, he found her frowning in concern. It was a look he hadn’t expected from her, but then again, he hardly knew the woman. It was unfair of him to make assumptions on what he had heard, though calling her Snow Lass had seemed rather accurate so far.

“I’ve heard tales o’ yer beauty, me lady, an’ I must say they’re nae true,” Aaden told Lilith with a smile. “Nae such tale could capture yer true beauty. Neither words nor paintings would be enough.”

Lilith gave him a cold glare, hands on her hips. Though she was several inches shorter than him, in that moment, it seemed to Aaden as if she was staring down at him.

“Empty flattery will get ye naewhere, Mr. MacEwan,” she said. “Dae ye truly think this is somethin’ I’ve never heard ‘afore?”

“Is it?” Aaden asked. “May I ask from whom? I’d very much like tae ken who me competition is.”

“There is nae competition.” Lilith sounded weary then, a sigh escaping her lips. “Everyone here thinks they will have tae fight over me like I am a prized pig. Look at them, already at each other’s throats.”

“I’m here, am I nae?” Aaden pointed out with a small shrug. “I’m nae fightin’.”

“Nay,” said Lilith. “Nay, yer nae fightin’. But somethin’ tells me that ye had a hand in this.”

Aaden smiled, neither confirming nor denying the accusation. Lilith was a perceptive woman and there was no point in lying to her. Instead, he took a step closer, emboldened by the fact that no one seemed to be paying them any attention, Freya and Evander too busy with each other while the rest were still trying to resolve the fight.

“I am determined,” he said. “Ever since I saw ye, I couldnae stop thinking about ye.”

They both knew he was talking about that night at the inn. Aaden expected some sort

of reaction, a coy blush, at least, at the memory of that night, but Lilith was just as impassive as always. She regarded him with what Aaden could only call boredom, as if she couldn't care less what he thought.

It only served to spur him on.

"I would suggest ye choose a more productive pastime activity," Lilith said. "Ye seem tae have too much time on yer hands. Idle minds are susceptible to temptation."

Aaden had no response to that, for once in his life silenced. He didn't have much time to ponder his failure, though, before Laird Stewart and Cameron approached them, leaving the guards to take care of the last of the men's anger as they returned to business.

"I will nae have ye behavin' like animals in me home!" Laird Stewart called behind him. "All o' ye, leave. I've had enough o' ye."

It was a drastic measure but one that worked in Aaden's and Evander's favor. With the rest of the suitors gone, they would have every opportunity to charm the two sisters and their father, as well.

"Laird Stewart," Evander said, quickly stepping into the man's way and bowing to him. "Evander MacEwan, son o' Laird Ruadh MacEwan. I was here recently fer a meetin' o' the clans."

"Aye, I remember," Laird Stewart said as he looked at Evander from head to toe, scrutinizing him, before doing the same to Aaden. Whether he was satisfied with what he saw, Aaden couldn't tell. The man could be as unreadable as his daughter. "It would be difficult tae forget when Freya talks about ye all the time."

"Faither!" Freya protested, the blush on her cheeks only deepening. "Please, dinnae embarrass me."

With a smile so charming that even Aaden could have believed it genuine had he not known his cousin, Evander turned to brush his thumb over Freya's cheek gently. "There is naething embarrassing about love. I'm sure me faither would say the same thing about me."

In perfect unison, Laird Stewart and Cameron rolled their eyes upon hearing that and Aaden had to stifle a laugh. He expected it from the laird but seeing Cameron react like this puzzled him a little. Perhaps it was nothing more than a natural reaction to Evander's obvious attempts at flattery, but Aaden would hazard a guess that there was more to it. There was longing in his gaze as he looked at Freya and Aaden wondered if anyone else had ever noticed it.

"Laird Stewart, may I have a word with ye?" Evander asked, breaking the tension.

"Forgive me," Aaden said, interrupting before the laird could respond. "I am Aaden MacEwan, Chieftain o' McDowell Clan. It's an honor tae meet ye, Laird Stewart. An' Cameron Baxter, correct? We have met 'afore."

"Och aye," said Cameron, quickly recognizing Aaden. "We met when I visited Clan McDowell, correct?"

"Aye, that is so," said Aaden.

"Clan McDowell?" Laird Stewart asked, raising a curious eyebrow. "How come ye are with the McDowells an' nae with the MacEwans?"

From the corner of his eye, Aaden saw that Evander was ready to respond, so he quickly said, "I wanted tae have more experience an' Clan McDowell needed an advisor. Now I can return tae me clan kenning that I can be useful."

It was an excuse he used every time someone asked him why he was with the McDowells instead of his own people in Clan MacEwan, one he had come up with a

long time ago. People loved to ask him that question. If nothing else, it made for good gossip.

Next to him, Evander snorted, much to Aaden's annoyance. The fool would ruin everything for him before they had even started. "Isnae that right, cousin?" he asked him, daring him to say anything different.

"Aye," Evander said swiftly, withering under Aaden's glare. "That is so."

"Well, in that case, would ye like tae join us fer the meetin'?" Laird Stewart asked. "If it is a clan matter?—"

"It is a private matter," Evander said. "It's about... it's about Freya, actually. I'd rather speak with ye alone, me laird."

There was only a moment of hesitation before Laird Stewart nodded, relenting. He turned to his daughters then, his gaze visibly softening as he addressed them. "Go an' prepare fer dinner. An' Cameron, please show Aaden the castle. If he is tae be our guest, he must ken where tae go."

"O' course," Cameron said with a tilt of his head.

With one last, scathing look at Aaden, Lilith turned around and left, followed closely by her sister. Just as Lilith walked by, her fingers brushed over his for the briefest of moments, sending a jolt of excitement through him. It may have been a small, barely-there touch, but it was enough to excite him, the point of contact between them blooming with heat. Even Lilith seemed to hesitate for a second, their eyes meeting, their gazes locked as she walked by him. But it didn't take long for her expression to turn cold and indifferent once more, her feelings entirely hidden from him.

As the two sisters walked out of the room, Aaden looked at Evander, who in turn looked at Freya—or rather, Freya's rear. It was a small comfort that he was at least

being discreet about it.

Not discreet enough for Cameron to remain unaware, though. When Aaden glanced at him, the man was grinding his teeth so hard he ran the risk of cracking a molar.

“Well,” Laird Stewart said, gesturing to Evander to follow. “Let us discuss.”

I hope he doesnae say anythin’ foolish.