



The Highlander's Mysterious Bride (Charmed by the Sassenachs #2)

Author: Ann Marie Scott

Category: Historical

Description: He's forbidden, dangerous, and everything she shouldn't want.

When Mary crossed paths with the mysterious Highlander at her sisters wedding, she never expected the memory of that one dance to linger so deeply. How can she resist him when he returns, holding the key to her freedom and the answer to her every desire?

... but his touch is like fire, and his kiss is a promise of everything she's been longing for.

Dangerously drawn to him, Mary is warned by everyone that the devilishly handsome laird is an enemy of the clan. When discovered in a compromising situation, he offers to marry her, giving her a chance to escape the terrible fate of a loveless marriage of convenience back in England.

As Mary falls for her husband, though, she suspects that he may have married her for his own secret reasons. Caught between loyalty and love, Mary must decide if Kiernan is the man of her dreams or her nightmares. Can love bloom amid betrayal, or will the ghosts of an ancient feud tear them apart?

The Highlander's Mysterious Bride is a story by Ann Marie Scott, packed with passion, romance, and mystery, set on the beautiful backdrop of the Scottish Highlands.

Total Pages (Source): 23

PROLOGUE

Mary rested her head against the wall next to the window that looked out over the Highland landscape before her. At Keep Aitken, she was normally struck by how beautiful the rolling hills and thick forest looked, especially lit in the glow of summer sunshine, but now, all she could see was a low, muted gray.

Perhaps it was the storm clouds gathering in the sky above them, or perhaps, she conceded, it was to do with her mood. She had longed to be back here, with her older sister Amelia, for the last few months, ever since her previous visit. Now that Amelia was nearing the end of her pregnancy, she craved that closeness even more than she had before. She wanted to be there when her first niece or nephew came into the world, and she could hardly wait to hold them in her arms.

If she were to be honest with herself, though, there was more to her flight here than just her family. Her mind, before she could stop it, drifted to the night of the wedding party, nearly eight months ago now. To the man who, no matter how much she'd tried to forget him, had remained wrapped around her mind like so much ivy around a tree.

She'd asked her sister who he was, but she'd been unable to give her an answer. Mary supposed she could have cast her net a little wider, but perhaps there was a part of her that enjoyed the anonymity they shared. He had no idea who she was, just as she had no idea of his history, and there was a relief in knowing that she could slip into almost any role he wanted, on that heady, warm night.

Though she was still learning how to dance the traditional ceilidh steps in those days, he had asked her to be his partner, and she had accepted at once. She'd apologized,

before they had even begun, for how she would tread on his feet, and he had simply smiled at her in amusement.

“Aye, I’m sure I’ll find a way to cope.”

She could still remember, all too vividly, the way his eyes had burned into hers; the way he had looked at her, those light-blue eyes meeting hers every time he pulled her close into a waltz step. He had led her with ease, his strong arm around her waist, his callused hand holding her tight, leaving her no room to tumble over her own feet as she normally did. She had no choice but to let him take the lead, and her breath had caught in her throat as he had swung her around, as though she was little more than a rag doll. His strength should have scared her, but instead, it thrilled something to life in her that she had never felt before.

When they had paused between songs for a drink, he eyed her for a moment.

“You look as though you’d rather be anywhere else, lass.”

“I just... I don’t know many people here,” she had confessed, before she could stop herself. She didn’t know why she was telling him this, or if he even cared.

“Ye’re no’ from around here, I take it?”

“Is it so obvious?”

He chuckled, and then nodded.

“Aye. It is.”

She lifted the ale to her lips and took a long sip, praying it would grant her the courage to keep speaking with him. She’d danced with men before, of course she had,

and she'd spoken to plenty more, but none had made her feel like this. As though meeting their gaze would cause a fire to explode between them, a fire she didn't know if she'd be able to put out.

"What are ye doing so far from home?" he asked her, peering down at her for a moment out of the corner of his eye. His gaze seemed more penetrating than she'd been prepared for, and she glanced away from him swiftly.

"I could be on the run," she offered flippantly. She didn't know why she didn't just tell him the truth, that she was visiting her sister and her new husband, but it would have sounded so... banal. A part of her wanted to tease out some more drama from this while she was still able to, no matter how silly it might have been.

"You could be," he chuckled. "You could be fleeing from having killed a man, and searching for sanctuary up here, where nobody would ever come to search for you."

She found it in her to turn to him again.

"Does that not scare you?"

He laughed this time, a low sound that seemed to come from some place deep inside of him. The sound of it sent a shiver down her spine, though she could not tell what she was responding to.

"I'm drawn to dangerous things, lassie," he remarked finally. "But perhaps you should be a little more careful."

With that, he took her hand, and led her out to dance once more. She lifted the hem of her dress—a light green affair, one that Amelia had picked out for her from her own extensive wardrobe—as she followed him, doing her best not to trip over her skirts. She was glad to share in her sister's wardrobe, as the two of them bore a striking

similarity; the same long, pale blonde hair, the same blue eyes, the same pale skin, though Mary bore a handful of freckles over her nose that her sister didn't.

But this man, he was different. Darker. Not just in the way he looked, though that was a part of it; his hair, that fell in dark curls to his jaw, his olive skin, the dark stubble along his jaw. But also in how he carried himself, how he moved, a dark, seductive air following him with every step.

Even as she sat there in the Keep, far away from that night and from the feel of his hand on hers, she could still remember it, as clear as day. That night, after everyone had gone to bed, she had lain in her own quarters, listening to her sister Lily's light snoring across from her, feeling that burning coursing through every inch of her body.

And she had not seen him since. When she had returned to the Keep, she supposed, there had been a part of her that had hoped she might run into him again. Though Amelia seemed to swear up and down that she had no idea who the man was, he would surely show his face around there again, wouldn't he...?

And what would she do if he did? Would she admit to him that she'd come back here to find him? Would she tell him that there had hardly been a day that had gone past since they had met that she hadn't imagined him, his hands on her, those piercing blue eyes staring down at her again?

And that he was the reason she could hardly imagine going through with what her father was trying to insist was right for her?

She shuddered at the memory of it. Another reason why she had come all the way to the Highlands, even though her father had relocated them back closer to the border again. She supposed he believed that if she were further from Amelia, who had rebelled against him so, she would be less inclined to do the same thing, especially in

the face of what he had told her.

That she would have to marry. And not just that she'd have to marry, but that she'd have to marry Lord Whitcombe, a man nearly thrice her age, who had agreed to deliver a parcel of land to her father for him to begin agricultural work on if he would simply gift Whitcomb one of his daughters to marry. Lily would have kicked up a horrible fuss, and Amelia was already happily wed with Arran, which left only her.

And now, she was due to be married to him. She knew not exactly when the date was to come, but it was only a matter of time till her father, the weaselly little creature that he was, decided to walk her down the aisle to be with that ancient old thing. The mere thought of his hands on her, the two of them having to share a marital bed where she performed her wifely duties... ugh. She pushed the thought from her mind at once.

Amelia had avoided the same fate by marrying Arran. While the circumstances that had brought them together at first had been far from normal, they seemed utterly content now. And perhaps, if she could find a man who was willing to wed her before Whitcomb got that ring on her finger, she would be able to convince her father to give her the freedom she so craved.

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Amelia glanced up from the book she had been leafing through, and a furrow appeared in her brow. Mary could feel her sister staring in her direction, but she kept her focus on the page in front of her, pretending as though she'd hardly noticed.

“Are you alright?”

Finally, Mary lifted her head, smiling at her sister. Amelia's hand was resting protectively on her swollen belly, as it often did these days. Mary could scarcely remember a time when her eldest sister hadn't been carrying around the enormous bulge under her dress, though the child was due any day now.

“Of course I am,” Mary replied, rising to her feet and making her way over to her. “Are you?”

“Yes, I—oh, my feet hurt...” she complained, slipping one of them out of the shoe she'd been wearing and pulling it awkwardly into her lap to massage the sole for a moment. Mary furrowed her brow sympathetically, and Amelia shook her head.

“I suppose I must look like a beached whale to you,” she joked, and Mary frowned at once.

“You look absolutely beautiful, Amelia. I don't think I've ever seen you as radiant as you are now.”

Amelia chuckled.

“I’m not certain I believe you,” she replied. “But I appreciate your sweet words, Mary.”

“Here, let me,” Mary murmured, brushing her hand aside and tending to her sore, swollen feet. It seemed as though every part of her sister had been aching recently, as she entered the last days of her pregnancy—everyone had been fussing around her, rushing this way and that as they tried to make sure she was taken care of. At any moment, the process could begin to bring the new member of the family into the world, and Mary smiled at the thought.

“Are you looking forward to meeting her?” Amelia asked, as though sensing what was on her sister’s mind. Mary glanced up at her, eyebrows raised.

“You’re still sure it’s going to be a girl?”

“I just know it,” Amelia replied, stroking her bump lovingly. “Of course, I’ll adore them no matter what they come out as. But I think it will be a little girl, a little daughter. A little niece for you and Lily!”

Mary pressed her thumbs into the arches of Amelia’s feet as she pondered it.

“I can scarcely imagine Lily as an aunt,” she confessed, “She seems too wild for it...”

“I think it’ll do the girl good to have some balance,” Amelia replied firmly. “A little wildness from Lily, and then some more... grounded teachings from you.”

Though Mary knew that her sister meant it only in the kindest way possible, her heart sunk slightly when she heard that. It was the truth, of course. Lily had always been the wildest out of the three of them, especially in this last year or so, as she had come into her womanhood at last. She seemed distinctly aware of how much power her newfound status had given her, power that Mary could rarely see in herself—perhaps

because she knew that her father would be using her womanhood to buy himself some new land soon enough, if he got the chance...

“What are you so consumed by?” Amelia asked, drawing her from her reverie. Mary shook her head quickly, and painted a smile on her face so her sister would not see the truth of what was going on inside her head. She had not spoken to Amelia about her father’s plans for her, knowing that it would cause her sister no end of stress. As long as she was with child, Mary had sworn to herself not to speak of what was going on with her family—she felt as though it would have laid too much pressure at her feet. Amelia had always felt responsible for Lily and Mary, and, though she would be a mother soon herself, Mary was sure it wouldn’t have vanished so quickly.

“I’m just thinking about the baby,” she replied as she straightened up. “How much I’m looking forward to meeting them?—”

“Her,” Amelia corrected Mary. But then, all at once, her face twisted into a mask of pain, and she gripped her lower belly. Mary sprang to her feet.

“What’s happening? Is it the baby?”

“I don’t rightly know,” Amelia replied with a grimace. Mary’s eyes widened when she saw a puddle of wetness staining her sister’s dress. Amelia gasped, and Mary rushed for the door.

“I’ll get the midwife!” she exclaimed. “And Arran! You wait here, Amelia, I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

She raced downstairs, taking them two at a time, until she arrived, near breathless, in the main entrance hall to the Keep. She realized, as she stood there, that she had little idea of where she was meant to be going, but much to her relief, Mairead, one of the housemaids, rounded the corner. When she saw the look on Mary’s face, she stopped

dead in her tracks.

“Is it the lady?” she demanded. “Has it begun?”

Mary nodded.

“I think so...”

“Come with me, lass,” Mairead ordered her, grabbing her arm and pulling her down the corridor. “We’ll gather some clean cloth. I’ll send one of the boys to fetch Arran.”

What came next was such a rush, Mary could scarcely make sense of it. She rushed after Mairead and Donna, the midwife, carrying a stack of clean cloth in one hand and a bucket of warm water in the other. By the time they reached the study, Amelia was on all fours, her cheeks red, puffing in pain.

“Where’s Arran?” she demanded as they helped her to her feet.

“I’m here, my love,” Arran called, darting towards his wife and slipping his arms around her to support her. “Where to, Donna?”

“The bedroom. Are the sheets clean?”

“I’ll go ahead and check,” Mary offered, and she took off down the corridor to make sure everything was ready for her sister to bring her child into the world. Her heart was pounding with excitement, but she was a little fearful for Amelia, too. Though her eldest sister had always seemed utterly sure of herself, she was not as invincible as she made herself out to be, and Mary was not foolish enough to believe that nothing ever went amiss.

Once Mary had straightened up the sheets and laid out the water and towels, Amelia

appeared in the doorway to the room, flanked by Arran and Mairead. Donna was leading her to breathe in a certain way, and it seemed to be going some distance to helping her manage the pain. They laid her down on the bed, and Amelia held out her hand for Mary.

“Hold my hand, please! Oh...”

She let out a loud whimper of pain, and squeezed Mary’s hand so tight Mary nearly cried out in agony herself. But she bit it back, reminding herself of how important this was, focusing on her sister.

“Is there anything else I can do?” she asked Mairead and Donna, as Arran moved to the head of the bed, kissing his wife on the temple and holding her other hand tight. Donna had Amelia’s dress pushed back, and she grimaced.

“She’s near ready to push already,” she muttered. “Amelia, can you hear me? Push! Push, lass!”

Mary was not sure how long it lasted for, the pushing part of it. Amelia cried out with each one, but she breathed through the pain. Arran encouraged her, and Mary just held on to her hand, wishing there were more she could do, but knowing well the most she could manage was staying at her sister’s side through this momentous event.

Then, all at once, a sound cut through the tense air in the room; the sound of a baby’s cry. Amelia half-laughed, gasping in shock, and turned to Arran.

“A boy!” Donna exclaimed. “A lovely wee boy. Here, Arran, come here and cut the cord with me.”

A boy? Mary glanced at Amelia, hoping that she would not be disappointed by the revelation, but Amelia just laughed again.

“A boy,” she breathed. “Oh, a boy...”

Arran pulled the child into his arms. Though it was still red and slick with blood, the crying had stilled for a moment, as if he knew that he was being held by his father.

“What did you decide on for a boy?” Mary asked her sister softly, as she gazed at the little child.

“Robert,” she replied, as Arran came to hand Amelia their son.

“Robert,” she whispered again, as she looked down at him. She reached out her finger to touch him in the center of his forehead, and giggled, as though she could hardly believe he was real. Mary leaned over to see him as Mairead and Donna prepared some clean cloths to wipe him down with, this little child who was her nephew, and Amelia looked up at her sister.

“Isn’t he perfect?”

“He’s perfect,” Mary agreed. It seemed almost impossible, that he could have come to life so quickly, but here he was, sitting before them, as though it were the most natural thing in the world for him to have emerged from her womb to make himself known, once and for all.

“My heir,” Arran murmured as he joined them at the head of the bed, peering down at his son with wonderment in his eyes. He kissed Amelia’s sweat-stained forehead as Mairead took the boy to clean him up. Even now, Mary could see the love in his eyes, the adoration he felt for this newborn. Though she’d never gone into great detail about it, Amelia had told her something of the struggles he’d had with his own family, and she supposed this must have meant even more to him as a result.

“We should celebrate,” he announced after a pause. Amelia stared up at him.

“I’m not sure I’m up to do much other than lie with the little one,” she replied. “But yes, you should celebrate. I want everyone to know about our little boy!”

Mary had scarcely seen Arran so animated in all the time she had known him. As he made his way downstairs, he seemed to almost levitate with every step. He called for his close friend Gregory when they reached the main hall, and he appeared a moment later, his eyes wide.

“I heard Amelia was in labor,” he blurted out, trying to catch his breath.

“Aye, she was!” Arran replied, slapping his friend on the shoulder. “And now I have a bairn. A boy, an heir!”

“Aye, you do!” Gregory agreed, shaking his head in delight. “I cannae believe you beat me to a son, Arran.”

“Ye’ll have to hurry to catch up now I’ve started,” Arran fired back. Gregory flashed him a grin.

“Aye, I’ll get to it just as soon as I can.”

Gregory laughed with delight, and, soon enough, they had rung the bells in the Keep and the surrounding villages to call in all the townsfolk to celebrate. Over the next hour or so, the news spread through the land, starting with the villages closest, and soon reaching out to the towns that surrounded them, that there was an heir born to Arran and Amelia. People began to arrive at the Keep in small groups—a handful here, one or two making their way on horseback there—and soon, there were at least a hundred people filling out the great hall. Several of them had brought instruments, and, in no time, the place was filled with music.

“Oh, I’ll have to get to cooking something,” Mairead fretted to Mary. “Could you

check on yer sister? Make sure there's nothing she needs?"

"Of course," Mary assured her.

Mary went upstairs to check on Amelia again, only to find her slumbering peacefully, her newborn in a small crib beside the bed. Mary stole a glance down at her nephew, now sleeping serenely where he was swaddled in cloth. She planted a gentle kiss against his impossibly small head, and then slipped downstairs again to join the gathering that was fast filling up the Keep.

Arran was already lively with excitement, telling anyone that he could find that he had a son—an heir, no less. It seemed as though he'd not be happy until everyone in the land knew of his newborn, and Mary couldn't help but smile, seeing his joy. Her sister deserved someone like him, someone who'd share in the thrill of this as deeply as he did.

As she moved through the crowd, she tried to fight that feeling of loneliness that often arose when she wasn't around her sister. Usually, she had Amelia to accompany her at these kinds of events, but her dear sister needed all the rest she could get after what she had just done. She could not blame her for leaving her alone, even if Mary herself knew nobody in this place.

She made her way to the large table at the end of the hall, which was already laden with food—most of it, it seemed, offerings from townsfolk who were glad to share in the happy tidings of a new heir. She poured herself a generous flagon of ale, and took a long sip, as she cast her gaze back to the crowd.

That, of course, was when she saw him.

At first, she blinked, thinking for a moment that she must have imagined him. After all this time, all those months, all those nights that she had spent tossing and turning

and wondering if he even remembered her, it was almost as though the sheer intensity of her thought must have brought him to her, some mirage from her stress-addled mind.

Yet, after she blinked, he was still there.

The man she had seen that night. The man she had tried to forget. His blue eyes blazing into her, his dark hair reaching in curls to his sharp jaw, the rough cloak still wrapped around his shoulders, as though he could not imagine looking at anyone else at all. The room was full of people, but he was looking only at her.

And she was only looking at him. Her heart thudded in her chest, and she tore her gaze away from him.

Because staring at him seemed dangerous, in ways she couldn't even imagine.

Kiernan noticed her the moment she stepped into the room. Her eyes seemed to be fixed on the floor, and her body was ridden with tension, almost as though she were waiting for something to happen. She dipped her head low, letting her long, blonde hair fall into her face, the simple brown dress she was wearing falling to her feet, as though it weren't made for her. But those blue eyes, as deep as the ocean, they couldn't have belonged to anyone else as she looked up at him.

As though she were waiting for him.

When she looked over at him, he grinned, and lifted his drink to her in greeting. She looked away at once, as though she could scarcely stand to look at him for too long.

Beside him, a small group of girls were chatting among themselves, and he noticed one shooting a look in his direction. After a few more words to her friends, she finally forced herself forward, gazing up at him, hopefully.

"May I... may I dance with you, my Laird?"

"Aye, of course you may," he replied, flashing her a smile. If the blonde girl was going to keep her distance, then he would not pass up the chance to dance with someone else. Perhaps when she saw him dancing with another girl, she'd find the nerve to make her own move.

Kiernan took his new partner out on the floor, and, as they joined in a strip-the-willow line, he noticed the blonde girl had done the same. She was standing opposite

a young man, who was staring at her with naked hope in his eyes. Kiernan pushed down a flush of jealousy as they came together to spin in the center, before they moved off down the line. The sight of his hand on her waist, even for the barest moment, raised his hackles.

But she had noticed him, too, and he made sure he gave her something to notice. He drew his dance partner closer than he needed to, allowing his hand to skim the small of her back, her hair to brush over his face as she moved, though, each time she did, he caught a snatch of sight of the blonde girl watching him, a slight furrow in her brow. Each time he caught her looking, she would tear her gaze away at once, as though she didn't want to be caught paying him so much attention.

He grinned. It was working.

As she danced, it struck him that she seemed to be dancing for him; not for her partner, but to draw his attention back to her, even as he parsed out his steps with his new partner. Even when her gaze was not on him, she seemed to be drawn by him, her body shifting to make sure he could see her, her hair flying where he could catch sight of it out of the corner of his eye.

When the dance was done, she retreated to a table for something to eat. Her partner, the boy, tried to speak to her, but she seemed scarcely able to keep the conversation going. Kiernan turned his back on her to find a drink, and, as he moved, he was sure he could feel her gaze burning into the back of his head, doing everything she could to make him turn back to look at her. And he would, but first, he had to make her crave his closeness so eagerly that she'd do anything to taste it again.

But if she thought for a moment that he was going to pass up the chance to get close to her, after so long, she was wrong.

He moved through the crowd with ease. It parted before him, people giving him

plenty of space to make his way across the room. He supposed, for once, his reputation had served him well; nobody here wanted to be the one to stand in his way when he had somewhere to go.

Finally, he reached her side. She couldn't so much as look up at him, and he paused for a long moment.

"Do you remember me?" he asked her, finally. She glanced up at him, and then straight down to the ground again, clutching her drink even tighter to her chest.

"Yes, I do," she admitted finally. "We met... I mean, I think we met at the celebration for the wedding, a while ago."

The way she spoke, it was almost as though she were trying to dodge the truth. The moment she had laid eyes on him, it was obvious that she knew who he was. She might have tried to pretend that she did not, but there was no shadow of a doubt in his mind that he had burned himself onto her memory, just as she had done for him.

He hadn't gotten her name, the first night they had met. He'd hardly thought to ask. Something as prosaic as a name seemed unimportant, when her small, soft body was pressed against his. The scent of her hair, violets and a sweet musk, had filled his senses, and it left no room for anything else. He had heard the tone to her voice, the lilt of her English accent, and had known instantly that she wasn't from around these parts—which only made her more intriguing to him. Someone who had known a life so different to the one he had known, he could only imagine everything she had experienced—and everything she had yet to experience, everything he could show her.

"I dinnae think I got yer name last time we spoke."

"Mary."

Mary. It seemed to suit her, something soft and innocent. A smile curled up his lips.

“And are you going to tell me what you’re called?” she demanded, her voice suddenly taking on an edge of defiance. Oh, he liked that. He liked the tone to her voice, the sureness in it. There was clearly more depth to this girl than he had given her credit for, and he only found her more intriguing with every passing second.

But before he could reply, a man appeared at her side. From the look on his face, Kiernan could tell that he was family. Only men who were related would have looked so concerned about his presence close to a woman they knew.

“Laird Fraser,” Arran greeted him calmly. “A pleasure to see you here. Perhaps ye’d like to meet with some of our other guests...”

“I’m fine where I am, my Laird” Kiernan replied. Arran bristled slightly. Clearly, it was not the answer he had been looking for. Mary, for her part, glanced up between the two of them with confusion, clearly not sure what to make of all of this.

“Kiernan,” Arran replied, his voice dropping slightly. Kiernan, of course, had heard tell of Arran’s reputation, but he was sure it would have softened since he had gotten married, especially since he now had a child in the world.

“Leave my sister-in-law alone, if you know what’s good for ye.”

His voice left no room for argument, his tone sharp and insistent. Mary’s lips parted, as though she wanted to protest, but Arran didn’t even look at her.

“Perhaps we should ask the lady what she thinks, Arran,” Kiernan shot back. He was challenging Arran. No wonder he was so protective of this girl, if she was the sister to his own bride.

“Arran, I’m quite capable of?”

“Laird Fraser,” Arran cut her off. He wasn’t going to take no for an answer, that much, he was making clear. A smile spread further up Kiernan’s lips, his usual response to finding himself in the midst of a confrontation. It was an instinct that had gotten him in trouble plenty of times over the years, but one that, even after all this time, he struggled to shake.

But, he supposed, this was truly the celebration of the birth of Arran’s son. He should not choose today, of all days, to dig his heels in and insist that he get his time alone with Mary. There would come another chance for that, when the time was right. For now, he had made his impression, he had gotten her name. All else could wait.

He took Mary’s hand for a moment, squeezing it lightly.

“A pleasure to see you again, my lady.”

With that, he backed off into the crowd, leaving Mary staring after him, her hand tingling from the pressure of where he had just touched her, and her lips parted in shock.

Then, Mary rounded on Arran.

“What was all that about?” she demanded. She felt bad for snapping at him so on a day like this one, but she was irritated, and she could not very well hide it.

“Stay away from that man, Mary.”

Arran intoned his command in a low voice, watching as Kiernan—that was his name, wasn’t it? Mary was quite sure that she had heard Arran refer to him in such terms—vanished into the crowd. She noticed a few other women glancing in his

direction, and had to bite back even more annoyance. After so long, she had finally found the man she had been thinking about all this time, only for her brother-in-law to cut in and stop her from doing what she wanted to do.

Whatever that might have been.

“It’s fer your own good, lass,” he snapped back at her, his voice dropping into a low and threatening tone that told her everything she needed to know. No matter how much she might have craved his presence, that man was bad news. As she glanced after him once more, though, she found herself wondering just how bad that news could have been, given the way her body tingled in response to him.

“Why? What has he done?” she demanded, her eyes narrowing. He shook his head.

“Keep yer distance. Ye’ll never need to find out.”

Before she could interrogate him on the matter any further, a slightly drunken woman appeared at his side to offer her congratulations on the birth of his son. Arran quickly covered his anger with a smile, and it was as though the confrontation with Kiernan hadn’t happened at all.

She turned that name over in her head. Kiernan. It seemed to suit him, somehow, as though that name belonged to him, as though nobody else could ever have called it theirs.

She rubbed her thumb along her knuckles, where he had touched her, so lightly that she could almost have told herself she’d imagined it. But she knew it had been real. She knew she could never have invented the wash of excitement that pulsed through her body when he had caressed her, the draw to him, her body craving more, aching for something she’d never ached for in her life.

Peering into the crowd, she suddenly realized that she had lost sight of him—was he dancing with someone else again?

A twinge of jealousy nagged inside her again. Was he with someone else, already? Was he spending the night dancing with another woman, like the one she had seen him with earlier, just as he had danced with her all those months ago? Had he thought of that night as often as she had, or was she just another in a long line of women he'd flirted with and then abandoned?

She had no idea, but she knew that there was a part of her that craved answers, a part of her that was even more fascinated than she had been before Arran had told her to keep her distance.

And she knew, deep down, that she was not going to be able to shake the memory of him any better than she already had. No, his hooks were even deeper into her than they had been before—and, much as she knew it was wrong to admit it, she wouldn't have changed a thing.

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His hands in her hair, the soft touch of his breath on her skin, her body so close to his she could feel the heat rushing from it. Those eyes, as blue as a crystalline river on a spring day, gazing down at her, the corners of his lips turned up, the expression on his face...

She is dancing with him again. The music pulses around them, though she can barely pay attention to it. No, the only thing that matters to her right now is the way that he feels, the closeness between the two of them. She is sure, somewhere, at the back of her mind, Arran is telling her to stay away from this man, but she can't imagine even trying to do such a thing now, not when this feels so right.

He leans down to her, his mouth just an inch or two from her own, and she cranes her neck like an animal trying to take a long sip of water, but, instead of meeting her lips, he lets go of her, and she stumbles forward.

All at once, as her eyes snap open, she realizes she is not in a room surrounded with other people now. No, she is somewhere else, somewhere... different. Her heart thrums in her chest as she looks around, trying to remember how she found herself here. The air is cold, the music dropping away suddenly, her skin prickling as goosebumps appear up and down her arms. She reaches out into the darkness, searching for him, trying to find him, but her fingers come up against nothing but the damp moss growing in the wall.

"Hello?" she calls out, but her voice just echoes in the small space around her. Tears prick her eyes. Where is he? Where has he gone? Why has he left her like this? It

doesn't make sense...

Then, all at once, she senses something. Something behind her, the hairs on the back of her neck standing up, as her instincts warn her there is something wrong, something terribly, terribly wrong.

When she whips around, there he is, standing behind her, but this time not with the soft eyes of a lover. No, all she can see are his teeth, gleaming in the darkness, the smile on his face like a wolf in the dark...

Mary's head snapped up from the pillow, her chest rising and falling fast as she came back to the real world. The dream was still fresh in her mind, so much so that she could almost smell his scent clinging to her. She propped herself up on her elbows and looked around, reminding herself that she was safe, that there was nothing here for her to worry about. She was in her chambers, at the Aitken Keep, just a few rooms down from her sister and her new baby.

But she could not shake the weight of the dream as it pressed down on her mind once more. She swung her legs out of bed, planting them on the ground below and trying to focus on the coolness of the flagstone beneath her feet. Putting her head into her hands, she realized that she was still trembling slightly, and she inhaled deeply once more.

There's nothing to be worried about. With all the stress of the day, it was no wonder that her mind had invented something so strange and so disturbing. Seeing Kiernan again, and then being met by Arran's warnings about him, it had caused a confusion in her mind, drawing together her desire for him and her fear of him to create something she could not parse.

Straightening up, she heard a sound down outside the door. For a moment, she stiffened in worry, but then she realized it was her sister. Amelia's voice, soft and low

as she soothed the baby. Mary made her way to the door, and, as she poked her head out, sure enough, there was Amelia, cradling Robert in her arms and gazing down at him with the loving eyes of a new mother.

“Milly?” Mary whispered to her sister. She had not used that old nickname for her in a long time, but there was something about the way she felt in that moment that practically demanded it of her. She felt... vulnerable, almost, as though she might have been exposed at any second.

Amelia glanced up and smiled when she saw Mary. She must have been too exhausted to see the look on Mary’s face, the truth of her feelings in that moment.

She made her way into Mary’s room, Robert still swaddled in her arms. He let out a little grunt and a groan as he nestled against her, and Amelia beamed down at him.

“Can you believe how perfect he is?” she remarked. “I scarcely can.”

“He’s wonderful,” Mary agreed, her voice a little shaky. “Is Arran...?”

“He’s asleep,” Amelia replied. “When Robert woke, I wanted him to get some rest, so I stepped out into the corridor to rock him. I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“No, I was already awake,” Mary assured her, as Amelia sank down onto the edge of Mary’s bed, still holding Robert close as he started to drift back off to sleep.

Mary watched her sister for a long moment, and found a smile curling up the corners of her lips. Truth be told, she had never seen her sister glowing with such life in all the time she had known her, as though having this baby had drawn out a new side of her she had never seen before. She could hardly wait for Lily to see their nephew, too. She would be amazed, she was sure of it.

In all fairness, she knew Arran had plenty to do with that. He might have been gruff with her tonight, when he had seen her speaking to Kiernan, but he had given her sister such safety, such happiness, such comfort, and such freedom, and now, a family to go with it. She would never have guessed that he would provide her with such a wonderful life.

“Amelia,” she murmured softly, not wanting to wake the baby. “Can I ask you something?”

“If it’s if you can hold him, no, you can’t,” she replied. “I don’t want to wake him again...”

“It’s not that,” Mary replied with a light chuckle. It’s... it’s about Arran.”

Her head lifted, and she looked over at Mary curiously. Mary didn’t delve too much into her sister’s marriage, and with good reason. She had always supposed that whatever went on between Arran and Amelia was none of her business. As long as her sister was happy, she had no right to go demanding how that happiness had come about. But curiosity was getting the better of her, and besides, it wasn’t as though there were many people she could talk to about such topics.

“What about him?” Amelia asked, tipping her head to the side in curiosity.

“Did you... do you trust him?”

Amelia stared at her for a second, clearly utterly confused by the question. But then, she nodded.

“Of course I do,” she replied, sounding almost offended by the suggestion. “Do you think I’d have had a child with him if I doubted that I could trust him?”

“No, it’s not that, I’m sorry,” Mary apologized, realizing how it must have sounded to ask her such a question. “I suppose... I suppose what I really want to know is whether you felt you could trust him from the moment you met him.”

Amelia fell silent for a long moment. Mary knew as well as she did that the circumstances of her meeting Arran had been anything but normal. When Mary had seen her sister led off to marry this man, who her own father’s advisor had tried to insist was too dangerous for her to so much as be left alone with, she had been terrified. But Amelia had taken it with a stoic certainty, and perhaps that was because she knew Arran would be able to provide the life he had for him. Perhaps she had always trusted him.

“I suppose I did,” she replied. “At least I trusted that he’d take care of me. I trusted that he would do everything in his power to make sure I was safe, even if I didn’t know what that might entail. It wasn’t as though I was in love with him from the moment I met him, but I... I sensed something in him, something I wanted to trust. And I’m glad I did.”

She gazed down at Robert again for a moment, her face softening. Then, she peered back up at her sister.

“Why do you ask?”

Mary bit her lip. She didn’t want to worry her sister with news of what had happened that night. She supposed it was most likely that Arran had told her about it, anyway, given that they were husband and wife. However, judging by the expression on Amelia’s face, she seemed genuinely curious to know what had happened, unsure what had caused her sister to question her husband in such a way.

“I was just... I wanted to know if you thought you could trust Arran’s judgment on someone.”

Amelia nodded at once.

“Of course you can,” she replied, as though it should have been obvious. “He knows this place better than anyone. And all the people in it, for that matter. Why? Did the two of you...?”

She trailed off. Mary reached out to stroke the soft, downy hair on Robert’s head. She could hardly come out and tell her that it had been about a man, let alone the very same man that she had been dancing with all those months ago, a man who had burned himself onto her memory like a brand on cattle.

“I just wanted to be sure that you could trust the man who was going to be raising my nephew,” she replied jovially, trying to lighten the mood between them. She was not asking her sister all of this because she doubted Arran’s abilities as a husband or a father. No, she could tell from the way he treated Amelia that there was no chance he’d ever do anything to hurt her, or their new baby, for that matter.

But when it came to Mary’s attraction to this mysterious Laird Fraser, she could not decide if she was to trust her instincts or Arran’s. The dream she’d had seemed to be a warning, stirred from somewhere deep within her. When it came to this man, she might not have been entirely safe.

She should trust what her mind was telling her. Her mother had always told her to believe what her instincts warned her of, told her that many a woman had been saved by trusting what her gut had told her, and that she would have been foolish to try and ignore it. She gritted her teeth, deciding then and there to keep her distance from that man no matter what desire pulsed inside of her when he was close to her. She could tell that she would be safer keeping her distance. And, given that it had been all that time since they had last seen one another, she doubted that she would face too much in the way of trouble when it came to that.

“I should get some rest,” Amelia yawned, rising to her feet again. “Are you sure you’re alright, Mary?”

“Of course I am,” Mary replied, quickly smiling up at her sister. The very last thing she wanted was to worry Amelia when all she needed was rest. “You go to Arran, get some sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Amelia leaned down to drop a maternal kiss on her sister’s head, and then made for the door. Mary stayed at the edge of the bed. She knew she should have been trying to get some more sleep, but there was something in her that would not rest, no matter how much her exhausted body called out for it.

Something that burned so bright for Kiernan Fraser, she knew she’d not be able to snuff it so soon.

It was a bright, cold morning as the carriage rumbled over the path that led to the village of Stonehaven; the clean air filled Mary's lungs, and she gulped it down in droves, glad that she was not still stuck up in her bed as she had been all night, tossing and turning.

It had been days since she had last seen Kiernan, and yet, her mind seemed to drift to him whenever there wasn't anything directly in front of her to distract her. She had hoped that getting away from the Keep for a while would go some way to clearing her mind and she had joined Arran's friend Gregory and a few of his men to run some errands in the village.

She peered out of the window, to the rolling hills beyond. They were studded with the bright yellow of gorse, a few scatterings of purple heather amongst them, embroidering the green like a delicate thread through a dress. She tried to keep her focus on the beauty of the landscape around her, but, as ever, she found her mind drifting back towards the one man she had been doing her best to forget.

Kiernan. She had spoken that name so many times inside her head, it almost felt like second nature to her now, though she knew it shouldn't have. Had he been thinking of her the same way? She had wondered that often, as she had woken from intense dreams about him night after night. Each dream had followed the same path, starting out with the slow dance when they had first met, and then, sliding into something darker, her body trapped in the confines of a small room, contained, his eyes and his teeth gleaming in the darkness, looking as though he wanted nothing more than to take a bite out of her.

She pushed the thought aside as the thuds of the hooves of the horses pulling the carriage started to slow down. They had finally arrived in the village, a bright, bustling place that seemed alight with chatter. Gregory arrived at the door and pulled it open, offering her a hand to help her step out.

“Thank you,” she murmured to him, and he bowed low playfully.

“My pleasure,” he replied, and she couldn’t help but laugh. She had grown fond of Gregory in the time she had been here. He was kind and witty, a good balance to Arran’s more serious nature. She could see how the two of them had become such fast friends, and she sometimes wondered why it was that a man of his age had not yet found a wife.

Splitting off from the rest of the group, Mary wandered towards the small market that had sprung up next to the inn, the same one that took place each week, where local farmers and other sellers would flog their wares to the highest bidder. Really, it seemed to be a chance for everyone to catch up on the local gossip, and, sure enough, she heard snatches of conversation flying around her as she made her way through.

“Aye, well, I heard that she’s already six months gone, and they only got married in the spring!”

“And did you tell him what you thought of that? I tell ye, if that had been me, I’d have given that man a piece of my mind...”

“...yes, Laird Fraser! I can hardly believe it, I thought he had been cast out of this place...”

Her feet stilled beneath her when she heard that name, the name of the man she had been doing her best to forget. She glanced over furtively to see where the conversation had come from, and, sure enough, there were a huddle of girls around

one of the stalls, perhaps close to her in age. They were speaking with their heads lowered, as though they did not want anyone else to hear what they were conversing about, but the conversation still sent a prickle of fear through Mary's body.

No, it was more than a prickle of fear. There was jealousy there too, as much as she didn't want to admit it. She was jealous that they were talking about this man, this man whom she barely knew. She was certain she was being absurd, but still, she found herself rounding on them, stepping closer so she could hear what they were speaking about.

All three girls looked around at her as she drew closer. The one who had spoken last lifted her chin and raised her eyebrows at her.

"Is there something ye've got tae say?" she demanded. Mary tossed her hair over her shoulder, mustering all the certainty she could.

"That man you were talking about, Kiernan Fraser," she replied. "You should be careful of him. He's no good. A very dangerous man, from what I hear. I'm sure girls like you wouldn't want to get involved with someone so..."

"Someone so... what?"

Her heart stuttered, and, for a moment, felt like it stopped. She recognized that voice at once, how could she not? She spun around on the spot, and there, sure enough, was Kiernan himself, eyeing her with open amusement. He nodded for her to continue.

"Please, go on," he prompted her. "I'd like tae hear what you've got to say about me."

"I—I didn't mean it like that," she blurted out. The girls, ducking their heads low, turned their attention back to the stall before them, clearly not wanting to get

involved in whatever this was.

“No, you were scaring away yer competition,” he remarked, an amused tone to his voice. “I cannae fault you for that.”

By now, her cheeks were blazing with heat, and she cursed herself for making it so obvious.

“That’s not why I was speaking to them.”

“Aye, you were just doing it out of the goodness of yer heart, were you?” he chuckled. He didn’t seem offended, which surprised her. No, he seemed... amused. She supposed he must have been used to people speaking about him in such a way. If Arran had heard such stories of him, she could only imagine how far they might have spread, the points they may have stretched to.

“I was just?—“

“I’m no’ angry at you, lass,” he assured her. “You can tell yer cheeks that.”

She lifted a hand to her face, annoyed that she was making how flustered she was so obvious. He seemed so utterly calm and cool in the face of everything that he came across, whereas she couldn’t seem to stop making a fool of herself whenever he was near her.

“I dinnae see much of you away from the Keep,” he remarked, tipping his head to the side, a dark strand of hair falling into his eyes. She wondered, briefly, if it would have been soft—how it would have felt to run her fingers through his hair, to feel the nape of his neck beneath her fingertips. She swallowed hard, forcing the image from her mind at once, trying to remind herself that she was an honourable woman, not some lusty maid who would swoon into the arms of any man she met.

“I wanted some fresh air,” she replied with a shrug.

“And perhaps a drink?” he suggested, nodding to the inn where Gregory and the other men had tied up their horses. A drink? With him? The thought sent a shiver down her spine, but not an entirely unwelcome one. The notion of sharing such an intimate space with him excited her, there was no doubt about it, though she was sure she should have done a better job at containing it.

“She’s no’ interested in a drink wi’ you”

Gregory’s voice cut in from behind them, and she turned to see him standing just a few yards away, his face as hard as stone. Judging by the way he was looking at the two of them, Mary could have guessed that Arran had warned him to keep an eye on her. The thought irritated her, but, at the same time, she was sure it was for her own good. If this man’s reputation really did run as deep as Arran had claimed, then she was better off keeping her distance.

So why did she still feel so drawn to him?

“A walk, then,” Kiernan countered. “Somewhere you can keep an eye on us, eh, Gregory?”

She wasn’t sure how he knew Gregory’s name, but it seemed to annoy Gregory. He straightened his shoulders, glancing between the two of them. Mary held her breath. She didn’t rightly know which way he was going to go, and it worried her that he might tell her no, put her back in the carriage, and take her from this place before she so much as had a chance to speak to him again. She knew it was wrong for her to crave his closeness so much, but, after days of dreaming of him, she felt it was only right for her to have found him once more.

“Just a few minutes,” she pleaded with Gregory, and he seemed to sense that he

would not get through to her. He sighed.

“Aye, fine,” he muttered. “But stay where we can see you. And be ready to go back to the Keep soon.”

She nodded, her heart leaping in her chest, and she stole another glance over at Kiernan. Even a walk would be a chance for her to get to know him a little better. She would take anything she could get at this point, anything that would go some way to sating the curiosity that had built inside her chest.

“How gracious of ye, Gregory,” Kiernan remarked, a note of teasing to his voice. Gregory glowered at him.

“Dinnae give me a reason to change my mind,” he warned him, and he turned on his heel to head into the market and pick up a few of the bits and bobs he had been sent for.

Just like that, it was only the two of them. Mary looked up at Kiernan. This was the first time she had seen him in the light of day. He was a little older than her, near thirty to her twenty, if she had to guess, and the crinkles around his eyes deepened as he flashed her a smile. He offered her his arm, surprising her with his gentlemanly knowledge. She took it, and, for a moment, she had to steady herself as the strength of him, even beneath his rough robe, sent a throb of excitement through her body.

“There’s a pretty spot down by the river,” he remarked as he began to lead her. “And you’ll no’ be out of sight of yer nannies.”

“They’re not my nannies,” she fired back, a little more sharply than she had intended. He chuckled.

“I was only jestin’ on, lass,” he teased her. “No need to worry.”

He led her towards the edge of the market, where, sure enough, a river flowed between two verdant green banks. She felt herself soften as they drew closer to it. She had always loved the sound of running water, something about it casting a peaceful spell over her body.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” he remarked. She gripped his arm a little tighter. She wished, all of a sudden, that he was saying that about her, and not the water.

“Yes, it is.”

He chuckled, and she glanced up at him, another flood of redness coming to her cheeks.

“What? What is it?”

“Yer accent,” he remarked. “It’s... different.”

“And so you think you can laugh at me?”

He shrugged. Just behind them, in the market, a man tied up his horse so he could pick up some goods. The creature pawed at the ground and let out a snort, catching her attention. She turned, her eyes lighting up.

“Oh, isn’t she beautiful?” she breathed as she reached out to pet the horse’s neck. The animal was a deep chestnut brown, with a mane as dark as bark on an old oak tree. Her eyes, framed with long lashes, matched, with a soft sweetness Mary couldn’t resist. Though she could not ride well herself, she was hoping to learn while she was staying with Amelia at the Keep. She knew her sister had learned in the time that she had been staying there, and she could only imagine how exciting it must have been to feel the wind in her hair, hooves thundering beneath her as they carried her off anywhere she wanted to go.

“Aye, she’s a pretty one,” Kiernan replied. To her surprise, he reached out, too, and planted his hand on the creature’s neck. The horse bowed slightly at his touch, allowing for her to reach its mane, though she was paying more attention to the way he treated it.

His touch was gentle and careful, making sure not to spook the magnificent chestnut mare before them. How could a man who seemed to treat this animal with such care be as dangerous as Arran had claimed him to be? It didn’t make sense. She had never imagined that someone so fearful, someone who cast such a long shadow with their reputation, could have been even remotely capable of what these people seemed to believe him able to do.

For a moment, as both of them paid attention to the horse, their fingers touched, his smallest finger grazing against her thumb, and she felt that familiar jolt, that rush of sensation that began where their connection did and raced through her whole body. She longed to steal a glance at him out of the corner of her eye, wishing that she could check on how he reacted to it. Could he feel it as well? Or was she imagining it all between them, inventing some spurious romance that could never have existed? Perhaps he thought it was funny, seeing the way she reacted to him, making it so easy to read her desires with every motion.

He dropped his hand by his side again, and she followed suit, remembering all at once that Gregory and the other men were nearby. It would have been too much of a risk to try anything more than this. What they had done thus far could have been passed off as nothing more than an innocent walk, but if she let her touch linger on his for any longer, she might have been caught in the act.

And she didn’t much like the thought of finding out what would happen if Arran knew what she had been up to.

She swallowed hard, running a hand through her hair to distract herself.

“The heather on the hills is so beautiful, don’t you think?” she asked, blurting out something, anything as soon as she was able to. He smiled and nodded.

“Aye, it is,” he agreed. “I used to pull it up by the roots when I was a lad, made for a good place to sleep when it was clear out.”

The two of them continued to converse as they strolled along the edge of the river. Birch trees dipped their green branches low towards the water, and a few birds fluttered along the edges, trying to pick out an insect or small fish to feed on. Dandelions studded yellow along the banks, and tangles of wildflowers twisted by the path. He offered his arm again, but she declined it, too worried of how obvious she might make her attraction to him if she touched him again. It seemed as though it was coming off of her in waves, and the notion that he might catch on to it was nigh-on mortifying.

The entire time, she was distinctly aware of Gregory and the other men watching her. She could feel their eyes on her, taking them in at every second, not a single word or gesture unnoticed. Would they report it back to Amelia and Arran? And what would her sister make of it, especially since she had made it clear that she totally trusted everything that her husband believed? Surely, she would take his side, if Arran declared that her closeness to this man was a risk.

By the time they rounded back to the market again, dark clouds had begun to fill the skies above them. Kiernan looked up, and she noticed, for a moment, the sharp outline of his jaw beneath his skin. She wished she could run her tongue along it, taste the roughness of his stubble against her skin.

“Looks like it’s getting dreich,” he remarked. “You’d best be getting home, lass. Else you’ll be washed away.”

He smirked as he spoke, almost as though he were challenging her. She eyed him for

a moment, trying to read his expression, his true meaning, though nothing seemed forthcoming.

“Take care o’ yerself,” he said, and with that, he turned to stride back towards the river, soon vanishing from her sight. She stared at the spot he had been standing, as though she could muster him back just through the sheer power of her thought, but the long silence remained, leaving her with it only the memory of his warning words.

And the question of when she was going to see this mysterious man again.

If ever.

As soon as she stepped into the main hall, Mary could feel eyes on her. She glanced this way and that. Sure enough, a couple of the servants were talking to one another, covering their mouths with their hands as they eyed her warily. Had her reputation fallen so far in such little time?

Lifting her head high, she tried to gather herself as best she could. She had been called to meet with Arran after what had happened in the village, her brief dalliance with Kiernan enough to stir the rumors that now rushed around her with seemingly endless force. She made her way towards the stairs that led to his study, trying to stem the thudding in her chest as she did so.

She had done nothing wrong, after all. She'd just shared a brief walk with a man. There was nothing dangerous about that, no matter how Arran tried to convince her of his misdeeds. She could hardly believe that someone like Kieran, someone who seemed to drip with such easy, open charm, could contain such darkness.

She reached the door to his study, and hesitated outside it for a moment before she lifted her knuckles and rapped on it. She could not allow her doubt to get the better of her, no matter how easy it might have been to give in to the mess of emotion rushing through her. She had done little more than take a walk, and she would not be told off by any man, let alone her brother-in-law, for doing something so innocent.

The door opened and on the other side stood Gregory. His face was creased with concern, and she felt a twist of guilt as she realized that she had likely landed him in trouble with Arran. The two of them were close, and she disliked the notion of

coming between them in any way.

“Come,” Arran called to her, and she stepped inside, shooting Gregory an apologetic glance as she went. She hoped he knew that she had not done what she had done for the sake of causing trouble between them. She had scarcely thought of where it might take her, what might come of this interaction with Kiernan, but now...

She took herself to Arran’s desk, where he was planted in a heavy chair on the far side. His eyes were impassive as they met hers, his jaw set tight, as though he wished he didn’t have to have this conversation with her.

“You called for me?” she prompted him, and he ran a hand through his hair and sighed. There were dark rings under his eyes, she supposed from the stress of taking care of a newborn, and once again, guilt panged in her as she thought of bringing this ill-called-for trouble to his door.

“Aye, we need to speak,” he replied, nodding to the chair opposite him. “Sit, lass.”

She sank down into the seat as she was told, not wanting to put up any more of a fight than she already had. She wondered if her sister had anything to say on this matter, what she made of everything that she had done. Mary wished she could reach out to her and ask her, but she had been giving Amelia plenty of space, as she recovered from the birth and the first few weeks of her beautiful son’s life.

“Gregory informed me that ye’ve been fraternizing with Kiernan again,” he told her, his voice as even as he could keep it, though she could tell that an anger boiled below the surface. She nodded slowly, not sure if she should admit to it or not.

“Yes, well, we ran into him in town when I went with the men to visit,” she replied, more defensive than she had intended for herself to sound. “And he asked me to come for a walk. I supposed it was better to be polite than to turn him down...”

Arran shook his head, cutting her off.

“Ye’ve no reason to be polite to a man like him,” he muttered, his voice darkening. Curiosity prickled the back of her neck. What was it he had done that was so dark, so monstrous, that nobody seemed able to tell her a single word of it?

He shot a look over at Gregory, and she followed his gaze around, landing on the man behind her. His eyes were lowered, and she could tell he was ashamed for what had happened earlier, the way things had unfolded. She sighed to herself, then turned back to Arran. She supposed she owed him, at least, a chance to speak out on what had truly happened, so she could make sense of the disdain they seemed to carry for this man.

“And why not?” she asked him, raising her eyebrows. “You’ve spoken about how dangerous he is, but you’ve not told me exactly why...”

“Because he wants this land for himself,” Arran snapped back, his voice sharper than she’d ever heard it. She drew back in her seat, surprised by his tone, and he closed his eyes and rubbed his hand over his face.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “There’s a... history between our clan and his. The Frasers and the Aitkens. One that goes back to my father, and to his...”

He fell silent once more. She held her breath. She could hardly stand holding back like this, could hardly contain herself as she tried to make sense of everything that seemed to be rushing through his mind. A history that she’d had no access to before, a history that she wanted nothing more than to unlock.

And a history that, whether she liked it or not, may have only sparked her curiosity towards Kiernan.

“What did he do?” she murmured to him, speaking softly, as though barely daring to say it out loud. A darkness flashed across his face, and he lowered his gaze to the desk for a moment.

“His father was a barbarian,” he replied, quietly, slowly, the words leaking from his lips as though he had hoped he would never have to say them out loud again. “He was determined, he’d set his heart on owning the whole of the Highlands. Fae Fort William to Drumnadrochit to Stonehaven, he’d decided that he’d have it all. Every piece. No matter the cost.”

A shiver ran down her spine.

“But aren’t some of those... aren’t those Aitken lands?”

“Aye, they are,” he replied with a nod. “But he paid that little mind. He cut through Lairdships around me, killed men to take their place, claimed more land to his name than he ever should have, and ruled it as a tyrant.”

He paused for a moment, as though remembering all of it. It was clear, from the expression on his face, that it was still just as present as it had ever been, the memory of it.

“And Kiernan, he was little more than his attack dog,” he continued. “He was barely more than a boy when he led his father’s men into the lands around us, when he clashed with the other leaders. Even back then, he was a fearsome warrior, there was naebody who could have contained him in battle.”

“But now...?”

“His father has long-since passed,” he explained. “And the lands that he claimed have reverted back to those who rightly laid claim to them in the first place. But he never

found a way to take our land from us, and I'd wager that he's trying to do what his father couldnae."

She stared at him for a moment. It was starting to make sense to her now, why he had been so reticent about letting her get anywhere close to him, why he had done his best to keep her away from this man.

"He thinks if he can get closer to you, he can find a way into this Keep," he continued, his anger written all over his face. "And I've got no intention of allowing that tae happen. Ye need to keep yer distance frae him, or you'll find yourself in more trouble than a lass like you knows how to deal with."

Mary rose to her feet sharply. There was something about his words that irritated her. As though she was little more than an annoyance to him, some child that he had to find a way to control and protect. When she was a grown woman. She might not have been married and had a child like Amelia, but that didn't mean she was some innocent waif wandering through the world with no idea of what she wanted or how to get it.

"Well, thank you for telling me," she replied, lowering her head slightly. She didn't want him to think she was angered by his words. She knew, after all, that he was just trying to help.

"Ye'll keep yer distance from him?" he asked, concerned. "I'd hate to think what he might do to you if?—"

"Yes, I will," she replied before he could finish what he was saying. "Thank you, Arran."

Before he could say another word, she made her way to the door once more, her mind reeling with the enormity of everything that he had just told her.

Was it all true? She supposed he would have had no reason to lie to her, not outright, but perhaps he had taken in some of what his own father had told him about the Fraser family and believed it without question. It was hard to believe that a man like Kiernan could have been so brutal, could have torn through people the way that he claimed he had. It made little sense to her, though she should have known better than to question it. People contained hidden multitudes that the outside world could only dream of at a glance.

Like the multitudes she felt she contained, too. The multitudes that Arran seemed intent on pushing down. She was a woman, after all, and a woman with needs and desires and wants that she was sure anyone her age had, too. And those wants... those wants rose to the surface in a way she couldn't control when she was around Kiernan. No matter what Arran had told her about that man, the desire was impossible to ignore, and she could not just switch it off as easily as snuffing out a candle.

And perhaps... perhaps there was some rebellious part of her that was drawn to this man because of the darkness that Arran claimed he had to him. It was long in his past now, she was sure of it, but she could almost imagine it, how easy it would have been to let that beast that had once existed in him escape once more, what that beast might do to her, given the chance...

But Arran's words throbbed through her mind as she made her way back to her quarters, her heart thrumming in her chest as she considered them once more. Was it all some kind of game to Kiernan, a game he intended to win by getting into the Aitken Keep once more? Could he have faked the tension that burned between them when they touched, as a tool to fulfill what his father had not been able to?

She flopped down in her bed when she reached her room once more, her face buried in the pillow as she let out a long groan. Her mind was being torn into different directions; her want for him, her need, clashing up against the loyalty she knew she should hold for her family.

Her family. Her family, which had recently expanded beyond just her and her sisters. Now, she had her nephew Robert to think of, too. Her heart skipped a beat as she imagined the harm that might come to him if she followed the desire that seemed to consume her. If he really was trying to find a way to get close to her, to infiltrate the Aitken clan and find a way to claim their lands, then she would have been leaving open the door for him to hurt her family by pursuing the need inside of her. And she would never have been able to forgive herself if something had happened to them because of what she wanted, because of what she desired. She had never been a selfish woman, but...

But she had been so good for so long now, she had allowed herself to be pulled this way and that by the people around her. She had lived her life in such a way that she had never really followed what she wanted. She had either been doing what her father had commanded of her, or, now, what her sister and Arran seemed to want from her. Was it not natural that she wanted some freedom, a chance to indulge in a desire that would only have benefitted her?

She dozed off as those thoughts spun around her head. By the time she awoke, it was dark outside, and her stomach was grumbling. She glanced around, a little bleary from sleep, and rose from the bed, making her way to the door, to find the Keep quiet—almost eerily quiet. As though the whole place was holding its breath, waiting for her to make a move.

Slipping on her shoes, she stepped out in to the corridor, and made her way to the stairs, intending to head to the kitchen to scavenge what food she could find left over from dinner that evening. She wondered if Amelia had noticed she was missing, and, if she had, if she thought it was to do with the conversation she'd had with Arran earlier that day. Perhaps she thought Mary was angry with her for not standing up for her, or annoyed that she was being told what to do.

Perhaps that was exactly how Mary was feeling.

She moved through the Keep as silently as she could, not wanting to wake anyone, but also not wanting to have to explain why she had hidden up in her room for all that time. If she admitted that she had been thinking about Kiernan, she knew that it would have caused more trouble than it ever had before, and she was loathe to invite such problems into her head when Arran had already warned her away from them.

She reached the kitchen, which was cold where the back door led out to the pantry outside. It was a dark, still night, a heavy weight seeming to rest over the place, as though someone had draped a blanket across the entire Keep.

There was a scattering of food left on the table in the center of the kitchen, and she picked her way towards it, moving slowly for reasons she wasn't entirely sure of. It was as though she was waiting for something, distinctly aware of every movement she made, and the weight it might have carried if she was not careful.

Then, all at once, she heard it.

“Lass, over here!”

She gasped and spun around, her hand clasped to her chest in a panic. As though she had managed to conjure him with the sheer intensity of the thought she had poured into him the last few hours or so, there he was, standing before her. Kiernan. The man she was supposed to keep her distance from.

The man she seemed unable to stop thinking about.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded, her voice hoarse as she glanced around. She was sure that if she stood here to talk to him, someone would emerge from the shadows to catch her in the act, and she detested the idea of being exposed in such a way, especially after what Arran had said to her.

A smile flitted across his face. Oh, that smile. She knew that smile would land her in more trouble than she knew what to do with.

“Come wi’ me,” he told her, holding out his hand to her. She hesitated, pulling back, a part of her screaming to run, to dash back into the Keep and tell everyone that Kiernan Fraser was there, and that she knew not what he wanted from her, but he was trying to get her to run away with him.

Yet, another part of her stood her ground. She locked eyes with him, lifting her chin slightly, mustering up every piece of strength she could.

“Why should I go with you? What are you doing here?” she demanded. The smile spread a little wider over his face, reaching his dark eyes.

“You already ken why, Mary.”

Oh, there it was again, the sound of her name on his tongue, that spell that seemed to cast a powerful charm across her entire body. She took a step closer to him, her body arching towards him before she could stop herself.

“Come wi’ me,” he repeated himself as he leaned in the doorway, outlined by the cold, glassy light of the moon behind him.

“Where to?”

“Does it matter?”

She chewed her lip. She should have told him to leave, right then and there, that she knew what kind of man he was and that she would never have allowed him anywhere close to her, but she couldn’t. Her hands rested on his open palm for a long moment, feeling the calluses on his fingers, and she could almost feel how they would have felt

against her body, how they would have traced out the shape of her and held her close, how rough they would have been, how commanding...

Before she could stop herself, she reached out, and slipped her hand into his.

Mary could hear the blood rushing in her ears as she followed him out towards the stables, the moon casting a long ray of light across the grounds of the Keep. Stealing a glance back towards the main building, she half-expected to find people staring down at her and watching her as she made her way after him, but there was nothing, nobody.

Just her. And him. In the quiet of that night, it was as though nobody else existed.

She stared at his hand wrapped around hers, marveling at how big it looked beside her own fingers. She was distinctly aware, all of a sudden, of how easy it would have been for him to just take control of her completely, to push her up against the wall and...

Her heart stuttered in her chest as she imagined it, how he could have taken what he wanted from her. Arran's words flooded back into her mind, and she slowed, stilling her feet beneath her just as they reached the stables.

He seemed to sense her hesitation, and glanced over his shoulder at her.

"Ye alright, lass?"

She didn't reply. In truth, she hardly knew the answer herself. She felt as though speaking it out loud would give away something she was not yet ready to share, but she supposed, if she was to trust him, then she should at least tell him what she knew of him.

“I... I heard this isn’t the first time you or your family have turned up at this Keep uninvited,” she replied, finally. He tipped his head to the side, clearly amused.

“Ye’ve been asking after me? My, I’m flattered.”

Her cheeks heated at once.

“That’s not what I meant. I didn’t—I mean, I haven’t.”

He laughed and took her hand once more, guiding her towards the stables. Inside, it was quiet and a little warmer. The horses stood either side of them, most of them asleep, paying them little attention as Kiernan rounded on her.

“I ken that Arran has nae time for me,” he replied, lowering his voice. “And I dinnae blame him. After what my father did...”

He shook his head, but he hardly seemed apologetic about it. She searched his face for some sign that he regretted it, some sign that he wished that he could go back and undo everything that had been done, but she didn’t find it.

“So what are you doing here, then?” she asked him. She was distinctly aware, all of a sudden, of how close they were standing. Between the door and the stalls of the stables behind them, there was only a matter of yards, and he stood just a few inches from her. Unlike the last time, when they had been watched over by Arran’s men, it was just the two of them, nobody to interrupt, nobody to stop them.

He stared down at her.

“I could ask ye the same thing,” he replied. “You could have raised the alarm when you saw me in that kitchen. You could have called for yer guards to come and carry me away. But ye didn’t, did you?”

She bit her lip hard. She hated this, but she couldn't pull herself away. She couldn't deny how badly her body cried out for him, how deeply the want seemed to get the better of her. She wished she could conjure some resistance to his charms, but she was melting into him, all the distance she had tried to put between them falling away at once.

"No," she whispered as she gazed up at him. "I didn't."

He reached up, planting a finger beneath her chin and guiding it upwards, so that she was looking into his eyes. Her knees were trembling helplessly, and she felt like she might faint on the spot. She could feel his breath on her skin, the promise of it, the temptation it held. As though he were the devil himself, and she was nothing more than a helpless sinner unable to resist his temptations.

"I came here tonight because I always get what's mine," he told her softly, his voice dropping to a low growl.

"You think I'm yours?"

"You think ye're no'?"

Her breath hitched in her throat. It felt as though all the desire, all the want, all the need, was finally spiraling down into this moment. She needed him, so badly she couldn't think straight, so desperately her whole body was pushing her forward. She had never wanted a man the way she wanted him, but she couldn't deny herself this any longer. Whatever attempts she had made to control herself in the face of everything he was asking for.

Finally, she sank her lips into his, giving in and giving herself to him at last.

He pushed her against the wall of the stable, his hands on her hips, his grip tight and

intoxicating, as though he never intended to let her go. She gasped against his mouth, and he slipped his tongue past her parted lips, kissing her deeply. She reached up to plant her hands on his shoulders, resting them there for a moment, tentative. One wrong move, she felt, and it would shatter this moment entirely, leave this falling apart around them, but she needed more.

She needed everything.

His hand shifted down, towards her skirts, and he gathered them up with ease and pulled them into his grasp. She moaned against his mouth, the sound surprising even her. She didn't know she was capable of such lust, but the rush of sensation coursed around every inch of her body. Something was tightening in her belly, reaching down between her legs, a deep, craving need that she had never felt before.

His fingers carved a line along the inside of her thigh, and she shivered again. Just a matter of yards away, everyone else was slumbering, and if they'd had any idea of what she was doing in here, with him, her whole reputation would have been forsaken in that instant. But, somehow, that only excited her more, and she pushed her hand into his hair, pulling him closer, as his fingers traced to the crease of her hip, teasing her lightly as a heady desire started to throb between her thighs.

Then, all at once, he pulled back. She gasped in shock, reaching for him again, but then she realized what had drawn his attention; the sound of footsteps, approaching the stables. Her heart dropped, and she pulled away from him, trying to put as much distance between them as she could. But, in this small space, she knew the chances of convincing anyone that this had been some innocent encounter were virtually nil.

"Aye, I'm sure I heard something out here," Gregory's voice cut through the quiet. He must have heard Kiernan sneaking around out there and, by the sounds of it, he had brought someone else with him, too. Her cheeks were flushed, her breath coming hard and fast, and she knew she stood little chance of being able to convince

Gregory—or anyone—that this was utterly innocent.

Then, to her surprise, Kiernan stepped out of the stables. Before she could stop herself, she followed after him, moving so that she was just behind him, his broad shoulders and strong frame blocking her from what was waiting on the other side.

“Gentlemen,” he called to them. “I think ye’re looking for me.”

With that, Gregory and his companion turned, and when they saw Kiernan standing just a few yards away from them, Mary cowering behind him, something in the air shifted.

Something Mary knew would never return to normal again.

“Ye’re lucky I dinnae have you killed on the spot!”

Arran’s voice crashed off the walls of his study, as Kiernan and Mary stood before him and Amelia. Mary could barely lift her head to look at her sister, sure that she would be met with a glower for dragging her out of bed in the middle of the night.

And that was not even considering what it was she had been caught in the midst of.

Gregory had raised the alarm, letting everyone know that Kiernan had been skulking around the Keep—and, worse, that he’d been found with Mary. The two of them had swiftly been guided to his study, while the corridors came alight with whispers and conversation about Mary, about what she had been doing with such a brute of a man, she was sure.

“And why don’t you, Arran?” Kiernan replied with a near-relaxed tone to his voice. Mary shot a look at him out of the corner of her eye. She did not much care for the idea that he was trying to bait Arran into doing something. She’d heard the way Arran had talked about him before, and she knew that he carried no care for the Fraser family in his heart.

“Because I’m no’ the kind of bastard your father was,” he snapped back, running a hand through his hair. Amelia reached for his arm, giving it a light squeeze, and he closed his eyes for a moment, as though he was drawing himself back down to Earth before he continued.

“If you’ve hurt her,” Amelia cut in, her voice dropping as she glanced over at Mary, but Kiernan let out a chuckle. Mary saw a flash of anger cross Arran’s face at the sound of it, as though he could hardly believe he would be treating this with such lightness.

“Does she look hurt to you?” he demanded, gesturing to Mary. His hand moved close to her, close enough that she could almost feel it grazing her skin, and a shiver rushed down her spine. Though it had landed them in all kinds of trouble, she could still recall, all too easily, how delicious it had felt to give herself to him like that, how badly she ached to do it all over again, no matter how foolish it might have been.

Arran rose to his feet and closed the distance between him and Kiernan. Mary had never seen such fury in his eyes before, and she found herself drawing away from him nervously, worried that she might find herself at the wrong end of it, if she wasn’t careful.

“You Fraser men have tried time and time again to cause trouble in my Keep,” Arran snarled at him. “But if you think I’m going tae stand by and let you defile my sister-in-law...”

“I did nothing of the sort,” Kiernan replied smoothly, not letting his voice crack for a moment.

“Gregory said that the two of you were in the stables together,” Amelia protested. “What were you doing, alone in there with her?”

“Perhaps you’d like tae tell them, Mary,” Kiernan remarked, shooting a look over at her, his eyes blazing with a playfulness, like he was challenging her to come out and say it. She felt her cheeks heat up as she drew her gaze away from him, loathing herself for making her desire so obvious.

“Dinnae try and deny it,” Arran continued, stabbing his finger in the air at Kiernan furiously. “You came here to...”

“I came here to make my intentions known,” Kiernan replied without missing a beat. “Though I suppose Mary and I found oursels’ somewhat... caught up in the moment.”

“Your intentions?” Mary whispered. She hardly knew what to expect from him as she waited for an answer, but she was sure, in that instant, that it would change everything, everything that had happened when he was close to her. He seemed to undo whatever certainties she had built up about herself, and tear them down for good.

“Aye,” he replied, as though it should have been obvious. “My intentions to marry ye, lass.”

The whole room fell silent. Amelia drew in a sharp breath, and Mary felt her knees shaking beneath her, her breath stuttering in her throat. Could he really have meant that? Could he really... was this some twisted game, some way to force himself into the Aitken keep, just as Arran had warned her?

Or was it about her? About her and him? And them? She found herself shifting towards him slightly, something in her crying out for his touch, no matter how wrong it might have been.

“Marriage?” Arran exploded. “Dae you think fer a moment that we’ll allow a Fraser like you...”

“I’m no’ asking what you think of it,” he replied, cutting off Arran mid-flow. “But, since you seem to think I’ve defiled her already, you should be grateful that I’m ready to do as any man should and become her husband.”

“You can’t—she’s too young for that!” Amelia cut in. Mary bit down on her lip hard, containing the response she wanted to blurt out at her sister. She knew that Amelia was just trying to help her, just trying to look out for her, but she was far from too young to get married—at least, that’s what their own father had decided. He had chosen to marry her off, and the only way she was getting out of it...

Was if she accepted the offer that Kiernan had laid on the table for her. No matter what his reasons for it, no matter if she could trust him or not, she could not risk the possibility of going back to her father as an unwed woman, and having to face the horror of whatever husband he had chosen for her.

“I’ll marry you.”

Everyone in the room turned to look at her; all of them, except Kiernan, seemed surprised.

“You will do no such thing!” Amelia protested as she sprang to her feet and Arran put an arm around her protectively, pulling her close. It was clear that she knew well of Kiernan’s reputation. Arran had probably told her more than he had even shared with Mary, and perhaps it should have frightened the girl to see her own sister so angry at the prospect.

“Amelia, I’m a grown woman,” she argued. “I can do as I please. If this man wants to marry me, and I him, then who are you to stand in the way of it?”

“My thoughts exactly,” Kiernan added, his voice smooth and confident, his dark blue eyes sparkling with amusement. Arran fired an angry look in his direction, and Amelia hurried over to Mary, taking her by the elbow and steering her towards the door.

Mary allowed her sister to lead her out into the corridor, though she knew that

whatever she had to say would not sway her from the decision she had already made. She could not tell Amelia about what their father had planned for her, or else she would stress herself into illness trying to make it right. No, this was the most sensible solution for everyone, and Mary intended to see it through.

As soon as they were out of earshot of the men, Amelia began to speak, the words tumbling from her mouth so fast it was as though she could hardly control them.

“Mary, please, think about what you’re agreeing to,” Amelia begged her. “You have to consider the kind of man Kiernan is—he’s dangerous. He’ll be no good for you as a husband.”

“I think I should be the one to make that choice,” Mary replied, her voice as stern and steady as she could keep it. In truth, the thought of being married to him sent a thrill of excitement through her body for she knew, if they were wed, that they would have to share a marital bed, that whatever had started in the stables would continue into something more... carnal. She pressed her thighs together beneath her dress, trying to stem that thought before it got the better of her, and returned her attention to her sister.

“You don’t understand, love,” Amelia pleaded, lifting her hand to her sister’s cheek and cupping it there. “You’re so young. You don’t know what makes a good husband, or...”

“And you did, when you married Arran?”

The words stopped Amelia in her tracks.

“What on earth do you mean by that?”

“There were those who called him a barbarian,” she reminded her. “Those who

thought he was some wild man who would... well, I won't repeat the stories of what I heard of him after he carried you off to be his bride."

"But that's Arran," she protested. "He's different. He's..."

"He's different because you gave him the chance to be different," she replied. "And perhaps... perhaps Kiernan deserves that chance too. Don't you think he does?"

Amelia's eyes were clouded with doubt as she gazed at Mary. Mary's heart was hammering in her chest as she wondered whether she had done enough to convince her sister that this was the way to go forward. She had no doubt that Arran would dig his heels in and try to find some way to stop the union before it came to pass, but she was a grown woman. If she wanted to marry this man, then she would do it.

She would give herself to him, as she had in those dark dreams, for so long.

"Arran doesn't trust him," Amelia warned her. "And he knows this place well, he knows the people who live in this area, he knows the Frasers and what they are capable of..."

"He knows what his father was capable of," she countered quickly. "He doesn't know Kiernan. He's made no effort to."

"Because of everything he's done."

"And Arran hasn't done much of that himself?"

Amelia fell silent. She had told Mary of the daring escape Arran had allowed her from the grips of the man who wanted to make her his bride, and she knew it had been a bloody, violent affair. Of course, it had been so she would end up in the arms of a man she adored more than anything in the world, but she must have been able to

see the contradiction there.

She gazed at her sister for a long moment, taking her hand and giving it a tight squeeze. She always knew when she had lost with her little sisters, when she had to concede the argument to them. Mary was rarely the one who dug her heels so deeply, but she refused to allow her sister to talk her out of this. If she did not marry Kiernan, her father would wed her to some ancient old man who'd make use of her body in ways that made her ill just to think of. Kiernan might have been frightening, in some ways, but at least she desired him, the way a wife should.

"Are you sure?" Amelia asked softly, and Mary nodded.

"I'm sure."

She pulled Mary into a sudden, tight hug, pressing her face into her shoulder and holding her close for a moment. Mary supposed that the birth of her son had left her feeling more maternal than she once had. Mary squeezed her back, grateful for her love for her but knowing, deep down in her soul, that she had to see this through. She had to be with this man. Even if something about the thought frightened her, the thought of going back to her father and allowing him to use her as chattel to pay off his debts was even worse.

"I'll tell Arran you've made your mind up," Amelia promised her, brushing a strand of hair back from Mary's face.

"Do you think he'll take it well?"

Amelia let out a chuckle, and shook her head.

"I expect he'll be furious. But I'm his wife. I can get him to see anything from my point of view if I try."

“You’ll have to teach me your ways,” Mary joked, her voice slightly shaky. “I’ll need to find some way to make Kiernan respect me the same as Arran does you.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage,” Amelia replied as she turned to head back into the study. For a moment before she stepped inside, she paused, and just looked at her sister for a long moment.

As Mary gazed back at her, she could tell that a thousand thoughts were rushing through Amelia’s mind in that moment, and she felt a twinge of guilt, knowing that she’d been the one to put them there. But she quickly brushed them aside. This was her choice, and she would stand by it. If it would save her from the marriage to Lord Whitecombe, then she would take it.

And if it meant that she and Kiernan could finally be alone together in the way she truly craved... then even better.

Mary stood before the polished glass of the mirror and took herself in. The soft white gown she was wearing hung from her body, the straps brushing across her shoulders. Goosebumps had appeared along her arms, and she reached for the delicate white shawl that Amelia had bought for her when she had realized that Mary was serious about going through with this wedding.

Mary could scarcely believe that the day was finally upon her, the day when she would marry Kiernan Fraser. She had seen him only a handful of times since their encounter in the stables, and never alone. Arran always made sure that someone was lurking nearby to keep watch on them, as though he feared that Kiernan might try to make off with her into the night before she was his bride.

A few times, she had considered doing just that. It would have been all too easy to leave everything behind, to forget the weight and enormity of everything she was going through, that she was about to dedicate her life to a man who had such a dangerous reputation, who came from a family with such darkness rooted into its core.

Every time she laid eyes on Kiernan, though, she knew that she had to see it through. She had to. She craved him, more than she had ever craved anything in her life before. In those brief moments they were together before the wedding, she could feel the heat burning between them, a heat that drove a curiosity she couldn't hide from. She longed for him, every part of him, and soon, she would have it.

As she stared at herself in the mirror, in her virginal-white dress, a handful of violets

woven through her blonde hair to draw out the purplish flecks in her eyes, she could hardly recognize the girl looking back at her. No, not the girl—the woman. The wife-to-be. She had to keep reminding herself of that part, that she was soon to be a wife, a lover, maybe even a mother.

The wedding had been planned quickly. Kiernan had insisted on it, perhaps fearful that she might lose interest in going through with it if he did not make his move with haste. Of course, he did not know of the truth of what she was running from, the man her father had planned for her to wed.

Dispatches had been sent to her family, though she had not heard back from them in time for the ceremony itself. She had hoped her mother might be in attendance, but she supposed her father was still in a rage at knowing that he couldn't use her to his own spurious ends any longer. Even if she had not agreed for the dispatches to be sent out, she supposed they would have found out about it anyway, given the gossip that was already swirling around the upcoming union. She'd had a few of the servants in the Keep ask her about her engagement to him, their eyes widening when she confirmed that the rumors were true.

Now, he waited at the altar for her, along with a priest who would marry the two of them. Amelia and Arran were to be the only witnesses in attendance—Arran's choice, as he had feared that too many would come by and try to cast aspersions on the union.

Arran himself had struggled to come to terms with it. It had taken Amelia's kind words to convince him that there was something to be said for allowing this to take place, a chance to mend the wounds that had long existed between their families. Much as Arran clearly despised Kiernan, he had agreed to allow the marriage to take place under the agreement that it would put their families' history behind them. No longer would the weight of the war that had taken place between their fathers sit heavy on them.

A small knock sounded at the door, and Mary lifted her head, drawing herself from her reverie.

“Come in.”

The door opened, and Amelia stood on the other side, dressed in a soft red dress, her hair loose around her shoulders. She smiled when she laid eyes on Mary, and made her way towards her slowly.

“You look beautiful, dear sister,” she murmured as she stroked her hair, fiddling with a few strands to make sure it was well and truly perfect. Mary smiled at her.

“Thank you.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

The question caught her off-guard; she had thought, by now, that her sister had come to terms with the choice she had made, that she would no longer put up the fight she had when she had first heard about his intentions. She stared at her for a moment, not sure what to say, and Amelia continued to speak, the words tumbling from her lips before she could stop them.

“I only ask because I would be happy to go to that man and tell him that you’ve changed your mind,” Amelia told her. “If you’ve decided this is a mistake, that you don’t want to marry him, then I’ll make certain that he understands and respects your choice.”

Mary shook her head.

“No,” she replied firmly. “I want to do this, Amelia. I have to do this.”

“Have to?” Amelia asked her, her eyes filling with sadness. “Mary, love, Arran only spoke of virtue lost because of...”

“No, it’s not... it’s not because of what Arran said,” she confessed, biting her lip. She had hoped she’d be able to avoid burdening her sister with this truth, but if this was what it took to make sure she was allowed to go through with the wedding, then she supposed she would have to share it.

“Then what is it?” Amelia prompted her. She looked genuinely confused, and Mary bit back a sigh. She loathed having to tell her sister the truth of what was going on with her father. She had barely escaped the same fate herself, after all, and Mary knew that hearing this would cast her back into the painful memory of everything that had happened.

“Our father, he... he had a match for me,” she replied, trying to couch the words in some sense of innocence so she would not read them for the harsh truths they were.

“A match?” she replied, confused, a crease appearing between her brows. “What do you mean by that?”

“He told me that there was a man he wanted me to marry,” she explained carefully. “A man he wanted to... to see me wed to. In much the same way that he had hoped you would marry, before you chose to be with Arran.”

Her face paled as the reality of what Mary was telling her began to sink in. Her eyes widened.

“He... he was going to do to you what he did to me?”

Mary nodded. A lump leapt into her throat. She could see the pain written all over her sister’s face, the pain that she would have carried if she’d had to marry that man. She

had to escape it, in any way she could.

“Why did you not tell me?” Amelia whispered. She sounded hurt, and Mary took her hand, squeezing it tight.

“You had the baby to think of,” she reminded her gently. “I didn’t want to burden you with that knowledge, not when I knew there was little you could do to change it, anyway.”

“Arran could have...”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Mary assured her. “I have a way out. I’m marrying Kiernan, and you know our father will respect that, just as he respected your union with Arran.”

She nodded slowly. She knew Mary was right, much as she wished there was some other way to go about it. She swiped a tear away from her eye, and ran a hand through her hair.

“There’s nothing I can do to change your mind, is there?” she asked, and Mary shook her head.

“I have my heart set on him,” she replied. Though, in truth, she knew it was far from her heart that had chosen this man for her.

“Then I suppose you should go to him,” Amelia suggested, managing a small smile, though it looked as though it pained her.

“I suppose I should,” Mary agreed, her heart skipping several beats inside her chest as she realized what she was about to do. With one last look in the mirror, she tugged the shawl a little tighter around her shoulders, and made her way to the door, ready, at

last, to become his wife.

Downstairs, in the chapel, the place was cold and nearly empty. Mary did not mind the lack of witnesses, though she wished Lily had been there to see it; she supposed her younger sister would have had a few choice words for her, given the suddenness of what she was doing, but she did not know how often she would be able to see them again when all of this was said and done.

Kiernan stood at the altar, next to the priest. His eyes were fixed on her when she stepped into the room, as cool and blue as the river that ran through Stonehaven just a few miles away, and she offered him a small smile. Slowly, she made her way towards him, counting each footstep and each heartbeat, the last she'd have as a maiden.

When she reached him, his hand slipped to hers, just as it had on the night that he had stolen her away from the kitchen. If she had not gone with him then, would this have happened at all? If she was able, would she have turned back the clock and undone it all?

As his thumb skimmed over her knuckles, she knew the answer. No. She knew she would have ended up here no matter what she had done, and she wouldn't have changed a thing.

"We are gathered here today..." droned the priest, in an almost bored tone, as though he could hardly wait to get this ceremony over with. Despite his attitude, Mary could feel excitement and nervousness prickling along her spine, twisting into a mess she did not know how to make sense of.

As the priest spoke, she could feel his eyes on her, studying her like he was taking her in for the first time. She stole a glance at him out of the corner of her eye, as though looking at him too hard might draw her mind in the direction of something unholy, in

a place of such sanctity.

The light filtered in through the small windows that surrounded them, and landed on his face in such a way as to cause shadows on his jaw and his cheekbones. He looked sharp, like a wolf emerging from the kill. His grip tightened on her slightly, as though he could sense her nervousness, and refused to let his prey rush away from him before he'd had his fill.

"Lay your hands on the binding stone," The priest ordered, and Mary tentatively pressed her hand onto the large rock that rose from the center of the altar. Along the base, tangled knots had been carved, rising up into a large cross that reached almost to the top. A tradition in this part of the world, she had been told, though one that felt entirely foreign to her. He planted his hand on top of hers, the pressure of it, the warmth, comforting in its firmness.

"Repeat after me," The priest continued, and, as he began to read the vows, Kiernan repeated them back to her. He did not break her gaze for a moment as those sacred words passed his lips for the first time.

"You are blood of my blood from this day forward. Bone of my bone. Flesh of my flesh..."

The words hung there between them, as he gazed down at her. Her heart twisted in her chest. Could a man like that ever really agree to such a promise, and mean it?

She stared at him, trying to read his expression. She was only standing there, after all, to escape the fate her father had chosen for her. Who was to say that he didn't have similar motivations, something darker and less honest than she could read? If his past was anything to go by, she struggled to trust that he could even begin to mean-

"I give you my body, in this life, and my spirit in the next. Forever, I am yours..."

He flicked his tongue out over his lips before he finished, as though savoring the words.

“And you are mine.”

His? She was his? Her heart thudded in her chest at the thought. Perhaps he was not a pious man, perhaps he only saw this as a way to get her into his bed...

Though she supposed she was not much better than him, given the way she was using him to avoid the fate her father had chosen for her.

She stuttered out her vows, tripping over the words a few times before she managed them in their entirety, but he slipped the ring onto her finger, a binding in gold, she could see the satisfaction in his eyes. He had her right where he had wanted her from the day they had danced together at that ceilidh.

And now, she was his to do with as he pleased. Though what exactly that meant remained to be seen.

A carriage was waiting for them outside, to take them back to the Fraser estate, half a day's ride away. Amelia and Arran came out with them to their transport, and Amelia pulled her sister into a tight hug before she went.

“You'll write as soon as you get the chance, won't you?” she fussed over her, picking a strand of hair from her dress where it had slipped from between the violets. Mary nodded.

“Of course I will...”

“Aye, if she finds the time,” Kiernan cut in, a devilish smile on his face. Mary's lips parted in shock, and Arran bristled with anger, but Amelia took his hand and

squeezed it tight, silently warning him that now Kiernan was part of the family, any quarrel he had with him would have to wait.

Kiernan offered Mary a hand to help her into the carriage, and, soon, the two of them were off. Mary peered through the window, towards the Aitken Keep, which had been her home for so long now. She was leaving behind her sister, her nephew, her family, everything that she had known, for a man she scarcely knew. Had she made the right choice?

To her surprise, she felt his hand cover hers where it sat on the seat between them. She glanced over at him, and she could sense from the way he was looking at her that he could feel her doubts.

“Have ye traveled much around the Highlands? Away from the Keep?”

She shook her head.

“There’s much of this fine country to see, lass. And ye’ll find plenty to like in it, I’m sure.”

His words were almost tender, catching her off-guard for a moment. In all the time she had known him, as little as that was, she had not known him to be a man who offered comfort when he sensed it was needed. He tightened his grip on her hand slightly, giving it a comforting squeeze, and she managed to offer a small smile back to him. It might not have been much, but she would cling to any vestige of kindness she could from her new husband.

As the carriage carried them over one of the large hills that surrounded the Aitken estate, she peppered him with a few questions to pass the time; about where he had grown up, what it had been like here for him, how the people were. She avoided conversation about his father, knowing it might have edged too close to a sensitive

subject, but he answered her queries with an ease and openness that surprised her.

“You’ve never been to England?” she asked him, slightly surprised when he confessed that he had never left Scotland. He shook his head.

“I cannae say I have.”

“Perhaps we’ll travel there together one day,” she suggested. “And I can be your guide.”

He eyed her for a moment, amusement flashing across his face.

“Aye, maybe you will.”

Soon enough, they arrived at the Fraser Keep, an imposing building, slightly larger than Arran’s estate that sprawled across the top of one of the largest hills and looked down upon a scattering of villages and farms below. A river looped around the bottom of it, the water dark under the dimming sky above them. It looked as though it could have gone on forever, there, under the starry sky, as though there was no end to the depths it reached to.

The carriage drew to a halt outside the large wooden door that led into the Keep, and Kiernan climbed out first, once again offering her his hand to help her down. She glanced around, drawing in a deep breath, trying to remind herself that this place was to be her home.

Two men stood at the doors, and they opened them for their arriving master. She noticed that one of them was staring at her with distinct confusion in his eyes. Had they heard about the wedding at all? Did they know it was due to take place? Kiernan seemed a man of such confusing notions, she could hardly tell the answer to it.

Inside, a large main hall was flanked by more guards, both of them carrying heavy swords that were slung around their waists. The sight of them sent a shiver down her spine. She knew they were only there to keep enemies at bay, but she couldn't help but feel as though they might have been there to keep her trapped.

She jumped when she felt his hand resting gently on the small of her back. He seemed to sense her doubt, and she glanced up at him, hoping that her emotions were not written too obviously over her face.

"Ye'll be safe here, lass," he promised her, his voice dropping slightly. "I'll make sure o' that."

But the way he said it, it was almost as though he intended it as some kind of threat. Like he was making sure she understood that this was where she belonged, and this was where she would stay. She managed a smile, but, at the back of her mind, doubts began to nag with a discomfoting force.

She yawned, trying her best to stifle it. Truth be told, she couldn't stop thinking about what they might be expected to do together, now that they were here. It was, after all, their wedding night, and she supposed that consummation was on the cards.

But then, he moved his hand from her back, breaking the connection between them. He turned to one of the guards, speaking sharply.

"Call down the lady's maids, have them attend to my new bride here."

A wave of shock ran through the room. Of everything they'd expected him to say, she suspected, that had been the very last. Had he not sent word back to his people that he would be returning with a woman at his side? Or perhaps they had not believed him, thinking it would be far too soon for something so enormous to have actually taken place.

But she barely had time to take it in before the guard had left, and returned with two younger women, both of whom curtsied to her as though she were some kind of royalty. She bit down hard on her lip, fighting the urge to assure them that they had to take no such niceties around her, but, she supposed, she had married the Laird of this place. She needed to get used to people treating her as their Lady.

“This way, my lady,” one of the girls told her, gesturing for the door, and the other took her arm to steer her out of the room and towards what would soon be her bedchamber. She cast one last look over her shoulder, at her newfound husband, but he was already stalking off down an opposing corridor, to what end, she didn’t know.

But she got the feeling she would soon find out, one way or another, the truth of what lay beneath the surface of her husband’s veneer.

“You were sent to expose the Aitkens, no’ to marry one of them!”

Richard, one of Kiernan’s advisors, slammed his hand down on the large table that sat in the center of his study, sending a crash resonating off the tall stone walls of the room. The rest of his visitors that night were one-time Lairds of their own provinces who had chosen to ally with Kiernan’s father rather than stand against him. Though their alliance had initially been uneasy, after Kiernan’s father had passed away, they had stood by him, perhaps hoping that he would be less harsh on them and willing to take in some of their suggestions, at least.

But now, as Kiernan delivered the news of what had happened at the Aitken keep, none of them seemed willing to even entertain the idea that he knew what he was doing. He had married the girl for good reason; this would give him more access than he’d ever had before, to the inner workings of the Aitken clan, everything that went on behind those doors when they were shut to the rest of the world.

And, as long as he could, he had to keep believing that was the only reason. In truth, there was a part of him, like an open wound, that felt more for her than he’d have cared to admit. Her brightness, her warmth, it was like the softest sunshine stirring him from a slumber after a long day, and being bathed in it felt better than anything he could remember in a long time.

“I cannae believe what I’m hearing,” Jacob muttered, running a hand through his thinning hair as he slumped further into one of the large chairs that sat around the table.

They had once belonged to Kiernan's father, Euan, and were ornately carved with knots and crosses along the sides. A signal of his wealth and power, for anyone who stepped into his office, that Kiernan had now inherited as his own.

"It's a disaster," Jacob continued, his voice rising again, as though he had found a new depth to his anger. Jacob had always been prone to outbursts of anger like this, especially when he felt things weren't going the way he expected. His father had raised him as a pampered child, and it showed in everything he did now he was a man. He had been barely more than a boy when his father had agreed to ally with Kiernan's father, and Kiernan often found himself with the feeling that Jacob detested not having the rule of his own roost.

"It doesn't have to be yet," Derrick cut in. Derrick was closer to Kiernan's age than that of the older men who shared this space with them, and he was canny and sharp. He'd come into power when his father had passed when he'd been barely more than eighteen, and he had clashed with Euan a few times, trying to establish himself with a little more certainty. It had taken years for him to grow out of it, and, even now, Kiernan found himself wondering how much fight he would have put up if he thought he could get away with it. Kiernan locked eyes with him, daring him to follow up his statement with something that would challenge him.

"What do you mean, lad?" Jacob demanded. "He's married her! One of the Aitkens! And an English woman, at that!"

"But you've no' had time to... consummate the marriage yet, have ye?"

The words hung in the air there, sitting in the empty quiet of the room. The only sound was that of the stable boys outside, wrangling some new horses who'd just been brought to the Keep, floating up through the small arrow slit windows that ran around the walls.

Kiernan's jaw tightened. No, he had not made such a move on his new wife yet, though it had taken almost every bit of restraint he'd had not to do so in the carriage as they rode home. There was something so innocent and unspoiled about her, something that he longed to get his hands on and ruin, to show her a side of the world and herself she had never seen before. Even the kiss they had shared in the stables had lit a fire inside of him. It hadn't been part of his plan to allow their encounter to go further than just being caught together so he could justify proposing to her to protect her honor, but when she had gazed at him with those sweet, innocent eyes, he knew he could wait no longer to take a bite of her ripe fruit.

"And if you've no' consummated your union, there's still time to call it off," Derrick urged him. "Send her back from whence she came. Get her far from this place."

"I'll be doing nothing of the sort," Kiernan replied sharply, silencing him. Everyone in the room quieted. They knew better than to try and fight Kiernan when he'd an idea in his mind. They knew the values his father had instilled into him, the stubbornness and certainty that would make it nigh-on impossible to beat him, whether it was a war of wits or of swords.

"She's no good to us!" Jacob protested. "She's..."

"She's my wife," Kiernan told him, rising to his feet. "And I'll hear no more on the matter. Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I have... matters to attend to."

"You owe us an explanation, lad!" Derrick exclaimed, springing to his feet to step out in front of Kiernan. The other men in the room, the dozen or so of them who knew better than to step in his way like that, seemed to suck in a simultaneous sharp breath, as though they could barely believe what they were seeing. Kiernan paused for a long moment, staring Derrick down, giving him ample opportunity to change his mind and put some distance between them.

After a long pause, he did. He took a step back, towards the large bookcase that was pressed against the wall just next to the door. His head dropped to his chest for a moment, and the other men in the room let out a collective sigh of relief.

“I’ll thank ye not to go asking about what happens in the confines of my bedroom between me and my wife,” Kiernan growled at him pointedly, and he shot a look over his shoulder, making certain that the rest of the men in the room had understood the same point. His father had worked too hard and done too much for him to allow such disrespect to take place in his own Keep, and he hoped they understood that well by now.

“My Laird, we are simply trying to make certain that the girl is not... using her wiles to lead you astray,” piped up Colin, one of the eldest amongst the gathered guests. He was Laird of the neighboring county, and it was his canny bargaining with Euan that had allowed him to continue his claim on the land that his family had owned for generations. Instead of handing over control of it to another family, he paid a monthly tithe in food and grain; a sure and steady supply of nourishment that kept the Keep well-fed and stocked.

Kiernan snorted.

“Her wiles? Do you think so little of me that you would believe a woman like her could outwit me?”

He was trusting in their belief that no woman could possibly stand up to him, let alone an English woman, though, deep down, a part of him twisted with the question of whether or not she might have been concealing hidden depths. He supposed he would find out, one way or another. Whatever her reasons for agreeing to marry him, she would not be able to conceal them from him for long.

He left that question to hang in the air, daring any one of them to argue with him, but

none did. He was sure there would be much more by way of discussion the moment he left, but that was of little consequence to him. They could gripe and moan all they pleased, but he was the one, at the end of the day, who chose how this place would be run.

And if he wanted to run it with her at his side, then so be it.

He moved towards the door, leaving an explosion of conversation and argument behind him. Before he could slip out into the night and make his way to her bedchamber, though, he felt a hand on his arm. Glancing around, he found Archibald, one of his father's oldest allies, standing before him. He had, until this moment, been silent on the matter of Kiernan's new bride, but he clearly had something to say before Kiernan left.

What is it, Archie?" Kiernan asked the older man, his voice dropping slightly. A furrow of concern creased Archibald's brow, and he shook his head.

"Be careful."

He tightened his grip on Kiernan's arm for a moment, as though driving home the point, his familiar brown eyes full of sincerity. But Kiernan drew his arm from Archie's grasp and moved to the door. Did the old man really think he could not manage a girl like Mary? She was an innocent little thing, who'd barely seen anything of the world. He doubted greatly that there would be anything she could say or do that would surprise him.

He left his advisors and allies fighting behind him and made his way to the stairs that would lead him up to her bedchamber. As he went, he felt something stirring inside of him, a deep want that he had been trying to contain until that moment.

But now, he had her exactly where he wanted her. Waiting for him, in his

bedchamber, his wife, his bride.

And he intended to make the very most of their first night together. In any way he could.

Mary took the brush to her damp golden hair, working it through the length slowly and methodically. Though her new ladies-in-waiting had offered to help her with her hair after her bath, she had insisted that she was capable of managing it by herself, and they had retreated, allowing her to do as she pleased.

She knew it would take her a while to get used to the thought of having people fussing over her so. It had just been her and her sisters growing up, and, even when she had been staying with Amelia and Arran, she had not been offered much help. She had never needed it. But here, she was being treated as though she could scarcely stand on her own two feet without tumbling to the ground, and she supposed that was how everyone would view her.

Her bedchambers were simple but well-appointed; a large wall hanging covered the wall next to the window, showing a wolf tracking a rabbit out of its hole. It seemed almost imposing, but she tried not to think about what it might mean, to have such an image looming over her bed.

She was perched on the edge of it now, a four-poster affair with an ornately-carved chair beside it. On the chair, knots and snakes tangled in the wood, reaching up over the arms and the back. She could still smell the lightly-perfumed water that had emanated from the bath she'd taken, her ladies-in-waiting sprinkling rose petals upon it so that her skin would smell of the flower. Sure enough, the scent clung to her now. She had always thought of roses as a sweet flower, but now, as the smell of them wafted from her skin, she found that there was something decidedly more adult and sultry about them.

She heard footsteps outside the door, and tensed at once. Was it him? It had to be. She supposed he would come to her eventually, whatever business he had to attend to first. This was, after all, the night of their wedding, and she would have to... give herself to him in a way she had never given herself to anyone before.

A few moments later, the door swung open, and, as she had predicted, there he stood, on the other side. His eyes seemed to blaze an even more piercing shade of blue in the candlelight, and her hand stilled for a moment, body frozen in reaction to him. Excitement twisted with fear in her stomach. She knew not what to expect, but her undying curiosity was threatening to get the better of her.

He paused for a moment, simply looking at her, and then made his way towards her. She was wearing a nightdress, which came down to her ankles, but she was suddenly distinctly aware of how thin the fabric was. One touch, and he would have been able to feel every inch of her body, every part of her at once.

Perhaps she wanted him to.

He moved towards her, and then sank to the edge of the bed next to her. His closeness was intoxicating, the smell of him bringing her back to the night they had met at the ceilidh. She longed, for a moment, to lean towards him and bury her face in his neck, but she managed to restrain herself.

He turned to her, his eyes scanning hers, as though searching for something there he couldn't quite put his finger on.

"Did they take good care of you?" he asked her softly, and she nodded at once.

"Oh, yes, they were wonderful," she replied. "I've never... I've never had anyone run around after me like that, though. I suppose it will take some getting used to."

He eyed her for a moment, clearly surprised.

“You’ve no’?”

She shook her head.

“No, never.”

“With yer sister being who she is,” he remarked. “I thought you’d ken what it was like to be fussed over.”

“Well, my sister might be a Laird’s wife, but that’s not how any of us grew up,” she replied. “My father, he was... he had some issues with his finances, I suppose you’d say.”

“Is that so, aye?”

“Yes,” she replied, with a nod. “That was why he was going to...”

She stopped herself in her tracks. What was she thinking, coming out with something like that to him? She glanced away from him, hoping that he hadn’t paid attention to what had just come out of her mouth, but as soon as she fell silent, his eyes narrowed.

“He was going to...?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she replied, shaking her head. “I shouldn’t have mentioned it.”

But, before she could brush it off entirely, he reached for her face, catching her chin in his hand and drawing her around to look at him.

“There’s nothing I won’t know about you, lass,” he murmured to her. His fingertips

were slightly rough on her skin, and she found her breath knocked from her lungs as she stared back at him. His firmness with her did things to her she didn't know were possible. Her mind flew back to the night in the stables, when he had kissed her, his tongue in her mouth like he was speaking a million secrets beyond her lips.

He smoothed his thumb across her cheek and dropped his hand by his side again. The moment he let go of her, she realized she wasn't breathing, and she gasped in a long breath. She could hardly tell if it was fear or something else that coursed through her when he laid hands on her like that, but she knew, deep down inside, that she wanted more.

"What was yer father going to do?" he pressed, and she closed her eyes for a moment before she responded. She wished she could leave all of this in the past, but she knew it would not be so easy. This man was her husband now, and what he wanted from her, he would get.

"He was going to marry me to another man," she muttered, her chin dropping to her chest. She couldn't look at him. She could feel the anger pulsing from him in waves at the mere mention of another man, and she forced herself to meet his gaze once more.

"He was going to what?"

"He was going to... there was this man, a rich man, he wanted to marry me to," she explained, as quickly as she could. She wanted to get this over with. It was hard to tell if the anger in his eyes was aimed at her or at the story she was telling him, and she didn't much like the thought of leaving that doubt to stew much longer.

"My father has some debts to pay off, and he had offered him a decent amount for my hand in marriage," she continued, her voice shaking as she recounted the truth of the fate she had so narrowly avoided. "He was... older, I suppose. And he'd struggled to

find a bride close to his age, so he picked me, hoping I would be able to bear children for him.”

“Yer father was going to sell you to some pervert to pay off his debts?”

His voice was simmering with fury. She managed to nod. She didn’t know him well enough yet to understand if this anger was coming her way, or at her father, or at someone else entirely. He was still such an enigma to her, even though she wore his wedding band on her finger—an irony that was not lost on her.

“That’s why you agreed to marry me with such ease,” he muttered, shaking his head. “I wondered why you agreed so quickly.”

“You thought I would turn you down?” she wondered aloud, surprised. Nothing in the way he had carried himself, the things he had said or done, had suggested to her that he’d ever doubted for a moment that she would be his one day. He seemed certain that he was due anything he desired, and she was just another in a long line of things he wanted to own.

He stared at her for a moment, his eyes flicking back and forth between hers.

“I’d no’ thought you’d make it so easy fer me.”

“Oh, I thought...”

She trailed off. She didn’t know if she could say what was truly on her mind, not without exposing more than she was ready to. He leaned forward with interest, raising his eyebrows at her.

“You thought what, lass?”

She hesitated for a moment, but then, deciding there was no point in trying to hide from him, she said it.

“I thought you’d get everything you want.”

A grin curled up his lips, slowly, like the wolf on the wall hanging opposite them.

“Aye, I do,” he replied, and he lifted his hand to her face again. This time, his touch was more tender, so soft and gentle that it sent a current of excitement rushing down her arm. She drew in a sharp breath, wishing she wasn’t making it so obvious, but at the same time, unable to deny how much she wanted him, how badly she needed him.

“And what is it that you want, exactly?” she whispered. She knew the answer, but she needed to hear him say it. She needed to hear him tell her how much he desired her. It was the only thing that mattered to her in that moment. Even though he had married her, even though he had made her his wife, she still wanted him to say those sacred words, more important than any vows they could have spoken to each other.

He flicked his tongue over his lips before he spoke, considering his answer. And then, at last, he said it.

“You.”

With that, their mouths came together once more, hungry for each other like they had been that night at the stables. He pulled her into his lap at once, her legs draped over his, his hands moving on her thighs and her hips like he was making sure she knew she belonged to him. He let out a low growl against her lips, the sound of it shuddering through every inch of her body, and she felt that tingle that had started where his hand had met her face starting to inch down, down, down...

Then, to her surprise, he flipped her over and laid her on the bed. Moving on top of

her, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her against his strong chest. She brushed her fingertips against his shoulders, marveling at the strength of him, as his mouth traveled down across her chin and towards her neck.

She felt his teeth graze at her there, and she was reminded, once again, of that wolf, that beast that could have torn the little rabbit apart with ease with a single motion. And yet, though it should have scared her, the notion of it sent another flood of desire coursing through her system, and she slipped her hand into his hair and pulled him back up to kiss her once more.

His tongue pushed deep into her mouth as his hands balled up her dress and pushed it above her hips. He let himself down on top of her again, and she groaned as she felt the pressure of his manhood against her for the first time. In that moment, some deep part of her knew how much she wanted it, how much she needed him inside of her. Though she had never been with a man like that before in her life, never even come close, some primal aspect of her being understood what it would feel like, and knew it would go some way to sating this need within her.

But, before she could so much as whisper to him how much she wanted him, he began to work his way down once more, starting at her neck, and brushing his lips over her shoulders, pulling aside her robe so that he could trail his tongue along the nut-brown curve of her breast. He let his teeth catch against her for the briefest moment, sending a shock of sensation through her. She expected pain, but instead, under his touch, it felt more like pleasure.

And he moved down, down, further down, until her nightdress was pushed over her hips and he had exposed the dark puff of hair on her mound. He let his breath warm a spot low on her belly, so close to her most sensitive spot she could scarcely stand it, and she found her hips lifting to try and meet him, silently begging him for more.

She looked down at him, her breath coming hard and fast by now, and found him

gazing back up at her, nestled between her legs, hands tucked beneath her thighs to keep them open. His mouth was just an inch or two from her sex, and she could feel the warmth of his breath against her, the promise of it, of everything that he wanted to give her. Yet, she got the sense that he would have enjoyed keeping her there in that moment forever, making her squirm with need and never quite sating her, just to see the look on her face.

But whatever mercy he had in him must have been close to the surface on that night, because, at last, he moved towards her, and pressed his mouth to her sex for the first time.

Her back arched from the bed, her lips parted, though no sound came out. The pleasure was too intense to be translated into something as mundane as sound, no, the feel of his mouth, warm and eager against her, was more than she could make sense of. Her hands balled the bedcovers beside her, drawing them into her closed fists as she tried to catch her breath, as he planted kisses against her most intimate spot, over and over again.

A low whimper escaped her lips as she managed to glance down at him once more, and the sight of him like that was nearly enough to take her over the edge in that very instant. This man, this wild, dangerous man, between her legs like that, giving her everything that she needed, doing things to her she could never have imagined. His lips and tongue were soft and practiced, his hands digging into her thighs to keep them spread so he could have all the access to her he wanted.

Her hips rose to meet him, the waves of pleasure building and building until she could not think of anything else. The world could have been burning down outside that bedroom door, and she would have cared little for it, such was the intensity of the pleasure he was sending to every inch of her body. She began to breathe faster, her eyes screwed shut, focused just on the way it felt, the graze of his stubble against the soft skin of her thigh.

When her release finally came, the corners of her vision blurred for a moment, a raw, deep sound tearing from her lips that surprised even her. She could hardly control herself, her body writhing on the bed, her entire system coursing with sensation so intense she couldn't think of anything but him. He didn't move his mouth, coaxing the last of her pleasure out of her, until, finally, she had no choice but to push him away so she could catch her breath.

He gazed up at her for a moment, from where he lay between her legs, and she was struck, all at once, by how different he looked, almost vulnerable, boyish, with her shimmering sex still smeared across his lips. She moved down to kiss him again, almost forgetting what he had just done, but he pulled back before she could reach him.

"You should rest," he murmured to her as he sat up once more, gazing down at her.

"Rest? But I..."

"You've had a long journey," he intoned as he slipped from the bed, turning his back to her. She furrowed her brow, her body still tingling from the release that she had just reached. Had she done something wrong? She reached out for him, trying to pull him back to her, craving the warmth of his skin against hers, but he had stepped past the length of her arm before she could.

He moved to the door and paused for a moment before he stepped out, casting a look over his shoulder at her. In the dim light, she could not make out the expression on his face, or what he might have meant by it. She had no guess as to why he had changed his tune so suddenly, or what she could do to change it back.

"Rest well."

With that, he stepped out of the door and pulled it shut behind him, leaving Mary

with no other recourse but to fall back onto the bed and stare at the ceiling, confused about what had just happened.

But not confused about how certain she was that she wanted it to happen again.

Mary lingered just outside the door to Kiernan's study, convincing herself to pluck up the courage to step inside. He's your husband, for goodness sake! I should be able to see my husband whenever I choose...

But, before she could muster up the nerve, she heard voices from within, and she pulled back. She knew she should not be eavesdropping, but she was still so confused about exactly what her husband wanted from her. Sometimes, it felt like the only way she might get to the bottom of his true desires, once and for all.

"Aye, I'll be in touch with the family in the village to pay their dues," a voice—Archibald's, she was quite sure—remarked. Kiernan let out a grunt in agreement.

"Make sure you do," he replied, and she heard the scrape of a chair, and footsteps heading towards the door. She thought to make a run for it, but she knew she would not have made it far before he had spotted her, and he might have been suspicious had she tried to put too much distance between the two of them.

A moment later, Kiernan appeared in the door to his study and came to a halt when he saw her standing there. A slight furrow appeared in his brow.

"Are ye alright, Mary?"

She liked the way he said her name. There was something about it that she had never heard on the lips of anyone else who had said it before, something just for the two of

them. She nodded.

“Yes, I just wanted to come and see you,” she replied, suddenly feeling foolish for even trying. In the week or so since she had arrived at the Keep, she had been struggling to find her feet, or really get a feel of what Kiernan wanted from her. After that first night together, he had left her to sleep in her bedchambers alone, working late into the night in his study. She saw him at dinner time, when she would take her seat next to him at the head of the huge table that served as a meeting place for his subjects and advisors.

Beyond that, her time with him had been scarce. She had visited him in his study a few times, and each time, he had seemed reticent with her, though she could not for the life of her understand why.

And, now, as he stood before her, she got the sinking feeling that the same thing went for this meeting, too. He eyed her for a moment, and she reached for his hand, craving some level of connection with him, whatever it was.

“If there’s anything I can do to help...”

“Ye’re fine, lass,” he replied, giving her hand a slight squeeze. “I told ye, ye need yer rest.”

“I’ve been resting for a week,” she protested. “I need something to do!”

A flash of amusement crossed his face, and his grip tightened on her hand slightly.

“Oh, you do, do ye?”

She felt a flutter in her chest. Here it was, a reminder of the man she had been so drawn to, the man who had given her pleasure she had not even imagined possible

just a few days before. She nodded, reaching her hand up tentatively towards his face, and brushing her fingertips along his jaw.

“I... I do...”

Before she could say another word, he kissed her, pushing her up against the wall and gripping tight to her waist. When he touched her like that, it was as though every inch of air vanished from her body, until there was nothing left but room for him. She could feel it, even now, the pressure of him against her, a sure sign of how much he wanted her, no matter what was going on around them. She was distinctly aware that someone could have wandered into this corridor at any moment, and found them locked in this embrace, but the thought of it only thrilled her more; the thought of someone seeing how much he wanted her, that he was willing to risk capture just for the sake of...

But then, footsteps sounded from inside his study, and he pulled back, his mouth still parted slightly. He laced his fingers through hers for a moment, and planted a kiss on the corner of her mouth.

“Ye cannae be distracting me like this, lass,” he told her, half-joking, half-warning. Before she could gather herself enough to find something to say in return, he had turned to make his way down the corridor, leaving her pressed against the wall, her mind a mess.

Just as she caught her breath, a man emerged from inside the study. As she had suspected, it was Archibald, and he greeted her with a slight nod. She managed to smile back at him, though she was sure he could see the burning red on her cheeks.

“Good afternoon, my Lady,” he greeted her, and she winced. She was still getting used to those terms being used for her, though she knew she needed to, sooner rather than later.

“Good afternoon, Archibald,” she replied. She cast a look along the corridor, towards Kiernan, but he had already vanished around the corner. She silently cursed to herself, worried about being left in the presence of one of his men like this. She felt as though she was constantly on the brink of saying or doing something she shouldn’t have, though she was sure it was nothing more than her worry that had her thinking in such a way.

“I’m surprised you remember my name,” he remarked to her, though a warm smile creased up his old face.

“I haven’t spoken to many people here,” she confessed, dropping her chin to her chest. She felt a little pathetic admitting it to him. What kind of Lady was she, if she could not even make conversation with those around her? Truth be told, she had hardly talked to anyone other than Hattie, her lady’s maid, and even she seemed nervous around her. As though she feared that she might say or do something to offend her new charge, and find herself out on her backside before she knew what was happening.

“Aye, seems Kiernan has been keeping you mostly to himself,” Archibald remarked. “Though I suppose that’s to be expected, with newlyweds.”

She managed a small chuckle, though, of course this man knew nothing of what had truly been happening in their respective bedchambers. Did everyone in the Keep know of how he seemed to be keeping his distance from her? Did they think her undesirable? Her mind reeled with questions, and she wished she had the answers to any of them. Or, at least, the distraction from their pressing weight.

“Have ye had much of a chance to explore the grounds yet?” Archibald asked, and she shook her head. She had stayed mostly in her room, hoping that Kiernan might come by again, as he had done on the night of the wedding, but no such luck.

“Perhaps I can show you around,” he remarked, and he offered her his arm. She stared at him for a moment, but then, she pushed the doubts to the back of her mind. It was clear that Kiernan trusted this man, and besides, did he expect her to just stay confined to her room, doing and saying nothing?

She took his arm, and allowed Archibald—who insisted she call him Archie—to lead her along the corridor and towards the stairs that led to the grounds. She had seen something of them from the window of her bedchamber, though it was late enough in the year that the flowers were not blooming as they might in the summer, and the leaves on the trees were turning vibrant shades of red, green, and gold. Various branches dipped down low over the path that led through the grounds, some of them skimming the earth as the odd sycamore seed dropped, twirling, from the trees around them.

“It’s lovely out here,” she remarked, glancing around, and Archie smiled.

“Yes, it’s a bonny wee part of the world,” he replied. “Kiernan’s mother did a fair job with it, when she was alive. I doubt it would be half the place it is now if it wasn’t for her work.”

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, sensing an opportunity to delve a little deeper into Kiernan’s history. He had done his best to keep her away from the truth of his past, and she supposed that she had no right to go delving, but if she was to be part of this family now, and she was, then she wanted to know the kind of legacy she was stepping into. His father’s, she knew something of, at least, but his mother’s?

“She worked in the garden?”

“Oh, she’d not let anyone else run the place for her,” Archie chuckled fondly. “Even when... even towards the end of her life, she would sit out here, not far from the

Keep, and instruct the gardeners on how best to tend to her plants. She liked to grow herbs, ye see, and she took that very seriously. I cannae remember how often Kiernan would come out here and try to get her back inside, to keep her from catching her death of cold...”

He smiled at the memory, and Mary glanced around the place. She felt a little better, knowing that there was some kind of peacefulness in this family, though it didn’t seem to be talk of that which had traveled the lands outside of the Keep. A few sprigs of lavender lined the edge of the path, the fragrant, herbaceous scent filling the air. Mary reached down to trail her fingers along the buds, bringing them to her nose and inhaling their freshness. It felt good to be out of the Keep, she had to admit.

“Here, she had a spot doon this way, next to a wee pond,” Archie told her. “Let me see if it’s still there. I’d bet Kiernan has had the gardeners keep it spotless, just the way she liked it...”

He led her down another path that branched off from the one that led away from the Keep, and, within a few moments, they had come upon a small stone bench that was perched on the edge of a pond carved out of the ground below. Various plants sprung up around the edge, and the sunlight shimmered off the surface.

He perched on the bench and she sat beside him, staring down at the water, which rippled as a few leaves dropped onto the surface. It was so peaceful there, it was hard to believe that this could ever have been the home of a man as dangerous as Kiernan’s father. But, she supposed, he was long gone now. Kiernan remained, running this place as he saw fit, and she needed to trust that her husband was capable of doing what needed to be done.

Even if he seemed intent on doing it without her by his side.

She shifted in her seat slightly, and Archie glanced over at her.

“You cold, lass?”

She shook her head.

“No, just... enjoying the quiet.”

He paused for a moment and nodded, but she could tell there was something else on his mind, though he seemed loath to come out and say it. She peered over at him, narrowing her eyes slightly. There was still so much she had to learn about this place, but a man like Archibald, he had been there for so long, he had to have access to some part of its history.

“Ye should be wary of the quiet,” he warned her, his voice dropping slightly, as though aware that she was waiting for him to speak. “You never know what might be hiding in it.”

She laughed slightly, nervous.

“What could be hiding in the quiet?” she asked, shaking her head.

“Something that doesnae want to be found. Something you’d never see coming.”

His words hung in the air for a long moment, as much a threat, it seemed, as they were a warning. She stared at him, confused. Was he trying to tell her that something was working against her? Trying to warn her to get out of here while she still could? She didn’t know. But the tone to his voice sent a shiver down her spine, and she leaned in, planning to ask for more.

But, before she could, he rose to his feet quickly.

“I should get back to the Keep,” he remarked, and, hardly giving her a chance to blurt

out a goodbye, he took off once more, leaving her alone on the bench.

She stared down at the water again, at the long ripples spreading out from the delicate leaves that landed on top of it. Those leaves, so frail, still left a mark on the water where they dropped, and she wondered what else might have been hiding under the guise of something so fragile. What else she might need to know about this place, and these people.

And what else was waiting for her behind the closed doors of the Keep that she had not yet had a chance to explore.

Mary laid the paper out in front of her, and stared down at the empty page. When Amelia had asked for her to write to her, she supposed she would not have expected it to come in such strange circumstances.

Her conversation with Archibald earlier in the day had been spinning around her mind ever since, leaving no room for anything else, and she knew she had to make some sense of it. Writing to Amelia, she hoped, would allow her some space to navigate her feelings and her doubts, especially since it was hardly as though she could go to her husband and ask for his help in all of this. He seemed to be doing his level best to stay away from her, though why, she could not make sense of. It was as though he feared being alone in her presence for too long might draw something out of him that he couldn't control. Perhaps the same thing that had emerged when he had come to her room on the night of the wedding...

She brushed that thought aside, and picked up the pen that laid on the small desk beside the window in her bedchamber. She had asked her lady's maid to bring her some papers, and she hoped that the implication she'd imbued not to tell anyone about it had reached her. She didn't know if Kiernan would be happy with her reaching out to her family, or if he expected her to cut them off entirely now she was his bride, and she had no interest in testing those boundaries any more than she already had.

But what was there to tell Amelia? Nothing had happened that was worth relaying, not really. She hadn't even shared a bed with her new husband yet, and life in the Keep had been quiet and peaceful; maybe too peaceful, if what Archie had said to her

bore any weight to it.

She didn't want to worry her sister unduly, and, as she hovered her pen over the paper, she struggled to find some way to put it into words, the truth of what she was feeling, the doubts that seemed to threaten to get the better of her at any moment. She wished she were a more verbose woman, so she could capture the sense of doubt that had been sneaking along her spine since the moment she had arrived here. She supposed it was still better than being married off to some ancient old man of her father's choosing, but, in some ways, it was difficult to believe that...

Just before she could begin her letter, she heard footsteps approaching her bedchamber. She quickly stuffed the papers into a drawer, though she had written nothing on them yet. A few moments later, Kiernan appeared in the doorway, and she rose to her feet. She felt, for a moment, like she should curtsy in greeting to him, though she knew it would have been ridiculous. He was her husband, not her master.

"Come with me," he told her sharply, jerking his head towards the door. "I've got something for you."

A gift? She followed him out of the door, and her fingers flexed at her side as she longed to reach out for his hand. No matter what had happened between them, no matter how tense it had been, she still ached for his touch. Perhaps that was the hardest part of all of this, to be teased with the pressure of his hands on her, then to be denied it all over again.

"Where are we going?" she asked him as they stepped out of the Keep and into the courtyard. The air was crisp and cool, and it bit at her hands as she clenched them into fists to try and stave off the cold.

"The stables," he replied, shooting a look over his shoulder. There was a look in his eyes that silenced her in an instant. She found, sometimes, that she was still afraid of

him, the memories of what Arran had told her about him fresh in her mind. She brushed it aside. She was married to him, she would have to find some way to muster her courage.

They reached the stables, a large wooden building with several smaller booths that contained the horses kept at the Keep. Most of them came to the door of their stable to see who was visiting, and a few of them let out snorts of excitement when they realized it was none other than Kiernan.

She watched as he reached out to greet them, resting his hand on their necks for a moment, smiling as he brushed his fingertips through their hair. His touch was surprisingly tender for these creatures, but she remembered how he had been when they had seen that horse down by the river together, back in Stonehaven. He clearly had a soft spot for these magnificent creatures, and a glimpse of this softer side of him did something to soothe the doubts that had been coursing through her mind all afternoon.

“What did you bring me here to show me?” she asked, doing her best to keep her voice light as they picked their way through the straw to the far side of the stable.

“Yer wedding gift,” he replied, and he clicked his tongue. A moment later, a horse swung its head over the edge of the stable, and Mary’s eyes widened in shock.

“This horse?” she exclaimed, confused. She hadn’t even thought that he owed her any kind of wedding gift, but, she supposed, it might have been an attempt to sweeten her after he had been so distant for so long. And this horse truly was a beauty, with a deep chestnut mane that flowed down over a lighter, sand-colored neck. Brown eyes peered up sleepily at Mary beneath long lashes, and she stood there for a moment before the creature, unable to do anything other than stare.

“Aye, her,” Kiernan chuckled, and he laced his fingers through hers and brought them

to the horse's neck. "She's a bonny thing, is she no'? I saw her, and thought of you..."

Mary let him guide her hand along the horse's neck, and the creature dipped her head low to allow Mary to reach her properly. Her coat was soft, and her mane glimmered in the strands of light that slipped through the cracks in the stables.

"She's beautiful," Mary murmured. "But I... I hardly know how to ride."

"I suppose I'll have tae teach you, then," Kiernan remarked. She ran her hand tentatively along the horse's neck and chest, feeling the strength of it beneath her hand. She was struck, suddenly, by how alone her and Kiernan were out there, the same way they had been at the stables at the Aitken estate, before they had been caught in the act. She turned to him, and drew in a deep breath.

"Thank you for this, Kiernan," she murmured to him. "It... it's very kind of you."

"Ye're my wife," he reminded her softly, bringing his hand to her cheek. She leaned her head into him at once, the warmth of his touch sending shivers through her whole body.

"There's nothing I wouldnae do to make you happy."

Just as he was starting to lower his mouth down to hers, a commotion sounded from outside. A horse was whinnying along with a cavalcade of voices trying to calm it. Kiernan let out an irritated growl and pulled back from Mary, stalking towards the door to see what was going on out there. Mary whispered her goodbyes to her new horse, and followed him out to the courtyard.

Outside, there were a handful of stable boys trying to calm a wild stallion. He had risen on his back legs, bringing his hooves down with a clatter on the earth below.

“Hey!” Kiernan called out, as two of the stable boys backed off, clearly fearful that they might be caught beneath the thundering hooves of this beast if they did not act quickly enough. Mary, for her part, had withdrawn against the stable, not wanting to put herself in harm’s way.

But Kiernan seemed to share no such concern. He caught the reins of the horse and wrapped them tightly around his hand, guiding him back to the ground, where the animal twisted its head and tried to break free. But Kiernan’s grip remained tight, not giving him a chance to rear again. He dropped his voice and took a step closer, lifting a hand to press it against the horse’s neck firmly.

“Aye, aye, there ye go,” he murmured. Mary could hardly hear him from where she stood, but the low burr of his voice calmed even her. He clearly knew what he was doing with this creature, and he took a patience with it she hadn’t seen him do for much else.

The horse pawed at the ground a few times, lifting one hoof then the other, as though threatening to rise back up as it had done before. But Kiernan didn’t let it spook him. He held his ground, still gripping the reins tightly, one hand against the animal’s neck, until it finally seemed to drop the fight.

He turned to one of the stable boys who had rushed away in such a hurry when the animal had begun rearing.

“Clear out one o’ the stables for him,” Kiernan ordered him. “He’s tired. It’s been a long journey fer him. He needs to rest.”

The man nodded and darted off, seemingly glad to be out of the potential line of fire for the horse’s flailing hooves again, and Mary inched closer to hear what Kiernan was saying to the animal. His words were soothing and confident, compassionate, even, as though he knew well why it would have been so disturbed, and wanted

nothing more than for the beast to be able to rest.

“Ye’re safe here, lad,” he murmured to it as he ran a hand through its mane. “We’ve food fer you, water, a place to sleep...”

The horse dipped its head a little lower, like he was conceding the point and accepting the help that Kiernan was offering him. As Mary watched, she felt a spread of warmth course through her body. Hearing him speak to the creature like that, it told her more about him than anything she had seen so far. There was a kindness in him, a patience, an understanding for creatures who may not have come from the most comfortable backdrop to be with him.

No man who could speak with such sweetness to a horse could be capable of the things that she’d heard about him. Could they?

Finally, once the horse was calmed, two of the stable boys emerged once more to lead him into his new home. Kiernan followed behind them, and the horse checked to make sure he was close by, as though his presence was a comfort. Mary, her arms wrapped around herself to ward off the cold, couldn’t help but smile. She found herself surprised by Kiernan at nearly every turn, and she hoped there were many more surprises yet to come.

Kiernan reached her once more, and grimaced slightly.

“Sorry fer that.”

“It’s alright,” she assured him. “I’m glad you could get that horse under control.”

“Aye, he’s a young thing, and he’ll take some fair training to get him ready to work,” he remarked, glancing back towards the stables with some concern on his face. “But I like a horse with spirit. Reminds you that ye’re dealing with a wild animal.”

“Exactly,” she murmured, not taking her eyes off him. He noticed that she was shivering slightly in the cold, and he pulled the cloak from his shoulders to rest around hers.

“Here, inside,” he ordered her, guiding her towards the door. “Ye’ll catch yer death of a chill out here...”

As she allowed him to lead her into the Keep once more, his arm resting around her shoulders, she found that warmth starting to bloom in her belly once more. The same desire that had driven her on the night of their wedding, the same need that she knew would not soon be forgotten. Stealing a glance at him out of the corner of her eye, she bit back a smile. She was no longer thinking about the cold.

No, not when he was so close to her.

As Kiernan walked Mary back to her room, she felt the crackle of anticipation in the air. The promise, she was sure of it, that something was going to happen tonight, something that she had been waiting for since the moment she had stepped foot in this Keep.

After he had gifted her the horse earlier that day, she had spent the rest of the evening with him. The two of them had taken dinner together, sitting next to one another at the large table where his subjects gathered, and she had felt his leg pressing against hers beneath the piles of venison and bread that weighed down the table before them. As though he wanted her to know, with no shadow of a doubt, that her closeness was the most important thing to him in that moment.

As though she could have mistaken it for anything else.

And now, after everyone else had retreated to bed, he was taking her to her bedchamber. Though she had joked with him that she was perfectly capable of finding it on her own, he had insisted on walking her there himself, as though he was not quite ready to be apart from her yet. She knew how he felt. Every time they parted, she found herself craving more, making some deal with whatever spirit might have been in charge of such a thing to steal a little more time with him.

He paused next to the door when they reached it, and she hesitated before she spoke. In this fragile moment, she knew she had to convince him to stay a little longer, to make just a little more time for her before he vanished.

“Thank you for my gift,” she told him softly, pushing a strand of hair back behind her ear where it had escaped the plait her maid had put it in that morning.

“Aye, I’m glad to have given it to you,” he replied. “Though I suppose I’ll need to give you lessons before you can ride out on her.”

“I’m a quick learner,” she assured him, tipping her head to the side. As she spoke, it struck her how suggestive those words must have sounded, coming out of her mouth as they stood just outside her bedchamber.

His eyes flashed with amusement, the implication not lost on him either.

“Are ye, aye?”

He rested his thumb on her chin lightly, his fingertips caressing the side of her jaw. His hands were rough and callused, but somehow, that made his gentleness seem even more tender to her. As though it were reserved for her, and only for her. As though there were nobody else in the world who got a chance to experience it.

She swallowed hard. Her lips tingled with the anticipation of the kiss she wanted so badly. But she did not know how to put it into words for him, how to tell him what she wanted. She had never craved it before in her life, and the words seemed to escape her.

“Is there anything else you’d like to learn, I wonder?” he murmured, as his thumb inched up towards her lips. She let out a low moan as soon as she felt him touching her, unable to hold back. There was something almost unbearably exciting about having him so close, yet not knowing if he was going to give her what she wanted. She wasn’t sure she could take another night alone, but it wasn’t her choice to make.

And it never had been.

“Yes, I do,” she breathed finally, answering his question at last.

“And what might that be?”

Her breath hitched in her throat. Did he want her to say it? To put into words the truth of the lusts she had been taught to keep to herself for so long? Her mind spun as she tried to make sense of it, of the enormity of what he was asking. She could feel a warm heat flooding her cheeks at the mere notion of saying it out loud.

But, as he gazed at her, a look of amusement on his face, she knew it was the only way that she would get what she ached for. He wanted to know she needed this as badly as he did.

“I want...”

The words caught on her lips. He raised his eyebrows at her, silently prompting her to keep talking. She closed her eyes, gathered herself, and then forced herself to continue.

“I want you to take me.”

There it was. The words she had been far too scared to say out loud. A confession to the darkest pits of her desire—to her husband, no less, the man who laid claim to those parts of her. When she opened her eyes once more, a smile had creased up his lips.

At last, he closed the distance between them, and kissed her hard.

The two of them stumbled over the threshold to her bedchamber together, her hands in his hair, his fingertips trailing along her waist and down to her hips, where they dug in tightly. Like he had on their wedding night, he guided her back towards the

bed and moved on top of her, letting her feel the pressure of his manhood against her hip. There was no doubt that he wanted more, he hardly had to put it into words for her to understand.

She gasped as he slid his mouth to her neck, his hands moving around her to deftly undo the strings of her dress. His tongue traced along to her ear, dipping inside for the barest moment as he pushed down the straps of her dress, and eased them away from her body, exposing her for the first time.

He knelt up between her legs, gazing down at her once he had stripped her dress away from her. She was wearing nothing but a slip, and it barely concealed what of her body lay underneath. To her shock, he took the flimsy fabric in his hands and tore it away from her body, tossing it aside, before he dived down on top of her and covered her exposed body with his hands and his mouth.

His lips trailed between her breasts, his hands groping at every inch of her he could find. It was as though he were a starving animal, feasting on her greedily, taking in every part of her he was able to. She grasped onto his shoulders, feeling the strength of him, reminded, all at once, of how easy it would have been for him to take anything he wanted from her if the fancy had so taken him.

But he'd waited. He'd waited until she had been able to tell him that she wanted him. And now, as he ravished her, his tongue dipping into her navel before he traced it along the crease of her thigh, he would not hold back, he would not still his desire for her.

He kissed her once more, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close, so she could feel the steady thud of his heart against her chest. He was pressing himself into her, and, even though his clothes, she could sense that the size of his manhood was... something to be seen, that was for certain. He reached down to his trousers to release himself, and she caught a glimpse of him as he drew himself into his hand.

But she hardly had time to take him in before she felt the pressure of him at her entrance for the first time. She gasped, her back arching from the bed, her hands tightening on his shoulders, and he stilled himself there, though she could tell it took every bit of restraint within him to do so. His breath was ragged and his eyes were dark as he gazed at her, silently waiting for her word before he took her.

Though she could barely manage to speak, she kissed him again, a silent promise that everything he wanted to give her, she could take. With that, he moved towards her, and, for the first time, began to ease himself inside of her.

It did not feel much as she had imagined it would. No, it felt far better than that. The strength of him, the fullness, it was almost more than she could take, but in the most delicious, satisfying way, like a need she hadn't even known she had, but now, she was sated at last.

His arms slipped around her, pulling her in close and tight, and she felt her breath stutter in her throat as their bodies came together fully, his hips flush against hers, taking her completely, filling her to the very brink. She gasped against his shoulder, inhaling the deliciously masculine scent of him, letting it wash through her and consume her, as she had longed for since the first time they'd met.

She soon found that her body moved against his with a practiced ease, almost as though some part of her, deep down, knew exactly what she craved from him, and knew how to get it. Her breath was starting to come harder and faster now, her heart beating hard in her chest as the pleasure began to rise between her legs.

But it was more than just between her legs, it through her whole body. She could feel it tingling to the very edge of her fingertips, to the top of her scalp, flooding every part of her as though this was everything she had been waiting for. She could feel the similar sensations as to when his mouth had been pressed against her sex, but even more intense now, as he slowly pushed into her, his strokes deep and hard, his breath

throaty against her ear.

It was that sound which took her over the edge; the sound of how much he desired her, how completely impossible it seemed for him to hold it back, even for a moment. As much as she had struggled to read and understand him all this time, here, now, she knew that he wanted her, and the knowledge seemed only to add to her pleasure, until, at last, she reached her release.

She cried out, the sound so loud she was sure everyone in the Keep could hear them, but she didn't care. Wasn't it right for a Laird and his lady to come together like this, in the confines of her bedchambers? Her thighs squeezed around him, her body demanding more, more, more, as the pulsations of pleasure coursed through every inch of her system. She could barely breathe, the corners of her vision growing ragged as she processed the sheer intensity of this feeling, the passion of it.

"Oh," she gasped against his ear, and, a few moments later, she felt him reach his own release inside of her. He moved into her one last time and then stilled himself there. She could feel him throbbing within her, the warmth of him inside of her a new sensation, but one that she knew she would be craving over and over and over again.

He didn't move for a long moment, just holding himself there inside of her as his breath returned to normal. He planted a kiss against her shoulder, and she turned her head to kiss his lips once more, their mouths coming together with the hunger of people who had only just found one another.

But then, as he pulled back, she sensed something shift in his demeanor. A cold rush moved through her, as she looked at him, but found that he would not meet her gaze.

"Kiernan?" she whispered, and she reached for his cheek, but he turned his head before she could touch him, as though even her fingertips would have been too much for him. How could this be? How could they have shared something so intense, so

intimate, and now, he seemed to balk at the idea of her caressing his face...?

“I should... go,” he muttered as he rolled off the bed, standing up and dressing himself quickly. She stared after him in utter disbelief. No—no! This couldn’t be happening.

“Kiernan, please,” she begged him as she reached for the covers, scrabbling to pull them up over her body. Though he had just seen every inch of her body, taken her in ways that nobody else ever had before, she suddenly felt as though she couldn’t stand to be exposed like this, as though he could see a part of her she did not want him to. He was turning his back on her, walking away from her, and her head spun with hurt and confusion as she tried to piece together what she had done.

Before she could so much as speak another word, though, he strode for the door. Pausing for a moment, he turned to look back at her, and his face, to her horror, was written with regret. A thousand words bubbled to her tongue, but none of them could escape before he stepped out of the door and left her there, in the dark, all alone, wondering what had just happened, and if it had all been some kind of terrible dream.

Though she knew even the deepest depths of her subconscious mind that she could never have invented something so perfect.

Kiernan made his way back towards his quarters, his mind reeling, a sickness twisting in his stomach. The whole time, all he could think of was the look that she had given him before he had walked out of the door and left her behind.

How could he have done something so foolish? All this time, he had been able to keep his distance from her—well, maybe not as much as he should have, but at least he had not taken her purity from her completely. Everything that had happened between them, up until tonight, wouldn’t have been the kind of thing that might put another man off marrying her, if she kept it to herself. But now? Now, he had taken

her. He had consummated their union. There was no going back now, no chance at annulment, no way for him to convince himself that this was all a game to get further into the Aitken Keep. She was his wife, and he her husband. They were partners, having come together in the most intimate way they could.

Nothing he could do would change that.

He had only left her there because he could not trust himself to stay around her any longer. He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that if he remained in her presence, he would be drawn to do the same thing again. The way her body had felt against his, the softness of it, how she yielded beneath his touch. Even now, as he tried to close off that very line of thought, he wished he could go back to her and do it again. He wanted to lose himself to her body, to her kiss, to her touch, her softness and sweetness, her innocence, matched against his harshness.

But even those thoughts made him feel as though he was betraying the clan. He had told his men, assured them, that he knew what he was doing, and they had trusted him—at least, enough to allow him to continue, though he could scarcely imagine that many of them would have stood up against him. He had intended for this marriage to serve as a way to open the doors to the Aitken clan, a clan who had defied his father despite his best efforts, but now... now, it was as though everything he had worked for was crumbling around him.

What would his father have thought of him if he had known that he had been with a part of the Aitken family? Of course, Mary was no Aitken by blood, but Arran had spoken to her and protected her as though she were. And now, Kiernan had given her a closeness he knew he could not take back, a passion that would never be erased from his mind...

And he had little idea of where that left him.

He reached his quarters and stepped inside, the air suddenly feeling cold as he imagined her in her bed, alone. How hurt she had seemed when he had walked away from her. She was just a young woman, she'd never known the closeness that she had shared with him that night. Now, their first time would be irrevocably tied with the memory of him walking away from her when she had wanted him to stay. No matter what he did, no matter how hard he tried, he knew he could not undo it.

He lowered himself onto the edge of his bed, and put his head in his hands. He knew he could not undo what had been done, and he knew little of what it would cause next. But he was sure that the harm he had caused tonight would come back to haunt him.

That the look in her eyes wouldn't leave his mind tonight, even in sleep.

Mary picked her way along the path, stepping in the piles of dead leaves just to hear the satisfying crunch they let out. She needed something to keep her focus after her mind had been left in such a state the evening before, when Kieran had left her in her bed, alone.

She had waited for him to come back to her for hours, listening for his footsteps along the corridor, for something, anything that would promise he had not just turned his back on her and walked away. But there was nothing. By the time she fell asleep, the morning light had begun to filter through the windows, and she was still so exhausted now she could scarcely bring herself to get out of bed at all.

But she knew that lying in that bed all day would have done nothing to improve her mood, and so, finally, she had forced herself to get to her feet and go to the gardens that Archie had shown her. Something about the cool air on her skin, the quiet around her, the slight rustling of leaves when a wind rolled in, it salved something in her aching soul.

As she perched down on the bench by the pond that Archie had taken her to, she found her mind twisting back in the direction of the man she had given herself to the night before. She had thought that, when they came together in that way, it would lower whatever walls he had left up between them, giving her the space, at last, to draw him close to her. Though she had entered into this marriage as a way to escape from her father's plans for her, if she could find real connection in it, she would welcome it with open arms. How could she not?

And how could he, with such ease, walk away from her after they had shared that sacred moment? Had she done something wrong? She'd never experienced such a thing in her life before, and she couldn't help but wonder if, perhaps, she had made some kind of mistake, shown her inexperience in some way he couldn't stand. But as she went back over the encounter in her mind, she could see no instant that it had fallen apart. They had been together, moving with each other, so close that it felt as though nothing could have pulled them apart, and then...

Then, he was gone. She sighed as she stared down into the pool of gray-blue water before her, and kicked a small rock beside her into it, watching the ripples spread out from where it broke the surface. That, she pondered, was how she felt about what Kiernan had done to her. She had started out smooth and safe and peaceful, and then, he had burst into her life and cast ripples across every inch of it. Unlike the water, she knew she would never go back to a perfect stillness again.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps behind her, and she glanced over, praying that it was Kiernan coming to explain himself. Instead, she found Archibald making his way towards her, a slight furrow in his brow, as though he could not parse what she would be doing out here.

"Good morning, my lady," he greeted her, and she gestured for him to join her on the bench. Perhaps it would do her good to have some kind of company, though she knew that Archie would likely report back everything she had to say to his master.

"Good morning," she sighed as he joined her. He paused for a moment, silent, and glanced around.

"Forgive me for prying, lady Mary," he remarked. "But I don't see yer husband anywhere."

"Good," she muttered before she could stop herself. Silently, she cursed herself for

her brazenness, wishing she could take it back at once, though she knew there was no way she could.

Archie let out a slight snort, clearly surprised by how open she was being.

“Did something happen between you and the Laird?” he asked her quietly. She hesitated for a moment. Could she really trust someone who served him with the deep well of emotion that she held inside of her at that moment? But then, she remembered Archie’s kindness before, how he had shown her this place, and told her a little of the way things had been before. Nobody else had offered her such kindness, and she supposed that she’d find nobody better to answer her questions.

“I...”

She trailed off, suddenly feeling embarrassed. Could she tell him that she and the Laird had been together the night before? That they had shared an intimacy she had never imagined possible? She glanced over at him, to find him studying her with a genuine curiosity, and it struck her that he might already know something was wrong.

“Some of the lady’s maids saw him emerging from your quarters late last night,” he murmured, lowering his voice and leaning a little closer to her. “Perhaps... perhaps the two of you...?”

She felt a lump rise in her throat and swallowed down on it hard. She hated how easy it seemed to be to read what had happened between them. She had hoped that moment would stay between the two of them, but, by the sound of it, it was already the talk of the whole Keep. She nodded, just once, drawing her gaze away from him.

“It was... it was the first time since we were married,” she confessed to him. He grimaced slightly and nodded.

“Aye, that was what I was worried about.”

She turned to him, surprised.

“You were worried that Kiernan and I...?”

He sighed, and ran a hand through his thinning hair, clearly wondering if he should even say what was on his mind. She stared at him, willing him to come clean, no matter how difficult it might have been. She was utterly lost, and anything she could cling on to that would help make the slightest bit of sense out of what happened, she would cling to it with all her might.

“I... I supposed that he might have waited some time before the two of you took your marital rites,” he explained, speaking carefully, as though fearful that he might say more than he meant to.

“But why?” she asked him, her voice cracking slightly. She cursed herself for being so emotional. She wished she could contain the sting of what he had done, but it rose to the surface with every breath.

“Now, I’m no’ the man to ask about this,” he warned her. “Kiernan’s the only one who can tell ye the truth of his intentions. But I wondered, when I heard news that he had married part of the Aitken clan, if there was... more to it than pure love, let’s say.”

Her heart dropped. She supposed she had no right to cast aspersions on what his reasons might have been for choosing to marry her, given that her own had been to escape a wedding to a man of her father’s choosing. But had they not moved past that in the time she had been here? Had she not proved herself a worthy wife? Had she not been enough for him?

She rose to her feet, and Archie's face creased with concern.

"Where are ye going in such a hurry, lass?"

"To talk to Kiernan," she replied, her voice dripping with venom. "You're right. If I want to find out what he thinks, I need to ask him myself."

She stalked back towards the Keep, her head rushing and her heart pounding. She knew little of what she was planning to say to him, just that she knew she needed to say it. She had to hear it from him. If what Archie had told her was true, if he was just using her, then she deserved to know it. She could hardly back out of the marriage now, but at least she could save herself further humiliation in the form of pining after him the way she had been.

Passing by his quarters, Mary made her way to his study, sure that was where he would be hiding out. Sure enough, when she pushed open the door, she found him behind his desk. He frowned when he saw her striding in, but rolled his shoulders back and rose to his feet, as though prepared for whatever conflict she intended to throw at him.

"What do ye want, lass?"

"I want you to explain to me why you did what you did last night."

"What part of it?"

"Leaving me!" she exploded, the anger rendering her unable to lower her voice.

"Lower yer voice," he ordered her, irritation crossing his face. She clenched her hands at her sides, the fury only growing inside of her. She knew it was not all fury that was aimed at him, but at her father, too, at everyone who had ever tried to use her

as some means to an end. She had given herself to him, she had believed wholeheartedly that he truly desired her, only for him to turn around and treat her like a child? She wanted to scream, to tear his books from the shelves and hurl them at him.

“Don’t tell me what to do!”

He glared at her.

“You sound like a child,” he snapped, and he stepped towards her, catching her by the shoulder. “What do ye want?”

“I want you to explain to me why you married me.”

His face started with surprise at the sound of those words coming out of her mouth. His mouth twisted up into a questioning expression.

“Because I wanted you to be my wife.”

He was dodging the question, she could sense it. She shook her head.

“But why did you want me to be your wife?” she pleaded with him. She needed an answer, she needed a reason.

“Perhaps you should be asking yerself why you were so keen to become my wife,” he shot back at her. She started. For a moment, she had forgotten that she had told him about her father’s intentions to marry her off, and for him to throw this back in her face like that, it almost made her want to cry.

“At least I was honest with you!” she cried out in protest. “The least you can do is tell me why you wanted to marry me, Kiernan. I’m your wife. I deserve to know.”

She trailed off as he stared down at her for a long moment, a darkness crossing her face that seemed almost familiar to her. Then, she remembered the dreams she'd been having before she had left to be his wife, the darkness that had crossed his expression in her nightmares. Perhaps they had been trying to warn her of something. Perhaps she should have heeded it.

“You truly want tae know?”

She nodded, trembling slightly. She knew well that the moment he told her his answer, she would not be able to forget it. She had hoped, she had prayed, that there was something real between them, but as he looked at her now, she could barely see the man who had been with her the night before, and that scared her.

Perhaps the man who stood before her now was the truer version of the man she had married.

He leaned in closer to her, his voice dropping, his eyes blazing with anger.

“Because my father couldnae find a way to take the Aitken Keep,” he growled. “And I told myself, when he died, that I'd be damned if I couldn't find a way tae make it happen myself. You were that way, Mary. You were my way into the clan.”

She felt as though her knees were going to give in underneath her as she stared back at him. That he could say it so bluntly, and with such little regard for how she felt... he truly was the man that Arran had warned her he had been all this time, but she had been too desirous to realize it.

“You... you married me for that?”

“Aye, and you've no place to be telling me I'm wrong for it,” he snapped at her, narrowing his eyes. “You only wanted to marry me to get out of that marriage yer

father had planned for you. We both needed something, and we both got it. I dinnae see a problem with that.”

She felt tears prick her eyes, and she blinked them back at once, praying that he hadn’t seen them. She couldn’t stand the thought of him seeing how badly he had hurt her with his words. She drew herself up to her full height, though she knew she was far from formidable in the face of this place.

“Well, I’ll not bother you with my presence any longer,” she spat at him, and she turned on her heel and stormed towards the door. Some part of her hoped that he could call out to her, tell her that he was sorry and ask her to come back, but the silence rang in her ears, impossible to ignore, impossible to deny.

In that moment, she swore that she would not allow him to hurt her again. She knew that detaching herself from him after what they had shared would be near-impossible, that there was a good chance no man would want her again, after what she had done. But living as an eternal spinster was better than staying with a man who would treat her in such a fashion.

She would leave. She would get out of this place and never look back, return to her sister, to the Aitken Keep. She’d have to pray that her marriage to Kiernan would serve as protection against whatever her father had planned for her, though she knew she’d have to cross that bridge when she reached it.

She reached her quarters again, and finished scribbling the letter she had started writing to Amelia. She would send it later today, and let her know that she intended on returning. Soon, she would be back where she belonged, with her real family, though she would have some wounds to tend to when she returned. She supposed she would have to admit to her eldest sister that she had been right, and that she should not have gone with someone like Kiernan, but that would be a small price to pay for the prize of returning home, returning to a place she knew she was safe.

For now, all that mattered was claiming her freedom again, and starting on the long road to forget the man whom she had given herself to, body and soul.

Cold air stung at Mary's lips and hands as she poked her head out of the door to her quarters, making certain that nobody was watching her. After what Archie had told her about the lady's maids overhearing her dalliance with Kiernan, she was distinctly aware of how exposed she was up here, but she needed to make certain that none of them saw her flight tonight.

It had been the better part of a week since her confrontation with Kiernan, and, ever since, she had been planning her way out of there. She had spent much of her time down at the small pond in the garden, staring into the water, trying to plan what would be best for her in the long run, and, to her surprise, Archie joined her several times, seeming to sense the doubts that were racing through her mind.

"What are ye thinking, lass?" he asked her gently, and she sighed heavily. She knew she likely shouldn't have been speaking these words out loud, let alone to someone who was so close to the Laird, but she had no other refuge in these trying times. She needed someone, anyone, to help her escape. It was hardly as though she knew the area well enough to flee on her own, and if she took her horse and tried to ride out, she doubted she'd make it far.

"I'm thinking about my family," she confessed to him, keeping her voice as neutral as she could. She wanted to test the boundaries before she committed to saying anything that could have landed her in trouble. She knew she had to pace around the truth of this as carefully as she could, lest something spill from her lips that she could not take back.

“You wish to see them again?”

She nodded. He leaned a little closer to her, lowering his voice.

“Perhaps I can help ye with that.”

She turned to him, eyebrows raised.

“You can?”

“I think so. I... I hate to see a young lass like you trapped in a place like this, with a man who may not treat you as a husband should,” he admitted. Her eyes widened.

“But... but he’s your...”

“I ken that he’s my master,” he replied swiftly. “But I dinnae care to see you so low. Perhaps some time to visit yer kin would do ye good.”

She chewed on her lip. Truth be told, if she found some way to get out of Kiernan’s grasp, she could not see herself returning. Did Archie already know that? He met her gaze steadily, and she could tell, though he was not saying much, that he understood what went unspoken between the two of them in that moment. She nodded.

“Yes,” she replied. “Yes, I think I’d very much like that.”

Glancing around to make certain that nobody was listening in on them, Archie shifted closer to her on the bench, and began to share his plan with her. In the dead of night, she would come from her quarters and meet him at the edge of the Keep; from there, he would whisk her away, to a carriage waiting beyond the river, which would take her back to her family. Her relief was unbounded at the thought of finally getting to see her sister again. She knew she’d have to admit that she was right when she had

tried to stop Mary from marrying Kiernan, but that was a small price to pay for her safety, for her freedom.

Now, as she slipped from her room, her heart thudding so hard in her chest she felt it might burst out, she wondered if she was making the right choice. Should she have given Kiernan more time to prove himself as her husband? She felt as though in a near-week since their time together, she had given him plenty of chances to come to her and admit that he had not acted as a loving husband should. All he had done was avoid her. He clearly wanted nothing to do with her. All he had intended was to take her and own her, and now he had her, he had no intention of treating her as a husband should have loved his wife.

She found that a tear had leaked from one of her eyes, and she dashed it away with the back of her hand quickly as she hurried for the stairs that would take her down to where she was meant to be meeting Archie. She was so grateful for his help. It was a relief that she had someone she could call a friend in here, despite all that had happened. She was certain most of those who inhabited the Keep still looked upon her as nothing more than a threat, an infiltrator from the Aitken side.

But she was nothing of the sort. She was just a girl, a woman who had sought freedom from the weight of what her father had wanted to trap her in. And now, she had to flee once more, putting as much distance between herself and the man she had sworn her life and her love to.

She picked her way down the stairs as quickly and as quietly as she could, her ears pricked for any sound that might indicate she was being watched or followed, but none came. Her eyes darted this way and that when she reached the bottom, searching for someone who would stop her. Normally, there were guards patrolling the corridors day and night, and it seemed strange to her, for a moment, that there were none lurking around on this particular evening. Had Archie managed to get rid of them so that she could make her escape without being caught?

She pushed that thought aside and continued her rush to the door of the Keep, finally reaching it and pushing it open. It creaked loudly as she did so, and she winced, praying that it had not roused anyone in the Keep.

But then, she saw Archie standing there, waiting for her, and a flood of relief coursed through her. He offered her a smile when he spotted her, and jerked his head towards the path that led down the hill and out of the Keep.

“Here, lass, and be quick about it!” he hissed at her, and she rushed out to meet him, following him along the path. The air was cold, mist hanging over the hill before her as she made her way behind him. He strode out confidently, as though he knew exactly where he was going.

“How far is the carriage?” she whispered to him as she followed, but he didn’t seem to hear her. He didn’t turn around when she spoke, and she hurried a little further, closing the distance between them. The Keep was starting to grow distant now, and, as they drew close to the river, she scanned the area for sight of the carriage that was meant to be waiting for her.

But there was none. Her footsteps faltered beneath her, and she came to a halt. This time, Archie seemed to notice her reticence, and he came to a halt, too.

“Archie?” she whispered, her voice carrying in the dead air around them. Slowly, he turned to her and the expression on his face was almost as fatal as the dagger he clutched in his hand.

Her hand flew to her mouth when she saw the weapon he was holding. The blade, jagged at the edges, flashed in the moonlight. She tried to scabble back from him, but she tripped, and he lunged forward, grabbing her before she could fall to her knees.

“I’m sorry, lass,” he murmured to her, and he seemed to mean it. He pressed the blade against her belly, not so hard that it snagged on her clothes, but enough that she could feel the dull pressure of it against her stomach. Sickness twisted inside of her, her mind rushing as she tried to make sense of it.

“What are you doing, Archie?” she pleaded with him. “I thought—I thought you wanted to help me. To help me get back to my family. You said you could not bear to see me trapped in this place...”

“And I meant it,” he replied, flexing his hand around the blade as he tightened his grip on her waist. He was holding her close to him, almost like a lover, but she knew that the blade was the only thing he intended to use upon her.

“I cannae stand to see you trapped here, with Kiernan,” he replied. “Because ye’re an Aitken. An Englishwoman, at that. There was never a chance that you would find a home here, not as long as ye lived. They would never accept a woman like you as their lady, nor would they accept Kiernan as such a weak man to be their Laird.”

Weak? Was that how he saw it? That Kiernan and his care for her were symbolic of his weakness? She could still remember how it felt to be with him in that intimate way, how much she had craved his touch, more than she could make sense of—how strong he had seemed, how masculine, how powerful. Anything but weak.

“They wouldn’t, or you wouldn’t?” she challenged him, daring him to say it to her face. The betrayal she felt in that moment was almost more than she could take. She had thought she had found a friend with Archie, only for him to turn around and treat her like this. It was sick, twisted, so monstrous she could hardly bear it.

“It doesnae matter,” he murmured, his voice dropping into a low fury.

“And you think that killing me will end your problems?” she snapped at him. “You

think that Arran and Amelia won't come after you for revenge?—”

“Not if I convince Kiernan that they were the ones who killed ye,” he replied. Her heart nearly stopped in her chest.

“You... you what?”

“Those letters that you sent to yer sister, they show that you were intending to return to them,” he continued, grinning, though it did not reach his eyes. “And when you turn up dead... well, Kiernan will think that they're the ones who did this. That they couldnae stand to see one of their own with him, and so, they killed her.”

A lump leapt into her throat. It made sense. Too much sense for her to refute. If Kiernan found out that she had been fearful of staying at the Keep, and that she had been planning on leaving, then he would take her death to have come as part of that. The thought made her want to vomit, but, as she felt the pressure of Archie's blade against her stomach, she knew there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she sent up a prayer to whoever might have been listening in that moment, praying that they would save her from this fate, before the man she had believed to be her friend betrayed her in a way she could never return from.

Kiernan woke early that morning, his eyes flipping open as the light began to pour in through the window. He woke with a certainty in his heart about what he needed to do, about how he was going to deal with the issue of Mary once and for all.

Rising to his feet, he dressed himself quickly, humming a tune to himself to distract his racing thoughts. He would be lucky if Mary had not already abandoned him, after all that had transpired between them. After all, he had hardly acted as a loving husband should, brushing her off when she had reached out to him with all the care and affection she carried within her.

He could still remember the look on her face when they had argued in his study, and he was far too proud a man to go back to her at once and admit his mistake. A part of himself he supposed he would have to work on, now that he was a husband. Because he longed for something real with Mary, something true, no matter how their union might have begun. Even if it had sprung from a place that was anything but honest, the connection they shared was undeniable, and keeping his distance from her this past week had been nigh-on impossible.

She'd be in her chambers now, as she had been most of the time since their clash. She had barely come down for dinner, though he had seen her traversing his mother's garden a few times. He had caught sight of her through the window of his study, trailing her hands along the drooping branches, stepping through the fiery leaves, looking almost as though she was a nymph passing through the forest. She seemed as delicate as the flowers that lined the path, but, at the same time, he knew she contained a strength that he had barely begun to understand.

He strode through the corridor that would lead him to her room, his mind racing as he tried to form the words that would most convince her of his certainty. He was not sure anything could undo the cruelty he had thrown her way with such harshness the other day, but he had to try. If they were to stay married and share their lives, he would have years to prove himself to her. It was just a matter of keeping her in the Keep and convincing her to give him a chance, no matter what he might have said and done.

His footsteps slowed as he reached the stairs that led up to her quarters, in the tower that overlooked the river below. Would seeing her in there be too much for him? When last the two of them had met there, the two of them had soon found themselves tangled in one another, words giving way to touch. He would have to find some way to control himself this time. He did not want to let his desire rise too quickly within him. The last thing he wanted was for Mary to believe that he only saw her as some vessel for his pleasure, when he desired her for so much more than that.

But, before he could pick up his feet again, he heard a voice calling his name. Glancing around, he saw Richard striding towards him, a furrow in his brow. Kiernan paused, sensing at once that there was something amiss.

“Aye, what is it?” he demanded, and Richard reached him, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Ye’ve got a visitor.”

He frowned. A visitor? He had no plans to entertain anyone, at least that he knew of.

“Tell them to leave. I’ve got mare important things to?—”

“It’s Amelia Aitken.”

He froze on the spot. Mary's sister? What on earth was she doing here? He knew at once that this had to be important. He could not imagine that an Aitken would breach the walls of this Keep were it not a matter that required immediate attention.

"Tell her I'll be with her in a moment," he replied quickly, running a hand through his hair. He glanced towards the stairs, wondering if he should call Mary down at first to let her know her sister was there, but he did not want to keep his guest waiting. Following Richard, he made his way down to the great hall, where, sure enough, Amelia was there waiting for him.

Her arms were crossed over her chest, her eyes fixed on him with the anger only a sister could muster. He nodded to her in greeting.

"My lady."

"Where is my sister?" she demanded, her voice echoing around the lofty room surrounding them.

"A pleasure to see you again too," he replied, an edge of sarcasm to his voice. "Would ye care to explain why you have graced the Keep with your presence, my lady?"

"Because I received a letter from my sister that had me concerned," she snapped back. "And I want to see her. I want to make certain she is alright. Now, where is she?"

She planted her hands on her hips, glowering up at Kiernan with a formidable fury in her eyes. As she spoke, the doors opened once more, and Arran stepped inside, carrying his young son in his arms. He looked less than pleased to have to be in such a place, but he moved to his wife's side, putting an arm around her shoulder, showing his support of her even in this difficult time. He must truly have cared for her, if he

was willing to enter the house of his enemy in such a way, let alone bring his son there.

“I’ll fetch her,” Kiernan replied, glancing between the two of them suspiciously. He didn’t much like the thought of them being here, in his home, his Keep. But, he supposed, he would have done the same thing if he’d had his suspicions that someone in his family had come to harm, and he could not blame them for making certain Mary was in safe hands.

“Go to the lady’s chambers,” he ordered one of the guards. “Awaken her and tell her that her family are here to see her. Now, go!”

The guard hurried off, and Kiernan watched after him until he vanished out of sight. He could feel a creeping uncertainty at the back of his neck, as though his instincts were warning him that there was something amiss.

A heavy silence filled the hall as they all waited for the guard to return. Kiernan thought of trying to make conversation with Arran, but he could tell from the man’s stoic silence that he hardly considered this a social visit. He doubted that it had been his idea to come to this place at all, more than he was reluctant to allow his wife to go alone.

Soon, the guard re-emerged into the hall, slightly out of breath, his face flushed from the exertion. Kiernan peered behind him, expecting to see Mary following close, but, to his surprise, she was nowhere to be seen.

“Where is?—”

“She’s no’ in her rooms, my Laird,” the guard panted, and Kieran’s heart slammed into his ribs. Not in her room? Then where could she be?

“Where is she, Kiernan?” Arran snarled at him, his eyes narrowing to a furious slit as he glared at the other man. Kiernan raised his hand, trying to soothe the situation before it spun out of control.

“I’m sure she’ll just be down in the garden by now,” he replied, doing his best to keep his voice steady. “Dinnae fret. I’ll find her.”

He made his way to the door, moving as quickly as he could without making it look to them as though he was in any rush. Why would Mary have left her chambers so early? She had scarcely emerged from them at all over the previous few days, perhaps only to pass on this letter to a messenger that had drawn Amelia to come here and check on her sister. He’d had no idea that Mary had been writing to her sister, and he wished he could see what was contained in those notes, what exactly she had said about him that had driven her sister to come rushing so quickly to her aid.

Once he reached the gardens, an eerie silence settled around him. He called out her name, praying that he would hear her reply to him.

“Mary?”

Nothing. He made his way down the path, picking his way across the fallen leaves and towards the pond he had often seen her retreat to. Had she known, when she had come here, that he was watching her? He wished he had joined her. Perhaps, if he’d been able to put his pride aside for a moment, he would not be searching for her that morning. She would have been in his bed, where she belonged, at his side.

But, as he scouted the garden, he could see hide nor hair of the girl. It was then that dread began to snake up his spine. Where was she? It was not as though she had made much of a point of exploring the Keep in the time she had been here. No, she had kept to herself, for the most part. He knew she would hardly have gone wandering. Which meant...

Which meant that there had to be some other reason for her sudden vanishing. And he intended to find out what that was.

But first, he had to admit to her family that she was missing—a job that nobody would have envied. He barked orders to the guards waiting at the door as he entered the Keep once more, sending them off to continue the search.

“I want this entire place searched from top to bottom!” he bellowed at them. “Not a room unsearched, no’ a stone unturned! If anyone sees Mary, report to me at once, ye ken?”

As he reached the main hall, it seemed as though her sister had overheard his commands. She rushed towards him, her eyes wide.

“What did you tell them? Where is Mary?”

“I dinnae ken,” he admitted, finally. She clasped a hand to her mouth in horror, and staggered back from him, where Arran caught her around the waist, pulling her into him protectively.

“What have ye done to her?” Arran roared at him, as Amelia lifted her son from his arms and clutched him to her chest, like he might be next to vanish if she took her gaze from him for a moment.

“I’ve done nothing to her!” Kiernan snapped back, furious. “She’s my wife, for the love of?—”

“Aye, and I know what men like you do to their wives,” he snarled, striding towards him, stabbing his finger in the air as he approached. “Especially to wee things like Mary, who’ve no?—”

“I didnae lay a finger on Mary,” Kiernan cut him off, and his voice cracked as he spoke, the sudden rush of emotion getting the better of him. His jaw set tight, he met Arran’s gaze steadily, daring him to argue, daring him to disagree.

“Then where is she?” Amelia interjected, her voice trembling with fear. “What—where is my sister, Kiernan?”

“As soon as I ken, you will,” he promised her. “I have my guards searching the Keep. After that, I’ll send them further afield, in case she’s?—”

“In case she’s what?” Arran demanded. “Fled from you? You think she’d have reason to do that, aye?”

“I didnae say that,” Kiernan growled back at him, furious. “I’ve done nothing to hurt her. Nothing to make her flee from me...”

“That’s not what it sounded like in her letter,” Amelia countered.

“And what exactly did she say in her letter?” he asked her, flicking his gaze to hers. Arran stepped in front of his wife protectively, lifting a hand to bar him from getting any closer.

“Dinnae speak to my wife like that,” he warned Kiernan. Kiernan glowered at him, the anger and guilt and fear at Mary’s vanishing starting to get the better of him.

“And what will ye do if I choose to, eh?” he demanded, tipping his head to the side. “This is my Keep, Aitken. And what you do here will not go unpunished?—”

“Please, stop!” Amelia exclaimed. “We can’t let whatever history the two of you have get in the way of finding Mary. I just need to know that she’s safe, please.”

Much as it was clear Arran wanted to lunge for Kiernan and make his opinion of him even clearer than it already was, he took a step back, retreating beside his wife. Kiernan felt a pang in his chest, seeing the two of them together in such a way, seeing them care for one another, the support they offered each other at this time of trial. The same thing he could have shared with Mary, he was sure, if he had not been so foolish as to fight with her the way he had.

Before he could say another word, though, Callum, one of his guards, rushed to his side.

“We’ve got news of Mary!” he told him, nearly breathless, and relief washed through Kiernan. Of course, she could not have gotten far. She would not have run off into the night like that, she was not so foolish.

“Aye? Speak, lad, where is she?” he demanded, and Callum gestured behind him. One of the cooks, Thea, was following him into the Keep, dusting the flour from her hands. She curtsied to Kiernan in greeting, but Kiernan hardly had time for such pleasantries.

“Did ye see something, Thea?” he asked, clasping the older woman by the shoulders and peering into her eyes. She nodded.

“Aye, it was late last night,” she replied. “I was in the kitchen, preparing some bread to rise before I went to rest. And I heard the front door of the Keep creaking, which I thought was strange, given it was so late. I left the kitchen to see if someone was arriving at the Keep, you ken, to see if they needed something to eat before they retired to their chambers for the night. And I saw...”

She hesitated a moment before she spoke, as though uncertain that she wanted to keep talking. Kiernan squeezed his grip of her a little tighter, wishing he could just shake everything she knew out of her.

“Aye?” he pressed. “Ye saw what?”

“I saw Mary and Archibald together, leaving the grounds of the Keep.”

He dropped his hands by his sides again. Shock hit him like a punch in the chest, nearly knocking the wind from his lungs. Archibald? Archie? And Mary? It made no sense. He had seen the two of them talking a few times, of course, but he had assumed that his old advisor was just trying to make her more comfortable. He had always been a man of great loyalty, and he could not imagine that he would have done anything with the wife of the man he served...

Or anything to her.

“Has anyone seen Archibald this morning?” Kiernan demanded. “Is he anywhere to be found?”

“I’ve sent a man to check his chambers,” Callum replied. “If he’s no’ there, then, well...”

He did not need to finish his thought. Kiernan knew what the implications were if he could not find Archie in this place. Could he really have left with Mary like that? And if so, why? Would Mary have left him for a man like that? And if she hadn’t... then what exactly had Archie promised her to get her to abandon this place? His mind reeled with questions, and, as Amelia stepped forward, he knew he was not the only one.

“Who’s Archibald?” she asked him. “Where is my sister, Kiernan?”

“He’s one of my advisors,” he muttered, his chin dropping to his chest as he tried to make some sense of this madness.

“Yer advisors? And he was with yer wife?” Arran asked, almost sounding amused. Kiernan flashed around, fury coursing through him. He would not take such an attitude from an Aitken, not at a time of such need...

“Stop, please, both of you,” Amelia pleaded with them. “We have to find Mary. We can’t focus on that if the two of you are at each other’s throats.”

Arran and Kiernan stared at each other for a long moment, but then, Kiernan nodded slightly.

“She’s right,” he admitted. “I want Mary back here, and safe, where she belongs, and I cannae do that if I’m fighting a war on two fronts.”

Arran’s jaw tightened for a moment, but then, he looked over to his wife. It seemed to be the expression on her face which made the decision for him. Kiernan could see the way his eyes softened when he looked upon her and their son, the way he so clearly wanted to do anything he could to end her fear and worry. Though there was little that could bridge the gap between Kiernan and Arran, Arran would at least put aside their differences for as long as it took to soothe his wife’s troubled mind. He jerked his head in agreement and extended his hand to Kiernan’s.

“Aye,” he replied. “A truce.”

Kiernan took his hand, trying to ignore the words that hung between them— for now.

“Thea, fetch some food fer our guests,” Kiernan told the cook, who dipped her head in agreement and then hurried off to take care of her duties. “And then come to the study, and you can tell us again exactly what you saw.”

He glanced around at some of the lady’s maids, who were hovering in the doorway, clearly unsure of how best to manage their duties now that the person they had served

had vanished into thin air.

“And you, fetch some fresh linens for the guest quarters,” he continued. “Make up a room fer Arran and Amelia, and their bairn.”

A silence hung in the air for a moment, as though nobody wanted to be the first one to move.

“What are you waiting for?” Kiernan roared. “Now!”

Soon, everyone was rushing off to take care of what needed to be done. Kiernan positioned several men on patrol around the Keep, to keep watch for Mary in case she made a sudden return, though, to be quite honest, he doubted she would. Wherever she had gone, and whatever she had left for, he did not know what she might have encountered out there beyond the walls of the Keep, and he cursed himself for not making certain that she stayed close to him.

Once Amelia and Arran had been fed, and young Robert laid down to rest, they made their way to the study, a heavy silence hanging over all of them. Amelia looked pale and drawn, while Arran seemed restrained and concerned about his wife.

“Can I ask you something?” Amelia murmured, finally breaking the silence between them. Kiernan nodded.

“Aye. Anything.”

“Why was she not in bed with you that night?”

Kiernan sucked in a sharp breath. A question, he had hoped, he would not be called to answer so bluntly. Arran eyed him, waiting for his response.

“Because...”

Kiernan’s words failed him. What could he say to them that they would trust? He knew what Arran thought of him, how the Aitken family viewed his clan, and he could hardly blame them, with the reputation that he had cultivated over the years. They were unlikely to believe that he had kept his distance from his new wife because he did not want to force her hand.

He needed a chance to make things right with her. More than anything in the world, he knew that was what he needed. He couldn’t let her slip through his fingers, couldn’t lose her, not when he knew he had hurt her so badly; not when he knew that he needed to fix the harm he had left in his wake.

“Because I made a mistake,” he admitted finally, looking between Amelia and Arran. “And I need yer help to make it right. I need to find her. To tell her how I really feel. And then...”

He trailed off. He did not know if she would even want anything to do with him after all that had transpired between them, but he knew that he had to find out.

Amelia and Arran exchanged a glance. Kiernan could tell that Arran was still doubtful, but the look on his wife’s face gave him all the encouragement he needed. He reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze, and then returned his attention to Kiernan.

Rising to his feet, he extended his hand, and gave him a sharp nod.

“Anything I can do tae help, I will,” he replied. Kiernan took his hand, a flood of gratitude moving through him at the sound of those words coming out of his mouth. He had never thought that he would join forces with an Aitken, but when it came to getting his wife back from the man who had stolen her away, he knew he would have

put anything on the line to make it happen.

“Thank you,” he replied, dipping his head slightly to express his gratitude. Arran drew his hand back, and glanced to the door.

“What are we waiting for? We must ride out as soon as we can,” he told him. “It’ll be nightfall soon, and we cannae risk leaving her there alone.”

“You’re right,” Kiernan agreed, and he strode to the door. “Come—I’ll get my horse tacked up, and my men ready, and we can go.”

Arran dropped a kiss on the top of his wife’s head and followed Kiernan to the door. Kiernan caught sight, out of the corner of his eye of the enormity of the estate that was laid out before them. He knew not where Mary had managed to get to, but he would sort through every inch of the place until he found her.

Until he knew she was safe once more.

Mary's breath tore in her lungs as she fled through the forest, barely able to see what was ahead of her through the canopy of trees on either side. Her legs were screaming with pain, begging her to stop, but she knew that if she slowed, she might give Archibald a chance to catch her.

She had slipped from his grip next to the river, and rushed off into the forest, trying to put as much distance between them as she possibly could. When he caught her again, he would not wait to deliver the killing blow, and she knew that the sharp edge of his knife would bury itself in her guts before she had a chance to protest.

With every step, she felt as though she could feel his breath on the back of her neck, the pure hate for her that burned in his eyes when he gazed at her. She could not believe that she had fallen for his pretence of kindness. Looking back, it seemed so obvious to her now that no man would have shown her such gentleness, or given her the secrets that had plagued this place for so long, if he was not getting something out of it herself. She had been too quick to trust, and now, she was paying the price.

All at once, as she ran, she felt a sharp weight across her chest. She stumbled and fell, the breath knocked from her body, and reached for something to grip onto in order to drag herself back to her feet.

But before she could, she felt a hand at the back of her neck, yanking her to a standing position with a rough motion. She gasped and scrabbled at the person who had managed to get her in such a grip, but there was no pushing them off. He had clearly been waiting a long time to get his hands on her, and he would not stop now

that he had her.

“Aye, there ye are, lass,” Archie’s voice sneered to her, through the darkness of the canopy of trees above them. “You gave me quite a chase.”

“Let me go, please,” she begged him, her voice bubbling over with panic. “Just let me go. I’ll go back to the Keep, I’ll tell them nothing of you, I’ll say I left on my own accord, and?—”

“Keep yer mouth shut,” he ordered her as he pushed her back against a tree. “And dinnae move.”

He shoved her against the thick trunk of an oak behind her, and used some fabric torn from his cloak to bind her to it. She wondered, for a moment, why he did not just kill her on the spot, but then she noticed that he wasn’t holding his knife. He must have dropped it at some point during the chase—sparing her for a few more moments, though she did not know if the reprieve would be anything other than a stay before her execution...

She struggled against the bindings around her wrists, where they had been secured behind the tree. She wanted to cry out, but she didn’t know if anyone would even hear her, not out here. Had they come looking for her already? Or did they think she had fled of her own accord, and left her to it? She didn’t know, and the thought of being abandoned here completely—of being left to die in the woods, where Archibald would use her death to spark war between her husband and her family—it was almost more than she could take.

Swallowing hard to try and moisten her throat, she watched as he made his way back through the forest, his eyes pinned on the ground, muttering something as though irritated that he had to go back and forth with all of this. He just wanted her dead. The thought sent a sick shiver down her spine, the feeling of it digging into her skin. He

wanted her dead. Nobody had ever wanted to kill her before, and knowing that she likely stood no chance of escape made her feel ill. She tried to cry out, but her voice was so hoarse from the running that she could not make a sound...

Then, all at once, she heard something. Her ears pricked. It sounded like... it sounded like footsteps. Though not Archibald's. No, they belonged to someone else, she was sure of it, someone else who was swiftly closing the distance between them. Her heart leapt. Could it be...?

"There she is!"

A familiar roar cut through the forest, sending birds fluttering from the near-bare branches around her. She gasped. It was!

"Kiernan!" she tried to cry, but she could hardly speak. At last, though, she saw it: his figure, cutting through the trees, followed by a handful of men—one of whom she recognized. She squinted into the darkness. Arran? What was Arran doing here?

Kiernan rushed towards her, seemingly unable to pay attention to anything else around him. To her horror, though, she saw Archibald rounding on him from behind. Her eyes widened, and he seemed to register the expression on her face just in time to turn and duck from the blow that Archibald aimed at his head with his newfound blade.

"Archie!" Kiernan yelled, as he rose back to his feet, his hand on his sword. "What the hell do ye think ye're doing, man?"

"I'm doing what needs tae be done," Archie snarled at him as he raised the blade again, the cold, serrated edge gleaming like teeth in the dim light.

"Taking her?" Kiernan demanded. "Ye think that's what I needed you to do?"

“I think this Englishwoman has put you under some kind of spell,” he sneered, taking a step closer to Kiernan. Mary could see his hand grip a little tighter to the hilt of the blade, but he was still reluctant to bring it from its sheath. This man, after all, had been his friend up until very recently. It must have been painful for him to see him betray him in such a fashion, and she could feel the doubt and the disbelief coming off him in waves.

“Fer a man like you, to marry an Aitken?” he continued, shaking his head. “I’m doing you a kindness, lad. Disposing of her, so you can find a more suitable bride?—”

That seemed to be the last straw for Kiernan. He drew his sword, and, like a beast untamed, flew for Archibald at once.

Mary gasped as she saw her husband throw himself at the man who had tried to take her. She could hardly believe what she was seeing. All the distance between them, all the ways that Kiernan had tried to pull back from her in the time that they had been together, only for him to fight like a man possessed when someone so much as suggested he would have been better off married to someone else?

She felt someone tugging at her bindings, and glanced around to see Arran standing just a few feet from her.

“What are you doing here?” she hissed at him, as he quickly undid the knot that Archie had created around her wrists. He shook his head.

“He needed help,” he replied, as though it should have been obvious. But, as she stared at him, she knew his choice to come here had not been about Kiernan. It had been about Amelia. She must have received the letter that Mary had sent to her, and now, she had sent her husband to make sure she came home safe. A swell of emotion threatened to overtake her. Arran was hardly the most expressive at the best of times, but she knew that his decision to aid Kiernan in his time of need was a profound one.

As soon as he had undone the bindings, Mary rushed towards Kiernan and Archibald. Arran caught her arm in the split second before she could throw herself into the fray.

“Stay back!” he warned her. “He means to kill ye!”

She had almost forgotten that Archie had plans to end her life. In that moment, as she watched Kiernan throw himself into their battle, all she cared about was making sure her husband was safe.

Kiernan drew his blade back and swung it at Archibald, and the older man lifted his dagger, catching the edge of Kiernan’s sword in the jagged teeth that glinted in the light. Kiernan let out a growl of fury, and pulled his sword away again, swinging it low at Archibald’s legs, but he managed to dodge to one side to send it crashing into the trunk of a tree, where it was briefly stuck, leaving Kiernan frozen to the spot.

Mary’s heart flipped in her chest when she saw Archibald round on him, pulling the dagger back and leaping for his turned back. Kiernan, though, seemed to sense his onslaught, and he threw his shoulders back, knocking Archibald off-balance and sending him staggering, giving Kiernan a chance to pull his blade from the tree and turn to face him once more.

It was then that Mary caught sight of his eyes, the almost-mad look in them, as though he was utterly lost to the rage and fury that Archibald had drawn out in him. But it wasn’t just his betrayal, she was sure of that. No, it was because Archibald had threatened to take her from him, and he was not going to let it happen, not for anything.

Kiernan, his face still blazing with rage, turned to Archibald again. The older man had struggled to regain his balance, but Kiernan showed no mercy. Using the tip of his sword, he knocked the dagger from Archibald’s hand, sending it crashing to the soft earth below, and, just as Archibald dropped to his knees to retrieve it, Kiernan

brought his sword to the tip of his throat.

Archibald slowly lifted his hands, acknowledging that he was caught. The way the blade looked against his neck, Mary could tell that all it would take was the barest twitch of Kiernan's hand to draw blood, to send his head falling from his shoulders.

"You tried to kill my wife," Kiernan told him, slowly, almost thoughtfully, as though he could not very well make sense of it himself. Archibald looked up at him, defiant.

"And I'd do it again, to save you from yerself," he snapped back. "If your father could see you, so in thrall to an Aitken, an Englishwoman, no less?—"

"You have no idea the kind of woman she is," Kiernan snarled, and Archibald's eyes flashed with anger.

"You planned to destroy the Aitkens," he reminded him, fury bubbling into his voice. "You married her because ye—because ye ken that they stand in opposition to you, to yer father! All those years, and they never capitulated to him?—"

"And maybe capitulation isn't what I need."

Archibald shook his head slowly.

"I'd have done ye a service, putting that creature out of her misery," he muttered. "Force a confrontation with the Aitkens, and then finally, this would all be over with?—"

"And you think you get to make that call, aye?" Kiernan demanded, flippant. "You think ye're the one who rules this clan?"

"I think I knew yer father well enough tae know?—"

“My father would never have stood for a traitor like you in his midst,” Kiernan replied, cutting him off before he could say another word. His tone was almost eerily calm, a stillness settling around them, like the very forest itself was waiting to see what he might do.

“A traitor?” Archibald replied, a note of amusement to his voice. “You’d call me a traitor without so much as putting me to trial, would ye?”

“I dinnae need to go to the effort,” Kiernan replied. “You’ve admitted it yerself. You tried to take her from me. And the penalty for that kind of treason...”

He pressed his blade a little harder against his neck.

“Is death.”

“Then kill me,” Archibald challenged him. “If you so dare. Kill me, if you think she is worth such?—”

“Such what?” Kiernan asked him, silencing him all of a sudden. “If she’s worth such what, Archibald?”

“Such betrayal of yer own flesh and blood.”

A small smile creased Kiernan’s face, and he dropped down, pushing his head close to Archibald’s for a moment.

“I choose the flesh and blood I welcome into my clan,” he told him. “Ye were lucky my father accepted you fer so long. But now? Now, I formally rescind his invite. Ye’re nae welcome in this clan anymore, no traitor is. And ye said it yerself, the price for treason...”

Archibald parted his lips to protest.

Before he could even finish what he was saying, Kiernan drew his sword back, and swung it against Archibald's neck. Mary gasped and drew her gaze away just in time to avoid the sight of his beheading, but she could still hear the dull, wet thud of the sword slicing through his neck, and then the sound of his head hitting the ground.

When she dared to open her eyes again, Kiernan was striding towards her, his sword cast aside, his face spattered with blood. For a moment, she did not know what he intended, drawing in so close to her, but then, he grasped her around the waist, and pulled her against him, so tight it was as though he never wanted to let her go.

"I'm sorry, Mary," he breathed in her ear, his voice shaking. "If I'd thought for a moment that he would—that he might try to?—"

She clasped her hands around him, squeezing him close to her, breathing in the scent of him. For all that she had been confused about what he wanted from her, whether he truly desired her or not, he had made himself clear, once and for all, with what he had done tonight. He had killed the man who had tried to take her from him, the metallic scent of his blood still on Kiernan's skin, and she knew he would have killed a hundred more if it meant he could hold her in his arms, as he did now.

"Let's get you back to the Keep," he murmured against her neck, his voice full of warmth that she wasn't sure she had ever heard from him before. But she knew, in that moment, that he would never deny her that warmth again. The walls between them had finally crumbled, and the man she had been waiting for him to be had finally shown his face.

As she breathed in the warm scent of him, she promised herself that she would never let him go, not as long as she lived.

As Kiernan rounded the corner that would bring them on to the path to the Keep, he pressed his face against Mary's hair one more time, inhaling deeply. He needed to convince himself that she was really there, no matter how impossible it seemed.

He thought he had lost her. He thought that she had slipped through his fingers, and that he would never get her back. When he had realized she was gone, it had fallen into place for him, how much he wanted her to stay, how badly he needed for her to be by his side. No matter what he had tried to tell himself, about using a marriage to her to get close to the Aitkens, the truth was that Archie was right about one thing; he wanted her as his wife, not as his pawn, as a piece he could move around the board to make use of whenever he needed her. As a partner. An equal.

Seeing her bound to that tree, mere moments away from being slain by Archibald, an anger had risen inside of him that he had not felt since his days fighting for his father's cause. He would have done anything it took to snuff out Archibald in that instant. No matter what they might have shared, how he might have trusted his old friend in the past, he would not have let him live, not after what he had done.

As they finally arrived back at the Keep just as the sun began to rise, he vowed that he would never let anyone get close to her like that again—not without his say-so. He had insisted on carrying her home on his horse, his arms on either side of her as he gripped the reins, and she had leaned against him, seemingly relieved to be able to let go of some of the fear and tension that had consumed her in her flight from the Keep.

When they arrived back, Amelia was waiting by the door. The moment she saw her

sister, she burst into tears.

“Oh, Mary!” she exclaimed, and Mary leapt from the horse to throw herself into her sister’s arms. The two of them embraced warmly, as only siblings could, and he caught Arran’s eye from where the other man—his brother-in-law, he supposed—was sitting atop his horse. Arran nodded slightly, a moment of silent respect passing between the men. Whatever had happened before they had met, they had worked together to find Mary and to bring peace to Amelia, and neither of them would ever forget what they had done for one another.

Arran moved to his wife’s side, and put his arm around her protectively. When the two women finally pulled apart, Kiernan took Mary’s hand and squeezed it tight. He didn’t want to be away from her, not even for a moment, but at the same time, there were matters in his Keep he needed to attend to.

“I’ll be fine,” she promised him softly, as though she could sense what was on his mind. “I need to rest. You can take care of whatever you need to. I’ll be waiting in my chambers for you.”

Those words softened something in his mind, and he nodded with relief, dropping a kiss on her cheek before Amelia began fussing over her again.

“Arran,” he called to his brother-in-law. “With me, if you would. I have matters to attend to that need your presence.”

Arran cocked an eyebrow, but did not resist. Kiernan supposed, after everything that had happened over the last day or so, he did not hold the same animosity towards him. Kiernan led Arran to his study, where he called for his advisors and allies to gather for an emergency meeting.

It seemed that news of Mary’s vanishing had spread quickly around the Keep because

everyone who stepped through that door seemed to have a question about where she was and what had happened to her. Kiernan assured them that he would explain once they had all arrived, and, sure enough, once the place was full of his most trusted advisors and allies, he rose to his feet, and began.

“As many of you already ken,” he began. “One of my most trusted advisors, Archibald, has betrayed me on this day.”

A murmur of shock passed around the room. He narrowed his eyes, glancing around, taking in their reactions. He was sure that the way each of these men responded would tell him all he needed to know about whether they agreed with what Archibald had done or not.

“He stole away my wife from the Keep,” he continued. “And he intended to slay her. He would have, had I not had the help of my brother-in-law Arran Aitken to stop him.”

He gestured to Arran, who nodded slightly, acknowledging his words.

“Because he believed that she had me in her thrall, and would do nothing but damage my kin and my clan,” he said, his words edged with a bitterness he could not contain. “And I would like to make very clear, in this moment, that anyone who shares this sentiment should leave. Now.”

His words hung there in the air between them, and he narrowed his eyes as he looked around, daring them to argue against him. A silence clung to the room, as though everyone was frozen with such horror they could not imagine what would happen next.

“If ye take yer leave now,” he told them, his voice dropping slightly. “Then I’ll no’ pursue any of you fer charges of treason, though I very well could. You’ll just be

asked to leave this place, and never to show your faces here again. Is that clear?"

He knew that Archibald could not have been the only one to have conspired against him in such a way, he was sure of it. He knew that there would be those who'd have plenty say on his marriage, his choice of wife. But he knew he would not let her slip through his fingers again, not for anything or anyone, and he wanted anyone who might have doubted what they shared out of his sight before they could do any more harm.

Finally, a chair scraped back. Callum rose to his feet, not breaking eye contact with Kiernan for a moment. He nodded at him briefly, and then made his way to the door. As soon as he had broken the quiet, he was followed by another man, then another, until nearly ten people had followed him out of the room and down the stairs, leaving this place behind for good.

Kiernan let out a sharp breath. Much as there was a part of him that hated to see these people leave, these people who had been so loyal to his family over the years, he knew it was for the best. His father had taught him, without a shadow of a doubt, that he could not lead a group of people who did not trust him or believe in his choices entirely. Though he could have had them all strung up as traitors, he would rather let them walk free than make an example of them, after he had already killed Archibald. Mary was a sweet thing, and she would not have wanted the blood spilled in her name, not if she could avoid it.

Once they were gone, and the sound of their footsteps had dissipated into the air around them, Kiernan clapped his hands together.

"Which brings me, gentlemen, to the other matter of the morning," he announced, nodding over at Arran. "As some of ye no doubt already ken, the Aitkens and our clan have often found themselves... at odds, over the years."

Arran snorted slightly, as though amused by the understatement. Kiernan smiled.

“But, now that we have joined together via my union with Mary, Arran has proved himself to me as a worthy ally,” he continued. “And I would like to take this opportunity to confirm our alliance, once and for all. Arran?”

He turned to the other man, and Arran stared at him for a moment, as though not entirely sure of what he was hearing. But then, at last, he nodded, a stoic expression crossing his face.

“Aye, we may have had our differences,” he replied, extending a hand to Kiernan. “But we’re far stronger together than we are apart.”

They shook hands, and, for a moment, locked eyes. Kiernan could tell that Arran was doing this for the good of his wife. Mary and Amelia had bonded them together and created the alliance that Kiernan’s father had never been able to. It might not have come in the way he’d expected it, but Kiernan was glad to have a man like Arran on his side, and he hoped that he could prove himself to be as worthy an ally to him in return.

Soon after, the meeting dispersed, the advisors muttering among themselves about all that had happened. Kiernan knew that this would keep the gossip mills turning for a long time. Pausing in the doorway before he left, Arran raised his eyebrows at him.

“I cannae say I much expected that.”

“I think, for the good of our wives, we’re better friends than enemies,” Kiernan remarked. Arran grinned—probably, Kiernan thought to himself, the first real smile he’d ever seen from the other man.

“Aye, I think ye’re right,” he agreed, and he glanced around. “Speaking of, I’m going

tae check on Amelia...”

He made his way to their quarters, and Kiernan, for a moment, gathered himself before he made his way to Mary’s quarters to see her again. He was sure there was still so much that needed to be said between the two of them, and he hardly knew where to start in finding the words for it. But he knew, if he wanted to be with her, they had to find some way to navigate the enormity of all that had happened, and he would not leave his wife alone to manage it without him.

He headed to her chambers, and, when he knocked on the door, she called for him to come in. Stepping inside, he found her on the edge of the bed, brushing out her hair, her skin damp from a bath—just as she had been on the first night he had come to her here.

She offered him a small smile when she saw him, almost a little shy, and then patted the bed beside her.

“Here, sit with me,” she offered him, and he took the chance at once, lowering himself down beside her, breathing in her scent. She finished brushing out her hair, and he was distinctly aware of how delicate the tendrils looked against her damp skin. He wanted to reach up and brush them aside, but he knew he needed to earn his right to touch her again, after the way he had treated her.

“May I tell you something?” she asked him softly, and he nodded.

“Anything, Mary.”

“I was... last night, when I left with Archibald. He didn’t have to convince me. I wanted to go.”

His heart stuttered in his chest. He supposed it should not have come as a surprise to

him, given the distance he had kept from her. He supposed that any woman would have taken that as a sign that her husband wanted little to do with her, if anything at all. But the thought that he had been the one to drive her from this place, the thought that she might have gone and never come back, because of how cruel he had been to her...

“And... and now?” he murmured. “Do you still want to go?”

She turned to him, her eyes finally meeting his.

“Do you want me to go?”

He shook his head at once.

“No, Mary, never. I never wanted you to leave.”

“So why did you treat me in such a way, after we were intimate?”

He closed his eyes for a moment. She deserved an explanation, of course, but he struggled to find the words for it. How could he tell her that he wanted her, more than anything, and it was the sheer depth of that wanting that made it so hard for him to control himself? When he was around her, he had forgotten everything he had tried to convince himself of how he could use her, how he could make sure she played to his rules, once and for all.

He lifted a hand to her face, took a deep breath, and forced himself to speak.

“Because... because I couldnae stand the thought of being so close to you again. So vulnerable.”

Her brows knitted together in confusion.

“So vulnerable?”

“Aye,” he replied with a nod. “When we came together, Mary, it... it shattered everything I had been clinging to. I thought I was in control of all of this, of the marriage, of the reasons I was doing it, of the chance to ally with the Aitkens and get them under my thumb. But the moment I had you, I couldnae pretend any longer.”

She breathed in sharply, not taking her eyes from his.

“You couldn’t pretend what?”

“That I wasnae in love with you.”

She leaned her head into his hand, her eyes softening at once. It was almost as though a warm light was coursing from deep inside her, warming her skin and her gaze.

“You’re... you’re in love with me?”

“As much as any man can love a woman, I love you, Mary. I knew it from the moment we were together, and that’s why I ran, because I never intended to love ye.”

“But you do.”

“But I do.”

A small smile curled up the corners of her lips at once, as though the reality of the situation was just starting to settle in to her.

“I love you too, Kiernan,” she confessed, gazing up into his eyes. “I... when I said I would marry you, I never could have imagined that it would lead here. I was escaping my father’s grasp, I was fleeing from what I knew, but I never imagined what I might

run into in the process.”

He leaned forward and kissed her softly on the mouth, brushing his nose against hers.

“And I’m glad you found me, lass,” he added softly. “Promise me ye’ll never try to leave again.”

“As long as you give me no reason to,” she teased him, and he laughed.

“Trust me when I say I have nae intention of givin’ ye any reason,” he replied, and he kissed her again—this time, a little firmer, a little more passion building between them. As she slipped her hand behind his head, he knew that she could feel it, just as clearly as he did; this certainty between them, this sureness, this passion that seemed to overcome everything else. No matter what mistakes he had made before, now, she was his, and he was hers.

And he could imagine nothing more important in the world than that.

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Music filled the great hall, just audible over the sound of the conversation flowing between the newfound allies. Kiernan slipped his arm around the back of Mary's chair and smiled at her.

"You think they're getting on alright?" Mary fretted as she watched the guards and other men from the Fraser and Aitken clans together. Kiernan laughed.

"A few more flagons of ale, and I expect they'll have forgotten there was ever a problem between them to begin with," he assured her. She managed a smile, and he leaned over to kiss her on the cheek.

"Be at peace, my darling," he murmured to her softly. "Ye've nothing to fear. We're allies now. Nothing will change that."

She rested her head against his for a moment, and let out a deep breath. She knew, of course, he was right. This gathering had been thrown to celebrate the union that had taken place between the Aitkens and the Frasers, to once and for all leave whatever heavy history had weighed on them behind. Nobody would have dared step in the way of Arran or Kiernan now that they had put aside their differences, and, judging by the conversation flooding the great hall, they were happy to share stories and conversation with their newfound comrades.

"Come, we should dance," Kiernan suggested, offering her his hand. She grinned. It would be just like the first time they had met, when he had been nothing more than a mysterious stranger whose touch set her alight in ways she could not put into words. Back then, she could never have imagined that he would one day be her husband, but, as she rose to her feet and slipped her hand into his, she felt as though it had been

written in the stars.

They pushed through the small crowd that had filled the center of the room. The tables had been moved aside to make space for them to dance, and dance they did. Couples joined together to form arches with their hands, while other dancers passed underneath them. The warm smell of fresh bread and ale filled the room, the small band playing fiddles and bodhrans where they had found some space in the corner. The air was bright with excitement and happiness, the relief of a past forgotten, and the hope of a future yet to come. Amelia and Arran were sitting with baby Robert at one of the tables, and he was giggling and grabbing with his little pudgy hands at anything he could reach from where he sat.

Kiernan took Mary into his arms, and she felt the familiar flutter she had the first time they had come together like this. It seemed almost impossible to her that she would retain such passion for her husband after so long, but she hoped it never left. His hand on her waist, he guided her through the steps, and she did her best not to get distracted by the strength of his arm through his cloak.

All at once, the music faltered. Mary's heart skipped a beat, and, when she heard a small commotion by the door, she spun around to see what was happening.

Gregory! It was Gregory, one of Arran's men, whom she had encountered back at the Aitken Keep. And he was with someone—a familiar figure, underneath a heavy cloak that looked as if it had been thrown from Gregory's own back to cover her...

When she tossed it off, Mary's eyes widened. It was Lily! Her precious sister, Lily! What was she doing here? And what had taken her so long to arrive?

Mary rushed over to Lily, pulling her into a warm hug. Her sister seemed chilled to the bone, but she still reached up to hug Mary back, clinging to her tight, as though she never wanted to let her go.

“Where did you come from?” Mary demanded, pulling back from her sister and looking her up and down. Lily’s cheeks were pink from the cold, and her eyes were ringed with dark circles, as though she had scarcely slept in a week.

“Lily, you look exhausted!” Amelia cut in, appearing behind Mary. “Where have you been?”

But Lily glanced up at her two older sisters, and Mary softened at once. For whatever reason, it was clear that she didn’t really want to get into this conversation right now, and Mary slipped an arm around her shoulders.

“Let’s get you something to eat and drink,” she suggested. “We can talk about everything else later...”

“Thank you,” Lily mumbled, leaning into Mary with gratitude, as Arran headed over to Gregory to speak to him. Once Amelia was sitting with Lily at one of the tables, filling her plate with food, Kiernan came to Mary’s side.

“Is she alright, aye?” he asked her softly. She nodded.

“She will be,” she assured him. “Now she’s here, at least.”

He pulled her a little closer, almost protectively, and she glanced up at him.

“It’ll be okay,” she promised him. She knew that he had a habit of worrying about things he feared could upset her, concerned that it might drive her to run away again. But there was nothing that could have caused her to leave, not after all they had been through, all they had shared together. He had proved to her, every day since she had returned from that awful affair with Archie, that he would do anything for her, and she held that certainty close to her heart at every turn.

She slipped her hand into his, and led him towards the edge of the hall and out of the door. The music was still playing in the distance, but she could only pay attention to him. She wanted to soothe his troubled mind, and make certain that he understood how certain she was that she had nowhere else to go.

He followed her without question, and, soon, they were in the hallway together, alone. She reached up to cup his face in her hand, a small smile playing on the corners of her lips.

“Yer sister—” he began, but she moved her finger to his mouth, quieting him.

“My sister will be fine,” she promised him. “I know her. And I know she’s got a lot of spirit to her. Whatever’s happened, we’ll be able to talk to her about it when she’s feeling a little more rested.”

She caressed his cheek softly, feeling the roughness of his stubble beneath her fingertips. It still amazed her that a man as tough as he was could contain such multitudes of sweetness, but she hoped she would discover many, many more in their time together.

“Tonight is about the future,” she reminded him. “Not worrying about what might have happened. Remember?”

Finally, he smiled, and, half-turning his head, pressed a kiss against her palm. The warmth of his breath on her skin still made sparks fly in her belly, and for a moment, she almost forgot all of the guests just a few yards from them.

“Aye,” he murmured. “I remember.”

He pulled her into his arms, and planted a passionate kiss on her lips—the kind that spoke to the hundreds, thousands of kisses they had to look forward to in their future.

She smiled against his mouth, sliding her hands into his hair, and, when he pulled back, she could see the weight had lifted from his shoulders.

“I suppose we should get back to the guests,” she remarked, though, from the tone of her voice, she made it clear that they were the last things on her mind right now.

“Aye, I think they can last a little longer without us,” he replied, a grin spreading up his lips. He leaned down and swept her into his arms, and she caught hold of him, hanging on for dear life as she laughed.

“I’m going to start this future as I mean tae go on,” he murmured to her as he made his way to the stairs. “With you in my arms.”

He carried her to their room, the place that had once felt so lonely to her, but now was so full of life and excitement. As he tossed her down on the bed, she reached for him at once. Pulling him down on top of her, she groaned when she felt the hardness of him through his kilt, marvelling at how well he responded to her, even now, after he’d taken her more times than she could count.

“How long do you think before people notice we’re gone?” she murmured to him as she pushed a hand into his hair, balling it at the back of his scalp so she could tug on it lightly.

“I dinnae care,” he murmured as he kissed down her throat and towards her breasts. She giggled, but it soon turned to a gasp of pleasure as he pulled down the top of her corset and exposed her breasts, drawing each one into his mouth at a time. He let his teeth graze against her swollen skin for an instant, the sensation sending a shock of pleasure through her system—a reminder, if she had ever needed any, of his strength, his wildness, and all he was capable of.

She reached down to pull her skirts up for him, and he needed little more

encouragement to begin his ravishment of her. He unleashed himself from under his kilt, kneeling above her for a moment, and she admired the strength of him before her, his masculine presence, the way it still thrilled her in ways she could not quite make sense of.

And then, he caught her hips and pulled her towards him so that her pelvis was at the same angle as his. It was like that with which he began to move inside of her, entering her warmth with one long thrust. Her back arched, her hands reaching for his, and their fingers interlocked as he held himself inside of her. Then, at last, he began to move.

The sensation that moved through her with each and every thrust was fiery, the heat of it almost overwhelming her, but the feel of her hands in his brought her back down to Earth each and every time she felt as though she might float away entirely. She could hear the grit and growl to his voice as he took her, the sound of his breath coming harder and faster, as the pleasure began to build to near-unbearable levels within her, too.

Opening her eyes, she gazed at him, moving herself back against him with each and every thrust. Their bodies matched perfectly, as though they had been made for one another. The longer they were together, the more Mary began to suspect that they had been. That she had been made for him, and he for her, and that nothing would have kept them apart, no matter how hard they had tried.

It was that thought which sent her coursing over the edge and into her release. She cried out, her voice so loud she was sure that the revelers downstairs might be able to hear her. Her body tensed around his, and, seeming to sense the extent of her pleasure, he stilled, allowing her to lose herself to the moment completely, the crest of it rising and breaking within her like a wave on the shore.

It seemed that her climax was all he had needed to take himself to his release; still

buried to the hilt inside of her, he let out a long, low growl as he finished, his hands gripping tight to her, as though he never wanted to let her go. He held himself there for a long moment, and then, at last, pulled back, moving on top of her and wrapping her in his arms.

Planting a kiss against his lips, Mary pulled back to look at him for a moment. Kiernan, her love, her husband, her man. Above all else, she knew that they belonged here, in each other's arms. Not just now, but for eternity, as all great loves did.

“What's on yer mind, lass?” he asked her, brushing his nose against hers. Instead of answering, she kissed him again, pushing her hand below his shirt to feel the thud of his heart in his chest.

As she melted into him, Mary knew that their future together was only just beginning, and whatever lay ahead bore all the promise in the world.

Thank you so much for reading my novel!

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“Come on, now, girl,” Mary murmured to Snowflake, dipping her head down so the horse could hear her. “We can’t let the boys beat us now, can we?”

Whether or not the horse could understand her, the creature—the same white mare that Kiernan had picked out for her all those years ago—picked up her hooves, and galloped steadily across the hills to where Kiernan and his steed had managed to pull ahead of them.

The sun glistened from the dew-soaked grass as the two of them took their morning ride. It had become something of a habit for them, as the Spring had begun to draw in again, the brightness of the longer mornings too tempting to resist. Though Mary was still learning how best to ride, she loved the feeling of the wind in her hair mixed with the scent of heather, and the way that Kiernan and she always competed to get to the same spot down by the river that both of them loved so much.

Today, it looked as though he had managed to make it there before her, slowing his horse at the edge of the bend of the river. Flowers had begun to sprout up from beneath the fallow earth in the last few days, yellows and reds and purples catching the sunlight.

She finally caught up with him, slowing Snowflake down to a halt and running her hand through the horse’s mane. Snowflake let out a little snort, as though irritated that she had allowed Kiernan to win, though, in truth, Mary did not much mind.

He offered her a hand to help her down from Snowflake, and, with her feet on the ground once more, she smiled up at him.

“You’re a very gracious victor,” she remarked, and he chuckled.

“Not difficult, when my opponent is as sweet as my beautiful wife,” he teased her, pulling her into his arms for a kiss. She smiled into his embrace, leaning up to plant her lips against his, letting the delicious warmth of his touch rush to every inch of her body. Though it was still cool on those early mornings, there was a heat to the way he laid hands on her that made all of it fall away.

Once he had drawn back, he pulled his cloak from his shoulders and laid it on the dew-sodden grass below them, sinking down onto it and inviting her to do the same with a pat of his hand. She did as she was asked at once, how could she not? Her husband made so much effort to find these precious moments for the two of them, even amongst all the work he had been doing with Arran to open trading lines between the Aitken and Fraser estate. She knew it had been taking up much of his headspace, but she was grateful that he still created these soft, sweet moments, just for the two of them.

He draped his arm around her, and she planted her hand against his chest, breathing in the scent of him, mingled with the deep, earthy scent of the grass. The river’s quiet rumble moved at their feet, and she peered down at the water, watching as it smoothed over rocks and carried twigs to their final destination.

“I think this must have been the same river we were at when we met at Stonehaven,” he remarked to her, and she raised her eyebrows at him.

“You still remember that?”

He turned to her, as though surprised she had even to ask.

“Of course I do, lass. You think I’d forget a day like that?”

“That’s very sweet of you,” she teased him. “What will everyone think, when I tell them that Kiernan Fraser is a sweet man underneath that rough exterior?”

He cocked an eyebrow at her, flashing her a bright grin.

“I’d wager to say that most of them already ken how sweet I am on you.”

Her heart stirred with a happy pulse inside of her.

“I’d wager that they do,” she agreed. She would have guessed, actually, that there were a few of her lady’s maids who slept on the same floor as her who were well and truly tired of hearing their passion for each other, late into the night, but she tried not to think about it.

“Aye, that’s why yer family were so keen to keep me away from you at Stonehaven,” he remarked. She laughed.

“You weren’t sweet on me then, were you?”

He looked at her for a long moment, simply staring in her eyes, as though he could hardly believe what she was asking. She frowned at him and then laughed.

“What’s got your tongue?” she teased. He reached up, brushing the hair back from her face before he replied.

“I’ve always been sweet on you, Mary. God knows I have. From the moment I saw ye at that ceilidh, all those months ago, I knew that there was something between us... something that I’d spend the rest of my life trying to capture, if that’s what it came tae.”

She gazed at him for a moment, letting his words wash through her. Of course, she

knew exactly what he meant. Even then, she had felt a connection with him, one that she had never sensed with anyone before. She had craved him, body and soul, his face filling her dreams and her heart with a weight she could not ignore. And to think that he had been imagining the same thing, feeling the same warmth between them? It was almost more than she could make sense of.

“Well,” she whispered to him, as she snuggled in a little closer. “I think it’s safe to say you’ve well and truly got me, Kiernan Fraser.”

A slightly cocky grin lit up his face, as he lowered his lips to kiss her once more.

“Aye,” he agreed in the moment before their mouths came together. “It’s safe to say I do.”

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It was a bleak morning on the edge of the Tarbert village.

Anne McKenzie, a lass of just thirteen, was sitting on the doorstep of her hut, staring at the dirt road.

It sloped up a little, showing the long road that led into the depths of the Highlands.

She peered into the distance, hoping that she would find her father striding back with a pack full of food slung over his shoulder.

There were moments when the desire became so intense that it almost became reality.

The illusion was washed away with every blink though.

She twirled strands of red hair between her fingers, humming a soft melody as she waited.

The minutes slipped by, and the gnawing hunger was like an unruly beast prowling within her body, waiting to be tamed.

She sighed, wishing that her father, John, had a steadier life than that of a mercenary.

He could be gone for days at a time, sometimes even weeks, and there was no telling that he would always return.

It was a dangerous destiny, but one that he was married to.

He said that it was the only way he could earn enough coin to support both her and Rory, but she often wished he was a simple fisherman, shepherd, or farmer.

At least then he would be able to stay with them.

As it was, Anne was the head of the household, sometimes more a mother to Rory than a sister, especially now that she was getting older.

As she tugged at her hair, she remembered her mother, Ellen.

She had the same type of hair as Anne.

Ellen used to spend the nights brushing Anne's hair while singing her songs.

The world had seemed gentle and comforting, and there was never any danger lurking in the shadows.

Her father had been happy then as well.

Now that she thought about it, she couldn't remember the last time she had seen John smile.

She heard footsteps behind her.

Rory yawned and rubbed his eyes as he came to stand beside her, following her gaze to the road ahead.

"Why did ye let me sleep sae late? I wanted tae wait with ye for Da," Rory said.

"Because when ye are sleeping ye cannae be hungry," she replied, pushing herself up and heading into the kitchen, where she searched for food.

The cupboards were bare, just like their stomachs.

If John didn't return soon, they were going to have to starve.

She asked herself what her mother would have done, and then pulled a shawl around her shoulders.

"Come, Rory, we are heading tae market," she said.

Rory exclaimed with delight and ran after her.

"Did Da leave us any coin?"

"Aye, just enough," Anne lied.

Her fingers ran along a couple of coins in her purse.

It wasn't enough to buy anything really.

The prices of everything seemed to be rising and rising, but she hoped that someone would take pity on them.

Perhaps she could even owe them a debt, even though her father had always sworn her against this.

He said that nobody should ever hold anything over you, because it gave them all the power.

Still, sometimes there was no choice.

Anne couldn't wait at the house.

If John was delayed then he might not return even by nightfall, and by then the market would be closed.

She watched as Rory ran along the road, pretending to be a warrior himself, fighting invisible enemies.

There was a time when life had been that simple for her as well, but now that she was older she began to see the world as it really was; a cruel place where everything could fall into imbalance.

It was all precarious and there was never anything guaranteed, other than misery and hunger.

Ellen used to tell her stories of grand feasts and banquets in great halls and keeps.

It must have been wonderful to live like that, Anne thought, but she would never have a life like that.

It wasn't meant for people like her, people who lived in the muck.

As they entered the market Rory's attention was caught by all the fascinating things offered by the merchants.

There were fabrics of wild colors and trinkets, as well as fine-smelling herbs.

It was as though the world had come to visit them, and they could sample the exotic delights of what existed beyond their narrow view of the world.

While Rory was occupied with this, Anne went to the food stalls and tried to barter, but she was always turned away.

She simply did not have enough coin, and nobody was going to show her charity because if they started giving food to one hungry child then a whole gaggle of children were going to start pestering them, and that was no way to run a business.

Anne sighed and turned away, wondering if her heart was going to turn hard when she stopped growing up.

Fearing that she would have to return to Rory empty-handed, she started to become desperate.

There was a stall that held sweet-smelling bread.

Her mouth watered at the sight of it, but the baker was not inclined to sell her any.

However, a moment was enough.

When a wild dog ran through the market and a butcher called after it, for the dog had stolen a chain of sausages, she saw her chance.

The baker rushed away and chased after the dog, leaving his stall unattended.

Anne's hunger battled with her conscience, but in the end, her need to take care of her brother won out.

She quickly pilfered a loaf of bread, hiding it under her long shawl.

She strode towards Rory and ushered him away from the market, telling him that they couldn't spend too much time away in case their father returned.

Anne's cheeks were flushed as she was certain that people would chase after her just as they had chased after the dog, but she soon found herself out of sight, walking

back home.

She pulled the bread out and handed it to Rory.

He munched on it contentedly, and she knew that she could live with herself even though she was now a thief.

Rory's well-being was the most important thing, for she was responsible for him until their father returned.

CHAPTER 1

Nine years later...

It was the middle of the night in Tarbert village.

Anne, now a woman of twenty-two, slipped out of bed.

She smoothed down her hair and wore a wicked smile.

She was light on her feet, while candlelight illuminated the room.

Behind her, a man snored.

His lips were parted, showing yellow teeth, while his chest rose and fell with each breath.

She stifled a chuckle, pitying him for the way his eyes had lit up when she had approached him, knowing that he was a fool for believing he could ever spend the night with her.

But some men's ambition was their downfall. Anne had made a living off of this. While he slept, his mind addled with drink, she rifled through his clothes, relieving him of his pouch. The weight felt nice in her hands, and she knew it was going to be a while before she and Rory were going to go hungry again. She clutched it close to her chest and closed her eyes for a moment, feeling triumph rushing through her. She gripped it tightly, not intending to let it go for anything, and then glanced back at the

man. A pang of guilt stabbed at her heart because she hated that she had to resort to stealing like this, but she told herself that he deserved it. After speaking with him it was clear that he wasn't a nice man, and he would only have frittered this money away on other vices. Better that it be put to good use, like feeding two starving people who had no other way to survive. In a way, she was helping him be charitable, and that had to be good for the soul.

She stole away from the room before he had a chance to wake up.

She closed the door quietly behind her and relaxed when no commotion was raised.

She tiptoed through the inn and descended the stairs to the bar, when she narrowed her eyes.

She hunched her shoulders and walked towards a table, reaching down and pinching Rory's ear.

He jerked awake, batting away her hand, and rubbing his earlobe as he frowned at her.

"Ye are supposed tae be keeping watch," she hissed, glancing around with a furtive gaze, trying to make sure that nobody noticed her crime.

The last thing she needed was someone noticing the same woman with straight red hair, emerald eyes, and a dusting of freckles across her face frequenting taverns and leaving men sleeping in bed, frustrated that instead of enjoying a warm body they were relieved of their coins.

Rory yawned and rubbed his eyes.

Anne yanked him up and pushed him out of the inn.

The crisp, cool air of the night rushed around them and tingled against her skin.

She kept walking, knowing that there were no guarantees with this particular theft.

Her target could have woken up at any moment and realized that she had stolen his purse.

She and Rory scurried away from the inn, making the trip back to their small hut on the outskirts of the village, the far outskirts where few people ever ventured.

“Ye need tae be more careful,” Anne scolded again.

Rory wore a sullen look.

“I thought ye hae everything under control.

Besides, he was alone.

It was nae like he hae any friends tae warn him.”

“But ye never know who is watching.

And taenight was nae just about him, it was about our next target.

Ye were supposed tae see if there was anyone else we could steal from.

We cannae afford tae miss any opportunities.”

“I dinnae like ye daeing this,” Rory said in a quiet voice.

He was fourteen now, and starting to become a man.

He was also starting to become aware of some of the things that happened in the inns.

It was her fault, she knew, for exposing him to this world.

He overheard things in conversation, dark things that no lad should ever hear.

For her own protection, however, she needed him to be beside her.

“I told ye it is nae dangerous, as long as we are careful.

Men are desperate creatures and sometimes what they want more than anything is some company.

I dinnae dae anything with them, I just talk with them a while and make sure they are drunk enough tae fall asleep before they can expect anything.

That’s why picking the right target is important,” she said.

She shuddered at the thought of any man laying a hand on her without her consent, but she tried to hide this discomfort from Rory.

Unfortunately, there was no other way for her to earn as much money as this.

“Dae ye think Da met women like ye when he was away?” Rory asked in a small voice.

“Nae.

He loved Ma,” Anne replied, although she wasn’t too convinced about her own statement.

After seeing for herself how greedy men were, how relentless they could be in their

ardent hunger, she wondered if, in his lonely years, her father had indeed succumbed to this urge that seemed to be within every man.

She tried not to think about it too much, though.

She preferred to think of John as he was when he was married, the happy home he and Ellen had created for their children.

It was a nice thought.

Sometimes, Anne could think about it so fiercely that it almost seemed real, as though this life was a dream and she would wake up as a girl again before everything had gone wrong.

But that was a dream, and this was the reality.

The thing with this was that it was never going to end.

“I dinnae mean tae scold ye.

I know ye are nae used tae staying up this late, it’s just that we hae tae be careful.

If people discover what we are daeing then they’re gaeing tae be angry,” Anne said.

“I dinnae know why we hae tae dae it at all.”

“Because we hae nae alternative.

I cannae gae tae war like Da, and the inns dinnae pay a waitress enough tae feed both of us.

Maybe once ye are older ye can find work on a farm or somethin’.”

“I’m gaeing tae be a warrior like Da,” Rory said, puffing his chest out proudly and lifting his chin into the air.

Anne’s eyes went wide with panic and she almost froze on the spot.

Her heart skipped a beat and uneasy tension ran through her body.

“Ye are nae,” she said with a heavy breath, glaring at him.

Rory’s pride and excitement were doused just like a flame that had been drenched by rain.

He dipped his head.

“Being a soldier was what took him away from us, and I am nae haeing anything take ye away from me, ye hear me?” she grabbed hold of his arm and squeezed it tightly, perhaps a little too tightly.

Rory frowned and wrested his arm away.

“Aye,” he said mournfully.

Anne hated herself for getting so worked up, but the emotions were still raw.

She glanced over her shoulder at the road they had walked.

It was no use to hope that her father would return.

She hadn’t been much older than Rory was now when they had received the news that he had perished in battle.

It had left a hole in the world and her heart, and she dreaded to think that Rory might

suffer the same fate.

Tears began to well in her eyes, but she blinked them away, not wishing to conjure all the sorrow of the past.

“Sae did ye hear anything about future opportunities?” Anne asked.

Rory kicked a pebble along the ground.

“There were some men talking about a gathering at the McLeod clan.

Apparently, there are people from all kinds of clans gaeing there tae celebrate their alliances.

Most of them are wealthy as well.

I’m sure there will be someone ye can target there,” he said.

Anne’s eyes flashed with excitement.

She knew that it was only a matter of time before people realized who was stealing from them.

There were only so many travelers who passed through Tarbert, and the men in her own clan would quickly narrow down the suspects.

At best she would be placed in a dungeon, at worst her head would be put on a pike.

This way of life was all well and good for the time being, but she needed an opportunity to guarantee Rory’s safety.

A gathering such as Rory described would provide ample opportunity to steal from

someone who would never recognize her.

And if they were wealthy, well, perhaps she could steal enough coin to provide her and Rory with many years of comfort.

She bid farewell to him, promising him that he would feel better in the morning once she went to the market and gathered enough food to fill their bellies.

Their house was old and foreboding.

The wind blew through holes in the roof, and in winter water dripped down.

She had patched it up as best she could, but it only seemed like a matter of time before a harsh storm came and blew the whole thing down.

She dreamed of living in a house like the one Ellen had told her in stories, and when she went to bed she pretended that she was sleeping in a wide bed and a soft mattress, rather than the cold, hard, narrow thing that she had to use.

She wrapped herself up tightly in a blanket and closed her eyes, wishing that her parents were still around.

She had to believe that things would be better if John and Ellen could take care of her.

She was twenty-two now, but in many ways, she still felt like a child. She had no trade to be proud of, nothing to boast about to the world, and nothing that would secure a future for her and Rory.

Ellen and John had both died, leaving the responsibility of his safety to her.

She needed to make sure that he was safe, and she vowed to do anything to make sure

that happened.

And she wanted to do it before he came of age to fight, because she did not want him to feel he had no other choice than to go to war.

She had lost her parents.

She wasn't going to lose him too.

Life was lonely enough already, she could not bear it if she had to lose him.

She fought against the cold and dreamed of a better and brighter future instead, one where she had an endless supply of food and safe surroundings.

She hoped she could put this life of cozying up to sleazy men behind her, for she hated laughing at their jokes and pretending they were the most handsome men she had ever had the luxury of meeting.

The more she thought about it, the more certain she was that this gathering would prove to be a boon for her.

She could slip in and out like a ghost, taking as much gold as she could carry, and perhaps some jewels as well.

She could afford to repair this house, no, she could afford a better house! They could move away from Tarbert and honor their parents' memories properly.

Anne knew that Ellen and John would never have wanted her and Rory to live like this.

If it wasn't for sickness and war then life would have been very different indeed, and it was up to Anne to balance the odds.

A new day beckoned, and with it came the potential for change.